


BOOK REVIEW

**Queer in Translation: Sexual Politics Under Neoliberal Islam. By Evren Savcı. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2021. 232 pp. \$25.95 (paper), ISBN: 9781478011361.**

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Evren Savcı's *Queer in Translation* investigates sexual politics and queer struggles in Turkey under two decades of Justice and Development Party (JDP) rule. A decisive moment for the book (which the cover reflects) is Gezi protests, during which queer politics gained significant salience. Savcı rethinks these struggles in the context of Turkish politics at large, bringing them to the forefront of anti-authoritarian organizing.

The book makes at least two important contributions to queer studies. First, it decentralizes the dichotomous framework whereby Islam is almost always taken up as the target of Western imperialism, whereas neoliberalism is often studied exclusively as a property of the West. As Savcı notes, “This results in positioning queers in the non-West either as authentic local subjects or as modernized, globalized, and therefore inauthentic” (3). In the context of Turkey, where there is a marriage between neoliberalism and Islam, such conceptualization fails to reflect the complexity of a situation in which queer politics, in the absence of the possibility of assimilation, necessarily becomes anti-capitalist, anti-militarist, and anti-authoritarian. Second, Savcı documents the tensions within queer struggles and failed opportunities for coalition building. As a form of self-critique, her account serves to rethink possibilities for practicing solidarity.

The book is also concerned with “unexpected” kinds of solidarity between marginalized groups—for instance, between Muslim cis-heterosexual women (many of whom support the JDP) and LGBTQI individuals. Savcı notes that when the JDP first came to power, both of these groups were disenfranchised in the Turkish republican tradition. She presents two case studies that suggest possible coalition building between these groups, beyond the supposed polarizations in the political arena. First, Savcı suggests that the debates around the headscarf ban at universities, where supporting LGBTQI rights served as a “litmus test” for veiled women, involved a missed opportunity for democratization. The interests of these two groups were continually pitted against one another in the media, highlighting incongruity rather than intersectionality. Second, Savcı examines

the media depictions of Ahmet Yıldız's murder, which the British newspaper *The Independent* (misleadingly) characterized as the "first gay honor killing in Turkey." Savcı notes that Ümmühan Darama, a Muslim woman, while having proclaimed that "homosexuality is haram," served as the only witness in this trial, demanding justice for Yıldız. While these events involved some opportunities for practicing solidarity between oppressed groups, Savcı points out that the polarized framing of the issues served to downplay, if not altogether foreclose the possibility of forming alliances across differences. Underlining the intersections between these struggles, Savcı's account makes clear the history of systematic violence against which we, as marginalized subjects, must organize. Savcı calls for coalition building as collective bodies that are continually victimized within "the politics of cruelty."

Yet this invitation presents some possible drawbacks. First, how efficacious would such organizing be if we were to establish alliances solely on negative terms—that is, through the state of being victimized, rather than through positive conceptions of justice? Is victimization a sustainable political category or a disempowering one that serves to erode a more capacious sense of political agency? Would it not lead us to a politics of assimilation, in which some victimized group's claims may be co-opted and integrated into neoliberalism, as it was the case with headscarf activists whose righteous struggle served as a stepping stone for the government to continue implementing a political and economic agenda that is of disservice to those who are marginalized (including, but not limited to, conservative women)?

Relatedly, we may wish to ponder the limitations of solidarity with those who simply "tolerate" us (as queers) when they are not actively working toward our eradication. When some acts do not even register as cruel within the epistemic regime in which we continue to be demonized, pathologized or radically dehumanized, what would it look like to reframe our struggles as one that is against a politics of cruelty, in alliance with other struggles that seek similar ends? In seeking solidarity, are we to settle for mere tolerance?

The book's last chapters focus on projects of collective world-building by way of attending to the "hopeless activism" of trans communities. Savcı notes that this kind of activism is not tied to a futuristic ideal, but instead focuses strategically on what can be done in the present moment. The testimonies of trans activists are resonant of Lee Edelman's provocative *Sex Pistols*-esque declaration that there is "no future" for queers. In light of the recent upsurge of trans exclusion debates in "feminism," one is compelled to ask, what is at stake in policing the boundaries of womanhood by restricting it to cis femininity, in a context where the sex/gender regime is inextricably tied to reproductive futurism that insists on a genital understanding of womanhood? Why would many cis feminists be invested in defending a gender regime that seeks control and regulation of our bodies, understood as a procreative machine, serving the interests of a neoliberal state that relies on the exploitation of cheap labor? In light of Turkey's withdrawal from the Istanbul convention—a treaty that seeks to combat and prevent gender-based violence—which the government deemed a "threat to family values," why not seek to build inclusive alliances against this

oppressive neoliberal understanding of “family,” which dictates normative sex, gender, and sexuality on a national scale?

The book studies a context in which, as queers, we are seen as either “sick” or “sinful” without the possibility for assimilation or integration into reproductive futurism’s economy of desire. Unlike the heavily commercialized Pride marches in the Global North, our Pride marches, which continue to take place despite the bans and violent attempts at suppression in the last several years (including on my own university campus at Middle East Technical University), are thoroughly politicized and provide the occasion to stand in solidarity with all who are precarized under global capitalism. Pride in Turkey, in this way, is and has to be revolutionary.

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