

ÖZGÜR HEVAL ÇINAR and COŞKUN ÜSTERCİ

CONSCIENTIOUS OBJECTION

RESISTING MILITARIZED SOCIETY

9 | Conscientious objection and masculine violence

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§ While not a form of action limited exclusively to men who refuse conscription, conscientious objection predominantly pertains to the coercion of men to use violence in performing the social responsibilities expected of them. Men's conscientious objection not only contradicts the political and ideological strategies of the nation-state, which forces them to use violence, but is also an easily overlooked necessity, because it speaks to the 'male violence' in patriarchal realms, such as the family and the market.

It is evident that dominating women and youth in the 'family', disciplining the workers assigned to production in the market, and fighting against the enemies of the nation-state are social roles expected of men, which usually involve the use of violence. The more violence the values associated with 'being a man' carry, the further entwined they tend to be with dominant strategies normalizing that relationship. For this reason, discussions about conscientious objection concern, on the one hand, the values of masculinity that urge men to use violence and, on the other hand, the ways in which men are made to perform the duties of the 'modern citizen' that form the basis of legitimization for these values. Seen from this perspective, discussions about conscientious objection necessarily demonstrate a parallel development with the questioning of 'male culture'. Men who are forced to commit violence are not simply forced to do something they do not want to do; they are at the same time imperatively required to endorse and internalize certain masculine values and behaviours. In this respect, discussions of conscientious objection also open the way for the criticism and transformation of violent male values associated with militarism.

Masculinity and violence

If we are to briefly define what is understood by the term 'male violence', which is employed in discussing the relationship between male values and violence, it is first necessary to note that the term does not amount to a gender-specific – that is, biological/anatomical – phenomenon. 'Male violence' is a form of social and political relationship that

is power focused; structured over age, class, gender and ethnicity-based hierarchies; which adheres to normative principles, such as 'order', 'discipline', 'manners' and 'honour'; and whose most fundamental technique is violence of every kind. Thus 'male violence' refers less to the gender of the person who commits it and more to the behaviour itself; in terms of its consequences, the status, power and advantages it distributes through the power relationships it produces are notable. Most of the time perpetrators of 'male violence' are men and they are designated as the gender that is able to commit violence. But from time to time it is observed that women too commit violence with authority borrowed from men.

Examining this phenomenon in terms of masculine values that naturalize 'male violence', this is a view that argues that men are predisposed to commit violence because of their 'nature' or some kind of genetic 'code'. For this reason, the actions of men who commit violence are tolerated, excused and passed over lightly; this effectively denotes an overt or tacit acceptance of men's dominant and privileged status as inevitable. The view that men are 'by nature' prone to violence and that women, as their opposite, are peaceful is quite obviously a reductionist and essentialist explanation. The practice of violence, as a capacity, is a 'vital reflex' in all living beings. Whereas in men this capacity is provoked, disciplined and articulated into various hegemonic practices, it is repressed, excluded and 'weakened' in women.

Just as one cannot say that every man endorses and experiences the practice of violence, however, one cannot say that every woman lives a completely non-violent life devoid of all violence. Just as there are men who shun violence, who cannot benefit from the positions of privilege or dominance that are derived from the use of violence, there are women who, through the use of violence, share the benefits of power with the dominant. What should not be overlooked here is that institutions such as the state, the market and the family that manage 'male dominance' and organize the distribution among men of the gains derived from 'male violence', along with concepts and practices based on male dominance, such as honour, virginity, marriage, gendered labour distribution, prostitution and military service, generally construct hierarchical inequalities between men and women. In this sense, is not 'gender regime' a regime whereby different masculinities and femininities are hierarchically defined while constructing the dominance of the most powerful and 'masculine' style?

Different views on the relationship between masculinity and violence

The primary field that explores the relationship between masculinity and violence is feminist thought. According to a widely accepted feminist view, the gender regimes of modern patriarchal societies grant men the use of violence as a gender-based privilege. Although not every single man directly and individually uses violence, he benefits from the privileges generated by 'male violence'. These privileges may not be equally distributed among men, who have different experiences of masculinity owing to their differences in nation, class and ethnicity.

Male violence makes possible, however, the wholesale 'subordination' of an entire gender through the suppression, inferiorization and exclusion of and discrimination against women. Each man can take his own piece of the 'patriarchal pie' if he so wishes: virginity, honour, heterosexual marriage, the invisibility of women's domestic labour, prostitution, gendered occupational models in the market that render men's labour more valuable, the basic logic of law that is built around 'middle-class male experiences'. By creating unequal relations between women and men, 'male violence' grants each man – even if he has not directly participated in male violence – a share of the 'patriarchal pie'; albeit in differing degrees, all women are harmed by the privileged areas and hegemonic practices of male superiority produced by this male violence; in one way or another the lives of all classes of women are under threat of being subjected to the dominant masculine values.

There are a couple of points left in the dark by this generally accepted feminist view: is it indeed the case that all men get a profitable share of the 'patriarchal pie' produced by 'male violence'? Are all women excluded from the arena of power created by the use of 'male violence' and in an entirely 'victimized' state of despair? To answer these questions, it is enough to merely gesture at the presence of men who refuse to commit violence and women who, with agency obtained from men, use violence and get a share of the privileges of the dominant. Examples of the former may be men's groups 'opposed to violence against women' and 'conscientious objectors', whereas examples of the latter may be women who use violence for the sake of capital and the mother-in-law who beats her daughter-in-law on behalf of her son.

The approach that tries to define the relationship between masculinity and violence with the characteristics of capitalism takes as its starting point the strategic connection drawn between the strategies of applying the working-class man to production and the male violence in modern industrial conditions of capitalism. According to this view, capitalism

was built upon muscle-powered male labour that produces in factory conditions as an extension of the machines, whereas women's labour is always primarily or secondarily located in the home and directed towards the reproduction of the male worker. In conditions of industrial capitalism the muscle power of the male can be rendered productive only through the provision of 'male violence' as male privilege. The male worker (better understood as usually being lower class, provincial or rural) displays raucous behaviour, fights with his fists, swears, attacks women; this is the 'natural aggression capacity' that must be disciplined. On the other hand, men who manage capital possess non-violent 'sterile' masculine values: gentlemanliness, competitive success, respect towards women, and so on. Men who own capital may use violence only in symbolic or economic forms; or the 'coercive' institutions of the state already do it for them.

In the post-industrial forms of capitalism, however, one encounters another new form of male violence. Because of the conditions of 'flexible production' created by the new global capitalist dynamics, a new lower class (or perhaps it is more accurate to say class outcast) of men who lack even the 'privilege' of becoming a factory worker by virtue of their muscle power demonstrate a new kind of 'vandalism'. Football hooliganism, street gangsterism, mafia-type activities, rising machismo, racism and xenophobia are some of the examples of this new 'male violence', and they are in fact forerunners of lower-class reactions to the newly emerging post-industrial capitalism.

The coupling of a form of capitalist analysis with feminist analyses in studying 'male violence' may indeed prove fruitful. Such generally 'non-gendered' analyses tend to be 'gender blind', however, and they are inadequate for understanding the gendered mechanism of violence-power dynamics. In order to understand the interrelatedness of dominant masculine values and violence, we need deeper analyses that can perceive how capitalism and the gender regime work together.

Different masculinities and different forms of violence in Turkey

Here I would like to briefly outline the findings that pertain to the relationships between different types of masculinity and different forms of male violence, from a study I am currently conducting for the purpose of understanding how masculine values are changing in Turkey. It is possible to better understand the violence-power relationship by showing how different forms of 'male violence' are intertwined with different positions of masculinity. Additionally, while looking at the intensification points of violence-power relationships, it is at the

same time possible to see some male experiences that 'short-circuit' these relationships.

Looking at four different masculine positions in their interaction with 'male violence', we first encounter a masculinity that is characterized as the 'head' of the 'peripheral underclass' family shaped throughout the process of migration from the countryside to the city; forced to accept any type of working condition for the sake of 'making ends meet'. When and if this man manages to feed his family, in return he is allowed to lead and dominate the women, children and youth in the family; to this end, as the 'head of the household', he graduates into committing violence under such pretexts as 'discipline', 'honour' and 'good manners'. This type of masculinity may possess certain privileges that are indicative of the power that is the benefit, the patriarchal share, of male values that depend on what we could call the patriarchal duty of protection. He possesses a masculine power earned by dominating women, youth and children.

Second, we encounter 'businessman'-type males who govern the management of capital; they derive their power not from the women and children they subordinate – the family – but from the 'hegemonic' status they forge with the money they earn. 'Men of capital' do not openly demonstrate a tendency towards or approval of direct physical violence. On the other hand, in the lives of 'men of capital' one frequently encounters symbolic violence and, more importantly, the most refined forms of economic violence. Strategies such as keeping others dependent and needy, effecting obedience through the threat of poverty and economic insecurity, constitute some of the 'sterile' forms of male violence used by men of capital.

Another group of men in Turkey who try to avoid participating in the forms of 'male violence' employed by the state, the family and capital alike, and who generally define themselves as 'egalitarian and democratic', defend and embrace the values of what one can call 'civilian masculinity'. Considering themselves to be equal with women, and friends with their children, these men, who defend the democratic state, egalitarian society and the values of free individualism, argue that they easily exclude 'male violence' from their lives or define it as a 'primitiveness' that they themselves supposedly never experience. Such non-violent 'sterile' life narratives seem to be common in the discourse of these men. These 'civilian males', who only speak a language that is sensitive to state violence against citizens, prefer to ignore the relationship between masculinity and violence instead of questioning it; there are no signs that these 'liberated men' have the critical language or the political experience that could 'short-circuit' male violence.

The most striking type of masculinity encountered in the study is the new, overt and startling 'male violence' found in the narratives of young men whom we can call 'ghetto youth'. In every daily practice of these young men who recently moved to the city, with little education, unemployed, single and residing in families/neighbourhoods in the peripheral social circles of the city – the father–son relationship, love rituals, entertainment among male friends, social competition – one encounters widespread, frequent and naturalized forms of 'male violence'. Furthermore, they believe that it is normal to be under the tutelage of a 'strong' big brother whom they obey and that it is normal that 'the strong' win. This 'new vandalism', which argues it is impossible to survive without being 'strong', that one should use violence against everyone if necessary, that one should kill when defence of Turkishness, Islam or the country is at stake, is also at best indifferent to all types of male violence towards women or directly defends and practises it.

Anti-violent men and conscientious objection

Looking more closely at the study findings on the experiences of masculinity that try to 'question male violence', we encounter some more pronounced contours with regard to the strategies of resistance against 'male violence' and the route of transformation associated with the relationship between masculinity and violence. It is possible to talk about the 'silent' presence of these types of men who try to exclude 'male violence' from their lives and try to create non-violent masculine values. These are men who have faced various forms of 'male violence' themselves: dissidents who were tortured by the state, Kurdish men who have been humiliated because of their ethnic identity, homosexuals who have a problematic relationship with their biological masculinity, war resisters, pacifists, conscientious objectors, men who were 'educated' while living with feminist women. These are men who try to confront 'male violence' by acknowledging it in their own lives and questioning their own male values. Another important factor we must add to this list is the experiences of men who grew up fatherless or outside intra-family masculine power relationships and managed to carve out their own paths.

It is not an exaggeration to say that such male experiences that are distanced from 'male violence' and which sometimes manage to be critical of it are not visible in any social, political or cultural context. The 'male language' that criticizes 'male violence' is still silent; it cannot find a space to represent itself properly. I would like to state, however, that this language has the potential to find channels in which to express itself in the near future.

In conclusion, it is important persistently to emphasize the fact that different experiences of masculinity situated at different places throughout power relationships produced within the context of male violence do not have a homogenous, non-conflicting or one-dimensional relationship with 'male power' at any point.

Translated by Balam Nedim Kenter