

Opponent Report for Cagla Cirikciel's Master's Thesis in Gender Studies at Charles University, Prague, Czech Republic.

Cagla Cirikciel has submitted a Master's thesis entitled "Covid19 and the Outbreak Narrative: How the Turkish State Produces and Obscures Gendered and Sexual Vulnerabilities." In it, she analyzes the rhetoric and documents of the Turkish Ministry of Health and Interior as they relate to the current global COVID-19 pandemic. She describes her interest as, "Hence the question of what is missing from the state representations of the pandemic and how 'certain topics came to be missing and the implications of these gaps' (Reinharz & Davidman, 1992, p. 162) became one of my research interest [sic]" (28). She argues that within them one can find authoritarian, conservative, nationalistic tendencies and militaristic imagery, which harm women as well as gender and sexuality minorities within Turkey. She also explains how the Turkish government has imposed a State of Emergency in the country since 2016 and has been using the pandemic to further extend governmental controls. She does a great job showing how aspects of the Turkish government, whose seemingly only concern should be the pandemic, continue to use patriarchal rhetoric to support the leadership of Turkey's president Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. While she analyzes primary documents from both the Ministry of the Interior and Health, her interpretation also relies on another interpretation of those documents, that done by IHD (Insan Hakları Derneği, or in English, the Human Rights Association). She contends that their analysis of the documents helps her better see what is missing from the state narratives she is analyzing.

Overall, I would say that Cagla clearly explains just how much and to what extent aspects of the Turkish government are praising and supporting the Turkish president. In fact, this thesis could very well function as an analysis of his rise to power and how that has created more and more repression in Turkey. That is how well-researched this part of the thesis is. However, that is not Cagla's goal for this thesis. She wants to prove how the rhetoric of the 'regime,' so to speak, excludes and further oppresses gender and sexuality minorities. That being said, there are points in the research and the examples given where I found that the information provided was not enough.

However, let me first start with an example from the research that works well. She compares the treatment by the regime of the Saturday Mothers with another women's group, the Diyarbakır Mothers. It is clear from her writing that those groups which align with Turkish policies find more support for protest and public outrage, as the Diyarbakır Mothers have been more free to demonstrate and protest than have been the Saturday Mothers. The Saturday Mothers demand accountability of the state as to where their loved ones are, whereas the Diyarbakır Mothers do not blame the state for their children's situation. However, this is the only concrete example of different treatment of different groups depending on whether or not their agenda supports the state's.

There is something to be said from the argument of silence which Cagla uses. Yes, only one narrative could stifle diversity and pluralism (52), but it does not have to, does it?

While reading the thesis, I often found myself wanting more examples of specifically how silence harms vulnerable groups. There is some discussion of queer individuals and female domestic abuse victims, but not enough. In fact, much of the discussion about domestic abuse is not about silence, but about how militarized the response to it has become. The argument from silence there seems to be about the under-reporting of statistics (which I would add is also very common outside of Turkey) and a lack of trust in the hyper-militarized response. In addition, as I read, there were times when I wanted better explanations of theorists or more detailed descriptions of feminist methodological sources, specifically intersectionality and how she uses it in her thesis.

This idea of wanting more examples leads me to my first question. Regarding vulnerable groups, has the rhetoric of the pandemic been considerably different from its pre-pandemic predecessor? Was it better? Worse? Still one of silence? Or, has it been the case that in pre-pandemic times vulnerable groups were often recognized and well-represented by both the Ministry of the Interior and Health? If the situation has become considerably worse since the rise of COVID, I think some of that comparative work between pre-pandemic and pandemic rhetoric would support your thesis immensely. If the rhetoric has not changed much if at all about these groups (i.e. if there was also silence), how would you account for your thesis then?

Second, how can one compare the politics and rhetoric of HIV/AIDS to COVID-19? How does the rhetoric of a disease that was, in the beginning of its history, painted in terms of morality and choice and which seemed to only have affected a very specific group - gay men - speak to a disease that is transmitted by air and was almost instantaneously global in nature? I wonder if adding in something about Turkey's response to the Spanish Flu would have helped you more successfully connect politics, illness, and rhetoric.

I found Cagla's thesis well-researched and with enough topics that she could have easily written on at least three different topics. It is clear that she has devoted much time and effort to this project. I would accept her thesis and recommend a grade of 1 / 2.

Submitted by Ivy Helman, Ph.D.

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