

Violence and Freedom: Politics of Kurdish Children

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...philosophy does not concern itself with children. It leaves them to pedagogy, where they are not in very good hands. Philosophy has forgotten about children.

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Abstract

This article provides an analysis of the experiences of violence and freedom of Kurdish children in Adana's Gündoğan² neighborhood populated mostly with victims of forced migration³. Approaching childhood as a historical and political construct, this article primarily explores how childhood and experiences of childhood have transformed in Kurdish society after forced migration, and how children construe and express their own experiences. Subsequently, in light of daily practices and subjective narratives, the article analyzes the dynamics that politicize and mobilize children within the Kurdish movement and the politics emerging from these dynamics. This article aims to rethink freedom, struggle and the political in relation to children's politics.

A friend of mine who was a teacher at a primary school in Yeni Bosna complained about how his students, most of whom had been subject to forced migration, were very violent: "Even high school students aren't like this," he said, and added: "Each month one or two teachers are beaten up by these small kids; a few teachers have started seeing psychologists. I don't know why these children are like this; it is as if they are not children. One day, I pulled the rogue children aside, I told them, look, I am the psychopath of this school, what do think you are doing, I'll destroy you. I know this is not something a teacher should say, but I don't know how to cope with them. On the one hand they are thugs, yet they're also political, they know Hayat TV⁴, EMEP⁵... Perhaps we want the children we see here to be like those we see outside."

According to Nurdan Gürbilek, until the 90s, in Turkish society children were identified with innocence, fragility and grievance. Child heroes in popular Turkish films; the orphans in Kemalettin Tuğcu novels; "the Crying Child" paintings hung on shop, coffeehouse and house walls, all made reference to this image of childhood in society. However, according to Gürbilek once children began to fill up metropolitan cities due to economic and political factors, this image turned into a tall tale. That is, the image of the innocent child, "strangely, when it encountered what it signified, and perhaps for this very reason, lost its credibility." (Gürbilek, 2001: 45). For years, children pickpockets, Kleneex sellers, stalkers and children prone to violence filled the third pages of newspapers. Yet this image of the "bad child" mostly referred to Kurdishness. As a matter of fact, the construction of Kurdish children as objects of fear in the social discourse began when they gained significant visibility in metropolises because of forced migration. However, beginning with the 2000s, Kurdish children were on Turkish society's agenda not merely as a judicial case, but also as a political threat against the state and order. The "stone throwing child" became the image that engrained this notion in the mind of Turkish society. Subsequently, violating all international children's rights treaties it is signatory to, and even its own constitution, the Turkish state prosecuted and arrested hundreds of children on charges of being members of a terrorist organization. This was also a sign of the panic experienced by Turkish society and state, as this time the accused demonstrators were considerably younger

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² I have changed the name of the neighborhood as well as the names of the people I interviewed for security purposes.

³ Between the years 1984 and 1999, around one million men, women and children living in rural areas in the east and southeast of Turkey were forced to migrate due to the armed conflict between the Turkish military and PKK (Kurdistan Workers' Party). They mostly migrated to urban centers like Adana.

⁴ Hayat TV is an independent TV channel that "aims to become the voice and face of workers, women, Kurds and all who are oppressed."

⁵ Emek Partisi (Labor Party), a Marxist-Leninist political party in Turkey founded in 1996.

compared to previous years. Furthermore, with what motivation children undertook these actions and the underlying dynamics of this politicization remained inexplicable.

Two incidents in particular brought Kurdish children to the heart of Turkey's political agenda. The first of these were the demonstrations held to protest the killing of 14 PKK guerillas with chemical weapons in 2006. During these demonstrations that were launched in Diyarbakır and spread to other regions, 12 people were killed including 10 children and youth. Following the police attack on a group returning from the funeral of one of the guerrillas, the violent conflict between the police and children lasted for days. In the speeches he made at the time of these demonstrations, the prime minister threatened the Kurdish people: "Be it women or children, our security forces will take all necessary measures against terrorist conspirators. Control your children" (Türker, 2008). As for the media, the dominant discourse was that the children were used by "malevolent people." The same year, with the amendments made to the "Law to Combat Terrorism,"⁶ the scope of "crimes of terrorism" was expanded and in this way it would now be possible to prosecute "families who sent their children to demonstrations."

Children once again stormed the public agenda in 2008, when they made radical protests not just in the Kurdish region but also in Western metropolises following the allegation that Abdullah Öcalan was tortured. Hundreds of children and youth were arrested during these incidents. Once again nobody could make sense of these events, as politics was not an arena for children. The elite discussed how these psychologically disturbed children could be rehabilitated. The media once again claimed that these children had been brainwashed. With the headline "Spare the children sirs," the newspaper *Radikal* depicted the children as innocent and pointed to the "terrorist organization" as the responsible party (10 February 2008). It was implied that there were attempts to "win over" these children by giving them bananas and candy. On the other hand, as the children were being harshly punished, the media raised no objection to such severe measures. In Adana, where children who had participated in the demonstrations were punished with prolonged prison sentences, the decision to revoke access to health services for uninsured "families who sent their children to demonstrations" was proclaimed by the Governor İlhan Atış himself. Atış was telling the children, "we love you more than your parents do," and adding with great irony: "Dear children, we don't want any of you to be at places with molotov cocktails. We don't want you to throw stones at the police, the gendarme, or to hospitals and health clinics where they are treated, to the neighbor's car, or the ambulance taking your neighbor to the hospital. We want all of you to go to school. We don't want any of you to get involved in drugs, to collect paper from trash, to help out your family by selling Kleenex between electric poles. Because we will provide all of this for you. This great state will provide it."⁷ Nonetheless the report drafted by the Human Rights Association Diyarbakır Branch clearly documented the state violence inflicted on children (Activity report, 2008).

Meanwhile the increasing population of Kurdish children was depicted in mainstream media as one of the biggest obstacles before Turkey. If Kurdish people continued to have so many children, by 2050 the Kurds population would outnumber the Turkish population. In one of his columns, Fatih Altaylı was urging the smart, educated (Turkish) middle classes, who have the means to offer their children a good education, to have more children. Altaylı continued: "We are decreasing, they are increasing. The best way to fight this is to have more children. For those like us to have more children." (Altaylı, 2007)

The perception of children as a symbol of the rising Kurdish population also constitutes the backdrop for the fear and hatred directed towards them. Interestingly, in an effort to put a stop to it, those who criticize the exercise of oppression and violence on Kurdish children are trying to

⁶ For the amendment (law no. 5532) to the "Law to Combat Terrorism" please see: <http://www.mevzuat.gov.tr/Metin.Aspx?MevzuatKod=1.5.3713&sourceXmlSearch=&MevzuatIliski=0>

⁷ For the text of the entire speech, please see: <http://www.lghaber.com/Adana-Valisi-Atis--Cocuklarimizin-Tirneginin-Acimasi-500-Kilogram-Komurden-Onemli--haberi-141962.html>

remind society that they are only children. And yet the very reason children are subject to violence and oppression is the fact that they are children.

The Category of Childhood

Childhood is usually perceived as a transcultural and transhistorical category (Neyzi, 2001). However, social historians and anthropologists have challenged this perception with their work. For instance social historian Philippe Aries, who argues that the concept of childhood did not exist until the 17th before when children were perceived as miniature people, asserts that between 1660 and 1899 the organization of the family changed and became child oriented (cited in Maksudyan, 2008: 3). On the other hand, historians such as Robert Jütte and Erving Goffman who borrow from Foucault's conceptualization of modern power claim that conditions for children have worsened with modernity because children were "institutionalized" under the discipline of orphanages, penitentiaries and boarding schools in this age. Thus in modern society children were not perceived as objects of attention as claimed by Aries, but on the contrary, as people who had to be disciplined through the discursive and non-discursive practices of modern power (*ibid*).

The emergence of the notion of childhood coincides with the advent of the bourgeois family. According to Kemal İnal, the modern paradigm of childhood has two fundamental bases: bourgeois values and science. In this period, not only childhood but also education and family were restructured (İnal, 1999: 63). To reproduce its own lifestyle based on individualism, the bourgeois society needed a certain understanding of childhood supported by science. According to Aries, the exclusion of children from the adult life was legitimized through the knowledge generated on childhood: Children were defined as ignorant, weak, irrational, and extreme/excessive. Therefore they had to be under surveillance, educated and disciplined. Furthermore children were essentially innocent and good, thus they had to be protected. Adults on the other hand were defined as rational and temperate and this definition elevated them to the status of observer/monitor and ruler (cited in Gürbilek, 47). This understanding based on the notion that children should be protected, disciplined and educated created an age based power dynamic between adults and children.

Beginning with Aries, social historians have analyzed how children and the category of childhood have been perceived by adults throughout history. However, how children construed and conveyed themselves and their experiences was not investigated (Hughes and Sargent, 1998: 15). In this context, Veena Das suggests that anthropology excludes the voice of children (Das, 1998: 174). Nonetheless, recently anthropologists have begun to focus on how children express themselves and how they make sense of their experiences, while also underscoring that the category and experience of childhood varies with time and space. These studies also began to challenge the concept of generation. Generation was generally perceived as a "social cohort based on age" with historical and biological connotations. Yet, with recent studies there emerged a tendency to express generation as "processes through which social identities and political projects are symbolically produced, reproduced, and transformed" (Collins, 2004: 13).

Actually, if we bear in mind that the hierarchy based on age and exclusion rests on constructed dichotomies, we could assert that not only childhood, but also youth and adulthood are political and historical constructs/categories. According to Jean and John Comaroff, the concept of generation is "not a chronological category, but rather a social, relational and political concept with deep material roots" (Comaroff and Comaroff, 2000: 10). Along these lines, Scott asserts that the control mechanism of the modern state regime depends on defining the population in reference to categories such as childhood, youth and adulthood (cited in Durham, 2000: 114). In this context, studies in this field underline that youth is also a product of modernity and the meanings attributed to this category differ in different historical contexts (cited in Comaroff and Comaroff, 2000). According to Comaroffs youth have been excluded from the economy by being confined to a lengthy education process. Just as childhood was attributed qualities of purity and goodness, youth was laden with recklessness, excitement and the future of the nation (Comaroff

and Comaroff, 2000). Similarly, Foucault emphasized that modern power operates through constructed categories. According to Foucault, certain forms of behavior and existence are deemed problematic at certain times in history. These forms of behavior and existence become the objects of discursive and non-discursive practices of power. Foucault coins this process as the “drama of truth.” When people believe in the validity of these categories, they also accept to become the subjects of experiences associated with these categories. Foucault illustrates this by pointing at how concepts or forms of behavior such as insanity, illness and crime are deemed problematic and transformed into abnormal experiences. Discursive and non-discursive practices are utilized in the process of defining these categories and attributing certain forms of behavior to them. Discursive practices are constituted through disciplines such as psychology, psychiatry and criminology which have claims to truth. As for non-discursive practices, they include institutions such as prisons, hospitals, schools and penitentiaries that provide the necessary conditions for the production of scientific truths (Foucault, 2000). From a Foucauldian perspective, we could argue that childhood is constructed by discursive practices such as law, psychiatry and medicine, and non-discursive practices such as the school and the family.

Childhood and youth studies constitute different disciplines in academia. However, recent anthropological work underlines that no clear line can be drawn between childhood and youth particularly in the 21st century. If we take a look at the representations, self-representations and daily experiences of children and youth, we find that it is very difficult to make such a distinction. Transnational migration, increasing child and youth population in metropolises, new modes of communication, civil wars, low-intensity conflict in postcolonial societies have led to a reconsideration of generational categories (Comaroff and Comaroff; Neyzi; Durham). Sharif Kanaana argues that young people joining the intifada leads to a type of “terminological uprising” in Palestinian society (cited in Collins, 2004, 38). Stating that the age category these young activists struggling against the occupation belong to remains unknown, Kanaana notes that the meanings of words traditionally employed to depict certain age groups have “either contracted or expanded” (*ibid.*). According to Kanaana no concept employed neither in English nor in Arabic suffices to define the young men in the intifada (*ibid.*).

As for Turkey, we see that Kurdish children, who were initially perceived as a judicial matter and later as a political threat due to their political practices, have gone through a transformation. Then what sort of a childhood is constructed and experienced in Kurdish society? What sort of a history and memory constructs this childhood? How can we understand this “generational uprising,” the children’s entrance into the political sphere, in particular in the 2000s when the low-intensity conflict has ended and peace has become more debatable and plausible? In the remaining part of the article, I will try to analyze the category of childhood and childhood experiences in Kurdish society based on the field research I conducted in Gündoğan neighborhood in Adana.

Childhood in Kurdish Society

Gündoğan neighborhood was founded by Kurds most of whom were forced to migrate to Adana after the late 1980s and built shantytowns at the empty lots on the periphery of the city. Since most of the people who were subject to forced migration had been politically active in the Kurdish movement in their villages, they continued to support the movement when they came to the city, and thus from the outset Gündoğan was founded as a rebel zone of PKK. However, while until the mid 1990s Gündoğan remained a neighborhood where the state could not open a police station and the police could not enter since they were bombed at each attempt, it went through a transformation with PKK’s change of strategy and militia’s retreat to the rural. The police station set up at the center of the neighborhood, the “reading houses” founded by radical Islamist organizations, emerging gangs and rapidly spreading drugs radically changed the texture of the neighborhood. It should be noted that children (and youth) are both the subjects and objects of these transformations, because those who use and sell drugs, join gangs, frequent “reading houses” are mostly children. Moreover, since the early 2000s children constitute the most mobilized and most radical fraction of Kurdish resistance in the neighborhood. This also points at the necessity to rethink the political. Because these political children also join gangs in

the neighborhood, they steal and partake in “criminal” incidents. In return, the gangs in the neighborhood also participate in political demonstration and protect children in conflicts with the police. This indicates that with the war and struggle at hand Kurdishness has transformed into a political identity for everyone. Subsequently, very diverse political subjectivities emerge beyond the customary political subject. Whether people join radical Islamist organizations, use drugs or join gangs, since they relate their entire grievance to their Kurdishness, they can somehow enter the political sphere or else politicize other spheres. In this context, I propose that the shift in what is political should be read as the politicization of everyday life.

On the other hand, it is necessary to reflect on the politicization of Kurdish children not merely as a matter of children/childhood, but also in relation to the transformation experienced by Kurdish society, given that the mobilization of children signifies the politicization of all segments of Kurdish society. The families of most of the children I interviewed were victims of forced migration. These children were born in Adana and therefore did not experience forced migration, yet they grew up with stories of forced migration and state violence. This is also effective in the transformation of the category of childhood in Kurdish society because children, appending their parents’ stories to their own, internalize the memories of the families and create a different history and memory for themselves. For this reason, when a ten-year-old child talks about himself, he talks about the village he never saw or the migration he never experienced. In other words, this child’s history extends further back than his actual age.

It should be added that even though these children did not experience forced migration first hand, they have lived through its aftermath. They have been born into an environment where state violence was intertwined with urban poverty, discrimination and exclusion. Therefore it is not only the memory of violence transmitted to children that reshapes the category of childhood in Kurdish society, but also the experiences in the city. While the adult members of the families have a difficult time adapting to urban life, children who are literate, who speak better Turkish and thus have a higher chance at employment redefine power relations in their families, and more generally in Kurdish society.

In order to discuss the transformation of the category of childhood in Kurdish society I would like to return to Aries. Aries states that childhood is constructed in the bourgeois family. There are two reasons why such a childhood is not construed in lower classes: (1) Because child mortality rate is very high among poor families, the child is not regarded as a permanent being. (2) Because children in these families start to work very early on, they enter the adult world very young, thus encountering institutions such as factories or police stations much earlier. However, with the 20th century, and particularly with the foundation of the nation state, education has spread to all segments of society and has even become compulsory. Therefore even though the category of childhood is not constructed in the same way in every society, it could be argued that this category has expanded beyond the bourgeois family, especially in the 20th century. Still, there is a different dimension to the transformation of this category as experienced in Kurdish society: Kurdish children, who construct themselves as political subjects, occupy the street and can be controlled neither by the state nor the Kurdish movement, have a claim to power. In other words, Kurdish children do not simply share adults’ power by working; they also limit the power of adults by constructing political subjectivities and creating their own political space. Hence, contrary to the dominant discourse in the media according to which children are used by adults, with their political subjectivities Kurdish children produce a politics that is capable of transforming even the discourse and practices of the Kurdish movement.

Childhood according to Kurdish children

Mainstream media frequently emphasizes that “stone throwing children” see political actions as a game. And yet children say it is not them but rather the adults who view politics as a game. According to children adults don’t take politics as seriously as they do because while they attend “fun” activities like Newroz, concerts and festivals, “they’re not around when it comes to serious demonstrations and protests.” Children also play games but the game they most frequently play is called “Apoism”:

Halil⁸: We play Apoism in the neighborhood. Four-five policemen, four five revolutionaries, we shout “*Bijî Serok Apo*” [Long live our Leader Apo] on the streets. We shout Öcalan and the police attack us.

H: Who wins?

Halil: Who do you think, the Apo people. We shoot bird rubber at the police.

Murat⁹: When we do so, we actually shoot our own people.

Halil: But you know, it’s a joke.

M: What if it hits his head. Cracks his skull?

Halil: We shoot their knees.

M: That’s worse, he can’t run at demonstrations.

In this environment where politics has penetrated all spheres of life, even the subject of games is the struggle between the police and the Kurds. Furthermore, since these games always turn into political actions, the distinction between game and reality also becomes blurred:

Halil: Well, we’re already training the neighborhood. Now, three or four of us become police, and there are three or four protestors, I’m a protestor, I’ve got two kids with me, we shout in the neighborhood, we go to the fascists’ district. All the women in the neighborhood are JDP supporters. We shouted, bastards of Erdoğan can’t wear us down, they looked at us, one said don’t shout man, and I said, what’s it to you fascist. She pissed me off. I looked, you know we’re in action... Now we are running, fighting with the police, the police you know, I said they’re from us. We entered the side streets, broke the windows of cars in the fascists’ neighborhoods. The woman shouted at us, we beat her up, bam she’s on the ground, then we broke her windows with bird rubber.

If even games turn into political actions and if adults are accused of playing games while they claim to be political, how are we to understand childhood in Kurdish society? I asked Murat what childhood meant to him. He responded:

M: The moment people listen to me, then I’ll be grown up.

H: Well, for instance if you compare yourself to a 20 year old in your neighborhood, how are you different?

M: Like he’s grown up, doesn’t have too many problems.

H: How so?

M: For instance children have more problems. Some go smoke hash, others smoke cigarettes, steal, but at least grown ups get family support.

H: How so?

M: How should I put it, for example, a child like me, he smokes, but he doesn’t have cigarettes. So he goes and steals. But a grown up doesn’t have such a problem. He has money, he doesn’t have a problem.

H: So then children steal more?

M: Yes.

H: Did you ever steal?

M: I did.

H: What did you take?

M: We stole a bike, there.

H: What did you do with the bike?

M: We sold it. We made six million. The bike had a flat, we sold it for cheap.

H: So you’re saying children have more problems, and what’s more no one listens to them?

⁸ Halil is the youngest child of a family from Mardin who were subject to forced migration and came to Adana. Halil is 13 years old, and the family has a total of twelve children. He goes to primary school and sells *simit* [bagels] in the neighborhood in his free time.

⁹ Murat is 14 and goes to primary school. He works at the neighborhood tea house in his spare time. His family is from Mardin and were subject to forced migration and came to Adana in the early 90s.

M: Yes, for instance, we see this in the party as well. When a child says something, they don't care. If a grown up does, they immediately listen. I mean when I grow up I'll attend meetings, where I'll be heard and followed. Because children don't really have a say. Grown-ups think they know better.

For Murat childhood means not being heard and not having a say in the adult world, and having many problems. I asked Halil the same question:

Halil: Living your life, now we were walking around, I saw everyone swimming in the pool, we also went in and swam. Since we are children, now someone is doing something, we also join the game. Someone says, come let's play hide and seek, we play. I think childhood is a good thing. It's a lot of fun. It's better to be a child. When you grow up, all these troubles, electricity bills, water bills. Tax for that, or you need to buy a table for the house, all sorts of problems. But mine is not a full childhood, it is half and half. Half childhood, half politics. Sometimes we have fun, we go swim, hang out with neighborhood kids. And sometimes when there is a demonstration off we go with the neighborhood kids. Half and half.

H: What do you think about children participating in politics?

Halil: Well it's very good, we learn early on what's what, who's a jackal.

H: When will you be completely grown up?

Halil: Two-three years.

H: So then childhood will end?

Halil: Childhood will end one day, and one day youth will end, and one day old age will, and then life ends.

H: Do you want childhood to end?

Halil: I do, I mean what is this. See my pockets, I don't have even 50 liras.

Halil defines himself as half-child. He says that adults have more responsibilities, especially financial responsibilities, and therefore childhood is better than being an adult, yet Halil himself works to help out his family. Actually, in Halil's family, it is only the children who work. On the other hand, the childhood we are accustomed to is not only not having any financial responsibilities, but also being indifferent to these matters. Yet everything Halil talks about regarding childhood pertains to economic hardships a family may face.

When it suits them, children also use their childhood. For instance they use slings they call bird rubber when fighting with the police. And they use tree branches and IV drip tubes to make these slings. Yet pharmacies in the neighborhood don't want to sell IV drip tubes to the children because they know that they use them to make slings.

Halil: I got hit with a lot of bird rubber there, eight or nine times. They were all looking at me and pulling. I ran, bam, bam, bam.

H: Does the police shoot bird rubber?

Murat: They can't hit us without bird rubber. But our stones don't reach them, we don't have bird rubber.

Halil: I do. I shot it once. One I hit a policeman on the head, he ran off. He was a plainclothes cop.

M: We ask for serum at the pharmacy, they don't give it to us. They say you are making bird rubber.

Halil: They don't! Come I'll buy you 250 of them. You know Aksoy pharmacy when you enter the neighborhood, on the right, they give it there.

M: Pharmacies on the main street also give it.

Halil: Those don't anymore, I went, they don't. Now I went, the woman said what are you going to do with it, I said I'll go to the village. She said here take it. I took ten.

M: And I said my mom is sick, she needs an IV, we need tubing, they gave it.

Murat looked down and clasped his hands before him as he uttered the last sentence and he spoke in a very low voice. Then all the children began to laugh.

Actually children are also influenced by the dominant discourse directed at them. They also think politics is a more suitable sphere for adults than children. Yet as “young revolutionaries” they go into politics to understand “what is what,” who is good and who is bad.

M: There are times when we have political fights with them (the teachers). For example we have a Turkish revolution history teacher who never wants to get into a political fight with us. He knows the truth but hides it. We say for instance our youth are imprisoned for no reason, he says be quiet and stuff, he says you don’t know the reality. The teacher told me I’ve been working with history for twenty-two years, and I said so what, is that such a big deal, I’ve been in politics for three years. And the teacher couldn’t respond, he was silent.

For Murat, the way to learn is not education but politics. He thinks he’s gotten to know people and life through politics. In the interviews I conducted with Murat and the other children I also tried to talk about “non political” issues, for instance their family relations. But they grew very bored with these questions, and for example after a while Halil said “let’s move on to politics.” I also interviewed Murat for the second time and we talked more about his family and work. After this interview Murat said, “this hasn’t been a good interview at all.” For the children, the political and their experience in politics renders them “knowledgeable.” This is why Murat thinks that the knowledge he has acquired in politics in three years is more valuable than the knowledge a teacher acquires in twenty years outside politics. If one of the things that distinguish an adult from a child is experience and knowledge derived from this experience, from the children’s perspective their participation in politics and the significance they attribute to political knowledge breaks this dichotomy between adulthood and childhood.

However, at the same time, for these children childhood implies having more problems than adults because the environment they live in forces them to steal. And while they are among the major actors in the struggle carried out on the street, childhood means their voices are not heard in the political arena dominated by adults. Children say grown-ups don’t listen to them because “they think they know better.” According to children the only thing adults do is to prevent them from being active in politics. However, based on the observations I made during my field research I would argue that children are gaining power within the movement nonetheless. For example, in the association at the neighborhood children and youth are influential in the decision-making mechanisms. What’s more, the manner in which children take action also influences the politics of adults. With their radical actions, children thwart any other form of politics in the neighborhood, because almost all demonstrations they partake in end in conflict. This tension between adults and children can also lead to a division in politics. For example during a press statement while the adults were bargaining with the police, children were shouting radical slogans. The police said the statement would only be allowed if there were no slogans. The adults were trying to hush the children. Then the children gathered together and talked; they decided to stay quiet and let the adults do their thing and then hold their own demonstration at night.

The memory they inherit, the violence they are subject to, the altered family relations and difficult life conditions construct a different childhood for Kurdish children. In return, children use this and produce political subjectivities to struggle against mechanisms oppressing them. As Halil says, the children in Gündoğan neighborhood are half-children. Like adults, they are burdened with the past and they struggle for power.

The repertoire: Inherited Language, Common Experiences

As mentioned above, almost all the children I interviewed were children of forced migrant families. Most of these children between the ages 11 and 16 have been born in Adana after the migration. Thus, these children who have not directly experienced neither the blatant state violence in the villages nor the forced migration, have grown up with stories of violence recounted by elder family members. Murat recounts his family’s migration story as follows:

H: When did your folks come here, to Adana?

M: My folks, actually I don't remember but they came here because our village in the Savur district of Mardin was shut down.

H: When you say shut down?

M: Well, the gendarme shut it down, what happened was, they raided the village, one of our relatives died there, was a martyr. Now earlier they had caught my uncle for aiding and abetting the guerrillas, they electrocuted him, his lungs collapsed, he died there. *And we couldn't take it.* And I also have an aunt, a policeman called her, pushed her around, raped her. They say they called but one policeman, I mean there were also good ones, took her, asked where she lived, and then you know they came here, we're here now. The village has been opened again, some went back.

As can be discerned from his narrative Murat has not witnessed his family being subject to forced migration, but he recounts these stories as if he himself has experienced them. Not only the detailed information and his articulate and lucid style but perhaps more significantly the grammar he employs transforms the story into a testimony. The inferential mood in Turkish is mostly used to describe events the interlocutor has not personally experienced but rather heard about. The simple past tense on the other hand is used to narrate the events experienced by the speaker. While Murat uses the simple past tense as he recounts events he has not experienced, it is only when he talks about a more difficult incident such as rape that he employs the inferential mood. His use of the simple past tense indicates that Murat has internalized these stories he has heard and he turns them into a testimony. Another important aspect of Murat's narrative is the use of the pronoun "we." When he says "and we couldn't take it," he is actually talking about a time he was not yet born.

Entering circulation in the private and public sphere, stories of violence transform into anonymous experiences. I noticed this particularly during an interview I conducted with an 11-year-old boy named Eren. In order to be able to understand what sort of an environment politicized and mobilized children I also wanted to speak to a child who wasn't mobilized within the Kurdish movement. I would thus be able to make a comparison. I knew Eren and his family personally and thought that he wasn't one of the "stone throwing children." However, during the interview Eren said that he participated in the demonstrations and elaborated on the incidents:

E: You know there's the field in the neighborhood, we used to go here, light a fire, shout slogans, and we'd run away. We do demonstrations in the neighborhood for the freedom of our people. One day we did one, okay, the police came, they'd followed us, we threw stones and split. Ran off to the side streets. I mean no one forces us. We go, put three four tires on top of each other, we burn them, the police come. We throw stones at the police. When they catch us they beat us real hard. And at that moment there were police there, we shouted slogans, they slowly began to approach us. We immediately picked up stones and threw at them. The police were slowly coming towards us. We ran away to the back streets. We do the demonstrations for the freedom of my people.

After the interview, Eren said the stories he told were made up. Having overheard a conversation I had with a friend, Eren had learned that I could not finish the field research due to the operations against DTP¹⁰ at the time. And he lied to me to help me out. Yet interestingly enough the made up stories Eren told were very consistent with the stories I heard from other children. How was it that these non-experienced experiences, made up stories of state violence and resistance could be conveyed in such detail, consistency and lucidity? Another question might be posed from the theoretical framework in which violence stories are discussed: Violence and trauma literature often assert that stories of violence cannot be recounted because the act of narration itself shatters the integrity of language, the body and the individual (Scary, 1985). However the

¹⁰ Democratic Society Party (DTP) was a party in the chain of political parties established by the Kurdish Movement in Turkey. It was founded after the ban on Democratic People's Party (DEHAP). DTP was banned in 2009 and was succeeded by Peace and Democracy Party (BDP).

interviewees' lucid and consistent rendition of stories they have experienced and/or that were transmitted to them suggests these stories have been told multiple times. All of this indicates that we need to re-conceptualize the relationship between memory, violence, trauma and the act of telling. Studies on memory usually approach trauma from an individual and psychological perspective. Since this literature situates the individual at the center and focuses on the impossibility of talking about trauma, it entirely disregards the political and the social (Radstone, 2008: 36) and overlooks the fact that politics is precisely concerned with dealing with trauma. Thus, the stories recounted by children can be understood not in relation to trauma and memory, but rather through the relationship between the act of telling and community. Their stories derive power from repetition itself, from telling and listening repeatedly (Üstündağ, 2005). At the same time, these violence narratives and experiences transform into a collective repertoire that any of the children may draw and elaborate on and perform. In this context, the interaction and transmission (post-memory) between politics, struggle and generations provide children with a narrative space. Hence trauma does not break down subjects; on the contrary it constructs them. Additionally this repertoire created by the perpetual circulation of stories also shapes what the children understand from Kurdishness and being Kurdish. Children, who attribute all their suffering to their Kurdishness, transform this identity into a node where injustice and violence can be expressed by repeatedly telling stories of violence.

H: What does being Kurdish mean to you?

Murat: Not giving their rights.

Some situations I encountered during the interviews also led me to consider the relationality between individuals and narratives. I had to conduct most of the interviews in crowded environments; therefore the interviewee's friends were also present during the interviews. They frequently intervened and started to tell their own stories. I initially tried to stop these interventions but eventually I noticed that everyone actually told similar stories or rather one collective story. The story of the person I interviewed turned into a theme and everyone added their own story to his lifeline. For instance when the narrator described the burning of his village everybody recounted how their own village was burned. Or when the somebody recounted how their house was raided by the police, everybody described the police house raids they experienced. Furthermore, the testimonies of others reminded the interviewee of other stories. In this respect, various testimonies recounted by different people lead to the construction of a singular story and a collective repertoire through repetition. This repertoire provides subjects with a ready-made language to convey experiences they would not be able to recount personally. In other words, this language comprised of collective experiences and narratives offers the children the possibility to attach meaning to daily practices and the history of the Kurdish struggle. For example I asked one of the children why his family migrated to Adana. He said he didn't remember. Other children intervened during the interview and told their own families' stories of migration. Later, one of the children asked why I did not ask the interviewee about their migration, following which the child I was interviewing said, "you had asked and I hadn't remembered. But I think my father said..." and told a story very similar to the others'.

In a research he conducted on African societies, anthropologist Charles Piot asserts that individuals cannot be considered independent of the social context and community dynamics that define them (Piot, 1997: 17). According to Piot, people in these societies are defined, and even constructed by social relationships. For this reason, he proposes: "people don't have relationships, they are relations" (*ibid.*). Piot describes a fluid, diffusive subject that is permeable and pluralistic in its relation to other subjects (*ibid.*). Such a conceptualization of the subject might be useful for understanding the political subjectivity of Kurdish children. Because what facilitates the construction of relational subjects, and determines how childhood is and will be experienced is the constant remembering and transmitting of a common history and experiences. Evidently the constant rendition of violence stories is linked to experiences in urban life. Victims of forced migration were subject to blatant state violence. Yet, the violence did not end when they migrated to the city but rather took on different manifestations; moreover it was combined with different forms of violence such as poverty and exclusion. The stories told about the violence in the village provide the children with the backdrop to recount the difficulties

experienced in the city today. In other words, rather than the past being a trace in the present, the present becomes a trace in the past, because more implicit forms of violence such as poverty and exclusion encountered in the city today are expressed with more difficulty compared to the open state violence in the past. Stories of violence from the past help children make sense of the hardships today and to denominate the discrimination in the city.

On the other hand, the circulating stories also signify an empowering form of knowledge for the collective subjects. The knowledge constituted by experience and the act of narration denote the oppression of Kurds and the cruelty of the state, yet the loss and grievance experienced by the Kurdish people is expressed with rage as opposed to grief. According to the children no matter how much violence the state exerts, it will only serve to amplify their rage. This knowledge is also the very factor that motivates children to participate in demonstrations.

Kuto¹¹: See, two three years ago I would slander DTP, but my grandfather died, my father told me things, how they burned the village and stuff, my uncle's incident. And since two three years I became like this.

As illustrated in the quote above, the knowledge devised through witnessing violence or internalizing the testimonies of others mobilizes children. The repertoire I talk about includes not only the violence stories from the villages, but also pertinent current political developments. Children closely follow discussions around the Kurdish issue on the TV and the internet. For instance a child was wounded during a demonstration in Hakkâri. The next day DTP organized a protest against the military operations in Adana. Before the demonstration, one of the children came out of an internet cafe and said "the boy in Hakkâri has become a martyr." The demonstration was just about to start and the news immediately spread. The children were saying this news had to enrage them more, so "they'd fight harder with the police."

All the children I interviewed were in primary school. They said that teachers constantly tried to influence them through violence and persuasion. Children who closely follow political developments regarding the Kurdish issue over the media are also constantly discussing this issue with their teachers at school.

Murat: My teacher says there is democracy, what democracy I say, he says what do you mean there's no democracy. I said for example Ahmet Türk spoke Kurdish in the parliament, why was he banned. He said that's the parliament, Turkey's official language is Turkish. I said why does the prime minister speak it, he said that was for a TV channel opening. I said so why do they speak English, French and that's not banned but Kurdish is. The teacher was now silent. The teacher almost took our side. There is a teacher, we say are you Kurdish, he says yes, but it is like Turkish blood flows, I feel Turkish he says. For example, you know we said they don't allow speaking Kurdish, we were in Turkish class, I brought this up. I said to the teacher why did they immediately stop the broadcast when Ahmet Türk began to speak Kurdish, he said that's the parliament, Turkish is spoken there, I said Obama spoke English, they speak all sorts of languages. Be quiet, he said, I said well why did they exile Ahmet Kaya? I said they exiled him because he said he'd make a Kurdish song, there you are oppressing the Kurds. He says be quiet to everything and when you continue, he comes and hits you. *Edî bese* [enough already].

Halil: See, we speak in Kurdish with our friends in class, and the teachers say why do you speak Kurdish. We say if we are Kurdish we will speak Kurdish. If you are Turkish you speak Turkish. You say yourself there is democracy in Turkey, if there is democracy don't we have a right to speak.

Kuto: Well, like we always shout slogans in the class, we'd also do it outside but there are cameras. A hundred people, you know we're all Kurdish so we gather together a

¹¹ Kuto is the son of a family from Batman, who were subject to forced migration and came to Adana. He is 16 and goes to primary school and also works at a barbershop in the neighborhood.

hundred people, we shout. We don't shout outside because there are cameras, but in class we bang on the desks, "we are not terrorists, we are PKK guerillas."

H: Don't you have any decent teachers?

K: No, all of them are scum.

M: They say there's one very good teacher but I didn't see him but they say he's very good.

K: For example the other day a teacher's jacket was stolen, he called us, we're anyway the dirtiest in the school, we have a few more friends, we're all in the same class, he called us, said if you don't bring my jacket back I'll have you kicked out of school. There is a DTP supporter girl, probably all her family is from DTP, she held the teacher's bag, the teacher beat her up and she beat the teacher up. I saw the teacher crying and we shouted a slogan, "we're not thieves, we're students." As we were going out the door, I kicked him, he fell down, didn't see us, everybody split. I shout next to him, I support Apo, he says I'll get you kicked out of school, but can't do anything either.

All these quotes indicate that the school has become a field of struggle for teachers and students. The presence of these children at school, their discussions, political motivations not only disrupt the spatial organization of the school as a state institution, but also challenge the foundations the school or education constructs itself upon. Only one of the children I interviewed stated that he would continue his education after primary school. And he said that the reason he wanted to continue going to school was because he wanted to be a lawyer, because Kurdish people need lawyers since they are constantly arrested. Other children said that once they finished the compulsory primary education they would not go back to school. So these children either completely reject education or they want to continue because they think they can use the education they receive in school to support the Kurdish movement.

Violence and Freedom

Violence is a constitutive element in all social relations in the neighborhood. Everything, including bodies, is made sense of in reference to violence and violence becomes a way of life. What's more, the language of violence is the only language children have. The narratives of all children begin and end with stories of violence. Thus violence becomes the primary theme of narratives. According Paul Ricoeur, "the event is not what happens. The event is that which can be narrated" (cited in Feldman, 1991: 15). And in this context since violence determines what can be narrated and what is not worth recounting, it also constructs the structure of the narratives. One of my initial questions at the interviews pertained to where the interviewee was from and why they migrated. Since the village is coded and remembered as the space where state inflicts violence, everything related to the village and migration is framed by state violence:

Berivan¹²: I don't remember much but I remember they beat up my parents in the house. They searched the house inside out, took away the books, tapes they found, everything. They burned all those books they found right before our eyes. Well, for example we had photos, our albums, pictures from the mountain, they burned them all. Horrible things happened. They were plainclothes cops and at the time those were very cruel. You didn't know when they would come. They'd come trashing in, kicking down doors. And the moment they beat my mother I can remember even now. They pulled my mom's hair, beat up my father. It really offended me. They dragged my older sister out like this. I remember. They stayed in jail one night. My sisters and brothers were tortured there.

Kuto: They bombed my grandpa's village, launched rockets. Two years ago we went you know, and this happened three-four years ago. And my grandpa died last you know, it

¹² Berivan is the only one among the children I interviewed who was not born in Adana. Her family is from Mardin. When Berivan was eight her family migrated to Adana due to the military oppression in their village. She goes to primary school and works at a hair dresser.

was about a year ago, the soldiers had planted mines, I mean to shoot the guerillas, and then as a passenger minibus was passing through, my grandpa was in it, we also had another relative, like four people died there. Then my younger uncle, if he lived now he'd be like thirty, they threw him in a well. They raided my grandpa's house, for you know aiding and abetting, they fed those on the mountains and stuff, they came, raided, and my uncle was playing by the well, they pushed him, he tripped on the fence, he tripped and fell into the well.

However the language of violence is not only used in the village narratives, but also when talking about the urban space, due to the violence experienced at the police station, the school, at home and on the street. Yet the narration of the violence in the village (the past) is very different from the narration of the violence in the city (the present). Even though the children have not experienced it themselves, they employ a language of victimhood as they coherently and lucidly describe the past events of village burnings, torture, death and loss of everything. In these stories while Kurdish people are depicted as the objects of violence, the state appears as the subject of violence. As I mentioned before, the reason why these stories are told over and over again in the same way is that this blatant state violence creates the legitimate ground for the children's present politics. On the other hand, even though the experiences of children in urban life are not so different from the experiences in the village, today's hardships are expressed with considerably more difficulty. Children have a preset language, collectively formulated and transmitted stories, that is, an entire repertoire to depict the state oppression in the past. However, they have no such repertoire, preset language or narrative to convey the hardships of the present; they need to create their own language and stories. Thus things pertaining to the present are either told in fragments or not conveyed at all. What's more, children construct themselves as both the object and the subject of violence in their narratives. Thus, the language they employ is not one of victimhood, but to the contrary, one of resistance to injustice. Yet this injustice refers not to the present but rather to the past. In other words, children say that their struggle is against the injustices their parents or the Kurds in general have suffered in the past.

The children mobilized within the Kurdish movement organize various demonstrations and actions. Since, compared to the past, it is now youth and children who are more active in politics, the police are more focused on these groups. Thus the children are routinely subject to police violence:

Berivan: They constantly raid houses during demonstrations... They were insulting. The words they used, the cursing, such ugly curses no one would use, really. As if we are abandoned, helpless. Actually if DTP party was not behind us, it's like we're abandoned... Plainclothes picked us up at school, we went in cuffs and stuff, what they asked at the interrogation: so who will save you, the party? That's the question they asked, they said are you going to the party, anyway, you can't even say yes, they didn't give us a chance to respond, and of course they beat us up some. We've got used to getting beat up by them, seriously.

Most of the children spoke about how they felt abandoned in state institutions such as the school and the police station. On the other hand, DTP appears as an institution that gives them a sense of belonging and protection. In arguments and fights, while Turkish children threaten to turn in Kurdish children to the police, Kurdish children threaten to turn in Turkish children to DTP. Since being in custody and under arrest have become prevalent experiences for children, the routine police violence creates an antagonism between the state and the children. Because their encounters with the "others" outside the neighborhood are shaped by violence, what they deemed worthy of telling me as a researcher mostly consisted of stories of violence.

Erhan: For example one day I hadn't gone to the demonstration but I got caught, just like that, without asking any questions they attacked me.

H: How old were you then?

E: I was eight. Even when I was eight they took me without asking any questions, I stayed in custody for two days. Then even though I was eight they took me in custody. It

was offensive, and then I stayed in for four months when I was 12. I stayed in jail for four months.

H: When you were in custody those two days, do you remember them?

E: Staying in custody two days, I mean, time not passing, without really knowing what, you get offended, to that degree. I mean it really pissed me off, those two days, two days, I mean even if it were just half an hour, being arrested when you're right, that enraged me.

H: Did you go to demonstrations after that, after those two days?

E: I didn't quit, I participated again, I mean because it offended me, I participated in all.

H: You were also arrested when you were twelve, what happened then?

E: Then we had a hearing and stuff, we went to trial, we had a lawyer, a lawyer, the lawyer talked, I mean they threw me in jail without evidence. You know they took me to court, prolonged it intentionally, prolonged it a day, you know since I am Kurdish, they anyway asked are you Kurdish, I said I am, I mean I'm not going to shrink.

H: So you stayed for four months, right, how was that?

E: Time wouldn't pass, we couldn't defend ourselves, we got more and more enraged, against them, them holding me here, at that age I shouldn't even be in jail, there is no such law, I mean imagine, there is no evidence anyway and what's more you can't even vote till you're 18, so this means you don't have the capacity to, if I don't have the capacity, then you have no right to put me in jail. If I can't vote they don't have the right to put me in jail, if they arrest me then I should vote. I mean then let me vote as well. Let me vote, so I can go to jail but I can't vote. When I first got out (of prison) time passing very quickly, you know being able to go where you want, it's something to stay inside but going around as you please, that's also something.

The political violence in the neighborhood is not limited to this: The police regularly raid houses. Actually almost all the children I spoke with in the neighborhood have also been taken into custody or were arrested at least once for thievery and fights.

The school is also one of the spaces where children are subject to violence. All the children recounted how they have been beaten by teachers for their political opinions and practices. Moreover, Kurdish children are taken into custody, and are even arrested because of the slogans they write in their notebooks, political discussions with their teachers and fights and quarrels between Turkish and Kurdish students. Plainclothes and uniform police go around the main streets of the neighborhood at all hours throughout the day and stop children for random identity checks.

Erhan: I don't know, the police ask for ID cards out of the blue, for example he asks, did you go to jail for politics, for this or that, they say they trick you, don't they. They give you money to do this, they say, yet it's all lies, I mean they're making things up, they give you money, they you this and that. They say for instance, the child is on trial, he says I did it for money, but it's a lie, it's police pressure. It's all pressure, all a lie, for example he says I caught your friend as well, I know this very well, they immediately throw bait, I caught your friend, he gave your name they say, I say bring my friend and we'll talk then. Bring him if you caught him.

The violence in the neighborhood is not confined to the school, the police station or the street, and neither are the police and nor other representatives of the state the only ones who exert violence. Violence has spread to all spheres in the neighborhood; it is also a defining element of family relations.

While children of families subject to forced migration are born into an environment where displacement is amplified by other forms of violence in the city, parents undergo a second defeat in the city as they have difficulty in adapting to urban life. During the field research, I observed that in most forced migrant families the father did not work, and children provided for the family. The reason why fathers don't work is that while they had a certain status in the village, they've become unskilled workers in the city. Job opportunities for them are very limited as well: they work in construction, sell produce at open markets or become street vendors. And most fathers

do not want to work because they think these jobs are humiliating. However, children have more job opportunities as they can work as apprentices at barbershops, carpenters and tailors. Also since children go to school, they speak better Turkish than their parents, and undertake significant bureaucratic responsibilities for the families such as paying bills, preparing the necessary documents to collect aid distributed by the governorship or municipality. Since some parents know no Turkish, their children take them to the hospital. All of these put children in a position of power inside family relations. Furthermore, since children regard themselves as more political than their families and are in fact more active in politics, a form of familial relationship we are unaccustomed to emerges. Children think their families have been intimidated and silenced by state violence. However, children share the information that the state oppresses Kurdish people through the media, and in particular the internet. According to them, unlike their parents this knowledge of oppression leads to rage against the state. At the same time fathers who lose their status and power within the family exert more violence on the children to reestablish their authority. Most of the children I spoke to said that they were often beaten up by their fathers:

Murat: When my father hit, he'd jump on the sofa and hit, jump and hit. He was overweight, and large. He'd hit me in the stomach, does it hurt, he'd say, when I said it did, he'd hit me more. He says, where does it hurt, where, I say here, then he hits, bam bam (laughs).

Children themselves become inflictors of violence. In response to the violence directed at them, they exert violence on their teachers, the police, even their families. Violence thus becomes the determining factor of children's experiences and the basic structure of their narrative. Interestingly enough children offer rational explanations as to why they become subjects of violence: For them violence is the only way to avoid more violence.

Erhan: What's the police to do, if you don't resist, if you shrink before them, they'll begin to crush you. When you resist, they can't do anything. If you don't resist, the police beats you up, comes to your house and beats you, if you resist they know you're not scared, they can't do anything. So if they swear you should swear right back. But if you're scared, they crush you more. They do more. And the police are also surprised, they're surprised, how can they shout back at us at this age. I mean, you know they are surprised, how can they push back, they are surprised. There is surprise and there is fear. You know, if they are doing this at this age, what'll they do in the future. Anyway they fear children the most. The police, when I first went in, in front of the school anyway the police hit one of my relatives, we fought with the police, so we aren't afraid of them. I mean they hit one of us, get their club and hit us, we take the club and beat him up. It happened many times, we even crushed one's head, we were taken to court for it.

Murat: The teacher is afraid of Erhan (Erhan walks in at that moment), no Erhan, I have nothing against you the teacher said.

E: You know that teacher, I beat that teacher up. We're in class, now he's walking around the kid next to me, you know looking for an excuse to beat him. He came and went, came and went, the kid did something, he immediately walked towards him, was going to beat him, just as he was about to hit him, I hit him. Since that year he doesn't touch me.

Kuto: The other day you know there is a ruler, aluminum, now we were talking with friends, I said something, I saw the entire class was laughing. I gave the finger behind her, ooo she said, the woman hit me, hit me, hit me, it didn't hurt, finally I looked, it hit the bone, I got angry, I got up, held her hair, slapped her, come touch me again I'll hit you more I said.

Beating teachers is the only way to avoid being beaten by teachers. Attacking the police (or not being scared of them) is the only way to avoid police violence. Children devise these strategies based on their own everyday experiences. For example they have learned from experience that if they fall down as they are beaten by the police, they'll get hit more. Their joining or wanting to

join gangs is also directly linked to this situation because they think if they have the gang behind them no one will dare touch them. In this context these children most of whom smoke hash, voluntarily assume the identity of a psychopath identity when need be. This psychopath identity awards them an immunity among family and friends. At the same time the children also inflict violence upon themselves. One indicator of this is the countless razor marks on the arms of most children in the neighborhood. They also scratch the skin on their arms with matches and write words like “hate,” “rage,” “revenge.”

It should be noted that the children also feel a sense of belonging to the neighborhood via violence and struggle. With their demonstrations, conflicts on the street and their political groups they make the neighborhood –and in the respect the city– their own. I asked them if they wanted to go back to their hometowns:

Erhan: I’d stay here (Adana), you know I’ve set up everything here, I mean I got to know my people, I mean I wouldn’t leave the people I’m together with. The party things, my friends, that’s why I can’t leave.

Erhan says he does not want to return to his hometown because he can’t leave his people and the party, yet the hometown he speaks about is Diyarbakır, which is considered the capital of Kurdistan and the center of Kurdish politics. However, it’s not just Erhan who thinks this way, none of the children I interviewed or talked with want to go back to their hometowns. This does not only imply that the Kurdish movement has transcended the borders of Kurdistan, it also shows that, as I mentioned above, Kurdishness is not defined in reference to a piece of land (or language) but with struggle. If Kurdishness is a resistance for these children, then Kurdistan signifies not a resistance but a defeat. As I previously noted, the village is defined and recounted by them only as a space where the state exerts violence. Yet Gündoğan neighborhood is recalled and narrated as the center of a large resistance and a rebel PKK region. Thus the children feel a belonging to Gündoğan, but they also say they are fighting to found Kurdistan. Where is this Kurdistan? Where will this Kurdistan be founded? I think Kurdistan no longer signifies a specific region; it rather transforms into an empty signifier that is always a bit distant for the children.

Until now I tried to depict how children become both the subjects and objects of violence in a neighborhood where all relationships are defined through violence. If a non-violent space and non-violent relationship cannot exist in this environment, how are we to understand the children’s politics constructed around violence? If children render the urban space their own through violence and struggle, and can exist through violence, what is the relationship between violence and freedom? And in this context how can we conceptualize violence and freedom? I will try to respond to these questions with reference to Georges Bataille.

Bataille argues that what defines a society is not production relations as claimed by Marxists, but rather the consumption relationships, that is how the surplus energy produced (“accursed share”) is consumed (Noys, 2000: 103). According to Bataille, the struggle for sovereignty is actually a struggle about how the useless and thus consumable “accursed share” is consumed. Along this line, what constitutes the accursed share in the society I am trying to depict? The foundation and operation of capitalism is linked to the control of demographics. Joost Jongerden argues that the modernization of Turkey is a geographic project because since its outset, the minority population has been forced to migrate from one place to the other with the aim of establishing control and producing Turkish citizenship (Jongerden, 2007: 281). In this context, the Turkish nation state (and the Ottoman empire in its final period) has constructed itself through its mode of intervention to the minority population, which it has regarded as a surplus. We always see Kurdish people being accused of having too many children. In other words, Kurds are accused of having more children than they can productively consume. Kurdish children constitute a surplus neither the state nor the society can consume productively. They are perceived as excess since they are not considered to bear the potential to reproduce either the state or the family. On the other hand, according to Judith Butler bodies which are constructed in public space as social phenomena bear traces of social life entailing various conflicts and struggles (Butler, 2005: 26). In this respect, Kurdish children’s bodies become the transmitters on which the violent history of the Kurdish people, PKK’s struggle in the cities, and the “future” dreams of Kurds are

ingrained. And this reveals the reason why Kurdish children are feared and loathed so while childhood is associated with innocence. Kurdish children in urban space become the source of the demographic fear of Turkish society. Symbolizing the increasing Kurdish population, they become a “demographic ticking time bomb” for the Turks (Collins, 61). And for this reason, the bodies of Kurdish children become a site of struggle. While the state tries to control these bodies perceived as objects of fear, children claim their own bodies and assert sovereignty over them through their practice.

Drawing a link between sovereignty and freedom, Bataille analyzes how oppressed people are liberated by performing sovereignty. According to Bataille, violence’s potential to transcend boundaries and norms places violence at the heart of all kinds of struggles for freedom (Noys, 66). Since sovereignty only comes to be through violence when boundaries are trespassed, actually the moment of violence and the moment of freedom are the same thing. Thus Bataille states that the liberation of the oppressed is only possible with sovereignty and violence, as violence corresponds to the moment when the oppressed confront those in power, risk their lives and thus transcend the norms of the sovereign (*ibid.*). When a person comes to the point of “nothing to lose,” when he sacrifices all that is holding him captive, including his own body, he consumes his own energy and attains the inner experience of sovereignty and thus becomes free (French, 2007: 115). Because when the oppressed transgress norms, when they break off the production relations in which they are produced and reproduced, they also break the mechanism that consumes them. However, the moment of freedom and the moment of defeat come simultaneously because violence that transcends all norms is also a form of self-destruction. Therefore, “waste is a tragic and lived experience” (*ibid.*, 24).

In this neighborhood I am trying to portray, the state asserts its sovereignty by transgressing all norms, and controlling children’s bodies with violence, torture and arrest. On other hand, children constantly perform “there’s nothing left to lose.” While the sovereign is trying to decide how to consume these children it regards as a surplus, children reassume control on how their bodies will be expended by transforming their bodies into both subjects and objects of violence. By transforming their bodies into objects on which they inscribe “hate” and “rage”, by hurting themselves, they turn their bodies into the embodiment of the rage and hatred towards the state and existent order. Thus, they surpass all norms in the performance of expenditure.

Conclusion

It is interesting that this mobilization of Kurdish children that is on Turkey’s agenda has started after the end of the “low-intensity conflict.” How are we to read this radical mobilization of Kurdish children in the context of the 2000s when negotiations between the EU and Turkey gained momentum; reform packages for democratization and minority rights were introduced; particularly in the increasingly hopeful atmosphere of recent years when the feeling that “we’ve never been closer to the solution of the Kurdish problem” is prevalent and the “Kurdish opening” has created hope in everyone? I think this discrepancy necessitates asking the following questions: What really is the Kurdish problem? How can the Kurdish problem be resolved or is there a solution to the Kurdish problem? Apart from the issues expressed in the language of macro-politics, what are the problems encountered in everyday life?

Erhan: Our resistance to it (the state) will always be there. Even if it doesn’t happen, if we can’t succeed, if we can’t win anything, I mean we’ll always resist.

The radical stance of Kurdish children against the state; their struggle nourished by rage and desperation as opposed to a liberal hope; their refusal to engage in a rational negotiation with the system can make possible the imagination of an alternative politics. However, as Kurdish children are constructing a political subjectivity without protecting themselves, accepting all risks and surpassing all norms, and in this context experiencing actual freedom in Bataille’s terms, they are also being subject to open state violence by getting arrested, being tortured and killed in this environment where power is divided unequally.

For Kurdish children the reason behind their oppression is the state and its institutions. Yet as they are struggling against the state, they also transgress the norms of their families, even those of the Kurdish movement. They do not reject the Kurdish movement; they define themselves within the movement and regard Abdullah Öcalan as a leader, a figure who mobilized them. However, they transform the politics of the Kurdish movement from within. What DTP has to forget in order to engage in actual politics –politics of peace, forgiveness, reconciliation and negotiation–, the children constantly remember in everyday life. The history and language they acquire from their families reminds them of state violence each and every day. Their everyday encounters with representatives of the state (police, teachers etc.) reproduce among the children the knowledge that ordinary Turks also play a part in this catastrophe. Even though DTP urges them to forget all these in the name of reconciliation and peace –or perhaps precisely because of it– these shape the children’s conceptions. However, what is significant here is that in the Kurdish movement a different political style emerges in a different generation. And this implies that the trajectory of the Kurdish movement will be shaped by this struggle between different generations. It should also be noted that children’s politics exists on an ambiguous temporal and spatial ground, therefore neither the state nor the Kurdish movement can understand this politics. On the one hand this politics defies norms, boundaries, social and legal laws. On the other, these semi-autonomous organizations produce alternative practices and discourses without rejecting Kurdish organizations or the representatives of the Kurdish movement. Even if they use the same slogans as the movement, they imply different things. For example one child says they fight for Kurdish identity. When I asked him what he meant by Kurdish identity, he said that their identity cards should read “the Republic of Kurdistan” and they should have their own country.

The political subjectivities of Kurdish children points to the possibility of an alternative politics that can transform the demands and the political discourse of the Kurdish movement. Furthermore, Kurdish children’s stories present us with possibilities to re-conceptualize freedom and struggle: Freedom and struggle is not achieved through the language of reconciliation and victimhood, but rather through violence and sovereignty.

Translated from Turkish by Liz Amado

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