Generation in debt: Family, politics, and youth subjectivities in Diyarbakır

Leyla Neyzi and Haydar Darıcı

Abstract

This paper investigates the political subjectivities of Kurdish youth in Diyarbakır through the interplay of kinship and politics. We argue that it is through a framework of kinship that young people make sense of the Kurdish issue. We show that the war between the Kurdistan Workers' Party (*Partiya Karkerên Kurdistan*, PKK) and the Turkish military has reshaped the Kurdish family, leading to a crisis in the life cycle. We suggest that the young feel indebted to the Kurdish movement, which they express using the term *bedel* ("debt"). Debt is related to the family, as the individual becomes indebted as part of a kinship group. We argue that the expansion of public space in Diyarbakır has created alternative ways of paying debt and doing politics.

Keywords: *War*; *violence*; *kinship*; *gender*; *Kurds*; *Turkey*.

Introduction

In the early 1990s, the Kurdistan Workers' Party (*Partiya Karkerên Kurdistan*, PKK) was the hegemonic power in Northern Kurdistan. As it was predominantly young men and women who joined the guerillas, Kurdish youth came to be viewed as potential guerillas both by the state and by their parents. There was a rumor circulating at the time within families, which included many illiterate mothers, that young people were reading a book that controlled their minds, making them join the guerillas. The young generation today refers to these youths as a legendary "lost generation," as many lost their lives or were incarcerated for long periods.

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Based on oral histories and ethnographic fieldwork, this paper investigates the subjectivities of the current generation of young people, who grew up in a different context and yet whose lives have been deeply affected by this violent history. We argue that Kurdish youth construct their life narratives around a form of sociality where the family constitutes the core, as it is through their family's experience that they make sense of both their own personal histories and of the Kurdish issue. As will be shown, the war between the PKK and the Turkish military reshaped the Kurdish family, resulting in a crisis in the life cycle. We suggest that young people feel indebted to those who sacrificed themselves for the emancipation of the Kurds, a relation of indebtedness framed around the notion of *bedel*. Debt is related to family inasmuch as one is indebted not individually, but rather as part of a kinship group. We argue that the expansion of public space in Diyarbakır has created alternative ways of paying debt and, hence, of doing politics.

Ethnographic context

The research for this paper was conducted in the city of Diyarbakır. Located in southeastern Turkey, Diyarbakır has long been a symbol of both resistance and fear in the public imaginary. Diyarbakır has historically witnessed upheavals and state oppression that accompanied these two different imaginaries.[1] Over the last two decades, following the internal displacement of its rural population, Diyarbakır has become associated with migration and poverty. The population of the city increased dramatically when the state burned villages under the state of emergency regime of the late 1980s.[2] Forced migration aimed at depriving the PKK of rural support.[3] Hundreds of thousands of displaced people from throughout the Kurdish region migrated to live in the periphery of cities, where violence then took on new forms.[4]

The landscape of Diyarbakır changed during the 1990s with the transformation of the strategies of the PKK. Rather than establishing a separate Kurdish nation-state, the PKK now aimed at becoming a democratizing force in Turkey.[5] This shift in strategy, together with the unilateral ceasefire

1 Uğur Ümit Üngör, *The Making of Modern Turkey: Nation and State in Eastern Anatolia, 1913–1950* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).

2 Dilek Kurban, Deniz Yükseker, Ayşe Betül Çelik, Turgay Ünalan, and A. Tamer Aker, *Coming to Terms with Forced Migration: Post-Displacement Restitution of Citizenship Rights in Turkey* (İstanbul: TESEV, 2007).

3 Joost Jongerden, *The Settlement Issues in Turkey and the Kurds: An Analysis of Spatial Policies, Modernity and War* (Leiden: Brill, 2007), 283.

4 Miriam Geerse, *The Everyday Violence of Forced Displacement* (Amsterdam: Rosenberg Publishers, 2010).

5 Abdullah Öcalan, *Bir Halkı Savunmak* (İstanbul: Çetin Yayınları, 2004).

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declared by the PKK, resulted in the legalization and institutionalization of the Kurdish movement.[6] Thereafter, Diyarbakır transformed into a laboratory where alternative solutions to the Kurdish question were experimented with. Through the emergence of political parties, NGOs, centers of culture and the arts, and the like, Diyarbakır acquired a new public face.[7] The expansion of public space in the city multiplied the modalities of politics and helped create a milder political environment. However, the mass uprising that occurred in 2006[8] and was led by working-class youth suggests that this public space was not available to and perhaps not desirable for all. Furthermore, the ongoing imprisonment from 2009 to the present of Kurdish mayors, lawyers, NGO workers, journalists, members of the Peace and Democracy Party (*Barış ve Demokrasi Partisi*, BDP), and the like through the KCK operations[9] demonstrates the fragility of this public space. The irony is that the legal realm that had been enlarged in part through the struggles of the Kurdish movement was now being used against it, as the state now used jurists—not, as in the past, paramilitary forces—to deal with the Kurds. Legal institutions thus became archives where Kurds' "illegal" activities were documented. In this sense, public space made the problems and demands of the Kurds visible as well as making Kurds identifiable.

Youth subjectivities, family, kinship, and gender

In our interviews in Diyarbakır, rather than direct the interviewees, we encouraged them to frame their own narratives and performances. In structuring their narratives, they tended to refer to family and kinship relations within the Kurdish community. Suad Joseph uses the term "familial self" to point to the strong connection between the formation of the self and the family in the Middle East. She argues that traditional norms valuing the family over the individual helps to create a relational self that "achieves meaning in the

6 Zeynep Gambetti, "The Conflictual (Trans)formation of the Public Sphere in Urban Space: The Case of Diyarbakır," *New Perspectives on Turkey* 32 (2005): 43–71; Cengiz Güneş, *The Kurdish National Movement in Turkey: From Protest to Resistance* (London: Routledge, 2012).

7 Gambetti, "The Conflictual (Trans)formation."

8 In March 2006, tens of thousands of children and young people started a mass uprising in Diyarbakır that was first triggered by the news that the Turkish army had killed fourteen Kurdish guerillas using chemical weapons. Clashing with the police for days, these young people also stoned workplaces, banks, and the like in Diyarbakır's wealthiest neighborhoods, which shows the class-based dynamics of the uprising. During these demonstrations, ten people were killed by the police, nine of whom were children and young people.

9 The so-called KCK operations were police operations conducted against political activists, academics, journalists, lawyers, members of labor unions, and so on who allegedly had ties to the illegal organization the Union of Communities in Kurdistan (*Koma Civakên Kurdistan*, KCK).

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context of family."[10] In her classic study on Kurdish kinship, Lale Yalçın-Hackmann showed the prominent role of family and tribe in the creation of meaning and subjectivity within the Kurdish community.[11] It is significant that this work was carried out before the conflict between the PKK and the Turkish army began. Handan Çağlayan's more recent work has shown that family continues to be a central point of reference for subjects both during war and in its aftermath, though in a different way. The attachment of Kurdish individuals to their family or tribe has become increasingly informed by the struggle between the Turkish state and the PKK.[12]

Our research has also shown how kinship as a form of relatedness is remade in the face of violence and poverty. In the Kurdish context, the family is inseparable from politics because both the victimhood that stems from state violence and resistance to the state are experienced in the familial realm. In other words, the "battlefield" of this war has come to be the intimate life of the Kurdish family.[13] Kinship, then, becomes about absence as much as presence, as it is the loss of family members that makes individuals belong to the family. Therefore, family lies at the center of young people's narratives in the sense that the narrator's life story functions, to a great extent, to tell the story of the family. We thus situate Kurdish youth subjectivity within the family.[14]

We also argue that the war has shaped the age, kinship, and gender system by transforming established categories of motherhood, fatherhood, and childhood, signifying a rupture between generations and a crisis in the life cycle. The unraveling of these categories leads young people to occupy a liminal space wherein they are neither adult nor youth.[15] There are three main figures in the narratives of youth which demonstrate this transformation: powerless fathers, mythologized mothers, and heroes—the last mostly those who sacrificed themselves for their community. In Northern Kurdistan, gender roles in a patrilineal and patriarchal society were revolutionized by the PKK, given the socialist ideology of the party and the entry of large numbers of young women

10 Suad Joseph, *Intimate Selving in Arab Families: Gender, Self, and Identity* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1999), 9.

11 Lale Yalçın-Heckmann, *Tribe and Kinship among the Kurds* (New York: P. Lang, 1991).

12 Handan Çağlayan, *Analar, Yoldaşlar, Tanrıçalar* (İstanbul: İletişim Yayınları, 2007), 168.

13 For a similar phenomenon in the case of Sri Lanka, see Sharika Thiranagama, "The Self at a Time of War in Northern Sri Lanka," *Journal of Historical Sociology* 26, no. 1 (2013): 19–40.

14 For an invaluable depiction of the Kurdish family in Diyarbakır, see Doğan Güzel's comic strip *Qırıx*; Doğan Güzel, *Qırıx* (Diyarbakır: Avesta Yayınları, n.d.).

15 This phenomenon is indeed not unique to Turkey. According to Dhillon and Yousef, neoliberal policies resulted in a crisis in the life cycle throughout the Middle East. This life-cycle crisis is one of the reasons behind the Arab Spring, as young people have been at the forefront of the recent uprisings in the region; see *Generation in Waiting*, ed. Navtej Dhillon and Tarik Yousef (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2009).

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into the guerilla force.[16] As leaders of the Kurdish movement, fighters, and martyrs, young people became the engine of society, challenging the elders.[17]

During the late 1980s, the Turkish state established the village guard system and supported the fundamentalist organization Hizbullah in order to mobilize segments within the Kurdish community against the PKK.[18] This fragmentation of the community manifested itself in tribal organization and the extended family, as some joined the village guards and Hizbullah while others supported the PKK. Asım, who grew up in a village in Diyarbakır, experienced this fragmentation in his family:

> "This event took place the summer I finished fifth grade. I cannot forget; it was such a strange night. It was August. In Kulp[19] during August, it's usually so hot, there isn't any wind, let alone rain. But a storm I never saw in my life occurred that night. Such wind—it was a wind that blew the roof off our house. I woke up and saw my mother crying. The sound of guns going off, those tracer bullets, luminous bullets. My God, I awoke, tracer bullets flitting about, my mother crying. And it was the first time I saw my father cry, and how … I had never seen him cry, for he was so calm. I thought my father would never cry. My God … his shouting, his cries are still in my ears."

That storm in August serves as a metaphor for how lives and relations changed irreversibly. The sound of weapons that Asım speaks about came from clashes between PKK guerillas and village guards. His father's cousin, who was a village guard, was killed that night by a group of PKK guerillas, one of whom was another cousin. This event affected Asım's father deeply. "It's an event that virtually ended my father's life," he says. His father was very close to the cousin who was killed: they had grown up together, and when Asım's father and

16 Handan Çağlayan, "From Kawa the Blacksmith to Ishtar the Goddess: Gender Constructions in Ideological-Political Discourses of the Kurdish Movement in Post-1980s Turkey," *European Journal of Turkish Studies* 14 (2012); Necla Açık, "Re-defining the Role of Women within the Kurdish National Movement in Turkey in the 1990s," in *The Kurdish Question in Turkey*, eds. Cengiz Güneş and Welat Zeydanlıoğlu (London: Routledge, 2014).

17 Marlies Casier and Joost Jongerden, "Understanding Today's Kurdish Movement: Leftist Heritage, Martyrdom, Democracy and Gender," *European Journal of Turkish Studies* 14 (2012). http://ejts.revues.org/4656.

18 Some tribes were historically allied with the state. The PKK went to war with these tribes when it began its armed struggle. These tribes took part in the village guard system, fighting with the state against the PKK. There were also long-standing blood feuds between families in rural areas, and some families became village guards to establish dominance over their enemies; see Şemsa Özar et al., *Geçmişten Günümüze Türkiye'de Paramiliter bir Yapılanma: Köy Koruculuğu Sistemi* (Diyarbakır: DİSA Yayınları, 2013).

19 Kulp is a town and district in the province of Diyarbakır, located approximately 75 miles northeast of the city of Diyarbakır.

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mother eloped, it was this cousin who helped them. A few years older than Asım's father, he was like an elder brother. Asım recounts that this same cousin used to come to their house every night before going home. He would sit on the stairs, drinking *ayran* (a yoghurt beverage) and chatting with Asım's father.

Asım's father used to go to Antalya, a city in southern Turkey, to work in construction. His life completely changed after he lost his closest friend. He never worked after that event, nor did he ever leave the village: "From that day onwards, my father turned into a villager who just kept a few goats." He was no more than thirty years of age at the time. The family had been planning to move to the city in order to send their children to good schools. Asım's mother had difficulty accepting the fact that her husband gave up everything.

What *did* it mean to be an adult male in Diyarbakır in the 1990s? Anthropologists have pointed out that men have been marginalized globally in the context of extreme poverty. Drug trafficking and urban violence in post-industrial New York[20] and in the *favela*s of Brazil[21] and unemployment in the slums of Delhi, especially for the lower castes[22] have pushed men into the margins. In many areas of the world, norms of masculinity require that men act as protectors and providers of the family.[23] As Veena Das puts it: "The male body seems penetrated by the forces of the market, while the demands of tradition on his masculinity seem too difficult for a man in such a position to fulfill."[24] This is, however, not to assume that there is another context in which fathers really *can* protect the family. As Slavoj Žižek contends, the father can never protect the family from harsh reality in any context: as the symbolic authority, he can merely "generate fantasies" to create a "protective shield of appearance" against reality.[25] What happens, then, is that fathers in certain contexts are not even able to generate fantasies to create such a protective shield, and thereby they lose their position as the symbolic authority. In the Kurdish case, the marginalization of men is largely due to state violence. Nazan Üstündağ, for example, argues that, in the surreal atmosphere of Diyarbakır prison during the junta of 1980, the state inflicted unprecedented violence on Kurdish men in order to undo their manhood. This "ontological war" against the Kurds,

20 Philippe Bourgeois, *In Search of Respect: Selling Crack in El Barrio* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

21 Nancy Scheper-Hughes and Carolyn Sargent, *Small Wars: The Cultural Politics of Childhood* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998).

22 Veena Das, "Modernity and Biography: Women's Lives in Contemporary India," *Thesis Eleven* 39 (1994): 52–62.

23 Ibid., 57.

24 Ibid., 60.

25 Slavoj Žižek, *The Art of the Ridiculous Sublime: On David Lynch's Lost Highway* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2000), 32.

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she suggests, produced two forms of Kurdish manhood: martyrs and betrayers.[26] This antagonism continued after the junta, particularly during forced migrations, with the introduction of the village guard system and the Hizbullah. In villages where the PKK and Hizbullah and village guards and the Turkish military fought, one was forced to make a decision: sacrifice or betrayal. A man either supported the state and its allies—thus betraying himself, his family, and his community—or he sacrificed himself by joining the guerillas. If an adult man did not side with any group, he became even more vulnerable to violence, losing his authority and power in the family. Such men formed a third category: non-agents. Asım speaks about his father:

> "I was in high school then. My father was highly respected, loved, and taken seriously within the family. He's your father; he seems like a god to you. But then I saw how they humiliated him, how he kowtowed to them, how he was scared, you know what I mean? I think of my mother, how it injured her, for her husband is a powerful male figure to her. Think of it, they shove my mother, do a body search—imagine how this injures a man. How not being able to act crushes you. After such a search, once those people were gone, they could not speak to one another for hours, as they were both so ashamed. I too felt then how meek my father seemed."

Another young man from Diyarbakır, Hüseyin, narrates:

> "My mother and father are silent. Everyone is silent. No one can speak. The phones are tapped in any case. Sounds are heard from the back garden. There are people on the roof. We are besieged. The only thing I remember is hiding under a bed in fear until the sound of weapons ceased. That's all I remember. Every single night! For months, every night, every night, every night it continued without a break. They were afraid. Especially during police raids. The police come, attack the house, we can only watch as they tear apart our home. No one can ask, 'What are you doing?' My father cannot ask them what they are doing. They wreck the house and leave. Put everything right; then every night the same thing."

During military operations targeting Kurdish households, soldiers encounter the whole family—the father, the mother, and the children—and so all family

26 Nazan Üstündağ, "Pornografik Devlet, Erotik Direniş: Kürt Erkek Bedenlerinin Genel Ekonomisi," in *Erkek Millet, Asker Millet: Türkiye de Militarizm, Milliyetçilik, Erkek(lik)ler*, ed. Nurseli Yeşim Sünbüloğlu (İstanbul: İletişim Yayınları, 2013), 517.

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members witness the assault. It is a moment that shows well the vulnerability of the family to the state.[27] In such scenes as these, which are common to most of the narratives we collected, the father emerges as the one to blame because he cannot protect the family. Thus, while women and children are depicted as victims of state violence, what marks the depiction of the father is his powerlessness. Powerless fathers also appear in the narratives of young people as objects of hatred. Hüseyin recalls:

> "My father was drinking and gambling. I remember wearing my cousins' cast-offs for the holidays. We used to stand side by side, me with their old clothes, them with their new clothes. It used to make me feel bad. You grow up, get over it. I remember having nothing to eat for breakfast but bread and tea. We suffered a lot. My father wanted to stop drinking but couldn't. He stopped gambling, but couldn't stop drinking. In Silvan,[28] a man who drinks is viewed badly. Drinking is sinful. He's ostracized. Because of my father, because he drank, I was treated badly by my friends. There was a time when I hated him. I used to say, 'He's not my father.' He made my mother suffer a lot. He used to beat her in front of us. I remember him drinking at breakfast. What makes a person drink so much? What kind of trouble?"

These men who experienced violence and who shouldered the burden of choosing a side became alienated from their family. In Hüseyin's narrative, drinking becomes a way to handle an impossible situation. Some interviewees told us that their fathers became paranoid: they would think their children had been killed if they were just a little late in coming home. These men had more trouble than women and children in dealing with violence. They lost the capacity of witnessing as they lost their agency.[29] As such, it is striking that, in the families of which we are speaking, it was not adult men who became witnesses of violent events, but women and children. As we will show below, it was women and children who circulated the stories of violence that opened up a political space for them in Diyarbakır's public.

We contend that fathers are depicted as non-agents—or worse, as a burden—due to their inability to sacrifice themselves., As will be seen in the next section, it

27 Veena Das and Lori Leonard, "Kinship, Memory, and Time in the Lives of HIV/AIDS Patients in a North American City," in *Ghosts of Memory: Essays on Remembrance and Relatedness*, ed. Janet Carsten (Oxford: Blackwell, 2007), 205.

28 Silvan is a district and city in the province of Diyarbakır, located approximately 50 miles to the north-northeast of the city of Diyarbakır.

29 For a discussion of witnessing, see Giorgio Agamben, *Remnants of Auschwitz: The Witness and the Archive* (New York: Zone Books, 2002); and Marc Nichanian, *The Historiographic Perversion* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009).

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is significant that only very few of our interviewees talked about their fathers with respect and admiration. In this case, the father was a martyr, killed by Hizbullah because of his political activities. What does it mean to survive in such a context? In order to answer this question, we need to look at another important figure in young people's narratives: heroes. The interviewees often mentioned someone who played a role in their politicization. This hero figure was usually one of their relatives who had been either killed or imprisoned due to their political activities. This hero/martyr is the antithesis of the father figure. If the father is someone who could not protect his family and became a burden once the family migrated to the city, the hero is someone who sacrificed himself for his/her community. In this context, then, one becomes an agent largely through sacrifice.

Gül, a young woman from Diyarbakır, told much of her life story in relation to her elder brother. When she was six, she was impressed by her brother and his friends, who were PKK militants. This group of young militants spoke a language full of political jargon, which did not make sense to Gül at the time. She did not understand what they were saying and doing, but she was impressed nevertheless—perhaps it was this very mystery that fascinated her. When her brother was arrested and transferred from one city to another, Gül and her parents followed:

> "For me, every trip led to my brother. Because the first trip I took as a child was to see my brother in prison. We traveled so many hours to Malatya[30] to visit my brother. We entered at nine, exited at twelve. Returned by the same route. So many kilometers for those three hours. Sometimes the prisoners would go on strike, refusing to come out for visits. Sometimes the administration created problems. Sometimes you go all that way in vain. For that reason, trips still mean a lot to me. I have a hard time staying in one place more than a month. I guess I still think all roads lead to my brother. Throughout the trip, I would think about what to say to my brother. Let me say this, use this word, stand like this, smile like that. My brother is in prison, he reads a lot, he shouldn't think me ignorant or ill-mannered. I would get through the trip by planning all of this. We used to correspond with my brother, but what a correspondence! At one point, I protested. I had gotten a letter from my brother. Yes, he wrote it, he touched it, but I don't understand a thing. Words that are unfamiliar, that I don't know. I said, 'Elder brother, I don't understand a thing.' He laughed, and then began to write in a more plain, more forthright manner."

30 Malatya is a province neighboring the province of Diyarbakır to the northeast, as well as the capital city of the province. The city is located approximately 150 miles to the north-northwest of the city of Diyarbakır.

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Similarly, the main figure in Hüseyin's narrative was an uncle who joined the guerillas when Hüseyin was two years old. This uncle was a student in medical school:

> "One day he comes home with his friends in a Volkswagen. Says goodbye to everyone. Picks me up, kisses me, says some things I don't remember, and leaves. That's the last time we saw him. My uncle going to the mountains. For me, that's a turning point."

This is Hüseyin's first memory of childhood, along with the sound of weapons. After his uncle joined the guerillas, the police frequently attacked their house. It was in this way that Hüseyin made sense of the Kurdish issue:

> "The police raid our home every night. Because of my uncle. Because he went up to the mountains. Every night without exception. It's midnight, the police come, tear apart the house. They enter with their boots. I remember them yelling, 'You'll see when Apo [Abdullah Öcalan] is caught!' Actually, I didn't even know what Apo was then. I was little. I figured he was a great figure in Turkey. It's only when I grew up that I understood what Apo meant."

What remained of Hüseyin's uncle were his books:

> "He left all his books. His medical textbooks, encyclopedias. I grew up with them. I would open the book, his name was written there. I would read his encyclopedias. No one dares touch those books. He had them bound with care. My cousins were jealous of me. I wouldn't lend them to anyone. I would say, 'These books don't leave this house.' It's still like that. They are in my room in Silvan. I don't even have the heart to bring them here."

Like Gül, Hüseyin was impressed by something he could not make sense of at the time. In this case, it was not political jargon, but scientific books from medical school. He created an image of a hero out of the books in which his uncle had written his name and which were full of his notes. It was this image that guided him.

Another common theme in these narratives concerns mythologized mothers. Women became crucial political figures within the Kurdish movement, particularly after 1980, gaining visibility in multiple political spaces as guerillas, politicians, and activists.[31] This phenomenon is informed both by the ideology of the PKK and the struggle of women to make a space for themselves within the movement. Framed as "killing the man," the PKK's critique of

31 Çağlayan, *Analar*, 87.

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patriarchy is based on the creation of a new manhood (and a new morality) where the male is no longer the authoritative figure in the family. Killing the man also means "killing the power" in the struggle for freedom.[32]

In the narratives of young people, the mother stood in between the father who survived but could not be an agent and the hero who sacrificed herself/himself. When the family moved to the city, it was the mother who kept the family together. In this sense, if the hero sacrificed himself for his community, the mother sacrificed herself for her family. Mothers, therefore, were authority figures in the family. Asım, for example, depicts how his mother's position changed after the tragedy mentioned above: "My father seems like the authority in our home but he is nothing: my mother can bring my father to his knees in a couple of sentences. I never saw my father win an argument. She is an amazing woman." This depiction of mothers is also related to the nationalist discourse in which the woman comes to represent the nation.[33] Mothers who are mostly illiterate and do not speak Turkish are associated with Kurdishness, as opposed to fathers, who learned Turkish through education or military service and whose masculinity was undermined by the Turkish state. It is interesting to see that it is not fathers but mothers who provide a symbolic protective shield for children, in Žižek's terms. As shown by the excerpt below, from the narrative of a young man named Lütfü, the mother who hid her children under her skirts signifies this symbolic protection:

> "If only there had been a camera recording my mother, if only you could have seen it. A woman doesn't care about her own life. She thinks of her children. I understood this that day. We hid under my mother's skirts, the children. She was screaming in pain, saying, 'Don't let anything happen.' How do you describe a woman hiding her children under her skirts? She lived this, I mean."

Furthermore, women became political actors in the (counter-)public of Diyarbakır. Their politicization occurred when their children ended up dead, in prison, or in guerilla camps. Women creating networks of solidarity through their public activities and organizations, such as the Saturday Mothers (*Dayîkên Şemiyê*, *Cumartesi Anneleri*) and the Peace Mothers (*Dayîkên Aşîtîyê*, *Barış Anneleri*), politicized motherhood.[34]

Gül elaborates:

> "My mother had a difficult life. She bore eleven children. My father made her suffer a lot. My mother's life is dedicated to her children. She sacrificed a

32 Mahir Sayın, *Erkeği Öldürmek* (İstanbul: Zelal Yayınları, 1998), 61.

33 Çağlayan, *Analar*, 87.

34 For a similar case, see Diana Taylor, *Disappearing Acts: Spectacles of Gender and Nationalism in Argentina's "Dirty War"* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1997).

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> great deal to raise her children. But my mother is not a meek, passive woman. She expresses herself. She speaks up. My brother was imprisoned for ten years. Since then, my mother attends demonstrations, goes to Ankara as a representative. She disregards her weight, her age. She takes part in hunger strikes for three days. While fasting at Ramadan, feeling faint, my mother does folk dances at hunger strikes."

This was the case for children as well, who gained power in the city as they became economic actors and witnessed the war.[35] The interviewees said that their experiences made them grow up fast. Gül narrates:

> "Would I have wanted another kind of childhood? I don't have such a desire. It contributed a lot to me. We had to grow up real fast and I believe pain adds a lot to you. My friends were my brother's friends from prison. My childhood in Iskenderun[36] … No child would play with me because I was a Kurd! The neighbors did not let their children play with me, but this did not hurt me. I do not see myself as a child. I look down upon them, for I have lived more than them, I have seen more than them. I cry because my brother left, not because someone took my candy."

In their narratives, these young people depict a childhood spent witnessing violence and the political activities of family members. On the other hand, children who were born in the aftermath of forced migration and who grew up hearing about experiences of violence and migration rather than witnessing them are poised to become political actors in the public sphere in Diyarbakır.

In Kurdish families, which tend to be large, the relationship between older and younger siblings is similar to the one between parents and children. Older children, especially girls, raise their siblings and work to send them to school. Semiha, for example, said that, when they first moved to the city, she was the only one in the family working. She wanted to go to school, but decided her brother's education was more important to the family than hers:

> "We say, 'Let him study.' I mean, we make sacrifices. I didn't top up my phone for six months—six months! I mean, I could have put on twenty million liras. But I always said, 'Let my brother have more. Let him have as much as his friends.' I would walk rather than use public transportation,

35 For a detailed analysis, see Neyzi and Darıcı, *"Özgürüm ama Mecburiyet Var"*.

36 İskenderun—the historical Alexandretta—is a city located in the province of Hatay on the Mediterranean coast of southern Turkey.

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giving him my own allowance. He even smoked cigarettes. We said, 'You study. You succeed in the exams. It's alright if we don't have anything.'"

Kinship and the modalities of *bedel*

Bedel, which literally means "paying the price," was a significant theme in youth narratives in Diyarbakır. *Bedel* refers to obligation and loss, to what the Kurdish community sacrificed, particularly in the late 1980s and early 1990s when the war between the PKK and the Turkish military was at its peak. All who identify themselves with Kurdishness are burdened with this historical debt, through which they are expected to build their morality.[37] *Bedel* is a complex reciprocal relationship through which the Kurdish community maintains solidarity within. It involves multiple actors: the Turkish state, the Kurdish community, the Kurdish movement, and the dead. *Bedel* is an ambiguous concept because not all parties agree on what it is, how it should be paid, and between whom it should be negotiated. Moreover, even though it is not a new concept, it gained new meanings and functions with the institutionalization and the legalization of the Kurdish movement. Understanding the political subjectivity of Kurdish youth necessitates analyzing the notion of *bedel*, through which people make sense of politics and familial relations. We contend that *bedel* is located in the familial realm due to the interconnectedness of politics and kinship.[38]

Young people feel indebted to the movement and believe they should reciprocate through political action. The ways that this debt can be paid multiply as the forms of Kurdish politics also multiply. The Kurdish movement includes the guerilla forces, civic politics,[39] and street politics. The guerilla forces, especially after the year 2000, remained a threat forcing the state to negotiate with the movement. Street politics, on the other hand, can be seen as

37 Nazan Üstündağ, "Pornografik Devlet," 523.

38 This historical debt, *bedel*, is a reminder of the discussions concerning the gift in the scholarly literature, particularly in anthropology, where it refers to the ground upon which relationships between individuals and the community as well as relationships between communities are formed (Mauss 1990, Strathern 1988, Munn 1992). Or, in Mary Douglas' terms, "The cycling gift system is the society" (Douglas 1990: xi). For Mauss, gift exchange is an obligatory and reciprocal relationship that is imposed by collectivities and that defines what the collectivity is. However, Derrida (1995) and Bataille (1988), in particular, have challenged the idea of reciprocity embedded in gift theory and emphasized instead the excessive and incommensurable nature of the gift, or a gift without return. Furthermore, even though theories of the gift have mostly concentrated on so-called "primitive" societies, more recent studies suggest that notions of gift and indebtedness are crucial to understanding contemporary societies as well (Appadurai 1986, Piot 1999), as they still exist in different forms—one of which concerns material and other exchanges between the modern state and its citizens (Shryock 2008).

39 For a discussion of civic activism, see Nicole F. Watts, *Activists in Office: Kurdish Politics and Protest in Turkey* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2010).

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a challenge and alternative to civic politics.[40] It is indeed young people, including children, who are at the forefront of street politics. As such, joining the guerillas is not the only option for the young. The formation of a counter-public in the city of Diyarbakır, in particular, made it possible for young people to be political in a variety of ways. The institutionalized Kurdish movement and numerous NGOs exemplify this growing public. However, it is primarily the urbanized, middle-class, and educated youth who have the option of being political in alternative ways, one of which is storytelling. Growing up in a city marked by Kurdish identity and the existence of this public shapes young people's relationship to the past and to the Kurdish issue. They express particular interest in experience and its narrativization. We suggest that youth narratives of violence are more than personal testimonies: they claim authority over recent history by demonstrating young people's embodied experience. Having authority over history due to such experience, the young see the circulation of stories of violence as a transformative political act, as a consequence of which wounds become "the evidence of identity."[41] In this sense, storytelling is a way of paying debt. This form of politics affected our research process in an unexpected way, as our purpose was also to collect stories. As part of our research methodology, we planned to conduct several interviews with each informant. In the first interview, we asked open-ended questions in order to find out what young people themselves preferred to speak about. However, even from the very first interviews, they would tell us complete and detailed life stories, answering questions we had not even asked yet. Thus, young people self-consciously viewed the project itself as a means through which they could tell their stories to a wider public.

NGOs constitute another space where young people can be political and hence pay their debt. Young people are extremely active in the world of NGOs in Diyarbakır. Hüseyin, for example, states that NGOs open up a political space for him. He is currently working with the Community Volunteers Foundation (*Toplum Gönüllüleri Vakfı*, TOG), an NGO active among university students. He believes that the activities of NGOs are more effective than those of political parties because they enable encounters between people of diverse backgrounds. Using a discourse of diversity, NGOs bring Kurdish and Turkish youth together, though they do not focus on the political rights of the Kurds as a community.[42]

40 Haydar Darıcı, "'Adults See Politics as a Game': Politics of Kurdish Children in Urban Turkey," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 45, no.4 (October 2013): 775-790.

41 Lauren Berlant, "The Subject of True Feeling: Pain, Privacy, and Politics," in *Cultural Studies and Political Theory*, ed. Jodi Dean (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2000), 43.

42 Gülgün Küçükören, "Reconstituting the Youth as a Political Category and Neo-Liberal Reason: The Case of Community Volunteers Foundation," (master's thesis, Boğaziçi University, 2010).

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Nevertheless, this creates a space for Kurdish youth to share their experiences with others. As Ahmet, who works for the foundation, says:

> "I don't gain much by sharing my views with those close to me. It's when I share with someone on a distinctly different plane that I myself develop. Respect for difference is one of the principles of this foundation. This makes you feel valued. You don't fear that which makes you feel valued: it draws you in. You feel secure. For me, this is an education in civil society."

Young people also prefer to work with NGOs because they present a less risky space that does not necessitate sacrifice, but rather emphasizes individuality and self-improvement. In their view, their parents are also glad that they work with NGOs rather than engaging in street politics. Kamil explains:

> "My family experienced a great deal, we suffered a lot. They remain aggrieved. My brother, my father lived this way their whole lives. In fact, my father advised us to remain silent even if we were beaten and scorned. For the torture he endured taught him to keep his mouth shut. I am a Kurd, but I will take part in the youth assembly of Muğla. There, I will share in decision-making and fight discrimination. This will also relieve my family. It is the right strategy for me. I don't want to punish others by paying a price myself. Because others don't penalize themselves for me. I don't see myself in the political arena. Because any gains in politics, if you already come from this culture, necessitate paying a heavy price. The risk of imprisonment, being kicked out of school, upsetting your family, condemning them to visit you in prison for years … I don't have the courage to take these risks."

Faruk is a law student in Diyarbakır. He works with several NGOs in the city. His family lives in Diyarbakır, but until the early 1990s they also spent time in their village in the Lice district, where violent clashes took place. Faruk narrates how they left the village due to the violence:

> "As I said, the trauma of migration still haunts me. Sometimes I isolate myself from the outside world. I am still aggressive because of my trauma. I think this stems from the past, the trauma that I experienced when I was five years old … Regarding migration, I think, OK, I was five years old, but it was impossible not to be affected by this trauma."

In his narrative, Faruk uses the term "trauma" (*travma*) repeatedly to the extent that he reconstructs his life story through the notion of

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trauma.[43] He implies that being traumatized is itself a form of *bedel*. He was traumatized during the migration when he was a child, an event that he does not remember but that nevertheless largely determined his life. His narrative functions to prove his embodied experience of violence and, hence, the price he has already paid.[44]

Other young people stated that, since their family had already suffered enough, they were exempt from debt. Elif, a young woman from Silvan who witnessed the violence of Hizbullah when she was a child, said that, because her family had already paid their debt, she preferred to distance herself from politics. To her, not all members of a family have the right to be politically active. There is a limit of sacrifice, and perhaps a division of labor within the family:

> "When you have lost so much, you want to pull back a little. As I said, people are a bit selfish. I mean, at some point they think of themselves. Maybe it's selfish, but this is necessary if we are to attain some happiness at this point. If we were all to be active in politics … It's possible. There's nothing to prevent us. But I would not want my mother to experience this. I don't think I have the right to go so far. I mean, I will still maintain my ideals. It's not a disadvantage for me to have been raised with this culture, to live according to my ideals. Perhaps I will transmit the same culture to my child. Maintaining a personal stance without being used by anyone. I don't have the strength to do more."

Serhat is a 21-year-old man. He works and lives in one of the poorest neighborhoods in the city of Diyarbakır, Xançepek, inhabited predominantly by forcibly displaced Kurds. This is also one of the most politicized neighborhoods in the city. We had a long conversation; he seemed comfortable and was highly articulate. He talked about the neighborhood, his family, and his school years. What surprised us, however, was that he never mentioned political events in talking about the neighborhood. Towards the end of the interview, we asked him whether he attended any demonstrations. His answer changed the direction of the interview. He replied in the negative, but suddenly added that his brother

43 Note that the notion of trauma entered the narratives of the people of Diyarbakır partly because of the NGOs in the city, which view trauma as the main form through which suffering is experienced and represented; see Didier Fassin and Richard Rechtman, *The Empire of Trauma: An Inquiry into the Condition of Victimhood* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009).

44 In addition to his personal experience of trauma as a form of *bedel*, Faruk also talked about his great-grandparents who joined the previous Kurdish rebellions, such as the Shaykh Said rebellion of 1925. This shows not only that resistance is the main theme through which familial genealogy is drawn (as he talked about older generations only through their participation in the resistance), but also that *bedel* is understood within the framework of kinship.

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was a guerilla who had been martyred. He added that his family had sacrificed enough. His answer was a kind of apology for not attending demonstrations. And this was the first time that he had mentioned his dead brother:

> "No, I don't go to demonstrations. I would lie if I said I do. Yet I vote for the BDP [the Peace and Democracy Party (*Barış ve Demokrasi Partisi*), a pro-Kurdish political party]. But I don't attend demonstrations.
> "Why?"
> "I don't know. Many friends of mine joined [the guerillas]. I did not. We sacrificed in the past. One of my brothers was martyred in the mountains. He was a guerilla."

Serhat was one of the few people who did not introduce the topic of sacrifice. He talked about it only when asked about his political activities. He thought that he had a good reason not to: he had already paid his debt to the movement. Serhat's story shows that *bedel* is determined on the basis of family. As an individual, one is not indebted as long as one's family has already paid a price. In the case of Serhat, *bedel* gives him the opportunity to distance himself from the political life of the neighborhood.

The story of Semiha exemplifies the complexity of the concept of *bedel*. Semiha is a 24-year-old woman whose brother was killed by the Turkish military in the early 1990s. Within the Kurdish community, the families of martyrs are respected and given the epithet "family of value" (*değer ailesi*). The municipality, governed by the BDP, has a policy of employing one member of the martyr's family. Since Semiha's family was poor and she was unable to find a job, their relatives consulted the municipality, which agreed to give her a job, but Semiha's parents did not accept the offer. As Semiha recounts:

> "Baydemir [Osman Baydemir, the mayor of Diyarbakır] said that he could give me a job. Yet my parents rejected this. You know, old people know nothing, they are ignorant. They thought that everyone would say, 'They eat their son's blood' (*Oğullarının kanını yiyorlar*). I tried to convince my parents to accept Baydemir's offer, but I couldn't."

Unable to find work in the following months, Semiha ignored her parents and decided to accept the offer. This time, however, the municipality rejected her application on the grounds that she had missed her chance. However, she was offered a job later. In turn, Semiha rejected this offer, as she was offended that her request had been rejected. This story, complicated by the pride and poverty of the family, signifies that *bedel* must be negotiated implicitly. Furthermore, the story shows quite well how the legalization and

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institutionalization of the movement changes the way *bedel* is understood. When the movement also becomes an economic actor, it reciprocates the gift of death with something that has an economic value, in this case with the offer of a job. Within this moral economy, we see an implicit social contract between the masses and the party—in the shadow of other actors; namely, the dead and the state—that calculates what is incommensurable. The contract failed in this case when it was explicitly negotiated and when it acted as a reminder of the fact that the base of the negotiation is the dead son, manifested in the phrase, "eating their son's blood."

Many of the young people we interviewed had a relative who had been martyred. While this experience led to their politicization, some chose to become active in politics while others claimed that their families had suffered enough and could not bear another loss. Bawer, for example, stated explicitly that the death of several of his close relatives was the main reason for his politicization. He recounts how he learned about these events, which occurred before he was born:

> "In my grandmother's house, there were six or seven photographs on the wall. They were photos of my martyred uncles, of family members who had been disappeared. I would go to that room and begin to ask: 'Grandma, who is this?' 'Your uncle.' 'What happened to my uncle?' 'They killed him.' 'The other one?' 'That's your uncle, too.' 'What happened to him?' 'They killed him, too.' 'The other?' 'Him, too.'"

Bawer believes that he is carrying on the mission for which his uncles died. One of his uncles was also named Bawer: he died right before his nephew was born, and his family gave his name to the child as a gesture of respect and love for this martyr. Bawer said that he is honored to bear the name. The death of the uncles is an irreplaceable and unsubstitutable gift, in Jacques Derrida's[45] terms, for their kin in the form of *bedel*. In return, the kin of the dead should give something irreplaceable. The gift of death is one way that different generations of kin relate to each other. As Georges Bataille puts it: "The sacrifice of the self is the most complete gesture of communication."[46] That is why Bawer and many young people in Kurdistan put their lives on the line every day. This gift of death for the youth—as well as their politicization—is made sense of through the interplay between a violent familial history and total dispossession, both material and otherwise, in the present. Thus, a violent past is remembered

45 Jacques Derrida, *The Gift of Death*, trans. David Wills (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995).

46 Michele Richman, *Reading Georges Bataille: Beyond the Gift* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1982).

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through the lens of present (im)possibilities. At the same time, the present is made meaningful and utterable only through reference to the past and, hence, to *bedel*.

Another interviewee, Fırat, is a 17-year-old man who also lives in a ghetto of Diyarbakır. His father was killed by Hizbullah when he was one year old. Even though he never saw his father, he grew up with stories about him. It was his father's death that politicized him. He attends all the demonstrations organized in the neighborhood. His mother used to tell him not to attend, as she thought the family had suffered enough. She herself supports the movement, but did not want to lose her son, especially after her husband's death. She once told Fırat that it is now others' turn to fight, and Fırat asked, "Is my blood more valuable than others'?" Not using the term *bedel*, Fırat never implied that the movement was indebted to his family, as the Kurdish movement is not differentiated either from him or from his dead father. On the other hand, in his view, Kurdish institutions betray the culture of the PKK. One of his anecdotes is of particular interest. Once, he and other young people organized a demonstration close to the city hall. The police attacked them with pepper gas and tried to arrest them. The young people attempted to enter the building, as they thought the police would not dare enter. However, the people working in the city hall closed the doors and did not let them in, so the young people broke down the doors and entered the building by force. In Fırat's narrative, then, *bedel* seems to operate between the dead, the self, and the state. He continues to struggle against the state as a way of paying his debt to his father.

Conclusion

In this article, we have shown that family is at the center of Kurdish youth subject formation. This stems largely from the interconnectedness of family and politics. Thus, the "Kurdish issue" can be traced through the transformation of the family during long-term armed conflict. The way Kurdish youth experienced their childhood and their place in the life cycle is part of the same transformation. Kurdish youth experienced the war and made sense of the Kurdish issue—both state oppression and resistance to state oppression—through what happened to their family, either through transformed familial relations or through heroes in the family. The family is also crucial for the youth inasmuch as the choices they make today and their vision of the future are strongly linked to the familial past and to relations of debt. This debt can be paid in a variety of ways, depending on particular possibilities and impossibilities in the present, on their relationship with this violent history, and on the metamorphosis of the Kurdish movement. If the previous generation is a lost generation, today's Kurdish youth constitute a generation in debt.

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