

Chapter 54

State, Masculinity, and the Aestheticization of Violence: An Alternative Reading of Behzat Ç

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ABSTRACT

Violence is a fundamental bio-sociological phenomenon. It can take many forms including psychological, emotional, economic, gender-based, religious, cultural, and political. The latter is primarily associated with the state. Historically, all states exercised violence in accordance with their law. Thus, law is the codification of violence. State and violence are also associated with masculinity, which is not fixed biological but rather a flexible sociological category. Masculinity is concretized in specific patterns of behaviors. In this perspective, the present study analyzes the famous Turkish TV Series, Behzat Ç: An Ankara Detective Story. It argues that since the Turkish law system could not function of its violence due to the struggles of various socio-political actors within the state, the protagonist, Behzat, aestheticizes and mimics state violence through his masculine performances. That is, state violence is materialized in the masculinity of Behzat who by resorting to violence brings the justice that the state fails to provide.

INTRODUCTION

Violence is a fundamental bio-sociological phenomenon, that Merriam-Webster Dictionary defines as “the use of physical force so as to injure, abuse, damage, or destroy”. However, it can take many forms including, psychological, emotional, economic, gender-based, religious, cultural and political. The latter is primarily associated with the state. Historically, the state-formation was closely related to the capacity to exercise political violence through wars as Tilly’s (1975: p. 42) famous formulation: “war made the state, and the state made war” suggested. This can be complemented by Neocleous’s (2000) argument

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that state's capacity for juridical violence in the form of police power was crucial in the fabricating the social order. There is thus a powerful link between juridical violence and the law enforcement system. Even in its modern, Weberian sense, (2004) the state as a political institution is characterized by its monopoly of legitimate violence. As Poulantzas, (1978: p. 77) argues contrary to liberal misconceptions, law and state violence have never been on opposite sides nor excluded each other. Rather, law should be understood as the "codification of violence". Hence, one of the fundamental characteristics of a state is its ability to enforce the law and exercise violence. A state that cannot perpetrate violence cannot enforce laws and vice versa.

Violence is mostly associated with masculinity (see Robert W. Connell, 2000) while the state has been a patriarchal institution from the start. "The state, for instance, is a masculine institution" (Connell, 2005: p. 73). Yet, this masculinity is not an intrinsic feature: "the state is not inherently patriarchal, but is historically constructed as patriarchal in a political process whose outcome is open" (Connell, 1987: p. 129). Since the state is not a monolithic institution, various parts have specific masculinized relations. For instance, the military and police tend to specialize in displaying "physical aggression" (Connell, 1987: pp. 127–128). Furthermore, "The state both institutionalizes hegemonic masculinity and expends great energy in controlling it." (Connell, 1987: p. 128). The concept of hegemonic masculinity refers to the multiplicity of practices of masculinities. It suggests that, in a given historico-social context, it "was understood as the pattern of practice (i.e., things done, not just a set of role expectations or an identity) that allowed men's dominance over women to continue" (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005: p. 832). Hence, hegemonic masculinity is materialized in specific masculine performances.

Drawing on this perspective, the present study analyzes the state, masculinity and the aestheticization of violence in the popular Turkish television series *Behzat Ç: An Ankara Detective Story* [*Behzat Ç: Bir Ankara Polisiyesi*], (Henceforth *Behzat Ç* refers to the series and *Behzat* to the specific character). This is a Turkish police, crime, drama series that aired on Star TV from September 19, 2010 to May 17, 2013. It then aired for one more season on an on-demand streaming service, Blu TV, during 2019. The series received many positive reviews, being praised as depicting real life situations, as well as criticism for misrepresenting the Turkish police, encouraging violence, alcohol, profanity, extramarital affairs, which some considered harmful to "Turkish family values" (for a detailed description of the delegitimization of *Behzat Ç*, see İşisag, 2015).

The series therefore triggered an intense political debate between secular and left-leaning segments of society and mainly right-wing political actors on whether it should continue. Turkey's Radio and Television Supreme Council [RTÜK in Turkish] fined Star TV because of *Behzat Ç* violating Article 8 Subparagraph h of Law No.6112 on the Establishment of Radio and Television Enterprises and their Media Services that programs "shall not encourage the use of addictive substances such as alcohol, tobacco products and narcotics or the gambling" and Article 8 Paragraph 2: "In radio and television broadcasting services, program that may impair the physical, mental or moral development of minors and young people shall not be broadcast during at times when they are likely to watch and without the presence of a warning symbol". This fine led viewers to support the series with the hashtag #behzat-medokunma [donttouchmybehzatc], a form of "hashtag activism" while fans watched four episodes for four weeks in Ankara's Yüksel Street. Even the Mayor of Çankaya, an important district of Ankara, participated in the activism. Thus, the series left an important mark as a popular cultural product and became a cult classic of Turkish television.

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