

Politicizing Disability/Disablement: A Case of Hunger-Strike/Death-Fast by a Kurdish Political Prisoner in Turkey

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Abstract: Over the past several years, we have been engaged in human-rights/disability-rights activism and organizing with disabled and/or traumatized survivors who have been victims of the state violence (e.g., war, incarceration, forced migration). As we interviewed them, documented their narratives, and/or read their prison memoirs, we re-lived our own past experiences with state violence as two racialized Middle Eastern women who have experienced incarceration in Turkey and Iran. Given our experiences, and being Disability Studies (DS) scholars and feminists, we have developed a new model to approach disability and disablement in the global southern/“third world” contexts. Herein, we narrate a real-life story of incarceration, torture, and hunger strike that has resulted in permanent disability. Following that we introduce our Transnational Disability theory to set the foundation for a historical and dialectical materialist understanding (DHM) of disablement. Finally, we apply the new model to our interviewee’s narrative and analyze it through a DS lens. We end the paper by offering future directions for DS and Ethnic Studies scholars, prison abolitionists, and/or disability-rights activists who are enthusiastic about using the transnational disability approach in theory and political praxis.

Keywords: Kurdish political prisoners, transnational disability model, Turkification, hunger strike, torture

Over the past several years, we have engaged in human rights and disability rights activism – organizing with disabled and/or traumatized survivors who have been victims of state violence (e.g., war, incarceration, forced migration). As we interviewed them, documented their narratives, and/or read their prison memoirs, we re-lived our own past experiences with state violence. As two racialized Middle Eastern women, we have experienced incarceration in Turkey and Iran. We realized that these experiences are common among disabled/traumatized political prisoners across cultures, nationalities, and ethnicities. Given our experiences and being Disability Studies (DS) scholars, we have developed a new theory to approach disability and disablement (especially) in Global South or “Third World” contexts. We have named our approach the Transnational Disability Model (TDM) and one of us has talked about it elsewhere.¹

DS is an interdisciplinary field, which engages with social justice issues concerning disabled people and their participation in society. However, DS rarely engages with *disabling* processes and relations that render people disabled. From the onset, it is important to clarify two current features of DS. First, the prevailing think tanks in this field are largely comprised of

¹ Kazemi 2017.

social constructionist theorists (those affiliated with the approach known as the social model of disability) employing either a cultural or material lens. Second, the most disputed DS model is the medical theory/model. The social model of disability and many other dominant perspectives in the field oppose the medical model or any type of rehabilitation model as they consider them part of a “normalizing” ideology.² On the other hand, racialized people in the global north are rarely part of the discourse in dominant DS, and by extension it’s even worse for marginalized and racialized peoples in the global south such as Kurdish political prisoners. This paper is a politically necessary intervention in dominant theorizations of disability as a Western and global-north “problem.” We aim to transform such theorization toward a more inclusive, transnational, and politicized approach to the damaged or injured human body, disablement, and disability.

In this paper, we narrate and contextualize a real-life story of incarceration, torture, and hunger strike that has resulted in permanent disability. This narrative is based on an interview with a former Kurdish political-prisoner from Turkish Kurdistan. Over the span of 14 years in prison, he survived two death fasts and one hunger strike and acquired several disabilities; and now lives in exile. First, we will tackle how disconnected this case of disablement is from the cases that are often discussed in the DS literature. This shows the Western, white, and bourgeois nature of DS as a discipline.³ Second, we will introduce our newly developed theory including its theoretical constructs to set the foundation for a historical and dialectical materialist understanding of disablement. Finally, we will apply the new model to our interviewee’s narrative and analyze it through a DS lens. We will end the paper by offering future directions for DS scholars, peace educators, prison abolitionists, and/or disability-rights activists who are enthusiastic about using the transnational disability approach in theory and political praxis.

In this paper, we invite you to look at disability not just as an individual biomedical issue, but as a result of exploitative and violent social relations extended through history. In this example, the prisoner uses his body as a weapon to build the struggle collectively and resist adverse and inhumane conditions. We encourage our readers to perceive *acquired-disability-through-violence* as a political problem, not just a biomedical one.

Recep Marasli’s Narrative

Our interviewee is Recep Marasli.⁴ To understand Recep’s narrative, first we need to attend to the historical and political context in which his narrative has taken place. Recep is a Kurdish man who was born in 1960 in Turkish Kurdistan. The Kurds are an ethnic group in the Middle East that constitute the largest non-nation state in the world.⁵ Their homeland, Kurdistan, was forcibly divided among Turkey, Iran, Iraq, Syria, and the former USSR in 1918. It is estimated that more than 40 million Kurds constitute the largest minority group of each state in which they reside. Furthermore, different mechanisms of oppression have operated to deny Kurds their basic human rights and identity which have led to various Kurdish resistance

² Goodley 2013.

³ Bell 2006, Dossa 2008, Erevelles 2011, Gorman 2016, and Meekosha 2011.

⁴ He insisted that we use his real name.

⁵ Mojab 2001.

movements challenging the oppressive states.⁶ It is estimated that between 12 and 15 million Kurds live in Turkey, which is more than a third and by some counts nearly half of the total population of Kurds in the world. Historically, they have been systematically oppressed and discriminated against since the establishment of the Republic of Turkey in 1923. Since the start of the new millennium, Kurdish societies in the four parts of Kurdistan (in the Middle East) have been experiencing what Ofra calls a “quiet revolution to different degrees,” which has, in turn, changed silenced and marginalized communities into active political ones.⁷

Recep Marasli was arrested right after the infamous military coup of September 12, 1980. It is important to provide a historical background to the military coup of September 12, and its impact on both the ‘Kurdish question’ and Turkish prisons in order to have a deeper understanding of the situation of political prisoners of this period. The modern history of Turkey has seen three coups (i.e., 1960, 1971, and 1980) that have changed the course of matters dramatically. However, the last coup d’état on September 12, 1980 has been the most significant one due to its transformative power in the reconstruction of Turkey and its ideological state formation. Since the coup, Kurdish political prisoners have been subjected to state violence, and prisons were used as vessels by which the state reconstructed the so-called “modern” Turkey. Between the military coups of 1971 and 1980, the state continued to build new prisons.⁸ As time went by, the state gained more experience in suppressing its subjects, especially its Kurdish prisoners by inventing new methods to optimize the impact of violence in prisons. In other words, after each coup, the state made significant progress in delivering atrocities on its imprisoned subjects.⁹

The period between the 1980 coup and 1984 was one of systemic tortures, the arrest of thousands of people, and executions. The military period lasted only three years, but its influence on the nation’s history can still be perceived after almost three decades. According to the Human Rights Foundation of Turkey, after the coup, 650,000 people were detained; 6,353 people were sentenced to death; and decisions of execution were given to more than 500 people, 50 of whom were executed.¹⁰ From September 12, 1980 until the end of 1984, 222 people were murdered as a direct or indirect result of torture in prisons. Eleven of them died during hunger strikes, and three of them were murdered because they became sick as a result of torture. Kurdish people were the main “target” of the military coup; 81,000 Kurds were arrested.¹¹

Recep served more than 14 years in prison, out of which six years was spent in the infamous Diyarbakır Military Prison (DMP). Diyarbakır is a prominent city on the eastern side of Turkey where predominantly Kurdish people reside. The distinguishing characteristic of Diyarbakır is that the Kurdish people living there are mostly politicized and affiliated with the Kurdish Movement. It is commonly suggested that the politicization of the Kurdish society of Diyarbakır is related to the atrocities in DMP. This prison, considered to be “one of the most

⁶ Başer 2016.

⁷ Ofra 2016: 5.

⁸ Zürcher 2008, cited in Yarkin 2013.

⁹ Demirel 2003, cited in Yarkin 2013.

¹⁰ HRF of Turkey 1996.

¹¹ McDowall 2000.

notorious prisons in the world”,¹² is where military personnel tortured Kurdish political prisoners systematically and continually between 1980 and 1984. Recep was one of them, captured in 1982 and tortured for years along with other Kurdish dissidents.

Prisons served as scenes for extremely cruel types of torture after the September 12, 1980 military coup d'état. The Turkish state made it clear that the only prisoners who could eventually walk out of DMP were those who were willing to renounce their Kurdishness and take up a Turkish identity instead. Thus, DMP became a site where Turkish sovereignty was exercised using unimaginable violence. Torture techniques in DMP were both physical and psychological: beatings and physical violence; forcing prisoners to memorize the Turkish national anthem; food and water deprivation and starvation; military training; bath tortures; insults; falanga¹³; making prisoners listen to the sounds of torture; banning speaking and looking; forcing prisoners to eat spoiled food; sleep deprivation; plunging into a cesspool; forcing prisoners to confess by torturing them; solitary confinement in cells full of excrement; forcing prisoners to sleep at attention; forcing prisoners to crawl nude in the snow; forcing prisoners to stand for days on end; depriving prisoners of medical care; under-berth torture (forcing prisoners to lie all together under a berth); hanging/Palestinian-hanging; opening windows in winter; forcing prisoners to drink foul water; sexual assault; closing windows in summer; forcing prisoners to eat excrement; blindfolding; electric torture; torture with cigarettes; forcibly inserting a truncheon into the anus; forcing prisoners to pee on other prisoners; rape or threat of rape of prisoners or relatives of prisoners in their presence; obligation to salute the captain's dog (German shepherds trained to bite the private parts of naked prisoners); rat torture; and forcing prisoners to get into a rubber tire.¹⁴

Almost all inmates were Kurdish, most of whom were members or sympathizers of armed leftist organizations, including the Kurdistan Workers' Party, known as PKK. Between 1980 and 1983, approximately 5,000 Kurdish political activists and leftists were incarcerated and tortured in DMP on a daily basis. In 1982, after subduing prisoners and increasing torture on the Kurdish and Persian New Year's Day, known as Newroz (i.e., March 21), one of the members of the leadership of PKK, Mazlum Dogan, hung himself in his cell, leaving three matches on the ground. The PKK, drawing on historical Kurdish symbols and folklore, declared his suicide an act of resistance in the prison. Two months later, four PKK prisoners self-immolated by starting a fire with thinner, plastics, and paint that were used to paint the walls and windows with Turkish flags.¹⁵ They left a letter stating, “this is not a life to live” and urged everyone to follow Mazlum Dogan, and resist humiliation and torture.¹⁶

The prisoners who protested against inconceivable torture, in fact, used their bodies as tools of resistance and struggle. Their stories became epics of martyrdom, heroism, and self-sacrifice. In the aftermath of these protests, on July 14, 1982, the PKK leadership declared an unconditional *death fast* against the torture. This historic death fast lasted for 65 days and ended

¹² Hines 2008.

¹³ A form of torture wherein the soles of the feet are beaten.

¹⁴ Arslan 2011: 42.

¹⁵ Yetkin 2010, cited in Gemici 2016.

¹⁶ Ibid.

with the death of five Kurdish political prisoners. Oguz and Miles define hunger strike as “an action in which a person or persons with decision-making capacity (often, but not always, in prison) refuses to ingest vital nourishment until another party accedes to certain specified demands”.¹⁷ They further explain “[m]ost hunger strikes include the ingestion of some water or other liquids, salt, sugar, and vitamin B1 for a certain time without asserting intent to fast to death.

During the last hunger strike in Turkey, a new term, ‘death fast,’ arose.¹⁸ These deaths brought prison officials to the bargaining table with the prisoners’ leaders. Finally, the prison officials and prisoners reached an agreement to end torture and improve the quality of food.¹⁹ To this list we add the right to defend themselves and to stop being forced to wear the prisons’ uniforms – these latter themes arose as we interviewed Recep. These amendments were enforced in only one of the wards—ward number 35—where the leader cadre’s cells were located.²⁰ This was the protesting prisoners’ first gain, but again, it was limited.²¹

While in captivity during this time, Recep was given electroshock through his toes, nipples, fingers, and legs. In order to protest violent conditions in DMP, Recep as a sign of resistance and in solidarity with his comrades went on a second death fast on July 14, 1984 for 49 days. His and his comrades’ demands were to stop being forced to wear the prison uniform and not having to go through torture. After 45 days, however, he went into coma and lost consciousness. After one person died under death fast, the prison officials agreed to give in to the prisoners’ demands and took three of the hunger strikers, including Recep, to the hospital. While hospitalized, Recep was inadvertently put through incorrect treatment and his condition worsened. One reason for the wrong treatment was that they had no idea how to treat a person who had been starving for almost 50 days. After 50 days, the three were permitted to clean themselves (take a bath), but they couldn’t do it themselves due to the extreme weakness they were experiencing. Recep said “someone washed me for the first time since I was given a bath by my mom as a child.” Recep lost his speech ability, all his teeth, vision, and mobility. It took him three months to partially regain his vision and mobility. However, his speech has never fully come back. Even when we were interviewing him, he had difficulty speaking. In addition to the speech problem, he has a hard time walking and standing upright, which has resulted in him developing a hunchback. Returning to our narrative, after being hospitalized for three months, Recep was taken back to prison while he still needed medical care. In prison, since he still had no vision, his comrades fed him with their own hands and looked after him while he partially recovered.

In modern notorious prisons such as Guantanamo, forced feeding is a technique to suppress hunger strikes. In this way, not only the prisoner’s body is a captive, but also his/her will and determination are subject to scrutiny and incarceration, and all control is taken away. Recep survived two hunger strikes and one death fast in 14 years of incarceration resulting in a speech impediment, post-traumatic stress, mobility impairment, and a hunchback. Additionally,

¹⁷ Oguz and Miles 2005: 169.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Gemici 2016.

²⁰ Ayata 2011b, cited in Gemici 2016.

²¹ Gemici 2016.

he talked about his friends, those who either passed away under extremely adverse conditions, or acquired several different forms of physical and psychological disabilities. Moreover, Recep explained to us that the staff in the hospital didn't know what to do with hunger strikers, so the treatment they provided ended up being more damaging than healing. The unit in which he and his friend were kept in the hospital was a special ward; and the hospital was a military hospital.

Since Recep used his body to resist extreme atrocities and acquired several disabilities caused by those atrocities, we wondered if and how his relationship with his body had changed. He said that once he thought about and remembered those days after approximately 30 years, he couldn't believe that he was only in his 20s when he went through these extremely traumatic experiences. He never used the word trauma or traumatic experience. The use of the word is our choice to show how we perceive his experiences. Neither did he even once give us the impression that he was a hero or that what he did was heroic. He said that he accepted his body the way it was and he thought to himself that he could continue living despite his new (disabled) body. He felt satisfied inside though, as he had been able to convince the Turkish state to give in to some of his and his comrades' demands. This, he thought, was a great achievement and gives him hope that everything can get better eventually, even his body. Recep's torture did not stop even after he almost died under death fast.²² Even after he was discharged from the military hospital, he was again tortured in prison, this time as a disabled person.

Today, Recep lives in exile and has a 70% disabled body,²³ excluding the psychological trauma that he has been forced to experience for years. Recep is 57 years old but looks much older. All his teeth are fake. Every single night, he has to deal with insomnia, for he is afraid to fall asleep in the dark, so he waits until dawn to close his eyes. Nights are scary for him, for they remind him of random nightly beatings and the torture that he has gone through for years. Recep feels guilty for having survived those atrocities while some of his comrades passed away. Survivor's guilt is common among trauma survivors. Recep has acquired brain damage (i.e., concussion), speech impediment, and memory loss. He loses his balance as he walks, as if he is walking on sand all the time. Having completed our brief narrative of Recep's story, we turn to a review of the predominant approaches to disability in current DS literature, and present our rationale for developing a transnational, materialist approach to disability, injury, and disablement.

Why a Transnational Disability Model?

Rejecting Apolitical, Idealist, and Mechanical Difference

Before introducing the new model and applying it to Recep's narrative, let us explicate why we perceive the need to develop such a model. We developed this model as a theoretical intervention and a political response to depoliticized and individualized approaches to disability. There is

²² The families of political prisoners and what they have gone through accompanying their loved ones is one of the under-studied topics in social sciences and sociology. Recep told us that while they were on hunger strike, some of the mothers of the prisoners also refused to eat. We are curious as to what they would have to add to this story, or perhaps they might tell us their own.

²³ According to the German government's measurement system.

a new wave in DS that disfavors materialist analysis of the body or disability. This new wave dismisses the materialism of DS by heavily drawing and relying on the works of phenomenologists and poststructuralist, such as Merleau-Ponty, and posthumanists such as Foucault, Derrida, Butler, Haraway, Deleuze, Guattari, Agamben, Hardt, and Negri, to formulate an embodied subjectivity of the disabled person.

For poststructuralist theorists, nothing occurs outside of discourse, and everything including human experience is mediated by language, meanings, and imaginaries. They focus on disabled embodiment in the context of the local, and in this process, overlook the historical conditions that render some bodies invisible and worthless in the global context.²⁴ Poststructuralists and posthumanist DS scholars eschew socio-economic structures, metanarratives, and experientialism. Unlike them, we believe that we live under *historically*-oppressive social relations such as patriarchy, racism, sanism, heterosexism, and ableism – all embedded in the violent economic structures of capitalism. Our problem with poststructuralist and posthumanist views is that they rarely ‘look’ at disability as a historically and socially organized material condition on a global scale. Instead, they look at disability as a constructed metaphor/fiction on a local level, something that denies sameness outside of economics, something that is individual and discursive.²⁵ This is to say that different categories of identity, such as race, gender, and disability *do not* exist in the outside world and are socially constructed. Simultaneously, this is to deny that the disabled embodiment cannot and does not exist out of the capitalist economy and the global class relations. Humanists/posthumanists scholars hardly historicize disability. They hardly ‘see’ disability in relation to other differences, such as gender and class at a material level.

Erevelles argues, “[w]hile poststructuralist theorists have been helpful in deconstructing humanist norms, they have not been able to explain why these normative structures persist.”²⁶ Therefore, a DHM analysis is needed “to connect ideological constructions of difference to the economic conditions and social relations supported by capitalism.”²⁷ An adequate study of differences is not limited to just studying cultural differences within and among disabled communities throughout the world. Instead, a thoroughly transnational disability study should be embedded in DHM and research the embodied differences that are socially imposed and organized by people through material modes of production. This is because capitalism, which is the dominant economic system in the world, is also a political system, as well as a social web that polices capital around the globe through free trade agreements, International Monetary Fund (IMF) loans, the arms trade, and war.²⁸ Erevelles describes their theorization as follows:

In these theorizations, the disabled subject appears as the irregular and contingent effect of shifting signifiers producing disorganized collections of hybrid associations/assemblages that morph into an

²⁴ Erevelles 2011: 20.

²⁵ Corker and Shakespeare 2002, and Tremain, 2001.

²⁶ Erevelles 2011: 165.

²⁷ Ibid: 164.

²⁸ Wood 1995.

unstable and transgressive Body-without-Organs (BwO)²⁹. No longer marked as abject, these transgressive theories of embodiment fiercely embrace a form of contra-aestheticism (Siebers, 2010) that mocks the normal, rejecting disability's limited role as prosthetic in identity politics, and engaging in the more transgressive political act of 'coming out cripp or crippin' (McRuer, 2006, p. 71).³⁰

Conscious of the danger of invoking an ableist aesthetic, we join Erevelles in arguing that these theorizations are exciting; however, we need to also angle the analytical frame purposefully toward considering the transnational geopolitical and historical contexts that allow and want people to *become* disabled. Grappling with the DS literature for the past several years, we became aware of four geographical and historical gaps in DS. These gaps in the current popular literature are: a) lack of historical materialist understanding of disability and disablement; b) lack of discussion about how disabilities are created; c) lack of discussion about how disabilities historically have been produced by unequal power-relations within and between the two constructed "First" and "Third" Worlds (e.g., war, poverty, environmental destruction, slavery, indentured labor, unsafe working conditions, fascism, colonialism, imperialism, theocracy, nationalism, unethical research/treatment, etc.); and d) ignoring and erasing the disabled residents of the "Third World"³¹ and their experiences of disablement.

To build our new theory, we conducted two case studies of disability production through armed conflicts in Iranian and Iraqi Kurdistan as well as through incarceration in Iran and Turkish Kurdistan. To proceed toward the theory-building process, we examined DS literature against our findings, and the conflicting literature represented an opportunity. The juxtaposition of conflicting results forced us into a more creative, frame-breaking mode of thinking. The result was a deeper insight into both the emergent theory and the conflicting literature, as well as a sharpening of the limits of generalizability of a single case study.³² Eisenhardt argues that an interaction with actual evidence, that is the data arising from a case study, "often produces theory which closely mirrors reality."³³ Our case study was a study of disability in the global/transnational context as opposed to always Western/"First World"/Global North contexts which have dominated the DS literature. By transnational disability cases we mean transnational (i.e., global with or without the interference from nation-states) mechanisms that mediate the ways in which people become disabled on a global scale.

²⁹ Campbell 2009, Goodley and Roets 2008, Kupperts 2009, and Shildrick 2009.

³⁰ Erevelles 2011: 27.

³¹ It should also be noted that "Third World"/majority-world/developing-world/global-south is not a homogenous concept, for it is comprised of several states, lands, nations or even state-less nations (e.g., Kurds, Palestinians), where people speak different languages and practice different cultures, customs, or religions. But they all have in common being overpowered by Western Europe and North America. In fact, beyond national and international boundaries, there is a commonality between them: they are all spaces of extreme exploitation and violence under global capitalist social relations (Erevelles 2011).

³² Eisenhardt 2002.

³³ Eisenhardt 1989: 17.

We were curious to find an answer to our pressing questions: How do social and economic relations mediate mechanisms of disability production, such as war, incarceration, torture, and hunger strike/death fast? What produces and sustains disability/injury in disabled survivors of violence? Building the new theory, based on dialectical and historical materialism (DHM), and using the case study, we extracted several theoretical constructs that are worth discussing here. As opposed to the medical and social models of disability that have only the two significant elements of self and society, our model has five constructs upon which our new theory stands. These important constructs are: *dialectical historicity* (pre-existing conditions leading to unavoidable forms), *class*, *nation-state*, *violence of capital* (or capitalist relations) along with other violent social relations (such as *nationalism* and *patriarchy*), and *ideology*. Let’s define these theoretical constructs thoroughly.

Dialectical Historicity

The first construct we extracted from the case study and put toward building our new theory is historicity. We define historicity as the first construct for the new theory because as scholars with a DHM approach, we are committed to approaching social relations with enormous caution because they are historically specific concepts. To interpret Recep’s story through the TDM, let’s analyze it first using our theoretical constructs one by one. To apply dialectical historicity, we contextualize Recep’s story and studied it in its own historical context. If it wasn’t for the historical context, we would not have been able to detect several ideological constructs that the Turkish regime (just like any other dictatorship) uses to oppress Kurds, imprison them, and torture them. Therefore, we need to look at every phenomenon in its own historical context.

Marx’s science is not transhistorical.³⁴ We can learn about the distinction between historical and transhistorical phenomena through the example of water boiling at 100 degrees Celsius, no matter in which historical era we try to boil it. Social relations such as capitalism are extremely historically specific, meaning they result in particular *forms* according to their *pre-existing conditions*. DHM is the main instrument and protocol for this emerging model, since we analyzed the case study using DHM. According to DHM analysis of the case study, for this emerging model, there are two key pre-existing attributes to consider: ideology and class. These are the pre-existing attributes for all three relations that will be discussed here: nationalism, capitalism, and imperialism. All are embedded in class-based societies and ideological foundations

Class

By class-based societies, we mean societies that are run on the lines of a capitalist economy, based on the internal contradiction between labor and capital. This relationship is not fixed, meaning we can abolish it. DHM’s conceptual tools, which we have been applying to the new model, based on our case study, are internal relations, dialectical contradiction/unity, form, and mediation. Ideology, on the other hand, is a concept or a set of beliefs that conceal reality.³⁵ A

³⁴ Allman 2007.

³⁵ Ibid.

quick look through the class lens teaches us that Turkey and its neighbors such as Iran, Syria, and Iraq are all class-based societies – societies that are run in accordance with the logic and rules of a capitalist economy. So are the other Western powers that are allies with Turkey and support the Turkish state with political aid, weapons, and logistics. While supporting the Turkish state, these Western powers have mostly remained silent as the Turkish state has oppressed, imprisoned, tortured, and executed Kurds. It is important to note that ideology and class are the most crucial components of nation-building processes and nationalism.³⁶

It is the nation-state, formed by its ruling class, that enforces its ideology upon society. In this process, Marx argued, the ruling class/bourgeoisie uses cultural ideology (superstructure in Marxian terms) such as religion to control and guard the economic base (natural resources).³⁷ In the case of Turkey between 1980 and 1983, the “ruling class” consisted mainly of high-ranking military officials (i.e. bourgeoisie) who promoted their nationalist ideology (so called “Turkish-Nation Building”) and controlled all natural resources (the economy). If the ruling class feels threatened, they tend to use any potential ideology to destroy ideas of peace, freedom, transnationalism or coexistence.³⁸ These ideologies include but are not limited to patriotism, fascism, xenophobia, anti-Semitism, hatred, and war. Again, a quick class analysis indicates that Turkey, its neighbors, and its imperialist allies, as capitalist countries, are all engaged in the core capitalist dynamic of “expand or die.”

Nation-State and Nationalism

According to DHM, the state is an organized structure comprised of people that serves the interest of the ruling class, meaning the capitalist, nationalist, and imperialist powers which are gendered and raced.³⁹ As is evident, nation-states are significant to the capitalist economy in the sense that they ensure capital’s free circulation to the remotest villages on Earth.⁴⁰ Nation-states dominate the economy at the local level by ensuring the regulated and legitimized exploitation of labor by servicing “free trade” agreements and policing capital’s flow through international relations, or what Desai calls “bourgeois discipline” at the global level.⁴¹

Turkish Nationalism: Turkification. Turkification refers to an ideological project implemented by the new Turkish Republic’s elites to homogenize, modernize, and Turkify the entire population.⁴² The project was started by the nationalist cadre of the new republic after the fall of the Ottoman Empire. Their intention was to establish a modern and secular Turkish nation based on nationalist ideology and hegemony.⁴³ Following Mustafa Kemal, known as Atatürk (Father of Turks), a new class of nationalists emerged, known as Kemalists, who

³⁶ Hassanpour 2015.

³⁷ Hassanpour, 2015.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Allman 2007, and Hassanpour 2015.

⁴⁰ Desai 2013, and Gorman 2016.

⁴¹ Desai 2013.

⁴² Zürcher 2008.

⁴³ Zürcher 2008.

were highly influenced by Mustafa Kemal’s ideas as the founder of Turkey. Let’s take a look at the Turkish state policy, described by Ataturk’s successor and Turkey’s second president, Ismet İnönü’s, in 1925:

We are frankly nationalist and nationalism is our only factor of cohesion. In the face of a Turkish majority, other elements have no kind of influence. Our duty is to Turkify non-Turks in the Turkish homeland no matter what happens. We will destroy those elements that oppose Turks or Turkism. What we are looking for in those who are to serve the country is above all that they are Turkish and Turkist.⁴⁴

During this period, the characteristics that constitute diversity of a population such as ethnicity, language, dialect, and culture were denied. In other words, the nation’s diversity inherited from the Ottoman era was completely suppressed and hegemonized into one identity: Turkishness. This extreme politic of Turkification was broadly practiced, especially in the second part of 1920s, wherein Kurds and other ethnic groups were forced to assimilate. In this period, Turkish politics became suppressive of diversity and perceived as a threat to Turkish nationalism. The Kurds resisted assimilation and that made them a threat in the eyes of a Turkish state that was busy implementing Turkification.

This process was facilitated through new pieces of legislation favouring Turkish language and Turkish culture over any other ethnicity inherited from the Ottoman era. Kurds were forced to assimilate through mass Turkish education and enforcement of the Turkish language, mandatory military service, and resettlement politics. The Turkish state even went as far as banning the speaking of Kurdish language in public spheres, including schools and state agencies. A new law, based on “unification” of education was established, for instance, banning the existence of Kurdish schools and Kurdish publications.⁴⁵ In this way, the Kurdish language was eliminated from the public sphere. Hassanpour calls this phenomenon “linguicide” or “linguistic genocide”, where an ethnic language is eliminated by the violence of assimilation.⁴⁶ Kurdish linguicide was carried out by the Kemalists aiming at re-structuring the country into a “modern,” “secular,” purely Turkish and Westernized state.

Imperialism, Geopolitics, and Global Politics

Imperialism is a form of indirect intervention by one nation or group of nations in other nations’ affairs, which influences the lives of its people (even future generations) by overpowering them in social, political, and economic relations.⁴⁷ In this particular case, the violence of imperialism should be examined in two of its separate but related, aspects. The first means by which the violence of imperialism is delivered in modern times is through the material and logistical support

⁴⁴ Yıldız 2001: 155.

⁴⁵ Arslan 2011, cited in Sahin 2005.

⁴⁶ Hassanpour 2000: 33-34, cited in Zeydanlioglu 2012: 163.

⁴⁷ Harvey 2004.

given to Turkey for combatting its perceived “internal enemies,” i.e.: the Kurds. Between 1960 and 1980, this was done through several military interventions, all orchestrated by the world’s imperial powers, such as the U.S. These interventions resulted in the regimes of dictators coming to power, in order to pave the way for the emergence of imperialistic neoliberal agendas (e.g., financialization).

The 1980 military-coup was not just a one-time intervention that changed the political system; instead, it was a process which drastically transformed the nation’s economy, culture, and political landscape. The Junta Period was a period of extreme cultural and social oppression along with the emergence of neo-liberal policies. Despite the crushing pressure from the Junta institutions, the organized socialist political groups mobilized and resisted the neo-liberal transformation of the society.⁴⁸ As a result, the September 12 coup was organized and performed in order to get rid of all resistance and organized collective struggle against the neoliberal transformation of the Turkish economy. The Turkish armed forces controlled everything from mass media to political party organization, trade union activism, higher education, and TV broadcasting. Needless to say, banning and censoring publications became a routine practice.⁴⁹ As well, imperialist interventions manifested themselves during this period in the form of the global community’s “silence”, remaining apathetic as Kurdish people went through persecution, incarceration, and genocide.

We organize our analysis in two parts: (1) ‘processes of disablement’ that are carried out through (2) ‘social relations’. Processes included production of disability, as well as perpetuation of disablement, as a socially organized condition. We unpack the relations that have produced and sustained disability in the affected Kurdish prison survivors (i.e., capitalism, imperialism, and fascist-nationalism). Following Marx, Allman reveals that relations carry out processes, and processes, in turn, (re)produce relations.⁵⁰

Production of Disablement. This process can be divided into six categories: fascist Turkish nation-building, imprisonment and torture of Kurds, military invasion of Turkish Kurdistan, prolonging the prosecution of Kurds after coups, using violence to suppress an ethnic group, and Turkification.⁵¹ On the other hand, hunger strikes/death fasts happened as an organized resistance to this inhumane violence.

Perpetuation of Disablement. In this narrative, this process includes pushing the Kurdish prisoner to a point of initiating a hunger strike or death fast; inadequate medical care; no-visitor status; lack of disability accommodation after the prisoner has lost his vision and mobility; lack of physical and emotional accessibility after acquiring a disability (e.g., still no-visitor status); and oppressing the disabled prisoner to a point where he initiates two more hunger strikes, despite adverse health due to continuous torture and lack of medical treatment after previously being on hunger strike.

⁴⁸ Doğru 2009.

⁴⁹ Doğru 2009.

⁵⁰ Allman 2007.

⁵¹ Zürcher 2008.

How Do People Become Disabled As a Result of State Violence?

Marx believed that the key to understanding dialectics is always being suspicious of how things appear at first sight. Scholars must dig deeper. He developed DHM to de-mystify human relations and understand history as a result of the “sensuous activity of [hu]man[s]”.⁵² Conducting this research, we adopted DHM and used it to understand everything as it relates to history and social structures, such as class and capital. This understanding includes social relations such as imperialism, and social organizations such as the carceral network. The case in point is not to think linearly about different models of disability but to entertain them dialectically. Our model does not approach disability by locating it inside the disabled individual. Neither does it locate the problem only in the surrounding society. The TDM, instead, locates the problem in the violence of global class-relations (e.g., capitalism, fascism, nationalism, imperialism, and neoliberalism), the dialectics of global politics, historical infliction of pain upon the poor and racialized body (e.g., colonialism, slavery, indigenous genocide, indentured labor, ‘war on terror’, poverty, world wars, incarceration), exploitative social relations (gendered, raced, and classed), and destruction of the planet by the ruling bourgeois class, causing health issues for every species.

The emerging TDM has a potential to help us understand apparently neutral mechanisms through which people become ill, injured, or disabled, such as poverty and ecological devastation. Key, Ma, and Drake reveal that, “In the developing world, 840 million people are chronically undernourished, surviving on fewer than [...] (2000 Kcal/day). Approximately 1.3 billion people are living on less than US \$1/day and do not have secure access to food.”⁵³ This happens while we actually have enough food to feed everyone on the planet. Foster warns us that capitalism is not only endangering life on earth; for some, it “is removing such basic ecological conditions of human existence as access to clean air, drinkable water, and adequate food”.⁵⁴ If developed further, using more cases, the TDM can be used as a way to understand unequal power relations not only among the “First World” and the “Third World,” but also *within each of them*, such as those which prevail in a system of class hierarchy, between those who cause disability and those who become disabled.

There are people who live in the “First World” who suffer from health issues that have been imposed on them by general pollution caused by overproduction of greenhouse gasses. This case also involves unequal power relations between the ruling class, as well as upper-middle class who exert control over economic growth, and those who have to deal with the consequences such as pollution.⁵⁵ We argue that the emerging TDM can be developed further in the field as a transformative revolutionary theory informed by geopolitics and the ways in which the violence of ideology and class in a capitalist society is enacted/facilitated/enabled by nation-states.

Furthermore, the TDM acknowledges the materiality of disability/injury and leaves it up to disabled people to seek treatment/rehabilitation or not. The TDM resists the ideology

⁵² Marx and Engels 1998 [1932]: 25.

⁵³ Key, Ma, and Drake 2008: 5.

⁵⁴ Foster 2007: 5.

⁵⁵ Austin and Phoenix 2005, Bray, Kenny and Chughtai 2008, Goldman 2005, Grech 2009, Murray and Lopez 1997, WHO 1997, and Zalik 2008.

of normalcy. However, it refuses to treat disabled humans as docile objects with no power in perceiving and determining their condition and potential treatments. The TDM remains respectful of human autonomy and decision-making power. Unlike other disability models, the TDM is not a bourgeois approach. The TDM looks at disability and disablement in the global context, not just in the Western/Global-North context; and unlike most existing models, it engages with transnational disability-production mechanisms such as war and incarceration. We conjecture that other aspects of the emerging TDM may potentially be able to encompass congenital disabilities if they have been created as a result of violence, such as poverty, chemical or nuclear weapons. In Japan, for example, after more than seventy years, there are still children born with disabilities as a result of the effects of the U.S. atomic bombs at Nagasaki and Hiroshima.⁵⁶ Moreover, nuclear testing and nuclear waste elimination are two other important factors to be considered. One example is the disabilities created in some remote villages in India as a result of people coming in contact with the dumped nuclear waste of France.⁵⁷ The same thing happens in Canada, when nuclear waste is dumped near Aboriginal reserves.⁵⁸ In these situations, children have been born with congenital disabilities created, in effect, by colonial and imperialist violence, which the TDM certainly covers. The other possibility is malnourishment of pregnant mothers that could lead to disabilities in the child. This also may potentially be coverable by the TDM, because it is concerned with economic relations – the capitalist system – that cause poverty.

Moreover, not only does the TDM include the existing models, but it also amends and transcends them. Very much like the social model of disability, we do not view disability as an individual problem in need of “normalization,” intervention, or fixing. However, unlike the social model, we view disability as an infliction upon the material human body by socio-economic relations extended through history. This means that the TDM allows for an exploration of the workings of the social processes that generate disability as a material reality mediated by economic and political relations. This might sound excessive for popular existing DS discourses, which have generally excluded biopolitics, experience, and identity by remaining white and pertaining to only a few Western nations.⁵⁹ However, the emerging TDM gives us a new perspective to explore the acquisition of disablement through the violence of incarceration and torture.

Transnational disability theory indicates that the capitalist economy has intrinsic necessities/features to it such as incarceration, imperialism, class exploitation, and ecological destruction. As such, we argue that the TDM has a potential to help us understand apparently neutral mechanisms through which people become ill, injured, or disabled, such as poverty. We argue that the emerging TDM can engender transformative revolutionary knowledge that is informed by geopolitics and the ways in which the violence of ideology and class in a capitalist society is enacted, facilitated and enabled by nation-states.

⁵⁶ Oftedal 1984.

⁵⁷ Patwardhan 2002.

⁵⁸ Briarpatch 2012.

⁵⁹ Bell 2006, Dossa 2008, Erevelles 2011, Gorman 2016, and Meekosha 2011.

Transnational Forms of Political Consciousness

The current dominant models in DS expect us to celebrate acquiring a disability as a condition that every human at some point in their life experiences. The TDM asks us, however, what if my disability has been acquired under the oppressive conditions of incarceration, ethnic cleansing, poverty, economic exploitation, torture, hunger strike (as an organized effort to resist violence), police brutality, imperialist violence, war, inhumane working conditions, and lack of access to adequate healthcare and education? What if human variations (e.g., race, sex) are used in the construction of disabled identities for exploitative purposes (e.g., slavery, indentured labor, colonialism, immigration laws, travel bans, etc.)?⁶⁰ And finally, how do we build solidarity across disabled bodies and communities while we negotiate the distances that simultaneously divide and damage them/us within the contemporary context of global capitalism-imperialism? Similar to the social model, the TDM recognizes the problem of ideological and institutional discrimination surrounding disability.⁶¹ However, the TDM is not just a theoretical model; it is also a political project that places enormous emphasis on political consciousness.

We argue that this model can be a point of departure that includes the myriad of ways in which disabled survivors of political trauma and violence (e.g., war, incarceration, state-sanctioned atrocities) experience *becoming* disabled. It can allow for expanding the notion of experience within the field of DS toward connecting disabled people’s resistances and struggles globally as an oppressed group. The emerging TDM has its roots in DHM, which is based on the unity of thought and action, because it does not conceal the connection between individual subjects and the material world.⁶² Therefore, we conjecture that the emerging TDM could also be capable of unveiling the social relations behind disablement caused by many different transnational issues on a global scale. This unveiling/defetishizing process, we argue, has a revolutionary capacity to produce non-ideological forms of consciousness, knowledge, and praxis.

We argue that this transnational model is geographically, historically, economically, and culturally sensitive. These features can help us to further understand disability as a raced, gendered, and classed power relation, rather than as a tragedy. Even though this model has been developed step-by-step by an orthodox scientific method, we have strived to stay away from empiricism in thinking about disability relations, partially because they are intertwined with global class relations. The other rationale for doing so is that empiricism is an ahistorical process and is not suitable when thinking about social relations in a given time and space. It’s always important to ask, “Whose disability are we talking about?” Because, we know that “[e]normous gaps ... exist[s] in evidence about disability, especially in low and medium resource countries of the world”.⁶³

On the other hand, different disabled peoples’ accessibility needs are often fought for in mere disconnection from other disabled peoples’ struggles. For instance, accessibility of buildings is often something that a middle-class disabled Canadian citizen expects to receive from the

⁶⁰ Erevelles 2011.

⁶¹ Oliver, 1983: 1990.

⁶² Allman 2007, and Bannerji 2005.

⁶³ Bickenbach 2011: 655, cited in Oliver and Barnes 2012.

Canadian state, and sometimes s/he does receive it. However, the accommodation of her/his disability happens in complete disconnection from hundreds of people who *become disabled* every week in wars and minefields globally. This is what we mean by global class relations of disability. Gorman reveals that the same social relations, which determine our experience of becoming disabled, organize even the way we think about disability. In other words, our systems of thought about disability are determined by the structures that rule over our consciousness.⁶⁴ This means that we should approach ‘disability oppression’ or ‘creation of disability’ in conversation with consciousness and agency; otherwise, we would end up floating in an ahistorical empiricist vacuum. We conceptualize the emerging disability model, TDM, as a political project that involves us consciously mobilizing around our experiences and taking off from there to discover and end exploitative relations. The TDM is not a “medical gaze” nor even a “critical gaze”; rather, it is a “radical gaze” that tries to understand the human relations and their forms of consciousness that have historically caused pain, injury, and disability in the “Other.”

Applying the TDM to Recep’s Narrative

How do we proceed so as to incorporate all aspects of the TDM when analyzing a disability-acquisition case? Consider Recep’s case of torture under incarceration and hunger strike. Recep got beaten up, tortured, and eventually to protest his maltreatment went on a death fast. The death fast damaged his body to a point where he acquired several disabilities. Was this a neutral incident? Or did it involve unequal power relations? How would the medical or social model analyze this disability-production mechanism? It is likely that both would treat this as simply an “incident” that has occurred. The medical model would seek ways in which the prisoner can be treated and “fixed” by the medical system. The social model would seek the ways in which the accessibility of the social and physical environment can be assured. It would also critique any unaccommodating attitudes on the part of people around the prisoner.

Now the question is how would the TDM approach this case? First of all, we suspect that neither the medical model nor the social model would be able to change the disablement conditions radically and prevent them from happening again. This is a case of incarceration, torture, and the resulting hunger strike, which stem directly from Turkification, militarism, Turkish-nationalism against Kurds, and imperialism in favor of the Turkish state. However, we argue that the nature of socially and politically dominant structures such as class and ideology would rarely, if ever, be discussed by either of the existing models. The race of the prisoners, their ethnicity, their geographical location, their history, and their culture would likely be overlooked by approaches rooted in either of these two models. Moreover, one significant aspect of Recep’s story is his political agency and critical consciousness as a member of a political organization as well as a comrade to thousands of Kurdish people fighting against Turkish nationalism. However, the existing models treat a disabled person either as a depoliticized individual or a docile object who needs care, rather than a politically conscious subject who has chosen to resist political violence using his only weapon, which is his body.

Therefore, as a result of working and organizing with prison survivors and being trained

⁶⁴ Gorman 2005.

in the DS field, we felt the need to develop a new approach to disablement. We developed the DHM, as a new theory adequate for creating change “with a centrally-situated agent or subject, without whom no transformative politics would be possible”.⁶⁵ We also know from Walter Rodney that what drives “global inequality” is the “violence of global labor and property relations set in motion through European slave-trade-colonialism and imperialism-capitalism,” and not the other way around.⁶⁶ In this paper, we shared a story of disablement in the Global South embedded in decades of struggle and resistance against state-sanctioned violence. We explained through our narrative how political and collective processes of becoming-disabled might be, as opposed to their being just biological, medical, ahistorical, apolitical, and individual. Additionally, we introduced a newly developed theory of disability which is political, historical, dialectical, transnational, race-conscious, and class-conscious. This article was a medium by which Recep’s voice was echoed to reach an international audience to tell them about the most humane aspects of being and remaining human despite the most unbearable and inconceivable circumstances.

⁶⁵ Bannerji 1995: 19.

⁶⁶ Walter Rodney 1972, cited in Gorman 2016: 4.

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