

Starve and Immolate: The Politics of Human Weapons. By Banu Bargu. New York: Columbia University Press, 2014. 512 pp. Hardcover \$65.00/£48.00, ISBN: 978-0-231-163408. Paperback \$30.00/£22.00, ISBN: 978-0231163415. E-Book \$64.99/£48.00, ISBN: 978-0-231-538114.

Suicide bombing and martyrdom are frequently associated with the religious violence perpetrated by Islamist groups. When in September 2014 a female suicide bomber of the Kurdish YPJ (Women's Protection Units) blew herself up amongst IS-fighters in Kobane, the world was once again reminded that militant self-sacrifice is not the sole prerogative of fundamentalists (*Al Jazeera* 2014). Instead there have been numerous examples of secular and atheist organizations in the Middle East and elsewhere who use dying for a cause as a tactic. But how can people be motivated to go their deaths without any religious justifications for martyrdom or paradisiac rewards? Are those organizations really secular or are they religious with secular disguise? Bargu's political ethnography of the struggle of leftist captives against the introduction of F-type Prisons in Turkey after the year 2000 provides an in-depth look in the mindset of secularists who forge their lives into weapons. The aim of *Starve and Immolate* is, however, much more ambitious than merely documenting this contention. Instead, the goal is to develop a theory about the complex connections and entanglements of contemporary forms of sovereignty and resistance.

In October 2000, several hundred political prisoners in Turkey went on a hunger strike in protest against the government's plan to send them to high security prisons, where they would be subjected to cellular imprisonment. Previously the prisoners had lived together in large wards in which they could organize a political life in communes. They saw the introduction of new prisons as an attack on their organization and feared that the isolation in the new cells would be equivalent to the torture of solitary confinement. As the Turkish government showed no signs of conceding to any of their demands, the captives intensified their protest by announcing a "death fast." Should the government not revoke its decision, the prisoners would collectively starve themselves to death. On the 61st day of the death fast on December 19, 2000 the authorities assumed that the prisoners were on the brink of death and decided to launch the "Operation Return to Life." Ironically, it did not save any lives but led to the death of 30 captives who resisted their forcible transfer and were killed by security forces or took their own life in protest. Furthermore, the event escalated the confrontation. In certain intervals new teams of volunteers joined the hunger strike until death. Through the consumption of sugar, salt, water, and vitamin supplements during the fast they could extend their

"labor of dying"—as Bargu (219) calls it—to periods of up to one year before succumbing. Additionally, the repertoire of tactics was extended. Some activists resorted to the defensive form of self-immolation to stage a spectacular public protest against what was happening in the country's prisons. Others tried to avenge the "fallen martyrs" by blowing themselves up amidst police and state targets. Altogether 122 people died in death fasts, self-immolations, suicide bombings or were killed by the authorities (310–325). It was only in January 2007 that the death fast campaign came to a halt when the Turkish government was willing to grant some minor reforms in negotiation with the prominent lawyer Behiç Aşçı, who had been on a death fast in solidarity with the prisoners and whose health was deteriorating (221).

"The Martyrs of the Revolution are Immortal!" was one of the slogans of the death fast campaign in Turkey. Are Marxist groups who emphasize death, martyrdom and immortality deviating from their own materialist and often atheist principles? Does the fact that many of the organizations hail from Alevi¹ families explain this ideological shift? Bargu emphasizes that the political self-sacrifice of the leftist groups "has nothing to do with religion" (240). Neither is it a kind of "liberation theology" combining Marxism and Islam, nor is it a form of Alevi leftism (237). Instead Bargu describes the ideological backbone of the death fast campaign as a "secularized political theology," and calls it "sacrificial Marxism" (236–242). The communist ideal is sacralized and dying a heroic death on its path is venerated. Communism, not paradise, is the reward for revolutionary martyrdom. Those who benefit from it are those who survive and not the fallen martyrs, who become immortal through commemoration of the living. Religion plays a role only insofar as certain Islamic and Alevi rituals and values are appropriated and reinterpreted.

But why did the Turkish Marxists resort to these sacrificial tactics in the first place? Bargu sees approaches that explain self-sacrifice with religious fanaticism or individual psychology as limited and often flawed (22–23). For Bargu, studies that focus on the strategic rationality of these acts are more insightful. However, these same analyses not only neglect the power relations in which strategic choices are made but also the political subjectivities of the social actors (23–24). For this reason her own work is based on a Foucauldian perspective of power ties and the historic shift from sovereign to biopolitical power in modernity. "With and against Foucault" Bargu develops her own theoretical terms and concepts (27). Fasting to death is one of several forms of the "weaponization of life," which also includes non-lethal

¹Alevism is sometimes regarded as a branch of Islam and sometimes as a religion of its own. Similar to Twelver Shiism, the martyrdom of Husayn, the grandson of Prophet Mohammed, at the battle of Karbala in 680 plays a central role.

self-mutilation, self-immolation, indefinite hunger strike, self-killing (with a variety of methods), suicide attacks and no-escape attacks (14–15). This political phenomenon is evidence of an increasing “necropolitization of resistance” which stands in a complex relationship with a “biopoliticization of sovereignty” (27–28). The sacrificial struggle against the prison conditions in Turkey is not an extreme case, but is exemplary for a global conjuncture of power and resistance that also takes place in Guantánamo and in detention camps and refugee centers around the world (349–350).

Arguing against some Foucauldians, Bargu stresses that sovereign power (the power over life and the right to kill) was not simply replaced by biopower (the power to foster and regulate life). Instead contemporary power appears in the shape of the “biosovereign assemblage”—a concept inspired by Foucault, Deleuze and Guattari (52–53)—defined as “a contradictory amalgam of the differential logics of biopower and sovereign power” (272). Internal contradictions also characterize the “necroresistance” that is produced by this assemblage of powers. The death fasters see their struggle as one or all of the three following principles: an act of resistance against torture, as (class) war against neoliberal capitalism or as refusal to live a life dictated by biosovereignty where biological existence would come at the expense of political existence (273–309). In realizing their immediate demands concerning the prison system, the movement was largely unsuccessful. Yet, Bargu stresses the possibilities of and the agency in the “weaponization of life,” which transcends the little stubborn acts of Scott’s “weapons of the weak” (2008). The refusal to live by authoring one’s own death also contradicts Agamben’s claim that the state has the power to produce “bare life” (77–82) as well as some biopolitical theorists who argue that biopower is so encompassing that it does not leave any space for resistance (63, 343).

What remains unclear in Bargu’s analysis is the historical development of the “biopolitical assemblage.” Does this constellation of power originate already in the historic shift of power in modernity described by Foucault or does it evolve only in the most recent time of the prison crisis around the year 2000? Linked to this question one can also ask if the intensification of “necroresistance” in regard to the coordination of several to hundreds of individuals (14) is really a novelty. Largely omitted from *Starve and Immolate* are examples of other death fasts and collectively organized hunger strikes in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Although Bargu mentions the suffragettes and Gandhi and also frequently refers to Feldman’s work on the hunger strike of the Irish Republicans in 1981 (1991), there are numerous other cases which would have shed further light on the relation between power and resistance. As early as 1888, Russian political prisoners went on a joint hunger strike to demand better conditions (*Atchinson Daily Champion*

1888);² a similar protest happened between 1916 and 1923 when several thousand Irish republicans abstained from food (Biggs 2007). Outside of Turkey there were at least forty cases of people who starved themselves to death, including the Irish republican Terence McSwiney in 1923, the Indian socialist Jatin Das in 1929, the Romanian communist Haja Lipschitz in 1929, and the Tamil Tiger activist Thileepan, who died in 1987. The contradictions of the “biosovereign assemblage” that Bargu describes for Turkey, killing prisoners in the name of life, selective pardons, and force-feeding without necessary vitamins, are perhaps not as novel as could be thought. In Russia in 1888 the prison warden simply begged the political prisoners to eat again and sent a priest into their cells. Already in 1917 the Irish prisoner Thomas Ashe was killed as a result of force feeding that was aimed at saving his life, and the British government frequently released hunger striking suffragettes from jail so as not to produce any martyrs (Reynolds 2002, 539).

While the spatial and temporal limits of “biosovereignty” and “necroresistance” are not fully explored, Bargu’s work offers a very impressive combination of empirically grounded ethnography with political theory. As such it is of relevance for scholars working on diverse topics such as biopolitics, theories of the state, social movements, as well as conflict and violence.

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²On hunger strikes and prison suicide in Tsarist Russia see also Morrissey (2007, 277). The wish to establish a revolutionary self, described by Morrissey, is strikingly similar to some aspects of the subjectivities of the Turkish captives in Bargu’s analysis (298–309).

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