



States of Dispossession: Violence and Precarious Coexistence in Southeast Turkey

by Zerrin Özlem Biner, Philadelphia, PA, University of Pennsylvania Press, 2020, 264 pp., \$69.95 (hardback), ISBN: 9780812251753

Joost Jongerden

To cite this article: Joost Jongerden (2021): States of Dispossession: Violence and Precarious Coexistence in Southeast Turkey, *Politics, Religion & Ideology*, DOI: [10.1080/21567689.2021.1978650](https://doi.org/10.1080/21567689.2021.1978650)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/21567689.2021.1978650>



Published online: 17 Sep 2021.



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BOOK REVIEW

States of Dispossession: Violence and Precarious Coexistence in Southeast Turkey, by Zerrin Özlem Biner, Philadelphia, PA, University of Pennsylvania Press, 2020, 264 pp., \$69.95 (hardback), ISBN: 9780812251753

States of Dispossession is a book about protracted violence in the city and the rural surroundings of Mardin, a region in the southeast of Turkey, close to the international border with Syria. The book discusses various ways which people navigate death and injury, are haunted by memories of genocide, excavate and value its remains, and trade compassion for benefit. Biner discusses this violence and/as dispossession in daily lives settings, from the deprivation of life to the appropriation of homes, from the treasure hunting of valuable remains to dispossession through heritage making, and a range of debt creating practices, in which a variety of actors are involved, among these military, provincial governors, *jinn*, diggers, real estate developers, tribal leaders, and village guards. The result is a staggering picture about the ways in which property, memory and bodies are disowned in daily practices of nation-state building and neoliberal multiculturalism.

Situating the city of Mardin and its surroundings at the crossroads of cultural, political and economic routes, and appearing in multiple narratives that chronicled the city's name and claimed origins, Biner reminds us to Mardin's deposition as a region that had lived through protracted tensions between Kurdish and Arab tribes who attempted to consolidate their power over the city; a late Ottoman 'rights-regime' legally redefining and recreating hierarchies between the Muslim and Non-Muslim; Catholic and Protestant missionary work providing a pretext for linking local Christian communities to the political cause of European powers in the region; and the 1915 Armenian genocide destroying a population, resulting in the 'disappearance' of half the Christian population of the city (Biner 2020: 43). While the Syriac-Orthodox community, and later Syriac Catholics and Chaldeans living in the city, were exempted by amnesty from the mass-destruction, Biner explains, the Armenian were subject to genocide and their churches and monasteries appropriated by the military, while other immobile properties became the spoils allocated to local families – Kurds, Arabs and Syriacs – or fell into ruins.

In her book, Biner also shows how the temporality of the Armenian genocide stretches into the new millennium, for example when the General Directorate of Land Registry and Cadaster announced an order that 'abandoned properties' could not be passed to individuals and belong to the state, dispossessing descendants of victims from the legal means to make claims to the land and houses taken from their ancestors. It's in this setting, that Biner narrates the Historical Transformation Project, which is announced in the 2000's. Warmly received by international actors in the field of heritage, UNESCO and EU, this heritage creation involved new forms of dispossession and value creation by dispossession. She shows how neoliberal multiculturalism and heritage making provided an opportunity for real-estate developers and political elites to build wealth from stones turned heritage.

The main objective of the Historical Transformation Project was to turn Mardin into an attractive open-air museum for global tourists. For this, it promised demolition of so-called unregulated buildings in the old city, end illegal occupation and upgrade the status of some of the old constructions. In the name of World Heritage and neoliberal multiculturalism, the city had to be cleansed from its dirt: the irregular buildings and their inhabitants, rural

migrants who had been displaced by force in the 1990s, found refuge in the old city, and who were now to be displaced again and relocated in mass-housing apartment blocks outside the old city. Resembling a looting political economy, embellished as multiculturalism, Biner also shows how this heritage creation embraced some old buildings, yet not others, as the Historical Transformation Project too extends the cleansing from Armenian remains into the very present.

After a glance at what can be referred to as the historical and contemporary setting in which dispossession and appropriation is created and recreated, Biner turns in the second and third chapters of the book to local residents: Armenians, for whom the stone buildings are objects of loss and pain, the local elite, who see new opportunities in the heritage industry turning left-over ruins from the past into objects for capital accumulation, yet mainly engages with the so-called diggers, who haunt the phantasy that the real value is hidden behind the stones – treasures clogged by the Armenians in the face of danger. She walks with the diggers, who cruise the ruins in search for hidden treasures, and engage with an ongoing form of ruination in search for these treasures. She explains how the diggers try to establish communication with *jinn*, the spirit-like invisible other that guards the houses against dispossession of the treasure that has been left behind by the Armenian absent other, yet could also guide the digger to the treasure's location (Biner 2020: 100).

In chapters 4 and 5, the book moves to the city's outside, the rural surroundings, the battles for the right to return to villages, for access to the land and the yields produced, and an extortion economy of 'protection money' which has to be paid to Kurdish paramilitaries working with the state. The relation between the Syriac returnee and the Kurdish paramilitary is described as one in which the former is condemned to the life of a debtor, living in a tolerated live on the land on bought time. In chapter 6, Biner further explores debt as a mechanism for the construction of relations yet turning its lens from the daily practices between inhabitants in the area, to a powerful and painful legal device, which is presented as a reparative justice mechanism. Under the Compensation Law, compensation could be granted to citizens for losses resulting from physical damage to damage to movable and immovable assets. A special case were the compensation recovery cases, which involved compensation for loss which the state pays to members of the armed forces. As the payer of the compensation, the state sues a third party, in this case family of a militant or guerilla, in order to recover its payment to a member of the armed forces. When the judge has spoken, and a claim of the state is granted, the family of the militant or guerilla has two options. The first option the family has is to cut the parental bonds and 'apply for renunciation of inheritance' (Biner 2020: 167). The second is that they do not cut the parental bonds with their children and pay the debt. This makes the compensation recovery cases, Biner argues, a practice 'designed to entangle its historically dissident and disloyal citizens in an interminable cycle of moral and economic indebtedness' (Biner 2020: 168).

Dispossession focuses how precarious lives are created and lived; about localized forms of sovereignty, embodied by tribal leaders, paramilitaries, governors, diggers, real estate developers; about the ways in which everyday experiences with dispossession fit in broader historical contexts; about memory and forgetting woven around ruins, land and dead bodies. In this thrown togetherness of relations, practices and temporality the EU and UNESCO, who provide funding and possess the so much desired 'World Heritage' label, important to connect Mardin to a global network of heritage sites, and tap into tourist flows, are the present absence. Their digging into proposals and applications, their neoliberal franchising of heritage, and the predatory economy it helps to create would be worth to analyze next. In a Latourian fashion, the law and the *jinn*, are actants in the force-field of dispossession, yet one may wonder to what extend they function as an externalization of responsibility

and alleviating moral distress: recovery payment as the implementation of the state's law, ruination as the effect of the directions suggested by the *jinn*. State and *jinn*, the two entities to which one can pass the moral responsibility of one's deeds.

Biner's book is an impressive account of the ways in which people live a life with the dead and the past in the present, and how death itself is never far away; it's a book how people navigate through the pain, injury and loss of others as well as that of themselves. It's an account of the ways in which people live a precarious life. Ultimately, it's a book about hope for a better, different life. But it's also a book that shows the suffocating effects of that hope being ravaged by new rounds of violence as the possibility of a livable life sways back and forth between sheer phantasy and toxic asset (Biner 2020: 28).

Joost Jongerden

Department of Social Sciences, Wageningen University, Netherlands

 joost.jongerden@wur.nl  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-0076-732X>

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<https://doi.org/10.1080/21567689.2021.1978650>

