



City Research Online

City, University of London Institutional Repository

Citation: Sloommaeckers, K. ORCID: 0000-0002-1189-5095 (2020). Book Review: LGBTI Rights in Turkey: Sexuality and the State in the Middle East. By Fait Muedini. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018. 274p. \$105.00 cloth, \$27.99 paper. Perspectives on Politics, doi: 10.1017/S1537592719004286

This is the accepted version of the paper.

This version of the publication may differ from the final published version.

Permanent repository link: <https://openaccess.city.ac.uk/id/eprint/23223/>

Link to published version: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1017/S1537592719004286>

Copyright and reuse: City Research Online aims to make research outputs of City, University of London available to a wider audience. Copyright and Moral Rights remain with the author(s) and/or copyright holders. URLs from City Research Online may be freely distributed and linked to.

City Research Online:

<http://openaccess.city.ac.uk/>

publications@city.ac.uk

LGBTI Rights in Turkey: Sexuality and the State in the Middle East. By Fait Muedini. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018. 274p. \$105.00 cloth, \$27.99 paper.

Koen Sloomaeckers, *City, University of London*

koen.sloomaeckers@city.ac.uk

Since the 2016 coup attempt in Turkey, Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Intersex (LGBTI) rights and activism has been under siege. Notable examples include the consecutive bans of the Istanbul Pride marches since 2016, as well as the Governor of Ankara's ban on any LGBTI-themed events in the capital. Against this political background and considering the scant scholarly attention given to the issues so far, *LGBTI Rights in Turkey* is a welcome contribution to the literature on LGBTI rights and politics outside the Western world.

The book's primary purpose is to "explore the various facets of LGBTI rights in Turkey, shedding light not only on rights abuses but also on how [... actors are ...] working to improve conditions for sexual minorities" (p. 6). To do so, it presents a history of human rights abuses within Turkey, provides an overview of the current legal status of LGBTI people, and documents and discusses a variety of strategies pursued by those actors fighting for LGBTI equality. Additionally, Fait Muedini is interested in the "relationship between the use of religion and [LGBTI] human rights" (p. 6), particularly in how different actors use religion in opposition to LGBTI equality and how LGBTI activists employ religious-based arguments.

The role of religion serves as a key point of focus and scope condition of the research. This is in part due to the way in which Muedini has structured the argument. Chapter One, for example, introduces the reader to the topic by drawing attention to the links between Islam and homosexuality in Turkey but with wider reference to (as well as embedding the argument within) the wider "Muslim World." After making empirical observations of homophobia within Muslim communities, the wider "Muslim world", and Turkey, Muedini, in an attempt to understand why this might be, draws our attention to what the conversations within Islam and Islamic jurisprudence have to say on homosexuality. Based on the assumption that it is these debates within Islam that drive anti-LGBT attitudes, Muedini then shifts the attention to how religion can be used to create social change. To set up this argument, Muedini finishes up this chapter with a discussion of how Islam has been reinterpreted to demonstrate an acceptance of LGBTI rights, and how these reinterpretations could and should be used in activism in Turkey.

One of the greatest contributions made by *LGBTI Rights in Turkey* is the encyclopaedic mapping of the current state of LGBT politics in Turkey. Chapter Two, for example, provides an extensive overview of the discrimination, inequalities, and violence experienced by LGBTI people in Turkey in different spheres of life. This includes the use of homophobic language by political leaders, the types of violent crimes against the LGBTI community, discrimination in the field of employment, as well as media restrictions. Most notably, Muedini must be applauded for the special attention this chapter gives to the experiences of LGBTI refugees in Turkey as well as the trans* community, who remain one of the most vulnerable groups in the country (and remain underrepresented in most scholarship).

Muedini presents a detailed overview of the existing legal framework in Turkey. He also provides an extensive overview of existing activists' strategies in Turkey, with special attention to the use of (digital) media and electoral strategies, as well as links between activists and different political actors. This includes detailed profile descriptions of several LGBT politicians that have been elected in local and national election. Here, the book's most important analytical contribution is that it draws attention to the local level and how activists can find several entry points into politics to advocate for LGBTI rights. Although at the national level homophobia might be frequently employed in statecraft processes, these tactics do not necessarily trickle through to the local levels of the state. Finally, the book also provides an overview of a wide array of other areas of work pursued by activists, including the provision of services and transnational networks, as well as different challenges activists might encounter.

By virtue of the wide range of topics it seeks to cover, however, *LGBTI Rights in Turkey* becomes very descriptive and loses much of its analytical power. This is not helped by the fact that Muedini does not seem to embed his analysis within the ever-growing literature on LGBTI activism and politics in a variety of fields, including political science and sociology. For example, in Chapter Four, in which Muedini discusses potential activists strategies, the rich sociological literature on identity politics (e.g. Mary Bernstein, "Celebration and Suppression: The Strategic Uses of Identity by the Lesbian and Gay Movement," *American Journal of Sociology* 103(3), 1997) and the relationships between LGBT movements and the state (*The Lesbian and Gay Movement and the State: Comparative Insights into a Transformed Relationship*, edited by Manon Tremblay et al., 2011) does not feature. Consequently, the chapter leads to a rather uncritical exposition of empirical examples of what activists in different parts of the world (with a predominant focus on the West) have done to promote LGBT equality. And although Muedini rightfully notes that some of these strategies are not always transferrable from one

context to the other, he does seem to take their analytical power for granted as he does not fully explore the theoretical debates that surround these strategies.

The second shortcoming of the book relates to Muedini's pre-occupation with religion – which he admits was a driving force behind his research (p. 21). This emphasises — and the what seems to be an undeniable desire to demonstrate how using religious arguments is an effective method for LGBTI activist to fight for social change (see p. 216) without the empirical evidence to back this up — raises serious questions about how Muedini (unwittingly?) reproduces essentialising idea that anti-LGBTI politics in Turkey (and the wider “Muslim world”) are the direct product of Islam. Rather than interrogating how religion is used politically, Muedini's approach at points reads as an analysis of Turkey (but as the book's subtitle suggest, also the Middle East) in which Islamic culture is reproduced as the West's homophobic other. While I assume that such a Western gaze was not the author's intention, it nevertheless emerges as Muedini, unfortunately, does not consider the existing critical literature on sexuality and the Middle East, or LGBT and sexuality studies more generally. For example, whilst Muedini seems to attribute the anti-LGBT politics of the AKP to the party's Islamic nature and their particular interpretation of Islam (p. 34), he does not consider the existing debates on political homophobia (Michael Bosia, "Strange Fruit: Homophobia, the State, and the Politics of LGBT Rights and Capabilities," *Journal of Human Rights*, 13(3), 2014; Meredith Weiss and Michael Bosia, eds., *Global Homophobia: States, Movements, and the Politics of Oppression*, 2013); homonationalism (Jasbit Puar, *Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalism in Queer Times*, 2007); homocolonialism (Momin Rahman, "Queer Rights and the Triangulation of Western Exceptionalism," *Journal of Human Rights*, 13(3), 2014), or threat perception (Phillip Ayoub, "With Arms Wide Shut: Threat Perception, Norm Reception, and Mobilized Resistance to LGBT Rights," *Journal of Human Rights*, 13(3), 2014). Such an engagement would allow the author to explore how both religion and homophobia can be instrumentalised as part of wider political processes, and thus avoid some of the essentialising tendencies of the book.

This lack of engagement with the relevant literatures bring me to the final shortcoming of the book: its use of language which suggests a rather limited understanding of the complexities of sexualities and LGBT politics. Here I point to the way in which Muedini uses LGBTI rights, same-sex rights, and sexual orientation rights seemingly interchangeably throughout the book. This does not only ignore the existing debates on the usefulness of the label LGBTI as an analytical tool (e.g. Jon Binnie and Christian Klesse, "Solidarities and Tensions: Feminism and Transnational LGBTQ Politics in Poland," *European Journal fo Women's Studies*, 19(4), 2012), but these slippages further erase the differences

between the different groups that the different letters of the acronym refer to, as well as remaining blind to the different processes of exclusion experienced by these groups. This is particularly unfortunate given that Muedini does spend *considerable* attention on the trans* community and their activism. Nevertheless, by reducing LGBTI to same-sex rights, Muedini's choice of words reinforces and reifies a lack of inclusiveness that remains all too present in some parts of the movement and even in scholarship, which remains pre-occupied and dominated by gay men.

In sum, *LGBTI Rights in Turkey* draws attention to an understudied issue in comparative politics area in and provides a good description of the current state of LGBTI rights, activism and opposition in Turkey. Its descriptive nature and the breadth of the topics covered make the book an invaluable source for scholars interested in LGBTI rights in Turkey. However, the book's lack of engagement with the existing literature and the focus on description rather than analysis limits its intellectual contributions.