

„For there was no shelter under which I could hide...”

Interview with Mehmet Tarhan for the Spanish newspaper Diagonal, published in January 2005. This interview took place during Mehmet's last hungerstrike in October after having been tortured once again.



Hi Cristina!

As you know, it took a long time for your questions to reach me. It took me quite some time to pick up the pen and answer your questions too. For unpleasant things happened. And I was afraid my answers would be unlike me when my thoughts and emotions were in such turmoil. Today is the 10th day of my hunger strike and although I have not yet calmed down I will still answer your questions since I may experience serious perception and attention problems in the next couple of days. I don't know if this will satisfy you but I hope it does. By the way, I would like to thank you and everyone who has been helpful. I can't help but ask: How did you come up with these questions? I have never seen so many difficult questions lined up one after the other :)

Can you talk about yourself? How would you introduce yourself to the Spanish Left? As well as to the people living in Turkey?

Mehmet Tarhan: Perhaps the last person to talk about oneself is that person, but I'll give it a try. I'm Mehmet, I'm 27, and I have been in a military prison for the past 6 months. I declared my conscientious objection in October 2001 and I have been trying to maintain an integrity of thought-expression-action ever since. Actually, that press release was the first step I have taken in this direction. I can say that that was the day I completely came out of the closet.

I am from the countryside and a child from a peasant family. My childhood was a time when ethnic nationalism was being incited and I was „the other” from birth, that is, Kurdish. I grew up in a repressed post-military-coup atmosphere and I was usually a cowardly child. I was constantly trying to get approval from people: my mother, my father or teachers. Especially outside of the family I kept trying hard to earn „but”s such as: „Kurdish but good,” „Kurdish but successful,” „Kurdish but speaks proper Turkish.” At puberty I discovered I was gay and although it took me a very long time to admit it to myself, still with this discovery my glass shield was shattered. Because now no „but”s could compensate for me.

Meanwhile I went to Diyarbakir where the civil war was raging. I was a government employee just at the age of 17. In the eyes of the inhabitants I was TR (Turkish Republic) but in the eyes of the police and the military that saw themselves as the representatives of TR, I was „the other” by virtue of being Kurdish. This forced me to place myself outside both contexts. Perhaps I owe the fact that I did not participate in the cycle of violence due to being in-between like this. Political conflicts and the conflicts I experienced within, barred me from making a bond with the system. And this process slowly forced me to come out into the open.

At the same time, I was living the first years of my youth and was trying to come to terms with my identity. Consequently, what I saw in my identity forced me to make a choice and my choice was to abandon hiding. I didn't want to pay a price for the perpetuation of the status quo. That is why I just ruptured my path in life. I worked with Kaos GL [an independent political and cultural LGBT group] and LambdaIstanbul [LGBT civil society initiative]. I also tried to be involved in and supported antimilitarist efforts.

I never had the desire to change that multiplicity we call „society” towards any direction. I never determined a path for myself either but I ceaselessly continued my (internal) questioning. As a result of this internal questioning I realized the need to work on myself for a non-violent and non-discriminating world and the need to illustrate the opinions I formed throughout this process via word and action, and right now I am trying to satisfy these needs.

I don't know what else to say. No matter how much I might hate this fact: I am a rather ordinary person. Before I was imprisoned, I was working for a publishing house and my life went by between home and work. And, in here, life passes by in my room and I do whatever the other prisoners are doing.

What does military mean to you, as an institution?

Mehmet Tarhan: Militaries are the sticks of the states and states do not only use these sticks against one another. I guess this can be better understood in countries of successive military coups such as Turkey or Spain. This is precisely when the real function of the military exposes itself. The military is still seen as the most reliable institution in Turkey. Almost 80% of survey takers on the subject confirm this. Relying on this archaic institution to such a degree stems from the myth of the „Military Nation”. And the most important instrument in imposing this myth over society is military service. When we look at the nationalization¹ of Turks and the history of the republic, we see that the army has always played an important role as both „the founder and the guardian” of the regime.

While we were preparing the *Militourism* (Militurizm) brochure, we defined Selimiye barracks (the birthplace of the modern Turkish military and one of the largest barracks) as a „lathe and level workshop.” With the help of compulsory military service, men, who make up half of the society, are passed through this lathe framework to be turned into obedient people who expect obedience within the families they will later build. This means that militarization infiltrates deeply into each household. Of course, then the individual has no choice but to be born into a hierarchical structure.

Military service creates a definition of „normality” for itself through the exclusion of women, gays, disabled persons and children and generalizes this definition to the rest of the society. The heterosexual man becomes the norm that the regime prefers and identifies with. The rest are considered as either surplus/excess or property to be protected. It should be emphasized that this process also posits differences on ethnic as well as religious grounds.

In short, military as an institution creates a certain type of citizen. It forces or humiliates those who don't conform to this type. It transforms the culture of violence and hierarchy into an unquestionable cult. It bases its *raison d'être* and the supposed necessity of its future existence on this cult. In this process, it needs to create its „others.” These „others” should constantly posit danger, or rather, people should be convinced they do. Perhaps we can define this coaxing of people into believing they are in constant danger as a form of terrorism. Here is a sharp but working definition: The military as an institution is an organization, which uses patriarchal, heterosexual, bodily, and mental norms to produce terror. This is what the institution of military means to me.

What are you struggling for?

Mehmet Tarhan: As I said before, what I am struggling for is to attain my integrity of thought-expression-action. To be able to express myself honestly. To create a mode of constant transformation in my own life, rather than waiting for social change for this to happen. And while doing all that, at least not being a part of militarism or any of its immanent forms of discrimination. I am not satisfied by asking my questions merely to myself, and that is a general shock; I guess it indicates

¹ The term refers to the conversion of Turkey into a modern state in the beginning of the last century, which started with the abolishment of otoman monarchy protagonized by Kemal Atatürk. During this conversion laicism was legally established and a strong nationalist ideology was developed which is still dominating the political affairs in contemporary Turkey.

once again that I expect everyone to at least conduct an internal questioning. And my utopia is to create a language that is free from violence and all forms of discrimination.

How would you explain your struggle to these below? To your mother; To a Turkish soldier from rural areas; to higher rank authority of the Turkish Army:

Mehmet Tarhan: This is the toughest question of all :) I wouldn't necessarily be using different words regardless of whether I was explaining it to my mother, to a soldier or an authority. As a matter of fact, so far I haven't been using different words. Basically I emphasize the individual's right to organize and make decisions about her/his own life. I don't ask questions regarding moral values like motherland, nation or flag. That is to say, I engage in an exercise to disrupt habitual thinking patterns (or an exercise in un-learning). For example, to someone who refers to military service as „patriotic duty/service to motherland” I direct the following question: „who are the producers, I mean, who owes who?” I ask a person who believes in the necessity of the military to tell me the reasons why. Each reason leads to new questions, and the answers given to the new questions lead to other questions. Rather than pushing all my views out there as one package, I constantly ask questions even if the person I am asking is proceeding in a very different direction.

Unfortunately we are witness to many wars and the evaluations of my mother, or a soldier or an army officer on this issue are not all that different from one another. Everybody realizes that there are no winners in war. It is obvious that the gains are never gains on the behalf of the people, societies. This is because the imperialist powers that cause these wars are shameless enough so as not to even hide their objectives any more. Although the conclusions arrived are similar, everybody, or the great majority, push forward „the reality” and hide behind excuses like, „impossibility” and „weakness.”

So here comes the big question: „What makes one human? Isn't it the concern to maintain one's inner peace? Isn't it the ability to make choices to this end?”

Why do you talk about your sexual identity in your declaration of conscientious objection? How are these two related?

Mehmet Tarhan: I mentioned this before: in many ways, my declaration of conscientious objection was an important step I took in order to come out of the closet. I was not objecting military service because I was gay. Of course, both my sexual and ethnic identity have been influential in questioning militarism.

However, this special emphasis had its reasons: First of all, the military stigmatizes gay people by using the „unfit for service” report [referred to as the „rotten” report in Turkish: „çürük” raporu]; and humiliates them with requirements such as rectal examinations and photographs of sexual intercourse in order to „qualify for” this report. It is pitiful that nothing has changed regarding this issue. What is even worse is that gay people had been volunteering for such humiliations. What better way to impose gay people with the idea that being gay is something to be ashamed of? By referring to this issue in my declaration, I wanted to tell the army that „homosexuality is not an illness, you cannot humiliate us in this manner, this is not right” and call on to gay people „do not let them humiliate you. Humiliating somebody because they are gay is what is truly despicable.” The army creates a normative type through those it excludes and as long as those excluded are -for whatever reason- silent, they fulfill the important role of being the triangulation point of this process.

In short, I wanted to emphasize the overall picture. That is why I think women's declarations of conscientious objection are important. They managed to isolate the basis of their decisiveness to stay outside of militarism (in one way or the other) or not to do military service from one part of their bodies. Just as Nazan didn't substantiate her stance against militarism by saying something like „it's because I have a vagina”, I too don't declare mine saying „because I sleep with men.” Even among conscientious objectors, there were those who found women's declarations of conscientious objection to be more ridiculous than mine. My question was always this: „Why did you support me then? Because I have a penis?” It is sad to see that the criteria for being an individual

are shared by the military and antimilitarists alike, and obviously we need to think more about militarism, heterosexism and the internalization of patriarchy. Perhaps the most important reason why that sentence referring to my homosexuality appears in my declaration is because I feel this need.

Who supports you? What does solidarity mean to you?

Mehmet Tarhan: After my arrest „Initiative for Solidarity with Mehmet Tarhan” was formed. There are people from many different groups in it. Other than that, my biggest support is my family. What really empowered me, besides their support, was the stance my family took throughout. My mother, my sister and brother did not take the position of a victim. I have also received personal messages of support from many parts of the world, in addition to those from numerous international organizations such as Payday and Amnesty International. In Turkey, I get support from antimilitarists, anarchists, IHD (Human Rights Association), Lambda Istanbul (LGBT civil society organization), KaosGL (LGBT organization based in Ankara), and the Greens.

There is a slogan used by Lambda Istanbul that speaks to queer people: „you are neither wrong nor alone.” Human beings are conformist creatures with high adaptation skills. Even if I truly believe I am right, I feel the need to hear this from others. Otherwise, surrendering or getting accustomed to all this would be inevitable.

Also I worry about everything on the outside, especially my mother. I guess solidarity means preparing the grounds for a person to deal with what is before them and giving them the energy required to do that. I should thank all those who supported me in that respect.

Can you talk about your happiest and your most difficult moment since you were taken into custody?

Mehmet Tarhan: To be honest, I didn't really like this question. This is just my feeling. Perhaps I disliked them because they caused me to re-live many of the things I went through in the past 6 months. Unfortunately these were such terrible experiences that I would never want to go through them again. Seeing my mother at the courtroom made me happy but it was sad at the same time. Similarly, I feel happy when I receive letters, but when these letters and postcards remind me which side of the bars I am, it gives me pain. I do not perceive time as a succession of isolatable fragments. The same thing goes for events. Although I would like to answer your question, I will not be able to. I am sorry.

According to my observations and research, Turkey (your „homeland” :) is a country full of heroism and heroic stories in its history. Do you see yourself as a hero?

Mehmet Tarhan: Frankly I do not completely agree with your observation and assessment. Heroic stories and heroes are historically recent additions to the national imaginary. We can say it began with the nationalization project. I don't think what we see here is any more or less than the heroism of other countries that have been through the unfortunate processes of nationalization. For instance postcards that read, „You are a hero” mostly come to me from places like Britain. In Turkey, however, I am more likely to be seen as a „fool,” or „crazy” at best. I could have perhaps enjoyed seeing myself as a hero and maybe it would make my life easier. But unfortunately I do not believe that what I am doing is heroic or superhuman. I voice my opinions and transform them into actions just like everyone should. Further more, I am not doing this for others; I am doing it for myself. This is what is easy for me to do. Further more, I act selfish enough so as not to make sacrifices from myself; I do not sacrifice my effort of being an honest person. Have you ever seen someone selfish being called a hero for doing something anyone else can do?

Although conscientious objection is a liberationist attitude, it brings with it imprisonment. So where and how do you find the source of this attitude?

Mehmet Tarhan: I see myself as someone very unlucky for being integrated into the system but very lucky in terms of questioning it. So my source is my own identity, in all honesty. For there was

no shelter under which I could hide. As a faggot Kurdish peasant :) I made a choice. I chose the easy path. Instead of living in constant grapple with myself, I practice my will over my own life albeit at the cost of confronting the system.

Many things that happen in the world embarrass me and I am trying to be free from this shame or at least lighten up my load. I guess most of the things I do stem from this feeling of shame. This shame is so immense that getting rid of it for one second compensates for whatever cost I may have to pay in return for doing something to free myself of it. And what I felt on October 27, 2001 when I declared my conscientious objection was not shame.

I hope I was able to answer your questions. Thanks again. See you.

Mehmet