

Review:

Turkish Metal – Music, Meaning and Morality in a Muslim Society

Johan Cato

Keywords

popular culture, music, identity, gender, Turkey

Turkish Metal – Music, Meaning and Morality in a Muslim Society. Pierre Hecker. Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2012. ISBN: 140943849X, 230 pages.

Turkish Metal – Music, Meaning and Morality in a Muslim Society, written by German scholar Pierre Hecker is certainly a very captivating book, since it combines the study of Islam and heavy metal music, which is an area in need of more scholarly attention. The book is divided into seven chapters that deal with a variety of topics related to heavy metal, Turkey and Islam. The topics include questions concerning gender, nationalism, media coverage and satanic panic. The book is based on a broad range of materials, which include in-depth interviews with musicians and *metalheads* active on the scene, interviews with journalists and documentary analysis in the form of Turkish daily newspapers and material from the scene like fanzines, flyers, lyrics and webzines. When it comes to defining metal Hecker emphasises the lucid character of all forms of cultural phenomenons. They are not once and for all set in stone, rather they are dynamic and renegotiated and changed due to circumstances and change over time. Moreover, what constitutes metal or heavy metal culture is heavily dependent on the eye of the beholders specific perspective.

Hecker tells a vivid story about the early days of the Turkish heavy metal scene from the 1980s and onwards and the hardships Turkish metalheads had to endure to get a hold of a foreign metal albums, magazines, instruments and

other forms of merchandise associated with the metal scene. The hardships were not only due to the political and economic situation post the *1980 Turkish coup d'état* but the Turkish states monopoly of national media meant that there were almost no outlets for rock or metal music on national radio or TV. But as we all probably know, necessity is the mother of inventions and in relation to the Turkish metal scene this meant several things. Hecker shows how important the developments of informal structures are in the dissemination of different cultural expressions. For someone grown up in the global digital era of mp3 files and social media, it seems somewhat obsolete and maybe strange with a concept like *tapetrading*, but Hecker in a convincing way describes just how important this was in establishing a vibrant Turkish metal scene. Remember that this was almost always done on a non-monetary level, which therefore during the economic recession in the 1980s in Turkey, helped a lot of bands to get hold of foreign music and at the same time promote their own bands.

One of the chapters deals with the accusations of Satanism among metalheads in Turkey through the prism of moral panic. The growing visibility of metal in urban public spaces in the 1980s and early 1990s is described as one of several factors in the Turkish media campaign against heavy metal and its listeners as deviant Satan worshipping lunatics.

In relation to Islam one of the common accusations against metalheads was that their love of extreme music also entailed a renunciation of Islam. Hecker illustrates how the use of certain anti-Christian themes, common to heavy metal and black metal, like inverted crosses, became interpreted as signs of a rejection of Islam and an embrace of the Christian creed. Hecker concludes that one way of understanding the ambivalence of these (anti)-Christian symbols in a Muslim society (not familiar with symbols within the metal scene) are as a threat not only to Islam but also to the Turkish national identity, since Sunni Islam is an important aspect of nationalism in the country.

One of the most stimulating parts of the book is the one that deals with questions concerning gender and metal and its consequences for

female metalheads and musicians in Turkey. Hecker displays how female metalheads appropriate metal culture in their own way and that their way of doing metal is not different from male members of the scene. But at the same time there is ambivalence, since there are strong patriarchal norms that govern gender roles not just within the metal scene but also in Turkish society. Metal is considered to be a male bastion and in line with concepts of masculinity, which in turn means, that male participants in the scene often denote women as lacking the right dedication or simply being uninformed. In the interviews with female participants in the metal scene, it is evident that they don't perceive themselves as subordinate or repressed. Instead they create their own female space within metal, that stands on its own, which is further supported by the fact of an ever-growing number of all-female bands. Hecker analysis therefore points to heavy metals subversive potential when it comes to challenging dominant concepts regarding femininity and masculinity, a challenge that goes both ways. The female participants in the scene challenge dominant understandings of morality by appropriating spaces like (rock bars) and behavior (drinking, smoking, staying out late at night) that are considered to be masculine traits. On the other hand male participants challenge norms concerning behavior and gender specific roles by their appearances (long hair, earrings) that are thought of as feminine forms of appearance.

All in all, this is a well written and thought provoking book. On a more critical note it would have been interesting to have a more in-depth discussion about the different theological understandings of music within Islam and its importance for the development of the heavy metal scene in Turkey *vis-à-vis* the religious establishment. In line with this it could also have been interesting to have a larger discussion about the metalheads thoughts about religion in general, Islam and secularism and its effects on their self-understanding, identity and the Turkish metal scenes future. This is of course just minor remarks and does not in any way obscure that Hecker's book is fascinating and a excellent contribution to a research area that deserves much more attention.