

The Accidental Miner and the Disabled Citizen

Elif İrem Az (Eh-leef Ee-rem Ahz, she/they)

Postdoctoral Fellow in Disaster Studies

Harvard University Center for Middle Eastern Studies

This talk examines the political, economic, and embodied dimensions of labor and disability in the Soma Coal Basin in Western Turkey, focusing on what I term the workers' body-labor dualism. By workers' body-labor dualism, I mean the framework through which coal miners understand their bodies as separate from subjecthood and inseparable from their capacity for able-bodied labor, deriving value from work ability rather than biomedical wholeness or personhood. Drawing on ethnographic research conducted since 2018, I show how miners and their kin conceptualize and experience injury and illness within a region shaped by rapid agricultural transformation, coal production expansion, and systemic neglect of labor conditions. Following the 2014 Soma mine explosion—which resulted in the deaths of 301 miners—this framework becomes visible in miners' concept and experiences of “becoming accidented” (*kazalanmak*), emphasizing loss of labor capacity over biomedical disability or disabled identity. Accidented bodies are thus understood not as autonomous subjects or as aspects of personhood but as bearers and measures of labor capacity, masculine provision, and social value.

I argue that Soma miners' experiences of accidented bodies illuminate broader intersections of labor, disability, and citizenship under contemporary capitalism. Injury transforms miners into disabled citizens who must negotiate medico-legal regimes that quantify their physical capacity and engage state-supported mining companies for compensation. Crucially, working-class reliance on the nation-state—and the intensifying nationalism this generates—is not merely political or economic but physical and biological: accidented bodies depend or anticipate dependence on state recognition and welfare, binding survival and dignity to national belonging.