



## The Afterlife of Migrant Gifts

*Gökhan Mura*

### THINKING THROUGH THINGS IN MOTION

“The car is full of gifts  
A stereo and a pair of jeans  
Creams of all sorts, and many other things  
Who will they give all these gifts to  
And who will eat all that food?”

These verses from the 1996 song *Kapıkule’ye Kadar* (Until Kapıkule, the border checkpoint between Bulgaria and Turkey) by the hip-hop duo Karakan is a portrayal of the typical homeward journeys of Turkish migrant families that started in the 1960s and continue today. A migrant family who travels to Turkey from a Western European country for their summer holiday by car or van with a trunk full of various objects and goods is a common memory in Turkey. Both members of the duo Karakan are children of first-generation Turkish migrant families in Germany, and their song paints a detailed picture of a once very familiar trip to Turkey based

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on their own experiences. The holiday is short, the motherland is far, the trip is long, and the car is always packed with things. The image of Turkish migrants who work in different European countries and bring material things to Turkey for their own future residences or as gifts for families and friends (Zaptçioğlu 2005) is a vivid memory in the history of Turkish labor migration. The gifts brought by the migrants tell the story of migration not only from the migrants' point of view, but also from that of those who remained, for the history of those on the move is also a history of those who stay behind. (Levitt 2006).

I suggest taking these remitted objects seriously. The personal histories of the entanglements between migrants and non-migrants and these objects provide us with an array of individual perspectives through which to study migration. The literature on remittances provides detailed and extensive economic and ethnographic studies on what is remitted, how it is remitted, and how remittances construct, affect, and manipulate relations between the transactors in a transnational network. This chapter outlines an approach to the study of the social effects of material remittances (Nowicka and Šerbedžija 2016) that places the migrant gift as a transnational object and a remitted commodity in the focus of the study. Thus, it explores migration and remittances by thinking about and thinking through objects (Candlin and Guins 2009).

This chapter discusses the reception and adoption of migrant gifts by non-migrants in Turkey. My main questions concern what happens to the migrant gift after it is relocated from its country of purchase and is received by a non-migrant in Turkey, and what this tells us about remittances, migration, and Turkish society. I here embrace the conceptual framework of the cultural biographies of things, and the changing value regimes that transnational things in motion undergo in the course of their biographies (Appadurai 1986; Hoskins 2006; Kopytoff 1986; Tilley 2006). I will apply this conceptual framework here to explore and interpret the mutable nature of the value of material gifts brought from Western European countries to Turkey from the 1960s until today.

### THE BIOGRAPHIES OF MIGRANT GIFTS

The history of Turkish labor migration to Western Europe in the second half of twentieth century can be told through things. An analysis of remittances based on the biographies of things in motion has the potential to reveal previously neglected nuances of the social history of this migration:

“biographies can make salient what might otherwise remain obscure” (Kopytoff 1986, p. 67). Mauer argued that looking at things through a biographical perspective “introduce[s] a temporal dimension to the study of material objects,” through which the object’s underlying value is redefined as it “gets into and out of relations of exchange” in its lifespan (Maurer 2006, p. 21). However, our view would be further sharpened by exploring the social effects of material remittances through the lens of the biography of things, taking into account the process of objectification (Tilley 2006) that occurs in a transnational migrant gift’s life, and expanding our perspective on the fluidity of the value of the things in motion (Appadurai 1986). Tilley’s broad definition of objectification as “a concept that provides a particular way of understanding the relationship between subjects and objects” (Tilley 2006, p. 61) was further crystalized by Giorgio de Michelis, who defined objectification as “the process through which human beings appropriate and domesticate things” (De Michelis 2014, p. 198). Throughout the lifespan of a migrant gift turned into remittance, the object constructs, reinforces, and redefines the social relations between people. Non-migrant remittance receivers re-appropriate the gifts given, attributing new roles to them in their material world, and defining new chapters in the biography of the thing.

Through the course of its life, an object witnesses several chapters as it is subject to material, functional, and social changes. In the case of migrant gifts, the impact of the spatial dimension on an object’s biography is as important as the temporal dimension previously underlined. The mutable meaning and value of an object relocated across transnational borders and over the course of time is affected by the social and economic changes taking place in both the localities it originated from and where it is remitted. The biographies of things and the people who possess, use, exchange, or discard them are moreover intertwined (Hoskins 2006; Tilley 2006). Social and economic changes in the lives of the objects’ owners therefore open up new chapters in the biographies of things.

I use the conceptualization “afterlife of the gift” to point to the opening of a new chapter in an object’s biography. The afterlife concerns the new chapters of the biographies of transnational things after they have been displaced from their intended environment into a new material environment in the migrants’ country of origin. I do not use afterlife as a metaphor to connote the death of an object, and what happens to it after it is discarded, but to emphasize the leap in the biography of a transnational migrant gift after it experiences a sharp material climate change. An

exploration and creative interpretation of the various stories of this critical turn in the biographies of migrant gifts in different decades of migration history enables us to develop a comparative framework for the study of migration and remittances from the point of view of the value regimes and material cultures of the countries involved.

In an effort to explore the transformative effect of remittances, I will look at the change of the meaning, value, and reception of migrant gifts in Turkey throughout the planned labor migration to Europe. I will discuss the changing roles of migrant gifts through the interpretation of auto-ethnographic examples and according to three concepts: the narrative value of the gift, the subjective shift in the perceived value of the gift, and the intersubjective processes of adopting the gifts in Turkish society. My aim in this chapter is twofold: First, I will expound a theory of material remittances from an object-biographical point of view, and second, I will attempt to tell the history of Turkish migration through objects. In doing so, I will employ the essential “imaginative interpretation and appropriation” necessary in “any history told through things” (MacGregor 2012, p. xviii). To this end, I will introduce the concept of the ‘industrial exotic’ to explore the shift in the value of gifts and remittances.

### THEORIZING THE GIFT AS A MEDIUM OF MIGRANT NARRATIVES

The objects that people possess, interact with, and exchange can help to compose and transmit narratives. Objects also help people to communicate their self-histories (Hoskins 1998). How an object comes to be in a person’s possession may reflect that person’s needs, habits, wealth, or lifestyle choices. If it is an inherited object or a gift, meanwhile, it may transmit information about that person’s history. How the object is utilized throughout that person’s biography tells a great deal about that person’s life, physical abilities, cognitive capabilities, as well as the social, economic, and material conditions that person lives through. Modern consumer society advocates the idea that what we buy, possess, or give is an expression of our preferred identity, a way of distinguishing ourselves, and thereby a reflection of what we think of the lives and identities of others. Therefore, objects can translate and transmit these personal narratives from us to others and vice versa. Besides, objects may also become an active part in people’s stories, or they may be instrumental in narrating stories, with the

object triggering, storing, transferring, or accompanying the narration of memories in self-histories. An object can be a prop helping to set the material scene of a narrative, or it can be used as a metaphor to impart the desired messages. Along its life cycle, the gifted object can assist in narrating the story of those actors in the migration network who participated in the gift exchange. The choice and acquisition of the mass-produced commercial object by the migrants in their country of residence defines what they think a good gift should be—a good gift for their relatives or friends back home, and a good gift for their own social role as the migrant visiting home and carrying out their ascribed role in the gift-giving practice. The purchase reflects the available material choice in the country of residence and the migrants' budget as well as the migrants' idea of the receiver's status and gift-worthiness. It represents both the status of the object in the country of purchase and the migrants' assessment of its potential value and status in the country of origin. When the gifted object is displaced from the country of residence to be given as a gift in the country of origin, the gift establishes an object-centered communication between the migrant and the remaining party through which the migrant's assessments of the appropriateness of the gift and the migrant's story can be narrated. The same object's reception and placement in a new material environment and its afterlife beyond this exchange defines yet another relation between the object and the new owners. The integration of the object into this new life exhibits the assessment of the utility, value, and meaning of the same material gift by the receiver. The change in the ascribed meaning or value to similar migrant gifts through time and the changes in the country of origin also offer new interpretations and translations in the perceived migration narrative. Different groups of people, their social relations, and the dynamics of these groups and their society can be addressed through an interpretative analysis of the many different forms in which exchange manifests itself (Carrier 2006). In the case of transnational gift exchange, the people involved in the gift exchange network constitute a web of interactions, and the dynamics of their relations are determined by their positions in the social, economic, and material circles through which they move as well as the material and non-material qualities of the gift itself. Each individual in this network is entangled in social relations in which the gift occupies a central position. Besides being a vehicle of economic and social exchange, the gift constitutes a material medium through which the transactors communicate.

Today, various channels of communication allow for a continuous audio and visual communication between the migrants and their families and friends back home. Global movement of commodities, as well as ideas, images, and mediated representations of different lifestyles in different societies, provide ever-expanding exposure to the life of other people in other places. However, in the early years of Turkish labor migration, information about the new lives of the migrants working in Western European countries was scarce. The life of the migrant was a subject of curiosity for the ones staying behind, but most of the information about the daily life of the migrant was based on personal testimonials. The migrant gift could thus be interpreted as a material manifestation, a visible account of the personal narrative of the migrant's new life.

I use the term 'migrant gifts' to signify industrially produced commercial goods and objects purchased in the migrants' country of residence with the intention of being brought to their country of origin as gifts for family and friends. These commercial and material gifts include objects like kitchen utensils, electronic consumer products, toys, and fast-moving consumer goods, such as packaged food (e.g. chocolate, instant coffee, and wafers), cosmetic products, clothing, and accessories. These commodities "provide material vehicles for narrating economic change" (Foster 2006, p. 285). The gift becomes the vehicle through which "individuals and groups identify themselves" (Tilley 2006, p. 71). When migrants transport objects to Turkey, either for their own use or as gifts, the objects become a part of a migration narrative contributing to the transmission of the personal histories of migrants. Alongside the widely discussed major concerns and grand narratives of migration, I argue that the possession and exchange of transnational objects can be considered a material manifestation and an alternative narrative of the migrants' cultural displacement. These transnational objects can translate experiences from the migrant's new life into comprehensible—and palpable—narratives to an audience lacking visual or material clues about the life of the migrant in a foreign country.

The transnational migrant objects, as material manifestations of their lived experience, provide a migration narrative for the migrants while also becoming the symbolic medium through which migrant stories are narrated. The migrant gift becomes both a medium of narrative through which the story of the life in the migrated country can be told and the materialized message itself. The medium through which the message is communicated thus becomes the message itself (McLuhan 2001).

Transnational objects can assist migrants in devising an alternative narrative about their life and experiences in their new countries of residence. The object, as a sign, a representational image of another material environment, has the potential to animate and amplify the migrants' narratives about their new lives by materializing their lives through previously inaccessible things that the non-migrant may nevertheless already have been aware of through mediated depictions in magazines or on TV. This narrative agency, that is, the foreign object's ability to enrich the story about the lives of others, is also part of the value of the migrant gift beyond its commercial or material value. From its early life to its afterlife, the narrative value of a migrant gift as the object's agency is preserved. Additionally, even after the material climates of the countries in the migration networks relatively converge, and even though the messages that were received and their interpretations might change over time, a migrant gift still retains its inherent ability to translate and transmit stories of migration from the past and provide reflections on the current remittance scene.

### EXPERIENCING THE OTHER LAND

The changes in the biography of a thing do not change its narrative agency. The object, as a part of the migrant's many narratives, becomes the medium and subject of the gift receiver's narratives after the exchange. When the gift is given to the non-migrant, this exchange causes a turn in how the narrative agency of the gift is employed. This leap from the object's previous life to its new life transforms whom the object serves and assists in composing and narrating the story of the effects of migration and social and material remittances from a non-migrant's point of view.

The recontextualization of the purchased gift in the non-migrant's life may also have impacts beyond facilitating a narrative. Levitt (2006) observed that non-migrants develop a covetous interest in migrants' lives, and they imagine their own lives elsewhere due to their continuous exposure to migrant stories, photographs, and home videos. The material narrative medium afforded by the gift, I argue, similarly becomes a material medium of experience. The gift is not only a visual representation of life in another country; it also affords opportunities for mimicking experiences of that life abroad through using the same objects and consuming the same products or cosmetics, food, or drinks. Using or consuming the gift provides the gift receiver access to a hands-on 'authentic' experience, reanimating the experiences of life of the object in the country where it

was purchased. This experience, carrying out a task like the people in the country where the object come from in their own country, or consuming whatever they consume in other countries, can be viewed as a cameo role for the non-migrant in the previous biography of the object. We can thus speculate further that, by using and consuming transnational gifts, the non-migrant can, to some extent, experience life far away. The gift, which translates and transmits separate stories of the migrant and the remaining party, respectively, further becomes a mediator between the migrant and the non-migrant, allowing the latter to interactively participate in the migration story she has been listening to.

### VALUE SHIFT: THE HISTORY OF TURKISH LABOR MIGRATION THROUGH THINGS

When a gift changes hands, a new chapter begins in its biography. The meaning of a thing shifts for different individuals, depending on the way it is utilized by its owner in different social situations (Foster 2006). The gift receiver redefines the meaning and value of the migrant gift; however, the revaluation of the gift by the non-migrant is not solely dependent on personal attributions, but also determined by the different value regimes (Appadurai 1986) that the commodity travels between. Furthermore, exploring the displacement of an object between different value regimes, and exploring these things in motion, “illuminate[s] their human and social context” (Appadurai 1986, p. 5). The shift in the perceived value of the gift when it arrives in Turkey and its change throughout the years of migration thus provides us a glimpse into social and economic changes in Turkey over time.

Turkey signed its first bilateral agreement with Germany concerning labor migration in 1961, which allowed skilled workers from Turkey to work in different industries and jobs in Germany. Following Germany, bilateral agreements were struck with Austria, Belgium, and the Netherlands in 1964, with France in 1965, and with Sweden in 1967. Although these bilateral labor migration agreements ceased in 1974, migration from Turkey continued in different forms, such as through family reunifications. Turkish worker families settled in their countries of employment but embarked on yearly holiday visits to their country of origin. Turkish migrant workers’ remittances constituted an important boost to the Turkish economy and a major source of foreign exchange in

the 1970s (Çeçen et al. 1994; Ertüzün 1976; Pamuk 1981), and the migrants' yearly holiday visits were a source of material remittances. While Turkish people migrated to Western European countries in the pursuit of a better life and were introduced to a new life in a new material environment, an import substitution policy was implemented in Turkey between 1960 and 1980 that significantly restricted the entry of imported goods into the country (Barkey 1984; Öniş 2010). This policy created a narrow market for foreign durables, as few people could afford the prices of the limited amount of available merchandise (Pamuk 1981). Even after the abolition of this import substitution policy, the import tax laws in effect until 1986 affected the import of Western goods and objects. Imported goods were thus scarce, and practically inaccessible to the masses with limited purchasing power. The few imported goods available were expensive by comparison to their local equivalents. Another result of the import substitution policy was the use of older and inferior technologies to produce local substitutes (Ertüzün 1976), which made the technologically advanced, higher quality foreign goods more desirable.

### INTRODUCING THE INDUSTRIAL EXOTIC

Kopytoff suggested that the value of a commodity, beyond the exchange worth determined by the social relations of its production, is attributed to it after it is produced “by way of an autonomous cognitive and cultural process of singularization” (Kopytoff 1986, p. 83). In the case of the gift brought from abroad, this is a particular process of singularization. The migrant gift brought to Turkey during the first decades of labor migration was a material manifestation of life in another country. It was distinguishable from other similar products, and, in most cases, it could not be found on the market. In some cases, products from abroad provided new services and introduced new ways of doing things, all of which enhanced the process of the singularization of the migrant gift. The discrepancy between the utility, accessibility, and affordability of the migrant gift and the objects available in the local market determined its status and its value for the non-migrant.

The value of the material object in its culture of origin shifts when it becomes a gift and is taken to a different country, not only because it inherits the exchange value as a gift, but also because it is singularized and inherits a different exotic quality because it is brought from abroad. I propose labeling transnational material remittances such as migrant gifts as

‘industrial exotic’ to highlight the cultural significance of the mass-produced goods and objects, which gain an increased value due to their culturally Western origin and their displacement from an industrially and economically developed country to a less developed one. The ‘industrial exotic’ is a mass-produced and mundane object that goes through a value shift and is thus perceived as more valuable compared to the place where it is produced. The ‘industrial exotic’ is neither rare nor hard to find in its place of origin. These are everyday consumer goods, available in developed industrial countries with free market economies. However, they become exotic in the countries where the economy or politics do not allow them to be circulated in the market, making them rare. The singularization of the ‘industrial exotic’ stems from its rarity, its utility, and what it represents in a developing country. Unlike the exotic as defined by geographical and natural conditions, ‘industrial exotic’ is not defined by natural resources, but it is a token of an economic and industrial achievement. ‘Industrial exotic’ is defined by the differences between the material climates of the countries the thing moves in between.

To substantiate the definition of the ‘industrial exotic’ and to show how its value shifts, I will provide auto-ethnographic testimonials from my own family as examples of how gifts from abroad were received back in Turkey. During my childhood in the 1980s, my dad’s cousin, not a migrant, but a truck driver traveling back and forth between Europe and Turkey, used to bring various gifts from different European countries to my family. For example, he brought die-cast toy cars for me and my elder brother. Our first *Matchbox* and *Majorette* toy cars were elegantly different from their local equivalents in Turkey in the early 1980s. Besides the joyous utility they afforded through the experience of playing with them, their scarcity in the Turkish market made them even more special to us: They were objects of distinction. My dad, on the other hand, used to receive different decks of playing cards, which he kept in a special cabinet. Some of these decks were even kept in their plastic-wrapped packages, waiting for a special occasion to be used. These simple, everyday industrial products, cheaply available and accessible in Austria and Germany, were rare and exotic objects in Turkey. Playing cards are made to be used more than once, as long as their durability allows, but my dad’s attitude toward these commodities changed their biographies and increased their perceived value to more than it was intended where they were produced, thus definitely extending the objects’ life [Fig. 11.1].

**Fig. 11.1** A deck of playing cards made in Austria. My dad still keeps this gift



One of the gifts my mum got repeatedly was a bar of soap from the German brand Fa. With its packaging, its shape, and its distinctive smell, the Fa soap was immediately perceived as different from the available soap brands in daily use in Turkey. Although it was perhaps an ordinary part of everyday life, and very accessible in Germany, Fa was not available at ordinary shops in Turkey. For us, it could only be brought from abroad. It was considered a luxury consumer product in our home, or at least a product that should be delicately consumed. Our relationship with our Fa soap, which was intended to have a short life span, artificially extended the life of this consumer good. There was a significant difference between the value and meaning of this single bar of soap in Turkey with the meaning it held in the country in which it was produced. It was not just the physical properties or the affordance of the soap that created this difference; it was where the bar of soap came from, what it represented, and not knowing when we would receive another.

At the DDR Museum in Berlin, life in the German Democratic Republic is exhibited vividly through images, videos, and the display of interiors and objects. One display drawer consists of a collection of objects that were smuggled into the GDR from Federal Republic of Germany during the Cold War. The display includes consumer goods that were abundant in West Germany, such as food products, packaged coffee, packs of nylon stockings, and basic cosmetic products like hand creams and different brands of soaps, including Fa soap [Fig. 11.2].

Apparently, Fa soap was a sought-after object, and worth the risk of smuggling. The glorified status of Fa soap both in the GDR and in Turkey during the same period, but for different people from arguably very different societies and geographies, unveils the essence of the ‘industrial exotic.’



their lives. The adoption of the transnational object is a cultural redefinition of the object in its new environment. And, as Kopytoff elegantly argued, “what is significant about the adoption of alien objects is they are culturally redefined and put to use” (Kopytoff 1986, p. 67). The gift’s adoption by its new user into a new material environment, or its rejection, determine the afterlife of the migrant gift. The received gift, appropriated as an ‘industrial exotic,’ experiences a value shift and can have an extended life span, used infrequently, enjoying its privileged status as a valuable item at home. Even fast-moving consumer goods that are made to be sold and consumed immediately have an alternative life story as gifts. Fast-moving consumer goods were a popular choice of gift among migrants, as most contemporary fast-moving consumer goods were scarce in Turkey due to the import substitution policy. Even edible gifts like chocolate, a very common and popular small gift from abroad, experienced this shift. Cheap chocolates from budget supermarkets received an esteemed treatment in Turkey, sometimes as delicacies saved for special occasions. Sometimes, they grew stale as they waited in glass cabinets for the perfect occasion.

Aside from the symbolic meaning of the exotic, the adoption of a gift is also based on its utility and how well it satisfies a practical need in the non-migrant’s life. The transnational objects accepted and used by their new owners become a part of the household and are integrated into their new material environment. However, although they may maintain their symbolic value and narrative agency, in time, the gift that becomes commonly used and adjusted in its new context loses its exotic quality and the ‘industrial exotic’ becomes ordinary. This ordinary object then becomes obsolete, because it not only gets worn out or broken, but its functional and cultural substitutes emerge in the market due to larger-scale changes in economic policies.

However, not all transnational objects brought from Western Europe were enthusiastically accepted or adopted in Turkey. The rejected, or perhaps better to say unadopted, remittances lived a short life as a gift or material remittance and ended up in places more suitable for the definition of afterlife. To continue with my auto-ethnographic approach, further testimonials from my family as a gift receiver help clarify what I mean by the acceptance and adoption of the gift. In the 1980s, my aunt and uncle remigrated to Turkey from Germany. Their home was always an interesting display of objects from Germany, an exhibition of the ‘industrial exotic’ in context. In 1988, they were visited by their neighbors from Germany, another Turkish migrant couple. The couple brought some small gifts for

my parents, as was customary for migrant workers visiting Turkey. My mum got some cosmetics and a vegetable peeler. While the object fascinated me as a child on account of both its utility and the novel solution it provided to peeling vegetables, my mum was not impressed, and did not adopt it in her daily kitchen routine. The vegetable peeler experienced a not so valuable life in our kitchen drawer and was later tossed away as a useless object. Years later, while living in Sweden as a designer, I brought my mum a gift, a cheese slicer, not only as a reference to the previous family story but also because, again, I was fascinated by its form and function as an object. As in the case of the vegetable peeler, she did not adopt the ways of doing things made possible by the cheese slicer; of course, most of the cheese consumed in Turkey is not suitable to be sliced with this instrument. An alien object from abroad that cannot perform its function in a new environment and that cannot challenge user habits remains unadopted, and eventually becomes obsolete. In this particular case, the object was not discarded, but still lives an abandoned life in my mum's kitchen drawer because, as an object brought by her son, its symbolic value remains intact. During my research, I heard testimonials similar to my personal stories from different non-migrant families in Turkey, who spoke about the disdain created by some technical objects brought from abroad as gifts. Some of these misfit alien objects still live in limbo, not used, but not thrown away, lingering in cabinets and drawers [Fig. 11.3].

A further step in the rejection of migrant gifts is when they are discarded or sold to new owners. A speculative interpretation of the

**Fig. 11.3** The abandoned cheese slicer from Sweden. My mum still keeps it



biography of these unadopted remittances can be compiled by tracking their afterlife in secondhand shops and flea markets. A yogurt maker found in a secondhand shop in Turkey, alongside several other electrical appliances in the same shop, were all objects alien to Turkish kitchens until recently. The ability to automatically make yogurt in 100 ml portions was technologically advanced for its time, but in a country where making large amounts of yogurt directly in a pot without mechanical assistance is a proud display of culinary talent, the technical ability of the object did not provide a happy biography. Similarly, coffee bean grinders and moka pots, in a context where espresso and filter coffee were not familiar or popular, were both doomed afterlives as items in secondhand shops [Figs. 11.4 and 11.5].

The rejection of remittances due to cultural and material differences can thus be said to prepare the way for an unanticipated afterlife for the remittances in question. While some transnational objects end up in land-fill or in secondhand shops, as they from the outset did not suit the habitus of Turkey, others lost their place over time with the social and economic transformations that took place in Turkey after the 1980s. A flea market



Fig. 11.4 A yogurt maker found in a secondhand shop in Turkey



**Fig. 11.5** A coffee bean grinder and a moka pot for sale in a secondhand shop in Turkey

stall I visited in Istanbul with watches, cigarette holders, and pens could be viewed as an exhibition of the decaying status of once sought-after foreign objects. The handmade sign stating that they are all high-quality products from Germany no longer helped to restore the status and value of the object, as many variations of similar products have been available in the market in Turkey for decades now. This gives us an idea of the fading perception of high-quality remittances from Germany [Fig. 11.6].

A decrease in interest in migrant gifts as material remittances might have been caused by the mismatch between what the gift offered and the cultural and practical needs of Turkish non-migrants, the differences between the material environments where the gift was made for and where it was brought to, and the loss of exoticness of migrant gifts over time. The amount of financial remittances to Turkey has been in decline since 1998 (Karamelikli and Bayar 2015, p. 33). The same is true for material remittances. In two separate field studies in 2017 and 2019, I interviewed Turkish migrants living in Paris about their gift-giving practices. The participants in both studies reported that they were bringing fewer material



**Fig. 11.6** A stall in a flea market in Istanbul for goods that are declared to come from Germany. The sign reads, in broken Turkish: “The things in this stall came from Germany. The prices are very affordable. Thank you for your interest”

gifts to Turkey than before. Aside from a reduced need for material remittances in Turkey, the decrease in the remitted commodities points to two major changes in the remittance scene in Turkey. The Turkish migrants in Paris underlined that whatever they decided to bring was accessible in the Turkish market as well. Furthermore, they reported that their families and friends back home were not always very happy with the quality of the gifts they brought, as was sometimes openly expressed to the migrants. The disdain toward migrant gifts in twenty-first century Turkey is not because of a change in the quality of the gifts, but due to the abundance of substitute goods and objects in the Turkish market and a changed perception of quality among the gift receivers in Turkey. This change in the value regime determined the attitude of the transactors at both ends toward material remittances. The change in the economic policies of Turkey, which opened its partially state-controlled economy to a free market economy, allowing more imports and a developing economy with manufacturing capabilities, provided much easier access to an extended material world. Formerly exotic and valuable objects brought into Turkey later became available and thus ordinary in the new open market, which is saturated with commodities produced in Turkey or imported from all around the world. The non-migrant, flooded with access to a much wider choice of material things, thus becomes pickier and more vocal about the indifference of the

material quality of the received gift. The disdain expressed toward some of the gifts discouraged the migrants from making the effort of transporting material remittances, especially when taking into consideration luggage capacity. One reason the migrants expressed for bringing fewer material remittances than before is that they preferred air travel over cars to reach Turkey. The limited baggage allowance naturally had a direct effect on their cargo. Alongside the evolution of the perceived value and meaning of material remittances, a change in the technologies of remittance and in the means and channels to transfer remittances throughout the history of labor migration from Turkey to Western European countries is a topic deserving of further research. This topic offers a rich potential for the further exploration of the material and immaterial flow of remittances and the evolution of remittance technologies in physical and digital migration networks.

## CONCLUSION

Turkish migrants used to bring gifts which money could not buy. These consisted of mass-produced commercial goods and objects that were difficult to find in the Turkish consumer market and were unaffordable for most people. Therefore, they were exotic. These migrant gifts were samples from the daily life of countries with a different designed material environment, affording utilities that may or may not have been accepted and adopted by Turkish people. The gradual change in the gift recipients' attitudes toward the gifts through the history of Turkish labor migration provides us an overview of the larger changes occurring at the same time in Turkey, through the lens of the objects in question. The change in the recognition of the material remittance, from 'industrial exotic' to ordinary, is a consequence of the economic and social transformations in Turkey that were also reshaping its material climate.

Carrier stated that in the UK and the US, everyday items and impersonal, purchased commodities constitute "risky gifts" that lack the personal touch and consideration one might expect from the social relation that prompted the gift exchange (Carrier 2006, p. 380). However, in the case of Turkish migrant gifts, the non-migrants welcomed the mass-produced and purchased commodities in the first decades of Turkish labor migration. The novelty and exotic quality of these foreign everyday commodities, as well as the gift's financial contribution to the non-migrant's budget, made the purchased commodities valuable and meaningful.

However, the warm welcome faded in time for those gifts that were not aligned with the Turkish way of doing things, as these did not present acceptable personal or social affordances (see Ströhle in this volume).

The various scenarios of afterlives of migrant gifts in Turkey, either their early retirement as alien objects, their disposal, or their revaluation in secondhand markets, alongside the intertwined personal life stories of the gift receivers, provide us a unique opportunity to focus on the evolution of the social impacts of material remittances. Migrant gifts are not only embodied economic transactions, but also materialized ambassadors, transmitting migration narratives from the perspectives of the migrants and non-migrants alike involved in the remittance practice. Alongside this evolution in Turkey and in other countries involved in the migration network, the value regimes changed. Consequently, the gifts' perceived value and ascribed meaning, and thus its acceptance and adoption, also evolved, reshaping the gift-giving habits of Turkish migrants. I believe we can further use this conceptual framework to develop a comparative study of the impact of remittances in different countries. A cross-cultural comparative analysis of the adoption and revaluation of transnational migrant gifts in different remittance-receiving countries would allow for an alternative object-oriented reading of the social impact of migration and remittances in countries with similar development patterns and economic and social conditions.

The biographical approach I have embraced in looking at the life and afterlife of objects, addressing the intertwined relations between people and things in order to explore the changing meaning and social impact of migrant gifts, can also illuminate the current transnational flux in which things and people are constantly on the move and interact with each other through complex networks. In this dynamic environment, the value and meaning of objects and their role in people's lives change continuously, in accordance with each actor's unfolding biographies. The global movement of commodities as well as ideas, images, and mediated representations of different lifestyles in different societies provide ever-expanding exposure to narratives of the lives of the other and challenge the object's agency as a narrative medium in the migrant story. With the abundance and accessibility of globalized commodities, the exoticness and representativeness of the 'foreign object' becomes demystified. This change in the narrative ability, meaning, and value of the transnational gift for the migrant and the non-migrant in a globalized, consumerist, post-migrant society begs further analysis. I believe the object biography approach

provides us with new opportunities for further research on the social impact of material remittances in a context where migration is constantly evolving.

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