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migrant women transforming citizenship: life-stories from Britain and Germany

Umut Erel, Ashgate, Hampshire, UK and Burlington, USA, 2009, 217pp.,

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Umut Erel's 'Migrant women transforming citizenship' is an in-depth exploration of the *life-stories* of ten migrant women 'from Turkey' in Germany and Britain. Focusing on a particular group of 'highly educated and skilled' migrant women, the author investigates through an 'intersectional perspective', their multiple positions in the countries of immigration across the axes of class, gender, ethnic and other social divisions.

Against the backdrop of a major shift in the politics of these European countries from a (relative) multiculturalist to an 'integrationist' approach to immigration, Erel describes how the regulation of citizenship and migration in the United Kingdom and Germany limits these women's access to employment and rights at work, the recognition of their skills, their sexual choices, their family relationships and their political engagement. Indeed, the author's major scope is to uncover the various ways in which these migrant women challenge their marginalized positions through their 'practices of citizenship'. These are detected by focusing on a range of areas of the interviewees' lives, namely: their schooling and family background; their current working lives; their 'mothering practices'; and their political and social activism in the country of immigration.

Despite the fact that the different histories and policies of immigration and citizenship have produced different forms of incorporation of migrants in the two countries, both migration regimes are converging towards a model based on a racialized separation between 'welcome' and 'unwanted' migrants. These categories, respectively, correspond to the group of 'highly skilled' professionals on the one hand and to the 'unskilled' workers on the other (in turn associated with asylum seekers and undocumented migrants) (p. 191). However, Erel argues that the experiences of the migrant women interviewed put into question the very distinction between 'skilled' and 'unskilled' workers, by revealing how 'skill' is not a mere personal attribute but is rather socially constructed according to gender, national and ethnic stereotypes (see Chapter 4). Most importantly, the author shows how it is the very regime of selection that produces a process of 'deskilling' for those women who do not 'fit' into the strict criteria that determine legal access to these countries' labour markets. The regime of 'differentiated citizenship',

that builds skills into the migrants' capacity to integrate in the society of immigration, constructs them as 'less competent citizens' (p. 190) exactly while limiting their possibilities for economic, social and political participation. By inscribing 'agency' into Bourdieuan notions of social and cultural capital, Erel illustrates how migrants respond to increasing nationalistic policies by mobilizing their migration-specific 'cultural capital' and struggling for their economic and social integration (p. 195). This reflection on the process of skills degradation leads the author to make the important case for migrants to have their cultural capital transnationally validated. However, the author might have gone further into the criticism of the very distinction between skilled and unskilled migrants, questioning the justice of the possession of certain skills as a precondition for legal migration into those countries.

Work and skills are not the only spheres where the migrant women researched by Erel challenge the boundaries of national, gendered and ethnicized citizenship. The author engages with a fascinating investigation of another dimension of their 'substantiating capacities', which constitute the basis to claim 'intimate and sexual citizenship rights' (p. 191) on a transnational level. Considering both their experiences of 'transnational mothering' and the relationships with their children once united (see Chapter 5), Erel reflects on the role of these mothers as 'cultural workers' in the validation of their children's identities against racist and marginalizing environments. Through their caring activity, negotiating linguistic and cultural differences across generations, and developing cross-ethnic relations with their peers and co-parents (transnationally and locally), these women challenge orientalist assumptions of migrants' educational practices. While these educational practices reproduce crystallized notions of 'intrinsically traditional' migrant families as merely transmitting ethnic-bounded identities, the author contends that these migrants and their children co-construct new 'cross-ethnic identifications' (p. 129). Erel acknowledges how theoretical 'notions of hybridity and transnationality need to be used in a way that is more attentive to class divisions and intra-ethnic differential cultural capital' (p. 188). However, the impact of class on these migrant women's family relationships could have received greater attention in the analysis of their individual life stories.

In considering caring and cultural practices as central aspects in the constitution of these women as 'political subjects', Erel offers further crucial dimensions that expand the way we understand social and political activism. Indeed, Erel argues that we need to move beyond an understanding of these practices of citizenship as solely 'rights claiming', and proposes an interpretation of the process of becoming political that stretches the boundaries of state-defined juridical citizenship. In certain stories even the *lack of status* provides the migrant women with the basis for political activism and the ground from which to contest the norms that regulate access to rights (p. 184).

Moreover, the author highlights how in some cases the women from Turkey experienced their professions as sites for political engagement from where they challenged public institutions and discourses on citizenship (see Chapter 4). While this analysis importantly highlights every day life at work as a further area of social participation, it may be worth reflecting on the potential consequences of thinking about 'social citizenship' and work together. This relationship remains controversial, as the author herself notices, especially under the predominant forms of regulation of citizenship in most European countries. While the sphere of paid work is often framed in terms of a 'conditionality' for migrants' access to social citizenship, in the United Kingdom, in particular, a recent emphasis on 'social cohesion' renders the provision of volunteering (unpaid) work a sign of and a condition for migrants' integration (p. 181). More generally, the very choice of 'citizenship' as a tool to interpret the social transformations enacted by migrants as well as its 'political potential' may be problematized in the context of contemporary policy and discursive developments.

Erel's work is an original and remarkable contribution to ongoing scholarly debates on transnational migration and citizenship providing empirical grounds for looking at the agency of migrants, and migrant women in particular. It is a good starting point for rethinking the notion of citizenship and challenging the boundaries of political participation.

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