

Vol. 20 No. 2 (2022): Historein 20.2 (2022)



Published: 2022-08-27

Editorial Committee:

Ada Diala, Effi Gazi, Giorgos Plakotos, Emilia Salvanou, Elias Stouraitis, Athena Syriatou

Book Review Editor: Athena Syriatou

Cover Image: Georgia Marketou, *Memory Landscapes*, 2004

Cover Design: Panagiotis Papidas

Vasileios Petrogiannis

European Mobility and Spatial Belongings: Greek and Latvian Migrants in Sweden

Stockholm: Elanders, 2020. 334 pp.

Rolf Petri

Ca' Foscari University of Venice

In one of the interviews that make up the empirical core of the book, a Greek migrant to Sweden, identified as “Lefteris”, is quoted as saying: “How much Greek you are and how much Swede?” Typical stupid question! And I respond 40% Greek, 30% Swede, and the other 30% I have lost somewhere in between” (161). Vasileios Petrogiannis’ research is based on the methods of social science as well as on historical knowledge and political theory.¹ His aim is to understand the significance of the nation in the present conditions of European integration. “For migrants,” he argues, “nation-states seem to be an insufficient and even a problematic framework for expressing their affiliations and identifications” (19). Hence, he is interested in finding out whether national belonging is still meaningful for migrants and what, if any, it means to them. At the same time, the author’s interest is in the better understanding of what may lay there “in between”, or has been lost there: for example, the oft-invoked “European identity”, or the pride or shame of belonging to a geographical region, such as the Baltic Sea area, Eastern Europe, the Balkans or the Mediterranean. The text examines individual “identifications and belongings on different spatial levels (national, European, regional) and scrutinizes the entanglement of this spatial nexus” (19).

To do this, the author unfolds a complex methodological and theoretical apparatus that carefully weighs the epistemological value of each part of his research against the backdrop of the broader picture. This first part of the book takes more than one third of the whole text before leaving room for the migrants’ interviews. This may sound like a difficult reading with plenty of arid analytical language, but this is not the case. The book is very well written and the theoretical and methodological questions, as well as the historical background, are broken down to short, incisive and smoothly readable reflections. After a historical overview of nation and identities beyond the nation,

possible levels of “banal” practical Europeanism in Billig’s sense, and the trajectories of intra-European migration since 1945, Petrogiannis sheds light on the state-of-the-art in theorising citizenship, territory, imagined communities, regional identification, EU region building, identity and the sense of belonging.

3 The basic theoretical premise of the work is a social constructivist one, as Petrogiannis sees “geographical and institutionalized spaces” as “products of the human intellect” (67). While this in the wider society may be still a minority proposition, in the world of scholarly research it is an almost uncontested axiom. Still, the scholarly agreement on the general principle does not attenuate the arduousness of the researcher’s attempt to interrelate multiple politically constructed spaces with individual life experience. The chapter on the *sense* of belonging, which is ultimately “a personal question and particular to every individual” (63), and the *politics* of belonging, which try to set a normative frame for the Us and the Them within which individual choices and feelings are accepted as being convincing, is excellent. It underscores the challenge to understand “how all these spatial connections are intertwined with each other, and finally how this is translated personally and emotionally” (69). It underlines the dialectics between collective and individual agency: every person’s life story happens to be construed with the semantic material offered by contingent historical and geographical contexts; at the same time, each person contributes to the collective attributions of meaning by resemanticising the context through telling their own life story.

4 The author is fully aware of the setting’s complexity and accepts its challenges. He does not seek answers by presenting a survey questionnaire but leaves ample space to the migrants’ biographical self-narration, to “retrieve knowledge, not mere information from each case” (71). In qualitative interviewing, the interviewees’ narration can develop rather freely in situations of empathic conversation, which are only indirectly guided. The interviewees become “storytellers, narrators of experiences, emotions, opinions, and expectations, connecting disparate parts into a coherent, meaningful whole” (74). Their stories provide the reader with an in-depth understanding of migrant experience, and the author a more thorough grasp of the social and psychological dynamics involved.

5 The 24 Latvian and Greek migrants who illustrate their experience compose an intentionally heterogeneous sample as far as gender, age, education, profession, and time and circumstance of migration are concerned. Petrogiannis analyses the migrants’ thoughts regarding their belonging to national, European and regional spaces separately for the Greek and the Latvian group, to see which topics prevail, which language they use to describe their familiarity with or estrangement from the spaces they inhabit or have inhabited, and what their narrative strategy is to make sense of their multifaceted life stories.

6 The Greek group of 12, to which we mainly refer to exemplify the research’s proceedings, comprises three major subgroups: the first is made of now elderly people who came to Sweden as political emigrants or children of refugees during the years of the Colonels’ Regime, the second of younger people who came to Sweden after 2008, in the midst of the economic crisis. One third of the migrants came to Sweden between the 1980s and early 2000s, for various reasons. A similar distribution, but with an even wider spread (three migrants came to Sweden during World War Two), characterises the group of Latvian migrants.

7 The richness of aspects that emerge from the lively accounts of the interviewees is impossible to report here in detail. To briefly summarise the main results, we may say that the nation – that is, both the “home” and the “host” nation – remains the prime projection surface of thoughts, feelings and emotions against which migrants of all ages

and sexes define their belonging or estrangement. The national discourse emerges as the overwhelmingly dominant one even from the duplicity, or multiplicity, of national and European experience. For example, “the different use of the personal pronoun ‘we’ and ‘they’” in migrant accounts shows a “contradictory and multiple belonging” to Sweden and the home country. As in the case of “Elya” from Latvia, this “variety of belonging is stipulated either by spatiality, as in ‘we the Latvians of Sweden’ in comparison to ... ‘the Latvians of Latvia’, or by national belonging to ‘we the Latvians’ as nation, with all of these identifications co-existing in contradiction” (206).

The author of the present review is familiar with similar discursive constellations from his own studies of multilingual border regions and other phenomena related to the modern nation. It reinforces his conviction that the national discourse, like few other forceful ideological or religious discourses in history, is strengthened rather than
8 weakened by logical inconsistency and its contradictory, almost paradoxical, thus all-encompassing, and all-embracing form and shape. Border regions or migration make such form and shape more easily apparent; still it holds likewise for a believer immersed in the allegedly homogenous mass of other believers who never move away from their place.

Therefore, this reviewer is not surprised that European migrants localise themselves in
9 the Cartesian plane of national belonging. Still, “Europe” is important for them, too. As Greek migrant “Eleni” states:

“But unfortunately, when they say it (migrant) now I think it’s a negative word ... I consider myself a citizen of Europe in the good sense of Europe: the free movement of people. I don’t want to accept the label ‘migrant’ because as I said, migrant has a negative meaning for me” (164).

10 Being a “European” means shaking off the uncomfortable status of an applicant and relying instead on rights granted by EU citizenship.

Is this the Habermasian constitutional patriotism projected onto the European Union? What stands out here is rather the possibility to distinguish oneself, if an elderly person, from the own former migrant status associated with discrimination, and the possibility for young and old to distance themselves from the negative phenomena tagged to migration and migrants. With regard to the present xenophobic debate in part of the media, politics and society, they can claim to be part of a We group. Their “we-Europeans” status is
11 accepted by most citizens of the host country as well. It rewards the person with legal equality under most aspects of practical life. Therefore, most migrants for their part reward the institutional expectations with a practical, “banal” sense of belonging to the European institutional framework. Yet, as Petrogiannis notes, this type of “European identity largely goes through European mobility” (291). Not by chance does the EU promote a series of mobility programmes, assuming for good reason that this is the best way to shorten the distance between national and European senses of belonging.

However, one should not forget that the access point to “European citizenship” is national citizenship. Beyond all idealised self-description, the EU remains a
12 supranational institutional framework anchored in international treaties. Diplomatic and international law practices continue to affect its daily decision-making even when it is supposedly supranational. Therefore, we may say that migrants who sense the importance of national belonging and display an instrumental rather than emotional bond with “Europe” seem to get the EU reality right. No wonder that “attempts on the part of the European political and economic elite to create macro-regional identities via political

projects did not have any significant fruitful outcomes, even in the identity fluid space of migration” (292).

In the case of Greek migrants to Sweden, references to regional belongings are multiple and varied, but play altogether a minor role. Spaces like the Mediterranean, the Balkans, Southern and Eastern Europe all are mentioned, positively or negatively. “My boss is a Spanish woman,” “Magda” relates, “and we don’t even have to talk to each other because
13 we just understand each other” (263) in a way that would be impossible with Swedish colleagues. Such “elements of a common character were related mainly to the [Mediterranean and Baltic] regions’ respective climatological or historical profiles” (278) – warm weather, warm blood and erratic temperament as opposed to cold weather and cold mindedness, predictability and discipline.

So, it is the Swedish “cold” and calculating character that creates “Mediterranean” commonalities among migrants who discover they have shared habits and ways of thinking. On closer inspection, the Mediterranean reference is mostly meant – and sometimes explicitly so – as “South European”, whereas Mediterranean otherness (especially Islamic religion and Turkish or Arabic languages) is ignored or vaguely hinted at with a negative undertone. The similarity of Greek cuisine with other Eastern
14 Mediterranean cuisines is downplayed by one informant, and with it – we may infer – the common Ottoman past is also downplayed. Just for one other informant the “good” Mediterranean extends beyond EU borders, thanks to the religious presence of Greek Orthodoxy in the Levant. The reference to the “Balkans” and “East Europe” is sometimes negative, others positive. Like also the reference to Pontic Greekness, it allows the establishment of commonalities with “other” East European migrants to Sweden. Multiplicity, variety and a minor importance of regional belongings if compared to the national and European ones, also characterise the accounts of Latvian migrants.

One final aspect should be mentioned here. It is the way in which migrants interpret their spatial and national belonging. Generally speaking, they tend to rely on (self-)stereotypes and essentialised explanations, ranging from phenotypes (“I think that for the Swedes, a Greek looks like a suntanned man from Crete” [166]; “You are blonde. Why are you talking like this?” [201]; “People from Greece look different from people in Sweden,”
15 [252]), to national characters (“the reason why Greeks get melancholic is because we are a Mediterranean tribe” [261]) to climate (“the further south you go, where there is more sun and higher temperature, the more you are outside, the more you are with people, the more extrovert you become” [138]; “we want our sun” [261]). Many of them exhibit “in a way a primordial understanding of nation” (148) when referring to the bloodline along which the mother tongue of the parents must be taught to the offspring, to instil in those who are born and growing up in Sweden a vivid consciousness of their “national roots”.

All this seems to show how in wider society the discursive materials of modern national “identity” continue to be woven deeply into the fabric of individual psychology and collective consciousness. What we call personal experience is not made of unfiltered perception but based on meanings learned since a tender age. This may help explain why the social space remains widely immune from intellectual deconstruction. What
16 Petrogiannis’ brilliant study specifically shows is that even the experience of multiplicity, encounter, exchange, fluidity and ambiguity, which the life of a migrant unavoidably encompasses, will rarely lead to a spontaneous critical questioning of the nation’s prevailing semantics. On the contrary, it seems that “nation” remains the easiest accessible tool to explain the world for migrants in search of categorical homeliness and reliable meanings in an otherwise fluid and blurry surrounding.

NOTES

- 1 The book is available on open access at <http://urn.kb.se/resolve?urn=urn:nbn:se:sh:diva-41915>.