

Refugee Studies in Turkey: Prospects and Challenges

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Dawn Chatty and Philip Marfleet explain very eloquently how Refugee Studies was first born in the 1980s as a state-centric discipline and, like many other disciplines, defending the interests of nation-states, and how it has become more critical in due course (Chatty and Marfleet, 2013). There are two very essential elements that seem to be missing in Refugee Studies in Turkey. **Firstly**, scientific studies conducted in Turkey regarding the situation of Syrian refugees often contribute to the securitization, stigmatization and statisticalization of refugees rather than to make their social, economic and political expectations visible to the receiving society. What is missing here is the lack of anthropological research permitting the refugees to speak for themselves. As Gadi Benezer and Roger Zetter once stated very well, such an anthropological research could make it potentially easier to occupy a space within the host population as well as in the public domain (Benezer and Zetter, 2014). In this sense, an alternative point of view can be offered to the larger public, a point that includes, beside their trauma and sufferings, their active rather than passive stance and their resourcefulness, motivation and commitment that was needed in order to escape from their homelands and sanctuary. What I am talking about here is the need for action to empower the refugees.

Secondly, what is also missing in Refugee Studies in Turkey is a retrospective analysis of refugee experiences in the country dating back to the early ages of the Republic as well as to the Ottoman Empire. This is not only the missing link in the Turkish Refugee Studies field, but also the missing element in Refugee Studies in the rest of the world. Philip Marfleet relates this problem to the limitations of the nation-states: “If the territorial borders of modern states confined some people and excluded some others, “nationalized” intellectual agendas have largely excluded migration as a legitimate area of study” (Marfleet, 2013). This is also what we witness in the Turkish case.

Actually, Anatolia has always been exposed to several different forms of refugee and migration practices throughout its history. Since the Byzantium era, Anatolia has hosted many different groups of people who found refuge in there. Anatolia has become gradually Muslimized throughout history along with the migration of dominantly Turkish and Muslim-origin populations. Jewish migration to the Ottoman Empire after their expulsion from Spain and Portugal in 1492 was an exception. The Muslimization of Anatolia became even more visible in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, when the boundaries of the Ottoman Empire were shrinking rapidly (Erdoğan ve Kaya, 2015). The expulsion of Crimean and Circassian Muslims escaping from the atrocities of the Russian Empire in the second half of the 19th century was comparable in terms of size to the migration of Iranians, Turks, Kurds, Bosnians, Kosovars and Syrians escaping the violent conflicts in the Middle East and the Balkans starting in the early 1980s (Kaya, 2005).

The first wave of refugees in modern times was from **Iran**, following the **1979 Revolution**. Other major refugee flows were Kurds escaping from Iraq in 1988, which numbered at almost 60,000; and in 1991, when half a million people from Iraq found safe refuge in Turkey. **In 1989**, with **Bulgaria's** "Revival Process", which was an assimilation campaign against minorities, almost 310,000 ethnic Turks sought refuge in Turkey. In the following years, during the wars in **Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Kosovo**, Turkey granted asylum to 25,000 Bosnians and 18,000 Kosovars (Kirişçi and Karaca, 2015). Turkey has been positioned on the transit route for irregular migrants from Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Iraq, Iran, and Pakistan since the 1990s (İçduygu, 2015). Turkey is also a destination for human trafficking in the Black Sea region, with victims usually coming from **Moldova, Ukraine, the Russian Federation, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan**. In the meantime, Turkey has long been a country of destination for immigrants from Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union, as these new immigrants see Turkey as a gateway to a new job, a new life, and a stepping stone to employment in the West (İçduygu, 2009). Its geographical location has made Turkey a crucial place on irregular migration routes, especially for migrants trying to move to EU countries. Turkey's position in the migration process is a unique one and it is becoming an important site, not just for new national settlers, but also for today's international settlers.

Ethnographic Research: Cultural Intimacy

In his path-breaking ethnographic book, *Cultural Intimacy: Social Poetics in the Nation-State*, **Michael Herzfeld** (1997- Second Edition 2005) elaborated on what he called “cultural intimacy” generated by the Greeks, which is a strong sense of difference between what they presented to the outside and what they know about themselves on the inside. Herzfeld defines cultural intimacy as “the recognition of those aspects of a cultural identity that are considered a source of external embarrassment but that nevertheless provide insiders with their assurance of common sociality” (2005:3). *However, he later draws our attention to the fact that the term “cultural intimacy” was often perceived in the literature as the simple idea of acquaintance with a culture (Herzfeld, 2013: 491)*, a definition that I am more inclined to follow in my research. What I mostly witness on the field is that Arabic-Speaking-Sunni-Syrians have already created comfort zones in various diasporic spaces such as Fatih in Istanbul, Çarşamba and Yavuzselim in Bursa, or Ahmet Yesevi and Süleymaniye in Urfa. These spaces of cultural intimacy seem to provide them with an opportunity to homify their new place of residence with regard to religious, moral, architectural, urban, and sometimes linguistic similarities originating from the common past of the Turks and the Arabs.

Michael Herzfeld’s notion of ***cultural intimacy*** includes various acts and attitudes repeated by members of a group of people, which lead them to the formation of a Manichean understanding of the world divided between “us” and “them”. These acts and attitudes may range from essentializing culture and past, practicing various stereotypes in everyday life, performing persuasive acts of resemblances, ordinary acts of embarrassment kept as intimate secrets of the group, and different forms of *iconicity*³ such as mythical, visual, musical and gastronomic images bridging a sense of resemblance with the other members of the group at large (Herzfeld, 2016, 3rd edition). According to Herzfeld (2016: 33), essentialization and reification of the past and culture is not only an ideological element instrumentalized by political institutions and states to control and manipulate the masses, but also an indispensable element of social life. Hence, ordinary individuals also tend to essentialize and reify the past for their own use to come to terms with the hardships of everyday life. Essentializing the past partly makes it possible for private individuals to create the semiotic effect of what Herzfeld (2016: 33) calls ***iconicity***, the principle of signification by virtue of resemblance. Syrian refugees residing in diasporic spaces at large, and in conservative

neighbourhoods in particular, are likely to construct bridges between themselves and the members of the majority society by means of visual, musical, religious, gastronomic, and even linguistic iconicities, which create a space of intimacy the host communities (Herzfeld, 2016: 33).

Tolerance threshold has recently declined and the political discourse of return has been introduced to legitimize the military operations in Syria. It seems that the political discourses of **guesthood** and **Ensar** do not correspond with the societal expectations. What is being vocalized as a rhetoric by the state actors at national level is the **return**. There is a tension between the rhetoric and the practice. In the mean time, the number of societal tensions is increasing at local level. These tensions mostly appear in the relevant local media, but not in national media. The absence of such news in the national media creates a veil of ignorance to what is going on in the public space. Here, the main problem is the absence of what is called public space where different stakeholders at national level can deliberate, negotiate and resolve the emerging tensions with the idea of providing the decision makers with some policy proposals to be implemented at national level.

The growing number of tensions and the decline of the tolerance threshold could also be perceived as a sign of the process of social, economic and cultural integration. What is experienced in the field is the act of **integration** at local level. Following the framework of Robert Ezra Park's "**race relations cycle**", one could argue that what follows the **encounter** of refugees and host communities is the **societal tension**, which later requires the **accommodation** of the state in the third phase and **integration** in the last phase.

Empowerment: From charity to rights-based approach

The target should be to empower the refugees so that they could become active and reflexive agents to resolve existing social-economic and political problems. Otherwise, they have the risk of being imprisoned in the culturalist and charity-based frameworks where they will continue to play with the cultural intimacy tactic to connect themselves to the majority society. As the American anthropologist **Renato Rosaldo** (1989) stated earlier with regards to the Mexican immigrants in the US, there is a negative correlation between power and culture. Those who do not have material power, refugees in our case, do not have any other choice but revitalizing a culturalist discourse.

Conclusion

Refugee Studies in Turkey and elsewhere need insights from ethnographic research to become more critical and to wither away from the idea of being a state-centric discipline. In this sense, scientific interventions from Anthropology, Social Anthropology, Global Anthropology, Political Science, Economics, Migration Studies, Diaspora Studies, and Transnational Studies will enrich Refugee Studies in general. Such interventions may eventually create a substantially anthropocentric perspective without the need to statisticalize, securitize and stigmatize refugees, asylum seeker, and migrants. Our Horizon 2020 Project, RESPOND: Multilevel Governance of Mass Migration in Europe and Beyond is expected to fill in this gap in Refugee Studies.

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