

Economies of House-ing and Labor Migration in a Global City

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The Body and the Cuts

“Are you looking at the scars?” Kurban asked. I found myself looking at the scars from the cuts on his arm. Caught doing something totally inappropriate, I immediately started apologizing and lying, “I am so sorry, I was thinking of something else and looking in that direction.” He didn’t care. “Don’t think that I am a psychopath. It is the summary of my life. Every single one of them reminds me something.” Showing his left arm, he continued: “This happened when I first ran away from home, where I was staying with my uncles. I stayed in the park for a week and started smoking marijuana. Can you believe that? I was just a child. Just 13 years old. Fuck that.” He stops, taking a drag from his cigarette: “That was the first time I cut myself and made these signs. Not to forget what happened.”

Looking at the scars, he tells me the unforgettable moments of his life: Fights with family members, homeless and lonely nights in parks and mosques, his father’s never-ending demand for money, exploitation of his bodily labor and fights with bosses, some stories of torture, fights with the Turkish youth in his neighborhood, and the pain of love were among the many stories that he told that night.

After a long day of work, Kurban came back from Ortaköy where he was setting the stage for a big music festival at a university. We went to a coffeehouse, which is both a place to socialize and play cards for many Kurdish workers, as well as the main center to wait for working opportunities. He is 25 years old. He started to come to Istanbul to work at the age of 11. At that time his family was living in Iğdır, in eastern Anatolia, on the Turkish-

Armenian border. All the youth of his village go to Istanbul to take advantage of the economic potential of the city. Since the 1990s, the Kurds of Turkey have filled the neighborhoods of Istanbul, and have turned it into “the biggest Kurdish city”, as the Kurdish workers proudly put it.

The reasons for the migration have changed considerably for generations of Kurds. The first migration waves of the 1950s, '60s and '70s were the result of state agricultural policies and were economic in character. The 1990s, however, witnessed the biggest wave of forced migration of Kurds into the Turkish metropolises. During the 1990s, the war between the Turkish state and the Kurdistan Workers Party, or PKK, reached its peak. Pursuing a policy of counterinsurgency, the state evacuated around 4,000 villages and hamlets and displaced and dispossessed more than two million rural Kurds in this period (Jongerden 2007). Forced migration compelled Kurdish peasants into a new mode of production as “free wage-laborers,” but also as a source of cheap labor that now, with the arrival of hundred of thousands of Syrian refugees, competes at the lowest end of the labor market both in the legal and illicit economies. Istanbul became one of the main destinations for the displaced in the 1990s, due to its economic potential, geographical distance to the zones of war, and ready support from the first wave of Kurdish immigrants of the 1950s.

Kurdish migrant workers in Istanbul today comprise two separate groups of migrants: those who fled political violence in the southeast during the conflict-ridden 1990s, and those who came to Istanbul for temporary work in the 2000s, largely for economic opportunities. These two groups live side by side, and distinctions between them are blurred. There are two reasons for this blurring. In the last decade, as state conflict with the PKK declined, many

displaced Kurdish groups were able to return to their home towns (even if temporarily). Today, political violence in the southeast still drives migration, but it is secondary to the uneven economic relations between the war-torn Kurdish region and the Turkish metropolitan areas. My ethnographic investigation considers how both political violence and economic restructuring drive Kurdish migration patterns today and how urban labor practices impinge on ethnic identity-making processes.

Like many migrant Kurdish workers, Kurban stayed at houses called “bekar odaları” which means “single men’s rooms”. These are the basements of buildings where temporary migrants come to stay and work for several months. Depending on what they do and where they work, these young men can stay in these rooms with family members, the youth of their village or other workers from their workplace (depending on their relations with their families). Telling me about the scars on his arms, Kurban gave me a list of the crises he went through with his relatives from his village. At that time, he would stay in parks, mosques, coffeehouses or workplaces. In each of these stories, the extent to which he succeeded in establishing social and economic relations overdetermined the places where he stayed.

Kurban did not talk about the scars of the work accidents on his body until I asked him to. In contrast to the traces of problems with his family and distant relatives, he regarded his scars from work as “normal.” In the end people pay you to work hard, but isn’t it the family’s obligation to care? He thought of the conscious cuts as reminders of those who betrayed him instead of caring and helping. He left the scars on this body consciously. As for the rest, there was nothing he could do. He showed me some other scars left from fights with the nationalist Turks in his neighborhood. He seemed almost proud of it. “If we hadn’t

fought enough, they wouldn't have let us live here." He regards them as a part of a larger struggle of making Istanbul home for the Kurdish migrants. In addition to the scars of the work accidents, they constitute the scars of the laws of inequality inscribed on his body. Unlike Pierre Clastres' description of the young man in the initiation rite of a primitive society, in which the individual is given a lesson in equality through pain and suffering, these are the signs and scars of structural inequality and violence.

The last story of Kurban's scars is about the capital letters K and A, which he had cut more deeply into his body. Naturally, it was a longer story than the others. It was about a girl, who was his distant relation and lived in the village. He is in love with her. For him, she represents the innocent, clean girl untouched by city life. "Everything [I do] is for her. I will save money as I work in this fucking place. And these things will come to an end when we build a home together."

Building a Home: House, Kinship, and the Economy

Yet Kurban has a long way to go before building a home. He has to save money for his future wife's dowry, help his newly wed brother Mevlüt who moved to a new house and pay off his father's debts. Three months after our conversations that night, Mevlüt invited him and their younger brother Bayram to his home, which he rented with his wife. He wanted to live together and share the expenses with his brothers. Both Mevlüt and his wife are textile workers in a factory. Bayram is a waiter at a restaurant. Unlike Kurban, who works as a day laborer, his brothers have a regular income. The basic impetus for them to come together is to save money and help each other. The family, among the Kurdish migrant workers, is regarded as the basic medium of social mobility. The previous generations of Kurdish

migrant workers, at least the ones who succeeded in the economic life, owe their success to large family structures and child labor, as the argument in the working class districts goes. Family solidarity, or its absence, are regarded as the underlying reasons of social mobility or poverty and misery, respectively. I collected many stories of social mobility or poverty explained in terms of the relative strength or absence of family solidarity (materialized in terms of building a home).

Housing in shantytowns marked the period between the 1950s and '90s for the migrants. Owning such houses served as the basic means of social and economic mobility among early migrant workers. The reversal of the Turkish state's populist policies during the 1990s and the economic restructuring of the country generated a different market for housing and land in the big cities. In stark contrast to the earlier migrants, over the last two decades, migrant workers in Istanbul now face an "immoral economy of housing" (Buğra 1998) and a scarcity of housing facilities. In a country where the construction sector has experienced a massive boom with significant state support, housing has nevertheless become more expensive and scarce. A recent figure shows that inflation-adjusted housing prices in Istanbul have increased more than 50 percent in the last five years.¹

Under an economic model of scarcity, the inherent contradictions and inequalities of family solidarity and house-making have become more visible. After a month of living together, Mevlüt and his wife Zehra were fired from their jobs at the textile factory. Since they recently got married, Mevlüt asked his boss for work under much less favorable conditions. They started to work according to the piecework system. Kurban and Bayram, the younger

¹ Scary Istanbul House Price Boom, May 8 2015: <http://turkishmarketnews.com/on-the-scary-istanbul-house-price-boom/>

brothers, paid the rent and the bills for three months. And when their parents asked for money to buy more sheep, the problems associated with the family solidarity, which were concealed to some extent at that point, started to shatter the unity and solidarity of the home and kinship relations.

Kurban calls me to meet for dinner. We meet at a café where young migrant workers and refugees from Syria, Kurdistan, Africa, and the Turkic states go to have cheap food. As scholars of international migration point out, Turkey is becoming a country of settlement rather than merely a transition point for refugees and migrants from the Middle East and Africa. As we order our food, he starts giving me advice: “You should stay away from your relatives. You should never trust them.” What he says about Mevlüt is in stark opposition to his earlier expectations of moving to the family house. He was expecting his elder brother to help him as he prepared for his own wedding. Yet Mevlüt refused to help. On the contrary, he asked his younger brothers to help him buy a house for him and his wife. In the last couple of weeks, the relations in the family house got so tense that Bayram chose to go and stay at the restaurant where he works. And Kurban went back to the single-men’s rooms, where he stayed with two cousins, his potential brother-in-law, and two distant relations from the village. Over dinner, he tells me how his parents, his younger brother and himself helped Mevlüt and his wife during their marriage and how much he gave them without asking for any payment in return. For Kurban, Mevlüt failed to realize his responsibilities to the house and the family. He didn’t stay with his parents, even though they offered him and his wife room at their house to save money before setting off on their own. They preferred to come to Istanbul, even though the usual path for the eldest son was to live with the family

until the second son got married and took his place. And now, from Kurban's perspective, Mevlüt and his wife wanted to exploit the family and buy themselves a new house without helping the others at all.

After dinner, we go to the basement floor, which has two rooms, a kitchen and a bathroom. There are six young men between the ages of 15 to 25, all of whom are relatives and are working in the daily job market for subcontractor companies. In his former place of residence, to which he has now returned, Kurban gives advice to his younger relatives. "You should be careful of what you do. Now you work and get money that you could not even imagine in the village. You buy new shoes and clothes and see many girls around. You think that this will go on like that forever. If you continue to work from day to day without learning any skills, you will have good money for a while but end up as a *hamal* [a highly derogatory name for porter in Turkish]." The younger kids smile at what he says but listen to him carefully. Getting angry at them, he reminds them to save enough money to build their own house and form a family. "Otherwise you will end up a *hamal* like me." The conversation includes many stories of the older members of their community. One pole of the narrative includes those who invested in a house and formed a family. The existence of women in the house not only refers to cleanness and frugality, but also to fertility and children. The opposite pole is the tale of the wasteful migrant worker, who spends all his money eating outside, going to taverns and brothels. Building a home (*mal* in Kurdish) means forming a family (*malbat*). It is presented as the difference between social mobility and poverty among young Kurdish migrant workers.

Building a house in the shantytowns for the earlier generations of the migrants, or buying a house for the latecomers decrease the costs of living significantly. The rent of a small apartment in a working-class district of inner-city Istanbul generally exceeds minimum wage. Furthermore, the costs of food are drastically reduced by the domestic labor of the women. Yet building a house does not only stand in opposition to the tale of wasteful single worker in material terms. Symbolically, starting a family represents a pure and innocent life that protects the worker from the sinful life of the city. For many Kurdish migrant workers, the significant place of the family and the house is a boundary-making practice that differentiates them from the urban life associated with the secular urban life of Turks. In this regard, the family represents an obstacle against assimilation into ethnic Turkish culture. (Needless to say, the praxis is quite different than discourse. The city is not only a place of labor or oppression for Kurdish migrant workers, it is also a site of desire and bodily pleasures. And many times, this aspect of city life keeps the temporary migrant workers in the city for longer periods of time.)

Yet, as the case of Mevlüt and his brothers reveals, buying a house or starting a family has inherent tensions and conflicts of interests. The exploitation of women's labor by men (White 1994), or the younger generations by the elders is euphemized under the heading of mutual benefit and the well-being of the family. The family does not try to maximize the benefits of its members in total; it is an institution involving inherent tensions and contradictions among the members. When the father or the elder brothers succeed in building a home and possibly save enough to start a small-scale family business, these tensions get loosened, if not totally lost. However, in times of financial crises and economic

hardship, they may end up harming family ties. As the immoral economy of the housing sector prevents the Kurdish migrant workers from building or buying their own houses, the ratio of those who succeed in building/buying a house decreases significantly.² High rents force the migrant workers who chose to stay in Istanbul to live in perpetual poverty, ending up as *hamals*, in Kurban's words. More and more migrant Kurdish workers continue to see Istanbul as a place to stay and save money during their youth to invest in their hometowns. Yet the question of whether to return is hardened by the volatile political situation and war-torn economy in the Kurdish regions of the country. After years of war between the PKK and the Turkish army, neoliberal restructuring of the economy and the increased housing prices in Turkey leave more scars on the bodies of migrant workers and their efforts to start new homes, thus new lives.

² On the one hand, inequalities between the war-torn economy of the Kurdish region and the western metropolises of Turkey increase the pool of Kurdish migrant workers in the cities. Furthermore, the political plight of the refugees from Syria, the Middle East and North Africa decreases the bargaining power of the workers. On the other hand, internal and international migration to Istanbul and low interest rates on mortgage payments and urban renewal projects keep increasing sale prices and rents of housing.