

Chapter 22

The Research Memoir of an Intra-EU Migrant Who Has Become a Guest in a Settler Colonial State



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22.1 A Short Introduction

I usually start my courses on migration by telling the students three things: First, migration is not a crisis but an inherent feature of human life (Livi Bacci, 2012). Second, as we understand it today, migration is the product of the nation-state, notably a form of political organization that has become dominant globally in the last 250 years but is not perennial. Rather, it is historically contingent, and so is our understanding of borders. As Abdelmalek Sayad (2014) put it 30 years ago, the paradox of migration—the presence/absence of the migrant—presence in a foreign country where they do not belong and absence from their own country where they should be—is a fabrication of the national state order. But things were different at the time of empires and are already different in regionally enhanced mobility regimes like the European Union. Third, I remind my students that studying migration is intrinsically political. Of course, all research is political, but that of migration even more since it touches upon fundamental issues about identity and diversity, community and belonging, about who we are and who we want to be. Migration tests our civic and political values and challenges our understanding of social justice and solidarity. The quest to decolonize the structures of academic knowledge production was voiced in the late 1970s and 1980s by prominent cultural studies theorists like Edward Said (1979) and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (1988), even though we are still struggling to achieve such de-centering and a plurality of voices (Triandafyllidou, 2017). In recent years the political dimension (in the broader sense) of studying migration has become more visible in the academic debates as there is a higher awareness that we need to ponder over the experiences of countries

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(and communities) of origin and transit and not just of destination (Triandafyllidou, 2020a). Being a migration scholar that is also a migrant brings several of these issues home when it comes both to personal life and research work.

22.2 Why Did I Study Migration?

Migration has been part of my maternal grandparents' story albeit not directly. The older brothers of my maternal grandfather had migrated to the United States in the 1920s and so did some of my uncles in the 1960s. But most of them returned to Greece after several years abroad. At the time (in the 1980s), I did not conceptualize these stories as migration stories. Instead, they were stories of the diaspora in a country that took pride in its being ethnically, religiously, and culturally homogeneous. I grew up learning that Greece is 98% Christian Orthodox and that we could trace our genealogical origins to Pericles and Socrates. Indeed, what formidable cultural luggage we carried as the cradle of (the European) civilization, no less. At school, we also learned that the Greeks of the diaspora were even more Greek than we were because they kept the culture and the language alive in faraway places, remaining faithful to the nation and its Christian Orthodox faith.

Only when I went to the university to study sociology did I discover some of the cracks in this national story. It was in the late 1980s that I found out that Greece was home to several ethnic and religious minorities, that returning Greek migrants were not always welcome, that the cultural and linguistic capital that their children brought to Greek schools was utterly neglected, and that actually Greece was and unfortunately still is a deeply racist even if (at the time) xenophile society (Gropas & Triandafyllidou, 2011). Nonetheless, my sociology studies focused more on ideological issues. I was intrigued by minority parties and their strategies for achieving influence and gaining votes; not ethnic minority parties but ideological minorities like the Greens or extreme leftist parties. I left Greece in 1990 to pursue my doctoral studies on political party behaviour, at the department of social and political sciences, at the European University Institute (EUI), in Florence, Italy. That was my first migration experience, but I was still unaware of being what we call an "international student" today, as I was cushioned by a generous scholarship and a special status that the EUI offered as technically an international organization. It also happened that I had studied Italian, so I could easily integrate both at the EUI (where the working languages were English and French) but also the local Florentine environment.

The start of my migration experience coincided with the first anniversary of the fall of the Berlin Wall and the landslide of changes that swept through Europe in the early 1990s. The Communist regimes imploded, and thousands of people 'voted with their feet,' moving west and south to other European countries. Almost overnight, Greece was transformed from an emigration to an immigration country. And so did the Greek public opinion: it turned almost as quickly from xenophile to xenophobic. After dinner discussions with fellow Ph.D. students, friend and colleague

Andonis Mikrakis and myself wrote our very first academic paper: ‘Greece: The Others Within’ published in *Social Science Information* in 1994 (Mikrakis & Triandafyllidou, 1994). Studying minority parties suddenly lost its meaning for me: the puzzle of nationalism and migration, of Self and Other, became, in a short time, the focus of my research and my academic career immediately after my Ph.D. I was both surprised and intrigued by such a sudden change of direction in Greek public opinion (Triandafyllidou, 2001).

Nest, I went to Belgium for a brief stint as a stagiaire at the European Commission and then to the London School of Economics (LSE) for a postdoctoral fellowship. It suddenly became clear to me that my identity was perhaps why I was interested in diversity, migration, xenophobia, and exclusion. Greek national identity is heavy; one cannot shed it lightly. You were raised to believe, and I am afraid this is still the case, that you are the heir of a formidable and unique people that 2500 years ago brought the world some of the most critical concepts in politics, philosophy, and the arts. It may be true that classical Greece was a great civilization, like several others, of course. But what is ‘heavy’ about the Hellenic heritage is that each young Greek is convinced that they have an intrinsic worth in this world because they are biologically the heirs of these great philosophers. At the same time, this wonderful classical heritage is coupled with Christian Orthodoxy and the greatness of the Byzantine empire. In a unique amalgamation of rather antithetical ‘western’ and ‘eastern’ traditions, the modern Greek nation emerges as unique, as ‘brotherless’ (Roudometof, 1996; Triandafyllidou et al., 1997).

The modern Greek identity is a difficult one: there are few margins of diversity within. You are a ‘traitor’ if you do not fully subscribe to the dominant ethnocultural nationalist discourse. I tend to think that Greekness resembles Jewishness – Greeks are a chosen people whose ethnicity can hardly be separated from religion and who believe they can trace their genealogical origins to time immemorial. I contend that ‘heavy’ identities often lead people to become researchers, to study their own predicament. And by way of observation, some of the foremost theorists of nationalism, Anthony D. Smith, Ernest Gellner, and Elie Kedourie, were all of Jewish descent. In choosing to pursue research on the impact of immigration on nationalism, soon after my Ph.D., in a field that was entirely new for me then, there was something clearly about me and my country. I needed to understand why and how so many of my fellow Greeks could be so xenophobic and racist.

22.3 From Xenophobia to Irregular Migration

After an intense two years in London at the LSE, I was looking for my next job. While my parents would have preferred that I try my chances at the Greek University, I was more inclined to stay in Britain—I wanted to pursue an international career, and British Universities seemed like the right place to start. Albeit, life shows the way. Before getting a job offer in the U.K., I won a Marie Curie Fellowship to spend two years developing my research on nationalism, at the Consiglio Nazionale per le

Ricerche in Rome. That was perhaps my first authentic migration experience. Even though I was fluent in Italian, Rome was the first place where I was irrefutably made to feel like a foreigner. I remember speaking with a real estate agent while looking for a flat to rent. While I was telling her proudly about my cosmopolitan travels, she turned to me and said: “Quindi, Lei e’ una nomade” (“So, you are a nomad”). That was not a compliment in Italian. It alluded to being a Roma, a ‘Gypsy.’ The friend accompanying me got angry, but I tugged at her sleeve. There was no reason to ruin a good deal over a racist comment. I wanted that flat; the deal was great. And who cared about the real estate agent? Nonetheless, I still remember that comment and regret not retorting to the agent that migrating is a good thing that opens up your mind.

A comment is in order here: My migratory experiences for most of the 1990s took place in a cosmopolitan framework. I lived in Italy but worked in English and French languages. The same was true for my brief internship at the European Commission in Brussels and my fellowship at the London School of Economics. I lived in Brussels or London but had little contact with the local society. My colleagues and friends were from elsewhere, there was little sense of who ‘belonged’ and who did not, and as a European citizen, I was protected. Even though intra-European mobility at the time was not as smooth as it is today, you still needed no visa and did not need to worry about being expelled if your stay permit had expired. I only knew what ‘real’ migration was about from the stories of some of my colleagues from the ‘Balkans’ (e.g., Serbia), Argentina, or Japan. For me, migration controls or irregular migration were research questions, not lived experiences.

After spending about five years studying the impact of immigration on national identity in southern Europe and comparing ‘new’ with ‘old’ host countries in Europe (e.g., Italy, Greece, and Spain with Germany or Britain), my research shifted quite drastically to immigration policy. The reasons were again both biographical and scholarly. From a research and policy perspective, I was particularly concerned with the plight of people with uncertain or outright irregular status in southern Europe, particularly migrant domestic workers or people working in construction, those doing the famous three ‘d’ jobs (dirty, dangerous, and demanding). I was interested in deciphering what was wrong with migration policy in southern Europe – why couldn’t things be simpler? Why were ‘third country nationals’ (or colloquially called: *extracomunitari*, meaning not from the EU) lost in bureaucracy when renewing their permit and receiving the actual document when it had already expired? Just getting permits issued took a long time. Often, the only way to solve their paperwork problems was to bribe someone or have a local contact that would help ‘push’ their case forward. Thus, my work shifted to policy implementation, regime, and migration control.

While a Marie Curie Fellow in Rome, I was looking for my next career step and was inclined to pursue research rather than a teaching path. I had already worked on EU-funded research projects during my Ph.D. studies, and I was ambitious enough to try and write my first project. At the same time, I realized that a research project must have a clear societal or policy relevance to receive funding. It is difficult to obtain financing for a purely conceptual project that will only tell us something

about identity and diversity, modes of belonging, and nationalism conceptions. A project that seeks to answer a specific question, such as how the same immigration policies are implemented in different national and organizational contexts, has a much better chance of succeeding.

This started a career that has evolved into the interaction between what interests me and what is likely to attract funds. I did not perceive this as a contradiction or a compromise. It has been a process of cross-fertilization. For every project, I had to match available funding to particular thematic areas that fit my scholarly interests.

The positive experience of putting together international research projects on migration-related themes has sometimes created a sense of fatigue: projects have their own pace, and by the time you finish one, you already have to start the next. This pace does not respect the inner rhythm of scholarly work that requires pause and reflection. Such contemplation gives space for cultivating your intellectual curiosity and seeking your own research questions rather than answering the research inquiries of policymakers. At the same time, international projects further gave me the freedom to move. After seven years in Italy, I decided to move back to Greece. In the meantime, I met my husband, Evgenios, a Hellenic Air Force pilot. We had had two kids in a transnational family setting, and we wanted to build a bit more of a stable life together. Working with research project funding allowed me to continue my career in Greece, as a return migrant, after 15 years abroad, despite the closed character of the Greek University landscape, where nepotism and networks had a much stronger influence than academic merit. Thus once again, almost by coincidence, my own migratory experience matched my research on migration, as I explain below.

22.4 A Return Migrant

During my first year back to Greece (in 2004), I believe I did not stop complaining about everything: the banks, the postal service, the lack of public parks, and the awkward timetables of other Greek families. Suddenly my country was no longer my own. I was different. My colleagues would comment behind my back that I was ‘strange’, wanted to impose the ‘foreign’ ways and thought I knew better. They were partly right and partly wrong. Clearly, I was a return migrant. I did not start studying return migration, but I did realize that once a migrant, you are always a migrant. You are never entirely at home anymore because you suddenly see everything from a certain distance; you can take a step back and observe how different people or communities deal with similar issues. You can be more sensitive or critical towards your own country of origin. Still, you also become more aware of your positionality towards fellow nationals or migrants and your own subject of inquiry.

As a return migrant, you know that things can be done differently; you have partly absorbed new values, new modes of doing things, and new perspectives. You are perhaps less passionate – your own identity develops in hybrid ways (Bhabha, 1990) – but you are also less innocent. I think most fellow researchers who are

migrants and study migration will recognize this short-circuiting of life and work. It facilitates a self-reflexive approach and being conscious of your positionality towards the subject of your research and authorities, whether they are authorities of your own country of origin or another country.

This realization prompts the researcher to feel privileged and transmit this sense of richness to their study subjects. With my colleague Ursula H. Meinhof (Meinhof & Triandafyllidou, 2006), we theorized this richness as transcultural capital that migrants develop by living in-between two countries and by bringing their networks, their experiences and their traditions from two or more nations together. The work with Ursula focused on migrant artists, but this transcultural connection has been a trope in my research, whether that focused on highly skilled professionals (Bartolini et al., 2017) or irregular migrants (Triandafyllidou, 2019).

22.5 A Migrant Mother or a Mother of Migrant Children?

One of the topics I have studied extensively in my work is the socio-economic and political integration of migrants in different European countries. Education had been one of the topics on which I had worked, from a comparative perspective. I spent hours and days at research workshops discussing why children of migrant families have lower educational attainment than native children, whether the mother tongue of migrant children should be taught at schools, and arguing about the place of religion in school life. In 2012, my husband's career took us to Naples; I had to start living as a migrant mother. My then three boys had been born in Italy during my previous employment in Florence, but we had moved to Greece while they were very young, so they had no memory of it. They had studied some French and some English, but their mother tongue was Greek. After a month at the local international school on the northern outskirts of Naples, my elder son said: "Ok, this is interesting, but when are we going home?" We had to explain that our home was now in Naples.

Children learn fast; before we knew it, they were no longer crying, understood the situation, and gradually started speaking and writing in Italian and English at their bilingual school. What I was not prepared for was for them to lose their Greek. Deep down inside, I had always been convinced that migrant children do not adequately learn the language of the country of origin because migrant parents are (a) not highly educated; and (b) have little time to spend with their children because they work double shifts to make ends meet. None of these two conditions were true in our case – we were both highly educated and were working single shifts – so how could such issues arise? Yet it became clear soon that children acquire their vocabulary and grammar primarily through school and not at home. Migration theory met migration practice. It was a fascinating time re-reading the literature on second and 1.5 generation children while living the experience at home (Alba et al., 2002; Rumbaut, 2004; Portes & Rivas, 2011).

22.6 Too Much Mobility?

Questions over identity have resurfaced time and again in our family. My children are convinced that you are born of a particular nationality—you do not become a national of a given country. They are not satisfied by my ‘grey’ answers—it all depends—they prefer my husband’s clearer answers. We have moved a lot; we made room for a double-career family, which has not been easy. The three older children were born in Italy while we lived between Florence, Ferrara, Patras, and Athens. They grew up in Patras and Athens as toddlers. Before they knew it, we were in Naples, almost a ‘different country’ compared to Florence, socializing with local Italians, Greeks, and US military officers and their families. Then, a fourth brother was born. By the time Italian had become their mother tongue, we had moved from Naples to Florence. My husband became a flying father, commuting between Greece and Italy every other weekend. In Florence, the boys introduced themselves in their new school as Greeks from Naples. A few mothers would come to me asking: ‘What’s the story?’

My son, Kimonas, was seven years old at the time. His schoolteacher—a great teacher in a very welcoming public school—spent the year explaining to me that I should not talk to the boy in Greek at home because this risked confusing him. She also referred him for a dyslexia assessment, along with two more boys I would later discover were both from migrant families. Being a high-skilled, secure, and seasoned migrant, I smiled and thanked her for her interest even though I was annoyed and felt hurt that my child was, in my view, suffering discrimination. But it just hit home why teachers have an essential role to play in education systems and why the ‘ethnic penalty’ (Heath & Cheung, 2007) persists in Germany, the Netherlands, or the U.K., despite all education reforms and scientific evidence (Helot & Young, 2002; Hoff, 2018). In the Accept Pluralism project, one of the best practices we identified was a framework for peer-to-peer dialogue between teachers and parents promoted in Danish schools in Copenhagen (Olsen & Ahlgren, 2011; Triandafyllidou, 2012). The city of Copenhagen pioneered that practice to support the involvement of Muslim migrant mothers in their children’s education and engagement in schools. It also occurred to me that such hurdles were genuine for the Peruvian and Romanian mothers that were my neighbours in Florence.

Another afternoon we were talking politics with the children, and one of my boys expressed negative opinions about immigrants and immigration. He was repeating well-known tropes about immigration being out of control, migrants taking jobs, and not adapting to their local values. When I asked him if he realized we were migrants, too, he was puzzled. While he identified as Greek and not Italian, our socio-economic position and even our phenotype had prevented him from realizing that we were also technically migrants. He had got it right in one sense: we were migrants but not part of ‘those migrants’ about which the newspapers in Italy often reported. We were the ‘good’ migrants that European countries wanted: white, highly skilled, and Christian.

For my children, it is entirely natural to switch from speaking Italian among themselves, to Greek with us parents, or English and French at school. However, their identity is not as fluid. Their exposure to diversity and mobility has led them to identify strongly as Greeks. They have not had the luxury of a stable childhood like my husband and me. For them, Greekness is a solid anchor in a liquid world (paraphrasing Zygmunt Bauman, 2000). This experience has greatly informed my thinking and writing about identity and citizenship. After all, identity is more about diversity and interaction with the Other than the Self. And yet when I thought I had probably gone full circle in my migratory experience and academic career, Canada came to challenge our existence further.

22.7 A ‘White’ European Migrant in a Settler Colonial State?

Responding to a fantastic career opportunity and feeling that this was a new phase for our whole family, a choice my husband also supported, we moved to Toronto in August 2019. Canada has been part of my academic work in my studies of high-skilled labor migration management, refugee resettlement, and of course, multiculturalism. I remember giving a seminar to European Commission officers in Helsinki, Finland, a few years back, comparing the EU Blue Card scheme with the Australian and Canadian systems for attracting highly skilled migrants. To me, Canada was a migrant nation, a place free from the heavy history of European countries, with their wars of independence, civil wars, and religious struggles. I had listened to Justin Trudeau arguing that Canada was the first post-national nation. I was enthusiastic not only about the professional opportunity to create a whole research program at Toronto Metropolitan University (then Ryerson University) but also about the life experience for all of us, particularly our teenage boys. They would live in a truly diverse environment, further develop their English and French, study at a Canadian university, and be genuine global citizens. I knew about Truth and Reconciliation but had not heard the expression “settler colonialism.”

Working and living in Canada, particularly during a pandemic, has been a welcome but steep learning curve. I have had to learn that I am a temporary migrant; my rights and my children’s rights are limited until we become permanent residents. For someone who has spent their life moving within the EU as an EU citizen, that realization came as a cold shower. I thought my high-skilled migrant status would protect me from this experience, as had happened previously. But the Canadian Express Entry system is very egalitarian; you have to jump through the same hoops as everyone else.

A second thing that I have had to learn is that I live in a settler colonial state, and I have to take sides: I have to choose whether I am a settler or a guest, and I have to reflect on the moral and political obligations that arise from my position. This choice is not easy for someone who, although European, comes from an ‘underdog’

country like Greece, whose narrative has been that of being the ‘poor relative’ of Europe while, at the same time, being the ‘cradle of civilization.’ Confrontation with my white privilege requires me to dig ever deeper into my national and racial identity. White is also a color and I do not identify as ‘White’ but people see me as ‘white’.

I have been hiding for a while behind my technical temporariness – I only recently became a ‘permanent resident’ after all. And that does not mean that I intend to stay in Canada for the longer term. I am still grappling with my role in changing settler colonialism in ways that make it more inclusive and equitable. While decolonization is not a metaphor (Tuck & Wayne Young, 2012), history is not going back either and the more I live in Canada the more I become convinced that we need to remake the future together, in ways that undo exploitation and abuse against indigenous peoples but also include the many, very different types of settlers that came to this land rather than reify ‘natives’ and ‘migrants’ (Sharma, 2020). This is a new area of research for me that has pushed my recent writings on nationalism (Triandafyllidou, 2020b) towards new directions engaging with race and history in ways different than what I envisaged before. The project from which this book has arisen is part of this exploration. It has made it even clearer that in research you need to work with the subjects of your research, and learn from them as much as you try to create new knowledge about them.

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