

AYŞE PARLA, *Precarious Hope: Migration and the Limits of Belonging in Turkey* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2019). Pp. 256. \$90.00 cloth, \$28.00 paper. ISBN 9781503608108.

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Grounded in the anthropology of emotions, Ayşe Parla's new book *Precarious Hope: Migration and the Limits of Belonging in Turkey* approaches migration through the lens of "hope" rather than despair. What happens to our understanding of hope, she questions, when we shift the focus away from the "downtrodden migrant or the suffering refugee" (6) and consider the experiences of a privileged group of migrants? Parla addresses this question through an extensively researched and elegantly written ethnographic analysis of the 700,000 Bulgarian migrants—or *Bulgaristanlı*, as she calls them—living in Turkey today. With few exceptions, this important topic has not been covered in the literature—a reflection, no doubt, of the unfortunately minimal attention paid in general to migration in the Turkish context—making Parla's highly anticipated book now the definitive English-language work. It should be essential reading for scholars of the Middle East, Turkey, and the Balkans who are interested in questions related to migration, citizenship, ethnicity, race, and gender.

The hopefulness of the *Bulgaristanlı*, Parla contends, stems from their perceived privilege and "sense of entitlement" rooted in their self-identification as *soydaş*, or "ethnic kin" who share a common culture and Turkish origin. Inspired by her subjects' claims that "we are Turks" and "[w]e, too, have Turkish blood in our veins" (4), Parla opts to translate *soydaş* as "racial kin," which better "delineates the ethnoracial underpinnings of Turkey's citizenship regime" (6–7). Indeed, the claim to being *soydaş* has important legal ramifications codified in Turkey's 1926 Settlement Law, whereby only someone of "Turkish race/lineage and who has ties to Turkish culture" qualifies as a migrant capable of attaining Turkish citizenship (7). Yet, as highlighted in the book's

paradoxical title, *Precarious Hope*, Bulgarian migrants' ethnoracial claim to special treatment has not always manifested in reality but rather has oscillated ambivalently between privilege and precarity. Although many expect "wholehearted acceptance" upon arriving their "symbolic homeland," their struggle for legal status and cultural acceptance exposes the complexities of Turkish citizenship and the limits of Turkish belonging (27).

As Parla explains in a clear, concise, and much-appreciated historical overview, the *Bulgaristanlı* are descendants of the ethnic Turkish Muslims who settled in eastern Bulgaria during the Ottoman conquest of the Balkans. As the Ottoman Empire collapsed amid the nationalist movements of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, over 800,000 Muslim-Turkish refugees were enthusiastically welcomed in the new Turkish Republic, where they were granted property and elite status as *iskanlı göçmenler* (resettled migrants). By the 1950s, when Bulgaria became a Cold War enemy, ethnic Turks in the Balkans became viewed as *dış Türkler* (distant Turks), who should promote the nationalist cause abroad. The major turning point was 1984–1989, when Bulgaria's communist government began a violent forced assimilation campaign, sparking a mass exodus of 300,000 Muslims to Turkey. Overwhelmingly, the Turkish government and society cheered these refugees as the homecoming of the *soydaş*, who had proudly and bravely maintained their Turkish identity despite persecution. The situation has differed, however, for the informal labor migrants who have arrived since the fall of communism in the 1990s, when Bulgaria hardened the border with Turkey and increasingly denied exit visas, prompting a rise in illegal border crossings (115–22). Although labor migrants expect similar favorable treatment, they have experienced a more tepid reception, revealing the declining value of claims to *soydaş*.

Overall, this book is analytically rigorous, well theorized, and pleasant to read. Each chapter artfully intertwines anthropological and sociological theories, government and public discourses about the migrants, and the personal stories of the migrants themselves. Indeed, by centering the migrants' voices through extensive and meaningful anecdotes and quotations, Parla does justice to the hopes, dreams, and struggles of her subjects. Her keen attention to the migrants' wishes manifests in her careful choice of terminology, prioritizing their self-identification over their external definition. Although Turks commonly call them *Bulgar Türkleri* (Bulgarian Turks) and *Bulgar göçmenleri* (Bulgarian migrants), many view these phrases as offensive, with one

noting that the implication that they are ethnically Bulgarian “makes me cringe to my bones” (9–10). Instead, Parla uses the phrase by which they describe themselves, *Bulgaristanlı* (a person from Bulgaria), which casts Bulgaria as a location rather than identity. This term is analytically useful, moreover, for it furthers Parla’s argument about the ethnoracial claim to *soydaş*.

The book also excels in its attention to the migrants’ intersectional identities including gender and age. While since the 1990s unpermitted female labor migrants have overwhelmingly been the victims of exploitation and sexual violence in their workplaces, Parla argues that those from Bulgaria feel entitled to a greater sense of security based on their *soydaş* identity, although their position remains precarious (136). Intriguingly, Parla adds a postcommunist angle to this discussion. While many *Bulgaristanlı* women have had nostalgia for the social benefits of life in Bulgaria, expressing a favorable view of communism undermines their claim to *soydaş*. Particularly, their general enthusiasm for employment outside the home, instilled within them during their communist upbringing, has “defied gendered conceptions of work” and made them “fit uneasily into the moral economy of gender in Turkey” (151). Parla also devotes meaningful space to analyzing children’s experiences. Crucial to migration due to the Turkish government’s issuance of “companion permits” (*refakatçi izni*) for adults accompanying minors, children were often smuggled across the Bulgarian–Turkish border. Reflecting her commitment to centering hope rather than despair, Parla argues that the “channelers” (*kanalıcı*), as the smugglers were called, did not “match the widespread image of the trafficker as heartless villain” but rather were family acquaintances who took relatively good care of the children (120). While Parla admits that this portrayal might be critiqued as romanticizing the experience of illegal border crossing, it does support her main argument about the coexistence of privilege and precarity: even though there was a “degree of choice” and “room for maneuvering,” she asserts, these acts were “dependent on the grace, will, and whim of structurally more powerful others” (121).

Parla’s book sparked several questions. How does the situation of the *Bulgaristanlı* compare to that of other groups: migrants from elsewhere who could claim Turkish blood, non-Muslim migrants from the Balkans, guest workers retuning from Western Europe, and refugees from the Syrian Civil War today? Would it be useful to interpret the case of the *Bulgaristanlı* not only as immigration but also as return migration? How, more broadly, can examining migration

help us comprehensively redefine national Turkish identity at the turn of the millennium? These questions do not serve as critiques, but rather reveal the ways in which Parla's research can serve as a foundation for future inquiries. Its rich historical context offers a model for how to study present-day migration with keen attention to the intertwined influences of the Ottoman past and post-Ottoman national particularities. Its argument about the role of *soydaş*, or ethnoracial kinship, contributes to the ongoing task to consider the long-overlooked category of "race" in Turkish history. Finally, amid a field that has inadvertently tended to portray migrants as downtrodden and passive objects of state policies and public discourses, its focus on "hope" provides a refreshing sense of optimism and agency – however "precarious" that hope may be.