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Book Review

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Kitap İncelemesi / Book Review

Ayşe Parla, **Kırılgan Umut: Türkiye’de Göç ve Aidiyetin Sınırları**, İletişim Yayınları, 1. Baskı, İstanbul, 2023, 312 sayfa, ISBN: 978-975-05-3520-8

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Migration has been a reality of humanity for centuries. Periodically, migration movements have either gained momentum or become more stable. Numerous migration movements from Bulgaria to Türkiye have occurred during different political periods, but the large-scale migration after 1989 had particularly significant political and sociological consequences. After 1989, approximately 400,000 people—fleeing various assimilationist pressures imposed by the Bulgarian regime—reached the Turkish borders seeking legal and moral refuge. This mass migration has been defined by the Republic of Turkey as the return and reunification of ethnic Turks with their homeland.

However, beneath this political rhetoric lie entirely different realities. Bulgarian migrants face a harsh economic and bureaucratic environment in the land they consider their homeland. They begin their new lives struggling with precarious working conditions and entrapment in informal labor arrangements. Furthermore, while migrants await citizenship with hopes grounded in their cultural and ethnic identities, their access to this right is significantly delayed through official procedures, bringing numerous bureaucratic obstacles. At this point, the concept of *precarious hope* encapsulates political and sociological meanings, enabling an understanding of the boundaries of belonging in the context of migration and increasing awareness of the fragility of belonging.

First published by Stanford University Press in 2019, Ayşe Parla’s *Precarious Hope: Migration and the Limits of Belonging in Turkey*—a substantial and influential work based on extensive field research—was translated into Turkish in 2023. Drawing on detailed ethnographic research, *Precarious Hope* focuses primarily on the experiences of Turkish immigrants from Bulgaria who have lived in Turkey since 1989, using migrants’ own testimonies. Consisting of eight chapters, the book addresses the concept of hope, its historical development, and its limitations in a distinctive and highly successful manner. While ethnographically examining the economic insecurity, bureaucratic uncertainty, and psychological fluctuations faced by immigrants classified as “cognates,” the book also interrogates the nation-state’s mechanisms of belonging.

Parla bases this study on a long-term, multi-stage fieldwork process that lasted approximately five years, during which she actively participated in migrants’ daily struggles

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as a participant observer. This approach demonstrates that her work not only contributes to academic literature but also provides tangible insights into the social, political, and legal dimensions of migration that directly affect society. Parla gathered data from migrant neighborhoods in İstanbul, upper- and middle-class employer districts, and institutional settings such as population registry offices and police stations. This illustrates that the fieldwork was not confined to a single, isolated setting but instead involved direct engagement with various institutions, actors, and social problems. Moreover, Parla's focus on the emotional and social dimensions of migration—beyond classical legal and economic models—enhances the anthropological depth of the study and underscores the value of multidisciplinary approaches in social science research.

Parla defines *precarious hope* as the persistent yet fragile expectation migrants hold while seeking access to the security promised to them. This hope derives from migrants' belief that, based on their Turkish identity, they are entitled to citizenship rights under the Turkish legal system. The state's emphasis on ethnicity also produces what Parla terms a "hierarchy of otherness," another key conceptual framework of the study. This hierarchy delineates who is perceived as a greater threat to national borders and how distance is constructed between national identity and legal belonging (p. 17).

The hope of acquiring citizenship—legally granted to migrants on the basis of Turkish identity—distinguishes Bulgarian migrants from other immigrant groups and places them at the top of the *Hierarchy of Acceptability*. This concept, developed by Parla in collaboration with Didem Daniş (2007), refers to the way states regard certain migrants as more acceptable and valuable than others (p. 19). Consequently, this hierarchy functions as a governance mechanism that secures migrants' compliance with state authority. It also highlights the dilemmas faced by immigrants, particularly how "acceptable" groups are pacified through carefully sustained hopes.

Parla is cautious in defining the boundaries of hope, deliberately avoiding purely positive interpretations. Instead, she emphasizes the contextual and ambiguous nature of hope, arguing that it can both empower and constrain depending on circumstances. While hope may foster solidarity, it can also produce exclusion (pp. 20–21). Her refusal to conceptualize hope from a single perspective—and her use of the Pandora's Box myth to illustrate hope's entanglement with suffering and control—offers a powerful symbolic framework for understanding migrants' paradoxical experience of despair and expectation. This approach successfully captures the emotional tension inherent in migrant life.

Parla further connects migrants' expectations to Patricia Williams's concept of "structured expectation," which refers to how certain groups are permitted to hope for justice under the law, while others are systematically excluded from such expectations (p. 31). Parla's central question concerns how hope, as both an individual orientation and

a collective sentiment, shapes the experiences of different migrant and minority groups. Structured expectation provides a critical answer: while laws and formal rights allow some groups to sustain hope, others are denied even the possibility of realistic expectation due to bureaucratic and social barriers. In this sense, hope emerges as a mechanism shaped by power and control.

In the introduction, Parla examines how Turkey's Settlement Laws frame migration through ethnic criteria, legitimizing immigration by defining Turkish ancestry and cultural affiliation as prerequisites (p. 50). For migrants arriving after 1989, however, these legal promises involve unpredictably long waiting periods, resulting in what Parla characterizes as a violation of the implicit legal contract. Migrants thus find themselves torn between loyalty to the state and feelings of betrayal stemming from unmet expectations. Parla compellingly portrays the resulting identity crisis and migrants' persistent attachment to the hope of eventual citizenship. Although hope is often framed positively in migration literature, Parla demonstrates how it also operates as a mechanism of control, sustaining a highly fragile migrant existence.

Parla's ethnographic approach, which conceptualizes bureaucracy as a spatial and experiential domain, is particularly striking. Bureaucratic spaces function as instruments of power, and prolonged waiting periods become tools through which the state exerts control over migrants. The uncertainty experienced during these periods deepens migrants' dependence on the state and continuously reproduces hope. Parla also illustrates how racial and ethnic hierarchies shape everyday discrimination. For instance, she contrasts the treatment of a Bulgarian migrant with that of a Nigerian migrant, Festus Okey, demonstrating how the hierarchy of acceptability influences encounters with police violence (pp. 130–135). Such experiences foster fear of law enforcement and compel migrants to constantly justify and reassert their identities.

Precarious hope is also evident in the sphere of labor exploitation and informality. Many migrants—including skilled workers—are concentrated in low-paid care work. Because work permits and employment conditions are largely controlled by employers, migrant labor becomes highly vulnerable to exploitation. In some cases, employers confiscate migrants' passports as a means of control (p. 165). By integrating interview material with conceptual analysis, Parla offers a rich and nuanced portrayal of these dynamics. Her deep involvement in migrants' lives and her attention to their psychological experiences of belonging open a distinctive and valuable perspective within migration studies.

Finally, Parla emphasizes that Bulgarian migrants often perceive themselves as semi-citizens and express a longing for the past. She argues that migrants' nostalgia for communism is not merely romantic but reflects a desire for the economic security, labor rights, and social stability they struggle to attain in Turkey (p. 213). By engaging

with migrants who recall a time when basic survival felt more assured, Parla reveals how nostalgia can function as a form of resistance against insecurity (p. 221). This insight significantly enriches understandings of migrant psychology.

In conclusion, Ayşe Parla's *Kırılgan Umut: Türkiyede Göç ve Aidiyetin Sınırları* (*Precarious Hope: Migration and the Limits of Belonging in Turkey*) is a comprehensive ethnographic study examining the experiences of Bulgarian immigrants following 1989. The book demonstrates that although these migrants occupy a privileged position within the hierarchy of acceptance, this status does not shield them from uncertainty or insecurity. Through the concept of precarious hope, Parla reveals how insecurity functions simultaneously as a tool of governance and compliance. Methodologically rigorous and conceptually innovative, *Precarious Hope* significantly enriches migration studies and offers enduring insights into the fragility and cost of belonging.