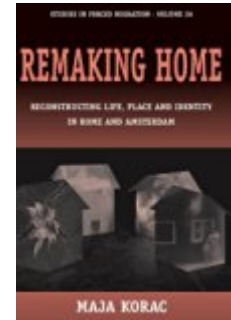


Maja Korac. *Remaking Home: Reconstructing Life, Place and Identity in Rome and Amsterdam.* New York: Berghahn Books, 2009. x + 186 pp. \$60.00, cloth, ISBN 978-1-84545-391-6.



Reviewed by Kaja Shonick Glahn

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In *Remaking Home*, Maja Korac examines the ways in which refugees from the former Yugoslavia have (re)created their homes and lives in the cities of Rome and Amsterdam. While her study is quite specific to the lives of refugees from the former Yugoslavia in two particular European cities, the conclusions and policy recommendations that she draws from her study are of much wider significance. Korac looks at the ways in which refugees construct their lives in these new environments and is particularly interested in how refugees “nest,” develop economic and social networks, and negotiate their lives in these new societies. Throughout her book, she emphasizes the complexity of the refugee experience and convincingly demonstrates that states would be well served by recognizing that complexity and adjusting their immigration, integration, and naturalization policies accordingly.

Methodologically, Korac’s study is based on qualitative data collected during a series of interviews conducted with refugees from the Yugoslav successor states in Rome and Amsterdam between

1999 and 2001. Her assessments and arguments are all based on ethnographic research and case study. As she explains in the introduction of her book, her aim is not to provide a comprehensive study of the lives of refugees from the former Yugoslavia. Instead, she aims to “offer insights into the complexity of the process of emplacement based on an in-depth knowledge of a small ‘slice’ of reality” (p. 18). Readers interested specifically in urban history will not find that Korac makes an explicit link between the urban environments of Rome and Amsterdam and the experiences of Yugoslav refugees. While she uses the cities of Rome and Amsterdam to geographically limit the scope of her study, the arguments that she makes are less about the specificities of life in those two cities, and more about the national policies and practices that shape the experiences of refugees in the Netherlands and Italy.

Korac carves out a place for her study within the vast field of refugee studies by focusing on the agency of the refugees. As she points out, most literature on refugees emphasizes the agency of the

receiving society and tends to portray refugees as passive subjects upon whom state policies are enacted. Korac in contrast depicts the refugees of her study as social actors with agency who control their own destiny. She also emphasizes their heterogeneity. Throughout her study, Korac argues that refugees constitute a diverse group of people with different social, economic, and cultural identities and interests. She is quite critical of both academic studies and government programs that seek to lump refugees together as a homogenous group on the basis of their countries of origin. Through her study she seeks to deconstruct the notion that refugees are one way or another, or that refugees should naturally identify themselves with other refugees or individuals from their same country of origin. She thereby destabilizes essentialized notions that dominate within both the academic and public discourses on refugees.

Korac argues that the experience of becoming a refugee needs to be understood as a simultaneous process of displacement and emplacement. She emphasizes the fact that while the process of migration can be very dislocating and difficult, it can also be a source of empowerment and self-realization. Throughout the book, Korac takes gender into consideration and argues that the experience of being a refugee and remaking home is different for men and women. She specifically argues that through the process of migration, many of the female refugees she interviewed were able to change the traditional gender dynamics that had previously dictated the terms of their relationships in their countries of origin. In chapters 1 and 2, Korac explores first the notion of home, and then the processes by which refugees decided to flee Yugoslavia and migrate to Amsterdam or Rome.

Despite her emphasis on refugee agency, her most compelling argument, which emerges in chapters 3 and 4, in fact has to do with the extent to which the national immigration and integration of the Netherlands and Italy significantly af-

fected the experiences and choices available to refugees. Korac argues that in the Netherlands, the Dutch model for refugee integration was driven by the state, which provided for the immediate needs of refugees from the former Yugoslavia in an organized manner. In the Netherlands, the rights and obligations of both the state and the refugees in the process of immigration and integration were clearly delineated. The state provided immediate housing in refugee centers as well as language training, social welfare, the transition to housing in private apartments, and easy access to citizenship. In return, refugees were expected to learn Dutch, seek employment, and generally adapt to the cultural and social norms of Dutch society. The process of integration in the Netherlands was thus one defined by an official policy of integration where the primary interactions between refugees and Dutch society took place at the official level and refugees were treated as a homogenous group.

In contrast, in Italy, there was no state structure for guaranteeing the integration of refugees. Instead, Korac argues that the Italian model functioned on an entirely ad hoc basis. The state did not supply refugees with housing, welfare benefits, or language courses, and access to citizenship for refugees remained difficult to attain. Surprisingly however, Korac reports that the refugees whom she interviewed in Italy showed higher levels of satisfaction with Italian society and higher levels of integration than their counterparts in the Netherlands.

Korac suggests that this is largely because of the greater control and agency that refugees in Italy had over their own lives. She argues that while refugees in the Netherlands remained economically better off than their counterparts in Italy, the fact that many services were provided to them by the state led to a decreased sense of self-sufficiency, fewer relationships on the part of the refugees with Dutch people, and a less positive assessment of their place in Dutch society. Converse-

ly, the lack of Italian state support for refugees meant that refugees in Italy were forced to be more self-sufficient and develop closer ties with Italians. Although many refugees faced significant hardships when they first arrived in Italy, and although many of them remained underemployed and their legal status remained tenuous, Korac reports that their overall assessment of Italy and their place in Italian society was much more positive. While she traces this higher satisfaction among refugees in Italy to a number of factors, the two most prominent ones are the agency exerted by the refugees in (re)creating their own lives and the relationships that they built with Italians.

Throughout her study, Korac addresses the implications that her study has for policymakers. While she is careful not to explicitly endorse either the Dutch or Italian models of dealing with refugees, she does note that important lessons can be drawn from both examples. She clearly points out the problems that arise when receiving societies, like the Netherlands, adopt a “one size fits all” policy of integration that does not take the diversity and heterogeneity of refugees into account and that does not actively promote refugee agency and independence. She also notes the problems that arise from state-sanctioned policies of multiculturalism where receiving societies like the Netherlands expect minority groups and refugees to speak with a single voice and express a homogenous set of interests. At the same time, she points out significant problems with the Italian model through which the legal status of refugees remains temporary, and which consequently impedes the ability of individuals to effectively plan for the future and advance economically.

The final chapter of Korac’s book deals with the transnational relationships and identities that she claims refugees from the former Yugoslavia have built for themselves in Amsterdam and Rome. She argues that many of the refugees she interviewed locate and identify themselves out-

side of the boundaries of a specific nation-state (i.e., they do not identify themselves as “Dutch,” “Italian,” “Croatian,” or “Yugoslav”). Instead, many identify themselves as being part of a larger transnational or even global community. She suggests that the development of transnational relationships and identities are an important strategy for dealing with the uncertainties that being a refugee presents and help to improve refugees’ material lives. Here too she outlines the implications that this has for policymakers and highlights the problematic nature of refugee resettlement schemes that fail to recognize the transnational lives and identities that refugees have developed.

Overall, Korac provides interesting and compelling insights into the lives of refugees and the processes through which they “nest” and remake home in their receiving societies. My main criticism would be that at times I wish that her source base were a bit broader and that her assessment of refugee claims were more critical. For example, rather than just presenting the claims of refugees regarding their feelings about their place in Italy and the Netherlands, it would have been nice to have compared these assessments with the ways in which native Dutch and Italians perceive refugees and the ways in which refugees are portrayed in the popular media and political discourse of both countries. While it may be outside the scope of this particular study, it would be very useful both for academics and policymakers to know whether Italians share the perception that the refugees of this study are “at home” in Italy and whether the Dutch agree that the refugees of this study remain isolated “strangers” in the Netherlands. Stylistically, the arguments of the book are presented clearly and are easy to follow. However, the book would have been improved by the inclusion of a brief concluding chapter in which the various arguments and strands of the study could have been drawn together. As it is, the current ending seems a bit abrupt. That being said, this book provides excellent and much needed insights into the lives of refugees in general,

and those from the former Yugoslavia in particular.

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