

Ayşe Parla. *Precarious Hope: Migration and the Limits of Belonging in Turkey.*
Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2019. 256 pp. \$28.00, paper, ISBN
978-1-5036-0943-3.



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Published on H-Migration (October, 2021)

Commissioned by Nicholas B. Miller (Flagler College)

Van Wyck on Parla, 'Precarious Hope: Migration and the Limits of Belonging in Turkey' (2019)

In a revealing moment in a book full of them, Ayşe Parla begins the first chapter of *Precarious Hope* with Selime, a migrant in Istanbul, complaining about being cut in line. Selime, a member of Bulgaria's ethnic Turkish minority, the Bulgaristanlı Turks, was waiting to inquire about the implications of a newly revised citizenship law on her status.[1] After being jumped in the queue, Selime lamented that “[this] place is full of Moldavians. They are not Muslims! They are not Turks! Where is the advantage of the Bulgaristanlı Turks!” (p. 35).

This protest from a migrant who hoped for preferential treatment on the basis of shared kinship to address her precarious legal status, only to be disappointed in the responses of the Turkish state, captures several of the intertwined threads in Parla's theoretically rich, expertly observed, and nevertheless quite readable new ethnography. Selime's hope emerged from a place of relative privilege, based on mixed signals from successive

Turkish governments and policy changes that have often embraced the Bulgaristanlı Turks as *soydaş*, a term Parla translates here as “racial kin.”[2] At the same time, while Selime might feel entitled to preferential treatment and might see referencing a perceived racial kinship as a strategy for attaining it, in practice her privilege and the hope founded upon it is precarious, neither consistently granted nor inevitably recognized by agents of the state. As the title suggests, *Precarious Hope* has much to say about hope of this sort and what the paradoxical position of the Bulgaristanlı Turks reveals more broadly about the uneven production and distribution of hope as it intersects with privilege, even a privilege as precarious as that of the Bulgaristanlı in Turkey.

Production is the operative word here, as the hope that interests Parla is less an inner, emotional state than the “collective structure of feeling”—à la Raymond Williams—produced by encounters with migration bureaucracies and laws, and by

history. Parla's focus is on why and how Bulgaristanlı migrants can "take hope for granted in their encounters with the law" (p. 5), even if these hopes are not always or even often fulfilled. Parla contributes to growing literatures on hope and other topics, including studies of the production of migrant il/legality, affect theory, postsocialist memory studies, and the role of race in defining citizenship and belonging in Turkey. Readers will find *Precarious Hope* a profound and compelling work of scholarship, one which provides a model for the successful marriage of keen, detailed ethnography with a concern for questions of broad theoretical and philosophical import.

The source of Bulgaristanlı Turks' privileged access to hope and present-day precarity lies in the history of Turkish state policies privileging ethnically Turkish immigration and the government's relationship to those labeled *soydaş* abroad. Chapter 1 ("The Historical Production of Hope") delivers what it promises, examining this history of strong—and for much of the Turkish Republic's history, legally enshrined—preference for immigrants of Turkish descent, to the point that Turkish culture and descent (in a word, *soydaş*) is a prerequisite for the legal category of *göçmen* (migrant) (p. 16f.) Parla situates this state preference for migrants who can claim Turkishness in a longer history of population management with the goal of ensuring a homogenous Sunni, Turkish citizenry through displacement and genocide, identifying significant continuities between late Ottoman population policies and those of the fledgling republic. In this respect, *Precarious Hope* builds on work by Turkish scholars like Taha Parla, Barış Ünlü, and Murat Ergin who have highlighted the ethnoracial elements in Turkish nationalism, often represented as the paradigmatic example of civic nationalism.

Turkish minorities in the Balkans have a special place in this history, informed by the widespread belief that the Balkans were the heart of the Ottoman Empire and Turkish settlers there

were of particularly pure and hearty racial stock. Such official and popular preferences were put to the test in 1989 when the People's Republic of Bulgaria sanctioned a campaign of mass expulsions that saw more than 300,000 Bulgaristanlı Turks emigrate to Turkey. Initially, the Turkish government granted these migrants citizenship on arrival. Such an enthusiastic reception did not last, with generous naturalization policies swiftly curtailed and many Bulgaristanlı Turks experiencing disillusionment and rejection in their putative homeland. Nevertheless, these rejections did not stop Bulgaristanlı Turkish migration. As in 1989, post-1990 Bulgaristanlı Turkish migrants, Parla's primary interlocutors in the book, evince a mixture of economic, political, and ethnonationalist motivations for migration. Post-1990 migrants experienced the same persecution and marginalization in socialist Bulgaria that officially justified the acceptance of the 1989 migrants; indeed, many of the post-1990 migrants Parla encounters tried and failed to emigrate in 1989. Yet, with the Cold War over, and with the increasingly neoliberal Turkish economy in need of cheap, vulnerable labor Bulgaristanlı Turkish migrants were cut off from the privileges the 1989 migrants enjoyed.

Thus, post-1990 Bulgaristanlı Turkish migrants have a paradoxical status in Turkey. They carry historical privilege and an ethno-religious sense of belonging, which encourages state authorities to tolerate irregular labor and improper visas in a way they do not with other migrants. At the same time, however, they are still not offered a clear path to permanent legal residence or citizenship. This is one of the many ways in which the Bulgaristanlı Turks are paradoxical in Parla's telling: belonging to a historically privileged group but cut off from the legal mechanisms that formally secured ready access to citizenship; neither representatives of the transnational elite nor criminalized economic migrants; precarious, but not desperate. Indeed, the very status of *soydaş* functions as a "double-edged sword" (p. 66), providing leverage for claims-making while simultaneously

connoting a second-class status distinct from the unmarked belonging of the Turkish majority.

Chapter 2 (“Entitled Hope”) builds on the history presented in the first chapter, demonstrating concretely how historical privilege manifests itself in the lives of undocumented Bulgaristanlı migrants in Istanbul. Parla details how these migrants, among all other groups in the diverse landscape of contemporary Istanbul, have received targeted amnesties regularizing undocumented migrants and favorable discretionary treatment from police or the bureaucracy, a remnant of legal privilege previously granted as a matter of course. Consequently, Bulgaristanlı Turks evince less fear of the police, to the extent of entering a police station willingly, something that would be inconceivable for other migrants.

Parla uses an encounter between the Istanbul police and two Bulgaristanlı migrants to illustrate the concept of “entitled hope”; that is, hope available only to those who enjoy access to relative privilege (p. 76). Parla accompanied Höşgöl and Nurcan, two undocumented Bulgaristanlı migrants who entered a police station voluntarily to inquire into the possibility of a renewed amnesty. While Höşgöl and Nurcan did not receive the hoped-for amnesty, neither were they detained or deported, and their police station encounter was characterized by “anxiety-ridden hope” (p. 87) on one side of the desk and “paternalistic benevolence” (p. 93) on the other. Parla contrasts this with the case of Festus Okey, a Nigerian murdered in an Istanbul police station in 2007. Okey—according to his killer—had acted in “an uneasy manner,” which prompted Okey’s shooting. The gulf in the affective dimension in these two encounters—one closely observed by the author, one secondhand—and their vastly, tragically different outcomes is used by Parla to illustrate a usefully novel vision of affect. Cutting incisively through the bewilderingly complex literature surrounding affect, Parla argues for using Williams’s “structures of feeling” as a bridge between emotion and affect, insisting

that structural privilege (the status of *soydaş*) produced by formal and informal legal codes and bureaucratic encounters preceded and informed the affective performance of these three undocumented migrants and ultimately, the divergent courses these encounters took. Privilege as *soydaş* was not available to Okey, explaining how his unease resulted in violence and Höşgöl and Nurcan’s unease led to a sympathetic, albeit unsuccessful hearing of their case. In other words, observable and measurable privilege preceded and structured hope with a different affective quality.

Chapter 3 (“Precarious Hope”) turns toward precarity, a concept that Parla observes has been used expansively to the point of losing analytic precision in recent years. Parla makes a series of “circumscribing moves” (p. 104), with the aim of restoring a once-recognized distinction between “precarity” as something differentially distributed and historically inflected and “precariousness” as a condition of uncertainty. The latter, as Parla argues, has been used by scholars to draw attention to a common feature of life under late-stage capitalism. While this may be productive in inspiring solidarity, it weakens the usefulness of the term such that academics have resorted to boosters like “hyper precarity” to draw attention to differences in access to resources or stability across groups. Returning to a notion of *precarity* as the differential distribution of *precariousness* (p. 106) allows Parla to spotlight what is distinctive about the position of the Bulgaristanlı Turks vis-à-vis other irregular migrants in Istanbul.

For Bulgaristanlı migrants, the precarity of their situation has to do with their access to favors rather than rights, and the dependence on the decisions made by police or employers. Bulgaristanlı women are adept at deploying *soydaş* status to push back on, or seek redress from, routinized sexual harassment faced by migrant women in Istanbul, who are often perceived as sex workers by the public and state actors. Bulgaristanlı women are precarious, since their defense against

harassment depends on the goodwill of officials. They are not, however, vulnerable to the same extent as African or Russian migrants. In describing the resourcefulness of Bulgaristanlı Turkish women, Parla gently pushes back on literature that arguably glorifies uncertainty as necessarily productive, bringing about as it does creative strategies like those of the migrant women described in the chapter. Yet, as Parla makes clear, the resources available to Bulgaristanlı Turks help them contend with uncertainty in creative ways other migrants cannot, again reinforcing a central thesis of the book that structural privilege must always be accounted for.

In the book's final chapter, ("Nostalgia as Hope"), Parla considers the contributing role of nostalgia for conditions of life in communist Bulgaria toward Bulgaristanlı migrant women's sense of entitlement and expectation for better conditions than those they face in the irregular labor market in Istanbul, especially in domestic work. Unlike other migrants in similar roles, Bulgaristanlı Turks feel entitled to security and predictability, not merely as *soydaş*, but also because of their lived experiences under state socialism. In that regard, their precarity is not merely about the present conditions they experience or their existing privileges; rather, it is also predicated on a sense of relative well-being in the past and privileges once enjoyed and remembered (and thus seen as possibly realizable in the future). In that sense, recollections of communism work in tandem with the historical privilege enjoyed by *soydaş* in the Turkish migration regime, providing Bulgaristanlı Turks with two sources of entitlement and expectation as well as disappointment and increased awareness of precarity.

The nostalgia about the past informing what Parla refers to as the "post-communist affect" (p. 139) seems paradoxical, when considering that it was under communist rule that the Bulgaristanlı Turks were subjected to the repressive assimilationist measures that preceded mass expulsions

and emigrations in 1989. Nevertheless, as Parla demonstrates in the chapter, recollections of gendered expectations of work and its meaning under communism are deployed by Bulgaristanlı women in a critique of Turkey's gendered divisions of labor, especially the comparatively low rate of women's workforce participation in the country. To a certain extent, of course, such a critique undercuts the racialized logic of Bulgaristanlı as *soydaş*, as women's nostalgia for *komünizma* cannot be easily squared with narratives of persecution and return to the yearned-after homeland central to claiming racial kinship in Turkey. And yet, at the same time, as Parla notes (pp. 153, 160), Bulgaristanlı Turkish women are capable of performing a certain gendered intimacy that allows them to criticize the Turkish gender regime from within by holding on to memories of the idealized woman as worker-citizen in communist Bulgaria as an alternative paradigm. Partial inclusion in the racialized, gendered community in Turkey therefore encourages postcommunist affect in Bulgaristanlı Turkish women, demonstrating that such affect is a resource to be utilized, not the melancholic, pathologized notion of postcommunist nostalgia often presented in scholarship. This is another respect in which Parla's book calls for greater attention to the effects of history, especially historical privilege, a perspective this reviewer can only welcome.

When considering limitations of the book and its potential use in teaching, as Parla notes (p. 78), comparisons between the experiences of Bulgaristanlı Turkish migrants and other migrants along what Parla and Didem Daniş have referred to elsewhere as a "hierarchy of acceptability" (*makbullük hiyerarşi*) are somewhat less finely drawn in the book.[3] Parla's work with the Migrant Solidarity Network activist group offers a window into the experiences of broader populations of undocumented migrants in Istanbul, especially those of African origin, and their encounters with state violence. Nevertheless, the limitations of sections of the book that narrate the divergent

experiences of African migrants from those of the Bulgaristanlı Turks are apparent when contrasted with the richness of ethnographic detail on the Bulgaristanlı side. This is less of a shortcoming of Parla's work than a recommendation that *Precarious Hope* be paired in the graduate or advanced undergraduate classroom with some of the path-breaking new work on African migration in Turkey.[4]

Throughout *Precarious Hope*, Parla offers a notion of hope that addresses the difference between competing philosophical interpretations of the concept. For one camp, hope is productive and necessary for transformational change; for another, hope blunts critical possibilities with its complicity in the status quo. Parla's approach sidesteps these contradictory interpretations of hope as inevitably either a virtue or a vice, demonstrating through the example of the Bulgaristanlı Turks that hope is equivocal. Parla contends that hope needs to be recognized as contextual rather than abstract; historical rather than timeless; and constrained by structural and historical inequalities rather than equally available to all.[5] For this reader, it is Parla's insightful, grounded treatment of the unequal distribution of hope that represents the most productive through line in *Precarious Hope*, one that might enrich often unproductive discussions surrounding hope and activism in unequal societies. To Parla's credit, individual readers will likely find different aspects of the book that resonate most with them, a testament to the wide range of this important work.

Notes

[1]. The *-li* suffix here meaning "of" or "from Bulgaria" but without the connotation of Bulgarian ethnicity as in "Bulgarian Turks," a distinction on which Bulgaristanlı Turks insist.

[2]. *Soy* can be translated as race but also ethnicity, blood, or descent, among other options (the suffix *-daş* means "common" or "shared"). Others, including Parla, have translated *soydaş* as "ethnic

kin" elsewhere. See Ayşe Parla, "Irregular Workers or Ethnic Kin? Post-1990s Labour Migration from Bulgaria to Turkey," *International Migration Review* 45, no. 3 (2007): 157-81.

[3]. Didem Danış and Ayşe Parla, "Nafle soydaşlık: Irak ve Bulgaristan Türkleri örneğinde göçmen, dernek ve devlet," *Toplum ve Bilim* 114 (2009): 131-58.

[4]. Many such works are found in Parla's bibliography. A recent example of scholarship that might intersect productively with Parla's insights in *Precarious Hope* is Alize Arıcan, "1237, or Dying Elsewhere," *Current Anthropology* 62, no. 1 (2021): 110-16.

[5]. Parla develops this critique of hope most directly in an essay worth reading as a companion piece to *Precarious Hope*. See Ayşe Parla, "Critique without a Politics of Hope?" in *A Time for Critique*, ed. Didier Fassin and Bernard E. Harcourt (New York: Columbia University Press, 2019): 52-70.

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Citation: Brian Van Wyck. Review of Parla, Ayşe, *Precarious Hope: Migration and the Limits of Belonging in Turkey*. H-Migration, H-Net Reviews. October, 2021.

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