



## Migration, integration and activism in Ireland

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### review of

Lentin, R. & Moreo, E. (eds.) (2012) *Migrant Activism and Integration from Below in Ireland*. Palgrave MacMillan. (HB. pp. 231, \$85.00, ISBN 9780230300620).

*Migrant activism and integration from below in Ireland* brings an original perspective to Irish migration studies by providing an in-depth exploration of migrant associations in contemporary Ireland. This book makes an important contribution to Irish migration studies by focusing on the role of migrant-led organizations as vehicles of social change and integration. Given the isolation often associated with the migration experience, organizations and associations can be seen as providing a vital social link for migrants in contemporary Ireland. Migrant-led organizations and associations provide a communal focus and a rallying point for group solidarity, and are shown to be a central means through which migrants both assert their presence in Ireland and engage in a *de facto* process of integration. This book directs attention to migration issues at a time when, due to Ireland's recent economic crisis, migration and integration policies have fallen from the political agenda in spite of continued high levels of in-migration (Central statistics office of Ireland, 2012). Editors Ronit Lentin and Elena Moreo bring together contributions from 6 authors exploring a range of theoretical and empirical perspectives to provide insight into the active role played by migrant associations in negotiating processes of integration. Published in 2012, this book is a culmination of the work carried through the innovative *Migrant networks project* as part of the *Trinity immigration initiative* (TII) between

2007 and 2010 and sheds new light into an underexplored aspect of migration studies.

This book is ambitious in its scope. It sets out to merge key theoretical debates with empirical studies of a range of migrant associations in Ireland in order to develop an understanding of the nuanced and complex issues affecting the process of integration. As a result of the theoretical diversity and conceptual complexity the writing is dense and challenging to even the most alert and theoretically oriented reader. Nonetheless it succeeds in its goal of providing innovative insight into the diverse range of practices through which migrants negotiate their integration into Irish society.

The book consists of a series of theoretical/contextualization chapters and chapters which merge theoretical debates with empirical data gathered from research with members of migrant associations. Each chapter introduces a complex range of themes and issues and provides a nuanced perspective into the lives and experiences of migrants in Ireland. In doing so it makes a very important contribution to Irish migration studies by demonstrating the versatility and capacity of migrant associations in instigating and negotiating a process of integration from below as well as providing a realistic account of the limitations imposed on these associations by the socio-political context of contemporary Ireland.

### **Terminology and theoretical paradigms**

*Migrant activism and integration from below in Ireland* highlights the vast disjuncture between current migration and integration regimes and the *de facto* experience of daily life for migrants in contemporary Ireland. The onset of the recession directly following the dramatic increase in levels of in-migration in Ireland has left many migrant members of the population severely marginalized and socially excluded as a result of cuts to welfare and social supports. In spite of the glossy rhetoric of interculturalism, with its emphasis on interaction and engagement, introduced by Irish politicians during the peak of Ireland's migration boom, few practical supports are available for migrants facing the challenge of integrating into Irish society (see Lentin, 2010).

The book provides a powerful historical and theoretical critique of integration regimes and immigration policy in Ireland. Lentin builds on her previous work in this area to outline the gross inconsistencies between the Irish immigration and integration regimes which at best, do little to facilitate a process of integration and inclusion, and at worst are at the core of the process of

marginalization and exclusion affecting migrant communities throughout Ireland (Lentin, 2008). She argues that in light of the manner in which its institutionalized practices perpetuate and consolidate processes of marginalization and exclusion, the Irish state can be seen as a racial state, and indeed, as a racist state. For Lentin this is epitomized by the 2004 Citizenship Referendum, which redefined the parameters of Irish society through the introduction of new exclusionary measures based on parental origin (7).

The hollow regime of interculturalism and top-down policies of integration espoused by the Irish state are contrasted notably with 'integration from below'; the *de facto* processes through migrants negotiate their position and assert their presence in contemporary Ireland. The view is taken throughout the book that the process of 'integration from below' is instigated by migrants through their practices and, therefore, defined by migrants according to personal and group aspirations and ambitions. For some, 'integration from below' is associated with access to education and healthcare facilities; while for others it may constitute the liberty to practice religious rituals (42). This flexible approach avoids the discussion becoming entangled in debates elsewhere explored at length (see Gray, 2006, MacEinri, 2007, Lenihan, 2008). In addition, the flexibility of the definition is extremely effective in allowing for engagement with a diverse range of migrant associations.

In keeping with the necessity for a flexible approach in analyzing the experiences of diverse migrant associations, the authors employ and develop the concept of agency as an analytical prism. The concept of agency is used to engage with the active role played by migrants in the process of 'integration from below'. Migrants are located in this process as the main protagonists of the process of integration. A focus on agency affords a means of understanding the diverse forms of migrant activism studies across a wide range of contexts. As outlined in chapter 2 by Carla De Tona and Elena Moreo: 'We understand migrants' agency in terms of concrete praxis but also as a form of knowledge production rooted in activists' subjective understandings and experiences' (36). This analytical device is successful in allowing for a nuanced and in-depth analysis of the role of migrant associations as vehicles for migrant agency and empowerment. Through the formation of associations, migrants assert their presence and play an active role in shaping their position in contemporary Irish society.

As the experiences of migrants are a central focus of this book, the use of research as a means of empowerment is a central methodological tenet. Moreo, in chapter 4, confronts the contradictions inherent in many academic engagements with marginalized groups. Drawing on the work of Fanon (1967) on visibility and representation, this discussion reflects on the implications of

representations of minority groups. She aptly points out that representations of migrants in Ireland have largely been constructed and mediated by non-migrants in the popular media and academic spheres. While this increases levels of visibility for migrant groups, it is contrasted with the positive empowerment that derives from a process of self-representation. Moreo therefore underlines the importance of a migrant-centred approach to academic studies as a means of empowering migrants in shaping their own representation. This point is well enunciated and provides a suitable segue into a series of studies which focus on empirical data generated in partnership with a diverse range of migrant associations.

### **Migrant activism as a multi-faceted process**

The book makes an important contribution to migration studies by shedding light on the complex range of ways in which migrants negotiate their position within Irish society. However, in spite of its apparent commitment to capturing the diverse range of experiences of migrant associations in Ireland, this book focuses almost exclusively on migrant-led associations in Dublin. It overlooks the experiences of migrants based in rural areas and indeed in other urban centres. This is a significant blind spot given the pivotal role played by both formal and informal associations and networks in the lives of rurally based migrants (McGarry and McGrath, 2013; McGrath, 2010). The authors nonetheless capture the diversity among Dublin based migrant associations, engaging with diverse migrant led-associations; including migrant women's associations, Chinese economic, cultural and emergency relief associations, Protestant churches and the *Horn of Africa peoples association*. By engaging closely with these associations the authors highlight a variety of manifestations of migrant activism, demonstrating that agency can be asserted in different ways, from engaging in advocacy work to the attainment of social membership and acceptance by taking part in religious ceremonies. This is a valuable perspective in a country where popular discourse tends towards the representation of migrants as a homogenous group.

De Tona's discussion, in chapter 5, of migrant women's associations highlights the extent to which migrant associations can act as vehicles for different types of agency and activism. By conducting research with a total of 18 migrant women's associations, ranging from small and recently established migrant groups to larger, well-established associations, she demonstrates that associations provide vehicles for agency in a variety of ways. While some associations seek change in a systematic and politically explicit way, others, which are concerned with the day-to-day issues facing migrants, enact a more subtle form of activism. Some

migrant women's associations such as AkiDwA, a migrant women's association founded in 2001, focus on the process of activism and advocacy which are explicitly linked to resistance, while others focus primarily on lending support to members and their families in their daily lives. De Tona here makes an important point highlighting the importance of seemingly every day and mundane events to the process of integration.

De Tona uses feminist theory to elucidate that the work carried out by migrant women's associations can be seen as socially transformative on many levels. The discussion outlines that; the activities of migrant women's associations 'enact a form of transformation through their empowerment of members in their day to day lives within the family and community'. By engaging in these processes of integration from below, migrant women challenge not only racism and ethnic marginalization, but also sexism and patriarchy. This is described as 'a new, creative anti-racist feminism', through which female members of migrant groups not only carve out their position and assert their presence in Ireland but also engage in an active process of transforming Irish society (115-116).

Yin Yang Wang's discussion of Chinese associations in Dublin also draws attention to the variety of forms that migrant activism can assume. This discussion highlights how specific discourses of activism and integration are employed by migrants in different contexts. This discussion also highlights the intricate processes of identity politics invoked in this process. Chinese associations are among the longest established and most diverse group of migrant associations in Ireland, comprising advocacy associations, commercial associations, professional associations and social/cultural associations. Traditionally membership of these associations was based on locality, lineage and dialect. These associations were largely informal, financially self-reliant and directed towards the provision of support to Chinese migrants while emphasizing transnational connections. Increasing the visibility of the Chinese community and seeking active inclusion in Irish society were not goals of these associations (126).

This orientation changed in the wake of the 2008 Sichuan Earthquake. Following the devastation of this tragic event, the *Irish-Chinese Sichuan appeal committee* was established to raise funds for victims of the tragedy. The foundation of the committee led to the adoption of a more visible role for the Chinese community in Dublin. The staging of public events such as the Chinese vigil resulted in the raising of the profile of the Chinese population in a manner that reinforced discourses of national unity, while asserting their position in Irish society. Rather than emphasizing ethnic traits and ethnic differences, the events organized by the *Irish-Chinese Sichuan appeal committee* saw the emergence of a

discourse of a unified Chinese national identity and of transnational solidarity. Yang draws on Hall's (1997) theorizations of identity as shifting and contextually constructed in order to further the argument that migrant activism can be understood as a form of identity performance that is context specific. The shift from informal and largely invisible associations to the public manifestations of the *Irish-Chinese Sichuan appeal committee* demonstrates that migrant activism is shaped by context and can be expressed in a variety of forms.

### **Empowerment and limitations of migrant agency**

While at its core, this book is a celebration of migrant activism and agency, the authors are realistic in pointing out the limitations of migrant associations in attaining integration. Migrant activism can succeed in instigating a process of integration from below, however, existing power hierarchies within associations and the limitations of regimes of integration and immigration may prevent the achievement of integration and empowerment.

This point is developed from an early stage of the book, Lentin, in chapter 3, provides detailed discussion of the evolutionary phases of migrant associations developing on the seminal work carried out by Pnina Werbner in the UK (1991). The discussion underlines the extent to which migrant associations, despite being founded as sites of resistance, come to be shaped and controlled by the inequalities inherent in mainstream society. While migrant led associations are generally founded as organic bottom-up organizations, often with the central goal of developing capacity and empowering members, they constantly face the threat of being overrun by the official top-down agencies and well-meaning indigenous philanthropists. Lentin traces four phases in the evolution of migrant-led associations, illustrating her discussion by reference to the experience of a number of these associations in Ireland.

The first phase, *from localized empowerment to appropriation*, is illustrated by reference to the experiences of the *Association of refugees and asylum seekers in Ireland* (ARASI). ARASI, a bottom-up initiative, was founded in the late 1990s by refugees with the goal of building bridges with mainstream society through self-organization. As a result of its initial success and continued increases in levels of in-migration, the association experienced a need to secure funding for sustained development. This led to the formation of an alliance with the Spiritans and the creation of SPIRASI. The alliance became one of unequal power relations with the original aims and objectives of ARASI being dominated by the charitable agenda of the Spiritans. The agenda of SPIRASI under the under this unequal

partnership became one of meeting needs rather than developing capacities and self-organization and building bridges (55-56).

A similar process of top-down domination is described in Phase 2 of Lentin's treatise; *solidaristic anti-racism*. For Lentin this entails the mobilization of indigenous members of society on behalf of migrants. While generally well-intentioned, this top-down approach is patronizing and can impede processes of integration from below and hence the organic process of empowerment. This effect is similar in many respects to phase 4; *Resistance without a presence*. This phase describes the manner in which state-funded bodies and NGOs, championing themes such as diversity and integration, engage with migrant led-associations on an unequal footing. For Lentin this is epitomized the frequent invitation of members of migrant associations to attend events as migrant representatives, without being afforded an opportunity to influence the agenda or hence to contribute in an empowering way.

Phase 3: *Independent mobilization* is Lentin's most optimistic example of 'integration from below'. This phase is illustrated by reference to AkiDwA, the longest established migrant women's association in Ireland. AkiDwA exemplifies how migrant-led associations can experience organic growth and development without falling prey to domination by non-migrant members or top-down agendas. AkiDwA was founded by African women in Dublin simply as 'a space for expression' in 2004 (63). In the intervening years this association has experienced extensive growth and has moved from a voluntary phase to one of professionalism, developing its remit to encompass policy submission to government departments. It has also extended its representational remit from African Women to migrant women more generally. For Lentin, the development of AkiDwA demonstrates the manner in which migrant women can become agents of resistance and transformation and resistance (64). However, AkiDwA, despite their many successes, find themselves continuously in a position of competition with indigenous women's groups for scarce budgets.

The precarious line between empowerment and patronage is also explored in Alessia Paserelli's discussion of Protestant Churches in Ireland. Paserelli's fifth chapter of the book develops an understanding of the role of Protestant Churches as vehicles of integration for migrants. This discussion addresses the manner in which the structures of Churches, while providing an important level of support to migrants, do not necessarily lead to integration. Paserelli reflects on data gathered through engagement with migrant members of both new migrant-led Churches such as the Pentecostal Church as well as with historical Protestant churches such as the Methodist Church and the Anglican Church.

The contributions of participants in this study underline that Protestant churches, particularly migrant-led churches such as the Pentecostal Church, provide 'a home away from home', acting as a cushion from the culture shock of migration and enhancing their sense of belonging. These services are seen by Paserelli as a platform for agency and activism in other areas of life. Historical Protestant Churches, in particular the Methodist Church and the Anglican Church, are also shown to play a vital role in providing support for new migrants, they often provide material aid as well as serving as a source of assistance in accessing employment and providing access to networks of friends and acquaintances.

However the extent to which these historical Protestant Churches foster a bottom-up process of empowerment is drawn into question by Paserelli. Historical Protestant Churches have made concerted efforts to support engagement with migrants; with the Anglican Church developing a national strategy, *The discovery project*, aimed at providing a welcome for new members from ethnic minorities and the Methodist Church encouraging each congregation to develop an intercultural strategy which suits its own needs. In spite of the measures taken by these Churches, many factors continue to hinder the agency of migrant members. Their role as service givers, though often vital, often results in migrants being constructed as 'needy'. In addition to this many participants cited a lack of training opportunities as delimiting their ambitions and preventing them from assuming leadership roles within the Church. Paserelli makes the important point while these Churches play an important role in supporting the needs and providing a welcome for newly arrived migrants, the constraints placed on their empowerment within the Churches prevent this welcome from engendering a process of 'integration from below'.

The theme of empowerment is also critically explored in Moreo's account of the experiences of members of the *Horn of Africa people's aid* (HAPA) in acting as an advocate for refugees and asylum seekers from Somalia and other Horn of Africa regions. Given the direct provision system governing the lives of asylum seekers and refugees, these migrants are among the most marginalized in Ireland<sup>1</sup>. The goal of HAPA is therefore to fill gaps in provision and to create a space for the valorization of refugee's knowledge and skills and their empowerment. However as a result of the paucity of services and supports available for asylum seekers

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1 The Direct Provision system was established in 2,000 as means of meeting the basic needs of asylum seekers while their claims for refugee status are being processed. Asylum seekers are accommodated in hostels where meals are provided and receive a personal allowance of €19.10 per adult and €9.60 per child per week. The conditions in Direct Provision centers have been widely criticized by a number of NGOs and Human Rights organizations

and refugees, HAPA focuses its work on advocacy and lobbying in relation to political and legal matters rather than on the development of individual and community resources.

Moreo's discussion problematizes the extent to which this process can be considered empowerment. She draws attention to the way that refugees and asylum seekers are constructed as helpless and dependent in political and popular media discourses. This process is likened to a form of bio-politics whereby all aspects of disempowerment are perpetuated and sustained by the institutional welfare structures (177). The work carried out by HAPA in securing resources for Somali migrants and enabling members of the organization to self-organize and to network with other groups can be seen as a form of basic empowerment. However, the extent to which this is conducive to 'integration from below' is severely delimited by the bio-politics of the institutional welfare structures.

Moreo delivers a clear and resounding message about the dangers of romanticization of the concept of empowerment at a grass-roots level. While the achievements of HAPA and the positive effect of this association on the daily lives of Somali refugees in Ireland should not be ignored, an over-estimation of the extent to which associations which receive no state funding can achieve full empowerment for members is detrimental to the development of socially inclusive policies. Moreo highlights this by reference to the tendency of many states to abnegate their responsibilities to provide resources for marginalized groups. In line with the current neo-liberal agenda pursued by many governments tend to transfer responsibility for integration to community organizations rather than investing in resources and supports. While an acknowledgement of the value and importance of migrant agency and activism in the process of integration from below it is vital that this is not presented as a full solution to migration issues leading to an abnegation of state welfare and social support responsibilities.

## Conclusion

This is a book that captures a series of snapshots of Ireland at a difficult juncture. Following the affluence of the 'Celtic tiger' period, migration has all but disappeared from the political agenda since the onset of the economic recession. Lentin and Moreo have compiled a series of treatises that lend important insight into the manner in which 'intercultural' Ireland has continued to evolve below the radar. They draw attention to the importance of collective action in countering the marginalization and exclusion that accompany the migration

experience. Migrant-led organizations and associations play a pivotal role in this process, acting as vehicles of activism and advocacy as well as providing the supports essential to day to day life in Ireland. The authors have captured diversity of migrant organizations and associations allowing for an understanding of the fluidity and the complex nature of migrant activism. By engaging with a wide range of theoretical perspectives and analytical prisms, this book provides a sophisticated and nuanced understanding of migrant experience in contemporary Ireland. This activism may be an explicit process, often spurred on by particular socio-political events, or may be an incidental outcome of the mundane processes of everyday life.

While this aspect of the book is celebratory it wisely contains a clear warning against the romanticization of migrant activism as a justification for governmental abnegation of welfare and social support responsibilities towards migrant groups. In doing so it captures migrant-led associations as balancing on a knife-edge. It conveys the precarious position in which they find themselves running a gauntlet between the need to ascribe to top-down processes of integration and organic processes of activism. The decision of the authors to draw attention to this fine line between empowerment and dominant patronage is a vital contribution to Irish migration studies. It clearly points to the need for Irish policy to engage with migrant activism at a grass roots level, and to engage with and support migrant associations and organizations in the shaping and development of a truly inclusive Ireland.

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