Homing interview

with Barak Kalir (University of Amsterdam)

conducted by Milena Belloni

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Barak Kalir is an Associate Professor at the Department of Anthropology, University of Amsterdam. He is the co-director of the Institute for Migration and Ethnic Studies and the PI of an ERC-funded project, "The Social Life of State Deportation Regimes," in which the implementation of deportation policies has been ethnographically examined in several countries. Since 2019, Barak has been the Co-PI of a H2020 project, *Advancing Alternative Migration Governance* (ADMIGOV) where he leads a work package on different *Exit Models* for noncitizens in the European Union. His recent publications include "Departheid: The Draconian Governance of Illegalized Migrants in Western States" (2019, *Conflict and Society*) and "Repressive Compassion: Deportation Caseworkers Furnishing an Emotional Comfort Zone in Encounters with Illegalized Migrants" (2019, *PoLAR: Political and Legal Anthropology Review*).

What is home for you as a person and in your work?

Home for me is a relational thing. Being a migrant myself – I was born and raised in Israel – I thought about it many times… home is relational in the sense that I feel my home is where my family and friends are, but there is more to it. Although I have kids growing up in the Netherlands and I speak Dutch quite fluently, if I go back to Israel the fact that everyone speaks my mother tongue takes away from me a certain effort that I constantly have when I am not at home. When you are not at home, you have to make an effort to feel at home. Even if I am very critical towards Israel and its politics, which is why I left it, the feeling of being there is just almost inexplicably good. I feel comfortable, I recognise everything, and things just make perfect sense to me. There are things about home which you cannot reproduce elsewhere. It is sensory and has to do with your early childhood memories, things that are wired to a place… these are hard to reproduce away from the place where you grew up. If I walk in Israel, there is a sensory feeling of joy that I cannot get here in Amsterdam or anywhere.

Home is also a place where you can put all the shields away, the place where you can be naked, literally and metaphorically. The farther you are from home, the more you have to put on other layers. This could have a negative aspect too. If home is the place where you are naked, unshielded, it is also the place where people are allowed to do the most horrible things, because you feel

protected from the law or any immediate social control. Here I think, for example, about domestic violence, which is the most rampant form of violence in the world, and it is hard to tackle precisely because it is hidden behind domestic walls in people's homes.

What does it mean for you, given your critical stand towards Israel, to feel at home in a place where home is possible only because others have been excluded?

I think this is unfortunately a given in our world. You find it everywhere towards first nations people. All the so-called 'national homes' that were built, all the modern nation-states, they are all based on displacement and massacres of Others. People who were deemed to be 'not at home'. There is no beautiful pure harmonic home. The place I come from - Israel - is obviously an ongoing colonial project, but even here in the Netherlands similar processes took place. There was never a 'Dutch nation'. There were a lot of people coming in and out of this place. At a certain point, the power elite placed stricter borders around certain territories and peoples, and that is how the Dutch national home was forged. This happens not only at a state level, but also at a local level, and it is not only linked to colonialism. Gentrification, for example, is another sophisticated way to put people out of their homes, and put other people in them. In my perspective, territory is always taken. All the land is taken, since the land, as an abstract concept, is of no one. This is why home, for me, is always the consolidation of violence.

In my writing I'm always very critical of this notion. It is often an exclusionary concept. Take my work on deportation, for instance. The reasoning behind deportation is often that people need to go back to their home. And there you see the double side of home: on the one hand, we say that this is our home and you do not belong here. On the other hand, we assign you to a place/home that maybe has never been yours or which you had good reason to leave. Home is hardly ever used in a positive way in the deportation field. Even when it is used in a romantic way, it is actually to create a kind of exclusionary nationalistic effervescence among citizens. You can also observe how this idea has been institutionalised in the form of Ministries such as Home Affairs, Homeland Security etc. where most of their work is in fact about excluding Others from a certain territory.

What are the key empirical and methodological challenges to investigate home and migration?

I am studying migration from the point of view of those who condition mobility. Our attention is usually drawn to the moving subject, because it is the active element. But I think that if we want to understand home, belonging, and feeling at home, we should rather study the structuring element, the people or the classes who decide what and for whom is 'our home'; who belongs and who does not; those who determine the channels, the rules and mechanisms of mobility. It is counterintuitive.

My idea is that talking about migrants is problematic on many levels: firstly, saturation. We have already so many studies about migrants! And then, if we are honest, there is a lack of reciprocity there: we are practically asking them to give us their time, views, histories, and we offer them to publish an article which will help us to advance our careers. Why should they offer all this to us when we have very little to offer them?

My own motivation to start doing research with bureaucrats and policy makers in charge of mobility was that I had already spoken with migrants in many countries for many years. They indeed have wonderful and interesting perspectives to offer, but these perspectives are always dependent on their emplacement in a corner of the society. And I thought it was much more interesting to see who builds that corner, how and why. The people that built that corner for migrants and refugees are White, like me, middle class, with good salaries, these people work in state institutions, international organisations, they are policy makers.

But don't you think that scholars and intellectuals still have a role to play to change the perspectives of the general public?

We can be politically active, but I am quite sceptical. My experience to try to communicate academic work to a larger audience is not very positive. I think that there is much more co-option of academia going on than a sincere attempt to have an effect on policy.

So one important political move by academic is to study the oppressor, we need to shift the gaze. This is in itself already a political statement. I am saying to White, middle class people: "I think you are the problem, not them". Sure, it is hard and confrontational, it is a hard to conduct fieldwork and hard to get access, but it is necessary, I believe. Moreover, ethical clearance to study policy makers and bureaucrats is very hard to achieve. The committee asks questions like: "Why is this research necessary?" "Isn't everything already written on the internet?" And they always say that there are security issues which could impede the investigation.

A second political move for me is to help migrants not as an academic but as a fellow citizen. I think that writing is not enough. As a citizen, you can try to affect the situation even if the effect might be minimal. If you are not doing other work in your life except writing, I think you count as a passive actor, not as a politically active one.

Do you think it is possible to do good ethnography with the oppressor and the oppressed at the same time?

I did it in different periods. First I studied the migrants and now I am studying the oppressor. I do not believe in the idea that "anthropologists do fieldwork in order to tell the world the stories of the voiceless." I do not believe that you can give voices to migrants and refugees, since they are already perfectly capable to tell their stories, articulate their needs, their claims, much better than we would do. The problem is that they are not listened to. Again the problem is not with them, it is with us, and specifically with the politicians and the policy makers. What migrants need is that the other side listens, that is why we need to put pressure on the other sides.

Did you ask policymakers about their notion of home?

I ask about belonging, how they define who belongs and who does not, who should be here and who should not. It emerged, maybe unsurprisingly, that their ideas are quite exclusionary, chauvinistic and restrictive.

Is there any alternative "home logic" to the one underlying migration controls and deportation?

Yes, for instance Ecuador put in the constitution the idea that nobody is illegal. As a point of departure, everybody can go to Ecuador and nobody can be deported. Other countries in Latin America, like Argentina or Bolivia, have no strict deportation policies. These countries do not work with the deportation logic of western countries, either because of a humanist understanding of belonging or because they recognize that deportation is a disproportionate and expensive sanction to apply to people who violate and administrative regulation and stay in the country without the "right" papers.

Do you think that it is connected to the existence of a strong welfare state in most European countries?

I think the opposite. It is not because we have a good welfare state that we cannot allow to accommodate everyone, but rather that because of this exclusionary rhetoric we can reject people who are desiring to join in contributing to the wellbeing of the nation-and-state. Undocumented migrants are more productive for the economy than most politicians would like to admit. They are no burden. Their economic contribution in terms of productivity, and even in tax-paying, is extremely high. There is after all a reason why all states in Europe accommodate millions of undocumented migrants.

But they do not pay taxes...

Yes, they do. In the Netherlands, for instance, before the year 2000, undocumented people had a social security number and could pay taxes and have medical coverage. Then the Dutch authorities coupled having a social security number with having a legal status (*The Coupling Act*) and made it more difficult for undocumented people to lead a "normal" life. But undocumented people still pay value-added tax on everything they buy and consume in our countries. Anyway, today the political atmosphere has changed. No politician would sit with you to discuss open borders policies. It is considered to be too leftist, too progressive. Although borders are nowadays real barriers only for low class citizens, who cannot move easily, while for you and I the borders of the world are quite open. It is the big hypocrisy of globalisation put into practice by our governments.

What do you think that our project about homemaking can add to migration studies?

I am thinking of Hannah Arendt in responding to this question. The issue with refugees that she studied after the Second World War was not the fact that these refugees were forced to leave their home, or that they completely lost it, but that they never got the chance of having another home somewhere else. The crisis of refugees is not only about the fact that they lost a home but that they are systematically excluded from the possibility of having a home elsewhere. I think that the challenge of a project like yours is to understand the conditions which determine the systematic exclusions of others in our society. What are the conditions that define their inability to recreate home away from home?

What kind of strategies would you use to study home?

My rapport with migrants was mostly very good. For example, I was often invited to the caravans where Chinese migrants used to live in while working in construction in Israel. I think that if you are a compassionate and sincere fieldworker, it is not so hard to be invited to people's homes. I also always invited my interlocuters to my home, also when I was doing fieldwork while having small kids at home. If you are open, people tend to be open to you. It is a two-ways thing. I have been to many of my interlocutors' houses, even if I am not sure these were places they would call home...

Did you go to policy makers and bureaucrats' houses?

I would have liked to go to their houses to better understand their entire worldview and perspectives. It is a riddle for me how they can work in such a repressive apparatus without suffering. I would have liked to know them in a deeper way. But I did not manage to go too far. I had interviews in their workplace, and I had a few opportunities to sit with them for a dinner in a restaurant or for a beer in a bar. But because of our differences in perspectives, it is much harder for me to share time with them than with migrants. Some scholars who study neo-Nazis, like Nitzan Shoshan in his book *The Management of Hate*, reflected on this aspect… It is a challenge to do research with people whom you don't like or even profoundly dislike. Not so many anthropologists do it. Recently, Arlie Hochschild in her book *Strangers in Their Own Land: Anger and Mourning on the American Right* investigated the rise in American Right-Wing politics in small white villages which are pockets of white supremacy and Trump's supporters. She does a great job in showing why they voted for Trump. Even if it is hard, I believe that these research enterprises are extremely worthy in what they teach us about people who we might too quickly and easily cast as stupid and racist.