

The immigrant experience

Affective and effective spheres and issues of race and gender

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Through looking at the working experiences of migrant workers, Minoo Moallem examines the porous borders between work and home, and between the public and private spheres, particularly in relation to emotional labour.

In this essay, through looking at the experiences of Iranian immigrant entrepreneurs, I aim to illuminate some of the ways in which the separation of the effective and affective spheres operates as an important component of the split between public and private, market and home, and state and civil society. In each of these splits the performance of work versus care is allocated to one side of the divide, in a way that legitimises existing sexual and racial divisions of labour. In addition, political citizenship is split off from any ethic of care (defined by relationships and interconnectedness), and instead is based on an ethic of responsibility (defined by abstract and imaginary notions of community). The disjunction of the affective and the effective is central to a notion of citizenship which separates the political sphere from civil society, and contributes to the naturalisation and normalisation of caring as 'non-work'. It also fosters

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the separation of bodies from their work, promoting a disembodied citizenship.

Feminist critiques of a political economy based on the separation of domestic and non-domestic spheres - one assigned to economically useful work and the other to non-work - and analyses of the increasing feminisation of the labour market have made very important contributions to our understanding of the feminisation of space and its consequences for women's lives. The concentration of women and racialised groups in the feminised, ethnicised and secondary segments of the market (characterised as low-paid, dead-end, labour intensive, with a high reliance on service and caring) has been an important focus for feminist and anti-racist critiques of the gender and racial division of labour. With the increase in globalisation and the expansion of flexibility and the subcontracting of labour, these sexual and racial patterns are taking new forms. As a consequence, the domestic and the non-domestic are merging, to maximise flexibility while minimising costs and risks. The 'home' is increasingly becoming a privileged site of flexible capital and labour that provides the effective incorporation of labour intensive work into the market. But at the same time the feminised and racialised segments of the market rely heavily on the affective relations of home for survival or success, leading to the packaging of care as 'excess of work'. Small immigrant entrepreneurial activities provide a rich field in which to study the impact of these changes.

Immigrant entrepreneurs as caregivers

Ethnic entrepreneurial spaces are now a familiar part of public spaces in which effective modes of economic activity are linked to affective modes of being. They are contrived by national boundaries and increasingly transnational cultural and economic networks. Furthermore, they are the most visible spaces in which cultural difference is expressed through economic activity.

Iranians are among the new immigrants who have found spaces of hope and continuity in small businesses. While some entrepreneurs find a place in existing categories of business activities, others base their businesses on their distinct cultural identity. Familiar icons from the travelling memories of migrants inform the process of naming, and invest certain products and their consumption with symbolic, affective values. In the interplay of culture and economics, and through the performance of the economic actions of everyday life, cultural goods and meanings move around, blurring the boundaries between the symbolic

demands of cultural difference and the economic demands of everyday survival. The presence of Zafran rice on the menus of Italian restaurants in San Francisco, of 'Isfahan' in the middle of Paris, or of 'Khayam' in Berlin does not have much to do with certain naive notions of multiculturalism, but demonstrates the insistence of the diasporic presence and the impossibility of its effacement and suppression from the dominant material and symbolic infrastructures. The links between social memory, space, migrancy and economics in the discourses and practices of immigrants are part and parcel of new forms of global restructuring and transnationalism.

Blending of the affective and the effective in Parvin's snack bar

For immigrants, many entrepreneurial spaces are spaces of social and community care. For example, Parvin has a small snack bar in a shopping mall in Berlin. She is from an upper-middle-class background, and opened her business only after experiencing great difficulty finding a job in her profession:

My kids cannot believe that I had servants and nannies and even a driver in Iran. Here in Germany, I have been treated like nobody. Even to start a business, you need so many permits, you have to deal with so many bureaucrats who treat you so badly, you have to prove to so many institutions that you can make it, running from one inspection to another, and you are constantly treated with a lot of suspicion and distrust.

Her class, gender and family resources (her husband and her children are involved in the snack bar), as well as a one-year training in small entrepreneurship offered by *Initiative selbständiger Immigrantinnen*, have been crucial in enabling her to start a business. However, she has been forced to give up any clear identification between her business and her Iranian culture because of racist reactions:

When I opened this place, I put up a sign advertising Persian specialities. But I heard people talking about Khomeini and Salman Rushdie. Many looked at me in a strange way. I was not getting enough clients, and at this location I mainly rely on German clients. I could not afford to lose them. Once, a couple

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passed by and the woman suggested that they have a cappuccino, but the man refused. In a very loud voice, he said, 'I do not drink a foreigner's cappuccino', so I changed my sign.

But Parvin has not given up her affective connections to Iranian culture. She has effectively incorporated them into her business activities. One way of doing this is by cooking Iranian dishes and presenting them under a German name.

I have managed to put some Iranian food on the menu, but I have given it different names. [She laughs.] This *Genussesnack*, for example, is nothing but our own *Kou Kou Sabzi*- The same with the eggplant dish. They don't want to identify these dishes with my culture, but that doesn't make any difference to me. I get to have them on the menu because they are special to me.

For Parvin, another opportunity to blend the affective and the effective is her work of 'caring'. She combines her abilities and knowledge as a former social worker, her Iranian cultural notions of hospitality, and her gender position as a wife, mother and older sister in her small business:

This is a highly individualistic society. People need attention and care. I use Iranian hospitality to comfort them here. I talk to them, I pay attention to what they tell me, I give them suggestions about what to do and what not to do. At the end of the day, I even give up my extra bread and croissants -I ask my clients if they want to take some home. Sometimes, I make Persian cookies and leave them here for everyone. In this way, I have been able to create a stable clientele. They might try other places once in a while, but they always come back to me.

Parvin organises the daily rituals of business interactions so that there is no separation between her affective relationship with her culture and her effective methods of doing business in a hostile environment. Caring as feminised and invisible work - identified increasingly with an immigrant and ethnic division of labour - manifests itself in her entrepreneurial strategies of survival and success. Through the discursive boundaries of foreignness and belonging, the German market is able to exploit the unpaid work of caring performed by Parvin in her daily business interactions, and she is able to offer it voluntarily as a natural part of her business activities.

What is 'homey' in Taghi's Cafe?

Taghi is an Iranian businessman in Berlin whose entrepreneurial activities rely extensively on his work of caring. In his case, caring is directed toward community members. Taghi has a hybrid shop in Berlin: his business is divided between a small Persian finger-food counter at the front and a travel agency at the back. There is no door between the two sections, but one does not immediately notice the desk, computer and fax machine in the rear. The walls of the store are covered with pictures of Iranian monuments and cities. I am received kindly, and treated to tea and fresh fruit. I sit with Taghi and we start talking. There are some Iranian men sitting outside, playing chess and backgammon. During the interview, I see both women and men dropping by for different reasons. The cafe has a homey atmosphere; people come and go. Since Taghi and another Iranian who works for him are from Azerbaijan, one hears Farsi and Turkish being spoken in the store. Occasionally, a German-speaking client walks in and is addressed in German. Phones ring constantly. Taghi tells me that he has a phone line connected to several Iranian homes where kids are left alone by working parents and instructed to call Taghi if they have any problems.

I don't charge them for this service. I try to be helpful. They make sure that their kids have access to someone from the community, and it is not much work for us. Sometimes the kids just call and talk to us and get support until their parents are back home.

Taghi studied engineering in Germany and had also been active on the Iranian left. His migration resulted from the political repression of the left by the Islamic Republic. After migrating to Germany, Taghi obtained a teaching job at a university and stayed there for a few years, but when it became clear that he was unlikely to find a permanent position in his profession, he too turned to business:

Many Germans think that we are taking their places. They don't know how much hassle we have to go through to make a living. I come from an academic and activist background, but I have learned to cook, to talk to all these small business bureaucrats, and to use day-to-day business language, etc. People see us working, but never ask how we've managed to survive.

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In his business, Taghi is not only trying to create a space where Iranians feel at home and can come and ask for different services. He also organises cultural activities, lectures and exhibitions.

Some people come here to talk to me about their problems, some come to meet with others, and some come to get information about different activities in the community. I have notices about all kinds of cultural activities.

Taghi is no longer involved with political activism, but he remains very concerned about the well-being of Iranian exiles. His concerns have turned towards the care of community members and the development of an effective mode of entrepreneurship. In his business, politics, economics and culture merge, spanning the gulf between Germany and Iran and connecting also with other diasporic locations. His work of caring brings its rewards: he has been able to add his travel agency to his finger-food store because of the effective and affective connections that he has established between his entrepreneurial activities and community needs.

I started to expand my business and opened a travel agency when I saw so many people around me who trusted me. I have been successful because I am able to serve them almost 24 hours a day. Some of my clients have very little time and come and see me late at night. Some prefer to deal in Farsi and trust me to find them good deals. These days, many Iranians travel back and forth to Iran and to other parts of the world where they have family. The presence of a considerable number of Iranians in diaspora has created a market for a travel agent who can serve them conveniently. In addition, I perform extra services such as sending medications or gifts with travellers. Sometimes people need to send a power of attorney, a legal document or simply urgent messages. I always do my best to be helpful to them.

Taghi's business is more than an entrepreneurial space. It is an affective community space. Here, culture and economics meet and enrich each other through the creation of some sense of control and power. It is also a transnational space where Iran and Berlin are experienced through social interactions which

blend national and ethnic boundaries.

As foreigners, we need to have our own spaces where we can take care of each other. I personally get a lot of energy from this business and the kind of life I have here. It gives me hope, as well as a sense of continuity and connection. When I see my fellow Iranians milling around and talking to each other, I feel very happy and joyous. For me, this is a business and also more than a business.

Beside citizenship

Small entrepreneurial spaces are quintessential examples of those transnational spaces where notions of time and space are blurred and transgressed in a number of different ways. First of all, these spaces challenge a linear notion of time and space, expressed in the dichotomy between here and there, homeland and host society, third world and first world, as well as home and market. Secondly, for massive groups of immigrants, the production and consumption of 'cultural goods' and the specialisation in small businesses do not arise solely from the collectivity's decision to preserve its common memories; a bigger factor is that, in the context of a daily experience of restriction and discrimination, ethnic entrepreneurial activities create an economic continuity that opens up the possibility of employment, money and hope in diaspora. Thirdly, with the expansion of new forms of globalisation and the presence of diasporic people in different locations and territories, new transnational entrepreneurial possibilities are emerging, and cultural boundaries are being realigned. Immigrant entrepreneurs are becoming new economic agents, facilitating the movement of capital, labour and culture from one location to another, from the private to the public sphere and from the formal to the informal, or *vice versa*. Their existence challenges modern politico-spatial divisions based on national territoriality and market-centred economism. The entrepreneurial presence of immigrants also challenges any narrow conception of participation in a centralised, state-regulated politics, placing in crisis the narrow confines of both modern nationalism and the global city-state. In this context, ethnic entrepreneurial spaces can be characterised as spaces of everyday self-government, where past and present, there and here, outside and inside,

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affective and effective, encounter each other.

These case studies demonstrate how the everyday life practices of immigrants are articulated inside, between and beyond the boundaries of culture and economy, care and work, here and there, home and market, and point to new spaces of be/longing and citizenship.