Organized Amateur Football and Turkish-Speaking Immigrants in London: Immigrant Identities and Integration (Kadir Onur Unutulmaz)

As Britain, among many other Western democracies, has been trying to prevent the emergence of a ‘society of enclaves’ where different communities would lead ‘parallel lives’ via policies of ‘integration and cohesion’, the issue of immigrant identities and their sense of belonging have become vital concerns (Vasta 2007; Parekh 2008; Grillo 2005; Brubaker 2003). The proposed research aims to analyze the identities and cultural integration processes in a severely understudied immigrant group, that of Turkish-speaking immigrants in London using the social milieu around football as a case study.

Identity (in its various forms) in this research is understood as one that is socially constructed and relational (Harre 1993, Gergen 1991), and not as one that is unified and essential. Searching for such ‘identities’ instead of one ‘true identity’, then, requires one to focus their attention on specific social milieus within which they can observe how ‘the self’ is ‘presented’ in everyday life of individuals (Goffman 1959). The selection of football as a central theme, though, is not arbitrary. It is selected because it is both a source of identity interacting with other forms of identity such as ethnicity and religion, and presents us with a complex set of social relations in which multiple identities from different levels are played out, presented, negotiated, and contested within specific contexts.

There are two major research questions to be addressed throughout this research: First one, to repeat what is stated above, concerns identities. How, for instance, are ethnic identities articulated and presented; what does it mean to be Turkish or Kurdish on a football pitch; when playing against a British team, do they see themselves through the lenses of national identity as Turkish, or as immigrants, or as Muslims?

Secondly, what implications does organized amateur football have on the ‘integration’ of Turkish-speaking immigrants in London? More generally, is there a direct casual link between active engagement in ethnic sport clubs and the integration of immigrants? The general assumption in the literature as well as in the political discourses seems to be affirmative, while recent research has suggested a more complicated picture.

By addressing the many issues centred around these two main questions, it is intended to (i) produce knowledge about an immigrant group which is increasingly visible in reality yet ‘invisible’ in statistics and literature; (ii) make a contribution to the literature on immigrant identities and their study around specific social milieu; (iii) make a similarly original contribution in the integration literature by not only assessing the implications of amateur football on immigrant integration, but also suggesting an ethnographic epistemology to investigate subjective and sensitive concepts such as ‘sense of belonging’, and lastly, (iv) to come up with policy recommendations concerning how amateur sports can be used as part of local integration policies in metropolitan cities.

To address the questions and make the contributions identified above, this research will employ an 12-month ethnographic field study to be conducted in North London. In line with the significant turn across the social sciences to ethnographic methods and oral histories in understanding migration, experience, and identities (Brah et al 1999; Castles et al. 2002), this research shall combine participant observation with oral histories and subjective narratives collected through semi-structured in-depth interviews.

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1 The term ‘Turkish-speaking immigrants’ refers to three ethnic groups; Turks and Kurds from Turkey, and Turks from Cyprus. The Turkish language has been the most influential common denominator linking these three groups along with other such as religion and cultural similarities (Atay 2006).