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Review of the Phd thesis by Inga Hajdarowicz

“Grassroots Strategies of Support of Syrian Refugee Women in Lebanon”

The PhD-thesis by Inga Hajdarowicz is a very rich and detailed ethnographic account of a grassroots organization led by Syrian women in support of Syrian refugee women in Lebanon, called “Women Now for Development” located in the Bekaa-Valley, and of the political subjectivities of a group of its participants firmly grounded in a well-elaborated feminist epistemology and methodology based on the tradition of activist research. Inga Hajdarowicz thus succeeds not only to challenge the still wide-spread (western) understanding of refugee women as helpless victims but also the still common highly gendered understanding of politics, its actors, spaces, forms, and goals. In doing so, she is able to expand the very definition of politics shedding light on the modes and potentialities of “everyday politics”, which is certainly not new in view of the vast literature in postcolonial studies or cultural and social anthropology on political practices and movements beyond institutionalized, organized and visible forms (Scott, Asef Bayat,); nevertheless Inga Hajdarowicz’ PhD is a further well written feminist contribution not only to this broad discussion in political, social and cultural science of politics and the “political of the everyday” but to the growing field of gender sensitive migration studies.

Based on three (?) long research stays within a four-year period (2018-2021) Inga Hajdarowicz is able to draw a nuanced picture not only of the pedagogical methodology of the organization, but portrays the women involved in the programs with great sensitivity, their motivation, experiences and development. Against the backdrop of a dominant discourse in society as well as in academia more or less portraying refugee women as vulnerable and as helpless, passive victims Inga

Hajdarowicz is especially interested to understand the complex subjectivity and agency of the involved refugee women and the grassroots type of community-based activities they are practicing by applying a well-founded feminist driven, intersectional reading of their biographies and practices. Thereby she combines a sophisticated understanding of recent approaches within the international interdisciplinary field of critical migration and border studies and gender analytical approaches in the field of migration research, that she nicely outlines in the introduction, with own extensive experiences in the field of refugee solidarity work she has gained in the course of her own involvement in such activities in Greece and Serbia in the wake of the refugee_migration movements in 2015/2016. Thoroughly reflecting these times that can be defined as a state led reception policy crisis Inga Hajdarowicz concludes that the biggest impetus for change and new ways of interacting between newcomers and residing societies were practiced by grassroots initiatives drawing on models of horizontal organizing and participatory democracy. Inspired by the experience of the power of refugees to act in these mixed initiatives along the Balkan route Inga Hajdarowicz decided to use her PhD-research to go a step further and study a refugee-led self-organization itself whose political agenda and methodology is firmly rooted in political grassroots activism in Syria.

Thereby she builds on a classical ethnographic research methodology with lengthy participatory observations and interviews, enriched with activist and participatory approaches – overall demonstrating a high level of (self)-reflexivity based on the constructivist grounded theory by Kathy Charmaz. After preliminary interviews with different international, Lebanese and Syrian organizations she decided to focus on “Women Now for Development” that started to operate its first women’s center in Syria in 2014. After first talks with the organizers about her research interests they commonly agreed that Inga Hajdarowicz would especially focus her research on the “Women leadership program” best suitable to study the feminist pedagogy of the organization and the political subjectivity of the women involved in the program, their individual transformation over time, and political practice most of them are developing in the course of the program.

Within her research period she is able to follow three editions of the program (2018, 2019, 2021) in situ and one – due to the pandemic lock down – online, and accompanied 30 emerging “grassroot leaders” in various political activities; Additionally, she conducted over 30 in-depth interviews with various organizers and teachers and other people and – in line with her activist, participatory research approach – invited the participants to discuss her preliminary results and to reflect on their political experience; Above all, she also offered English classes and workshops on the international feminist movement and complementary topics the organization itself was not able to provide for; Following her activist research understanding and conceptualizing research “as a practice of

solidarity”, she as well organized public events in Poland and raised money for the organization; she also managed to find a writer – Aleksandra Lipczak - who wrote a reportage on the organization for a Polish journal to reach a wider public in comparison to academic papers.

All in all, her methodological approach is well reasoned, presented in great detail and thoroughly reflected whereby Inga Hajdarowicz not only reflects her own researcher positionality, but discusses various “research risks” such as the problem of “informed consent” that exacerbates in the context of a humanitarian crisis as is the case for refugees in Lebanon; Especially her own extensive experience with feminist and migrant solidarity practices and the developed activist research methodology certainly have opened doors to the field and were a prerequisite for establishing close and trustful relationships with the research partners.

However, especially in the analytical chapters the reader wonders if her long presence in the field and the close contact to the participants not also have revealed some more frictions, contradictions, conflicts and problems in/of the organization and its way of training refugee women to become a “leader” and political activist in the very specific socio-political context for refugees in Lebanon, as Inga Hajdarowicz’s accounts do – just to mention on the one hand the high degree of legal and economic precarity the Syrian refugee women are confronted with, and on the other hand the high degree of NGOization of the crisis response and the dominance of international funding that must have had some influence on the way “Women Now” has been operating. And the naming of the program as “leadership training” is certainly an indicator of the dominance of the global humanitarian and development aid dispositive and how change is envisioned – unfortunately, Inga Hajdarowicz misses to address the field of critical studies of humanitarianism and its gendered accounts in more detail (such as the work by Didier Fassin, Miriam Ticktin and others), despite the fact that she nicely delves into a critical reading of the vulnerability-discourse as part of the field.

Driven by the main question to understand the political practice by the Syrian women “outside of institutionalized field of politics” her analyses is mainly based on a critical, well-elaborated discussion of different conceptual understandings of “politics” and “power”, drawing on the broadly established feminist critique of conventional notions of politics and its foundational gendered binaries as the private/public-split, or formal/informal differentiation. In doing so she is able not only to addresses one of the main sociological questions, the one of structure-and-agency, but also the one of visibility and invisible acts and adds “space” as an additional dimension as laid down by John Gaventa in his conceptualization of the “power cube”. This allows her to address as well the different scales of power which – in view of her topic – could have been done in greater detail (e.g. with James Fergusson and his notion of “transnational governmentality”) as this – for example -

would have allowed her as well to critically engage with the conceptualization of “grassroots” that she more or less unquestionably perceives as opposed and free of the other scales of power; Inga Hajdarowicz herself, following a nicely outlined feminist understanding, defines power as relational and with Pettit and McGee as “iterative, intersectional and multi-dimensional, departing from the dualist ‘agency vs structure’ lense” (p.30). Consequently, in the following sections Inga Hajdarowicz describes concisely the intersectionality-approach drawing on the work of Patricia Collins and the Combahee River Collective and stressing its decolonial critique of universalist notions of knowledge and the knowing subject. Also, her following critique of conventional notions of politics firmly interlinked with the notion of the public sphere and its gendered undercurrent as put forward by Habermas is based on a thorough reading of feminist critiques such as elaborated by Nancy Fraser. Focusing on community-based activism of marginalized groups as it is practiced by her field Hajdarowicz rather speaks of “subaltern counter publics” or “micropolitics” and turns to the debate of participatory democracy that not only facilitates political learning processes but reevaluates local knowledge and experiences as powerful resource for change (on the local level) whereas Inga Hajdarowicz critically interrogates the notion of experience and simple understandings of a “politics of voice” based on testimonies of the oppressed. She goes on to outline further differentiations of such “spaces of learning, framing, and enacting politics” (p.42), as put forward in the feminist literature between “invited” and “invented” spaces and “coping” (for immediate needs) and “resisting” (radically re-modelling the system) practices whereas Hajdarowicz herself is against such a binary reading as grassroot politics are of a much more fluid and process-orientated nature. Now she finally comes to the literature focusing on “everyday politics” such as James Scott who in the early 1980s came up with the concept of “infrapolitics” shedding light on the power of not organized, more or less hidden resistance practices by ordinary people taking place in the everyday life worlds, in the communities and households later taken up by Asef Bayat and others to explain the velvet revolutions in the Arab world. Unfortunately, Inga Hajdarowicz doesn’t even cite Scott properly nor does she explain the notion of “infrapolitics”, she rather quickly goes on to quote some feminist critics that stress the importance of a practice-oriented approach underlining the difference between awareness of oppression and acts of resistance that are firmly rooted rather in a “culture of resistance” and may take the forms of episodic mobilizations as Asef Bayat outlines. As Inga Hajdarowicz mainly sheds light in her research on a pedagogical program and learning, and transformational processes of the involved women she turns to a discussion of approaches of a “feminist pedagogy” as laid down by bell hooks drawing on the works of Paolo Freire; Here, learning and change are understood as collective processes and as an act of knowing through sharing and collectively analyzing personal experience that highly informs as well the practice of the

“leadership program” run by “Women Now” as Inga Hajdarowicz extensively demonstrates in the following empirical chapters.

However, before she delves into her description of the political practice of the program and the (political) subjectivities of the involved refugee women, Inga Hajdarowicz firstly describes in-depth the highly precarious legal, social, political and economic situation of Syrian refugees, especially of refugee women, in Lebanon, drawing on existing studies as well as on her own interviews, observations and experience. This account is thoroughly written and gives a nuanced picture of the high level of precarity generally characterizing the social and the living conditions in the context of the protracted state-crisis in Lebanon that exacerbates for Syrian refugees whose stay in Lebanon is not legalized, who are more or less excluded from the labor market and the formal political system, increasingly getting the scapegoat and object of racist attacks. Especially the empirical insights, that Inga Hajdarowicz was able to gain in the wake of her deep immersion in the field, allow her to depict the everyday world of Syrian refugee women such as the housing situation, the high level of violence and its effects on mental health in great details, producing a nuanced gender analytical understanding of their “multidimensional vulnerabilities”.

The next three chapters are devoted to the analyses of the center’s political understanding based on the organizer’s experience within the Syrian revolution and its methodology with a specific focus on the pedagogical aspects of the “leadership program”. Inga Hajdarowicz’s digression about the role of women within the Syrian revolution and how the voices of women got increasingly marginalized is specifically interesting for transnationally orientated social movement studies and to understand the grassroots-, community based approach of the center that learned to design political change and caring social infrastructure from the bottom-up, partly as a substitute for a failed, non-responsive or repressive state. Then Inga Hajdarowicz goes on to give a close account of the leadership program, its curriculum, actors/educators and methods used thereby describing how the program operationalizes main aims such as “teaching for critical practice”, “learning about gender”, sensitizing towards “intersectional challenges” and how the program tries to build new caring networks for the women whereby she artfully mixes her analytical observations with accounts from interviews and talks with participating women that nicely integrate the participants’ view and experience with the program and its trajectories. The next chapter looks more closely on the interaction of the women with different power structures and how they learn and gradually establish an own (political) understanding of their role and agency within their families and communities and how this is changing in the course of the program, and finally how they develop own initiatives and practices and interventions whereas Inga Hajdarowicz pays attention to the specific gendered destabilizing but as well empowering situation of being in exile that also opens up new possibilities

for women to take over responsible roles within the families and communities. Thereby she again describes nicely various biographies and cases of participating women and how they negotiate their (new) role, (newly developed) spaces and gown self-confidence as well as knowledge of rights and possible actions to enact and enforce them. Now she also describes their motivation and different ways how they came across the center and why they enrolled with the leadership program. Finally she shows what the participants did when they were leaving the program, what kind of activities, initiatives and campaigns they themselves initiated or got involved with mainly on the level of the close neighborhood and community, but some also beyond the grassroots level. In her last chapter she mainly reflects on the notion of leadership by on the one hand asking the participants to reflect what they learned and how their own understanding developed and on the other hand bringing in her own analytical understanding of feminist transformative leadership especially valorizing the community-based and grassroots-focus of the program placing the transformation of the self and the near surrounding such as the family center-stage of a progressive political agenda.

Only now, Inga Hajdarowicz sheds light on “challenges” such programs and centers are faced with. Thereby she mentions the socio-economic and legal conditions for refugee (women) in Lebanon, the increasing instability, precarity and growing racist resentments, touches upon the dependency of such centers and programs on funding schemes and hence on international organizations and their programming, and on the diversity of its clients and the Syrian refugee population in general. However, this last section comes very late and gives the impression as if these challenges are rather technical ones, all coming from the outside; Only very superficially and shortly Hajdarowicz touches upon internal contradictions, frictions and conflicts that must be there as well when such (socially, religious-, political-, educational-, political-, age-wise) divers actors come together under such glim and precarious conditions and in a situation of a very high level of a NGOization of the social. It would have been highly interesting to learn more how such conflicts – e.g. over hierarchies within the organization, the different income-possibilities etc. – have been framed and handled. Without such insights the whole empirical, more or less descriptively written chapters present a rather smoothed picture of the Women’s Center and the leadership program.

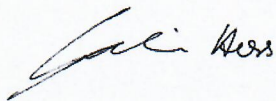
Another critique concerns the way Hajdarowicz presents and integrates the participating women: as she doesn’t present her main protagonists in a comprehensive way at the beginning of her empirical chapters and rather integrates quotes after quotes, some of the women are introduced again and again. This not only produces quite a redundant impression, rather it also hinders to get a closer understanding of the social (etc.) and political background of each women and the hindering and enabling factors for a certain political (learning) process; A more nuanced and in this regard as well

actor centered writing strategy would have allowed as well to try to build some typologies that in turn would have allowed a more analytical approach on the political trajectories and subjectivities of the individual women and the different factors that play a role.

Nevertheless – apart from these few critical remarks – Hajdarowicz PhD thesis is a solid, well written, ethnographical very rich, and theoretically well elaborated research project firmly grounded in the feminist social science research tradition and theoretical debate on (feminist) politics beyond the conventional forms shedding light on a multiple marginalized group of women from the Global South. With this research on a women's self-organized center of and for Syrian women placed in Lebanon and its political methodology and practice she definitely contributes to the growing research field of gender related/feminist migration studies by not only shedding light on the agency and political subjectivity of refugee women but by going beyond the perspective of the Global North and putting the experience, knowledge and as such theory production of women from the Global South center stage that deserves special positive attention.

As such, I definitely recommend to let the PhD thesis of Inga Hajdarowicz pass.

With my best regards

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Sabine Hess', with a stylized, flowing script.

Prof. Dr. Sabine Hess

