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Beyond their years: Unaccompanied minors and the social construction of categories

Review: Ulrike Bialas. *Forever 17: Coming of age in the German asylum system*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2023

This spirited study draws readers into the experiences of unaccompanied minors in the German asylum and youth welfare systems as many of them try to remain *Forever 17*. The author not only sheds light on the problems of age designation, but also invites us to question our conception of age itself as something clear and fixed. One of several recent releases to take a human-centered approach to refugee issues, *Forever 17* is a compelling read not just for researchers, undergraduates, and graduate students, but even for a broad audience. Bialas' focus on the trajectories of a few young men puts their perspectives front and center while her analysis remains well-reasoned and well-grounded in theory on the social construction of age, bureaucratic categories, and identity.

From the fall of 2017 until the spring of 2020, Bialas volunteered with an organisation serving unaccompanied minors and then developed personal relationships with Samir, Idris, and several other young men undergoing the asylum process in Berlin, Germany. She followed their lives through appointments at immigration offices, age determination examinations, conflicts with social workers at residence facilities for unaccompanied minors, authorised apprenticeships and unauthorised work, parties and religious gatherings, and all of the challenges of life in legal limbo. Though the study could perhaps benefit from additional background statistics on unaccompanied minors in Germany, this decision to focus on a few individuals and depth rather than breadth is a conscious one, as Bialas' trusting relationships with her interlocutors allow for greater insight into "studying fabrications" (173). German asylum laws and social support systems for refugees are much more generous with unaccompanied minors, and all of her interlocutors hoped to benefit from a system that privileges youth.

Yet these young men often come from environments where age is conceptualised differently, leaving them at odds with a system that depends on binary classifications of individuals as adults or minors. Birthdates as occasions to be marked, recorded, and celebrated year after year are typical of modern Western societies, but are not the norm everywhere. Many asylum seekers arrive in Germany without a birth certificate or knowing their exact birthdate, meaning that the state must determine their age using methods such as forensic x-ray examinations of teeth and

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bones. Although these approaches are based in science, they are not exact. In several moments in *Forever 17*, such as when young asylum seekers joke about celebrating their state-designated birthdays together on January 1, readers get a window into the strangeness of this experience for the youths themselves and the mismatch between "official" age and personal identity.

One of the main points that Bialas makes with this book is that age, like race and gender, is a social construction. Age in Western societies captures so much more than the time that has elapsed since birth: we associate youth with "vulnerability, innocence, dependence, and immaturity… the right to hope and joyful anticipation, and a jester's license to mess up and try again" (162). Western notions of maturity are therefore shaped not only by biological development, but also by life experiences, responsibilities, and vulnerabilities. As we get to know Bialas' interlocutors and observe both moments of maturity and immaturity, we are invited to ask ourselves why the number seventeen allows us to designate people as vulnerable, while the number eighteen does not.

Through following the trajectories of several asylum seekers – some of whom are designated as minors, some not – Bialas demonstrates the potentially severe consequences of the age assessment. Special legal protections and state supports for unaccompanied minors are meant to protect the most vulnerable. This means that applicants determined to be eighteen or older, who may still be vulnerable in many ways, can fall through the cracks. Without youth welfare offices and social workers at their disposal, several of the young men we meet in *Forever 17* have little help navigating asylum applications or the appeals process, and alternative options for secure residency – such as apprenticeships – are all more easily accessible for unaccompanied minors than for adult asylum seekers.

While minors are privileged in the German asylum system in many ways, minority also has additional practical constraints and emotional costs. Youth housing residents are watched and controlled, an infantilising and emasculating experience for young men. They may have recently undergone a challenging migration journey alone but must then argue that they are unable to care for themselves in order to increase their chances of making it in Germany. For those who believe they were dishonest about their age or other parts of their story, the "burden of deception" (78) can damage both their mental health and their relationships with others as they attempt to maintain the secret.

From a methodological perspective, this book is particularly interesting for researchers studying the experiences of individuals who may be inventing or hiding parts of their identities. In the last section of the book, Bialas provides readers with a thoughtful reflection on her experience of navigating the line between trusting her interlocutors – who may happen to be living under partially false identities – while taking seriously her own arguments about the ubiquity of fabrication in the asylum system. Through this reflection on the methodological and ethical challenges she

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faced during her fieldwork, her care for the young people in the study as well as for the future of other migrants comes across.

Ultimately, as Bialas points out, administrative categories – of minor or adult, but also of forced or voluntary migrant – are tools of political compromise, contrived identities that allow Global North countries to pacify differences in public opinion by maintaining policies of admitting the most "deserving" migrants without opening the borders completely. Such a half-hearted commitment to the protection of asylum seekers is also reflected in the liminal legal status of most of her interlocutors: while they may not be deported, they are still barred from social inclusion on many fronts, directly embodying such political compromise. These administrative categories rely on often trivial or arbitrary distinctions, are assigned by individual bureaucrats tasked with determining the unknowable, and yet have powerful consequences for immigrants' livelihoods. *Forever 17* serves as a call to move beyond reductionist, binary protection categories, and a shift towards a complex and holistic consideration of vulnerability and needs. Those familiar with the work of Cecilia Menjívar, who problematises the administrative categorisation systems of the asylum regime, will find this study a worthy contribution to theoretical discussions on the social construction of refugee legality. Bialas contextualises what is often seen as an "uncomfortable truth" (191) – that sometimes, asylum seekers fabricate or embellish aspects of identity – within an asylum system that imposes categories which are insufficiently theorised and therefore insufficiently capture migrants' realities.

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