On Unequal Multilingualisms, Uneven Mobilities, and Different Desires in Late Capitalistic Switzerland

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Under late capitalism, when the saturation of the western markets is resulting in the accelerated transnational expansion as well as the restructuration, flexibilization and technologization of the economy, mobility and multilingualism are increasingly viewed by western governments as key resources of political and economic investment. This contribution discusses the logics regulating the political-economic desirability of mobile and multilingual speakers, and inquires who wins and who loses from the fact that specific forms of multilingualism and mobility are desired. In particular, I present data from two interrelated ethnographic projects investigating the management of sociocultural diversity in Geneva, an economic center in French-speaking Switzerland. By an analysis of both a) the governmental marketization of Geneva – a highly linguistically and culturally diverse location – to attract high-skilled, multilingual foreign workers and b) the management of sociocultural diversity in the social, educational, and professional integration of young immigrants, I discuss which forms of multilingualism and mobility are considered to be particularly desirable, with reference to the specific conditions. My analysis demonstrates that not all multilingualisms and mobilities are equal, but that, rather, some forms are considered to be more desirable than others, effectively arranging multilingual and mobile individuals into a hierarchy and affecting their capacity to access forms of legitimacy and capital. I also show that the observable variability of the desirability of a multilingual and mobile labor force is not neutral, but that it results from the political and economic necessity of managing societal fears caused by globalization; I furthermore demonstrate that this variability is linked to the need to turn immigrants into productive employees who contribute to boosting the reproduction of capital in Geneva. Finally, I explain how the observed hierarchizations are legitimized by those modern nationalistic, classist, and racist ideologies that have traditionally contributed to justifying inequality in multilingual Switzerland.

Keywords: "Multilingualism”, "Branding”, "Late Capitalism".