Markets, citizenship and rights: state regulation of labour migration in Malaysia and Spain

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People say that writing a book is a long journey, a journey that in many cases begins long before it is dreamed. They also say that, like other journeys, a book never happens alone. While the responsibility for what is said is not shared, the path that leads to its being said is shared. Without prior research, without sources, without uncomfortable questions and without people with whom to share the process of research (and the life that always goes with it), the result would never be the same. Better said, it would be much poorer. In the case of this book, both things are true. Hence, I must begin by naming places and people.

Looking back, I’d say that it all began with my mother’s thesis, which was also about migration though, in her case, it was about Catalan emigration to Puerto Rico in the nineteenth century. Her father, my grandfather, was one of these emigrants although he went to Puerto Rico half a century later, which is to say in the period after the Civil War, in the early years of the Franco dictatorship. Like so many other emigrants, my grandfather went alone, worked, sent letters and money, and never returned. Years later, my mother retraced his footsteps with her study. My sister and I followed her from Barcelona, hearing all her stories and, on her return, helping her to organise all the information she had gathered about emigrants, origins and destinations.

It is thus no accident that I studied History. In these student years I confirmed my interest in Latin America and deepened my knowledge of this part of the world. I also discovered two realms that were new to me: anthropology and Africa. The former was discovered with Sandra, Jaume, Joan M., Ana and Marc M. The latter with Jordi T, Joan G., Carme, Albert and Jordi B. With them I learned and took pleasure in learning and, I am happy to say, I am still doing so. Without them and everything we shared, I would never have reached this point.

The difficulty of choosing from among these worlds (those experienced at home and those subsequently discovered at university) took me to Brazil, which I thought was the perfect place for me: it was halfway between America and Africa and it had a significant anthropological tradition. Unfortunately destiny intervened and I had to return home. However, in Brazil I met Wouter, with whom I would emigrate to the Netherlands years later. Without him, and hence without my Brazilian sojourn, Amsterdam would never have appeared on my map of possibilities.

Once in Amsterdam, I did the Master’s degree in Migration and Ethnic Studies at the International School for Humanities and Social Science (ISHSS) at the University of Amsterdam. Without a grant from the Fundación Caja Madrid, this would not have been possible. In retrospect, I can say that this was an intense year since it was then that I discovered two worlds that were new for me: the field of migration studies and Southeast Asia. I was not alone in this either. I would like to express my gratitude to Myriam, with whom I explored Amsterdam and shared readings and studies throughout this first year. I missed her afterwards. Again, I am
eternally grateful to Leo Lucassen, who not only supervised my master’s thesis but imbued me with an interest in academic research and encouraged me to continue.

Guided by Leo Lucassen, I met my PhD supervisors: Rinus Penninx, Kees Groenendijk and Jeroen Doomernik. I can say in all sincerity that I could never have imagined better supervisors. Over these four years we met in the Hoog Brabant café in the Utrecht Central Railway Station. The French anthropologist Marc Augé would call it a non-place (non-lieu), which is to say a space of transit where everything passes through, where nobody stays, where there is no structure except pure becoming. It was precisely in this non-place where my thesis took shape. It did so thanks to the criticisms and comments of my supervisors and also their support, interest and confidence in me. If I have any regrets on finishing this thesis, it is that I no longer have an excuse to keep meeting them there.

Behind my directors has been the constant presence of the Institute for Migration and Ethnic Studies (IMES). I would like, first of all, to thank Jan Rath and Hanneke Grotenbreg for their support and belief in my project. When I began researching for my PhD, Jan Rath warned me that these were special years and that I would never again have so much time and freedom for doing my own research. Thus it has been, and I shall never forget it. Next, I wish to thank each and every one of my colleagues. Although it took time, I ended up feeling at home. In particular, I would like to express my gratitude to Anja van H., Mies, Flip, Manolis, Elke, Ilse, Aimee, Mar, María V., Bastian, Anja R., Malini, Elif, Danielle, Thamar, Marcel and Sébastien. In different ways they have shared these four years of research with me. I am also thankful to Tesseltje de Lange, whose comments on my work were crucial both at the beginning and at the end of my PhD. Finally, I have experienced, suffered and eventually celebrated with María Bruquetas and Lisa Peters the end of our three theses. Without them, it would have all been very different.

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In Spain I was fortunate in being helped by Lorenzo Cachón and Ana López Sala. In both cases, I have to say that my indebtedness is twofold: for their guidance in my fieldwork and for thinking of me on so many other occasions. A thousand thanks to both. In Spain, too, I must thank each and every one of my sources. Once again, I was given much more time and trust than I imagined I would receive and, again contrary to what I expected, I was pleased to find that many of the people I
went to interview (in unions, employer’s organisations, government departments and NGOs) were women. Finally, I would like to give my thanks to María’s parents Carlos and Nane, for the warm welcome they gave us in their home while I was doing my fieldwork in Madrid.

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I dedicate this book to my mother Tona with whom I could not share it and whom I continue to miss day after day. This journey would have been unimaginable without her. Since I am indebted to you for the dream, this book is both for and because of you. T’agradaria.