Abstract

In the wake of the political salience of migration, projects that target employability and/or entrepreneurial thinking have become important components of European development interventions that address 'irregular' migration in Tunisia and elsewhere in recent years. *Working towards Modernity* investigates the rationales behind and consequences of such skills development projects. To this end, this dissertation draws on interviews with donors and implementing organisations as well as documents to analyse the implementation of fifteen skills development projects funded by European donors in Tunisia. In doing so, this dissertation reveals that these projects do not simply aim to prevent Tunisian migration. Instead, being aware of the limitations of using development to reduce migration, stakeholders promote an individualised idea of development in Tunisia and hold out the prospect of selective mobilities to Europe. More specifically, these projects circulate ideologies of (soft) skills and work ethic as signifiers of modernity. These allow for striking a balance between demands to prevent migration, which have shaped European political and public debates, and the interests of private companies in their search for labour and new markets.

In unpacking the material and ideological interests underpinning these projects, this dissertation argues that migration and development interventions reproduce structures of racial capitalism. This involves an articulation of race that drives calls to exclude racialised subjects as well as capitalism's reliance on the reproduction of racialised hierarchies. Yet, given that Europe needs to uphold a liberal self-image, (soft) skills and work ethic ideologies become important signifiers of modernity that exclude subjects on the grounds of seemingly apolitical market logics. Ultimately, these projects reproduce Europe as a self-proclaimed container of modernity that is committed to liberal values and maintain a racialised liberal order which extends rights to a few selected subjects, while denying them to most others.