

Workshop Report ‘Forced Migration, Exclusion, and Social Class’ (Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology, Halle, 23.-24.05.2019)

Themes of the Workshop

The workshop, initiated and hosted by the Max Planck research initiative on “The Challenges of Migration, Integration and Exclusion” focused on the interrelation between forced migration, exclusion, and social class. This focus was motivated by the observation that previous research on forced migration often hides social class behind other terms, e.g. when refugees are described as “vulnerable”, “poor”, or as “better off”. Only few studies recognised that a forced migrant remains a ‘classed’ person (Van Hear 2004, 2014; McSpadden 1999: 251) and observed that a middle- or upper-class background can ease the start in a host country but also lead to a sense of frustration and “misrecognition” (Kleist 2010: 198) and that a high social status is not always transferrable to the host country (Jansen 2008: 182). The leading question was how a focus on class contributes to the study of forced migration. The contributions span from conceptual work on the overarching topic to specific regional and temporal foci.

Class and Aspirations

Even though the papers in session one of the workshop discussed very different settings where refugees moved to, there were many commonalities regarding their perceived and aspired class status. One main topic running through the session was the way forced migrants tried to avoid the label of ‘refugee’ in order to keep a higher social status, since this label was negatively connoted in their eyes. Magdalena Suerbaum and Tabea Scharrer brought together anthropological examples of Syrians in Egypt and Somalians in Kenya, showing how forced migrants link economic independence and a certain work ethic to higher social status. This influences their mobility aspirations, resulting in a reluctance to move to Europe where they would be dependent on the welfare system. Aysen Üstübici’s research with Syrians in Turkey similarly underlined that middle-class refugees did not intend to move to Europe and ‘start from scratch’, whereas lower class refugees, who remained marginalised in Turkey, considered either migrating to Europe or returning to Syria. Therefore, class positions heavily intersect with settlement/integration perspectives in the refugee-receiving country. Susanne Bygnes’ presentation about young Syrian refugees in Norway echoed the main thread of the session, that being categorised as refugee entailed a stigma that forced migrants had to cope with in their narratives and which they tried to overcome through work ethic. She additionally showed how refugees performed ‘normalness’ by adopting dominant Norwegian middle class values in for instance gender relations or healthy living, thereby using them as prestige symbols. Miriam Schader’s discussion urged a clearer conceptualisation of class, one that goes beyond personal narratives, in order to show the effects of socio-economic stratification on the possibilities to deal with exclusion and stigmatising categorisations.

Class and Livelihoods

The second session of the workshop investigated the impact of social class background on the ways in which refugees navigate through different livelihood options while facing considerable uncertainties. The first presentation by Elke Grawert, based on field research on Afghans in Afghanistan, Iran and Pakistan (2015-17) in protracted displacement, showed that upper middle

class refugees are more likely to evade social exclusion that stem from state policies as well as perceived group membership. Translocal networks, a higher level of education and competences enabled middle class refugees with more livelihood opportunities and allowed them to alleviate effects of restrictive refugee policies. Similarly, the second presentation by Sena Duygu Topcu, very much in line with Üstübcici's findings mentioned above, underlined how middle class Syrian refugees in Istanbul have managed to establish a life for themselves and made considerable emotional and financial investment in Turkey to the extent that they were unwilling to return and 'start from scratch'. Topcu also pointed out that even though refugees face considerable uncertainty, a class-based analysis allows for detecting similarity of concerns across citizens and non-citizens alike. Jennifer Hough's presentation differed from the previous two by showing how South Korean resettlement support to North Koreans migrants construes them all as in need of welfare, in complete disregard of their class diversity. Such general support does not only create hostility among South Koreans towards the newcomers and increases discrimination but it is also challenged by North Koreans who wish to emphasise their endeavours to settle down. In his discussion, Paolo Gaibazzi invited the speakers and participants to think through whether it makes sense to understand class as a variable or more as systemic structural force. If the former, he argued one could possibly use more precise terms and if the latter, he raised the question whether the idea of a self-reproducing, relatively stable class-based society structure is a useful analytical tool for refugee studies.

Class and Mobility

Nicholas van Hear discussed in his keynote the question in how far the notion of 'class' helps to understand forced migration by bringing together theoretical and empirical work about class and mobility. While for a long time class was eclipsed from migration studies (and beyond), socio-economic differences have become part of the research agenda in the last decade in three areas: when asking about the capacity of people to move or to stay put, and when looking at the outcome of migration in communities of origin (esp. through remittances) as well as in the destination settings. What has been missing so far in this research, is the usage of class as a collective notion as it has been studied mostly on an individual level. Therefore, one could ask if other terms, such as inequality, status or wealth could be used instead of class. Concerning migration, the introduction of the term 'mobility' has helped to normalise the practice of movement (of people, things, and ideas), yet it has also become clear that not everybody is able or willing to be mobile. Socio-economic differences play an important role for the possibilities and choices of mobility. As a possible pathway for research, Nicholas van Hear introduced (based on Hirshman) three terms: moving power, mobilising power (in the political sense) and staying power. While all three can be discussed for an individual level, he argues that they become stronger when being a collective matter instead of remaining an individual one.

Class and Political Engagement

The third session of the workshop began with a presentation by Amany Selim about her fieldwork among Syrians in Oslo and Berlin. She investigated the cultural, symbolic and legal capital of Syrian activists and their (political) self-identification, concluding that those Syrians who were engaged in activism often had previous political expertise and were usually in a stable situation, holding a legal status and having various resources on which they can rely. Helia

Lopez Zarzosa focused in her presentation on the classed experiences of Chilean refugees during their flight, exile and return migration. She challenged the idea that migrants would always be able to transfer resources they had acquired before they migrated to a new local setting. Seda Özdemir presented a historical, class-based analysis of the compulsory population exchange of Greek and Turkish population in the city of Ayvalik. She described how immigrants, who possessed at least one form of middle-class capital (such as higher education), developed strategies to gain notable positions of higher economic and social status. Many of them participated in voluntary organisations in order to increase their political influence in the new settlement and to define a sense of class. Discussant Boris Nieswand argued, that the resources that mattered in the specific cases were different, showing that class does not mean the same everywhere but is context dependent. He emphasised that some trans-contextual resources were used, such as money, that could be utilised in various localities, while other resources (such as social status) were embedded in specific settings. This leads to a focus on border regimes, their permeability and their power to define which resources are convertible. All three papers dealt with class as a personal issue, fitting into neoliberal thinking, while the notion of class struggle in the Marxian sense was absent. Another question raised addressed overlaps between class and established-outsider configurations (Elias) and how some groups earn normative power over others.

Class, Encampment and Refugee Policies

The fourth session of the workshop focused on the connections between class and migration policies. Two presentations dealt with Tanzania, a country with one of the strictest refugee laws in the world. Clayton Boeyink and Jean-Benoit Falisse presented their research in one of the refugee camps in the west of the country. They concluded that within the camp setting pre-flight socio-economic differences did not matter much, instead a new class structure emerged there based mainly on the social capital to get lowly paid jobs provided by NGOs. In contrast, Markus Rudolph argued that in the urban setting among clandestine refugees there is rather a reproduction of class taking place. Upward social mobility only rarely takes place and is often linked to skills needed (for instance in the case of French language teachers) and social networks, either through family or through networks created while migrating (for instance through aid organisations). Markus Engler shifted in his presentation the attention towards Germany and talked about refugee admission policies and the (at times unintended) vital role of class. He argued that even though resettlement is often discussed as a means for especially vulnerable refugees, often rather wealthy and well-educated refugees profit from these programs. The same is true for family reunification policies, which again marginalise poorer refugees. In the discussion chaired by Luc Leboeuf the question was raised in how far research should focus more on ‘integrationism’, the logics and results of integration policies. Furthermore, beside class, the influence of luck and coincidence also needs to be taken into account when discussing social mobility in the setting of forced migration.

Concluding Discussion

In the final session several themes were discussed in terms of open questions:

Definition of class: How do we define class in our research? A number of us relies on a Bourdieusian perspective of possession of different types of capital. We have also used a

definition that relies on having access to resources and powers (keynote). However, in most papers, what seems to be lacking is the collective dimension of class: is there anything more than an individual variable? Very few papers talk about class struggle or class consciousness – class for itself.

Context and convertibility: Is class position context-dependent or is it transferrable? This was a major question that most papers engaged with. Particularly the transferability of different types of capital from one national to another national or else transnational context as well as convertibility between different types of capital was prominent in the discussions.

Temporality: How does class change not only across space but also across time? Relatedly, as any other social phenomenon class is not always relevant. Therefore, an important question remains to see when it is.

Interactions: The four panels discussed the interactions of class with mobility/migration aspirations, with inclusion/exclusion process, with political engagement and mobilisation and with state policies and established that these are best perceived ambiguous.

References

Jansen, S. (2008) ‘Misplaced Masculinities: Status loss and the location of gendered subjectivities amongst ‘non-transnational’ Bosnian refugees’, *Anthropological Theory*, 8, 181-200.

Kleist, N. (2010) ‘Negotiating Respectable Masculinity: Gender and Recognition in the Somali Diaspora’, *African Diaspora*, vol. 3, 185-206.

McSpadden, L. A. (1999) ‘Negotiating Masculinity in the Reconstruction of Social Place: Eritrean and Ethiopian Refugees in the United States and Sweden’, in Indra. D. (ed.) *Engendering Forced Migration: Theory and Practice*. New York/Oxford: Berghahn Books, 242-261.

Van Hear, N. (2004) ‘I went as far as my money would take me’: conflict, forced migration and class’, *Centre on Migration, Policy and Society Working Paper No. 6*. Oxford: Compass.

Van Hear, N. (2014) ‘Reconsidering migration and class’, *International Migration Review*, 48 (1), 100-121.