

ASA-Kaleidoskop

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Summary of the workshop “Sending and receiving. Perspectives on migration”

by Sarah Böger

Entering the seminar room the participants of this workshop have to wait. The seminar chairpersons Clementine Burnley and Ludger Eltrop are sitting behind two tables that hinder the participants to enter the room and ask them to register first: Eye color, race, gender, home address and prove of our willingness to return home afterwards. Some people start arguing and complaining, beginning to play a role in this situation that tries to reflect visa procedures in many countries. The participants are asked: “What are you bringing to this country? We already have enough knowledge, but money would help you enter without problems.” The first person that knows how to say “welcome” in Amharic can enter – but only if this person promises not to fall in love inside. The roles change and those who enter become the visa officials controlling the “visa applicant”.

How did this situation make us feel? For some people the situation reflects their own experiences, for others feelings such as helplessness, unease, insecurity, being treated unfriendly and unfair or feeling rejected and unwanted are not connected to visa procedures. On the other hand, some admit to feel a sort of pleasure being in the position of power and control as an official. When comparing our role-play to real situations it becomes evident, that most people with passports from African countries have experienced discriminatory visa procedures while people with Western European passports have rarely made similar experiences. While the first were automatically considered to come to stay, Europeans were seldom hindered in entering countries of the Global South - regardless of their willingness to stay.

We note that to have a German passport is a privilege. **But when did the idea of passports arise?** While there have been some examples during the Middle Ages, it was only after the French Revolution and with the invention of nation states that passports and travel control gained importance. Controlling the movement of people can be seen as part of mechanisms of territorial control. Yet, migration itself is as old as humankind since people had always moved in response to changes in the environment and various circumstances.

Who are we talking about when we talk about migration? We talk about migrants, although nobody of us considers themselves a migrant. Quite some of us have lived, worked or studied in different countries. If we are not the migrants, who are they then? Referring to BBC, we look at official definitions. While the Oxford English Dictionary defines a migrant as the “one who moves, either temporarily or permanently, from one place, area, or country of residence to another”, an UN Document proposes that “The term 'migrant'... should be understood as covering all cases where the decision to migrate is taken freely by the individual concerned, for reasons of 'personal convenience'”

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and without intervention of an external compelling factor.” In these definitions the term migrant implies voluntary movement. Indeed, most of us could identify with this description; yet at the same time we don't identify with the term “migrant”. We perceive its negative connotations and the fact that it is implicated in the realms of need, flight, poverty, as well as of people looking for a better life.

What is the difference between expats and migrants? While expats (ex-patriate from the Latin terms ex "out of" and patria "country, fatherland") are seen as professionals that are still connected to their home country and often bringing expertise to the new country, migrants are not seen as carriers of knowledge and are often rather considered as simply moving from poor to richer countries.

„Migrant“ and „expat“ are categories that involve images which are ascribed and attributed to certain persons. These categories tend to give value to people which can be positive or negative. „Expat“ goes with benefits – but have we ever heard of expats coming from Ghana and working in Germany? In this context the question arises: Can someone, in general, ever stop being a “migrant” in the receiving society?

The group then discusses two fictive statements: **“Migration is or will be a regular phenomenon in our global world” versus “Everyone wants to stay at home with family and friends.”** We discuss the critical role of media images as co-productive to the urge to move to richer countries even if these images are often biased and create false hopes. **But now, is migration a good or a bad thing?** Some participants see it as bad for “us” as the receiving society and as “good” for those who migrate. Others state that there are “too many” migrants. But these views are also contested by other participants who point out the declining work force in Germany, but also by underlining that fear of difference should not influence our perspectives on migrants as equal human beings with equal rights. Only if we do not talk about the migrant – whether voluntarily or forced - as the 'Other', we can also start to talk about our own motivations and, hence, about a desire to move or to travel or to migrate. We conclude that everyone should have the choice, whether or not to move or to stay – a choice framed by the term [“freedom of movement”](#). And we decide to try to rather focus on our own personal migration histories in our statements, which is easier said than done.

Migration has changed historically over the centuries. While there is currently a lot of movement out of, into and inside Asia and Africa, the previous centuries were marked by Europeans moving to Australia, South and North America. So again, migration has a long history with changing patterns and directions. Yet, **can we think about a society which nobody wants to leave?** We invent places like “Utopia”, “Basis”, „Home“ and „The island surrounded by hungry sharks“ where everyone would want to stay. Utopia encompasses the whole globe so there is no inside or outside of the society. In these societies, everyone is satisfied with their basic needs, freedom, justice, solidarity, the upholding of human rights and being surrounded by friends, love and family. Interestingly in the

discussion basic needs are rarely mentioned by participants from richer countries, while freedom, democracy and human rights are seen as less important for those from poorer countries in the group.

“What is happening in the societies where a lot of people are leaving?” We think about demographic change when young people move away, leaving the old ones behind; about “brain drain” as a loss of qualified people. We also discuss “brain gain” when people come back to their home societies bringing back knowledge as well as the economic role of remittances sent by migrants back to their homes. Another point which we tackle is the fact that in the most cases migration is not directed towards Europe or North America, but rather occurs within a continent or a country. 57.3 million people are displaced from their homes worldwide according to the UN High Commissioner for Refugees. By contrast, 869 thousand people are reported to have entered Europe since February 2015. Migration from rural to urban areas is as common as e.g. the movement from one African country to another one, for which we can give the more recent examples of South Africa, Angola or Namibia as attractive receiving societies. According to one participant, in these cases societies face similar problems with integration and migration as Western societies. In other cases, like in China as a sending society, migration is a remedy to overpopulation and underemployment.

In the end, we come to a crucial perspective on forced **migration as a symptom of a complete failure of economies and of equal distribution**. Forced migration cannot be considered out of the context of economics. Within the current global economical system, local markets in poorer regions are destroyed by economically stronger actors. This highly affects local livelihoods and the lack of sources of income often lead to migration. This is why we base our recommendations on political and economical conditions.

We summarise our workshop by saying that economies and policies must change in order to reduce forced migration while especially recognizing and empowering marginalized people. We speak about European agricultural policies whose trade terms destroy local markets in Africa through agricultural subsidies inside Europe. These terms of trade should be changed while taking into account all affected groups and thereby strengthening local production and striving for a more equal distribution of resources. Also, the visa procedures should be re-examined and changed accordingly as their processing, as seen today, is highly discriminatory. Last but not least, climate protection, employment and education were identified as essential steps towards the scaling down of forced migration.

Anyways, migration is a huge and very complex topic with different layers and no easy questions, answers or solutions – as the discussions in this workshop exemplified perfectly.

Literature:

Theodor Michael: Deutsch sein und schwarz dazu