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## **The Shadows of Canadian Immigration Policy – A Comment on the Metropolis Conference 2012**

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### **Envisioning Future Immigration Policies in Toronto**

Why has it become important to talk about the future of immigration and settlement in Canada? One reason can be found in the major changes happening in this policy sector for some years, most notably since the Tory government of Prime Minister Stephen Harper came to power in 2006. These changes, which some think to be paradigmatic, have lead to developments similar to what can be observed in other world regions that have been affected by growing globalization and neoliberal politics. This makes the Canadian case also interesting for a variety of scholars who are interested in a comparative and historical perspective (e.g. Bauder, 2011; Triadafilopoulos, 2012).

It is not surprising that the 14<sup>th</sup> Metropolis Conference (February 29 to March 3 2012) also took stock of these developments, under the title “Future Immigration Policies: Challenges and Opportunities for Canada.” Starting out 15 years ago, the national Metropolis Project now has five centers across Canada and has become the major platform for research on immigration and settlement. As the final funding period for the Metropolis Project is coming to a close, the Conference brought together in Toronto more than a thousand researchers, community workers, policy makers, and NGO representatives from Canada and beyond. Its unique international, intersectorial and interdisciplinary composition turned the Metropolis Conference into something special – a large platform and a place to discuss research findings and their policy implications.

Since it is impossible to summarize the whole Conference, the following contribution offers a selective commentary on some of its aspects from a perspective interested in transnationalism in social work. I will conclude with a short outlook on future aspects for research and practice.

### **The Neoliberal Winds of Change and the Negative Impact of Growing Insecurity**

One of the threads of the Metropolis Conference 2012, and the focus of the first plenary session, was the link between immigration, innovation, and entrepreneurship. This issue derived its importance from the observable demographic changes and growing global economic competitiveness. As Geoffrey Cameron, co-author of the book “Exceptional People: How Migration Shaped Our World and Will Define Our Future” (Goldin/Cameron/Balarajan, 2011), said in his statement, the future will bring labor scarcity in many countries. Hence, according to Cameron and others, the competition between nation states for skilled labor will increase even more as large emerging economies are joining the global hunt.

Nevertheless, the policy implications that can be deduced from such an outlook are debatable. One strong feature that is characteristical not only for Canada is the tendency to couple the ideas of innovation and newcomers in a specific neoliberal manner. This became clear in the address by Jason Kenney, Minister of Citizenship, Immigration, and Multiculturalism of the Canadian Federal Government. His Conservative Party believes that future immigration policy should be guided primarily by allegedly predictable economic needs. According to Kennedy, the nation needs different and better skilled immigrants to safeguard its competitiveness on the global market. This translates into the necessity to attract younger professionals with higher language proficiency and adaptable skills, so that their labor market performance is also better and in sync with the ever changing economy. As we have heard from many other neoliberal disciples around the globe, Minister Kenney presented the proposed radical change in today's immigration policy as one without alternative. Thus, the Minister outlined a faster and more flexible system of immigration as the one and only choice. This strong missionary zeal might be one of the reasons why Kenney left after his speech without any possibility for the plenary to get into discussion with him, but not without being accompanied by a few jeers.

Nevertheless, from a transnational perspective it becomes clear that even when favoring such an orientation, related questions of social and economic integration of these newcomers can be answered differently according to the conceptual understandings one prefers. It makes a big difference whether migration is conceived as a singular one way movement from A to B or instead as a process that can include a number of successive migratory stages, can have continuous transnational impacts, and that relates "immigrants" simultaneously to different nation states, localities and communities (Basch/Glick Schiller/Blanc, 1994; Vertovec, 2009). One such difference occurs when adequate political solutions have to be found with regard to the challenges of integration and social justice. Moreover, what Kenney's official talk on immigration did not mention was the fact that it is quite the same policy that has led to an increase, unprecedented in Canadian history, of entrants with temporary visas. And, equally significant, the selection streams and pathways towards full citizenship have been multiplied and diversified, leading to a number of side door policies with questionable governance implications. As such, the impacts of an immigration policy that is more and more employer-driven and serves short time goals were one of the major themes throughout the plenary sessions, policy addresses, and workshops. As Olivia Chow, Member of Parliament and representative of the opposition National Democratic Party stated in her reaction to the Minister, if we just focus on labor skills and employers' demands, we will see more and more migrants and their families stuck in poverty. According to Rupaleem Bhuyan and many other researchers, the dramatic shifts in Canadian policy have led to new and longer episodes of precarious status (Bhuyan, 2012). As presented in the workshop "Migrant Women Negotiating Status and Social Services in Canada," 1 in 34 people living in Canada matched the category of precarious status in the year 2009. This amounts to almost one million temporary residents throughout the country.

The possible transnational impacts of such a development became very clear to me as a short term visitor from Germany as I participated the same night in a solidarity event at the Lula Lounge in Toronto. "A Night to Remember" seemed to me almost as the flip side of Metropolis, though many familiar faces showed up. This evening provided a quick response from the Toronto community to the tragic death of eleven temporary migrant workers, nine of them from Peru, in a car accident in the Greater Toronto Area just a few days before. Through a form of direct transnational practice, a large group of organizations raised funds

for the migrant workers' families in Peru, thus demonstrating border-crossing solidarity and concern. The vulnerable and precarious situation of such "temporary entrants" has been the focus of some Canadian researchers for quite a while. Nonetheless, it is only recently that the wider public has become aware of the working and living circumstances in Canada and beyond of this large group, and of their families who are living mostly outside the country. As one representative from the social movement organization "Justicia for Migrant Workers" (<http://www.justicia4migrantworkers.org>) said to me with regard to the great number of news stories on the case, it was sad that it took the death of eleven people to get the attention that could not be attained throughout decades of hard and dedicated advocacy work.

### **The Growing Precariousness in Complex Migratory Trajectories – Giving Power to Transition Agents**

Taking on a critical perspective based on a deep insight into people's experiences in Canadian society, some of the workshops during the Metropolis Conference 2012 put the precarious status of these migrant workers on the agenda. Thus it was argued that in reality the so called "low-skilled labor" is just low-paid labor in most cases. Many of these jobs in Canada feature characteristics that can be defined as human trafficking and related conditions of exploitation, as presented by Shelley Gilbert in the workshop "Experiences of Illegality in Canada." As discussed by Eugénie Depatie-Pelletier and colleagues in the workshop on "Temporary Migrant Workers," all of this is pushed by an employer-tied work authorization regime that yields de facto to unfree labor (Depatie-Pelletier/Rahi, 2011). Due to such immigration policies at the federal and state levels, a growing number of workers and students entering Canada with time-limited permissions are more dependent on recruiters in their home countries, informal brokers such as money lenders or informal remittance services, local employers, educational institutions, lawyers, or other professional facilitators (Nakache, 2012).

Thus, many conference contributions such as the one by Jenna Hennebry (2012) showed how currently these migrants have to rely on diverse transition agents or intermediaries, some of them with dubious intentions, in their efforts to navigate and negotiate ever more complex pathways in their search for a decent life and a more stable residence status. The presenters also showed how employer driven policy, with its short term goals, has transnational effects on the labor market of sending countries. For example, previous work experience in the fast food industry in the sending countries has become a precondition for recruitment as a temporary worker in Canada. Hence, Filipinos with a relatively high level of formal education are looking for low-paid jobs in their home country, as Geraldina Polanco and Sarah Zell discussed in the workshop "What Happens When Temporary Becomes Permanent?" One could conclude that downward occupational mobility does not start in the receiving country, but the opposite seems to be true: Canadian labour market and immigration policy is reaching out far beyond state borders with negative effects for the sending countries long before a physical movement towards the receiving country takes place. Once arrived in Canada, it is likely that this "human capital" ends up in jobs that offer just enough income to survive in conditions that do not provide any viable routes to other employment sectors. The case of Mexicans in Canada contracted

under current temporary worker programs provided an even more absurd picture. As language becomes more and more a precondition for successful selection, it is oftentimes those who work in an English speaking context before entering Canada that make it through. Thus, for some workers, their transnational experience as “unauthorized migrants” in the US de facto becomes a structural precondition for their selection for low paid jobs within the diversified Canadian temporary migration streams for so called “low skilled” labor.

### **The Permanency of Temporariness and the Emergence of “Probationary Immigrants”**

Despite many differences among the talks and workshops at the Metropolis Conference 2012, a widely shared agreement emerged about the characteristics and impact of the current Canadian immigration policy. Firstly, Canada is moving towards a two-step immigration model which has a strong impact especially on social citizenship (Goldring/Berinstein/Bernhard, 2009). And secondly, as some voices stated, there is nothing more permanent than the temporary, which is true both for Canada and most other countries throughout the world. Traditionally, this classic country of immigration closely connected immigration to citizenship. Nowadays temporariness has become a conditional and oftentimes precarious stage. Nevertheless, whether people can successfully move from their status as “probationary immigrants” towards permanent residency or full citizenship through some federal or provincial programs, or whether they end up in even more vulnerable situations after their limited work permit expires (e.g. if they “choose” to go underground) seems to be a contingent matter. Generally, such transitions become even more individualized and require strong agency on the part of the immigrants themselves. And the complex structural conditionings for such multiple turning points and status passages play an even stronger role in the navigations of a person’s migratory course.

From a social work perspective this points towards the need to offer and establish various forms of coaching, counseling, social support arrangements, and political practice around language proficiency, health related issues, strong personal networks, information campaigns about rights, as well as legal defense for individual cases, both on the local and translocal level. This is especially relevant for those migrants at the bottom of society whose practices show the characteristics of migrant transnationalism (Vertovec, 2004). It is well known that, as they oftentimes live at the margins of society, they are in need of adequate social services and other forms of social help (Furman/Negi/Salvador, 2011: 4) as well as of supportive social policies (Lightman, 2012). There is also good news: during the conference days I got the impression that many grassroots organizations, advocacy groups, social movements, and unions in Toronto and beyond have already started to establish such a political practice that entails transnational dimensions, too. And some public and private institutions question their own exclusionary attitudes.

In sharp contrast to these examples, however, many contributions at the Metropolis Conference emphasized that precarious status or “non-status” groups are not eligible for most social services, especially when compared to the attention that high-end newcomers receive through services from the private and the public “immigration and settlement industry.” Summing up, it is safe to say that perspectives using the self-perceptions, actions,

and transnational experiences of the migrants, their siblings, and communities as the starting point for research, policy, and practice did not form the centerpiece of this conference. Despite the multifaceted conference program, the rather classical account towards migration that has been criticized elsewhere for “methodological nationalism” was predominant (Amelina et al., 2012; Anderson/Sharma/Wright, 2009; Wimmer/Glick Schiller, 2002). This impression from the conference reinforces the assertion that Canada has taken up transnational perspectives at a late stage when measured against developments in migration studies in the US or Europe (Goldring/Krishnamurti, 2007: 2).

### **Lessons from Metropolis 2012: Overcoming the Traditional Focus on Immigration and Settlement**

What can we learn from the Metropolis Conference 2012 as researchers that are interested in transnational social issues? On the one hand, it might be necessary to spur on a critical debate in research, policy, and practice on the purpose and range of the “traditional” settlement services in Canada and to discuss their objectives according to their own mission statements, objectives, and ethics. What is the role of settlement services in enhancing migrants’ agency (Königeter/Smith, in press)? What do they really generate? Do they fit the needs of a democratic society? And how might social services be redesigned in order to meet the dynamics of migration, and the relatedness of migrants to different localities? On the other hand, and related to this, it might be fruitful to open up the conventional but limited concept of “immigration and settlement,” by taking on a transnational and transformative political perspective. First, in a practical sense this might provide opposition to the ongoing conservatism of the whole sector. Second, both for researchers and frontline workers it could be very helpful to review how different boundaries get created and enacted within the organizational procedures in the everyday work of social services. By doing so we could become aware of the multiple boundaries and borders that are stabilized through the oblivious application of categories, thus contributing to bringing about the difficulties in people’s lives as mentioned above (Raithelhuber, in press).

There are also huge obstacles towards a more just and better future of immigration in Canada. Currently, a political and economic climate predominates in which community-based organizations and the social sector in general are confronted by harsh cuts in public funding. Unemployment has become a major threat for large parts of the population. And it is obvious that more and more vulnerable people – both recent immigrants and long-term residents – lose access to services and professional support. Under such conditions it will not be easy to convince the public that the needs of people labeled as temporary foreign workers, who are “provided” with jobs, should be attended. All of this is due to the financial cuts in and the managerial restructuring of the publicly funded social sector at the same time that grassroots organizations state a growing demand for social help.

To close with a brief personal reflection on the Metropolis Conference 2012, I can state that, as researchers who are interested in studying transnationalism in social work, we should take the indicated difficulties as an encouragement. We can build on existing findings and reflections to reinforce our own efforts towards an even stronger engagement in relevant empirical research and conceptual discussions. Thus, the framework of “transnational social support” (Chambon/Schröer/Schweppé, 2012) provides a good basis

for our efforts to go beyond the narrow individual perspective and the micro level and keep on moving towards the next step. We have to push beyond this level to the next dimension and towards a more political perspective, too. Such an outlook towards what has been coined “transnational social policy” (Lightman, 2012), a perspective on political issues that affect transnational migrants and the processes of transnational migration, is already on the horizon.

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