

Chasing the gold at the end of the rainbow

Migrants and their experiences with inclusion and exclusion

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Economic migrants move across borders in search for a better life, economic prosperity. They come chasing the elusive pot of gold at the end of the rainbow. Those that are fortunate enough to arrive to their new country and find work are faced with a multitude of societal and institutional barriers to inclusion. Political discourses and attitudes towards migrants exist within a very strong binary of insider/outsider. This paper will explore how this binary is manifested in various contexts. I will analyse the experience of Mozambican refugees from field observations undertaken in Mpumalanga and also look to a broader context of the migration discourse in South Africa. I will compare this case study with the experiences of Polish migrants in the United Kingdom. Through this comparison I aim to highlight the similarities of the barriers migrants face in what appears two markedly different political paradigms. External factors and events often shape the way in which citizens as well as governments view migrants and their expectation of what roles migrants should play in society. I will analyse the impact the global financial crisis has had on people's perception of migrants, in doing so I will take example from trade union protests that occurred last year across the United Kingdom and the way in which it was reported in the British media. Finally I will turn briefly to the European Union's lack of direction on a common migration policy.

Collectives constitute themselves as a polity by closing themselves off as an inside against an outside. There are academics who view the concept of the nation-state as a Western illusion (Zapata-Barrero, 2009) it is an imagined community that has turned out to be a fictitious construct that marginalizes those who are different, some go as far to say the European Union itself is an imagined community for those who do not belong (Nyamnjoh, 2006: 5). Immigration is an area of policy that is deeply politicised, often used by politicians to engender a climate of fear and unite their constituents against the unknown intruder who comes to threaten their standard of living.

South Africa provides an interesting case study in analysing the experience of migrants through this inclusion/exclusion binary. Often discussions and commentaries on migration in South Africa lead to a discussion of xenophobia. South Africa has a considerable pull for migrants in Africa. Its peace and prosperity in comparison to many other countries in the region plagued by economic hardship, political unrest and conflict, make it a clearly desirable

destination for those looking for employment and to ameliorate their economic status (Landau et al, 2005: 2).

Nyamnjoh (2006: 3) notes that in Africa “there is a growing preoccupation with belonging, bringing with it the question of previous assumptions about nationality and citizenship. The growing importance of identity politics and more exclusionary ideas of citizenship is matched by the urge to detect difference and to distinguish between ‘locals’ ‘nationals’ ‘citizens’ ‘insiders’ on the one hand and foreigners immigrants strangers or outsiders on the other. Under apartheid South Africans were divided, and nationality, identity, and citizenship were used as tools to divide black South Africans not only from the white population but from their land and the rights associated. Hence it is little wonder that South Africans today are preoccupied with asserting their identity and belonging under a new democratic system. While apartheid may have ended almost two decades ago many South Africans are becoming frustrated with the fact while they have citizenship and rights safeguarded under the constitution they are yet to see the material benefits of the advent of democracy in a post-apartheid South Africa (Nyamnjoh 2006:3). These frustrations compound and, often in these situations, people look for someone to blame and the migrant presents an easy target.

In May 2002 a popular South African pop singer released a song titled ‘AmaNdiya,’ the song was banned from public broadcast as it was deemed to constitute hate speech (IOL 2002). The song accuses the Indian population in South Africa of enriching themselves at the detriment of blacks and that the community must display greater patriotism and not straddle the two countries (Nyamnjoh 2006: 15). This song is a clear display of xenophobic sentiments towards a migrant community, it also highlights that any economic gains made by a migrant is perceived to be at the cost of the potential “local,” this reinforces the argument presented in this paper that migrants are seen as threats to the livelihood of those who appear to belong within the borders.

Landau et al (2005:2) cite that there is strong evidence that migrants, or non-nationals, living in South Africa face discrimination not only from citizens but also government officials and the police. They maintain that the reasons for this discrimination are varied but some are due to fear of economic competition, a belief that foreigners are inherently criminal and they add stress to public resources. As a result migrants’ ability to access employment, accommodation and health care become much more difficult. (Landau et al 2005:2)

In February 2009 I took part in a field study based primarily in Mpumalanga run by Monash University Australia. Mpumalanga is an area that borders Swaziland, and Mozambique. We were based in Buffelspruit which very close to the Mozambican border on the N4 National highway. It is a farming area and sugarcane farming is one of the main crop types as the Transvaal Sugar Board (TSB) has one of its sugar mills in the province. As part of the field study we visited various farming collectives on sugarcane plantations. The farmers told us that they frequently engage seasonal workers to harvest the sugar cane, the work is physically demanding and the cane plantations are dense and often safe havens for snakes. Mozambicans are often hired to harvest the crops, some of them have crossed over illegally and some legitimately, they provide cheap labour regardless of their legal status. Some farmers said they preferred to hire the Mozambicans as they were cheaper labour. (Field observations, 2009) Thus to a large extent this type of work in this area is associated with the Mozambican migrants, this dirty and dangerous job has become racialised, a job acceptable for an “outsider.” McDonald et al (2000: 814) note that from the late nineteenth century contract workers from countries such as Mozambique have been recruited to work in South Africa as mining and agricultural labourers.

It is also interesting to note that around the town of Buffelspruit the Mozambican migrants live in slums separate to the rest of the population in the immediate surroundings of the town. This raises questions as to whether this group are seen as only belonging seasonally, when the sugarcane needs harvesting, and thus their presence outside this season is not welcomed. This cannot be answered definitively however this doubt remains in light of the context within with xenophobia evident in South Africa. This is the experience of a very small area in a particular industry and thus one cannot draw any general conclusions and claim that this is the perception of all South Africans for all migrant groups it is yet another example of these dynamics of inclusion and exclusion at play.

McDonald et al (2000) conducted 2,300 interviews in Lesotho (629 interviews), Mozambique (661 interviews) and Zimbabwe (947 interviews) to gauge people’s experience’s with and attitudes towards migration to South Africa. The survey results suggested that migration was highly circular, many people interviewed migrated back to their country of origin. When asked to compare their home countries with South Africa, “the majority of those interviewed identified their home countries as a better place to raise a family, with access to basic resources

like land, water, and housing seen to be much better at home.”(McDonald et al 2000: 826) These sentiments highlight the difficulties these migrant groups face in South Africa, xenophobic attitudes no doubt play a part in these groups feeling as though they cannot make a life, in terms of settling down and access to resources, in South Africa.

The following case study looks at the experiences of Polish migrants in the United Kingdom. The enlargement of the EU in 2004¹ and in 2007² signalled a transformation of the European Union from a group of 15 ‘Western European’ states. Some commentators viewed the enlargement, particularly the of the 2004 group, as a ‘return’ of these eight Central Eastern European (CEE) to their rightful place in Europe (Kengerlinsky 2004). The accession process has occurred in a number of phases, the phase which is of most relevance to this paper is the phase-in in relation to the free movement of persons. The existing EU Member States are entitled to derogate from the Schengen *acquis* on the free movement of workers in respect to both groups of accession states for a period of seven years (Currie 2008: 2). The existence of these transnational restrictions on new EU member states limits the freedom of movement, a fundamental right accorded to EU citizens, is restricted for citizens of new accession states.

The experience of migrants within labour migrants of EU member states differs depending on their status, the status of a migrant may be ordered in a pyramid. The top of the pyramid is clearly EU member state nationals who enjoy the full rights of EU citizenship. On the lower rungs we have third party nationals with limited privileges, within the category it should be noted there is a difference between the experience of and American or Australian migrant than to that of an African migrant (Currie 2008: 69). There has been a general acceptance that third-country nationals have been undertaking the ‘degrading, dangerous, and dirty’ work in Member States that EU nationals are no longer prepared to do (Shennan 2005; Grice and Brown 2006). Migrants from EU accession states occupy a unique position in this pyramid as they neither enjoy the full rights of EU member states nor are they in the same category as third party nationals.

¹ 2004 accessions: Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Slovenia and Slovakia, Malta, Cyprus. (EU8)

² 2007 accession: Romania and Bulgaria (EU2)

Prior to enlargement on the granting of labour market, access for EU8 migrants focused very much on “what they can do for us.” (Currie 2008: 68). From the outset the suggestion was that migrants from the EU8 would “fill in the gaps” in the labour market and as a consequence their rights to access employment have been shaped by this proposition. (Currie 2008: 68). Thus migrants are expected to conform and integrate in a certain manner and working in certain sectors, they must fill these proverbial gaps and society and they must not aspire to anything different, the role they play in their new host society has been predetermined-or at least this is the message one gets from such political comments.

These public perceptions of the roles migrants must fill in the labour market can result in migrants working in jobs that do not match their skills and level of education. Academic Samantha Currie (2008) undertook research on the experience of Polish migrants who had moved to England. Of the 44 Polish migrants she had interviewed 28 had graduated from university in Poland and were overqualified for the jobs they occupied in the UK. A majority of the participants in the research admitted to their feelings of disappointment with the social ranking in their new country. As one participant who was a teacher in Poland said:

“I am working as an office assistant which is a real downfall for me from what I was doing before...it’s a bit of a shock because it’s just like you cross a couple of borders and then your status falls like a lead balloon” (Currie 2008: 72)

As mentioned economic migrants move to host countries in search of improved economic conditions and better standards of living. However these Polish migrants acknowledged that if they returned to Poland to a job for which they were qualified they would still earn more as a waitress in London. Then the trade off for these migrants seems to be their social status and their ability to undertake paid employment which adequately reflects their skills for a job that is menial but is economically more beneficial. Essentially the price for economic gain is a loss of professional development.

These new immigrants are facing social and institutional discrimination that degrades their position in society. This makes it very difficult to challenge racial assumptions associated with their status as an outsider- they face barriers to their ability to engage meaningfully with their

new society. Regardless of education and experience, immigrants are treated as a source of cheap labour and are relegated to low paid menial jobs. The pot of gold imagined at the end of the rainbow seems more and more like a fantasy the closer we look at migrants experiences.

From these two case studies one can draw significant parallels. Namely, migrants are limited in their choice of employment as both countries have expectations on the roles migrants must fulfil. In South Africa Mozambicans are expected to work in mining or agriculture, and in the UK Polish migrants can get jobs in hospitality or menial office jobs however they should not aspire to something higher which may match their qualifications. These migrant groups inclusion into these societies appears conditional upon them fulfilling a particular function. Can one meaningfully argue that this is actual inclusion when these migrant groups struggle to break out of these conditions to their participation in society? Migrants may come seeking work however meaningful participation as a member of their new society should not be an added bonus but an integral part to the migration transition.

The Global Financial Crisis has had an impact whether directly or indirectly on many areas of policy. The direct impact the financial crisis has had on the experience of migrants may be too broad to assess in its entirety. To narrow this analysis down one can look to one of the more obvious manifestations of the financial crisis-unemployment rates. The unemployment rate is an important indicator with both social and economic dimensions.

In March 2008 unemployment rate in the European Union was 6.7% unemployment. In May 2009 that figure rose to 8.9%. The number of unemployed people in the euro area went up by 3.7 million to a total of 15.0 million in May 2009. Eurostat explains that different Member States have been affected differently by the crisis and unemployment has risen at different rates and from different dates. (Eurostat, 2009) For example in Spain unemployment started to rise as early as May 2007.

However reports of unemployment rising in many countries within the Union no doubt has had an impact on the public mood and media coverage. Thus people are already on edge as to how the crisis will affect their standard of living that prevailing attitudes towards migrants, such as the perception that migrants will steal their jobs are only perpetuated. And once again migrants are seen as threats.

An example of how these tensions have played out in the media and on a national level is in the United Kingdom. In late January and early February the United Kingdom saw a number of trade unions protest against Total. The oil and gas company Total had put a contract out to tender for a £200m construction project and an Italian company won the contract and supplied its own permanent workforce and almost 400 workers from Italy and Portugal. Thus British workers who had been fired were angry that British based workers had not had the opportunity to apply for the jobs. (Booth, 2009)

The Guardian reported the protest at a power station in Wales where workers were protesting the number of foreign workers being given jobs. (Morris, 2009) Some of the interviewed picketers commented on how they felt about the current situation:

Andy Summers, 60, an insulation engineer, said:

"It was the working classes who opened up Europe but it's now the working classes who are going on the dole — with jobs going to people coming from abroad."

He went on to say:

"People like us have travelled across Britain on contract jobs. But now we can't get work because of the influx of European labour."

Another worker John Cummins, held a slightly different view:

"I was laid off as a stevedore two weeks ago. I've worked in Cardiff and Barry Docks for 11 years and I've come here today hoping that we can shake the government up. I think the whole country should go on strike as we're losing all British industry. But I've got nothing against foreign workers. I can't blame them for going where the work is."

There were claims that these protests were xenophobic manifestations however both spokespeople from the Trade Union Congress (TUC) and political commentators from the Guardian (Milne, 2009) pointed out that it is wrong to label the protest and dissent on the part of the workers as racially motivated. Taking the more moderate view Brendan Barber the secretary

general of the TUC said that workers were “rightly angry” but that “the anger should be directed at employers not the Italian workers” (Booth, 2009). Taking a stronger standpoint Milne (2009) claims that dubbing the protests as xenophobic protests against migrant workers have provided the governments ministers and the British media with a convenient cover to deflect blame. He also claims that many of the BBC news edited a comment of a striker interviewed so that “it appeared he was refusing to work with Italian and Portuguese workers, when he was in fact complaining that he had no chance to do so.” (Milne, 2009)

This example highlights the impact the financial crisis has had on unemployment and the indirect impact this can have on migrants. While it is clear that the protests were not purely motivated by xenophobic attitudes towards migrants, the fact that these racial undertones are contested highlights the ease with which the finger of blame is pointed to migrant workers. The insecurities felt by individuals as to their job security motivates some to quickly scapegoat migrants. The example shows two diverging views between Andy Summers and John Cummins to highlight that mixed attitudes among individuals. The media’s propensity to paint a xenophobic uprising and the possibility that the government may also allow, or even encourage as suggested by Milne, the reporting to take such a spin is indicative of what was mentioned earlier: regardless of the facts, there is always an actor or individual quick to scapegoat the migrant. This only reinforces the insider/outsider division for migrants.

As the example discussed above highlights there are mixed feelings towards the way in which Europe has opened up and allowed workers to move freely. A clear consensus as to the very existence of a need to address labour migration issues at the EU level is missing. Forging and EU agenda on migration related issues has encountered structural obstacles. It is an area that is deeply politicised and “touches upon sensitive chords of sovereignty” (Papagianni 2006: 322).

EU member states have surrendered many of their competences to the supra national level, the European level, one could argue that it could be that states hold migration policy close to their domestic legislation as it is a policy area that goes to the very core of their political autonomy.

Not all Member States appear convinced that the communitarisation of migration particularly those in areas of labour is either necessary or desired (Papagianni, 2006). In addition

to this migration policy has a strong horizontal character in the sense that it is being affected and affects other areas of policy which gives rise to more hesitancy from member states.

Fundamentally, what is also lacking is political will among members states.

What is interesting to note is that over the issue of illegal migration there appears to be a much clearer consensus over the need to cooperate at an EU level (Papagianni, 2006). It is much easier to define what is not wanted than what is wanted, again we encounter a binary us/them, in order to protect 'us' we must keep 'them' out. EU approach to migration is seen primarily through a security lens (Papagianni, 2006: 292). States regulate migration as a security issue; they need safeguard themselves against external 'threats'. Terrorism risks result in states clamping down their borders as a security measure. Thus the attitudes towards migrants shifts towards seeing them as a threat to their security and well being.

Political discourse perpetuate these negative attitudes towards new migrants. We see that attitudes in Europe may not differ so much from those of South Africa, xenophobia may not be as overt and the factors perpetuating these xenophobic sentiments are very different but the outcome for new migrants is the same, they are marginalised to the fringes and treated as unwanted outsiders.

Since the 1970s many Member States have applied a "zero immigration policy" however in practice immigration did continue (Papagianni 2006: 322). There are signs that political leaders are ready to open up the migration discourse. This may be due to the fact that the EU's ageing population can be balanced out with what the UN describes as "replacement migration" that is allowing young migrant workers into these ageing societies (Papagianni 2006: 273). However there are academics and to an extent the European Commission have argued that "replacement immigration" in itself cannot solve the demographic imbalance of member states (Papagianni 2006: 273)

As discussed the Financial Crisis will no doubt have been damaging to political will and the likelihood that the discourse surrounding migration closes up again as states are concerned about their economic stability and thus the focus will shift back to "who we are keeping out" instead of a much needed and more progressive discourse on "who we are letting in."

Migration policy is a very powerful tool to perpetuate harmful attitudes towards migrants. While feelings of xenophobia and marginalization of migrant communities cannot be solely blamed on government policy it plays a very large role. Societies need to reframe their thinking and attitudes towards migrants and stop seeing migrants as threats. Allowing migrants to meaningfully participate in society is very different from giving them a permit to work, migrants have much more to contribute to societies than just labour. Economic migrants chase the rainbow in search of the pot of gold at the end, but what they often face is social exclusion. Migration is nothing new as long as societies have existed people have moved. We need to stop using migration as a political weapon and change prevailing attitudes towards migrants in order to break down the insider/outsider paradigm.

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