

# QUESTIONING CONVENTIONAL MIGRATION CONCEPTS: THE CASE OF TRANSIT MIGRATION

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In course of scientific work, terms and concepts used are often taken as a matter of course. And often it seems to be out of convenience and custom that codes are applied that are thought of reflecting shared and commonly agreed ideas. Thereby, it tend to be ignored that some such concepts have been developed within a specific historical era, on the basis of very specific observations, and sometimes inspired by specific political concerns. Concepts, which date back to 19. century migrations, and that were derived from the Great European emigration to the Americas, or a terminology that was inspired by political motives, for example to alert to public, and problematising specific features of human behaviour may be of only limited use today. Research has been suffering, for example, from methodological nationalism, as Wimmer and Glick-Schiller (2003) put it radically. Certainly, there are cases where political bias, distorted Eurocentric perspectives – for example ignorance of the immigration experiences of certain non-European receiving countries -, normative assumptions - how things ought to be – and subsequent identifications of an alleged *explanandum* – for example identifying immigration as the problem whilst it could have equally been asked what is wrong with a receiving society, which could not cope with mobile populations - are typical problems in methodology and epistemology.

Furthermore, under conditions of globalisation, information and transport revolutions, the fall of the iron curtain and the emergence of a new global order migrations undergo a metamorphosis, as Joly (2004) argues. Research found that temporary movements and irregular migrations are the fastest growing present migration patterns, we have noted the feminisation of migration, maybe it is more adequate to say the feminisation of research, we have observed the re-emergence of a European migration space, the revival of some traditional paths in Central Asia and across the Sahara and the emergence of global labour markets facilitating global migrations (Düvell 2006). Meanwhile, migrants originate from any part of the world

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<sup>1</sup> This paper is a modified but short version of a COMPAS working paper, 'Crossing the Fringes of Europe: Transit Migration in the EU's New Immediate Neighbourhood'.

and can be found in any part of the world illustrating the increasing globalisation of migration.

In this light it seems appropriate to put conventional concepts on test, reassess their validity, take into account the specific historical circumstances under which a concept or typology did become popular and to adjust definitions accordingly. Since types and categories have often been identified through comparison it may well be that the cases which have once been compared with have changed, or that a feature or pattern has disappeared. As a consequence, fresh comparison is required which may lead to fresh results. I would like to give you a few brief examples, giving you a taste of what I mean, before analysing the specific case of transit migration in greater detail.

Sociologists in particular engage in identifying the order of things and to understand their interrelation and interaction. They develop classifications, taxonomies and typologies based upon 'particular significant characteristics' (Durkheim 1895: 99). What is a significant characteristic is open to interpretation, and depends on the perspective taken by the scholar. May I recall the famous metaphor of the half full/half empty glass? Usually, a pair of characteristics, a dichotomy is developed and cases ordered accordingly, such as origin/destination, east/west, permanent/temporary, highly skilled/low skilled, forced/free, legal/illegal, internal/international, tourist/worker and so on. But is it not that often people or countries slip between the categories, or are both at the same time, or that they move from one stage to the other and back and that more cases fall in-between the dichotomous categories than actually match them?

For example, we engage in distinguishing states by being emigration countries and immigration countries. But is it not that almost all countries display more than just one feature? We have already accepted that Greece, Italy, Spain and Portugal have become countries of immigration, even though Portugal still is a country of emigration. We have seen that Turkey has turned from an emigration country into a country of emigration, immigration and transit, and simultaneously sending and receiving refugees. Meanwhile, Czech Republic, once perceived a transit country has become an immigration country too. Or if we look at Poland, we find that western sources identify Poland as a sending country, whilst Ukrainian sources identify Poland as a receiving country. That shows that different perspectives generate different results. Related to this is the concept of east/west migrations perceived in the west as the predominant pattern, whilst a blind eye is turned on east/east

migrations, as from Ukraine to Russia, or to east/south movements as from Moldova to Turkey. All such observations require far more comprehensive research efforts whilst changes in migration patterns and directions require constant control of our concepts. Maybe, acknowledging the plethora of movements from and to diverse directions, such simplifications should be deconstructed and abandoned altogether.

Migration figures, as it is the case with classifications, have to be checked and recalculated, and the quality of the data set taken into account. For example, the figure of 175 million international migrants is constantly repeated in the media and in academic publications, even though recent GCIM reports (2005) illustrate that it is long outdated. Furthermore, it is acknowledged that temporary cross-border movements are of increasing relevance (OECD 2002), whilst irregular migration is the 'fastest growing form of migration' (OECD 2001), but because conventional statistical methods are not geared up to reflect these movements, such figures must be treated with great caution. Furthermore, internal movements, even in large countries such as Russia, India or China, or internally displaced people, are ignored because they do not match the criteria of crossing an international border, yet another example for the nationalist methodological bias. Taking into account all such movements we would come up with a very different figure for global human mobility raising radically new questions about the human nature, the normality of migration.

Finally, studies in illegal immigration usually find that immigrants enter on a visa, hence they are legal immigrants, but then they overstay or engage in illicit work and become irregular, but after a while they may regularise their status or they return and re-enter on a fresh visa. As a consequence, the legal status is a much more fluid thing than a simple dichotomy suggests.

Enough examples, I would now like to discuss the need for questioning some conventional and convenient concepts by taking the case of transit migration. The thoughts I am presenting here are of very recent nature and represent work in progress.

### **Transit Migration - a politicised and blurred concept**

The emergence of the concept of transit migration is closely related to the fall of the Iron Curtain, EU accession and global economic integration, the turning up of new immigrants on European soil and the 1990s asylum crisis, or panic as some would argue. It seems to have been invented in 1993, in course of a UN conference on that same topic, and by the International Organization for Migration (IOM) in 1994,

following a (see references) series of papers, urging its member states to recognise transit migration as an important pattern in international migration, and in particular in irregular and asylum migration. Widgren (1995), director of International Centre for Migration Policy Development (ICMPD), too was warning that at the height of the European asylum panic most asylum seekers were transiting CEE countries. Transit migration has quickly become a policy issue, referred to in a 1998 strategy paper of the then Austrian presidency of the Council of the European Union emphasising, not for the first time though, the importance of transit migration and transit countries. This was responded by six action plans on Afghanistan, Sri Lanka, Iraq, Albania, Somalia and Morocco, drafted by the High level Working Group on Asylum Migration (HLWG) in 1999, which put according emphasis on transit routes and transit countries. More recently, the 'Ministerial Conference of the 5+5 Dialogue on Migration in the Western Mediterranean' (2001) reemphasised the need for 'joint management of the phenomenon'. The Council of Europe too has been engaged in related conferences and processes, for example through its regional conference on 'Migrants in Transit Countries' in 2004, and thereby raising attention and encouraging national authorities to respond.

### **The Emergence of the Concept of Transit Migration**

Migration history has identified patterns of 'transit migration' long before it was called transit. Bade (2000: 151), for example, referred to Swedish observations whereby young women first moved internally from countryside and villages to larger towns and port cities, where they worked in order to acquire the necessary funds for paying the ship passage to America. He called that *step-by-step migration*. In earlier years, similar movements have been understood as *migration in stages* (Treibel 1990: 24). Past studies frequently found that, for example Turkish labour migrants in Germany have often moved internally from village to city before deciding for international migration (Kleff 1984). Furthermore, development studies and urban studies have for long been acutely aware of the link between rural-urban, hence internal migration and international migration (e.g. Bilsborrow 1998). But because such internal transit movement were not international migration sociology often does not see the link between the two. That may explain why a migration pattern which has for long been known to migration historians, geographers and development studies did only enter the academic discourse of migration when it began to affect international movements.

The concept of 'transit migration' finally seemed to have entered the migration policy discourse during the early 1990s (UN 1993; IOM 1994). Since then, it has become increasingly applied if not popular. Transit migration is often identified with irregular migration and illegal employment and with human smuggling, trafficking and organised crime. Typical terms or descriptions would be 'illegal transit migration', 'in general, transit migrants travel in groups and use the services of traffickers' (Sipavicieno and Kanopiene 1997: 9). For example, a UN publication identifies transit migration 'flows of irregular and illegal migrants from the Third World and from east European countries' (International Migration Bulletin, 3, 11/1993: 7). In view of the parliamentary assembly of the Council of Europe (2001: 1) the 'two major characteristics of transit migration are its illicit nature and an elaborate criminal organisation' (see also ICMPD 2005a: 1). For ICMPD, the 'Dialog on Mediterranean Transit Migration' which they have been initiated is a direct consequence of their aim to 'prevent irregular migration' (<http://www.icmpd.org/default.asp?nav=budapest&folderid=362&id=-1>).

A literature survey reveals that transit migration is as much a discourse as it is a scientific concept. What becomes obvious though is that 'transit migration' has become a code for 'illegal immigration', and for ineligible asylum seekers, who according to the Dublin Convention are supposed to make their claim in the first safe country instead of moving on. Accordingly, countries found to be transited by migrants are thought of as problematic (GDISC 2006). Some publications presented transit migration as yet another threat to Europe. For example, the IOM (1994a) report on transit migration in Hungary engaged in notorious number games alleging that up to two million migrants are living in Central Europe who wanted to move to the West. Recently, again high and implausible figures circulate about millions of sub-Saharan African transit migrants gathering in northern Africa trying to move north.<sup>2</sup> Basically all EU neighbours have been associated with transit migration. 'Transit migration' has to some extent become sort of a war cry directed at countries that are expected by European Union countries to keep unwanted migration off European territories.

Unfortunately, rigorous academic research is scarce, few case studies have been conducted focussing on Iranians (Kaytaz 2006), Iraqis (Danis et al. 2006) and West

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<sup>2</sup> Personal conversation with Denise Holt, Foreign and Commonwealth Office, held at the occasion of a meeting at the UK embassy in Berlin. In this case transit migrants seem to have been confused with immigrants, namely in Libya, whilst in fact most of the 1,2-1,8 million migrants in Libya are labour migrants and only a minority can be considered transit migrants.

Africans (Brewer and Yükseder 2006) in Turkey (Yaghmaian 2005, Icduygu 2005), Kurds in Greece (Papadopoulou), Somalis and Sudanese in Egypt (Roman 2005), Chinese in Russia (Ghelbras 2001), or Morocco (Haas 2005) as case studies. Obviously, more research is required in order to produce evidence-based findings instead of politicised conclusions.

Despite widespread use, there does not exist a category or definition for transit migration in international law. Instead, such a definition has entered into political and academic discourse by custom, as it seems. One of the earliest definitions has been offered by UN/ECE (1993: 7), whereby transit migration is 'migration in one country with the intention of seeking the possibility there to emigrate to another country as the country of final destination'. Meanwhile, IOM is also defining transit migration as 'refugees awaiting resettlement' (IOM 2004: 53). Other sources define transit migration as 'the stage between emigration and settlement' (Papadopoulou 2005: 2). Several sources insist that transit migration is of often irregular nature (UN/ECE (1993: 7) or involve smuggling and trafficking (Council of Europe (2001, para 3; US State Department 2001). Such definitions are either particular narrow or rather vague; transit migration is confused with forced migration, illegal migration and with trafficking. The invention of the concept is not free from political motivation, and its use is often politically loaded, if not negatively connoted. The way it is applied by some international and intergovernmental organisations, is often grossly simplifying if not misleading. What was once meant to be a clear-cut category, aiming to raise the attention of migration control agencies instead turns out to be a complex, multifaceted and multidimensional migration pattern.

### **A Complex and Problematic Concept**

The difficulties with the concept of transit migration are manifold. These will now be discussed in some detail.

There is a certain and disturbing bias attached to the transit concept and that is the assumption, that migrants from low-income countries who are found in, for example, a middle-income country, such as Russia, Ukraine or Turkey, are inclined to move on to high-income countries. This assumption seems to be informed by economic modelling, based upon the Todaro (1969) model, which is suggesting that migrants move to the destination which offers the highest return for their labour. Opposing this assumption is the fact that migrants in their majority instead move to neighbouring or nearby destinations, which are linked through regional migration

systems (Düvell 2006). Instead of striving for maximum income improvement, as Todaro suggests, any improvement seems to serve as an incentive, whilst distance, language and culture, lack of social and human capital and general risk adverseness serve as disincentives for moving to a high-income but distant country.

Meanwhile, it can be observed that countries that have for some time been perceived as transit countries, such as the EU-8 countries, but also Turkey are acknowledged to be also countries of immigration. There is some plausibility in assuming that this has to do with increasingly rigid migration controls, regulations and restrictions of western European countries which prevent migrants from moving further west and instead force them to settle where they are. This however, is a somewhat biased and short-sighted perspective. Not only that EU-8 countries have high growth rates, scarcities resulting from emigration and populations that are ageing at an even faster pace than in western Europe leading to some demand for migrant labour. They also had distinct bilateral relations with sending countries, in particular attracting students from many African and Asian countries. Thereby, specific migration channels have been introduced, which may well have developed into distinct migration networks and even systems. Thereby, EU-8 countries are too integrated into global migration movements, and into regional and intercontinental migration systems. Assuming that these countries cannot be countries of destination but must be transit countries, and assuming that immigration is to be solely explained by the 'stuck' effect does not seem justified.

A problematic dividing line to draw is that between transit migration and repeated migration. This seems to be the problem with some authors who interpret migrants who move on to another country 'transit' even after a long stay in their first host country (e.g. Roman 2006). In contrast, diverse evidence-based and inter-related migration theories – the theory on cumulative causation, culture of migration and accumulation of migration experiences (see DaVanzo 1983, Massey and Zenteno 1999, Massey and Zenteno 2001) found that an individual that has migrated once, and who has improved his/her human and social capital develops a higher propensity to migrate again. This could also affect on-migration from a first to a second immigration country. On the other hand, as it has been observed in Turkey (McAnailly Burkey 1997) and in Greece (Jordan and Düvell 2001), repeated migration may be the consequence of frustrated experiences in the first country of destination, where lack of opportunities may result in considering to move on to more promising destination. The distinction seems to be that repeated migrants who move on to another country did not intend to do so in the first instance but only developed such an aspiration whilst staying in their first host country. It is unconvincing to define

a migrant as in transit retrospectively, hence to mark periods in their life as transitory which lie before the point of time at which the decision to move on has been made. In contrast, a migrant who would have the aspiration to move on to another country from the day s/he arrived in their first host country could justifiably be understood a transit migrant.

There are two very different aspects that lead researchers to the application of the concept of transit migration. Either (A) a person, which is found in a given country is indeed transiting this country and in fact continues the journey, or (B) a person found in a given country only intends to transit this country and plans to move on to a final destination. Whilst (A) is a matter of fact, (B) is an immigrant's account, an intention or maybe no more than a dream.

That leads to considerable methodological concerns. As yet, most research seems to have been conducted in what are perceived the transit countries. Consequently, the interviewees have not been met at the supposed end of their migration trajectory but somewhere in-between a supposedly longer migration project. Or perhaps not! At least such interviews do not provide satisfying evidence for the concept of transit migration. What they reveal instead is a state of mind, a mentally transitory process maybe. But is that not similar to findings related to the concept of return migration where it was found that, for example, guest workers in Germany or Asian labour migrants in the UK, dreamed of a return to Turkey or Pakistan, even after having spend most of their live in Germany or England? Return rather became a 'myth' (Anwar 1979, Düvell 2006) than a realistic option. No one would have concluded that individuals holding on to such a myth are in fact return migrants. Could it not be that the idea of being in transit and that the intention to move on to the shinier destinations in Western Europe or the US is representing a similar myth? Could it not be that, for example, that the 70 per cent of migrants who were interviewed by IOM (1994a) in Hungary and who explained that they want to move west were voicing a dream rather than having concrete plans? At least the realisability of such accounts cannot be taken for granted.

Another set of literature is based upon an equally incomplete and biased set of data. Kosher (1997), Robinson and Segrott (2002) and Gilbert and Kosher (2004) studied asylum seekers in the UK in order to identify reasons, such as social networks, that explain why these migrants have chosen the UK and how they have managed to come. These, however, only build upon those migrants who successfully made it to the UK, hence those, whose trajectories can be retrospectively interpreted as transit migration. Neither does it consider those who were unsuccessful and who

wanted to move on but stranded in a third country, nor is the context accurately conveyed in course of such post hoc narratives.

Furthermore, there is considerable overlap, if not confusion of transit migration with asylum migration and with refugee resettlement, and with irregular migration and trafficking. Empirically, it has been found that migrants who are restricted from moving to Europe legally and who therefore turn to the services of human smugglers or fall into the hand of traffickers are often taken through a range of countries (e.g. Mavris 2002; Futo et al. 2005). Often they have to acquire further funds in order to finance their journey and to pay consecutive smugglers in order to reach their next stage. With respect to asylum, Papadopoulou (2005) challenges the separation of asylum and migration; both are embedded in different discourses and policy contexts, whilst in fact there are common characteristics. In particular transit migration seems to be consisting of both irregular migrants and refugees.

Finally, there is a set of related questions that illustrate the difficulties with the definition of the concept. How long, or short, is transit supposed to last to be interpreted as transit migration? After which length of stay does 'transit' turn into immigration or temporary migration? Is a highly skilled IT worker, doing a 12-month job in the UK and after that intending to move on to the US a transit migrant or is s/he not? Where to draw the line between transit migration, repeated migration and even global mobility? Are migrants who are staying in one country for several years but still insist that they intend to reach a final other destination are really transit migrants? Would the discourse not be better advised to distinguish between actual transit migration and mental transit?

To sum up this discussion and in order to justify the application of the concept of transit migration to given migration patterns and intentions certain conditions should be met:

1. A person has the clear intention to move to a country of destination via a transit country.
2. This clear intention existed prior departure from the country of origin.
3. A person has the clear intention to move on from the country of his/her present stay to a final destination.
4. A person is taking concrete steps to realize this aspiration, e.g. making savings, or otherwise preparing for the journey.
5. A person has as a matter of fact arrived and settled at the final destination by transiting another country.

## Conclusion

Transit migration has become a hot topic on the migration policy agenda; it is as politicised as it is a policy discourse. Transit migration has equally become a code word for 'illegal immigration' and for unwanted refugees. Efforts to combat illegal migration or unwanted refugees do in fact target transit migration and transit countries. Two major principles can be identified that explain transit migration, protectionism, because destination countries and increasingly traditional transit countries impose restrictions that provoke would-be migrants to make the strangest, and sometimes dangerous deviations in order to reach their destination; and class, because those migrants who are too poor to simply take a flight to their country of destination or to disguise their purpose by pretending to be tourists or businessmen take cheaper routes by foot, bus or train through other countries.

Often, transit migrants are not in transit out of choice, nor is transit intended or even planned; instead migrants are compelled to move on because their first country of immigration turns out to be an impossible place to stay, for either legal and economic or for social reasons. And often, the choice of transit, or the choice of a final country of destination only occurs in course of a migration trajectory. In some cases, transit may turn out to be repeated migration or global mobility instead.

None of the critical questions raised here are meant to argue that there does not exist such thing as transit migration. There are ample observations, hints and evidences suggesting that transit migration is widespread and that numerous countries do experience migrants transiting their territories. What has become clear though is that the concept of transit migration, because of the difficulties and problems that characterise the concept, requires evidence-based refinement and reinterpretation.

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