

Political Engagements of Latin Americans in the UK

Synopsis

In both policy and academic circles, new immigrants have generally been considered objects rather than subjects of politics. This attitude has been reflected in researchers neglecting how new immigrants – especially when they are not entitled to vote – engage politically to address the difficulties that they encounter in the receiving context. This project intends to complement and update existing research by providing an analytical description of the political efforts made by Latin Americans, a group of new immigrants, to improve their conditions in Britain.

Background

Political engagement of new immigrants is a topic which has been overlooked by academic and policy-makers. While attention has been paid, on the one hand, to immigrants as objects of policy and, on the other, to ethnic minorities (i.e. citizens) as casters of votes, little interest has been directed towards factors that might induce new immigrants to mobilize collectively and about how such mobilization is articulated. Non-electoral political engagements are important forms of political expression in themselves, but they become particularly important when a particular sector of the population – like new immigrants – is deprived of the right to vote. Exploring and reflecting upon such engagements is equally important for the immigrants who are seeking to improve harsh conditions and for institutions within receiving societies who are to facilitate smooth incorporation and promote social cohesion.

Aims and Objectives

Starting from the recognition that Britain is not merely a country of 'post-migration' but also one of 'new immigrations' this project focuses on the political initiatives of a group of recently arrived migrants from non-commonwealth countries – Latin Americans. This evidence will be contrasted with existing studies of immigrant politics that have investigated migrants as object of policies or the voting patterns of ethnic minorities (British Citizens).

The ESRC Centre on Migration, Policy and Society (COMPAS) at the University of Oxford conducts high quality research in order to develop theory and knowledge, inform public opinion and contribute to policy debates on migration.

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In particular this project intends to increase our understanding of new immigrants' civic and political agency by exploring and mapping the main forms and content of collective action taken by Latin Americans in the UK to improve their conditions. In researching these migrants' mobilizations, special attention has been paid to the influence exerted on them by the British multicultural set up in terms of opportunity structures, by the migrants' own background and experience as well as by their conditions and status.



Methods

The project has used a comprehensively defined ethnographic approach, including: participant observation, formal and informal interviewing and life histories and document analysis. These methods have been deployed in a range of different sites and events and have involved various types of informant, including immigrants themselves and British political and civic activists. The project while following a socio-anthropological approach has a strong interdisciplinary dimension in terms of topic and disciplinary significance (i.e. migration and ethnic studies, sociology and politics).

Work in Progress

A review article on recent studies of political practices has been published (Però, D: 2005, "Engaging power. Recent approaches to the study of political practices", in *Social Anthropology* vol. 13, n. 3, pp. 331-338). Ethnographic research (including participant observation and interviewing) is currently underway. Analysis and disseminations have also begun with the presentation of preliminary findings at the following international conferences: Metropolis (Toronto, October 2005), American Anthropological Association (Washington, December 2005), Canadian Association of Social and Cultural Anthropologists (Montreal, May 2006).

Planned Outputs

- Presentation of papers at the following events: IMISCOE - International Migration, Integration and Social Cohesion, Workshop B6 (Oxford, June 2006); European Association of Social Anthropologists Conference (Bristol, September 2006).
- Talks at workshops with users
- Publication of scholarly articles in work in progress series (COMPAS working paper series), edited books (Reed-Danahay D and Brettell C eds.: 2007 forthcoming, *Immigration and Citizenship in Europe and the United States: Anthropological Perspectives*. Rutgers University Press) and refereed academic journals (Focaal-European Journal of Anthropology, special issue on Migration and Mobilization, 2007 forthcoming).
- Publication of articles in the lay and community presses.

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