

Robertson, Shanthi: *Transnational Student-Migrants and the State. The Education-Migration Nexus*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan 2013. ISBN: 978-1-137-26707-8; 203 S.

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The pattern and nature of migration has shifted paradigmatically in the past fifteen years. Demographic, labour and market changes, combined with a transition to the so-called „knowledge society“ at the end of the 1990s, created a scarcity of highly skilled workers in OECD countries. To address this labour deficit, legal frameworks for highly skilled migrants were adjusted or were – in many cases – installed for the first time. Conversely, the regulations for less qualified people have been made more restrictive, particularly in the aftermath of 9/11 security concerns.

Selective labour migration policies have since proliferated among the „migrant destination countries“, with special visas and point systems being designed to actively recruit highly skilled workers from „source countries“. Governments have identified students as the most desirable sub-group among the highly skilled migrants and adjusted migration policies accordingly. The ability to attract students has been equated with ensuring innovation and keeping up in a world in which knowledge is the new production factor. This development, coined the „education-migration nexus“, is the departure point for Robertson’s „Transnational Student-Migrants and the State“.

Robertson opts for Australia as a case study, identifying it as a prime example of an education-migration nexus. Notably, it was there that student migration policies first became a matter of national debate. Australia is also particularly pertinent due to sheer volume, as between 1997 and 2009 about four million international students came to the country for educational purposes. As a teacher of academic English and university preparation courses for international students in Melbourne, Robertson operates at the heart of her research subject. Being a member of this international academic community is of great

value as she not only takes a look at the policies, but examines how individual students cope, make decisions, develop practices and engage with the migration pathways set forth by the state.

In the first chapter of her book Robertson places the education-migration nexus in a global policy context, distinguishing between „two-step“ and „stepping stone“ countries. She places Australia, Canada and New Zealand – countries with points based systems and a clear study-to-residence pathway – in the first category, while the United States, the United Kingdom, France and Germany feature in the second. In the latter, the journey from student to permanent residency tends to be much more staggered and with significantly more uncertainty. These two approaches are depicted as points on a policy continuum that national governments opt for based on their distinct and varying needs, objectives, and political climate. The global flow of students has become increasingly institutionalized, and the discourse has moved toward a highly marketized form of education, particularly in Australia where fee-paying students are considered an important part of the greater economy.

Robertson argues that migration is shifting from permanent settlement and family reunion to one that is creating a flexible and targeted labour force to fill specific skill gaps. She adds that the demand-driven side has become more pronounced. That is in line with what other experts in migration studies such as Allen Findlay have observed. He describes the geography of student flows as being heavily influenced by the financial interests of those who organize, supply and market elite higher education opportunities within the global economy.¹ However, he goes a step further in emphasizing not only the rise of the demand side, but the „geographically selective fashions“, meaning that governments favour students from particular countries. The latest trend in the refinement of these policies is the preferential treatment of applicants from high caliber universities.

In the third chapter „The Nexus and Its Dis-

¹ Allen Findlay, An Assessment of Supply and Demand-side Theorizations of International Student Mobility, in: *International Migration* 59 (2010) 2, p. 162.

contents: An Australian Perspective“ Robertson outlines the criticism illuminating issues of corruption, exploitation, racist violence and flawed policy, leading to various re-examinations and shifts in policy. One of the aforementioned unintended consequences of previous policy, for example, was the emergence of a myriad of self-interested third parties, including labour brokers and higher education recruiters. These actors worked along the boundaries of legality and illegality, fostering the creation of a student-migrant underclass. Such activity led to a public backlash, where students were portrayed as an undesirable nuisance, and the system as ruthless and exploitative. In exploring this process of policy adjustment, Robertson distinguishes between the „state behavior“ of regulating, refining, critiquing, and recalibrating the education-nexus as a form of „neoliberal statecraft“ on one side, and a public imagination constructed by the Australian and international media, the education industry and the general public on the other.

In the next chapters Robertson advances the argument that migration journeys are increasingly complex, and that „like other neoliberal immigration systems the education-migration nexus, has constructed a staggered process of entering the state“. Student migrants are, she concludes, a specific form of transnational migrant with migration trajectories that are circuitous rather than linear. They maintain a transnational consciousness, use communication technology to mediate their in-betweenness and disrupt the unitary relationship between state and citizen with dual-citizenship or combinations of denizenship and citizenship. Student migrants are both enabled and constrained by national and global regimes of mobility. While on the one side the state wields absolute power, students also exercise their agency through choice in study destinations, as well as formal and informal channels to assert their rights. Student migrants simultaneously contest and reaffirm the borders of the nation state.

Robertson derives her conclusions from semi-structured interviews, participant observations and „cultural probe packages“ of mixed media materials, embedded within a broad theoretical framework recurring from

authors such as Appadurai, Castels, Massey, Sassen or Ong. The relationship between students and states and the ongoing negotiation of permeability of borders necessitates this sort of globalization literature. This represents a distinct advantage when compared to other studies of this kind. While framing the issue as a matter of OECD countries is legitimate, it might cut too short. Countries throughout the world have developed policies to attract students from abroad, be it China, India, Brazil, the United Arab Emirates, Singapore or Ghana. Transnational student migrants have become a global phenomenon with governments, universities and students monitoring policies and mobility patterns to predict where the intellectual and economic powerhouses of the future will emerge.

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