

16th Nordic Migration Research Conference & 9th ETMU Days 13–15 August 2012, University of Turku

Immigrants and Civil Society

Civil society – what could it be like?

The ‘Immigrants and Civil Society’ international conference in Turku in August 2012 provided a forum for scholars, government officials and others to discuss the question. A wide range of thought-provoking accounts were presented, drawing on social and cultural studies on multiculturalism and interculturalism, as well as practices to do with migrant integration and vulnerable groups. What did some of them make of the core values of a civil society, or indeed: what might such core values be?

“Constructing solidarity and difference”

For Professor Jeffrey Alexander, the first keynote speaker (Yale, US), a civil society is a matter of more open and pluralistic society. This is however something that Europe is currently very much struggling with. The struggles pertaining to Europe involve those to do with ‘incorporation’ and ‘super-diversity’ that are – often uncritically – seen as unprecedented and posing an ‘imminent danger’. The risk discourses of ‘terrorism’ are obviously found on both sides of the Atlantic, heavily infiltrated by debates on Islam. Thus efforts to build solidarity are hampered by populist and political backlash against multiculturalism, resulting to exclusionary policies based on constructed difference.

“A new moral order”

The conference took place about a week before Anders Behring Breivik was convicted and sent to prison for twenty-one years. Professor Leo Lucassen (Leiden University, the Netherlands) referred to Breivik as an example of how individuals occupy ‘different assumptive worlds’. Mentioning the phenomenology of Alfred Schutz, Lucassen analysed the conspiracy theories, exaggerations and pessimisms arising from such assumptive worlds. Such

worlds have consequences for us all as they represent ‘a new moral order’ of the day.

Whilst pondering over the strange death of Dutch multiculturalism, Lucassen asked: “What the hell is going on in the rotten kingdom of the Netherlands?” As Alexander, he pointed toward the fallacy of talking about ‘mass-immigration’. Whilst much talked about a topic, there is a plethora of other issues seldom mentioned in public discussion. Did you know, for instance, that the selection of immigrants by skills levels has, at worst, created an ethnic underclass? Did you know that adopted children make a great deal of immigrants? In fact, did you know that a half of the world’s refugees are children?

The meek are to be elevated – but is it done reflexively?

Amongst the marginal there are those even more marginal. The issue clearly pertaining to policy is no stranger to sociology either. Sociological studies on children’s lives tend to remain on the margins of research interests, let alone those on migrant children. Maren Bak and Kerstin von Brömssen (University of Gothenburg, Sweden) called for more visibility for this area.

Nevertheless, the approach typically adopted by childhood sociologists is that relying on an unproblematic treatment of children’s voice and agency. It is suggested that research on the margins – be it indeed about children or adults – could incorporate reflexivity to a greater extent. The issue is even more imperative in intercultural contexts (Komulainen, 2007) as the problem about power differences between the researchers and the researched have by no means been resolved as to yet.

Conviviality as a remedy for segregation

City-dwellers have further opportunities for making societies civil. For Dr Jonas Alwall (Malmö University), conviviality in the city refers to the “vernacular and everyday forms of cosmopolitanism”. For Catney et al. (2011), it is about the ordinariness of mixing. In places like London, for instance, such things could well be a reality. Malmö aspires to be a cosmopolitan city of this kind as well, although it might not be there just yet. For Finnish cities, it seems, the journey has only just begun.

In a civil society, humanity is diverse

The further the conference proceeded, the more clearly it was articulated that the core issues about civil society are really about basic humanity, and that humanity is diverse. A question was posed, for instance, as to whether multiple voices within any one ethnic community are being heard where integration/incorporation is practiced. Petr Potchinchchikov replied that there are a lot of diverse voices and one just has to live in the situation and somehow deal with it. One cannot expect that all the 50 000 Russians living in Finland are the same.

Diversity also applies to simply gender. For Tuori, women’s feelings and experiences do not count as knowledge as ‘knowledge’ is defined as something other than ‘personal’. In this respect, among other things, Professor Alexander’s call for more cultural studies instead of merely demographic approaches on immigration makes sense. Hear hear.



From left Petr Potchinchchikov, Merja Pentikäinen, Hannu-Pekka Huttunen and Peter Kariuki. Photo: Sirkka Komulainen.

References:

Catney G., Finney, N. & Twigg, L. (2011). Diversity and the complexities of ethnic integration in the UK: Guest Editor’s introduction. *Journal of Inter-cultural Studies* 32(2): 107–114.

Komulainen, S (2007) The ambiguity of the child’s ‘voice’ in social research. *Childhood*, 14(1): 11-28.

The Institute of Migration was one of the organizers for the ‘Immigrants and Civil Society’, the 16th Nordic Migration Research Conference & 9th ETMU Days, 13-15th August 2012, University of Turku, Finland. Website: <http://www.etmu.fi/etmudays/nmrc2012/>

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Etnisten suhteiden ja kansainvälisen muuttoliikkeen tutkimuksen seura ETMU:n tunnustuspalkinto myönnetään vuosittain ETMU-päivien yhteydessä henkilölle, joka on tehnyt erittäin merkittävää työtä etnisten suhteiden ja kansainvälisen muuttoliikkeen tutkimuksen edistämiseksi Suomessa. Vuoden 2012 tunnustuspalkinto myönnettiin Pohjoismaisen muuttoliikekonferenssin yhteydessä Turussa järjestetyillä yhdeksänsillä ETMU-päivillä

13.8.2012 Siirtolaisuusinstituutin johtajalle, dosentti **Ismo Söderlingille**.

Etnisten suhteiden ja kansainvälisen muuttoliikkeen tutkimuksen seura ETMU ry. on tutkijoiden monitieteellinen yhteenliittymä, jonka tarkoituksena on edistää aihepiiriin liittyvää tutkimusta Suomessa. Seura on perustettu kesäkuussa 2003. Sen jäsenyys on avoinna kaikille aihepiiristä kiinnostuneille, jotka haluavat edistää yhdistyksen tarkoitusta.