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A RESPONSE TO SUZANNE HALL

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Mooring, migration milieus and complex explanations

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Since Suzi Hall (2017) first penned her essay on “Mooring ‘super-diversity’ to a brutal migration milieu”, the harsh social and political condition that she invokes has actually gotten worse. By the time the reader views this, my own piece, the migration milieu may well have worsened still.

A milieu, setting or environment surrounding migration is characterized by way of its public conceptualizations, debates, policies, laws, border regimes and everyday practices. The current one portraying most Western societies at present, Hall suggests, is particularly marked by a “politics of contradiction” (Western societies both require and refute migration) and an “ethos of subordination” (embedded histories of sorting and ranking people). She advocates that – especially now – the notion of super-diversity needs to be more explicitly related (her sense of “mooring”) to the structures and processes of power and inequality that condition, and are conditioned by, a worsening migration milieu. I wholly agree.

Hall uses the metaphor of “mooring” in her title. This suggests that the concept of super-diversity is somehow adrift. In many ways, I also concur with this assessment. The concept has been read, invoked, criticized, and taken up in an astounding variety of different ways across academic disciplines, in policy and public debates (for a discussion of these, see the lecture “Super-diversity as concept and approach” on the Max Planck Institute website www.mmg.mpg.de). If one only read what is said *about* the concept of super-diversity, one would indeed have a hard time pinning it down. Therefore, I welcome Suzi Hall’s call to moor the concept in ways that might better address the conditions of a brutal, and worsening, contemporary migration milieu.

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In offering comments to support this process of mooring, I must first stress that super-diversity is not a theory. I regard theory as providing an account of how-things-work (inherent relations or causalities). Nor is it a hypothesis (or to-be-tested theory). As its author (Vertovec 2007), I always intended super-diversity to be first and foremost a descriptive concept, constructed for a special purpose in order to tie together a set of observed, co-occurring phenomena that supersede phenomena that were previously evident (hence the “super-” prefix). For this purpose, super-diversity was coined to draw attention to complex – and arguably new – patterns in migration phenomena over the past three decades or so. Such patterns especially entail emerging and specific configurations of national and racial or ethnic background, gender, age, language, legal status and migration channel. The task of conceiving, observing and describing migration patterns in a complex, co-occurring, intersectional way remains a most important one – to which I will return in this essay. To be clear: mooring super-diversity, a descriptive concept, to the migration milieu will not in itself explain, as theory would do, the relationship between multivariate, intersectional migration patterns and public understandings, political debates and policies that underpin structures of power and inequality. That work will remain to be done. However, such a mooring might crucially offer a more complex reading of this relationship – which is seriously required in a context where simplistic explanations seem to dominate.

Punitive border complex

As initial part of her reflection on the issues, Suzi Hall probes the relation between increasing multifariousness of border regimes and migration outcomes. This is an important focus since, as she says, it is “an erratic border complex that shapes how bodies are diversified across space” (Hall 2017). She reflects on ways that movement across borders and their regulations for filtering people produces multiple discriminations and differential outcomes. Yet borders are not just on the peripheries of nation-states. As Hall notes, “border systems extend into the everyday” (Hall 2017). They penetrate the population through legal statuses in a manner that comprises a system of stratification.

The range of statuses and their stratification directly affects individuals’ lives, not least in potentially opening up a range of possibilities for what most commentators generally mean by “inclusion” or “integration”. These are conditions and measures allowing or restricting people – in differentially ordered ways – to settle, build families, educate themselves and their children, gain employment, enter the housing market, make use of the health system, and engage in the system of political representation. While certain statuses

are enabling, some statuses shut down or highly constrain these processes, effectively excluding people in a variety of ways from gaining a better foothold on life in the “host” country. At practically every stage and status concerning migrants and asylum-seekers, there are opportunities, restrictions and consequences set by policies and institutional measures concerning:

- access to welfare, health, education, public services;
- permission and restrictions for work and the process, type and focus of insertion into the labour market – including nature of employment contract, work conditions and wages;
- nature of treatment by the criminal justice system;
- length and nature of residence;
- prospects of family reunification;
- nature of legal advice and support, including modes of appeal;
- forcible removal and deportation; or
- chances for permanent settlement and eventual possibility of gaining citizenship.

Migrant legal statuses parcel-out or limit rights and access in ways that inherently position people as closer-to/distant from the state. At the same time, they socially rank people (including high status skilled workers through low-status manual labourers to stigmatized asylum-seekers and “illegals”). For states, such a formal stratification continuum is a bureaucratic and institutional modus for the control of people – their mobility and their socio-economic positioning, public resources, political debate and public opinion. For migrants and asylum-seekers, the stages and statuses that comprise the stratification continuum have fundamental implications for individuals’ earnings, health outcomes, housing, social network formation, locality, incorporation into neighbourhoods and family dynamics.

Inspired particularly by the work of Lydia Morris (2002), the idea of migrant statuses as a social stratification system was at the core – and, for me, remains as a defining feature – of the notion of super-diversity. Here the idea is that not only are migrants generally stratified in a number of ways by their legal status, but – due to the patterns of characteristics surrounding migrant flows – whole clusters of migrants (by way of combinations of nationality, ethnicity or race, gender, age, language and human capital) are socially positioned in a stratification system.

As a critical part of the worsening migration milieu, regimes of sorting and stratifying (would-be) migrants and asylum-seekers – at geographical borders and in-country – have grown more severe over recent years. For instance, the IMPALA network of legal scholars has shown, through a comparative study of immigration policies in nine countries between 1999 and 2008, evident “trends toward more complex and often, more restrictive regulation since

the 1990s, as well as differential treatment of groups” (Beine et al. 2016, 828). More recently – and especially indicative of the worsening migration milieu – politicians have looked for ways to tinker with migration categories and restrictions in order to appease rising right-wing populisms obsessed by immigration. In many countries, one of the foremost ways of doing this is through re-categorizations to increase the scope for deportation, often giving authorities a much broader remit to target undocumented people – even those who do have some form of status or permission to reside – in order to remove them. In the USA under President Trump’s executive order on immigration, for instance, such measures provide that,

Not only will Ice [Immigration and Customs Enforcement] agents be allowed to target immigrants with any sort of criminal conviction on their record whatsoever, from minor misdemeanours such as trespassing or vandalism to serious felonies, they will also be able to apprehend individuals who have simply been accused of crimes and subject to investigation. But the order goes broader even than that, allowing Ice officers the ability to target people they assess to be a “risk to public safety or national security”. The order offers no guidance at all on how such a broad definition could be applied, leaving it to the “judgment” of individual Ice agents. (Laughland 2017)

Further, the order includes as “criminal” anyone who has crossed the border illegally. “Immigration lawyers have already raised concerns that people with no criminal history will be swept up by the large net the administration is casting” (Medina 2017). Although not as extreme as in the USA at present, many countries have redefined categories and stepped-up the search for deportable immigrants, starting with lawbreakers of any kind. Consequently, emerging through the entanglement of both Frontex and individual member states, “A vast deportation apparatus has indeed been established in Europe” (Polke-Majewski 2015). Increasingly, deportation measures – however arbitrary – are deemed important politically, in order to show the public that the government is “doing something” about immigration.

Migration threat narratives

It is a vicious circle: populist discourse leads to reactive, more restrictive policies (especially among politicians with election cycles in mind), which in turn both “justify” and drive populist discourse. To be sure, one of the most prominent features of the current milieu is the hostile public discourse on migration. Here, Hall draws upon Massey (2015) and his description of a growing “new politics of fear” concerning immigration. This is in line with what many others have seen as the predominance of “threat narratives” concerning migration in areas of the print and television media, social media and political rhetoric. Such narratives have long been at the core of framing migration and migrants in public and political discourse (see Vertovec 2011). Crisis, flood,

invasion, illegal ... these are common trigger words invoking threats immigrants purportedly pose to jobs, public resources, national culture and security. Differing national contexts and histories, as well as particular historical events, account for one or another locus of threat to come to the discursive fore. In Brexit, migration as a threat to public resources was a key theme; in Trump's America and among many on the European right, migration and the terrorist threat is highlighted.

Threat narratives work particularly well since they are not only emotive, but simplifying. This can be seen over time in media treatments of migration. For example, Greussing and Boomgaarden (2017) have recently keyword analysed the coverage of the 2015 migration "crisis" across six Austrian quality and tabloid newspapers. The core modes of coverage coalesced in order of prevalence around: security threat, economization, criminalization and humanitarian issues. Over time, these tended to crystallize further into a narrow set of tropes. Progressively, reading audiences were "provided with a limited set of interpretations of a still complex and multifaceted issue" (Greussing and Boomgaarden 2017, 15). Similar findings arose in comparative work of media coverage of migration in fourteen countries (White 2015): while nuanced with national references, the general pattern indicates overly simplistic accounts lending credence to threat narratives.

While threat narratives broadly present negative evaluations of migration and immigrants generally, they are also easily linked with the stratified categories produced by legal statuses and the multiple-characteristic clusters described by the notion of super-diversity. Here the ethos of subordination, flagged by Hall, results in classifying, ranking and subsequently de-valuing swathes of people by categories that not only have to do with legal status, but threat-imbued stereotypes. (Muslim asylum-seekers represent the current case in point.) One outcome, as we have witnessed in many countries when right-wing populism has made gains, is the emboldening of hate speech that, in turn, has direct bearing on everyday lives and encounters. This is what Hall (2017) has in mind, I am sure, when signalling the "expansion of borders across physical and mental space".

Super-diversity, migration milieus and urban space

Hall draws attention to the ways that the links between super-diversity and migration milieus manifest in urban spaces. She advocates a meticulous analysis of super-diversity and the city, playing close attention to notions of diversity-making in policy and discourse, "being public" in cities and taking account of multiple ways that restrictions and opportunities become available for various urban actors. I too believe that this call represents a highly productive approach. Indeed, it is broadly the approach taken in *Diversities Old and New* (Vertovec 2015), which describes the results of GlobaldiverCities – a five-year

comparative project examining migration-driven diversification and emergent socio-spatial patterns in Johannesburg, Singapore and New York. In light of changing migration policies and public discourses in each context, the project analysed processes through which diversification creates or modifies social categories that, in turn, condition discrete urban relations. Here again we saw very complex, intersectional characteristics in play leading to a variety of social dynamics and outcomes – all the time during which, differentially in government policy and public discourse in each of the three cities – simplistic terms and discussions of migration nevertheless prevailed.

Complex and simple understandings

In practically any field of study, public debate or policy, simplistic explanations are characterized by rudimentary categories, single causalities, and linear trajectories. Complex explanations utilize multiple and intersecting categories, compound causalities and non-linear trajectories. Simplistic explanations give people the fabricated feeling that (a) they understand what is going on, and (b) they are able to control the matters at hand (including even the possibility of reversing them). “Fake news” and “alternative facts” fit well with simplistic explanations; rarely has “fake news” suggested anything complex. Complex explanations are often unwelcome because they inherently entail a measure of uncertainty: that is, there are so many factors in play in certain processes that we cannot really predict what will happen.

Policies made on simplistic explanations are, practically by definition, highly limited in their effectiveness: (multiple) causes are not accounted for, leaving unaddressed the drivers of social processes; (intersectional) social characteristics are overlooked, leading to mismatches of policy coverage; outcomes are often very different from those predicted by policy intervention, because possible (non-linear) outcomes are not foreseen.

When publicly addressing social and political issues, academics have usually played a conventional role in rightly suggesting that the issues at hand, almost regardless of what they may be, are “more complicated” than public debates usually make them. That can lead to certain caricatures of academics, and both policymakers and the media tend to get particularly frustrated with complications and uncertainties. They prefer simplistic explanations: they are more satisfying in many levels. Complicated explanations are deemed elitist and out of touch. (The people “have had enough of experts”, as leading Brexit campaigner Michael Gove famously said.) Moreover, in the increasingly brutal milieu at present, complex academic views concerning migration are more unwelcome than ever. They confound and confute the simplistic explanations and threat narratives that “work” for so many politicians and members of the public.

Yet now is precisely the time when academics need not only to counter migration threat narratives, but do so in language that preserves complex explanation. It is clear that – as opposed to being based solely on single causes such as “the search for better paying jobs”, or presumed “wanting to live off the host state”, or even just “fleeing conflict” – migration occurs due to multiple and compound drivers (including economic, political, social, demographic and environmental causes effecting one another; cf. Black et al. 2011). Migration also has complex outcomes – of which the patterns of super-diversity are part.

Understanding and seeking to explain the dynamics between multiple, compound causes of migration and super-diversity outcomes necessarily entails a relationship with migration milieus (particularly border regimes, legal status stratification systems and modes of public discourse). Suzi Hall has done us (the academic readership of *Ethnic and Racial Studies*) a service by her call for better mooring, lest our focuses further drift at a critical historical juncture.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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