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Migrants are the city: commentary on “London: diversity and renewal over two millennia” by Anthony Heath and Yaojun Li

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ABSTRACT

By querying the social connections that underlie Heath’s and Li’s overview of the peopling of London over the millennia, it becomes clear that London was made as people from elsewhere settled, maintained multiple networks of connection and created local forms of sociability. Generations of migrants built London, as those in power extracted wealth from colonies around the world through the African slave trade, theft of land from native peoples, indentured labour from South Asia, and the dispossession and cultural subordination of Irish, Scottish, Welch and English rural classes. To trace the history of London must be to explicate the intertwined processes of racialization, women’s subordination, Orientalism and the cultural hierarchies of difference. As all comprehensive urban histories can do, if they address the relationships between migrants and city making, Heath and Li’s account of London teaches us that underneath politically constructed migrant non-migrant divides, over time migrants become the city.

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According to Alejandro Portes, migration and urbanization are two sides of the same coin (2022). Anthony Heath and Yaojun Li (2023, 1) express a similar perspective on the relationship between migration and cities, stating “London has from its beginning in the second century AD has been a major European and subsequently world city, shaped by migration”. In my discussion, I first ask to what degree to Heath and Li’s discussion of London deepen the analysis of the relationship between migration and city making. Secondly, I suggest that a multiscalar conjunctural analysis can contribute to our understanding of the relationship between migration and urbanization in London. I argue urbanization comes about through

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multiscalar networks of people and institutions that are connected to elsewhere. These networks provide capital, provisioning, resources, skills and population replenishment (since cities have been historically and are currently very unhealthy places).

Heath and Li tell us that “inward migration must have played a major role in London’s population growth from the medieval period up to the 20th century” (2023, 5) They further state

there would also have been international migration right from London’s foundation (although the modern distinction between internal and international migration would have been an anachronism in periods before the nation-state had become widespread)

and then name Roman, Saxons, Viking, Normans, French Huguenots, Jews, and black, Chinese and Indian seamen (2023, 5). But then what is London – who built it – what is urbanization? If a history of London is a history of the mobility of populations so that the migrants of one generation are the natives of the city in the generations to follow, then how can we talk about migration history separate from a history of the city? In fact, migrants are the city.

We learn that there was no London without the arrival of Roman conquerors/settlers/migrants – people from afar who were part of an imperial project and that the city grew in terms of its connections to elsewhere that were reached by ship and by road. We learn that you couldn’t from the beginning understand London as a city without its connection to empire building and the links of urban, regional and imperial scales of governance and economic processes. And to think of Roman imperial processes, we have to remember that all colonization is a process of dispossession – taking of land, displacing of people. London grew within imperial processes that began with the Romans and continued through the rise and disintegration of the British empire. Imperial processes engendered multiple populations movements and reorganizations including the settling of coming and going of administrators, the extracting of the produce and labor of the land, and the redistribution of people within the imperial domain. London, as well as the British cities that became wealthy through industrialization, were the offspring of empire.

Greg Wolf (1992) an archeologist, reminds us that “empires are political systems based on the actual or threatened use of force to extract surpluses from their subjects”. Labor – impressed, enslaved or otherwise captive – and multiple mobilities are foundational to empire building including city making. The Roman army was actually Romano-British marked by ethnic and cultural diversity including the incorporation of the local population (Mattingly 2006).

To think more about London as an imperial city that served as a port and a hub, we would need to make a multiscalar analysis that emphasizes that from the beginning London was built by migrants with different degrees of military, political, cultural and economic power that were connected to multiple places. This point is further highlighted when Heath and Li take up their narrative with the Norman Conquest, which was part of another historical conjuncture marked by the prestigious Norman ruling class claiming Britain as migrants/conquerors/settlers.

Heath and Li (2023) next turn to a condensed history of London as the British imperial center. However, even though they mention empire and London's diverse population, by and large they continue to treat London as a separate unit of analysis. The paper would benefit from a further analysis of the social, political, economic and cultural implications of the centuries-long transference of the wealth produced by people around the world into the holdings of the British ruling classes and the subsequent emergence of the London-based financial class. Citing Michael Hecter's (1977) concept of internal colonization, they note that as the center of the British empire, London grew on both external and internal colonization. However, despite this observation, London somehow in their telling seems to stand apart from the rest of Britain. Yet to approach London as a city built within multiscalar networks of disparate power means to acknowledge the foundational role of people around the world as the constitutors of the wealth and power of London. Generations of migrants built London, as those in power extracted wealth from trading the enslaved African people, thefts of land from native peoples, from colonies around the world, indentured labor from South Asia, the dispossession and cultural subordination of Irish, Scottish, Welch and English rural classes, and intertwined processes of racialization, women's subordination, Orientalism and cultural hierarchies of difference. Once we think of connected cities across geographic scales, our understanding of the economy, politics and culture of cities differs as does our perspective on population flows – and the political-economic transformations that led different sectors of the population at different times to be labeled as migrants and natives.

The decline of empire marks London's next historical period for Heath and Li, which they date from 1939. They mention the decline of London as a major port and London's post-world War II slum clearance project in east London. We learn that there was housing redevelopment, a destruction of working-class neighborhood solidarities, and an influx of colonized labor and displaced Europeans who enter into city building. However, we get too little sense of just how London's economy was reorganized. I especially want to reinforce Heath and Li's invaluable insight that the migrants in the post-World War II period

may well have played a role in reviving the inner city In the 1950s and 1960s the areas where migrants settled were cheap because the affluent whites had already moved out to the suburbs. The demand for housing from the new arrivals, plus their vigorous communities centred around the church, gurdwara, temple or mosque, are more likely to have revived the inner city than the opposite, and undoubtedly compensated for the suburbanization of the affluent white population. (2023, 10–11)

While here Heath and Li chose to focus on the religiosity and communalism of this generation of newcomers, there is much more to the story. If instead, we take seriously their reminder that the post-war generation of migrants was “diverse in their ethnicity, religion, reasons for migration, skills, knowledge of English, degree of ‘selectivity’, and the geographical and employment niches that they filled in London” (2023, 8), we are better able to appreciate that migrants as city builders rather than as populations to be integrated or assimilated.¹ It puts newcomers within a cycle of property devaluation and revaluation that drives the capital accumulation realized through real estate investment. Revaluation is at the heart of urban regeneration and it works through racialization and criminalization of migrant neighborhoods, their devaluation, dispossession, and subsequent gentrification and revaluation. In this context, migrant entrepreneurial activity must be understood as related to processes of neighborhood revaluation. In this section and the post-1979 period, Heath and Li’s urban history becomes a migrant history but the sense that migrant history is different somehow from urban history continues. Reference to the labor movement and its complex relationship to national liberation movements, which also had London connections, would be helpful.

In their discussion of Post-1979 London, Heath and Li begin to address the conjunctural moment of the neoliberal restructuring of capital accumulation. Unfortunately, in noting what was in fact a multiscale reorganization of the processes of accumulation and the ascendancy of finance capital globally, as they did from the very beginning, Heath and Li continue what could be called London exceptionalism. In point of fact, all cities in the UK and in fact globally have participated and been remade through forms of neoliberal restructuring, which although differentiated are none the less interrelated (Brenner and Theodore 2003; Smith 2002). Although not sufficiently referencing this larger picture, Heath and Li do call our attention to the increased significance of the City of London as a global financial center. They speak of this restructuring reinvigorating the economy and major renovation projects such as Canary Wharf, which attracted “inward investment, and high-skill inward migration” “and led to the growth of London’s population” (p. 10). Much more could have been said and has been said about the implications of this form of urban regeneration for people around the world and the ongoing relationships

between neoliberal dispossession and migration (Delgado Wise 2021; Watt 2013).

In the UK, neoliberal reorganizations and development projects, beginning with Thatcherism and continued through New Labor and Tory governments, have created massive shifts in wealth, health outcomes and educational disparities, not only in greater London but in the UK and globally. Forms of capital accumulation through dispossession took the form of privatization of housing, public services, public spaces and public transport.² These changes generated political angers among those displaced by this massive shift of wealth and power to the London-based financial elite. Migrants were part of this reorganization in every aspect – within the financial industries, tourist industries, as international students and scholars, health care workers from administrators to cleaners, and as politicians. They were among the dispossessors and the dispossessed.

And that set the state for Brexit, the rallying of populist angers by a political elite whose agenda only included intensification of same dispossessive processes (Favell 2020). Not addressed in this paper or fully evaluated yet, given the ongoing pandemic disruptions, is the full effect of stripping London and the UK of its migrant workers – since both unskilled and anyone but the highly paid face almost insurmountable difficulties obtaining work visas that lead to permanent settlement. Yet short-term migrants continue to provide highly exploited labor through short-term contracts. These changes in visa policy predate but have been intensified by Brexit. At the same time, there is also a complex shrinkage of higher education – including cuts in the amount of government subsidies for higher education loans. The privatization of British higher education was from the start a gift to the financial industry and an extraction of wealth from those struggling to secure an education for upward mobility or to maintain middle-class standing. While old class analysis is inadequate to the current situation in London or the UK, we certainly need to develop an analysis of those dispossessed of housing, access to education, access to decent health care or elder care, and increasingly to adequate heat or food. These dispossessed, who I call a dispossariat rather than a precariat, consist of both migrants and non-migrants, who are being pitted against each other (Glick Schiller 2021).

In making these comments, I have built on the multiscalar approach to migrants as city makers that Ayşe Çağlar and I (Çağlar and Glick Schiller 2021, 2018; Glick Schiller 2021, 2018, 2015, 2012; Glick Schiller and Çağlar 2009, 2011, 2016), have developed over the past 20 years, in a creative reading of a range of critical geographers including Neil Brenner (2019); Gillian Hart (2002, 2018) and David Harvey (2005, 2012). In the course of

our work, we have been making five points which I will use to summarize the points I raised in this discussion paper.

1. Cites are not units of analysis but entry points within multiscale networks of disparate economic, political and cultural power.
2. Cites are produced by agentive networked actors including migrants. One generation's natives were past generations internal and international migrants.
3. Cites are made by migrants and categories of internal or international may not be the most relevant approach to city making.
4. Cites are produced within networked processes of capital accumulation that extend across space and time. These processes remake our worlds.
5. Currently all cities are now global but in different ways.

In looking to further discussion of London and other, it would be helpful to build on two points raised by Raul Delgado Wise (this volume). First of all, he reminds us to look beyond the city to the city region to which populations are being displaced and to the larger global capitalist system that frames urban growth, decline and possibilities. Secondly, Delgado Wise highlights the importance of saying a better urban future and world is possible but not within the current organizations of wealth and power. We must build on the sociabilities and aspirations for social justice of those being dispossessed to build movements to save the planet and each other.

Notes

1. As in the United Kingdom (UK), migrants in the United States have faced the barriers of racialization and discrimination but have also been city makers throughout US history. This included African Americans, initially as enslaved labour and then as internal migrants. The contrast Heath and Li (2023, 8) make to the US through passing references to Warner and Srole's (1945) discussion of ethnic succession or their mention of "ethnic segregation" in cities such as New York or Los Angeles' provides a distorted comparison of the diversity of London as compared to a ghettoized US cities.
2. Populations in the North of the England were told not to hope for tax redistribution but to move to London. Housing benefits were cut as property values soared pushing working- and middle-class people out of their housing in England, even as the global city status of London was celebrated. Regeneration and sports venues, as elsewhere in the path of Olympics, led to few jobs and increased public debt.

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