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Ambivalent Transnationalism: Class, Gender, and Nova Scotia Nominees

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Ambivalent Transnationalism: Class, Gender, and Nova Scotia Nominees

Catherine Bryan

Abstract

Drawing on the narratives of recent immigrants to Canada who arrived through the Investor/Business Stream on the Nova Scotia Nominee Program, this paper focuses on the interaction among migration, class, and gender in relation to the cosmopolitan identities and aspirations. Attracted to Canada for its pluralism and relative gender equality, the members of this group of elite migrants seek to contribute to and participate in Canadian society. Their aspirations, however, are limited by rapid downward class mobility, caused by inadequate employment opportunities and the constraints of "Canadian Experience". The result is their unexpected reliance on familial, social, and business networks in and from the country of origin. From this emerges a sort of ambivalent transnationalism, in which migrants wish to establish themselves first and foremost as Canadians (in a multicultural and cosmopolitan Canada) but due to a number of obstacles (both implicit and explicit) cannot. The strategies used to mitigate these obstacles are highly gendered and, in many instances, undermine their migration objectives.

Keywords: immigration, Nova Scotia Nominee program, gender, transnationalism

Introduction

This paper focuses on some of the gendered consequences of immigration strategies and policies predicated on economic objectives. It draws on ethnographic field work¹ completed in Halifax with recent immigrants to Nova Scotia and highlights the interaction among migration, class, and gender in relation to the cosmopolitan identities of participants. Attracted to Canada for its pluralism and relative gender equality, this group of migrants - men and women alike - sought to contribute to and participate in Canadian society - indeed, to live and engage with difference. Their aspirations, however, were limited by rapid downward class mobility caused by inadequate employment opportunities and the constraints of "Canadian experience". The result was an unexpected reliance on familial, social, and business networks in their country of origin. From this emerges a sort of ambivalent transnationalism, in which migrants wish to establish themselves first and foremost as Canadians (in a multicultural Canada) but due to a number of obstacles are unable to do so. The strategies used to mitigate these obstacles tended to be highly gendered and, following from them, the gendered objectives of migration - increased mobility, opportunity, and security for female family members - were undermined.

This paper begins with an overview of the migrant sample and a discussion of the context in which they had arrived in Nova Scotia. Drawing on the concept of cosmopolitanism, the second section discusses the migrants' objectives - framed in terms of class and gender - in coming to Canada and highlights the extent to which these objectives have gone unmet. The final section relies on a *slight* reconceptualization of transnationality. Here, the transnationalism experienced by the sample is labelled "ambivalent" in the sense that it is more profound than was anticipated. In other words, while the migrants' intention was never to sever ties with their respective homelands and while a transnational identity was both expected and desired, the breadth of these ties was unexpected. This section concludes with a discussion of the gendered consequences of this "ambivalent" transnationalism. In so doing, it emphasizes the correlation between immigration policy that seeks to attract particular kinds of migrants (those with high levels of social and human capital), class, and gender.

Features of the migrant sample and context of immigration

1 Data for this analysis were collected under the auspices of "Who comes, who stays, and at what cost?: An ethnographic and political analysis of Nova Scotia's Provincial Nominee Program", a study conducted by Dr. Pauline Gardner Barber (Department of Social Anthropology and Sociology, Dalhousie University, Halifax, Nova Scotia) and Dr. Alexandra Dobrowolsky (Department of Political Science, Saint Mary's University, Halifax, Nova Scotia).

The migrant sample consisted of 17 newly arrived migrants to Halifax, Nova Scotia. Countries of origin were Korea, the Philippines, Iran, Turkey, and China, with the majority from Iran. The migrants came to Canada through the Nova Scotia Nominee Program (NSNP). Provincial Nominee Programs (PNPs) represent a shift in Canadian immigration policy. Before the late 1990s, immigration was largely the responsibility of the federal government. Under the PNPs, provinces can attract and nominate potential migrants for permanent resettlement (Carter, Morrish & Amoyaw, 2008). Potential migrants, once accepted by the province, are nominated to Citizenship and Immigration Canada, which makes the final decision on their applications. The PNPs provide provinces with the flexibility to tailor immigration policy and programs to meet local labour market needs.

Following the success of PNPs across the country, the NSNP was implemented in 2005. Initially, the NSNP comprised three streams under which potential migrants could apply for permanent residency: skilled worker, community-identified individual, and economic². In 2006, a further stream for family business workers was created, followed in 2007 by one for international students (Dobrowolsky, 2009). The migrants (hereafter referred to as *nominees*) interviewed for this study all arrived in Nova Scotia under the economic stream (herein called the *business/investor stream*), which was cancelled in 2006 after considerable controversy. The stated objective of the NSNP is to meet Nova Scotia's social and economic needs by attracting qualified migrants who would bring their expertise, experience, and financial capital to the province. To achieve this purpose, the business/investor stream recruited individuals with high levels of human, social, and financial capital. To qualify, nominees had to pay a fee of \$130,000, most of which was given to Nova Scotian companies that had agreed to serve as mentors. For many of the nominees, the mentorship program, which was to include a six-month middle management work term, did not go as planned; a number of the nominees were assigned positions well below their skill level, and, as was the case for those interviewed, many were not placed at all (OAG, 2008)³.

Much of the critique of the PNPs, and of the NSNP in particular, has focused on their economic imperatives. PNP logic emphasizes migration as an inevitable process based on individual choices and the

2 Given the economist logic and labour market imperatives of the NSNP, the category "economic stream" is somewhat misleading. In a sense, it implies that the other streams are not economic in focus, while in fact they are. More precisely, then, the classification "economic" under the NSNP refers to a business class/investor stream in which applicants had to have a particular skill set (upper management experience) and certain levels of capital to qualify. While the term "economic" was employed by the NSNP and by the Office of Auditor General of Nova Scotia in their respective 2008 reports, this paper will use the term "business/investor" when referring to this stream of the NSNP.

3 Following a review by the auditor general, the NSNP was cancelled, and nominees became eligible to receive a refund of their application fee. However, the refund was contingent on the nominee remaining in Nova Scotia for one year.

features of the receiving country that make immigration desirable. These features are defined in terms of labour market prospects and economic opportunities. capitalize on this process by recruiting and securing the most economically viable migrants: those who are able to secure the means necessary to migrate but who do so to improve their economic standing either through finding higher paid employment, investing in an existing Canadian business, or establishing a new business. The class bias of the NSNP business/investor stream is more immediately apparent relative to other streams of the program as nominees who could pay the \$130, 000 fee were effectively fast-tracked through the immigration process. As Dobrowolsky argued, the economist logic of the program was “conspicuous not only in terms of the institutions and actors involved, but also the ideas and political strategies to which they were committed” (Dobrowolsky, 2009, p. 21).

The gender bias is perhaps less explicit but no less there, reflected in the fact that the vast majority of principal applicants of the economic stream were male, with women arriving as spouses or dependants. That women generally tend to be relatively disadvantaged economically, the business/investor stream represented a masculinized immigration category (Dobrowolsky, 2009). Furthermore, the strategies employed by some nominees to mitigate the failure of the program and their inability to find employment yielded highly gendered outcomes: women were charged with additional household and family responsibilities, while men continued to work in the country of origin. Such arrangements were far from ideal and certainly not expected. In fact, in many instances, they were fundamentally discordant with the objectives of the nominees. While diverse, the objectives of the nominees can be conceptualized in relation to a particular kind of cosmopolitanism cultivated and pursued by the participants.

Cosmopolitan dispositions, class aspirations, and gender equality

Cosmopolitanism represents a disembedding of agency and imagination from local or national contexts and a movement toward a global society founded on cultural hybridity and fluidity (Beck & Sznaider, 2006; Delanty, 2006). The subjects of cosmopolitanism, *Cosmopolitans* are individuals who assume a position of “openness” towards difference: people, things, and experiences that originate in locations different from their own. And while this openness is often circumscribed or even superficial (Skrbis & Woodward, 2007), it informs how a growing number of people globally understand themselves in relation to others. This movement toward openness can be linked to the tactile experiences of globalization - the proliferation of various sorts of virtual, imaginative, or corporeal mobilities (Skrbis &

Woodward, 2007), as well as rhetorical potency of globalization (Kelly, 2000).

The 17 nominees interviewed can be regarded as having a particular disposition toward cosmopolitanism. Before arriving in Canada, many several of the nominees had lived outside of their countries of origin, all had travelled extensively, and all had vast transnational kinship and social networks. As a result, they had developed significant cultural competencies and felt an affinity towards ways of life different from their own. Migration to Canada was understood as an extension and expansion of their cosmopolitanism; access to Canadian citizenship and a Canadian passport would facilitate travel, thereby making the world far more accessible to them and their children. But for many, Canada represented an opportunity to engage with a difference not just during travels but on an ongoing basis. In this way, Canada as a multicultural and, indeed, cosmopolitan place loomed large in their imaginations.

Class aspirations were equally present. While employment was not the primary reason for migration for the nominees interviewed, it was regarded as the obvious outcome. Men and women alike expected to find employment comparable to that held in their country of origin. Class emerges as an important feature of the ongoing debate concerning cosmopolitanism: is it the prerogative of the global elite, those who are easily mobile with high levels of capital, or is it an attitude, a way of living in the world, open to all (Werbner, 1999). The manner in which many of the nominees engaged in cosmopolitanism was very much linked to their status as global elites (*see* Woodward, Skrbis & Bean, 2008); their interactions with difference and their understandings of *the global* appeared to be predicated on an appreciation of western liberalism and capitalist economics - their decision to come to Canada informed by a desire to be more fully integrated into that socioeconomic system. This integration occurred unevenly across the group, with many of the nominees remaining unemployed for extended periods of time⁴ after landing. Many of the nominees expressed dismay at their situations because they believed their cosmopolitanism - embedded in class privilege and a specific set of values deemed “liberal” - would mitigate the challenges of immigration, notably under- and unemployment.

In addition to the expectation of lucrative, meaningful employment, the nominees arrived in Canada with particular expectations about the integration and participation of female family members.

4 At the time of the interviews, only one (male) of the 17 nominees had found employment comparable to what was held before his arrival in Canada. Three nominees were in little hurry to find employment, while the remaining 13 were considerably distressed over their unemployment. This was expressed in terms of concern over financial security but also class status and self-image. The unemployed nominees had unsuccessfully been looking for work for six months to two years.

Gender has emerged as a consideration for both conventional and more critical accounts of migration. In much of the literature, it is anticipated that women's resocialization in national contexts viewed to be more "progressive" will result not only in the empowerment of individual female migrants but also in the transmission of more equitable understandings of gender and the sexual division of labour in the country of origin (Fouron & Glick Schiller, 2001; Pessar & Mahler, 2003). Further, while much of the work on women's migration focuses on the decisions of individual women in relation to emancipation from traditional gender roles, little research has been done on the extent to which gender equity informs the migration decision-making of heterosexual couples and families.

For many of these nominees, the decision to leave the country of origin was tied to restrictions placed on the mobility of women, and, in this way, migration became a means of redressing gender inequality. The value of gender equality was understood in terms of a universalism that can be attributed to both their cosmopolitan dispositions and their liberalism. That female partners and children were unable to access the opportunities and rights of their male counterparts in the country of origin was - for some - reason enough to leave. It is important to note, however, that while the promise of enhanced gender equality motivated the migration of many of the nominees, the female partners of the men interviewed and the women interviewed had, with few exceptions, been employed in the country of origin. Most held middle management positions, and it was believed that this experience would help them overcome the limitations of gender-stratified labour markets in Canada (*see* Boyd & Pikkov, 2008).

In the country of origin, because both men and women tended to work long hours⁵, domestic work, including child care, was often delegated to female domestic labour and female family members. Although not directly involved, nominee women were typically responsible for the management of social reproductive tasks, such as child care, elder care, cleaning, and cooking, within the home. In this way, these tasks remained gendered not only in terms of who performed them (hired domestic labour or female family members) but in terms of who managed them (the nominee woman). In the absence of paid household labour and kin in Canada, nominee families hoped, in some instances, to renegotiate the conditions of the patriarchal household, with men and women and male and female children alike engaging equally in a variety of household duties.

Canada, then, represented for a number of participants possible upward mobility coupled with

5 Both the men and women interviewed described incredibly long working weeks. This coupled with lengthy travel times to and from work (all participants lived in large urban centres) meant that time spent with children or on household responsibilities was extremely limited.

enhanced gender equality. Cosmopolitanism had facilitated their move, motivating them to seek out new opportunities, and was regarded as an asset that would expedite the processes of resettlement and integration. However, the hoped for outcomes of migration were unevenly attained, with most participants unemployed and forced to rely on familial, social, and business networks in and from the country of origin. Moreover, what appears to have happened in some instances is a re-establishment of normative gender roles in Canada as men returned to the country of origin to work, the one vital difference being the heightened spatial divide between social reproduction that occurs in Canada and production or income generation that occurs in the country of origin.

Ambivalent transnationalism and the outcomes of migration

Transnationalism represents the ongoing connection among people, ideas, and things across national borders (Basch, Glick Schiller & Szanton, 1994). It differs from cosmopolitanism in that it is the “emerging reality of social life under the conditions of globalization,” as opposed to the subjective feelings or attitudes individuals or groups may have toward that reality (Roudometof, 2005). The nominees interviewed all anticipated continued ties to their countries of origin. Some, by virtue of having already lived abroad or by the migration of family members, already belonged to vast transnational networks. Further, while many of the nominees came from relatively privileged families, most spoke of providing some financial support to family members. All nominees spoke of regular visits to the country of origin, in some cases to provide respite for siblings caring for elderly parents, but in other instances for vacation. All remained interested in and informed of the political situation in their home countries, and all kept in regular contact (through email or by phone) with friends and family. In other words, the question here is not whether the nominees would remain connected but rather to what extent.

Unable to access the purported benefits of the NSNP business/investor stream (gaining necessary Canadian work experience and making contacts with professionals in their fields of expertise) or secure employment, most of the nominees engaged in a variety of modified survival strategies that spanned great distances and relied on familial, social, and business networks in the country of origin. For some, this meant continued employment in the country of origin, a strategy effective in cases in which one family income earner - typically the male partner/parent - had been able to maintain employment in the country of origin. In these cases, the migrant's spouse - typically the female partner/parent - and children remained in Nova Scotia living on money earned not in Canada, as anticipated, but in the country of origin. The

strategy itself is gendered, no doubt drawing on divisions of reproductive and productive labour in the country of origin; however, it is also predicated on access to employment in the country of origin. Take, for example, one couple from Iran; she was a doctor who sold her practice before leaving for Canada, while he was a businessman. He is far more able to re-establish himself professionally in Iran and, perhaps most importantly according to the male participant, can do so independently. Although living apart is not ideal, it represents the partial attainment of the goals of migration: the female partner and children's security.

The outcome of this strategy is equally gendered. Female partner/parents, who may have been income earners in the country of origin, yet were unable to secure employment in Nova Scotia, became fully responsible for the day-to-day responsibilities of social reproduction and household management in Nova Scotia. Their roles were, in essence, reconstituted within the traditional sexual division of labour. For some, this meant assuming responsibility for work that had previously been done by domestic labour or family. This, of course, compromised the awaited outcome of migration - increased mobility for female family members and, in a sense, served to diminish the autonomy achieved through paid employment in the country of origin. Furthermore, separated from their children, nominee men were not afforded the opportunity to engage in family and domestic life as they had hoped for. For both men and women, then, normative gender roles were reassigned and reinforced by the circumstances of resettlement.

For those families with no Canadian employment and no income possibilities in the country of origin, migration has meant drawing heavily on savings and relying on the financial support of family (siblings and parents) in the country of origin. Through this, we can observe an explicit reversal of the expected flow of remittances as both migrant and money flow in the same direction: away from the country of origin and into Canada. Frequently, the relationship between migration and remittance-sending is understood in terms of neutrality and balance: people flow to capital-rich destinations, and capital, through the remittance process, flows back to the country of origin, presumably a capital-poor country (Binford, 2003; De Haas, 2005). Such depictions, however, fail to account for the challenges migrants may face on arrival (*see* Reitz, 2007) as nominees in Canada became the recipients rather than senders of remittances. The result for most of these families was a decrease in living standard. No longer “global elites,” many of this group of nominees and their families live the lives of unemployed migrants. In this sense, the class aspirations of this group were largely curtailed.

Conclusion

The NSNP business/investor stream sought to capitalize on the experiences and assets of a specific class of cosmopolitan subject. Yet, the cosmopolitanism that facilitated migration through the NSNP did not help the nominees resettle and integrate as planned. Despite prolonged attempts to find work, many nominees- at the time of the interviews - were unemployed. Because of this, most experienced rapid downward class mobility and were compelled to rely on income generated in the country of origin. Predicated on more conventional divisions of reproductive and productive labour, this strategy undermined the efforts of some nominee families to achieve a more balanced division of household labour. Furthermore, one of the anticipated outcomes of migration - increased mobility and opportunities for female family members - was impeded. What emerges from their experiences is therefore a kind of ambivalent transnationalism whereby the financial and employment connections many nominees maintained with their countries of origin were unexpected and unwanted. These outcomes are important to highlight as they underscore the social ramifications of immigration programs geared explicitly to economic ends. The focus on the economic potential of migrants, both in Canadian immigration policy generally and more specifically in the case of the economic stream of the NSNP, serves to downplay, if not negate, their inherent humanity. The nominees interviewed arrived in Canada with expertise, experience, and capital but also with a set of objectives related to how they understood themselves and their place in the world. Sadly, for many these objectives have gone unmet.

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