

## **Preface: Hundreds of millions in suspension**

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A sojourner desires to return. A migrant plans to settle down. A transient moves on. The centre of a sojourner's world is the home; the centre of a migrant's world is their destination; the world of a transient is the world itself. While a sojourn is a typical pre-modern form of mobility, and migration is associated with the era of the nation state and citizenship, transient mobility became prevalent in the globalizing world of the twenty-first century, though it has by no means weakened the institution of the nation state.

All transient migrants are temporary migrants, but not all temporary migrants are transients. A temporary migrant may become a permanent settler, but a transient is forced to move on (for instance, as an unskilled contract worker) or refuses to stay (for instance, as a highly paid expatriate). Transient migration is temporary not only in the sense that it is not permanent, but in that it is *against* permanency.

Transient migration is supposed to be short-lived, ephemeral, leaving minimal marks in the local society. Transients are not even second-class citizens; they are simply not supposed to be related to the host population at all. Horizontal relations between natives and migrants are replaced by their separate, vertical relations to the globe. Destinations like Singapore and Dubai, for instance, rely on transient migrants to maintain their status as global cities, and transient migrants are imagined to pursue their careers in the global labour market in different sectors. Once concrete, direct social connections now give way to parallel relations mediated by an imagined globe and concerns about marginalization, while exclusion and discrimination have also become irrelevant ('They are here for two years only, what kind of integration can you expect?'). As everything supposedly goes global, the national and the

local are emptied out. Not only is formal citizenship inaccessible, but informal citizenship – the social solidarity that develops from daily interactions – is also curtailed.

Transient migrants are highly diverse. They range from highly paid experts to construction workers, domestic maids to intracompany transfers, seafarers to tourists – yet they all share this structural (non-)position. Transient migrants have become indispensable for many societies, but each transient migrant is by definition disposable. The scale is phenomenal. Rural-urban migrants in China – who cannot settle down in cities due to the household registration system and therefore constitute a special internally transient population – are 120 million strong alone. Is it not a peculiarity of our times that an economically vital population of such size could become socially suspended and politically irrelevant? Yet this is the charm of transient migration for many governments. Circular migration – the most popular form of transient labour migration – is said to bring a win-win-win scenario: unemployment reduction for the origin countries; cheap labour for destination economies; and jobs for migrants. We have this impossibly happy condition because it decouples economic development from political participation and social changes; smooth growth without social reordering.

The increase in transient migration is not only a result of economic deregulation and advances in mass transportation, it is directly caused by the sophistication of regulation. Just think of the numerous types of visas that classify to an ever finer degree who should enter the country, under what conditions, for which jobs and for how long. Upon arrival, many transients are sent to guarded dormitories, have their passports taken by an employer or recruitment agent, and are required to leave the country upon contract termination. Hypermobility is interlaced with forced immobility. The privileged ones are not forced to be transients, but their mobility is also dependent on and conditioned by various regulations and institutions. Without the state-of-the-art airports, high-end serviced apartments and exclusive

expat clubs, the mobile elite would not be able to hop around the world as smoothly as they do. They can get in and out of places with such ease because of the social bubbles that distance them from the local society. In sum, transient migrants are transient not because they are neglected; on the contrary, they are actively suspended – lifted up from the ground and held in the air, so to speak, by an ever-expanding state-corporate apparatus.

Uplifting is not uprooting; suspension is not displacement. Transient migrants' lives are often tightly encapsulated. At the same time, transient migrants often fare better than many others, such as sweatshop workers, peasants, refugees and illegal migrants. Moreover, transient migration has undoubtedly improved the living standards of millions of households worldwide. But suspension disables the countermovement precisely because it is not displacement. Uprooting, displacement and dispossession have historically brought about great international proletarian solidarity. The suspended, however, face unprecedented challenges in developing political positions. Since they take no position, they cannot be an opposition either: suspension is de-positioning.

The response to de-positioning has to be repositioning; not by resuming lost positions, but by creating new ones. New positions must be derived from practices while simultaneously transcending individual experience. As a first step, we need visions – systematic and accurate accounts that delineate how transient migrations have come about as part of the world that we inhabit; that explore what kinds of potentialities are being borne in the processes of transient migrations; and which propose where our concerns and hopes should lie. While it is important to pay full attention to individual agency, it is also worth remembering that transient migrants themselves, like any other labouring population, are not particularly interested in how ingenious they are or how they suffer in every day – what they want to know is why and how they are compelled to act in particular ways, and what their life means to the world and history. Migrants want a vision that positions for themselves. We

should of course let their voices be heard and attempt to see the world as they see it, but an even more important task is to help them articulate their voice, their vision. Only by doing this can we resist the global trend of de-positioning and begin attaining new positions.

### **Contributor's details**

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