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Mapping Migration: Contemporary European Policy Debate and the History of Nation-State Interventions in the Movement of Labor

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Abstract:

On November 30th, 2014 The Independent (a British newspaper) reported that British Prime Minister David Cameron had “been forced to retreat” from Conservative Party members’ earlier call for “caps” on immigration. Cameron’s parliamentary speech addressed immigration to the United Kingdom from European Union member states. While expectations from Conservative MPs had included a call for “caps” on all migrants, Cameron instead called for “tougher and longer re-entry bans for all those who abuse freedom of movement including beggars, rough sleepers, fraudsters and people who collude in sham marriages.” He differentiated between “desirable” and “undesirable” immigrant labor. Conservative European policy makers argue that contemporary migration of people seeking work throughout Europe is unprecedented and threatens to overwhelm national resources without a “Cameronian” distinction. The contemporary rhetoric about “freedom of movement” for “desirable and undesirable labor,” however, has its origin in the rise of centralized government in the Early Modern era. The link between renaissance English fears of “masterless men,” “sturdy beggars,” “traveling rogues” and “unsettled” or “displaced” labor is well documented (see Fumerton, Slack, Kunze, McIntosh, Brundage, Clark et al.) and matches rhetoric about “those who abuse freedom of movement.”

The research that we propose will address historical immigration policy, enforcement, and rhetoric for comparison with contemporary labor-migration issues and rhetoric. We – Ruth Bjorkenwall, Kaijsa Calkins (UWYO libraries), and I – are collaborating on a project to assemble a digital database on the history of labor and state interventions in labor migration – or “freedom of movement.” We will use interdisciplinary approaches to present the data: historical analysis, sociological analysis, and library digital cataloguing, and the material would be housed (for now) on the (closed) UWYO server. The database would be used across disciplines by University of Wyoming faculty and students for studying the history of labor, labor laws, poor laws, labor migration, poverty, state welfare, state power, and the “moral policing” of work, movement, and wages and their impact (or lack thereof) on current EU policy debates. This digital archive could also be used as a teaching/mentoring resource for web publishing, web curating, and web exhibiting skills for University of Wyoming students. Ultimately, our goal is to create a research tool based at the University of Wyoming that would be used and recognized as an international resource for policy makers and researchers. In addition to using the research for an electronic archive, we are also currently working with an editor at Lexington Books (an imprint of Rowman and Littlefield publishing group) on a co-edited book on the history of state management of labor mobility as part of Lexington’s “labor history” series.

My contribution to the project is to document the link between specific laws and instances of their selective enforcement restricting/policing the mobility of the most “valuable” labor pool of young men. Men between the ages of 14 and 40 during the 16th and 17th century in England were the highest paid class of “casual” labor. This body of “unskilled” labor was rightfully regarded as having the most potential for violence and disruption in law and the public consciousness but also reflected a necessary agricultural and military resource for the state. As changes and challenges in the early modern economy necessitated alterations in government
financing and taxation, the bureaucratic “paper surveillance” of potential labor resources increased apace with these adaptations. England’s National Archive and the British Library in London, UK contain records of migration, legislation, and population movement data on these changes. I will use these archives to collect material for the database.

Ruth’s work examines the free movement of labor across European national borders, but the time, place, economic conditions, and prevailing ideology and practices are different. It focuses on the 1954 agreement on a joint Nordic labor market between Denmark, Iceland, Norway, and Sweden, which Finland joined in 1955. The Nordic Labour Journal, published by Norway’s Work Research Institute, which is commissioned by the Nordic Council of Ministers, calls this common labor market “the jewel in the Nordic cooperation.” It “became a success with citizens” with its “greatest impact,” the journal reported in May 2014 in its celebration of the 60-year-old agreement, “on the relationship between Finland and Sweden.” The Nordic “project’s boldness” was, furthermore, “linked to a belief in a planned economy.”

Ruth’s preliminary research indicates a more complex situation than current EU policy arguments over free-labor-movement benefits and costs for European Union member states indicate. The Nordic celebratory retrospective of the supposedly successful joint labor market and macro-level cooperation that began in 1954 does not address the reality of all its migrant workers. Ruth’s research addresses human-security concerns such as health costs to migrants rather than addressing financial costs to states. In her Nordic case-study project, she focuses instead on the micro level and the Finnish workers who migrated to work at the Kiruna iron mine in northern Sweden beginning in the mid-1950s. These were unskilled laborers who moved from a fairly similar economy and language environment as many natives in Kiruna spoke (and still speak) Meiänkieli, a Finnish-Swedish cognate language. Jan Saarela and Fjalar Finnäs (2007), on the Finnish “adjustment failures” to immigration, note that, in general, [i]migrants from Finland, and specifically male ones, have been found to have elevated risks of cause-specific diseases and deaths … . The data … reveal that mortality of Finnish immigrants in Sweden is higher than of the population in Finland, as well as of native Swedes … .” Human costs to immigrant individuals – such as those of Finnish immigrants in Sweden – are often neglected in current EU discussions on migration labor. Ruth will research archives in the Stockholm Royal Library and public records in the city of Kiruna as well as labor union records for documentation on Finnish migration to Kiruna under the Nordic Labor Agreement.