Neo-assimilationist citizenship and belonging policies in Britain: meanings for transnational migrants in northern England

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Aims

The paper contributes to debates on the relationships between citizenship and migration in the United Kingdom context in the light of recent changes in UK immigration policy. In particular, it focuses on the question of what an increasingly neo-assimilationist state articulation of national belonging means for transnational migrants living in Britain. The research was funded by the British Academy.

Methodology

The project carried out 20 biographical interviews within 10

families of Somali and Kenyan origin; one parent and one child generation interview in each family. Three focus groups were also conducted within the 2 communities, organised by gender and age where appropriate. All of the first generation participants have lived in Britain for between 5 and 40 years, and their ages range from 40 to 60s. Interviews were carried out during 2008-2009 in Yorkshire and Humber.

Key issues

The evolving nature of citizenship conceptualisations in Western neoliberal contexts and how Britain has responded to this shifting landscape. The context is one of enhanced ‘migration securitisation’ wherein the state implies that the integrity of the nation state and its security can only be assured if migration flows and migrants themselves are closely controlled and monitored. This has led to Britain attempting to bolster the formal institution of citizenship [with its attendant rights and responsibilities] and tie it more explicitly to notions of belonging to the nation.

Conclusions

Transnational migrants’ feelings of belonging often exist in tension with neo-assimilationist policies designed to promote a core national identity. Transnational migrants commonly experience simultaneity in their feelings of belonging to different places as a result of being ‘here and there’ and ‘straddling worlds’. This leaves them unable to unilaterally identify as

‘British’ or to feel singular emotional belonging to the nation.

Recommendations

This paper urges greater theoretical attention to the ways in which citizenship and belonging are constituted through emotions. Scholars should not only explore how migrants’ emotional subjectivities emerge in response to citizenship governance, but also countenance the possibility that transnational migrant emotional subjectivities may develop in spite of state neo-assimilationist invocations of national belonging within overarching frameworks of ‘neoliberal citizenship’.

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