

Categorisation(s) and Migrations

“Immigrant”, “alien”, “refugee”, “emigrant”, “primary migrant”, “second generation”, “asylum seeker”, “undocumented”, “flows” or “stocks” are words meant to explain migratory processes. They are both practical categories being used by actors in the migration field, including both policy-makers and individuals, and analytical categories for researchers in order to label migrations. These two fields should be distinguished. Moreover, historical, social, political, as well as cultural processes at stake in the construction of these categories should be questioned.

Here we use the term “categorisation” (rather than the fixed term “category”) as “a process which tends to organise the world in terms of categories (groups of people, objects, events), and to label them.”

Categorisation may introduce a notion of stigmatisation, of valorisation, or simply be neutral. But it may also be instrumentalised by the parties involved in order to obtain advantages, or to be used to develop a so-called “ethnic economy”. In addition, it may be the product of destination society (in this case the category is defined by an out-group), or the outcome of the migrants (in this case the category is self-defined).

Categorisation can emanate from legislative, legal, statistic authorities (illegal immigrants, political refugees, etc), or it can involve social connotations (the indian “bazaars” or “moros” shopkeepers in Barcelona). Moreover, researchers use some categories considered as to be academic, for instance “diaspora”, “transnational communities”, “minority”. Sometimes, the categories used by some groups are taken over by other social actors : the so-called “sans papiers” in France was a legal category and became an object of social mobilisation ; the term “wetback” originally assumed that a individual got his back wet while swimming across the Rio Grande to get illegally into the United States, but it saw official use by the U.S. Government in 1954 with “Operation Wetback”.

In all these cases, the terms used to label populations always imply presuppositions and consequences. As a result, the production of categories has political, material, and symbolic effects in migrants’ lives and destination societies.

Indeed, categories virtually constitute a paradox: whereas they are by definition a moving population, the categories used to speak of migrants also fix them. These categories can be then perceived as a yoke. The conference proposes to think further about these categories, from the very origin of words to their implications for migrants’ lives and for destination or origin societies.

The conference is interdisciplinary and therefore appeals for theoretical studies as well as case studies of categorisations in the migration field are welcome. We are particularly interested in including a range of papers dealing with different geographic areas.

Propositions should not exceed 900 words and should be addressed to the following email: migrations@yahoo.fr, before December 15, 2007. **Please save your documents as Format Word or RTF with your name and surname.**