Windows: The 21st-Century Migration Experience
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If migrants in the 19th and early 20th centuries remembered migration primarily as physical journeys that were marked by the smell of the ship, the sound of the train, and the heat of the desert, their 21st-century counterparts may experience migration as dealing with various windows: the window for visa application, the window at the immigration checkpoint, and the windows on the computer screen for booking appointments, submitting information, and applying for verifications of documents.

Migration is no longer pursued or regulated 'on the road', but is done so 'through the window'. As Adam McKeown (2008) has established clearly, while migratory journeys were the main target of the US regulation of immigration in the 19th century, by the turn of the 20th century the policy focus had decidedly shifted to the migrant's identity as proved by documents at checkpoints (the window).

In contrast to Georg Simmel's (1997) meditation which took bridge and door as central symbols of social divide and connectedness, Catherine Liu (2011) suggests that in the contemporary era, 'disembodied and virtual freedom and trespass have made the window a critical feature in thinking about differentiation and separation'. The physical movement of a body across a borderline may have become a rather insignificant moment in international migration, whereas what happens at the windows can be far more consequential.

Central to such 'through the window' management is the idea of multi-two-dimensionality. This form of migration management is two-dimensional in the sense that the interaction between regulator and regulated is confined to clearly defined interfaces, based on information prepared and presented in designated manners, especially in flat forms and tables. The interaction aims to reach an unambiguous conclusion: approve or reject, yes or no. It allows for no contingency or grey zone. Would-be migrants need to 'flatten' themselves into a particular shape or shade in order to pass scrutiny.

Two-dimensionality creates a sense of transparency and predictability. Kafkaesque gates, which condemn people to endless waiting in the dark and block communication and mobility, are no longer acceptable in the liberal world. In contrast, windows allow for partial freedom and negotiation space. Windows do not aim to block mobility, but seek to screen, differentiate and channel mobility. In this sense the window may be a more accurate metaphor than the gate for contemporary international borders. Unlike a gate that is either open or shut, the border is both open *and* closed.

Two-dimensionalisation is not a new phenomenon; it is an integral part of modernity. Bureaucratic forms, legal files and statistical tabulations are all about flattening. Flattening makes individuals legible to the state and governable from the center (Scott, 1998). But the window is somehow different. A window does not flatten the world itself into two-dimensional presentations. A window view is not an aerial view, or a representation of cadastral maps, nor does it 'collapse the life of each person into a single point, which is connected to other such points by lines' as lineage trees entail (Ingold 2000). The two-dimensionality of the window is a specific means of interaction in the multi-dimensional world. Instead of fixing fluid reality, windows are like the buttons that engineers press in order to move intricate machines, or dams that are strategically placed on rivers to regulate the unruly water.

The two-dimensionality of windows is always multi-two-dimensionality. Windows have to work with other windows. Effective regulation over mobility must create and monitor the linkages between the passport, the visa, domestic population registration, criminal records, migrant quotas, and so on. The interconnections between windows are systemic yet invisible. It is these connections that shape movements virtually and structurally, unlike what traffic police or border patrol teams do. Microsoft Windows – a system in which one two-dimensional interface leads to another in ways that seemingly follow the users' free will but are preconfigured – may become the ultimate (and perhaps most apt) symbol of how migration is managed and how we experience migration.

The window is thus not only about two-dimensionalisation. The key is the dialectics between 'flattening' and 'embedding', or between the processes of two-dimensionalisation and processes of creating multi-faceted connections. Things always start being multi-dimensional; it takes highly complex social processes to flatten them. Furthermore, in order for the flattened artifacts and relations to work, they must be related to each other and beyond in multi-dimensional ways.

The window resembles the Foucauldian notion of power – diffusive, invisible, ubiquitous and capillary-like – but it also gives definite shape to power. Windows are the strategic sites where authority is tangibly presented and power is directly exercised, experienced and negotiated. As such, the window not only presents a particular logic of how mobility is regulated, but also provides us with a methodological window through which power can be examined ethnographically and institutionally at the same time.

References

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