The legacy of empire: post-colonial immigrants in Western Europe

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The Legacy of Empire

Post-colonial immigrants in Western Europe.

Hans van Amersfoort

In the literature regarding immigration and immigrants in the various West European states, the label post-colonial migration and/or post-colonial immigrants is regularly used. The use of such a general label suggests that there is a fundamental similarity between this kind of migrations setting it apart from other migrations as for instance from Turkey to Germany. As is often the case with such general labels, this is partly true and at the same time partly misleading. It is therefore worthwhile to take a closer look at the characteristics of migration from former colonies to present day welfare states.

Migration during colonialism

It is obvious that there is a historical component in modern migration flows and that former colonial ties explain to some extent various migration flows. If we look for instance at the emigration from the Caribbean countries and territories, we see that Jamaicans migrate to the U.K., people from Martinique to France and from Surinam to the Netherlands. All these territories have economic and political circumstances conducive to out-migration, but the direction of the flows is strongly influenced by former colonial ties. However we must be careful not to neglect other factors, such as geographical nearness; there have for instance also been substantial flows between the Caribbean islands and the United States, when labour market developments created opportunities for immigrants. Migration to and from the colonies has been an essential aspect of colonialism. If we disregard the European colonists, service men and administrators, we still have to be aware of the migration of ‘colonial subjects’ towards the respective mother countries as sailors, domestic servants and with the development of an autochthonous middle class, students and educated professionals. The educational system in the colonies was strongly tuned to that of the mother country and thereby had directly or indirectly a profound influence on the elite, even while taking the lead later in anti-colonial movements. The pre-war migration of people with intellectuals/educated people with middle class status reached only relatively small numbers but when after World War II the migration scene changed substantially, this type of immigrants still formed an element in the post-colonial settlement that differentiates these immigrant populations from pure labour migration flows as we see for instance in the first decades of the guest-worker migration from the Mediterranean area to Western Europe.

Migration after colonialism

After the Second World War the age of colonialism came to an end. The former colonies became independent states; only a few small territories remained part of the mother country, normally in arrangements, which hardly can be classified as colonial. The end of the colonial relations between the various parts of the world brought the question to the fore what the implications of this development were for the population mobility between the former
colonies and their former mother countries. During the twentieth century migration has been increasingly regulated by measures of the nation states designed to control entry, residence (mostly defined as a stay longer than three months) and after the great economic depression of the nineteen thirties, work. Government by the people for the people made the divide between citizens and foreigners increasingly important and the right of abode became an aspect of citizenship and the question of citizenship became of the essence with respect to migration from the former colonies. Were the inhabitants of the former colonies to be regarded as citizens or at least as people who could claim citizenship rights? The answer given to this question has had great consequences for specific migration flows. When Indonesia became an independent republic the Eurasian population known as Indo’s were—after some hesitation—classified as Dutch citizens and migrated to the Netherlands. Even today, the inhabitants of the French Overseas Départements have French citizenship status, and the inhabitants of the Caribbean islands, which are still part of the Kingdom of the Netherlands, are Dutch citizens. Much more complicated were the rules applied by the U.K. The reconstruction of the former British Empire into an Old Commonwealth of white dominions and a New Commonwealth of post-colonial states was for years a sensitive political issue, because practical considerations (with regard to numbers e.g.) and more or less hidden racial attitudes were often combined. Also in the present day migration form the various Latin American countries towards Spain and Portugal the access to citizenship and /or privileged residence status plays an important role.

A specific aspect of the migration from former colonies towards Western Europe is therefore the legal status of these migrants that differs in many cases—or has differed in the recent past—from migrants who had no previous legal bonds with the host society. In general the receiving societies have tried to minimise and finally to end the regulations that gave post-colonial migrants (relatively) easy access to the country.

The social position of post-colonial immigrants.

The social position of immigrants from the former colonies was not only influenced by the legal status of these immigrants, but also by the ideas of race and colour that had been an intrinsic part of the ideological status hierarchy in the colonies. However complicated the relations between the European administration and indigenous elites in some colonies were, the basic principle of social classification has always been that white was superior to coloured. But racist idea’s were not only prevalent in the colonies themselves but also wide spread in Europe. Even among sections of the population for whom the colonial past had only been a distant experience, something out of the geography lessons at school, racist ideas were wide spread. When social scientists started to study the immigrants from the colonies, the experience of racial discrimination was their foremost concern, especially in Great Britain. It was reflected in the titles of their books such as White and Coloured and Dark Strangers. But also in other former mother countries the aspect of being visibly of “lower rank” played a role. It was, and still is, especially visible in cases of middle class immigrants, who are denied positions which match their qualifications on the basis of more or less open racist arguments. An altogether different, but nevertheless important consequence of colonial rule was the distorted image the indigenous populations had of life in the European countries. The only white people they knew were administrators and other people of substance. That the majority of the inhabitants of the mother countries were just ordinary workers and farmers had never been part of the picture they had of “white people”. When the migration from the former colonies to western Europe gained momentum, many immigrants testified of their surprise of
seeing white people as blue collar workers in factories, as farmers ploughing the land or milking cows. The twofold experience of racial discrimination and the need to come to realistic expectations with regard to their possibilities in the new country, sets the post-colonial immigrants somewhat apart from labour migrants in general.

However the differences between labour migrants with and without a colonial background should not be exaggerated, as there are also important similarities. I will in the context of this essay not dwell on the definition of labour migration, but concentrate on the ‘classical labour-migration’ that is to say on the migration of poorly skilled labour from less developed areas to more developed regions. This kind of migration is highly dependent on the labour market and its lateral developments. When the economies of the West European countries recovered from the Second World War, labour shortages became visible in the classical industries of the industrial era such as textiles, automobile assembly and coal mining. In the beginning spontaneously, but soon regulated by the respective governments, workers were recruited. Especially in Great Britain labour was recruited in former colonies. Recruitment for the Netherlands happened so rarely that it can be disregarded. The labour migration to Western Europe followed a series of stages, characteristic for this kind of migration. In the first stage, there is a highly skewed gender ratio. The labour migrants are predominantly men, who expect to work hard for few years, to save a lot of money and than to return to their homes again. In reality, they settle and bring over their wives and children after some time. This sequence was well known in literature but still surprised the various governments. When with the oil crises of 1974 a process of de-industrialisation set in, the labour migrants saw the labour market shrank dramatically exactly in those sectors that had provided jobs for lowly skilled manual labour. The immigrants found themselves out of jobs, concentrated in the wrong regions in the country, over represented in the wrong neighbourhoods in the cities and with few if any possibilities for upward mobility in the course of generations. The danger that out of the labour migrants of the past an ethnic underclass may develop is historically linked in some cases with the colonial past. However this development is not inherently connected with migration form former colonies, the same negative developments threaten to block the gradual absorption into main stream society of for instance Turks in Germany.

**Surinamese and Moroccans: a comparison.**

The case of the Netherlands is particularly interesting because it offers the opportunity to compare a post-colonial immigration with a pure labour immigration. The migration from Suriname and Morocco to the Netherlands gained momentum in the same period (1970-1980), be it for different reasons.

Suriname had always had only a small population and especially when the sugar plantations went into decline after 1800, the economic perspective was practically limited to the administrative sector and small peasant agriculture. Under these circumstances the coloured middle class was already early oriented toward an education and carrier in the Netherlands. Before the war there was already a small settlement of Surinamese intellectuals, sailors, and artists, especially in Amsterdam. After World War II, the Netherlands wanted to decolonise its small possessions in the West Indies, but it was thought too far-fetched to transform these small territories into independent states. So it came to a construction wherein Suriname and the Antilles, remained inside the Kingdom of the Netherlands, with a high degree of autonomy. The inhabitants of all parts of the kingdom had the same Dutch citizenship. When the economy of the Netherlands recovered and the development of the transport technology made travelling around the world much easier, the immigration from Suriname increased, slowly but persistently. The migration also changed in character, in the sense that a much
broader spectrum of Surinamese decided to try their luck in The Netherlands. The Dutch government started to worry. Surinamese became visible especially in Amsterdam and the stereotype image became that of uneducated blacks who were unsuited for the labour market and profited unduly from their status as citizens. In reality the migration was still modest and did not exceed the number of 7000 a year, bringing the total number of Surinamese immigrants on around 55,000 in 1974. But the Dutch government thought it was a burden to the country and strongly pressed Suriname to become an independent republic in 1975. The idea was of course that in this way the immigration could be brought under control. The result was the opposite. In a “beat the independency” rush between 1974 and 1980, around 100,000 Surinamese used their citizenship status to migrate to The Netherlands, exactly in a time when the labour market collapsed under the impact of the oil crisis.

The immigration from Morocco followed a quite different pattern. Employers started to recruit labour in the Mediterranean countries and in this way started flows of classical labour migrants, for instance from Morocco to the Netherlands. The idea that these ‘guest-workers’, like we expect from guests, would once return home was of course an illusion. The Moroccan population in the Netherlands consisted in the early seventies almost completely out of men. But just at that time these men started to give up the idea that they would once return to Morocco and began to reunite their families in the Netherlands. From about 5000 Moroccan workers in 1965 the population increased rapidly to around 300,000 in 2000. Unfortunately this happened at the same time when the labour market for unskilled blue-collar labour collapsed and the once recruited workers lost their jobs.

Both immigrant populations were seen as very problematic in the last quarter of the twentieth century as characterised by high unemployment and concentration in neighbourhoods with substandard housing conditions. But when we compare these two populations at present on classical indices of immigrant integration, such as employment, school participation, residential patterns and intermarriage, we see great differences. On all these indices the Surinamese score higher, even much higher than the Moroccans. This different experience of two immigrant populations that entered the country roughly at the same (unfavourable) time elucidates the specific character of post-colonial migrations. The immigrants from former colonies, even when they have not any longer the status of citizens, possess a substantial amount of social and cultural capital (in the terms of Bourdieu). Familiarity with the language, even when spoken with an accent and the educational system and the availability of networks of families and friends where valuable knowledge is exchanged, are factors which differentiate post-colonial migrants from classical labour migrants. The presence of middle class persons among the post-colonial immigrants still forms an important aspect of these migration flows. Of course this is true especially for the first and possibly second generation. It is to be expected that in the course of time we will see also a growing participation in society of Moroccans in the Netherlands, when a second and even third generation comes to the fore.

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