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Conference Report: The Migration Conference 2018, Lisbon, Portugal

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Abstract

This is a brief reflection on the Migration Conference 2018, the sixth event in our conference series, was hosted by the University of Lisbon, Portugal. The Conference brought together nearly 600 international researchers. The Migration Conference series builds upon the earliest conferences held at Regent's University London and over time has grown to become the largest global gathering of migration scholars. The thematic tracks in the conference covered various aspects of human mobility ranging from identity issues to remittances and migration law. The audience has also enjoyed the keynote speeches by distinguished speakers including Joaquin Arango from Complutense University Madrid and Ruba Salih from SOAS University of London.

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The Migration Conference 2018 (TMC 2018) brought together a global community of researchers to explore and offer alternative frameworks for understanding human mobility in a time of increasing nationalism, xenophobia and anti-immigrant rhetoric. With nearly 600 researchers from universities, think-tanks and policy centers around the world and presentations on hundreds of topics organized into 125 panels, there was quite literally something for everyone.

The conference built upon our earliest meetings held at Regent's University (then Regent's College) London and focused on the challenges confronting Turkish migrants. From our humble start, we realized the importance an expanded discussion of migration held. Too often, our meetings focus on specific regions, issues and policies; forgetting that migration is a global process with many drivers. By opening the floor to include a variety of research and sometimes-contrasting voices, TMC 2018 created the largest gathering of migration scholars in the world and the opportunity to engage in open discussion and debate.

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The keynote by Professor Joaquin Arango, “Migration regimes in comparative perspective: the four worlds of contemporary immigration” challenged all in attendance to build toward policies that address movers and non-movers. He recognized the depth and complexity of contemporary migration, the differences that mark movers from a variety of origins and with a diversity of needs. He also reminded us that migration does not occur in a vacuum, rather it is driven by a range of cultural and social factors that can include economic inequalities, violence, security and insecurity.

The anthropologist, Ruba Salih, built upon Dr. Arango’s lecture and in her talk “Reading Hannah Ardent in the Middle East.” Dr. Salih reminded us that our theories, models and policies are based in the experiences of people living and past who confront migration, their status as refugees, movers and non-movers everyday.

Illustrating our keynote speakers the papers presented throughout the three days of the conference wrestled with theory, policy and modeling to create a framework for analysis that builds upon historical work in the field – emphasizing the pulls and pushes that define so much of human mobility; but also pushing the boundaries of our understanding. In particular, there was an emphasis on the place of healthcare and well-being in migration and migration flows; a rethinking of transnational theory in migration studies; an awareness of the similarities and differences that exist among migrants and refugees around their mobilities, gender and opportunities; and an emphasis on issues surrounding integration, the second generation and education.

Our discussion of health included the challenges facing disabled movers; wellbeing and health status of refugees; access to healthcare, mentoring and integration of new immigrants and refugees and outcomes of acculturation for different groups in new destinations. As our panel presenters reconsidered transnational theory they explored the role transnational social formations can play for movers in new destinations and as they integrate. A focus on gender asked if transnational processes were equal for men and women; and finally in a most timely way, a discussion of the value transnational connections hold in an era marked by xenophobia and anti-immigrant rhetoric.

These topics contributed to an engaged and lively debate around the status of migrants and refugees; events in Europe and the growth of nationalist politics in the US and beyond. Central to our discussions and injecting passion into our debates, TMC 2018 also featured writers, artists and performers who brought their work (including poetry, film and art) to our meeting. Sharing their experiences, triumphs and tragedies, they reminded us that migration is real. They also reminded us that migrants and



refugees are not victims but people adapting to difficulty and doing so with faith in themselves, their families and communities.

Helping to guarantee we will always strive to learn, several workshops shared models for research and writing for newer scholars as they establish their careers. The workshops included sessions focused on the theoretical discussions of the challenges facing refugees as well as research methodologies and in particular the design of qualitative methods in support of migration research.

Timely and a well suited response to the growth of xenophobia around the globe, the papers presented at TMC 2018 remind us that migration does not just happen. People do not simply pick up and move. Rather, movers are driven and we can define the forces at work that influence outcomes for individuals, their families and their communities. Framed as a social act, our discussions move away from the assumption that migrants are independent or that refugees are looking to escape. Instead, the presentations reveal the difficult decisions that confront movers, their households and their communities, as well as the extreme challenges that conspire to push refugees out of their home and across unknown boundaries.

Looking forward to the TMC 2019, it is my hope that we will continue our dialogue, add more voices to our discussion and further debate the future of migration research in Bari, Italy from 18 to 20 June (<https://migrationconference.net>).

