

Global inequalities and migration critique

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Abstract

In the past decade, social scientists, economists and legal scholars alike have stressed that international migration provides a possible way to attain the precious and globally scarce good of citizenship in a stable and well-off polity. At the same time, upper class membership comes with the significant benefit of being able to sidestep both ascription of citizenship at birth and actual migration. Resorting to market mechanisms in order to elude this ascription is an increasingly visible, yet rare option available only to the wealthy few, who are however rarely described as migrants and more often as “global investors”, “expats”, or “foreign residents for tax purposes”. The paper juxtaposes the growing commodification of citizenship rights across the world in recent years, i.e., the possibility of literally purchasing residence and citizenship rights in parts of the Caribbean as well as Southern and Eastern Europe, with the experience of the great majority of transnational labour migrants. I argue that wealthy individuals of non-Western countries use the so-called investment citizenship as a means of global social mobility that eludes both ascription and migration, and one that at the same time trumps race. In turn, for transnational labour migrants, the border-crossing awarding upward economic mobility simultaneously entails the opposite risk – being (re)classified as non-white and thus often experiencing downward racial mobility. Depending on the colonial and imperial history of the context where one’s racial identity is being negotiated, such racial reclassification poses very different degrees of difficulty, thus reinforcing the hierarchies underlying the constructed racial continuum.

Biography

Manuela Boatcă is Professor of Sociology and Head of School of the Global Studies Programme at the University of Freiburg, Germany. She has published widely on world-systems analysis, decolonial perspectives on global inequalities, gender and citizenship in modernity/coloniality, and the geopolitics of knowledge in Eastern Europe, Latin America, and the Caribbean. Together with Anca Parvulescu (Washington University, USA), she has recently co-authored “Creolizing the Modern. Transylvania Across Empires” (Cornell UP 2022), which has received the René Wellek Prize for best monograph from the American Comparative Literature Association and the Barrington Moore Award for Best Book in Comparative and Historical Sociology from the American Sociological Association in 2023