

A WANDERER BETWEEN WORLDS



Nicola Piper

She knows how it feels not to speak the language of the country you have ended up in. Not to be able to read the script. To be the only one who looks different to everyone else: Nicola Piper got a feeling of this during a period of study in Tokyo. The Japanologist and Political Sociologist is fully aware how privileged her experience as a migrant was, as a well-educated, white European. It is not at all comparable with an African trying to escape across the Mediterranean to Europe. Nonetheless, when she wanted to extend her visa in Tokyo, she did experience the interrogation, the mistrust. “You don’t have the same rights as everyone else and you always have to legitimise yourself.” An experience she shares with migrants all over the world. Born in 1966 in Munich, the cosmopolitan has spent more than half of her life living outside Germany: Great Britain, Denmark and Singapore were only some of the numerous stops along the way. Professor for Migration and Human Rights at the University of Sydney in Australia for five years now, a fellow at FRIAS since the start of June, she has had to split the nine-month Marie Curie

Fellowship into two stages because of her limited availability. The professor of migration studies has not only brought her English partner with her to Freiburg, but also her unpretentious manner shaped by Anglo-Saxon culture: Honorifics such as ‘Dear Professor’ can be cast aside from the very start.

“I live what I research,” she says. Global migration flows: This is no abstract concept for her – it concerns people who are denied the most basic human rights, a subject which moves her. She is convinced that, “A society does not only need highly qualified immigrants. New York would descend into absolute chaos if all the foreigners who perform the so-called low-skilled jobs were deported.” She used to greet all the cleaners at her university in Sydney, wanting to “haul them out of invisibility”. She also utilises her research for this, which firmly departs from a Eurocentric viewpoint. Seen from her global perspective, that which is currently brewing in European migration politics seems quite narrow-minded: growing nationalisms, Brexit, border controls

and fear of immigrants who are allegedly sponging off the state. Nicola Piper comments that with its freedom of movement, Europe was long considered a role model. “Nowhere else could you find such uninhibited mobility.” According to her, Europe can now hardly continue to be a role model to the ASEAN member states, who are striving for something similar.

Nicola Piper sees migration as a global phenomenon: “There is not a single country which is not affected by migration,” – whether as a sending country like many African countries, the Philippines, Indonesia or Sri Lanka, or as a receiving or transit country. But the line between these is not always so clear-cut, even if countries like to define themselves exclusively as one or the other. For example, South Africa receives migrants and also sends nurses to Great Britain. The trained Filipino nurses who work in Germany with legal EU-level working conditions under a bilateral agreement are in a much better situation. Trade unions and migrant organisations were involved in the negotiations. But this is not the norm. What Nicola Piper observes with real concern is unprotected migration. People who slave away on construction sites or in households without any rights, for low or no wages, and for whom holiday or privacy are simply unheard of. It is easy for her to dismiss German football manager Franz Beckenbauer’s assertion as “nonsense”: One of the key figures in the allocation of the football World Cup to Qatar, he had assuaged critics by claiming he had not seen one single slave on

the construction sites. According to Piper, the International Trade Union Confederation is aware of 1,000 South Asians alone who have died there. “Recruitment agencies promise people in recruiting countries everything under the sun, and then fail to deliver on their promise.” People are then at the mercy of employers in the receiving countries without any protection whatsoever.

Due to the global nature of the problem, Nicola Piper focuses on organisations operating on a global level, such as the UN or their specialized agency, the ILO (International Labour Organization). Both organisations draw up conventions which lay down international work and human rights standards. “But nobody in Europe or Qatar is prepared to ratify them,” so they never come into force there.

They would never even have been written at all if trade unions, NGOs and migrant organisations had not drawn attention to these issues and lobbied for the disenfranchised, says Nicola Piper. Joining forces and building up networks has allowed them to have even greater impact. “Without campaigns mounted by civil society, these conventions would not exist.” For example, the new ILO Convention on Domestic Workers, which aims to bring about working relationships where workers and employers are on an equal footing.

Nicola Piper works with qualitative methods: Conducting interviews, following discourses, attending the negotiation processes at the ILO,

reading and analysing documents (reports, political statements). Even language can be treacherous, she says. In Arab countries, for example, the live-in domestic servants kept in inferior conditions similarly to slaves are commonly called ‘maids’. However the ILO Convention on Domestic Workers refers to ‘domestic workers’, for whom fixed working hours, reasonable remuneration and respect for privacy should be agreed. Piper states clearly, “Generally international organisations are not interested in opening the doors to everyone. Instead, it is the question of which rights should apply to those who do enter.”

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