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João Peixoto
ISEG, Technical University of Lisbon

“Migrants trafficking and individual strategies: the formation of dynamic channels in international migration”

Extended abstract

Migrants' trafficking, both the one related with workers movements and with sexual exploitation of women, is not a recent phenomenon, and it is not circumscribed to a specific geographical area. The end of the cold war and the fall of the Berlin wall, at the end of the 80s, have set a turnover in the incidence of this problem in Europe. Since then, migrants' trafficking into Western Europe has increased drastically as a result of the abolition of internal borders between countries of the European Union, the higher organisation of transnational networks and a more close restriction of immigration policies.

It is known that the notion of migrants trafficking is extremely diffuse, comprising very different modalities of migration. In practice, these movements balance between subtle forms of smuggling, mainly involving support for irregular migration, and drastic forms of trafficking (in a strict sense), involving exploitation, violence, fraud and systematic profits. The large continuum of situations renders difficult a precise understanding of the phenomenon, since very different migrants' individual attitudes, state policies, intermediary agents and related social problems may be involved.

The main theoretical aim of this paper is trying to unveil the logic and modalities of migrants trafficking - in its dual meaning of smuggling and pure trafficking - in contemporary societies. Besides revising some of the theoretical debates that have been set around the subject, the aim is to go further in understanding the phenomenon. The underlying claim is that it is the conjunction of individual aspirations for migration, stringent migration policies and organised intermediary agents that lead to the surge of dynamic modalities for channelling flows. The fact that each agent actively interacts with the others explains the continuing changes in the process. In other words, it is the simultaneous evaluation of individual migration strategies, the institutional framework – particularly state policies - and intermediary agents' strategies that can lead to a systematic understanding of trafficking modalities.

The perception of concrete forms of trafficking in space and time contexts, as well as the modes of its development, need a comprehensive approach of this type. Indeed, migrants' trafficking reveals itself to be extremely dynamic, reflecting the fact that individual and collective agents must be continuously adapting to the behaviour of others. Several agents are involved: individual potential migrants and their families, state officials, smugglers and traffickers, labour employers. The ultimate outcome of trafficking is to build channels for migration, which must respond to the individual motives and the general framework. In this process, the desire of individuals to migrate must combine with the lucrative purposes of traffickers, in a context of institutional policies and labour market requirements.

Two implications are the following. At the one hand, most individual migrants have an active role in the migrants' trafficking process. The discourse on the victimisation of migrants has been often criticised, and this is supported by this view. Except in extreme cases of violence and exploitation, individual migrants involved in trafficking have some active role in searching and

choosing between different modes of migration. The restrictions created by immigration policies have indeed an important role in explaining illegally organised modes of entry (although not all forms of trafficking are illegal). At the other hand, trafficking processes reveal themselves to be extremely dynamic, conducing to ever new irregular migration channels. This dynamism is mainly the result of an open interaction between active agents, either individuals or collective entities. The latter comprise both formal institutions, such as the state and firms, and informal ones, such as diffuse networks of trafficking.

In empirical terms, this paper's aim is the study of migrants trafficking in Portugal, in relation to which it intends to understand the extension and complexity of the thematic. Therefore, issues related with trafficking of workers and trafficking of women for sexual exploitation, responsible for the recent strong increase of illegal immigration flows in Portugal, will be addressed. This phenomenon became visible mainly at end of the 90s. The country witnessed significant processes of this type, mainly trafficking of labour force coming from Eastern Europe and trafficking of women for sexual exploitation coming from Brazil, besides other sources. A large part of the recent growth of overall immigration was related, directly or not, with these processes. The modes of operation of trafficking became extremely dynamic, displaying rapid surges or profound changes in the time-span of very few years.

Empirical work in a subject such as this is always complex. This paper will present the main findings of a research project still in course that deals with the subject in a plural way. In order to have an informed view about the phenomenon and to produce a description of migrants trafficking networks in Portugal, several steps were taken: theoretical and documental analysis, including media and legislation analysis; research of judicial cases; interviews with several governmental and non-governmental institutions related with the topic; and collection of life histories. As a result, the project brings together contributions from sociology, law and political science. From a methodological point of view, a varied set of research methods were used, namely gathering and analysis of bibliography and documents, semi-directive interviews to institutional representatives and life histories of victims. Since the project is being carried out since January 2004 and will end in December 2004, this paper will be able to integrate the complete research findings.