

Joachim Schroeder

Making refugee research visible

Idea, objectives and programme of the conference

In the last decades, the very presence of refugees in Europe has led to a reconsideration of migration and integration concepts as well as to a reflection of practical work not only in the various political areas but also in institutions responsible for advice, education and guidance. In contrast, research activities on how to tackle refugee-related concerns in Europe have remained sporadic and unsystematic. Up to now neither a historical or internationally comparative nor an interdisciplinary research scene on the topic of flight in the European context has emerged:

- There are a number of individual studies on different *refugee groups* from specific regions of origin or on specific age groups, particularly on children and adolescents.
- Research on specific *problems* such as the consequences of traumatization or on gender-specific reasons for persecution has been conducted.
- There are empirical works on different *fields of action*: health/medicine, law and politics, educational sciences.
- Refugee research undertaken by international organisations (UNESCO, ECRE) is particularly preoccupied with the provision of databases (collecting statistical data and bodies of legal and political regulations).

These scientific reflections have hitherto largely gone unappreciated and tended to remain unconnected. For the most part, they do not go beyond the level of describing quantitative and conceptual aspects; data-based analysis does usually not result in theorizing in social sciences.

Similar developments in the scientific debate can be observed in the projects which – under the heading of “asylum” – were brought into being on the initiative of the European employment programme EQUAL (2002-2007): As a recent survey reveals, despite the fact that in some countries involved extensive empirical research on the vocational guidance for asylum seekers has been conducted by several groups in diverse areas, the spreading and critical discussion of these studies in the academic field have not gone far enough. While specific transnational efforts to build on the results and experience gained

in the programme and to mainstream them into practice and political decision-making bodies have been initiated, the transfer of the findings provided by EQUAL to science and research is still in its infancy.

In the networks devoted to the vocational integration of refugees in Europe, however, significant theoretical, empirical and practical results could be obtained, which also have the potential to give a new impetus to social sciences. Moreover, several new questions and problems have arisen in the course of the six-year programme, which should be approached and tackled scientifically as soon as possible.

The idea for this conference is old and was already a topic for discussion in the initial funding period of EQUAL. Still little is known about the circumstances and educational needs of refugees. Sweden successfully integrated research projects on various aspects of the circumstances of asylum seekers into the context of its development partnerships there. Likewise, other countries connected EQUAL with research projects. The purpose of this conference is to expand and intensify such efforts to scientifically approach the topic of flight and refugees.

As intended, we have succeeded in combining empirical research with practical intervention in refugee work and thus brought together people of different fields dealing with the topic of flight and its consequences for the European context. This meeting intends to give an overview of the latest developments in refugee research as well as to identify new questions of research and to highlight relevant and innovative fields of research. Reflecting on EQUAL, that European support programme which has addressed refugee-related problems with particular intensity in the last years – albeit with focus on questions regarding the integration into the labour market –, possible (joint) research projects will be conceived, corresponding research groups be established and preliminary suggestions on how to implement the objectives be encouraged. It is suggested here to divide the efforts and discussions into three primary fields of research:

- (1) **Subject-oriented** research, which focuses on biographical and social circumstances of refugees in Europe: How can the heterogeneity of transnational biographical developments of refugees be approached? What strategies do refugees adopt to deal with the asylum procedure and the given restrictions? How useful are the skills and competencies acquired in the new country for their future development? How do they perceive the receiving society? What are their experiences like?
- (2) **Structure-oriented** studies, which deal with the response of the various social institutions to the needs of refugees: Are institutions open to the specific concerns of refugees, and if so, what exactly do they do? Or do they

close their eyes to the interests of refugees, and for what reason? How can institutions develop from refugee-specific bodies to inclusion-oriented bodies? How are such processes initiated? How can they succeed, why do they fail?

(3) **Intervention-oriented** investigations, which concern the desired effects and unwelcome consequences of practical action: What socio-political theories can be drawn on to approach strategic concepts of politics, education and medicine? What normative assumptions form the basis for such concepts? What specific strategies for intervention are being developed and how effective are these?

The conference will be held in the form of a workshop in order to facilitate the process of active project work. In the course of the three days, possibilities for joint research projects will be discussed and the necessary conditions for that be specified. For structuring purposes the following thematic blocks are proposed:

- ‘**Who does what?**’ – In the presentation of the participants’ own research and practical work on the topic of refugees in Europe, highlighting significant results, relevant questions and research desiderata will be identified. Furthermore, we would like to get an idea of the topics treated and methods applied in your work in addressing the above-mentioned three research fields so far, thus examining if there are subjects to be taken up for further analysis and identifying possible gaps which should be filled.
- ‘**Where does theory stand?**’ – In an introductory presentation, Prof. Dr Louis Henri Seukwa will provide an overview of the latest developments in refugee research, while particularly stressing the significance of the three proposed research fields – addressees, institutions and interventions – from the perspective of social science. He will outline some key aspects in order to define the discourse framework of this conference. Such fundamentals are, among others, the theoretical insights gained from work on transmigration, the concept of competence as well as on the theory of ‘habitus’.
- ‘**What is needed in practice?**’ – In two impetus-giving presentations on the three research fields, analysing EQUAL, relevant insights into the political and educational measures for the integration of refugees will be summarized, flaws be identified and (new) problems arising from the project work be approached, explained and explicitly formulated as research questions. Similarly, from a macro perspective on EQUAL, Christian Rabergh will specify a number of unanswered research questions in the European context, while, from a micro perspective of a local network, Maren Gag will focus on questions of scientific relevance by illustrating the example of the

development partnership “FLUCHTort Hamburg” (‘A safe haven in Hamburg’).

- **‘What is our aim?’** – From the variety of ideas, suggestions and concerns an attempt is made to outline at least *one* project, to discuss its objectives and methodical questions and to elucidate possibilities of practical implementation. If this conference results in the formation of at least one group working on a joint project, we will have taken a great step forward, though it would be an even greater step if several projects were brought to life by the end of this meeting. Moreover, this conference represents one of the rare occasions to develop such projects in close cooperation with practical fields and thus to combine theoretical and practical work in refugee research.
- **‘What kind of support do we need’** – Finally, the acquisition of research grants and questions with respect to the necessary forms of cooperation, coordination and the organisational structures should be addressed as well as appropriate agreements be reached. In the run-up to the conference, the University of Applied Sciences here in Hamburg agreed to pay the start-up costs as well as the costs to develop an infrastructure for the establishment of a coordinating research centre – based on this, further arrangements with respect to the forms of cooperation should be made in as specific and binding a way as possible.

“Research gone unappreciated” – the title of this conference shall highlight three major aspects:

- The particular *difficulties* faced in refugee research in a field which is characterized by repression, fear, shame, criminalization, violence and social exclusion, thus forcing the people involved to live hidden away from society and making it difficult for research to conduct fieldwork.
- The specific *questions* relevant to the subject area of flight. The topic of asylum should not simply be subsumed under the category of general migration research but deserves attention of its own in order for science to reveal and define the hidden issues related to this kind of forced migration.
- The particular *challenges* arising in the transfer of refugee research to the academic field. Similarly to all research done on marginal groups, asylum research is confronted with the problem of scientific marginalization and devaluation. It is considered too specialized a topic and even regarded as an exotic field of interest which has little to offer for the development of educational sciences. We should thus step out of the dark and bring refugee research into the light of public awareness.

Making refugee research visible, addressing important problems still unsolved, reflecting on possibilities of their scientific treatment and outlining initial specifications for project work – these are some of the aims we attempt to achieve with this conference.