

Els de Graauw

Advancing Our Understanding of Local Responses to Precaritized Migrants

Comment on Homberger et al. (2022)

The Homberger et al. (2022) article (in this issue) offers a useful roadmap to scholars researching municipal responses to migrants with precarious legal status. First, they urge scholars to conceptualize and operationalize migrant precarity not as a dichotomous or categorical status (e.g., legal vs. illegal), but rather as a polychotomous and contingent one (also see Jones-Correa and de Graauw 2013). Second, they underscore the importance of approaching municipalities not as monoliths, but rather as ecologies of different governmental and nongovernmental actors that work with each other – in collaborative and confrontational ways – to support (or not) ›precaritized‹ migrants residing in their jurisdictions. While important and timely, there are three ways in which scholars can build out the conceptual approach offered in this article.

First, scholars will want to take an even wider and more nuanced view of who or what constitutes the horizontal dimension of the multi-actor governance framework discussed in the article. For example, it is not sufficient to differentiate locally elected from administrative government actors. Here, it is equally important to distinguish different types of elected officials (e.g., those in the legislative vs. executive vs. perhaps even the judicial arm of local government) and different types of local administrative officials (e.g., those working in service vs. regulatory municipal agencies) (see de Graauw 2016; Marrow 2009). These different local governmental actors each have their own goals, missions, cultures, and accountability mechanisms that influence how they frame and act on issues affecting migrants with precarious legal status.

Similarly, it is important to study and analyze a multiplicity of civil society actors active at the local level. These include immigrant-led organizations, labor unions, neighborhood associations, chambers of commerce and other

Els de Graauw

Associate Professor of Political Science, Baruch College, the City University of New York

business organizations, philanthropic funders, faith-based institutions, and (ethnic) media outlets. These different civil society actors also have different goals, missions, cultures, funding sources, accountability mechanisms, and liberties to engage in advocacy affecting precaritized migrants depending on their incorporation status (see de Graauw 2016). Not all these civil society actors are necessarily activated on precarious migrant issues, which makes it all the more important to study when, why, how, and to what effect they are engaged, whether it is within the context of one city or across the different contexts of multiple cities.

Second, to deepen our understanding of how cities negotiate inclusive practices, it is important to consider not only municipal service provision – the article’s focus – but also how the cities address formal rights protections and modes of democratic participation vis-à-vis migrants with precarious legal status (see de Graauw 2021). Indeed, municipalities can create an inclusive environment through the provision of basic services, such as by improving migrants’ access to existing city services, restoring services to migrants that have been limited or taken away by other government levels, or developing new services for migrants in response to national immigration policy changes. However, municipalities can also create more inclusive environments by developing new rights protections policies. These can address *negative rights*, where city officials cannot govern in a way that harms precaritized migrants (as in the case of city sanctuary policies), and *positive rights*, where city officials need to govern to secure rights for precaritized migrants (as in the case of local workplace rights). Additionally, municipalities can create more inclusive environments by developing new modes of democratic participation, such as by allowing precaritized migrants to vote in local elections, serve on municipal boards and commissions, and participate in local budgeting decisions.

Third, I invite scholars to reconsider the use of the concept of ›deservingness‹ for understanding municipal approaches to migrant inclusion. In my own research (e.g., de Graauw 2016), I have found Schneider and Ingram’s (1993) notion of the »social construction of target populations« helpful in analyzing different municipal actors’ responses to migrant issues. The concept of ›socially constructed target populations‹ underscores not only the plight and normative need of precaritized migrants that shape municipal policies and practices (as emphasized in this article’s use of ›deservingness‹), but also a host of political motivations, powers, opportunities, and resources on the part of different governmental and nongovernmental municipal actors that are active in a particular policy domain. In other words, the idea of ›socially constructed target populations‹ urges scholars to consider how the

moral considerations of ›deservingness‹ are mediated by myriad political ones that different municipal actors also need to respond to.

References

- de Graauw, Els. 2016. *Making Immigrant Rights Real: Nonprofits and the Politics of Integration in San Francisco*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.
- de Graauw, Els. 2021. City Government Activists and the Rights of Undocumented Immigrants: Fostering Urban Citizenship within the Confines of US Federalism. *Antipode* 53 (2): 379–398.
- Homberger, Adrienne, Maren Kirchhoff, Marie Mallet-Garcia, Ilker Ataç, Simon Güntner, and Sarah Spencer. 2022. Local Responses to Migrants with Precarious Legal Status: Negotiating Inclusive Practices in Cities Across Europe. *Zeitschrift für Migrationsforschung – Journal of Migration Studies* 2 (2): 93–116, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.48439/zmf.179>.
- Jones-Correa, Michael, and Els de Graauw. 2013. The Illegality Trap: The Politics of Immigration and the Lens of Illegality. *Dædalus: Journal of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences* 142 (3): 185–198.
- Marrow, Helen B. 2009. Immigrant Bureaucratic Incorporation: The Dual Roles of Professional Missions and Government Policies. *American Sociological Review* 74 (5): 756–776.
- Schneider, Anne, and Helen Ingram. 1993. Social Construction of Target Populations: Implications for Politics and Policy. *American Political Science Review* 87 (2): 334–347.