

Reviews

Michael Blume/Detlef Kantowsky (Hrsg.): Assimilation, Integration, Isolation. Fallstudien zum Eingliederungsprozeß südostasiatischer Flüchtlinge in der Bundesrepublik Deutschland. Vol. I: Analysen und Empfehlungen. Vol. II: Ausgewählte Fallstudien und Dokumente. (Schriftenreihe Internationales Asienforum, 7). München/Köln/London: Weltforum Verlag, 1988. XX, 613/XX, 628 pp., DM 138.-

From time to time, but with increasing frequency over the last decade, German politicians, as representatives of the general will of the people, have felt compelled to reiterate the standpoint that Germany is not an "Einwanderungsland" – an immigration country, comparable to the United States, Canada or Australia. Foreigners may be needed to augment the labour force, they are given no encouragement to remain as settlers. Should they decide to do so, they are expected to assimilate themselves. Official policy as well as public opinion concur in the need to retain cultural homogeneity and reject cultural pluralism at the national level.

In one particular instance in the last decade however, the state has exercised its discretionary powers to actually enable the resettlement of over 30.000 foreigners in the country, a measure that was accompanied by a strong wave of support from the general populace. The year was 1979, the plight of the Indochinese refugees, who were fleeing their home countries at great risk to their lives and safety, caught the attention of the mass media, and the United Nations High Commission for Refugees was coordinating efforts to resettle the refugees in western countries. Legislation was speeded through the German parliament to confer on these "contingent refugees" (as opposed to those seeking political asylum who have to prove their personal subjection to political repression) the same legal status as those granted asylum in the country, and an extensive aid programme was swung into action. In retrospect, this entire operation comes into focus in its singularity, drawing upon a constellation of factors which generated at that particular time a favourable climate for the admission of the refugees. How have the refugees fared? The appearance of this first in-depth study of the issue by a team of researchers from the University of Konstanz under the direction of Prof. Dr. Detlef Kantowsky can be expected to make a welcome contribution to the field of migrant, and in particular, refugee studies.

In keeping with the general trend in migrant studies in German sociology, the focus of the study has been on the process of integration into German society and the problems which this entails, or rather, the factors impeding this process. For this pur-

pose, the theoretical model developed by Esser (1980), incorporating an action-oriented individualistic perspective, has been adopted, in particular for the analysis and presentation of the data. His terminology, including the definition of assimilation as the state of similarity to the norms of the new society, as distinct from integration, defined as the state of equilibrium (contentment) of the individual migrant, regardless of the extent of assimilation, has also been employed in the study.

The methodology employed in the study deserves special mention. Data collection was centred around 15 case-studies of families of Indochinese refugees dispersed across the country. Care was taken to allow for variation in the sample population with regard to ethnic origin (Vietnamese, Chinese and Cambodian), size of the family (from single males to three-generational families) and social background. Each family was assigned a researcher (very often the social worker who was responsible for the family), who provided a basic descriptive write-up on the family. The main research instrument was the narrative interview, conducted with as many members of the family as were willing and able to participate. This was then complemented by a structured questionnaire.

The findings are summarized and presented in the first volume in separate chapters, each devoted to a specific subject: the family, language competence, living conditions and social contact, experience with sponsorship, schooling, occupational assimilation and psychosocial problems. The second volume contains the transcriptions of four narrative interviews. Space certainly does not permit even a partial reproduction of the wealth of information contained in the 1.300 pages which make up these two volumes. An attempt can only be made here to provide a brief review of the major research findings, and to raise some issues generated by the study which seem to be pertinent to future research into refugee issues in West Germany.

The authors themselves consider the main import of their study to lie in the identification of different forms of "Eingliederungskarriere" or patterns of adjustment open to and displayed by different individual refugees. They thereby stress the importance of the distinction between assimilation and integration, in the sense in which Esser employs the terms. The two do not necessarily correlate with each other, a fact to be taken into account by those responsible for the formulation and implementation of an assimilationist policy in the country. The role of the family and the ethnic community in the process of a successful assimilation or integration in the new society is accorded great significance by the authors. The two problem groups – the elderly and the single young men – illustrate this well.

For the elderly, encompassing in this case those over 50 years of age at the time of arrival in West Germany, the barriers to language learning and occupational assimilation proved to be virtually insurmountable. They had to resign themselves to an existence based on social welfare, and to the sense of well-being provided by the

presence of the family. As the motivation for fleeing the country was often that of providing a better future for the children, this now has to be seen as compensation for the loss of an independent existence of one's own, the price of flight. The problems faced by single, young men do not need to be elaborated upon. What a difference the family could make is poignantly expressed by one of them: "Ich liebe meine Mutter so sehr, weißt Du. Das heißt, ich brauche nur hier ein Bruder, einen Bruder oder eine eigene Schwester oder Verwandte von mir, und vielleicht ich bin ganz anders gewesen."

The authors conclude, however, that the family could make a positive contribution to the assimilation process only if the family structure were to be reorganised in the direction of more freedom of decision-making, in particular for the female head of the family. The women namely, were found to be more capable of establishing interethnic relations with Germans (for example the contact between sponsor and refugee families tended to be maintained by the women) than the men, thereby also displaying a greater willingness to acquire new norms and standards of behaviour.

The authors' critique of the predominant models of assimilation rests on the relative neglect of the role of the family, the ethnic community and the women. The criticisms are valid and point, in fact, in the direction that future research could take. Just how are refugee families structured; in the same vein, just how are refugee communities structured? It may be pertinent at this point to raise an issue not explicitly formulated by the authors of this study, namely, how is refugee migration to be distinguished, if at all, from "normal" migrational phenomena? In the literature, this is often done on the basis of the differences in individual motivation, the act of migration deemed to be voluntary, that of flight forced upon the individual. A more fruitful approach, it would seem, is to see the distinction as contingent upon the political constraints of flight and resettlement, with its subsequent structuring of the refugee family and the refugee community.

It is precisely with respect to these two areas that differences and similarities can be established with emigrant communities. Whereas the migrant community tends to be supportive and to succeed in its attempt to establish institutional completeness, the refugee community, by the very nature of its constitution as a result of political conflicts, tends to be far more ambivalent in character. One valuable chapter in the first volume is devoted to an analysis of the relationship between conflicting refugee associations and competing German welfare agencies, and is suggestive of the highly complex processes operative within the refugee community, due in part to the exposure to and intervention of the receiving society.

Refugee families tend also to suffer from institutional incompleteness, a condition that cannot even be bridged by the occasional holiday back home. Room here

for acute loneliness and also for exaggerated idealization of the family back home. The processes and mechanisms involved in both areas call for further research and illumination.

If taken seriously, the appeal for greater attention to be paid to the nature of the refugee family and the refugee community, should lead to the discarding of the one conceptual bind which, one could argue, has blighted the study of migration and of minorities in German academia, namely, the confinement of research interest to the assimilation process into German society. Imperceptibly, the structure of research here replicates the view of the majority alluded to in the introductory paragraph. While only too natural, it is, as a research enterprise, often enough only too superfluous, as the majority view tends anyhow to command sufficient explication. It is the view of the minority, the "Lebenswelt" of the migrant, or the refugee, which remains unknown and unappreciated. An adequate understanding of this "Lebenswelt" can only be arrived at by seeing the migrant or refugee in the context of his past, as well as his present and future. Furthermore, while assimilation could well be high on the priority list of every migrant and refugee, it is fraught with a great deal of ambivalence for many. Precisely this ambivalence, what it signifies and how it is resolved, has to be thematized.

We return to the original question posed by the study. How have the "boat people" fared in the Federal Republic of Germany? The answer provided by the data would seem to be – not very well. A sobering finding, in view of the "privileged" position, compared to other political refugees, which the Indochinese refugees have enjoyed with respect to official support and resettlement programmes. It should not be forgotten though, that five years is a very short time in the personal and social history of migration and assimilation. The pain of uprootedness, the grief over loss, the humiliation of the newcomer, the ambivalence of change – can be alleviated by an infrastructure of professional help but cannot be resolved by it. The question so often directed at the authors of this study (p. 536) "Are they now assimilated or not?", has perhaps, at this point in time, simply to be rejected.

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