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International Education: An Untapped Archive of Canadian Nation Formation

Following recent discursive shifts in policy talk about international students as “ideal immigrants” (McCullum 2015), I am exploring the politics driving the Canadian state’s active courting of international students. This research builds on my previous work on the construction of racialized skilled immigrants as trainee subjects requiring Canadian/Western pedagogical interventions (Chatterjee 2015).

This relatively newly developed imperative of the state, while discursively positioned as a search for job-ready immigrants, aims to secure a larger share of the global higher education market, and to use ‘soft power’ diplomacy to secure the country’s position in the contemporary hierarchy of nation states. The subsequent entanglement of study migration, internationalization of postsecondary education and nation formation is the focus of my project.

While Western universities have been major sites for colonial domination and imperial expansion, recent developments in international higher education increasingly mask this fraught relationship in an innocent discourse of exchange and collaboration. American interests in building cultural, industrial and commercial interests via international student engagement have been systematically studied. However, the issue remains quite poorly explored in the Canadian context. My goal is to foreground the site of higher education and study migration as a way to start engaging with the geopolitics of Canadian international relations via educational engagements.

The lack of attention to the politics of international education/students in Canada is partly because the country is a relative newcomer to the “race for talent” (Shachar 2006) and because of its nationalist cultural imaginary as a peace-loving and friendly middle power. However, we should not forget, Canada has a long history of making strategic exceptions for students, diplomats and businessmen who were allowed entry even during the time of the Chinese Exclusion Act. Furthermore, while relatively insignificant, Canada has a history of various international exchanges and collaborations, as its involvement with the postcolonial Colombo Plan shows. Launched in 1950, the Plan consists of “an aggregate of bilateral arrangements involving foreign aid and technical assistance for the development of Asia and the Pacific” (*A Legacy of Excellence* 2010, 15). Canada was one of the founding members and major donors till it withdrew from the Plan in 1991. To offer but one example of ‘soft power’ diplomacy discourse

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through such initiatives, consider the following statement by Nik Cavell (1952), Canadian Administrator of the Plan, talking about Pakistani civil servants visiting Canada:

I am reasonably sure that those 12 young men will enter on their careers with broader minds and an affection for Canada, which will last them all their lives. This particular piece of our technical assistance effort did what I would like to be sure that the whole worldwide technical effort is doing: it made us 12 real friends in Asia.

This excerpt is a fascinating early example of the kind of 'soft power' diplomacy discourse that continues to accompany current national education strategies in the west. State commissioned reports from Canada, the United Kingdom and Australia, for example, identify postsecondary education as a growing export sector, erasing the power relations that such discourses enable. Despite such compelling examples of historic and contemporary global power struggles over international education, much of the current Canadian research continues to focus on mere instrumentalities of study-migration and internationalization policies of postsecondary institutions.

Drawing from the historic Colombo Plan, and a cross-country (UK, USA, Australia, Canada and Germany) review of literature and accompanying discourses on contemporary study-migration policies and priorities, my research brings together the archives of migration, higher education and internationalization policies that have long been read in disconnect from each other. I pay attention to aspects that are buried deep under the rhetoric of knowledge, skill, innovation and exchange with the goal of revealing a previously unsuspected relation, namely, international education as an archive of Canadian nation formation.

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