



INTERVIEW WITH  
MICHAEL KEITH

**Migration and the city.  
Dynamics, challenges and complexities**

*by Leonardo Cavalcanti and Alena Profit*

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## INTERVIEW

# Migration and the city. Dynamics, challenges and complexities

*Interview with Michael Keith*

*by Leonardo Cavalcanti and Alena Profit*

**M**ichael Keith is the Director of the Centre on Migration, Policy, and Society (COMPAS) at the University of Oxford, working on projects in the Labour Markets, Citizenship and Belonging, Urban Change and Settlement, and Welfare clusters. Former Professor of Sociology and Director of the Centre for Urban and Community Research (CUCR) at Goldsmiths College, University of London, he has been a politician in the East End of London for twenty years and Commissioner on the National Commission on Integration and Cohesion. The following interview took place in January 2014 in the Centre on Migration, Policy, and Society (COMPAS) at the University of Oxford. Professor Keith talks about the recent debates in the European integration, mobility flows and divides in the European Union, welfare and borders. The conversation also includes a perspective on the dynamics of the geographies and temporalities of migration and the transnational, economic, political, and social logics behind them. Finally, Professor Keith argues for the necessity of including the city as a powerful driver of social phenomena as a unit of social analysis in Social Science research.



**INTERVIEWERS** *The term “Fortress Europe”, a common term in the debates on European immigration and asylum issues, symbolically refers to the restrictive characteristics of common EU policies in the last two decades. In the recent debate on migration within and to the European Union, the metaphor received new media attention and has extended its polemics to the inner EU countries. In your opinion, which are the driving forces and fears behind the current debate on migration in the European countries?*

**MICHAEL KEITH** The term “fortress” has a long and troubled history, clearly in the sense that Europe was a desired location. If we look at the more recent

past, we have a time where most of the European states were characterized by two patterns: one pattern meant steady increases in development, Gross domestic product (GDP), and affluence. The other was a variable, but general pattern of aging, and an aging society and growing affluence produced a period of time when a more favourable attitude towards migration became more common during the late 1990s and early 2000. What we saw for a period of time was nations that have historically always been source destinations of migration became destinations of migration in their own right of migrants, particularly in the South of Europe, in Spain, Portugal, Italy, and Greece. We saw those countries that for many decades had been places where people had migrated from were increasingly places where people migrated to, frequently having to do with linguistic or postcolonial links, as Latin America and Portugal and Spain, for example. What has happened since the Great Recession of 2008 or the Financial Collapse of 2008 is that that landscape has changed dramatically. Since 2008, the growing populist xenophobia and sentiments against migrant presence has intensified significantly but also reconfigured the dominant forces within Europe itself. In generic terms, the economic downturn and major recessions we have seen in many European countries have reduced the labour market demand and resulted in massive unemployment rates throughout Europe, with the possible exception of Germany, and particularly in the European South. I believe that Germany has not been growing as rapidly as before 2008. And also the scale of economic downturn in the European South has led to increased departures from those countries that were newly countries of destination, but there is a trend of moves from countries such as Portugal, Italy, Spain, and Greece, northwards, most significantly to Germany, but not only to Germany alone, but to other places; to the “islands” that have sustained economic growth post 2008, cities like London are very notable in this regard. The British economy is in many ways schizophrenic, but the London economy, which is not only the area of London but London and its surroundings, as far as Oxford, Cambridge, and Brighton, is growing quite rapidly whilst the rest of the country has had economic downturns.

There are patterns within Europe, between North and South, a new North-South, between the European South and the European North, and also in the legacies of the European expansion, as for example the A2<sup>1</sup>, and then we come to Britain. I will also talk about the South-North divide, and the East-West divide later on. The European expansion, so to speak, produced fairly

1 On 1 January 2014 the restrictions on the free movement of the “A2” migrants-nationals from Romania and Bulgaria- in countries such as the UK and Germany ended, granting the same rights as all EU citizens to live and work in any EU country.

major depopulations in some of the former East European countries, places like Latvia for example lost significant numbers of their population. So that creates a dynamic within Europe which has a formal rhetoric that says free movement of people is a fundamental right of the European Union. In some ways this denies the reality of the geographical scales at which this movement might generate policy concerns. At the same time, the EU has a policy field of ‘integration’ that applies, put in European terms, to “third country nationals” or people from outside Europe, people who are asylum or refugee seekers. The fact that, sociologically, ethnographically and, in some ways politically, the arrival of people from different parts of Europe plays in very similar ways to the arrival of people from third-country nations but doesn’t always feature in the European policy agenda, and that is why I think we are in a moment in which the European project is troubled enough with the problems of the Eurozone of the recent years and migration begins to outline a series of further challenges.

INT *I would like to shift the discussion to the European migration patterns. How do the EU-states and the migration regulatory systems react to complex migrant mobilities and, in your opinion, how and to what extent could they engage with this issue?*

MK How they have reacted is showing the increasing complexity of the European pattern, both the complexities in economic terms and in migration terms. In the period before 2008 it was possible to talk about a common European dynamic to the extent that most places were aging and most places were receiving significant flows of migration. But that is, I think, sociologically no longer the case. Whilst Germany has now become the principal destination of migration within Europe, other countries, particularly in the South and the East, are losing numbers through migration. Ireland became a site where migrants became a significant factor in the landscape of cities like Dublin, but in 2008 there was a more serious meltdown in Ireland and other countries. They were referred to by the acronym of the “PIIGS”, Portugal, Italy, Ireland, Greece, and Spain – notwithstanding my East-West-North-South metaphor. However, the downturn in Ireland was horrific and Ireland changed from a receiving country to a country where young Irish people and migrants left. Consequently, the dynamics within Europe became complex, more complex, and I think that this has created policy stresses because the logics are not singular: The logical interests of Spain and Greece are not the same as the interests of Germany. Alongside that, there are traditions that are troubled in many different ways around histories of migration in pretty much every single European country. But the United Kingdom is a good case in point or a bad case in point of evidence where you see that hostility to migration is also fairly variable across the European Union. In some places, notably in nations like the United Kingdom,

hostility towards migration is intense, and the public discourse is extremely unsympathetic towards migrants and hostile towards migration as a phenomenon. In the case of the United Kingdom it becomes like a Dutch Auction, a race to the lowest point of populism as political parties, mainstream political parties, are tempted to appeal to populist sentiments. But the problem of appealing to populist sentiments sometimes amplifies these sentiments. Potentially – and this is difficult to prove conclusively – there are many people that have argued that by appealing to anti-migrant sentiment you increase anti-migrant sentiment and you increase the appeal to anti-migrant sentiment. And you have a cycle in popular discourse. And this is the case of the United Kingdom over the last five or six years. In the media discussion there has been a rise in anti-migrant sentiment of what is thought normal or permissible to say. The British represent an extreme case, but they wish to challenge the fundamental right to mobility across the European Union. I think that this will be rejected across the rest of Europe, but there are some sympathetic noises being made, particularly in France and Germany about whether or not the rights of migrants from within Europe should be limited in some ways, particularly around welfare state eligibilities.

If you think of welfare in the broadest sense of the term, that might apply to health when you are very young, or to school when you are slightly older, to housing, to healthcare when you are at working age, to employment insurance and unemployment benefits through to other forms of welfare benefits when you are not well off, through to pension rights. The whole net of welfare payments that may last, in one form or another, from birth to death. It already works very differently across Europe. Historically, the German welfare system is very different from the French, the British, and the Italian. Some welfare systems emphasize contributions where you have to contribute before to get something out, and some welfare systems prioritize more the need regardless of the contribution. Objectively, those welfare systems that emphasize benefit regardless of the contribution are in a sense more migrant friendly. So if you arrive in a country in which you are immediately eligible for unemployment insurance or subsidized social housing, if you need it, then the competition for that particularly scarce public resource will in some way be more favourable to migrants than is the case in other countries where you are only eligible after so many years of contribution. So that is factually already the case and that provides a landscape in many countries in which you have a much greater dispute over what kinds of eligibility migrants might have for the sorts of welfare nets. And some of the nastier forms of populist debates have been in the United Kingdom around excluding migrants from welfare benefits of various kinds. But also there are sympathetic noises from northern countries in particular

about whether or not migrants from other European nations without questioning the fundamental right of mobility should be excluded from certain basic welfare nets until they have contributed to society. And I think that this debate will be more pointed in Europe over the years to come. But I think it will be difficult because there is already, particularly in the European South, a sense of questioning, for example the dominance of European Bank central economic policy. If at the same time you then have people from the South and the East, in that southern and eastern divide, being treated less well in terms of welfare then the potential for there being considerable political dispute across Europe is quite profound. Britain is quite a poor and difficult place, but it is not the only place where this debate is being carried out.

INT *In what way may we understand the notions of welfare and borders in the context of the differentiation of rights and entitlement to welfare provision?*

MK There is a sense in which we move to a more variegated Europe. The universalism of citizenship is qualified by the reality of rule and law and politics. And this already works in many strange and sometimes very insidious ways. If we just take the British example: If you want to marry and bring somebody to this country who is not from a European country, they have to both demonstrate income above a certain level and a capacity not to become dependent on the state. What that means is that two British citizens do not actually have the same rights to marry somebody from another country because they don't have the right on family reunification unless their partner is demonstrably self-sustaining economically. We have a much more stratified set on rights and discourse on human rights than we actually imagine. If you take that one case, my rights if I earn above a certain income are greater than somebody else's rights if they earn below that income because I can marry somebody of anywhere in the world, and they cannot. And there are consequences to this. We will see this becoming more complex, but of a similar choreography, a similar dance, when you look at what will happen across Europe where people may be citizens of the European Union, but that doesn't mean they will all be equal citizens. And that pattern is already beginning to take shape. And this will be intensified. And secondly, you will have incidents such as Lampedusa, the horrors which happened are grotesque. But what needs to be recognized is that bodies were washing up at the South of Spain throughout the wealthy years. So "Fortress Europe" didn't go away during the wealthy period, there has always been a brutal edge to the European border. The ways in which the Mediterranean in some discourses is sometimes contextualized is equivalent to the Mexican border, a metaphor that is deeply problematic and some people would say is deeply offensive, but an alternative perspective might say that no nation or region

treats its borders trivially. And if you have to build nations or regions with a sense of identity of themselves there has to be an outside as well as an inside. There is a complex debate about borders in the context of Europe. So firstly we have a more variegated and stratified Europe and secondly we can't pretend that this border hasn't always been a harsh border. Thirdly I would say, and differently in many ways, what the migration debate tends to do is it almost changes the location of the border because what needs to be policed does not have an inside and an outside. In fact, it becomes more of a Möbius strip than a border because what needs to be policed is what is inside already. So the border moves inside as much as anything else, which means that many countries, including the United Kingdom, have increased measures to check what is happening to those people when they come through the country, to where they leave, when they carry identity cards, what rights they have when they are here. The notion of policing and controlling the population and normalizing the sense of what the population needs to be controlled becomes much stronger as the border is internalized within the nation and externalized as the boundary between the inside and the outside. I think although people talk about that so much this is just as profound and has consequences.

INT *What are the challenges that research might face over the coming years to make sense of the complexities that this debate implies?*

MK What we have to understand are two things that are worth starting with. One is that the meaning of migration is changing, and what that means is that as a result, migration starts to impact on other academic disciplines and other policy concerns in a different way. And when I say that the meaning of migration is changing it is that conventionally, in the early twentieth century or before, migration was thought of as a once and for always process by which you go from place A to place B, going from A as a native in one place to a settler in another place and assimilate to the place you arrive. Whereas we know, if this was ever true, and in lots of ways it wasn't, it is certainly not true now, that when I go from A to B, I may go back to A frequently – hence all the debate around the diasporas and transnational network. But we also have the debate about technology and the virtual world, think about how online we can be in place A and place B simultaneously. Another debate concerns how the forms of the globalized labour movement changed. The geographies and temporalities of migration have changed very significantly. We need to develop an understanding of what the term of migration means. Because of that the concerns become very different in terms of how we think about the challenges of migration theory and key areas of migration research. You might think about what sovereignty means, in terms of the sovereignty of the nation states when

peoples' movement is much more fluid. For example, if you want to understand the politics of East London right now, you have to understand the politics of Bangladesh right now. And this in two ways, what happens in Bangladesh on the weekend with the election will play out on the streets of East London at the same time. Or sometimes, people who may have lived in London or even were born there make it back to Bangladesh and become members of parliament in Bangladesh. So there is a two-way exchange of relationship.

Now what the sovereign state means anymore and what we think about sovereignty as a core political idea has changed as a result of that. If we think of the ways in which we normally think about society as driven by individuals who grow up, contribute, grow old and draw on welfare, the temporalities of that life pattern have changed significantly. How you think about intergenerational mobility from one generation to a next has changed. So how you think about the temporalities of migration has changed remarkably. How we think about markets, we historically thought of taking place within nation states, markets are now much more messy, sometimes global, sometimes very local, sometimes strongly regulated as in the Scandinavian and German model, or much more neoliberal in the American sense of the term. So what markets are – structures, how we think about the demand for the free movement of labour as well as capital – has changed. The fourth area would be the fact that, if we look globally, where people live has changed, particularly in the global south, the BRICS, particularly Brazil, Russia, India, China. The movement to the city is becoming phenomenal whether it is Moscow becoming a mega-city in Europe or whether it is China which is seeing about 253 Million people moving to the cities. Massive urban growth is tied to migration to the city, like São Paulo. So it means that the city as a unit of social analysis becomes profoundly significant, alongside the nation state. So how we think about cities becomes important, and finally, how we think about caring and welfare, and who we owe debts to and who we create welfare nets for changes in a mobile world. Partly in terms of the things we were talking about earlier on, and we come to think about to whom we owe care and this brings us back to Lampedusa, if you like. If we think about owing a duty of care that is more global and developmental, then welfare isn't purely about those close to you geographically, but is a much broader concept. More generally, what we have to think about in migration changes is how social sciences and humanities make sense of the world.

INT *What would a theoretical and conceptual approach have to incorporate?*

MK I think it needs to be both multiscalar, and secondly, it needs to be interdisciplinary, drawing on the social sciences and the humanities. Then, thirdly, it needs to think about different kinds of engagement in the form of policy

thinking. By multiscalar I mean: you need to think about the small neighbourhood where things happen, alongside the district of the city, alongside the city as a whole, alongside the nation state, alongside the fact that there are geometries that structure the relationships of all those across the world. So in one neighbourhood you might have connections of over two hundred languages across parts of London, and two hundred sets of connectivities that link up the globe through a space of a few hundred metres. And this is a sociological reality, but just because that's a sociological reality that doesn't mean that either that neighbourhood or the district or that city doesn't have a logic of its own and its own interest. So we need to have the capacity to work at different geographical scales. That also means that, secondly, we need to have work that is interdisciplinary in the sense that it understands people not merely only as objects to be counted, precisely because if you want to understand why they behave in a particular way you have to understand their memories in the way the past shapes them as well as their hopes for the future in the way the future shapes them. In that sense, what is going on in many parts of the world in transnational and diasporic politics is a configuration of various remembered pasts, various imagined communities, and various aspirational futures that create a complexity that demands history, it demands sympathy, it demands the disciplines of the humanities alongside the disciplines of the social sciences. It needs to be interdisciplinary in that sense. We also need to think about how those kinds of multiple skills are brought to bear in policies that recognize that you do need to understand the logics of economics to see how economic growth favours certain kinds of migration flows and what the policy trade-offs are. Economics does not just go away just because things become transnational. But you need to hold that alongside the study of political theory, alongside the study of moral obligation.

INT *You state that the movement to the city is becoming phenomenal and at the same time tied to migration. Cities in both the global North and the global South are experiencing new patterns of urbanisms, negotiations, and modifications of everyday social interactions. What is the role of the city in the structuring of those relations and geometries?*

MK The nation state is one of the most powerful units out of which international relations and law, forms of cosmopolitanism are based. In no sense are we talking about the disappearance of the nation state. But what we are talking about is that the city becomes in various ways a political, social, and economic unit in its own right. It will have its own interests, it will develop its own cultures and its own politics. Just to give a fairly banal but quite important example: I spent some time of my life, after the bombings in London in 2005, I was asked

to be on a National Commission on Integration and Cohesion where we travelled the country looking at social relations between different groups in different parts in the United Kingdom, and what was striking was that the variation across the United Kingdom was extraordinary. The results were driven, mostly, by the prosperity of some places and the completely post-industrial sustain or decline of other places. All of this is simplifying because we don't have so much time. If you look at London, which has continued to grow for the last twenty-five years, then that process of growth is very ruthless and it involves all sorts of polarization and all sorts of victims, all sorts of change, all sorts of losers, but also it involves a significant number of winners, significant opportunities for people that are new as well as for people that have been in the city for a longer time. So it means that the nature of social relations between people from different geographical parts of the world is radically different, in some ways it is a difference of indifference. The city is so dynamic that things are changing. If you go to other parts, for example in small cities of the north of England, where there has frequently been sustained economic decline for the past twenty-five years, what you see is almost an ossification of a past which then becomes potentially generative of much more intense borders and boundaries of ethnic minority or majority communities where things can become much tougher at a certain, banal level. This is equally true when the deliberation between those groups becomes much more important, because they remain subject to capture by one group or another or misrepresentation, or perceived or real injustices. It becomes much harder to sustain the public good, and that creates a dynamic of what is happening in different cities but also in different parts of cities that begin to develop their own logic. So that logic is transnational, is economic, is political. So it does not get rid of the nation state but it creates a very powerful logic that is a powerful driver of social phenomena. I think this is also as true in China as it is in India or in Brazil.

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