

Q&A: Researcher finds immigration doesn't threaten welfare states

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It is often thought that immigration threatens the solidarity on which

redistribution relies. But looking at the post-war period, Ph.D. candidate Emily Anne Wolff finds that this is not the case.

The post-war period was an age of welfare expansion but also of decolonization and migration. What can this time tell us about immigration, race, and welfare today? Wolff studied the social inclusion of postcolonial migrants from (present-day) Indonesia, Algeria, and the Caribbean in the Netherlands, France and the U.K., respectively, between 1945 and 1970. Wolff will defend their thesis on Tuesday 18 June.

You set out to measure the inclusion of migrant groups in their new home countries. How do you measure inclusion?

Good question! I came up with a framework for evaluating inclusion that focused on different dimensions. One dimension was the extent to which individuals had access to material welfare. Were they eligible for [social assistance](#) or social security? And did they actually receive these benefits? A second dimension focused on whether people were treated with respect, as a moral equal.

The need for these dimensions became especially clear when I realized that sometimes people had a lot, but the type of thing they got was demeaning or degrading, forcing them into [cultural practices](#) or jobs that they might not have wanted to be in.

What patterns of exclusion or inclusion did you find?

I found a lot of cases where, as time went by, policymakers and members of the national community at large—the national media, [civil servants](#), the general public—constructed identities of specific migrant

groups as particularly deserving or undeserving of welfare. In France and the Netherlands, these efforts led to several different forms of inclusion in the welfare state.

One of the clearest examples is the harkis, Algerians who supported French military efforts during the Algerian independence war. Some 50,000 of them came to France. They were formally eligible for French social assistance, but rarely received it, and were explicitly redirected towards occupations in isolated forests such as forest ranger or cattle herder.

One of the reasons given by French policymakers at the time was that certain Harki characteristics made them better suited to these professions. For instance, that the harkis were from a rural background and were unprepared for urban life. Which was racialized and untrue: in one 1962 survey, more harkis had training in industrial or construction than in agriculture, and Algerians had been powering the French automobile sector for decades.

The U.K. responded to these migrations somewhat differently. Caribbeans were eligible for social assistance on (formally) equal terms. However, civil servants and politicians used this to justify their exclusion under immigration reforms of the 60s and 70s.

What do you think was the real reason for constructing these identities?

Its easy to underestimate how disruptive the Second World War and decolonization had been for Europeans understanding of who they were. The war, coupled with a flurry of UN reports debunking race as a biological concept, delegitimized the racial order that had powered the empire-state. I think that introduced a lot of confusion about what it

meant to be French or Dutch and which migrants deserved welfare. National identity needed a new source of fuel.

What does your research tell us about immigration today?

There's lots of concern in academic circles and the public sphere about the impact of immigration on welfare states. The reigning idea is that if we have immigration, it will introduce cultural and [racial diversity](#) and decrease the public's willingness to share their resources.

My research shows that diversity flows from our ideas of who is like us and that these ideas are subject to change and vulnerable to influence from political, cultural and social actors. So it's possible that immigration has an effect on a [welfare](#) state. But if it does, it's not because of diversity, but because of vigorous efforts to police the boundaries of, and at the same time give meaning to, [national identity](#).

In other words, it comes from a process in which we're constantly telling each other who's in and who's out.

Provided by Leiden University

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