Panel:

**Variations of Urban Citizenship and the Struggle for Migrant Rights. Exploring the Inextricable Connection between Institutional Landscapes and Political Agency in the City**

Abstract**:**

**Pathways to urban citizenship for low-income migrants in São Paulo, Brazil**

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Recent waves of migrants are establishing an increasingly visible presence in the urban landscape of São Paulo, both in its centre and its peripheries. Though a city with a rich history of immigration and diversity, the arrival of migrants in recent decades has not been accompanied by specific municipal policies for the migrant population, an absence which affects in particular, low-income migrants.

Migrant NGOs and activists in São Paulo argue that it is the ‘failure’ of municipal policies and archaic national legislation which has resulted in these NGOs, many affiliated with the Catholic Church, taking on the role of governing immigration in the city. They provide migrants information about rights, assist in the insertion of migrants into the urban labour and housing markets, address the challenges of precarious labour and organise cultural activities. The wider goal of migrant activists is to mobilise migrants to campaign for a recognition of their rights, for changes in the legislation, including giving migrants on permanent visas the right to vote, to install migrant-specific municipal policies, and to cultivate among migrants, a sense of belonging and participation in Brazil’s largest city.

Yet this paper also argues that the movements led by NGOs are not necessarily representative of the experiences of all low-income migrants, nor is there always wide participation of migrants in such movements. The manner in which such movements approach the question of urban citizenship and migrant rights also inadvertently provokes tensions and exclusions. It is therefore important to also highlight the agency of migrants in developing a sense of `citizenship from below’ within and around the institutional constraints and possibilities. This entails a consideration of how migrants develop strategies of survival, articulate their grievances, use micro-level social networks to find work and housing, learn Portuguese and feel a sense of participation, enfranchisement and access to what the city has to offer; and the struggles and barriers that this involves. Case studies include individual stories of migrants who use specific networks to build a sense of urban citizenship, as well as a migrant-led mobilisation against racism and xenophobia after an act of violence, in which migrants aligned themselves with Brazilian social movements on race.

Drawing on examples of institutional, activist and migrant practices in addressing questions of inclusion and exclusion in the city, the paper will trace the multiple and still fragmented ways of articulating rights and developing a sense of urban citizenship as newer waves of migrants join the urban landscape of São Paulo.

This paper forms one part of a wider comparative research project, which in its next stage, will examine the question of urban citizenship and migrant rights in Mumbai.

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