Approaching Refugee Experiences from a Transcultural Societal Studies Perspective

Summary of Proposed Project

From a state-side perspective, refugees and displaced persons have been considered in the 20th century as objects of special admission programs and as targets of support and rehabilitation measures. From a "human agency"-perspective, refugees as subjects have to and want to re-establish continuity in interrupted life-courses. Like voluntary migrants but under far more difficult circumstances, they intend to regain control over their trajectories. Thus, in this project I plan to analyze life-writings of refugee men, women, and children in order to trace their strategies of rebuilding lives or, at a minimum, to re-act to their environment. Special attention will be paid to which programs and structures facilitate or hinder insertion and acculturation and how they do so. Such understanding of human agency is a prerequisite for developing effective governmental or NGO supportive structures.

As theoretical frame I will use the holistic approach to human lives and societies that I have recently developed: The concept of "Transcultural Societal Studies" as an approach that, on the analytical level, is interdisciplinary and, on the level of the subjects addressed, deals with all aspects of human lives in specific cultural settings.

I will analyze accounts of refugees in the United States and Canada, as well as Germany and France (and other countries if accounts are available in English, French, or German language) and place them in the context of the respective state's "refugee regime" and society's "refugee discourse." The results are expected to be of relevance for policy-makers and to contribute to an internationalized research approach to refugees and displaced persons.