

IMISCOE 13th Annual Conference „MIGRATION AND DEVELOPMENT“, Prague, 30 June 2016

Opening address

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My name is Maurice Crul. I am a professor of Sociology and the international coordinator of the IMISCOE network. I want to warmly welcome you all to this conference in the beautiful city of Prague on behalf of the IMISCOE organization.

I came to Prague for the first time about thirty years ago, only two years before the famous velvet revolution. Together with my wife I came to Prague out of curiosity for the city, but also to see with my own eyes how people lived under communist rule. We had an address of a person named Jiří who had visited friends of ours in The Hague. After a few days of wandering around in the city we decided to look up the address. With Jiří our journey began in the subculture of young opposition activists in Prague. I vividly remember one night we ended up in a bar which was frequented by all the marginal groups of Prague: Roma, young activists, prostitutes and a lot of alcoholics. At one point a fight broke out between two very drunken guys, the police came and we all had to run and landed in the apartment of one of the activist friends of Jiří. After a lot of drinks, we are asked by the host to come to one of the rooms because he wanted to show us something. It turned out to be his secret weapon collection. We were rather surprised especially because Jiří had been lecturing us about the strictly non-violent character of the student movement. These sort of contradictions seemed to be rather normal in those ten days we spent in Prague.

About one year after our visit to Prague, Jiří had to flee to Germany after he organized a demonstration in support of the Tiananmen Square uprising in China. The life story of Jiří points to all key questions of this conference: migration and development on the one hand and the categorization of migrants and the consequences of this on the other hand. Jiří with his move to Berlin instead of being a student activist then became labeled as a refugee. When they threatened to relocate him to the countryside of Bavaria, as they usually do with asylum seekers, we offered him to come to the Netherlands. We rented a car and picked him up just across the border of Germany. He then transferred from being a refugee to being an undocumented migrant. And we were, what we would now call, human traffickers. We took a small side road avoiding the border control and brought him into the country illegally. We supported him with money till he found an 'of the records' job. He of course was also a student, an architect student, and after two years he signed up again at the Technical University in Delft. Together with a group of friends we paid his tuition. Eventually he married a friend of ours, which again gave him a new status: a temporary permit dependent on his marriage partner. He eventually became a Dutch citizen. The different categories he passed didn't really take into account who he really was. He was one of the brightest and most talented students in his own country, winning prizes and awards but as soon as he crossed the border to Germany he became a category. And this had a huge effect on who he became in life. In the Technical University in Delft they didn't recognize a lot of the course work he had done in Prague. The fact that he was for a long period undocumented resulted in major delays in his studies. As one of the most talented young architects of his generation, he never managed to finish his studies in Delft and never worked as an architect. Jiří is now mostly working as a carpenter and handy-man. There are periods that he doesn't have work and he lives from social benefits. His friends who stayed in Prague by now all have their own successful architecture businesses and companies. The contrast is very big! The development in Prague has by far surpassed the development of the refugee, then migrant and now citizen of Amsterdam.

We are now witnessing one of the largest migration flows to Europe from the South and these people face similar and more severe issues than my friend Jiří. The story of Jiří, however, shows us that how we

categorize people will have a huge effect on their life story, but also what we as a society will gain or lose in terms of the talented people that now come. We, for instance, can see the young people that come from Syria as *refugees*, but we could also categorize many of them as *international students*. Many of them have a bachelor degree and speak perfect English and would like to continue their master here. Instead we put these young people in refugee camps and make them first learn the national language and all together it will take two years or more before they can return to their studies.

These and other topics are at the heart of this year's conference in Prague. Dusan, the director of GeoMigrace and his team, have put together a great program with important and inspiring key note lectures and many workshops that address the topic of Migration and Development. I think IMISCOE as a network could not be more relevant than today. So thank you Dusan for bringing us all together here in Prague. I think it will be a great and stimulating conference.