



## Panel Report: Riches and Belonging: Global Diasporas in the 20th Century

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Responsible: Elena Valdameri

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Comment: Martin Dusinberre

**Report by: Tanja Hammel and Julia Tabea Streicher, University of Basel**

The only double panel at this conference was opened by the organizer ELENA VALDAMERI (Zürich) who stressed the four papers' focus on:

- 1) The role of poverty and wealth as qualifying or disqualifying factors to determine inclusion in and belonging to a polity
- 2) The increasing attention paid to the economic potential of diasporas/migrant communities and the efforts to appropriate them in order to generate national wealth
- 3) The elaboration of discourses of legitimacy and entitlement for migrant communities in a host society

Valdameri stated that the speakers would shed new light on how flows of money, knowledge, and ideas of (self-)status affected senses of belonging, discourses of legitimacy, and notions of citizenship in different colonial, crypto-colonial, non-colonial, and post-colonial contexts.

**DARIO WILLI** (Zurich) presented his Master's thesis at the History Department, University of Zurich. In the brief insights into his biography of the 'Mather fortune' (1813–1914), he stressed that money has agency (*Wirkungsmacht*). Money should thus be seen as an actor in itself (Latour), as a means of communication (Luhmann, Foucault), as an intermediary, and as an instrument to enable and empower people. Willi focused on three case studies in three different places to demonstrate



how fortune changed perceptions of wealth and senses of belonging (to a community, state or location, a social class, the imperial elite, the aristocracy, or political entity).

**HARALD FISCHER-TINÉ** (Zurich) illustrated on the basis of the *Komagata Maru* incident (1914) that Canadian immigrant policies discriminated against migrants on the basis of their economic status, which debunks the inclusivist discourse of British imperial citizenship as mere rhetoric. He showed that Punjabis started to migrate to North America around 1870, but were not very popular as laborers, as they were perceived as harder to control than 'coolies', and not willing to adapt to North American culture, which in turn triggered anti-South Asian sentiment. To keep them out, Canada enforced a law in 1908 that immigrants in general were required to possess at least \$200. Gurdit Singh (1860–1954), a well-to-do fisherman in Singapore, born in the British Punjab province in India, met hundreds of Punjabis in Hong Kong who were willing to migrate to North America. 376 passengers, 338 of whom were Sikhs, chartered a Japanese ship and demanded their right to emigrate to Canada. 24 of the passengers could eventually prove that they were carrying significant cash reserves and were allowed to enter, but the others were sent back to Calcutta, where some of them were imprisoned and 19 died in violent conflicts. The incident bears much symbolic capital and continues to shape imaginings of belonging, and political debates about citizenship rights. Indian nationalists constructed the *Komagata Maru* passengers as "freedom fighters" and martyrs. On 18 May 2016, the Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau and the Liberal Party apologized for Canada's racist stance in the past to the South Asian diaspora recalling *Komagata Maru*. They did so in order to evoke Canadians' understanding for their letting 25,000 Syrians into the country for which they had been under fierce attack.

**MARTIN DUSINBERRE** (Zurich) in his comments suggested to use the examples raised by the papers to focus more on borders and blockages in global history than on connections and networks. He also asked the presenters to discuss the hypothesis that money moves easier than people. Looking beyond the panel's papers, he recommended 1) analyzing what role law plays in mobilities, 2) studying ships as mediators and actors, including what happens on board, so as to understand how the meanings of money and people change in transit and 3) focusing more on the color of money and the connections between race and wealth.

In part two of the panel, **MARK RAVINDER FROST** (Colchester) re-examined the interviews collected by the Oral History Department of the National Archives of Singapore in the early 1980s. He demonstrated that the lived experience and belonging of the Chinese diaspora in late-colonial



Southeast Asia differed from what scholars have hitherto described as the 'rags to riches' stories that comprised the founding myth and official historical narrative of the island as a land of migrant opportunity. His analysis complicated and undermined the official picture of rapid upward social mobility and wealth accumulation.

**ELENA VALDAMERI** (Zurich) focused on some of the social practices, behaviors, and values connected to the way Indians understood their being (or not being) good citizens in colonial and post-colonial India. She showed that in the colonial period, Indian nationalists saw citizenship as based on notions of sacrifice, poverty, and austerity vis-à-vis the colonial view of citizenship as instrumental for achieving material benefits. With the emergence of Gandhi as a leader of the Indian national movement, poverty was even more politicized and became an element to distinguish Indians culturally from Western modernity. After independence, being poor was still valued in public morality: According to official discourse, the poor was the one working for industrialization, the country's economic development, and for uplifting his/her social status. Yet from the mid-1980s, and especially after the economic liberalizations, poverty ceased to be seen as respectable. Neoliberalism and Hindutva increasingly depicted wealthy diasporic Indians as worthy citizens to be rewarded for loving their mother country.

Dusinberre commented that both papers focused on the creation of discourses. Yet he raised the question whether citizenship could be considered the same as belonging. He also critically reflected on the terminology and methodology the presenters had chosen. Particularly, he encouraged historians not to use European theoretical concepts (e.g. capitalism, or citizenship) and project them onto extra-European historical contexts. He has often observed scholars using Western concepts for analysis and "native" concepts for practices, inciting us to push local languages to a theoretical level. He also rhetorically asked whether women did not move and why their stories were not included in the histories presented in this double-panel. And lastly, he urged caution, since *richesse*, *Reichtum*, *wealth*, *riches/richness* and *prosperity* can mean different things and more conceptual selectivity is required.

All four papers showed how financial means or difficulties determined inclusion and belonging to a state (e.g. India, Canada, Singapore) or a social class (e.g. the poor, the aristocrats). They illustrated what can be gained from focusing on what money did to people and by re-examining discourses on citizenship and belonging and the impact wealth and poverty had on them.



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### **Panel overview:**

Willi, Dario: "Princely Bequest." A 19th Century British Inheritance and its Journey Around the World

Fischer-Tiné, Harald: Race, economic status and citizenship rights: Revisiting the formation of the South Asian Diaspora in Canada (c.1900-1920)

Frost, Mark Ravinder: "The Migrant Speaks? Oral Histories and the Chinese Experience of 'Rags to Riches' in colonial Southeast Asia"

Valdameri, Elena: "The poor, the rich, and the citizen: shift in discourses of citizenship in 20th century India"

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