

Transcript- Migration Oxford podcast

Immigration to Innovation

Robert McNeil 00:00

Hello, and welcome to the latest episode of the Migration Oxford podcast. I'm Rob McNeil.

Jacqueline Broadhead 00:06

And I'm Jacqui Broadhead.

Robert McNeil 00:07

In this episode, we're going to be talking about migrant entrepreneurialism. And we're going to have a focus particularly on refugee entrepreneurialism. And so just to kick it off, I was going to ask you, Jacqui, I mean, what motivated you to focus on this issue in particular?

Jacqueline Broadhead 00:23

Well, thanks, Rob. Partly, this was about visiting an exhibition at the Migration Museum—we're going to be talking about that today—called Taking Care of Business, which is all about the kind of contribution of migrant entrepreneurs to the British high street and to, kind of, all of our...all of our high streets. And not just the big businesses, you know, and some of the stories of migrant entrepreneurship that we might all have heard, in a British context, places like Marks and Spencer and things, but also some of the smaller businesses, so thinking about the corner shops and the Chinese takeaways and things like that. And, as I was visiting the exhibition, that got me thinking about all of the research that I know is going on about this topic, in terms of understanding its dynamics and understanding the contribution that's been made, but also some of the challenges and...and some of the sense that we have sometimes that migrants get pushed towards entrepreneurship because of other barriers to them entering employment in a...in maybe a slightly less risky way. So that might be kind of language barriers for newcomers, but also things like structural discrimination and things like that. So we wanted to explore a little bit about the exhibition and really excited to, kind of, be able to speak to one of the curators, but also...but also to get the sense of, kind of, what do we know from research about this idea of entrepreneurship, why it's seen as this policy response, and if actually, there are some structural barriers that we should be addressing at the same time as...as encouraging this kind of innovation and dynamism from newcomers. I think the other really interesting question that comes through is how entrepreneurship affects our ideas about the type of communities that we have. So our interactions with businesses, migrant businesses on the high street or in our day-to-day lives. Does that have a big effect on our, kind of, communities, the way that we think about our communities...

Robert McNeil 02:20

...which I think is really, really nice. I mean, I suppose food, again, I mean, it's...it's slightly the kind of the obvious thing that we think about because we all interact with it on a day-to-day basis and...but, you

know, you...you talk a lot when we're...when we're doing various things about this kind of two-way process of mutual accommodation being what integration is, and a lot of people are kind of reticent to acknowledge that and think, well, you know, people...it's the responsibility of the migrant to change and adapt to the society that they live in. But of course, I mean, nothing...nothing really encapsulates how societies shift and change better than the move that people slowly make towards different cuisines, different eating different things. Like it's super, super interesting. It's a super nice way of understanding how integration can work.

Jacqueline Broadhead 03:03

Yeah, and it's very practical. And it's much more applied than some of the other kind of slightly abstract ideas.

Robert McNeil 03:08

It's true. It's a metric...these are metrics that we can see and taste every day and that's a really wonderful thing. Well, I think that's quite enough of us chatting about stuff, let's...let's talk to some people who really know what they're talking about.

[Sounds of Lewisham shopping centre]

Jacqueline Broadhead 03:20

Ok, so just walking through the doors from Lewisham shopping centre into the Migration Museum, and I'm joined by Aditi Anand, the Artistic Director here, and Curator of the Taking Care of Business exhibition. Hi, Aditi.

Aditi Anand 03:37

Hi, Jacqui.

Jacqueline Broadhead 03:38

So we start off coming into the Migrant Makers Market, the next iteration of the museum gift shop which I really enjoy. And then we move through into what I would have to say is a kind of perfect re-creation of the Lucky Star takeaway.

Aditi Anand 03:56

Yeah, I think...I think the Chinese takeaway is...is one space where we have lots of really emotional reactions. And yeah, it's very evocative. There's a space here where you can pick up a phone and dial numbers to listen to memories from takeaway kids. It's very interactive, people can leave their memories. So I think, yeah, I think this has definitely hit a chord with a lot of our audiences.

Jacqueline Broadhead 04:17

And so then as we kind of wind our way past the tables, what I can see coming next is a whole load of shopping bags. Very apt for our location.

Aditi Anand 04:29

Yeah, so I mean the exhibition is kind of set up a bit like a high street in a way, so you've got these different sections that look at different types of businesses. So, you know, we touched on food, we touched on technology. This particular section was looking at style and the ways that migrant businesses have shaped our styles through the ages.

Jacqueline Broadhead 04:45

Absolutely. And I guess we're sort of, if this is the high street we're maybe in like the town square here, I guess, because we've got fashion, we've got sort of homeware, we have the perfect sort of evocation of a corner shop. And then finally we have the Golden Scissors. It has a 'Come in, we're open' sign, so this is the barbers.

Aditi Anand 05:01

Yeah, so we had...we had a barber shop in our Room to Breathe exhibition before, where we had this installation which is about, you know, migrant barbers and their customers having conversations. You sit down in the barber's chair and you can kind of listen into these conversations. So we kept that. But we also expanded the space to look at the history of, kind of, hair and beauty businesses. And, yeah, explore some of the stories that aren't as particularly well known.

Jacqueline Broadhead 05:28

Great, thank you so much for that tour round the exhibition. Maybe if we just take a seat and have a little bit more of a chat about Taking Care of Business.

Jacqueline Broadhead 05:39

We're sat here in the middle of Lewisham shopping centre at the Museum. Was that an inspiration for this exhibition?

Aditi Anand 05:47

Yeah, definitely. Our location here inside Lewisham shopping centre was definitely an inspiration for the Taking Care of Business exhibition. I think when we were planning the exhibition, we couldn't help but notice that we're in a very diverse part of London, inside the shopping centre, which is full of shops that were started by migrant entrepreneurs. I think there were a few other considerations as well, like we've been thinking about certain anniversaries that fall within the year that we're launching the exhibition. So this year marks the 50th anniversary of the arrival of Ugandan Asians. And that's a community that's had a huge impact in the business world in Britain. So all of those kinds of threads wove into the idea of the exhibition.

Jacqueline Broadhead 06:30

And that's one of the things that I really liked, this idea of, it covers both, kind of, high-street businesses, businesses that we know really well like Costa Coffee, and kind of quite surprising origins in the 70s, but also co-curated spaces that focus on, kind of, everyday, local businesses like the corner shop, Chinese takeaway, and that kind of thing. I know one of the slogans of the Museum is, kind of, "all our stories". Was that something that was kind of important to you in putting this together? And how did you translate that through into some of the things we see in the exhibition?

Aditi Anand 07:04

Yeah, I think sometimes in putting together an exhibition like this, sometimes there's...it's easy, or there's a temptation to kind of focus on the big success stories, the recognisable names. So obviously, there's, you know, a large number of those in our exhibition, everything from M&S to Costa Coffee, Rimmel, Robert Dyas. But, you know, for me, it was equally important that we represent businesses at all scales. And really, the exhibition is about looking at the ways that migrant entrepreneurship impacts our everyday lives, from the clothes we wear, the food we eat, you know, the apps on our phones, just all the things we kind of take for granted, but are a huge part of our lives. And I think also, it was really important to look at the different scales of businesses, because, you know, sometimes the bigger stories obscure the fact that...of why so many people get into entrepreneurship to begin with. And you know, with the story of the sort of takeaway, or the corner shop, you really see it was a story about survival, really, it wasn't, you know, about people coming here necessarily with a zeal to start a business, but it was because they were discriminated against in the job market or didn't have the kind of networks to allow themselves to, kind of, get the job that they were previously qualified for. So a lot of them...the...a way of entering the job market was through starting their own small-scale businesses.

Jacqueline Broadhead 08:26

I wondered, was there anything that particularly surprised you as you were putting together these stories or, also, the people who were co-curating them, were they surprised about what they learned about their own families' histories?

Aditi Anand 08:35

I think what surprised me most, actually, though probably was just how many quintessentially British businesses have migrant roots. I don't think I quite appreciated that when we started doing the research. Because, you know, there's some that seems sort of obvious. But, you know, there's a lot that I personally didn't realise, and it was...and it's actually quite difficult to find the migrant origins because you have an inkling about it, but there isn't, you know...these companies have been sold multiple times, there aren't necessarily archives. So actually the digging in and finding all of, you know, all of these stories...But yeah, I think...I think what really struck me is just how many of those stories there are, whether it's, sort of, KPNuts or Durex, or, you know, Burton, all of these things we think of as being quintessentially British.

Jacqueline Broadhead 09:23

And maybe the businesses themselves don't have that much interest in, kind of, understanding that history because things change and they're kind of forward-looking. And yet capturing that and kind of understanding the contribution that's been made is so important, and it's so fascinating to kind of see and understand it. I think one area where that...that history is really clear, and is often celebrated, is in the kind of restaurant section. And, you know, we have a lot of, I think conversation about the kind of food histories and the way that they've contributed to Britain. And that's kind of probably one of the areas where it's most visible maybe. But also this idea that, initially, it was adaptat-...restaurants adapted to kind of fit the British palate. And now there's more of a sense of those restaurants kind of changing our national palate. Was that...does that kind of chime with what you found in putting together

the exhibition and speaking to those kind of restaurateurs? Or is there a little bit more, kind of, nuance to the...to that picture?

Aditi Anand 10:28

Yeah, absolutely. I mean, I think, like you said, food is definitely one of the most visible places where we see the impact of migrant-owned businesses. I think one thing that's interesting is just how far back some of these food stories go. We kind of think it's, you know, it was all British food, quote, unquote, "British food". And then, you know, migrants came along in the sort of twenty...20th century. But some of the restaurants that we look at in the exhibition, you know, their histories go back to the 1800s, whether it's looking at the first sort of curry house in Britain. So definitely, I mean, I definitely think that there was a strong thread in looking at some of the...the sort of businesses that adapted food for British tastes. But, equally, there was, I think, a lot of innovation from the start. And I think some businesses actually, they were initially started to cater to a kind of migrant population. So exam...for example, looking at some of the Brick Lane curry houses, and it's only sort of later on where you had some restaurateurs deciding to kind of broaden their clientele base, and then market to a sort of White audience or a White British audience. And that involves kind of changing and adapting those dishes. But yeah, I mean, I think...I think there's always, there's always adaptation. And I think we...one of the questions we pose in the exhibition is also about kind of what makes something authentic? And that's quite a large, long question, I think, to get into, but I'm quite curious to see what audiences think about that. Like, what is...what is authentic food anyway? Because it's always been such a mixture of different influences.

Jacqueline Broadhead 11:56

I noticed that the subtitle of the exhibition is Migrant Entrepreneurship and the Making of Britain. What's been your kind of key takeaway about that contribution, [is] there something that you, kind of, understood better around the contribution of migrant entrepreneurship to Britain?

Aditi Anand 12:13

I think what I can say is that...just Britain would not be Britain without migrant entrepreneurship, really.

Jacqueline Broadhead 12:19

Thank you so much for joining us today. Can you tell us where we can find the exhibition and how long it's on for?

Aditi Anand 12:24

The exhibition is called Taking Care of Business and it's at the Migration Museum until Spring of 2023. And we're based in Lewisham in the shopping centre.

Jacqueline Broadhead 12:34

Wonderful. Thank you so much.

Aditi Anand 12:35

Thank you.

[Sounds of Lewisham shopping centre]

Jacqueline Broadhead 12:37

So, we've just been to the Migration Museum and explored migrant entrepreneurialism through the Taking Care of Business exhibition. And now we want to explore some of the research behind refugee entrepreneurialism. I'm delighted to be joined by Gilda Borriello. Gilda is a DPhil candidate in Migration Studies, where she researches refugee entrepreneurship by studying Syrian refugees in Jordan and Turkey. She's also a Consultant for the World Bank, where she works on connecting businesses with refugees through the private sector for refugees global initiative. I was really interested to see in your recently launched Twitter page that you have these two questions about refugee entrepreneurship: why do refugees create a business? And what kinds of businesses are created by refugees? I just wonder if you could tell us a little bit about why you're interested in these questions and what some of the answers that you're finding are?

Gilda Borriello 13:33

Well, first of all, I think that these two questions are very much interconnected. The reason why refugees start a business, also determines what kinds of businesses can be out there. Let me start with the first, of course, why refugees start a business. Refugees are similar to migrants, but slightly different. They are a heterogeneous group. They're not all the same. They come from different countries, each refugee has his own experience, or her own experiences, and also the host country play a vital role in providing the regulatory environment for business creation. So, generally, refugees usually start a business because of lack of other opportunities. This, of course, influences the kinds of businesses that they start, usually these are very small-scale businesses, sometimes informal, in countries with very high infor-... informality, such as, for instance, East Africa, also Jordan or Turkey. But I have to say that there are also refugees who start a business by purpose. So there is a variety in reasons why refugees create a business and in the kinds of businesses they are created. But I think that the interesting question is, is whether the refugees who create a business because of necessity, because they need to survive, do they end up being more risk takers? And actually, do they end up having an...an attitude to business ownership or to entrepreneurship? And then, this implies that they...that they may end up growing and generating employment and also, not only employment, but also other economic benefits for the host country, like innovation.

Jacqueline Broadhead 15:27

That's a really good point. And I think that idea of entrepreneurship through necessity is really interesting. And, you know, this idea that, on the one hand, refugees are...can be innovators and are risk taking, but also, inherently, that sometimes they're pushed towards that risk because of structural factors, such as discrimination within the labour market, or language skills. And I just wonder, do you think sometimes that refugees are pushed towards the entrepreneurialism, when actually they would prefer to be in employment, but that's not open to them? And what do you think the consequences of that...of that is, if you do see that?

Gilda Borriello 16:10

Of course. I think, of course, this is one of the main reasons, if not the main reasons, that refugees open a business formally or informally, in the UK or in Jordan, anywhere. What I have noticed, actually,

it's something interesting, that sometimes I see that some refugees...some refugees decide to create a business in order to face the challenges that themselves and also other refugees face. For example, there is a Syrian refugee in Germany, who created an app to teach German to other migrants or refugees. Or, in Turkey, there is another Syrian refugee, who created a consulting firm that helps businesses owned by refugees, who don't know the regulations in Turkey, or simply who want to export, or who want to grow their business. So in this cases I see that it is the real...the very barriers that prevent...that usually prevent refugees to access self-employment to open a business that actually push them to be innovative, and also with benefits for other refugees or other migrants.

Jacqueline Broadhead 17:21

And this is innovation from the refugees themselves to almost provide a support infrastructure for entrepreneurialism, based on the gaps that they've noticed. Are there examples from your work of the state or from NGOs supporting and kind of developing that infrastructure? And is that in parallel to providing support for people to get into employment? Or is there a kind of preference for entrepreneurship versus employment or vice versa?

Gilda Borriello 17:51

Well, especially in here, in Jordan, where I'm doing my research, there is a very high level of unemployment. So rather than providing employment support to refugees, the policy here is more to try to have refugees create employment, as a way of having them being integrated in the Jordanian society and Jordanian economy. This, though, has its disadvantages, because, of course, you cannot create one hundred home-based businesses that produce pickles, the market would be saturated. And this can also lead to discrimination toward the Syrian refugees from the local Jordanians. So there are pros and cons, of course, of these programmes supporting refugee entrepreneurship. And I think that, of course, it is paramount to have an assessment of the local workforce or the local market before starting any kind of this programme. And, on the other hand, that at the same time, the regulations don't help, because now in the case of Jordan, refugees cannot work in all sectors. So of course, such programmes focus on providing this...providing refugees with, with the opportunity of opening a business only in certain sectors where they can actually work. So I think that generally it's a refugee entrepreneurship. It's a very complex...complex issue. And it's really at the intersection of this...social factors of...in the host communities, the economic outlook of the host country, refugees' previous experience skills and of course the training network available. And also finance...financial support available for these refugees.

Jacqueline Broadhead 19:43

Do you think entrepreneurship supports integration and inclusion? Obviously, we know from the integration literature that workplaces can be really important sites for integration and inclusion. Yet, if people are setting up their own businesses, especially if they're micro-businesses, they don't necessarily have access to that. Are there ways in which entrepreneurship supports inclusion? Or in some ways, does it inhibit it by people being a little bit more isolated and on their own as they set up their own businesses?

Gilda Borriello 20:15

It's actually both. What I am thinking about recently, in my research, is exactly the double-edged sword of the inclusion or integration issue. Generally, it's...generally it's always thought that entrepreneurship brings to integration. And this is true, ideally, because when somebody...when a refugee in this case, opens a business, he or she would interact with a...series of people, from customers, to suppliers, to...to the other businesses where he or she sources the products, etc. But in practice, I have seen that this really changes, depending on the context. For instance, let me jump now in East Africa, where refugees, for instance in Kenya, are not allowed to get out of the refugee camp, and are in refugee camp. On the contrary, in Jordan, or in the UK, they are mostly in cities. Here, refugees tend to do business only between the same...among the same ethnicity. So there is really no much...not much of exchange and on, of social inclusion, and the perception from the host community stay the same...stays the same negative stereotype of the refugee entrepreneur. So yes, I think that the...generally the inclusion concept is very tricky. Yes, entrepreneurship can bring to inclusion, but it can also bring to exclusion if there is no support network. And in this, I think that local authorities or local business association, and also CSOs play a really important role in connecting one-by-one, the refugee businesses with the local businesses, with the local customers, or suppliers and so on.

Jacqueline Broadhead 20:58

I know that you have been publicising some of the work that you're doing through a Twitter feed, would you be able to share with us where people can follow you to find out more?

Gilda Borriello 22:19

Yes, it's at @Refugee_Entr

Jacqueline Broadhead 22:27

Thanks so much, Gilda.

Robert McNeil 22:30

You've been listening to the Migration Oxford podcast. I'm Rob McNeil.

Jacqueline Broadhead 22:34

And I'm Jacqui Broadhead. We couldn't pass up the opportunity to take a closer look at the Taking Care of Business exhibition at the Migration Museum. So myself and Aditi went for a bit of a guided tour around the Museum and around the exhibition. And if you're interested in that, we have a bonus episode coming out soon.