Beyond the bounds of the ethnic: for postmigrant cultural and social research

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ABSTRACT

This article draws on an ongoing self-reflexive debate in German migration research. It is considered that migration research has much contributed to (re)produce subject categories and concepts of the nation-state which it, at the same time, aims to criticize. With its specific focus on diverse figures and formations of the migrant, on ethnic minorities and transnational diasporas, the respective counterparts of a white, national majority and the hierarchical relations between these are being implicitly coconstructed. Especially, the plethora of accounts of migrants’ lives and migrants’ worlds tend to limit themselves to a more or less exclusive “migrantology”—thus petrifying rather than challenging and transgressing the inner boundaries of the nation-state.

New approaches of critical migration research, however, aim at broadening that perspective and at reversing its viewing direction: From the perspective of its ethnicized and racialized “margins” the naturalized “centre” can be explored as being part of a postmigrant, postcolonial space of cultural dynamics and social struggles. Extending its scope in this way, beyond its conceptual limits, migration research would be cosmopolitanized and turned into a general study of cultural and social realities crossing ethnic and national bounds.

Migration moves and shapes societies to a much greater extent than politicians and researchers concerned with those societies would like to believe. Social realities have long outstripped attempts to order and control them by means of internal national and external European borders. European societies have become postmigrant societies that are characterised through and through by the experiences and effects of coming, going and staying. However, in the established discourses, which revolve around “immigration” and “integration”, migration is still treated as a separate problem as if the “majority society” (conceived as its opposite and automatically assumed to be national and white) had nothing to do with it.

“Culture” is a key term constituting this contradiction, and plays an important role in the politics governing migration. As a culturalising attribution and justification of “otherness” it functions to make migrants, their children and even their grandchildren into the problematic “ethnic others” of “our” society; a culturalised concept of otherness then serves as the basis for national “integration” of migrants as “minorities” that must fit in or be tolerated, and for the distinction between “failure” and “success” of migrant projects. The culturalised concept of otherness also plays a role in deciding who may legally cross national borders, as well as the European Union’s new frontiers.

Critical migration research emerged in opposition to this politics of ethnicisation, which places migration in a set of cultural containers along the margins of the “majority society”. Its aim is not just to study migration as a part of society, but conversely—and even more so—to observe society from the perspective of migration, in the sense of examining it from the margins it has itself created. Here we can build on the theoretical advances of a transnational social and cultural anthropology that makes migration the starting point for new concepts: from the transnationalised understanding of mobile culture in the works of Ulf Hannerz through the transnational social spaces introduced to the international discussion by Nina Glick Schiller and Avtar Brah, and the links between migration, media communication, imagination and cultural globalisation advocated above all by Arjun Appadurai.

Nonetheless, in its own dealings with the concept of culture, empirical migration research often lags behind such critical theoretical revisions, and not only because many studies actually transpire on closer examination to remain within the familiar narrow confines of ethnically or religiously defined communities, even if today they do so more or less automatically in the transnational dimensions of social networks and with reference to their cultural diversity.
and hybridity. Nina Glick Schiller criticises this pertinently as “methodological ethnicity”: Here the ethnic group is unquestioningly assumed to represent a natural category of analysis and non-ethnic categories of belonging and distinction are ignored. For the culture it describes, ethnicity thus remains the same “straight-jacket” Ayşe Çaglar criticised more than 20 years ago. Finally, even where it focuses on interethnic interfacing and multiethnic constellations, migration research all too often restricts itself to relations between individual migrant nationality groups—transcending the monoethnic perspective of classical community studies but still failing to move beyond the bounds of migrant worlds. Thus, its perspective still comprehends and reflects only the ethnically demarcated zone of minorities at the margins of society.

In the Migration Lab at the Institut für Europäische Ethnologie in Berlin we have explored this as a fundamental dilemma: on the one side the very point of critical migration research is to read migration against the grain of the dominant discourse and identify it as a productive societal and cultural force; on the other the strategy of endlessly repeating this narrative of alternative, transnational, hybrid migrant worlds leads inadvertently into a dead end. While migrant life-worlds are highlighted as especially dynamic and mobile, they remain fixed on the periphery, as a “special research area” outside the ethnically unmarked, immobile “majority society”. One underlying problem here is that migration research is often understood merely as “research about migrants”, producing a “migrantology” that is capable of little more than repeatedly illustrating and reproducing itself; a “migrantology” that at the same time plays its part in constructing its supposed counterpart, the national society of immobile, white non-migrants. In the Migration Lab we suggest that a shift in perspective is needed here: a shift that would “demigrantise” migration research while “migrantising” research into culture and society. Or, put differently, as we have already proposed in the project Transit Migration. What is lacking is not yet more research about migration, but a migration-based perspective to generate new insights into the contested arenas of “society” and “culture”.

I understand this shift in perspective as a fundamental change of course towards a postmigrant migration research. What this requires in the first place is reapportioned research domains that systematically transgress the bounds of the culturalised, ethnicised migrant worlds to enter the as yet untouched “majority society” and its institutions. This expanded research configuration will enable a new visibility of migration within overall societal developments and within the ongoing debates over culture in its dual function: as an instrument of governing migration and as practised politics of migration. Leaning on the concept of “methodological cosmopolitanism” and the latest discussions about a postcolonial concept of cosmopolitanism, I understand this expansion of perspective as a necessary cosmopolitanisation of the concept of culture—and of the research dealing with it.

Cosmopolitanising culture as an arena of social conflict

In Contesting Culture (1996), the social anthropologist Gerd Baumann reports the following discussion in the London district of Southall, where he conducted his research:

“See my friend Jas here,” said Phil, an Englishman, and pointed to his drinking-mate at the Railway Tavern bar, “he’s an Asian, but he’s born in Africa. So I’d say he’s an African. And me, I was born in Burma, so I’m the Asian here, aren’t I. And Winston here, you think he’s a West Indian: he’s the only one of us born in this town, so he’s the Englishman born and bred!”

Phil and his friends pithily expose the absurdity of the ethnic classifications with which they are labelled in postcolonial British society. On their own, with only a sympathetic field researcher as their audience, they laugh about the inadequacies of the categories, yet the manner in which they do so demonstrates a sharp awareness of the power of the ethnic categories they mock. In a different situation—for example, a public hearing on the progress of integration in their borough—they could just as easily slip back into the ethnic attributions that would turn Phil back into the white Englishman, and his friends into the Indian and the “Afro-Caribbean”. In their everyday lives they are all, as Baumann makes clear, involved in a multitude of different milieus, some of which have ethnic or religious contours, while others depend on social, economic or age-specific characteristics, on youth and music genres and subcultures, on gender-specific experiences and sexual preferences. Out of this diversity of milieus the relevant ones are adroitly fore- or back-grounded depending on the situation.

Baumann’s observation is in no way limited to the British context of the 1990s; it recurs—with varying roles and categories but similar patterns—wherever practices of migration encounter the boundary-drawing of migration discourses. These contradictions automatically make migrants into experts (and artistes) for internal and external boundaries delineated by cultural attributions. Artful juggling with false passports and invented biographies at the borders of the European Union represent but one example of this, along with the many dimensions of code-switching, self-ethnicisation and ethno-mimicry in contemporary European societies.
As well as dissecting culture as an instrument of power in what he calls the “dominant” discourse that equates community, culture and ethnic identity, Gerd Baumann also explores its role in a practice-driven, “demotic”—in other words popular—discourse that rejects the concordance of culture and ethnic community. Both discourses are actually closely intertwined through the contradiction that exists between them, which negates the one and brings the other to the fore. The dominant understanding of culture resists all efforts at scientific deconstruction and all local refutations because it, as Baumann also demonstrates, has served since colonialisation as a vital tool for constructing cultural differences and hierarchies for the purpose of governing over others.

Thus, a solely praxeological revision of the concept of culture falls short. The concept of culture cannot be peeled away from its “false” political usage (out of which it emerged in the first place, as its ethnological etymology demonstrates) and purified into a “true” analytical category. It is equally futile to abandon the concept of culture simply because it is, as Eric Wolf put it, a “dangerous idea”. That would mean withdrawing migration research from one of the central arenas of political debate over Europe’s internal and external borders today. Instead, culture needs to be investigated as a mode of societal negotiation, as a contested discursive field and as practised politics. That is a research perspective for which the ethnographic and reflexive expertise of ethnology represents a particularly useful resource.

Such a project can only succeed if the research—as already demonstrated by Gerd Baumann—systematically escapes the classical terrain of migration studies. Baumann assumed neither a single, ethnically-defined group of migrants, nor interethnic constellations between migrants of different backgrounds, but studied his urban district complete with all the social and cultural aspects of relevance to the actors there. That is the only way to piece together the complex picture in which governance over migration and the intervening, intertwining practices of migration are not just the conditions of existence in migrant worlds, but also constitute and cosmopolitise society as a whole.

**Studying Up—Studying Through: Cosmopolitising the Migration Concept**

Echoing the applied multiculturalism of integration policy, social and cultural migration research also suffers a tendency to seek and find its clientele largely on the social margins. As such, both perspectives supplement and reinforce the popular belief that has made migration more or less a synonym for society’s most visible problems.

In a conceptual study conducted in collaboration with Steve Vertovec and a team of cultural anthropologists in Frankfurt am Main, we contrasted this narrow social definition with a concept of migration constituting the entire city. The small but global city of Frankfurt is an especially obvious place to do this, with at least 60 percent of children and adolescents already having a so-called “migration background” (Migrationshintergrund), meaning that they either immigrated with their parents, or were born in Germany as so-called second-generation immigrants. As well as turning the usual ideas about majority and minorities on their head, the high figure also contradicts the tired idea that migrants form a social and cultural problem group. As we were able to demonstrate in the study, these children and adolescents come instead from a very broad spectrum of different social circumstances, they live in almost all parts of the city and their parents work in all domains of the urban economy— from the heights of the executive suites atop the skyscrapers of the global banks through a broad middle of professionals and self-employed to ordinary workers and the depths of irregular employment and illegalised existences.

Expanding the concept of migration in this way to create a cross-sectional perspective demands, first of all, a “studying up” of migration research in the sense of including privileged migrants in the overall picture. Although the life and work experiences of expatriates, transnational professionals, mobile creatives and students have been widely studied, research to date has tended to examine them explicitly under these labels and thus implicitly exclude them from the circles of “proper” migrants. What is needed now is to set their mobility in relation to the ostensibly problematic mobilities of the other “others”. Frankfurt is not the only place where doing so dramatically changes our understanding of the city. The same also applies in Berlin and elsewhere, because migration is everywhere, not just in the social ghettos of the underprivileged, in the mosques and run-down tenements, but in the trendy neighbourhoods of the affluent middle classes and the haunts of the academic and creative precariat.

The point here is absolutely not to sing the praises of seemingly cosmopolitan diversity without social boundaries. Nevertheless, until research takes account of the entire social spectrum of migration it will remain unable to demonstrate that social and political inequality exists not only between migrants and the established, but also between different forms of mobility and mobile subjects, and that what we see here is above all a hierarchy of cultural distinction. We know that it makes a big difference whether a person comes to Germany, to Europe, from Pakistan or the USA, from Turkey or France. That difference continues to apply even where all concerned have similar
social backgrounds, for example as students, as precarious artists or as high-flying bankers. What we are dealing with here is a border-related mobility regime that makes one group into desirable tourists, and others travelling in the same style into undesirable illegal aliens—to name just one pair of extremes in this finely gradated classification of mobile subjects. The mobility of those in the latter category is controlled and regulated as migration, the mobility of those in the former regarded as a badge of the kind of entrepreneurial flexibility needed and encouraged across all of Europe. Whereas individuals and families of Pakistani or Turkish extraction—whatever social class they belong to—fall under blanket suspicion of failure to integrate, nobody would usually think of forcing a French business consultant or Californian student to participate in an integration course, or demand that they improve their local ties, or frown at their broken German.

The double standard here is glaring. It employs the same colonial distinctions that to this day privilege roots in an imaginary West over origin from an imaginary “Orient”. Michael Herzfeld speaks in this context of a global cultural hierarchy where the former colonies rank right at the bottom of the scale of attributed cultural characteristics and mentalities, but Europe’s peripheries and crisis states, such as Greece and the EU’s new eastern member states also feature. Herzfeld calls the latter “crypto-colonies” because they are deemed culturally inferior from the Eurocentric perspective. With respect to migration, the sociologist Anja Weiß expands Pierre Bourdieu’s categories to describe this cultural racism as “racist symbolic capital”. The culture ascribed to migrants is thus not only alien but also more or less—depending on provenance—negatively connotated. As political theorist Sandro Mezzadra demonstrates, the hierarchy of rights inherent to the EU’s European border regime reproduces the colonial distinction between national citizens and imperial subjects.

A circumscribed concept of migration operating only on the level of the socially and politically excluded subjects cannot reveal these powerful distinctions, and instead itself becomes an instrument of the border and mobility regime, whose logic it obeys rather than exposes. A cosmopolitanised concept of migration would instead draw attention to the conflictual encounter of differently connotated, differently visible mobilities at a single locale but under highly different conditions: that is precisely what a migration research that transcends its own boundaries will need to address.

Borrowing a concept from the anthropology of policy, I would designate my second recommendation for migration research “studying through”. By this I mean a research perspective that takes as its starting point society’s negotiations over migration, rather than making migration itself the object of study. Instead of investigating for the umpteenth time how migrants get along in the societal enclaves and cultural ghettos to which they are assigned, the point of this new approach would be to illuminate the institutions, milieus and contexts of the (majority) society from the perspective of migration. One field in which I have myself already conducted research of this kind is that of youth culture and the urban club scene. Whatever migration research has been done in this field to date has tended to concentrate on the ethnically labelled areas of hip-hop and urban youth centres. This produces a restricted perspective that is rightly criticised by postcolonial migration researchers as an exoticising desire for “hip otherness”. Ayse Caglar proposes concentrating instead on the migrant mainstream that has conquered the urban centres, for example in the form of Turkish pop. The same could also be said for reggae beats and Balkan grooves. The point of the exercise is neither to romanticise this development as a migration success story nor to condemn it as a commercial misappropriation of migrant cultural creativity. Instead, what interests us here is precisely the tensions between consumable culture and conquest of the mainstream, as Walter Leimgruber and Nadja Boškovska also argue. Migrant reinterpretations of cultural attributions from Balkan to Orient generate subversive effects precisely because they plant their flag at the heart of—rather than outside—the pop culture mainstream. Of course, one can find more sophisticated cultural productions offering more solid and critical takes on the social realities of migration than the films of Fatih Akin or the Bukovina Club of Stefan Hantel alias Shantel. However, it is precisely the pop culture lightness and the self-aware irony with which such productions deconstruct the excesses of multiculturalism that means they make a more successful contribution to slowly but surely changing the image of migration in society. Shantel’s CD Disko Partizani contains the lines: “Some say that I come from Russia/Some think that I come from Africa/But I’m so exotic, I’m so erotic/cause I come from the planet Paprika”. Shantel, whose maternal grandparents hailed from the Bukovina, plays wryly on the ubiquitous clichés and resentments surrounding origin, using them instead to communicate desirability. Such lyrics made him the star of a trans-ethnic party community and a celebrated representative of a Balkanesque cultural avant-garde.

These developments are certainly not just offshoots of pop culture that have nothing to do with the true life of society. Instead, they are just the most visible expression of an ongoing migrantisation and thus also cosmopolitanisation of parts of society that are still regarded as bastions of a national majority. Research into subcultures, artistic and cultural
production, and the creative industries always seems to get by almost without explicit reference to migration. From the perspective of migration the absence is a national fiction. Not only in Frankfurt can one demonstrate that all the clubs and tribes of youth culture depend on the contributions of migration, at all levels from the club owners and managers to the precarised service and cleaning staff, the level of the musicians and producers, and not to be forgotten, the consumers and audiences. Here again, the point is not to laud the cosmopolitan diversity. Instead, these societally central locales also need to be investigated as arenas of ongoing political conflict, the tug-of-war between a trans-ethnic postmigrant cultural practice that actually arrived at the centre long ago, and the attempts to keep such realities at categorical arm’s length using the boundaries of an ethnicised concept of culture.

Conclusion: From “Migrantology” to Postmigrant Cultural and Social Research

I have argued for a postmigrant research that takes migration as its perspective rather than its subject. Just as gender studies is today much more than women’s studies, migration research that seeks to say something about social and cultural conditions cannot (just) be research about migrants. What is needed first of all is to develop a theoretical framing of the concept of migration in the sense of a contested social relation resting on a naturalised binary polarisation between “native” and “foreign”, “majority” and “minorities”, and on a polarising and hierarchising classification of mobile subjects by origin.

The concept of the postmigrant points in the direction of the ongoing conflicts that are shaped by this social relation, and at the same time beyond it. It originates from Shermin Langhoff, former director of Ballhaus Naunynstraße in Berlin, who coined the designation “postmigrant” for her very successful theatre concept as an assertive riposte to the “migrantisation” of people who are simply part and parcel of society. A string of pieces in the 2010/2011 season marking the anniversary of the agreement that brought the Turkish “guest workers” to Germany were presented under the motto “Fifty Years Marriage of Convenience”. Rather than theatre for and by Turkish migrants, these performances dealt with developments and states, with the transnational and postcolonial dimensions of a postmigrant society. That is the perspective I would like to see migration research adopting.

Notes

1. Bojadzijev, “Bürgerrechte und die Perspektive der Migration,” 246–247; Römihld, “Aus der Perspektive der Migration,” 50–59; Hess, “Wider den methodologischen Kulturalismus in der Migrationsforschung.” 194–203.
2. Hannerz, “Kultur in einer vernetzten Welt,” 64–84; idem, Transnational Connections.
3. Basch, Glick Schiller and Szanton Blanc, Nations Unbound; Glick Schiller, “From Immigrant to Transmigrant,” 121–140.
4. Clifford, “Diasporas,” 302–338; idem: Routes.
5. Brah, Cartographies of Diaspora.
6. Appadurai, Modernity at Large.
7. Glick Schiller, “Beyond Methodological Ethnicity.” https://dspace.mah.se/bitstream/handle/2043/7491/ wb%20_08%20muenp.pdf?sequence = 3.
8. Çaglar, “Das Kultur-Konzept als Zwangsjacke in Studien zur Arbeitsmigration,” 93–105.
9. See https://www.euroethno.hu-berlin.de/en/standard?set_language=en.
10. Bojadzijev and Römihld, “Was kommt nach dem Transnational Turn?”
11. Ibid., 10.
12. Ibid., 11.
13. Forschungsgruppe, ed., Turbulente Ränder.
14. Beck and Snaider, “Unpacking Cosmopolitanism for the Social Sciences,” 618–24; Werbner, ed., Anthropology and the New Cosmopolitanism; Römihld and Westrich, “Kosmopolitanismus an den Grenzen,” 85–98.
15. Baumann, Contesting Culture, 5.
16. Beck, Der kosmopolitische Blick oder, 157 ff.
17. Römihld, “Fremdzuschreibungen—Selbstpositionierungen,” 157–178.
18. Ibid., 172 f.
19. Baumann, Contesting Culture, 72 ff.
20. Wolf, „Gefährliche Ideen,” 331–346; see also: Abuhughd, “Writing Against Culture,” 137–157.
21. Cf. Herzfeld, “Epistemologies,” idem: Anthropology, 21–54.
22. Regina Römihld, Steve Vertovec et al. “Frankfurt vernetzt: Vernetzungs- und Vielfaltspolitik in Frankfurt am Main”. The study was conducted in 2009 for the Amt für multikulturelle Angelegenheiten in Frankfurt am Main. Published as chapter 1 of the Frankfurt integration and diversity concept (in German): http://www.vielfaltbewegt frankfurt.de/sites/all/media/Integrationskonzept_Kap_1_Vernetzung_Vielfalt.pdf see also: http://www.mmg.mpg.de/fileadmin/user_upload/documents/Integrationskonzept.pdf.
23. In the Frankfurt study (see note 23) we identified a growing spectrum of different residence statuses as a striking characteristic of the “super-diverse” (Steve Vertovec) migration metropolis: from the almost unrestricted freedom of movement enjoyed by the citizens of “old Europe” through the still limited freedom of movement and residence of migrants from the EU’s new eastern member states to the enormous differences in conditions for those from “third states” outside the EU—from the privileged migrants from the global West to those from other parts of the world who can often only enter the EU illegally. These finely graduated categories of EU and “third state” citizenship remind us of the widely ignored fact that the EU’s border regime penetrates deep into national and local migration policy. Behind it lies yet another range of limited temporary statuses, down to the particularly controversial
category of temporary suspension of deportation ("Duldung"), which leaves people in permanent fear of deportation, often for years. At a rough estimate there are about 80 different residence statuses, and the number is growing; even the immigration lawyers we consulted admitted having completely lost their overview. This diversity of residence status creates a situation where rights differ—sometimes seriously—between people from the same country and even within families.

25. Glick Schiller and Salazar, "Regimes of Mobility Across the Globe," 183–200; Lenz, Mobilitäten in Europa.
26. Herzfeld, "The Absent Presence," 899–926.
27. Deutsch, "Bürger und Untertanen," 207–223.
28. Wright and Reinhold, "Studying Through," 86–104.
29. Bergmann and Römhild, eds. Global Heimat.
30. Gutiérrez Rodríguez et al. "Das hippe Verlangen nach Otherness," 226–237.
31. Caglar, "Verordnete Rebellion," 41–56.
32. Leimgruber and Boškovska, "Balkangroove," 223–238.

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