

## What's wrong with migration scholarship? A critique and a way forward

Peggy Levitt

*(Received July 2011)*

Several problems plague migration scholarship. Much work continues to use specific national (and sometimes regional) frames to analyse migration in other contexts or to find general properties based on particular national experiences. It assumes that boundedness, rootedness and membership in a single national, ethnic or religious group are the natural order of things. And it doesn't take culture seriously enough, whether it be the different cultures of knowledge production which drive our work, the different culturally infused categories we use or the role of cultural institutions in imagining and changing the nation. This article expands on these critiques and suggests ways to move scholarship forward.

**Keywords:** migration; immigration; transnational; culture; religion; critique

Several months ago, I attended an interdisciplinary conference that brought together migration scholars from both sides of the Atlantic. It struck me that, even though we all communicated in English, we were speaking different languages. We had sidestepped the challenge of translating within and across continents – that is, of doing the difficult work of uncovering and then explaining what the taken-for-granted categories we use really mean in the places where we use them.

What was it that we were and were not understanding? Even though these critiques have been around for some time, we were all still guilty, to varying degrees, of using our national (and sometimes regional) frames to analyse migration in other contexts or of claiming to find general properties based on our national experiences. A lot of our talking past each other also boiled down to our assumptions about the boxes we use to collect, organize and think about our data. Implicit in our analyses was the assumption that boundedness, rootedness and membership in a single group are the natural order of things. We still default to the nation state, the ethnic group or the religious community. And, finally, many of our conversations just didn't take culture seriously enough, whether it be the different cultures of knowledge production within which we work, the different culturally infused categories we use or the role of cultural institutions in imagining and changing the nation.

Let me begin with the issue of categories.

Postcolonial scholars, like Dipesh Chakrabarty (2000) or Talal Asad (1993), urged us long ago to ‘provincialize Europe’ by calling attention to how European and American theories are taken as universal. The corrective is not to produce more theories but to confront, with eyes wide open, how our analysis shifts when we fold back in the historical and culture conditions under which these theories were produced. Asad, who is writing about religion, prompts us not so much towards a critique of existing theories as towards the question of why ‘we’ view some kinds of ‘religion’ to be normal or natural and to the multiple practices and processes, religious or otherwise, that produce these labels. Migration scholars need to do this not only with respect to our theories, but also with respect to the vocabularies we use to generate them. We need to do a better job of incorporating how the history of ‘race’, ‘ethnicity’ or ‘nationalism’ in a particular place shapes how these words are used and what they ultimately capture.

How migration scholarship generally treats the category of ‘religion’ is a great example. I think it’s fair to say that the study of Islam is a growth industry, especially in Europe. But the understanding of religion and how it is actually lived and breathed that drives much of this work is dangerously misguided. Until recently, the script went something like this. We live in a secular world where religion is an aberration rather than a normal part of daily life. Because surveys indicate that most people don’t go to church on Sundays (except in the United States, where people do at higher levels than in any other country with a comparable standard of living), we confidently declared that religion was of little importance. But, of course, that failed to take into account the deep ways in which religion is embedded in bricks and mortar. Think about how public space is organized around central squares flanked by churches in so many cities and towns. Think about the cafeterias all over Europe that still serve fish on Fridays. Think about the many holidays with deep – although often forgotten – religious roots that order life by structuring the calendar. The lasting cultural imprint of these seemingly secular phenomena does not go away. There may be a legal separation of church and state, but there is no such thing as a cultural one.

Then Islam came along. And migration scholars – and others – had to deal with religion. And we did what we always do, which is to use Christian, Western-centric and congregationally based categories to get a handle on it. We treated religion as something packageable and bounded that is enacted in a formal setting; we looked at how people live out their lives in the context of religious organizations. We assumed that the new institutions immigrants created could be made to look and act like the religious communities already present. We took the distinctions between religious traditions, and their salience for people on the ground, for granted (Bender and Klassen 2010).

But what’s also at stake is the basic definition of the religious. What would we learn by thinking outside the religious box? Rather than assuming that religion stays primarily within contained spaces (be they religious traditions, congregations or nations), we could start with circulation and linkages. We could see religion not as a stable set of beliefs and practices rooted in a particular time

and space but as contingent clusters that come together within to-be-determined spaces that are riddled by power and interests. The resulting assemblages – made up of actors, objects, technology and ideas – travel at different rates and rhythms across the different levels and scales of the social fields in which they are embedded (Levitt 2012).

Opening up the religious box reveals that just as Christianity is not a one-size-fits-all category, the traditions that immigrants bring with them do not fit into one, closed, Christian-like container. What gets called Dutch or American Islam is sometimes shaped as much by forces outside the nation as within it, because people and groups belong to transnational religious networks that exert their influence from far away (Levitt 2007). Thinking outside the box also drives home the fact that individuals embrace religion, as well as other allegiances like ethnicity and nationality, to become part of the places they move to and to stay connected to their homelands. They traverse these multiple pathways to incorporation simultaneously in different configurations at different times (Brubaker 2004, Glick Schiller *et al.* 2006). And, most importantly, it brings to light the social and political work that gets done and whose interests are served when religion is conceptualized as a cohesive, bounded system – as closed groups capable of engaging in pluralistic relations, as opposed to the unruly, clumsy, constantly moving collection that it is (Bender *et al.* 2012). Religious studies scholars and anthropologists are hard at work creating tools for engaging more meaningfully with the religious; migration scholars just have to do our homework.

Another enduring box that complicates our conversation is the nation state, even though fighting methodological nationalism has become something of a cause célèbre. Assuming that social life automatically takes place within nation states is a hard habit to break. Any number of studies recognize this but they don't take the next step of looking at how the subject of their investigation is connected to things across the globe. Even studies that use a transnational optic, my own included, often fall into the trap of simply looking at relations between two settings – a source and destination community – without stopping to consider how these are also influenced by other places and scales of social experience where co-nationals or fellow believers have settled.

In Europe, at least, transnational studies of migration are increasingly common. I welcome this as a necessary step forward but I worry about the many studies that claim to be transnational without actually opening up their gaze. 'Transnational' is an adjective, not a noun. Using a transnational methodology means looking at how processes of incorporation, enduring homeland or other involvements occur at the same time and mutually inform each other. It is not shorthand for how people continue to participate in the economics or politics of their homelands (as is so often the case) but tries to capture how they simultaneously become part of the places where they settle and stay connected to a range of other places at the same time. Using a transnational optic may or may not reveal transnational engagement.

Too often, though, researchers who work on immigrant incorporation and those concerned about poverty alleviation in a homeland remain in their separate camps. And because many of the data we collect still confine us to comparisons across discrete nation-state units, we artificially separate these dynamics. To the extent that our scholarship has an impact on policy, we perpetuate this increasingly artificial and unhelpful institutional divide that fails to reflect the reality of people's lives.

There are two important moves to be made. One is to take seriously the multiple sites and layers of the social fields where migrants are embedded. Doing so may reveal how something that is seemingly local is intimately connected to other places and levels of social experience. It would also bring into focus how individuals, associations and nation states are assuming new functions, shedding old ones, quietly (and not so quietly) expanding the social spaces where economic, family life and politics get enacted and challenging how and where race, class or gender is constituted. How, for example, do we think about the class of the family that lives in subsidized housing in their country of settlement but owns a brand new home in the community where they come from? How do people identify racially when they circulate between countries, like Brazil, where there is a range of racial identities from which to choose, versus places like Germany or Sweden, where race is hardly discussed? What kinds of social and political institutions are being created that might enable simultaneous access to education, health care or legal and political rights, thereby creating a new kind of social contract that is not just fulfilled nationally? How can we create new ways to measure social mobility and identity across space?

The other intellectual shift that counteracts methodological nationalism is incorporating considerations of scale. A transnational optic reveals the uneven and heterogeneous impacts of globalization (Brenner 2004). Neo-liberalism challenges the traditional nested hierarchies of local, regional and national by unevenly distributing resources and power to particular regions and cities. Cities, as Gillian Hart (2006) argues, are not closed, rooted containers but power-laden processes of constitution, connection and disconnection where there are slippages, openings, contradictions and possibilities for alliances. Cities, and localities in general, inform and are informed by the intersecting sites and planes of the broader social fields where they are located and by cultural structures and governance regimes next door and halfway across the globe.

Not only do we need to take these multiple layers of power, resources and agenda setting into account, but we need to understand how and why scales intersect differently in different places, thereby moving some localities closer to the driver's seat of geopolitics while sending others to the back seat. We are seeing this now in the United States as places like Alabama and Arizona try to pass strict anti-immigration laws out of frustration with the federal government's lack of action. What is it about how these states are positioned in relation to global capital that helps explain their response? City scale can strongly influence immigrant incorporation and people's ability or desire to maintain homeland ties. Cities also use immigration and diversity to 'rescale' or to reposition themselves geopolitically

by marketing their multiculturalism (Bretell 2006, Caglar 2007, Glick Schiller and Caglar 2009, Jaworsky *et al.* forthcoming).

So far, I've argued for expanding the boundaries of our analytical boxes and for taking a hard look at the assumptions on which they are based. I now want to focus on culture. Bringing culture back into migration scholarship means not only looking at how ideas, people and objects circulate but also seeing migration as an inherently cultural act. Work in cultural sociology that treats culture as context, as discourses and assumptions embedded in institutions or as repertoires of meanings that are marshalled in response to specific dilemmas and purposes can help us move closer to getting our categories right (Alexander and Smith 2003, 2010).

A lot of work needs to be done. One important task is to strike a better balance between economic and sociocultural considerations. This is particularly true for migration and development researchers, who have all too often defined the migration–development nexus in purely economic terms. It's not all their fault. Those of us concerned with social remittances have not done a good enough job of showing how the social changes wrought by migration scale up and scale out to other sectors – how changes in gender relations prompted by migration, for example, might ultimately lead to fertility declines or increase women's participation in the labour force (Levitt and Lamba-Nieves 2011).

Another way to bring culture front and centre, which I have already alluded to, is to take into consideration how the deeply rooted cultural and historical ways in which difference is dealt with, what we might call regimes of diversity management, influence the migration experience.

'The story of every city', wrote urbanist Lewis Mumford (Mumford 1938), 'can be read through a succession of deposits: the sedimentary strata of history. While certain forms and phases of development are successive in time, they become, through the very agency of the civic process, cumulative in space.' These continuous cultural overlays transform spaces into places by sewing the seeds of what become resilient cultural structures or conceptual threads, like traditions of hierarchy or collective responsibility that appear and reappear throughout history (Alexander and Smith 2003). As these become more deeply embedded, they strongly influence the kinds of cultural institutions a city creates, the policies it embraces and the values that undergird them.

It's easy to argue that history and culture affect nationalism and pluralism, but we tend not to look clearly enough at how these affect immigrants. Let's take a small example of national styles of patriotism. American flags are a standard feature of the landscape and not just on 4 July. When I visited Germany during the 2006 World Cup Championship, and Germany had reached the quarter-finals, my colleagues commented that this was the first time they could remember seeing people hang German flags from their windows. Outright expressions of national pride were too strongly associated with Nazism. The important question here is how the stories nations tell themselves about who they are, and how they perform themselves to members and non-members alike, influence

immigrant incorporation. Comparative research needs to foreground these ontological differences so we can see the range of the possible.

A third way to take culture seriously is to look at how cultural policies and institutions set the stage for the migrant experience. What kinds of cultural products are produced by migration and where are they showcased? How is cultural policy used to manage movement and settlement? In Sweden, for example, it is standard practice to use state cultural institutions to pursue social goals, while in the United States there is no coherent cultural policy, let alone one aimed at integrating immigrants. Throughout Europe, museums have long played a starring role in the drama of nation-building. What kinds of citizens are they creating now, given Europe's heightened diversity and competing efforts to create loyal European citizens? How does the publishing industry or the media create space for newcomers? These cultural institutions are potential producers of the building blocks we use to continuously reinvent and reimagine the nation.

And finally, what underlays all of my previous comments are differences in cultures of knowledge production and the power relations and institutions that structure it. Elsewhere, Glick Schiller and Caglar (2009) have laid out convincingly the different trajectories pursued by European and US migration research and the different blind spots they produce. In the United States, migrants from different countries settled in a single country, whereas in Europe migrants from a single country settled across the continent. Consequently, while the receiving state and society are often left out of migration research in the United States, both sending and receiving states and societies are taken into consideration in Europe. On the US side, there is a plethora of comparative work on migrant groups from different countries, while in Europe the comparative work generally contrasts the experiences of a single group in several host nations.

Our blind spots and miscommunications are also a function of our networks.

If we're honest, that's in part due to a divide between those who can and like getting on airplanes and speaking other languages, and those who can't or don't. Who wants to leave the comfort of his or her own parochial national fan club or go beyond the few cherry-picked outsiders we invite into it? The incentive structures of the academy mitigate against interdisciplinary work at the edges because rewards and visibility are still organized along disciplinary lines. All too often the conversation stops at Europe and the United States because that is what most Western scholars know how to do best and the kind of scholarship our networks most easily allow. I don't even have to argue why that is not nearly enough or why we need to invite a much broader range of people to the party.

It is hard to be a dilettante. It's hard to learn enough about a lot of places. We still need country experts. But we also need to train a new generation of scholars who can speak about a range of regions and experiences. We need to create different kinds of professional organizations and training centres that will jumpstart different kinds of conversations. This is, I think, what is behind the proliferation of global studies programs we are witnessing, but it remains to be seen if they will do the trick.

Driving all of this, of course, is unequal access to power and resources. The North and the West are still defining the goals of the migration–development nexus even though most of the people who benefit from migration’s alleged rewards live in the South and the East (Delgado Wise and Covarrubias 2010, Glick Schiller and Faist 2010). The agenda ignores critical development studies, which call into question the means and ends of development, and leaves unchallenged the neo-liberal structures that create poverty and supposedly alleviate it. Likewise, the structural and ideological causes of increasing poverty and inequality in the industrialized world remain intact. It’s the classic treating of the symptom rather than the disease.

Sometimes, however, we get too wound up in critique without charting a way forward. We phrase the question as one of good versus bad, in versus out, rather than *when, under what circumstances* and *for whom*. Right now, I am studying museums and the kinds of citizens they create. A large body of scholarship, to which I am very sympathetic, critiques how museums have reproduced power inequalities rooted in colonial projects. Some authors claim that museums are simply beyond repair. But I am unwilling to throw the baby out with the bathwater. Museums are not going away, and they have enormous cultural power. Critical analysis is important, but we also need a way out.

Attribute it to my American optimism.

## References

- Alexander, J. and Smith, P., 2003. The strong program in cultural sociology: elements of a structural hermeneutics. *In*: J.C. Alexander, ed. *The meanings of social life*. New York: Oxford University Press, 11–26.
- Alexander, J. and Smith, P., 2010. The strong program: origins, achievements and prospects. *In*: J. Hall, L. Grindstaff, and M.C. Lo, eds. *The handbook of cultural sociology*. New York: Routledge, 13–24.
- Asad, T., 1993. The construction of religion as an anthropological category. *In*: T. Asad, ed. *Genealogies of religion: discipline and reasons of power in Christianity and Islam*. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 27–54.
- Bender, C., Cadge, W., Levitt, P., and Smilde, D., eds., 2012. *Religion on the edge: decentering and recentering the sociology of religion*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Bender, C. and Klassen, P., eds., 2010. *After pluralism: reimagining models of religious engagement*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Brenner, N., 2004. *New State Spaces*. New York and London: Oxford University Press.
- Bretell, C., 2006. Introduction: global spaces/local places: transnationalism, diaspora, and the meaning of home. *Identities*, 13, 327–334.
- Brubaker, R., 2004. ‘Civic’ and ‘ethnic’ nationalism. *In*: R. Brubaker, ed. *Ethnicity without groups*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 132–146.
- Caglar, A., 2007. Rescaling cities, cultural diversity and transnationalism: migrants of Mardin and Essen. *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 30 (6), 1070–1095.
- Chakrabarty, D., 2000. *Provincializing Europe: postcolonial thought and historical difference*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Delgado Wise, R. and Márquez Covarrubias, H., 2010. Understanding the relationship between migration and development: toward a new theoretical approach. *In*: N. Glick

- Schiller and T. Faist, eds. *Migration, development, and transnationalization*. Oxford: Bergahn Books, 142–175.
- Glick Schiller, N. and Caglar, A., 2009. Toward a comparative theory of locality in migration studies: migrant incorporation and city scale. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 35 (2), 107–202.
- Glick Schiller, N., Caglar, A., and Guldbrandsen, T.C., 2006. Beyond the ethnic lens: locality, globality, and born-again incorporation. *American Ethnologist*, 33 (4), 612–633.
- Glick Schiller, N. and Faist, T., eds., 2010. *Migration, development, and transnationalization*. Oxford: Bergahn Books.
- Hart, G., 2006. Denaturalizing dispossession: critical ethnography in the age of resurgent imperialism. *Antipode*, 38 (5), 977–1004.
- Jaworsky, N., Levitt, P., Cadge, W., and Curran, S., forthcoming. Rethinking immigrant context of reception: the cultural armature of cities. *Nordic Journal of Migration and Ethnicity*.
- Keller, M., 1985. The personality of cities: Boston, New York and Philadelphia. In: *Proceedings of the Massachusetts Historical Society*. Third Series, vol. 97, 1–15.
- Levitt, P., 2007. *God needs no passport*. New York: The New Press.
- Levitt, P., 2012. Religion on the move: mapping global cultural production and consumption. In: C. Bender, W. Cadge, and D. Smilde, eds. *Religion on the edge*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Levitt, P. and Lamba-Nieves, D., 2011. Social remittances reconsidered. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 37 (1), 1–22.
- Mumford, L., 1966. *The Culture of Cities*. New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company.

**PEGGY LEVITT** is Professor of Sociology at Wellesley College and a Research Fellow at The Weatherhead Center for International Affairs and The Hauser Center for Nonprofit Organizations at Harvard University  
ADDRESS: Sociology Department, Wellesley College, 106 Central Street, Wellesley, MA 02481, United states.  
Email: Plevitt@wellesley.edu