

Migrating People and Migrating Culture: Some extremely disorganized stray reflections.

Philip Kasinitz

In the year of Brexit, the second year of Trump, after several years that have seen the increased prominence of Wilders, Le Pens (*pere and fille*), Orban etc. one thing seems sadly clear: Borders are Back.

For many of us who came of age in the 70's and 80's this has been something of a shock. We have long assumed that, for better and for worse, some version of globalization was inevitable. The neo-liberal right liked the globalization of markets. The multi-cultural left liked the globalization of culture. And for very different reasons both (mostly) liked the free movement of human bodies across borders. Voracious global capital had to be resisted by global labor. Global trade meant the rise of global regulation. Globalization often meant the imperialist, colonial and neo-colonial exploitation of people in poor places by people from rich ones – but—it also meant that world cities became, to borrow Vertovec's phrase—“super diverse”. For many of us, that was experienced as a good thing. But whether good or bad, it was, until recently largely seen as inevitable. The nation state as a bounded, hard edged cultural unit seemed “*so 19th century*”.

Today it is clear that many people in North America and Europe do not share this vision. They seem to want borders. And while this desire is sometimes justified in economic terms, any examination of it shows it to also be cultural. In both Europe and North America policies of what might be termed “officially sanctioned” multiculturalism—what Amartya Sen (2006) has argued might be more accurately termed “plural monoculturalism”—have increasingly come under attack. Among some parts of the “native” populations on both side of the Atlantic we have seen what Duyvendak and his collaborators (2016) have termed a “culturalization” of citizenship.

What does this mean for any global “de-centering” project?

We cannot ignore or simply dismiss the increasing importance of ethnically bounded nation states and the importance they have for many people. To do so would be to risk irrelevance. At the same time, the demographic, economic and cultural factors that got us interested in a “de-centered” global culture in the first place have not gone away. The experience of everyday life for people living in “super diverse” cities on both sides of the Atlantic, shows that for many, national, ethnic and racial boundaries have actually become increasingly fluid and multi-dimensional, particularly among the young. Nowhere is the contrast between the growth of hyper nativism and the vernacular cosmopolitanism of everyday urban life more evident than in the arts, which can serve as arenas for both asserting and questioning group identity, bonding and deconstructing social groups as well as creating emotional connections between people. Of course, we should not be so naive as

to believe that cosmopolitan tastes in culture necessarily leads to openness of a more cosmopolitan outlook in other spheres of life. That said, however, perhaps it is a place to start.

This leads to several questions for cultural practitioners, critics and researchers:

1. Clearly some people in diverse societies find the cultural difference threatening. Others see it as amenity. Why? Education is probably part of the answer, but it is certainly not the whole answer. Class plays a role. It has become cliché to speak of the people left behind by globalization, but many ardent nationalists come from relatively privileged backgrounds. Growing real economic inequality is clearly a factor, as is understandable resentment of global elites in the face of growing inequality. But why this takes the form of hyper nationalism is less clear. I think we need more investigation of what creates and discourages a cosmopolitan mind set.
2. The split between diverse cities and their hinterlands seems stronger than ever. This leads to the question: What is “urban” about “urban diversity”? Is it just that cities attract people more invested in a global world view? Or repel those who are not? Or is the urban experience itself playing a role in changing ways of life, ala Simmel and Sennett?
3. The paradox of (de) centering. The centers—that is global cities, are actually more centers of difference, than the periphery, which is increasingly identified with national traditions and rejections of “de-centering”. Elite cultural institutions in the centers are now often more open to (de)centering than those based in more monoculture places and traditions. This is why so much academic canon bashing at elite Universities and other elite cultural institutions now feels like boldly crashing through an open door!
4. The role of Elite cultural institutions in (de)centering. Of course, traditionally arts institutions have been places where culture is reified, frozen, literally put on the wall. A space where the nation can be visualized. Yet they can also be settings for encounters between diverse people (peoples?). They are settings where boundaries can be (and are) blurred and categories challenged (“de-centered” if you will). What is the role of the cultural institution in conferring official recognition of worth on art and culture-- and how can that be contested without throwing out the notion of standards altogether? Who owns culture? Who gets to say? How do arts institutions treat newcomer and other outsider communities as partners, while remaining open to change, borrowing and hybridity. Is “ownership” even the right model? Isn’t plagiarism an essential building block of all culture?

5. “Tolerance?” And of what? How do we respect and promote tolerance of different cultural traditions among groups without sacrificing the values of tolerance of *individual* difference and freedom of choice. I want to protect the right of every woman who wants to wear the Hijab to do so in all public settings, with no restriction on her social participation, no matter how uncomfortable it makes her. I also want to protect the right of every woman who wants to, to take off the Hijab, no matter how much it makes her Imam, father or husband uncomfortable. This is, clearly, a tricky balance to strike.

6. Integration...into what? Cultural institutions need to question the notion that there is a “mainstream culture” or that we all agree on what it is. See the German controversies over what exactly defines the *Leitkultur*. Yet as much as we may (and should) reject the imposition of cultural assimilation on anyone, we need to be open to the possibility that newcomers can and often do choose to be part of the host nation’s culture and that they reimagine and recreate that culture in the process. It was an Immigrant who wrote “God Bless America.” And it was the son of Spanish speaking migrant who wrote *Hamilton*.

7. Participation. In my more optimistic moments, I suspect what most people in diverse societies, at least in the global north (I frankly don’t have the knowledge to talk intelligently about anywhere else) really want from newcomers and minorities is not “assimilation” into some monolithic national culture but rather participation in civic and cultural life. Indeed in many places diversity has taken on an unquestioned normalcy, particularly for the young. Cosmopolitanism arises from the micro interactions of everyday life. Yet here is a great irony. Unauthorized migrants *cannot* participate in American civic and to an increasing degree, cultural life. Refugees are often excluded from meaningful civic participation in Europe. Both are increasingly pushed them out of the public sphere, socially and culturally as well as politically. So, how can cultural institutions and other actors encourage a “de-centered” integration that does not impose cultural conformity, but that does encourage – and celebrate—participation, interaction, encounters? This it seems to me, is the key question in how we create a more diverse, more inclusive, more equal and ultimately more exciting culture.