

## **Migration, Culture, and Migrating Culture(s): From Universal Human Condition to Universal Culture?**

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Human beings have always migrated and human beings have always had 'culture', both are intrinsic to the human condition and were precondition for the human conquer of the world. This essay discusses what happens when culture(s) migrate? This question is, of course, particularly interesting when culture(s) do not enter previously human-free areas, but encounter 'other' people and cultures. One answer to the question is, of course, always the specific observation of each case that specific conditions, a specific historical moment, and specific actors. What I am interested here is, if there are also very general answers: Are there fundamentally anthropological aspects that come forth from how 'culture' works and what role it plays in the encounters of people in the context of 'migration'? Are there aspects that we should understand, in order to not be surprised when we observe, or maybe even become able to *predict*, certain things happening with some level of likelihood when people and cultures migrate?

I would like to start with some general observations:

First, people migrating and cultures migrating are, in principle, *two different things*: Cultures can migrate (or travel or spread) also widely independently from migrating people – 'widely' because, at least throughout most parts of human history, migrating cultures needed travelling people to be involved in this. Yet, it is by no means necessary that those who serve as carriers are also adepts or intimates of the cultural stuff they bring with them. And cultural elements and artifacts can develop their own lives at other alien places, independently from their carriers. This is nothing new, even though the age of digitalization has certainly immensely speeded up processes of cultural diffusion that happen independently from specific people on the move. Culture also *makes* people move and migrate – not necessarily as a cause (in the stricter sense of the term), but maybe as a motivation and (additional) stimulant. This includes people leaving their home country for feeling threatened or severely limited in their choice of certain cultural practices – which is often the case with ethnic, linguistic or religious minorities when nation-states do not accept the factual diversity of their populations, but also e.g. Asian and Latin American 'classical' musicians wishing to come for studies and work to Europe, to mention just two examples. In many cases, this involves a lot of movement back and forth and further on of people and of cultural elements and meanings.

A fine example for this complex 'texture' of migrating culture and migrating people and their possible connections and disconnections could be Tango: Its deeper origins seem to be difficult to trace, and even for the name there are several explanations that involve several cultural influences coming together. It can be taken for granted that there are roots that range from Cuba via the Canary Islands to Portugal, but also include African slave culture and German and Polish musical instruments. Its original form developed in the bars and nightclubs of Buenos Aires and Montevideo in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, but its current forms have been strongly shaped by several movements back and forth between, especially, South America and Europe. It was adopted by British choreographers in the 1910s to become part of the standard tournament dances as International or European Tango (next to waltz and foxtrot etc.). But also Argentinean Tango-musicians throughout

the 20<sup>th</sup> century repeatedly very successfully toured and stayed in Europe, especially in Paris. However, it was only since the early 1980s that Argentinean Tango exerted a remarkable influence in Western Europe again when Argentinean exiles from the dictatorship in their country organized dance opportunities and started giving Tango-lessons. Having become more and more successful in Europe, Tango travelled back to Argentina again in a 'new dress': more developed in artistic terms and better adapted for shows for tourists, but also the stages of Argentinean 'high culture'. Tango's success in Europe and elsewhere also produced new migrations from and to Argentina, e.g. new dance instructors and stage artists on the one side, and dancing tourists and professionals from Europe on the other. Tango is today one of the most popular dances worldwide, a development that certainly needed the hype or fashion around it in Europe for some time. But, Tango adepts also see a quality or character that is perceived as independent from specific places and people and historical moments because it 'speaks to' people and 'touches strings' that resonate with peoples' emotions, even when there is no social and cultural connection anymore to the origins in the nightlife of prostitutes and petty criminals on both sides of Rio de la Plata. This is probably also the main reason why Tango has developed different lives in different countries. One of the most peculiar stories here is Tango in Finland where it has become part of the country's genuine 'national folk culture' with its own songs, words and musical heroes. Finnish Tango dates back to the first wave of Tango enthusiasm in Europe described above, but it developed its specific own life across all social classes under the very specific historical conditions of the Russian occupation in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. At the same time and despite its great versatility and insertion into so many different 'other cultures', Tango is a fine example for how cultural elements, be it artefacts like musical instruments or cultural practices like dancing styles, can insert themselves and become meaningful in the cultures they migrated to, albeit in very different forms and modes. It can also illustrate the interesting relationship between continuity and change in cultures in a 'post-migration' new context: There are songs from the Golden Era of Tango in Argentina and Uruguay in the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century that are still around worldwide, but frequently in translated versions whose origins are widely not known to those who sing and love them. The commonalities between the original nightclub Tango in Buenos Aires and Montevideo and its contemporary 'artistic' versions on show stages or at the Olympic Games are still clearly visible and audible, despite completely different social and cultural functions.

Second, migrating people always bring culture with them, but what this means may vary a lot. The Syrian refugee movement brought also a lot of musicians to Western Europe which, for example according to the owner of a music agency in northern Germany, has created a new market for mainly traditional Syrian music. But the refugee movement also brought this tenor from a classical music academy in Damascus who – together with a Korean pianist – at a festive event on 'integration and diversity' in Hamburg sang songs from Schubert's *Winterreise*. What virtually all migrants do bring with them is some cultural knowledge and 'intimacy' with culture as a *daily social practice* at the place where they came from or had spent the most significant part of their lives. But, in order to give something like 'diasporic culture' a meaning, it needs to have a *social* meaning for a certain number of people that flock together under the roof of a common origin. Yet, being detached from 'home country' daily routines and habits, 'diasporic cultures' tend to become more ritualized and symbolic, on the one side, but also change and adapt to new routines and contexts, on the other (this is what terms like *creolization*, *syncretism* and *hybridization* also refer to). And also the migrating people themselves are obviously

not 'static carriers' of some culture, but in new contexts experience cultural change: adapting themselves and slowly, but steadily adopting new cultural knowledge which then also gives them new options for new and different cultural tastes and preferences. It is certainly safe to say that people in new places are never *not* influenced by their new social and cultural environment; this even applies to relatively short-term stays of a couple of months, and increases with the time passing. Yet, within this general observation, there are all kinds of variation possible, depending on all kinds of variables and factors: perspectives and expectations, spatial or social isolation, a myriad of individual factors and dispositions, education and opportunities, home country relations and many more – leading to potentially quite different, but also *differentiated* outcomes, in the sense that individual stories do need to be in any way 'coherent' in this regard.

Third, also cultures that are being 'migrated to' or get in contact with 'migrating cultures' are likely to change – i.e. the other side to the Tango-story above. Immigrant-receiving 'mainstream cultures' are always influenced by elements from immigrant cultures – especially new varieties of food are gratefully incorporated or here the influences become most easily visible. The point is that, on the one side, *cultural change* is happening anyhow at any moment and also independently from immigration. Cultures are thus, in one way or the other, equipped with mechanisms for adopting new (and abandoning old) cultural elements – which is, by the way, also an important means of renewal and prevention from immobility and congealment. Because of this constant cultural change, it is hardly ever *specific cultural practices* that define a group or a nation (even though national or group self-imaginings may tell a different story). What does generally appear to be surprisingly stable are the cultural *self-image* – especially languages play a central role here which indeed, despite clearly visible changes, also show remarkable continuity – and a given society's *self-concept* that does not seem to be affected even by major cultural changes – e.g. the above-described introduction of Tango into Finnish folk culture or the immense inter-generational cultural shift in Germany after World War II. This is possible, because the most important 'glue' and 'red thread' through times and generations is *identity*.

*Identity* is a complicated thing, not least because it is always very loaded with – at the same time – *Zeitgeist* and essentialism. Most representations of identity are ontological; identity is about *being* something (and not becoming something or stopping to be something or having changed from one thing to another etc.) and identities are supposed to be not only very stable, but almost 'given by nature' (e.g. the genes). At the same time, the actual use of the term 'identity' is pretty fuzzy: it is of course used for individuals and their personality and particularities, i.e. emphasizing *difference* and uniqueness. But it is also used for nations, religions and ethnic groups that are presumed to have an identity or particular 'character' too. Statements about what is 'typically French or Italian or Dutch' presume a minimum level of empirical prevalence when observing individual or group behaviors within a specific national community – and this puts the emphasis on *sameness* – which refers back to the etymological origin of the term in the Latin word *idem* for 'same'. We could go more into detail here, and also reflect upon the various attempts in social sciences and anthropology to get a grip on this fuzziness and contradictions of which, in my view, many fell into the same trap of ontological essentialism as is daily practice in social discourse. But there are two very basic, yet frequently overlooked aspects in the theory of identity that are particularly interesting for the study of the relationship between migration and culture: (a) identities are *labels* for sorting people into larger categories that have a wider social meaning; this

means that empirically observable commonly shared attributes or behaviors are not a *sine qua non*-condition for belonging or non-belonging – especially mega-categories, such as nation, ‘race’, ethnicity, gender, or generation can function very well as common denominators without extensive scrutinizing their members’ actual level of correspondence with the stereotypical images linked to them. (b) Each human being’s individual identity consists of a complex *texture of belonging* to different larger and smaller, frequently intersecting socially meaningful categories. These different categories allow individuals taking on socially accepted roles in very different social contexts, such as e.g. being a parent or a colleague, flirting in a bar or having a job interview, supporting a national or a local sports team. Each category label may require a different repertoire of behaviors and set of attributes, but this depends also on the level of abstraction connected to the category: Social (and cultural) expectations connected to, for example, being a parent or a villager or member of a fan club can be much more specific and explicit than for being Catholic or Korean. Very young professionals and very old parents, for example, are likely to meet some skepticism about the ‘legitimacy’ of their roles and position in these specific contexts which is rooted in certain empirical experiences that, however, are also likely to change because their social realities change: parents get steadily older; in certain fields (e.g. social media or computation) the experts can be considerably young. The following example of a young black person in a New York concert hall, however, illustrates how much more abstract notions, such as ‘race’ (and its intersections with ‘class’ and ‘nationhood’) can have much more enduring effects on social relations and expectations – even though the absurdity and inadequacy is so obvious:

Almost everyone, as almost always at such concerts, was white. (...) It never ceases to surprise me how easy it is to leave the hybridity of the city, and enter into all-white spaces, the homogeneity of which, as far as I can tell, causes no discomfort to the whites in them. The only thing odd, to some of them, is seeing me, young and black, in my seat or at the concessions stand. (...) But Mahler’s music is not white or black, not old or young, and whether it is even specifically human, rather than in accord with more universal vibrations, is open to question. (Quote taken from Teju Cole’s novel *Open City*, 2011: 251f.)

What I consider to be most important here is that people are thus always *same and different* at the same time, or differently put: different things at different moments and places and social contexts. At a Mahler concert, at work, at the parents’ evening in school, in the supermarket, or in sports clubs: why would and should people be above all ‘immigrants’ or ‘natives’ or ‘black’ or ‘white’? But mega-categories, such as nation or ethnicity or religion, are very powerful and claim a more comprehensive and transcendent validity. Probably, it is precisely in these two aspects – their ‘disconnection’ from everyday relevance and the offer of ‘transcendental meaning’ – where the power of these mega-categories resides; they do actually not offer much opportunity to empirically perceive them as ‘inappropriate’.

The stereotypical definitions and expectations connected to mega-categories are difficult to escape, while, at the same time, the individual ‘identity texture’ presents individuals with an almost infinite capacity to very skillfully deal with different cultural repertoires and make adequate use of them without getting confused. Language is a good example for this, although the focus is frequently dominated by the notion of *foreign* languages which, especially in the ‘North-Western’ parts of the world, non-immigrant people generally start learning rather late and whose use is mostly restricted to the school context and tourism. But, the social and cultural realities in immigrant and bi-national families, and also on other continents reveal that people can grow up with several

languages and become (at least close to) 'native speakers' in all of them. But the example of (foreign) languages is also misleading, because *switching between different linguistic codes* happens at all times: We use different codes when talking to superiors than to colleagues, to close friends different than within the family, on a conference different than in a seminar – and these are on purpose examples that describe pairs of social contexts which are very close to each other; imagine the variety of codes that are connected to regions and localities, social milieus and subcultures – not least as a means for mutual recognition and marking a difference to 'others'.

So, what does all this mean? It means, above all, that in culture and identity almost anything goes. As analysts, we should not be too surprised when we come across even the most, in our view, 'absurd' or 'inconsistent' statements of identity because of clearly denying empirically observable and proven realities. Culture is a means of producing, expressing and symbolizing *collectivity*, it is – in general anthropological terms – almost everything that people produce in order to be socially engaged and to be able to communicate at ease not just through actual words, but also rituals, habits and things (including the arts as different 'sophisticated' forms of socially meaningful cultural expressions). Culture and 'cultures' are never static, but constantly change following the dynamics of social relations. As a consequence, people have built in cultural mechanisms that reduce complexity and make it possible to perceive and maintain *continuity* – individually and collectively – even when passing through processes and periods of more massive or rapid cultural change. Here, identity comes in with its very effective and smart combination of two seemingly contradictory processes: bringing individuals together in socially meaningful 'groups', claiming 'sameness' among their members and creating a sense of unity and collectivity, *and* emphasizing the uniqueness of personality and individuality of each single individual or person and its difference to any other human being. Identity is not about cultural practices because these have to be constantly negotiated, but about establishing a common denominator that, together with some stereotypical cultural apprehensions, serves as a common thread that leads through times and changes. The central issue here is *community formation* in a form and sense that makes the community independent from specific individuals and their moments of encounter or mutual sympathy.

But, as we have seen above, 'culture' leads its own life. Richard Wagner and his music, to take just another example, had a particular function for German national self-definitions when it was composed and initially performed, but because there is an 'objective quality' to the music, it does no longer 'belong' to German nationalism or the specific context of its creation. We may not go as far as Teju Cole's protagonist cited above who is not sure whether the 'universal quality' of Mahler's music does not even go beyond humanity, but cultural artifacts can, at least, resonate cross-culturally with some of the anthropological foundations of humanity by, in one way or the other, expressing (near to) universal sentiments and 'truths' about human relations. If we add the great potential of transferability of cultural artifacts, taking meaning over or being given a new meaning, and modern ways and possibilities of global cultural diffusion – i.e. giving 'culture' even better possibilities to lead its own life – the long-standing great debate about cultural relativism versus universalism could come to a conciliatory conclusion: it is both and at same time and sometimes like this and sometimes like that... Studying migration and its short-, mid- and long-term effects on the two societies involved is a great tool for deeper insights into this.