The intersection of lifestyle and ideology in migration

Stephen Davies,* Matthew Hayes**
& Margit Feischmidt***

   * [s.davies@uw.edu.pl] (Polish Academy of Sciences, Warsaw)
  ** [mhayes@stu.ca] (St. Thomas University)
 *** [feischmidt.margit@tk.hu] (Centre for Social Sciences, Budapest)

The pursuit of cultural authenticity, environmental purity, and meaningful social relations has become the global hallmark of the 'postmaterialist' middle class (Inglehart, 2018). Beck and Nyíri's (2022) Chinese interlocutors were attracted specifically to a European rather than an Anglo-American version of modernity, which they perceive as more capitalistic and therefore more similar to China's ('pastoral Occidentalism' in Fran Martin's term). It stands for a wholesomeness they see as gone from Chinese society. Since the 2010s, the pursuit of authenticity has become increasingly intertwined with the nativist backlash against liberal democracy. But while the authenticity nativists wish to reclaim usually lies in one's own imagined past, in this case, the nostalgia is projected onto someone else's imagined past. In this optic, lifestyle migrations may intersect in unexpected ways with currents of ideologies of environmental, cultural, and racial purity. How does a destination country's symbolic meaning for immigrants relate to ideology? What do we know about the scale of this phenomenon? Is the quest for authenticity/purity (both in physical and spiritual terms) an important driver of migration? How should we understand the interplay between economy and ideology, particularly when destination countries are on lower rungs of the global development hierarchy? Should we reinterpret/revise the notion of flexible citizenship as a tool for maximising economic accumulation (Ong, 1999) in order to accommodate these developments?

Stephen Davies

After the democratic transition of 1989–1990, Western businesses entered Poland, accompanied by managers and technicians. Demand for business and language knowledge attracted many American and British people, but also others from Western European nations. These people had business acumen, briefcases, and professional qualifications. For some, migration was seen as a stepping stone on a career ladder to another destination. British migrants who came to Poland in the 1990s could be seen as traditional middle class: they had inherited middle-class values, capital and so on. Their children went on to universities like Oxford and Cambridge, and even in Warsaw, we have an Oxbridge alumni club.

There were also a lot of students, a lot of young people who were looking for a new life, who arrived with just a rucksack on their back, looking for a life they did not have in the UK, people who felt that they were either rejected by the system or could not find a place to fit in. This was an individual leap in the dark for many people who did not know what to expect.

After the Polish accession to the European Union in 2004 and the 2008 recession, researchers started to wake up to other kinds of migration apart from the outmigration of Poles. They began to see return migration of Poles as well as new Western migrants who were coming to Poland. I found some interesting media representations of different groups of Western migrants. One was Italians, described as either under 30 and looking for work because of unemployment in Italy, or over 60 and looking for retirement. And there is a narrative of 'love migration', which used to be that Polish women were going to Italy for love, but now this has reversed and it is coming back in the direction of Poland. There are also a lot of Germans in Poland, often in formerly German-held or -occupied lands, such as Silesia and western border regions. Here, the narrative is around care; they can use their capital and income to get cheaper care in Poland. The advertising of some companies in Poland accentuates that it is just the same care as in Germany: same language, same meals, but a lot cheaper. But the leading source country of permanent immigration is the UK.

Immigrants from Spain, the USA, or France are generally based in cities, whereas among those from the UK, Germany, and the Netherlands, there is a more even split between the rural and the urban, particularly after accession, and particularly in the last decade. I have access to several closed Facebook groups, which British people are involved in. The most frequently shared images are of gardens, nature, animals, weather, fresh food, and freshness in general.

People who have come over the last 10 or 15 years very often have intercultural marriages. Usually a Polish woman and a British man with a young child. I think they are voting with their feet: looking at the situation in the UK, looking at chances of social mobility, at education systems, and safety. Additionally, the Polish government provides something called the 500+ allowance, which is a family supplement for each child. So, I think there is an important economic element to it, but there is also an element of biological reproduction.

Let us take 'flexible citizenship' or 'strategic citizenship' as a starting point. I found that taking Polish citizenship is not a very popular option for British long-term migrants, or indeed, for anybody from Western European countries. People often do not value Polish citizenship, they consider either, if they are from the EU, that one EU citizenship is enough for them – it is flexible citizenship in itself or, for British people, there are other options. One option has been to obtain an Irish passport, another to adopt a wait-and-see strategy.

The agency that many of the migrants have has been eroded by Brexit. The option of moving back to the UK is very difficult to foresee now for people who have Polish partners and probably would not qualify for the Points Based System, which requires EU migrants to be in skilled employment at a minimum salary of around £25,000. Many people who have been here for longer than 15 years were not eligible to even vote in the Brexit referendum. Children who might have gone on to higher education in the UK are no longer able to do that because the British government reneged on a promise of a seven-year moratorium on fees. British migrants in Poland who have children would have to pay the European fees.

I know of at least one or two people in my study whose children have turned their backs on the UK. They have been rejected, but they also have chosen to reject it. For people who have young children, it is not an option to move anywhere else. But once those children have grown, even long-term migrants do not necessarily tie their future to Poland.

The papers by Beck and Nyíri mention that there is a possible attraction to the homogenous, pure, nativist approach to culture in Hungary. A similar approach by the Polish government and part of Polish society is actually very negatively viewed by British people who

tend to be more liberal, more anti-Brexit and more pro-European. Because they see that illiberalism and xenophobia is present in Poland, but also in the UK, neither of these countries is an attractive location for retirement or living the rest of their life. And many of them are already thinking about where to go next.

Matthew Hayes

I am interested in thinking through the relationship between ideology and migration through the concept of 'imaginary,' which has been taken up in other studies by scholars like Karen O'Reilly and Michaela Benson. The case study of North American lifestyle migration to Cuenca might provide some interesting comparative stepping stones for thinking about Chinese migration to Eastern Europe.

The imaginaries of the lifestyle migrants from Canada and the United States going to Cuenca, Ecuador, Cuenca focus on how it is a 'colonial-style city'. From a sociological perspective, it is interesting how the colonial style of the city gets produced. It references Ecuador's colonial past, but currently, it is produced through an elite-led discourse of positioning the city in an archipelago of other colonial-style cities in Latin America, which have been marketed towards North Americans as retirement destinations or as lifestyle migration destinations.

A big part of elite-driven narratives about urban heritage and 'colonial style' is a product of the debt crisis of the 1980s when the World Bank began emphasising tourism as a way of earning foreign exchange. In the early 1990s, Ecuador (particularly Quito) was trying to copy the success of Costa Rica and Panama in attracting that type of real estate investment as a way of diversifying the economy. Cuenca's urban landowners began thinking about situating their own city within global heritage networks in the late 1990s, gaining UNESCO recognition in 1999, which referenced it as an 'outstanding example' of a planned colonial inland town.[1] The colonial-style town is an Ecuadorian discourse, in part presenting Spanish colonial heritage as world heritage. The presentation of the city in this way is internally created, but it also connects to American visions of a certain type of urbanism.

There are a few key parts of drawing people to this urban space. One is the European feel, referring to the architecture in particular, which feels old to North Americans and is in dialogue with cultural notions of authenticity. Another is its walkability, which is frequently commented on by North American migrants. It is an urban fabric that is no longer easily available in North America, where cities have undergone processes of disinvestment in the urban core in favour of automobile-centric suburbs. Cuenca's urban fabric is often described as being like America in the 1950s. The trope of the 1950s is culturally very important, it is a watershed trope: as I point out in my book *Gringolandia* (Hayes, 2018), it papers over deeply divisive social transformations that began in the 1960s. It harks back to an apparently simpler past of close families and straightforward life trajectories that are a source of nostalgia for some North Americans.

Drawing on Durkheimian cultural sociology, an imaginary refers to collective representations, which affect material forces and help to structure social life. North Americans'

---

[1] https://whc.unesco.org/en/list/863/

imaginaries of Ecuadorian families index the transformation of the family in Canada and the US. Similar to Biao [Xiang]'s discussion of social reproduction migration, lifestyle migration in this instance can be understood in terms of moving away from social formations that have increasingly commodified relations of care and reproduction, and moving instead towards places that are supposedly defined by something that is missing in North America: intimate families whose relations of care are unpolluted by the market mechanism, by the advances of the women's liberation movement, or by the painful struggles of the 1980s and 1990s over changing gender patterns of paid vs. household labour. The shift from Fordist capitalism to neoliberalism is understood by most people through changes in the family – from a system based on gendered care work in the household to one that was more time-crunched in the dual-income family. My North American participants spoke of the apparently closer Ecuadorian families they observed, but these imaginaries speak more to how North American families had changed than they do to the reality of Ecuadorian families, which have also changed. Ironically, these imaginaries of a more caring society also commingle with practices of purchasing lower-cost care labour, which would have been unaffordable for most in their home countries.

Lifestyle migrants to Ecuador also spoke a lot about Ecuador belonging to the past of North America's present. This is also what the 1950s trope signals: a denial of coevalness that references a specific, cultural notion of time as evolving through various stages from lowest to highest. In an evolutionary notion of time, Ecuador is seen as a developing space. It is developing towards North American modernity, which my interviewees identified as more progressive but having lost cultural authenticity and proximity to a purer, more natural human condition. This sense of loss reproduces North American settler ideology, which represents indigenous people as being more proximate to nature and therefore more authentic. I think some of the discussion about authenticity in our field is worth looking at through the prism of decolonial scholarship that highlights the concept of a Eurocentric notion of time.

These imaginaries are important cultural codes, deployed to make sense of certain forms of migration, and indeed, as others above point out, an imaginary of 'building a better life' is present in many different forms of migration. But these imaginaries amongst migrants who move from high-income to lower-income global regions must also be understood in relation to the political economy of a shifting and unequal global division of labour. In this respect, part of the imaginary of Ecuador for North Americans related to its low cost of living, highlighting utilitarian cultural codes of thriftiness, and utilitarian self-interest. They speak of their relocations as a kind of geographic arbitrage, but one that should be understood as a cultural discourse, rather than an economic one. It is not merely about choosing spaces where savings go further, but also of selecting places that facilitate the pursuit of meaningful projects, including perhaps family projects, or as I point out in some of my work, cultural strategies of aging. It is as much about the transfer of cultural and social capital to spaces where they hold more symbolic power as it is about economic processes of arbitrage.

For retirees in Ecuador, geoarbitrage was very much about being able to live a more active retirement that met the cultural goals of successful ageing in North America. Material conditions, of a changing North American economy, underpin some of those cultural ideals amongst the baby boomers who are retiring right now. There are locations in global social space where it is still possible to live out this imaginary of the good life for middle- and working-class Canadians and Americans who may have lost resources for attaining it in their home countries.

Margit Feischmidt

I would like to show certain ethnographic examples that we can interpret together and complicate the picture a bit because I focus on a migrant wave from East to West. Specifically, Hungarians who went to Germany and have lived there for years or decades.

In the first step, we started collecting data on Facebook and identifying those groups that organised the Hungarian diaspora, and we did a small survey among their members and networks. Then we conducted 42 interviews. In the end it turned out that most of the interviews were focused on four localities, where I also did some ethnographic research.

The most general outcome of the qualitative part of the research was that participants reported they were happy with migration, and they thought of themselves as successful. Overall, happier and more successful than they were previously. One particular group, however, composed of wives of leading managers and professionals, reported that they are unhappy, lonely and they have nostalgia. This is the most unhappy subgroup within this sample, but they are also the ones who talked the most about the education of their children. For example, Helga, who was in a leading position back in Hungary, is now a housewife in Germany, and she reports that the only reason for not returning to Hungary is the quality of school for her children.

I have four cases. Anna is a child of well-educated parents who themselves once tried to move to Germany. Curiosity and desire to travel was an important stimulus for her. The international trajectory that was mentally present to her suddenly became a reality offered as an option of a student exchange. Her image of Germany is strongly connected to Berlin and Potsdam, to cities and the professional institutions to which she is attached. She reports that arriving in Germany had a liberating effect on her life. There is money, structure, and more equal working conditions.

There is Emese, whose story is much more determined by her origins than by her current residence: the Transylvanian ancestors, a Hungarian village, a grandmother who was considered a witch. There is also a Catholic attachment, which is mostly institutionalised in the children's participation in the Boy Scouts. She says about her husband that scouting had made him Hungarian. The integration of nation and religion in the understanding of Hungarianness is the opposite of individualism and consumerism identified with Germany. Her nationalism carries not only the concept of authenticity but also mystical and oriental cultural connections, in contrast to the West she experienced in Germany. 'Hungary is the place I always wanted to go back to' – this is what she repeatedly says. She is happy that one of her four children has moved back to Hungary. Her disdain for German culture and society is really represented in the term *korcs* (mongrel), used also by others in the same diaspora community in opposition to the supposed 'purity' of Hungarian culture.

My next example is Dóri, who says 'I love the order in Germany, I love discipline.' Dóri's biographical narrative begins with her early enthusiasm for the German language and culture. She studied German philology in Romania where she was born. She arrived in Germany in the early 2000s. Currently, she has a permanent position as a school psychologist, working primarily with immigrant children having difficulties in learning and integration. In her narrative, there is simultaneous identification and criticism. The former is directed at values of capitalism and modernity, which appear here in the national framework of Germany. Criticism is directed at current migration policies, which lead to an unlimited number of undisciplined immigrants. Dóri presented the narrative of a 'new German' with an Eastern European minority background who supports the German Far Right.

I have one final example, Judit. Concerning relationships with German society, successful integration trajectories and social mobility were apparent in the narratives of the older generation. Our interviewees in their fifties and sixties are now well-connected to German society, through professional or personal ties. Some of them live with a German spouse and have ethnically mixed families. Judit is a successful businesswoman who moved from Budapest to West Berlin in the 1970s. With her university degree in economics and good language skills, she ascended to a leading position in international trade and currently leads her own small company. She speaks about hard work, and the long time it took for her to get along as an immigrant in Germany, which nevertheless involved a much easier experience than for new arrivals from war, or conflict zones.

What do these examples show in relation to the papers at this workshop? They support the idea of *Wertrationalität* in migration. Which were the most striking values? Solidarity, freedom, and I think nostalgia. Solidarity and freedom are somehow connected to each other, and nostalgia and conservative values are also linked. We can see solidarity and freedom, not only at the level of personal narratives but also in the activities of these people.

We found a subcategory of Hungarians with other Eastern European migrants living in Germany. They became active in the support of the refugees immediately after the so-called refugee crisis of 2015. It was only partially true that these people were the well-established middle class. Some of them were in very unstable (precarious) positions at that time in Germany, just in the first year after their arrival. Some of them became employees of the state maintained supportive systems for the refugees in a couple of years. So while they were supporting others, their social position rose.

How do they report about such solidarity? The discourses of commonality became very important. They often talk about how 'hard-working' and 'well-performing' migrants are. They illustrate with their own experience that if one works hard as a migrant in Germany, good things will follow. So, I think this is a new discourse of 'deservingness'. At the same time, we also see cosmopolitan identities are very much connected to or become part of the discourses of solidarity. I was wondering how far these cosmopolitan identities can be identified among the Chinese immigrants and new immigrants who came to Hungary because they are attracted by certain lifestyles.

The other set of values can be identified around historical nostalgia and concerted conservative values. The notion of re-enchantment of culture and nation offered by Pál [Nyíri] is very important and comes up very often. Nevertheless, I think this is not only a cultural issue and not only a historical issue. I would say that that the concept of long-distance nationalism with the old meaning, offered by Benedict Anderson, is crucial. There is a political radicalism that relates to the unaccountability of diaspora organizations and members of the diaspora and the support which comes from an authoritarian nationalist state. So most of these diaspora organizations, which are behind the nostalgia, and the Hungarian state are crucial factors if we want to identify not only the individual but the institutional background as well.

In conclusion, I want to propose an inquiry about differentiating the role of consumption and ideologies in migration. How far can you connect the two? How different would the outcome be if ideology were the central frame of analysing migration? What about the cultural commonality of the Chinese and the Europeans? I think that the perception of authentic otherness was rather emphasised, so Europe is an authentic other in many of your papers. What about the commonalities between the Chinese self-representation and self-perception and the perception of Europe? What is the perception of white Europe? Lastly, the disappointment. What would the disappointed migrants emphasise?

The discussion started with the complexity of the destination countries' imaginaries and their relationship to migration and settlement. Some Western Europeans move to Eastern European countries because they reject multiculturalism and liberal values in their home countries, but there is no evidence to suggest this is a major motivation. Ideas of authenticity and purity are frequently connected to the destination countries' cultural and natural features. Many foreigners buy real estate in the countryside of these countries and not in big cities. However, many expat subjects were less engaged with the culture of the destination country: this resulted in ' failed migrations'. Other migration narratives relativised the differences between the home and destination country, allowing them to skirt the sometimes racist or illiberal practices of the latter.

Powerful imaginaries of care were also added as a discourse that contributes to migration, for instance, in the case of Cuenca. North American elderly people connected their impression of Latin American care workers to the destination country of Ecuador, which made it a likely place for settling down.

A debate unfolded on how much intermediaries or even states' own self-promotion overtakes the spontaneity of migration. Subjects were mentioned who were rather clueless before moving to a new country. At the same time, the promotion of 'golden visas' and 'global/digital nomad visas' or real estate abroad are huge businesses relying on monetising cultural brokerage between destination countries and prospective migrants. Their relevance is further increased by more and more people 'aging into poverty' in high-income countries.

References

Beck, F. & Nyíri, P. (2022). 'It's All for the Child': The Discontents of Middle-class Chinese Parenting and Migration to Europe. *The China Quarterly,* online first. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0305741022000169

Hayes, M. (2018). *Gringolandia: Lifestyle Migration under Late Capitalism.* University of Minnesota Press.

Inglehart, R. F. (2018). *Cultural Evolution: People's Motivations Are Changing, and Reshaping the World.* Cambridge University Press.

Ong, A. (1999). *Flexible Citizenship: The Cultural Logics of Transnationality.* Duke University Press.