
BOOK REVIEW

The Migration Turn and Eastern Europe: De-homogenising the abstract category of ‘migrant’

Melegh, A. (2023). *The Migration Turn and Eastern Europe: A Global Historical Sociological Analysis*. Palgrave Macmillan

<https://doi.org/10.17356/ieejsp.v10i1.1274>

Racial, and all social categorisation for that matter, bears a ‘risk of reification, of reducing and distorting the plurality and diversity of a person’ (Kurzweily & Escobedo, 2021b, p. 2). This process, which we describe as having a violent nature (Kurzweily & Escobedo, 2021b), has material consequences (Jenkins, 1983; 2000). It constructs and shapes people (Simmel, 1971/1908; Hacking, 1992); it makes them recognizable (Butler, 1997). During a study on social categorisation in the migration process in present-day South Africa, we observed that the words ‘migrant’ or ‘foreigner’ are as abstract as any other category such as ‘black,’ ‘white,’ ‘European,’ or ‘Portuguese’ (Kurzweily & Escobedo, 2021a). They are constructed contextually, situationally, and through people’s interactions and transactions (Barth, 1998; Brubaker & Cooper, 2000; Jenkins, 2000; Brubaker, 2004). However, we also observed that when given the actual opportunity to tell their stories and be listened to (Watts, 2008), those coded as ‘migrants’ or ‘foreigners’ can ‘oppose reductive categories and negotiate the interpretation of themselves as complex individuals’ (Escobedo et al., 2021, p. 19). After publishing our study in South Africa in 2021, I started engaging with my own life story and migration experiences, only to realise that, like categories, stories also vary across space and time. Herewith I employ *The Migration Turn and Eastern Europe* (Melegh, 2023, hereon *The Migration Turn*) to retell my own experience, ‘on the ground,’ as someone ascribed the abstract category of ‘migrant.’ In other words, I apply the ideas proposed by this book to illustrate how the ‘migration turn,’ as understood here, has restructured my life and experience, while at the same time, although only to a certain extent, de-homogenise said category.

I was born in Peru in the 1980s, during the initial phase of the migration turn. As a child, I witnessed what a political, economic, and social crisis meant. I remember the armed conflict between a failed state and the subsequent authoritarian one, and those organisations that the state classified as terrorist. It was in the 1988–1991 transition to Fujimori’s neoliberal project when my father experienced a bomb attack that, as far as we know, only resulted in his present hearing impairment. It was during this same period that his brother, a former military officer, got shot as a result of three different clashes with the Shining Path group in Huanta, an Andean town among those with the highest

number of casualties (Truth and Reconciliation Commission, 2003). Blackouts, shootouts, car bombings, the cholera epidemic, and more bad news were rapidly encroaching upon us. *Zona roja*, or 'red zone,' became a common way to refer to Peru, or at least to parts of the country. Despite this dire situation, my parents, at the time underpaid (US\$ 80/month each, as they recall) young medical doctors employed in exploitative occupations, made sure that we enjoyed the occasional family trip in my father's old Volkswagen beetle through an Andean 'red zone' of outstanding landscapes. We had a happy childhood. Others, unfortunately, were not as lucky.

Only in my adulthood have I been able to truly grasp the dimensions of the crisis and conflict we lived through. However, I have not yet been able to fully comprehend how much more pernicious this had been for the various ethnic and linguistic populations with pre-colonial roots, as they continued to be othered in their own land (Portocarrero, 2010; De la Cadena, 2012; Drinot, 2014; Escobedo, 2016). Ever since, generations of Peruvians have crowded migration offices, flights to the United States, Spain, Italy, and Japan, and bus rides to Chile and Argentina. That was the beginning of Peruvian mass migration.

The early 2000s would be the stage of a more intense migration wave. By 2009, almost a quarter of a million of Peruvians would leave every year not to come back (INEI et al., 2018, p. 23). It was in 1999 when, still a teenager, I left, first to the United States, then to Germany, Poland, Mexico, South Africa, and Romania, where I currently live. Abroad, I did not witness the gradual inflow of Peruvian returnees that began in 2010. Neither did I see the first steady, and then hastened, arrival of more than a million Venezuelan immigrants and asylum seekers in major Peruvian cities. Nor am I taking part in the most recent departure of more than 415,000 Peruvians (Pighi Bel, 2023), more than in the 2006–2009 peak (interestingly also the period when, according to Melegh, globalisation peaked), or in the debate developing around this phenomenon. What I did see, and experience was what it was like to be a non-white (or brown, as I say today) Peruvian, or 'non-white immigrant,' as I am now labelled both abroad and in Peru, for a little over half of the forty years of the global migration turn. Our situation today is certainly not that which followed 9/11, or before 2016, when the EU, the Schengen space, the UK, and several other territories started granting Peruvians visa-free movement.

Melegh understands 'migration turn' as the substantial increase in the intensity of emigration and immigration because of globalisation, as the wheel that enables the further marketisation of societies, and as the effect of the dynamism of migration as a discourse and category, one that, as we said before, actively changes meanings across time and space. One of his key ideas is that during the migration turn discursive blocs were formed within different states: Those that portray themselves as open to migration, those that support strict border measures, and those that call into question marketisation and market relations due to their perceived cultural and social consequences. Following this, I now compare my migration experiences in Germany, Poland, and Romania, in relation to these blocs, to expose how abstract the category 'migrant' can be – one of Melegh's intentions – when engaging with the individuality, complexity, and humanity of those categorised as such.

I moved to Germany in August 2001, two weeks before 9/11, and four years before Merkel started making proper institutional and discursive changes to increase tolerance towards migration, what would later develop into *Willkommenskultur* and mark the begin-

ning of what Melegh (2023, p. 217) describes as ‘a historical-political bloc that made use of migration as a demographic and market tool’ since the 2010s. Preceding Merkel, the private university I attended had integrated ‘international’ into their name and promoted itself as a symbol of internationality, inter-disciplinarity, and private and elite higher education. Re-evaluating it through Melegh’s lens, however, this institution may as well be seen as part of a network of market institutions that used migration as a demographic and market tool, and in this way reproduced global inequalities.

Most of the students were from Bulgaria and Romania – both joined the European Union in 2007. To my admiration, many of them had high performance and results, were highly proficient in German and other Western European languages and had good knowledge of the channels of labour mobility in Germany and across transnational academic and non-academic institutions. At the same time, and to my surprise, most of them would often articulate a dichotomic narrative where their countries of origin were ranked lower and as unpreferred destinations. Melegh would tie a case like this one to the idea of unequal exchange resulting from the larger gains of having generations of highly qualified human resources move westwards as compared to the low social redistribution of the benefits of foreign capital moving eastwards. Something similar occurred with other, coincidentally almost always, non-Western representations on campus. After reading *The Migration Turn*, I started wondering whether whenever the cigarette or snack vending machines were vandalised on campus and no German name appeared on the list of student-suspects this would not have been the work of someone challenging unequal exchange rather than an isolated event. However, a realisation I did have after reading the book is that my choice to sidestep ‘migration’ and the globalised labour market by trying to ‘live my life’ in Germany after university had challenged said concepts more than the vandalism of a vending machine ever did. Hence the subsequent series of ‘punishments’ I had to endure at the hands of police and migration officers, security personnel at night clubs, and a public in continuous denial. Surveillance, the denial of entry, arbitrary interrogations, false accusations, and the like became routine in what I could now describe as their way to restore what was ‘out of order’ (Berry et al., 2017, p. 546).

My first year in Poland was completed in 2008, a period when Peruvian migration and globalisation both peaked. By the year 2014, when I left that country after completing two master’s and one doctoral degree, I had also endured a series of physical xenophobic attacks, one of which had impacted my income, social relations, and sport performance (for more, see Escobedo, 2022). After reading Melegh and revisiting the seven years I spent in Warsaw, I, however, have come to a striking realisation. Before therapy, which I started in 2022, I would have mostly described my experiences there in a victim-perpetrator dichotomy. After therapy, I simply dropped that discourse. However, after *The Migration Turn*, yet another dimension was added to my perspective, allowing me to see that my former aggressors and I were both somehow victims and we were simultaneously fighting the same thing, rather than each other. In Germany, I was primarily injured by epistemic injustice and institutional racism. In Poland, my aggressors and I were both targeted by this injustice at a transnational level: for very different reasons, neither of us was following ‘the plan’ to remain within the structures of ‘migration’ and the ‘globalised labour market.’ Instead, we were, once again, falling ‘out of order’ (Berry et al., 2017, p. 546). My aggressors’ racism, manifested in their attitudes and behaviours, was what they adopted

in the absence of a more hospitable state-guided cultural and narrative repertoire in the face of ‘migrants’ and ‘migration,’ fuelled by the perception of loss of social and job security, the increase of marketisation, and the decline of non-market-related social institutions.

Like in Germany and other states where the pro-migrant discursive bloc has taken precedence in the past decades, Romania’s elites, and mostly the urban middle classes approach migration from a utilitarian perspective, and from this stance they support market transformation and open borders. In the face of a labour shortage, and other demographic challenges, they conceive immigration as cost-efficient and advantageous in fulfilling a necessity while making the country wealthier. When starting our research at the Transylvanian Hungarian town of Gyergyóditró/Ditrău, notorious due to an incident where two Sri Lankan workers were expelled in 2020, we realised that the Hungarian majority government’s narrative pointing at an ‘external enemy’ had been deeply enrooted. This case epitomised a clash between the pro-migration and the anti-migration discursive blocs, which in the examples above prevailed with more clarity in the contexts of Germany and Poland, respectively, and led us, as researchers, to pursue, on the basis of Melegh’s ideas, a third discourse, one requiring a more thorough analysis of the cultural and social consequences of the marketisation of migration.

As Melegh’s work portrays, a migration turn is not something that happens in a particular space and at a particular time. While its effects could be local, it is global. And, while our experiences occur in a particular moment and place, they are also part of the *longue durée* of globalisation. Maybe it was about the time when I lived in one place or the other. Maybe about who I was, in which stage of my career I was, or who or how those around me were at a particular time. However, one thing of which I am sure is that I and many like me were being treated as an abstract category, for better or for worse. We were given ‘a mythological status,’ in Melegh’s own words. Once navigating the global migration turn, our diligence would suddenly define our worth. Our lack of it would make us unworthy. And so, our lives, experiences, and even bodies have been and continue to be shaped by market institutions at a global level. Melegh’s work has allowed me to reassess and rewrite my own story, and revise my own critical lens towards my future as a non-‘migrant.’

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