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Integration: a dangerous concept

Migration researchers should not use the concept integration, as it locks us into a nation-state way of thinking – argues prof. Adrian Favell [@adrianfavell](https://twitter.com/adrianfavell) from the Bauman Institute [@BaumanUoL](https://twitter.com/BaumanUoL) at the University of Leeds [@UniversityLeeds](https://twitter.com/UniversityLeeds). He also reflects on #Brexit and believes the threat to European citizenship is much wider than just Britain's exit. Read the interview in the following pages of CMR Spotlight and join us for the next CMR UW Migration Seminar on March 11, 3:00 PM (CEST Time), at which prof. Favell will be speaking on “Decolonizing ‘integration’? Beyond methodological nationalism in immigration politics and policy”.

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Integration: a dangerous concept

“The example of a post-national [European] citizenship was pointing the way to a different kind of world, where the national borders and national membership would matter less”. Interview with prof. Adrian Favell

Dominika Pszczołkowska: You argue that by using the term integration in relation to migrants, researchers are falling into a trap set up by the nation state. What exactly does this trap consist of?

Prof. Adrian Favell: Integration is a term which is hugely widespread, on all levels: in policy, political debates, academic debates. It has become central again over the last 20 years, since I studied it in my PhD and first book *Philosophies of Integration*, which was devoted to the history of integration in France and Britain, as a mainstream policy concept that had risen and fallen and risen again in different ways. We are working with a term which has become almost pervasive across Europe in progressive thinking about immigration, and is even now becoming a preferred term in the US, where they have always talked about assimilation.

That’s maybe all obvious, but it is important to emphasize how pervasive it has become -- particularly in terms of things like EU funding - - so it is very important to think about what that imposes on us as researchers. We need to maintain a certain independence in our uses of concepts from the way it is used in practice by

politicians, media and so on. One question we should always be asking is: “have all those academics who are using the term put enough distance from the way politicians, or the media are using it, from the point of view of the state or public ideology?”. As Rogers Brubaker often notes, citing Pierre Bourdieu, our categories of analysis need to be distinct from their categories of practice.

There are various dimensions to why I think it is a kind of trap and gets us locked into a nation-state way of thinking. There is something inescapable about the term itself, which is linked to its long conceptual history – that even when people use the word in a relatively soft sense, say, to talk about integration at the local level of a newcomer group with the host society that’s really about mutual recognition or cultural interaction, calling that integration evokes a much larger theorization of society, which has a long historical baggage in social theory. What this is, in fact, is a classic modernist developmental paradigm that is really built into colonial modes of thinking developed in Europe and North America to think about how the rest of the world was going to be kind of pulled along

to resemble Western societies. It is about how our modern society is able to take the "backward" cultures of newcomers, transform and absorb them as emancipated individuals with the shared and bounded values of a common citizenship. It's the ongoing idea of enlightened colonial rule, transformed into the post-colonial scenario of advanced Western societies trying to deal with the consequences, in terms of population diversity, of their colonial and global adventures.

What term could we use instead?

Integration is irrevocably attached to its roots in the sociology of the 19th century French founding figure, Emile Durkheim. The reason why it is much more dangerous than words like accommodation, incorporation, inclusion, participation, and even more dangerous than assimilation in some ways, is because integration is the core Durkheimian concept, which implies several things at once: the unifying of society – the achievement of parity or identity between people, which is I guess what people think of when they think of integration, but it also implies a certain sort of individualization of society. It's about producing the modern individual in a Durkheimian framework, and it's also about binding society, that is, drawing a border around a more diversified society. Integration is then also very central for the way we put some people outside of society. That means there are always people who are left out, and left behind, and made invisible by the process of integration, to create this kind of vision of a coherent society that works. All this together is what makes it a functional vision of society and what makes it Durkheimian, how it echoes through the modernist paradigm, which is

about creating this particular vision of modern society that is the modern nation-state.

Do you believe integration is a term that is more excluding, creates more of a border, than assimilation?

In technical terms assimilation research and integration research is essentially the same thing. There is really no example of quantitative integration research that isn't assimilation research. It is why basically quantitative scholarship on integration is simply always using and adapting American research on assimilation, which has always been more sophisticated, and had much better data sources. Assimilation or integration research is about being able to identify different or newcomer groups in society, what are referred to as "minorities", who will be compared to a homogenised benchmark group that is the majority, and which stands in for the national society. As soon as you start measuring things and try to collectivize on any kind of scale, it becomes assimilation research. Assimilation research is often rather crudely associated with conformist ideas of people becoming like an ethnocultural majority. But if you look at how it developed in the US, assimilation research is about the statistical construction of an increasingly (and allegedly) colour blind, post-racial "mainstream", into which immigrant groups will disappear statistically as they "lose" their ethnicity. Over time, ethnicity -- which foreigners have but "natives" supposedly don't! -- becomes less and less of a visible marker of the inequalities the groups face, with the exception of racialised groups against which the failure of integration is measured. That's effectively

what integration research, when it is done quantitatively, does.

Assimilation is naïve about the borders of society; it just takes for granted that there is some kind of pre-existing national population. Integration research, I think, goes further to also evoke the nation-building function of identifying a foreign population in order to specify what holds the national population together. It's very much about singling out a group of people who have moved across a border and can potentially become new citizens of that society. All the other people who are moving across borders -- the high-end flows of globalization like tourists, people who are travelling for business, or lower-end migrants who are irregular and called illegal -- are not really part of the integration question. They are seen as being outside of the linear process that integration is - the process of taking a foreigner who moves across a border, settles, goes through a process of transformation, and becomes eventually a full citizen of that country in both the formal and the substantive sense. It is a naturalization process, which is also a nationalization process. It's about turning that foreigner into a full and equal member of that society. In the process, it defines who or what a "good" citizen is -- a burden projected onto ethnically "different" new members who are often therefore set up to "fail". At the same time other members of the same society -- at the higher end -- are enabled to be free of this burden -- nobody would ever question their "integration". They are basically free to come and go as they please as mobile "global" citizens.

Some of the people who did not have integration policies directed at them, and who were not on this spectrum you are talking about, were the intra-EU migrants or mobile populations, like the Polish in the UK...

Integration is usually looked at from the point of view of the host society. A lot of what happens with our conceptions of integration is based on an Americanized vision of what an immigrant society looks like. So, it is a relatively positive view of integration, it is about the society being built of immigrants, where all immigrants who do integrate can become citizens, bringing diversity and change. It is a process of inclusion, of a new national identity being built out of those populations. I don't argue with all of that, I'm not trying to say that integration is inherently ethno-culturally exclusive or something. I think the most dangerous forms of integration are in fact the most modernistic and forward-looking ones, which are the ones that render invisible some of the consequences of successful national integration.

So it is possible to imagine Britain or France as sort of like the United States, new immigrant societies that are creating a new nation out of different migrant populations. That sounds good until you realise it's basically a definition of classic nationalism. This is the vision of Boris Johnson and post-Brexit Britain. They are very much open to global immigration and they would say "well, those European migrants living rather dubiously as non-nationals in our society with European citizenship, which the British population has rejected, now can become immigrants of Britain, they can become immigrants just like immigrants from Asia or Africa, they can choose to become

British and become part of the new nation which can be inclusive of them. EU citizens in Britain have the right to settle and become immigrants in that sense. The Polish will become part of that vision". I'm putting it in these terms, because there is an argument there, which you can imagine working for an island of immigration, now separate from Europe. But also, it ought to be ringing alarm bells for us, because something has happened in this vision which has taken away the rights that the Polish living in Britain were enjoying, which never presupposed that they had to become British. Those rights are precisely the rights of European citizens: to live and work in another member state within Europe as a non-national, without the pressure of integration, without giving up your former nationality to become a new national of that society.

The Polish were a kind of intermediate case because lots of Central and Eastern European migrants have had formal EU citizenship but have experienced intra-EU migration as a kind of immigration. They have been under pressure ethnically and racially, to modify behaviour and gain acceptability, and often faced racism and other forms of discrimination, in the way that nearly all typical non-European immigrants do as they go through this long-drawn-out process of integrating. The Polish experienced some of that, but they also were able to use intra-EU migration as it was conceived: as a two-way thing. They were not moving to Britain to become British; they were moving there to live in a different part of Europe. They might also have been able to live in Poland and Britain simultaneously, and have various kinds of

transnational flows going between the two nations.

That, I would like to argue, is precisely a de-nationalizing vision of what integration might be, if almost to conceive of it as something outside of the national framework. This was particularly remarkable because what European citizenship did was offer this possibility to a much wider part of the population, who otherwise might not have been able to do this unless they were elite and privileged. High-end migrants with lots of human capital and economic capital are always able to move internationally. It's no surprise: it's a core feature of neoliberalism. But the point of European citizenship was that it made it available to everybody who was a national of those societies, from top to bottom of society. It created a genuine kind of right that was a form of equality across society, but more specifically a form of non-discrimination by nationality. This created a particular sort of transformative dynamic -- particularly, as we know, for younger CEE migrants who seized the chance to be spatially mobile in order to move up in European (and Polish) society.

The problem is, we are now in a situation in the UK where that is no longer possible. The Polish immigrants, as they are now called, face a choice: they either have to stay and become British, go on the integration path, or they should leave. They will not be able to maintain the transnational lifestyle. We have to wait and see. In some cases, you can get away with dual nationality and maintain this sort of lifestyle. But it's precisely because this got cut off as a right, that we see that something got lost in the process of Brexit.

I mean, it's all great if they want to become British, fine. But that's also like saying that being Polish is not as valuable. This is a core example of how global inequalities work, in which where you are born is the most important factor, globally speaking, in your life chances. It is the fundamental injustice of the world that we live in: that you win the lottery of life being born British, and you are more likely to lose if you are born in Poland.

My more general argument is that this example of post-national citizenship in the EU was pointing the way to a different kind of world, where the national borders and national membership would matter less, in a world of dramatic inequality tied to citizenship and nationality. If you take Branko Milanović's message seriously about the "birthright lottery" – then if we want to see any change in global inequalities, the idea that integration of immigrants is going to make any immigrants more equal is absolutely the wrong way to go. It basically gives rights to nationals and members of the club only, and thereby reinforces the inherent superiority of, say, British citizenship over the citizenship of Afghanistan, Eritrea, or wherever you want to think of that is down at the bottom of the scale. The other thing is: celebrating the very few immigrants allowed along the golden path to successful citizenship, is to forget all those who were left behind, could never move, who lacked the right human or social capital in the first place to escape where they were born.

In the rest of my work, I try to address this as a fundamental question of migration and development that needs rethinking outside of the one-way linear immigration, integration and citizenship paradigm.

A lot of people know you from your book, *Eurostars and Eurocities*. This kind of lifestyle will no longer be possible between London and other European cities? How will London change?

First of all, the threat to European citizenship is broader than this, it is now apparent in some other ways. Britain is obviously out of the European citizenship completely. Other countries have been restricting it by legal means - restricting social rights of various kinds on a national level, in various contexts to some EU nationals, selectively. That is not how citizenship -- or more precisely non-discrimination by nationality -- is meant to work. Things have been kind of rolling back and we are now in a situation under COVID, where we have seen that it is entirely possible for nation states to close the borders again, suspend all free movement rights, and we don't know whether that is going to come back. We don't know what free movement is going to look like after the COVID pandemic.

That puts everything into question at this time. London is not going to become less of a global city as a result of all this. But the globality is going to be ever more structured by inequality. The argument in *Eurostars and Eurocities* was a tentative argument about the massifying effect of rights of free movement, that is, a right normally associated with global elites moving down through the middle classes and into more ordinary populations, who could also become transnational. That was a kind of transformative dynamic. The argument was tentative because it was focusing on predominantly younger people who had used education and mobility as a form of social mobility. There were lots of stories of relatively

provincial people, mostly Western Europeans, often women or LGBT people for example, who used the route of mobility to achieve something they wouldn't have achieved staying at home. But as they got older, they found it increasingly difficult to convert their idealized European life into one of longer-term settlement, a kind of stable transnational life in the countries they are living in. Family life is heavily nationalised by welfare states and social security systems. Even they, with their education and resources, found it very difficult to live a transnational life.

Some parts of the Central and Eastern European migration of course resembled the Western European story, because they were also highly educated, young, and mobile people who benefited enormously from those opportunities, and then maybe faced the same longer-term challenges. There is a different story obviously around the lower-end, less-educated migrants from the East and South of Europe, who used EU mobility to create other sorts of transnational dynamics. A new book by Juan Díez Medrano, *Europe in Love*, for example, describes the effects of intra-EU marriage, and shows very clear effects of these marriages on lower, more working-class people across Europe who have also benefitted from more mobility, in a way distinct from the middle classes and professional classes.

Assuming we get to a post-Covid situation where core member states of the EU remain committed to what I call "the fourth freedom" – the freedom of movement of persons -- and certain functional things are developed more to enable people to have these lifestyles across borders, then I think we can be cautiously

optimistic that some of what happened will return. People will go to Amsterdam or Barcelona or wherever instead of London.

Obviously, as a British citizen I have suffered myself from the loss of European citizenship, so it's something that motivates me intensely. I lived a life as a free-moving European for many years, I have lived and worked across Europe, and it hurts to not have those sorts of opportunities in the future. In some ways, Britain was one of the most exciting examples of European mobility. It was transformed in extraordinary ways by European integration, by the Europeanization of British society, carried by these migrants. Britain has politically rejected that, even though it was a wonderful transformation of the country in many ways – in terms of diversity, and the economic effects on Britain.

But now obviously there is a sense that there is an alternative out there, and that all European nations might default to the more nationalistic mode of thinking, which builds a vision around a self-sufficient, national conception of society. Of course, this way of thinking is very much reflected in the way nations continue to think about immigration and integration. That's one of the other key points of my work: the immigration and integration paradigm is directly damaging of the kind of post-national and trans-national aspects of European and regional integration. There is a clear trade-off between these two things.

Are you also arguing that in public discourse, by politicians, in the media etc. we should avoid the term integration?

There are softer uses of integration, where people are talking about inter-cultural

relations and interactions, diversity, and the transformation of societies, particularly at the local level. But I think it's problematic that integration is used even for those kinds of things. One of the contingent factors here is that Europe as a whole, the EU, in the face of the big refugee crisis has been looking for solutions for dealing with post-refugee settlement. Integration has become the catch-all progressive term for what goes on here. Many of the policy efforts and trying to think constructively about allowing people coming through refugee channels to settle, have been described this way. They are often positive and laudable, but 10 or 15 years ago we wouldn't have called it integration, we would have called it multiculturalism.

One thing that is a problem is that it is always the migrants integrating into the host society. Yes, there is supposedly some sort of two-way transformation going on, but it's heavily weighted, directional towards the host society. We lose sight of the fact that when it is really integration as a an equal two-way process between the powerful host and the migrant from a less advantaged society, the foreign influence should work to lessen the global inequality here, in effect to "dis-integrate" the national society as a distinct unit, and rather integrate it more into a global society, or as I think it ought to be called – a kind of planetary society. The interaction would be specifically creating spaces and localities within a national society that are porous aspects of a much wider global world.

The language that we used in the 1990s for all of this was the language of transnationalism, of diaspora, post-national membership, human rights, and other aspects of

international society which seemed to be pointing toward something different than the traditional nation-state-centered society. I am arguing that we need to continue to think about those issues. However, we do have to factor in that a lot of those things have been heavily discredited, because they were also clearly hinged to processes of neo-liberal capitalism that have been seen to be highly damaging. It's a difficult issue of trying to look at what is left of transnationalism, and the effects that migration has as a form of transnational transformation of society, while also being aware that much of what was going on with transnationalism, cross-national integration, is also leading to increasing inequality on a global scale. This is the kind of difficult equation that we are facing in research.

Is there a lesson here for a country like Poland, which is just starting to get significant numbers of immigrants?

I would hope that a society like Poland would continue to look at the experiences of those Polish who have been on the move as a positive resource of this society. There were a lot of economic benefits of this migration, it was not a kind of complete brain drain, stripping of human resources that you have seen in other countries. The vision of a transnational Poland within Europe continues to suggest why Poland, through its mobile populations, is deeply embedded within Europe.

Poland is also obviously a major country of immigration now. One would hope that there would also be a perception of the external effect of the inclusion of migrants in Polish society, a reflection on "what happens to the

European neighbourhood adjacent?”, “what happens to those societies the migrants have come from?”. Immigration is never really one way. You don’t want societies of immigration to celebrate becoming a caricatural vision of

the USA, which simply drains the world of human resources, as it attracts and selects "the brightest and the best", while leaving the rest of the world left behind and locked out.



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