What role for migration in European history?

What role do immigrants play in the construction of historical narratives within a uniting Europe? Can the cultural diversity spurred by immigration be included in new European narratives of diversity? What would such broadened historical pictures look like? Such general questions lay behind the project Migrants Moving History: European Narratives of Diversity; questions triggered not least by the fact that immigration and immigrants in Europe often serve – and have served in the past – as ‘others’ in constructing nationally dominated historical narratives. In these narratives immigrants are not yet seen as an essential part of Europe or its nations; rather, they serve as entities against which excluding and exclusive collective narratives and identities are forged.

The project Migrants Moving History: European Narratives of Diversity tried to challenge this rather linear and one-dimensional assumption and identify some possibilities for more inclusive European counter-narratives. Immigrant voices, immigrant stories and migration history became the starting point for this process. The project itself was launched in 2008 by Network Migration in Europe (Berlin) and enjoyed the support of the German Hauptstadtkulturfonds. Two ambitions directed the team’s work. The first of these was to document the narratives of various European ‘immigrant intellectuals’, writers and film makers, in interviews lasting around two hours each.¹ Twelve individuals living in ten major European cities (Amsterdam, Athens, Berlin, Istanbul, London, Luxembourg/Paris, Madrid, Oslo, Warsaw) were interviewed. These interviews formed the basis for a dialogue centred on the interrelation of history, migration and diversity in Europe. The film footage was condensed into a 23-minute documentary, with an

¹ The following artists were interviewed: In Amsterdam, Fouad Laroui (writer); in Athens, Gazmend Kapllani and Petros Markaris (both writers); in Berlin, Wladimir Kaminer and Emine Sevgi Özdamar (both writers); in Istanbul, Annie Geelmuyden Pertan (art director and film maker); in London, Sarjit Bains (film maker); in Luxembourg and Paris, Jean Portante (writer); in Madrid, Basel Ramses Labib (film maker); in Oslo, Nefise Özkal Lorentzen (film maker) and Michael Konupek (writer); in Warsaw, Steffen Möller (writer and comedian). Nine of these artists are immigrants themselves, and three were born into immigrant families.
accompanying website making available a broader array of film material.\(^2\) Thus, the film material created a diverse narrative mosaic and established a virtual European dialogue, echoing crucial European voices on history and diversity. The second ambition was to hold a conference at which these selected intellectuals would reflect on future historical and museological European narratives.\(^3\) Some 80 other European experts – including museum experts, historical researchers, and representatives of immigrant organisations – also attended the conference. They met for three days to exchange ideas and thoughts in seven moderated workshops of 13-15 participants each.

The film and conference project was governed by three underlying considerations. The first of these was to bring highly qualified and articulate immigrant voices into the debate and have them communicate at a European level. The second was to operate along the lines of narratives and narrators / storytellers: the twelve interviewees, all either film makers or novelists, work with some sort of narrative forms themselves; at the Berlin conference they entered into dialogue with historians and museum experts, i.e. key actors in creating historical meaning through the use of narratives; thus, they met on shared methodological grounds, reflecting on (among other things) the role of narratives in imagining Europe's interwoven and intersected history of diversity. The third consideration was that the interviews should not only bring in the film makers' and writers' biographical and artistic views on history and identities in an age of migration and diversity, but that they should also experiment with the idea of looking for those European historical places and symbolic spaces (i.e. *lieux de mémoire*) that stand for experiences and memories related to the processes of migration.

During the interviews, the immigrant writers and film makers were asked to point to and reflect on places that give meaning to individual and/or collective experiences of immigration. As the project had a strong focus on the role of museums and migration history in museums a concluding

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\(^2\) The film and other extracts of the interviews are available on the project's website: [www.migrants-moving-history.org](http://www.migrants-moving-history.org).

\(^3\) The conference in Berlin was hosted by seven Berlin-based museums and co-organised by ICOM Europe the Luxembourgish *Centre de Documentation sur les Migrations Humaines*. The following institutions were among the cooperating partners: Deutsche Kinemathek – Museum für Film und Fernsehen, Erinnerungsstätte Notaufnahmelager Marienfelde, Jüdisches Museum Berlin, Jugendmuseum Schönberg, Museum Neukölln, Kreuzbergmuseum and Stadtmuseum Berlin/Märkisches Museum.
question sought to locate a symbolic European equivalent to Ellis Island. The former American gate of immigration (1892-1954), which has been an Immigration Museum since 1990, was taken as a reference point for the interviewees to reflect on the process of historicising and 'musealising' Europe's rich migration history so that this can be placed at the core of new European historical narratives.

Mosaics of Belonging – Towards New Identities

In the more recent theoretical and empirical research on identity formation in culturally diverse societies, it is argued that hybridity – the mixture of identities and a contextual or situative approach towards questions of belonging – is on the rise. Individuals as well as groups increasingly meander between various forms of belonging that overlap and intersect. Identity is no longer conceived in the singular; instead, plural and pluralistic conceptions are gaining momentum. In Europe this pluralisation of identities is due not least to the fact that immigration reshaped Western European societies, making them ethnically and culturally diverse and thus questioning the nation state paradigm of a single clearly-bound national identity. The statements, reflections and narratives of those immigrant artists who were interviewed provide ample evidence of this seminal shift, and of the redefinition of spatial and social belonging in contemporary Europe.

Jean Portante, a Paris-based writer who was born in Italy and raised in Luxembourg, reflected on the transitional state of immigrants by pointing to the experiences of his parents and the interrelated family mythology. ‘My mother did not give up her plans of return,’ he said. ‘For her, it became something mythical, mythological. She settled in the definite interim, while my father had long settled in the interim definiteness.’ This example of early post-war labour immigrants sheds light on the fact that the process of social inclusion – or its lack – exercised a lasting impact on the self-perceptions and individual positions of immigrants. Ambiguities and ambivalences of belonging emerged. Although the narrative of home and return was kept up, the practice of settling down produced a new state of being in-between definite and interim belonging.

Portante’s Turkish-German colleague, the writer and actress Emine Özdamar, elaborated on this state of transition by drawing an analogy: ‘Sometimes you think that you have to choose one country and its language or the other. It’s as if you are stuck between your husband and a lover. You
keep thinking you have to make a decision. [...] They say, when you’re somewhere strange you lose your native language or that you’re in-between two places.’ However, her personal experiences provide evidence that it did not turn into a question of either-or: ‘Well, you don’t have to be in-between two places, you can be in both. I realised about myself that I am in both places.’

The experience of being and living in several worlds simultaneously featured in many statements. The German-born writer and comedian Steffen Möller, who commutes between Warsaw and Berlin, put it as follows: ‘I’m neither a Pole nor a German. I am a “betweener”. That’s what I call myself. The English would call it an “in-between”, I think. [...] My home these days is the Eurocity train between Berlin and Warsaw. I usually sit in the train restaurant with all the other betweeners. We are people who always make comparisons. We’re people who have a train in our heads that continuously goes from East to West.’

Life in two countries and languages offers double or even multiple identities. The Greek-Albanian writer Gazmend Kapllani stated: ‘As I live in two languages, as I have lived in two countries, my life can be divided almost exactly in two; I think that I participate in both identities.’ The author argued that this dual perspective and double state of belonging creates a benefit for his intellectual work, as it makes him see things differently. ‘Of course, immigration gives me great freedom of movement as a writer and as a journalist. It is the telescope, the keyhole through which I can see the outside world.’ Jean Portante even argued that this position results in something more than just being in two worlds: ‘You are becoming something new, you are neither this nor that. [...] We have another point of view, another perspective on things when we are not entirely submerged in them.’

According to the Czech-Norwegian writer Michael Konupek, ‘It is not only the transitional situation – leaving one country and settling in another – but this transitional feeling remains a key theme of your life because it becomes a spiritual condition.’ The Istanbul-born, Turkish-Greek-Norwegian film maker Annie Geelmuyden Pertan sees this state as the basis for her having become European: ‘I am what? I'm really nothing. I don’t belong anywhere. I'm half Norwegian – I only lived in Norway seven years of my life. I'm half Greek – I live in Turkey. That's why I said I don’t belong anywhere. I'm a European citizen, let's say.' All of which goes to show that immigrants could be at the forefront of ‘building Europe’: supposedly marginal positions and perspectives could form the basis of a newly emerging Europe based on
diversity. As Steffen Möller claimed: ‘I think migrants are the avant-garde of Europe. [...] And I think this is the future.’ The British-Indian film maker Sarjit Bains portrays immigrants’ trajectories as a European dream analogous to the American dream: 'I'm sure there's a European dream for immigrants, and a lot of immigrants have achieved that European dream.'

Although all those interviewed argued in favour of immigration and the positive influence it had exercised on their own work and lives by shaping new and multiple perspectives and identities, they were aware of the challenges and problems. Sarjit Bains illustrated this point by citing the British example: ‘Britain feels very scared of immigration. You know, they feel that at any time we’re going to be overthrown by thousands of people, and that kind of hasn't changed.’ The Istanbul-born, Greek-Armenian writer Petros Markaris argued that incorporating diversity into European society is a pressing challenge for a European cultural policy: ‘The Europeans have to be open enough to say that what we have now has been achieved by the participation of others, of immigrants. But it’s not enough if they accept it openly; they have to integrate it culturally.’ However, there are serious challenges to be overcome, particularly by the non-immigrant or majority populations. ‘No majority, let’s say, tends to accept multiculturalism. [...] In general, people love uniformity. They love compact things. And they look at the Other as a crack in that uniformity. And they do not want cracks.’

An open-minded and diverse cultural policy, it was argued, could help to create an inclusive environment that would make Europe safe for immigration and cultural diversity. Yet it is not only culture that matters, but also politics in general, and citizenship politics in particular. The exclusive politics of naturalisation and citizenship no longer match Europe’s reality. Both the Russian-German writer Wladimir Kaminer and Emine Özdamar suggested that citizenship policies need to be reformed to make Europe fit for its current and future diversity. Kaminer portrayed his ideal of citizenship in a fairly ironic mode: ‘My political vision would be multiple citizenship. You could have several states to choose from without having to move, without emigrating. States would function like service providers, like telephone companies.’ Özdamar also set her hopes on multiple citizenship as a solution to problems of exclusion: ‘Well, I always said: “You need 18 passports. Two are not enough.” You never know who did what to whom in history or will do so in future. That’s why we should have a passport report in the morning, right after the weather report, where to go with which passport today. It would be wonderful. When a Frenchman travels to Algeria, say, he could do

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that with his Dutch or his Turkish passport. It would be a wonderful solution.'

*Bringing Migration into the Historical Equation*

Europe’s political and historical discourse about belonging and migration is not least a discourse about historical and narrative inclusion and exclusion. The dominant, victorious form for constructing belonging used to be the homogeneous nation as a strong force for building collective cohesion. The nation state acted as its legal and political tool and national history as legitimising narratives. Nation states formed national identities based on national narratives. Nation, nation state and national narratives have developed into interdependent forces ever since the late 18th century, when nations and nation states emerged as the ruling political categories in Europe. Minorities, whether ethnic or immigrant, usually served to demarcate lines of exclusion. However, the triadic nexus of nation, nation state and national narratives came increasingly under attack in the second half of the 20th century, coinciding with increasing levels of migration. Labour migration, humanitarian migration and migration related to decolonisation re-shaped Europe’s ethno-demographic fabric, its constituency and thus its polity in the second half of the 20th century. Diversification became an ever increasing, albeit controversial, social and political force in Europe. This social and cultural reality of diversity and hybridity is currently about to generate new historical narratives.

Immigration is an omnipresent phenomenon of human history. There is no history without mobility and migration. ‘Migration is the history of mankind,’ argued Wladimir Kaminer. ‘It is something that always goes on, because people continually migrate, travel throughout the world. It is this movement which makes the earth keep rotating.’ Regarding the European case, Jean Portante stated: ‘Of course, all of European history is made up of departures and arrivals. It does not exist without that.’ However, mainstream narratives do not portray things like this, as Petros Markaris argued: ‘There has always been immigration. It’s not anything new. However, I think we look at it as if it was new, but it’s not.’ What is still missing is the normality of recognising and tackling this fact not only politically, but also historically. Instead of narrative inclusiveness, the phenomenon of ‘othering’ immigrants and labelling them collectively as strangers dominates the public discourse.
In the case of Great Britain, Sarjit Bains observed: ‘If it’s not the Jamaicans or if it’s not the Indians, now it’s the eastern Europeans.’

European history and contemporary practices provide rich evidence of how exclusionary practices are continuously perpetuated. Jean Portante argued that we have to look back to the 1950s to understand these patterns and mechanisms of exclusion: ‘The Italians were not welcome – they were like the Arabs in today’s France, like the Turks in today’s Germany, the Romanians in Italy.’ Breaking through these patterns means bringing history into the equation, as Gazmend Kapllani remarked: ‘From some point onwards, Europe will deal successfully with immigration, but it won’t deal successfully with it if [Europeans] deny the history of immigration, if they don’t see it as an integral part of their own history.’ Petros Markaris made a strong plea for a common European effort to achieve this goal: ‘Maybe we could sit down and say and discuss: How do we bring our diversity, how do we bring our different experiences together to create a common experience and common politics. It needs discussion. It needs an open discussion, then working through the results.’

What feasible steps could be taken to put Markaris’ proposal into practice and make it work? Not surprisingly, the interviewed artists, narrators and storytellers argued in favour of creating inclusive European narratives that would incorporate the immigrant experience. Doing so would involve more than just telling the history of migration as a separate chapter and adding it to national history. It goes far beyond this, and points to new forms of history that would intersect with various levels of existing narratives, linking migration to the past experiences of Europeans, and seeking to uncover the universal messages these experiences can convey. Fouad Laroui argued that the historical narratives of immigrants as well as non-immigrant Europeans need to be put into a communicative framework. ‘We must be able to say: “Yes, the story of your [immigrant] parents happened. Yes, the history of immigration happened. But now, we will also accept everything that happened one thousand years ago, everything that has happened on this land.”’

A fertile ground for such cross-communication could be the history of migrations, both overseas and within Europe. The Spanish-Egyptian film maker Basel Ramses Labib illustrated this idea in relation to Spain: ‘An intersection of history and immigration is to make an analysis or films or research about similar experiences of Spaniards who left Spain and went to Germany, France or Switzerland, in order to work during the 1950s and the

http://www.ecflabs.org/narratives
1960s, and the immigrants who currently come to work in Spain [or Europe].’ Gazmend Kapllani came to similar conclusions with respect to Greece, arguing that ‘rethinking this connection of history, this “historicity” of the immigrant, that our past selves (= former emigrants) are the Others of today (= contemporary immigrants)’ is needed not only to understand diversity historically, but also make the past speak to the present and build a strong historical narrative basis for the future. Fouad Laroui went even further, suggesting that the historical experiences of migration be universalised: ‘We should immediately ask ourselves the universal question, that question of what kind of humanity is in immigration. It’s only then that we can see the extraordinary richness of this experience.’

Whether the narrative is particular or universal, it needs to be mutually informed if Europeans are to benefit from it. As Jean Portante stated: ‘Everybody gains in this interaction, and it is not only the task of those who “landed” here to give. Everybody gives in this interaction, and thus something new emerges.’

Where does Europe’s Ellis Island lie?

The historical reconstruction and imagination of migration in and to Europe is an increasing development. This can be seen in the countless temporary exhibitions, small and large, dedicated to the topic over the last ten to fifteen years throughout Europe. The first steps towards building migration museums have successfully been taken. France opened a national immigration museum in October 2007, though it is not called a ‘museum’ but instead is labelled Cité nationale de l’histoire de l’immigration. Several other national initiatives for migration museums are on the way, for instance in Germany, Great Britain and Switzerland. However, there is no guarantee that any of these initiatives will succeed in establishing another migration museum in Europe.

What is missing so far is a common European social and political move towards realising a project that would represent and commemorate migration history in Europe generally rather than simply within individual nation states. Though initial concepts were developed in the early 2000s, the idea has not yet taken off, despite immigration and its history being transnational phenomena that would be much better located in a supranational institution than in a national one.
The artists who were interviewed provided a range of different answers to the question of where a European equivalent to Ellis Island could be located. These varied from doubts over any possible equivalent to suggestions of specific places. However, there was no consensus on any place; rather, a competing variety of very diverse locations. Several artists pointed to the fact that whole cities (such as Berlin, Istanbul, London and Paris), urban ethnic neighbourhoods (French banlieus) or cityscapes could best stand as a historical space worth being musealised. These areas were seen as symbolically and historically equivalent to Ellis Island, partly because of their potential to celebrate diversity, partly because of their economic, cultural and culinary diversity. Ethnic housing or immigrant camps were also mentioned as places comparable to Ellis Island and the local New York-based Tenement Museum in Manhattan’s Lower East Side.

There was a general consensus that the dominant European trope concerning migration is the narrative of borders and frontiers, of safeguarding these borders by controlling immigration through the tackling of undocumented or ‘illegal’ migration. Thus, Lampedusa, Ceuta, Gibraltar, but also the former Iron Curtain figured among suggestions for historical and symbolic places that epitomise the history of migration. Two specific suggestions shall be mentioned. Fouad Larouï pointed to the fact that the post-war labour migration of individual males was characterised by emotional and sexual misery which led to greater levels of prostitution, with brothels thus becoming inherent locations of Europe’s post-war migration history. The Turkish-Norwegian film maker Nefise Özkal Lorentzen argued that migration turned into a universal urban phenomenon in 20th century Europe: in order to reflect this, European cities should have several small interactive installations and locations of commemoration to represent the history of migration; this would suit the decentralised diversity of Europe much better than one central European institution.

**Being an immigrant – imagining immigrants**

Does European history need to be enlarged by experiences of immigration to make the continent a better, fairer and more inclusive place? The respondents overwhelmingly agreed that it does. However, there were also some critical remarks warning that the very status of ‘being an immigrant’ should not eternally be prolonged and thus petrified. It is worth remembering Fouad Larouï’s somewhat ironic comment: ‘We are only
immigrants in the eyes of others. I do not see myself as an immigrant when I
wake up in the morning. When I shave in front of the mirror, I do not see an
immigrant. I see myself.’ History should not place and keep people in small
commemorative boxes.

Yet deepening our historical knowledge of migration, and learning how
to read the cultural codes and signs that it entails – this seems to be an effort
worth making. Both Nefise Özkal Lorentzen and Bases Ramses Labib remind
us that there is a strong symbolic dimension to succeeding as an immigrant
in a new society. ‘You come to a new country and you learn the new language
and you feel like, OK, now I can communicate, but then suddenly you realise
that you don’t have the internal codes’ (Özkal Lorentzen). ‘The problem is
that many times I didn’t know what to talk about. And there was much more
silence and much more distance because I didn’t know these social or
cultural codes in order to manage’ (Ramses Labib).

Perspectives and perceptions in culturally diverse societies are also
diverse, which is a truism. Jean Portante illustrated this in speaking about his
childhood experiences: ‘As an Italian child, I did not see the same reality in
Luxembourg as a Luxembourgish child, or a child from a different place.
These are all different realities. It starts at home. Everything is different: the
way you spend your days, the way you eat, the way you listen to music.’

Difference needs explaining so that societies do not fall apart. In
constructing social and commemorative cohesion in Europe, the past does
not strike the author as the worst point of departure.

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