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The state we’re in: critical questions in migration scholarship?

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ABSTRACT
In his provocative book, Adrian Favell advocates a grand normative theory for migration scholarship. He aims to debunk research focussing on “integration” and the liberal nation-state. He constructs a lumpen “mainstream” straw man of scholarship that remains wedded to an outdated container model of the nation-state – a feature he argues is effectively apologist for colonialism and empire. Against this, he advocates a theory of society based on postnational borderless, human rights and free movement, that draws its conviction from decolonizing, critical race perspectives on the liberal nation-state and global (racial) inequalities. In my view, the historical evolution of knowledge production on “integration” perspectives is more engaged, diverse, critical, imaginative and socially relevant than this binary master-narrative critique could present. Ultimately, I remain to be convinced whether his prognosis offers a viable way forward, as a scholarly statement, or for migrants in the social world. Readers should decide for themselves.

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The image that kept springing to mind while reading this book was the famous iconic painting The Scream (1893) by Edvard Munch. Today, Adrian offers us a dystopian view of the world and in his view the utter failure of scholars of migration to render it meaningful in a progressive way. This failure – so the story goes – is due to a collective and sometimes wilful lack of sociological imagination by all who have used the term “integration”. Apparently, a slavish false consciousness focussed on “integration” has simply served to reinforce the imposition of a neo-liberal capitalist order by powerful western nation-states, blinding us from the understanding that globalization processes constitute a re-ordering of growing racialised
inequalities between black and white, within and between countries, across the globe. It is a highly dramatic story that is told in a language of hyperbole. It is intentionally provocative – a scream against migration scholarship, the same migration scholarship within which Adrian has been a prominent and ubiquitous, dare I say integral or “integrated” member, since the last century. So what is on offer?

The master-narrative

Adrian claims that there is no meaningful contestation over the concept of “integration”. Apparently, it has a clear and coherent genealogy, so that, “use of the term commits scholars – including those who see their work as strictly positivist – to both political (i.e. normative) and methodological nationalism, as well as effectively an apologetics of the consequences of colonialism and empire” (Favell 2022a, 4). Against this complacency, there are critical scholars with, “other values rooted in the struggle against global inequalities, against racism, and for transformative politics on a planetary scale” (2022a, 4). This effectively sets the master-narrative of villains and heroes for the book: On one side, there is a lumpen set of “mainstream” academics working within a single integration paradigm, still lacking the sociological imagination to see outside the container-box of the nation-state, who reinforce the hegemony of nationalist values and stand as blind apologists for racial inequality, colonialism and empire. On the other side, critical migration and race scholars are progressive, politicized and imaginative. They see all vestiges of the liberal state as powerful oppression, demanding conflictual not consensual political responses, and this is the added-value that propels their insight as the chosen ones who recognize global inequalities, racism, and a transformative politics. The radical Adrian 2022-style sides with this latter group.

It will be news to many scholars who have used the term “integration” down the years that they are not progressive, their scholarly research has not evolved beyond a Neanderthal version of the nation-state, and they do not challenge racism and inequality borne out of colonialism and empire. In my view, there is not a uniform “mainstream migration studies” that has suddenly been found out by critical theorists – this division of the intellectual landscape is problematic, substantively and historically. The evolution of knowledge or intellectual history of migration scholarship over time, trying (and often failing) to keep up with a rapidly transforming world, has been far more interesting, diverse, and the debates, internal and interdisciplinary, far more exciting than that story tells. Lumping all together into a “mainstream” serves a narrative function of creating a “straw man”, but it also flattens the interesting historical evolution and transformations of the field, driven by critiques and counter-critiques, not to mention empirical
findings, into a simple binary division. True, all the “integration” perspectives share epistemological roots in the liberal democratic states and societies they uphold and to some degree idealize, but the de-colonizing postcolonial critique is similarly very much the product of the society it critiques. Indeed, while importantly re-focussing scholarship again on how today’s social relations remain built on the racial injustices of empire (e.g. Mayblin and Turner 2020), the British sociology variant shares the same ethnocentric limitations of the position it critiques, seeing the British experience as universal and applicable to all. Even in Adrian’s book, for all the added-value of making global (racial) inequalities core to the perspective, there is little engagement with the detailed significant theoretical and empirical scholarship on SE Asia and Latin America, and the Global South, not to mention China, nor with scholars from those societies. Does a single one-size (Western hegemonic) critical interpretation always have to fit all?

“Integration” – a critique of some critiques

There is not enough space for detailed arguments across the issues, but there is still value in critiquing some of Adrian’s critiques of “integration” scholarship. My selection is eclectic, not comprehensive, focussed on my interests. It is also Eurocentric and does not directly address the US context, which again requires further discussion. I think there are distinctive patterns and trajectories between the US and European countries that make them difficult to compare, not least in the role of the state in society (actual and normative expectations) and the composition effects of people of migrant and ethnic origin.

Adrian starts by critiquing what he calls “the ‘integration industry’ of mainstream policy-oriented research” (2022a, 9). Note the premise of this involves the reification of a diverse set of scholars and perspectives into an “industry”. Is this narrative device, claim or fact? Yes, as has been internally discussed and critiqued for decades within research on “integration”, those working closest to state policy frameworks (and sometimes funded by them) are at the highest risk of co-optation, so that research may lack imagination and simply repeat the state policy line while adding legitimacy to it. So, no smoking gun there, just research should be more reflexive, independent and remain critical. His critique directly addresses the influential Ager and Strang (2008) model for refugee integration, or as it is presented here a “model of integration in the form of a business school-type diagram” (Favell 2022a, 9). The deficits are listed as lacking a grand theory of society, a causal structure, understanding of scale or context, and sense of history. There is a qualification: “But highbrow social theory is not the target: the society and the groups it speaks of are all assumed to exist” (2022a, 9). Ager and Strang’s (2008) perspective not only assumes that groups exist, it
actually worked with them as real people who did exist – it was generatedbottom-up by detailed practical measures and social experiences supportingand serving refugees in a specific societal city context. One could, of course,turn the question the other way round and ask what use is the proposedhighbrow social theory of society to the practical needs of displacedpeople trying to re-set their lives and life-chances within a new city? Mypoint here is not to be a supporter of policy-oriented integration approaches,that (like normative theory) can be well or less well done, but to demonstratethat the two perspectives do not engage, because they serve different aca-
demic and social purposes.

Another target is the ‘normal science’ of the MIPEX citizenship indicators,and other academic efforts to use analytic indicators to measure cross-
national variations. MIPEX is one of the examples that we have used withMasters students for a decade to point out the limitations of an indicatorsapproach to citizenship. MIPEX presents itself as the Eurovision songcontest of citizenship studies, implicitly declaring a national winner, acrossa set of variables. Yes, this merits criticism, and has long been criticized.
The slippage of the argument then shifts this critique onto academic com-
parative citizenship studies (e.g. Vink and Bauböck 2013) and then withoutfurther elaboration onto those who study social stratification comparatively(e.g. Kalter et al. 2018). Sure, citizenship indicators studies have limitations,mostly because they are records of an independent variable (how a stategrants access to rights) but miss a dependent variable (data on the outcomesof that for the constituency group, migrants/aliens). This means that out-
comes for people of a state’s citizenship position have to be interpreted ina derivative way, often falling back on the familiar national stereotypes ofnational citizenship regimes. Having said that there is still value in havingcross-national information on how states grant access to rights to non-citi-
zens, comparatively and longitudinally. The case of the social stratificationresearch is again different because this does gather data on social outcomesfor groups (defined by class, ethnicity, race, gender, etc) relative to oneanother, for example, in education, welfare or health. Of course, how agroup is defined (as Muslim, Bangladeshi, or by class, gender) matters,especially if they are simply stated-derived categories, but again this canbe and has been subjected to internal critique within the broad integrationparadigm. Distinctions between categories of analysis and categories of prac-
tice have been discussed throughout the history of work in this field, if notalways sufficiently taken on board. So, Adrian’s main critique here seems tobe that integration scholarship performs as a ‘normal science’ and isunaware of its own normative implications. I guess that is a matter ofopinion and depends on who you are talking about. So what is the alternativepost-integrationist post-national analysis for the better theorized society?Decades on from the famous valid Wimmer and Glick Schiller (2002)
‘methodological nationalism’ critique, cited here as an inspiration for critical opponents of integration, what new methods, categories and forms of empirical analysis have emerged? Not much really, baby steps at most. Andreas Wimmer (Wimmer and Soehl 2014) even publishes an AJS article on the acculturation trajectories of Europe’s immigrants – a classic nation-centric linear integrationist perspective- using general European Social Survey data, a nation-centric and actually weak data-set for studying migrants and minorities (due to sampling and samples) and asking questions in majority national language. So, is there a time when grand critique offers social science a better way forward by conceptual and methodological innovation for analysing society empirically? Or is it just horses for courses?

Turning to the discussion of cross-national comparative citizenship perspectives within the European context, it will be surprising for those who have read Adrian’s (Favell 1998) Philosophies of Integration to learn that the work was a historical study. Attaching his own work generously to Brubaker’s pathbreaker (1992), we learn that those who read it within a comparative nation-state citizenship framework are guilty of a “reductive mischaracterization of these two rather more sophisticated comparative historical works” (2022a, 75). It would take a great leap of faith and enforced myopia to see the liberal state as depicted in Philosophies of Integration as categorically different than those critiqued in this book. Indeed, I was surprised to see that Adrian omitted a discussion of this work from the keynote lecture I commissioned on this topic (Favell 2022b), as it would have provided an opportunity to unpick his own intellectual journey from then to now alongside the social transformations of a much-changed world.

Certainly, anyone laying claims to be an intellectual historian would need to apply more rigour and accuracy to unpacking the emergence of this research field than the selective, self-serving and superficial version here. As someone who worked and was a protagonist in these debates at the time, it is hard sometimes to recognise the world presented today as something that happened then. I wrote a large chunk of Contested Citizenship (Koopmans et al. 2005) and worked with Ruud Koopmans for a decade (’95-’05) putting those ideas forward in numerous joint articles. Unsurprisingly, we have both moved on from then, and it feels odd to revisit this now. But this body of research is now falsely levered into a Koopmans’ “programme”. It is misrepresented so that it can be judged post hoc from a distance of two decades and used by Adrian as a vehicle to express his political opposition to Ruud’s later metamorphosis into a public intellectual critical of multiculturalism. But put Contested Citizenship alongside Philosophies of Integration and it is difficult not to bracket them together – readers make up your own minds. At the time when Contested Citizenship was published, I was contacted by Adrian enthusiastically telling me how the innovative conceptual approach using ideal types for state national
citizenship variants was the discussion of a workshop held by multicultural theorists Modood and Triandafyllidou. Now today, he holds us up as the prime example of those lacking imagination who fell for the, “great attraction (of) setting up four-way typological recepable boxes to characterize empirically observable integration processes and outcomes in linear motion … with the inevitable progressive pull” (2022a, 78). There is no detail or engagement or critique to support this claim, perhaps that would have required some re-reading, or even evaluating it by the same standards applied to his own work of the same time? The Contested Citizenship approach is presented as a static deterministic typology where integration is the only progressive option while others (apparently including multiculturalism) have pathological outcomes (Favell 2022a, 79). That is not an interpretation that this author recognizes – again readers can make up their own minds.

For the record, Contested Citizenship is a five-country comparison, which offers a degree of comparative methodological insight that a two-country comparison like Adrian’s cannot offer. It is also based on original data (and methods), and so we didn’t have to mix and match between other people’s accounts to build a national narrative and then claim to be quasi-historians. Our approach is explicitly a critique of rigid national models of citizenship. It then develops a political space of ideal types to gauge where nation-states stand relative to one another in granting access to citizenship and cultural inclusion cross-nationally and vary over time (an early indicators approach!). The approach is dynamic, not static, and the outcomes not predetermined. The states change positions in the space relative to each other and across time according to their actual policies and how these change. Against these state positions, we assess migrants’ mobilization (as well as that by other societal actors) using claims-making data across the countries and time, to see to what degree they fit distinct policy approaches or not. The approach comes from a social movements perspective, using original (not state-derived) data on claims-making (a method we invented) in relation to distinct national policy approaches as opportunity structures. The perspective acknowledges multi-levelling, so that it identifies claims that are postnational, transnational or do or don’t fit the preferred categories of a national integration approach. A key important finding on mobilization by migrants who were Muslims is that it did not fit (and hence was not simply a mirror-image determined by) the integration policies. For what it is worth, contrary to the claim about everything converging on a progressive integrationist ‘happy end’, the book’s findings demonstrate a direction of state change that is not uni-directional or predetermined, but driven by contentious politics. That is the whole point, the title Contested Citizenship precisely aims to show how mobilization pushes integration approaches towards inclusiveness or exclusiveness. Notwithstanding limitations and the passage of time, that is a far more dynamic form of sociological analysis than focussing on national
“philosophies of integration” in two countries as the beginning and end point for assessing a liberal state’s migration politics. Our overall conclusion is actually not too dissimilar to that Adrian presents here as his own. At the time national perspectives were salient, but also under salient challenges from postnationalism, transnationalism and multicultural citizenship theories. Positions in the field were often nuanced and blended across perspectives. There was far more engagement and learning across positions than polemical tones indicated. Even Yasemin Soysal’s (1994) postnational exposition sits in a book that spends a lot of space discussing national state approaches in a standard way. These important discussions on citizenship, including Adrian’s that was an important step, were influential in shaping what has come later and remain mostly a good read. It would be a pity if newer generations are left with Adrian’s “reductive mischaracterization” of the many salient sophisticated arguments of that time.

Of course, Adrian’s 2022-style presentation of the field is politically motivated. This is demonstrated towards the conclusion of this section of the book when we are told: “Koopmans’s work largely converged with Joppke’s” (Favell 2022a, 79). This does not make much sense if we are talking about their academic contributions: Koopmans has studied data on migrants in relation to policy approaches; while Christian Joppke has always explicitly worked on the liberal state studying and comparing legal and legislative changes (not using original data on migrants), among many see e.g. Joppke (2009). However, both have been critical of multiculturalism and Islam and drawn ire from the progressive majority within academia for doing so. This is what they share and why they are linked in this critique. Again, there is no substantive depth or detail in the critical discussion. Koopmans and Joppke are personalized as “combative” (unlike Favell!), while we are told they “(set) up ostensibly empirical arguments, which are in fact driven by a strong normative message” (Favell 2022a, 79). All meaningful research questions have normative foundations. So, what is an “ostensibly” empirical argument? Is it one where the authors selectively misuse or misinterpret their data to give the political message they want to find in the first place? This interpretation would fit with the negative depictions of what is referred to as “positivism” throughout the book. Surely, if empirical studies have shortcomings, these could be demonstrated by empirical work using similar data as a basis for finding alternative outcomes? That would be a stronger basis for academic critique. Or do we just call out people, when we politically disagree with their conclusions? For the record and for what its worth, I do not personally share their stances as public intellectuals.

Turning to transnationalism, the selected “straw man” this time is two women: Marta Bivand Erdal and Ceri Oeppen (2013). Their important critique of zero-sum perspectives on integration versus transnationalism basically updates and underlines the classic transnationalism idea that migrants can
have a foot “here” and “there”. As human geographers, their position draws also from their own ethnographic work, often based on experiences working directly with migrants who face the challenges of negotiating and managing lives spread across borders and making them work. Like Ager and Strang (2008) it is a perspective based on getting out there and doing research on migrants’ lives, talking and walking with them and their families, in settlement societies and their homelands. I think it will be news to them (and their subjects) that they depict host societies as, “simply a friendly, receptive, culturally capacious context, presumably upholding a full range of rights and entitlements enabling the immigrant to do much of what they want to do, but without restriction” (Favell 2022a, 132). Unlike the search for a one-size-fits-all grand normative theory, their research approach is contextualized, inductive and bottom-up – cases can vary, demonstrating differing forms, degrees and types of transnational lives. Yes, their conclusions follow to some degree in an optimistic transnationalism tradition that was strongly present in the earlier formulations (e.g. Levitt 2001). As Roger Waldinger (2015) rightly pointed out in his later cross-border connections perspective, this underplays the powerful role of borders and states, ordering and disciplining the social world of the migrant, so that it can become a liminal and marginal existence, where maintaining transnational ties is difficult. There is not space to do this argument justice, but importantly Waldinger’s perspective on intersocietal convergence brings the (sending and receiving) states back into transnationalism and offers a sociological framework for empirical analysis that would allow study across different cases and contexts to show when, how and for whom transnational living persists, transforms, or withers away. This potential empirical research agenda for studying cases of transnationalism within a framework of strong states and borders comparatively across different contexts of place and by types of migration/migrant seems a fruitful way forward.

**The prognosis – the state we’re in**

Adrian’s last chapter starts to sketch what is presented as a ‘new political demography’. This is an odd terminology as there is not much that a demographer would recognise here as demography, and calling something ‘new’ is always a moot point in social theorization. It is certainly a highly politicised viewpoint. It seems to be a synthesis of a postnational borderless human rights and free movement perspective, deepened by the conviction from critical race and decolonizing perspectives, that the liberal state is inherently racist, liberal capitalism is racist, and that the underprivileged need to rise up (locally) and challenge elites supporting this system that exacerbates global inequalities. Apparently, consensus was the fool’s gold of the liberal state. Adrian advocates that, “a more conflict- and contention-based understanding of social relations, points towards new mobilizations, solidarities
and collectivities emerging from ongoing population change” (2022a, 160). Following Waldinger, he points to the disintegrative effects of migration and mobilities, but goes much further saying that these disintegrative effects generate collective action and are, “the politically most significant. It is people seizing and actualizing ‘rights to act’, rather than rights existing formally on paper.” (Favell 2022a, 171) Adrian’s new radical bottom-up contested citizenship is about people coming together to make informal constitutions, structures of power, to challenge the world order. The idea that movements or their allies can use the state as a vehicle for progressive change is anathema – the old reform versus revolution debate. Marxist overtones are explicit, but without an analysis of political economy (something Marx spent many volumes on). “Neoliberalism” is a catch-all slogan, an invisible hand, not a topic for analysis. Neoliberal states produce contradictions, divisions, inequalities and conditions for their potential political overthrow, locally and globally. No surprise who a heroic revolutionary role is ascribed to: “Migrants have emerged as collectivities with a voice, inspiring mobilizations, solidarity and political action – not merely as vulnerable, victimized, included or excluded individuals who are the subject of immigration and integration laws and policies (Favell 2022a, 172).” Migrants are attributed this historic role, despite being the primary bearers of harsh disintegrative effects. Perhaps Adrian should consider that an established tenet of social movements research is that it is seldom the most marginalized, deprived and aggrieved in the world who mobilize, but those who also have access to some resources and capabilities to do so (the grievances versus opportunities argument). Of course, there are some exceptional examples, but is it helpful to raise these to a general normative theory? Even for the much-discussed case of Islam and Muslims in Europe, a consensual outcome is not to be sought as the way forward: “conflict, not integration is inevitable and can be politically desirable” (Favell 2022a, 179). Be careful what you wish for here, conflict and divisions rather than consensus tends to bring the likes of Trump to the fore.

Having said all that, I actually agree with a lot of the discussion of specific cases and examples in the book. I also agree that we need greater reflexivity within long-standing concepts of “integration” and think increasing recognition of race and colonial responsibilities matters within academic and policy thinking, as well as in society. But do we need to throw aspirations for consensus and the liberal state out like the baby with the bathwater? For sure, this is an age that deserves pessimism. Liberal democratic nation-states have failed to live up to their liberal aims while riding the tidal wave of social transformations carried by globalisation processes that carve the world into very few very rich winners and very many losers, within and across nation-states. Liberal constitutions and polities have failed to withstand populists from the right who peddle cod nationalisms – it is still hard
to see Trump’s mob on Capitol Hill, or Johnson’s “getting Brexit done” (but not really), as anything other than liberal democratic self-harm. The harsh social consequences and costs are borne by the “little people” in societies, including the poor, migrants and people of colour, who are no longer supported by the governing custodians of the liberal state, but blamed as individuals for being born into a lower (race, class, national) status from which all exits are blocked. Yes, there is a lot to be angry about, also for white people like me from a working class background, who experienced the benefits and privileges of a 1960/70s liberal progressive educational thrust that brought some limited upward social mobilities, only to have the idea of a better world defeated. Yes, we could all scream today with justification – and some have more valid and deeper justifications than others. What does it mean to be progressive in today’s world? A difficult personal, academic and political question. Adrian’s contribution stimulates the right questions at the right time, but I remain to be convinced by his critique and prognosis. Being intentionally provocative is fine, but that also raises the bar for nailing an argument, demonstrating a point, and offering a viable alternative, otherwise, all that is achieved is a rapid descent into acrimonious academic turf wars.

**Disclosure statement**

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