

## **The reenchantment of culture and flexible citizenship in a hardening world** Ideology and life strategies in middle-class migration to Europe and beyond

### **Workshop**

at the Centre for Social Sciences, Budapest  
in co-operation with the Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology  
26 November 2021

### **Convenors**

NYÍRI Pál (Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam and Centre for Social Sciences) and  
XIANG Biao (Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology)

The quest for a better life that drives global migration flows, from boat people to students, is overwhelmingly understood as economic accumulation. Yet as the global balance of economic power shifts and as the nature of work and migration governance changes, migration that is driven by consumption rather than accumulation is becoming more visible. In Europe, an increasing share of middle-class migrants, both within the continent and from outside it, are seeking the consumption of a particular lifestyle and environment. Their destinations are often Southern and Eastern European countries that successfully market an authentic "European lifestyle" at lower costs (Nyíri and Beck 2020).

For the global middle class, Europe -- in contradistinction to the "world cities" of liquid, hybrid ultramodernity (Ong and Roy 2011) -- has long been a purveyor of slowness, luxury, "authenticity," and purity in such things as food, cosmetics, or "culture." Such ideas are central to the ongoing tide of nativist sentiment -- but equally central to attracting the "tourist gaze" of a consuming Other (Urry 1990, 2011). Nativism often goes hand-in-hand with opposition to immigration; yet nativism, which emphasises authenticity and wholesomeness, can paradoxically also be a draw to lifestyle migrants, many of whom seek to move away from societies they perceive as crowded, competitive, polluted, expensive, and materialistic environments and in some cases seek to satisfy a nostalgia for a simpler life and more meaningful human relations they can no longer find in their native environments (cf. Constable 2003, Toyota and Xiang 2012). For such migrants, an attractive lifestyle can be heavily ideologically laden.

Well-to-do migrants from outside the West, Chinese in particular, have been recognised as expert practitioners of "flexible citizenship" (Ong 1999). Yet as a new non-Western consumer class emerges in a world racked by a backlash against the liquid and the hybrid and a rising "reenchantment of culture" (Ong 2005), Europe increasingly becomes the unadulterated Other there to be consumed. In this quest for authenticity -- in a particular variety of a Polányian "double movement" -- "flexible citizenship" may be more widely practiced than before, yet it may have lost much of its emotional appeal. Middle-class migrants may *be* flexible citizens, but they want to achieve or recover a sense of *hard* cultural citizenship they feel they have lost or never had. In this sense, we can speak, for some, of a "reproduction migration."

In this optics, lifestyle migrations may intersect in unexpected ways with currents of ideologies of environmental, cultural, and racial purity. This is what happened in Hungary, where an investment-immigration programme successfully targeted middle-class Chinese in 2013-17 even as the country made global headlines with its supposedly uncompromising opposition to immigration. Simultaneously, Prime Minister Orbán Viktor declared: "We do accept real refugees, those who are fleeing political correctness in Germany, the Netherlands, Italy, and France."

While middle-class Western Europeans moving to the East in the decade after the end of the Cold War may have seen themselves as harbingers of cosmopolitanism and teachers of cool modernity, these days they may be regarding themselves -- like religious settler colonists in North and Central America and Siberia in the 17th-19th centuries -- as refugees seeking an authentic, white, Christian haven (*Le Figaro* 2016). Neither group of migrants has much sympathy for the left-wing politics of "inclusion" that calls into question Europe's historical centrality and seeks to relativise its sociopolitical model.

### **Format**

The workshop will be organised in conjunction with the launch of an ethnographic research project that will study different groups of migrants (Western Europeans, returning Hungarians, and Chinese) attracted by Hungary's nativist promise.

The workshop is planned in a hybrid (on- and offline) format, with the possibility to move entirely online if the epidemic situation requires this.

We welcome submissions based on empirical studies that explore these migrations in the context of the rise of nativism, global shifts in geopolitics and economy, and a backlash against social and cultural change. While we are particularly interested the contemporary European setting, we also welcome submissions dealing with the intersection of lifestyle and ideology in other parts of the world and in earlier times. We welcome both mature papers and work-in-progress reports, including those at an early stage if they contribute to the intellectual agenda of the workshop.

### **Some of the empirical questions submissions might address**

1. Migrants' decision making: migration to nativist Europe is an active decision as opposed to a path-dependent action following a migration "tradition". How should we understand this decision as part migrants' broader life strategies, what do these destinations mean in relation to their home countries and to other possible destinations? To what extent are they pushed and to what extent pulled?
2. The migration process: given that migrants, especially those from Asia, know little about these destination countries, including their languages and basic social systems, and the near non existence of migrants networks to rely on, how do the migrants arrange the move? What are the roles of the intermediaries? How does physical migration intersect with financial transactions—what is being exchanged, on what terms, and how should this be conceptualised?

3. What lifestyles do migrants establish at the destination? Do they "go native" in countries that go nativist? What are migrants' connections to the local society? How do they finance their consumption—what kind of economic arrangement is behind?

4. How do migrant narratives reflect differences within Europe? Do they reproduce a dichotomy between a liberal, hybrid, mongrel West and an illiberal, authentic, white East?

Those interested should submit an extended abstract (around 500 words) that summarises the argument and its empirical basis.

Abstracts should be sent to Nyíri Pál, [p.d.nyiri@vu.nl](mailto:p.d.nyiri@vu.nl), by 30 August 2021.

---

### References

Constable, Nicole. *Romance on a global stage: Pen pals, virtual ethnography, and "mail order" marriages*. Univ of California Press, 2003.

*Le Figaro*. Ces Allemands qui fuient leur pays pour s'installer en Hongrie. 23 October. <https://www.lefigaro.fr/international/2016/10/23/01003-20161023ARTFIG00110-ces-allemands-qui-fuient-leur-pays-pour-s-installer-en-hongrie.php>

Nyíri Pál and Beck Fanni. "Europe's New Bildungsbürger? Chinese Migrants in Search of a Pure Land." *Diaspora* 20.3 (2020): 305-326.

Ong, Aihwa. *Flexible citizenship: The cultural logics of transnationality*. Duke University Press, 1999.

Anthropological concepts for the study of nationalism. In Pál Nyíri and Joana Breidenbach, eds. *China inside out*. CEU Press, 2005, pp. 1-34.

Roy, Ananya, and Aihwa Ong, eds. *Worlding cities: Asian experiments and the art of being global*. John Wiley & Sons, 2011.

Toyota, Mika, and Xiang Biao. "The emerging transnational 'retirement industry' in Southeast Asia," *International Journal of Sociology and Social Policy*, October 2012.

Urry, John. *The tourist gaze*. Sage, 1990. 3rd ed., with Jonas Larsen, 2011.