CONFERENCE PAPERS

The re-enchantment of culture and flexible citizenship in a hardening world

Ideology and life strategies in middle-class migration to Europe and beyond

The Research Centre for Social Sciences (Centre for Excellence, Hungarian Academy of Sciences) and the Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology (Halle, Germany) co-organised the workshop 'The Re-enchantment of Culture and Flexible Citizenship in a Hardening World: Ideology and Life strategies in Middle-Class Migration to Europe and Beyond'. The workshop took place on 26 November 2021, when global migration seemed to be gradually emerging from a lockdown. The initiators, Pál Nyíri and Biao Xiang, invited scholars whose work sheds light on the various forms and interpretations of middle-class migration. By the time we are finishing the editing of the workshop's materials, we are in the middle of a major war in Europe and escalation of military tensions in the Asia Pacific. The questions that the workshop aimed to tackle have only become more urgent.

Migration and values

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People migrate not only to make money, but also to seek freedom, happiness and new meanings of life. Migration is inseparable from values – migrants' perceptions of what is good, important, and worthy (for a succinct review of anthropological discussions on values, see Robbins and Sommerschuh, 2016). Following Graeber (2013, pp. 219–243), we distinguish *values* (in the plural), i.e. norms to be striven for or moral principles according to which one wishes to live, from economic *value* (in the singular). Specific values that drive migration include fairness, freedom, tolerance, authenticity, autonomy, among many others. For instance, middle class Chinese have been moving to Hungary since the 2010s to enjoy a slower pace of

life and a stronger sense of autonomy, while sacrificing their financial incomes (Nyíri & Beck, 2020). Chinese parents send children, including pre-school children, overseas for education that is hoped to offer happy, free, and well-round development, which suits 'human nature' as the parents put it (Xiang, 2022; Kardaszewicz, 2019). There have been reports that Western Europeans committed to a right-leaning political ideology have moved to rural Hungary in order to lead a more authentic 'European' life in an environment perceived as white and Christian (e.g. *Le Figaro,* 2016).

These emerging flows are compelled by ideologies, desires, and lifestyle choices. But none of them alone is sufficient to account for the migrants' motivations. Values encompass these elements. Deeply internalised, values also have more direct effects on actions than ideologies. According Kluckhohn's classical definition, values are about 'conception, explicit or implicit, distinctive of an individual or characteristic of a group, of the desirable which influences the selection from available modes, means, and ends of action' (1951, p. 395). People are much more likely to relocate in pursuit of gender equality (a value) than following the faith in socialism or liberalism (ideology). Values shape lifestyle choice but are much more than lifestyle strategies. There is no such thing as desire or as lifestyle choice without people's value judgement. When we examine how people migrate for a desirable lifestyle, we have to ask *why* they regard that lifestyle desirable in the first place. People may opt for lifestyles that appear less enjoyable because they see them as less materialistic or corrupt or as environmentally more sustainable.

It has been long recognised that values are an integral part of migration. Albert Hirschman, James Scott and David Graeber have made the case that the search for political freedom and autonomy has been a central driving force for long-distance migration throughout human history. Immigration as a quest for freedom is central to the mainstream narrative in the U.S. about its national history. During the Cold War, communist states prohibited outmigration based on the perception that it reflected a choice of political values, and thus emigration, or even the intention to do so, constituted an act of disloyalty.

However, in the social science literature on migration, values are curiously absent. Despite significant differences in their approaches, migration scholars, political commentators and advocates share a focus on economic motives. They tend to dismiss earlier views of migration as an act expressing value preferences as naive at best, and self-serving at worst. The push-pull model and neoclassical theories reduce migrants to value-maximising but values-free *homo economicus.* The structural-historical school, as represented by the dependency and world systems theories, call attention to inequality and exploitation, but they nevertheless perceive migrants as economic actors following economic laws. Frameworks based on migrant networks go beyond economic transactions, and call attention to social norms such as reciprocity, ethnic solidarity, and familism. But norms as identified in migration network theories are different from values held by individuals. These norms are given and assumed to be followed; values as we understand them require reflexivity, judgement, and active endorsement. People are obliged to conform to norms, but actively seek values that are what they want or believe that should have (Venkatesan, 2015, pp. 442–443, cited in Robbins & Sommerschuh, 2016, p. 2). Norms facilitate existing migration; values initiate new flows. Social networks literature describes how migration became normalised and therefore self-perpetuating but fails to explain why people sometimes migrate against norms, even without networks.

A major exception to this utilitarian approach is the literature on migration and gender. This body of work clearly shows that people, especially those at marginalised positions, migrate for the sake of dignity, respect, individual autonomy and sexual freedom. They do so often at the cost of economic security. Values motivate them to break with norms, and migration enables them to achieve so because it is hard to rebel against norms in the home society. This literature further demonstrates that migration is not a straightforward journey led by a signal value. Migrants negotiate multiple, often conflicting, values. For instance, female migrants constantly struggle to balance their desire for being a good mother, an independent woman, and a happy self. Migration is a process in which migrants reflect on and remake values (for latest examples along this line of study, see Fengjiang, 2021; Yang, 2021).

The literature on migration and gender provides us with important inspirations in tackling the relation between migration and values. This is the time to broaden the notion of values and develop a larger framework. As the world is going through major shifts after the 2008 financial crisis, especially after the COVID-19 pandemic and Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022, it is becoming increasingly apparent that values are shaping migrations more directly than before, and conversely migration is more closely tied to global shifts as a contestation over values. Take China as an example. On WeChat, the social network used by virtually everyone in mainland China (Sun & Yu, 2022), searches for the term 'emigration' (*yimin*) jumped by 440 per cent nationwide on April 3 when the central government announced to adhere to its zero-COVID policy (WeChat Index, 2022). For many middle-class Chinese, insistence on this policy is not only misguided but a reflection of how the government's increasing authoritarianism makes life increasingly difficult even for those who stay out of politics. It is unclear, however, whether this desire would translate into actual outflows as the Chinese government has drastically reduced the number of passports issued. According to data from the State Migration Bureau, 335,000 passports were issued in the first half of 2021, which accounted for only 2 per cent of the number issued in the same period in 2019. Regulations for 'non-essential' travel abroad were further tightened in 2022. The trend of decoupling of outmigration control from ideology, unbroken through all political upheavals since 1986 (Cheng, 2002; Zweig et al., 2004) seems reversed. This reversal of a long-held policy of free movement is likely to be caused by the state's fear that Chinese who have studied or lived abroad may be a source of subversive values.

In Russia, where travel abroad has been impeded by cancelled flights, official harassment, and payment difficulties due to sanctions, an estimated 50,000 to 70,000 IT specialists left the country by the end of March, a number that is forecast to reach 100,000 in April (Volpicelli, 2022; Metz & Satariano, 2022). While tech workers have been overrepresented in this migration as their international firms enabled them to relocate, it extends to other segments of the urban middle class. An economist at the University of Chicago calculated an outflow of 200,000 by the second week of the war and predicted 0.5 million to 1 million outmigration in 2022.) As in China, it is driven by an intersection of values – a liberally minded urban middle class not wanting to live in Putin's Russia – and the apparent end to their ability to carve out a lifestyle bubble within which life appeared tolerable and even pleasant (Gessen, 2022). Are they leaving Russia as the evil side, the losing side, or simply the inconvenient side? Different people would have different answers, but all of them have to face the values question.

Unpacking migration as a value-action and value-aspiration

Migration as an action is by definition a multifaceted and practical process. The process is never a direct reflection of migrants' wishes. In many cases what appear to be ideological causes of migration may be post hoc rationalisation. This may explain, in part, why existing literature has been reluctant in factoring in values as an explanatory variable. It is therefore important to investigate empirically how abstract ideas interact with specific material conditions that eventually shape the migration journey. To this end, we will need to do the following.

First, we need to pay much closer attention to the migrant-sending context. In contrast to the limited attention to values in the study of migratory processes, values-related questions do figure, if disproportionately focused on the 'integration'-transnationalism binary, in studies on *post*-migration experiences in the destination country. Just to name a few examples of such values-related concerns: identity, citizenship, rights, access, diversity, long-distance nationalism, and transnational householding. Other vectors of values are, however, rarely considered. More strikingly, it is as if that only after a migrant settles down at the destination does she become a full person with concerns about values. In this sense, the negligence about values in migration is a function of the negligence of the sending context. If we take the sending context as seriously as the receiving context, and examine how the desire for migration emerges through complex social relations in the sending context, values may naturally emerge as an important dimension. As Inglehart has pointed out, as societies get richer, they often undergo an accompanying shift in values (Welzel & Inglehart, 2005), a shift that has recently become increasingly obvious in newly affluent societies outside the West (e.g. Hansen & Svarverud, 2010). However, such value shifts are uneven and often generate tensions with and backlashes by holders of traditional norms – defined by class, generation, gender and other factors – which can contribute to decisions to migrate among both groups.

Second, we need to delineate the two-way relationship between values and experiences. Values are always a particular person's values. A person's socioeconomic status and lived experiences shape values. Middle-class migrants have different values, including the ways that they assert such values and means to pursue such values, than other groups. It is thus important to locate the migrants in their home society according to their relations to other groups. At the same time, we need to listen carefully to how migrants envision living according to values they subscribe to. Migrants' complaint about the lack of freedom, for instance, may refer to the rote learning model in the education system, or an excessively competitive work environment, or patriarchal family relations, but also to surveillance, political freedoms, and ideological conformity. Freedom can be enjoyed by privileged groups in an authoritarian state more so than by ordinary people in a democratic country. Migrants sometimes may choose to move to a country that is not at all friendly to foreigners because, despite the general hostile environment, the middle class could recreate bubbles of perceived freedom. It is not values in general, but always values in particular – values of particular group in particular context, that shape migration.

Third, we need to examine how migration as a plan and inspiration expresses values. Many more people think and talk about migration than those who actually migrate at the end. These 'would-be migrants' (Xiang, 2014) may fail in their migration plans but reinforce their values by thinking and talking about their desire for outmigration. 'Runology' – discussions about how one can 'run away' from China quickly – was a major topic in the

Chinese social media in early 2022 (Zhang, 2022). The question 'what does the internet term "run" mean?' posted by a netizen on the website *Zhihu* attracted 612 responses, including lengthy and sophisticated argumentations, and nearly 8 million views by the end of May 2022. Many posts under 'runology' on *Zhihu* expressed dissatisfaction with the economic development model and especially top-down control, and the desire for happiness, responsibility, fairness, individual freedom, democratic participation, limiting public power, and the rule of law. The topic was regarded so sensitive that a WeChat group *Huarun Wanjia* (which is the name of a chain department store; the term can be interpreted to mean 'ten thousand families run away from China') was banned in May 2022. Communication is important because values must be expressed in order to be maintained. Migration is a special means to articulate values. Talking about migration is making an international comparison, and this links personal life to global geopolitics. In the era of instant global communication and rapid world reordering, international relations is an important dimension of value articulation.

Fourth and finally, in addition to being more attentive to the sending context, we need to develop more nuanced understandings about the meaning of the destination. Desirable destinations are not necessarily places where offer the best economic opportunities, and vice versa. This partly explains why southern and eastern European countries have become a popular destination for many middle-class migrants, especially from China, in recent years. Some of these migrants move as investors, others as students. They see southern and eastern Europe as the location that offers an authentic 'European lifestyle' associated with desirable values at lower costs. This does not mean that the values desirable for the migrants match the dominant ideologies in these countries. In many cases they contradict each other. But particular cities may identify themselves as locations of exception to national regimes of value. The migrants may also cultivate particular social niches to satisfy their desirable values. As such, the destination should be understood as particular place and social milieu, which is nested in multi-scalar relations to other places, rather than a monolithic nation.

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