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Migration, Culture, and the Nation-State

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## Global Heimat Germany. Migration and the Transnationalization of the Nation-State

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## Abstract

The article explores the increasing gap between the cultural dynamics of transnationalization in Germany and the national self-perception of the German society. While concepts of "in-migration" (*Zuwanderung*) and "integration" still stick to notions of the nation-state as being a "container" embracing and controlling a population and a culture of its own, the various processes of material and imaginary mobility across the national borders contradict and challenge this notion as well as its political implications. By drawing on the transnational life-worlds and the cultural productivity of migrants, anthropological research has made important contributions to render visible this challenge. It is argued, however, that an all too exclusive focus on migration may, in fact, rather conceal the wider effects of transnationalisation and cultural globalisation on the society and its cultural fabric as a whole.

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**Keywords:** migration, transnationalization, cultural globalization

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**Global Heimat Germany.  
Migration and the Transnationalization of the Nation-State**

Katja is 16 years old. She lives and goes to school in Frankfurt, in a post-industrial quarter called „Gallus“. Katja and her parents immigrated as „ethnic Germans“ (Aussiedler) from Usbekistan, a former republic of the Soviet Union. Katja, however, would not perceive herself as German; many of her friends, she says, „are Russians as well“. And moreover, a major part of her personal network is „Russian“ - including cafés and clubs as well as the homes of other relatives all over Germany, but also back in Usbekistan, in the village of her grandparents. At school, Katja shares the classroom with, in her words, „Turks“ and „Yugoslavs“. Antonija, for instance, has escaped from the war in former Yugoslavia. We asked her where her friends are, and she answered: „Gallus, Griesheim, Croatia“, linking Croatia to Frankfurt like it was just another neighborhood. Antonija’s friend Jeffrey lives next to her with his German mother. His father, a soldier of the US army formerly stationed in Frankfurt, has moved back to the States. While Jeffrey was especially shocked by the events of 9/11 because of his family living in New York, others in the classroom with different migration histories were more apt to interpret them as a fatal consequence of the western repression of the Arabic world. One of Katja’s girlfriends is Armenian – an important differentiation in Katja’s eyes, since the girl’s first name and appearance could easily be interpreted as Turkish. Yet, Katja insists on keeping some distance to Turks – although some sentences earlier, she had obviously counted the Turkish boys among her peer-group. All of Katja’s classmates have their specific ethnic places, where they like to go: Turkish or Yugoslav cafés, Russian bars and clubs. And then, they like to meet again at the local Burger King, a location they especially appreciate for not being ethnically dominated, neither by the German or any other nationality.

This ethnographic detail is taken from “global heimat” (Bergmann & Römhild 2003), a research project conducted at the Frankfurt Institute of Cultural Anthropology and European Ethnology in which we explored Katja’s classroom (see Kämper 2003) and other multiethnic sites in the small global city of Frankfurt as indicators of the state of transnationalism in German society. Our approach was to consider migration one of the main production sites of a current “transnationalism from below” and to perceive of its cultural consequences in terms of an everyday cultural globalization. This approach and the cultural reality we discovered thereby contradict the current discourse in Germany in some fundamental ways. Because in that discourse and its politics, the concept of the “nation” still dominates both the self-perception of the German society and the expectations towards effectively controlling migration. It is this contradiction that I will explore further in this paper: The contradiction between the nation-state’s claim to power and the reality of migration that has for long surpassed and rendered fictional this claim.

Katja's world provides us with a first glimpse at that reality. Here, the diverse movements of migration are apparent: the labor migration of the so-called "Gastarbeiter" moving and connecting people from all over the Mediterranean to Germany; the migration project of the so-called "Spätaussiedler" addressed at those who can prove the status of an "ethnic German" in the post-socialist Eastern world; and the many migrant refugees who manage to escape from the various global regions of economic and political crisis, whether they come from Ex-Yugoslavia, from Afghanistan, Iran, Iraq or Sudan. In the multi-ethnic classroom, all these movements meet. But yet, it is not a melting pot producing some common sort of a new "German-ness". And it is not a place of multiculturalism either, sorting people into communities according to their national or ethnic backgrounds. Rather, it is a space of negotiation in which the prescribed categories of German multiculturalism are played out as well as transgressed by diverse forms of crossover peer-group building. And it is a space which is "open to the world", as anthropologist Ulf Hannerz (1998) puts it, in that it uses the various connections to other places on the globe as material for the invention of transnational cultures and identities beyond the territories of the nation-state.

From the perspective of most migration research in Germany, however, transnationalism would not be the point of departure for looking at Katja and her peers. Although researchers are by now beginning to acknowledge the new paradigm, they do so mainly in its classical reading drawn from the pioneer research at the US-American-Mexican border. For the most, transnationalism is reserved for the paths and networks of those mobile migrants who are physically moving between the geopolitical spaces of the nation-states. A case in point is the practice of irregular labor migrants from Eastern Europe commuting on the basis of tourist visa or au-pair contracts (see Hess 2004).

By contrast, it is still the over-all concept of "integration" that is applied to those migrants who seem to follow the classical one-way route of immigration. Thus, the main question here is still whether or not they settle down and accommodate in their new home state. What is left aside is the many ways in which migrants manage to live with more than one home and even create imaginary homes beyond known territories. Migration research, in its narrow perspective on immigration into a nation-state, tends to overlook that it is not only the physical but also the imaginary mobility that creates transnational connections to the world. And it tends to miss the wider influence of migration on society as a whole. Since migrants are deemed the ones to adjust to an apparently given social and cultural setting, the opposite perspective on how migrants may challenge and transform that setting does not come into sight.

In missing that point, migration research meets the public and the political discourse. Here, migrants are still widely believed to enter a „German“ cultural landscape to which they have to or should be made to adapt by way of „integration“. The presence of migrants may render the fabrics of the society a „multicultural“, as the major narrative goes - still, that multiculturalism is perceived in localized terms: fixed within the confines of a German nation-state (see Vertovec 2001).

But why do popular political concepts seem to miss the reality of a transnational Germany? My hypothesis here is that this is not due to ignorance or naïvety only. Rather, it is the threat of that reality which forces the nation-state to react against it and trying, thereby, to gain back at least some control over migration.

The debate around the first immigration law in Germany is the case in point. When it was set on the political agenda by the German government in 2000, the law was meant to be an innovative step towards acknowledging the more than 50 years of immigration as a constant fact also for the future of Germany. Now, after four years of tenaciously struggling with the conservative political forces (also within the government), the law turns out to rather restrict and prevent than facilitate immigration. In the aftermath of 9/11, the public debate was overshadowed by dark visions of migrants creating “parallel societies” and a new hostile image of the migrant as the potential Muslim terrorist. Compared to other transnational challenges in economy and world politics, it was migration that became the major scenario for the visible weakening of the national state power.

The effects of this threat can be traced throughout the text of the law. The main measures taken are: forced integration of those who are considered integrable and tightened rejection of all others whether they are deemed unproductive in economical terms or suspected to be a danger for the inner security.

As to the law, the integration of “foreigners” shall be fostered on a cultural level by way of specific compulsory courses delivering knowledge of the German language and “knowledge of the law, the culture and the history of Germany” (§ 43, 3). On the socio-political level, integration is meant to become a German citizen more easily. The general alternative of a multiple citizenship that has been discussed for a long time has not been realized, at least not in full terms.

From the perspective of Katja and her peers, this version of integration into a German cultural and political landscape seems rather out-dated. Katja’s neighborhood, the Gallus quarter, can be seen as one of the typical inner city settings of the German migration society. Here, most of the kids come from migrant families. They have either arrived with their parents or were already born in Germany. Here, being a migrant is a shared, common experience, and the fact that elsewhere in the republic, in the white suburbs, the native Germans claim majority rights is rather absent in everyday life. From Katja’s perspective, her classmate Anika is the exception to the rule: Anika was born in Germany as a German. In the multiethnic classroom she represents a minority. In cases of conflict, nationality serves as a category of delimitation also with respect to Anika, the German. Then, it may well be that her migrant peers call her “potato”.

The relations in this and many other German classrooms do not reflect the national ideal of integration. In that model, only two manifest groups are constructed and expected to interact in “intercultural communication”: a majority of resident Germans on the one hand, and a minority of non-German

immigrants – or “foreigners” - on the other. Practically, integration is measured in terms of the degree of “cultural and social rapprochement between immigrants and native Germans” (Straßburger 2001, 15). But this bipolar construction does not apply to life-worlds such as Katja’s. In her social networks and those of her parents and peers, native Germans do not play any major role. Rather, Katja is integrated in one of those transnational social spaces that have become so typical for urban life in Germany.

Such processes of self-integration include various forms of self-positioning beyond the given blueprints of nationalities. The anthropologist Sven Sauter has studied such self-positioning in the case of young migrants who define themselves as “Frankfurt Turks” (Sauter 2000). Their specific interpretation of Turkish-ness results from critical examinations of both the cultural world and the often rural traditions of their parents and the conditions of migrant life in Germany. Being a Frankfurt Turk expresses a self-defined difference vis-à-vis the demands of a German as well as a Turkish national identity. Furthermore, being a Frankfurt Turk addresses the city as the place for such transnational cultural projects. However, it is not a German Frankfurt that is referred to, but rather the cosmopolitan urban space shared and created with many others who engage in similar projects. In her self-positioning, Katja has decided to locate herself among the “Russians” in Germany – although she could claim to be German according to her specific status as an ethnic German “Spätaussiedler”. However, she prefers to define herself a migrant like most others around her. And also for her, this implies setting herself off from both the differing expectations of her parents and from the national ascriptions of the German society.

Such processes of creating new cultural spaces, however, contradict traditional notions of cultural conflict and identity crisis that are employed to consider the consequences of migration for the individual. Migrants are believed to carry with them their “original” culture as a sort of “baggage” (see Vertovec 1996, 51) representing those primordial roots that contrast to the cultural environment in Germany and, thus, produce feelings of “otherness” (Fremdheit, in fact, is the most frequently used term whenever it comes to describe the problems of migration). The common image that migrants are torn between two cultural worlds and get stuck in a state of “in-between-ness” results from this culturalist view (see Soysal 1999). Hence, a whole generation of social workers and intercultural educators dedicated themselves to help migrants out of that apparently pathologic state by providing them with a new sense of belonging and new cultural roots in Germany.

From behind such concepts lurk the template and the logic of the nation-state, as I would argue according to similar interpretations of Ludger Pries, Steve Vertovec and others. The model of the nation constructs the unity of a population, a culture and a territory. The result is a static view on the nation-state as being a territorial “container”, as Ludger Pries (1997) has put it. The world, then, is conceptualized as a stable arrangement of many such containers, each embracing a culture and a population of its own. The ideal of such order is the sedentary individual and a culture that is essentially bound to its territory. From that perspective, human and cultural mobility across the borders of the container-states must be the exception to the rule. Cross-

border mobility is deemed an irregular, transitory movement that has to come to an end either in terms of return to the original home or in terms of a new settlement in another national territory and culture. Implicitly, that logic not only continues to inform the current politics of “integration”. It is also prevailing what Ulrich Beck has called the “methodological nationalism” (Beck 2004, 39 ff.) of the social sciences: here, the research agendas still tend to think of society and culture in terms of physically bounded, clear-cut territorial entities (see Pries 1997; Welz 1998).

The reality of global movements and transnational connections, however, has passed and reversed this logic. From that perspective, the ideal of fixed territories of culture turns into a fiction, and mobility becomes the common ground for the proliferation of diasporic life-worlds, cultures and identities. In Germany, especially the younger migrants more and more refuse to respond to the questions of where they come from and where they belong to. They refuse to define themselves in the territorialized terms of the nation-state. And by creating transnational, imaginary homes of their own, they are slipping out of the hold of the nation-state – both that of their family’s origin and that of their residence.

Today, such expressions of migrant resistance to the grip of the nation are no longer restricted to the so-called ethnic ghetto. In the “global heimat” project we have explored the contributions of migration to the urban spaces of restaurants and clubs, music and youth culture (see Papadopoulos 2003). We have studied the Salsa disco as one of the spaces of negotiating and re-cycling globalized cultures and identities on local dance-floors. And we have learned from Tolga, a son of Turkish Gastarbeiter, how he, as a musician, moved from hip-hop to reggae and how this movement created strong imaginary – and practical - ties across the Atlantic, connecting the history of the black popular culture in the US and the history of post-colonial Jamaica to the experience of migrants in Germany (see Akkaya & Tews 2003). While Tolga has become one of the local heroes in the German and the Jamaican reggae scenes, other transnational productions are not as successful to enter the market of world city culture. The Frankfurt Sudanese, for instance, miss the multiculturalist taste of world music folklore when they prefer to organize concerts with pan-African pop-stars like Wardi who represents a cosmopolitan rather than an ethno-traditional Khartoum (see Akkaya & Tews 2003).

Although highly selective, the mainstream popular culture has absorbed much of the cultural production inspired by migration. In fact, the current pop culture in Germany could not do without the contributions of writers such as Feridun Zaimoglu or film makers like Fatih Akin. And even the critical voices of Kanak Attak are welcome today to add some avant-garde kanak chic to the bourgeois sites of high-culture such as the city theatre of Frankfurt. Akin’s film “Gegen die Wand” (“Against the Wall”) that has recently been rewarded with the Golden Bear in Berlin is but the latest example of how migrants have come to represent a new German culture which is, by now, also recognized and acknowledged internationally. Still, the everyday culture from which these productions draw their inspiration is not acknowledged in the same way. On that level, the consequences of migration are still

considered a threat, because they are proving the failure of the German project of integration day by day.

Consider the story Tulay, a girl with Turkish background, has told us: “In our neighborhood, in Griesheim, there is a German ... I’m not against Germans - but this one ... My mother wears a head-scarf. When he meets me on the street, he is friendly all over. But when I walk along with my mother, he gets angry and shouts: You foreigners, you will ruin all of us, get out of here!”

As in this story, German everyday racism still concentrates on the worn-out templates of the other, represented in symbols like the head-scarf which evoke fantasies of a Muslim danger to the own privileges. However, Tulay is the only Muslim believer in her family. But her religion does not keep her from joining the transnational looks and the life-styles of migrant and German youth. Her mother worries about her daughter’s weight when Tulay fasts on Ramadan. Tulay, by contrast, only worries about having to stop smoking during that time. Tulay’s story is a story about integration – but from a reversed perspective. From such perspective, the Germans would have to ask themselves whether they are integrated in the new Germany; a Germany of which they do not seem to know much by now.

Meanwhile, the current discourse on migration in Germany rather invokes and fosters these same racist stereotypes than works against them. And it is still the nation-state that is expected to govern and control the danger. The fear of the Muslim migrant as a potential “preacher of hate” has dominated the debate of the last months, and it has found its way into the text of the new immigration law where it legitimizes severe measures, including the deportation of individuals on the basis of mere suspicion. And by opening the gates of immigration only for high-skilled workforce the state suggests once more to be able and ready to effectively distinguish the “good” from the “bad” migrants.

In reality, however, the widespread presence of irregular migration in Germany contradicts this vision of a “national fortress”. And while the state fights against them, the economy seems to welcome these irregular migrants as a flexible, low-wage workforce. Like elsewhere, the German economy also relies on what Saskia Sassen (1998) has described as the “ground staff of globalization”. And it is not only people from all over the globe, but also the global conflicts that have already become part of the local life in Germany anyway. They are present in the everyday negotiations of the migrant society. But there, they reveal the potential of a, in Ulrich Beck’s words, “vernacular cosmopolitanism” (Beck 2004, 65 ff.) rather than contribute to the scenarios of violence imagined in the media and the national politics.

All such processes point to the transnationalization of the German nation-state not only from within the migration society, but also from the outside of a new European and global map of migration movements. “Transit Migration”, another project I am currently involved in, aims at rendering visible these hidden dimensions of a transnational Germany (see [www.transitmigration.org](http://www.transitmigration.org)). The project is a collaborative venture with researchers and artists funded by the Federal Cultural Foundation of



Germany (Kulturstiftung des Bundes). We are working towards exhibiting a transnational view on the German and European landscape of migration in 2005 in Cologne.

In our cooperation with the Kölnischer Kunstverein and DOMiT (Dokumentationszentrum und Museum für die Migration aus der Türkei), a multiethnic migrants' documentation center, we are re-reading the post-war history of labor migration as a transnational project that passed the state's interest of a temporary "guest-work" and realized itself as immigration. At the same time, it connected Germany to the Mediterranean and laid the ground for the ongoing flow of people and ideas across the European borders (see Römhild 2000; Römhild 2002). Meanwhile, the Mediterranean has itself become a crossroad of migration from the global east and south. This scenario, in turn, has caused the European Union to make migration the precedent of taking over the control of national politics. Still, this take-over does not prevent Europe from getting acquired by the global movements of migration – though they have to make their way on illegalized routes.

These European and, ultimately, global dimensions of migration will further weaken the nation-states' demands of autonomy. By contrast, it is the moment of an "autonomy of migration" (Boutang 2002) which radically undermines all attempts to govern it.

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