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The perils of integration policies: migration to Britain and Germany

Marc Collinson (Bangor University), Nikolaos Papadogiannis (Bangor University)

Executive summary

- Migrant integration policies have been pursued in diverse ways, as examples from the UK and the Federal Republic of Germany since 1949 clearly show.
- When using the notion of integration in public debates, policymakers and public commentators often present it as the opposite to the 'ghettoisation' of migrants.
- This paper critically evaluates the concept of 'integration'. It challenges the idea that it is the only lens through which the interaction between migrants and non-foreign-born people can be viewed.
- Historical evidence suggests that in place of integration, a richer and more positive concept of *reciprocity* would better inform more successful and workable policy outcomes.

Introduction

In February 2018, German Chancellor Angela Merkel made an unequivocal statement during the annual conference of her party, the Christian Democratic Union. She claimed that: 'Misguided tolerance is as dangerous to our cohesion as populist incitement against anything foreign'. Merkel warned migrants to ['integrate or face consequences'](#). Her words point to a dichotomy that figures prominently in public debates around migration: migrants either integrate or form ghettos that pose a threat to the host society.

The notion of migrant integration has often featured in public debates, but its precise meaning varies. For scholars, [it usually denotes the interactions with non-foreign-born people in which migrants engage from the moment of their arrival](#). By contrast, policymakers tend to link it to an end goal of the policies they promote. In both cases,

the notion usually refers to the lifestyle of migrants, but may also extend to their opportunities in the job market as well as their access to the institutions of the host society. In this policy paper, we show why precision matters when talking about 'integration'. Integration policies have been deployed in different ways by diverse actors, such as state institutions and civil society groups. In this vein, we explore the ways in which the notion of integration has been construed in two European societies: the Federal Republic of Germany and the UK. Their respective populations of migrants and refugees are among the most sizeable in Europe and, indeed, across the globe: Germany and the UK [hosted the third and fifth largest population of international migrants in the world in 2017](#), respectively. Moreover, these countries have followed different trajectories in their institutional approaches to integration. A notable case in point is the relative openness of the German government towards accepting refugees in 2016, by comparison with most other EU countries. The Integration Act, the first comprehensive federal law on integration [entered into force in Germany in the same year](#). Simultaneously, in the context of the Brexit referendum, integration [seems to have all but disappeared](#) from public debates in the UK.

Despite the diversity of integration initiatives in Germany and Britain, they are largely premised on similarly questionable basic assumptions. The second aim of this policy paper is to reflect critically on these perceptions. In particular, policymakers largely construe 'integration' as the adaptation of the migrants to the norms of the host society – as manifest in Merkel's comment – ignoring the impact of migrants on the cultural patterns and ideas of the host society. Moreover, in pursuing this goal, they frequently neglect the interaction between migrants and non-foreign-born people in contexts outside the host society. In critically evaluating these points, we also address alternative ways in which policymakers can promote connections between migrants and non-foreign-born individuals. We challenge the notion that the relations between non-foreign-born people and migrants should revolve solely or chiefly around the problematic dichotomy of integration or ghettoisation of migrants.

Great Britain: the contested nature of integration

From assimilating nineteenth-century Irish migrants to Eastern European Jews fleeing oppression in the early twentieth century, Britain has often attracted large groups of migrants. Its citizenship was vaguely drawn. In the post-war era, after the passing of the British Nationality Act 1948, migrants to Britain from its empire were able to attain the designation of 'Citizen of the UK and Colonies'. This could be gained through birth as a British subject or naturalisation. The influx of migrants from the colonies was not always

welcomed by the non-foreign-born population, however. In 1958, race riots saw migrants targeted.

British state institutions did not try to develop a comprehensive policy on how to address migrants from former colonies until the mid-1960s. Nevertheless, in a May 1966 speech to the National Committee for Commonwealth Immigrants, Home Secretary Roy Jenkins tried to combine integration with respect towards migrant cultures. He defined integration as 'equal opportunity, accompanied by cultural diversity, in an atmosphere of mutual tolerance'. This speech was representative of a metropolitan liberal discourse. Rhetoric was backed by legislation, with Section 11 of the Local Government Act 1966 facilitating the provision of extra funding for local authorities in areas with large migrant populations. However, Enoch Powell's 'Rivers of Blood' speech, delivered in April 1968, and the apparent local popularity of anti-immigrant groups, undermined any consensus. In response, Edward Heath's Conservative Government legislated to change the right to citizenship through 'patriality' (which defined whether a migrant was exempted from immigration controls, possessing a 'right of abode') and implemented an annual, renewable, work permit system. Although Labour limited some of its effects after 1974, Heath's legislation remained in force.

More recently and inspired by protest against the authoritarian 'institutionally racist' nature of the state in the 1970s-1990s, Tony Blair's administration developed an agenda of 'multiculturalism'. Analogous to the Jenkins Doctrine, it aimed to move away from assimilation, but led to criticism [that it reinforced difference, and ghettoised communities](#).

Migration policies have never received ample long-term attention from British politicians. Deeper issues, such as widespread poverty, deprivation, and disadvantage, have remained unaddressed. Limited state resources have further constrained alternative political options. Similarly, the active presence of the far right has long influenced political debate, with groups including the [British National Party](#) and [the United Kingdom Independence Party securing significant media coverage](#), if not votes. The continued presence of anti-migrant sentiment has even led the previously liberal Tony Blair to infer that the [failure of multiculturalism](#) requires a drive towards greater integration. Up to the present day, terms, such as 'integration' and 'multiculturalism' have been approached [in a patchy and often contradictory manner](#) by the British state institutions.

Germany: towards national integration policies

Germany has been, like the UK, a country that has received numerous refugees, worker and student migrants. Germany's switch from a country that mainly exported migrants to one that had more incoming than outgoing migrants dates back to 1893. This tendency extended on into the post-1945 years. While Britain and other European countries such as the Netherlands have mostly received postcolonial migration, this has not been the case for West Germany and, subsequently, the reunified Germany. Instead, it has attracted since the late 1940s waves of refugees from Eastern Europe, Turkey Yugoslavia and, more recently, Syria and Afghanistan. Migrant workers from Southern Europe have also moved there. By 1988, over 5.2 million of those migrants had decided to remain permanently in the host society.

Despite hosting a large population of refugees and migrants, the German state and civil society were initially quite reluctant to accept them as integral parts of the host society. The 1970s, as [Hess and Moser](#) show, were marked by a watershed in institutional approaches to migrants in West Germany. The state slowly began to consider the integration of the migrants into the host society. This was spearheaded by initiatives of municipal authorities, such as in Munich. Moreover, the federal government, which comprised the Social Democrats and the Free Democrats, began in the late 1970s to consider the integration of migrants. Crucially, the federal *Ausländerbeauftragter*, namely the policymaker in charge of migration policy, Heinz Kühn, argued in 1979 that numerous migrants were long-term rather than temporary residents of West Germany. However, the federal government remained cautious towards the notion of 'integration', especially once a coalition government was formed in 1982 between the Christian Democrats and the Free Democrats. According to the former party, the senior partner in the coalition governments between 1982 and 1998, (West) Germany was not a country of immigration.

The attitudes of the federal government began to change more decisively only when a new coalition government of the Social Democrats and the Greens assumed power in 1998. This government introduced a law reforming citizenship rights that introduced *jus soli* – the principle of citizenship through birth. [This made it easier for a child born of non-German parents to acquire German citizenship](#). From that point on, the governments led by both the Social Democrats and the Christian Democrats have committed themselves to the goal of migrant integration since the 2000s.

Overall, in the Federal Republic of Germany, approaches to migrant integration have followed a different trajectory than in the UK. In federal Germany integration initiatives began at the local level, but have gradually spilled over to the national level.

Integration policies and their problematic assumptions

At first sight, it might appear that (West) German institutions evolved more inclusive approaches to migrants and refugees, which contrasts positively with what has been happening in the UK. However, in both cases their integration policies draw on some problematic assumptions, which have reinforced a negative bias against migrants and refugees.

A key shared perception is that migrants and refugees need to adapt to the host culture. Integration policies in both countries have [encouraged migrants to become culturally similar to the non-foreign-born population](#). Policymakers in favour of integration largely believe that peaceful coexistence should rely on a homogeneous society. As [Ash Amin](#) has aptly remarked, this is 'the imaginary that each society exists as a homeland with its own people'. Policymakers frequently associate a homogenous society with dominant norms of the non-foreign-born people. A telling example in this respect is the National Integration Plan of the Federal Government in Germany of 2007. As [Serhat Karakayali](#) has shown, this referred to 'our' and 'national' culture, into which foreign-born people had to integrate. Similarly, after 2007 the new British premier Gordon Brown [directed a re-emphasis on Britishness, forming](#) part of a [Europe-wide trend](#) of party leaders appealing to vague nationalist sentiments.

There are, of course, some counter examples showing that influential politicians began to approach integration as a process of mutual influence; Roy Jenkins is a case in point. Moreover, in the case of Germany, Merkel has recently argued that "[Islam is part of the German culture](#)". Nevertheless, the line that distinguishes integration from assimilation is a blurred one. Policymakers tend to favour activity that renders migrants culturally alike to the non-foreign-born population. Tellingly, in his 1966 speech, Jenkins claimed that the children of first-generation immigrants dressed and spoke 'much as we do', apparently without recognising how this attitude might imperil the cultural diversity he desired.

The demand for adaptation to the norms of the non-foreign-born population poses the question, 'which national culture?' For instance, a duality of nationality has long been prevalent within the UK. Britishness itself has arguably been diluted by non-foreign-born citizens, as well as migrants. In a composite nation, many people, migrants and non-foreign-born, readily define themselves as [English, Welsh, Scottish and Irish, as opposed to or in addition to British](#). Britishness as associated with the UK's imperial history adds to the problems, especially amongst those descended from former colonial subjects. Similarly, class affiliation, and regional and civic identities have further complicated the idea of a unified national culture.

Integration policies also tend to assume the superiority of the indig non-foreign-born enous cultures over migrant cultures. In the case of Germany, public commentators and policymakers tend to portray migrants and refugees as 'backwards' in comparison to the non-foreign-born population. This is applied particularly, but not solely, to Muslims. A telling case is the sexual education offered primarily to refugees, but also to migrants residing in Germany, [by a webpage supported by the federal government](#). This project was launched in the aftermath of the 2015/16 New Year's Eve sexual assaults that occurred mainly in Cologne: refugees and migrants were initially suspected to have been the perpetrators of most of these, [though in fact few perpetrators have since been identified](#).

Policy initiatives relating to integration tend to neglect the positive changes that migrants and refugees can bring to the receiving society and its culture. A case in point are the solidarity initiatives developed among Greek politicised migrants living in West Germany in the late 1960s and early 1970s. These initiatives targeted the dictatorial regime (Junta), which ruled Greece between 1967 and 1974. They included not only Greek migrants, but also non-foreign-born activists. They also encompassed other migrants, such as Spaniards, who simultaneously struggled against the Francoist regime. As [Papadogiannis' work](#) has shown, these initiatives allowed for intense interactions among some migrants and non-foreign-born Germans. Many West Germans became accustomed to Greek cultural products, such as music, as well as coming to have a better understanding of how Greek affairs intersected with German history and society. In the context of their joint action with Greek migrants' initiatives against the Greek Junta, non-foreign-born activists took further the need to acknowledge Nazi activity in Greece during the 1940s, including atrocities which had been barely discussed in West Germany up to that point.

These anti-Junta initiatives did not explicitly aim at integrating migrants into West German society. Many of the activist migrants dreamed of returning to Greece, once their financial condition improved and the dictatorial regime collapsed. Nevertheless, some of these migrants remained in West Germany, even after democracy was restored in Greece. They would retain some of the contacts with other migrants and with non-foreign-born activists which they had developed between 1967 and 1974. Their increased connectivity was not a process of their adaptation to the host society, but a two-way traffic: the taverna [Terzo Mondo](#) in Berlin, for example, was created in 1972 by the Greek migrant Kostas Papanastasiou and remains today a popular meeting point for migrants from diverse origins living in Berlin and for non-foreign-born Germans. It hosts not only artistic events that reflect all these cultural backgrounds, but has also served as a space where both migrants and non-foreign-born Germans have met to discuss and develop joint political initiatives.

Meanwhile, in the UK, it was the activism within some immigrant communities that reshaped political perceptions of the police, especially in London. This activism led to campaigns within the Labour party and civil society for [greater accountability, most notably and enduringly in relation to the Stephen Lawrence case](#). This complex connectivity is barely captured by the typical banal, unidirectional integration initiatives. Research suggests that the alternative to integration is not necessarily the emergence of migrant ghettos, but can be the creation of culturally rich and diverse communities of reciprocity and engagement. Many migrants and refugees feel attached to countries of origin and destination. Either integration or segregation are not the only options, nor are they the options that many take. Double allegiance is a notable tendency among people of Turkish origin living in Germany: according to Ayhan Kaya, [27% of them felt affiliated with both countries in the early 2000s](#). Meanwhile, as Bidit Lal Dey et al have argued, young British South Asian adults also demonstrate an [attachment to the UK and their 'ancestral country/community/culture'](#).

Policymakers should not expect either first or second-generation migrants simply to 'fit' to the dominant norms of the receiving society and should be careful in employing such metaphors. More crucially, they should consider both how migrants may get accustomed to non-foreign-born cultures, but also how they can enrich them. Policymakers should not simply compel migrants to learn the official language(s) of the host society, but should multiply the opportunities of non-foreign-born people to learn the languages that migrants use. They should diversify educational curricula to reflect new cultural and social influences and histories relevant to migrant populations. Overall, the guiding principle for migration policies should be, in our opinion, to cultivate an *open-ended dialogue* among non-foreign-born and migrant cultures.

The nation-state as a facilitator

Promoting a dialogue between migrant and non-foreign-born communities poses an important question: should the institutions of the nation-state be the ones that initiate and safeguard this dialogue?

The nation-state is a key to promoting strong connectivity among diverse migrants and non-foreign-born people. It can enable migrants to become actively involved in the social life of the host society. Crucially, it can grant or deprive migrants of citizenship rights. Having the right to vote and gain election into positions of power allows migrants and refugees to work alongside non-foreign-born people in setting the policymaking agenda for the host society. Migrants and refugees should have more such opportunities in the future. Similarly, the nation-state may play an important role in

promoting economic equality among migrants and non-foreign-born people, enhancing their interaction on equal terms at the workplace. Making sure that legislation grants migrants equal rights to non-foreign-born employees and vigilantly inspecting its implementation is yet another crucial contribution of the nation-state to the interaction of migrants and non-foreign-born people. In this vein, the welfare state must be efficient in offering both the migrants and the non-foreign-born individuals of all classes equal opportunities for a high-quality education, healthcare, housing and job opportunities. The lack of equitable provision of public services to all communities in Britain has often contributed to the scapegoating of migrants. Quite tellingly, as [Peter Shapely](#) has demonstrated, those white residents of Glodwick who suffered from deprivation in the early 1970s blamed this on their migrant neighbours.

Therefore, the nation-state can serve as a facilitator in the relations among diverse migrants and non-foreign-born people. However, instead of promoting the purported 'national' culture of the host society, it should take a light-touch approach. The ideas and values of migrants should be offered equal consideration in the context of an open-ended dialogue.

Conclusions

Policymakers in Germany and the UK need to formulate their policies carefully in respect of migrants, especially given the size of the migrant populations in each of those countries. Overall, the options that policymakers have in relation to migrants are not well explored, and tend to be limited by the assumption that integration or segregation are the only approaches. Policymakers tend to define integration as migrants becoming, to a greater or lesser extent, culturally similar to the non-foreign-born people in the host society. However, better policy outcomes would be sustained by attention to a genuine two-way traffic: an open-ended dialogue, where ideas and practices from both migrant and non-foreign-born cultures can blend and offer empowerment to all people, regardless of differences in gender, ethnicity and age. A common cultural background does not need to exist, only a willingness on the part of diverse migrants and non-foreign-born people to interact and learn from one another. Policymakers in the host societies must critically evaluate the cultural bias manifest in the texts exclusively promoting integration. In taking such a light-touch approach, the nation-state still has an important role to play in enhancing the social connectivity between migrants and the non-foreign-born population. Historical evidence suggests that the existence of an efficient welfare state that supports both the migrants and the non-foreign-born people is also key. Lack of service provision may contribute to the latter scapegoating the former for sub-par education, healthcare, housing as well as limited job opportunities.

Workable effective policy in this area requires offering migrants more options than either 'integrate' or 'face the consequences'. Should policymakers take a step further and discard the label of 'integration'? Given the normative load that it carries, this might be a plausible suggestion. One viable alternative might be radically to redefine the way in which the notion is employed, recognising the complex and potentially valuable ways through which migrants and non-foreign-born people interact. A term such as 'reciprocity' might be best to describe such an approach.

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