

## Tilburg University

### Does the authentic immigrant exist? Try taking a look at diversity on the ground

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## Commentary

### Does the “authentic” immigrant exist?

Try taking a look at diversity on the ground.

Massimiliano Spotti

**THE CONTEXT** of this piece is easily sketched. Nation-states have developed an obsession. They tend to downplay the value of diversity and look wherever possible for measures that contribute to national order and homogeneity. They categorise newcomers according to the following laws: the law of the ground (*Were you born here?*), the law of blood (*Were both your parents born here?*) and the law of the language (*Do you speak our language? And if so, how well?*).

**REPRESENTATIVES** of immigrant communities wonder whether an assimilated immigrant voted into parliament can voice their needs. Conceived in this way, diversity becomes a dichotomy. Either you are an assimilated “good” immigrant for the majority but a non-representative immigrant for minorities or, if not assimilated, then you are a “good” immigrant for minorities but a pain in the neck for the majority.

**THREE** questions come to mind. First, what constitutes a good/authentic immigrant representative of his/her community? Second, is a well-assimilated immigrant unable to voice the interests of other immigrants? Third, how does one define the degrees of assimilation?

**A CASE** in point: I am a legal immigrant who was born within the European Union, which makes me much easier to digest bureaucratically in the nation-state’s quest for order in comparison to someone hailing from, say, Burkina Faso. I pay tax, I attend a Finnish language course, I have Finnish friends and I even indulge in the odd post-sauna dip in a frozen lake.

**AFTER** a night out I satisfy my cravings with a Turkish kebab prepared by my Egyptian neighbour who speaks fluent English. He, in turn, buys his vegetables at the local market where prices are low because the vegetables are sold by Thais who speak an ethnic variety of Finnish, and who have a relative who owns a Thai restaurant and who is married to a lady born in Inari. And they have a child.

**WHETHER** any of us constitutes a *good-authentic-pure* immigrant able to represent the interests of immigrants in Finland remains to be seen. But one thing is certain: diversity on the ground, that is, the diversity that we encounter in our daily lives, is much more complex than the dichotomy posited by both mainstream and immigrant stakeholders. Diversity on the ground is not the product of group-oriented monoculturalisms – the Italians, the Turks, the Somalis.

**RATHER**, it is the product of culturally heterogeneous human beings engaged in particular activities, situated in overlapping socio-cultural spaces that make up this (so-called mainstream) society. It follows that cultural diversity is an advantage to some and a disadvantage to others. This is intrinsic to any social system in any nation-state, as in any social system of any nation-state there are inequity and power imbalances. Finland is no exception.

**I TOTALLY** support the right of immigrants to have their voice heard, like the initiative of the Immigrant Parliament of Finland aims at doing. But if one speaks for or against diversity one should be keenly aware of what diversity on the ground actually looks like.



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