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# Politics of Belonging: International Migration and National Narratives in Europe

**Keywords:** migration, nationalism, identities, belonging

The 20th Nordic Migration Research Conference and the 17th Society for the Study of Ethnic Relations and International Migration (ETMU) conference was organized online in collaboration with the University of Helsinki, Finland, on January 11–14, 2021, under the theme of Colonial/Racial Histories, National Narratives and Transnational Migration. The conference brought together multidisciplinary academic discussion in which the colonial/racial past and present are seen as relevant for how diasporic communities, racialized minorities, and Indigenous Peoples are encountered and acted upon in the Nordic societies.

## The era of migration

For a millennia, flows of people transferring to other areas has been a universal human phenomenon. Yet, themes surrounding migration are more relevant today than ever before.

Accelerating pace of new transportation links, internet access and global market have brought about an era of mobility where important questions regarding immigration are more urgent than ever. Even the COVID-19 pandemic, which has drastically changed how we move between places, does not obscure a cycle that is continuing even during massive restrictions. During challenging times, people who have been looking to settle in a new country have been targets of political aggravations.

## New approaches

Recognizing the complexity of migration in its current phase should first start with a raw overlook of the uncomfortable past where

inequality manifests itself. European states are searching for a way to grasp issues such as asylum, employment, housing, language policy, border security, segregation and racism. The level of hesitation to address any migration related phenomena varies regionally, and the key issues seem to range from state to state. What these conversations have in common is the ubiquitous friction that arises in discussions of histories dealing with oppression and discrimination. Immigration then creates a paradox for nations that have often imagined themselves through a homogenous historical line. The imaginary homogeneity is in direct contrast with the heterogenous past, present and future for many European nations, but this contrast is perhaps most evident in the Nordic countries.

The variation of minority rights and identity discourse in US and Europe is an example of how states depend on their histories and historical narratives, and how deeply rooted these narratives are. Nordic countries purposefully rely on a “common ground” – common implying being different from the rest

of Europe. As European Union is aiming for a more symmetrical migration policy and centrally regulated border control, this critical notion of Northern Europe's exceptionalism in migration issues is becoming less plausible.

While many states in Central Europe have an established history of large scale migration, Nordic states seem more uneasy in developing their stand on the increasingly complex discourses related to minorities, segregation, race and ethnicity. The Nordic unwillingness is often explained as a natural irrelevance to the racial and colonial history of Europe, as these narratives supposedly do not apply to the Nordic context. Accusations of racism and oppression of the minorities create a direct contradiction to the common ethos and Nordic values: equality, transparency and taking care of the vulnerable. This common national narrative across the Nordic countries share an idea of a progressive civil society, a nation designed not to leave anyone behind. Naturally, these narratives are crippling, to say the least. Steering clear from discussions on the colonial heritage has allowed Nordic countries to turn their heads away from evident systemic racism while "naïve will to do good for others" continues to feature in the Nordic national self-perception.

The ongoing public demand for new solutions across Europe is involving states and intergovernmental organizations alike, and many areas witness a push for a massive reform that would directly impact not only immigration but also the lives of millions of migrants who live permanently across Europe. In an attempt to claim some maneuverability over migration that is perceived as "out of control", politicians and law-makers are affecting the reality of migration today and in the future. Parties and advocates of anti-immigration in their part bring to light the real central questions of migration: centrality of belonging and identity are the components that help us analyze migration policy and public discourse.

In the past, even the asymmetry of privilege was more linear. Central concepts of political belonging of past decades seem much more organic; in a globalized market, previously passive and stable categories such as "citizen" have been remodeled.

## Recognizing Europe as already diverse

How does the increasing diversity of European identity, if there is one, change the current narrative of European political and ideological belonging? Juridical and political categories, which are often understood as almost

organic forms of belonging, are currently undergoing reforms. European nations that hold equality and accessibility as their core values are bending to respond to the market forces which ignite competition of highly skilled workers. The entry requirements to the cultural core group have increased for some, and lowered for others. This shift from the welfare state model to a market-driven competition of individual competency is framed as an organic national level survival method in the global scale. New migration systems, that weigh potential new residents on a point-based system, is a reality where individual's value is defined in terms of estimated market benefit. In order to implement this competency model to Nordic welfare states, the old tales are not thrown away – instead, they are remodeled to serve the new agenda.

Two-tiered reality ideologies surrounding national identity are being reconstructed, and these changes are described as essential in sparing and protecting the fundamental core-functions of a society. As before, the feeling of an alien threat is most capable of surfacing the deeper structures and myths of identity. The emotional components people deem integral to their identity are highlighted during times when people feel their core identities are marginalized.

Professor emerita Gloria Wekker, keynote speaker during the previous Nordic Migration Research Conference on 12th January, discussed the longevity of these narratives that continue to resist. Her engaging keynote *White Innocence: race and cherished self-narratives in the Netherlands*, eloquently answers this question of resisting and often dear national narratives. The Netherlands has continued to function as if centuries of colonial history did not leave a trace. Statements of "color-blindness" and total denial of any racist behavior are components of a collective psyche that cherishes a certainty of perceived innocence. Prof. Wekker suggested that both white guilt and the asymmetrical self-consciousness over one's privilege are stemming from recognition of deep contradictions of these national myths.

The political slogan of "European migration crisis" ironically suggests that Europe is facing an identity crisis. Simultaneously the imagined harmless past and the realities of colonial rule are carving out a new approach to racial history in Europe. As Professor Anders Neergaard commented during a discussion following his keynote "*Even in Sweden*": *Exploring the Swedish Racial Formation, Theoretical Challenges and Dilemmas*, by having neglected colonial and racial history in the North, we are essentially freer to develop a

new discourse that is not twisted by layers of colonial identity.

In an era of far-right and fundamentalist political movements, an un-biased read of the emotional and symbolical value of nationalist ideology and national narratives is crucial for achieving resourceful policy and decision-making. It is important to include the silenced histories of racism and colonialism to our own present and recognize the lessons that arise from truthfully analyzing our past. The structural, juridical and political reforms in the Nordic countries showcase a fundamental need for new approaches that not only seek to manage problems or prevent new ones but also validate the experiences of racialized minorities.

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Pasi Saukkonen

## Vimmainen maailma

Kirjoituksia muuttoliikkeestä,  
monikulttuurisuudesta ja nationalismista

Kansainvälinen muuttoliike on aina muuttanut maailmaa. Läntiset yhteiskunnat, Suomi mukaan lukien, ovat entistä monikulttuurisempia. Samalla uusnationalistiset liikkeet ja puolueet hyödyntävät ihmisten epävarmuutta ja kaipuuta takaisin kansallisvaltioiden maailmaan. Rasistisia näkemyksiä viljellään etenkin sosiaalisessa mediassa, ja niin islamistiseen kuin kansallismieliseen ajatteluun sisältyy äärimäisiä, fasistisina pidettäviä piirteitä. Elämme vimmaista aikaa.

Tähän kirjaan on koottu erikoistutkija, dosentti Pasi Saukkosen vuosina 2015–2019 julkaisemia Siirtolaisuus-Migration-lehden kolumneja sekä muita kirjoituksia maahanmuutosta, monikulttuurisuudesta ja nationalismista. Kirjoitukset kommentoivat ajankohtaisia tapahtumia ja keskusteluja. Ne myös tarjoavat tietoa kirjan teemoista. Teoksen päättää aikaisemmin julkaisematon kirjoitus, joka kokoaa tärkeimmät kehityskulut ja katsoo kysyvästi tulevaisuuteen. Mitä tapahtuu seuraavaksi?

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