Introduction

Migration, Identity, and Citizenship: Anthropological Perspectives

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Yacine, a 17-year-old, Algerian-born high school student living in the French town of La Courneuve outside Paris was involved in a confrontation with police during the riots in suburban Paris in the fall of 2005. Interviewed a few days after the incident, Yacine told a reporter, “Before this, I would never have thought that I could get into a fight with the police. . . . Now if I’m asked to beat a French, I would do it. I don’t feel French” (Sciolino, 2005, p. A12). Yacine’s statement is one that has been repeated several times by immigrants in France who do not identify with their host society. The same can be said for many of the children of immigrants who are French born, know little of the country their parents left, and yet do not feel particularly welcome or integrated in a country of which they are citizens. This alienation was seemingly also present for the young British citizens of Pakistani origin who blew themselves and others up on the London underground in the summer of 2005 and for the Dutch-born youth of Moroccan heritage who murdered Theo van Gogh in the fall of 2004.

These recent incidents raise intriguing questions about migrant identities. Identity is a word much used but rarely defined. What do we mean by it? On one hand, it refers to a process of drawing difference, of distinguishing oneself from others. In anthropology, this understanding of identity is largely explored in relation to ethnicity—that is, how individuals associate themselves or are associated by others with a particular category or group of people based on ethnic (or cultural) markers (Banks, 1996; Jenkens, 1997). As Tseng (2002) has argued, drawing on Frederik Barth’s (1969) classic study Ethnic Groups and Boundaries, ethnic identification is “dialogic, in the sense that it is created, preserved, reaffirmed, and even rejected through a continuous set of contrasts between one’s own group and others” (p. 386). This dialogic process involves agency, whether on the part of individuals or groups of individuals (an ethnic community), in constructing an identity or identities.

Others suggest a broader understanding, defining identity construction as the process of “making people” who have a sense of “belonging” (Robins & Aksoy, 2001, pp. 687-688). With regard to migrant identities in particular, Silvey and Lawson (1999) suggested that these are constructed through the process of mobility “in ways that incorporate and blend experiences of multiple places simultaneously”
Migrants, in other words, occupy multiple subject positions, some of which they define for themselves and some of which are defined for them. On one hand, subjectivity involves making choices about identity as well as resisting those identities that are imposed by others and outsiders. On the other hand, and as Kathleen Hall (2002) observed, immigrants are also “produced as multiple types of subjects associated with distinctive ‘minority’ statuses that classify those so defined in racial, ethnic, religious, linguistic, generation, and gendered terms” (p. 2). Class should of course be added to this list. In addition, immigrants are often defined—as legal or illegal, citizen or alien—largely by the state, an institution that plays an important role in the political and cultural production of migrant identities in the public sphere. Leo Chavez (2005) has noted that the role of the state in constructing migrant identities, as well as hierarchies of belonging, can be illuminated by a Foucauldian framework that stresses the creation of governable categories (see Foucault, 1977). Furthermore, and as Vicencio (2002) has argued, focusing on issues of membership, belonging, and citizenship as state projects “allows us to address the interpellation of wider forces with local subjectivities and identities as an ongoing, historically and spatially specific process of mutual configuration” (p. 123; see also Smith, 1999). The important point, of course, is that these local subjectivities, or identities, are constantly in the making, flexible and fluid, constructed in relation to changing contexts.

The articles in this issue, two of which focus on the European context and four of which focus on the U.S. context, explore various aspects of migrant identity, migrant subjectivities, and the meaning of citizenship and belonging, focusing on not only how these are constructed and experienced by immigrants themselves but also how they are shaped by the state or in the context of encounters with individuals and institutions of the host society.

In their article, Sargent and Larchanché-Kim argue that strategies of state surveillance shape the construction of migrant identities in France. Focusing especially on Senegal River Valley migrants from West Africa, they suggest that ideologival and institutional constraints surrounding legal status and family reunification create a shifting world of unstable identities for West African migrants, who move between legal and illegal statuses. The riots across France in the fall of 2005 have been widely cited as an illustration of the failure of the French model of immigrant integration. Increasingly restrictive legislation since 1975, especially the prohibitions against polygamy, has challenged gender relations and hierarchies in migrant communities. Sargent and Larchanché-Kim suggest that the gendered production of immigrant identities merits special attention, in that women’s and men’s diverse experiences require differing strategies of adjustment. In France during the past 30 years, anti-immigrant protectionist discourse and practice has effectively contested the long-standing state policy of integration and its implicit emphasis on the achievement of nationality as the ultimate immigrant objective. Given the instability produced by the proliferation of changing immigration regulations, underscored by an emphasis on zero immigration, migrants aim to retain or regain legal status rather than to obtain
French nationality. The gendered strategies of West African migrants in France demonstrate that state polices, whether of integration or zero immigration, in fact have created a new category of migrants whose everyday lives seem permanently in transition.

The Italian response to increasing immigration from outside the European Union parallels that of the French public in its ambivalence and in the social challenges represented by a rapid influx of migrants. The growing presence of Muslims has produced particular suspicion and unrest. Castellanos argues in his article that immigrants in the northern Italian community of Bergamo draw on broader, prevailing political ideologies that serve as strategies for negotiating local identities. These ideologies, especially “Communist,” (or generally leftist), Catholic, (or Christian Democrat), comprise not only political affiliations but also an array of cultural and social meanings and practices. In addition, foreigners attempt to replicate local cultural models of community, for example, speaking the local dialect rather than learning Italian and attempting to replicate customary guest/host styles of behavior. Among the broader public, ideological responses to immigration draw on negative stereotypical images of the immigrant, which in turn emerge from Italy’s colonial past as well as from historical interactions with peoples of the neighboring Mediterranean region. Castellanos’s ethnographic research offers vivid illustrations of how immigrants and nonimmigrant Italians perceive one another and the extent to which migrant strategies to engage in Bergamo work and yield successful social relationships. As elsewhere in Europe, tensions of exclusion and inclusion characterize migrant efforts to situate themselves in the local community and create stable identities.

Focusing on one neighborhood in Trenton, New Jersey, Adler traces ethnic transformation since the early 20th century, as the population shifted during the course of three generations from predominantly Italian to a mix of Italian, Latino, and African American. Although second- and third-generation Italians have tended to leave the neighborhood, they continue to participate in local economic and religious activities and visit relatives. Immigrants themselves, Italians in this neighborhood strongly differentiate themselves from newer immigrant groups, whom they categorize as criminals, untrustworthy, and challenging to community traditions. Adler shows how ethnicity and class intersect in the production of local hierarchies evident in the division of labor. Italians who self-identify as “White Americans” tend to dominate higher paying and more prestigious occupations. Latino immigrants work in blue-collar and service occupations, as do African Americans. In addition, legal status significantly shapes migrant identity and defines community relations. Since 2004, Immigration and Customs Enforcement raids in the neighborhood, targeting Guatemalans in particular, have legitimized ethnic profiling and produced a hierarchy of inequality within the Latino population. National origin, social class, and legal status shape local identities, but as Adler argues, ongoing Immigration and Customs Enforcement raids are likely to result in further ethnic fragmentation and disempowerment for those most threatened by immigration policies.
Brettell’s article also deals with questions of immigration status and identity, but she frames her discussion in relation to questions of political belonging and cultural belonging to differentiate between the rights/responsibilities and the identificational dimensions of citizenship. She observes that in much of the social science literature, citizenship has been taken as a measure of assimilation. More recent, however, scholars attuned to the impact of globalization have emphasized a “bifocality of outlooks” that influences both attitudes toward citizenship and the construction of migrant identities. Brettell’s article compares four different populations (Asian Indians, Vietnamese, Salvadorans, and Nigerians) who have settled in the Dallas–Fort Worth metropolitan area. She shows that distinct auspices of immigration influence the path to naturalization. These differences are equally important to the way in which senses of belonging, as well as the two dimensions of citizenship, are constructed and expressed. In her analysis, she points to subtle differences among the groups in the reasons given for naturalization, most of them very pragmatic. There are equally subtle distinctions in how immigrants from different countries of origin assess the rights that citizenship accords them and the responsibilities that are expected of them. Finally, Brettell’s analysis reveals that across all these groups, the reasons for becoming a naturalized citizen are kept quite distinct from the more emotional and culturally rooted aspects of identity. Brettell moves from a discussion of labels of identity to rich qualitative data collected from respondents who were asked to assess what it means to be American on one hand and Indian/Nigerian/Salvadoran/Vietnamese on the other. Most respondents, like the Malian immigrants interviewed by Sargent and Larchanché-Kim in France, do not want to choose between being one or the other. They can be both and will emphasize different identities depending on the situation and context.

Although the Salvadorans, Nigerians, Vietnamese, and Indians discussed by Brettell have the flexibility of choice and a bifocal outlook, circumstances have created a completely different situation for the Iranians in the United States discussed by Mobasher in his article. Mobasher argues that the Iranian revolution and the dramatic 1979 hostage crisis resulted in anti-Islamic sentiments in the United States that in turn negatively affected cultural and ethnic pride among U.S. Iranians. The more recent equation of Islam with terrorism and religious extremism has further contributed to a collective identity crisis. In an effort to differentiate themselves from Islamic extremists, increasing numbers of Iranian Muslims in this study have converted to Christianity or openly reject Islamic faith. Those who remain Muslim have minimized public expression of this facet of their identity. Among the tensions affecting the expatriate Iranians are pride in identification with ancient Persian culture but shame in perceived connection with the current Iranian regime. Collective and personal identities among Iranian Muslims are challenged by the contested link between religiosity and ethnicity. Using cultural trauma theory, Mobasher analyzes how Iranians in the United States use such strategies as altering their physical appearance, “acting White,” and referring to themselves as Persians or Persian Americans to construct a new and less controversial identity in mainstream U.S. society.
In her article, Bhalla also deals with how a new identity is formed, focusing her attention on Indian immigrants who settled in the United States in the period between 1972 and 1982. Indians in the United States, she argues, have reinvented themselves. Bhalla roots her discussion in an analysis of “Letters to the Editor” that were printed in the publication *India Abroad*, an expatriate newspaper for Indians in the United States. She argues that this was the locus for not only the invention of a new identity but also a debate about the meaning of “Indian-ness.” Bhalla emphasizes three themes in her analysis: the attempts to establish a pan-Indian identity in the United States, the process by which cultural meaning has been assigned to this pan-Indian identity, and the effort by Indians to situate themselves in relation to prevailing racial/ethnic categories in the United States. As she demonstrates, Indian immigrants often define themselves in contrast to Americans and American culture, and they institutionalize the instruction of cultural practices to ensure their survival. Of particular interest is Bhalla’s discussion of the heated debate about minority status and its implications for the kinds of racial/ethnic identities that Indians in the United States wish to appropriate. Bhalla hints at the significance of class identity to this debate and concludes, like Brettell, that migrant identities and the process of identity transformation must be understood in both political and cultural terms.

Writing about Asian identities in Britain, Parminder Bhachu (1993) has emphasized a range of important analytical dimensions. Bhachu mentioned “the nurturing forces of a homeland culture, which (at least in the early stages of settlement) provides cultural reinforcement,” as well as “the maintenance of ethnic boundaries through the exclusionary forces of racism, confrontations that are said to lead to the identities of resistance and defiance” (pp. 108-109). These are certainly apparent in the articles included in this volume that collectively capture the multiple dimensions of migrant identities, including some not emphasized by Bhachu. The articles point to both the institutional imposition of identities and the personal production of identities informed by ethnicity, class, race, gender, legal status, and political context. They also illustrate how identities are constructed in the context of everyday practice (Escobar 2004) and, hence, are situational. Although some scholars (Brubaker & Cooper, 2000) have recently critiqued the constructivist stance on identity, the articles assembled here indicate both powerfully and effectively that fluid, situational, and multiple identities remain significant for migrants themselves who must negotiate place both in local communities and host societies. Often such identities are constructed in the face of, or in response to, “the coercive force of external identification” (Brubaker & Cooper, 2000, p. 1) and, thus, indicate both agency and resistance in the lives of immigrants.

References


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