

## Language and Identity

Week 1

### INTRODUCTION

I want to concentrate on the question of migrants and their environment, both in the past and the future and on what factors might make it the same and different today and tomorrow. I want to look at how we have imagined migration and what migration is yet to come and to examine assumption about language and its history.

Thus, what I shall say today will draw on history, philology (in the best sense), on geography, on archaeology, on economics and on genetics; genetics because advances in DNA analysis have enormous consequences for our understanding of the historical movement of peoples over the past 15,000 years and beyond, and consequently on the history of the mutation of languages. It also means that many of the myths about ethnic origins and language that we hold dear must necessarily be revised.

Until recently, the story of the world's languages was carved in stone, or rather it wasn't. It was precisely the absence of traces of written language which meant we just had to settle for the language myths handed down to us. Now all is open to doubt and question. The old theory that Celts speaking some sort of Welsh were pushed out of Central and South England into Wales and Cornwall is practically disproven.

Let us turn to the very distant past, or if you are an archaeologist the fairly recent past. To discuss Stephen Oppenheimer's work on genetics and the pre-history of Britain, *The Origins of the British* in which he applied modern methods of DNA analysis to the post-Ice Age migration between 15,000 and 7,500 years ago out of the Ice Age refuges on what is now the French-Spanish border (or rather the Basque country), out of Modalvia and out of what is now the Ukraine. (SLIDES) And to the second colonization which started around 7,500 years ago.

Male and female DNA is passed down from generation to generation but every so often subtle changes mean that we can locate in a chronological order the movements and whereabouts of specific groups and their relatives who may have moved on.

What this tells us in this part of the world is that the myths with which we all grew up in modern nation-states, the myths of national origin we live by, ignore the existence of the original majority inhabitants of the northern part of this continent who migrated here well before our later ancestors.

As Oppenheimer says:

“After all, Celts, Angles, Jutes, Saxons, Vikings, Normans and others, we are all minorities compared with the first unnamed pioneers, who ventured into the empty, chilly lands so recently vacated by the great ice sheets.” (Stephen Oppenheimer, *The Origins of the British*, 487)

We all know that the so-called Anglo-Saxon invasion of England is said to have taken place after the Roman colonization of Britain. But if they did invade rather than just settle over a prolonged period, then they made little demographic impact. Over 95% of indigenous genetic lines “survived”, even the later Vikings left a greater genetic imprint than the Anglo-Saxons. The

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evidence for an Anglo-Saxon genocide of indigenous peoples is totally lacking; “I am certain,” says Oppenheimer, “after studying the genetic story, that there was no genocide in Dark Ages England.” (Stephen Oppenheimer, *The Origins of the British*, 478).

So how then in the space of a few hundred years did this Anglo-Saxon minority impose on the existing population what became the English language? Where else on earth did linguistic colonization and evolution ever happen so quickly? Even the hegemony of a modern language like Italian over local dialects had to await the advent of television in the 1960s. How then in a relatively technologically backward illiterate age did the Anglo-Saxons manage it?

For Oppenheimer, English, or proto-English dates much further back than the supposed post-Roman invasion of the Saxons. “The Anglo-Saxons were not ... the first English nation. They did not all arrive at the same time. The Saxons, in particular, were already in residence in Roman times. The Angles were not genetically, culturally or linguistically so close to the Saxons, nor for that matter to the Frisians. The Angles and Jutes were more Scandinavian culturally and linguistically, with clear genetic and archeological matches to the Danish Peninsula and Sweden. They were not even our first Scandinavian visitors....” (Stephen Oppenheimer, *The Origins of the British*, 479).

Of course, we cannot thousands of years later make categorical statements, as Oppenheimer says “the possible relationships of language to archeology and genetics are all speculative and can be misleading.” However, at the same time the genetics do tell us clearly that “the Welsh/English genetic border is perhaps of Neolithic or earlier antiquity and the archeology tells us that there were always two separate sources of cultural flow into the British Isles, with Ireland and the British Atlantic Coast relating southwards, and the east coast of England relating across the North Sea. If the prehistoric language split followed the same Neolithic divide, the cultural and

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linguistic divisions between the English and the rest could be just as old too, or at least as older than the Roman invasion.” (Stephen Oppenheimer, *The Origins of the British*, 301).

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Migrants in the past roamed overseas and land in search of clement climates and available food sources. Today the same impulse is at work, but movement is much less free. Borders and frontiers must be crossed and negotiated. But borders and limits give rise to conflict. And historically, conflict is enmeshed in the construction of frontiers between the « Other » and « Us », the maintenance of barriers that protect us from what is different.

Humans occupy a space and make it their own, and conflict with the Other thus becomes territorialized along the interstices between the spaces of the Self and the Other. These frontiers are represented by maps but also discursively through language. Before modern science in the 17<sup>th</sup> century taught us to imagine space abstractly as a three-dimensional empty, infinite receptacle, space was imagined in correlation with the earth, the ground, and in our collective language and imaginary, reinforced by media and literary discourses, we continue to conceptualize space in this way.

In high and popular literary practices, in filmic media, and scientific discourse the historical links between the representation of conflict and that of frontiers persist. In question are not only geographically-located, physical, real frontiers but also imaginary limits between peoples, genders and cultures. Historically the imaginary frontiers which have given rise to real frontiers, and vice-versa, have concretized the fear of the Other, and articulated anxieties arising from « racial », gender and generational differences.

But not all migration is across national borders. Massive migration takes place within empires and within modern nation-states. Recently urbanized labour forces are the product of migration

from the countryside in China and in other parts of Asia. This is no different from the 19<sup>th</sup> C emptying of European countrysides into newly industrialized urban centres in Europe and America. This is an economic, that is a capitalist, process with cultural and linguistic consequences, consequences all the more spectacular when languages are “lost” as in the case of the Scots or the Irish who migrated. And yet such loss is not always inevitable. 19<sup>th</sup> C emigrants to the United States did indeed keep their linguistic communities alive. It was only when the State decided with the onset of World War One and the need for a monolingual fighting body of men, that America demanded a national homogenizing language and monolingualism was imposed as in European states.

Of course, modern technology and communications may militate against language loss. For while mostly originally indigenous peoples of central America may have lost their own languages, now as immigrants to the USA they are not losing the language of their first colonizers, the Spanish. The maintenance of Spanish in immigrant communities in the United States indeed spells the ultimate demise of English linguistic hegemony on the North American continent.

As to the land and the lands, the territory and the countries, and also the sea and the air, that we attempt limit and protect with barriers and fences and borders, there is one that is in constant mutation and that is our shoreline.

As was the case for our ancestors, over the next century we shall see land masses shrink, and islands become smaller or even disappear as sea-levels rise and shores-lines recede. Such lands will be truly irrecoverable. At the same time more and more of the African and South American continents *will be* recuperated to the cultivation of food stuffs for Asia, in what is a delocalisation of food production, or if you like a massive water resource reallocation, what is also know by the

experts as virtual water— when you don't have the water to grow food you grow the food where the water is. Of course, there are enormous consequences in terms of transport and fuel resource consumption, and in turn a greater impact on the environment.

## DIASPORA

While many of the human reactions associated with the movement of people – xenophobia and racism for instance – have evolved little if at all, technological advances have very much changed the physical – in terms of time and space – dimension of migration. The impact of the communications revolution on migrant communities, on diasporic communities, has been enormous. Whereas my grandfather who emigrated from China to Europe in 1911, would wait weeks and months for news from home, or to catch a glimpse of a Chinese newspaper, news from China today is instant (when news is allowed to be reported naturally). Satellite TV has replaced the crackly old radio, and Internet the long-awaited newspaper. “China’s Got Talent” can be viewed in parallel with European and American reality shows right here in Dublin. And up to the minute Chinese karaoke is available in many a Dublin Chinese restaurant. Really you are in Dublin, but virtually you are in China. This electronic immediacy of communication and entertainment has a direct impact on the real-time linguistic and cultural literacy of first-generation immigrants while still leaving the question of the bilingualism and bi-culturalism of second generations as a major question.

Diasporic communities are now like the rest of the world: Linked-In. A recent editorial in *The Economist* sang the praises of diasporic communities as efficient and beneficial networks for world trade. **Diaspora networks—of Huguenots, Scots, Jews and many others—have always been a potent economic force, but the cheapness and ease of modern travel has made them larger and more numerous than ever before. There are now 215m first-generation migrants**

**around the world: that's 3% of the world's population. If they were a nation, it would be a little larger than Brazil. There are more Chinese people living outside China than there are French people in France. Some 22m Indians are scattered all over the globe.**

### **Discourse and representation of migration**

As we have seen, Human **migration** has always been one of the principal motors of the transformation and evolutions of human history. With the emergence since the 16th century of the capitalist economy associated Western expansionism, human migration has increased apace.

Now in the 21st century, societies are constantly in a state of movement and transformation. It is not surprising that these modern societies are dominated by the practices and discourses of a spatial movement, migration. With the displacement of communities, mainstream practices, dominant languages and popular imaginaries are disrupted. New phenomena thus begin to appear and clash with dominant imaginaries in Europe and elsewhere. And such phenomena disturb the modernist illusion that has become part of a global commonsense, of well-defined, stable and homogenous identities, cultures and "races."

By deconstructing categories of collective representation, these phenomena compel us to interrogate the paradigm of modernity, a paradigm that fails to take into account new cultural and political practices that can neither be assimilated in the representations of "self" nor the "Other", and that arise from cohabitation giving rise to a socio-cultural hybridity a *métissage*.

### **Cultural Hybridity and multilingualism in the process of globalisation**

The majority of European societies are currently in the process of **mutation** into culturally diverse and hybridized communities. Migration, *métissage* and the multiplication of political,

ideological and cultural programmes are destabilizing well-defined and seemingly homogeneous identities, languages, cultures, “races” and nations. The consequences of the emergence, from the 18th century onwards, of a modern industrial capitalist economy, associated with policies of Western colonial expansion have resulted in this post-colonial age in migrations and mixing of populations on an unprecedented scale.

Thus while the European Union official encouragement of European linguistic diversity of is highly laudable -- (“The European Union has always considered its many languages as an asset, rather than as a burden. While committed to political and economic integration among its Member States, the EU actively promotes the freedom of its citizens to speak and write their own language.”) -- the lived reality of many minorities is one of an unequal multilingualism where an official European language serves as their professional or educational interface, while a non-European language or dialect (Arabic, Turkish, Urdu), or variable amalgams of the two, is the means of communication in the home between family members or generational groups. A direct effect of the neglect of multilingual education in European Union countries is that writing systems are being compromised. Children may speak their parents’ language but can they read and write it?

While for several decades a number of European states, such as the UK, supported the use of **multiple languages** (mainly those spoken by members of former colonies but also those spoken by immigrants internal to the EU, for instance Polish in the UK), more recently much more stringent policies insisting on linguistic integration and mastery of the national language have been instituted. Should the co-existence of non-European and European national languages be considered a problem or a resource, and what are the social and institutional problems

engendered by a recognition of such linguistic, and by extension cultural, diversity or indeed by its denial?

### **Citizenship and minorities**

The concept and institution of **citizenship** is intimately linked to the problems arising from the contemporary transformation of societies. A central figure in the modern political imaginary of the Nation-state, the citizen is theoretically imagined as an acultural and atemporal individual, colourless, memory-less, bearer of neither language nor origin.

Thus as a pure political subject, s/he represents the modern individual who can exist and move about in the regulated and fragmented space of the world of nation-states. But this universal and radical definition of citizenship, formulated by the Enlightenment philosophers is marked by an implicit ethnocentrism and fundamentally opposed to cultural diversity.

Are we witnessing a mutation of definitions and categories, or are we rather faced with the construction of new multiple and/or fragmented identities?

Does diversity privilege the construction of a universal representation, or does it rather intensify the sentiment of insularity? Which spaces are invested or eluded in the representation of communities perceived as 'different'.

On the institutional and structural level, the growth of diversity had incited nation-states to implement a series of policies, programmes and interventions which taken together may be considered « policies of integration ».

At the same time certain states have been increasingly erejecting multiculturalism. What, in that case will be the effect on immigrant minorities and their future in Europe?

## **Migrationary movements of the future**

How should we imagine the nature of migrationary movements of the future? The United Nation's convention on the rights of migrant workers has been signed by only 40 states (all from emerging economies) and experts who recommend a universal right to mobility are confronted by those who stand to lose most: the nation-states which attempt to impose their sovereignty by policing frontiers, and defining nationality. Should migration be considered only a security question? Should migration continue to be criminalised or should it rather be structured with the development of a legal status for the migrant (see the UNDP 's 2009 Human Development Report *Overcoming barriers: Human mobility and development*)?

But if we look beyond the immediate arguments over immigrant status and criminalisation of migration, it is already clear that the very idea of sedentary existence is untenable in the face of the unprecedented migration taking place in the contemporary world. Sedentariness and nomadism have changed. As we saw in the cursory discussion of diasporic communities, the sedentary are now at home wherever they are due to new technologies of mobile telephones and laptop internet-connected computers. These are the sedentary of privileged hypermodernity. However, as Paul Virilio has noted “the nomad is never at home anywhere.” Whether the reasons are climate change or more immediately economic, all migration is about surviving. Whole communities don't move home for the fun of it.

The massive migrations of the future (1 billion migrants in 2040 according to Christian Aid) represent a considerable challenge and necessitate a reformulation and mutation of the duality between necessary permanence of political identities, as represented by the figure of the citizen, and the inevitable perpetual movement of people, cultures and languages.

The rising sea, encroaching extensive agriculture, rapidly increasing population growth constitute a combination of climatic, economic and demographic factors which will result in massive migration whether local (as when Amazonian indigenous people are evicted from their land) or global when the landless and hungry and displaced go in search of survival.

Climate and the search for arable land, or for food to gather and hunt, have been factors contributing to migration for tens of thousands of years. But only during the past few centuries has humankind been faced with the relentless machine of capitalism that yearningly and insatiably seeks new places to invest its surplus as more and more people are forced into poverty and destitution.