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“The open Society and its Migrants”

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Immigrants from all over the world have changed the face of our cities. The original intentions, whatever they were, theirs and ours, ceased to matter a long time ago. The world has settled into our neighbourhoods, and it's a confusing and shocking experience. Our markets, places of worship, schools, sports clubs – everything and everyone has been affected by the great migration that's underway and whose end is nowhere in sight.

We're in the midst of profound changes and it's unwise to pretend they're inconsequential or simply to close our minds to them. How often do we hear the unanswerable 'immigration has always been with us', the notion that people are always on the move and our own time is no exception? The Amsterdam municipality writes, matter-of-factly: 'Almost half of all Amsterdammers were born outside the Netherlands. This is nothing new. For centuries Amsterdam, as a city of immigrants, has been open to people of different origins and faiths. Think of the Portuguese Jews, French Huguenots and seasonal workers from Germany.'

Even if we accept that from a historical perspective there's nothing new under the sun, no one can doubt we are witnessing a profound change to the composition of Western populations. People certainly moved around a great deal in the seventeenth century, but that surely does nothing to mitigate the upheaval that cities are going through now. The guest workers from Morocco and Turkey, who are changing Dutch neighbourhoods, aren't simply counterparts to the seasonal workers from Germany who spent time in the Low Countries in centuries past. The fact that Jews from Portugal fled to the Netherlands to escape the Catholic Church's Inquisition doesn't make it a matter of course that refugees from Islamist despotism in Iran and Afghanistan should come to live here.

In any case, how much is it possible to know about the newcomers who made Amsterdam into a city of immigrants in earlier times? A recent study by historian Erika Kuijpers speaks of 'the innumerable' and 'the invisible' and demonstrates that our knowledge about them is limited, aside from a social elite that left a heritage of public works and charming houses on the city's main canals¹. It's hard to find out anything about the lives most migrants lived; even the numbers are a rough approximation. The lack of information alone makes that stalwart 'there's nothing new under the sun' little short of exasperating.

How long can you downplay the significance of what is happening to you by talking about those who shared the same fate in the past? How long can a deeply felt experience be declared off limits? There's a growing feeling that today's migrants and the reactions provoked by them have not as yet done much to move Western societies forward. This feeling refuses to be placated.

¹ Erika Kuijpers, *Migrantenstad*, Ch. 2

In a time when progress is all that counts, when the sense that something is being lost is dismissed as nostalgia, we've become adept at transforming reality, blithely describing impoverishment as enrichment, allowing semi-lingualism to pass for bilingualism and treating narrow-mindedness with sympathy. But compliant language doesn't make reality any more amenable. Turning a blind eye to the clashes caused by the arrival of immigrants is no longer an option.

Today's migration cannot simply be described as making receiving societies more open, since as a result of the traditional beliefs many migrants bring with them, old questions about the position of women have suddenly resurfaced and freedom of expression has become controversial. People have started to talk about blasphemy again, even apostasy. It may all seem familiar from recent history, but having to repeat the emancipation struggles of fifty years ago can hardly be described as progress.

There is a need to go beyond the simple assumption that the migration of past decades amounts to an enrichment of the societies in which newcomers have arrived. In fact the continual use of the word 'enrichment' is rather unfortunate, considering the impoverished lives many immigrants and their children lead. Schools are suddenly faced with a multiplicity of special needs, and this fact alone causes significant problems. Set against the benefits, the costs of migration have so far turned out to be high, in some countries perhaps even higher than the returns, although such calculations are always complicated.

This has nothing to do with the question of guilt that raises its head in so many contemporary discussions of immigration. Receiving societies are hesitant in their dealings with newcomers; established populations are becoming noticeably more rigid and tending to turn away from the outside world. It has even proven possible to find majority support for measures to limit immigrants' civil rights. Nevertheless, many migrants could have done more to create a place for themselves in their new countries. They ought to have rid themselves sooner of the 'myth of return', the belief that their stay was only temporary. As someone remarked in a debate: 'The price of staying is that you take the trouble to learn. Learning and spurning are two quite different things.'

It's not difficult to point to shortcomings on all sides but there is a good deal more to be said. This book examines how the conflicts surrounding migration can bring about a renewal of society as a whole, taking us closer to our aim of creating an open society. There's a need for a more candid approach to the frictions and clashes that always result from the arrival of sizeable migrant groups. Earlier generations of historians and sociologists have left us a remarkable body of work to draw upon. Oscar Handlin, the best-known historian of immigration in America, is one source of inspiration. In *The Uprooted* (1952) he describes the causes and effects of migration from Europe to America. They can be summed up in one sentence: 'the history of immigration is a history of alienation and its consequences.'² Alienation and loss are key features of any description of the arrival of migrants in a strange environment.

Handlin is thinking primarily of those who came, 'for the effect of the transfer was harsher upon the people than upon the society they entered'.³ He tells the story of the millions who were set adrift by industrialization and by the astonishing population growth of the second half of the nineteenth century. The dislocation and poverty that resulted, especially in rural areas, led to mass emigration from countries including Ireland, Germany, Italy, Sweden, Norway and Poland. Huge economic and social forces were at work, and people were torn loose from environments they had occupied for centuries. Hardly anyone welcomed this liberation, Handlin says, since above all it meant separation. He describes with great empathy the often atrociously journey they made across the Atlantic and their arrival in a new land where they had to make their way as immigrants, often

² Oscar Handlin, *The Uprooted*, Introduction, p. 4

³ Oscar Handlin, *The Uprooted*, Introduction, p. 5

utterly destitute and with no idea what the future might bring.

In unfamiliar surroundings many sought refuge in the certainties of their religion. 'In that sense all immigrants were conservatives. All would seek to set their ideas within a fortification of religious and cultural institutions that would keep them sound against the strange New World.'⁴ This hankering after old structures and customs served as an aid to survival in an urban environment. It is easy to see why many migrants tried to perpetuate village life in foreign cities, which makes it all the harder to understand why immigrants are so often described as great innovators.

In their new country, so confusing and full of dangers, people felt a need for the support of their religion, but maintaining religious faith was a challenge: 'The same environment, in its very strangeness and looseness and freedom, made it difficult to preserve what could be taken for granted at home.'⁵ The end result was all too often a sense of not belonging anywhere any longer. 'They had thus completed their alienation from the culture to which they had come, as from that which they had left.'⁶ This is an experience shared by many contemporary migrants as they try to connect with a new society.

It was not only the migrants themselves who were afflicted by insecurity. Those already living in the new country, which after all was not a blank canvas but had customs and traditions of its own, were thrown off balance. Handlin acknowledges their side of the story: 'Everything in the neighbourhood was so nice, they would later say, until the others came. The others brought outlandish ways and unintelligible speech, foreign dress and curious foods, were poor, worked hard, and paid higher rents for inferior quarters.'⁷

In an earlier study Handlin had examined the reaction of nineteenth-century Bostonians to the arrival of Irish immigrants, who came in huge numbers. After the two groups clashed it took at least half a century for the city to regain its balance. 'Group conflict left a permanent scar that disfigured the complexion of Boston social life.'⁸ Yet Handlin's approach was subtle and he avoided laying the blame on one side or the other. He used cautious terms like 'latent distrusts' and 'social uneasiness' to describe the attitudes of longstanding residents.⁹

It's not hard to understand reactions like these. People saw their world changed by immigrants and instinctively harked back to a shared notion of the community as it had been before. It serves little purpose to impress upon people who no longer feel at home in their neighbourhoods that we all have to move with the times. In the often hostile expression 'stranger in your own country' lies a recognition that migration has brought people from all over the world to settle in today's major cities. We need to face up to the feeling among established populations, that a tried and tested society is being lost, just as we need to acknowledge the feeling of uprootedness among many newcomers.

For far too long, those who didn't live in the neighbourhoods where migrants settled, were the warmest advocates of the multicultural society, while those who did live in them steadily moved out. Their opinions were ignored, or they were belittled for suddenly giving voice to their own latent xenophobia. Now that the middle classes can no longer escape the changes migration brings – in part because they can no longer fail to notice migrants' children in the classroom – the argument has broken out in earnest and there is a need to think seriously about both, the life stories of immigrants and the experiences of indigenous residents. It is indeed true to say that the history of immigration is a history of alienation and its consequences.

⁴ Oscar Handlin, *The Uprooted*, p. 116

⁵ Oscar Handlin, *The Uprooted*, p. 141

⁶ Oscar Handlin, *The Uprooted*, p. 285

⁷ Oscar Handlin, *The Uprooted*, p. 189

⁸ Oscar Handlin, *Boston's Immigrants*, p. 206

⁹ Oscar Handlin, *Boston's Immigrants*, p. 184

Yet that alienation does not last forever, quite the reverse in fact. Back in the 1920s American sociologist Robert E. Park described what was then generally referred to as the race relations cycle as beginning with isolation and avoidance and moving on via contact, competition and conflict to accommodation and assimilation.¹⁰ There is an underlying logic here: on arrival migrants tend to keep to themselves, partly as a result of the attitude of avoidance they detect in the society around them. In the years that follow, migrants and their children struggle to claim a place for themselves in the new country, and this leads to rivalry and strife. The question of how everyone can live together becomes unavoidable. If a satisfactory answer is found, the descendants of the original migrants will be absorbed more or less smoothly into society. This is a hopeful view and it suggests the familiar model of three generations.

Of course the process can't really be divided into phases or generations as neatly as this, but the important point is that every story of migration involves conflict. That was and is the case in America and the pattern is being repeated in contemporary Europe. It's difficult to say how long or how severe the period of conflict will be, but the phase of avoidance is gradually coming to an end. We should see today's frictions as part of a search for ways for newcomers and the established population to live together. Conflict has a socializing effect.

Immigration is the most visible aspect of globalization, which gives many people a sense that their familiar world is vanishing. This is not yet felt to be an improvement. In European countries many people are convinced that a period of stagnation or even decline lies ahead. Few still believe their children will have a better future, whereas the post-war generation enjoyed the prospect that their offspring would live freer and more prosperous lives. It doesn't really help to say that future generations will see these as the good old days. Right now all that counts is that a sense of loss has taken hold and people are looking for ways of reaching beyond that experience.

Literary critic Svetlana Boym discerns a pattern: 'Nostalgia inevitably appears as a defense mechanism in a time of accelerated rhythms of life and historical upheavals.'¹¹ Newcomers and natives react in similar ways – and no wonder, since the cause of their unrest is the same. Migrants personify a world set adrift, and those they come to live amongst are swept along by changes to their everyday environments, but shared experience does not bring the two sides together, Boym concludes. 'The moment we try to repair longing with belonging, the apprehension of loss with a rediscovery of identity, we often part ways and put an end to mutual understanding.'¹² That is exactly what is happening now: the desire for a firm footing in a turbulent world is driving old and new citizens apart.

Natives and newcomers often seem far apart, and beneath a veneer of harmony countless stories can be heard – by those willing to listen – about daily cultural clashes. A conflict successfully avoided for years has erupted all the more fiercely. Where silence reigned for so long, too much is now being said and too stridently. Multicultural diplomacy alone will not be enough to build mutual trust, but for a long time few awkward questions were asked, both because no one was particularly interested in the answers and because it was felt too much would be stirred up if they were. Noiriel remarks that crises surrounding migration 'are moments in which the social rules for the whole of the receiving society are ruptured and redefined'.¹³

¹⁰ Robert E. Park, *Race and Culture*, p. 150. See also Ulf Hannerz, *Exploring the City*, p. 44

¹¹ Svetlana Boym, *Future of Nostalgia*, Introduction p. xiv

¹² Svetlana Boym, *Future of Nostalgia*, Introduction p. xv

¹³ Gérard Noiriel, *Le creuset français*, p. 274

This process is now well underway. In migrant communities, one generation after another puzzles over the nature of its relationship not just with the society it finds itself in but with its countries of origin. In an autobiographical account Ziauddin Sardar writes: 'As we, the Asian community, became more British, more rooted in time and place, here and now in Britain, we also needed to build more barricades against losing touch with where our parents came from. We needed barricades to protect us from the increasing sense of being rejected by British society.'¹⁴

Ambiguity is rife in countries of immigration and it can easily lead to distrust on all sides. When relations between people are coloured by suspicion, anything anyone does can be interpreted as malicious: on closer examination an offer of help is mere meddling, a question can easily sound like an order, apparent uncertainty is taken as some kind of subterfuge and before you know it all attempts at sincerity have run into the sand. The conclusion drawn by German writer Hans Magnus Enzensberger seems justified: 'Today the preparedness and ability to integrate cannot be taken for granted in any country or on any side. The multicultural society remains an empty slogan as long as the difficulties the concept raises are declared taboo but not resolved.'¹⁵

There has been too much avoidance on the part of receiving societies, and it goes some way to explain the current impasse. The twentieth century was marked by attempts to reduce social inequality and bridge cultural divides; no issue has disturbed European public life so much as the effort to elevate a whole range of population groups so that full citizenship would be available to everyone. This determination to achieve equality of opportunity arose out of a fear of social unrest, but it was also inspired by moral convictions.

Generally speaking past efforts to integrate all social groups could be described as successful. Rank and class lost their edge; people became less and less bound by their origins. This makes the resigned response to the rise of a new, perhaps more pernicious divide seem all the more troubling. Newcomers and their families often lag behind, and at the same time institutions are not sufficiently open to new talent. The absence of urgency was the product of a consensus that prevailed for decades, the idea that integration is purely a matter of time, a natural outcome of socio-economic progress. What's lacking now is a clear notion of citizenship that goes beyond a plea for improvements to the position of migrants in the jobs market and in education.

Timidity on the subject points to a more general failing. The call for integration prompts the response: 'Integration, fine, but into what?' A society that has little or nothing to say for itself will quickly be exposed as flawed. This has not escaped the attention of migrants, who respond with a combination of 'What do you actually want from us?' and 'For heaven's sake leave us alone'. As one student remarked: 'You never know where you stand here. What is integration, in fact? What are Dutch or French or British norms and values? I have a feeling politicians are deliberately vague about them, so that they can always say: no, that's not what we meant.'

Such reactions are all too often expressed in aggrieved tones, but anyone aiming to close the chasm nevertheless needs to come up with a convincing response. 'Diversity' is a commonly deployed concept, but it does little to clarify matters. It ought to go without saying that an open society is characterized by divergent outlooks, lifestyles and beliefs, but even in a liberal democracy there are limits: not everything that's different is valuable. Embracing diversity indiscriminately is tantamount to protecting traditional habits and customs from critical scrutiny. There's a tendency to address migrant families as members of the groups to which they're presumed to belong. This applies not only to the first generation, which is to some extent preserving the traditions of its countries of origin, but to the children and grandchildren of migrants as well. They are regarded as perpetuating a particular culture, whereas it may well be that many

¹⁴ Ziauddin Sardar, *Balti Britain. A Journey through the British Asian Experience*, p. 88

¹⁵ Hans Magnus Enzensberger, *Die grosse Wanderung*, p. 59

'Turkish' children prefer listening to American rapper 50 Cent than to Turkish pop star Sezen Aksu – quite apart from the fact that many different influences can be found in Aksu's work.

There's another reason why the prevailing view of diversity doesn't necessarily represent progress. If minorities continue to see themselves primarily as ethnic groups, there's a real danger that majority populations too will increasingly conceive of themselves in ethnic terms, especially when in many cities they find themselves outnumbered. American sociologist Charles Gallagher has observed: 'Like it or not, middle-class and lower middle-class whites see themselves as a minority and have adopted a posture of being the victims.'¹⁶ This is the risk we run by emphasizing ethnicity. Why should one group be allowed to appeal to its own ethnic identity if another group is not? It's important always to keep in mind the aim of creating a society in which people are asked how they see their futures, not one in which they're judged according to their pasts. Getting there will be a process of trial and error, and all citizens will need to look beyond ethnic dividing lines.

It's often argued that integration should engage both newcomers and natives, but what does this actually mean? Instead of emphasizing the differences between minorities and the majority, we should concentrate on shared citizenship as an ideal to which everyone can aspire. Migrants can be invited and challenged by a society only if it has a strong culture of citizenship. Problems surrounding migrants and their children are general social issues writ large. They concern not only important institutions such as education but constitutional rights like freedom of expression. This is the reason migration cuts so deep: it goes to the heart of institutions and liberties.

The basic principle is simple: native populations cannot ask of newcomers any more than they are themselves prepared to contribute. Those who encourage others to see themselves as fellow citizens must have at least some notion of what it means to be a citizen and, as far as possible, turn that notion into practical reality. Hence the embarrassment that typifies debates about integration. An established population that asks people to integrate will sooner or later find itself facing similar demands. This is all part of an ongoing quest, a process of social renewal.

Take linguistic skills. There can be no doubt that the command of a country's official language is a prerequisite for all those trying to hold their own as citizens. The Dutch have therefore talked a great deal over the past few years about language deficits in migrant families, a problem currently referred to as 'low literacy'. It was only a matter of time before people started asking: How good are the reading and writing skills of the indigenous Dutch population? It quickly became clear that hundreds of thousands are struggling, and initiatives are now being implemented that are aimed at raising levels of literacy across the board.

This is just one example of how debates about integration can make hidden social problems visible, introducing issues that go far beyond the emancipation of migrants. The growing divide between low-skilled and educated people demands attention; Flemish writer David van Reybrouck regards this as the most important cause of current dissatisfaction with democracy. Many people with little more than a basic education no longer feel represented: 'As in the Netherlands, a parallel society has grown up in Belgium. The low-skilled are in the majority, but they genuinely feel themselves to be a minority that is subjected to discrimination.'¹⁷

Integration conceived as a reciprocal process confronts society with profound questions about what it means to be a citizen. What kind of knowledge is required? Those who think migrants should know more about the development of their adoptive country's constitution, for example, cannot avoid the question: What exactly do you know about it yourself? This has revealed another weakness of Western societies. Doubts about the historical awareness of the average citizen matter, because citizenship involves a realization that something came before us, and something

¹⁶ Samuel Huntington, *Who are we?*, p. 315

¹⁷ David van Reybrouck, *Pleidooi voor meer populisme*. p. 42

will come after us. It's hard for any sense of responsibility to develop unless people see themselves as part of a continuing history.

Which brings us to another series of questions: What image of the past does established residents want to present to newcomers? Might there not be a need to discuss this image with everyone, irrespective of background and origin? Are schoolchildren taught in any meaningful sense about colonial history? Is any attention paid in schools to migration into and within Europe over the centuries? Gestures are of little use. It's essential to hand down as truthful and self-critical an account of the past as possible. The issue of integration has forced many countries to take a fresh look at school curricula.

Self-examination is going on outside schools as well. New museums are being established, such as the French museum for the history of immigration and the Dutch National History museum, while those already in existence are reassessing the stories they tell. The aim is not so much to win people over as to use migration as the starting point for a re-examination of commonly-held assumptions.

There's an even more fundamental sense in which the principle of reciprocity prompts societies to question themselves. It concerns the rights and duties attached to citizenship. Citizens are now well aware of their rights but far less likely to have been given a clear understanding of their duties. This is a crucial problem, since freedoms unaccompanied by a sense of responsibility will start to erode. The issue of religious freedom illustrates the point. Muslims invoke the right to practice their religion and that right is non-negotiable, as long as it's exercised within the bounds of the constitution, but it also confers upon all believers a responsibility to defend the rights of people of other faiths or none.

There's a need for shared norms to which both the majority and minorities feel bound, and they include the right to freedom of conscience. The question that needs to be addressed is: What do the difficulties surrounding integration tell us about the strengths and weaknesses of society as a whole? The search for ways to live together demands self-examination on all sides. That's the deeper significance of the reciprocity we seek: those who ask migrants to take a critical look at their traditions must be prepared to hold their own cherished assumptions up to the light.

Citizens, whether newcomers or otherwise, should not be required to absorb themselves into society as it is now but rather to identify with society as it has the potential to be. Everyone should feel invited to help society move closer to its ideal of equal treatment. Reciprocity as a basic principle of citizenship means that anyone trying to combat discrimination against migrants and their children must be prepared to oppose forms of discrimination within migrant families, against unbelievers, for example, or homosexuals. We can't pick and choose when it comes to equality.

This became clear on a visit to a school in Antwerp where a large majority of pupils are from Muslim families. One commented, as a joke: 'I've counted the Belgians at our school. There are twenty-three.' The school has a long tradition and many of the children do well, but the teachers say it becomes difficult to talk about evolution in biology lessons, about the Holocaust during history lessons and about 'perverts' like Oscar Wilde in literature lessons. A choice has to be made. Should teachers give in to the religious prejudices many children bring from home or oppose them, with all the patience and dedication that requires?

The reverse is also true, of course. A society that cherishes the principle of equality must be willing to listen to those who claim they've been discriminated against at work or in pubs and clubs. Sometimes legal action is necessary, but in many situations the key to success is persuasion, not compulsion. Campaigns and rules may help to combat discrimination, but we all need to confront prejudices publicly, challenging them as a step towards developing mutual trust.

Not everyone is favours such reciprocity, as is clear from comments like ‘they came to us, we didn’t go to their country’? This amounts to saying that the majority has the power and the right to force minorities to adapt. Such an imbalance of power can never produce a truly integrated society, if only because the protection of the rights of minorities is a defining element of democracy. The opposite view is equally unproductive. It often takes the form of claims that there can be no reciprocity while the imbalance between the established and newcomers is as great as it is now. In other words: ‘You can’t ask the same of those at the bottom as you do of those at the top.’ This attitude leads nowhere, except to the paternalistic notion that people in migrant communities are not responsible for their fate. Shared citizenship means, by definition, that we are all invited to enter the public arena as equals.

We started by identifying a sense of alienation and loss among both immigrant and indigenous populations. If the shock of the new can inspire self-criticism and change, real progress will have been made. Efforts to ensure that people from all regions of the world can be part of today’s urban society should prompt a reassessment of prevailing notions. This is not a matter of being disloyal to everything Europe and America have contributed to the ideal of an open society but of becoming more faithful to that ideal.

In other words, the arrival of migrants is not only irreversible, it offers a unique opportunity for introspection. American sociologist Henry Pratt Fairchild was aware of this almost a century ago. Much of what he wrote is now outdated, but surely he was right in saying that the degree to which migrants were able to feel part of a new country was not down to them alone: ‘Before laying tardy assimilation too readily at the door of the immigrant we should thoughtfully consider whether our own house does not need to be set in order.’¹⁸ In short it makes sense to talk about integration only if it’s seen as part of an effort to improve society as a whole. As Fairchild puts it: ‘If the immigrant is to love America he must first have the opportunity to experience America, and having experienced it he must find it lovable. No amount of lecturing, legislating, and threatening can make the alien love America if he does not find it lovable, and no amount of original strangeness and unfamiliarity can keep him from loving it if in the final event he finds it worthy of his love.’¹⁹

The subject of immigration and integration – and therefore of citizenship – creates uncertainty because it affects so many areas of life: education systems, welfare provision, constitutional rights such as freedom of expression. The public debate now underway sparks conflict time and again. This book is an attempt to reach beyond existing divides. That will be possible only once we’ve explored the causes of discontent and developed a realistic view of society as it is now, irrevocably altered by migration.

Perhaps integration has in fact been successful in recent years and newcomers are now just as disengaged as the established population. A society without clear ideas about citizenship will be unable to inspire migrants to see themselves as citizens. It’s time for some thorough renovation. An open society cannot survive without self-criticism. We must aspire to become what we say we are.

¹⁸ Henry Pratt Fairchild, *Immigration*, p. 426

¹⁹ Henry Pratt Fairchild, *Immigration*, p. 425