



Editor's Note: Migrating Identities and Perspectives

Mohammad H. Tamdgidi

University of Massachusetts Boston

mohammad.tamdgidi@umb.edu

Abstract: This is an editor's note to the Fall 2009 issue of *Human Architecture: Journal of the Sociology of Self-Knowledge*, on the theme "Migrating Identities and Perspectives: Latin America and the Caribbean in Local and Global Contexts." The editor argues—reflecting on his own lack of a sense of identity as a migrant despite being one—that migrating back and forth from the personal to the global, from the international to the domestic and local, from one academic culture and disciplinary tradition to others, from the examination of one social dimension to others, etc., all require an openness to theories and praxes of difference that may come more easily to those who have experienced a physical migratory movement in their own lifetime across cultures, whether or not they have self-consciously internalized the label "migrant" or (in Persian) "mohajer" as an overt part of their multi-faceted identity. So, reflecting back, he can see that he has been a migrant or mohajer all along, but not in the narrower sense of a physical experience, but in a broader, multi-faceted, always ongoing and never-ending feeling of not belonging entirely to one culture, perspective, ideology, politics, etc., and being (or trying to always be) *on the move*. For the above reasons, the editor fully concurs with the apt introductory conclusion of the co-editors Jones and Mielants that issues explored by various contributors herein have much wider significance and implications than its regional focus on Latin America and the Caribbean may suggest. They made him also to realize what a mohajer he has been and continues to be all along, and could not envision any other state of being, subjectively speaking, more appropriate for a humanity that thirsts for integration and unity amid the violences of artificial fragmentations and static identity attachments inherited from the past.

This issue of *Human Architecture: Journal of the Sociology of Self-Knowledge*, on the theme "Migrating Identities and Perspectives: Latin America and the Caribbean in Local and Global Contexts," is published with the co-editorial initiative and assistance of Terry-Anne Jones and Eric Mielants of Fairfield University, CT.

The co-editors, in their introductory essay that follows this editor's note, helpfully summarize the basic themes of various contributions of authors—and, additionally, the abstract to each contribution provides further opening insight into the respective study—so I will try below to present a brief personal note that may provide an addi-

Mohammad H. Tamdgidi is Associate Professor of Sociology, teaching social theory at the University of Massachusetts Boston. Most recently he has authored *Gurdjieff and Hypnosis: A Hermeneutic Study* (Palgrave Macmillan, forthcoming/2009), and *Advancing Utopistics: The Three Component Parts and Errors of Marxism* (2007, paperback edition 2009) and is founding editor of *Human Architecture: Journal of the Sociology of Self-Knowledge*, a publication of OKCIR: The Omar Khayyam Center for Integrative Research in Utopia, Mysticism, and Science (Utopystics) which serves to frame his research, teaching, and professional initiatives. Tamdgidi has edited various collections on Paulo Freire, Edward Said, Gloria Anzaldúa, Frantz Fanon, and Thich Nhat Hanh, and his writings have appeared in *Sociological Spectrum, Review* (Journal of the Fernand Braudel Center for the Study of Economies, Historical Systems, and Civilizations), *Humanity & Society*, *Contemporary Sociology*, and several other edited volumes.

tional or different window for appreciating the explorations and findings of the studies that comprise this volume.

Whenever the topic of migration and its studies come up, somehow, as far as I am concerned, the term does not personally ring an identity bell in me immediately. For some reason, the status of being an immigrant to the U.S. does not strike the core of my identity formation and sensibility. I have always wondered why, given that obviously I am, for all practical purposes, an immigrant from another region of the world (Middle East, Iran in particular), having arrived in the U.S. to pursue higher education at the age of eighteen, in 1978, basically on my own, though with financial support from my parents at the time. The term for “migrant” in Persian is “mohajer,” and somehow I have very rarely, if at all, referred to or considered myself as a mohajer. This seems quite puzzling to me, especially in light of the very theme of this issue of *Human Architecture* focusing on the interplay of migration and identify formation, albeit focusing on a different region of the world, i.e., Latin America and the Caribbean, than the one I come from.

I think a part of what may explain this lack of internalization of an overt immigrant identity in me has to do with a denial of what the notion of migration is supposed to designate figuratively. A migrant moves from one place to another, not belonging to the original place, and being (or, trying to be) integrated and assimilated into another place. The notion that I am any less of an Iranian, or belonging to Iran, after coming to the U.S.—being a foreign student for a while, then a permanent resident, and finally a U.S. citizen—has not penetrated my personal or broader social identity. I became, in fact, more involved in Iranian affairs, political or not, and began more than before seeing myself as an Iranian of Persian descent—and to some extent Azeri, as far as my parents’ “domestic” migration from the Azerbaijan provincial city of

Tabriz to Tehran in their youth is concerned—when I moved to the U.S. and became involved in the Iranian student movement at U.C. Berkeley at the time of the revolution and immediately afterwards. And I didn’t feel any less Iranian during my graduate studies in Upstate New York, and later as a faculty at UMass Boston. Physically, yes, I have spent more years of my life in the U.S. by now; subjectively, however, it is as if I never left Iran, to which I must add that I have also not felt entirely assimilated into the U.S. culture and social and political self-identity. This is not to say that I do not appreciate living in the U.S., and having benefited one way or another from the personal, collegial, and professional associations I have made throughout the years living in the U.S., but somehow the notion of being “no longer” an Iranian simply because I have lived for more than thirty years in the U.S. simply does not exist in my subjective experience. In fact, I feel one can be in one place and not be of it at all, and not be somewhere else, and strongly feel a sense of belonging to this somewhere else.

To make matters a bit more complicated, though, I must say that my identity as one coming from a more or less Shi’ite Muslim family went through a drastic transformation, subsequent to my involvement in leftist oriented Iranian and non-Iranian student movements during my undergraduate and later graduate years in the U.S. Paradoxically, however, as I became alienated from religion for being what Karl Marx used to call “the opium of the masses,” my self-reflections on the troubles of Marxism and its theories and historical practices, eventually led to my rediscovering of new spiritual traditions and movements and also those aspects of the Iranian culture, particularly of Persian mysticism and poetry, that had been dormant in my automatically formed cultural identity during childhood. Again, alienation from religion and Islam in particular was not whole-

sale. The alienation experienced brought me back in a return journey to a selective appreciation of aspects of Iranian and Islamic culture that I could not imagine I had belonged to, while remaining critical of other dimensions of the same culture or religious teachings.

What I mean to illustrate in the above is that "migration" is much more complex and slippery in the subjective sense than one may simply assume in an objective sense of movements of bodies world over. This is particularly important to recognize now, in the higher Age of Information characterized by venues of spontaneous communication via the Internet across the globe. This is not to deny that the actual move, physically, from one place to another is not important, and not enormously significant for the varieties of socio-economic, cultural, political, legal, religious, moral, aesthetic, and other personal troubles or public issues that accompany and/or follow it. But the important issue to consider is, as microsociologies have emphasized in challenge to simplistic Behaviorist models that preceded them, that objective circumstances do not simply affect people apart from the inner subjective experiences that they go through in the process, and for this reason the theme of this issue of *Human Architecture*, and the excellent studies represented in it, aptly justify an appreciation for its two-fold focus on migration and identity formation.

What has characterized my own experience has therefore been not merely a matter of physical migration, but a multitude of ever changing, ever continuing, migrations across cultural, political, ideological, economic, political, and spiritual states of being, bringing forth the meetings of new undiscovered selves in me and in others that perhaps always were there but never subjectively recognized and "related to," at times often co-existing and at best merging with another and articulating new states of mind, feeling, and being that may not spe-

cifically belong to one or another place as readily noticeable. The studies herein propose the notion of using theories of international migration to understand the experience of domestic migration, in effect "migrating" from one perspective to another while maintaining enlightening aspects of one or another theory and perspective previously considered as separate islands in the academically fragmented disciplinary landscapes we have fallen asleep to and been taking for granted.

What emerges from the studies in this volume, then, is a renewed emphasis and appreciation of the fact that to understand social reality especially in the age of new globalizations, one cannot escape the essential requirement of being a migrant oneself academically and intellectually, being able to travel across different theories, perspectives, paradigms, "academic" or not, scientific, religious, philosophical, and all other forms of intellectual insight, to be able to adequately comprehend who one is, what the world one lives in is like, and how one can adequately understand and transform it in favor of more just and desirable outcomes. This is one reason why I opted for the use of an active term "migrating" rather than migration for this issue, and also why it was necessary to use "identities and perspectives" for the purpose since, for exploratory purposes it is essential to integrate all sorts of theories, disciplinary perspectives, and socio-cultural sensibilities in our efforts at understanding the actual, not presumed, objective and subjective realities of what happens when people migrate.

Migrating back and forth from the personal to the global, from the international to the domestic and local, from one academic culture and disciplinary tradition to others, from the examination of one social dimension to others, etc., all seem to me require an openness to theories and praxes of difference that may come more easily to those who have experienced a physical migratory movement in their own lifetime

across cultures, whether or not they have self-consciously internalized the label “migrant” or “mohajer” as an overt part of their multi-faceted identity. So, reflecting back, I can see that I have been a migrant or mohajer all along, but not in the narrower sense of a physical experience, but in a broader, multi-faceted, always ongoing and never-ending feeling of not belonging entirely to one culture, perspective, ideology, political viewpoint, etc., and being (or trying to always be) *on the move*.

For the above reasons, I fully concur with the apt introductory conclusion of the co-editors Jones and Mielants that issues explored by various contributors herein have much wider significance and implications than its regional focus on Latin America and the Caribbean may suggest. They made me also to realize what a mohajer I have been and continue to be all along, and could not envision any other state of being, subjectively speaking, more appropriate for a humanity that thirsts for integration and unity amid the violences of artificial fragmentations and static identity attachments inherited from the past.