# Migration Studies and Social Theory: Problematizing Ontologies; De-Centering Migration

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## Certainties unearthed: lessons on migration?

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**Abstract**: In "The Dawn of Everything," David Graeber and David Wengrow (2021) unearth certainties held regarding the social evolution of humankind, which supposedly began with the Neolithic revolution and – following a linear trajectory – resulted in modern state-building. The book is not about migration at all by its making, and yet mobility plays a vital part in the authors' account. It imparts two vital lessons to migration research. The first concerns the role and function of migration as such. The second concerns the role of schismogenesis. Both conceptualizations are not new to migration studies, but they emphasize essential insights. By applying both concepts, migration as freedom and schismogenesis, to my own research project, I will attempt to dismantle the notion of the migrant subject.

## Introduction

The work of an anthropologist and an archaeologist examining humankind during prehistoric times is not the kind of study that imposes itself on someone looking to engage with reflexive migration research. In fact, the book is not even about migration. Yet, or because of it, it paradigmatically de-centers it. [1] Most importantly, however, "The Dawn of Everything" by David Graeber and David Wengrow unrattles presumed certainties about social evolution and humans' social order and political organization throughout the past. Therefore, it is relevant to our current understanding and sense-making of social relations, dynamics, and systems, especially when attempting to question them in a (self-)reflective manner.

Graeber and Wengrow dismantle the widely held myth of social evolution moving from anarchic foragers and nomads into sedentary farmers, a development that was thought to necessitate the formation of stratified polities and states eventually, implying a correlation between population size and social complexity with structures of hierarchy and domination. In contrast to any Neolithic revolution instigating such a trajectory, social organization of humankind before and afterward took the shape of various top-down or bottom-up,

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[1] Andreas Wimmer and Nina Glick Schiller, both with backgrounds in anthropology, in their now-classic critique of methodological nationalism (Wimmer and Glick Schiller, 2002), point out the reluctance of anthropology (at least in France) to turn migration research into a sub-discipline of its own.

egalitarian or hierarchic, autonomous or authoritarian systems, sometimes even shifting between them seasonally. Some social units experimented with one system, such as an elite-driven stratified regime, only to substitute it with an egalitarian approach after a while. The point is, rather than being bound to follow rule-like trajectories of social dynamics, people have always been aware of political organization and alternatives to political organization, making them agents of social change, no matter the intended or unintended consequences.

As such, disregarding the critique and discussion of their work (e.g., Appadurai, 2022; Feinman, 2022; Morris, 2022; Scheidel, 2022; Smith, 2022) or by means of applying the principle of charity, I want to engage with two main aspects of Graeber and Wengrow's work and question their relevance for migration research. These aspects are certain forms of freedom ascribed to human living throughout history and (cultural) schismogenesis as an essential culture-defining property.

I intend to apply these notions to my own research, for which I conducted interviews with Zimbabwean migrants in South Africa (Kögel, 2024).


**Migration as the embodiment of freedom**

Among different civilizations throughout different times and places, David Graeber and David Wengrow (2021) identify three kinds of freedom: the freedom to move away/relocate, the freedom to disobey, and the freedom to reorganize social relations or build new social worlds. The freedoms to disobey and to reorganize often lead to and essentially converge with the first, the freedom to move away, which we may call migration. In this regard, the authors speak of social movements, where movement still contains its physical dimensions. These freedoms were lost among "modern" civilizations or undermined by the modern territorialized nation state.[2] The freedom to relocate (unless one moves to some vacated space of land) entails and presupposes "norms of hospitality and asylum, civility, and shelter" (Graeber and Wengrow, 2021: 520).

Freedoms are often taken for granted, to the extent that migrating is not seen as something special but something very ordinary. While these freedoms may have been lost as simple certainties, we can still identify, if not residuals, parallels, or their telling absence.

*Freedom of movement*

In terms of the first freedom, there is a significant association with my research participants in that they did not identify as migrants. There is no consciousness of doing something outside the ordinary. One simply relocates their current place of residence. Nothing that would classify them as a "migrant." In fact, none of my interviewees used the term "migrant." Instead, labels such as "immigrant" and "foreigner" were used. However, "immigrant" was not employed as a term of affirmative self-description or self-identification. It was used only in the context of describing the challenges and adversity faced in their place

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[2] Whether one has gained other forms or types of freedom in exchange, as Hegel and others have argued, is not the focus of discussion here.

of residence. Consequently, none of them said anything like "I am an immigrant" or "I as an immigrant." Instead, they used formulations such as "when you are an immigrant."[3] "Immigrant" seems to carry unfavourable connotations. "Foreigner" is viewed even as an outright derogatory term. Hence, phrases like "us, who they call foreigners" are used, ensuring a distinction from that category. This may indicate that moving is not seen as constitutive, and there is no "migrant" subjectivity.

While one may feel free to move, it is not freedom in an objective sense, as state authorities decide and control movement, at least across borders.

*Freedom to disobey*

Deviance appears within my interviewees' accounts. That may be in bending or ignoring legal and physical boundaries in terms of trespassing or lack of official documents and permits. It may also be uttered in defiance, for example, in the case of the expiry or non-prolongation of the special dispensation visa many migrants held: "we won't go anywhere," or declaring that "we can cycle back" in contrast to migrants from abroad. This, however, must not be read as a freedom to disobey. If it were a freedom, disobedience would be sanctioned. In this case, deviance would be penalized. Hence, you can be free to exercise the freedom to disobey, but it is not a socially sanctioned form of freedom; there is no right to deviance. Breaking the law can have severe consequences such as detainment or deportation.

*Freedom to build new social worlds*

To build a new, alternative social order or formation, migrating first to another place used to be the way. This obviously has become obsolete in times where every inch of territory has been assigned to a sovereign nation state. Certainly, new social relations are made; there has also been a range of migrant NGOs. Otherwise, often the lack of any organized political community has been lamented. Movements to rebuild social life in particular areas have existed and been successful in South Africa. They naturally encompass all residents, hence also migrants, but it is not an explicitly migrant-driven endeavour.

For Graeber and Wengrow (2021: 520), the loss of the first freedom, to move away from one's residence, means the loss of the second freedom, to disobey. The third freedom, building new social formations or orders, however, rests on the previous ones. Consequently, the freedom to move may be seen as the most pivotal freedom of past humankind. While the freedom of migration certainly has been stressed and continues to be, Graeber and Wengrow's insights put gravity on this argument that can hardly be overstated.


**Schismogenesis**

As a main driver of social evolution, the authors identify schismogenesis, the development of division among people by means of friction and separation between its groups. Originally, schismogenesis was used to describe mutual tendencies of developments of groups within

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[3] The generic "you" serves as an indicator for self-distancing (Orvell et al., 2017).

the same cultural group by Gregory Bateson (1935; 1936).[4] Graeber and Wengrow detect it as having been at play between different, usually neighbouring culture groups or "culture areas," in order to explain various developments, such as the refusal of one group to adopt physical or social technologies from other groups, as other explanations, such as instrumental rationality or geographical factors, simply lack explanatory potential.

Graeber and Wengrow see schismogenesis as having played itself out throughout history, for example, between upland and lowland foragers of the Fertile Crescent (10,000 and 8000 BC), between foragers along the Pacific coast of North America (1800 BC), between historic Athens and Sparta (500-400 BC), between highland Teotihuacan and the lowland Maya (12th century), between French colonists and the Wendat people (17th century), and between hill people and valley societies in Southeast Asia (until the 20th century). The most detailed account they provide is the cultural difference between residents of California and the Northwest Coast. These two groups could hardly have been any more different in relation to each other, leading the authors to state that schismogenesis "appears to have affected everything from the configuration of households, law, ritual, and art to conceptions of what it meant to be an admirable human being, and was most evident in contrasting attitudes to work, food, and material wealth" (Graeber and Wengrow, 2021: 207).

Back in the 1930s, Bateson noticed that "the nations of Europe are far advanced in symmetrical schismogenesis and are ready to fly at each other's throats" (Bateson, 1935: 182). For our times, Graeber and Wengrow (2021: 58) state the following:

> "If 'national character' can really be said to exist, it can only be as a result of such schismogenetic processes: English people trying to become as little as possible like the French, French people as little like Germans, and so on. If nothing else, they will all definitely exaggerate their differences in arguing with one another."

In my study, Zimbabweans pretty much define themselves vis-à-vis South Africans, rendering a self-description of Zimbabweans as hardworking, educated, humble, determined, peaceful, and empowered people. By that, what Zimbabwean denotes differs, for example, to Zimbabweans in the UK or Zimbabweans in Zimbabwe, giving rise to the thought that nationality actually operates as a floating signifier.

Given that, as mentioned above, social world-building is subject to the sovereignty of the nation states, the form of schismogenesis facilitated is not invested in cultural differentiation but in the fixation of national difference.

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[4] Bateson, in fact, conceptualized two kinds of schismogenesis: symmetrical and complementary schismogenesis. Bateson's example for the first is the boasting of two groups that enforces more boasting behaviour on both sides. The latter refers to assertive behaviours of one group that are met by submissive behaviour of the other and again to reinforcing repetitions, which can be seen either among sex groups or the relation of novices and initiators. Furthermore, for Bateson (1936), schismogenesis can appear between groups as well as between or even within individuals.

**Lessons? Questions!**

Mobility, as conceptualized by Graeber and Wengrow, used to be not only the default option of former societies, as has been pointed out repeatedly by now, but it denoted a bundle of socially sanctioned types of freedom; it was a necessity for human evolution and social/cultural survival. Basically, it was what we would like to call a "postmigrant" society, or an "antemigrant" society, as "the migrant" simply did not exist. Migration was not found to be a thing, never mind a problem, while it simply occurred.

Graeber and Wengrow put into perspective the very short time of political orders we have been accustomed to, and which we experience as universal (the democratic nation state). In fact, migration in its form as a problematized topos is even of a more recent nature. At the beginning of the 20th century, passports and visas, which had partly been introduced, were abandoned, and the first studies on the topic of migration did not differentiate between intra- and international migration and apparently saw no necessity in doing so (Wimmer and Glick Schiller, 2002).

The ideas of schismogenesis and the freedoms outlined by Graeber and Wengrow are not new. However, if we take their significance for past and present humankind seriously, we may pose some questions to (de-centering) migration research.

➔ Question 1: What does the impossibility of the freedoms described mean for our times and lives?
   • Do we need to declare migrating/mobility a human right?
   • Would that change anything, as we know that human rights that undermine the nation state's sovereignty have dim prospects?[5]

➔ Question 2: If we take schismogenesis as a cultural constant of the importance outlined by Graeber and Wengrow, what form does it take in times of the modern nation state, especially within the nation state?

   Often enough there have been instances of nationalism, xenophobia, civil war, or genocide. In my own research, I detected nationality as a cultural tool and strategic means, subversive to national politics, used in order to articulate legitimate political claims.

*On the migrant subject*

Migrant subjects or subjectivities, produced in modern times—especially in the 20th century and also by the social sciences (Wimmer and Glick Schiller, 2002)—have become problematized by the system of territorial nation states.

➔ Question 3: Is the proclamation of the "post-migrant" state or society (Yildiz and Hill, 2014; Hill and Yildiz, 2018; Foroutan, 2019) helpful as long as that very system remains unchanged?

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[5] Taking mobility as a human right already meets its boundaries in its problematic and ambiguous character in the non-Western world.

A post-migrant society can/should not scrutinize migrants, but the nation state keeps on producing them. Must we then treat the "post-migrant" society as a Wittgensteinian ladder?

➔ Question 4: Do migration studies (in order to be a self-reflective discipline) need to abandon the "migrant" as a (research) subject?

Migrant research reifies the migrant as a subject. The "migrant" features as a deficient figure (vis-à-vis the non-migrant, local, native, autochthonous, citizen) and as a non-figure of self-identification. "Migrant" can be regarded as a label with negative connotations and refused as a term for self-description. Problematic terms (labels such as "migrant") tend to have no direct opposites (the "non-migrant" at best features in academic texts) or are coupled with faulty opposites (like "citizen").[6]

A cursory solution may be to highlight the "migrant" as an analytical term. In this regard, the normalization of the problematization of migration as the atypical aberration of the norm allows for an analogy to the case of disability. Hereby the term "dis/ability" has been introduced as a split term (e.g. Goodley 2014: xiii; 2018). It emphasizes the co-construction of both antipodes, ability and disability, as well as their nature as social constructions, including its critique of its binarity.[7] Analogously, we may speak of "mi/grants." Engaging in some terminological gymnastics, we can think of those whose residence at a place (or country) is taken for granted/given[8], and the ones whose residence is less ("minus"/ "minor") taken for granted, mi-grants. They are not regarded as "not requiring proof," but the opposite. The character of the social construction of the "mi/grant" hence would be made immediately apparent while rendering its "constitutive outside" (Hall, 1996: 3) visible. Used as an analytical term, it escapes the reifying consequences of the commonly used term.

Eventually, however, the aim should be to abandon the notion of the migrant altogether. The problem—not to get me wrong—is not to abandon the study of migration but to get rid of its reifying practices and concepts. Just as I play football but am not a "football player," and football is something we can study, in the same way, I may have migrated without being a "migrant," and the phenomenon of migration is just another social reality that can be researched.[9]

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[6] One can consider alternative terms. In contrast to the "alcoholic" (instead of the "non-alcoholic"), there is the "healthy," where "the healthy" is supposed to be coupled with "the sick." The "criminal" (rather than "non-criminal") is opposed to the law-abiding citizen, where "citizen" suggests different opposites ("foreigner"). Even though the term "migrant" may be used in an analytical, normatively neutral manner, it still resembles something like the "healthy diabetic" or the "functioning alcoholic".

[7] However, in the case of dis/ability, Gregor Wolbring (2006; 2017) points out that what is needed is to differentiate the discourse of body and social impairment, which both conflate in the semantics of disability.

[8] "Grant" derives from the Latin "credentem", the present participle of "credere" (to believe, to trust). To take something for granted means to "regard as not requiring proof" (Online Etymology Dictionary, 2023).

[9] Normally, an activity only becomes subjectified either when it has been performed professionally (hence someone is still addressed as "the football player" even though one's professional career lies in the past), or one has achieved something outstanding that is being remembered and associated with that person, such as having invented the light bulb or having climbed Mount Everest for the first time. Since migrating is and should be treated as a rather ordinary thing, "the migrant" does not qualify for such particular status.

## Conclusion: The paradox of de-centering migration

Reading migration through the work of David Graeber and David Wengrow, we can detect additional evidence for the commonplace nature of migration. Furthermore, we may view it as a cultural technique that has been utilized throughout human history. By granting migration a central place within our social world, we thereby rid migration of its particular notion and open it up to a broader sociological and interdisciplinary context. In its wake, I have tried to argue that the migrant needs to lose his/her status as a subject (not as an autonomy-equipped and socially addressed and responsible individual, but as a (speaker) position that receives its legitimacy only through contextualization within a migration background). As disciplinary change often proceeds slowly, a theoretical concept of the "mi/grant" is suggested as a cursory and transitional solution.

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