

Preface

A Plea for Cultural Histories of Migration as Seen from a So-called 'Euro-region'

The Centre for the History of Intercultural Relations (CHIR), which organised the conference of which this book is the outcome, is composed of researchers belonging to different faculties and departments: cultural history, history of education and historical and comparative literature. This group is strongly convinced of the idea that an interdisciplinary approach is particularly useful, if not indispensable, for the understanding of the interrelated character of many cultural attitudes and practices of migrants or towards migrants, especially in border regions. Several PhD students, postdocs and many MA students are actually working along these lines in Kortrijk and in Leuven. The results of the research projects concerned are already available in different publications, including this book.

Within one of their current research projects, migration, mainly during the nineteenth century, functions as an exemplary field for the study of intercultural relations. This is, of course, not by accident. On the one hand, Kortrijk is situated within the Euro-region of Lille, and functions today as a potential meeting place for cultural interchange between Flanders, Wallonia, and Northern France. On the other hand, the second half of the nineteenth century witnessed an exceptionally high level of migration from Belgium, and especially from Flanders, towards Northern France.

Within the existing historical literature, this phenomenon is generally perceived as a 'smooth' migration – a viewpoint that, in our opinion, has to be qualified and contextualised in light of an analytical background in reference to contemporary theories of 'intercultural' or 'hybrid' identities. Our research project aims at the historical reconstruction and interpretation of intercultural identities being developed in Belgian migrant culture in Northern France. The latter process, initiated by a specific source culture and directed towards a specific target culture, was mainly steered by social and economic constraints, and followed different time paths, such as seasonal migration versus long-term settlement. In our programme, migrant culture is understood as a long-term settlement, resulting in a multifarious and heterogeneous communication system that develops flexible and changing relations with both its source and target cultures. It should therefore be carefully distinguished

from the origin, forms and structure of the migration process itself. More specifically, the project focuses on parameters of the communication process such as: participants (authors, readers, institutions, associations), codes (language, literature, painting, social life), media (newspapers, museums), and products (literary texts, paintings, educational curricula, textbooks). The underlying presupposition here is that the reconstruction of these parameters and the study of their interplay will enable the understanding of the construction and evolution of intercultural identity (or identities) with regard to the Belgian migrants in Northern France during the second half of the nineteenth century.

The search for more appropriate historical concepts and theoretical constructs was certainly one of the incentives for the organisation of this international, i.e. 'comparative-oriented' conference, focusing on the understanding of interacting forms and contexts of intercultural identity construction in border regions. As far as our research is concerned, expertise in other cultural areas, such as in colonial and postcolonial settings, has already been developed in previous projects. In any case, our research programme is fully interdisciplinary, since cultures, including migrant cultures, are made up by numerous types of human behaviour, such as architecture, religious and social rituals, art, gatherings in associations, clothing, language, etc., all of them being embedded in corresponding cultural institutions. Therefore, a number of specific objects and their corresponding institutions are studied in their relation with the central theme: verbal culture, including artistic products such as songs and short stories, artistic (visual and musical) culture, associative culture, and school culture. The development of national identities implies the construction and use of national (hi)stories. Such identities, linked to the rise of modern nation states, were developed by means of a national culture which was to a large extent a historical culture, and thus by means of the creation and promotion of national stories. The study of hybrid identities and the specific problems of identity within a given migrant community therefore has to take into account its dealings with the past.

The attention for the phenomena of migration and mobility has become conspicuous in many scholarly disciplines, such as sociology, history, economy, political studies, cross-cultural psychology, media studies, comparative linguistics, cultural studies, discourse analysis, literary studies and a few more. These disciplines have, in a rather short period of time, produced a large array of studies, including theories, dealing with different aspects of migration. In addition, several of these disciplines try to encompass more than one disciplinary angle and to go beyond their traditional scientific habitat, which often results in fruitful encounters and enduring exchanges with other disciplines. This is no

doubt an enjoyable evolution, and indicates the multilayered and complex character of the migration process in all its aspects.

Consequently, migration is a rich and controversial field of study, with considerable relevance for current political, sociological, and media debates. In a globalised world, characterised by increasing cultural diversity and societal complexity, discussions about migration, integration, assimilation and (inter)cultural identity, call for a nuanced and in-depth discussion of the way in which people with different cultural backgrounds (try and have to) live together and shape their cultural self-understanding. As illustrated by a brief evocation of the research taking place within the CHIR, a comprehensive and thorough insight in these matters asks for a study of their long term development, and thus for a multifaceted historical perspective. The acknowledgement of this necessity forms the starting point and scientific backbone of this book.

Although the historical study of migration is not new, thus far most of the traditional research that has taken place has focused on the economic, sociological or structural dimensions of the migration process, while scant attention has been given to its cultural implications. This striking neglect obviously ignores many of the most crucial aspects of the experience of cultural transition inherent in migratory movements, not in the least as seen from the perspective of the migrants themselves. Consequently, a rightful place for the cultural dimensions of the migration process and the way they relate to intercultural identity construction and its corresponding cultural expression and embedding, is called for.

This focus on cultural aspects of migration not only provides a necessary contribution to migration history, but also to cultural history. Like many other fields of history, cultural history has been studied mostly within national frameworks, in which national cultures and cultural homogeneity function as basic notions. Even the focus on cultural transfer, including the idea of reciprocity, has not undermined the reign of the national, even though the increasingly hybrid character cultural reality poses new and unforeseen challenges. A profound analysis of cultural production and exchange in a context of migration reveals the complexity of cultures, as being essentially layered, hybrid and in constant transition.

In search of a better understanding of both migration and the contribution of migration to culture, in the context of this book special attention is given to border regions, as cultural crossroads par excellence and privileged places of migrant settlement, implying a particular and exemplary emphasis on the relation between (relatively) short distance migration and the corresponding intercultural identities. At the same time, though, the concepts of 'border', 'frontier' and 'boundary' also have a powerful social, mental or metaphorical significance in the

context of cultural transition and intercultural identity, opening up a whole range of scientific explorations in migration studies that transcend the strict geographical or geopolitical connotations of these terms. In addition, these varying demarcations can shift in cultural significance, meaning, or connotation with the consecutive generations of migrants concerned.

The present book is the outcome of an international conference (with two conference languages: English and French) organised in Kortrijk from May 27 to May 29, 2010, on migration and intercultural identities in relation to border regions. As mentioned before, the initiative for this conference was taken by an interdisciplinary research group on the history of intercultural relations (CHIR), located at the Kortrijk campus of the KU Leuven, where the conference took place. The conference itself brought together more than seventy scholars from twelve countries. Its central topic was reflected in three main angles of approach within history (cultural history, literary history, and educational history). In view of these angles, a geographically and thematically balanced programme has been elaborated. Next to the four keynotes, sixty-one papers were selected and divided into several thematic sections, including both theoretical perspectives and specific studies concerning topics such as: migration and identity formation; migration and education; migration and cultural exchange; migration, borders, and spaces; migration, literature, and borders; migration and language; migration and memory; literature and migration; and more specific historical case studies, e.g. Belgian migration in Northern France. Self-evidently, it was not possible to select all these contributions for publication. What follows is a selection of 17 articles, representing the main issues raised at the conference. The first three chapters deal with reflections of a more theoretical or general kind in relation to migration and cultural identity, with relevance for a great number of domains, even though they originate from a particular disciplinary stance. In this regard, they can also be conceived as 'introductory chapters'. In the second part a variety of issues is addressed in the context of the relation between nation and identity. Part 3 brings together some papers specifically dealing with migration and its consequences as such, while Part 4 focuses primarily on the aspect of borders. In a last part, the dimension of interculturality is the central object of attention.

We hope that this book may inspire future research in the history of intercultural relationships and, indeed, lead towards a better understanding of the phenomenon of migration.

*Elie Declercq, Walter Kusters, Saartje Vanden Borre,
Marc Depaepe, Lieven D'hulst, Dagmar Vandebosch, Tom Verschaffel*