

Immigrants are stealing your culture... but not in the way you think

- Sulin Sardoschau, on “International Migration and the Diffusion of Culture”, *Humboldt University, Germany*

When talking about migration and cultural change, the first thing that comes to mind is the cultural dynamics triggered by immigration into the receiving countries. Statements such as “Immigration is a threat to Western values” summarize a recurring theme among right-wing nationalists, ranging from outright conspiracy theories of a Great Replacement to milder calls for the protection of the besieged native culture and its values¹. Various versions of this argument have made their way into mainstream politics. The Hungarian Prime Minister Orban expressed in a speech in 2018 that “We must state that we do not want to be diverse [...] We do not want our own color, traditions, and national culture to be mixed with those of others.” Just a few months later, former US President Trump reaffirmed this concern, saying that European leaders should “better watch themselves” because immigration was “changing the culture” of their societies². Similar cautionary tales are also brought forth by prominent scholars such as George Borjas and

Paul Collier, who argue that immigrants could import “bad institutions” from their origin countries into the receiving countries. They see such epidemiological effects as a negative migration externality that they consider to be overlooked by their fellow researchers.

While the focus on receiving countries is important and can yield valuable insights, other compositional and dynamic effects can also govern migration-based cultural change. In a recent study (Rapoport et al., 2020), we investigate whether migration makes countries culturally more similar. The novelty of our approach is that we look at the effect of migration on cultural dynamics in both sending and receiving countries. This allows us to shed light on the main diffusion mechanisms at work.



Sulin Sardoschau is Assistant Professor at the Department of Economics at Humboldt University in Berlin. Her research interests are in international migration, political economy, and development economics. She holds a PhD in Economics from the Paris School of Economics and worked as a researcher in the Department of Economics at Harvard University in 2015-16. She is a fellow at the Institut Convergences Migrations and the Berlin Centre for Empirical Research on Migration and Integration (BIM).

Contact:
sulin.sardoschau@hu-berlin.de

¹ In Western countries, proponents of the Great Replacement or white genocide argue that white Christian populations are being deliberately replaced through immigration. The term “Grand Replacement” was coined by French writer Renaud Camus in 2010 to describe the alleged substitution of native European populations by non-European immigrants. On March 15th 2019, a terrorist attacked two mosques in Christchurch, New Zealand, after publishing a manifesto titled *The Great Replacement*.

² Prime Minister Viktor Orban’s speech at the annual general meeting of the Association of Cities with County Rights, February 8th 2018, Veszprem and President Donald Trump at Chequers in Aylesbury, England, on July 13th 2018.

Theorizing migration-driven cultural change

In the theoretical part of our work, we incorporate the receiving country's perspective – *What happens to the host country's culture when migrants of various cultural composition enter the country?* – as well as the sending country's perspective – *Why do people with different cultural preferences emigrate and how do they impact the cultural dynamics in their home countries?*

Migration affects cultural similarity through short-term, compositional effects, and through the dynamic diffusion of values and norms in the medium and long term

We start with a compositional model of migration. This means that, in a first step, we only consider the direct effect of migration on culture looking at it as a snapshot and disregarding all dynamic diffusion effects. We identify two compositional mechanisms, which materialize in the short-term:

1. *Cultural selection*. Migrants are typically not a representative sample of the origin population but they can be selected along various dimensions (age, gender, education), including cultural preferences or norms. If we believe that individuals like to be surrounded by people with similar values, then the immigrant pool is culturally more similar to the destination countries' population than the average person in their origin

country (e.g., cultural selection). As a result, when these "selected" migrants leave, the destination and origin country become more culturally distant. Greater cultural selection would lead to higher cultural divergence between countries.

2. *Cultural mixing*. Even if migrants are culturally selected, they could still be quite different from the destination country's population. Cultural mixing is similar to the melting pot idea: immigration leads to a potpourri of different preferences, norms, and values. Almost mechanically, immigrants from a specific origin country will make the destination and origin country more culturally similar (i.e., cultural convergence).

These short-term mechanisms are simple and intuitive. However, the effect of migration does not stop there. There are multiple other channels through which migrants can gradually alter the cultural dynamics in both sending and receiving countries in the medium and long term:

3. *Cultural assimilation*. Over time, immigrants may absorb the values and norms around them and become more similar to the host country population. Migrants' assimilation would make the destination and origin country more culturally dissimilar.

4. *Cultural dissemination*. Not only immigrants can adopt local norms, but the reverse may also be true. Natives can observe the preferences and norms of immigrants and start emulating those. If natives learn from immigrants, then the origin and destination countries would become more culturally similar over time.

5. *Cultural remittances*. Migrants are not cut-off from their origin countries

Our unified theory generates testable predictions, which allow eliciting the dominant mechanisms at work

after they move. They remain a vital part in the community, influencing the cultural formation in their origin countries well after they have left. Cultural remittances refer to the values and norms that immigrants absorb at destination and send back to their home communities, thereby bridging the cultural gap between home and host country. While cultural assimilation and dissemination unfold in the destination country, cultural remittances are a transnational system that connects immigrants to their home communities.

Although a classical empirical analysis would allow us to test whether migration makes sending and receiving countries culturally more distant or more similar, it would not allow us to elicit why this is the case. Combining competing mechanisms in a unified theory is essential to identify the conditions under which cultural convergence and divergence are likely to occur and test those empirically. Firstly, we can distinguish between static and dynamic forces. On the one hand, the compositional model describes the static relationship between “cultural distance” and the size of immigration in a given period. On the other hand, the dynamic model predicts that cultural distance responds to past changes in the size of immigration with some lags. Secondly, once we have established whether migration-driven cultural change is dominantly static or dynamic, we can start to investigate the respective mechanisms. In particular, focusing on the dynamic model, our theory predicts that a culturally more selected migrant pool – i.e., emigrants being more similar to the culture of the receiving country – decreases cultural convergence under the dissemination channel and increases cultural convergence under the remittances channel. This is rather intuitive since migrants that are more similar to the host population are less likely to spread norms and

values from their home countries to natives (i.e., dissemination). Conversely, migrants that are very similar to their destination countries are more likely to promote the destination country’s values at home (i.e., remittances), thereby pulling the origin towards the destination country’s culture.

Bringing theory to data

In order to test the predictions of our model, we first construct several indices of cultural distance for thousands of country pairs. We use data from the World Value Survey (WVS) covering the 1981-2014 period. We do not make a deliberate choice on the cultural dimensions to be included. Instead, we choose all questions that were asked consistently (same framing and scale) across all WVS waves and were available for the maximum number of countries. We end up with the following five dimensions:

Values that parents want to transmit to their children. Set of questions about independence, hard work, feeling of responsibility, imagination, tolerance, thrift, determination, religiosity, imagination, unselfishness, obedience, self-expression.

Gender equality. Opinions on assertions such as: “When jobs are scarce, men should have more right to a job than women”; “Being a housewife is just as fulfilling as working for pay”; “On the whole, men make better political leaders than women”; “A university education is more important for a boy than for a girl”.

Priorities in life. Set of questions about family, friends, leisure time, work, religion, and politics.

Generalized trust. Set of questions such as: “Generally speaking, would you say that most people can be trusted or that you need to be very careful in dealing with people?”.

Control over life. Set of questions such as: “How much freedom of choice and control you feel you have over the way your life turns out?”.

Overall, our empirical analysis establishes that migration increases cultural similarity between the destination and the origin country (see Figure 1). The migration-based cultural convergence findings is highly robust to the choice of cultural similarity indices. As mentioned before, this result is in line with

three different mechanisms: cultural mixing, cultural dissemination, and cultural remittances.

Then, we examine whether this cultural convergence happens statically or dynamically. This way we can rule out whether the convergence is driven by cultural mixing, as predicted by our compositional model, or by the mechanisms underlying the dynamic model. We assess the compositional model in different ways and find that convergence unravels over the longer-run. Similarly, even if we exclude immigrants respondents when constructing the indexes we still find cultural convergence. We take these results as evidence that cultural mixing is not the driver behind cultural convergence.

Finally, we examine the dynamic forces and exploit that our theory yields opposing predictions for the dissemination and the remittances channels: a more culturally selected migrant pool would decrease convergence under the dissemination channel and increase convergence under the remittances

Overall, international migration increases cultural similarity between sending and receiving countries

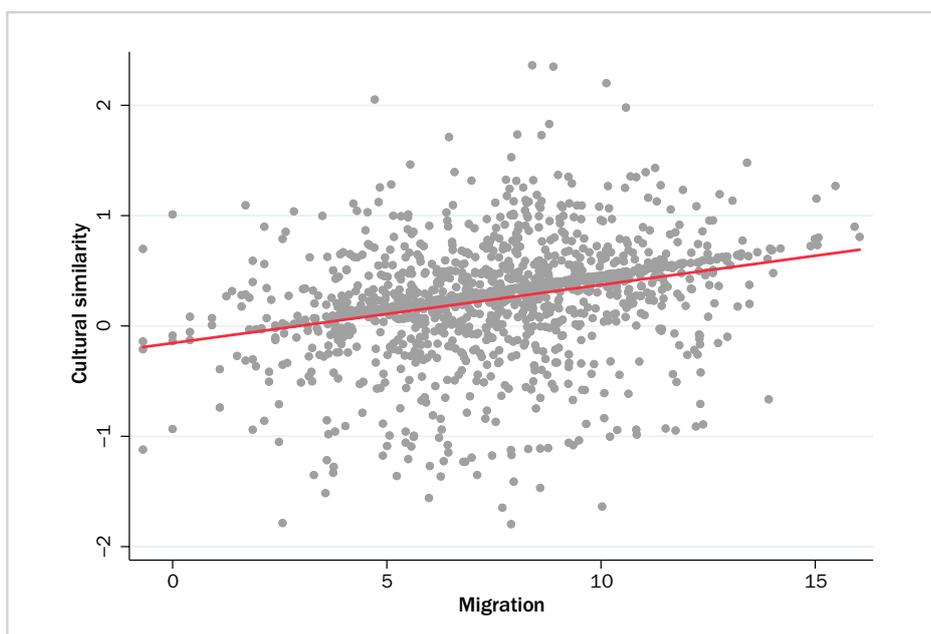


Figure 1:
Log of bilateral migration and Education cultural similarity

Note : The figure displays the relationship between migration and cultural similarity between over 6,000 country pairs. The Y axis represents the Euclidean cultural similarity between origin and destination countries, and the X-axis is the log of the migrant stock from origin to destination. We see a positive relationship between migration and cultural similarity. The figure plots the predicted values from our model, which includes country-time and bilateral fixed effects, and bilateral time-varying controls (trade, GDP gap).

Overall, migration driven cultural similarity is governed by transfers of norms and value from destination to origin

channel. We take these predictions to the data by looking at cultural selection at the individual and at the country level. In particular, we use different subsets of migrants (skilled versus unskilled) and subsets of countries with specific characteristics (economic distance and initial cultural similarity) which can tell us something about the cultural composition of the migrant pool. We find that cultural convergence is greater when cultural selection increases, which provides evidence for the cultural remittances rather than the cultural dissemination channel.

In sum, our work takes seriously the various competing mechanisms that can drive migration-based cultural change and brings them together in a

unified theory. Formalizing the different intuitions in a theoretical model not only illuminates the underlying assumptions behind the oftentimes heated debate around migration and cultural change but it also provides clear and testable predictions that we can take to the data. We find that migrants are agents of cultural change but the much cited dilution of Western culture through immigration seems to play a minor role in comparison to the promoting force that migrants play in the diffusion of the destination country's culture. Immigrants "steal" the destination country's culture without taking away from it. On the contrary, they send these norms and values back to their home communities, inspiring cultural change there.

Based on

Rapoport, Hillel, Sulin Sardoschau, and Arthur Silve (2020). "Migration and Cultural Change." CESifo Working Paper 8547, CESifo: Munich.

References

Bisin, Alberto and Thierry A. Verdier. (2000). "Beyond the melting pot: Cultural transmission, marriage, and the evolution of ethnic and religious traits." *Quarterly Journal of Economics*, 115(3), 955–88.

Borjas, George J. (2015). "Immigration and globalization: A review essay." *Journal of Economic Literature*, 53(4), 961–74.

Collier, Paul. (2013). "Exodus: How migration is changing our world." Oxford University Press.

Maystre, Nicolas, Olivier Jacques, Mathias Thoenig., and Thierry A. Verdier, T. (2014). "Product-based cultural change: Is the village global?" *Journal of International Economics*, 92(2), 212–30.

Olivier, Jacques, Mathias Thoenig, and Thierry A. Verdier. (2008). "Globalization and the dynamics of cultural identity". *Journal of International Economics*, 76(2), 356–70.