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# Learning from Past Displacements?<sup>1</sup> The History of Migrations between Historical Specificity, Presentism and Fractured Continuities

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“During the last decade it has become more than clear to historians working in the field of migration that this phenomenon has to be regarded as a normal and structural element of human societies throughout history.” (Lucassen and Lucassen 2005, p. 9)

## 1. Introduction

In 2015, more than 890,000 people arrived in the Federal Republic of Germany, seeking refuge and asylum. In the same year, another 846,000 EU citizens moved to Germany as well. Almost 600,000 people (non-German citizens) left the country within the same year.<sup>2</sup> However, media coverage mainly dealt with the group of refugees and asylum seekers—people mostly fleeing from theatres of war in Syria, Iraq and Afghanistan. Debates among Germans—pro and contra asylum—were concerned with a number of issues (and the list is not exhaustive): integration and assimilation, Islam and the Islamic State, terror, cultural difference, crime (sexual abuse in particular), reasons behind flight and migration, jobs and housing markets, escape conditions and death in the Mediterranean.

Discourse on flight and migration was by no means random. Expectations, prejudice and fears as much as aid built on past experiences (or, more precisely, on narratives of past experiences)—more recent and less recent ones. Germans, the media and politicians in particular, turned to history (and at times also to historians) in order to understand two things: (1) next to political, religious and economic aspects they became interested in historical reasons behind flight and mass migrations in the second decade of the twenty-first century; (2) they inquired into historical examples of migration, integration and/or assimilation. People from a great variety of social strata and with different educational backgrounds turned to ‘the past’ in order to understand the present.

However, can we understand present migrations through their historical ‘making’? Can we compare present migrations with other, past migrations? And what can we learn from this?

## 2. Early Modern Migrations (1500s to Late 1700s)

Before I tackle these questions in a more systematic way, I would like to start with a brief analysis of early modern migrations from and within Europe, which is my area of expertise as a historian. I will then use these in order to answer the questions as introduced in the previous paragraph.

<sup>1</sup> In following the editors of this special issue, I am opting for the term displacement in the title as it “allows for cross-historical perspectives” (Isayev and Jewell 2017). Throughout this paper, I will use the terms migration, refuge and asylum, sometimes interchangeably, which might “conflate” these terms. However, it is not always practicable to clearly distinguish between these phenomena in discourse (and practice). While—as analytical terms—they mean distinct phenomena, this is not the case with regard to (historical) migrations. See also text below, especially Section 3 and Lucassen and Lucassen (2005, pp. 10–17)

<sup>2</sup> (Federal Office for Migration and Refugees BAMF).

In the early modern period, people migrated for a number of reasons: wars (often causing temporary migrations (e.g., [Oltmer 2008](#)), natural catastrophes/disasters such as droughts or floods, earthquakes, climate change (“little ice age” between the early fifteenth and the nineteenth centuries, or the Dantean anomaly of 1309–1321 ([Cowie 2007](#); [Parker 2013](#); [Brown 2014](#), pp. 251–54), epidemic plagues, scarcity of food and land, overpopulation, better economic opportunities elsewhere and persecution (more often than not for religious reasons). One of the largest migrations of the early modern period was forced: between the sixteenth and the early nineteenth centuries Europeans deported more than 12 million slaves from Africa to the Caribbean and the Americas to supply the rising plantation systems (on the so-called Black Atlantic e.g., ([Gilroy 1995](#); [Heywood 2007](#); [Smallwood 2008](#)).

Within and from early modern Europe, mass displacements were often triggered by the persecution of the religious ‘other’. A common phenomenon since late antiquity, efforts to ‘purify’ state and society increased with the Reformation. The ‘body of the nation’ was to share one faith, it was not to be ‘contaminated’ ([Terpstra 2015](#), pp. 74–132) by the (religious and racial) ‘other’—it was supposed to be Christian and, after 1517, Catholic *or* Protestant. From the Reformation onwards, Christians not only persecuted and expelled Jews or Muslims, but Catholics and Protestants alike drove out Anabaptists (and later Mennonites), Protestants persecuted and expelled Catholics and vice versa.

With regard to Jews and Muslims, the early modern period saw a number of major periods of displacement, forced by state and church, or voluntarily—as staying would have resulted in forced mass conversions. In 1492, following the Spanish conquest of the Emirate of Granada, the last Muslim stronghold on the Iberian peninsula, the Alhambra Edict brought the expulsion of some 150,000 to 165,000 Sephardi Jews. Most of them went to Portugal, North Africa and more eastern parts of the Ottoman Empire ([Gerber 1994](#), pp. 115–44; [Benbassa and Rodrigue 2000](#), pp. 22–28).<sup>3</sup> Granada’s Muslims left in smaller numbers, as they were not immediately expelled from the territories of Isabella of Castile and Ferdinand of Aragon. Deportation, resettlement and—for many—expulsion followed between 1609 and 1614 when some estimated 270,000 to 300,000 Moors (the so-called Moriscos) were forcibly moved from their settlements ([Harvey 1990](#), pp. 331–35). In Portugal, mass conversion of Jews followed the Edict of Expulsion of 1497. From 1536, with the establishment of the Inquisition in Portugal, and from 1580, when Portugal came under the rule of Philipp II of Spain, larger waves of emigration followed. The Portuguese Jewish diaspora came into place. Many of these Sephardim re-settled in Bordeaux, Amsterdam, London, Hamburg and much of the forming Atlantic world ([Benbassa and Rodrigue 2000](#), pp. 28–52; [Lachenicht 2009](#), pp. 32–33).

Protestants persecuting Catholics and vice versa also entailed mass migration—as stated above. One of the largest occurred in France, that of French Protestants, Huguenots, first between the 1560s and 1629 and then from the late seventeenth century. In 1685, the Edict of Fontainebleau put an official end to Protestantism in France. This brought about the dispersion of 150,000 to 200,000 Huguenots (of 750,000 Huguenots in total; France had a population of 20 million people at the time). It confronted Europe with the need to accommodate refugees on a large scale ([Lachenicht 2010](#), p. 197).

Other, sizeable religious migrations happened in the period between 1568 and 1648 when some 60,000 to 150,000 Protestant Dutch left the Spanish Netherlands (with a total population of 3 million people), during the Dutch Revolt, to re-settle in the United Provinces, England, the Palatinate and Brandenburg-Prussia ([Esser 1996](#); [Janssen 2014](#), pp. 55–57). With the Peace of Westphalia in 1648, the emigration of Catholics and Protestants from German territories became more important as it solidified the *cuius regio, eius religio* and the *ius emigrandi* principle, already established with the Peace of Augsburg in 1555. This meant that a respective territory’s prince or an imperial city council decided on his/their and all his/their subjects’ Christian denomination. Those who were not willing to conform

<sup>3</sup> While some scholars estimate 100,000 to 165,000 Jewish exiles ([Israel 2002](#), pp. 5–6; [Swetschinski 2004](#), pp. 56–57), more recent research establishes the number of exiles at some 80,000 ([Terpstra 2015](#), p. 2).

had the right to leave the territory or imperial city. With re-catholicization in Bohemia the emigration of Protestants to Prussia and Saxony took shape (Schunka 2006, 2008). From the 1620s, English Puritans left England to re-settle in North America, followed by English Catholics in the 1630s and Presbyterians and Quakers from the 1650s onward (Bremer 1995; Garrett 2010; Hamm 2003). In the 1730s the Austrian Habsburgs and the Prince Bishop of Salzburg deported or expelled their crypto-Protestants from their territories (Wilson 2000; Walker 2000; Van Horn Melton 2008). Moravian brothers, the Herrnhuters, had to move from Saxony to Denmark, Sweden, the Netherlands and then onward to North America (Wellenreuther 2007). Between 1755 and 1763 Britain deported some 11,000 French Catholics from Acadia (today Nova Scotia) to purify its empire from the 'Catholic threat' (Hodson 2007, 2012).

Some of these refugee groups—from the more privileged estates and social strata—left escape accounts: refugees were able to flee with the help of trafficking gangs or illegal emigration networks—by sea on board vessels with the refugees often being packed in barrels or crates. Other escape routes led refugees on foot. Upon arrival in a place of refuge, they would be quartered in the households of the local population (for Huguenots see (Lachenicht 2010, pp. 69–80)). As with the Sephardi diaspora (Swetschinski 2004, p. 55), some of these refugees never found a permanent new home (Magdelaine 1985, pp. 26–37).

Would—and if so why—early modern states, empires, cities and provinces accommodate these refugees?

Studying early modern religious migrations in a comparative perspective (Lachenicht 2016a) shows that states, towns and cities, empires had specific motives for granting refugees asylum. One of the most important which comes up in many state and church-related sources of the sixteenth to the late eighteenth centuries is Christian charity. It was Christian duty to relieve distressed brethren—not solely but preferably of one's own denomination. It ordered European states and empires to also grant asylum to Jews despite wide-spread anti-Judaism in early modern Europe (Lachenicht 2016a). Other motives were much more utilitarian in character: demographic reasons (increasing the number of a prince's subjects), colonization and civilization schemes (often related to the former), economic, military and confessional reasons. Epidemics and wars, high mortality rates (for children and mothers in particular) caused time and again major population losses in many of the European states. Increasing the number of subjects was meant to make good these losses. Demographic growth, however, was also considered a value *per se*, manifesting the potential economic and military might of the early modern state and empire. Colonization, internal and external, within Europe and overseas, required colonists who more often than not were recruited among refugees or people from other countries willing to emigrate and populate the newly subdued territories in the Americas, Asia and—in the later eighteenth century—Australia and New Zealand. We find the same refugee groups in colonization schemes of a variety of European imperial states: Sephardi and Ashkenazi Jews in the British, Dutch, French and Russian empires, Huguenots within the Dutch, British and Russian empires, Moravians in the Dutch, British and Russian empires, Mennonites in the British, Dutch and Russian empires.

The accommodation of religious refugees was an important tool in the building of early modern empires. Colonization and the establishment of plantations were supposed to have a "civilizing" effect on indigenous peoples: in Ireland, Prussia and Russia or on the Balkans as much as in the Caribbean or the Americas. Economic reasons behind asylum and settlement privileges depended on a refugee group's reputation: some minorities such as Sephardi Jews were settled for their global networks of trade and commerce (Frijhoff 2002, pp. 27–52; Israel 1998, pp. 372, 655, 676, 1033; Kaplan 2002, p. 1; Po-Chia Hsia 2002, pp. 2–3). For Spain, Portugal, England, the Netherlands and France Sephardi or *converso* communities became 'agents and victims of empire' (Israel 2002, p. 1) who largely contributed through their networks to imperial and commercial structures as much as Quakers or Huguenots. Huguenots were also settled for their assumed knowledge in wine-growing, as well as the establishment of manufacturing and textiles (Lachenicht 2016b). Confessional reasons also motivated the settlement of religious refugees. Foreign Catholics or Protestants could increase the number of orthodox subjects: in Brandenburg-Prussia Dutch, Swiss and French Protestants were accommodated

to raise the number of Calvinist subjects. This was also the case in Ireland where a Catholic majority should have become (but never did) outnumbered by Protestant settlers who were to foster Ireland's loyalty to the British (Protestant) Empire. Settling refugees and migrants on the *frontier* of expanding early modern states and empires was meant to protect these frontiers against competing powers: in late sixteenth and throughout the seventeenth century, Protestant settlers in Irish provinces such as Munster and Ulster were to defend English plantations against the Catholic Irish (Canny 1987). The same was true for German Lutherans in Georgia whose settlements were built on the frontier against the Spanish and American Indians (Wilson 2000, pp. 217–19), Mennonites and Moravians did the same within the Russian Empire (Gestrich 2000, p. 90).

Utilitarian reasons and great expectations behind the accommodation of refugees and migrants often clashed with realities. More often than not they were not met—at least not in the first place. Christian charity had its limits if the refugees did not fulfil the prince's or city council's expectations (Lachenicht 2016a, pp. 265–66).

Early modern states, towns, cities and provinces were by no means willing to or capable of sustaining refugees or displaced people on a large scale. While church(es) and state(s) supported refugee groups with offertories, refugee communities (called “stranger communities”, “nations” or “refugee churches”) (Pettegree 1986, p. 23; Lachenicht 2010, pp. 206–9) had to organize poor relief, accommodation, job opportunities, education and many other things. In other words: early modern laws allowed refugees to settle within the confines of a given state or province of a city but made sure that entire groups were settled as corporations that had to care for themselves. These ethnic or religious enclaves often established their own administration, social aid and educational systems, sometimes their own jurisdiction, and at the *frontier* of empires sometimes their own militia. Stranger communities had to swear an oath to the monarch (or republic) and were responsible for their members' offences against the state's, province's, or city's laws (Lachenicht 2016a, pp. 272–76).

As many of these groups had been persecuted for their faith, the leaders of refugee communities—pastors, rabbis, imams, military leaders, social elites at large—tried to (re-)create communities with strong and orthodox belief systems, a high degree of endogamy, and educational systems, which were supposed to ensure the survival of what people might want to call group identity. At the same time, stranger communities aimed at naturalisation or denization. Many displaced people, however, did not adhere to these stranger communities but opted for what we would call today acculturation or integration strategies, through intermarriage with other groups, economic cooperation and adherence to other religious communities (Lachenicht 2014).

With regard to perceptions of the ‘other’ we find many migrant group stereotypes, prejudices and xenophobia—on the part of the hosting societies as well as on the part of migrants and refugees. Huguenot refugees in seventeenth century Brandenburg-Prussia thought of German Lutherans as “uncultured oafs”, as “stingy people”, while Huguenots in England described the English as “degenerated”, “unpatriotic” and “dishonourable”. The Irish were considered an “idle”, “papist” and “bigot nation”. Huguenots also shared anti-Jewish sentiments—as was common throughout the early modern period (Lachenicht 2010, pp. 231–34). In sixteenth century England, Francis Bacon considered French Protestants (so Huguenots) to be unpatriotic and incapable of developing patriotic feelings for the English nation (Yungblut 1996, p. 36), while all strangers in late sixteenth century London were held responsible for the rising prices for food and housing, vagrancy and the corruption of morals (Luu 1995, p. 160). We find the same fears in late seventeenth century Halle or Berlin (Lachenicht 2010, p. 243). At the same time, petitioners in London exhorted “aliens” (so foreigners) to intermarry with Englishmen and share their competencies as craftsmen with English people (Luu 1995, p. 160). Numbers of refugees in the City were often exaggerated, rumours about crime spread through City and country. At the same time, we find descriptions of migrants as “poor refugees” in need of aid and relief (Lachenicht 2010, p. 242).

### 3. Presentism, Historical Specificity and (Fractured) Continuities

Many of the above developments sound familiar—too familiar perhaps. The apparent familiarity of narratives of the past often provokes simplistic comparisons or equations. Themes such as reasons behind displacements and the accommodation of refugees/migrants, myths and expectations among refugees and hosting societies, flight conditions, legal status, integration and assimilation, mutual prejudice all seem to be the general, universal categories connected with flight and migrations. However, these are not early modern but twenty-first century—our contemporary—categories, which we use as a lens to consider past displacements.

This *presentism* or anachronistic use of current concepts has often been criticized as a primary “fallacy” of historical work. One of the general assumptions is that presentism serves to validate present-day beliefs and moral judgements and neglects or even ignores historical specificity (Fischer 1970, pp. 137, 139). With his concept of “radical historicity”, Michel Foucault went further and challenged the universality and teleologies of historical writing as much as the categories of analysis (Foucault 1994; more on this, see below). But can we do otherwise? Can we consider the past without using the lens of present concepts, present discourses?<sup>4</sup> In *Die anwesende Abwesenheit der Vergangenheit* Achim Landwehr suggests that we reflect on the “chronoferential” claims we make when establishing relations between the present and the past—when we project our present questions and categories into past times (Landwehr 2016, pp. 28–39). Landwehr reminds us to consider the diversity of opportunities of the present and the multitude of histories of the past, the plethora of *possible* histories. This requires us to ask why we look at certain aspects of the past (and why we neglect others) and how we look at them. We choose those histories (over others) by asking questions that, in the first place, have more to do with our present times than the past times we enquire into. This past no longer exists—it has elapsed, it is gone, it is no longer there (Landwehr 2016, pp. 32–33). Can we reconstruct “the remains of those traces, the habits, the manufacturing, the thinking, that is no longer present”? And how much “imagination” does the historian need? (Segatto 2017, p. 3) Past times, despite their absence, are present(ed) in a relational way: we constantly refer to them, we recontextualise material and immaterial objects from the past. We make claims about the past to understand our present times. The past and our relationship with it is a paradox (Landwehr 2016, pp. 40, 247).

Our inquiries into past times, as problematic as they might be, can bring about more reflexivity with regard to present times. This is what Landwehr and many other historians call “the critical potential of historical analysis” (Landwehr 2016, p. 248). Critical analysis comes with and produces uncertainties. Historical analysis understood this way does not produce or reinforce identities or certainties about present or past times (Landwehr 2016, p. 250). It triggers reflection with regard to the specificities of past and present times, with regard to (fractured) continuities, with regard to possibilities of what the past *could* have been about and what present times *could* be.

In projecting our contemporary categories on past flight and migrations and in comparing the latter to present-day displacements we might not only miss out on forgotten histories but also on historical specificity, on the radical historicity of past phenomena. Historical contexts—even more recent ones as evoked in Alessandro Petti’s text (Petti 2017, pp. 6–10)—hardly resemble present-day contexts, either with regard to political, legal, social, cultural or situational contexts or with regard to discourses—so how people thought and spoke about the world, how they constructed their realities (Landwehr 2008, p. 67). In terms of context, early modern Europe differed significantly from today: weak states with weak institutions, no constitutions, no legal equality, no legal security. Today, European legal contexts provide human rights (including the right to asylum), state constitutions,

<sup>4</sup> On discourse and historical discourse analysis see (Martschukat 2002, pp. 9–10; Landwehr 2008, pp. 65–78). Following Martschukat and Landwehr, I understand discourse as the thinkable, utterable and doable of/in historical situations/moments. Discourses thus always are also practices and vice versa.

legal equality and security as well as state institutions—depending on the European state we look into—responsible for the application of laws, social aid, healthcare, education and many other issues. While most European states include people from a variety of backgrounds, the legal framework of the constitutional state is supposed to guarantee each individual basic human rights, legal equality and safety, freedom of religion, freedom of thought and speech. These contexts, as much as the European Union's regulations and the UNHCR convention, provide a context for today's migrants and refugees arriving within the European Union that differs radically from past experiences. While some phenomena seem to allow comparisons or even equations—historical difference is the more important feature.

Despite historical specificity and/or the historicity of past displacements, the narrative on early modern religious migrations, as produced in section two, contains a number of issues that appear as 'fractured continuities'. By 'fractured continuities' I mean the products of individuals and groups who constantly relate themselves to past times, consciously or subconsciously—in other words as the product of a dynamic process of re-inscribing ourselves (also as historians or social scientists) into (historical and present-day) political, social, cultural, economic, environmental, situational contexts—as becomes also evident from Petti's text on refugee camps and how they are being compared to colonial and totalitarian contexts (Petti 2017, pp. 6–10).

Historical examples, comparisons—and terminology—are tricky. One of the most obvious examples of 'fractured continuities' comes with language, with the terms and concepts we choose. In using notions such as 'refugee', 'exile', 'displaced person', 'migrants' or 'asylum', people evoke a plethora of past migrations from Antiquity to the present day. Many of these notions are heavily loaded: with the term "refugee" both migrants and hosting societies might associate 'persecution', 'flight', 'rescue' or '(Christian) charity'—sometimes without a profound knowledge of the past displacements that have shaped these terms and the theological and ideological connotations that were once associated with them. As such, they (more often than not) subconsciously draw on the Jewish Diasporas as well as on other religious migrations—which are, however, different from modern ones. In some contexts today, the term 'migration' is associated with dehumanizing terms such as 'flood', 'crisis', 'spread', 'dispersal' or 'masses'. Depending on who uses these terms and for which purposes, the term 'migrant' can come across as profoundly negative: in Germany this is especially true for the term *Wirtschaftsmigrant* ('economic migrant') as it is associated with 'fortune seekers', 'profiteers' and 'adventurers' and seems to evoke individual and collective memories of some, not very well defined, but somehow perceived past experience. In the Canadian context of the 1930s and 1940s the term 'refugee' had negative connotations, while the term 'migrant' was associated with people who would enrich the young 'nation'. Again, vague 'memories of the past' had intense repercussions on expectations with regard to 'refugees' or 'migrants'.

However, these 'fractured continuities'—not only with regard to the language we use but also with regard to the practices that result from it—are highly problematic. The relationship between present and past contexts is never the same, re-inscriptions never reproduce the same realities but create new realities through the process of re-inscribing (e.g., Landwehr 2016, pp. 118–48). In his interpretation of Michel Foucault, Jürgen Martschukat reminds us of this radical historicity of every single moment, context or situation (Martschukat 2002, pp. 14–16)—which is at the same time the dynamic and relational product of our constant references to (lost) past times.

The first and most persistent fractured continuity is migration itself. As the introductory quote insinuates, humans have migrated and will always migrate. Migration as a "normal and structural element of human societies throughout history" is a continuity in human history indeed. However, using the term 'migrant' on the part of people on the move, or by those in receiving societies, obscures or ignores complexities, novelties, singularities, uncertainties, possibilities. Do people know—once they start moving—what their experiences will be? Whether they will be temporary or permanent refugees, pilgrims, migrants, seasonal workers, return migrants, adventurers, profiteers—or something else? Do hosting societies know whether the terms they use—'migrant', 'migration'—correspond with

the complex and uncertain situations of the people they qualify? ‘Migration’ as a term (especially with the various histories behind it) produces a set of associations and mental images that might have very little to do with the realities and lives of those who are being concerned. The term ‘migration’ comes with questions about the ‘why’. People will ask for ‘motives behind migration’. While the ones presented in section two are among the more obvious, others might occur (Lucassen and Lucassen 2005; Canny 1994; Moch 1992). Furthermore, more often than not, individuals and groups will leave their homes for more than one reason. Migration history as much as interviews with present-day migrants show that dichotomies such as forced versus voluntary migrations or migrants versus refugees do not really reflect the complex, multifaceted realities of displacement and how people would describe themselves (Lucassen and Lucassen 2005, pp. 11–17). As such, it has always been and will always be difficult to clearly identify the push- and pull-factors behind individual and group migrations. As motives for migration are complex and varied, we need to carefully reconstruct specific historical and situational discourses on displacements. No displacement equals another. Attempts to establish migration patterns and systems of migration are useful. At the same time, however, the stories and histories are historically (and individually) specific and unique, despite apparent parallels and resemblances (see also the concluding remarks).

The second ‘fractured continuity’ in the history of migrations is the persistent practice of constructing the ‘other’. Migrants and hosting societies alike produce essentialising discourses about one another—they produce “cultural difference” (Bhabha 2011)<sup>5</sup>. According to Bhabha, situations of contact create a Third Space which is a “contradictory and ambivalent space of enunciation”. Third Space makes evident that “the meaning and symbols of culture have no primordial unity or fixity; that even the same signs can be appropriated, translated, rehistoricised, and read anew” (Bhabha 2011)—as some of the examples in Alessandro Petti’s text clearly show (Petti 2017, pp. 4–5). Essentialising discourses deny the plurality and variety of possible enunciations of the construction of the ‘self’ and the ‘other’ in situations of contact. Some of these essentialising discourses, stereotypes and prejudice are rather old: anti-Jewish and anti-Muslim sentiment has a long history in Europe—as section two has shown. However, the histories of anti-Jewish and anti-Muslim discourses are never the same. They might build on past discourses. New and ever-changing contexts, however, produce ever-new varieties of religious and (at the same time) racialised discourse.

Third, linked to the construction of the ‘other’, and the production of cultural difference, is the question of whether migrants or refugees are considered ‘good’, ‘bad’ or ‘ugly’ (Lucassen and Lucassen 2005, p. 17). While some migrant groups seem to have always been treated or looked upon in one specific way, critical historical analysis makes clear that narratives on the ‘good’, the ‘bad’ and the ‘ugly’ migrant/refugee can change substantially—in the short, middle and long term. They depend highly on context and on political, economic, social, cultural discourses which do not only vary depending on time and space but on the situational as well. The example of the Huguenots in the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries is among the most striking: while in the early 1680s Protestant (especially Calvinist) states considered them ‘ideal migrants’, their arrival produced sentiments of unfulfilled expectations. Many Protestant European states closed their borders and refused further admission; anti-Huguenot sentiment rose in many of the hosting states. Through a process of integration (which included the integration of the story of their ‘usefulness’ into the national historiographies of the hosting countries), Huguenots are today (again)

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<sup>5</sup> According to Bhabha “cultural difference is a process of signification through which statements of culture or on culture differentiate, discriminate, and authorize the production of fields of force, reference, applicability, and capacity”. Opposed to “cultural diversity” which “is also the representation of a radical rhetoric of the separation of totalized cultures that live unsullied by the intertextuality of their historical locations, safe in the utopianism of a mythic memory of a unique collective identity”, “cultural difference” is a process of negotiation, it points to a Third Space where “culture as a homogenizing, unifying force, authenticated by the originary Past, kept alive in the national tradition of the People” is being profoundly challenged (2011).

considered a successful example of migration and integration—in all (former) countries of refuge (Lachenicht 2010, pp. 483–510).

Fourth: from the few examples provided for the early modern period, we can see—apparently—claims towards the acculturation, integration and assimilation *avant la lettre* of migrants and refugees. If, however, situations of contact produce cultural difference *ad infinitum*, if there is no “primordial unity or fixity” of culture(s) (Bhabha 2011) what do concepts such as acculturation, integration and assimilation mean? Hosting societies are far from homogeneous. Variety or multiplicity are normal features of every society, nation, ethnicity or whatever marker for collective identity or imagined community we might use (Lucassen and Lucassen 2005, pp. 22–23). So, what does it mean if we talk about acculturation, integration and assimilation—at present or in a historical perspective? In the history of migrations it would be vital to enquire into *specific discourses* of acculturation, integration and assimilation. In today’s Europe is it about shared values, legal security and protection, about equality, about human rights? Who voices these claims? In which contexts? With what aims? How do those who are being ‘summoned’ react to these claims?

#### 4. Conclusions

In his *Pour une histoire comparée* of 1928 Marc Bloch argued for two purposes behind comparison. According to him (Green 2005, pp. 58–61) comparisons can help understand (or, as I would put it, produce *more* understanding of) specific phenomena, they can draw our attention to the (more) specific and the (more) general of the past and present (Bloch 1983). Historians have argued that “the comparative approach yields contradictory processes of unification and diversification” (Bouvier 1988, p. 14). Nancy L. Green has opted to move toward “post-structural structuralism” in migration studies, which means “examining and reinterpreting the structures surrounding the migration process in light of individual choice and vice versa”, “generality and difference” (Green 2005, p. 72). This needs to be done in a synchronic and diachronic perspective. We might not be able to approach “the (historical) truth” as such (Landwehr 2016, pp. 190–208). However, these seeming dichotomies, dualities or antagonisms between the specific and the general produce a tension field and thus the ground for critical inquiry. The latter might bring forth more understanding than simple equations, generalisations or unique particularities. In an attempt to integrate Bloch, Green and Foucault this means the following: as the specific reinscribes itself in discourses that produce realities, the specific is always part of the more general. Applied to the history of migrations and the question of what we can learn from it, I would suggest the following answers:

1. Present migrants and/or refugees always relate themselves to past migrations as much as home and hosting societies relate them to displacements of the past—consciously and subconsciously. While each case is specific and unique, it is always embedded in ever-changing, historically contingent discourses that produce realities. These discourses need to be analysed as fractured continuities—on the micro and the macro level.
2. Comparisons between present and past migrations need to be aware of our presentist perspective. While we use our concepts, our categories, we must critically assess that we project our presentist expectations into past phenomena. Furthermore, asking specific questions and using specific categories already implies a number of choices about what we are interested in and what we want/tend to ignore. Comparisons are about choice; they are never neutral; they always come with specific agendas on the part of the historian (Green 2005, p. 59). Thus, we leave aside a plethora of aspects coming with present and past migrations—and as such, historical specificity, too.
3. Following discourse analysis, it is vital to enquire into the following: (i). Who is inquiring into past migrations? (ii.). For which reasons? (iii). What are its consequences? (iv). Which discourses yield our questions?

Approached in a more (self-)reflexive way, the history of migrations might not produce absolute certainties—which are not possible given the infinity of past histories, present and future stories. However, critical historical analysis will produce *more* understanding of the complexities of displacements. It will do *more* credit to the specific and explain how it is embedded into the more general. It also allows us to see the individual case as specific and general at the same time. Also, it will strengthen the individual and specific experience as it keeps enlarging our more general perspective.

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