

HOMInG interview

with Robin Cohen

Conducted by Ilka Vari-Lavoisier
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Robin Cohen is Professor Emeritus of Development Studies and Senior Research Fellow, Kellogg College, University of Oxford. He directed the International Migration Institute (2009–11) and was principal investigator on the Oxford Diasporas Programme funded by the Leverhulme Trust (2011–5). Robin Cohen is editor of the Routledge series on Global diasporas and of the Cambridge survey of world migration. His books include *The new helots: migrants in the international division of labour* (1987), *Frontiers of identity* (1994), *Global diasporas: an introduction* (1997, rev. 2008), *Migration and its enemies* (2006), and *Encountering difference* (co-author 2016). His publications, many of which are available as free downloads, are available at <https://oxford.academia.edu/RobinCohen>

1. What does home mean to you and to your work, in the light of your disciplinary approach?

I want to answer this mainly in a personal way -- the effect on my work is indirect. I was born and grew up in apartheid South Africa. Home was neither a fatherland nor a motherland. A fatherland implies a deep and sensuous attachment to the soil, to the topography, to the weather, seasons, sounds and smell of the place. I did connect to all of those, but not at all to the more gory rhetoric of the apartheid government, which insisted that those deemed 'white' defend the country against enemies abroad and the majority at home. (I refused to do my national service.) South Africa was also not a motherland, which implies a nurturing, giving place, a 'land of milk and honey', the sweet consolation of a mother's breast. My family lived modestly but comfortably, and I was given a decent-enough education. But the honey did not flow and the milk curdled as I became aware of the deprivations of the black population. (I left aged 20.)

I recognized that I had to make a new home, and insofar as it became a territorialized home, that was going to be the UK. I have been treated very well here by my neighbours and colleagues. Yet I have never lost the sense of a loss of home and I have never completely found a home.

Of course I am not alone in feeling such a loss, nor am I alone in my search for home. The large literature on exile and diaspora spoke to me and helped to generalize my experience.

2. There has been some debate over time, in diaspora studies, on "home" as an almost mythical place, and on "homing" as a longing towards it. Is home only an "imagined" entity, for diasporas, or is there more to it? What is your view on the potential and limitations of taking "home" as an analytic for diaspora studies - whether at present, or historically?

Without theorizing home and understanding its full complexity, diaspora is largely a vacuous concept. I find myself questioning two positions, both of which I think are simplifications. 1. Home is (only) one particular nation-state from which a diaspora was scattered and to which it continues to relate. (This may be true in some cases, but note that there were diasporas that pre-dated nation-states.) 2. Home can be totally imagined, literally spaceless. (I doubt this. Even if not one land, there is generally an elaboration and fabulation of an existing or historical space e.g. Ethiopia, or a riverine space e.g. the Ganges, or a religious space e.g. Mecca.) In short, home has to be understood in all its complexity, not only imagined, or seen as only one nation-state.

3. What are the most relevant empirical and methodological challenges that you identify in researching home and migration, whether in a historical perspective or in the here-and-now?

I don't have any particular insight into methodology. I use suggestive contrasts, typologies, ideal types and Wittgensteinian 'fibres of meaning', but there are many ways to approach this. I do decry the habit of working from **one** ethnography to produce a supposed refutation of an general analysis that has been based on an intense study and comparison of **many** examples.

4. HOMInG, our project, is a multi-sited, collaborative research framed around processes of home-making in relation to contemporary migrant trajectories. What do you think this investigation could add to the field of migration?

I don't know enough about your project, but there is certainly room for a comparative project on how migrants construct home, and what constrains them. I also hope that the performance and the representation of home are part of your project.

5. The notion of home can also be evoked in the public discourse to underpin a fundamentally exclusive stance - e.g. when people (or politicians) tell migrants "this is not your home", or "go back home". Do you think there is a way to take this exclusionary subtext out of the notion of home, or is it part and parcel of it?

I think the denial of home is part and parcel of this debate. It is the ugly side of the argument and a recognition that home is not just a matter of subjectivity. Maybe it takes 'two to tango', but it takes more than two to make a home. It is an iterative process that involves contestation, negotiation and reflexivity with many social actors. To give on small example. For many of us who have been born abroad and are trying to make our home in the UK, we were shocked that, in an effort to placate the national populists, Prime Minister May referred to people like us as 'citizens of nowhere'. Of course, this is absolutely of no consequence compared with being beaten up or racially abused. But, small matter as it is, the phrase cut deep and suddenly made us feel less 'at home'. I share Adorno's thought, which may be a consolation: 'It's the first principle of morality never to be at home in one's home.'

6. Throughout your publications, there is a tension between the local and the global. For instance, you explored cultural differences with a focus on everyday encounters, through the

concept of “creolization”. How do you think this approach could advance our understanding of the home-migration nexus?

Regarding the local and the global, I have not particularly worked this through, but my conviction is that we will need to move to a strategy of multi-scalarity, not just the local and the global. I strongly advocate using the concept and experiences of creolization to understand the post-migration search for home. This seems an ideal way of understanding **asymmetry** (for example between newcomers and an established population), **complexity** (there are normally many groups, generations and internal group differences), **creativity** (new things emerge in cultural overlaps), **everyday interactions**, and the ways in which heritage identities inform emerging identities.

7. Considering your unique expertise in migration studies, what are the main methodological challenges you identify in advancing the current literature on migration, mobility and home?

I'm not really a good person to advise on methodology. I just throw everything I have at an experience I'm trying to describe and analyse. I read all I can, listen to as many voices as will speak to me and I like to go to the places I'm talking about. I like to soak myself in the sounds, sights and rhythms of a fieldwork site and I'm unsystematic about the questions I ask. I'd fail any methodology examination I sat.

Thank you for so much for that! it is a true gift from you.