

UC SANTA BARBARA

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Home Away From Home

When Britain's Office for Budget Responsibility issued a report last July warning that a steady — and growing — influx of immigrants over the next 50 years would be necessary to sustain the country's economy, Paul Spickard was not surprised.

According to the professor of history and of Asian American Studies at UC Santa Barbara, Britain's birth rate is not high enough to maintain the steady population necessary to keep its financial system humming. Ditto for every other European country. "To be at replacement level you have to generate 2.1 babies per woman," Spickard said. "France has the highest birth rate in Europe at 1.98."

You do the math.

Still, while immigrants benefit their host countries in a variety of critical ways, they often are not made fully welcome. In addition, misconceptions frequently abound about their quantitative contributions to society and the real value of their presence.

Spickard's recently published book, "Multiple Identities — Migrants, Ethnicity, and Membership" (Indiana University Press, 2013), examines how migrants and minorities of all age groups experience their lives and manage complex, often multiple identities that shift with time and changing circumstances.

As editor, he brings together a group of contributors who consider minorities who have received a lot of attention — Turkish Germans, for example — and some who have received little, such as the Kashubians and Tartars in Poland and the Chinese in Switzerland. They also examine international adoption and cross-cultural relationships.

"Every country in Europe is having that kind of conversation now: What are we going to do with all these immigrants?" Spickard said. "And, usually, there's this notion that it's inappropriate somehow for the immigrants in question to be there, or that they're sucking the country dry of its resources."

But according to Spickard, the opposite is true. While there are small pockets of immigrants that do cost the state a fair amount of money, in Europe — as is in the United States — they are a net benefit to their respective economies. "It's true in every country in Europe, even for folks who come as refugees and need a lot of settlement aid," he said. "Taken over the course of their first five years in the country, they're a net benefit. And over the course of their lifetimes and the lifetimes of their children, they're a massive benefit."

"Multiple Identities" takes a look at the situation in various places in Europe and, throwing off the mantle of public rhetoric and public policy discussions, seeks to understand the shape of people's lives. A theme that emerges has to do with how differently ethnic and racial systems work in different places. "The ways people conceive of their relationships to other peoples around them is really different,"

Spickard said. "And a lot of times that's racialized. We imagine there is a permanent, inextinguishable difference between you and me."

Those dividing lines vary greatly, however, depending on location. "In Sweden, for example, they don't make much distinction among the various people they would generally imagine to be Muslim or from the Middle East," Spickard continued. "They're all lumped in one category; whereas, in Germany, Turks and Arabs fall into two very distinct categories. And in England, the Pakistanis are in one group, the Arabs in another, and the Sikhs in still another. They aren't all racialized into one category."

Compare that, he said, to the Chinese people living in Switzerland. "The Swiss don't see them as all that different because their numbers are really small and they enter the country mostly as scientists and engineers," Spickard explained. "But within the Chinese community itself, there are sharp divisions. "Are you from the People's Republic, or are you from Taiwan? Are you from Southeast Asia? Do you speak Cantonese? Mandarin? Fujianese? What it means to be Chinese internally is not perceived at all from outside, and it's quite various within these Chinese groups"

Taking the book in a different direction, Spickard explores the issue of international adoption highlighting the attitudes in Finland and in Britain. "The two countries have very different understandings of what's going on in international adoptions," he said, adding that each has positive aspects. "The Brits try really hard to match children with the same racial or ethnic adoptive parents. So that means a lot of kids in Britain don't get adopted. The same is true in the U.S."

But for those who are adopted transracially, he continued, the government does attempt to make compensatory arrangements to help parents understand the importance of recognizing their children's cultural backgrounds.

In Finland, the sensibility is quite different. “They’re much more likely to say a loving family is a loving family, and we’re going to ignore the cultural differences, and the kid’s going to grow up how he or she grows up,” said Spickard.

Each system has its positive aspects, he noted. “Warehousing kids because there aren’t enough black or Southeast Asian parents for them isn’t a viable option, but at the same time, there is an issue with cultural fit,” he said. “You’re teaching these kids to be Finnish and to operate in that culture, but they’re going to be treated differently at school and at work, and you have to make some kind of accommodation for that.”

Editing the book was a challenge, Spickard said, because he is the only native English speaker among the contributors. In fact, some were working in their third and even fourth languages. It resulted in what he described as a strange cornucopia of conversations about the complexities of identity.

“One of the things we’ve learned over the last 20 years is that the social categories we thought were simple are maybe not so simple,” he continued. “Think about RuePaul. She has beautiful makeup and size 14 shoes. That’s a complicated thing, and that’s what this is all about.”

About UC Santa Barbara

The University of California, Santa Barbara is a leading research institution that also provides a comprehensive liberal arts learning experience. Our academic community of faculty, students, and staff is characterized by a culture of interdisciplinary collaboration that is responsive to the needs of our multicultural and global society. All of this takes place within a living and learning environment like no other, as we draw inspiration from the beauty and resources of our extraordinary location at the edge of the Pacific Ocean.