

**WE ARE ALL  
MIGRANTS**

*Political Action and the Ubiquitous  
Condition of Migrant-hood*

GREGORY FELDMAN

**stanford briefs**  
An Imprint of Stanford University Press  
Stanford, California

## INTRODUCTION

### *The Presence of Migrant-hood and the Absence of Politics*

To argue that we are all migrants is not to partake in an act of liberal patronage. It has become fashionable to seek political or moral capital by expressing a shared identity with collectivized groups in less fortunate circumstances. The specific contents of that identity remain strategically vague, often invoking descriptors such as "human" or entities such as "humanity," whatever these terms may mean. These proclamations of togetherness may succeed in shipping a few resources from the affluent to the needy. But here is the rub. Whoever proclaims such a universal identity is, in effect, speaking *for* others rather than *with* another. The speaker is not engaging the other in a dialogue of equals, because the other is not empowered to switch the sentence's subject (the speaker) and its direct object (the one spoken for, the "other"). Subjects may speak; objects cannot. The social structure and the grammatical structure work together.

A case in point is found in a media campaign by the "Keep a Child Alive" charity. It consisted of posters featuring Western celebrities in what appears as decorative African face paint as a show of solidarity with African children suffering from AIDS. The large script caption at the bottom of the posters reads, "I am African." Sting, David Bowie, Liv Tyler, Gwyneth Paltrow, Sarah Jessica

Parker, and Elijah Wood among others offered their images in support of this cause. The campaign's premise maintained that since all people must ultimately trace their ancestry to prehistoric people who migrated out of Africa, the ethical course of action is to enhance the quality of life of African children because we share a common origin. In the words of the campaign itself:

As we live our lives in the West, perhaps we forget our origins. It is well know [*sic*] that each of us originated in Africa from our African ancestors. Indeed it was these incredible people who traveled far and wide and whose genes are in all of us. . . . Indeed, if we let Africa die then we are letting the origins of our species perish.<sup>1</sup>

Not all Africans, however, share this sense of common humanity, but rather interpret it as more liberal patronage from those who would enhance their profile against the suffering of children living in Africa. One counterimage modeled on the campaign motif that circulated online featured an African woman in traditional dress with the caption, "I am Gwyneth Paltrow." A scathing indictment of celebrity activism and faux solidarity appeared in small print at the bottom of the poster<sup>2</sup>:

I am Gwyneth Paltrow: help us stop the shameless famewhores from using the suffering of those dying from AIDS in Africa to bolster their pathetic careers now that they are no longer dating Brad Pitt and no one gives a shit about them. Just kiss my Black ass to help.

To my knowledge, no major funding from Western sources resulted from this plea. It can be a bit uncomfortable when the "other" speaks. The rage expressed in the counterimage's caption reveals the frustration of being spoken *for*, when one is not empowered to speak as an equal about how we should live together in this

1. <http://keepachildalive.org/media/campaigns/i-am-african/>; accessed March 12, 2014.

2. <http://thisisnotafrica.tumblr.com/post/28001392173/text-in-picture-reads-i-am-gwyneth-paltrow-help>; accessed March 12, 2014.

world. The original campaign's invocation of a common humanity functions as a device to silence particular voices, which might question the world order, rather than as an invitation to negotiate its order.

The assertion of a common humanity that drowns out particular speaking subjects can be found anywhere. In a far more innocuous example, in my hometown of Vancouver, city buses project larger-than-life images of professional hockey players screaming victoriously in their full game regalia before legions of fans. The banner headline running across the side of the bus declares, "We are all Canucks." I do not personally know these hockey players, and I cannot identify any particular fan in the arena. The image gives no indication of what a Canuck actually is or why I should be one. Yet it speaks for me and demands that I, and any particular individual across the city, melt into an essentialized municipal whole in which we are all one and so none of us is anyone in particular. If this view seems to make a mountain out of a molehill, then consider a reverse equation similar to the "I am Gwyneth Paltrow" counterimage mocking the "Keep a Child Alive" campaign. Most certainly, TransLink (Metro Vancouver's public transit operator) would hardly be interested in plastering my image across a city bus underneath the headline, "We are all Greg Feldman." Such a headline would instantly spotlight an absurdity: while a mass of particular individuals can be dissolved into a *generic* figure, that mass cannot be reduced to any *particular* individual because no two particular individuals are identical. Yet the fact that we need satire to highlight this point reveals the banality of our belief in common human essences, which are expressed in abstract singular figures like "Canuck" or "African" or, in parody, "Stephen Colbert," leader of the mock Colbert Nation.

This belief comes at a cost. Unexpectedly, the woman in Africa, posing ironically as Gwyneth Paltrow, and yours truly hold something in common that we share with countless others: fundamentally, we do not matter politically, because we cannot speak as

particular people. We can only be spoken for, once we are lumped into mass, stereotyped groups (for example, voters between ages 18 and 30; refugees; consumers earning more than \$400,000 per year; radicals; fellow citizens; the working poor; job applicants with a master's degree; immigrants admitted on a three-month work permit; and so on). I am not suggesting that those who cannot speak are all essentially the same or that their different positions in the global socioeconomic hierarchy do not matter. Rather, I argue that people qua particular individuals share a common condition of *atomization* (and not a common essence) that renders our particular, individual differences politically inconsequential, or at least creates a situation in which our particularity can only politically appear *despite* the "system," not *because* of it. Wealthy individuals are obviously better positioned to reproduce structures of inequality to their own advantage, but this is something different (and still unacceptable) from political empowerment.

This book argues that we are all migrants because in today's world people face common conditions of existence for a life experience proverbially understood as that of a "migrant": rootless, uncertain, atomized, disempowered. If so, then it stands to reason that the root causes of the hardships that migrants face degrade the lives of citizens as well, potentially if not actually. This position does not trivialize the hardship confronting migrants, particularly from the Global South, or claim that a middle-class Northern citizen viscerally understands the loss of a child on a clandestine journey across a sea or desert. Instead, it argues that the basic conditions that make it reasonable to risk such a journey underpin contemporary politics, economy, and society across the globe and so affect, if to a different degree, the life chances of the proverbial middle-class Northern citizen. If that citizen has not faced the same dilemma as that migrant, then the difference is explained by their respective locations in a global socioeconomic hierarchy that, likewise, can turn against the citizen in the right historical moment. To elaborate, Jean and John Comaroff argue that the violence plaguing the

transitions to liberal democracy in the postcolonies is not antithetical to a tranquil North more experienced in peace and democracy. Rather, it is only a more robust manifestation of similar Northern problems resulting from such Northern-led initiatives as neoliberalism, state disintegration, and the substitution of policing for politics. The postcolonies more fully express the conditions in which "we" live in the North; "their" world is "ours" too. Hence, people in either place might have reason to see each other as partners in political action.

In the formulation "we are all migrants" I locate the impetus to political action in the existential question, "Do I, in particular, matter in this world?" a question prompted by the condition of migrant-hood itself. Readers with leftist orientations might find this approach unconvincing, preferring instead to begin with the structures of inequality that generate conflict and struggles between opposing actors. They might consign existential angst to one's private life in order to get on to the public matters of socioeconomic inequality. I think that these two orientations to political action do not conflict because the existential question itself only becomes possible through modern alienation, which is deeply intertwined with socioeconomic factors. Readers with a liberal-humanitarian perspective might find the focus on one's existential angst to be overly self-absorbed and thus insufficiently attuned to the suffering of others in worse circumstances. However, such angst does not spontaneously sprout from one's psychological constitution, but rather it emerges through one's attempt to negotiate surrounding social, economic, and political conditions facing both migrants and citizens. Armed with the insight that our deepest anxieties are composed in the same historical field of human relations, then "their" struggles no longer seem so foreign to "mine." They might even begin to look similar.

The importance of honoring the existential question as the impetus to action is that it hits us with urgency and immediacy

and in such a way that cannot be fully explained to anyone else. We must seek explanations for it after we acknowledge its presence. Does this angst come from a psychological disposition? from a medical condition? from social relationships? from economic exploitation? from cultural changes? In any case, the theoretical explanation we choose only provides us with understanding; by itself, theoretical reason does not instigate action. Instead, the angst's very immanence deep in our interior selves—that unquestionably subjective experience—compels us to ask not only “why” but also “what can I do?” From this vantage point, that angst-ridden question will only be satisfied in the world “out there” with others, when people mutually constitute themselves as particular speaking subjects in what Hannah Arendt called *spaces of appearance*.

Spaces of appearance arise when people organize themselves to ask if the world they live in is the world they want to inhabit, and if not, what could be done differently. It makes no difference whether the specific issues they address are large or small, or of global or local consequence. Either way, spaces of appearance are the embodiment of political action among particular speaking subjects. The reason why someone would want to constitute such a space is not necessarily to gain access to vital resources (and often this is not the core problem). Access to resources keeps our bodies alive, but it does not address the existential question, which reverses the biological question's priorities: rather than ask, “How can I survive?” it asks what the point of keeping my body alive is if nothing more matters. This existential question, of course, does not deny the primary need to survive, but instead aims at the will to live through one's particular life as fully as possible. It therefore speaks to the power of natality (the fact that “I” in particular was born, though I might not have been) more than the power of fatality (the fact that “I,” like all others, will inevitably die). From this distinction, the question follows that if I was not born into this particular life, and do not experience it as a conscious individual, then what meaningful difference does it make if that fateful day comes sooner rather than later?

The existential question is ultimately a political question because the will to appear means much more than simply being appreciated by others. The will to appear reveals a drive to play a constitutive role in the world, which we invariably share with others. It begins with dissatisfaction with how the individual herself allows injustice to perpetuate in the world by passively reproducing that world through her own daily routines. The apparent helplessness to help signifies more than a frustrated wish to “do good.” Rather, it signifies the drive to act in the world under one's own volition. This motivation does not imply altruism, but neither does it imply pure self-interest. Instead, the unjust situation generates the existential question because she has determined that her ethical conflict with the world has become so great that she (1) cannot appear in it as her own particular self; and (2) cannot live with herself as agent of that injustice, even if she only plays a passive role in its perpetuation. If her perspective creates no impact through a worldly appearance, then the sad conclusion is that she in particular does not matter, and angst continues. Her particular *self* has no worldly presence; it cannot be confirmed by any other person; and so she is frustrated, atomized, and voiceless for lack of anyone else with whom to speak about that conflict. The sheer agony of this silencing effect was simply but brilliantly portrayed in Munch's famous painting “The Scream,” which has been so successfully reduced to a cliché that its political insight is now all but lost.

The existential struggle to reach agreement with herself about how to conduct herself in that unjust world begins with thinking. Thinking is the two-in-one dialogue between her and herself that she undertakes in order to understand an ethical dilemma from the perspectives of others involved. Specifically, thinking is a discussion within an individual naturally divided into two equal parts (myself and I) aimed at unifying one's particular self. The unified self, however, only obtains a worldly reality if others recognize it in speech or action. The end of her condition of migrant-hood begins if she finds others willing to seriously consider the ethical viewpoint that emerged from her thinking and the action

that it implies. As thinking individuals gather as particular speaking subjects, they constitute spaces of appearance that exist only as long as they jointly undertake the actions they deem necessary to deliberate and rectify the injustice. Their particularity of perspectives enables them to judge ethical dilemmas that do not fall into the rubric of pre-given laws, customs, and habits. In other words, when just action cannot be deduced from an established principle, then they must decide for the first time how justice can be achieved in such a way that allows them to maintain inner agreement in their dialogues of thought. The creation of this space, however, requires more than just *thinking* and *judging*. It also requires *willing*, the impulse to act in the world. Like the faculty of thinking, the will is also divided against itself because every volition the individual has to act is internally confronted by an opposite force to refrain from action: she wills, but she also wills not. When she resolves the conflict between her two wills, then she is poised to constitute a public space with others who have done the same. The space of appearance is a function of the joint action itself. It does not matter that people will not share the exact same opinion, but only that they can reach agreement on a course of action. These spaces are as varied as the countless possibilities of human assembly, yet all share the common purpose of doing justice to the cause of the angst in each person.

Without such spaces of appearance, the thinking individual—seeking to reach agreement with herself—receives no affirmation of her particular personhood and cannot appear in the world even if her will would so command her. She remains suspended eternally in a dialogue with herself, separated from the empirical world, and unable to satisfy her will to appear in concert with others. The obvious psychological problems that result from this miserable situation are thus rooted in the state that surrounds her (that is, the status quo) rather than in the state of her mental health. These problems are primarily political, not psychological. The will to appear is intrinsically a political act necessary to evade atomization

and loneliness. Furthermore, once spaces of appearance dissipate, those who constituted them return to the atomized condition of migrant-hood if they have no home to which they can temporarily retreat. Atomization is not a situation in which people cannot cooperate due to physical separation. Atomized people cooperate all the time, particularly at work. Instead, it is a condition in which the unique perspective that each individual inherently possesses—simply because no two people have lived the same life—cannot be brought to bear on the question, “Why are we, as people living together, doing things in one way and not another?” If people are poised to ask this question, then people as particular speaking subjects would constitute their own sovereign spaces as they negotiated the given issue and acted accordingly. Spaces of appearance show politics as a positive endeavor reified by acts of constitution and reconstitution by particular speaking subjects. By positive, I surely do not mean morally correct in absolutist terms. Spaces of appearance are not utopias; no such thing exists, of course. These spaces are positive in the sense that “I,” and the others in them, obtain a worldly existence as “myself” at my best, that is, actualized as the particular person I am. We must understand politics as such an act if the term is to gain a dignified meaning.

Our contemporary view of politics is largely negative, signified as gratuitous self-interest, or as something that has to be done so that economic activity can smoothly proceed, or as necessary acts that break down injustices better than they build new things in their place. To be sure, organized resistance often assembles in spaces of appearance so that the negative act of resistance against large-scale structures can transpire through the positive assembly of a public composed of particular speaking subjects. This experience can appeal to anyone alienated in mass society regardless of their particular political views. Hence, in contrast to the default view of politics as something negative, this book argues that in its positive form politics brings us to life as particular individuals, because to the existential question of whether “I” in particular

matter, it answers, "Yes, because this place could not *be* what it is without me, just as I cannot *be* without this place." These moments are the instantiations of freedom.

But why are we all migrants rather than workers, family members, inhabitants of the earth, or some other category? Why focus on migrant-hood as a defining status of modern life rather than something else? The reason for focusing on migrant-hood is to clarify the relationship between two contemporary phenomena that we do not usually associate with each other. The first is a worldwide obsession with migration. People tend to have firm views about it. The figure of "the migrant" plays a prominent role in the collective imagination and in national politics, testifying that nationalism remains deeply entrenched in personal identities as well. The migrant's presence on this front is curious since migrants amount to only three percent of the world's population according to United Nations estimates. On a global scale, migrants do not reach extraordinarily large numbers, unlike workers, women, or postcolonial subjects. However, the "migrant" now dominates public debate more than any other categorical subject. This character usually appears as a stereotyped threat to national purity; as an economic resource that fills holes in the labor market; or as a victim of tragedy that must be saved and quickly returned home. Yet in insisting that the migrant is fundamentally different from the citizen (that is, that "they" are different from "us"), we obscure the shared conditions that undermine our political agency as well as theirs.

The second phenomenon is a growing sense of disenfranchisement with mass party politics in representative democracies. While the liberal democratic tradition has succeeded right up to the present in liberating people from tyranny, dictatorship, and autocracy, it has arguably exhausted itself as far as incorporating people as political equals into decision-making processes that affect basic conditions of their daily lives. We are asked to respond to initia-

tives far more than to partake in acts of political constitution itself. The ballot box has become little more than a suggestion box; money and media hype make a mockery of the jingle, "Your voice counts." Hence, activist groups around the world, regardless of their goals or political orientations, seem to hold in common the drive to establish methods, often found in their own organizational forms, through which direct democracy can transpire on the basis of their own lived experiences. Examples of such groups range from those confusingly described as anarchist or antiglobalist to those more familiar to the mainstream, such as church groups, community organizations, and internet activists. They make clear that people from around the world dearly want political presence, and not just (if it all) a more comfortable Northern, middle-class lifestyle, a prospect that is vanishing along with the Northern middle-class itself. Curiously, they want it in a time when liberal democracy is by far the most dominant of modern ideologies; it triumphed over communism twenty-five years ago and those two together defeated fascism forty-five years earlier.

Bringing these two points together, this book maintains that (1) modernity as we know it creates the conditions for permanent migrant-hood threatening to atomize everyone it touches, citizen and migrant alike; (2) this pervasive condition of migrant-hood undermines joint political action, leaving people isolated, frustrated, and lonely; and (3) conversely, where joint political action appears, migrant-hood dissipates. The acquisition of national citizenship is not the bridge between the "migrant" and the "citizen," because something much more fundamental underpins both their possibilities of existence, namely, the obstacles they confront when trying to constitute themselves so that they can directly negotiate the basis of their coexistence with others.

Giorgio Agamben picks up on the link between migrant-hood and the absence of one's political selfhood when discussing Arendt's chapter "The Decline of the Nation-State and the End of the Rights of Man" in *The Origins of Totalitarianism*. Arendt highlights

the central position of the migrant to explain the absence of political rights within the nation-state system. In that discussion, the migrant, signified as the stateless refugee, falls outside of state protection entirely. She points out that the very figure who most urgently tested the liberal system of universal rights was instead systematically denied them in interwar Europe. It is well known that Agamben argues from here that each individual citizen of the modern state is a potential refugee insofar as she becomes devoid of basic rights and political voice when the sovereign declares a security crisis (the "state of exception"). Law is suspended at that moment and the sovereign may act with impunity to reestablish the state's equilibrium as it sees fit. Those against whom the sovereign acts are *homo sacer* ("sacred man," that is, a voiceless, abstract person who is pushed outside of mundane, legal order). The slippery slope to the status of *homo sacer*—from citizen to refugee, that is—rests on the citizen's blurry, inside/outside position with respect to the nation-state. Though not formulated in precisely the following terms (or in terms of labor at all), Agamben argues that the citizenry's ambiguous position requires, on the one hand, their *presence* as atomized, abstract bodies on whom national sovereignty is imposed and from whom labor power is extracted; that is, as generic national citizens and exchangeable abstract laborers. On the other, it demands their *absence* as particular speaking subjects lest people qua particular individuals directly constitute their own sovereign spaces in spite of the nation-state and recognize their laboring activities as something that only keeps them alive, biologically speaking, but does not, by itself, beget their freedom. Hence, citizens are both inside and outside the sovereign nation-state. The state depends on them while simultaneously neglecting their particular political perspectives, just as the global economy depends on their labor but is ready to dismiss particular laborers at the first convenience. The citizen-laborer's structural position is not categorically different from that of the migrant legally understood. The laws that differentiate them

ultimately stand on mushy ground. These countless silenced individuals, capable of acting as particular speaking subjects by virtue of their plurality, which Arendt recognized as a basic human condition, are akin to how Hardt and Negri later described the "multitude," which lives as Empire's creative underbelly, a vital force that apparatuses of rule must constantly appropriate in order to nullify its political potency.