



# Deromanticising integration: On the importance of convivial disintegration

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## Abstract

In light of current experiences with migration-driven diversification, is it still conducive to think about the effects of international migration by advocating for immigrant integration? This article argues that there are key problems with European uses of immigrant integration logics that cannot be resolved through redefinitions or reappropriations of the term. Even highly refined notions of immigrant integration misconstrue the role and relevance of differences in diversity dynamics. Immigrant integration further risks concealing and perpetuating power dynamics and (colonial) hierarchies. These continue to shape the social relevance of differences. Analytically thinking about superdiversity directs us to paying more attention to disintegration, a notion that cannot be reduced and measured by way of individual or group performance. To be able to usefully engage with disintegration, we argue that it needs to be divorced from ideas about social fragmentation and social collapse. To do this, we draw on recent developments in the literature on conviviality to emphasise the relational practices, power asymmetries, and materialities that enter into negotiations of difference. Convivial disintegration aptly addresses continuously reconfiguring and uncertain social environments. Our article thus provides a deromanticised and enabling provocation for easing integration anxieties.

**Keywords:** disintegration, conviviality, immigrant integration, superdiversity, difference

## 1. Introduction

Migration scholars and practitioners repeatedly remind us that international migration is, or at least, ought to be seen as the usual state of affairs in an interconnected world (de Haas 2014; Crépeau 2018). Despite these pleas, rhetoric of containing and restricting

doi:10.1093/migration/mnz056

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migration—by constraining and regulating migrants—is the *modus operandi* in a world where too often ‘the migrant’ is portrayed as needing to be removed or coerced into submission. In Europe, a recent toxic turn in these debates followed the oft-cited backlash against multiculturalism (Vertovec 2010; Schinkel 2017). This backlash has been used to popularise increasingly hostile integrationist politics, accompanied by a more general rhetorical turn that virtually muted debates about the value of the dynamic social configurations linked to international migration. It is a sobering state of affairs, if the links between migration-driven diversification and brutal migration regimes are made explicit (Hall 2017). Migration and immigrant policies (Geddes and Scholten 2016) are increasingly hostile sometimes in seemingly schizophrenic ways (Hansen 2018). As a flare point in a much longer history of insider and outsider constructions, the lines currently drawn between ‘native’ citizens and those marked as other are exposing their sustained dual rootedness in a politics of citizenship and in colonial hierarchies of domination and oppression (Genova 2010).

To account for those processes, immigrant integration scholars have repeatedly reconceptualised the notion of integration and what it should mean (e.g. Cherti and McNeil 2012; Gidley 2012; Klarenbeek 2019). Despite the concept’s persistent use and its many reformulations, an integrationist thinking has still not been able to shed itself of the basic premise that migration is the reason why integration efforts are needed. Migrants have to do the integrating to uphold the myth of an integratable society (Korteweg 2017). In proposing solutions for current social problems, integrationist thinking frequently alludes to an idealised cohesive past—presumably preceding large-scale migration—or to a social imaginary in which stable social configurations are the pinnacle of living together. At the same time, the language of integration is divisive as it points at and defines those deemed unintegrated. A closer examination of the history of Europe’s integrationist politics and rhetoric reveals a logic of control that is discriminatory by building on ideas of in- and exclusion (Schrover and Schinkel 2013).

It is the deceptive solutionism of integration that compels us to present an alternative approach. Inspired by recent literature on conviviality largely rooted outside Euro-Western epistemology (Heil 2020), we propose and conceptually develop what we call convivial disintegration, in which the notion of disintegration emphasises that migration drives social dynamics resistant to integrated consolidations and where the idea of conviviality is used to point to relational practices of engaging difference. We do not aim to provide a descriptive or for that matter idealised and prescriptive blueprint of what convivial disintegration might look like. Instead, it is the yo-yo like tendency to romanticise and idealise, which is seemingly wedded to integrationist thinking that we want to interrogate (see Mahtani 2014). The basic difficulty we see is that even in highly refined reformulations of immigrant integration, there is an attempt to solve inequalities while doing little to address the power differentials that are a root cause of those inequalities. More broadly then, we want to use the disruptive potential of thinking about convivial disintegration to shift the terms of how we do migration-related research more generally and what role implicit normative assumptions of the right order of things play in our approach to the field.

To do this, we have to engage with the notion of difference. If we accept the premise that difference alone cannot lead to social fragmentation, we can distance ourselves from

the idea that disintegration is integration gone wrong. Difference understood as processual is the result of socially significant and relational differentiations along all the dimensions that decolonial, feminist, or queer, intersectional, and superdiverse approaches have highlighted. Decolonial, feminist, and queer thought have radically disclosed the normalisation of a particular (e.g. Western, male, and heterosexual) subject position that excludes a different other. Intersectionality highlights the deep exclusions when two or more systems of oppression intersect. To this, superdiversity adds awareness for the endless facets of how differences can become meaningful in social contexts that are shaped by migration. These literatures show that any attempt to integrate otherness by 'addressing' difference is fraught. We need to pay attention to the contextual production of difference, its material and non-material dimensions, and genealogies. The salience of difference is irrevocable but malleable and it has to be acknowledged that the production of difference 'has always been implicitly, or explicitly, hierarchical in thought and oppressive in practice' (Alexander and Alleyne 2002: 543).

Acknowledging disintegration gives room for the analysis of, on the one hand, a genealogy of systemic power asymmetries, and on the other hand, the dynamic relational practices that mediate difference—something that been discussed as conviviality. We do not understand disintegration as integration gone wrong but rather as part of the social dynamics that emerge from understanding the (making of) difference in relational terms. Convivial disintegration then highlights the potential and concomitant tensions of living with difference. Rather than juxtaposing conviviality and racism, for example, we hold that the ambiguities and shifts between cooperation and conflict in living with difference equally constitute conviviality. If we separated them, we would just reproduce the dichotomy of dis/integration which we here set out to overcome. Following this line of argument, with this article, we move on from immigrant integration and add to the literature by conceptually developing the analytical potential of convivial disintegration in studying social configurations of difference, in particular regarding the role migration plays in them.

We commence the article by exploring how integration has become a maxim in the migration literature. Despite concerted efforts and poignant critiques, we note that even the most refined rethinking of integration harbours ideas about social stability that perpetuate power hierarchies by problematising difference. We argue that by thinking in terms of disintegration, we can get closer to a sense of change that is forward-looking, cognisant of historicity, and enabling. We then argue that starting with disintegration does not mean embracing some form of social decline or fatal fragmentation. Instead, we consider disintegration in terms of recent developments in theorising and applying the notion of conviviality. Through this talking and thinking about disintegration becomes a platform from which to acknowledge and critique power asymmetries in contexts of superdiversity. We see the notion of convivial disintegration as a provocation necessary to draw the line between academic and policy work in a way that does not completely sever channels of exchange between the two. We conclude by inviting a debate on convivial disintegration as a way to acknowledge deromanticised superdiverse re/configurations of asymmetrical difference and the instability, this entails. We emphasise the importance of relational modes that prevent total fragmentation—keeping us as migration scholars on our toes while rejecting the lure of unilateral solutions and win–win–win scenarios.

## 2. The rise of immigrant integration as a maxim

In migration studies, immigrant integration has been a long-term concern. The prevalence and the use of the notion have changed over time; in the 1990s, the term was seen as paradigmatic and then ebbed off in relevance (Pisarevskaya et al. 2019). Following the revocation of multiculturalism as a variously interpreted political ideology, a turn to immigrant integration language resurfaced. This initially entailed a move away from assessing immigrant integration in terms of national models towards debating it in terms of civic integration models (Joppke 2007). More recently, attention has almost exclusively shifted towards assessing integration as a multilevel governance concern with a specific focus on local, mostly urban contexts. This local turn in immigrant integration research (Zapata-Barrero et al. 2017; Hadj Abdou 2019) shows how policies vary from locality to locality and often stand in contradiction to national immigrant integration policies.

A local turn is also evident in funding for immigrant integration research, which frequently explores comparative case studies of local initiatives. These developments have been wedded to attempts to redefine immigrant integration as a positive and desirable outcome at the local level. However, for those subjected to integration, it always remains just out of reach either because initiatives are found to not be comprehensive/flexible enough to respond to superdiversity (Phillimore 2015) or because certain third-country nationals are cast as not meeting the integration threshold expected of them (Alba and Foner 2016).

There are multiple approaches to studying immigrant integration. Scholars frequently distinguish between social, economic, political, and cultural integration, which are debated in relation to different groups including a vast literature on the second or even following generations. We here identify three quite distinct ways of talking about local immigrant integration that crosses all these dimensions. First, immigrant integration becomes the focus of research as a policy objective with questions about what kinds of practices and policy interventions are required to make immigrant integration work (Phillimore et al. 2018; Scholten et al. 2017). This research tends to take the shape of reviewing policy documents and evaluating policy implementations, often drafting recommendations for change. A second research stream measures immigrant integration. Used as a yardstick, integration is assessed mostly with quantitative measurements of migrants' socio-economic performance, generally in comparison to the 'non-migrant' population (Esser 2010; Ersanilli and Koopmans 2011; Alba and Foner 2016). Finally, immigrant integration is debated as a discourse that influences how we perceive and make sense of the implications of international migration (Korteweg 2017; Schinkel 2018).<sup>1</sup> While approaches to, and meanings of, integration diverge, in pointing to these three strands, we want to emphasise that *immigrant* integration remains the central concern in all of this research—and this omnipresence matters.

Even though there is overlap, it is not surprising that the three different literatures rarely proactively talk to each other. The policy-focused literature is often critical of too hard and fast ethnofocal categories but takes these for granted when drawing on the second set of literature that aims to measure integration. This tendency is not surprising because scholars can refer to the measurement of integration performance—which is usually portrayed as not good enough—to justify the relevance of research. The integration

measurement literature is often discredited or challenged by those who focus on discourse. Yet, the former's foundation in long-term data collection and index development as well as its justificatory role both for researchers and—maybe more importantly—for active policymakers means that it is highly unlikely that those in the business of measuring immigrant integration will seriously embrace such critiques. Finally, the discourse-focused set of readings need the discourses that the policy- and measurement-focused literatures feed into, as this is after all the subject of their critique (Meissner 2019). Everyone needs immigrant integration and by extension the undesired/ill-fitting migrant who needs to be integrated. This is how immigrant integration is a maxim from which it is difficult to move on (Meissner 2018).

The first set of studies, in particular, tends to maintain a base level faith that integration can be made to work. Indeed, it has to be assumed that policy instruments can be engineered in ways that would provide for (more) stable social configurations. The implicit subtext is that policies need to be adjusted to new contexts. Those contexts are increasingly discussed in terms of superdiversity (Grzymala-Kazłowska and Phillimore 2017; Scholten and van Breugel 2018). Policy adjustments then need to achieve a similar level of integration to that existing in the past, when presumably there was less migration and less complexity and when integration policies used to work or were simply not necessary. Rightly done, immigrant integration will result in making the socially undesirable implications of migration negligible. Clearly, much research conducted under the banner of immigrant integration deals with relevant issues such as occupational or educational disparities or unequal opportunities for social mobility. Addressing those and other disparities is laudable but it is misguided if the approach is already predetermined: immigrant integration. Migration scholars and policymakers converge in their work on immigrant integration as funding schemes, such as the European Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund,<sup>2</sup> often explicitly require partnerships between them (see Scholten et al. 2015). The 2016 'Action Plan on the Integration of Third-Country Nationals', linked to the fund and published by the European Commission, portrays third-country nationals as always already in need of integration and therefore as not integrated.<sup>3</sup> Following this logic, it is regularly muted in research agendas that this very presupposition and integration language itself might be problematic for how we approach the study of the implications of migration.

As we argue throughout the article, the logic that integration gone wrong has to be addressed through more integration is circular and it does not address a central problem with integration research and practice: that it can mask power asymmetries and often inadvertently protects them by way of feeding into what might be best described as 'integration anxieties' (Benton and Nielsen 2013). Furthermore, arguing that there is a need for adjusted immigrant integration policies entails that there is something wrong with the level of social stability in cities that need to be addressed by getting immigrant integration right—a position that is also adopted by some scholars drawing on superdiversity to develop and structure their analysis. A frequent argument in the literature critical of superdiversity is that the notion mutes attention to the reproduction of colonial legacies and power hierarchies (Ndhlovu 2016). Such critiques are in part made possible when superdiversity terminology is linked to prospects of immigrant integration. If we search for common vectors that resurface across the literatures surveyed above, ethicised or

racialised categories notably remain of concern with religion emerging as a prominent additional one. Explorations also frequently focus on specific policy areas (e.g. health, education, and work) with the links between those areas remaining underexplored. This indeed does not provide adequate room for exposing deep structural inequalities across domains. In addition, complex reconfigurations of migration-driven diversification continuously add to the processes of disintegration.

Turning away from integration and to disintegration requires a shift in how we think and talk about superdiversity. While some consider changed practices of integrating migrants to be the response to an emergent superdiversity, we argue that thinking in terms of superdiversity, specifically paying more attention to the complexities spurred on by regulating migration and mobilities, is one of the most cogent challenges to a number of very simple but fundamental flaws in integrationist thinking and practice. What are those flaws? For one, it is difficult to deny that because integration is always out of reach, it is deeply frustrating for those having to try to integrate, a frustration that lingers and has cross-generational implications. Another flaw is that if certain individuals are identified as not integrated, this is frequently used to suggest that entire population groups, identified through markers of difference, specifically through their status as foreign (non-white/poor), are deemed to not have met the integration threshold. Furthermore, [Xanthaki \(2016\)](#) notes that integrationist arguments have been used to curtail access to human rights. Integration can become oppressive. Finally, in proposing to stabilise the social dynamics of diversity by integrating immigrants, the noted flaws of integration thinking become the accepted *modus operandi* which consolidates the opacity of the power relations that are at play in efforts to make integration work.

As [Schinkel \(2018\)](#) notes, thinking about immigrant integration as both a normatively driven objective and a subject of research needs to be critiqued. While he suggests that immigrant integration can only be the subject of research and should not be its objective, we argue that it is crucial to take an additional step and consider what happens if we imagine the implications of migration without alluding to integration or to related concepts such as cohesion and assimilation.<sup>4</sup> We do this to destabilise the maxim of immigrant integration as we described it above. What happens if we accept social disintegration as a more apt and at the same time disruptive descriptor of everyday social configurations?

### 3. Disintegration is *not* integration gone wrong

In the early 1990s, at a time when migration research started to form as its own subfield, [van Hear \(1994: 12\)](#) noted that ‘the paradox of today’s migration is that it is—or may be—both disintegrative and integrative’. This quote brings to the fore a very common dualism where integration’s opposite is disintegration. We here want to distance our take on disintegration from the idea that disintegration is integration gone wrong. We argue that the term disintegration does not need to be negatively connoted in relation to the social implications of international migration.

The centrality of the integration concept in the social sciences is generally attributed to Parsonian sociology tracing its roots to Durkheim ([Wieviorka 2014](#)). As [Blommaert et al. \(2018: 248\)](#) note:

A society, in the views of Parsons and his followers, is a conglomerate of social groups held together by integration: the sharing of (a single set of) central values which define the character, the identity (singular) of that particular society (singular).

This paraphrasing of a Parsonian understanding of integration highlights its problematic basic assumption: cohesive and self-determined communities are relatively homogenous regarding their values and these values provide for integrative social glue. The arrival of newcomers disrupts such integration since they are presumed to not share the same values. This is ever more disturbing since integration thinking falls behind a long tradition of classical social theory that has always pointed to alternative models of modern, urban societies, of which Durkheim's organic solidarity (Durkheim 1984) might serve as an example. As Portes and Vickstrom (2011: 472) aptly observed, 'present calls to homogeneity and communitarianism are backward-looking and, hence, reactionary'. The more pertinent and difficult challenges instead are the long-standing economic, racial, and colonial inequalities that are not being addressed.

In the literature on migration, one of the central critiques that have emerged over the past decades is that the long-held community or group thinking, which also underlies original integration logics, has defied efforts to reconcile with the kinds of social processes migration researchers have been witnessing on the ground. The implications of migration rarely, if ever, play out in binaries. As Brubaker (2003) famously noted, groupness is not necessarily a given or uniform characteristic. This makes it less viable to commence research focused on preconceived groups. To respond to this and similar challenges, a now large body of literature has formed around the notion of superdiversity to show how various aspects of the movement of people across state borders influence complex contemporary social dynamics (Vertovec 2007). A central analytical challenge of superdiversity that is still too often neglected is to better make sense of differentiation processes that happen in the light of amplified efforts to control migration and immigrants at an unprecedented scale (Meissner 2017, Hall 2017). Much of those control efforts appear like a misguided rescue mission of a modernist ideal of integrated societies—accepting only the 'right' migrants in the name of integration and to not obstruct progress is a common mantra of migration management. We live at a time when international migration and how to deal with it is an all-pervasive topic and arguably increasingly the subject of regulatory efforts. These efforts have an impact on both those who have moved internationally and those whose mobility is *a priori* restricted (Meissner 2017, Spijkerboer 2018). This also means that we cannot afford to ignore long-standing and new power asymmetries that are linked to these developments.

In addition, it is increasingly acknowledged that making sense of the implications of migration cannot be based on the presupposition that people moving somewhere will indefinitely remain there. Wiewiorka (2008, 2014) has repeatedly cautioned that recognising the multiplicities of mobility patterns spurred on by globalisation is reason enough to doubt the usefulness of the concept of integration for advancing social analysis. As he notes, it is necessary

to stop talking endlessly about integration concerning immigrants who then only hear one thing: they are being asked to subject themselves to norms and rules

without being given the means to construct their own lives, and to make their own choices. (Wieviorka 2008: 35)

We agree and, against the backdrop of the structurally enshrined inequalities and the perpetuation of partial citizenship justifications (Bauböck 2011), we suggest that the problem that needs fixing is not how immigrant integration is done, measured, or talked about, but the problem is the notion itself. It is in bringing together the terms integration and immigration that this shift from thinking and researching societal integration to othering and individual/group integration is accelerated. Applied, as it is in much of the literature, to the behaviour of individuals or presumed to be stable groups (including the generic group of ‘migrants’), the integration maxim continuously steers our focus to look for and analyse individual or group characteristics and outcomes. This poses difficulties with unmooring the resulting categorisations because the conditions and circumstances under which accentuations of difference become possible are muted (Hall 2017). Privileging a focus on unfit practices is one of the most obvious problems with integration thinking (Schinkel 2018). In contrast, disintegration is an unsuitable descriptor of decontextualised individual/group practices. Starting an analysis with disintegration avoids this partiality because rather than discussing an individual’s or a group’s capacity to fit in or integrate, as we show in the next section, disintegration acknowledges the continuous relevance of the reconfiguration and reconstitution of difference. While Wieviorka turns to a mobilities framework to move on from integration, we here explore what can be achieved by taking advantage of the disruptive potential of thinking about disintegration. Usually seen as a negative and undesirable state or outcome, we employ it as a notion that centres on the dynamics of superdiverse socio-material configurations.

An obvious problem with this proposition is that we can be accused of simply shifting our gaze to integration’s opposite. We argue instead that viewing disintegration as integration’s opposite risks equating disintegration with fragmentation. This is problematic because it implies that difference is necessarily a fragmenting social force. In part, the backlash against multiculturalism advanced such a critique (Vertovec and Wessendorf 2010). However, as has been variously described and analysed, there is an immense capacity for chaotic order in social settings, of which the relational dynamics of conviviality are part, and the prevalence of difference, therefore, is not at all a sufficient condition of social collapse (Marut 1994; Simone 2016; Nieswand 2017). The potentiality and uncertainty that are central to disintegration also become tangible in the interplay of multiplicity and relationality (Glissant 1997; DeLanda 2006). The dynamics of superdiversity point us to recognition of repeated shifts in how migration becomes relevant for propelling change. This should direct our attention to a form of disintegration that cannot automatically be linked to narratives of collapse and fragmentation. Focusing on the possibility that highly complex urban social settings by and large do not collapse, Magnusson (2014) makes the parallel argument that it is necessary to unmoor thinking about urban politics from a state-centric position to grasp why this observation is actually not that surprising. In relation to the social implications of migration, we allude to Magnusson’s logic and see a need to divorce disintegration from integration thinking in a similar fashion. The way we go about this in this article is by focussing on the dynamics of migration-driven differentiation.



As Schinkel (2017) and others note, one of the most problematic aspects about the continuous use of immigrant integration language is that the reference group invoked is a homogenous (white) native group which, characteristically for Western zero-point epistemology (Castro-Gómez 2007; Mignolo 2010), is not made explicit. As a consequence, integration is assessed by identifying the non-integrated exclusively amongst those who are deemed as other even if integration is framed as a process of multilateral engagements. Yet, two- or more-way models of integration can still reproduce power asymmetries. Most people (whether migration has been a relevant factor in their lives or not) do not think of integration as just a two-way process. In the Netherlands and the UK, Sobolewska et al. (2017) find that public opinion about immigrant integration shows a more multidimensional understanding of what immigrant integration means. However, they also identify a higher non-white integration penalty—the burden is higher on the side of non-white immigrants and their descendants. If a more complex appreciation of immigrant integration does not resolve these imbalances and structural discriminations, we conclude that immigrant integration is too divisive a notion that errs too frequently on the side of harm to be a useful notion for social scientific efforts (Meissner 2019).

Disintegration, on the other hand, is not as amenable to be thought about in terms of individual performance since, in the way we understand the notion, its central feature concerns the social dynamics that we witness in (the making of) contexts of superdiversity—including the attention this requires to the effects of regulating migration and migrants. Disintegration thus defined requires a starting point that considers the entire population, their transnational connections, and historicity and—as a consequence—relational positioning. Disintegration requires defining research populations not as hermetically sealed but fuzzy. This shift in focus derives from paying attention to the dynamics of change and multidimensional differentiations that thinking with and through a superdiversity lens requires. Divorced from integration, disintegration calls for different logics in making sense of the implications of migration. Disintegration alludes to a somewhat unstable state and it certainly entails a substantial share of unpredictability of outcomes and, yes, it may indeed entail processes leading towards fragmentation—yet, since the term itself is not steering us to think about a finished position or a given process, it opens the space to talk about who gets to define difference and how and why this matters. Maybe most importantly, in talking about disintegration we can address the role of anxieties over social uncertainty. The crux is to think of disintegration not in terms of differences between individuals but to appreciate differences in a relational space that is characterised not only by different differences but also by material infrastructures, which allow for those differences to matter in multiple ways (Amin and Thrift 2017).

What is thus recognised is that any ambition to make the dynamics of diversity more cohesive is also always already initiating a process of consolidating social and economic hierarchies. Does this lead us towards an argument and debate where there is no common ground or basis for forming and negotiating consensus? Does thinking in terms of disintegration mean anything goes? As we have argued, this would foreclose the option of unlocking the intended analytical potential of shifting our language. It is at this junction that the notion of conviviality can be a useful and needed corrective in not just moving beyond integration but allowing for disintegration as a way to make uncertainty a productive starting point and to avoid the noted shortcomings of an integration approach.

## 4. The provocation of convivial disintegration

Difference and how it is re/produced is central to the way we have debated disintegration up to this point. Conviviality in recent years has become increasingly relevant to studying processes of living with difference. Some even declared a ‘convivial turn’ (Neal et al. 2013; Wise and Noble 2016). There needs to be a clear distinction between conviviality as an analytical term and its common usage. The latter, which we avoid, understands conviviality as a reference to having a good, slightly inebriated time together with friends or family.<sup>5</sup> Heil’s (2020, 2019b) conceptual notion of conviviality—which we here build on—has emerged from inductive theorising with interlocutors in various urban settings including in Spain, Senegal, and Brazil. For his interlocutors, difference is explicitly part of everyday encounters. Grounded in the everyday, conviviality focuses attention on processes in which people live together engaging with difference. Difference here is not understood as an essentialised characteristic of individuals but rather as what sets people apart when in relation to one another. Difference is, therefore, not a priori reified but perpetually reproduced and reconfigured in the light of its respective genealogies. Therefore, convivial encounters are collaborative and conflictual, embracing both emergent multicultural *and* genealogies of racism and exclusion. This sets our notion apart from those propositions that maintain an either-or approach. Rather than delimiting conviviality to the sphere of multicultural (Back and Sinha 2016: 522), we here propose that the relational practices of conviviality bridge the whole spectrum. Thus and given that asymmetrical power relations are produced by coloniality, autochthony, or racism, encounters with differences are most often fragile and potentially precarious (Heil 2015a). Not unlike Glissant’s (1997) poetics of relation, conviviality directs our focus to the relational dimension of social configurations as they become apparent in encounters during which difference is re/negotiated and re/translated (Heil 2015b).

We set a focus that is somewhat distinct from other uses of conviviality. Gilroy (2005) provides rich narratives of conviviality and acknowledges the persistence of inequalities and power asymmetries.<sup>6</sup> However, he also links conviviality to the condition of multiculturalism which he describes as a state when ‘a degree of differentiation can be combined with a large measure of overlapping’ (Gilroy 2006: 40). In this line of argument, Neal et al. (2017: 31) propose that ‘thinking through the connections between conviviality and community may present a more productive extension of conviviality, scaling it up to a macro discourse of how multiculturalism and difference is lived.’ They rightly observe that ‘conviviality has empathy with difference [...] while community [relies on] affinities with recognised and similar others’ (34). To us, rather than seeing a commonality, this observation sets conviviality and community apart. First discussed by Illich (1973), another prominent approach has linked conviviality to a normative art which counteracts global challenges and the negative outgrowths of modernity. Alphandéry et al. (2013: 6) declare that ‘the main task we face is that of working out a new philosophy and developing practical forms of peaceful interaction.’ Both approaches risk falling back into the deeply rooted framework provided by integrationist thinking and, this time under the heading of conviviality, they provide yet another modulation of what will bring societies back together as integrated wholes.

The relationship between multiplicity and oneness, or difference and community, is one that also haunts creolisation, hybridisation, and mixing (Wiedorn 2013: 911–2). Rather than following the romanticising turn back to integration logic, we acknowledge and highlight the challenges that living with difference can entail. In contrast to purely hopeful readings of creolisation and mixing in which the challenging dynamics of difference might persist but can be overcome, as, in certain renderings of multiculturalism, our use of conviviality captures *both* everyday and conflictual encounters with migration-driven and other forms of difference that remain a meaningful part of these encounters throughout. On the basis of century-long experiences of living with difference in West Africa and Brazil (Heil 2020; Dreyfus & Juillard 2005; Telles 2004), certain differences continue to be salient, while others dynamically reconfigure without disappearing. Underlying power asymmetries and social inequalities are, therefore, part and parcel of conviviality which leads to uncertainty and discomfort. In a nutshell, thinking with conviviality in this way raises awareness for complicated relational positionings and practices that mediate cultural and other differences as well as power asymmetries and structural inequality in diverse and unequal societies (Alba and Foner 2016; Costa 2019; Heil 2019b). Key relational practices can be identified in situations that are either conflictual or cooperative as well as neither and/or both. Such situations can be in a neighbourhood block, a city square, on public transport, at the workplace, in the government department, the hospital, or the shopping centre. Regardless of the locality, relational practices are always interlinked across geographic and organisational scales. This is why a deromanticised glance at the mundane points to social situations that may be experienced as conflictual by one party but not by another. Even if certain instances seem to become tense, multiple outcomes remain possible. Both difference and conflict are part of spaces of ambiguity and cannot be tied to social decline in and of themselves.

Convivial disintegration highlights that the urban and other environments marked by migration-driven diversifications are full of interaction alongside reconfigurations of difference. Conviviality conceptually focuses on how urban dwellers interact, even with minimal involvement, and how they make different activities and needs temporarily intelligible to smooth over their everyday battles and discontents. Some urban dwellers more than others aptly translate and retranslate between their difference to get along sufficiently—to avoid and actively counter social breakdown (Heil 2015a). To be clear, this does not make convivial disintegration inevitably equivalent to mixing, hybridity, or—for that matter—integration. People have different motivations for, morally justify and historically embed their relational practices (Heil 2014, 2020). Different (urban) materialities such as spaces and resources, regulations, and surveillance infrastructures as well as everyday ethics, motivations, and convictions are heavily intertwined in and part of such convivial relationalities. Ultimately, conviviality appears as a meshwork, flexible enough to endure and bolster the strain of the various atrocities we as humans have grown and are growing accustomed to. It provides room for conflict, uncertainty, and contestation rather than making the attempt to dilute or overcome them through integration. Conviviality is constituted through relational practices, such as, but not limited to, interaction, translation, and negotiation. These are never fixed, never completed, but always subject to debate and change. Thus, minimal consensuses, which Heil (2015b) sees as a feature of conviviality, only describe snapshots of societal states in becoming, raising

awareness for the historicities involved in dynamically disruptive, convivial disintegration. Importantly, temporalising consensus pays tribute to the structural–material conditionalities of convivial disintegration.

Can the meshwork of conviviality break or, in other words, can convivial disintegration become fatal fragmentation? It would be too utopian to say it cannot. Complete avoidance of contact—a very privileged option for current-day urban dwellers—or coerced segregation of the apartheid kind might set examples of the limits that exist to conviviality. They also fall outside the framework of an integrated society, at least if it was thought coherently. In countering the myth of an integratable society, convivial disintegration does not provide an alternative fix. While disintegration foregrounds the superdiverse configurations of current-day societies, conviviality raises awareness that flexible and unpredictable relationalities co-constitute such disintegrated collectivities. To live together with difference implies continuous work, nothing that goes by itself. Yet, it is substantially eased since no overburdened normative objective of achieving bounded, working whole is superimposed. This is how convivial disintegration disrupts and goes beyond the integration maxim.

Against this backdrop, we can see an empowering quality in convivial disintegration. It means that difference is and should be fought for, and that subjectification needs to be contested and questioned. Coercing structural forces will exist and can be addressed. Decolonial, racial, feminist, and queer analyses have long argued that difference is never neutral but always imbued with power relations (cf. Butler 1990, 2011; Fassin 2011; Mignolo 2011). Subjectification and the abject are part and parcel of contemporary social configurations. We cannot romanticise if both such ruthless regimes as the colonial and postcolonial ones and sociality as complex and unequal as the classist and racist Brazilian one have already been described as convivial (Mbembe 1992; Heil 2019b). Currently diversifying societies have more in common with such past and present regimes. As Mignolo (2011) aptly shows, the conceptual and political links between ‘the West and the rest’ (Hall 1992) continue to be rejected by geopolitical actors who claim modernity for themselves while silencing its darker side: coloniality and its outgrowths. Mignolo’s reasoning further highlights that integration remains within the line of epistemological racism that denies its co-constitution with coloniality and the part it plays in the current, unequal, and discriminatory migration-driven and other forms of difference. Convivial disintegration, on the other hand, inscribes itself into a reflexive epistemological framework (Heil 2019a), which, to us, addresses currently diversifying configurations more aptly precisely since it originates and intimately remains acquainted with exploitative, unequal, and disintegrated configurations and looks at the relational practices that enmesh them. While it in and of itself also does not resolve power asymmetries, inequality, or epistemological racism, convivial disintegration at least offers a take on current-day societies that has—sometimes cruelly so—little to do with wishful thinking and overstretched expectations.

## 5. Conclusion

Narratives of collapse are fuelling much of the scaremongering about the effects of migration—our analysis in this article suggests that presenting disintegration as the opposite of

integration is unhelpful in countering such narratives. As we are concluding this article, we have just witnessed another horrific attack on Muslims, this time in Christchurch, New Zealand. The perpetrator's manifesto condemns diversity and calls for 'unity [...] and racial nationalism'<sup>7</sup> to counter a presumed imminent threat. The attackers equate imaginaries of homogeneity with social stability, predictability, and domination (listed examples of such homogeneity include China and other places where diversity is ever present but certain forms of it are violently marginalised by the state). Diversity for the attackers is linked to societal breakdown. Those deeds and logics can under no circumstances be equated with the objective to make integration work. However, an uncanny and disconcerting connection emerges in calling for certain alignments and related adaptations that can lead to unsolicited demands for homogenisation in the name of social stability and progress.

Divorcing the notion of disintegration from integration, by refusing to let one be the opposite of the other, is helpful in proactively recognising that a desire for social adaptation and stability is never innocent. A focus on disintegration calls for a more concerted engagement with the uncertainty and instability of everyday situations which rarely lead to the kinds of social breakdown discursively used to justify the need for immigrant integration. As Appadurai (2006) notes, much of the anxieties fuelling hostile politics are based on precisely a fear over losing control. Some of the wind is taken out of the sails of integrationist thinking if neither the starting point nor the ultimate goal is an integrated whole but if it is acknowledged that the complexities of superdiversity promote a societal model that is continuously disintegrating but at the same time remains convivial due to relational practices of engaging with difference.

At the start of the article, we noted that the provocation inherent in talking about convivial disintegration invites a debate over reframing the academic discussion and (implicit) normative assumptions about immigration and its effects on urban social fabrics. Such a debate neither refuses nor objects to the role academics should and can play in thinking about policy debates on immigration. We acknowledge that policy debates will continue to focus on efforts to integrate migrants. This would be the case—at least for some time—even if all academics were to turn their back on integrationist language, including those in the business of measuring integration. However, the latter could, for example, understand convivial disintegration as a call to more clearly expose margins of error, fuzzy results, and degrees of uncertainty over justifying validity without recognising the ways in which exercises of measuring immigrant integration reproduce and reinforce power hierarchies. After all, there are many concerns that have to be and are being addressed.

We do not aim to dogmatically declare convivial disintegration to be the new maxim. Policy responses, if starting with the notion of convivial disintegration, may not be radically different from current advances in acknowledging and responding to migration-driven diversification. We may, for example, see an increased mainstreaming of policy interventions (Scholten and van Breugel 2018). The continuous unequal positions of individuals in social settings and animosities, fuelled by ideas about integration demands and other factors, will make enabling interventions necessary. However, open acknowledgement is needed that interventions will not lead to a stable social environment immune to further social changes and reconfigurations. State provisions for collective social

infrastructure can be called for (Amin 2012) but not on the condition of integration. Ultimately focusing on and considering relational modes of conviviality entails paying attention to the potentiality of reconfigurations, the uncertainties, and conflicts that come with it but also the possibility spaces this provides. Through more equitable redistribution, which pays attention to the historical origins and material consequences of difference, political interventions may facilitate resilience in the form of convivial disintegration, a resilience that is continuously shifting and changing. It will involve efforts to observe and recognise the role difference plays within such settings rather than efforts trying to ‘address’ and thereby resolve difference. This is the crux in moving from thinking about immigrant integration to thinking along the lines of convivial disintegration. It means that the question of perpetuating power asymmetries cannot be a hindsight concern but needs to move to the start of the analysis and remain a central element.

Does calling for a focus on convivial disintegration merely accept that current-day urban configurations are superdiverse because of a multiplicity of difference that is more often than not unequal, unjust, inequitable, and exclusionary, as well as racist, sexist, xenophobic, and classist? Can moving on from integration via convivial disintegration inadvertently re/produce social hierarchies and power asymmetries? Rather than advocacy, convivial disintegration is an attempt to deromanticise, and always consider the superdiverse re/configurations of asymmetrical difference, the instability this entails and the relational modes which prevent total fragmentation. Conviviality as we use it in this article points to difference never ceasing to matter. Acknowledging the possibility of breakdown and failure goes hand in hand with recognising the dynamics of convivial disintegration. Instead of starting our analysis from the vantage point of idealised propositions that may never be met, convivial disintegration calls for a focus on an intermediary level that allows translating between different contexts in which disintegration is dealt with. While we started our analysis with discontent about an arguably particularly European take on integration, we are positive that our elaborations are of wider, if not global relevance. This is not least the case, since convivial disintegration is a notion that is inspired by relational practices we encountered in our fieldwork around the globe. We, therefore, hope it can provide for the scope to talk about diversity and differences across geographic divides. If one accepts that living with difference can fail, the prospect of failure can no longer be used as a rationale for unsolicited subjectification. It then becomes possible to more proactively address power asymmetries linked to migration, which are part and parcel of social dynamics more generally. Rather than perpetuating unnecessary and unethical subjectification, convivial disintegration invites us to think about the necessary interventions that strengthen resilience in living with difference.

## Notes

1. Going beyond the scope of this article, similar tendencies have been discussed in terms of the expressly exclusionary discourses of autochthony and belonging (Geschiere 2009). They assume that homogenisation is the principle mode of confronting difference.

2. <<http://ec.europa.eu/research/participants/portal/desktop/en/opportunities/amif/topics/amif-2018-ag-inte-1.html>> accessed 10 Oct 2018.
3. <[https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/sites/homeaffairs/files/what-we-do/policies/european-agenda-migration/proposal-implementation-package/docs/20160607/communication\\_action\\_plan\\_integration\\_third-country\\_nationals\\_en.pdf](https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/sites/homeaffairs/files/what-we-do/policies/european-agenda-migration/proposal-implementation-package/docs/20160607/communication_action_plan_integration_third-country_nationals_en.pdf)> accessed 10 Oct 2018.
4. The assimilation notion while more focused on cultural incorporation and more prominent in the North American literature is often used interchangeably with immigrant integration.
5. <<https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/conviviality>> accessed 9 Mar 2019. Cf. also [Overing and Passes \(2000: xiii\)](#) who make a similar analytical distinction.
6. For a more comprehensive overview, see [Costa \(2019\)](#).
7. <<https://alternative-democracy-research.org/2019/03/15/brenton-tarrants-views-of-diversity/>> accessed 18 Mar 2019.

## Funding

This work was supported by the European Union's Marie Skłodowska-Curie Actions Grant Agreement No. [707124]; the Research Foundation - Flanders (FWO) and the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme under the Marie Skłodowska-Curie Grant [665501].

## Acknowledgements

This article presents the work of two equally contributing authors. We would like to thank Prof Steven Vertovec and the two anonymous reviewers for providing useful comments on earlier versions of this article.

*Conflict of interest statement.* None declared.

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