HOMInG interview

with Oliver Bakewell

Senior Lecturer at the Global Development Institute, University of Manchester

conducted by Luis Eduardo Perez Murcia in Manchester on 15 March 2018

Senior Lecturer at the Global Development Institute, University of Manchester. His work focuses on the intersections between migration and mobility and processes of development and change, with an empirical focus on migration within Africa. He is the Research Co-ordinator on Migration and Development for the Research and Evidence Facility of the EU Trust Fund for Africa (Horn of Africa) https://www.soas.ac.uk/ref-hornresearch/.

At a personal level, what does the term' home' mean to you and where is home for you?

In some ways it is very easy. I think home is where I have been living for the last 15 years and where I live now, in Rose Hill, a neighbourhood in Oxford, so that is my home. I was born in London but I have never particularly seen home as fixed on the place where I grew up. But after some time working abroad, a year in Kenya, a year in Sudan, and these sorts of places often talking to migrants, refugees and others about where they are from, I started to become more aware of the ways in which we tend to use the word home to refer to people's places of origin. I realised I tended to use the word home casually, saying things like 'let's go home' at the end of the day. Spending this time abroad made me think more about the idea of home. I was always aware that I was staying in places where did not belong. That experience led me to start using a simple definition that I find work for me: home is a place where I do not have to explain where I am there.

As a white British man staying in Western Kenya, I was different so it gave rise to lots of discussions about why and how I was there. At some point, I believe these kinds of questions block the feeling of being at home because it is not always easy to explain why you are there. When I moved to Oxford, no one was particularly interested in why I was there and nobody asked me to explain my presences. Of course, there are huge issues of class and ethnicity among many other factors that make the experience of being, or not being at home possible in different places. For my part, in Oxford I can just be there. So I very rapidly got the sense of home. Home is where I do not need to explain myself.

In light of your past and ongoing research on migration, could you tell us why did you engage with the notion of home and how do you use the term home in your research?

To be honest, I am not sure I ever particularly engaged that much with the term 'home' directly in my work. I have been interested in how people move and for my first research project I was looking at repatriation, challenging the idea that is was automatic thing that people would return 'home' when they could. Actually, in terms of repatriation my questions were exactly about where do you think you would belong and do you want to go to that place? What I wanted was to explain why some want to move when others do not, and so questions of home became important. I know from this work with Angolans in Zambia that it is a complex issue to understand where home is. Some of the people I interviewed have a very strong perspective of home as a rooted place – most memorably one woman told me here home was where her placenta was buried; others referred to the place of the ancestors. For others home is much about where the family is now, networks and connections. I remember people saying things like 'if my family is here, so I am at home here. Now I am Zambian. This is where I am'. So these very different perceptions challenge the idea of rooted homes and give room for a more fluid perspectives on where the migrant's home is. Even those who come from the same country may have very different perspectives towards home. There is a psychological element to it that makes the experience of home very individual. So as a social scientist, I think home is a very problematic concept to play with.

In a paper you published in 1999, you called into attention how 'concepts of home vary greatly between different societies, and between different individuals within societies'. In light of this statement, what do you believe is the potential, if any, of home for understanding migration and the life experiences' of migrants?

I am not sure, I have moved that far. My concern is that home is sometimes deployed as a static thing or in general as a uniform thing. So rather than letting people define their ideas of home and where they belong, we just take for granted where home is for them and where they belong. So looking at ideas of home from the migrants' own perspectives help us to problematize questions of home and belonging. With displacement, for example, I know that some people continue to be displaced, while others become established occupying news spaces and creating new senses of belonging. Some of them however do not feel at home even after 5, 10, 15 or 20 years of displacement. I believe that by looking at the relationship between home and migration we can have a better understanding of where people feel at home and where people belong.

Our project is a collaborative, comparative, multi-sited research framed around migrants' processes of home-making. What do you think this research could add to the study of home as specific field of inquiry and also to the field of refugee studies?

I think having a comparative approach could be really important as most research on refugees tends to focus on a particular population, and their histories and narratives about home and belonging are often presented as if they were only explained by their refugee background.

And I wonder how the picture would change if they start looking at the different narratives coming from people from very different conditions, very different cultures, norms and expectations. It could be fascinating to look at how far you can see the same process of home making and emplacement amongst the displaced and those who maybe never move anywhere. The understanding of the perceptions of home in both populations may shift our ideas of home and belonging.

In a piece of research you published in 2011, you suggested that the condition of displacement can be reversed. 'It comes to an end when people regain their sense of home and become emplaced []'. Could you share with us what do you think is the value of home for understanding the migrants' process of social integration?

Home it is lots of different things for different people. As I said at the beginning, however, for myself, I use the term home to denote a place where you don't have to explain yourself being there, you are a part of the furniture so to speak. So achieving a sense of home is really important for people because they become part of the wider community. They become part of the society where they live, they have a sense of connection and future there and thus the sense of being emplaced. To achieve the feeling of being at home in a particular place however doesn't necessarily mean that people cannot leave it. So, this idea of home is not about roots necessarily, it is not the sense they become rooted and stuck or fix. They might do – but some other things happen: the children may move somewhere else, and parents may move back and fore. All people move around. For refugees, getting to that stage may mean having the same mobility as everybody else. And, it is not reflection of the refugee background; it is just because what happens to people and what people choose to do and how they want to live their lives.

What are the most relevant empirical and methodological challenges that you identify in researching home and migrants' home making-practices?

I suppose we need not to impose an idea of what people mean by home. Probably we need quite open questions and then try to find some sort of common threads across different contexts, different people, and different migratory trajectories. And I don't think that is impossible. You need some conceptual underpinnings you can carry across of different spaces. I am not sure, however, that home provides that, primarily because home means different things for different people. Maybe you will be looking at some at the most solid things related to home, like employment, family relationships, networks, and connections.

At some point our project may engage with comparing experiences of home and home-making practices for people with a wide range of migratory backgrounds including refugees, low and high-skilled migrants, diplomats and international students. Do you see any potential in this kind of research to advances debates on home and migration?

I think it is a really valuable thing to do, because there is always this element or question about what's forced or what's voluntary, when it comes to migration. And when thinking of

those who may have been forced to leave their homes, governments still are making decisions about where and when they need to go or move on to some other place. At the same time, when you think of students who might not have to leave their homes, you may find that they are also a lot of things playing on how they behave and experience home, perhaps some things that affect their experience of home in which they do not have much choice or options. If we assume that refugees have no choices, we are ignoring the way that they may really find some room, albeit often very limited, to make choices but also that their migratory experiences are not necessarily so far different from many of the other migration histories we can hear. So we do need to understand all migrants' motivations, what they want to stay in a particular place or why they want to move back 'home'. I think you might find maybe some more similarities between those different sources of migrants than expected. I think this analysis will be useful.

In you recently published book *Forging African Communities: Mobility, Integration and Belonging* the cover promises to the reader that the book "sheds new light on how human mobility redefines the meaning of home, community, citizenship and belonging". Could you tell us a little bit more why scholars looking at the interplay between migration and home may find this book interesting?

Thank you, this provides me with a good chance to plug the book! https://www.palgrave.com/gb/book/9781137581938 This book looks at the movement of people across Africa. As its starting point, we noted that most African international migrants move to other African countries. And we have very little knowledge about how they settle. So we wanted to understand how it is that these migrants become settled. The book wanted to explore some cases of how different groups and in different ways people come to being in new places, how they becoming incorporated into new societies, and particularly how that works in African settings. I think there are critical lessons that perhaps are relevant to understanding migration more widely, not just in Africa.

A central issue is that migration in Africa is not headline of policies. If you want to use the term integration, for example, you rarely find integration policies concerned with how international migrants settle in African states. In Europe, however you define integration at some point it seen as something states need to deal with. Across of Africa for the most of part, South Africa perhaps being an exception, people forge their position within their new societies by themselves. To some extent you can maybe explore things more openly asking questions about what it means to belong here, or not to belong; how do people negotiate their position to being part of this place or not. It's not all about happy endings. The term integration is indeed foggy; what people are doing is creating something new by becoming part of the new society. So for example, what comes to mind is the case study in the book from Congo Brazzaville. There are artisanal fishermen from other parts of West Africa who have settled on the beach in the city of Pointe-Noire. Over time, they have been able to create alliances with some sections of the local community. Working together they have been able to resist the pressures an oil company to remove people from the beach. This has helped establish their position as part of the city. From my own work in Zambia, I have seen Angolans settling in very remote parts of Zambia. They create new processes of social

formation. They have been creating new societies through migration, and through is people navigating the way to new settings.

We can perhaps see this more clearly in Africa partly because we are not distracted by the focus on integration policies that seems more prevalent in Europe and America. We can ask much more open questions about the relationships people make, and the way they find a place, become part of it and then change things. I suspect at some level we could identify the same social processes enabling and frustrating peoples' settlement in new societies across these very different contexts. So I think that the analysis of these social processes through African cases studies may be of broader interest to people who work on migration and home.

Thank you Oliver, it has been a great pleasure to hear your thoughts.