

HOMInG interview

with **Peter Kivisto**

(Augustana College)

Conducted by Paolo Boccagni

November 2019



**Peter Kivisto** is Richard A. Swanson Professor of Social Thought at Augustana College and an International Visiting Professor at the Center for Research on Ethnic Relations and Nationalism at the University of Helsinki. His interests include immigration, social integration, citizenship, religion and social theory. Some of his recent books are *The Trump Phenomenon: How the Politics of Populism Won in 2016* (2017), *Incorporating Diversity: Rethinking Assimilation in a Multicultural Age* (2015) and *Illuminating Social Life: Classical and Contemporary Theory Revisited* (2012).

**Would you like to share what home means to you, at the personal or professional level, or both?**

Well, at the personal level, maybe one good way of looking at home is that it's a place where you like to return to. On the one hand, when you leave home you break out of your routines. In some ways, this is like what Simmel had in mind when he described an adventure. Going out is an adventure, and then you come back to the everyday comfort of the familiar. There are people who are averse to the adventure, they don't want it, preferring to just stay home. There are other people who don't want to be at home; they always want to be on an adventure. I'm one of those other people, the other category, who likes to go out and then come back home. I find routine good, valuable, something I need and embrace, but not all time... so it's a kind of dialectical move, back and forth between going out and returning home. I have lived in the same house for thirty years; I know the house. I know its sounds, I know the things that don't work very well and those that do work. Home is a place where you return to: from your daily work (or whatever else you are doing), being out in public, doing various things in the view of other people. Then you come home, take off your shoes, the cat sits on your lap, and you find yourself in a different place.

**Is it the same home after your children went...?**

It changed after they left. There were three stages of life in this house. In the first years of marriage when we didn't have kids, we developed routines involving a household of two. This, of course, changed once we had children, in no small part because you do things according to their schedules. Finally, since my kids have been gone for some time, our lifestyle returned to many of the ways we acted before we had kids, so being what some call an "empty-nester" is not unfamiliar.

**What about the meaning of home to you as sociologist? Is it the same or a different one?**

I think home is a place where there is a kind of order, a kind of structure. Even though my wife and I are pretty informal about keeping a house organized and tidy by some standards, there is order insofar as usually know where things are, what we need from the market, etc.

### **Order in terms of predictability?**

Predictability, that's exactly right. I value that. I personally find that, in terms of getting work done, my home extends to my office. I live very close to my campus and I almost never, for example, use the home computer. I use the one in my office and when I come home I'm done with that stuff for the day. My office is large and it's a very functional space. I have a large library and similar resources at my fingertips. I keep these resources in my office and not at home, and that works well for me. My office is also comfortable, so for example, when the weather is snowy, I take off my boots and have slippers in the office just like at home.

### **It's a kind of homelike space...**

Yeah, and by the way, the slipper thing has become popular with my younger colleagues.

### **You legitimated them...**

I suppose you could say that I legitimated it, that my colleagues have decided that being comfortable in their offices involves making them feel like home. Someone down the hall has decorated her office with Ikea furniture that she brought from home. So in a way she has reinvented her office to be a home away from home.

### **As a sociologist would you see any particular point or merit in researching home?**

Yes, because home is where people spend most of their time. People use their homes in different ways, make their home available to other people in different ways, inviting in large numbers or small numbers of people based on their preferences. Sociologically, home is a private space, though people understand this differently. For some, the private and the public are meant to be kept quite distinct, while for others the home can at certain times be a public space. Thus, if you have a fluid view of private/public, you are comfortable hosting a large party, leaving the door open, as people you may not know well come into it, thus making your private home for the moment more of a public space. Some people are comfortable with this while others aren't, for whatever reason. Either way, it tends to become part of the routine of how you conduct your life.

### **Moving from there: would you say that your own understanding of home resounds with the mainstream view of home in the USA?**

I think so, probably. That being said, it is clear that there are a range of views in such a large and heterogeneous society. Some people have large extended families, which I don't. For example, I have a former secretary, now retired, who is from a farm community. All these farmers, her family, cousins, siblings and so on, get together all the time, large numbers of people getting together in each other's homes. She would tell me of the numerous occasions when as many as 50 family members would get together. From her perspective, this was built into the nature of the family. I would probably go insane if I was expected to regularly entertain fifty people in my house

### **Would you say this is true only with houses size or also with class, race, gender...?**

I'm sure those things play a role, too. People who have very large homes can accommodate large gathering and in this regard the role of social class is relevant. There are also people that I know, including African Americans and Mexican Americans, who live in my community with extended families living nearby. They frequently have a lot of family members around. Since in most instances they have small homes with small rooms, dealing with large numbers poses challenges. But this doesn't deter gatherings. Some of these are seasonal, so, for example, you can accommodate larger gatherings in the backyard, barbecuing or something similar.

Very close to my campus is a growing Mexican community, a neighbourhood called *Florecente*. It is very clear that the residents of the neighbourhood invest quite a lot in their homes. One can always find numerous renovations and new construction projects underway. I've been in a few homes and discovered that when the homeowners renovate, one finds certain similarities. For example, renovating older houses typically involves removing carpeting and replacing it with tile. I always think this is a way of bringing something of Mexico to the American Midwest. These immigrant families also commonly put an iron fence around the property, with brickwork and sometimes quite decorative features, again a reflection of a very Mexican thing. So at some level there is an effort to transplant, in a very different place, something that is familiar.

**Would you see this as a generalizable pattern or not?**

I suppose it is, but it's somewhat hard to generalize. For example, I think of the local population of highly-educated immigrants, particularly from India, and particularly doctors, who live in expensive gated-communities. I only have been in few of these homes. Sometimes in Hindu households one finds instances of a home-temple, but to a large extent you don't see the furnishings and decorative features reflecting the ethnic background. Rather, the owners seem to be saying, "We are here", reflecting the upper-middle class aspirations and aesthetics of the affluent native born.

**This probably points at an intersection between ethnicity and class...**

Absolutely.

**Among historians and historical sociologists of migration in the US, would you say that the idea of studying the evolution of immigration by observing the built environment is relevant as an argument?**

I do and I'll give you an example. I grew up in a mining town in Northern Michigan which had a very large Finnish population, which my father's side of the family was part of. Those immigrant Finns often had wood-burning saunas in detached structures in the backyard. If you go to my hometown today, you will discover that very few of those saunas remain. Those outdoor saunas constituted an architectural culture transplanted in the US. Subsequent generations of ethnic offspring have replaced those traditional saunas with modern indoor electric saunas. I should know: I have one in my basement!

**So, would you say it is a matter of transplantation first, and assimilation at a later point?**

Yes, but assimilation, as we understand, entails people picking and choosing what they hang on to and what they let go of. For example, there are a lot of people of Swedish ancestry where I live, and some of them have opted for red, Swedish-style mail boxes at their home, which transmits a message that people living there have some connection to Swedish things. At another level, it's just a mail box.

**Would you call that "symbolic ethnicity"?**

Exactly right, yeah. For example, if you are a Finn, you purchase "Iittala" glassware (which I have in my house too, by the way): you have wine glasses, bowls, candle sticks, etc. from this well-known glass company in Finland. That's pretty much symbolic ethnicity. You tend not to see other people owning Iittala products, many seeing them, quite rightly, as overpriced.

**Assimilation has been described, in a broadly metaphorical sense, as "people feeling at home" in contexts of arrival. Would you say you can use a home-jargon, home-phrases to talk about assimilation?**

One of the things that happened to the Finns over time, and also happened within Swedish-America, and in general to European-origin groups is that its members know less and less about what is happening in the country of origin. For example, it is a historical fact that many Swedish-Americans became conservative Republicans over time, despite the fact that Sweden became a social-democratic country. There was a political disconnection. This is anecdotal, but I have a lot of Latino students, second generation: most of them speak Spanish, but you get the sense that they don't know very much about Mexican politics. Sometimes young people don't have knowledge about American politics either, but there seems to be again this disconnection, and this is the second generation! And some of these kids go to Mexico to visit grandparents and other relatives during the summer, so they are not so removed from life in Mexico.

**Which leads us to the question: what place do they call home?**

Well, I had a student a couple of years ago who told me she and her parents and siblings, along with various aunts and uncles, would visit grandparents in Mexico every summer. That would be the family vacation but, when the kids were teenagers, they didn't want to go anymore. They found the village "boring" and they were tired of the trip. They told their parents repeatedly that they'd rather be hanging around with friends in the Midwest, kids they knew from school. So, clearly, for them – unlike their parents – "home" is a town in the Midwest.

**Speaking of a question like "what is home to you?": do you see it as a heuristically fruitful question or...?**

I do. For example, there was a person I knew who was married to a wealthy surgeon, and they had a very large home. She told me she came from a rather wealthy and politically connected family in India. I remember her saying "home is where my suitcases are". When she said that, I looked at her house and I thought to myself "I don't think that's quite true". But you know, what she was saying was "Yes, I have all this, but I could be anywhere; I'm a cosmopolitan person who could be comfortable anywhere". I don't know what happened. Her marriage ended, and she is no longer in the big house. I don't know where she ended up, but my guess is she not living out of her suitcases.

**So it was more of a stance, a claim...**

It was a claim. I think she was saying, "I can be anywhere. A home is very tenuous thing, not a place that I really find necessary to help ground me".

**You sound sceptical about this claim...**

I knew her a little bit, so yeah, I was sceptical about it. Of course, there are such people. What I'm saying is I don't think she was one of them; my suspicion is that it wasn't true, or entirely true, in her case.

**If you were to put the question "where is home to you?" to the average immigrant in the US, what would you expect this person to answer?**

I think for a lot of immigrants there could be a transnational answer—reflecting that they do really feel they are "here" and "there", but whether that gets transferred to the next generation, that's the question. Why do the parents want to go to Mexico every summer? A part of it is to keeps the kids connected to the family. None of the students I talked to had parents who were building homes in Mexico, but some of the parents apparently would, at the very least, think "maybe that's where I'll retire, maybe that's where I'll end up". But the kids are not thinking that. I think some people are quite conflicted and torn about where they want to be, and there may be some people who can actually think both places are home, but I think others want to sort out which is their "real" home. On the one hand you are living in a place where you make enough money to send the kids to college

and so on; on the other hand there is a lot of stuff you don't particularly like about what you see, and back home there is a family and other people you know, so you're drawn to it. I think most people aren't comfortable living in both places, because you need resources to be able to do that, to really be footloose and fancy-free. For the ordinary working-class person it's always like: "Here is where I am, but where am I gonna be in the long run?"

**Would you say this is the same thing Schutz said in his article about the "homecomer", the person who comes back and finds the place he/she used to call home is no more home?**

Exactly right, yes. There is a literature in migration studies going back decades about going home and people seeing you are changed, while you didn't know you were changed. All of a sudden you're not really part of the world you left.

**Lots of old literature on this, which leads to the question: "is there nothing new to find out there, in working with the idea of home, or...?"**

No, actually, I think that taking seriously the idea that home is defined in meaningful, but different ways, and thus asking what kinds of meaning are attached to the idea of home, opens up new avenues for empirical inquiry. One of the dangers, I think, is... Think of this woman I was suspicious of: from the point of view of the social scientist, you need to listen to people carefully, take them seriously, but you don't need to necessarily buy what they are saying. You need to maintain a healthy distance – a healthy scepticism, a critical sensibility. This is an interesting area, but this kind of stuff can end up being little more than a "coffee-table book" of engaging narratives. While these are in their own way worthwhile, if you try to do something that is more analytically rigorous, then you have to ultimately take this idea and make it an analytic term, not just *a* term. One of the virtues of "home" is that everyone has some idea about home. But this also constitutes a challenge insofar as given that everyone comes to the table with some sense of what home is, one needs to get beyond the taken for granted views, unpacking them in order to articulate a more analytically precise concept.

**Would you see a merit in trying to develop "home" as a category of analysis and not only a category of practice?**

Practice can be looked at in terms of "this is what people are doing" and the analysis comes later. But if the analytical work has been done, it is to distil what the practice is, since those things can be bundled together. The practice is part of getting at the mechanism of how people define and act upon what they understand as home. In setting up this analytic framing, we try to look at the mechanisms, and practice is the vehicle for doing that. Out of that, you are going to get some sense and at very least you end up with a typology, but if you want to do more than have a typology, you want to understand why *these* kinds of practices versus *those* kinds or practices. What are the circumstances in which one type of practice prevails while others don't gain traction?

**Would you say that *home* can do a good analytical job for this exercise, relative to categories such as *identity*, *community*, *belonging*?**

One of the problems with "identity" is it tends to be used in such a sweeping way that, I'm not saying always, but it can lose the precision that is needed. About community... while "home" tends to accentuate the private, when you think of "homing", you immediately think of community. There is also a public arena where this stuff happens, and actually words like "community" are somewhat in between, being used like a fuzzy feeling of belonging to something.

**If I wanted to use the word *homemaking*, would that sound to you as a synonym of "domestic work", or not necessarily?**

I think that has more of a domestic sound. It seems to me that you have a high hurdle to get over if you trying to use it in another way.

**So you see more *room for manoeuvre* for the word *homing* than *homemaking*?**

Yes, absolutely. And besides that, home-making is about the concrete practice of making home, where home-*ing* can include that, it seems to me, but not be limited to that. Am I right?

**Ah! Now – can you figure out if colleagues on migration studies have done research on home, homemaking and homing?**

As far as I know, it is not something that has taken off in the US. That much I can say.

**Which again leads me to wonder *why*?**

Because I think that Americans read other Americans in migration studies, and are still not keeping up on things published elsewhere. That's an overstatement, no doubt. I don't really know the answer to your question, which gets at the complex matter of the transmission of ideas.

**What's your view of the argument of domopolitics? For example Walters, a Canadian geographer, made an argument about the fact that the jargon and the emotions of home can be used in the discourse as exclusivist stances, saying to the immigrant that you are an outsider: “this is not your home, you can stay here only on my terms, as a guest”. It is an implication of home, of the domestic space...**

Your focus has been on immigrants, but you can flip it to the receiving society and ask how *they* are defining home. “This is the stranger”, what kind of perception does he/she evoke, does he/she belong in the home, etc.? There is a question rooted in the history of immigration scholarship: was the transplantation of, say, the sauna in the backyard or something, an indication that immigrants were comfortable in the receiving country, or was it in part predicated on an understanding of not being well received, and thus transplantation constituted a kind of defensive creation of a home? To the “if you want to be part of this home, you'd better be like be just like us”, you say “no, we are going to do certain things our way”. You limit what you are trying to get at if you only look at what migrants are doing with home. Looking at what the native-born do with the same idea makes it fruitful, because it's a term that everybody uses. It makes it harder analytically though, which is always the issue with “familiar” terms. You can take them off the shelf and use them, but it's also a more difficult challenge to transform them into useful concepts. In contrast, when you opt for a term that is not used in everyday life and language, you don't have that problem. Think of “transnationalism”, which is not an everyday term that people used, unlike, say, “multiculturalism”, which everybody uses or *abuses*, always having some ideas about it, whether good or bad.

**Then the question, to me, is: does “transnationalism” necessarily do a better analytical job than “multiculturalism”, due to the fact that it is not used in everyday discourse? Does using an everyday term for analytic purposes necessarily make a difference, for better or worse?**

I used to think that it was a good idea to try to find a non-popular, non-everyday term. I'm agnostic about this now. It doesn't make any difference what I think since people are going to bring terms into play, either commonly used or not, and you just deal with it. The same thing has happened with “populism”; it's a term that has been used for a very long time, but has recently obtained a new lease on life—while generating considerable confusion. It's no use to say, “Let's abandon the word.” So the question is: what's the value added to the use of any particular term? What is it about this particular term that I think I *need* it as part of a conceptual toolkit?

**My final question is: what does this picture reminds you of? I often used it in in presentations of the research...**



**Marc Chagall, *Remembrance*, 1914.**

It's obviously about transplantation. You try to bring the home with you, but it's also the *weight* of it, right? If that guy was not trying to do that, he would be standing upright, not all hunched-over. It's a dualistic thing: on the one hand this guy has a desire to take his home with him, but he is paying a price, and anyone looking at him can see that the home is a burden. He could be travelling lighter, if he didn't have it, but presumably he is compelled for whatever reason to accept the burden.

**So the question is, why does he?**

Because the house is meaningful, home is meaningful... it could be easier... does that mean it's better? Does that mean it's meaningful? Does that mean it's something you really want to do? No, he is willing to do this, that's what I would say.

**Would you expect home for him to be on *that* side, where he's going to, or on *this* side, where he comes from?**

He is bringing it from here, he is taking it from somewhere to another place.

**As sociologists of migration, can we at some point predict where this place will be and what it will be like? Or must we just be content with the picture...**

In Erving Goffman's ASA's presidential address, published in 1983, he wrote that sociologists were as bad as economists in terms of their predictive abilities. I don't know what the man will do; we can't predict where he might go. We don't even know exactly what he's doing. All I can tell is the guy feels the need to do it, wants to do it. Maybe he's taking the house because he knows there is no place for the house where he left; it will be destroyed. Thus, if he wants to protect his home, he has to take it with him. Or maybe it's not going to be lost there but he can't bear to be without it.

**In an ideal world, if you wanted to know more about him, do you think you would understand more by *interviewing* him or by *observing* him? Getting back to the difference between the Indian woman who told you about her suitcase, but her house told a different story...**

This is what makes mixed methods so important. Quite simply, you need to do both. Interviewing in itself is important but not sufficient, and similarly so is observation, because if you observe people and you don't talk with them, then you tend to impart your *own* sense of what they are doing. You either have your own reference, about what *you* would be doing, or you would have a generalized reference of, say, Jewish immigrant fleeing from Eastern Europe. You need to engage at the level of concrete specificity and at the level of more abstract generalization.

**Ok, thank you very much!**

You're welcome!