# Relational integration/ assimilation? A critical dialog with postcolonial and mainstream perspectives

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Mainstream studies on integration and assimilation, epitomized by scholars like Richard Alba and Nancy Foner, tend to equate the terms, describing them as processes in which migrants lose their ethnic salience and gradually become barely distinguishable from the white majority. Postcolonial critiques, most notably from Willem Schinkel and Adrian Favell, challenge these views labeling them as methodological nationalism that allegedly perpetuates racial biases and reduces migrants' agency. Ultimately Schinkel calls for deconstruction of the entire field of migration studies, while Favell advocates for separating integration from the logic of nation state. To rebuild a once-failed dialog between these influential but divergent perspectives, this article utilizes Klarenbeek's relational integration theory, which argues in favor of balancing egalitarian social relations between majorities and minorities over one-directional integration models that assign migrants the role of passive recipients. Using Klarenbeek's framework, I offer a critical perspective on both the mainstream tendency to problematize migrants and the radical deconstruction of integration suggested by postcolonial theorists. I argue that both mainstream and postcolonial scholars should move away from methodological whiteness, acknowledge the conceptual distinction between assimilation and integration, and incorporate insights from acculturation theories to foster a much-needed egalitarian dialog between their competing approaches.

KEYWORDS

assimilation, integration, relational inequality, postcolonial critique, methodological nationalism, acculturation

## Introduction

Research on immigrant integration is one of the paradoxical cases when the amassed knowledge is both fragmented and consolidated simultaneously. It is fragmented because, despite similarities among states rhetorically grouped into geographical or political clusters such as the EU, North America, Scandinavia, or the Western countries as a whole, the experiences of integration for migrants vary greatly. Numerous studies are produced across the world, describing unique experiences of particular countries and even cities within these countries. Some of these studies are in English, while others are in native languages, making them known locally but not to a broader academic or professional audience. Simultaneously, the mainstream studies on immigrant integration are notably consolidated, particularly by Western European and North American experiences of assimilation and integration (Collier, 2013; Goodhart, 2013; Alba and Foner, 2016; Statham and Foner, 2024) with the name of Richard Alba occupying a particular niche. In the February special issue of the *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, devoted to the legacy of Alba, Paul Statham and Nancy Foner highlighted the significance of his contribution, crediting him with a leading role, if not the

leading role, in shaping the concepts of assimilation and integration in the study of twenty-first-century societies (Statham and Foner, 2024).

While the directions for future integration research described by Statham and Foner (2024) are outlined in the "empirical pathways" section of this article, it is important to consider some of the key ideas of mainstream integration research that will be analyzed, challenged, defended, and reconceptualized throughout this study. First, following Alba's pragmatic stance, Statham and Foner **treat assimilation and integration as synonymous terms** (Statham and Foner, 2024, p. 5). Although they acknowledge the differences between "assimilation" and "integration" and recognize their distinct US and European heritages, their decision to use these terms interchangeably renders this distinction meaningless. This acknowledgment is insufficient as it does not impact the way these terms are actually applied in their analysis. By conflating the terms, even with recognition of their distinct histories, the conceptual clarity is diluted, and the unique processes behind them are inadequately represented. Furthermore, Alba himself is not consistent with this approach; in some of his recent studies, he treats assimilation and integration as equivalents, while in others, he distinguishes between them, claiming that integration involves gaining social acceptance and economic benefits through participation in political and educational systems (Statham and Foner, 2024).

Second, for Alba and his supporters, assimilation (and accordingly integration) is the **reduction of ethnic distinctions** and their associated cultural and social differences. This does not mean that ethno-racial differences disappear entirely, but rather that they lose their social importance. For example, descendants of the first Italian, Jewish, or Irish immigrants to the U.S. over 100 years ago no longer manifest their ethnicity as strongly as their ancestors did (Alba, 2020, p. 146). Alba's perspective frames assimilation/integration as a result of various choices made by migrants, such as attending majority schools, moving out of minority districts, intermarrying with the majority, and losing proficiency in native languages, leading to their ethnic distinctions fading away (Statham and Foner, 2024, pp. 7–8). Critics of the mainstream approach refer to this process as migrants becoming "translucent," no longer clearly visible (Favell, 2019, p. 5).

Third, the last important feature defining the mainstream approach, reinforced by Alba and Foner (2015), is the focus on **whiteness**. Due to the long history of racial divisions being highly salient in American society, Alba focused not simply on Italian, Jewish, or Irish migrants losing their ethnic features, but on how they were reclassified as white in a process designated as ethno-racial boundary shifts (Alba, 2007, p. 239; Statham and Foner, 2024, p. 12). Thus, one of the key debates over Alba's legacy is whether he equates assimilation with whitening. He himself claimed that whiteness, as a concept and phenomenon, is not sufficient for modern assimilation analysis, as the majority of recent immigration waves are not white (Alba, 2007, p. 239). His proponents share this perspective and add that he never claimed that whitening means the eradication of prejudice and racism (Kasinitz and Waters, 2024), while critics argue that whiteness no longer refers exclusively to skin color, therefore meaning integration into the majority is integration into whiteness (Favell, 2019).

Alba's three pillars of the mainstream approach to integration— equating it with assimilation, focusing on the reduction of differences, and the acquisition of whiteness—have not gone unchallenged over the years. The **most radical and notable criticism** was voiced in Willem Schinkel's provocative piece, "Against 'immigrant integration'"(2018). He argued that from a postcolonial perspective, the current academic integration/assimilation mainstream primarily serves as a disguise for nationalist policies (labeled as "**methodological nationalism**"), while integration itself is a highly problematic and politicized concept that brings little value to political analysis and requires thorough deconstruction (Schinkel, 2018, pp. 10–14). His critical stance has only intensified over time, with his recent work asserting that immigrant integration is a racialized and colonial concept perpetuated by journalists, politicians, and scholars, resulting in a mode of power typical of liberal democratic capitalist entities (Schinkel, 2023, p. 1601). Schinkel's efforts have garnered support from prominent intellectuals like Adrian Favell, who advocates for abandoning the nation-state logic of integration and accuses Western governments of forcing immigrants to assimilate into a vague notion of a nation. He also criticized the academic mainstream, particularly Alba and Foner (2016), for furthering government interests by normalizing assimilation and being unable to answer a fundamental question: whom and into what are we supposed to integrate? (Favell, 2019, p. 2).

Schinkel and Favell raise extremely important questions and express highly valuable ideas in the field of integration, which are nonetheless muffled by their rebellious rhetoric and vehement criticism of anything beyond the scope of postcolonial studies. So far, their debate with the academic mainstream, particularly with Alba and Foner (2016), has not been productive, resulting, as Favell himself put it, in "anger and dismissal" (Favell, 2019, p. 2). The conspicuous absence of postcolonial discourse from the review of the most relevant ideas on assimilation and integration in the 21st century by Statham and Foner (2024) has been somewhat mitigated by the presence of the study on relational integration by Lea Klarenbeek (2024). Klarenbeek's approach notably overlaps with Favell's and Schinkel's critique of methodological nationalism but, in contrast to them, employs ameliorative conceptual analysis (Klarenbeek, 2024) instead of pure deconstruction of the mainstream. Therefore, the primary relevance of this article is **bringing the academic mainstream into a critical and balanced dialog with postcolonial studies through the relational approach**. I focus on the rigorous theoretical analysis of all the represented ideas and the potential empirical pathways for their further implementation. Overall, by working on the theory of relational integration, I aim to build an argument for a new vision that goes beyond methodological nationalism, currently reduced to the study of a migrant becoming a non-migrant.

## Relational theoretical approach

I adopt Klarenbeek's concept of relational integration (2019; 2024) as the foundational element of my theoretical framework due to its robust assumptions and methodological rigor. Klarenbeek contrasts her methodology with the dominant analytical approaches to integration. Similar to Favell and Schinkel, she argues against problematizing migrants and questions the notion that minorities inherently need integration merely because of their foreign status (Klarenbeek, 2019, p. 4). While postcolonial scholars often refer to this tendency as methodological nationalism, Klarenbeek prefers the term "**civic integrationism**" (Klarenbeek, 2019, p. 2). Like postcolonial

scholars, she argues against viewing integration as a tool for subordinating migrants and suppressing diversity in favor of unity. However, she disagrees with the notion that the concept, or even, the term "integration" inherently entails subordination and cautions against rejecting it as a heuristic tool. Klarenbeek considers integration issues as a subset of relational inequalities, useful for examining issues such as social membership, social hierarchies, and corresponding inequalities in migration contexts (Klarenbeek, 2024, pp. 234–35). In this respect, I completely agree that while discarding the concept of integration may eliminate the problem of civic integrationism in academia, it also removes potential solutions for making integration more egalitarian.

Another important point of relational integration is a straightforward engagement with normative assumptions or, in this specific case, **the tendency to see integration as a positive phenomenon**. This tendency is often shared by the proponents of civic integrationism as much as its critics. In both cases, the 'positivity' behind integration is measured in the increased degree of similarity of migrants to the majority. The postcolonial critique says that normativism leads to multiple problems, such as making migrants comply with the vague expectations of the majority, the lack of clear criteria for what it means to be integrated, and even the loss of academic autonomy, in the sense that scholars simply reproduce the government narratives instead of creating independent knowledge (Favell, 2019, pp. 4; Favell, 2022, p. 21). In response, Klarenbeek acknowledges the inherently normative nature of integration in relation to social phenomena, arguing against the approaches that try to either discard the concept of integration as a whole or 'purify' it from normativism, making it impartially analytical (Klarenbeek, 2024, p. 237). She points out that integration should not be perceived as a merely neutral phenomenon in the social landscape, but understood through a lens that considers moral and political implications. Therefore, **integration is a way to describe hierarchical societal relations that originate from the socially negotiated and contested boundaries** within a context of migration, with relational equality being a hypothetical balance in which "people enjoy social standing as equals" (Klarenbeek, 2024, p. 239). Thus, relational integration empowers a researcher by providing tools to analyze current asymmetries or inegalitarian relations between the majority and minorities, while establishing a firm normative foundation.

The primary improvement needed in the well-developed methodology of relational integration is addressing **whom is to be integrated and into what**. Klarenbeek's answer aligns with mainstream views: individuals integrate into society, the only difference with the mainstream being in how she defines "society" and "people." The relational integration theory describes the mechanism behind achieving membership in society and legitimization of this membership by others. This is exemplified in migrants gaining citizenship (formal or otherwise) and being recognized as a part of the majority. Klarenbeek views society not as a static entity but "a sum of relational interactions," and, referring to Bauböck (2017), asserts that membership is not a personal attribute but a relationship between individuals and society (Klarenbeek, 2024, 240). For her, terms like 'immigrant' and 'non-immigrant' derive their meaning from these interactions (Klarenbeek, 2024, p. 240). However, **these assumptions lead to a classic problem of any relational approach: an infinite loop where membership in society is defined as a relationship with a sum of relational interactions**.

The loop of relational integration is a product of slightly different understandings of social entities between Klarenbeek's and Bauböck's ideas on political membership, where the latter refers to highly specific social entities such as society, community (Bauböck, 2017), and even city (Bauböck, 2003). Though defined relationally, these categories are intrinsically static, as they need to fix relations at a certain temporal point to have meaning. Klarenbeek acknowledges this implicitly and restricts the definition of societal members to "individuals who reside in a territory with some degree of permanence and are integrated into the same political and social institutions," leading to "meaningful connections with other members and these institutions" (Klarenbeek, 2024, p. 241). Being un/integrated, according to relational integration, translates into the process of mis/recognition as equal by others, preferably all members of society (Klarenbeek, 2024, p. 245). That is why the empirical concerns of relational integration are twofold. One focuses on the recogniser's position of symbolic power due to certain people's and institutions' gate-keeping roles, which make their recognition or misrecognition more impactful. Another concern addresses the degree to which there is a structured pattern behind misrecognition, which may point toward the presence of structural hierarchies and relational inequality (Klarenbeek, 2024, p. 246).

My primary methodological contribution to the concept of relational integration is to **transcend the conventional mainstream explanation of integration** as merely the process of individuals becoming part of a society. This requires rethinking how membership itself is perceived. In my previous work (Polynin, 2023), I argued that on the level of self-perception—how individuals define their belonging to a social group—social identity closely approximates membership. I made this claim referring to Tajfel (1978), who defined social identity as "a part of an individual's self-concept which derives from his knowledge of his membership in a social group (or groups) together with the value and emotional significance attached to that membership" (Tajfel, 1978, p. 68). Incorporating social or collective identity into the discussion of integration resolves multiple problems with the level of analysis and makes membership matter. Tajfel's theory emphasizes that individuals categorize themselves and others into social groups (ingroups and outgroups) based on shared characteristics, such as race, ethnicity, nationality, or other features. This categorization leads to a sense of membership and belonging to the ingroup and results in ingroup favoritism and outgroup bias (1978). This is precisely what is happening during the process of integration, as the boundaries of the ingroup and outgroup identities are redefined peacefully or through a conflict. That is also a reason why throughout the text of this article I use the categories of ethnicity, diaspora and a nation instrumentally, because they receive meaning only through specific interactions or as Tajfel himself put it "the definition of a group (national, racial or any other) makes no sense unless there are other groups around" (Tajfel, 1978, p. 72).

Metaphysically speaking, **integration involves incorporating a part into a larger sum of similar parts** (not necessarily a whole), much like fitting a puzzle piece into an existing pattern. When discussing the integration of migrants into society, the mainstream approach often conflates different levels of analysis. It assumes that specific, living individuals should become part of a vaguely defined entity called society, which can mean anything. Properly framed, integration should involve people integrating with other people. However, there is a notable absence of discussion about integrating 'migrants' into the 'ethnic majority.' For example, neither academics

nor politicians typically suggest integrating Syrian migrants into the German population. Instead, migrants are often rhetorically merged into abstract concepts such as society or community.

I argue that from the viewpoint of relational integration, **immigrants, as individuals, cannot become part of a society that is the sum of relational interactions, but their identities can**. Both immigrants and non-immigrants derive their sense of meaning from these interactions, which shape integration policies and perceptions. The civic integrationist approach measures integration through specific markers such as proficiency in the majority language, educational achievements, employment, and socio-economic status. In this view, integration becomes an additional challenge for migrants, with the majority acting as evaluators of their performance. An important point often overlooked is that possessing language skills or economic well-being does not necessarily mean becoming a part of society. Acquiring necessary skills and resources is a form of adaptation, but it does not inherently entail integration. Klarenbeek emphasized that relational integration involves achieving an egalitarian balance between the recognizer and the recognized. Therefore, a more focused question within this perspective should be: how egalitarian is the process of integrating migrant and majority identities? Under what conditions does this interaction shape both parties, and how do various identities intersect?

Practical examples of relational integration inquiries can include those that address hierarchical relations and aim to establish an egalitarian normative perspective. For instance, to what extent is it possible for a Muslim migrant to identify as French and be recognized as such? What is the interplay between the identities of the African American diaspora and new African migrants in American society, and what minority group/s do they constitute? Are the integration expectations for EU migrants with English language proficiency in Finnish society similar to those for non-EU migrants? Under this lens, factors such as race, ethnicity, language, citizenship, security, and even past traumas become integral to the process of integration, accompanied by identity negotiation and mis/recognition. However, as this discourse closely aligns with postcolonial studies, we should consider the shortcomings that relational integration allows us to overcome.

## Deconstructing integration

One of my key profound disagreements with Schinkel's positions on the concept of immigrant integration resides in the challenge of having a constructive debate with someone who would rather see the entire field of migration studies dismantled (Schinkel, 2023, p. 1600) than work on improving problematic theoretical concepts in it. However, this discussion is necessary, as due to the radicality of Schinkel's statements, his contribution to migration and integration studies is highly notable, causing multiple scholars to address them (Klarenbeek, 2019; Omanović and Langley, 2023; Anderson, 2023; Hemmaty et al., 2024; Favell, 2022). Moreover, I personally agree with his critique of the dominating discourse of immigrant integration's tendency to problematize the differences of migrants from the majority and focus on how to eliminate such differences in order to achieve their (migrants') inclusion into society (Schinkel, 2018, pp. 2, 8). Such discourse pictures integration as a one-directional process, places the responsibility for integration exclusively on the migrants,

and erroneously presents society as a static and harmonic whole of which immigrants need to become a part. Nonetheless, despite my support for the idea of integration's reciprocity, I tend to agree with Klarenbeek's appraisal, which compared Schinkel's intention to discard the whole of integration research as neocolonial with "throwing out the baby with the bathwater" (Klarenbeek, 2019, p. 1). Thus, it is important to consider Schinkel's ideas from the perspective of relational integration, recognizing their provocative nature as well as their strengths, all the while aiming for constructive improvements in the research on integration.

Schinkel claims that one of the primary flaws of migration studies is the coding of a **migrant "as a person who might not have been here"** (Schinkel, 2023, p. 1604). He blames the academics supporting this approach for further enabling the world outlook of current/former colonizing nations of Europe and North America, or creating a "modality of debt," which means keeping track of the "indebtedness" of migrants to the nation-states that accepted them into "whiteness" and the differences from the majority that they brought along with them. Even though Schinkel concludes that the modality of debt is erroneous and calls for decolonization of migration studies, he also believes doing so partially is completely pointless. He argues that to truly decolonize migration studies and the concept of integration means dismantling them altogether; there will be nothing left after the conditions for conceptualizing someone as migrant disappear along with the imposed "violence" of the gender and racial hierarchies of the discipline (Schinkel, 2023, p. 1604).

Schinkel argues against any kind of theoretical framework operating with the concepts of migrants and natives, which he sees as empowering racism (Schinkel, 2023, pp. 1604–5). One might think that this perspective would unite Schinkel with scholars arguing in favor of the **superdiversity approach** (Vertovec, 2007; Crul, 2016), which is defined procedurally as the unique situation when integration is happening while no ethnic majority demographically dominates over the other groups (Crul, 2016, p. 55). Such alignment would be logical to assume considering that Crul specifically contraposes superdiversity to the views dominant among far-right populists. However, Schinkel decisively rejects superdiversity under the same pretext of reproduction of the migrant/native dichotomy or failing to recognize the extent to which the violence and exploitation allegedly needed to maintain labor markets and national economies are embedded in current social and political systems. For him, the liberal academic focus on the exclusion of migrants defended by superdiversity scholars fails to avert the dominant discourse of reinforcing the superiority of the native population over the "indebted" migrants, being designed only for securing financial support from the political mainstream. Thus, he concludes there is nothing of value to keep from migration studies when integration is concerned, and the only way to deal with this "rotten" body of knowledge is to remove it as a whole (Schinkel, 2023, pp. 1604–5).

Schinkel's arguments, while expressive, exemplify significant problems with the decolonization focus in academic knowledge. From the position of relational integration, the reduction of a migrant to "a person who might not have been here" not only lacks precision and a clear reference point but also fails to address who defines such a status. Who decides where one could have not been? Why should we take such a fundamental assumption for granted without any empirical evidence? But even ignoring this obvious question and safely assuming that Schinkel expands his view to the entire field of migration and

integration studies, this definition still does not adequately describe the diverse realities surrounding the geographic, economic, demographic, political, psychological, social, and cultural aspects of a migrant as an object of study. While Schinkel's dismissal of migrant/ native dichotomies aims to deconstruct racialized power dynamics, in contrast with Klarenbeek's relational integration, **it fails to capture that these relationships are negotiated within societal structures**. A Ukrainian war refugee in Sweden, a Polish builder in the United Kingdom, a British pensioner in Spain, a Hungarian school teacher in Romania, a Syrian pupil in Turkey are all migrants existing in a constellation of possible conditions, perceptions, self-perceptions, expectations, hierarchies, integration policies, and personal strategies, which cannot be simply reduced to a cartoonishly evil, one-dimensional prejudice about a person who never should have come to the place where they are.

Second, the terms "migrant" and "native" are not merely labels but crucial tools for accurately describing and analyzing global phenomena, reflecting a set of relations tied to non/indigenous status in specific times and places. While these relations certainly require further clarification and conceptual development, they initiate essential discussions. Overly modifying or eliminating these terms risks detaching migration studies from real-world dynamics, reducing the discipline's relevance and utility. Klarenbeek highlights the relational nature of the concept of foreignness, which is not restricted to legally being a migrant but intersects with racial, gender, and ethnolinguistic identities, for example, making "expats" less foreign compared to "immigrants" (Klarenbeek, 2019, p. 4). Schinkel's proposal to eliminate the concept of "migrant" due to its alleged perpetuation of racism and violent social hierarchies overlooks the fundamental purpose of academia: to describe and understand society. How relevant is social science that fails to achieve this goal? The existence of the categories of migrants, natives, and many others will not cease if migration studies abandon these terms; however, scholars would lose a crucial framework for describing interactions between these groups. Furthermore, Schinkel's rejection of superdiversity appears even more unfounded, as superdiversity demonstrates multiple integration pathways beyond merely problematizing migrants. It likely reveals the naivety of Schinkel's assumption that erasing certain terms would magically dissolve the violent hierarchies and asymmetrical power relations inherent to human societies, with these relations extending far beyond the sphere of integration.

The last but not the least considerable point of my argument is that Schinkel's focus on **integration into whiteness reproduces the same mainstream, misguided focus in migration and integration studies that he intends to criticize**. Schinkel links the "modality of debt" with integration into modernity and whiteness, perceived as a system dominating social science (Schinkel, 2018, p. 5). He views the practice of measuring immigrant integration as neocolonial, rooted in historically racialized cultural classifications and dominance. This perspective aligns with Wekker's (2016) critique and disputes the notion among white scholars that their racial identity does not influence their research (Schinkel, 2018, p. 12). While such accusations of color-blindness are common among postcolonial scholars, they often suffer from a lack of robust evidence and persuasive reasoning, tending toward oversimplification.

Indeed, acknowledging racial and gender imbalances is crucial to addressing these issues within the discipline, but it does not necessarily constitute an endorsement of them. Furthermore, viewed through the relational prism, the diverse experiences of migration and integration across Europe and North America challenge the notion of a homogenous "white way" of conducting studies, as the grouping of these experiences is possible only to a small extent. For instance, while the Baltic states share some commonalities in their handling of Russian diasporas, significant differences in citizenship policies and national minority institutions exist. Similarly, the legal, political, and socioeconomic realities of segregation in the United States and Canada are markedly distinct. Even the models of nation-building in France and Germany, as described by Brubaker (1992), have evolved significantly since the 1990s, demonstrating a liberalization of immigration, asylum, and citizenship policies in Germany that diverges from earlier classifications. Also, postcolonial scholars focusing solely on the legacy of colonialism and an outdated understanding of whiteness risk neglecting the rich diversity of non-Western experiences and global responses to migration. By accusing anyone who disagrees with their reductionist view of migration studies of color-blindness, they themselves become **blinded by color**, unable to perceive any factors other than whiteness as primary determinants and models for integration.

## Against the nation state?

Even though Adrian Favell's critique of the nation-state perspective on integration notably overlaps with Schinkel's calls to end neocolonial knowledge production, his criticisms are much more constructive. Favell specifically targets the concept of immigrant integration and does not aim to dismantle the entire field of migration studies, a goal as unrealistic as it is unfounded. The importance of Favell's contribution is defined by his efforts to reconceptualize integration while being ready to move beyond the comfort zone of "whiteness"/critical race studies and to facilitate a discussion across scholars following competing epistemologies (Favell, 2019, p. 1). Similarly, to multiple scholars, Favell (2019) emphasized that the mainstream academic answers to "whom and into what" integration is supposed to be carried out are currently lacking (Bucken-Knapp et al., 2019; Hemmaty et al., 2024; Campomori and Caponio, 2013). However, what makes him stand out is his convincing critique of the dominating paradigm of integrating "people" into "society." Favell insists that contrary to the prevailing view, migrants are not integrated into a "single, indivisible 'state'" (Favell, 2022, p. 12), as this suggests that integration is a process with a single united whole of integrated society as a final destination. Klarenbeek agrees with this criticism by arguing that a national society does not exist as a harmonious whole but is instead riddled with inequalities and contested boundaries (Klarenbeek, 2019, pp. 2–3).

Favell also builds his argument by dismantling methodological nationalism, or the shared belief that populations inherently belong to a specific territory or society and should be considered as "nationals," while others are contraposed as "foreigners" or aliens, to be integrated (Favell, 2022, pp. 15). He presents methodological nationalism as an uncontested assumption shared by a vast majority of social scientists, politicians, and the general public, asserting that the process of transforming "immigrants" into "citizens" is unconsciously reproduced in a large number of studies on immigrant integration (Favell, 2022, p. 21), particularly singling out Alba and Foner (2016)

in his critical notes (Favell, 2016). Favell argues that **the primary problem with these studies is their legitimization of artificial standards set by nation-states**, which allegedly impose the vision of people belonging to specific territories, while in truth functioning within the "reality of global society" (Favell, 2019, p. 4). The normative implication of this belief on migration studies is that an immigrant not belonging to a territory may progress from a "bad" state, or not being a part of a host society, to a "good" one of becoming integrated. The normativism of this approach is further extended to perceiving integration as membership and the obtaining thereof as a measure of success (Favell, 2022, p. 21). Therefore, according to Favell, any research on immigrant integration operating within these boundaries loses its agency and acts as an extension of a government policy instead of doing independent analytical or empirical sociology (Favell, 2019, p. 4).

Before addressing the issues with Favell's approach, it is important to first acknowledge the strengths of his critique. Favell brilliantly identifies the most dangerous pitfall of the concept of immigrant integration: the lack of self-reflection. Integrating people into society, or as Favell phrases it, **turning "immigrants" into "citizens,"** presupposes that the latter is a defined, pre-existing container (Favell, 2022, p. 21). Postcolonialism meets Klarenbeek's relational critique (2024, 249) when it emphasizes that both "society" and "citizens" are shaped as much by migrants and integration processes as the other way around. However, the concept of immigrant integration typically focuses only on the changes happening to migrants. In political practice, the assumption that integration is needed translates into policies, which problematize migrants, perceiving their linguistic, cultural, skillset, and political "otherness" as issues to be eliminated. Favell castigates methodological nationalism with clear allusion to Alba and Foner (2016) by claiming that the mainstream models presuppose assimilation into whiteness, thereby depicting truly integrated migrants as "translucent," or not different from the rest of society, or as Favell himself puts it, not being "a visible social problem (as a group)" (Favell, 2019, p. 4). This is why Favell argues that mainstream and especially applied research on integration must consciously strive to supersede "nationalist assumptions" (Favell, 2019, p. 2, 4) rather than simply replicating them in academia.

Nonetheless, this critique is built on a fragile foundation of rejecting national integration as a whole. It intertwines with Schinkel's critique of "methodological whiteness" as much as it deepens its flaws: "Historians will all tell us that 'national integration' never really happened as it was 'imagined'; and if it did it was only ever in the context of (global) industrialization and colonial exploitation. Economic, cultural, social 'integration' at the bounded national level evidently is a conceptual nonsense. The illusion of self-defining nation-state societies is today only sustained because of American hegemony: the last container nation-state, the archetype on which all other nation-state societies consciously or not project their identities" (Favell, 2019, p. 3).

In the excerpt above, Favell posits that the concept of national integration is an anachronism, rendered obsolete by global industrialization and exploitation. This assertion, however, rests on a flawed epistemological assumption reminiscent of Durkheim's notion that reality consists solely of social facts (1982). **By suggesting that if a nation is imagined, it does not exist, the argument overlooks the complex interplay between imagination and social constructs** in the formation of national identities.

I disagree with Favell's argument that a nation is an "absurd anachronism" from both a relational standpoint and in the context of the entire field of nation-building, which is strongly influenced by Benedict Anderson's theory of imagined communities (1983). Anderson argued that language, ethnic features, history, common media, and education serve as key features of national identity. He claimed that nations exist through the symbolic power of shared narratives, symbols, and a sense of belonging, despite individuals within a nation never meeting all their compatriots (Anderson, 1983, pp. 42–45). Klarenbeek also provides a solid epistemological foundation for the counter-argument against Favell's assumption when she addresses the related issue of hierarchical relations. She claims that even though categories of "superior" and "inferior" migrants are mental constructs, their impact on social reality is visible (Klarenbeek, 2024, p. 239). In simpler terms, concepts like racism, discrimination, equity, and equality, though mental constructs, have real consequences that people have to live with. Thus, just **as imagined hierarchies become real through social interactions, imagined communities materialize when people embrace national identities** and form modern nations.

Furthermore, Favell's argument presented in the excerpt regarding the influence of an alleged American hegemony on the concept of the nation-state is overly simplistic and not sufficiently grounded in academic rigor. The assertion that the illusion of self-defining nation-state societies is sustained solely by American hegemony (Favell, 2019, p. 3) overlooks the diverse and complex processes through which nations define themselves. In this regard, **Favell's approach is blinded by color as much as Schinkel's,** because to suggest that the identity of a nation as historically and culturally rich as, for example, China, is shaped primarily by the United States is to ignore the multifaceted influences that contribute to national identity formation, including internal dynamics, historical legacies, and regional interactions.

Moreover, Favell's and Schinkel's postcolonial critique of the nation-state as a product of American hegemony does not adequately account not just for the agency of non-Western nations, but also for a timeline of constructing their identities independent of Western influence. Nations and nation-states have emerged and evolved through a variety of processes, many of which predate the American state or run counter to its dominance. The diversity of nation-building experiences across the globe challenges the notion that the nation-state model is a mere export of American ideology, if ever there was a single one.

**Favell proposes the idea of planetary integration** as an absolute pinnacle of total diversity in contrast to integration within a nation-state, which in his view reduces diversity to retain political power over a homogenizing society (Favell, 2022, p. 29). Choosing planetary integration as the ultimate opposite of methodological nationalism, he critiques the transition from assimilation to integration as a retrogressive move, suggesting that there is no difference between the two, due to most operationalized integration measures being allegedly assimilation measures (Favell, 2019, p. 2). This conflation also leads him to mix integration with centralization, positing that truly integrated national societies might resemble North Korea or East Germany under Honecker, characterized by rigidity, conformity, and closure (Favell, 2019, p. 4). For Favell, integration always means a color-blind blending into "whiteness" that assimilates diverse people into invisible, modern individuals (Favell, 2019, p. 5). He concludes that the ultimate goals of integration are to ensure compliance with

the rules set by the majority and to support the existing hierarchy where the white working class, racial minorities, and new migrants are marginalized and oppressed, while the elites freely enjoy all the benefits of globalization and transnationalism (Favell, 2022, pp. 120–121).

While I empathize with Favell's sentiment about the inequalities faced by migrants, his proposed theoretical approach does not meet its declared goals. Despite Favell's adherence to transnationalism, his vision of planetary integration is extremely one-sided, as it almost exclusively targets Western nation-states. Favell's postcolonial methodological zeal, influenced by analyzing everything through the prism of whiteness, leads him to view inequalities between majority and minority members as a direct consequence of neoliberal policies and a romanticized "white working-class identity" (Favell, 2022, p. 121). Although he acknowledges that integration and the corresponding reduction of diversity, rendering migrants translucent, happen in Asian countries as well, he drops the neoliberal component of the argument and does not suggest that China and Japan (see Favell, 2022, p. 114) **may have a different understanding of race than the whiteness he criticizes**. Therefore, his explanation that both countries exhibit similar integration patterns to Western ones is true only to an extent.

Favell's approach overlaps with Klarenbeek's intersectionality of relational integration, as the latter also points out that integration problems do not emerge solely after the arrival of migrants, but are influenced by the already pre-existing hierarchy of society (Klarenbeek, 2024, p. 246). Nonetheless, Favell's focus on whiteness does not seem to recognize intersectionality, collapsing the renegotiation of boundaries between linguistic, local, national, and transnational identities into a simplistic picture of migrants losing their uniqueness and being pushed into white translucency. Following Klarenbeek's focus on relational inequalities, we can see that even in Western, predominantly white societies, the **prominence or invisibility of one's identity is determined by power relations**. Therefore, the reduction of diversity and integration outcomes will vary greatly from country to country. For example, even considering the postcolonial presumption of homogeneous whiteness in the Netherlands, political balance at the national level is achieved through negotiations between the Flemish and French communities, which are integrated into the whole that outsiders know as Dutch society.

On the whole, Favell's approach is problematic. While challenging the mainstream way we see integration processes in academia, **it does not present a convincing explanation of what integration is**. It discards the nation-state as a concept and argues for an ultimate transnational diversity and integration of various individuals as humanity on a planetary level, blinded by color like Schinkel and falling into the methodological whiteness of the mainstream approach.

## Empirical pathways

Drawing from recent academic publications addressing the issue of integration, it is clear that the **postcolonial call for self-reflection did not fall on deaf ears**. Abdelhady and Norocel advocate for re-envisioning and decolonizing the notion of integration by challenging binaries such as integrated/non-integrated and calling for multicentric knowledge production. They argue that through this, the Global North (primarily European Democracies and North America)

can learn from the Global South (mainly Africa, Latin America, and the Caribbean countries) (Abdelhady and Norocel, 2023). Another notable shift is the localization of integration studies, with which scholars acknowledge Schinkel's and Favell's fundamental criticisms by describing integration within the local framework of specific communities rather than describing it on a national level. This interest is particularly evident in case studies like Bridget Anderson's "Integration: a Tale of Two Communities," focusing on the city of Bristol in the United Kingdom (2023), or Hemmaty and others, who examined the experiences of local stakeholders in the Swedish county of Scania in their article, "We Never Say We Are Integrating People!" (2024). The direction of these works alone raises logical questions about the future pathways of integration research.

The influence of postcolonial discourse on integration research has been amplified not only by the sharp criticisms, fresh ideas, and the radicalism of the arguments but also by a lack of reaction from mainstream integration/assimilation studies. In their detailed description of the current state of the discipline, Statham and Foner highlight that Klarenbeek's relational integration theory "invites dialog in a European migration field that has been increasingly polemicised in recent years" (2024, p.19). On the one hand, this statement is completely correct as Klarenbeek's approach indeed offers deep insight, fosters dialog, and is less radical than the postcolonial one. On the other hand, this statement, along with the previous section of Statham and Foner's article (2024), implies that the North-American experience (to which they attribute their own analytical contributions) is debated to a lesser degree, which is hardly true. Moreover, **Klarenbeek's critique of civic integrationism is not limited to European countries and is directed at Alba's approach as much as at the rest of the assimilation/integration mainstream**, a fact that Statham and Foner do not seem to acknowledge.

When analyzing Alba's approach, Statham and Foner demonstrate a considerable degree of reflection, which is nonetheless subtle. From the standpoint of relational integration, it is important to raise two inquiries. First, Foner emphasizes that assimilation/integration is a two-way process, while multiple other mainstream studies still overemphasize the linearity of the process during which migrants are integrated into American society (2024, 16). However, it is not clear at which point this became a landmark decision and how it translates into an empirical approach. We can infer some information from the fact that Foner herself shifts the entire focus of assimilation studies to the historical analysis of the impact of immigrants on the United States (2024). Yet, the value and implementation of reciprocity in integration, stemming from Alba's writings, remain unclear. Second, another example of this **unreflected paradigm shift** is the move away from equating assimilation with whiteness. While Kasinitz and Waters (2024) defend Alba from dismissing the phenomenon of assimilation due to discrimination and racism faced by migrants, the message from Alba's school is unclear. If Statham and Foner (2024) agree with Kasinitz and Waters (2024) that whiteness is an empty signifier, does it mean that U.S. migrants are indeed assimilated into it? Of course, in a review article, it is hard to address all possible questions, but these are important as they constitute a vital part of the discussion on the critique of Alba's legacy, not just in the U.S., but beyond.

So, what are the **potential empirical pathways** for future research on integration? Before addressing the primary challenges originating from the previous sections, let me differentiate between the relational and postcolonial approaches to applied empirical research. Klarenbeek

aims to openly discuss and challenge the normative assumptions behind the civic integrationist mainstream (such as the innate "goodness" of integration) and establish a dialog with empirical scholars, inviting them to approach problems relationally (Klarenbeek, 2024, p. 235). At the same time, Favell depicts policy-oriented research as "thinking for a state," which he juxtaposes against "credible, critical 'autonomous' academic sociologists" (Favell, 2019, p. 4), thereby creating a binary and presenting these directions as mutually exclusive. Without dismissing Schinkel's and Favell's other valuable arguments, this binary is normative and misleading, as it presents a considerable number of academics and think tank researchers with a false choice. They are allegedly forced to choose between contributing to a credible body of knowledge without making any meaningful impact on integration and producing what Schinkel called "power knowledge" (2018, p. 9), being reduced to mere mouthpieces of their respective nation-states. This approach is counterproductive, as **denying the subjectivity of applied researchers solely because of their ability to influence policies is harmful** to the general body of Social Science and turns it into a self-righteous sect occupied by pure theorists.

The broader question for further inquiry is where could the mainstream, postcolonial, and relation theories on assimilation/ integration intersect in order to help resolve empirical problems? The first and foremost issue is reconceptualizing **the difference between assimilation and integration**. Using these terms interchangeably, as in the cases of Alba (2024) and Statham and Foner (2024), causes confusion and erases multiple important differences between the phenomena. The same might be said about the postcolonial critique, which deems the unfinished move from assimilation to integration initiated by Alba and Foner (2015) as retrogressive and pointless, due to Favell's view of assimilation and integration measures as indistinguishable (2019, p. 2). Empirically speaking, this approach means seeing no difference between, for example, the assimilationist policies of China toward the Uyghur minority and the integration policies directed at the South Asian immigrants in Canada. By discarding the nuances and labeling both cases as assimilationist, we encounter a similar problem to Schinkel's initiative to dismiss the categories of migrant and native: **while the mainstream does not acknowledge the problem, the postcolonial approach produces a social science which avoids drawing and explaining simple comparisons.**

Even though Klarenbeek does not address the aforementioned problem directly, the relational integration theory **has a solid foundation to differentiate between integration and assimilation through its normative basis**. Considering that relational equality, or people enjoying equal social status, is a key normative assumption for Klarenbeek, it would be only logical to argue that integration is characterized by more egalitarian relations, while assimilation entails inegalitarian and hierarchical relations. This distinction should be taken not as a binary, but rather as a spectrum where assimilation and integration are opposite poles of forming the rules defining identity and recognizing membership.

Klarenbeek highlights that the current relational framework does not provide a sociological theory that offers empirical insight into how integration processes happen (2024, p. 238). In order to resolve this problem and further develop the theoretical difference between assimilation and integration, I would join the call of Alba (2020), along with Statham and Foner (2024), trying to move assimilation discourse closer to a deeper cultural analysis (2024, p. 12). Moreover,

I argue that such an analysis already exists in the field of psychology, in the form of the integration hypothesis discussing acculturation (Berry, 1997, 2017; Grigoryev et al., 2023). Proponents of the integration hypothesis argue that migrants who adopt an integration acculturation strategy—engaging in both their original heritage culture and the larger society's culture—adapt better psychologically to their new lives. The alternatives to integration are assimilation, separation, or marginalization, each involving either submission to the majority culture, maintaining the heritage identity separately, or losing the heritage identity without acquiring a new one (Grigoryev et al., 2023, p. 2). Therefore, relational integration is in a favorable position to bridge empirical sociology and psychology, as it could move the analysis from the individual to the structural and processual levels.

**Situating acculturation strategies within a relational context** of asymmetric power relations, mainstream cultural turn, and postcolonial critical inquiry could resolve several problems. First, this approach would move the discussion of integration beyond the void of methodological whiteness, focusing on identity issues formed during integration and assimilation processes within specific countries while still producing generalizable empirical output. Second, the acculturation framework could benefit from the egalitarian normative assumptions of relational integration, making a self-reflective effort not to prioritize the majority over the minority. Third, relational integration ensures that the empirical analysis of acculturation strategies will not be reduced to measuring migrants' acquisition of benchmark criteria, such as language and employment, but will also consider the complex and multidirectional relationships of integrating with the majority on national, local, and even global scales.

## Conclusion

This article employed Klarenbeek's concept of relational integration to foster a constructive dialog between mainstream assimilation/integration studies, particularly Alba (2024), Statham and Foner (2024), and their postcolonial critics, such as Schinkel (2018, 2023) and Favell (2019, 2022). While I acknowledge and partially agree with the postcolonial critique of methodological nationalism and civic integrationism elements in mainstream scholarship, I find calls for dismantling the entire field of migration studies or abandoning the nation-state logic of integration counterproductive. I supported the normative assumptions of relational integration and argued for improving its methodology. Instead of viewing integration as simply inserting people into society, I interpreted it as a renegotiation of collective/social identities. Through relational integration, I challenged the mainstream and postcolonial perspectives for using assimilation and integration interchangeably and argued in favor of creating distinction between the terms defined through asymmetries and inegalitarian relations between the majority and minorities. I also suggested deepening these categories through the acculturation framework from psychology, which discusses various strategies (integration, assimilation, separation, marginalization) that migrants use to adapt. I concluded that relational integration can transcend methodological whiteness by bridging empirical sociology and psychology. This approach not only brings equality into the concepts of integration and assimilation, but also calls for competing ideas to engage in a constructive dialog that could move the field further.

## Data availability statement

## Author contributions

## Funding

## Conflict of interest

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