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Transformation in Postmigrant Societies: Contextualizing Jochen Oltmer's Concept of Negotiation

Abstract

Drawing on diverse theoretical and perspectival approaches, such as »super-diversity«, »transnationality«, and »autonomy of migration«, this article situates Oltmer's concept of »negotiation« in current debates in migration research and examines how it can be linked to the perspective of the »post-migrant«. While the latter assumes that the distinction between migrants and non-migrants is becoming increasingly irrelevant for a productive analysis of social contexts, this remains valid for the present time with regard to negotiations. Simultaneously, the focus on negotiations enables analytical clarity and historical depth, which contribute to an understanding of the change in the social concepts of belonging.

Keywords

Migration studies, negotiation, post-migrant paradigm, migration regimes

Transformation in postmigrantischen Gesellschaften: Zur Einordnung von Jochen Oltmers Konzept der Aushandlung

Zusammenfassung

Ausgehend von einer Vielzahl theoretischer und perspektivischer Zugänge der Migrationsforschung wie »Superdiversität«, »Transnationalität« oder »Autonomie der Migration« verortet der Beitrag Oltmers Konzept der »Aushandlung« in aktuellen Debatten der Migrationsforschung und fragt, inwie-

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fern er mit der Perspektive des »Postmigrantischen« in Verbindung zu bringen ist. Während Letztere davon ausgeht, dass die Unterscheidung von Migrant:innen und Nicht-Migrant:innen für eine produktive Analyse sozialer Zusammenhänge zunehmend bedeutungslos wird, bleibt die Zuschreibung im Blick auf Aushandlungen zunächst bestehen. Zugleich ermöglicht der Fokus auf die Aushandlungen analytische Klarheit und historische Tiefe, die zum Verständnis des Wandels gesellschaftlicher Vorstellungen von Zugehörigkeit beitragen.

Schlagwörter

Migrationsforschung, Aushandlung, Postmigrantisches Paradigma, Migrationsregime

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In recent decades, a range of theoretical approaches has emerged to capture the complex transformations driven by migration. These include perspectives on superdiversity (Vertovec 2007), transnationalism (Faist 2000), the migration-development nexus (Nyberg-Sørensen et al. 2002), open or contested borders (Bauder 2013), multiculturalism (Modood 2007), conviviality (Nowicka and Vertovec 2014), autonomy of migration (Mezzadra 2011), and competitive narratives (Triandaphyllidou 2001). Across these frameworks, it is widely acknowledged that migration reshapes not only the lives of immigrants but also the institutions, identities, and imaginaries of host societies. These processes are frequently accompanied by contestation and ambivalence, reflecting deeply political struggles over participation, legitimacy, and access to rights.

We have to read and understand the work of Jochen Oltmer within this broader theoretical landscape, where he describes the transformation through migration as a mode of negotiation, or *Aushandlung*. Rather than treating migration as a unidirectional movement driven by push-pull factors, Oltmer reframes it as a historically embedded process of negotiation among multiple actors. His notion of *Aushandlung* illuminates how migration is continuously shaped through dynamic interactions involving state institutions, migrants, civil society, and economic interests (Oltmer 2018). This framing places Oltmer's work in dialogue with, and as a complement to, the post-migrant paradigm that emphasizes negotiation as a constitutive force in democratic transformation within societies (Foroutan 2019).

Yet, reflecting upon the differences between these perspectives, it becomes evident that Oltmer's conception of *Aushandlung* primarily emphasizes interactions occurring between migration regimes on the one side and

migrants on the other, highlighting structural dynamics alongside individual agency. In contrast, the postmigrant paradigm moves beyond distinguishing between migrants and non-migrants who negotiate their belonging, instead differentiating between pro-pluralistic and anti-pluralistic positions—stances that can be adopted by both immigrants and non-immigrants alike. This shifts the analytical focus away from distinct cultural heritages and toward the shared objectives that might be pursued through strategic alliances, thereby transforming the very notion of negotiation itself.

Originally coined within the cultural sector, the term *postmigrantisch* has gained traction in the social sciences to denote the enduring societal impact of both past and present immigration. Numerically this is evidenced by the fact that as of 2023, nearly 30 percent of the German population had a migration background—among children under five, the figure reached 43 percent. Immigrants and their descendants include neighbors, classmates, colleagues, friends, and life partners. Together with those without recent migration experience, they form complex postmigrant constellations. This reality requires a shift in perspective: migration is no longer understood as a temporary phase; rather it is a foundational element of societal structure.

Postmigrant societies are characterized by the institutional and political recognition of migration as a constitutive element of the social order, a macro-norm embedded within plural democracies (Fraser 2008; Modood 2007; Chakrabarty 2007; Taylor 1992). Yet this recognition has not gone unchallenged; it unfolds through continual processes of *Aushandlung*, and Germany exemplifies this. Following the first 1955 labor recruitment agreement, the years until the 1980s were shaped by the assumption that migrants would return to their countries of origin. The subsequent 25 years were marked by political resistance to the idea of Germany being a country of immigration. It was only in the early 2000s, particularly after the 2006 Integration Summit and under the leadership of Chancellor Angela Merkel, that Germany began to formally design a coordinated integration policy. This shaped a dynamic phase in which German society began to actively negotiate and partially recognize its migration reality while trying to formulate a kind of »New German We« as a national and collective identity. The political acknowledgment of Germany as a country of immigration in 2001 constitutes a critical moment of institutional negotiation, perceived by many immigrants and their descendants as a new social contract—a legitimizing moment for demands around equality and participation. This acknowledgment exposed and challenged structural inequalities, intensifying societal tensions and political polarization. These productive negotiations emerged mainly after a setback in 2010 when Thilo Sarrazin tried to abolish the idea of Germany having become a country of immigration. Negotiating migration is not a

linear process of constant achievements but it comes with disputes, regressions, and ambivalences.

Against this backdrop, Oltmer's work offers both analytical clarity and historical depth. His studies of migration regimes reveal that migration has never been a linear process of arrival and assimilation into a passive host society. Instead, migration has been shaped by the continuous renegotiation of migration-related categories, meanings, and conditions. Migration has been influenced by determining who is considered a migrant, under what conditions people marked as migrants may reside, and how categories such as »refugee«, »guest worker«, or »person with a migration background« are defined. Such definitions are not fixed; they emerge from historically contingent processes of *Aushandlung* involving various stakeholders, such as governments, local authorities, employers, civil society actors, and migrants themselves (Oltmer 2018).

One of Oltmer's contributions is his theorization of the »migration regime«: a relatively stable but evolving configuration of norms, institutions, and practices through which migration is produced and formed (Oltmer 2018). Crucially, these regimes are not static structures; they are the outcome of ongoing negotiations between actors with diverging interests. For example, during the guest worker programs of the 1950s to 1970s, bilateral state agreements, employer demands, and migrant strategies intersected in a regime that was constantly being adjusted. As Oltmer notes, even the state should not be seen as a monolithic actor but as a complex ensemble of agents and agencies often pursuing competing agendas.

Concrete examples of such negotiations abound. Consider the long and contentious process surrounding dual citizenship in Germany. From heated political debates in the late 1990s—where entire election campaigns were fought against dual nationality—to the eventual legal recognition in 2014 (BPA 2014), these processes involved political institutions, legal frameworks, and civil society actors negotiating the boundaries of national belonging. Even after legal recognition, negotiations continued. Questions of double voting rights, inheritance laws, military obligations, and cultural legitimacy, such as public acceptance of headscarves or circumcision, remained deeply contested.

This conceptualization of migration as a co-produced and historically contingent process resonates with the epistemology of postmigration. Postmigrant theory introduces a threefold analytical framework: (1) a descriptive reading of structural shifts after migration (after), (2) a deconstructive reading of anti-immigrant discourse to expose power asymmetries (behind), and (3) a normative reframing of societal belonging beyond ethnonational binaries (beyond). Each of these »post-lenses« reflects the analytical perspective

of *Aushandlung*. They trace how societies narrate, contest, and renegotiate their self-understanding in response to migration.

At the heart of the postmigrant paradigm is a commitment to democratic renewal. It emphasizes the promise of equality not based on ethnonational origin but on shared democratic rights (Nassehi 2018; Fraser 2008). The ongoing adjustment of the boundaries of belonging takes place through contested processes of acknowledgment, driven by opposing forces: those advocating for expanded recognition, and those resisting it. This dynamic generates shifting alliances and hardened antagonisms, leading to what Bauman (2016) and Mouffe (2000) describe as deep societal ambivalence. As both Oltmer (2018) and Pott (2018) observe, these negotiations are intrinsic to how democratic societies manage pluralism.

In postmigrant societies, conflict lines continue to revolve around access to economic resources, but are increasingly accompanied by identity-based struggles, such as gender equality and the rejection of racism and discrimination in their cultural, religious, national, and class-based forms. The demand for recognition implicitly includes expectations of equal opportunities and participation. When these demands are unmet, systemic transformations and political resistance follow. As Bade (2017) noted, marginalized groups invoke the promise of plural democracy to claim measurable participation in education, labor, justice, and political life.

Recognition deficits thus become the starting point of negotiation processes. One clear example is the Antidiscrimination Agency of the Federal Government in Germany (ADS), whose creation led to the 2006 General Equal Treatment Act (AGG). This legal shift was accompanied by broader cultural negotiations around language, canons, and symbols, many of which sparked controversy as they challenged long-standing social norms.

The dynamics of *Aushandlung* extend deeply into symbolic and affective dimensions. Do people with a German passport who wear a headscarf belong to the national cultural tradition? Is circumcision part of the »German culture«? Is it appropriate to call the children of immigrants »foreign children« if they hold German citizenship? These questions demonstrate that laws do not automatically produce social acceptance. Norms must be renegotiated across societal fields—education, media, politics—through democratic conflict and deliberation. The conflict dynamic in postmigrant societies, therefore, centers on the redistribution of both material and symbolic goods. Minority actors, now acknowledged as legitimate participants in public discourse, challenge established privileges and demand recognition and equal rights. Yet this struggle typically remains open-ended and contested, as social hierarchies are rarely relinquished without resistance. As Spivak (1988)

reminds us, marginalized groups often challenge dominant power structures without guarantees of success.

A society becomes postmigrant when the distinction between »migrant« and »non-migrant« loses its explanatory power—a distinction, however, that was still central to Jochen Oltmer's conception of (historical) migration regimes and negotiation processes. In these new contexts, attempts to reassert cultural hegemony risk undermining democratic norms. This often produces racialized discourses and reflects broader phenomena of social anomie (Durkheim 1981) and ideological antinomies (Mouffe 2000; Gramsci 1971). However, these tensions also open up new possibilities: If migration is continually renegotiated, then belonging can be as well. In this sense, *Aushandlung* becomes both an analytical or heuristic and a normative tool—a way to understand conflict and to envision inclusive futures.

Oltmer's inspiring contribution lies in demonstrating that migration is not merely an empirical reality to be acknowledged and managed, but a relational and political process that reveals the deeper layers of democratic life. His historical approach underscores that the terms and concepts under which people move, settle, and belong are never final; they are always contingent, open to challenge, and subject to transformation. In honoring his work, we recognize *Aushandlung* not only as a method of analysis but as a democratic practice—one that continually invites us to reimagine who »we« are, and on what terms we want to live together. Perhaps one day, we will simply decide that there is no longer a »we« left to negotiate. At that time, we will be able to pack our things and move toward a new place we might call home, in negotiation with others over how to shape and drape this place we might call *Heimat*.

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