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Within the State and Without the Nation: Unraveling the Nation-State's Dual Role in the Lives of Migrant Descendants Through Sayad's Critical Sociology

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Abstract

This article examines the dual identity challenges of migrant descendants within the system of immigration built by nation-states, drawing on Abdelmalek Sayad's critical sociology of migration. It highlights the tension between their status as legally recognised citizens and culturally marginalised 'others'. The discussion underlines the nation-state's struggle to reconcile its homogeneous national identity ideals with the realities of global migration, often failing to integrate these individuals fully. Central to this analysis is the distinction between 'state'—legal-political institutions—and 'nation'—cultural-linguistic identities. This division places migrant descendants in a liminal space, navigating their dual identities as insiders and outsiders. The article critiques the conventional integration paradigm that places the onus of assimilation on these individuals, suggesting that nation-states should instead adapt their structures for true inclusivity. The paper calls for reevaluating the nation-state, proposing a more inclusive and pluralistic approach to national identity that acknowledges the layered identities of all citizens, especially migrant descendants. This reconfiguration aims to ensure their full participation in the nation-state's social, cultural, and political life. By shifting the responsibility to nation-states, the article aligns with Sayad's critique of migration policies, emphasising the need for structural reforms that transcend legal recognition to achieve genuinely inclusive practices. This approach is vital for addressing the disparities and tensions within contemporary nation-states and moving towards a more equitable society.

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1. Introduction

The debate about the identity and social position of migrant children within the societies their parents migrated to is nearly as old as migration studies itself (Park, 1928). These descendants have drawn particular attention from researchers and institutions as they crystallise many of the tensions between the nationalist foundations of contemporary states, racism as a tool of governance, and the immigration system's legal frameworks (Sayad, 2004a). While scholars have long explored issues of integration and identity, this article offers a unique contribution by applying Sayad's critical perspective to examine the mechanisms of simultaneous inclusion and exclusion faced by the descendants of migrants, revealing the liminal space they occupy within Western European nation-states nowadays. By grounding our work on Sayad's framework to analyse the state of limbo in which these individuals live, we highlight the deeper layers of symbolic exclusion faced by those who are legally included within the state yet culturally marginalised from the nation.

According to Sayad (1994), the state is inherently antagonistic to migrants, a dynamic that intensifies with their descendants, who challenge core pillars of the nation-state—such as the pursuit of cultural or racial uniformity (Raimondi, 2016). By confronting these foundational ideologies, the descendants of migrants occupy a pivotal position in debates on the ideological, historical, and political coherence of nation-states. Nowhere is this tension more apparent than in discussions of integration. While first-generation migrants were expected to fulfil specific labour functions within the immigration system, their descendants—full legal members of the state their parents and (grand) grandparents once migrated to—face a paradox. Despite their formal status as citizens, they remain symbolically excluded from the national identity that defines "the original community". This exclusion, operating along socio-economic and racialized lines, underscores their position as members of the state but not the nation. In doing so, the offspring of migrants challenge the very foundations of the nation-state, revealing contradictions between formal inclusion and symbolic marginalisation.

This article explores these mechanisms of exclusion, starting with Sayad's theoretical framework and his sociology of migration. In the first section, we critically analyse the evolving conceptualisations of the 'second generation of immigrants' and similar labels, highlighting how these terms implicitly

perpetuate alterity through the prevailing nation-state perspective in migration research (Glick Schiller et al., 1992). By designating descendants of migrants as 'second' or 'third generation,' we artificially impose the status of 'migrant' on individuals who never participated in any migration process, reflecting a nation-state framework where individuals are marked by their, or even their ancestors', countries of origin in opposition to a so-called 'native' population that is considered the norm (Mazzucato, 2024). Through a critical examination of academic and institutional definitions, we uncover how these categorisations not only lie at the heart of mainstream knowledge production in migration studies but also actively shape the social identity and social positioning of these individuals from the outset, often reinforcing their symbolic exclusion from the national community.

Next, we turn to the complexities of the nation-state as a political and cultural construct, focusing on its inherent contradictions. While traditionally viewed as a cohesive entity that unites governance, territoriality, and cultural identity, this conception oversimplifies the reality within nation-states, particularly the tension between legal inclusivity and cultural exclusivity. The originality of this article lies not only in its grounding in Sayad's critical framework but also in placing the descendants of migrants at the centre of our analysis. By highlighting the lived experiences of these individuals, we reveal the extent to which they exist in a state of limbo—insiders of the state but outsiders of the nation—a unique ambiguous position of presence and absence they do not share with either migrants or native citizens, disrupting the presumed unity of the nation-state. Although legal frameworks in Western Europe may formally include descendants of migrants as citizens, they remain excluded from the ethnocultural narrative of the nation, perpetuating a divide between native citizens and those of migrant origin. This section examines these contradictions within modern Western Europe, where the experiences of migrant descendants underscore the nation-state's failure—particularly its immigration and integration systems—to fully embrace the diversity brought by non-European others, especially from the Middle East, Africa, and Asia. The resurgence of monoculturalism and nationalism further exacerbates this failure as nation-states struggle to adapt to the multicultural and transnational realities of contemporary society.

Lastly, we examine the symbolic edges of national identity and everyday nationhood, illustrating how exactly descendants of migrants, despite formal citizenship, are marginalised in daily life. We explore their agentic ability to challenge and renegotiate the boundaries of national belonging, particularly through selective inclusion and exclusion in cultural and social spaces. This section underscores the persistent tension between exclusion and agency, revealing how these individuals contest and reshape the very notion of

belonging in modern nation-states. We conclude by offering a Sayadian critique of the nation-state, calling for rethinking its structural limitations and a more inclusive approach to citizenship and belonging in an increasingly diverse and globalised world.

2. The "second generation" debate

As is often the case in the social sciences, there is no consensus on how to refer to the descendants of immigrants. The term "second generation" is widely used despite its conceptual limitations. Many scholars acknowledge its contested nature by framing it as the "so-called" or "known as" second generation, yet, despite its shortcomings, few widely accepted alternatives exist to describe this population (Chimienti et al., 2019). However, divergences are not limited to the use of the category but also to its definition. After discussing the commonly used but problematic term "second generations," it is crucial to acknowledge, as Valentina Mazzucato (2024, p.3) points out, the use of quotation marks around such terms is not merely stylistic but indicative of a deeper issue: "the quotation marks indicate a lack of appropriate terminology; this lack is in itself a sign of how far research on migration has been and continues to be guided by a nation-state perspective." This observation invites us to consider how the field of migration studies might evolve if it moves beyond these traditional categorisations to embrace a more nuanced understanding of migrant experiences unbounded by the rigid frameworks of nation-state ideologies.

Two blocks of definitions can be identified: firstly, there are those we could call "institutional," as they are provided by international and supranational organisations, whose purpose is to define groups as targets of specific public policies. On the other hand, there is a second group of definitions that we shall refer to here as "academic," as they are aimed at a scientific understanding of the phenomenon.

Among the first group, the following definitions should be highlighted, given their substantial impact on the international community, governments, and global civil society.

The United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE) notes that "second generation" is commonly used. However, it prefers referring to these people as "descendants of foreign-born" to include them as a specific category within the various population censuses. This definition consists of the following elements: "Group of persons born in the country with at least one parent born abroad and persons whose parents are of mixed origin: those who

have one parent born in the country and the other parent born abroad" (UNECE & EUROSTAT, 2006).

The European Migration Network (EMN), an institution dedicated to researching and providing reliable information on migration and refuge to the European Commission, also includes two different terms in its glossary. Firstly, it states that a "person with a migratory background" is, in its third meaning: "A person who has at least one of their parents previously entered their present country of residence as a migrant" (EMN, 2024).

Secondly, the EMN also notes the existence of the category of "second-generation migrant," which it defines as: "A person who was born in and is residing in a country that at least one of their parents previously entered as a migrant" (EMN, 2024).

Finally, within this group of institutional actors, the International Organisation for Migration (IOM) stands as a very relevant actor thanks, among other activities, to its reports on global migration. In contrast to the previous definitions, whose simplicity aims to limit the group to identify it statistically, the IOM adopts a somewhat more political stance, pointing out a fundamental difference between migrating and being a migrant. This subtlety is crucial to understanding the discussions on the so-called "second generations," as it raises a significant question: can someone who has never migrated be considered a migrant?

The IOM notes that while migrating implies moving from one place to another, the status of the migrant varies according to the context. A person may be considered to fall into this category when he or she has specific characteristics or social conditions that do not directly entail having migrated (IOM, 2023, p. 29). Instead of listing a series of defining characteristics, the IOM admits it is a controversial concept as it is highly politically charged. This point brings us to the second group of definitions, those that we have called "academic."

Here, the conceptualisation of the so-called "second generations" has been more varied, as authors and theories are based on more complex sociological, political, and historical postulates. Thus, divergences arise from specific epistemological questions such as: can children born in the country of origin but who migrated to the host country be considered "second-generation migrants"? If the answer is yes, then at what age does the boundary between being a migrant and belonging to the "second generation" lie? Is it a homogeneous group, or do their characteristics vary according to variables such as nationality of origin, social class, or command of the host country's language?

These issues have marked the course of the academic debate on those known as "second generations," mainly from the 1990s to the present day, with

certain hegemonic schools of thought and some solid critical currents, as we shall see below.

Within the hegemonic field, the sociologist Alejandro Portes holds a preeminent place. He has conducted influential studies in collaboration with other scholars. Notably, his work with Min Zhou on "the new second generation" (Portes & Zhou, 1993), with Rubén G. Rumbaut on the legacies of the immigrant second generation (Portes & Rumbaut, 2001), and with Rosa Aparicio and William Haller on the coming of age of the second generation in Spain (Portes et al., 2016) has significantly impacted research on "second-generation immigrants" in the United States and Spain. In his research with Rumbaut (2001), they considered "second-generation migrants" to be those who were born abroad (in this case, outside the United States), and at least one of their two parents was a foreigner.

This definition, whose simplicity recalls those in the previous section, is operative, as it justified the sample selection of their projects. In other cases, "second generations" include both the children of immigrants and individuals born abroad who migrated before the age of four (Fullaondo Elordui-Zapaterietxe, 2017).

This latter aspect refers to one of the central academic debates surrounding the so-called "second generations," that is, do foreigners who migrated as children belong to this group? The central aim of this debate is to differentiate those who did not migrate from those who did, as the former should not, in theory, "adapt" to the host society (Crul & Schneider, 2010).

The issue of adaptation, integration, or assimilation is critical in studying second generations. This is why many members of the research community have focused on pointing out that the social conditioning factors of those who were born in the destination country are not the same as those of those who were born in another society and migrated from it. However, where is the age limit that separates the two groups?

López and Stanton-Salazar (2001) proposed a division by age to indicate that the moment when individuals migrate brings a series of different conditioning factors. Thus, they established that, in the case of Mexican migration to the United States, there is a generation 1.75, made up of those who migrated when they were less than five years old, a generation 1.5, who arrived between the ages of 6 and 10, and a generation 1.25, who arrived between the ages of 11 and 15. Although this seems a somewhat rational vision to understand differences between groups, it has been quite polemic as it equates humans to software, ranking their versions according to the time they migrated and thus reproducing a vision that is only interesting for the State but not representative of a social reality.

The "generational" debate does not end with these discussions. As Moncusí Ferré (2007) notes, some authors also differentiate between "new" second generations and "old" second generations, depending on the history of emigration of their national group to the destination country and locating social integration as the defining paradigm of these populations.

As can be seen, the academic debate surrounding the so-called "second generations" is complex, and, precisely for this reason, the authors of certain studies often use categories such as "generation 1.5" or "second generations" without going into their specific definition, assuming a supposed, but non-existent, universality of the concept. This point is precisely questioned by the most critical positions, including those of Sayad, that will form the theoretical frame of this article.

Pioneer of a critical sociology of migration (Gil Araujo, 2010), Abdelmalek Sayad articulated a perspective on migration studies that sought to transcend the scope of a mere theory. His most comprehensive work, "The Suffering of the Immigrant" (Sayad, 2004b), is a compendium of his central studies on migration, in which his critical reflections on the link between the state and migrants can be appreciated. In synthesis, his outline aimed to strip down the state's postulates, pointing out that if migration exists, it is because states exist, states whose national borders turn anyone who tries to cross them into a migrant. By designing what he called "a system of immigration" working through permits that entail specific rights and duties for migrants, migration policies construct these people as an "other," differentiated from "us," whose authorisation to reside in destination would only be justified by their usefulness as labourers in sectors needing workers.

Based on this perspective, migrants would be "eternal suspects" in the eyes of the state, having to constantly justify their presence (by renewing residence permits), demonstrating that the reason for which they were allowed to enter the country still applies. This "migratory utilitarianism" (Morice, 2001; Molinero-Gerbeau & Sajir, 2024), therefore, defines a kind of social pact between the destination state and the migrant, which, however, in the case of the so-called "second generations", is broken.

Sayad (2004b) notes that, paradoxically, the so-called "second generations" create the first generations since, by articulating a discourse of generational transmission of migratory status, it is accepted that a first generation settled in the country of destination. For this author, the stigmatisation of the migrant, a reflection of the institutional racism with which foreigners are treated, is transmitted to the children, as they are designated as migrants despite never having migrated. They are thus a kind of hybrid, defined by Sayad (1991) as "illegitimate children" as they do not share all the characteristics of nationals, but neither do they share all the attributes of non-nationals. They are called

migrants because, despite being born in the destination, having studied there and speaking the local language, they carry migration in their name, customs or skin colour, inheriting the status of "migrant" from their parents and grandparents.

Sayad also discussed the concept of generations because it entails a biological approach linking social differences to genetic factors. That is, speaking of second generations implies making a separation between being part of a society (probably in formal terms such as being the recipient of citizen status) but not being a "natural" member of it, as these persons are not descendants of the original community nationalist discourses revindicate coming from. Then, the vague concept of generations perpetuates otherness, jumping from the different legislations defined between nationals and non-nationals to a difference based on genetic transmission, as usually, children of immigrants tend to obtain citizenship and then erase the legal difference (Sayad, 1994).

The primary underlying debate in hegemonic and Sayad's critical studies on migrants described as "second generations" revolves around whether migration is an inheritable status (Moncusí Ferré, 2007). At all events, the approach to this question varies depending on whether one focuses on elements such as upward social mobility (hegemonic approaches) or the social subordination of migrants under the rules of destination societies (critical approaches). We will here continue, in the following section, developing Sayad's frame to understand how the subtle but very relevant, in material terms, difference between being a member of the State and not of the Nation derives in the perpetuation of illegitimacy (Sayad, 1991) expressed through social marginality and racism for children of immigrants.

3. The nation-state

As a concept and reality, the nation-state has significantly shaped the modern world's political, social, and cultural landscapes. Historically emerging as the dominant form of political organisation, it represents a complex amalgamation of sovereign governance, territorial integrity, and a unified national identity. This entity is typically understood as a singular, cohesive unit where the state's authority coincides with the cultural, linguistic, and ethnic homogeneity of its people. However, this conceptualisation masks the inherent complexities and contradictions embedded within the nation-state model.

Lodewyckx et al. (2010) describe the nation-state as an outcome of a "successful compromise" among diverse social groups, securing political loyalty through promises of societal participation and security. This model evolved

distinctly from the multicultural empires of the past, such as the Hapsburg or Ottoman Empires, by fostering an inward homogenisation that often suppressed local identities to fabricate a singular national narrative. This process involved the strategic blending of culture and identity, ensuring that the governance and bureaucratic systems were accessible primarily to the members of the so-called nation, thereby excluding others who did not fit this constructed identity (Eller, 1999).

Today, in current scholarly discourse, the term "nation-state" is used to denote sovereign entities that govern defined territories, often analysed as unified wholes. Yet, this perspective is increasingly challenged by scholars in migration studies who argue that such a view reifies the nation-state, oversimplifying its complex reality (Dahinden et al., 2020). These critiques highlight, as Sayad (2004b) did, how methodological nationalism, a tendency to view social processes within the confines of national borders, unwittingly reinforces the nation-state's perceived unity, obscuring its diverse and often conflicting identities.

The intertwining of national and state symbolisms further complicates the distinction between these entities. Elgenius (2011) notes that national symbols often become conflated with state symbols, making it difficult to separate the cultural identity of the nation from the legal and political identity of the state. This conflation masks underlying inequalities and creates a facade of egalitarianism among the populace (Kapferer, 1988). However, as we will explore in this section, the perceived homogeneity of the nation-state is a political and cultural construct that does not necessarily reflect the realities of its diverse populations.

Despite the apparent unity of the nation-state, significant tensions exist between the concept of the nation and the state. These tensions are particularly pronounced in the context of Western Europe, where the presence of migrant descendants highlights the discrepancies between state policies and the cultural identities of the nation. This distinction points to a fundamental discord within the nation-state, where the legal inclusivity offered by the state often clashes with the cultural exclusivity maintained by the nation.

As we explore these themes further, we will uncover the nuanced interplay between state mechanisms and national narratives, revealing the complex realities of nation-state construction and its implications for migrants and their descendants.

3.1. The Janus-Bifrons nature of the nation-state

Building on the foundational understanding of the nation-state provided earlier, we now examine the inherently dualistic nature of this concept. The term "Janus-Bifrons" aptly captures the two-faced character of the nation-state, reflecting its simultaneous push towards unification and division, inclusion and exclusion. Janus, a Roman god represented by two faces looking in opposite directions, symbolises transitions and duality, such as beginnings and endings or war and peace. Janus, often depicted as a two-faced creature in mythological contexts, underscores the notion of seeing both past and future, embodying a dual nature. This metaphor vividly illustrates how the nation-state operates with two distinct "souls": one that governs legal and political structures (state) and another that fosters cultural and historical identities (nation). This subsection will explore these tensions, particularly in the context of migration studies, and will be informed by Sayad's critical perspectives.

The traditional view of the nation-state as a congruent alignment of people, territory, and sovereignty is increasingly challenged in a world characterised by multicultural realities and transnational connections. As scholars such as Elgenius (2011) note, the aspiration for a unified national culture remains dominant. However, in reality, nation-states are far more fragmented—not just as a consequence of modern societal evolution, but because their very structure seeks to homogenise diverse cultures, languages, and histories into a single national narrative.

Arendt's (2017) analysis sharpens our understanding of the divergence between 'nation' and 'state', defining the first as a shared cultural, linguistic, and historical identity residing within a specific territory. The state, however, is characterised by its legal and political structure, which governs the territory and confers citizenship. The critical tension arises from the state's legal inclusivity, which often clashes with the cultural exclusivity promoted by the nation. This dichotomy is significantly pronounced when dealing with ethnic minorities and migrants, who may be legally integrated but culturally marginalised.

Habermas (1998) adds another layer to our understanding by distinguishing between the legal-bureaucratic aspects of the state and the cultural and linguistic community of the nation. His concept of the nation-state involves two intertwined but distinct processes: the state's legal-juridical formation and the nation's cultural-historical development. This bifurcation is crucial for understanding why migrants and their descendants, even when fully integrated into the state's legal system, often remain peripheral to the nation's cultural core and narratives.

Transnational practices and networks further complicate the nation-state model. Migrants and their descendants engage in practices that transcend the

rigid borders of the state, maintaining and creating new forms of cultural, social, and economic networks that span their countries of origin and residence (Portes, 2001). These activities and networks challenge the notion of the nation-state as a 'solid container' and suggest a more porous, fluid arrangement where cultural identities and affiliations extend beyond legal jurisdictions. This perspective aligns with Sayad's critique of the nation-state, emphasising how migration exposes the arbitrary nature of national borders and identities.

Sayad's work provides a critical backdrop to this discussion, highlighting the inherent contradictions in the migrant experience within the nation-state framework. Sayad argued that the state's approach to migrants is often utilitarian, valuing them primarily for their economic contributions rather than as full community members (Sayad, 1994). This utilitarian approach manifests the broader tension between the 'nation' as an idealised cultural entity and the 'state' as a legal-political entity. As we will see in section 4, the children of migrants, in particular, embody this tension as they navigate their identities within these overlapping spheres becoming "illegitimate children" towards the eyes of the State in Sayad's words (1991).

The Janus-Bifrons faced nature of the nation-state thus reveals a structure fundamentally at odds with itself, striving for universal legal frameworks while simultaneously fostering exclusive cultural identities. The dual nature of the nation-state is fraught with internal contradictions that particularly affect migrants and their descendants. Sayad's perspective, focusing on the marginalisation inherent in these structures, aligns with the analysis of the nation-state as a site of ongoing cultural and legal conflicts. Before delving into how this dualism translates for migrants and, notably, their descendants into lived experiences in a state of limbo, as members of the state and non-members of the nation, we focus now on the main achievements and failures of the nation-state.

3.2. Achievements and crises of the nation-state

The proliferation and resilience of the nation-state were not driven by a universal moral principle but by its practical advantages and adaptability in a rapidly modernising world (Ben-Israel, 2011). According to Habermas (1998), the nation-state's success largely stems from its apparatus's ability to manage the imperatives of social, cultural, and economic modernisation through a centralised authority, legal systems, and administrative infrastructure supported by the legitimate use of force and taxation. This form of societal organisation resolved many challenges of its time by promoting social integration through a

unified national identity, which, as we have seen earlier, is often conceptualised as homogeneous and unitary.

However, the nation-state now faces significant challenges that question its continued efficacy. Globalisation has introduced complex issues that transcend national borders, such as economic interdependence, technological advancement, and ecological threats, which the nation-state structure is increasingly ill-equipped to manage alone (Habermas, 1998). The rise of cultural, ideological, linguistic, and religious diversities further strains the traditional nation-state model, which has struggled to adapt to these new realities (Lodewyckx et al., 2010).

The presence of ethnic minorities and the increasing visibility of diasporic communities present profound challenges to nation-states that still define themselves as "mono-cultural, mono-ethnic, and mono-religious" (Triandafyllidou, 2012, p. 14). Despite possessing legal citizenship, these communities often face systemic exclusion, sparking significant debates over citizenship, identity, and rights that surpass national boundaries. Ben-Israel (2011) highlights that dealing with what are perceived as hostile minorities poses one of the most significant challenges for today's nation-states.

Sayad (2004b) argues that the state approaches migrants through a lens of "migratory utilitarianism," valuing them in their system of immigration primarily for their economic utility while perpetuating their marginalisation. This utilitarian approach extends to their descendants, who, despite legal citizenship, are often seen as "illegitimate" outsiders due to their inherited migrant status (Sayad, 1991). This perspective elucidates the systemic exclusion and symbolic violence faced by ethnic minorities, reinforcing their marginalisation within the nation-state.

While Europe has become increasingly diverse, with many individuals identifying with multiple cultural and social groups, monoculturalist views and cultural purism have resurged in various cultural contexts, social media, and political debates. European societies have witnessed a rise in populist, nationalist, and extremist movements that have fuelled xenophobic, anti-immigration, racist, anti-Semitic, and Islamophobic attitudes and actions. These movements selectively defend the idea of 'us' as a monocultural group. Extremist ideology-driven attacks have significantly impacted people's perceptions of Europe and its future development (Lähdesmäki et al., 2020).

The rising success of far-right, nationalist, and anti-immigrant parties in recent European elections (Stevis-Gridneff, 2024) reflects a reactionary shift towards mono-culturalism, underscoring the nation-state's struggle to adapt to increasing diversity. This surge in nationalism can be seen as a direct response to the perceived threats such diversity poses to traditional national identities. This political shift reflects deep-seated tensions within European societies

about identity and belonging, further complicated by the ongoing negotiations over cultural diversity and social cohesion.

The nation-state's inability to adequately respond to these internal and external pressures calls for reevaluating its structure and principles. Sayad's critique highlights the inherent contradictions in the nation-state's approach to migrants and their descendants, emphasising the need for a fundamental shift in perspective. The question arises: can the nation-state sustain its foundational premise of unity while embracing increasing diversity? This reevaluation requires recognising modern societies' dynamic and pluralistic nature and reconsidering the terms of inclusion of diversity and social cohesion.

As we consider the transformative impacts of migration and globalisation, it becomes imperative to question whether the nation-state can remain the primary form of political organisation or if new forms of governance that embrace multiple citizenships and layered identities are necessary. This inquiry sets the stage for further exploration in the next section, where we will focus on the lived experiences of non-European others—migrants and their descendants—from the Middle East, Africa, and Asia.

4. Symbolic edges and everyday nationhood

In the discourse on migration and integration, it is imperative to delineate who we refer to when discussing descendants of migrants, particularly those from non-European backgrounds—specifically from the Middle East, Africa, and Asia. These individuals, as explored in Section 2, are often categorised within migration studies as 1.5, 1.75, second, or even third-generation migrants. They include descendants of migrants from countries like Algeria, Morocco, and Turkey, who moved to Western Europe after WWII to aid in rebuilding efforts. Now settled in countries such as Spain, France, Italy, and Germany, these persons are caught in a liminal space, though born and socialised within European contexts. They possess the same legal rights and duties as indigenous citizens yet are perceived and treated as illegitimate "second-level" citizens, perpetual outsiders to the "*volk*" due to their visible ethnic differences (Sayad, 1991).

Fox's (2017) exploration of the "edges of the nation" provides a critical framework for understanding how national identities are contested and constructed at the margins. These edges are spaces where the explicit and implicit understandings of nationhood are negotiated, particularly by those on the periphery. For descendants of migrants in Western Europe, these symbolic edges are daily realities where the abstract concept of the nation becomes a tangible force impacting their lives. Sayad's (2004b) insights into the utilitarian

approach of nation-states towards migrants underscore how these symbolic boundaries are not merely lines on a map. Still, they are instead active in the everyday exclusion and marginalisation of these individuals despite their formal citizenship status.

Billig's (1995) concept of 'banal nationalism' elucidates how national identity is constantly reinforced in subtle and often overlooked ways. Billig argues that nationalism is embedded in the mundane—the unnoticed flags, national narratives in the media, and everyday conversations that delineate 'us' from 'them'. This form of nationalism, pervasive and penetrating, operates under the radar, influencing perceptions and behaviours without overt symbols like parades or national anthems. In these everyday interactions, descendants of migrants encounter persistent reminders of their otherness as the nation subtly yet continuously articulates who truly belongs.

Building on the work of Fox and Miller-Idriss (2008), this final section examines how everyday practices embedded within the fabric of society reinforce national identity and, by extension, exclusion. For descendants of migrants, these practices range from the bureaucratic (legal documentation processes that highlight their status as 'other') to the interpersonal (social interactions that underscore their perceived foreignness). Each interaction serves as a reminder of their conditional belonging, where their status overshadows their identity as citizens as perpetual foreigners. This section will use specific case studies to illustrate how everyday nationalism and the symbolic edges of nationhood manifest in real scenarios, impacting the lives of these individuals across various European contexts.

4.1 Symbolic utilitarianism and the selective inclusion of migrant descendants in national narratives

When examining migratory utilitarianism, much of the literature has traditionally focused on the economic contributions of migrants and their descendants, emphasising their role as malleable providers of cheap labour while also noting their persistent marginalisation despite these contributions (Sayad, 2004b; Morice, 2001; Sajir, 2024). In contrast, this article extends the analysis to the symbolic dimension of migratory utilitarianism, reflecting our earlier discussions on the Janus-Bifrons faced character of the nation-state, where economic and symbolic interests intersect.

This analytical shift highlights how the symbolic contributions of migrants are leveraged for national prestige, particularly visible in arenas like international sports and arts events (e.g. European Athletics Championships, Eurovision, Football World Cup). Here, the exceptional talents of migrant descendants are

celebrated as embodiments of the nation's success and cultural vitality, projecting an image of a diverse yet unified nation-state vis a vis the other nations. However, this symbolic utilisation contrasts sharply with the reality faced by most migrant descendants, who, lacking such extraordinary abilities, remain marginalised and positioned at the nation's edges.

Furthermore, this transition from state-centric economic utilitarianism, which prioritises cheap labour, to nation-centric symbolic utilitarianism, which valorises exceptional achievements, underscores selective inclusivity. Only those migrant descendants who achieve outstanding success in high-visibility fields such as sports, sciences, and arts are heralded publicly as true representatives of the nation.

This selective celebration reveals the conditional nature of national inclusion, where most ordinary migrant descendants' lives continue to be undervalued, and their contributions to other less glamorous sectors are overlooked. Thus, while migrant descendants may be heralded as symbols of the nation's diversity and prestige, this recognition is often superficial and does not extend to a genuine inclusion into the fabric of national identity. Instead, it serves as a strategic display intended to enhance the nation's image on the global stage, leaving the structural challenges and everyday exclusions faced by most migrant descendants largely unaddressed.

4.2 Clarifying state thought and nation thought: a dual path for migrant descendants

In the discourse on migration, Sayad's contributions illuminate the dichotomy between "state thought" and "nation thought," concepts crucial to understanding the multifaceted challenges faced by migrants and their descendants. State thought, as Sayad (2004c) articulates, represents the legal-bureaucratic framework that governs citizenship—predicated on standardised legal criteria that ostensibly offer an egalitarian basis for inclusion. This form of inclusion is primarily administrative, focusing on the formal aspects of citizenship without delving into the subjective experiences of belonging and acceptance.

Conversely, nation thought ventures beyond the legalistic confines of state thought to encompass the ethnic, cultural, and historical predicates of national identity. These are not codified in law but are deeply embedded in a nation's social fabric and collective memory. Here, belonging is intertwined with cultural conformity, historical continuity, and, often, racial homogeneity. While Sayad does not explicitly use the term "nation thought," his analysis of the cultural

and social layers accompanying legal citizenship infers its presence, highlighting a more exclusionary, ethnocentric approach to national identity.

In the discourse on migration, particularly when applying Sayad's theories to real-world contexts, Italy is a poignant example where the distinction between "state thought" and "nation thought" becomes starkly evident. Italy is known for its stringent citizenship laws, requiring a decade of residency for eligibility, a process that, while delineated, merely begins the journey toward societal acceptance. Securing Italian citizenship legally under state thought offers migrants a set of well-defined rights and responsibilities; however, this legal status does not equate to an automatic absorption into the fabric of 'Italian-ness.'

'Italian-ness' is bound not merely to civic identity but to a collective imagined concept of ethnicity and race, steeped in historical perceptions and expectations of whiteness and ancestry. This racial and cultural identity forms the crux of nation thought, which significantly transcends the legalistic boundaries set by state thought. It permeates the visible attributes such as skin colour, hair type, and other phenotypical features, effectively setting the boundaries of who is considered part of the nation. Consequently, even as legal citizens, migrants and their descendants often remain considered illegitimate (Sayad, 1991), on the periphery of national identity, caught in a precarious balancing act between being legally 'Italian' on paper and socially 'other' in the public eye (see also Leddy-Owen, 2012).

This nuanced difference between being a member of the state and not being recognised as a member of the nation illustrates a pervasive exclusion within the national consciousness. For non-white Italians and those from visible religious minorities, their claim to 'Italian-ness' is continually contested, reliant on a performance of identity that must align closely with the traditional, often unspoken, standards of the national ethos. Despite meeting all formal legal requirements, their social acceptance remains conditional, marked by a continuous negotiation with an imagined set of cultural and ethnic ideals that define the Italian nation. Such a dissonance between the inclusive promises of state thought and the exclusive realities of nation thought underscores a broader European challenge, reflecting deep-seated societal tensions that complicate the integration of migrants into the national narrative.

Lodewyckx et al. (2010) highlight a stark contrast between the clearly defined legal pathways to citizenship and the ambiguous, often unspoken standards for social acceptance within the national community. In Belgium, as in other European countries, the acquisition of citizenship follows explicit legal criteria, offering a clear, ostensibly egalitarian roadmap for becoming a member of the state. These criteria are designed to be universal, applying equally regardless of an individual's racial, religious, or ethnic background. This

framework, representative of 'state thought,' defines precisely "who can be a citizen" based on legal and administrative standards.

However, 'nation thought' operates on a far more elusive and pervasive level, where cultural, ethnic, and historical perceptions heavily influence the sense of belonging and acceptance, which, as we will see in the next section, has important implications on the racial and ethnic-based stratification of citizenship. This process does not offer a clear set of rules or values that newcomers can follow to be recognised as fully legitimate members of the nation. As Lodewyckx et al. (2010) note, even meeting the formal requirements of citizenship does not guarantee acceptance as a "real" Belgian, pointing to a deeper, often subconscious national identity that transcends legal definitions. The implicit criteria for being considered a genuine member of the nation are influenced by factors such as whiteness and cultural conformity, which are not just structurally vague but often impossible for migrants and their descendants to change. This discrepancy creates a precarious situation for these individuals, legally included but perpetually kept at the margins of the national identity, navigating an undefined and challenging landscape of cultural and social expectations that keep them from feeling 'at home' within the nation.

These insights lead us to a critical understanding of how state and nation thoughts operate in tandem, yet their mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion operate differently. The state's legalistic framework offers a seemingly more egalitarian environment. Yet, the nation's cultural gatekeeping enforces a more restrictive and often exclusionary landscape that strategically activates vague notions of shared history, ancestry and whiteness. For migrants and their descendants, navigating these layered complexities requires more than just fulfilling the legal criteria of citizenship; it demands an ongoing negotiation with elusive and laying claims concerning undefined and contrasted ideas of nations, as we will see in the remaining part of the article.

4.3. Descendants of migrants as second-class citizens in a racially stratified citizenship

Following the exploration of "state thought" and "nation thought" in migration discourse, it becomes evident that despite possessing all formal markers of citizenship, descendants of migrants often find themselves in a paradoxical limbo—officially recognised yet peripherally accepted within their nations. This stratification of citizenship along racial and ethnic lines, while legally non-existent, manifests palpably in the everyday lives of these individuals, marking them as *de facto* second-class citizens within societies that tout egalitarian principles.

Lentin (2020), in "Why Race Still Matters", underscores how race continues to influence policies and societal attitudes, reinforcing the cultural marginalisation of these individuals despite their formal inclusion as citizens. This exclusion is not merely a byproduct of historical biases but a continuous process that sustains racial hierarchies within contemporary nation-states. As such, the lived experiences of these descendants are characterised by a marginalised existence on the fringes of the national community, holding burgundy European passports and fulfilling all prescribed rights and duties, yet never fully recognised as legitimate members of the nation.

This disparity between legal status and social acceptance, illuminated by Sayad's insights, reveals the dual existence migrants endure—recognised by law yet marginalised by national ethos. The ramifications of this stratification extend beyond moral or legal concerns, posing a significant threat to these nation-states' social fabric and future viability. In light of Western Europe's aging population and economic stagnation, maintaining a stratified citizenship system amounts to societal self-sabotage in the long run, as potential contributors are kept at arm's length, unable to fully integrate or enrich the societies they legally belong to.

As we transition into the final part of this section, we will delve deeper into the symbolic boundaries of the nation, exploring how cultural gatekeeping and the renegotiation of national boundaries demonstrate how the marginal position of migrant descendants within the nation is maintained and contested. This exploration will further illuminate the intricate and often contradictory nature of national identity and belonging, shaped by state and nation thoughts.

4.4. Symbolic mobilities and symbolic boundaries in nationhood

Symbolic dimensions of nationalism, as explored by scholars like Elgenius (2011), reveal the intricate layers through which nations assert their identities and demarcate boundaries. Elgenius argues that nationalism operates on multiple levels: as an ideology, a political movement, and a rich language of symbolism that authenticates and enforces boundaries. This symbolism is crucial, she asserts, not only in grand displays like national holidays and sporting events but also in the everyday symbols and narratives that define national identity and membership.

Symbolic boundaries, as conceptualised by Lamont et al. (2015), are the subtle yet powerful lines that include and define some groups while excluding others. These boundaries are not static but are actively maintained and reshaped within the daily practices of nationhood—what might be termed 'daily nationhood'. Drawing on Bail's (2008) analysis, we see how everyday

interactions and societal norms reinforce these boundaries. For descendants of migrants, whether born within the country or brought as children, these symbolic boundaries are not abstract concepts but lived realities that dictate their acceptance and belonging. These experiences shape their interaction with the national community they grow up in, continually influencing their sense of identity and inclusion (Sayad, 1991). Bail's work shows that even as official policies promote integration, symbolic boundaries upheld by majority groups often undermine these efforts, perpetuating a deeper, more ingrained form of exclusion.

Recent critical studies in migration and diversity have shifted away from framing diversity as inherently "problematic" or a "threat" and instead focus on the capacity of migrant descendants to harness multiple cultural repertoires in their daily lives (Arias Cubas et al., 2022; Mansouri and Jamal Al-deen, 2023; Erel and Ryan, 2018; Sajir 2025). Drawing from Bourdieu's framework of capital, Meinhof and Triandafyllidou (2006) introduced the concept of "transcultural capital," which refers to the strategic use of knowledge, skills, and networks acquired through connections with one's country and culture of origin that are activated in new contexts (Triandafyllidou, 2009). This transcultural capital integrates Bourdieu's economic, cultural, and social capitals, highlighting the capacity of migrant descendants to navigate and counteract social isolation while forming proactive identities that bridge cultural divides (Arias Cubas et al., 2022). Importantly, these studies underscore the agency of migrant descendants, portraying them not as passive subjects but as active participants in shaping their social realities through transcultural engagement.

For instance, Arias Cubas et al. (2022) found that young migrants and their descendants, especially from diverse religious backgrounds, effectively leverage cultural repertoires to build competencies and interpersonal skills. They demonstrated how transcultural capital can be valuable in navigating everyday constraints and opportunities. Similarly, research by Mansouri and Jamal Al-deen (2023) in cities such as Melbourne, Toronto, and Birmingham revealed that migrant youth strategically draw upon diverse cultural resources to reshape their sense of belonging and assert agency in dynamic social environments. In alignment with this, Sajir (2025) introduces the notion of "post-secularising agents" in his study of Muslim migrant descendants in Europe. He underscores how these individuals navigate the continuum between the secular and religious realms, using their transcultural capital to challenge and reshape the boundaries of both spheres. This agentic role allows them to mobilise their cultural knowledge and social skills across secular and religious contexts, demonstrating the transformative power of transcultural capital in transcending simplistic identity binaries. However, their research also underscores that racialised

stereotypes may hinder the full realisation of transcultural capital, limiting its potential as a force for social mobility.

This ability to engage across cultural differences is increasingly recognised as a critical asset in multicultural societies, contributing to individual empowerment, broader social cohesion, and effective diversity management (Colombo, 2010; Arias Cubas et al., 2022). Nevertheless, it is important to remain cautious about overly romanticising the agency of migrant youth. While transcultural capital offers significant benefits, its development is shaped by socio-structural factors such as gender, ethnicity, class, and citizenship status, which influence the extent to which individuals can harness these resources (Erel and Ryan, 2018; Arias Cubas et al., 2022).

Sayad's works (1991, 1994, 2004b) enrich this discussion by highlighting how symbolic exclusion is a form of systemic violence, subtly yet powerfully reminding migrants and their descendants of their outsider status. This form of exclusion is both pervasive and persistent, fundamentally shaping the migrant experience in ways that legal inclusion cannot fully address.

As we conclude this section and move towards understanding how these boundaries are policed and contested, it becomes evident that the renegotiation of national identity is not just a challenge but a necessity. The descendants of migrants, navigating these complex layers of inclusion and exclusion, play a critical role in this process, challenging and reshaping the symbolic boundaries that define who is considered part of the nation. This exploration sets the stage for a deeper examination of how national identities are contested and renegotiated in the face of demographic and cultural shifts, pointing towards a dynamic understanding of nationhood in contemporary society.

4.5 Redefining national identity: race, power, and the contestation of boundaries

In their incisive critique, Elgenius and Garner (2021) expose a critical, often neglected aspect of national identity discourses—the role of race. They contend that conventional analyses frequently marginalise the importance of race in determining who is considered a member of the nation. Moreover, they reveal how "whiteness" intersects with these processes, engendering hierarchical subcategories within national identities that pivot around notions of "indigeneity" and migrant status. This dynamic thus allows dominant groups to exert substantial control over the informal "common law" rules of national membership that often overshadow formal citizenship laws, thereby enshrining a form of gatekeeping that solidifies the dominant group's power and perpetuates racial hierarchies within the nation's fabric. Through this

mechanism, the symbolic boundaries of the nation are not only defined. Still, they are also continuously negotiated and contested, revealing the deep-seated power structures governing societal inclusion and exclusion, as Sayad (2004b) discussed.

Parekh (1995, p. 268) defines national identity as "a cluster of tendencies, impulses, and values," emphasizing that it is neither fixed nor arbitrarily changeable. He argues that national identity must evolve in light of historical contexts, present needs, and future aspirations. However, he warns that communities must navigate this evolution carefully: failure to adapt risks national disintegration, while abrupt or directionless change threatens societal cohesion and may destabilize society as a whole. This perspective underscores the dynamic and process-oriented nature of national identities, highlighting the delicate balance between continuity and transformation.

Building on Parekh, we consider national identities as processual and shaped by perpetual tensions. The autochthonous majority often gatekeeps national belonging through shared history and common ancestry, while descendants of migrants challenge these symbolic boundaries, asserting their place within the nation. This dynamic interaction underscores the evolving and contested nature of national identity. By examining these fluid boundaries, we highlight the necessity of inclusion and adaptation in preserving the integrity and cohesiveness of modern nation-states. This perspective aligns with Sayad's (2004b) insights, illustrating how legal inclusion often coexists with social exclusion, exposing the layered complexities of national belonging and identity.

Contemporary struggles over national identity are deeply embedded in power negotiations between dominant groups and migrant descendants, as elaborated by Elgenius and Garner (2021). They argue that discourses on national identity are not merely affirmations of belonging but rather intense sites of power contestation, where "dominant" and "subaltern" groups are actively constructed through dialogic processes. These discourses invoke historical affiliations and bloodlines to reinforce solidarity among dominant groups while simultaneously marginalizing others.

Elgenius and Garner (2021) illustrate these dynamics through the interactions between British nationals and British Poles. Although both groups are racialized as white, subtle power relations create distinct hierarchies. Positioned in opposing categories—"indigenous" versus "foreign"—on the basis of ancestry and cultural ties, British Poles experience exclusionary mechanisms that underscore the ongoing construction and contestation of symbolic boundaries, even within ostensibly homogeneous racial groups.

The strategies employed by minority groups actively shape the negotiation of belonging. For instance, British Poles, despite being racialized as white, navigate an ambivalent position within a racialized hierarchy, challenging the

presumption that whiteness unconditionally ensures national inclusion. These minority groups assert counterclaims to belonging, often met with resistance and contestation.

This complex interplay of national identity negotiations reveals that the nation-state is not merely a passive backdrop but an arena where symbolic boundaries of national membership are continuously constructed, reinforced, and contested. The ongoing dialogue between dominant claims and subaltern counterclaims reflects the contested and deeply political nature of national boundary-making.

A poignant example of counterclaim and renegotiation of the nation's symbolic boundaries is seen in Ghali's artistic expression. Ghali, a 30-year-old Italian rapper of Tunisian descent, born near Milan, exemplifies this process through his performance at the 2024 Sanremo Music Festival. During the event, he presented a medley that intertwined a piece in Arabic with Toto Cutugno's iconic song 'L'Italiano', a widely recognized anthem of 'Italian-ness', long embedded in the national imaginary as a marker of traditional Italian identity. In his rendition, Ghali emphasized the refrain 'a true Italian,' repeating it several times and directing it toward the audience, subtly pressing for recognition of his and other second-generation Italians' rightful place within the national fabric. By incorporating Arabic lyrics into a song deeply tied to conventional notions of Italian identity, Ghali not only asserted his belonging but also directly contested the essentialist narratives that define Italian-ness. This act of cultural redefinition resonates with many second-generation Italians who, despite their legal and social ties to Italy, continue to be positioned at the margins of dominant constructions of national identity.

The profound dialogues within this discourse illuminate that national identity is not merely a framework for social interactions; rather, it is a dynamic and contested space where symbolic boundaries are continuously established, challenged, and renegotiated. Descendants of migrants engage in this process from the periphery of the nation, striving to carve out a space within it.

Central to this discussion is the reality that not all individuals can equally benefit from the privileges associated with whiteness, as highlighted in the research by Elgenius and Garner (2021), or the visibility conferred by celebrity status, as in the case of Ghali. For instance, the descendants of the *tirailleurs sénégalais* and *Harkis* in France exemplify how marginalized communities assert their belonging despite lacking the public visibility granted to celebrated athletes or artists. Instead, these groups draw on shared historical narratives, loyalty, and wartime sacrifices to stake their claim within the nation, emphasizing the deep-rooted connections shaped by colonial history.

In conclusion, the claims and counterclaims shaping the national dialogue reflect an ongoing negotiation over the very contours of the nation. This

process is structured by hierarchical distinctions rooted in notions of indigeneity, migrant status, and racialized visibility, underscoring how dominant groups function as gatekeepers of national belonging while subaltern groups actively contest and redefine the terms of inclusion. These struggles extend beyond determining who is recognized as part of the nation; they also challenge the foundational narratives of 'nation' and 'national identity' by exposing their constructed and exclusionary nature. In doing so, they highlight not only who belongs, but also *when*, *how*, and under *what* conditions belonging is granted or denied, revealing the power asymmetries embedded in these negotiations. Understanding these dynamics is crucial for grasping the complexities of national identity in contemporary society, where competing narratives continuously reshape both the symbolic and material boundaries of inclusion and exclusion.

5. Reconfiguring the burden: a sayadian critique of the nation-state

In embracing Sayad's critical posture within the sociology of migration, this article aims to shift the mainstream narrative concerning the integration of migrants and their descendants. Typically, the burden of integration is placed squarely upon these individuals, with persistent questions about their desire and ability to assimilate into the host society. However, rather than continuing this one-sided examination, we propose a pivotal redirection of responsibility towards the nation-state itself, questioning its capacity to inclusively redefine national identity in the face of global migratory trends.

While historically instrumental in addressing the challenges for which it was conceived, the nation-state has shown considerable inadequacies in responding to the complexities introduced by globalisation. These include the globalisation of commerce and communication and the transnational challenges of the system of immigration that bring diverse cultural and racial identities into traditional nation-states.

The critical lens provided by Sayad allows us to see how nation-states often fail to effectively integrate descendants of migrants, trapping them in a limbo where they are members of the state but not fully embraced by the nation. This dichotomy reveals a deeper malaise within the architecture of the nation-state, where legal membership does not guarantee equal participation in the national community. This is particularly evident in the disparate treatment of descendants from non-European countries who, despite possessing formal citizenship, grapple with a perpetual outsider status within the national narrative.

The presence of migrants and their descendants exposes and intensifies the intrinsic tensions between the nation and the state. These individuals challenge the myth of homogeneity that nation-states often strive to project, highlighting the constructed and exclusionary nature of national identities. This situation necessitates reevaluating what it means to be a citizen versus a national, where state citizens' rights are clearly defined and protected. In contrast, national citizens' entitlements remain mired in the murky waters of cultural and racial gatekeeping.

The reality for many descendants of migrants is a narrative of second-class citizenship, where their legal rights are undercut by their social experiences of marginalisation. This discrepancy points to modern nation-states' "Janus-faced" nature, which proclaims inclusivity yet practices exclusion. As noted also by Lentin (2020), the use of racial categorisations and generational labels serves to reinforce these barriers, perpetuating otherness and embedding systemic racism within the very fabric of national identity narratives.

In conclusion, this article calls for fundamentally rethinking the nation-state paradigm, particularly in handling migration and integration. The evidence suggests that the traditional nation-state is increasingly unfit for the realities of a globalised world—where identities are not only fluid but also shaped by transnational connections, hybrid cultural affiliations, and digital forms of belonging that transcend territorial borders. Sayad's analysis of 'double absence' offers a key insight here: descendants of migrants do not merely negotiate their inclusion within the nation-state but actively construct identities that exist beyond its constraints. By shifting the analytical focus from the supposed failures of migrants to integrate to the structural inadequacies of nation-states to accommodate diversity, we align with Sayad's critical perspective and contribute to a more equitable and realistic understanding of contemporary migration dynamics. The path forward requires an acknowledgment of the nation-state's limitations and a committed effort to reformulate national policies and narratives to foster genuine inclusivity and equality. This includes reassessing citizenship frameworks to eliminate racialized stratification, moving beyond methodological nationalism in policymaking, and fostering participatory structures that allow migrant descendants to actively shape the national narrative rather than merely adapting to the rigid binary frameworks of national belonging imposed upon them.

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