When Do Migrants Shape Culture?*

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Abstract

This chapter explores the impacts of migrants on the culture of their destinations. Migrants often assimilate to local social norms and practices, but they also tend to maintain their own culture. Sometimes, beyond preserving their culture, they influence their new neighbors. We propose a conceptual framework to understand *when* migrants shape culture at their destination—and *how*. We identify two key *conditions* for influence (ideological intensity and power structure) and three *channels* of influence (cultural spillovers, organizational mobilization, and political leverage). We combine insights from political economy, social psychology, and evolutionary approaches to illuminate pathways of influence in historical perspective. Our review offers a new perspective on the mechanisms of cultural transmission, using illustrative cases to characterize the various ways in which migrants shape culture in their destinations.

Keywords: Culture, Migration, Power, Elites, Norms, Ideology

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1 Introduction

Throughout history, migrants have continuously shaped and reshaped societies. Whenever a sizable group settles in a new place, they can influence not only the local economy but also its culture and politics. Often, migrants assimilate, adopting local norms as their distinctive traits fade over time. Yet, migrants may also retain cultural traditions from their places of origin, sometimes preserving them across generations. In some cases, migrants even reshape the culture of their destination communities. In this chapter, we examine *when* and *how* migrants drive this sort of cultural change far from their homelands.

We motivate our inquiry with a broad conceptual and historical discussion. Section 2 characterizes three types of cultural dynamics when migrants arrive in a new location: *assimilation* into native culture, *persistence* of origin culture, and *influence* on native culture. We also describe other types of cultural change, including the emergence of new cultural forms through amalgamation and adaptations to the environment. We draw on historical studies to outline and illustrate each of these possibilities, which are not mutually exclusive. Assimilation and persistence may be seen as two ends of the continuum along which migrant culture evolves. Cultural persistence among migrants is, in turn, a necessary condition for migrants to influence natives. However, if migrant and native culture persist in isolation, then we would observe neither assimilation nor influence as the two groups remain in cultural enclaves. Under amalgamation and adaptation dynamics, we see two-way influence between migrants and natives and the transformation of cultural traits through recombination.

With this motivation as background, our chapter focuses on influence, seeking to understand when and how migrants shape culture. Section 3 proposes a conceptual framework, developed with our coauthors in Bazzi et al. (2025a), that elaborates key *conditions* and *channels* for migrant influence. We identify two broad conditions for migrants to shape culture: *ideological intensity* and *power structure*. Migrants with strong cultural identities or distinctive traits are more likely to influence their destinations, especially when they maintain cohesion and project their identity in social life. The extent of influence also depends on the power structure, which is in turn determined by several factors such as access to influential occupations, the malleability of the destination society, and the size of the migrant group. Migrants that become powerful in their destinations can have outsized impacts when local populations are fragmented or open to outsiders. We discuss how the conditions for migrant influence are shaped by the very factors that drive migration, including *push* and *pull* forces, as well as the selection and sorting patterns that determine the size, composition, and characteristics of migrant groups. We also describe how ideological intensity and the power structure may be interrelated.

Under favorable conditions for influence, migrants can activate specific channels for influencing natives. Our framework identifies three sets of channels: *cultural spillovers*, *organizational mobilization*, and *political power*. *Spillovers* comprise the familiar triad of cultural transmission: vertical transmission (intergenerational from parent-to-child), horizontal transmission (peer-to-peer within generation), and oblique transmission (cross-generation outside the family). All of these are favored by ideological intensity as migrants with stronger cultural attachments may be more likely to engage in onward transmission of that culture. While vertical transmission is key for persistence across generations, influence requires horizontal and oblique transmission, which are stronger in the presence of linguistic similarity, residential integration, intermarriage, and shared workplaces. Influence at scale requires oblique spillovers amplified through *organizational mobilization*. The extent of influence can be bol-

stered through infrastructure for collective action and cultural transmission. These include organizations like religious groups, schools, and media outlets, through which migrant culture can be propagated. The final channel of influence we discuss is *political leverage*. When migrants have access to authority positions in which they can shape de jure institutions and policies as well as de facto norms, they may act in ways that favor the spread of their distinctive cultural traits. In other words, migrants can leverage favorable power structures to directly shape the institutions, policies, and norms that influence culture.

The general framework in Section 3 is based on our interpretation of historical cases of influential migrant groups. We then turn to describe several studies that motivate and inform this framework. Our historical discussion starts with brief reference to pre-modern conquests, and we then focus on European colonization as the first set of case studies. The remainder of our analytical narratives are disproportionately focused on European migrants to the Americas during the Age of Mass Migrations. These episodes provide a rich set of case studies that allows us to illustrate the range of conditions and channels for migrant influence. However, it is important to note that our review of historical cases is far from comprehensive. Expanding the scope to studies of other origins and destinations is an important direction for future research.

In Section 4, we review historical cases that illustrate how ideological intensity and power dynamics shape migrants' cultural influence. Migrant groups with strong ideological identities, such as Scots-Irish herders or Southern whites from the former Confederate States of America, have used environmental adaptability, institutional gaps, and group cohesion to embed their culture in destination communities. In some cases, economic opportunities amplify these traits, as seen in the rugged individualism of U.S. frontier settlers, who thrived in harsh, resource-rich environments. To illustrate the importance of power structures, we revisit how European colonizers in the Americas reshaped institutions and cultural norms through dominance. We also look at more recent examples that highlight the relevance of power without control of formal institutions. These include, for example, the influence of Forty-Eighters, a small but elite group of political refugees from failed revolutions in German-speaking areas of Europe in the 1840s, as well as the mass Italian immigration to Argentina in the late 1800s and early 1900s.

In Section 5, we review historical cases that illustrate the different *channels* of influence: cultural spillovers, organizational mobilization, and political power. We highlight the three canonical modes of cultural transmission. While vertical transmission is key for cultural persistence within the migrant population, horizontal and oblique cultural spillovers are key for onward influence of natives. We discuss examples in which domestic and international migrants in the U.S. are able to exert greater influence through intermarriage and residential integration. Horizontal and oblique transmission are, in turn, facilitated by vehicles through which migrants can influence natives as peers or as elder authority figures. We describe examples of organizational mobilization in several domains: Christian churches and schools founded by immigrants and colonizers in the Americas, evangelical Protestant churches and conservative talk radio propagated by Southern white migrants during the Great Migration of the 1900s, white supremacist organizations entrenched by migrants from the Confederate diaspora of the late 1800s, progressive print media and civil society groups established by the Forty-Eighters, and local party politics infiltrated by Nazi migrants in Austria and *pieds noirs*, returning French migrants from Algeria post-independence. These sorts of organizations provided platforms for migrants to transmit their norms at scale in host societies. Often, such platforms allowed activist elites within the migrant community to directly wield public authority, e.g., as pastor in a church or editor of a newspaper. And these informal

pathways to influence could be complemented by more formal pathways as seen, for example, in the case of the Confederate diaspora, which exerted greater cultural influence in areas where elite migrants served as mayors, judges, and police officials.

Finally, Section 6 concludes with suggested directions for future research and a discussion of how our framework for understanding migrant influence can enrich public debate about the future of migration and cultural change globally. Our review offers a clear roadmap for engagement with specific episodes of migration and cultural change historically. Many episodes have been discussed at length in the history literature, and we see considerable scope for fresh insights from an empirical reinvestigation of such episodes with an eye towards understanding the conditions and channels for migrant influence. While our review focuses on cases of identifiable positive influence, there are many instances where such influence never materialized as migrants assimilated or persisted in isolated cultural enclaves. Our framework can also be used to better understand those assimilation and counter-assimilation trajectories. We provide examples of the data, designs, and settings where we see strong potential for learning. As societies everywhere grapple with the challenges of cultural change in an increasingly interconnected world, clear evidence on the nature of migrant influence is vital for an informed public.

Our focus, throughout the chapter, is on the influence of migrant groups on their destinations. Migrants can of course also influence the culture of their origin locations, as underscored by the emerging literature on "social remittances" facilitated through return migration, as well as temporary visits, letters, and other information flows.[1] Our framework can also be applied to understanding the influence of return migrants: relatively small groups of returnees can have such big impacts on their home communities when exposure to other cultures makes them ideologically intense and when they have power, which they may have acquired through migration and associated gains in income and prestige.

Without claiming comprehensiveness, this chapter synthesizes the growing literature on the cultural impacts of migrants, while also offering broader insights into cultural dynamics and the interplay between people and the environment. Understanding when and how migrants influence culture in their destinations is important because migrants have, in fact, shaped and reshaped societies across space and time, through different means and to varying degrees. Moreover, migration waves provide variation for exploring broader questions of how identity groups shape their environment (natural and social) or adapt to it. In other words, studying migrants offers a window into the bidirectional links between people and place—a key dimension of the process of development and cultural formation.

Two other chapters in this handbook underscore the broad relevance of migration for the study of cultural formation, offering complementary insights. As part of a wide-ranging analysis of cultural change, Fernández (2025) discusses research on historical experiences with enduring cultural impacts, concentrating on three categories of major shocks: slavery, warfare, and migration. Fouka and Tabellini (2025) examine the links between culture and political preferences—preferences over regimes, policies, parties, and candidates—and highlight the insights into persistence and transmission from empirical designs that exploit migration-induced shifts in preferences.

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[1]See Barsbai et al. (2017); Beine et al. (2013); Bertoli and Marchetta (2015); Daudin et al. (2019); Godlonton and Theoharides (2023); Melki et al. (2024); Rapoport et al. (2021).

2 Motivation: Cultural Assimilation, Persistence, and Influence

Migration has been fundamental to the process of cultural change throughout history. There are many ways that migrants shape and are shaped by the culture in the places they settle. We organize these forces into distinct but interrelated categories. First, migrants can **assimilate** into the culture of native residents at destination. Second, migrants can maintain the culture prevailing in their origin, that is, **persistence**. Third, migrants can **influence** the culture of native residents.

Assimilation and *influence* represent opposite ends of the spectrum of possible outcomes in the cultural exchange between migrants and natives, with *persistence* occupying an intermediate position. Under assimilation, migrants converge to native culture, while natives maintain their culture. Under influence, natives converge to migrant culture, while migrants maintain their culture. If both groups display persistent cultural traits, each remains a cultural enclave, with migrants neither assimilating into nor influencing native culture.

Together, these different forces help explain the foundations and evolution of culture that characterize places throughout history. This section introduces these basic notions and references some important studies illustrating various pathways. In Section 3, we present a framework for understanding when and how migrants actively shape the culture of their destination communities—rather than assimilating, and even beyond just persisting in their cultural traits.

In practice, there is more to cultural change than assimilation, persistence, and influence. At the end of this section, we discuss other types of cultural reconfigurations. Both migrants and natives may persist in their cultural attachments to varying degrees across the different interrelated elements of their cultural configurations. Assimilation and influence may operate simultaneously, possibly in complex ways, and new forms of culture that mix, reconfigure, or replace the original cultures can emerge through a process of amalgamation or adaptation to the environment. This dynamic co-evolution is perhaps most pronounced in newly established communities, where all incoming residents are migrants, and all the relevant forces interact in a relatively unstructured manner.

2.1 Assimilation

Often times, migrants assimilate to the cultural norms of the incumbent, native population. In practice, this means shedding elements of one's inherited culture from the origin and adopting the prevailing culture at destination. A large and growing body of research examines the process of cultural assimilation, providing rich historical evidence. Without attempting a comprehensive review, this section draws on the literature to outline stylized facts and key notions about cultural dynamics in diverse societies shaped by migration.

In *Streets of Gold: America's Untold Story of Immigrant Success*, Abramitzky and Boustan (2022) provide an insightful analysis of the history of migration in the United States, grounded in the extensive available evidence. In Chapter 6, they take a deep dive into the meaning of cultural assimilation, and characterize some of its key dimensions—the adoption of the local language, intermarriage, residential integration, and naming choices that signal local identity.

Classic studies characterize intermarriage as both an important vehicle for and a salient outcome of assimilation (Gordon, 1964; Pagnini and Morgan, 1990). This work emphasizes the central role of the family as an incubator for cultural change. Intermarriage is a choice reflecting both demand

for assimilation and the supply of willing partners. As such, it is jointly determined with other key elements of migrant assimilation in the form of residential segregation as well as shared language. In the U.S. context, Bleakley and Chin (2010) show that English ability facilitates residential integration and intermarriage. By gaining access to native communities through marriage and housing markets, immigrants can more readily learn about and adopt native culture. They can also more easily pass this culture on to their children, which, in turn, may help weaken the persistence of origin culture. Borjas (1992, 1995) provides an economic microfoundation for the sort of externalities that might induce this weakening of cultural ties as migrants interact more with those outside their origin community.

Across the social sciences, there are many other measures of assimilation beyond intermarriage, language acquisition, and residential integration. Prominent examples include, among others, earnings (Borjas, 1985; Lubotsky, 2007), occupations (Abramitzky et al., 2014), and criminality (Abramitzky et al., forthcoming).[2] These studies provide a rich window into the many domains across which immigrants assimilate in their new homes.

Recently, scholars have tapped into name choices to understand assimilation. Naming children is a primordial act of intergenerational cultural transmission that contains informative signals about parental preferences over identity and attitudes. A large literature in economics and other social sciences has characterized these signals (see, e.g., Knudsen, 2024; Ogihara et al., 2015; Varnum and Kitayama, 2011). In the assimilation context, Fouka (2019, 2020) shows that name choices of German immigrants in the U.S. responded to assimilation pressures in the early 20th century. More generally, Abramitzky et al. (2018) find that immigrants to the U.S. gave their children less foreign names over time during the Age of Mass Migration (1850–1913). Their findings show that immigrants erased about half the naming gap with natives after 20 years, and Abramitzky et al. (2020a) find similar rates of names-based assimiliation between European immigrants in the early 20th century and Asian/Latin American immigrants today. Elsewhere, Gerhards and Hans (2009) and Algan et al. (2022) use names to document assimilation patterns in contemporary Germany and France, respectively.

The vast literature on historical migrations documents substantial variation across periods and places in the extent and pace of assimilation, partly due to differing socioeconomic incentives and constraints. For instance, an important factor shaping assimilation is migrants' expected length of stay: those who anticipate staying permanently in the destination country have stronger incentives to assimilate than those who expect their stay to be temporary. This pattern is evident in comparisons between refugees and economic migrants: because refugees are less likely to return to their home countries, they tend to assimilate more rapidly (see Abramitzky et al., 2023; Cortes, 2004). Similar findings emerge when comparing temporary and permanent economic migrants (see Dustmann and Görlach, 2016). However, many refugees and asylum seekers face uncertainty about whether they will be allowed to stay permanently, so their assimilation patterns may resemble those of temporary migrants, with lower levels of investment in integration (see Becker and Ferrara, 2019).

2.2 Persistence

Migrants do not always assimilate, at least not fully and across all cultural traits. In many contexts, their distinctive culture persists across generations. Quantitative studies by economic historians and broader, qualitative studies by historians provide complementary insights on cases of cultural persistence through

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[2]See Fouka (2024) for a comprehensive survey of research on assimilation with a focus on the role of host country policy.

migration. These are consistent with the studies documenting assimilation, since persistence in some traits is compatible with assimilation in others.

The idea that migrants can retain their distinctive cultural traits over time also features prominently in a set of important contributions that rely on the so-called "epidemiological approach" (see Alesina et al., 2013; Algan and Cahuc, 2010; Fernández, 2007, 2011; Fernández and Fogli, 2006, 2009; Giavazzi et al., 2019; Giuliano, 2007; Haddad, 2024). This approach explores the effects of culture by focusing on immigrant populations and their descendants. By comparing immigrants from different countries who live in the same new country, researchers can distinguish between the effects of culture and those of the current environment. Such designs are predicated on the fact that cultural traits, beliefs, and behaviors are, at least partially, transmitted from one generation to the next. The transmission and persistence do not have to be complete, but they have to be significant. How strong they are is an empirical question, which some studies explicitly address.

A set of classic studies of migrants and culture outside economics also underscores the importance of cultural persistence. In *Albion's Seed: Four British Folkways in America*, Fischer (1989) presents a compelling argument on the persistence of cultural traits across generations. The book identifies four major groups of British immigrants who settled in different regions of colonial America, whose distinct cultural traits persisted long after their initial settlement: Puritans from East Anglia who arrived in New England from the 1620s to the 1640s; Cavaliers and indentured servants who migrated from South England to Virginia from the 1640s to the 1670s; Quakers from the North Midlands who arrived in the Delaware Valley between the 1670s and the 1720s; and the Scots-Irish who left Northern Britain to settle in the Appalachian backcountry between the 1700s and the 1770s.

The "folkways" of these groups—defined as the normative structure of values, customs, and meanings within a culture—remained remarkably stable over time, shaping both the regional cultures and the political landscape of the U.S. Their values and beliefs, including religious beliefs, work ethics, and concepts of liberty and authority, were transmitted across generations. So too were their attitudes towards family, education, law, and governance, which shaped the social institutions in their new communities.

The book also makes an early contribution to the analysis of mechanisms underlying cultural persistence. Fischer explains that these cultural traits persisted through various interlocking mechanisms, including child-rearing practices, cultural ethics, legal codes, and institutional structures. According to the book's argument, these mechanisms created "ethical imperatives of great power" that continue to shape behavior and attitudes across generations.

In a follow-up study, *American Nations: A History of the Eleven Rival Regional Cultures of North America*, Woodard (2012) extends Fischer's (1989) analysis in multiple directions. First, he considers a longer sweep of history going from the early days of colonization and settlement to the present. Second, he explores additional groups and regions beyond those settled by early British arrivals.[3] Third, he describes the process by which different groups, including indigenous populations and different colonizers, interacted and competed with each other to engender cultural change. Finally, he traces the implications of these regional cultures for modern political divides. This book provides a glimpse into the sort of mechanisms driving cultural persistence and change in settler societies, a topic on which we

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[3]Woodard (2012) characterizes 11 regions: Yankeedom (New England), Tidewater (Chesapeake Bay), Greater Appalachia, Deep South, Midlands (associated with Quakers), New Netherland (New York, influenced by Dutch settlers), El Norte (Mexican influence in the Southwest), Far West (interior West, influenced by frontier expansion), Left Coast (West Coast), New France (Quebec and parts of Louisiana), and First Nation (indigenous influence in northern Canada).

will provide much additional detail in the remainder of the review.

While the foregoing books broke new ground in popular historical understanding of these settlement processes, Grosjean (2014) provides striking empirical evidence on how this cultural persistence unfolds in the particular case of the Scots-Irish settlers in the 18th century U.S. Hailing from outlying regions of Britain, these migrants came from herder societies where violence was a key mechanism for enforcing a culture of honor. Grosjean shows that these migrants brought these norms to the American South, where weak institutions enabled such violent practices to thrive and endure across successive generations, only to weaken in more recent periods as those formal institutions grew stronger. In follow-up work, Tan (2024) shows that Scots-Irish descendants also brought this honor culture elsewhere in the U.S. as they migrated in large numbers during the Great Migration of the early 20th century. Many destination communities in the American West of the 1900s, like those in the South during the 1700s, had weak cultural and institutional foundations, allowing Scots-Irish culture to prevail and persist. This malleability will be an important part of our discussion of conditions for migrant influence discussed later in the review.

In their classic book, Glazer and Moynihan (1963) argue that in contrast to the idea of America as a melting pot, ethnic groups maintain distinct identities and cultural practices even after several generations. Studying five major ethnic groups in New York (African Americans, Puerto Ricans, Jews, Italians, and Irish), they conclude that these ethnic groups were not simply assimilating and losing their distinct identities in American society, but rather maintaining their identities through social structures, communities, and institutions. One of the elements they highlight is that, while immigrants often lost their original languages and cultures, they formed new identifiable groups with unique characteristics. The book explored how ethnic identities influenced political behavior and power structures in the city. The authors challenged the idea that immigrants would simply blend into a homogeneous American culture.

2.3 Influence

Rather than assimilating into local culture, and beyond just maintaining their distinctive culture, migrants may influence culture and institutions in the destinations they settle. In terms of the direction of cultural spillovers between migrants and locals, *influence* runs opposite to *assimilation*, as captured for instance in Rapoport et al.'s (2021) formal model of migration and cultural change.[4] Interestingly, while social integration in neighborhoods and marriage markets can be key dimensions of assimilation, in some cases they may increase the scope of migrant influence, as discussed below.

A history-defining instance of migrant influence is European colonization, which had profound impacts on the global landscape of cultures. In many other instances, migrants did not have the power to completely reshape institutions as European settlers did, but we still see pathways through which migration influenced the direction of cultural change. At the core of our review chapter is an effort to understand these pathways, and Sections 3–5 provide a structured look at some of the literature most informative about these pathways to influence as distinct from assimilation. To set the stage here, we briefly describe three empirical studies that illustrate the potential for migrants to shape culture during the same period and country in which other studies document rapid assimilation in key dimensions.

Giuliano and Tabellini (2020) examine the long-term effects of immigration on political ideology in the United States. Using variations in European immigrant presence across counties from 1900 to 1930, they find that areas with higher historical immigration show stronger support for redistribution and more

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[4]What we describe as *influence* is akin to what is described as *dissemination* in their model.

liberal political leanings today. These trends are largely driven by immigrants who experienced social-welfare reforms in their home countries before emigrating. The evidence points to the transmission of preferences within immigrant communities, reinforced by broader socialization and integration with native populations through intermarriage and residential proximity. Immigrants' political incorporation into the Democratic voting bloc and the election of pro-redistribution legislators also played a key role in this ideological shift.

Bazzi et al. (2025a) explore how white migration from the postbellum South in the late 19th century spread and entrenched Confederate culture across the United States during a pivotal period of westward expansion and postwar reconciliation. Migrants helped diffuse Confederate symbols and racial norms nationally by the early 20th century, with former slaveholders playing a prominent role in this process. In addition to memorializing the Confederacy, these migrants intensified racial violence, promoted new forms of exclusion, and worsened Black disadvantage outside the South. Their influence was particularly strong in communities lacking established institutions and deeply ingrained native populations. Over time, they passed down these norms to their own children and also transmitted norms to non-Southern whites. The lasting impact of this diaspora continues to shape racial inequities in labor, housing, and policing today. These findings provide new insights into migration, elite influence, and the relationship between culture and institutions in the nation's development.

Bazzi et al. (2023) study how the migration of millions of Southern whites in the 20th century shaped the cultural and political dynamics across the United States. Southern white migrants, steeped in racial and religious conservatism, formed a foundation for an alliance with economic conservatives, accelerating partisan realignment and fueling the rise of a New Right movement with long-term national influence. Beyond expanding the conservative voter base, these migrants influenced non-Southerners by establishing evangelical churches, spreading right-wing media, and intermarrying and residentially mixing. Evidence from non-Southern households suggests that living near Southern white migrants increased the adoption of conservative religious values. Ultimately, this mass migration blurred the cultural divide between North and South and redefined the geography of American conservatism.

Some of the findings in these studies resonate with the arguments in Jones (2022), *The Culture Transplant: How Migrants Make the Economies They Move to a Lot Like the Ones They Left*. Drawing on illustrative cases, correlational patterns, and cross-country research designs in economics, this book contends that migrants transmit cultural values, norms, and institutional preferences that shape long-run outcomes in destination societies. His account builds on a tradition of popular work—including Fischer (1989) and Woodard (2012)—that links historical migration to persistent differences in local culture and governance. Nowrasteh and Powell (2020) offer a more skeptical view, arguing that institutions in liberal democracies are generally robust to large-scale immigration and that contemporary fears of cultural or institutional erosion are often overstated. Our chapter sheds light on this debate by developing a framework that identifies the conditions under which migrant cultural influence is likely to take hold. We show that the transmission of norms and practices from migrants to hosts is contingent—not automatic—and depends critically on factors such as migrants' relative social and economic status, the structure and intensity of intergroup contact, and the perceived success or prestige of the migrants' cultural traits in the new environment.

2.4 Amalgamations and Other Reconfigurations

In practice, the dynamics of migration and cultural change can involve much more than assimilation, persistence, and influence. Migrants and natives assimilate or persist in their cultural attachments to varying degrees for different cultural traits. Cultural configurations comprise multiple interrelated traits. Assimilation and influence may operate simultaneously for different traits. New forms of culture that mix and reconfigure original cultures can emerge through a process of amalgamation. Cultural reconfigurations also take place through adaptations to environmental conditions.

History presents many salient instances of cultural amalgamation, where cultural traits from different migrant groups are mixed and recombined, leading to novel configurations. The Romans adopted Greek art, philosophy, religion, literature, and architecture, blending these elements with their own traditions to create a distinct Roman culture. After the fall of the Roman Empire, Roman Judeo-Christian traditions amalgamated with Germanic tribal cultures across Europe, shaping religious practices and social norms. More recently, Chinatowns around the world exemplify cultural amalgamation, representing a unique fusion of Chinese and local cultures, distinct from both origins. Jazz music is another example of cultural fusion, combining African and European musical traditions to create a new art form. Culinary fusions also illustrate cultural amalgamation, with cuisines blending ingredients and techniques across cultures. Jones (2022) uses a well-known example to illustrate the simultaneous operation of influence and assimilation, calling this the "the spaghetti theory of cultural change": Italian food is highly popular in the U.S., but it has also adapted to local preferences, often featuring larger, meat-filled portions.

Sometimes, migrants interact and adapt to the environment, engendering new cultural norms and shared identities that are distinct from those prevailing in their origins. Such cultural reconfigurations are more likely in newly established communities, where all incoming residents are migrants, and there are no established cultural foundations. In these settings, all three forces—assimilation, persistence, and influence—-interact in a relatively unstructured manner. We describe here a few examples of such cultural reconfiguration processes in salient contexts where communities are comprised overwhelmingly by new migrant populations.

Bazzi et al. (2019) explore the foundations of identity and cultural change in the quintessential settler society. They study newly established agricultural communities in Indonesia, created during the 1980s as part of a large-scale, government-run population resettlement program. These villages were established with identical institutions and perfect equality in terms of housing and land ownership. However, due to arbitrary features of the planning and implementation process, communities varied widely in the ethnic diversity among initial settlers. Using this variation, the authors show that in communities comprised of many smaller ethnic groups (high fractionalization), individuals integrate through a new, shared national culture and identity. By contrast, in communities comprised of a few large ethnic groups (high polarization), individuals remain entrenched in their ethnic groups and persist in their cultural dissimilarities. Residential mixing, intermarriage, and socialization of children are key vehicles through which cultural integration happens over time in more fractionalized communities. They identify these cultural changes through various outcomes, including the use of the national language at home as a revealed preference measure of identity, as well as a new measure based on the ethnic content of children's names, extending the approach in Fouka (2019, 2020) and Abramitzky et al. (2020a) to a multidimensional identity space.

In related work, Carlitz et al. (forthcoming) examine a similar large-scale resettlement program launched as part of broader nation- and state-building efforts in Tanzania. The program brought together

diverse migrants scattered across rural areas into newly established villages run by the centralized state. Within these villages, the government used schools and newly developed curriculum in particular to propagate a new shared national identity. Comparing across cohorts and across space, Carlitz et al. show that exposure to resettlement-cum-curriculum hastened the breakdown of ethnic attachment and convergence towards a new shared form of national culture and identity.

The Indonesian and Tanzanian resettlement contexts share similarities with other historical contexts where immigrants settled frontier areas and, in the process of mixing, gave rise to new cultural forms distinct from their respective groups. Many of these contexts can be found in settler societies in the so-called New World where foreign-born migrants settled en masse and displaced indigenous populations. In the United States, for example, Bazzi et al. (2020, 2024a,b) investigate the process of westward expansion during which largely European settlers mixed in newly founded communities as they pushed the frontier of settlement throughout the 19th century. In the process of establishing new communities in harsh conditions of extreme isolation with limited institutional infrastructure, these migrants forged a new culture rooted in "rugged individualism." This cultural configuration combined the disproportionately high levels of individualism among frontier settlers with other traits favored by the frontier environment, including anti-statism, localism, and conservative gender norms. This frontier culture, which emerged at a critical juncture of state- and nation-building, would became a key feature of national culture in the United States.

Outside the U.S., Grosjean and Khattar (2019) and Baranov et al. (2023) offer another example of adaptation to the environment among migrants, which creates a lasting cultural configuration. In particular, they study how the gender composition of early settlers in Australia influenced the development of gender norms. The initial migrant population from Britain was predominantly male, largely due to the convict system. As men and women mixed in this new society, distinct gender norms emerged, differing from places with more balanced sex ratios. In the settlement, women were more likely to marry and less likely to work outside the home. Over time, as sex ratios balanced, conservative gender norms persisted through vertical transmission and limited mixing between gender-egalitarian and -inegalitarian groups in the marriage market. Moreover, these historically skewed sex ratios also contributed to a strong culture of masculinity with implications for social violence and gender-based health inequities. Together, these studies highlight another example of how cultural reconfigurations can emerge in frontier contexts.

Another example of endogenous amalgamation in frontier settings comes from Jewish settlements in Mandatory Palestine, where diverse streams of Jewish migrants—speaking different languages and bearing distinct cultural legacies—were channeled into communal agricultural villages. Panza and Zylberberg (2024) show that in the absence of a dominant local group, more ethnically mixed kibbutzim were especially likely to develop cohesive, egalitarian institutions that fostered a shared Zionist identity. These reconfigured communities used Hebrew schooling, civic rituals, and participatory governance to invent common purpose from cultural plurality. Strikingly, these amalgamated settlements produced a disproportionate share of the future Israeli elite, illustrating how internal cultural synthesis within migrant communities can seed broader national influence.

Another form of cultural reconfiguration occurs in diverse settings with three or more groups, where the arrival of one group can alter the cultural boundaries between others. Borrowing insights from theories of self-categorization in social psychology and group boundaries in social anthropology, Fouka et al. (2022) and Fouka and Tabellini (2022) show that the arrival of a culturally distant migrant group can

drive greater cultural integration between distinct groups, effectively bringing the incumbent minority and majority closer together. Fouka et al. (2022) demonstrate that during the First Great Migration, the influx of Southern Black migrants into Northern U.S. cities led to stronger integration of recent European immigrants into American cultural identity, bridging previously ethnically distinct but racially similar native and immigrant populations.[5] A key mechanism in this reconfiguration of white American identity was the increased receptiveness of native Whites to immigrant Whites, as well as greater assimilation efforts by the latter. However, Fouka and Tabellini (2022) find similar integration dynamics in response to the influx of Mexican immigrants many decades later, this time between native-born Black and White Americans. In this case, the arrival of a non-American immigrant group helped bridge the racial divide among American citizens. Together, these studies highlight the complex ways in which culture evolves in diverse societies with shifting compositions.

3   Conceptual Framework: *When* and *How* Migrants Shape Culture

Cultural assimilation, persistence, influence, and reconfiguration are present in every wave of migration, but they manifest in different ways and to varying degrees. While assimilation and reconfiguration might seem to contradict persistence, they are not mutually exclusive, as culture is multidimensional. Our goal in this review is to understand when and how migrants shape the culture of the communities in which they settle—in other words, *influence*.

We propose a new framework for understanding the conditions and channels of migrant influence. This framework, developed with our coauthors in Bazzi et al. (2025a), offers a new way of organizing and interpreting the disparate findings on migrants' cultural assimilation, persistence, and influence across different contexts. We elaborate the framework in this section and then use this conceptual structure, in Sections 4 and 5, to organize a comprehensive discussion of important findings in the literature. Looking ahead, this framework can be used to inform retrospective work on the legacy of historical migration in different contexts as well as prospective work aimed at understanding the potential impacts of increasingly diverse population movements within and between countries.

Concretely, we argue that the degree and depth of migrants' influence in their communities depends on two overarching factors. First, there are key ***conditions*** for influence: the *ideological intensity* of the migrants and the *power* of the migrants relative to the local population. Second, there are key ***channels*** through which influence takes place: *cultural spillovers* across individuals, mobilization of civil society *organizations*, and the use of *political leverage* to shape institutions, policies, and norms. In the rest of this section, we explain conceptually each of these conditions and channels of influence.

3.1   Conditions for Migrant Influence

We think of two broad conditions as necessary for migrant influence: (i) the *ideological intensity* of the migrant population, and (ii) the *power* of migrants relative to the local population. We also discuss how selection and sorting patterns in migration shape these two conditions for influence.

(i) Ideological Intensity. Migrants vary in the strength of attachment to specific traits of their cultural identity. One way to conceptualize this is by treating identity as a component of the utility function,

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[5]See Collins (2021) for a review of the literature on the Black Great Migration.

distinct from pecuniary considerations. Akerlof and Kranton (2010) develop this idea, showing how social identities and norms shape individual behavior and economic outcomes. Using Bisin and Verdier's (2001)'s concept of "imperfect empathy," we can think of intensity as a parameter capturing the likelihood that parents vertically transmit their cultural traits, even when those traits are not the most advantageous. Additionally, ideological intensity may depend on the structure of cultural configurations, as some are more rigid than others (see Acemoglu and Robinson, 2025).

Selection patterns in migration can make migrant groups more or less ideologically intense than the populations of their home countries. In many contexts, migrants tend to self-select on certain characteristics that set them apart from the average resident of the origin community. Economists are most familiar with selection along dimensions of skill (see Borjas, 1987). However, migrants also vary along dimensions of culture. For example, in origins with a collectivist culture, more individualistic types within that culture may selectively emigrate. Knudsen (2024) provides evidence of this type of selection among Scandinavian emigrants to the U.S. during the age of mass migration. It is important to note that such counter-selection on a dominant origin cultural trait does not imply that migrants have weak ideological attachments. In the example of individualistic emigrants from collectivist societies, those migrants may nevertheless be intensely individualistic and hence play an active role in shaping a culture of individualism in their new community.

Beyond the key drivers of ideological intensity discussed above, cultural persistence tends to be stronger in groups with high cohesion, reinforced by cultural tightness (see, e.g., Gelfand et al., 2006). Tight-knit cultures enforce stricter social norms, show less tolerance for deviance, and impose harsher disciplinary measures, all of which contribute to ideological intensity. Religion plays a central role in this dynamic, as it often serves as a foundation for social norms, making religious beliefs particularly resistant to change. The binding moral foundations associated with religious and traditional values support cultural tightness, suggesting a bidirectional relationship between religion and cultural cohesion.

While more ideologically intense migrants may exert greater influence, their impact is not necessarily linear. Two key forces could generate an inverted-U relationship between intensity and influence. First, beyond a certain threshold, heightened intensity may provoke a native backlash, ultimately counteracting or even reversing prior migrant influence. Second, religious groups, in particular, often exhibit club-good dynamics, maintaining exclusivity by screening out less committed members. This ensures a higher provision of group-specific goods and services but may also limit their broader influence (Iannaccone, 1992). These dynamics help explain why migrant influence varies across the ideological spectrum.

(ii) Power Structure. Migrants' ability to shape societal norms, values, beliefs, and behaviors through various channels is both a driver and a result of their economic, social, and political power. In other words, their ability to influence culture—*cultural power*—is intertwined with the broader *power structure* (see, e.g., Acemoglu and Johnson, 2023; Michael, 1986; Peschek, 2024). The power structure depends on both the characteristics of the migrant group and their destination, including geo-climatic features and the local population. Power is inherently relational, configured by a mix of group-level and place-level factors and their interactions (see, e.g., Piven and Cloward, 2005; Scott, 2018). Fernández (2025) (in this handbook) advances the idea that cultural change depends on incentives—which may shift due to historical experiences, policy interventions, or learning—and on the power of prospective winners and losers.

The proximate determinants of power structures include, among others, the following dimensions:

the adaptiveness of migrants' skills and cultural traits to the local environment, with socio-economic and political status conferring cultural power that can be amplified by prestige bias; the migrant group's size and its identitarian cohesiveness; and the malleability of local social norms and institutions. In turn, the malleability of the environment is a function of the size of the local population, their group cohesiveness and openness to cultural influence, their adaptiveness to the environment and socio-economic status, the strength of the local norms and institutions shaped through history, and geographic isolation from other influences. Other relevant dimensions of power structures include coercion and violence technologies, as well as population dynamics driven by disease and fertility differentials.

The *adaptiveness of migrants to the local environment* affects their economic and social success. In destinations better suited to migrants' skills and cultural traits, they can access higher-earning opportunities and more easily accumulate wealth. In these contexts, they are more likely to have the means and opportunities to transmit their cultural norms to others. However, this economic pathway to cultural influence is often an equilibrium outcome that is difficult to disentangle in settings where migrants can endogenously sort based on skills. In such places, prevailing cultural norms are likely to be more favorable to migrant culture, as the local environment aligns with the skills migrants bring. Michalopoulos (2012) provides argument and empirical evidence on how this confluence of location-specific human capital and ethnolinguistic identities emerges and persists over time. Meanwhile, Bazzi et al. (2016), Obolensky et al. (2024), and Steckel (1983) offer modern evidence on the returns to location-specific human capital and its role in shaping geographic patterns of human settlement.

Just as the socioeconomic status of migrant groups varies widely, so does their access to positions of public-facing authority. This access is particularly important in determining the extent to which migrants can influence others in their community. If migrants are excluded from prestigious positions in the public or private sectors, as can occur through de jure labor market restrictions, their ability to influence culture and institutions beyond their own group is limited. Individuals in elite positions within government and private enterprise have greater opportunities to shape public discourse and, consequently, influence the direction and scope of cultural transmission. With access to such positions, migrants can project their cultural norms into broader spaces, increasing their visibility among both natives and migrants from other backgrounds.

The cultural power associated with socioeconomic and political status is greater when both the local population and the migrant group exhibit some degree of prestige bias. This concept refers to the human tendency to learn from, imitate, and defer to those perceived as having high prestige or success in a particular domain. Henrich and Gil-White (2001) argue that this tendency has evolutionary roots, as prestigious individuals often possess valuable skills, knowledge, and behaviors that others can benefit from by imitation. Prestige bias is therefore crucial to understanding the role of leaders in cultural change. In communities with high prestige bias, leaders can play a more influential role in cultural transmission, even driving abrupt shifts in norms by coordinating expectations and revealing the value of new behaviors and practices to the community (Acemoglu and Jackson, 2015).

The balance of power in society—and its implications for cultural dynamics——also depends on the *size of the migrant group* relative to the local population. Larger groups may naturally have more opportunities to exert cultural influence across various domains. However, this does not exclude the possibility of influential minorities. More broadly, there may be nonlinearities in the effects of group size. For instance, there could be tipping points beyond which cultural change occurs discontinuously such that

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migrants' norms become disproportionately influential relative to their population share. Additionally, there may be increasing returns as the group grows, allowing them to exert greater influence across more areas of public life. These nonlinearities resonate with theories of cultural adoption and change, which emphasize how such change can occur through tipping points, where the preferences of a small minority can lead to widespread cultural shifts once certain thresholds are crossed (Bikhchandani et al., 1992; Kuran, 1995, 1997; Schelling, 1978; Young, 1993). There may also be diminishing returns: as migrant populations grow locally, internal heterogeneity within the group could dilute their collective influence.

In some historic settler societies, the local population was relatively small or lacked stable territorial control, creating conditions of high malleability. Consider, in the most extreme case, the first migrant group arriving to a place and putting down communal roots. In these settings, the "doctrine of first effective settlement," proposed by the cultural geographer Zelinsky (1973), is particularly relevant. This theory suggests that in areas where social norms and institutions have not yet been established, the first group to dominate conditions the long-run cultural trajectory. In the case of frontier locations without preexisting populations, the first migrant group could embed their cultural norms in local institutions and public life, determining the ability of later migrants to exert influence. The initial settlers would also create conditions that encourage other culturally similar migrant groups to settle there, reinforcing the cultural norms of the first group. This scenario exemplifies the founding of new communities by first movers. In less extreme cases, multiple groups may compete for dominance during the early stages of settlement, when social norms and institutions are still in flux. In such cases, the first group to establish dominance can still exert significant influence on the long-term culture of the area.

Another key dimension of cultural power and malleability is the *cohesion of the migrant and non-migrant populations*. The theories above suggest that minority influence, and tipping points in particular, depends on the group's strong commitment to its cultural norms. Additionally, it may be easier for migrants to influence non-migrant populations, regardless of size, when those populations are culturally fragmented or less committed to their own norms. In such cases, migrants may find it easier to persuade other groups to adopt their cultural norms.

A related aspect of malleability is the *openness of the non-migrant population* to migrant influence. This depends on the cultural and linguistic distance between migrant and non-migrant populations. When migrants and non-migrants are more similar, it may be easier for information to flow between the two, increasing the potential for migrants to transmit their cultural norms to natives. However, the extent of influence also depends on non-migrants' tolerance of outsiders. In intolerant societies, migrants face significant barriers to influencing local culture, as their cultural expression may be restricted in public life. Furthermore, these societies often create obstacles to interaction between migrant and non-migrant groups, limiting opportunities for cultural transmission (see, e.g., Bisin and Tura, 2019). These challenges can be compounded in environments where native backlash leads to the departure of locals from communities where migrants settle.

Finally, another related dimension is *isolation from outside cultural influence*. While remoteness can create significant cultural gaps between local and outside populations, migrants who settle in such locations may find more favorable conditions for influence due to the absence of countervailing external forces. This isolation could result from geographic barriers that make it difficult to access markets and population centers with cultural norms that differ from—and possibly oppose—the migrants' own. It could also arise from limitations on access to media, which might otherwise dilute the prominence of

migrant culture or reduce its appeal.

Discussion: The Role of Selection and Sorting. Conditions for influence—ideological intensity and power structure—are jointly determined through migrant selection and sorting. The *push* and *pull* factors driving migration, and the associated patterns of selection and sorting, determine the quantity and type of migrants from specific origins to specific destinations, which may have implications for the conditions for migrant influence. Selection on cultural traits will likely affect ideological intensity, while sorting across destinations along cultural and economic dimensions is bound to affect the power structure.

The ideological intensity of migrants can stem from both group-level cultural differences between their place of origin and their destination, as well as from selective migration patterns. The widely-used epidemiological approach in cultural economics, along with studies showing how specific migrant groups carry cultural and political traits from their origins, highlight the importance of these cultural differences between origin and destination (e.g., Giuliano and Tabellini, 2020). When push factors lead to large-scale migration from across the cultural spectrum of the origin, the differences between the origin and destination cultures tend to be more influential than selective migration effects. However, selective migration can also significantly amplify or reduce the ideological intensity and distinctiveness of migrants. For example, European migration to the United States was characterized by individualism, both because Europe was generally individualistic and due to the selection of more individualistic types into migration (Knudsen, 2024). In contrast, among the Confederate diaspora studied by Bazzi et al. (2025a), migrants were not as ideologically intense as stayers, but they still maintained strong cultural attachments to Confederate identity, which influenced the communities where they settled.

Conditional on emigrating, individuals often sort towards places that align better with their skills and preferences. Skill-based sorting can help migrants earn higher incomes, thereby gaining power and prestige. This may explain why Confederate migrants had greater cultural influence in locations suitable for extractive industry and labor coercion (Bazzi et al., 2025a). Preference-based sorting has more subtle implications: while migrants may have greater influence in destinations where natives have stronger underlying cultural affinity, this cultural proximity also limits the scope for cultural change as two similar groups interact locally.

More generally, ideologically intense migrants may be more likely to seek out malleable destinations where they will face little cultural resistance. In the extreme, this may lead to sorting towards frontier areas with limited incumbent populations and no formal institutions. Bazzi et al. (2020) provide evidence along these lines for individualistic settlers, comprising both international and domestic migrants, on the American frontier. And Bazzi et al. (2025a) show how aggrieved whites leaving the South after the Civil War sorted disproportionately towards the Western U.S. and destinations where the federal government and Union Army sympathizers had more limited reach.

Because the two conditions for influence are affected by common underlying factors driving migration, they often appear interrelated. Several other factors can simultaneously shift both conditions for cultural influence. The demographic, economic, and institutional context can influence the incentives for each group to maintain or change their norms, thereby shaping these conditions. For instance, the suitability for extractive activities can increase the intensity of ideologies with racial animus and decrease the intensity of alternative ideologies, while also increasing the relative power of individuals with the former. Another factor is the relative size of the migrant group, which affects economic incentives to maintain the native language across generations (Lazear, 1999). Language serves both as a means

of preserving group culture and as a crucial tool for transmitting that culture to other groups. This may be one reason why migrants from more linguistically similar backgrounds could have greater effects on natives. These migrants not only have a better ability to communicate and interact with locals but are also more likely to assimilate economically, gaining relative power and prestige. For example, Pérez (2021) shows that, compared to Italian migrants in the U.S., Italians migrating to Argentina experienced faster economic assimilation in terms of homeownership and occupational status. The smaller linguistic distance enabled them to enter a wider range of occupations. These findings emphasize the importance of the alignment between migrants' characteristics and those of the host community.

Ideological intensity and power are interconnected not only because of shared underlying forces but also because relative prestige and power depend on the cultural intensity of both the migrant group and the local population, as well as on how the two groups interact with their environment. When a migrant group's cultural traits align well with the local environment, this tends to strengthen the group's cultural persistence and amplify its influence through prestige bias.

3.2 Channels of Influence

Under favorable conditions, as elaborated above, migrants can influence the culture in the places they settle rather than merely assimilate into the prevailing native culture. While those conditions are necessary to realize such influence in practice, they are not sufficient. With favorable conditions in place, migrants must additionally activate mechanisms for transmitting their culture. We group these mechanisms into three broad channels of influence: **cultural spillovers** at the level of individuals-to-individuals, **mobilization of organizations** where individuals form groups that influence many other individuals, and **political leverage** to change institutions, policies, and norms. In this section, we provide a conceptual introduction to these three interrelated channels of influence.

(i) Cultural Spillovers. Migrant culture can spill over to non-migrants through various individual-level interactions. Bisin and Verdier (2001) identify three modes of cultural transmission: vertical, horizontal, and oblique. For migrant culture to influence the broader society beyond the first-generation diaspora, initial migrants must transmit their culture to their children in the second generation through vertical transmission. This ensures the persistence of migrant cultural norms within the destination. However, for these norms to spread beyond the migrant community, other modes of transmission are necessary.

Within a given generation, migrants can transmit their culture to natives through interpersonal contact in various domains. Among other pathways, horizontal transmission could occur between children in schools, neighbors within a community, and between spouses in an exogamous marriage. Building on Allport (1954), a large body of social science literature suggests that, under certain conditions, intergroup contact can reduce prejudice and bias (see Lowe, forthcoming, for a review). If these mechanisms apply between migrants and natives, contact between the two could, over time, make natives more receptive to migrant influence.

Finally, through oblique transmission, migrants from an older generation can influence the culture of younger generation residents outside their family, including both migrants and non-migrants. Among other pathways, oblique transmission could flow from teachers to students, from religious leaders to their flock, and from public figures in media, entertainment, sports, and government. This last pathway becomes especially important in settings where the non-migrant population exhibits a strong degree of prestige bias as discussed in Section 3.1.

These three modes of transmission may interact and compound each other, creating a virtuous cycle of cultural influence within and across generations and within and between migrant and non-migrant populations. Through this dynamic process, migrant culture can become deeply entrenched in the inter-generational fabric of society.

(ii) Mobilization of Organizations. In addition to individual-to-individual transmission, collective action provides additional infrastructure for cultural transmission. By building, mobilizing, and controlling organizations—such as churches, schools, and civil society groups—migrant communities can actively shape social norms and values. This groups-to-individuals channel complements and augments individual-to-individual horizontal and oblique transmission.

Religious and educational institutions can serve as powerful vehicles for cultural formation, persistence and influence—configuring and reinforcing identity and transmitting values across generations. Religious institutions often regulate some essential aspects of social structure, such as marriage patterns, fertility, and family structures, with key implications for cultural configurations (see, e.g., Henrich, 2020). Education systems influence individual worldviews, embedding cultural norms that persist across generations (Giusta et al., 2017; Carvalho et al., 2024). Religious education may similarly function as a means of preserving group identity (Bazzi et al., 2024c; Cohen-Zada, 2006). Civic organizations also play a crucial role in shaping cultural norms, as illustrated by Putnam's (1994) work showing how local associations, mutual aid societies, and grassroots organizations with civic traditions can enhance social trust, cooperation, and institutional effectiveness.

(iii) Political Leverage. Migrants may activate a third level of influence when they gain elite status and capture local institutions. By holding de jure and/or de facto political power, groups of individuals can shape formal institutions and informal rules of the game, the policies adopted by local institutions, and the distribution of resources (Acemoglu et al., 2005). Such actions can directly shape social norms and can also augment migrants' influence through channels (i) and (ii).

In Bisin and Verdier's (2023) formal model of the joint evolution of institutions and culture, the institutional structure of a society influences the incentives governing intergenerational cultural transmission and thus the composition of cultural traits in society. Similarly, control over policy decisions determines the economic incentives that drive the persistence or change of cultural practices (see, e.g. Bau, 2021). Acemoglu and Robinson (2025) argue that institutions shape culture by structuring the meanings and social norms that justify them, which can shift suddenly in response to institutional changes or political struggles.

4 Conditions for Influence: Insights from History

This section provides a systematic look at the literature on migrant influence with a focus on the conditions elaborated in Section 3.1, namely ideological intensity as well as power. In some cases, we draw lessons about different conditions from the same study.

4.1 Ideological Intensity

Migrant groups may be ready to leave their distinctive cultural traits behind and assimilate to the culture and norms of their new location. The evidence on naming patterns documented by Abramitzky et al.

(2020a) suggests that this is often the case, at least in some cultural domains. Sometimes, in contrast, migrants may be strongly attached to the distinctive cultural traits and resist assimilation to their new environment. History presents several examples of such ideological intensity, in which migrants display starkly distinctive cultural traits to which they remain strongly attached. Ideological intensity can be rooted in the environment or the history of a migrant group, as well as in selection patterns.

Herding Culture. According to an influential contribution by Cohen et al. (1996), the Scots-Irish herders that settled backcountry areas of the U.S. configured the violent honor culture that dominated much of the American South historically and persisted through the 20th century. Grosjean (2014) empirically examines this hypothesis, showing that areas with a historical Scots-Irish presence display more homicides today, particularly involving white offenders. Interestingly, Scots-Irish transmitted their culture of violence across generations only in locations with historically weak institutions, where reliance on violence was better adapted to the environment, consistent with the interconnection between ideological intensity and the power structure proposed in Section 3.1.

Honor culture provides an example of how environmental conditions shape extreme ideological intensity. The roots of Scots-Irish honor culture trace back to their history as herders, a cultural phenomenon one observes across a range of settings globally. Cao et al. (2021) explore the relationship between traditional herding practices and the development of honor cultures promoting violence and revenge-taking. They find that pre-industrial herding societies fostered value systems that emphasize violence, punishment, and revenge. This legacy persists over long time horizons, with modern descendants of herding societies showing a greater willingness to take revenge and punish unfair behavior.

Le Rossignol and Lowes (2022) explore a related but distinct phenomenon: the link between transhumant pastoralism—seasonal livestock migration—and moral universalism, defined as the extent to which individuals exhibit similar altruism and trust toward both in-group and out-group members. They hypothesize that transhumant pastoralism fosters cohesive in-groups while promoting hostility toward out-groups beyond extended kin. Using global data and various methods—cross-country comparisons, within-country resident comparisons, epidemiological approaches with second-generation migrants, and an instrumental variables strategy—they find that historical reliance on transhumant pastoralism predicts higher in-group trust relative to out-group trust. This pattern is specific to transhumant pastoralism, not other economic activities, and is more pronounced in regions affected by climate shocks and conflict.

Michalopoulos et al. (2019) show that across Sub-Saharan Africa individuals whose ancestors were more reliant on herding relative to agriculture during the preindustrial era tend to be worse off economically today, with lower levels of education and wealth. They rely on anthropological records and survey data to examine how historical practices continue to shape modern socioeconomic status. One of the important mechanisms they establish is that groups with a herding background tend to have more favorable attitudes toward violence, which, in turn, may influence socioeconomic behavior and success.

Together, this literature provides strong empirical evidence on the environmental roots of distinctive cultural practices associated with strong in-group preferences and the instrumental role of violence in sustaining cohesive group identity in the presence of out-groups. These cultural norms traveled with herder-origin migrant populations historically and remain relevant for understanding modern behavior.

"Rugged Individualism." Both the Scots-Irish and the Puritan folkways described by Fischer (1989) had a strong individualistic component. The American frontier, which attracted individualistic types, made them even more individualistic and also honed opposition to government intervention (Bazzi et al.,

2020). This distinctive cultural configuration remained a locus of American culture many decades after the end of the frontier conditions that had created it. The harsh conditions alongside abundant resources on the frontier rewarded self-reliance and innovation, two features of individualism. Individualists were much more likely to leave settled areas in the Eastern U.S. to go to the frontier, and adaptation to the frontier environment further increased the prevalence of individualism.

The configuration of American frontier culture demonstrates how migrants' initial cultural traits and selection patterns are reinforced by adaptation to the destination's environmental conditions. In this case, complementarity between the individualistic culture of migrants and the structural demands of frontier life led to heightened levels of ideological intensity, as individualistic traits were particularly adaptive on the frontier. The dynamic interplay of selective migration, cultural transplantation, and adaptation to local conditionss—reinforcing a culturally valuable trait of the original settlers over generations—may help explain why individualism became deeply ingrained as a core aspect of U.S. culture and ideology.

Migrants at the Ends of the Political Spectrum. A notable case of extreme ideological intensity is the Confederate diaspora, studied by Bazzi et al. (2025a). Confederate migrants developed a unique ideological fervor shaped by their experiences during the Confederacy, its crushing defeat, and the post-war Union Army occupation. These experiences set them apart from both antebellum Southern migrants and later Southern migrants during the Great Migrations of the 1900s. Their direct involvement in slavery, deep-rooted antebellum nostalgia, and strong opposition to federal intervention fostered a distinct cultural configuration that endured as they resettled across the country during post-war period of reconciliation and nation-building. This ideological intensity was particularly pronounced among slaveholding families, who had greater participation in the Confederate Army (Hall et al., 2019) and faced larger losses in wealth and status after the war (Ager et al., 2021). Driven by grievances, elite backgrounds, and aspirations for power, former slaveholders sought out malleable destinations where they could secure positions of authority. From these positions, they embedded their Confederate culture into new communities, perpetuating the ideological intensity of the diaspora.

The French *pied noirs* present another example of intense ideology (Cefalà, 2023; Remigereau, 2022). In the 1960s, following Algeria's independence, about one million French Algerians went back to France. Through their history as European settlers in Algeria, they cultivated an ideology characterized by strong pro-colonial sentiments, nationalism, and political conservatism, often opposing Algerian independence. After repatriation to France, many embraced a nostalgic idealization of colonial Algeria, while maintaining a distinct cultural identity and viewing themselves as victims. In areas that received more *pieds noirs*, electoral support for the right-wing subsequently increased. Moreover, political parties responded to this shock, with right-wing parties trying to capture their support by incorporating *pieds noirs* concerns in their manifestos, and other parties incorporating similar language as well.

Menon (2023) offers complementary insights, exploring whether and how refugees affect local political behavior. The study argues that forced migration fosters a strong group identity among refugees, which can drive political mobilization in support of parties addressing their identity-based grievances. Focusing on the post-WWII expulsion of ethnic Germans from Eastern Europe to Germany—one of the largest forced migrations in modern history—the author analyzes district-level data from 32 elections over a century. The findings reveal that areas with larger inflows of expellees show greater support for radical right parties, historically aligned with the expellees' interests. This trend is especially evident when identity-based grievances remain unresolved. Additional evidence, including data on expellee

monuments and associations, underscores the role of a persistent expellee identity in shaping long-term political outcomes, demonstrating the enduring influence of forced migration on political behavior.

Ochsner and Roesel (2020) meanwhile explore the settlement of Nazis in a specific region of Upper Austria in 1945, offering another example of how extreme ideological intensity persists through migration over time. The ideology of these "migrating extremists" survived WWII and became central to Austria's post-war right-wing movement. Prior to WWII, Austria's right-wing camp embraced a pan-German ideology, but after the war, the Freedom Party of Austria retained extreme political views, fueled by a faction of neo-fascists and neo-Nazis. The study highlights the significant role Nazi migrants played in shaping this ideological trajectory.

On the opposite end of the political spectrum, Dippel and Heblich (2021) examine the impact of the Forty-Eighters—the leaders of the failed 1848–49 German revolution—who were expelled to the U.S. and became influential during the American Civil War. The study focuses on how these politically active immigrants shaped their new communities, particularly in mobilizing support for Union Army enlistments. The Forty-Eighters, being politically engaged and having experience with progressive revolutionary ideals, influenced local attitudes and mobilized support for the Union cause. Drawing on their experience with progressive revolutionary ideals, the Forty-Eighters promoted democratic and anti-slavery values, using their education and political acumen to influence local attitudes and rally support for the Union cause. The study demonstrates how the political ideals from the failed 1848 European revolutions were internationally transferred to the American Civil War.

Jha and Wilkinson (2023) and Ottinger and Rosenberger (2023) examine a similarly striking transfer of progressive ideals across the Atlantic, studying how French soldiers who fought in the American Revolutionary War influenced the events of the French Revolution, which ultimately toppled the monarchy and dismantled the feudal system. The experiences of soldiers sent from France to fight alongside American revolutionaries against the British shaped their political views. Upon returning to France, they helped catalyze key aspects of the revolutionary movement—such as the formation of political clubs, local revolts, and the expression of democratic values in official documents known as *cahiers de doléances*. Both studies emphasize the intense progressive and democratic ideology the soldiers absorbed and carried back with them, while Jha and Wilkinson (2023) also highlight the complementary role of organizational capacity developed through military service, which was later deployed in political mobilization during the Revolution.

The multiplicity of influential migrant groups with high ideological intensity and salient political identities suggests that these two features may be mutually reinforcing. In their review of the links between culture and political preferences, Fouka and Tabellini (2025) (in this handbook) discuss how cultural primitives shape political preferences and how these preferences can persist across generations—beyond merely reflecting the persistence of underlying cultural traits. Insofar as political identities exhibit mechanisms of persistence and reinforcement (e.g., through political socialization or high salience), they could directly or indirectly intensify the associated cultural configurations.

4.2 Power and Malleability

A key condition for influence lies in the migrants' power relative to the local population. In many instances, migrants arrive in locations with long-settled, well-formed institutions and social norms, where they are relatively few compared to the local population, and where they have little or no immediate

access to positions of power. In such conditions, assimilation is much more likely than influence. Sometimes, however, migrants do have power.

European Colonizers and the Theory of "First Effective Settlement." One case of extremely powerful migrants are European settler colonizers in the Americas. Effectively, Europeans conquered the Americas, took control and land away from the previously settled populations, and completely reshaped the institutions and social norms. Several strands of research in political economy and economic history investigate the long-term impacts of colonizers, and they also illustrate the ways in which their power allowed them to persistently influence the culture of their destinations.

The institutionalist research agenda advanced by Acemoglu et al. (2001), Acemoglu et al. (2005), and Acemoglu and Robinson (2013) underscores how European colonization shaped the economic and political institutions of colonized regions, particularly through the development of inclusive or extractive institutions. The factors that affected the choice of colonial institutions—resources, native population density, disease environment, and the cultural identity of settlers—reinforce again the role of adaptation to the environment and the persistence of culture through migration.

Extractive institutions, designed to concentrate power among a small elite and extract resources for the benefit of the colonizers, were typically established in regions with abundant natural resources or large indigenous populations. These systems, such as the *encomienda* in Spanish colonies and slavery-based economies in the Caribbean, exploited the local population and restricted their economic opportunities, ultimately perpetuating inequality and limiting long-run development. In contrast, *inclusive institutions* promoted broader economic and political inclusivity, protected property rights, and encouraged investment and innovation. These institutions fostered a more level economic playing field, allowing for greater long-term economic growth. These institutions were more common in locations with fewer extractable resources, sparser indigenous populations, and less hostile disease environments for European settlement, as in the cases of British North America, Australia, and New Zealand.

The key role of the culture and history of powerful migrants is highlighted in La Porta et al.'s (2008) theory of legal origins and their economic consequences. This study explores how the historical roots of a country's legal system impact its contemporary economic outcomes and regulatory frameworks, classifying nations into legal families such as common law (originating from England), civil law (including French, German, and Nordic traditions), and socialist law. Common law, associated with English legal traditions, tends to be more supportive of private economic arrangements, with less government intervention and greater emphasis on judicial independence and adversarial dispute resolution. In contrast, civil law systems, particularly those following French traditions, are more dirigiste, with a stronger focus on state-directed regulation and the use of comprehensive legal codes, where dispute resolution is often inquisitorial in nature. These legal traditions, which were spread globally through colonization, conquest, or voluntary adoption, continue to shape modern legal and economic systems.

Colonial powers likely influenced not only the institutions of their colonies but also their cultures. Putterman and Weil (2010) suggest that the critical impacts of migrants from historically powerful regions did not operate primarily through institutions, but rather through culture, human capital, and knowledge.[6] Colonizers may have influenced culture directly and also as a byproduct of their institutional leverage. One salient dimension of cultural influence is language. Across the world, European

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[6]The relative importance of human capital versus institutions as drivers of Europeans' long-term impact in comparative development is debated by Glaeser et al. (2004) and Acemoglu et al. (2014).

colonizers established their own language in their dominions, thus seeding a key component of identity for centuries to come. Religion and education, also part of the colonial legacy, are shaped by institutions and have critical effects on cultural formation as we discuss at greater length in Section 5.2. Bisin and Verdier's (2023) general framework on culture and institutions underscores how migrants could have a much larger impact than the mechanical change in a society's distribution of cultural traits implied by their arrival. When migrants control important institutions, like those in religious and educational domains, they can shape policy decisions in ways that augment their initial impact.

The influence of European settlers across the Americas aligns with Zelinsky's (1973) thesis of "first effective settlement," which argues that "[w]hen an empty territory undergoes settlement, or an earlier population is dislodged by invaders, the specific characteristics of the first group able to effect a viable, self-supporting society are of crucial significance for the later social and cultural geography of the area, no matter how tiny the initial band of settlers may have been." Given the imbalance of power rooted in technological and epidemiological asymmetries, Europeans effectively found the Americas to be highly malleable, and even in the locations where there were longstanding indigenous social norms and institutions, Europeans took over and asserted dominance in shaping the social order. One aspect of the interconnections between conditions for influence is that relative prestige and power are shaped by the cultural intensities of both the migrant group and the local population, as well as by how the two groups interact with the broader environment.

In *Conquests and Cultures*, Sowell (2021) examines the cultural impacts of Spanish and Portuguese conquerors in the Americas as well as three other case studies. The Spanish and Portuguese conquerors imposed Catholicism, their languages, European-style urban planning, and hierarchical social structures that later persisted. The Roman and later the Norman conquest of Britain introduced linguistic influences, legal systems, and governance structures that laid the foundation for British institutions. In Australia, British settlers introduced the English language, common law, and Western education, leading to the erosion of indigenous cultural traditions and the dominance of British cultural norms. In Africa, European colonial rulers imposed Western bureaucratic governance, European languages, and formal education systems, all of which reshaped cultural and social hierarchies. Across these cases, conquest functioned as a powerful force of cultural transmission, with conquerors imposing their language, religion, governance, and social structures, often displacing or marginalizing preexisting cultural forms. This perspective highlights how migration, when undertaken by groups with significant power, can radically reshape cultural landscapes at destination.

Elite Migrants and the Soft Power of Cultural Influence. As the ruling elite, European colonizers in the Americas also exerted strong impacts on cultural formation and augmented their influence through prestige bias. Given the human tendency to learn from, imitate, and defer to those perceived as successful, European settlers were dominant cultural figures for many decades following settlement. This explains why, in addition to the overall influence of Anglo-Saxon culture in North America, each of the British folkways traced by Fischer (1989, see Section 2.2) had such long-lasting impacts: each of these groups was the local elite during the period of cultural formation. While the case of European colonizers in the Americas is one of extreme influence supported by an extreme imbalance of power, there are other migrant groups that had outsized influence without directly controlling de jure political institutions.

Acemoglu and Robinson (2025) and Acemoglu and Johnson (2023) explain that in the presence of prestige bias, "cultural influencers" may leverage their success to shape public opinion and behavior

across various domains. Innovators, celebrities, religious leaders, and intellectuals may exert the power of influence through various mechanisms, e.g., psychological appeal, communications, and the authority of the institutions they lead. These insights shed light on the key role that elite migrants can have, even when they do not hold de jure political power.

One such example is the Confederate diaspora studied by Bazzi et al. (2025a). In addition to being ideologically intense, many of these migrants were extremely influential because they often became elites at destination. This allowed them to leverage, in addition to direct cultural spillovers, channels of influence through organizational mobilization and de facto political power. A key condition for this influence was that they often sorted to frontier localities and other "malleable" locations. In these malleable destinations, Confederate migrants, and especially former slaveowners, could more readily occupy prestigious and powerful positions in public life. From such positions of authority, the forces of prestige-bias would reinforce these migrants' capacity for horizontal cultural transmission, which was a necessary condition to implement policies that entrenched Confederate ideology.

The study of the Confederate diaspora highlights the critical role of de facto political power. Compare these migrants' influence to the evolution of the U.S. South after the Civil War: following the brief Reconstruction period, racial inequity and exclusion (in line with the norms of the ideologically intense Southern white elites) were re-established and entrenched through de facto political power as well as de jure institutions, i.e., Jim Crow laws. Acemoglu and Robinson (2006) and Acemoglu et al. (2008) characterize the regime of the postbellum South as "one of the best examples of the persistence of economic institutions as a consequence of persistent de facto power." Outside the South there was also a system of inequality, the "Jim Crow North" (see, e.g., Douglas, 2005), which was not established through de jure institutions, but rather through de facto political power. It was not as prevalent or extreme as in the South. It varied across locations, and an important driver of this variation was the local presence of the Confederate diaspora. Below, we discuss in detail why this migrant group embodied a powerful combination of conditions for influence and reinforcing channels of influence.

The "Forty-Eighters" studied by Dippel and Heblich (2021) offer another example of migrant influence without de jure political control. These elite migrants became highly influential through their political and social activism, facilitated by their participation in journalism and cultural organizations. Through newspapers, they maintained a strong identity and influenced others. They were influential in the German-language press, which, in cities with large German populations like Milwaukee, boasted greater circulation than English-language press. They often became civic leaders in their local communities and established organizations that served as social and recreational clubs and brought together German-speaking immigrants. On the other end of the ideological spectrum, the Nazis that migrated to Austria after WWII catalyzed long-run support for far-right ideologies with their entry into local political party branches being a core channel of influence (Ochsner and Roesel, 2020).

Cultural dynamics are influenced by both political and economic power structures. Migrants' adaptability to local conditions, which impacts their economic status, shapes their incentives to assimilate or retain cultural traits. Many migrant groups throughout history faced conditions where their attributes did not yield high returns, creating incentives for assimilation rather than influence. In contrast, elite migrants, whose attributes align with economic and political power, wield disproportionate influence, with prestige bias enhancing their cultural impact.

Abramitzky et al. (2020b) provide evidence on the relevance of economic incentives for the cultural

assimilation of second-generation immigrants in the early 20th-century U.S. Individuals with American-ized names had higher wages, better educational outcomes, and lower unemployment rates than those with ethnic names, indicating that assimilation offered economic benefits. Additionally, those with eth-nic names were more likely to marry within their ethnic group, reinforcing cultural persistence when economic incentives for assimilation were weaker. The economic penalties of ethnic names disappear when controlling for household fixed effects, suggesting that families prioritizing assimilation chose Americanized names as part of broader integration strategies. In contrast, families maintaining cultural traditions likely faced fewer economic incentives to assimilate.

In *Mafias on the Move: How Organized Crime Conquers New Territories*, Varese (2011) effectively illustrates the importance of local conditions and migrants' adaptability to their environment. The book argues that successful mafia transplantation requires not just criminal groups with the necessary skills, but also local conditions that offer high returns for these attributes. Specifically, weak state protection, thriving illegal markets, and corrupt local officials create demand for the enforcement and protection services mafias provide. The comparison of New York and Rosario highlights this dynamic: New York's rapid urbanization and the illegal markets fueled by Prohibition in the 1920s provided ideal conditions for mafia growth, while Rosario lacked these factors, leading to the assimilation of mafiosi and the decline of their cultural identity.[7]

Internal Migrants from the Core to the Periphery. Another example of relative power shaping migrant influence is seen in internal migrants who relocate from the economic and political centers of countries to more peripheral regions inhabited by minority or historically marginalized groups. These migrants often occupy structurally privileged positions stemming from their earlier exposure to state-led modernization efforts and development programs.

Bazzi et al. (2025b) explore this dynamic in the context of Indonesia's Transmigration program, focusing on the diffusion of fertility norms between migrants from the Inner Islands of Java and Bali and native populations in the Outer Islands. These groups came into contact in newly established agri-cultural settlements (see the above discussion in Section 2.4 on the Transmigration program). By the late 1970s, when the program was implemented, migrants from Java and Bali had already experienced the initial stages of fertility decline, following the introduction of state family planning initiatives. Al-though both migrants and natives shared similar low levels of income and education, the Inner-Island migrants arrived from regions that had historically been central to Indonesia's economic planning and political authority. This entrenched core–periphery structure, as documented by Tirtosudarmo (2018), lent symbolic authority to migrants from Java and Bali, casting their behaviors and norms as markers of "modernity" and implicitly positioning them as cultural reference points for native Outer Islanders.

In line with this structural asymmetry, the authors find that fertility norms were more likely to flow from Inner-Island migrants to native Outer Islanders than vice versa. Using the arbitrary assignment of migrants across new villages, they show that this one-way transmission holds even when migrants come from higher-fertility areas than natives, consistent with asymmetric cultural influence.

This study offers clear evidence in support of the conceptual framework in Section 3. While all

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[7]Dipoppa (2025) offers a complementary perspective on how criminal groups can expand even in strong-state environments. Studying the expansion of Southern Italian mafias into Northern Italy during the postwar economic boom, she shows that organized crime thrived where it could broker informal labor from co-ethnic migrants to local employers. The ability to exploit and control migrants—rather than state weakness per se—enabled mafias to build durable networks and reputational capital, effectively reconstituting their cultural identity and organizational presence in new, institutionally strong contexts.

settlers in these villages were relatively poor, the socio-political centrality of the Inner Islands afforded their residents a degree of symbolic and institutional capital not shared by their Outer-Island neighbors. Bazzi et al. (2025b) find stronger norm transmission from Inner-Island migrants toward natives with lower educational attainment and lower-status occupations. Moreover, the effect is amplified when Inner-Island migrants are employed in more prestigious positions. Together, these results underscore how relative power and prestige bias enable migrants to influence their neighbors, especially in settings with broader core–periphery hierarchies.

Together with Bazzi et al. (2019), the study by Bazzi et al. (2025b) also demonstrates the co-occurrence of cultural influence and amalgamation in the same context, though applied to different cultural traits. In terms of fertility, Bazzi et al. (2025b) show that, in some cases, migrants pass on socioeconomically advantageous norms to the natives. In terms of national identity, Bazzi et al. (2019) find that migrants and natives integrate through a new norm that fosters welfare-enhancing weakening of interethnic differences and facilitates coordination around a shared identity.

Strength in Numbers? As discussed above, the cases of Confederate migrants and Forty-Eighters illustrate how small numbers of migrants can exert outsized influence on local culture and institutions without necessarily holding the reins of official political power. We turn now to cases in which migrant groups achieve power through scale.

After the colonial era in the Americas, newly arriving European migrants did not have the power to fully capture and reshape local institutions. Yet, they still exerted cultural influence. One aspect that increased migrants' cultural and political imprint during the Age of Mass Migration was their relative size. The greater the numbers, the stronger their influence, as shown in many studies, including Giuliano and Tabellini (2020) on European immigrants in the U.S. during the early 20th century.

The Italians in Argentina are a salient case of a migrant group with substantive influence partly based on large numbers. Many studies document such impacts during the Age of Mass Migration, including the expansion of pro-social cooperative traits as well as stronger preferences for redistribution. Martignano (2024) analyzes how these migrants influenced cooperative preferences in Argentine society. Using Census data, the study tests whether immigrants were able to shape cultural values in their new country, with civic capital serving as a proxy for cooperation. A key finding centers on non-profit risk-sharing associations, which were common in Europe but not in Argentina before the arrival of immigrants. By 1914, out of 1,202 associations, over 1,000 were formed in part by European migrants.

Lazzaroni (2021) explores the transmission of political ideologies between countries by examining the diffusion of populism in Argentina from 1946, focusing on the influence of Italian mass migration between 1880 and 1945. The study hypothesizes that populist elements of Mussolini's Fascist ideology spread to Argentina through Italian migrants, contributing to the rise of Peronism. By analyzing the Italian provincial origins of Italo-Argentine members of parliament using surname distribution and machine learning, the study finds that MPs with ancestors who migrated during Mussolini's rise were more likely to affiliate with the Peronist party. The analysis, leveraging migration timing, exposure to Fascism, and strong earthquakes as a push factor, also reveals that MPs' likelihood of aligning with Perón during his first term correlates with family migration during Mussolini's regime. The findings provide evidence that ideological transmission occurred through both family lines and Italian social networks.

Strength in numbers also helps explain the transformational impacts of the Great Migration of Blacks and Whites in the U.S. Calderon et al. (2023) show how the migration of more than 4 million African

Americans from the South to the North of the U.S. between 1940-1970 helped expand the civil rights movement that ended institutionalized racial discrimination. Southern Black migrants influenced the wider population and especially more progressively-inclined Northern whites in the cities to which they gravitated. However, given their scale, the Black migrants also constituted a novel and sizable voting bloc that directly influenced local Congressional representatives' support for civil rights legislation.

There were also millions of Southern whites that migrated widely across the non-South during the 20th century. They too had critical impacts on American culture and ideology. As documented by (Bazzi et al., 2023), these migrants hastened partisan realignment and helped catalyze and bolster a national New Right movement that bundled together three layers of conservatism: religious, racial, and economic. While these Southern migrants influenced their new communities through various channels, their relatively large numbers were a source of strength in cultural transmission. For example, their local electoral influence exhibits tipping points: beyond a certain population threshold, the electoral effects of the migrants exceeded their relative share in the population. Such tipping points are consistent with a variety of mechanisms but, overall, point to the role of migrant scale in determining their influence.

A complementary pattern appears in early 20th-century U.S. cities, where European immigrants faced the decision of whether to naturalize and engage politically. Shertzer (2016) shows that immigrants were more likely to pursue citizenship when their ethnic group made up a moderate but not overwhelming share of the local electorate. This nonlinear relationship reflects strategic coalition-building: medium-sized groups were best positioned to partner with the urban Democratic Party and thus had greater incentives to mobilize. The findings illustrate how political incorporation is shaped not only by absolute numbers, but by the strategic logic of group size in a competitive political environment.

Despite these examples where larger migrant groups exert greater influence, there are theoretical reasons for a negative relationship between group size and influence. In the canonical Bisin and Verdier (2001) framework, parents have weaker incentives to invest in activities supporting vertical cultural transmission when their culture is already widespread in society. In such cases, other children and adults help transmit culture through horizontal and oblique pathways, respectively. Therefore, in settings where a migrant group constitutes a large share of the local population, parental efforts in socialization are less critical for understanding migrant influence. Instead, influence is more likely to stem from tipping points in political representation and the capture of key institutions for horizontal and oblique transmission, such as schools, churches, and media, as discussed in the following section on channels of influence. Conversely, in contexts where migrants are few and face opposition to their identity from a larger native population, as with the Confederate diaspora (Bazzi et al., 2025a), vertical transmission becomes more important to prevent cultural dilution through social interactions.

5   Channels of Influence: Insights from History

This section provides a systematic look at the literature on migrant influence with a focus on the channels discussed in Section 3.2: (i) cultural spillovers, (ii) organizational mobilization, and (iii) de facto and de jure power. Again, we sometimes draw lessons about different channels from the same study.

5.1 Cultural Spillovers

We begin by expanding upon the conceptual discussion of cultural spillovers in Section 3.2, and draw from historical case studies for illustration. Migrant groups may transmit their culture to others through three main types of spillovers: vertical, horizontal, and oblique transmission. *Vertical transmission* occurs when beliefs, values, and traditions are passed from parents to their children. This form of cultural transmission is key for migrant groups to have persistent traits (Bisin and Verdier, 2001). Without persistence through vertical transmission, migrants may completely assimilate within just one or two generations. The transmission from parents to children is powerful as a conservative force that makes traditional values of each group insensitive to changes in the environment, and limits the process of cultural change due to its direct lineage-based nature. All of the literature drawing from the "epidemiological approach" is grounded in the fact that second- and third-generation migrants maintain cultural traits adopted from the parents and grandparents. Ideological intensity, one of the conditions for influence outlined above, may be a force that increases vertical transmission (Bisin and Verdier, 2001).

While vertical transmission is directly tied to cultural persistence among groups, for a migrant group to be influential it must also activate horizontal and oblique cultural transmission. *Horizontal transmission*—cultural spillovers between individuals of the same generation—are key for cultural change, as this type of spillover often entails a rapid spread of new ideas. For example, Giuliano and Tabellini (2020) and Bazzi et al. (2023) show, for migrants from Europe and from the U.S. South, respectively, that their political influence was greater in contexts with high rates of intermarriage and residential integration, where we expect horizontal transmission to be stronger.

Oblique transmission is also key for migrants to influence culture at scale. This type of transmission refers to the cultural spillovers from older generations to younger individuals outside their family, often as educators or authority figures. This sort of spillover is more pervasive when a migrant group has outsized presence in key organizations, such as schools and churches, as discussed in the following section on organizational mobilization.

Cultural spillovers often occur at a very local level. For example, Bazzi et al. (2023) show that non-Southern Whites moving into neighborhoods with more Southern White migrants (in the 10 households on either side) tend to give their later-born children more religious names than those born prior to moving. Identified using a mover design with household effects, these patterns are consistent with horizontal transmission of Southern whites' religious conservatism. Similarly, Bazzi et al. (2025a) find that in the 1920s, non-Southern Whites living *next door* to Southern White migrants were more likely to join the Ku Klux Klan, a white supremacist organization where Southerners played an outsized role. In Indonesia, Bazzi et al. (2025b) identify hyper-local effects of intergroup contact in resettlement villages, showing that the transmission of fertility norms is strongest at the neighborhood and next-door-neighbor levels, even after accounting for community-wide exposure. Using a similar strategy, Bazzi et al. (2019) show that these hyper-local transmission pathways are also important for understanding cultural reconfiguration: conditional on overall village-level diversity, national language use at home is higher among individuals living in more ethnically diverse neighborhoods and with non-co-ethnic next-door neighbors.

Several studies further suggest that the scope and effectiveness of cultural transmission depends on the tolerance of native populations and may vary over the short and long run. Bursztyn et al. (2024) consider the case of Arab Muslim immigrants in the U.S., a group which has long faced stigmatization shaped, in part, by their host country's recurring conflicts with Arab Muslim countries. Using an inno-

vative identification strategy developed in Burchardi et al. (2019), they show that sustained exposure to Arab Muslim immigrant neighbors leads not only to greater native tolerance but also increased electoral and charitable support for Arab Muslim issues. One important channel for migrant influence lies in greater intergroup friendships and more generalized contact in various domains of public life.

While Bursztyn et al. (2024) find that *long-run* exposure to immigrants leads natives to contribute more charitable giving towards immigrant causes, Dahlberg et al. (2012) find that *short-run* exposure to refugees in Sweden leads natives to express less support for redistribution. Dahlberg et al. (2012) use exogenous policy variation in refugee arrivals to identify changes in native preferences for social welfare spending. Part of the difference across these two studies may lie in the time horizons: Bursztyn et al. (2024) study decades-long exposure to specific immigrant groups, and Dahlberg et al. (2012) study changes in refugee arrivals over three-year horizons coinciding with electoral cycles. The latter horizon may simply be too limited for migrants to overcome initial native misgivings about outgroups. Over time, however, opportunities for intergroup contact expand and could lead to greater transmission of migrant culture in local public life and concomitant weakening of native intolerance. Steinmayr (2021) provides evidence on this sort of dynamic reversal in the Austrian context, effectively reconciling the disparate short- and long-run findings. The study shows that localities exposed to short-run inflows of refugees en route to Germany led to increased support for far-right anti-immigrant political parties, consistent with the findings on welfare spending preferences in Dahlberg et al. (2012). By contrast, longer-run exposure to asylum seekers had the opposite effect, dampening far-right support, consistent with the findings on electoral support in Bursztyn et al. (2024).

Together, these studies illustrate the important role of intergroup contact over time in shaping migrant influence on native preferences and behaviors. In the very short run, there is limited scope for onward transmission of migrant culture. But as migrants and natives begin to interact more frequently in public domains, such transmission becomes more feasible as neighbors interact in local communal spaces and peers interact at school, work, and elsewhere in the community.

5.2 Organizations

By controlling organizations such as churches, schools, and newspapers, migrant groups can greatly increase the persistence of the cultural traits across generations and amplify their influence on other groups. The literature on European colonization documents how settlers not only shaped institutions but also had transformative effects on culture through their dominance in language, religion, and other domains. Across varying institutional contexts, religious organizations and schools played key roles in this process during colonial times. In post-colonial times, even when migrant groups did not control formal institutions, they could exert strong cultural influence by mobilizing organizations in the education, religious, and media sectors as well as civil society more broadly.

Missionaries and teachers were authority figures that fit the category of "cultural influencers" at the local level (Acemoglu and Robinson, 2025; Acemoglu and Johnson, 2023). Nunn (2010) shows that Protestant missions in Africa significantly boosted Christian conversion rates and spread European cultural values, often through schools teaching in the colonizers' language and religious practices. This educational influence went beyond religious conversion, driving long-term societal changes, including reducing gender-based educational disparities. Valencia Caicedo (2019) examines the Jesuit Missions in South America, finding that their historical presence is linked to higher levels of education and eco-

nomic performance in the long run. These studies suggest that missionaries facilitated both religious conversion and cultural change, transmitting European social norms and institutional frameworks that shaped economic behaviors and attitudes.

Schools also played a crucial role in cultural persistence and influence. In colonial America, education was largely driven by religious organizations. In the British colonies, schools were often motivated by religious goals, such as Bible reading, and varied by region and religious affiliation. Schools and churches were central social spaces that contributed to the origins and persistence of distinct regional cultures, as explored in Fischer (1989) discussed above.

Abramitzky et al. (2025) examine the role of ethnic Catholic churches in immigrant cultural persistence and assimilation during the Age of Mass Migration, highlighting variation across groups. Tracking church locations and their effects on Italian and Polish immigrants in Boston, Chicago, Philadelphia, and New York, they find that Italian Catholic churches had little impact on assimilation. In contrast, Polish Catholic churches fostered stronger communal ties, increasing the likelihood that Polish immigrants would marry within their ethnic group, give their children Polish names, and remain in the same neighborhoods, while also making manual occupations more common and lowering earnings. This divergence aligns with historical accounts suggesting that Polish community life was far more church-centered than its Italian counterpart, naturally shaping the scope for cultural influence through religious organizations.

Fouka (2020) highlights a notable example of cultural persistence, showing how German-language schools in the U.S. allowed German immigrants to maintain their culture despite increasing assimilation pressures after WWI. Similarly, Gagliarducci and Tabellini (2022) provides evidence from the religious sector, showing that Italian churches helped immigrants preserve their culture amid rising anti-Catholic sentiment in early 20th-century America. This helps explain why the later study by Abramitzky et al. (2025) finds such a contrast between Italian and Polish assimilation. For both German and Italian immigrants, these key organizations enabled families and communities to transmit their culture to the next generation, slowing down the assimilation process. While these cases emphasize the role of schools and churches in cultural persistence, in other instances, these organizations also allowed migrants to influence their outgroup neighbors.

Religious figures remained key "cultural influencers" into the 20th century, while media (e.g., newspapers, radio) became increasingly important for cultural influence. Bazzi et al. (2023) show that churches and right-wing radio programs were vital channels through which Southern white migrants in the U.S. transmitted their conservative political views to new communities. Both right-wing media and evangelical churches played significant roles in spreading conservative ideologies beyond the South. Southern white migrants were instrumental in expanding evangelical Protestantism, particularly through the Southern Baptist Convention and Pentecostal denominations, which gained prominence in diaspora communities by the mid-20th century. Evangelical leaders became politically active, addressing moral issues like sex education and government overreach, ultimately contributing to the formation of the "Christian Right" coalition, which aligned closely with the Republican Party by the late 1970s. Additionally, these migrants had a major impact on the growth of right-wing media, starting with religious radio programs like Carl McIntire's Twentieth Century Reformation Hour in the 1950s, and continuing with figures like Rush Limbaugh, expanding conservative messaging beyond its Southern base.

During the earlier wave of Confederate migration studied in Bazzi et al. (2025a), there were two key organizations: the United Daughters of the Confederacy (UDC) and the Ku Klux Klan (KKK).

Both played key roles in transmitting and entrenching Confederate culture and racial animus outside the South. The UDC was instrumental in the establishment of Confederate memorials and the promotion of Lost Cause ideology, which glorified the Confederacy and its leaders. The KKK, particularly its second iteration in the 1910s and 1920s, spread alongside Confederate symbols and rituals, bringing white supremacist ideals to regions outside the traditional South, including across the West and Midwest. The diaspora from the South was associated with the establishment of KKK chapters in non-Southern counties, with the influx of Southern whites stimulating the formation of KKK groups, which propagated not only anti-Black racism but also white Protestant chauvinism. The success of the UDC and KKK may have been facilitated in part by the influence of Confederate-born migrants on local newspapers as these migrants tended to be overrepresented on editorial boards and among newspaper publishers.

Newspapers and civil society organizations were also central to the influence of Forty-Eighters studied by Dippel and Heblich (2021), as discussed above in Section 4.2. These cultural leaders gained cultural influence through local German-language newspapers and social and political clubs. Many Forty-Eighters, who had experience as publicists and editors in Germany, took a prominent role in the U.S. newspaper industry, where they founded new publications and shaped public opinion. These German-language newspapers, often bilingual and read by both English-speaking and German-American audiences, became key sources of information and platforms for public debate. During this time, newspapers were widely read, and even General Ulysses Grant recognized their importance in cultivating an informed Union Army. The political impact of the Forty-Eighters is evident, with figures like Ottilie Assing and Heinrich Börnstein using the press to advocate against slavery and support Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation. The arrival of the Forty-Eighters in the U.S. corresponded with a sharp rise in the number of German-language newspapers, further underscoring their influence on media and politics. Another channel for the influence of Forty-Eighters was their participation in various social organizations, including free men's societies, singing groups, book clubs, and shooting associations. Some were purely social, while others, like the Turner Societies (*Turnvereine*), had a political dimension. Turner Societies started in the early 19th century in German states during Napoleonic rule, originally focusing on gymnastics to promote physical and moral strength. By the 1830s, they became increasingly political, playing a significant role in mobilization during the German revolutions.

Political parties are another important organization through which migrant groups have amplified their influence in some historical casess. Local party branches were a key mechanism of influence for the Nazi migrants in upper Austria studied by Ochsner and Roesel (2020). For the *pied noirs* studied by Cefalà (2023) and Remigereau (2022), a critical mechanism was their influence in political platforms, which they could achieve given their relatively large numbers. We find here another direct connection between conditions for influence and channels for influence: "strength in numbers," one of the ways to establish power, can be important to activate organizations as a channel of cultural transmission. And in all cases, the migrants' ideological intensity is a necessary condition for such activation to materialize.

5.3 Political Leverage

Migrants may influence culture through de jure institutions, informal rules, and policies. In Section 4.2, we argued that the power of a migrant group relative to the local population and the "malleability" of the latter are a key condition for influence. The channels of influence we discuss here are tightly related to these conditions: when migrants hold relative power in malleable environments, they have the ability

to shape rules and policies in ways that amplify their cultural influence. The work of Acemoglu and Robinson (2013) argues that colonizers shaped the institutions at destination following profit incentives. Did these migrants and other migrant groups that held relative power also shape institutions and policies in ways that strengthened their cultural influence?

The cultural impacts of European settlers through churches and schools, discussed in Section 5.2, often had institutional foundations. The replacement of indigenous religions and languages, which were key parts of Europeans' strategies for cultural assimilation, were often institutionalized through state-backed policies. The suppression of indigenous languages and replacement by European languages was sometimes institutionalized in schools by enforcing the adoption of the official language and other policies that limited or prohibited the use of native language. A salient case was the residential school system in which indigenous children were separated from their families to be to educated in the colonizers' language and culture, effectively erasing many aspects of their native identity (Jones, forthcoming).

Religion was another key domain in which European colonizers exerted cultural dominance. The imposition of Christianity on indigenous populations was a central aspect of the colonial strategies for cultural assimilation. Religious conversion was frequently coercive, with indigenous peoples being forced to abandon their spiritual beliefs and practices. This was linked to the ideological intensity of colonizers, who often backed policies with religious doctrines such as the "Doctrine of Discovery," which asserted that colonization was necessary for spiritual salvation and territorial expansion. This religious imposition disrupted indigenous spiritual systems and introduced new cultural norms that aligned with European values, which then became dominant beyond the migrant elites.

There are several other instances of European institutions in the Americas shaping culture. Several studies document how markets and liberal democracy were conducive to the diffusion of individualism, bourgeois values, and moral universalism—some of the defining traits of European culture. For example, Posch and Raz (2024) show how railroad-induced market expansion in the U.S. fostered greater individualism and moral universalism in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. And Jung (2024) shows that the expansion of suffrage to women fostered greater individualism in the early 20th century U.S.

Migrants can also exert influence even without controlling institutions, as demonstrated by the Confederate migrants studied by Bazzi et al. (2025a). These migrants, who were ideologically intense, were highly influential because they often became elites at their destination. This allowed them to not only activate wield cultural spillovers but also mobilize organizations and deploy de facto political power. A key factor in this influence was their tendency to settle in frontier or other malleable locations, where they could more easily occupy prestigious and powerful positions. From these positions, they could leverage prestige bias to enhance horizontal cultural transmission and effectively entrench Confederate ideology in public institutions, often with adverse consequences for minority populations.

6   Discussion and Directions for Future Research

This chapter contributes to a deeper understanding of when and how migrants reshape the cultural landscapes of their host societies. By delineating the pathways of migrant influence, we offer a new framework for understanding cultural change in diverse societies shaped by migration. This framework characterizes the conditions for migrant influence as well as the various channels through which they can activate such influence. We illustrate these conditions and channels through a series of historical cases

with a particular focus on the Americas. Key conditions include migrants' ideological intensity and relative power. Key channels include intergroup spillovers within and across generations, mobilization through organizations, and the wielding of authority over institutions and policymaking.

Ultimately, the legacies of migration reflect both continuity and change, as migrants simultaneously carry their heritage and adapt to new environments. This dynamic shapes not only the cultures at destinations but also the broader trajectory of social evolution. Understanding these mechanisms is essential as migration continues to be a defining force of modern globalization, creating increasingly diverse and interconnected societies. Our framework thus provides a foundation for further research into the ongoing impacts of migration on culture worldwide.

Looking ahead, we see several potential directions for innovative research. First, the explosive growth of digitized historical records and linked Census data have created exciting new opportunities for understanding intergenerational cultural persistence. The speed of cultural change across different traits and among different migrant and native populations are important parameters in debates about integration amid rising diversity.

Second, there is a growing need to understand how different types of migrants may influence host societies. There are reasons to expect differential influence across voluntary and involuntary migrants (on differential assimilation, see Becker and Ferrara, 2019). And among involuntary migrants, there may be further differences between political exiles, religiously persecuted groups, and those displaced by climate shocks, among others. These migrants likely vary not only in their ideological intensity and relative power but also in their capacity for activating the channels for influence at destination. Such distinctions across migrant types are important for policymakers and warrant further investigation in the historical and modern contexts.

Third, as the globalization of media deepens, the gaps between migrant and native culture may narrow, thus creating both greater amenability to migrant influence and less scope for such influence given more limited ex ante differences. At the same time, social media, and internet access more generally, also allows migrants to retain deeper connections to their origins. While such connections may facilitate social remittances from the diaspora, they might also allow for cultural attachments to the origin to persist and thus ensure migrant culture endures in the face of assimilation pressures. It would be interesting to explore how these two-way interactions in an increasingly digitally connected world may fundamentally change the nature of migrant influence on destination (and origin) societies. Yarkin (2024) shows, for example, that internet connectivity in the origin reduces migrant integration at destination. The implications for migrant influence, in a dynamic setting, remain an important area for future work.

Fourth, researchers should investigate nonlinear dynamics in the cultural influence of migrants, including tipping points in migrant population size and related cultural changes. They should also explore potential backlash following successful migrant influence. The political legacy of the Great Migration of Black and White Southerners offers insights into these dynamics. The influx of Black migrants sparked a leftward shift in urban politics as liberal whites allied with Black neighbors to capture the Democratic Party (Calderon et al., 2023). However, it also fueled racial segregation pressures, prompting many conservative whites to move to the suburbs, limiting further Black influence on white communities (Boustan, 2010). A similar process occurred with Southern white migrants who spread across the U.S., shaping culture in small towns and rural areas. They not only influenced their white neighbors but also created conditions that pushed non-whites to migrate to urban centers, altering the geography of

race and politics in the U.S. (Bazzi et al., 2022, 2023, 2025a).

The relationship between migration and cultural change is inherently dynamic, and it is important to understand how fluid interactions between migrants and natives may give rise to new hybrid cultural forms and unstable group identities over the long run. In the U.S. case, the Great Migrations hastened the construction of a white national identity that cut across North and South after a devastating civil war. In more recent years, immigration from Latin America and growing intermarriage across white and non-white immigrant populations has the potential to further blur the boundaries of group identity and culture. These shifting cultural grounds are upending politics in the 21st century and remain critical areas for future research, building on prior work by Fouka et al. (2022) and Fouka and Tabellini (2022).

Finally, we conclude with an important, overarching lesson from our review. Many residents of majority white, Western societies worry about the cultural impacts of non-white, non-Western migrants. Such concerns have fueled the rise of populism across many countries (Guriev and Papaioannou, 2022). These views are predicated, in part, on the belief that such migrants will dilute native culture through various mechanisms of influence. The framework we proposed in this chapter offers a way to understand the contingent factors that would need to hold for such influence to materialize. Importantly, however, those factors—the conditions and channels we emphasize—are not likely to hold in all or even most cases. Ultimately, the pathways to influence today may be narrower than those in the historical era when institutions were weaker, culture was less deeply ingrained in policy, and technology was more limited. This conjecture seems like a ripe area for future research and one with important implications for those engaged in public debate around immigration.

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