

# EVOLVING TRANSNATIONAL MIGRATION SYSTEMS

Linking the Americas "from Below"

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*THE CULTURE OF MIGRATION IN SOUTHERN MEXICO.* By Jeffrey H. Cohen. (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2004. Pp. 207. \$50.00 cloth, \$21.95 paper.)

*CROSSING THE BORDER: RESEARCH FROM THE MEXICAN IMMIGRATION PROJECT.* Edited by Jorge Durand and Douglas S. Massey. (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 2004. Pp. 384. \$42.50 cloth.)

*FROM CUENCA TO QUEENS: AN ANTHROPOLOGICAL STORY OF TRANSNATIONAL MIGRATION.* By Anne Miles. (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2004. Pp. 247. \$55.00 cloth, \$22.95 paper.)

*NEW DESTINATIONS: MEXICAN IMMIGRATION IN THE UNITED STATES.* Edited by Víctor Zúñiga and Rubén Hernández-León. (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 2005. Pp. 368. \$45.00 cloth.)

In-the-not-too-distant past, migration research's all-too-obvious interdisciplinary character was fraught with disciplinary rigidity in both theoretical construction and methodological persuasion. Domains of migration scholarship were discipline bound, with each social science discipline reserving a migration research agenda as its exclusive right. Lip service might be paid to cross-disciplinary or interdisciplinary exchanges of theoretical insights or methodological explanations, when a few (more) enlightened migration scholars commented on migration's "confusion frontier" or the field's "interdisciplinary potential," but disciplinary scholarship on migration processes and patterns was content to be cautious and inward looking rather than adventurous and "outside the box." Whether it was Latin America, Mexico, the Caribbean, Jamaica or North America, Europe or another country or region with its internal and international migration patterns and processes were under scrutiny, disciplinary thematic approaches "ruled the waves" for decades.

An unfortunate consequence of this rigidity was the self-serving tendency for disciplinary scholarship to view alternative research findings as suspect, partial, or insufficient. Research could thus be seen as theoretically flawed or limited, methodologically deficient in rigor, and lacking the necessary statistical framework to allow scholars to draw general inferences. Humanists disputed the generality of social science "explanations," or at the very least called them into question because of their reductionism, empirical dependency, or their modeling restrictiveness. Marxist and neo-Marxist historical materialistic scholarship was a complete theoretical and methodological opposite of neoclassical "reductionist" approaches, logical positivism, quantitative modeling and the like. Disciplinary "narratives" were expressed in completely different languages, jargon reigned supreme, and turf wars occurred within and between disciplines so that the interdisciplinary nature of migration was rarely factored into research agendas, projects, and explanations. Circles of migration scholarship talked past each other, not with each other, so that it was difficult, if not institutionally impossible, for scholars to seek interdisciplinary connections, gain interdisciplinary insights to reinforce more holistic understanding, and to move migration research beyond the "confusion frontier."

More recently, in anthropology, cultural studies, and cultural geography in particular, postmodernism and poststructuralism joined the jousting tournament to take on social science and its goals of generalization, but fortunately, this latest critical onslaught was not so damaging, or distracting, to migration's evolving interdisciplinary maturity. If there were "cultural clashes" and disputes over what constituted theory and central tendencies in social process, social contextual limits and opportunities and agency transformative action served us better. So, such counter-arguments on behalf of the recognition of difference, diversity, uniqueness, imagined attachments and multiple identity formations and the rest, did not stifle the cross-fertilization of ideas. Insights were mutually shared among those with social scientific goals and collective agendas to build empirically tested, theoretical constructs. Poststructuralist perspectives might come to be referenced, if they added to our explanatory power and depth of understanding. Yesterday's turf wars had proven counterproductive, so unnecessary disciplinary rigidity and defensive posturing on behalf of the superiority of one methodological approach over another could be duly consigned to history. Migration research was saved another round of advances and retreats, counterattacks and capitulations, and disciplinary isolationism. Migration's "confusion frontier" needed to be opened up to scrutiny from many sides, and signs are everywhere that it has been; the quality of modern scholarship demonstrates this positive turn of events.

Are things really different today? Yes. We have come far in the last ten to fifteen years or so, and the scholarly field of migration has matured,

embraced interdisciplinary explanations and methodologies, and advanced our collective social scientific understanding of such an important societal process as human migration. The collection of recent texts under review in this essay is proof positive that we have indeed built the necessary academic bridges. At least in the research field of Mexican migration scholarship, which is well represented in these four texts, there has been a meeting of minds and a refreshing merger of methodological approaches and a cross-fertilization of theoretical and empirical insights. The rigid (and unproductive) barriers of disciplinary correctness are no longer the defining constructs for these research inquiries, and the rigor of quantitative analysis is matched and merged with qualitative assessments and in-depth inferential explanations.

Instead of limiting themselves to one discipline, these four texts—two monographs by anthropological social scientists and two ‘collective products’ of the bi-national Mexican Migration Project (MMP) headed by sociologists Douglas Massey and Jorge Durand—comprise a rich interdisciplinary collection including in-depth ethnographic life-story accounts, personal life-history and migration-history experiences, family transnational histories, community-level accounts, sampled subpopulations, representative samples, age- and gender-selective cohorts, demographic investigations, and humanistic interpretations. The veritable potpourri of offerings allows us to draw out common themes and explanations and to substantiate generalizations on Mexico-U.S. cross-border migration flows, patterns of settlement, circulation, and more permanent relocation behaviors, as well as the development of transnational migration systems and their dynamics. The binational mix of authors in two of the collections—Durand and Massey and Zúñiga and Hernández-León—is complemented by the two U.S. anthropologists’ ethnographic treatise, which is culturally enriched by many years of immersion in their respective field sites and local communities, living among, and befriending, their primary respondents and migrant and nonmigrant families.

To provide order to the more detailed review of these complementary texts on Latin American transnational migration, I am going to start with Durand and Massey’s *Crossing the Border*, which provides many insightful social scientific analyses and studies of migrants’ experiences while “on the move” and when adapting to their transnational worlds.<sup>1</sup> Policy issues are again raised in this collection, so the applied value of this field of research is well represented. A second collection of the Mexican Migration Project, coedited by Zúñiga and Hernández-León and entitled

1. The reader should also refer to Douglas S. Massey, Jorge Durand, and Nolan J. Malone’s *Beyond Smoke and Mirrors: Mexican Immigration in an Era of Economic Integration*, which establishes the contextual scene in which these cross-border systems of migration have evolved and become embedded.

*New Destinations*, rounds out the coverage by adding more insights, as well as more micro-level interpretations. This second text adds to the collective evaluation of this transnational migration system's evolutionary character by covering the geographical dispersal of new immigrant destinations and the subsequent ramifications of their presence in new destinations and their adaptation experiences and experiences of adjustment, or partial-adjustment, of the local "host" communities.

Cohen's *The Culture of Migration in Southern Mexico* focuses on rural Mexican society and examines the complex range of factors that cause rural Oaxacans to migrate or stay at home, and which contribute to the development of a culture of migration in which a transnational path to *el norte* is one among many options for members of the community. The fourth volume under review, Miles's *From Cuenca to Queens*, takes a biographical approach to transnational migration and follows the path of an Ecuadorian family, the Quitasacas, from their home community in Cuenca, a squatter neighborhood in the city of Guayaquil, to Queens in New York City. Here, the lens focuses in on the most micro-level unit in the transnational migration system, thereby completing "the story" these four texts narrate.

This review essay, therefore, moves from the societal scales of structure and agency interactions to locality and community interactions, and eventually depicts the agency behaviors at the family and individual levels, in terms of transnational family biographies of chance, hope, promise, frustration, and failure. Mexican-U.S. transnational migration (and the Latin American-U.S. migration by inference) is thoroughly examined, that's for sure!

Durand and Massey's *Crossing the Border* brings rigorous inquiry to the forefront and in a series of well-focused analyses provides a broad empirical range of substantive findings based upon the substantive data of the Mexican Migration Project (MMP), sponsored by the Russell Sage Foundation. They go to considerable pains to emphasize the social scientific rigor of the analyses and the comprehensiveness of the data, on which the contributors draw their generalizations. In their words: "the MMP has (ethno)surveyed eighty-one binational communities, yielding reliable data on nearly eighteen thousand current and former U.S. migrants, some 60 percent of whom were undocumented at the time of the survey. The data set contains life histories of around fifty-five hundred migrant households, yielding nearly 260,000 person-years of information on immigration stretching back into the 1920s. The MMP database offers the largest, most comprehensive, and most reliable source of statistical data on documented and undocumented Mexican immigrants currently available"(3). Following an introductory chapter in which Durand and Massey reflect on what they have learned from the MMP are four sections, three with four contributing

chapters—"Migration and the Family," "Regional and Sectoral Differences," and "Lessons for Policy Makers"—and one, "Migration and Gender," with two contributions, which taken together make this rich empirical substantiation a treasure trove with considerable analytical and empirical authority.

*Crossing the Border* contests many of the myths that the U.S. anti-immigration lobby relies upon. The restrictive policies of the late 1980s and 1990s are not only criticized for their counterproductive effects, but they are found to be based on erroneous thinking. Today's Mexican migrants are neither desperately poor nor are they intent on settling permanently in *el norte*. The increased militarization of the border and heightened security have not succeeded in preventing immigrant entry, but instead have hindered or delayed return. Migration, savings, and remittance relationships are highly interdependent, and investments in houses, community projects, and family support "back home" remain highly significant motivations for temporary work "over there." Many immigrants come from dynamically developing regions, not the most underdeveloped rural peripheries; more young men and women alike are seeking temporary work because of rural and urban labor market failures and associated unemployment at home. And as Durand and Massey conclude, "Left to their own devices, the vast majority would return to participate in Mexico's growth as an economy and society" (13). Several of the contributions stand out because of their convincing findings: Mooney's chapter 3 on social capital accumulation in Mexican home communities and families; Parrado's chapter 4, which informatively links migrant investments with the growth in the size and quality of Mexico's housing; Donato and Patterson's chapter 6, which is an engaging assessment of women's border crossing strategies; Rivero-Fuentes's chapter 11, which challenges the false dichotomy that internal and international migration are distinctive mobility processes; and Reyes's chapter 15, which shows that the sharply falling probabilities of return have substantially increased the length of Mexican migrants' sojourns and have therefore contributed to the rapid growth of the Mexican presence in the United States to its current estimate of around 10 million, half of whom are irregular, or unauthorized.

Zúñiga and Hernández-León's *New Destinations* is the other MMP contribution, and it adds more insights on the national dispersal of Mexican immigrants away from the traditional few destinations (California, Texas, and Chicago, Illinois) and utilizes more micro-level interpretations and ethnographic case studies. The 'new geography of Mexican immigrant settlement' of the mid-1980s post-IRCA (Immigration Reform and Control Act) era is given special attention throughout this collection, because this embedded and nationally-dispersed, Mexican-U.S. transnational migration system now demonstrates its own momentum and its own cumulative causation. In this collection, immigrant experiences and community

formation is the main theme of the first section, and economic integration and local communities' reactions to their newcomers is the theme of the second section—with three chapters in each section. The dynamic of intergroup relations is sensitively and informatively presented in a third and concluding section, again with three contributing chapters. Ethnographic inquiries are more common in this MMP collection, which is an appropriate change of scale and methodological lens given the local nature of new immigrant experiences and consequences. Here too, several contributions stand out: Donato, Steinback, and Bankston's chapter 4 is one exceptional case in point, where authors discover counter-intuitive findings about formal/legal and irregular migrants' receptions; another is Grey and Woodrick's chapter 6, which gives a positive spin to the adaptation experiences and progressive character of the local communities' response; and a third is Rich and Miranda's chapter 8, which exposes the local communities' ambivalent and conflicting response to the presence of Mexicans. The two MMP texts reviewed here are certainly complementary, and the rigor of many of the examinations in the first volume is nicely balanced with the descriptive insights gained from the ethnographic case studies in this latter collection. However, this Mexico-U.S. transnational, cross-border story is still not complete. What about the view (or views) from Mexico and the challenges of transnational people's lives and livelihoods, as they are caught up in the uncertain world of global-to-local, transnational interactions and go about their 'everyday practices'? These oversights are 'filled in' by the two remaining books in this review set, by Cohen and Miles

Cohen's *The Culture of Migration in Southern Mexico* is a much needed view from the global South, where the author brings his anthropological lens and his long-term immersion experience in Oaxacan rural society to help the reader understand how migration, both internal and international, has emerged as a tried-and-tested survival and sustenance strategy for many rural households and formative families. Diverging from the ethnographic practice of studying one rural community in depth, Cohen designed a more comparative framework for his data collection and in-depth inquiries, enabling him to comprehensively record the historical emergence of household-level migration strategies, the increased reliance on migration of household members as a life-skill strategy, and the variability in migration's incidence across his set of twelve rural communities in the Oaxaca valley. Taking six years to complete this in-depth study, Cohen marshaled local support, graduate student assistance, and lots of help from Oaxacan migrant families themselves, which allows him to write confidently about the growing "culture of migration" that now permeates Oaxacan society.

Cohen is at pains to show that internal and international migration are only two options, among other mobility and immobility choices.

They are not inevitable, nor are they easily characterized as structurally determined responses to rural poverty or deprivation. Perhaps claiming a unique first in such migration-focused treatises of rural Mexico, chapter 5 documents the experiences and rationales of nonmigrant households, capturing the behavioral motives behind their reasons for staying, as opposed to leaving, either temporarily or permanently. Starting as he does in rural sending communities of South Mexico, Cohen's informative and rigorous examination of which community resources underwrite migration and how circuits of people, knowledge, money, and gifts in kind help to build reciprocal linkages among family-systems of migration that are part internal and part international, or transnational in their spatial reach, is the ideal accompaniment to the MMP examinations of the wider Mexico-U.S. transnational migration systems and their impacts on local destination communities. Cohen concludes with this observation about the culture of migration in Oaxacan everyday life and experience in their increasingly uncertain world: "It is a sign of the resilience and ingenuity of most rural Oaxacans that they can cope with the changes, that they can integrate migration into the patterns and processes that define their world, and that they can use remittances to accomplish important goals for their households and their communities" (148).

The last story in this scalar descent through the societal hierarchy of optical views is Miles's *From Cuenca to Queens*, which takes a biographical approach and follows the transnational path and conflicting experiences of the "joys and hardships," of one of the members of an *indio* Ecuadorian family, the Quitasacas—namely, their eldest son Vincente from his rural home community in Cuenca to Queens, in New York City. Family members' views and experiences are elicited to acquire a fuller, ethnographic account of Vincente's transnational journey. In Miles's own words, her anthropological treatise "is about the construction of images, impressions, imaginings, and stories of transnational migration as it is experienced and understood by one Ecuadorian family" (2). Appropriately sensitive to gendered relationships and the negotiated tensions within this transnational family, Miles deals theoretically and interestingly with class, race, and culture issues in identity formation and is also theoretically perceptive in recognizing the importance of contextual influences on family members' transitions through their life courses.

Her focus on the family as the decision-making and operational "transnational unit" and on family member's roles, images, and anxieties not only widens the account but also provides important corroboration to the story of Vincente, the eldest son, who makes the journey from Cuenca to Queens. One notable observation, which Miles characterizes as the Quitasaca's intra- and inter-generational quandary, is generalizable to other Latin American multi-local, migration experiences: "the Quitasacas have long struggled with the disjunctures between their rural

past, their urban present, and their children's cosmopolitan futures" (50). Chapter 3, on "Family Matters," is indeed an impressive narration of intra-family relationships, engendered power-struggles, and negotiated familial outcomes in which Miles's own participant observations are blended with the scholarship of other insightful researchers.

The four chapters that follow give personal accounts of family members' views and experiences; first, that of Rosa, the stronger of the married pair in chapter 4; then of her husband Lucho in chapter 5; of Vincente's two younger siblings in chapter 6; and eventually in chapter 7, of Vincente, the transnational migrant himself. The summation chapter, chapter 8, called "Lives and Stories," brings the biographies together, and not only reiterates the unpredictable nature of transnational journeys but also reminds us that families left behind follow unpredictable journeys themselves. Mutual networks form beyond the family, and transnational migrants should be expected to follow divergent paths and have different levels and degrees of success, failure, and hardship, largely because of the widening or narrowing geographical scales of the transnational system in which transnational migrants and their families go about their daily lives, undertake their life decisions, and negotiate their way living between and identifying with multiple worlds.

One underlying premise in all four texts reviewed here is that transnational migration offers hope, the promise of better things, better chances for loved ones, progress; yet, all the while the paths towards these goals are prone to disruption, and achievement gives way to disappointment, but not for long, or always. Crossing the U.S. border—whether one migrates from Ecuador, central Mexico, Oaxaca, or other distant places—has become a job-seeking strategy for many, though not necessarily the truly disadvantaged, the most impoverished, nor the most desperately poor. Crossing the border from the United States into Mexico, on the other hand, has become more dangerous for today's irregular migrants as the militarization of the Mexico-U.S. border has increased (Lovato 2005). In addition to increased governmental concern (paranoia) over securing the Mexico-U.S. border as an essential aspect of the war on drugs, the war on terrorism, and the threat "third nation immigrants" might pose to domestic safety, the task of securing the border has also become privatized, with vigilante groups taking it upon themselves to conduct armed patrols and overtly brutal methods of intimidation, physical abuse, and humiliation to "scare the *mojados* away." The human rights and dignities of immigrants are too easily taken away or compromised in today's insecure times.

On the other hand, the stories of these well-entrenched, transnational migration systems that are so well documented in these four texts are persuasive, hopeful, and positive because they narrate the triumph of people's creative and flexible responses to institutional rigidities, the structural power of authorities, and the harsh competitive reality of

global capital's march. Transnational migration certainly qualifies as a "resistance from below" and a strategy for the less powerful and the less advantaged who seek a better future for themselves and /or for their loved ones—for their children and their children's children.

## REFERENCES

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