New Perspectives on Borders, Frontiers and International Migration

Review essay by Pieter de Vries


The field of migration studies is becoming an exciting area of research and theorisation in the social sciences. Much disciplinary research remains oriented to the production and analysis of data which is of relevance to policy debates on the impact of migration on labour markets and demand for government services. At the same time the experience of migration has captured the imagination of many scholars interested in theoretical topics such as globalisation, transnationalism and multiculturalism. The works reviewed here are illustrative for the evolution of the field and show how it has become an area of confluence for different disciplinary perspectives. In order to put the empirical topics discussed in the volumes in a wider framework, I will first provide a short overview of a number of conceptual developments in the field.

To begin with, migration studies are no longer concerned mainly with explaining the economic determinants of decisions by individuals or households to relocate from point X to point Y, or about the kinds of skills and values migrants may need in order to assimilate into the host society. It is not enough to analyse the migration process merely as a progression from temporal and circular to more permanent forms. Forms of migration change over time in response to economic and migration policies, but they cannot be understood as purely mechanical responses to these. It is well recognised today that the choices and decisions to migrate are shaped by those opportunities offered by wider networks of migrant kin and by the expectations raised by past experiences and trajectories of migration. The perspectives that see migration as functional in transitional processes from traditional societies to modern ones, or in effecting forms of articulation between different modes of production are found wanting as they fail to explore the complex set of arrangements by which binational support networks are sustained.

When concentrating on individual choices or structural determinations, conventional approaches direct our attention away from the organisational process through which migration is undertaken and the cultural resources migrants draw upon for constructing complex livelihoods that cut across the sen-
ding and host societies. In particular the cultural dimension underlying this social organisation of migration has attracted much attention. As pointed out by anthropologists, the experience of moving in and out of different societies forces migrants and academics to question their received notions of culture as being tied to specific locations or geographical areas. Rather than analysing migration as movement through space, it seems more interesting to study the culture of movement and to explore the ways in which it is related to specific modes of social organisation. Migration, thus, should be seen as a process in itself, with its own forms of social and cultural organisation.

This repositioning of the field of migration studies has encouraged the development of new and competing conceptual and methodological approaches drawing upon 'old' and 'new' analytical traditions. For instance, the 'new economic sociology of migration' (see Portes 1995) builds upon notions of social networks and social capital in order to research and analyse why certain groupings are more successful than others in securing particular resource niches, and the role that ethnicity plays in the differential ways in which migrants are absorbed into host societies. This is an influential line of thinking that can be encountered in several of the contributions in the works reviewed (see Guarnizo and Portes in Challenging Fronteras and Smith's commentary to the chapter by Cornelius' in Crossings).

A mutual cross-fertilisation between post-structuralist theory and new approaches to migration is now occurring. Recent works within this current of thought are looking into how notions of place are constructed by analysing the various ways in which space is deterritorialised and reterritorialised, and by reflecting upon how local experience is made understandable and represented within imagined cultural spaces. In the process, distinctions between community and migration studies blur, giving way to the notion of transnational communities.

Recent studies on transnational migration from Mexico to the USA (Rouse 1995, Smith 1993) have been influential in pointing out the multiple sets of resources, values and commitments that Mexican migrants combine and the impact that diverging paths of capitalist development in both countries has had on their ability to construct a livelihood in either Mexico or the USA. Roger Rouse, for instance, argues that due to structural transformations in global capitalism, migrants have become semi-proletarians in the USA while remaining tied to small-scale operations in their countries of origin. In these approaches much attention is being paid to the role of communication and information technologies – telephone, video tapes, cheap air fares and, recently, e-mail and internet – in shaping cultural practices by which people relate to their homelands.

It is not surprising, then, that this 'cultural turn' in migration studies has been embraced by scholars concerned with the study of how larger transformations in the global economy give rise to the emergence of new socio-political identities along the axes of class, nation and locality. As a result, alternative forms of imagining national belonging are possible, often in opposition to state or hegemonic attempts to control people and territory (for example, Basch and Glick Shiller 1995, Gupta and Ferguson 1997). That global capitalism has acquired a cultural logic is a tenet that has been widely accepted in 'post-modern' political economy studies of transnational migration.
The works reviewed here deal with the different aspects of migration, the cultural construction of ethnic frontiers and the experience of life on the border. *Crossings* centres on Mexican immigration from an interdisciplinary perspective, and deals explicitly with the policy debate on migration while discussing what has been coined the 'new migration' in American migration studies. *Challenging Fronteras* sets out to understand the emergence of new Hispanic identities in the U.S. as a result of the diaspora of Latin Americans to the U.S. In doing so it highlights the diversity of these populations in cultural, racial, and class terms. Finally, *On the Line* documents recent structural evolutions along the Mexican-U.S. border and dwells extensively on the experiences of Mexican migrants. It presents us with a lively and passionate picture of the consequences for Mexicans of the emergence of a *maquiladora* industry on the Mexican side of the border.

**Understanding Mexican Immigration to the U.S.**

As suggested, the field of migration studies is increasingly occupied with issues concerning recent global changes and the capacity of the social sciences to develop conceptual frameworks for understanding these transformations. A common view represented in *Crossings* and *On the Line* is that Mexican immigrants in the U.S. have been incorporated into the labour force under subordinated conditions. Return migration is being closed off as smallholder economies become highly dependent on the U.S. economy through remittances. In addition, return migration is becoming increasingly difficult as returnees are confronted back in Mexico with the fact that they have lost the cultural capital to operate effectively within the Mexican context. The result is a continuous state of displacement as social reproduction is no longer exclusively tied to specific national or regional settings.

A different concern is the continuous involvement of migrants in informal (and often illegal) activities and the ways in which different types of migration (legal and illegal, temporal and permanent) shape new patterns of economic activity in both sending and host societies. Wayne Cornelius' chapter in *Crossings* deals in particular with the 'structural embeddedness of demand for immigrant labour' in San Diego county and shows that Mexican immigrants not only outcompete the locals in the labour market but they have also contributed to various thriving sectors of the economy. He goes so far as to suggest that the employment of immigrant labour is so highly institutionalised that it is no longer sensitive to changes in the legal and public policy environment that are intended to deter new immigration or discourage permanent settlement by immigrants already there (p. 116). This being the case, questions can then be raised about why Mexican immigration remains so high on the public policy agenda. Is it because Mexican immigrants are easy scapegoats for economic and social problems in California, or because certain images of culturally different 'others' are functional in strategies of segmentation of the workforce?

*Crossings* is composed of original essays written by leading scholars of Mexican immigration to the United States. It is the product of an international conference titled 'The Socio-Cultural Remaking of the North American Space', held at Harvard University in 1997. Each article is followed by the com-
mentary of a leading scholar in the chosen field. The focus lies on those aspects of the recent immigration experience that are new and that differentiate them from earlier experiences in this century. Mexican immigration is analysed from different disciplinary perspectives such as anthropology, economics, demography, education, political science, psychoanalysis and sociology. Several issues are tackled in the volume such as how the unprecedented pattern of Mexican immigration is transforming the texture of the American fabric. In other words, what will be the ethnic consequences of immigration by Mexicans and other Latinos when the U.S. is no longer dominated by the divide between ‘black’ and ‘white’? The book is organised according to four different themes. After a useful overview written by the editor, the ‘antecedents and new demographic formations’ of Mexican immigration are discussed, followed by economic, social and psychocultural themes. There are rich pickings for everyone in this volume. There is an interesting mix of informative, descriptive essays and the more theoretical chapters. It also displays several modes of analysis and styles of reasoning, varying from statistical economic analysis to more ethnographic approaches.

It would be going too far to discuss all the chapters of the book. Reference has already been made to the chapter by Wayne Cornelius and Andreas. In my view the last section of the book on psychocultural themes is theoretically the most innovative one. These chapters centre on the phenomenological and experiential dimensions of immigration, paying special attention to the process of uprooting and resettlement. In addition to the chapters by Gutierrez on the impact of ethnicity and culture on the remaking of public culture and institutional life in the U.S. and Andreas’ chapter on law enforcement at the U.S.-Mexican border (which is discussed below), there is an interesting chapter by Ricardo Ainsley on ‘low intensity mourning’. In his contribution Ainsley discusses the appropriation of the flea market of Austin, Texas, by immigrants and the ways in which they reconstruct a lost world and create a vehicle for effective engagement in the new one. This is not an uncontested process, though, as it provokes deep anxieties among the host population.

Life on the Border and the Construction of Cultural Frontiers

If it is the case that transnational networks are constituted by flows of people, commodities, information and cultural objects leading to new types of social and economic interconnections that transcend national borders, then we need to rethink the role of borders and frontiers. Apparently borders increasingly play a disciplinary role in the regulation of flows of people while their economic regulatory functions are decreasing. One interesting contribution on the subject is Peter Andreas’ chapter in Crossings which discusses the nature and efficacy of the massive new law enforcement efforts at the southern border of the United States. He argues that although illegal entry has certainly become more difficult and dangerous, there is little evidence to believe that migrants are turning around and heading home. The total increase in the number of border apprehensions may actually reflect an increase, rather than a reduction, in border crossings. Andreas claims that new efforts such as the ‘prevention through deterrence’ field operations conducted at the southern border have
largely failed to actually reduce illegal immigration flows. In fact, as Suárez-Orozco, the editor of Crossings argues, these initiatives create a 'seductive imagery of state control and reinforce the myth that the answer to the problem of illegal immigration is to be found on the border' (p. 32).

A related set of questions concerns the process by which cultural images of migrants are constructed by political groupings in the North to the effect of representing uncontrolled movement as deviant or transgressive. Migration from Latin-American nations to the United States is associated with criminality and thus perceived as a threat. Illegal and all too often legal migrants are stigmatised as cultural aliens and criminalised as a menace to public security and the American way of life. As a result of this criminalisation of migrants, metaphors of borders and frontiers have become salient in both forms of demonisation as well as for conveying the experience of illegality and marginalisation that migrants endure. Ideas of frontiers and borders are repositories of various and often contradictory meanings and experiences. Purportedly, borders are liminal spaces where the national cultural hegemony is undermined, or rendered ineffective, whereas the idea of frontier refers to bureaucratic efforts to delimit national territory. However, border places as shown in On the Line by Augusta Dwyer are contrived places in the sense that they lack deep-seated historical memories while at the same time they are becoming icons for the representation of the experience of uprootedness.

As immigrants in the U.S. are likely to stay, a relevant line of research shows how common identities are negotiated among Hispanics and how these relate to the emergence of new lifestyles and 'ethnic' markets. This subject is central to various contributions in Challenging Fronteras (and the contribution by Gutierrez in Crossings). The importance of cultural notions of belonging and the construction of mythic pasts in attempts to create broad alliances between native Hispanics and legal and illegal migrants is explored (see Klor de Alva's contribution in Fronteras).

Challenging Fronteras and On the Line look at borders and frontiers in different ways. Whereas the former focuses on socio-economic, cultural and political development on the actual frontier between Mexico and the U.S., the latter inquires into the cultural processes by which ethnic and racial frontiers are constructed. Challenging Fronteras is an example of the present interlocking of migration studies with ethnic studies in the U.S. It grew out of an attempt to structure a reader on Chicano and Latino studies in sociology. The volume is composed of four sections. The first provides a theoretical framework for conceptualising the Latino experience and is in its theoretical scope exemplary for the U.S. debates on multiculturalism. The second one deals with different immigration experiences ranging from Central America to Puerto Rico, Mexico and Nicaragua. The third section deals with issues of ethnic identity and contains chapters on Dominican entrepreneurs in New York, on identity construction by Puerto Ricans and Chicanos and on the everyday experience of being a Hispanic maid. The fourth section deals with changes in the gender division of labour among Latinos in the U.S. and the fifth section with patterns of economic and political restructuring. The quality of the chapters varies. Most are rather descriptive and culturalist in their efforts to give an impression of what it is like to be a Latina or Latino in the U.S. Although the theoretical discussions
are by now somewhat outmoded, the volume gives a good overview of the research undertaken on the topic.

*On the Line* is a book written by a committed reporter. It describes the rise of the maquiladora industry on the border and blends a compassionate view of the hardships of workers and migrants with well-grounded analyses of various topics such as labour organisation, the environment, health and safety in the factories, illegal migration to the U.S. and the workings of the U.S. border patrol. Though not an accomplished academic work, it is highly successful in directing attention to the plight of those who do not benefit from the enormous profits to be gained by investment in the border. It is also the work of a political activist taking sides on the discussion on the North American Free Trade Association, NAFTA. For as Dwyer puts it, 'The experiences of the past twenty years or more along the border gives the lie to government and business assertions that uncontrolled economic growth will inevitably improve people's lives. New jobs have failed to translate into decent salaries or housing, or into any kind of hope for the future generations of Mexican workers' (p. 129).

The three volumes differ in thematic focus and theoretical approach, yet they have in common their attempt to come to grips with the changing nature of, and interrelation between, issues of migration, borders and frontiers. And although they do not 'represent' a particular current of thought, they do give a good impression of recent intellectual engagements with these topics. They are valuable readings for students and teachers of Latin and North American studies and migration studies as well as for those interested in the socio-cultural and economic impacts of transnationalism.

**References**


