

Forget Victimisation: Granting Agency to Migrants

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Abstract: The 'migrant' is a category excluded from not only from celebratory concepts such as transnationalism and cosmopolitanism but also increasingly spoken of as a victim. This article exposes prejudices in what is meant by the term and proposes another vision, in which less advantaged people are granted ordinary human autonomy.

Keywords: migration, work, informal sector, trafficking, transnationalism.

There is a growing tendency to victimise poor people, weak people, uneducated people and migrant people. The trend, which began as a way of drawing attention to specific forms of violence committed against women, has now become a way of describing everyone on the lower rungs of power. Routinely, supporters position them as victims in order to claim rights for them, but this move also turns them *into* victims, and victims need help, need saving—which gives a primary role to supporters. Much rhetoric about migration has fallen into this pattern: migrants, it turns out, are not only vulnerable to exploitation, a patent truth, but they are 'victims'.

The other choice, according to sensationalist media treatments, is criminal. Since news on migrants is reported only when disasters befall them, or when they are caught in something 'illegal', they can only be positioned in one of these two ways: as past victims of poverty or conflict in their home states and present victims of criminal bands, or as criminals who take advantage of such victims. The victims need to be saved, and the criminals to be punished. This reductionism encourages the idea that there is something inherently *dangerous* about being a migrant. Since migrants are usually seen as people from the third world, the positioning of so many of them as victims—of economic restructuring if not of criminal agents—harks back unsettlingly to the old category of the 'native'. And since migrants nowadays are so often women, these natives are constituted as backward, developmentally *less* than first-world women. This is most overt, of course, in 'trafficking' discourses (for example, in Barry, 1979) but can now be heard in general talk about 'illegal' migrants.

Ratna Kapur shows how this victimising tendency began in the early 1990s with the project to reveal the widespread, routine nature of violence against women:

In the context of law and human rights, it is invariably the abject victim subject who seeks rights, primarily because she is the one who has had the worst happen to her. The victim subject has allowed women to speak out about abuses that have remained hidden or invisible in human rights discourse (Kapur, 2001: 5).

This strategy has led to many benefits for women. The problem is that the person designated a victim tends to take on an *identity* as victim that reduces her to being seen as a passive receptacle and 'encourages some feminists in the international arena to propose strategies which are reminiscent of imperial interventions in the lives of the native subject' (Kapur, 2001: 6).

The category 'migrant', awkward and ambiguous to begin with, becomes more so when it is victimised. In this article, I want to look at what we think we mean when we call someone a migrant, and then suggest that there are both class and postcolonial analyses to be made of this constructed identity and the passivity assigned to it. To do this, I will call on my own research with migrating people in various parts of the world. What I recount is widely known, but not often included in formal studies of migrations.

Conventional travellers

On the surface, there seem to be patently different kinds of travellers: tourists, people whose work involves travel, refugees and migrants. Tourists are generally defined as people with time and money to spend on leisure activities who take a trip somewhere to do it: they are 'travelling for pleasure'. Tourism is defined by an absence (work), and tourists are believed to have left their jobs behind to indulge consciously in *not* working. In the literature, the tourist is someone from the North (the tourism of Southerners is invisible). Some people oppose a status of 'traveller' to that of tourist, saying their trips are unplanned, open-ended, longer and more appreciative of the 'real culture' of a place. 'Interacting with the culture' is the goal for many of these, and this interaction most likely comes about through getting a job. 'Working' does not exclude pleasure, then, for first-world subjects.

People who travel in the course of carrying out their jobs are at first glance also clearly identifiable. Whether sent on trips by companies or undertaking them on their own, business travellers are obliged to be on the road. Their trips may be long or short, involve familiarity with the culture visited and the local language or not and require sociability or not, but they have in common that this is not supposed to be 'leisure time'. But is this true? Many businesspeople also engage in tourism during their trips, using their 'expense accounts' to entertain clients, much of this money going to sites where tourists also go (theatres, cabarets, sex or gambling clubs, restaurants, bars, boat trips, sports events). The trips taken to attend conferences, do field work or provide consultations by academics, 'development' and technical consultants, missionaries and social-sector personnel also feature tourism. Sports professionals, singers, musicians, actors, salespeople, sailors, soldiers, airline and train personnel, commercial fishermen, farm-workers, long-distance truck drivers and a variety of others travel as part of their professions. Modern explorers search for oil, minerals, endangered species of animals and plants and 'lost' archaeological artefacts. Many of these people spend a long time away from home, and their work life is punctuated by leisure and tourist activities. Some of these people have homes or 'home bases' in more than one place. Students who take years abroad or travel to do field work are combining tourism and work. The main goal of a voyage for religious pilgrims is not work, but they may work and engage in tourist activities on the way to and from the pilgrimage. And then there are nomads whose traditional way of gaining a livelihood includes mobility.

The dichotomy working traveller/work-free traveller is misleading, and many forms of travel have aspects of both. So what makes a 'migrant' different?

This other kind of traveller

Some people distinguish between all the above types and ‘migrants’, on the grounds that the latter ‘settle’. According to this distinction, migrants move from their home to make another one in someone else’s country. They are not positioned as travellers or tourists, since they are looking not only to spend money but earn it. The word migrant is nearly always used about the working class, not about middle-class professionals and not about people from the first-world, even if they also have left home and moved to another country. Instead, the word rings of a subaltern status.

Theories of migration have tended to concentrate on what causes people to move to new countries, focusing on structural conditions such as recomposition of capital or globalisation of markets, national policies and the rational decisions of ‘household units’. Discourses of ‘push-pull factors’ at the point of origin and the point of reception centre on causes such as wage differentials between countries, loss of land or crop failure, recruitment by employers abroad, family reunification projects, favourable immigration policy, flight from violence, persecution and armed conflict and the ‘feminisation of poverty’. None of these conditions excludes the others, and migrations are obviously best thought of as having multiple causes, since no single condition guarantees that migration will take place.

That such factors exist is unarguable, but they envision human beings as being *acted upon*, leaving little room for more subtle issues of desire, aspiration, frustration, anxiety or a myriad of other states of the soul. ‘Push-pull’ factoring, which sounds like something that happens to less-than-‘civilised’ people, is not usually mentioned when Euramericans are the migrants; these are more likely to be described as modern selves searching actively for better situations in which to realise their identities.

We know that choice is always at work, even with the poorest migrants, simply because *everyone* does not migrate from places having ‘push’ factors.

If it were true . . . that the flow of immigrants and refugees was simply a matter of individuals in search of better opportunities in a richer country, then the growing population and poverty in much of the world would have created truly massive numbers of poor invading highly developed countries, a great indiscriminate flow of human beings from misery to wealth. This has not been the case. Migrations are highly selective processes; only certain people leave, and they travel on highly structured routes to their destinations, rather than gravitate blindly toward any rich country they can enter (Sassen, 1999: 2).

Since the media, many governments and numerous supporters of migrants tend to talk as though the proverbial ‘avalanches’ of migrants were actually occurring, it seems important to underscore this point.[1] Even in the most trying situations, there are people who prefer to remain at home, while other people prefer to leave. Both are acted upon by world forces, yes, but they do not lose their ability to think through their options. Individual personalities play their part, differences such as degree of self-confidence, willingness to take risks and adaptability in the face of change. Being in a structurally less powerful position than people in the first world does not mean that one is not making decisions, and those decisions are influenced by a vast multiplicity of circumstances, including individual desire. Being poor does not make people poor in spirit.

In the same way, it does not follow that people who have decided to leave home, travel abroad and look for work, even in the most arduous conditions, *never* have leisure time, engage in tourist activities or look for pleasure. Combining business with pleasure is a concept available to the poor as well as the rich, to those with a false passport as well as those with a real one, and to those working in stigmatised occupations such as sex work as well as those doing what societies call ‘dignified work’. Saying migrants are people exclusively dedicated to work makes as little sense as saying business travellers are—it means rendering them one-dimensional, less than human.

A good deal of the fault for this reductionism goes to the media overload on the issue of *how* people migrate.

The manner of arriving

Until recently, the *way* people migrated was not a central issue in migration studies. They were assumed to have got the money together somehow, taken a bus, train, boat or plane and landed somewhere. Until they tried to make money, asked for help or presented some kind of social problem, they were more or less invisible. But now that the focus is on people getting past border controls to work in the sex industry, questions of how people get out of their own countries are on the agendas of numerous national and international governments.

Without a job offer, work permit and associated documents, entrance to the first world and many other countries is legally out of the question. Entering with a tourist visa is therefore a conventional solution, the idea being to overstay the time allotted and ‘disappear’ from authorities’ control. But obtaining a tourist visa can also be next to impossible for citizens of many countries with destinations in the first world, or may require long waiting because of quotas. Or the potential tourist-migrant may indeed be able to get a visa but not have the money to buy tickets and survive while looking for work. For these and other reasons, would-be travellers commonly seek help from intermediary agents in the travel process. These intermediaries sell services and documents that many travellers cannot afford to buy, so loans are a common feature of these trips. Those who help (in this context selling the service is helping) are often family members, old friends, tourist acquaintances, independent entrepreneurs or any combination of these, and they may play a minimal part or offer a whole travel ‘package’ which links them closely to the migrant at every step of the way.

Services offered for money may include the provision of passports, visas, changes of identity, work permits and other documents; advice on how to look and act in interviews with immigration officials (at the border, in airports, on trains and buses, in the street); the loan of money to show upon entrance with a tourist visa; pick-up service at the airport or car transportation to another city or country or to pre-arranged lodgings; and contact information for potential employers or other intermediaries at the destination. These services are not difficult to find in countries where out-travel has become normalised over time, and in certain countries, formal-sector travel agents offer such informal services.

Once in the destination country, travellers continue to need help and advice if they are going to get safe jobs with decent pay and without egregious labour abuses. They need contacts who can provide transport schedules or transport, addresses of safe places to stay, translation services, information on labour and cultural norms, medical references and other, conventional travel advice. In short, the creation of an economic niche for outside agents is a *normal* development in the informal economy facilitating migrations. That part of this economy turns to criminal exploitation does not mean the entire network does, nor that the clientele are all its ‘victims’.

I remember one day in a café in the centre of a Caribbean town. While Europeans were enjoying typical tropical holidays on nearby beaches, everyone in the café was talking about how to get out of the country. A young waiter discreetly chatted me up, soon asking if I could help him travel to Europe, in exchange for any kind of services I liked. Many vacationers who have been in poor countries have had this experience, and some will still remember the sympathy they felt, and the desire to help. Some will, in fact, have helped with money, ideas or contacts, thus becoming part of the informal networks that assist migrations, but few of these think of themselves as ‘traffickers’ or ‘smugglers’, no matter what job a migrant is destined to do.

The processes described involve potential migrants in a series of risky judgements and decisions. Each step of the way, they must weigh the story they are being told against what they have heard from returned migrants, friends abroad and news reports. Whether migrants buy a ‘full package’ from a single entrepreneur or make a succession of smaller decisions, only one link in the chain needs to be bad in order for things to go wrong. Obviously, this kind of clandestine market, outside all regulation, is not ‘fair’ in comparison with what people expect to enjoy in the first world. But the people who act within it are real, whole people who do not merit being generalised as ‘victims’. Néstor Rodríguez describes such migrations:

It is important to understand that autonomous migration means more than unauthorized (‘illegal’) border crossings: it means a community strategy implemented, developed, and sustained with the support of institutions, including formal ones, at the migrants’ points of origin and . . . points of destination. Precisely because core institutions (legal, religious, local governmental, etc) support this migratory strategy, undocumented migrants do not perceive its moral significance as deviant. Migrants may see their autonomous migration as extralegal, but not necessarily as criminal (Rodríguez, 1996: 23).

This point demonstrates that the ‘other’ of the victim—the ‘criminal’—is also a misleading notion for describing great numbers of people both travelling and facilitating travel in these immense worldwide networks.

Thinking about migrancy another way

Granting agency to migrating individuals does not mean denying the vast structural changes that push and pull them. On the other hand, granting them autonomy does not mean making them over-responsible for situations largely not of their own making. Global, national and local conditions intervene in individuals’ decisions, along with doses of good and bad luck. Many situations come up during a migration in which migrants have to choose between doing things the ‘right’, or legal, way, or doing them so that they might turn out the way they want. This brings to mind the conversation I

had with a Colombian woman through the bars of the detention centre where she was being held in Bangkok after spending a year in prison. Her anguish did not derive so much from her having been in prison as from her own feelings of guilt because she had semi-knowingly broken the law, allowing a fake visa to be prepared for her in order to get into Japan. Her family had helped her with this, and her resultant conflicts over love and blame were tormenting her. While this woman had been a victim, she had also made choices and felt responsible, and I would not want to take this ethical capacity away from her.

Since Manuel Castells proposed the idea of a 'space of flows' for human movements in a 'network society' (Castells, 1996), migration scholars have used this metaphor in various ways. Doreen Massey emphasizes the 'power geometry' of flows:

Different social groups have distinct relationships to this anyway differentiated mobility: some people are more in charge of it than others; some initiate flows and movement, others don't; some are more on the receiving-end of it than others; some are effectively imprisoned by it (Massey 1994: 149).

The migration-project consists of a vast complex of forces, from the national and global to the most local, personal and serendipitous (whom one happens to meet in a café). How people move, how necessary knowledge moves toward them, how they move their money and how its value moves them, as well as how they encourage other migrants to make similar moves: all form part of these flows. We are surrounded by images and sounds that foment the desire to 'see the world', and although we don't have solid proof that this vision affects the desire to travel, we all know that it does.

In the classic distinction, migrants 'settle'. So very many don't, though: because they never (mentally or physically) relinquish a house, village, city or culture they are accustomed to, because they set themselves up to do business between the old and new country or because they find it unavoidable or impossible not to leave and go back. The latter possibility by no means signifies failure of the migration project, which may end up taking the shape of repeated use of tourist visas or simply repeated attempts to cross the border illegally and manage not to get caught while working. Most of these people come to feel they have more than one 'home', and that they live in both of them.

Living in more than one place

Take the titles of two texts written about the Dominican diaspora: *Between Two Islands* (Grasmuck and Pessar, 1991) and *One Country in Two* (Guarnizo, 1992). In this case, a large number of Dominicans are said to live in both Santo Domingo and New York City, or live between them, on the 'bridge' they have built during the past 20 years.

Family arrangements in which one or both parents live in the U.S. with none or some of their children, while their other children live on the island, are frequent. Although having more than one household in two different countries might be a source of emotional stress and economic hardship, it also arms family members with special skills to deal with uncertainty and adversity. They become more sophisticated than nonmigrant people in dealing with a rapidly globalising world. (Guarnizo, 1992:77)

These arrangements may derive from enormous injustices committed against a people in the past but be expressed as great strengths. Take the case of the West Indian island of Nevis:

The global quality of West Indian culture is seen to be related to the circumstances of slavery and colonialism which sought to suppress and make invisible the Afro-Caribbean community within the island society. For this reason the Afro-Caribbean people employed colonial institutions, to which they gained access, as frameworks within which to formalize and display a culture which they saw as their own. After emancipation these frameworks increasingly derived from migration destinations in the West Indies, North America and Britain, where waged employment was available. In the course of these historical processes a global culture emerged which was characterized by its ability to cultivate and promote a locally developed system of values and practices through the appropriation of external cultural forms (Fog Olwig, 1993)

Karen Fog Olwig's study is called *Global Culture, Island Identity*, again demonstrating the 'bothness' of many peoples' sense of home. These concepts, so common to studies of diaspora and hybridity, are so far not recognised widely in studies of migrations in general, which makes me ask whether we think diaspora is something more profound or complex than mere migration, and why. Diasporas began, after all, with ordinary migrants, 'pushed' or 'pulled' by 'factors'.

Cosmopolitanism should give us another way to position migrants, but Ulf Hannerz, in another classificatory exercise, said:

Most ordinary labour migrants are not cosmopolitans either. For them going away may be, ideally, home plus higher income; often the involvement with another culture is not a fringe benefit but a necessary cost, to be kept as low as possible (Hannerz, 1990: 243).

How in the world does Hannerz know this? It's patently not true of many, many migrants, and anyway—at what point does a person stop being a migrant and become something else? Hannerz fixes migrant identity in an early stage, that of ant leaving, self-protection and wariness toward the new. We can be thankful that most migrants, especially younger ones, do not remain in this stage for long, and they may just as well go on to be cosmopolitans as anything else.

Alejandro Portes *et al* have proposed a new social field to be called Transnationalism, composed of

a growing number of persons who live dual lives: speaking two languages, having homes in two countries, and making a living through continuous regular contact across national borders. Activities within the transnational field comprise a whole gamut of economic, political and social initiatives—ranging from informal import-export business, to the rise of a class of binational professionals, to the campaigns of home country politicians among their expatriates (Portes et al, 1999: 217-8).

Defining a field means the authors have to delimit the phenomena involved, to avoid the term's 'spurious extension to every aspect of reality, a common experience when a particular concept becomes popular' (219). From the quoted text, it would appear that

transnationals are middle class, but I see no need for this. Delimitation is not my project, however.

Beyond labelling

I opened this piece with a complaint: that (unconscious) victimisation is the growing *modus operandi* of people speaking on behalf of migrants. Obviously, those who work in victims' services meet only victims, and as long as they speak on behalf of those particular people there is no problem. But the tendency is wider, and it is not solved by trying to distinguish *precisely* between a 'smuggled' person and a 'trafficked' one. Possible abuses committed by facilitators of migration know no boundaries; they may happen to men as well as women and to those working in sweatshops as well as in private houses.

I suggest that we re-confirm the idea of *agency* for migrants, with the emphasis on the process they are going through. Although some migrants may experience a (sad) feeling of being *permanently* uprooted, many others do not, and the whole theory of social 'integration' of migrants depends on their desires and abilities to adapt, assimilate and lose not their own identities but their identification with migrancy. At best, 'migrant' refers to a stage of life.

I also suggest that researchers and supporters consider the 'transnational' as a way to understand many migrants' customs, including those that have caused polemic ('sacrifice' of animals, wearing headscarves and so on). Perhaps I don't use the term in a carefully delimiting fashion, but it seems to me that many individual migrants evolve transnational ways of living that show creative adaptation and strength: looking for ways out of bad situations, trying to maintain something of the past while opening to the future.

Notes

[1] According to the director of the external relations department and senior regional adviser for Europe at the International Organization for Migration: 'The 150 million migrants estimated to be in the world today make up only 2.5 percent of the world's population' (Schatzer, 2001).

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