Migration and Culture

Robin Cohen

Why is it important to connect 'culture' (such a capacious and abstruse word) to migration? In a long essay from which this entry is partly derived, I argue along with Gunvor Jónsson (2011) that the arrival of cultural analysis into migration studies is somewhat overdue, and a logical outcome of the cultural turn across much of the human sciences. That said, we are at the beginning of a cultural focus in migration studies, which has hitherto been commandeered by demography, sociology, human geography and, more recently, by neoclassical economics. We live in a political climate where anxious politicians, fearful of many long-standing residents' response to further immigration, demand estimates of future migration flows, often on the flimsiest evidential base. Cultural analysis not only adds a necessary layer of complexity to simple statistical models of migration, but also provides a necessary component to those interested in post-settlement questions.

Western cultures predominantly understand migration as driven by flight or the search for work. However, in the Pacific, oscillating population movement is characteristically seen as sustaining kin relationships over space. For example, *Va* is an indigenous moral imperative obliging Samoans to migrate in order to sustain a web of social networks and relationships, despite dispersion (Lilomaiava-Doktor, 2009). This is an unusual example, as it illustrates that the connotation of migration to social actors may differ vastly from the meanings and motives ascribed to such migrants. More recently, western scholars have added 'lifestyle migration' to the 'flight and work' paradigm, wherein movement is predicated on enhancing or perhaps retaining 'a better way of life' with richer cultural choices (Benson and O'Reilly, 2009, Benson, 2011).

More amply covered in the literature is the notion of 'a culture of migration' or a 'migration culture', namely the growth, at a number of levels (family, village, region or nation), of dispositions and predilections that favour migration as a solution to social stasis, unemployment and relative deprivation. In certain communities with long-standing movement, culture and migration have become mutually constitutive. In such settings, migration becomes so deeply rooted that young people expect to live and work abroad, sometimes in complete defiance of known market signals and political restrictions. Cultures of migration have been described in many parts of the world, including Cape Verde, Morocco, Mexico, India and Mali, while many other studies include similar observations, even if these are not explicitly labelled 'cultures of migration'. We should not assume that such predilections are static. The migration aspirations of young people today are modified by greater global connectivity, and are not just a replica of the ideas and values of previous generations. The existence of sophisticated transport technologies, access to global media, schooling and, increasingly, unequal distribution of income and wealth around the globe, are factors that shape current migration aspirations and fantasies.

The migration-culture nexus is also addressed in the 'culture contact' literature, encounters that may antedate, accompany or post-date the migration experience. Migration aspirations arose when people of different heritage learned to speak to others and engage in a range of creolizing social practices. A further crossover occurred through syncretism in religious rituals. Intensifying cultural contact and the subsequent intermingling of peoples, languages and religions were embedded in asymmetries of power and privilege, usually inscribed through racial markers. The enslavement of 11 million Africans provides a clear example. The transatlantic trade deposited Africans in the USA, Caribbean, Mexico and Brazil to work on tropical plantations. Their suffering has been embellished on the consciousness of Europeans and Americans partly because of their historical complicity in owning and exploiting slave labour, but also by the extraordinary success of New World Africans in conveying a sense of their plight through art, literature, music, dance and religious expression. Forced migration has forged powerful cultures of resistance and affirmation.

Early historical and anthropological accounts describing separate cultures have given way to the idea that all cultures have permeable edges and shared traditions arising from history and, more notably, from a step change in connectivity, the set of social changes loosely described as globalization. These changes include the movement of images, ideas, music, goods, money and people – whether as migrants, visitors, tourists, students or football fans. Moreover, the connections (through remittances, by telephone or via the internet) between the stay-at-homes and the movers are now so intense that the experience of mobility, directly or indirectly, affects most of the world's population. The consequence is that old cultures have become ever more permeable. While many authors have accepted the notion of indeterminate boundaries, James Clifford (1997) suggests that culture itself has become 'a borderland, a zone of contacts – blocked and permitted, policed and transgressive'.

COMPAS

Migrants construct migrant imaginaries that are spread to surrounding societies and communities. Even people who are immobile are profoundly affected by these imaginaries. Culture itself becomes mixed and creolized. Popular forms of culture travel with migrants, where they become means of authentication, but also mutate, influencing surrounding cultures in unexpected ways and taking on fresh cultural freight from their new ambiance. The origins, journeys and experiences of the migrants are presented, represented, performed and expressed. Novels, film, poems, dances and music and digital media provide a moving wallpaper, a succession of opaque and pellucid screens that surround everyday activities. Because of the possibility of living in bilocal or transnational space, diasporic practices connecting home and away, origin and destination, established or newly acquired cultural practices, can thrive simultaneously. In short, culture and migration have become folded into each other in forms of social behaviour, thus constituting what Mauss and later Bourdieu called the habitus, the nexus of dispositions governing normal social practices and aspirations.

References

Benson, M. and O'Reilly, K. (2009) 'Migration and the Search for a Better Way of Life: A Critical Exploration of Lifestyle Migration', *Sociological Review*, 57(4): 608–25.

Benson, M. (2011) *British in Rural France: Lifestyle Migration and the Ongoing Quest for a Better Way of Life*, Manchester: Manchester University Press.

Clifford, J. (1997) *Routes: Travel and Translation in the Late Twentieth Century*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

Cohen, R. and Jónsson, G. (2011) 'Introduction: Connecting Culture and Migration', in R. Cohen and G. Jónsson (eds.) *Migration and Culture*, Cheltenham: Edward Elgar.

Lilomaiava-Doktor, S. (2009) 'Beyond "Migration": Samoan Population Movement (*Malaga*) and the Geography of Social Space (*Va*)', *Contemporary Pacific*, 21(1): 1–32.