Blogging Migrant Knowledge – Part II

June 26, 2022 ~ Mark R. Stoneman

Migrant knowledge is not so much a concept as it is a research agenda.[1] It can foster work on what migrants know about their world, and it challenges us to think more about what societies, including states, know about migrants. In Part I of my reflections on our sister blog, *Migrant Knowledge*, I highlighted posts that focused on the knowledge of and about migrant children and youth. Here I turn to a rich set of posts that treat societal knowledge about migrants from the perspective of two elite groups, so to speak, the state and its agents, on the one hand, and scholars, here primarily historians, on the other hand. Two additional perspectives appear in these accounts: the entanglement of state knowledge about migrants with the knowledge that migrants develop about the state and its expectations, a big theme here, and the influence that scholarship can have on migration policy and outcomes.

State Knowledge of Migrants and Vice Versa

In "What's in a Name?," Eliyana Adler points out that the labels that states and other actors attach to migrants "convey information at a variety of levels." In our own time, for instance, "undocumented" and "illegal" are a familiar pairing in U.S. politics and policy-making. "Illegal" expresses a negative image of people without the necessary permits to live and work in the country, and it often conveys a broader anti-immigrant stance. "Undocumented" attempts a more neutral description of people lacking the right immigration and residency status, although such people might still possess identity papers from another state. Policies and politics surrounding foreign nationals who have entered a country with an intention to establish a new home, permanent or temporary, are also conveyed in terms such as "refugee," "asylum seeker," "migrant," and "immigrant," each with its own connotations and possible consequences. Adler uses this insight to scrutinize "the application of different terms to a particular group of Polish Jews during and after the Second World War," those who sought safety from the German and Soviet invading armies in the Soviet Union.

LIST OR MANIFEST OF ALIEN PASSENGERS FOR THE U. S. IMMIGRATION OFFICER AT PORT OF ARRIVAL.

Page from "List or Manifest of Alien Passengers for the U.S. Immigration Officer at Port of Arrival" for the S.S. Hannover sailing from Bremen to Baltimore, May 6–21, 1906, via FamilySearch. This document includes Germans, Lithuanians, and Poles who had emigrated from the Russian Empire, providing information about their literacy, destination, cash on hand, and more. See Sebastian Bondzio's *Migrant Knowledge* contribution for more on what the U.S. federal government sought to learn about would-be immigrants.

Sociologist Ulrike Bialas is also interested in terminology and classification, albeit for its implications for migrants in the present. She notes, for example, a discrepancy between one young man's description of his "adventure" in Africa and the translator's matter-of-fact rendering of the term as "flight." The choice made the youth legible to the state without disqualifying him for asylum because of any overly literal interpretation of "adventure" divorced from its cultural context, even if "flight" did not quite line up with the youth's self-image. Bialas's anecdote forms part of a larger argument about the need for sociology to consider the utility of certain language before throwing it overboard:

> Is it not unwise to question categories in the hopes of demolishing their confining walls when those same walls also provide shelter?

A state maintains its immigration regime on the basis of its knowledge about those seeking entry, whereas would-be migrants learn what that state is looking for and try to meet (or skirt) those expectations. Nonetheless, different "ways of knowing" can clash when the migrant encounters the state's officials at the border. In the century-old example that Andrea Wiegeshoff offers from U.S. immigration records, three kinds of knowledge come into play: "private knowledge or memory" (of a young man seeking entry), "practical knowledge or experience" (of immigration officials), and "scientific knowledge or expertise" (anthropological, in this case). The young man asserted he was half Hawaiian, so the Chinese Exclusion Act did not apply. The experience and biases of immigration officials led them to reject this story, however, and the court did not accept the anthropological testimony offered in support of the supplicant's claims. It deferred to the immigration officials' practical knowledge (including prejudices) and denied the young man's claim to residence.

Wendy Rouse describes an apparently effective effort to work around the Chinese Exclusion Act in the United States, albeit at the cost of family separations. Many parents in China obtained false papers for their children and taught them invented family stories to go with the papers. Their aim was for the children to join native-born families in the United States, to which the Exclusion Act did not apply. Rouse writes that the stories children brought with them for immigration officials later had lasting effects on their offspring.

> As they grew and had families of their own, many paper children passed on to their descendants two histories: the history of their paper family and the history of their biological family, public and private memories. Both stories were crucial to their new identities as Chinese Americans. Storytelling thus became a crucial part of the transfer of knowledge between the generations.

Stacy Fahrenthold discusses the knowledge that Syrian American advice booklets offered to would-be immigrants from the same region of the Ottoman Empire before World War One. Those seeking entry did not have an Exclusion Act to contend with, but they still needed to know "how to perform the role of the worthy immigrant" at Ellis Island. The booklets offered guidance on this and on how to handle their later interactions with officials during the period of surveillance preceding naturalization. One had to learn and practice strategic self-representation in order to be understood and accepted by the state's representatives.

The state's efforts to regulate migration at—and increasingly also at a remove from—its borders is the subject of a piece by Ulf Brunnbauer. He focuses on the Habsburg state's efforts to hinder emigration and on the counterstrategies of migration facilitators. The business of emigration included agents at the local level who could leverage local knowledge and relationships. Brunnbauer rejects the recurrent efforts of states to demonize migration facilitators in narratives that emphasize their self-interested greed while obscuring the agency of migrants themselves. Instead, he views them as fulfilling a need. Picking up at a point just after the Habsburg empire's collapse, Allison Schmidt looks at how Joseph Roth portrayed people smugglers in lands of the former empire. The point of the exercise for her is likewise to overcome the powerful tacit knowledge about such activities that we have absorbed in our own lives.

Scholarly Knowledge of Migrants

These contributions to *Migrant Knowledge* are part of a broader conversation about the production of scholarly knowledge about migrants and migration. The actual object of such study, however, is complicated by our relationship to the terminology that states and other stakeholders use in the sources we work with. Isabella Löhr and Christiane Reinecke argue that the reflexive turn can help.

> Migration researchers … analyze how discourses on migration are linked to the worldviews, intentions, and interests of specific historical actors. A self-reflexive perspective on migration research … entails asking the very basic question of how migration research and other forms of knowledge production contribute to a particular image of society and mobile people. How does the production of academic and other formalized knowledge about migration help draw the lines between "inside" and "outside," belonging and non-belonging, inclusion and exclusion?

Why, for example, did first-class passengers arriving in Britain in the 1920s not need an entry visa, but other classes had their papers scrutinized? Why were Chinese workers excluded from the United States in the same period, but Chinese students were not? Why have "different mobilities … been cast as 'immigration,' 'emigration,' or 'migration,' while others have not"? Finally, why do the terms "migrant" and "refugee" overlap in some instances of scholarship, but not in others?[2]

Not just terms but the metaphors we use can shape how we understand migration. In Germany in 2015, for example, some members of Angela Merkel's party took up the anti-immigrant language that had proved effective in the fight to limit political asylum in the 1980s: "the boat is full."[3] Another problematic metaphor portrays large numbers of migrating people as forming potentially dangerous bodies of moving water—big waves, powerful streams or currents, floods—that could take control of the boat, even break it apart and sink it.[4] Luise Fast interrogates metaphors used in a different body of scholarship about mobilities, "the historiography of encounter." She is particularly interested in encounters between westerners and Indigenous peoples in North America's Pacific Northwest in the nineteenth century. At issue here is how the visual and auditory metaphors she has identified shape how scholars write history.

Elliot Young's "Beyond Chinese 'Coolies' as Victims" evinces a kindred sensibility, questioning not a metaphor as such but an overly influential leitmotif. Although Chinese migrant laborers frequently endured terrible treatment, he argues, an exclusive scholarly focus on their victimhood blinds us to their agency.

> Kidnapping and voluntary emigration were the extreme ends of the spectrum from total coercion to free choice, but most Chinese fell somewhere in the middle. Their dire circumstances in China led them to choose a dangerous path of emigration and bonded labor.

The shift in relationship between historian and subject that Young models enables him to see a connection with "the victim narrative pushed by today's anti-human trafficking scholars." As important as it is to take bad-faith actors to task, an exclusive focus on the "wily trafficker" obscures the agency and otherwise complicated narratives of people who engage the much-needed services of smugglers to bring them across the border. To be sure, these images work well for the prosecutor who wishes to win a case against someone facilitating undocumented immigration, but they can severely limit the possibilities of policy and scholarship.

For her part, Julie Weise moves our attention away from the modes and means of migration to focus on migrant workers' interactions with the state in other situations. In three different regional and national contexts, state recruiting and labor policies targeted workers. In the context of these interactions, workers developed their own understandings of citizenship, that is, of what the state owed them, especially in terms of their safety and health. Weise would like to know how migrants developed, learned, and passed on this important knowledge to others as the modern welfare state emerged.

Next to these reflections on how to study migration there are two contributions under the rubric "Revisiting the Classics," a blog feature conceived by Andrea Westermann that I hope will grow. Michelle Kahn offers a nuanced look at Werner Schiffauer's 1991 ethnography *Die Migranten aus Subay* (The Migrants from Subay). The book's most valuable insight today, she argues, lies in its insistence that scholarship on migration look beyond the host country as its main analytical locus:

> . . . we tend to confine our questions to the geographic boundaries of host societies. We ask how host societies respond to the presence of migrants, how migrants interact with host populations, and how migrants carve out their own spaces in—and, in turn, fundamentally reshape—host societies. This approach, however, generally downplays a crucial reality: migrants have lives of their own before they arrive in host societies, and they never cease to maintain ties, whether physical or emotional, to the homelands they leave behind.

Donna Gabaccia, the author of several classics herself, looks at an older book of considerable, albeit ambivalent reputation.

> William Foote Whyte's study of Italian immigrants in the North End of Boston was not particularly successful after its release in 1943. In the years after 1970, though, *Street Corner Society* garnered great success . . . Paradoxically, specialists in Italian American studies found little to love in the book. Here I argue that a hidden history of gender and ethnic dynamics in the academic production of knowledge can explain the paradox.

Gabaccia's narrative includes Whyte's "own penchant for self-reflection" over the years, but also his willingness to use his considerable influence, even as a retiree, to settle scores with detractors.

State and Scholarly Ignorance of Migrants

Lauren Stokes brings us full circle with a critical look at a 1977 sociological study commissioned by the West German government: *Situational Analysis of the Non-Employed Wives of Foreign Workers in the Federal Republic of Germany*. Stokes shows that the academically certified knowledge that the study proffered merely confirmed the biases and prejudices of the client that paid for it. The study ignored the country's gendered impediments to women's wage labor, which the interviewed women had described. In this way, the study provided cover to the state to continue doing nothing to help immigrant mothers hold a job. Such mothers, the study claimed, would not become wage earners because their male-dominated Mediterranean cultures militated against it.

The study's findings did not even reflect the state of scholarship at the time. There were academics who knew better, not to mention the immigrant women themselves. If this embarrassing episode did not amount to explicit disinformation, it can still be understood as an example of agnotology,[5] a topic covered on *History of Knowledge* under the rubric of "producing ignorance." Sometimes states and other stakeholders want to know, but other times they would rather not, or they are culturally or socially incapable of doing so. In fact, debates about migration that hinge on overly narrow definitions and framing can lend themselves to agnotology, insofar as they can obscure as much as they illuminate. Research, publication, and teaching agendas that subject migration studies to history of knowledge perspectives can mitigate such potential for harm.

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1. See Simone Lässig and Swen Steinberg, "Knowledge on the Move: New Approaches toward a History of Migrant Knowledge," *Geschichte und Gesellschaft* 43, no. 3 (2017): 313–346. ↩
2. On the last point, see Rebecca Hamlin, "'Migrants'? 'Refugees'? Terminology Is Contested, Powerful, and Evolving," Migration Information Source, March 24, 2022. Thanks to Robin Buller for this reference. ↩
3. See, for example, Ernst Eisenbichler, "Bayerische Flüchtlingspolitik: Eine Chronik der Abschreckung," BR24, September 3, 2014; and Robert Birnbaum, "'Das Boot ist voll' – Kritik in der Fraktion an Flüchtlingspolitik der Kanzlerin," *Der Tagesspiegel*, September 23, 2015. ↩
4. For Germany, see, for example, Matthias Klein, "Metaphern über Flüchtlinge: Wir reden wieder von Wellen, Flut und Strömen," *MiGAZIN*, November 18, 2015. ↩
5. See Robert N. Proctor, "Agnotology: A Missing Term to Describe the Cultural Production of Ignorance (and Its Study)," in: *Agnotology: The Making and Unmaking of Ignorance*, ed. Robert N. Proctor and Londa Schiebinger (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2008), chap. 1. ↩

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