BOOK REVIEW

Diasporic Homecomings. Ethnic Return Migration in Comparative Perspective.
Edited by Takeyuki Tsuda

The field of migration studies shows a burgeoning interest in return migration as a distinctive type of population movement worthy of its own study. This volume focuses on ethnic return migration which denotes the ‘return’ of later-generation descendants of diasporic peoples to the country of ancestral origin in contrast to first-generation diasporic peoples moving back to their natal homeland. Similar to labor migration, ethnic return migration is often initiated by economic pressures. However, transnational ethnic affinities, not preexisting social networks, direct the migration flow to the ancestral homeland. The most important and perhaps unexpected conclusion of this volume is that the privileged status of ethnic return migrants as co-ethnics does not prevent them from becoming ethnically and socioeconomically marginalized in the homeland.

After an introductory chapter in which the editor positions this volume in its thematic and theoretical field, the contributions are grouped in three separate parts. Part one analyses the causes of diasporic return. Chapter 1 distinguishes pull and push factors of ethnic return migration. Chapter 2 compares ethnic return migration in Europe and Asia showing that such migration movements have dropped in Europe, whereas they remain strong in Asia. Chapter 3 compares the cases of Germany and Israel, both sharing a preference for co-ethnic immigrants, but showing a diverging pattern of ethnic migration. While Germany experiences a sharp decline of such migrants, the migrations flows to Israel remain strong due to deviating geo-political forces and national(ist) agendas.

Part two and three deal with diverging ethnic and socio-cultural experiences of ethnic return migrants in their ancestral homelands. Part two focuses on Europe. Chapter 4 looks into the changing status of Aussiedler (ethnic German descent returnees from Eastern Europe) in Germany experiencing a shift from privileged to ordinary immigrant status. Chapter 5 explores the recent ethnic return migration of Argentines of Spanish descent to Spain, in particular their disadvantaged position in the Spanish labor market. Chapter 6 provides an example of positive ethnic return, i.e. ethnic Swedes from Finland returning to Sweden enjoying a smooth homecoming because of their linguistic skills and cultural competences. Chapter 7 investigates the ethnic return of Hungarian descendants from Romania to Hungary where they become economically marginalized and socially denigrated as unskilled ‘Romanian’ labor migrants. Chapter 8 analyses the problems with integration and decline of occupational status suffered by Russian Jews moving to Israel.

Part 3 focuses on East Asia which has received both large numbers of ethnic return migrants from developing countries and also smaller populations from developed nations. Chapter 9 compares returnees from Brazil and America to Japan. While the former category toils as unskilled migrant laborers and develops defensive nationalist identities, the latter category enjoys membership of a global educational and professional elite developing a stronger transnational connection to their homeland. Chapter 10 describes the ambivalent identities of Japanese Peruvians who develop a distinct Peruvian-Japanese identity due to ethnic and economic exclusion in their homeland. Chapter 11 focuses on the ethnic return migration of Korean Chinese to South Korea and their experience of ethnic and socio-economic marginalization in their homeland. Conversely, chapter 12 examines Korean Americans in South Korea, who despite their privileged background, find themselves ethnically not accepted and therefore strengthen their identity as Americans. In conclusion, the editor
pulls together the main observations about the difficulties inherent of diasporic homecomings which force homeland governments to reconsider their ethnic return migration policies and transform the returnees’ ethno-national consciousness and their understandings of home and homeland.

The major strengths of this book are: (1) The study of ethnic return also contributes to the transnational perspective by emphasizing that migration is an ongoing process that comprises of later-generation ‘return’ which again encourages the ‘remaking’ of diasporas as ethnic return migration is creating new ethnic minorities based on processes of exclusion experienced jointly by returnees in their homelands. (2) The comparative framework of this book allows the contributors to analyze how the differing socio-cultural characteristics and national origins of ethnic return migrants influence their levels of social integration or marginalization in their ethnic homelands and subsequent transformations in their ethno-national identities. (3) This volume offers a nuanced approach to ethnicity and culture, showing that the mutual ethnic affinity causing diasporic descendants to return-migrate is primarily based on essentialized assumptions of shared ethnicity that are quickly challenged as both migrants and hosts discover a multitude of cultural differences between them. The relevance of this volume exceeds the limits of migration studies and offers fresh perspectives for ethnic studies and identity theory as it addresses the close relationship between the social construction of ethnic identities and shifting class positions embedded in social context.

The major weaknesses of this volume are: (1) The selection and spread of cases. While the European cases illustrate positive and negative experiences of return and good spread across the continent, the Asian part is rather one-dimensional in its focus on South Korea and Japan. Although these cases address the difference of diasporic return migrants from developed and developing countries, this section fails to critically assess the alleged Asian ‘success stories’ of China, India and Taiwan where pro-active returnee policies strategically recruit high-skilled diaspora that is supposed to take up leadership positions in the homeland’s economy. How much different is their experience in the homeland? (2) The lack of attention paid to the push- and pull forces emanating from the diasporic host-countries which impact on the value of diasporic migrants for homelands through offering or denying them training and education (cf. Dahles 2011). (3) The narrow perspective on homeland stakes in diasporic return migrants for either their economic potential or shared ethnicity. Research has shown that they are also invited back for their access to global networks, proficiency in foreign languages and multi-cultural competences (cf. Dahles 2011). Conversely, diasporic migrants may return for various purposes beyond employment and ethnic affiliation, and may encompass investments as much as illegal or exploitative endeavors (cf. Dahles 2011).

Reference:


Heidi Dahles
Department of Organization Sciences
VU University Amsterdam, Netherlands