

LATIN AMERICAN MIGRATION TO THE UNITED STATES: A MULTIDISCIPLINARY VIEW

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There are very few scholarly topics quite as amenable to working within and between disciplines as immigration. Individuals make conscious decisions about moving across international borders for political, economic, and social reasons, all of which are seasoned by demographic pressures. Historical factors lead migrants and policy makers alike along certain (and often competing) paths. The arrival of immigrants changes the cultural and linguistic face of receiving communities, with clear spatial implications. Their departure leaves a mark on all those they left behind, and the resulting interaction between origins and destinations transforms both places. Meanwhile, governments at all levels make policy based on perceptions of their constituents' preferences and beliefs about the value of immigration.

Migration cannot be understood from the perspective of a single discipline, and this special issue of *The Latin Americanist* showcases the work of different disciplines, methodologies, and subjects within the broader category of Latin American migration. The articles also serve as a reminder that studying Latin American immigration to the United States necessarily entails a deep understanding of Latin America itself, not just of the United States.

From a sociological perspective, Xóchitl Bada's article on Hometown Associations demonstrates that HTAs can have a positive political impact on improving civil society's ties to the state. Thus, the local political level, which is often ignored, deserves more scholarly attention. Sociologist Christine Wheatley also analyses the impact of immigration on sending communities in Mexico, but focuses on the differences between those who return voluntarily or involuntarily (i.e. deportees). Involuntary return creates unintended challenges to the conception of citizenship and belonging, which in turn means that Mexican social policy must address the challenges of reincorporation. There is already growing ambivalence in Mexico about returning migrants (Fitzgerald 2009), so the increasing number of deportations will make that process even more problematic.

Demography is also a central element of immigration, as we have noted elsewhere (Weeks and Weeks 2010). Sarah Blanchard, Erin R. Hamilton,



Nestor Rodriguez, and Hirotoishi Yoshioka examine the demographic factors of being young economic migrants that make Hondurans especially susceptible to deportation. Immigrants from Honduras have received relatively little attention in the literature since, unlike El Salvador, Guatemala, and Nicaragua, Honduras did not suffer Cold War-inspired civil war that sparked large-scale migration.

As Ernesto Castañeda and Lesley Buck demonstrate, the disciplines of sociology and social work also give us analytical leverage about the effects of transnational parenting. Remittances are very often viewed as a net benefit to sending countries, but there are important negative psychological effects for children whose parents have migrated. This question of how emigration affects children who are left behind is a critical one, as it affects both economic and social development within Latin America.

Geographers have enhanced our understanding of the patterns and effects of immigrant settlement. Emily Skop and Kendall Zanowiak-Antonelli discuss the shifts from traditional gateways to “unlikely” gateways in the central and southeastern states of the United States, as well as the policy shifts required in these new gateways. This is part of what has been referred to as “transformations of place” (Smith and Furuseth 2006).

Political scientist Duncan Lawrence’s article on attitudes toward immigration questions the role of the Catholic Church in successfully promoting positive views about migrants, and asserts that economic self-interest remains the most important factor in determining those views. As a political scientist utilizing quantitative methods, his analysis serves as a reminder about how diverse methodological approaches to the study of migration can—and should—be.

Americans often assume that the United States is the only outlet for Latin American migration, and so it is very helpful to have historian Chiara Pagnotta remind us that Latin Americans are also heading to Europe. She uses a qualitative approach to explain Andean migration to Europe, placing that migratory movement in the context of European immigration policy. There is even significant Latin American migration within Europe, as migrants move from one country to another in search of the best economic outcomes.

Meanwhile, historical perspectives also demonstrate how immigration policy is linked to broader U.S. foreign policy. Historian Timothy Henderson’s article discusses the relationship of the Bracero Program (1942–1964) to President Franklin Roosevelt’s Good Neighbor Policy, which was intended to improve the relationship between the United States and Latin America. All too often, immigration policy is viewed as separate from foreign policy because it is based in large part on domestic political concerns. However, foreign policy has always had a strong influence on immigration, especially by creating certain incentives or disincentives for potential migrants (Mitchell 1992).

If the mix of articles seems somewhat eclectic, then we have achieved our purpose in exploring Latin American Migration from several different

social science perspectives. Each paper adds significantly to our store of knowledge about the phenomenon that is quite literally changing—once again—the face of the Americas.

References

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