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Migrating in the Americas

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Migrating in the Americas

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Françoise Lestage and Paul Schor

Translation : Michael Hinchliffe

- 1 This dossier on migration in the Americas is dedicated to the memory of Aristide Zolberg (1931-2013) whose work towards a deconstruction of the myth of the United States as a land of migrants¹, constitutes a major contribution to the study of migrations and the construction of nations. Aristide Zolberg was present at the “Migration en héritage” (“Inheriting the Migration Experience in the Americas”) symposium in Paris in June 2012, where several contributions figuring in the present dossier were first aired².
- 2 Migration is a global phenomenon, but the Americas have with it a special relationship in that the word “migration” itself came into use contemporaneously with the first transatlantic movements that occurred after the “discovery” of America at the close of the 15th century. The appellation “New World” already says much of the time frame involved in migratory experience, and the Americas have been the scene of manifold waves of migration, both trans-oceanic and intra-continental in character, making this land mass a space where populations from all over the world came together, settled, confronted one another and engaged in exchange. On the scale of the entire continent, the sheer long drawn-out nature of the phenomenon of migration is an evident, one could even say a constitutive fact. America and its peoples hailing so massively from elsewhere have indeed received the “heritage of migration”.
- 3 In their approach to so central a theme, the studies brought together in this issue call on methods and resources proper to a variety of disciplines: history, geography, anthropology, sociology, while bringing into play contrasting space and time scales in such a way as to adumbrate not so much an exhaustive picture of migration in the Americas, an impossible enterprise in any case, but rather a picture of how migrations of the past and the present affect the life experiences of migrant populations and their descendants or, more widely, of how they affect both sending and host societies.

Migration studies, and in particular those concerned with the Americas, have undergone profound changes since they began, so that reaching a coherent vision of a phenomenon apprehended today from a multiplicity of angles is no easy task. Such, however, is the ambition of the dossier presented here. The designedly heterogeneous nature of the contributions provides a reflection of the diversity of memory, experience and spatial movement involved; at the same time, it helps to hold together studies that have in common an approach centered on the person, on the individual, on the human experience, direct or indirect, of migration. Emerging from correspondence, from archives, from investigation, from statistics and from fieldwork, is the figure of migrants on the move, with their itineraries, their traces and connections forging the specificity of the American continent.

- 4 A founding element of the Americas, migration, is also an integral element of a worldwide system so that to pass from one scale of vision to another is to inscribe different cases in both the history and the present evolution of globalization. Poor workers, qualified workers, activists, entrepreneurs, those following clearly defined trajectories or a more complicated one, involved circulation between regions and countries, all these different migratory displacements establish relationships between spatial entities, or zones, that are separate, but increasingly interconnected. Hence, taken together, the contributions to this issue, the majority of which are concerned with one-nation cases, show how migratory journeys plot the geography of the entire continent, to the extent that all are affected, even those who do not migrate.
- 5 Notwithstanding the diverse nature of the subjects dealt with, these studies share general themes running through them all. The first of these themes is that of the living memory of migration, the continuity of life experience that stretches well beyond the more contracted time scope of the act of migration itself, a fact emerging from the study of correspondence, a source material that has recently found new historiographical vigor. The differentiated use of letter writing made by migrants and travelers shows how transnational networks coalesce and dissolve over a long period. The study by Aubert demonstrates how, by means of letters and photographs, Episcopalian ministers produced literary and visual images of their respective southern “terrains” of Chile and Brazil, in a dual movement of exoticization on the one hand and integration into the US imperial project on the other; the study by Da Orden looks at the letters of Sicilian migrants to Argentina over several generations (1910-1980). In both cases, the study of the correspondence amounts to a reconstitution of the time frame involved in the experience of migration. Da Orden’s contribution also shows how correspondence fulfills several functions, becoming for the historian the basis for a study of both power relations within families and of the reshaping of family relationships in the context of migration. The study by Venkovits analyses how the correspondence and tales of Hungarian travelers were encouraged and oriented by Porfirio Diaz’s government in order to attract potential European migrants to Mexico rather than the United States.
- 6 The memory of migration, whether it arises from a political project or a family strategy extended to a wider kinship, finds expression not only in writings but also in objects which, transmitted initially within families and later through museums, attain a heritage dimension. The study by Daniel examines this process in relation to descendants from Finnish, German and Jewish immigrants to the United States. By donating objects and family archives to ethnic museums, they confer on them an

institutional status for the group while operating a symbolic inscription of their communities in the host country. This symbolic ethnicity, a production of later generations, also has the effect of situating migration in a long, multi-generational time frame, weaving history and memory together.

- 7 It appears, then, that where migration is concerned, the shifts to and fro between spaces and periods are both multiple and complex. This becomes obvious in the long term history of migrations, but the same process can be seen at work in the more contemporary cases studied in this issue. Rachedi et al. look at the grieving behaviors of migrants to Quebec around 2010 and find that they cover a wide spectrum, ranging from the exact replication of ancestral funeral rites, to their modification, and then to the invention of entirely unaccustomed rites, which enable migrants and their descendants to project themselves into the future within the society of their present life.
- 8 The second general theme running through these contributions is the focus on the living experience of migration, which, as has already been noted, is a recent one in work on migration. Migrants hope to obtain rights and a social status consonant with their economic and political participation in the host society, hence several studies examine migrant experience with regard to this question of social recognition. Schaffhauser studies how the *Braceros*, the Mexican agricultural laborers of the 40s and 60s, began to mobilize in the early 2000s demanding payment of a pension which they had never received despite having contributed to the scheme; Sanders chronicles the widening gap between entrepreneur migrants and public services in New York and Philadelphia which were supposed to be helping them set up their businesses; Luconi compares the political participation of Italian migrants in Argentina and the United States during the first half of the 20th century.
- 9 These three contributions arrive at divergent conclusions. For Sanders, the situation is a “double-edged” one because although, on the one hand, the policies aimed at accompanying entrepreneur migrants are indeed a mark of recognition as to their status and rights and do indeed help them to conform their businesses to local norms, yet, on the other hand, the bureaucracy itself gives rise to structural difficulties that tend to hamper migrant entrepreneurship. As far as the recent political experience of the retired *Braceros* is concerned, Schaffhauser sees this as a democratic contribution to contemporary Mexican society: the demands formulated by the *Braceros*, who firmly believe that their rights will be recognized, and are mobilizing to that end with unfailing determination, are in the process of “re-institutionalizing” Mexican institutions by forcing them to act as a public service, a state of affairs which is far from being the norm in Mexico. Luconi finds that according to whether Italian migrants settled in the United States, already dominated by Protestants from Northern Europe, or in Argentina, where a national society was yet to be built, they gained acceptance into the political arena at later or an earlier date and were precluded from playing, or able to play, a role in it. The election in Argentina in the year 1890 of the first president originating from Italy was a clear indication of this recognition, which came about at a much later stage in the United States.
- 10 An eminently political project was the voluntary emigration of African Americans to Haiti prior to the abolition of slavery. It showed how both the people who left (and in some cases returned) and the people who, having envisaged departing, did not do so, contributed to the construction of complex national political entities in Haiti and in the

United States. Bourhis-Mariotti concentrates on this little known aspect of the history of abolitionism in which migration, either as a project or as a reality, is constitutive of people as political subjects in a manner contrary to the tendencies at work in the United States during the final years of slavery. For the descendants of slaves, voluntary migration, as opposed to projects involving the emigration of freed slaves promoted by white abolitionists, stands as an affirmation of liberty and as an enacted critique of the racist character of the US political regime.

- 11 The study by Cohen displaces the focus of attention towards intimacy. She shows how undocumented Mexican workers in a Chicago restaurant, where she herself was a worker and an observer, are engaged simultaneously in love and family relationships the status of which is different on either side of the frontier. In this case, the frontier has the effect of structuring love relationships characterized by gender inequality, and, additionally in Chicago, by an ethnic and social mixing (the girlfriends are not part of the same social group and their level of education is higher) held by the men to be of no consequence. These asymmetrical relationships between migrant males and American females introduce new complexity into the hierarchies of status and power between migrants and non-migrants and illustrates how the experience of migration may lead to highly personal rearrangements.
- 12 The third general theme present in this issue is the demonstration of how the movement of people brings different spaces together, whether within the American continent (Morales, Baby-Colin), or between the Americas and Europe (Gérard and Grediaga; Miret and Cordoba) or between the Americas and Asia (Esses, Medianu and Sutter). This is illustrated by very diverse objects of study, such as the international placement of Mexican engineering students or the relationship of Colombians living in Barcelona to their new urban space.
- 13 Studying the training trajectories of Mexican engineering students in the second half of the 20th century, Gérard and Grediaga pose the question of how their international trajectories relate to the circulation of knowledge in a globalized and hierarchized world order and discover that student mobility has paradoxical effects. They find that the very construction of “chains of knowledge”, or to put it differently, systems of privileged cooperation between Mexican and foreign establishments, a construction linked initially to student mobility, in fact reduces this student mobility over generations. They also note a modification of training trajectories, resulting in new institutional relationships and new mobility circuits which thus breaking away from traditional patterns.
- 14 The displacement of people also brings about spatial transformations, a fact noted by Miret and Cordoba in their use of the biographical details and discourse of a group of some twenty Colombians who travelled to Barcelona in the early 2000s as students or qualified migrants. The authors attempt to discern how the experience of urban life in the host country may affect modes of life in the source country. On their return to Colombia, these migrants take up new modes of urban life, close to those they encountered abroad. Conversely, Miret and Cordoba hypothesize that negative representations of local urban space in Colombia, together with valorized, mythified versions of European urban space, may well have been, for these same Colombians, an incitation to migrate.
- 15 As Baby-Collin demonstrates in her account of the little known migration of Bolivians to the US, the diversification and greater complexity of migratory trajectories in

general have, in turn, an effect on individual displacement and the choice of new destinations to settle in. Baby-Collin studies both the role played by this specific destination in the wider scope of Bolivian migration and in the living experience of migrants.

- 16 Lastly, as the analysis conducted by Esses et al. in the case of Canada shows, the perceptions of migrants are constructed and fashioned by the media treatment of migration “crises” which harness all countries together within a global system of mobility. Enrolled in this system are the countries of Central America, the subject of the piece by Morales, who describes their progressive North-Americanization in the aftermath of the revolutions in the second half of the 20th century and their integration into economic, ideological and political globalization by virtue of their migrants. Whereas these migrants are actors from a distance in their countries of origin, excluded or, at the very least, kept at a distance, from their social, political and economic systems, they are nevertheless a source of manna in the shape of cash transfers to their families, the distribution of which results in social and territorial recompositions in the home region. This contribution brings the dossier to a close, linking together, as it does, the individual experience of migration, the phenomenon of regional, national and international mobility and that of globalization. For Morales, the “migrant-as-subject” is a key link in the sequence of political, economic and social transformation in Central America and the same notion applies to all the contributors to this issue of *IdeAs*.
- 17 To take the living experience of migrants as a starting point for an apprehension of the complexity of trajectories, networks, fixities and senses of belonging is to enable a different portrayal of the Americas, a continent in which the displacements of people have a profoundly structuring effect on societies and relationships, on individuals, families, groups, regions and countries.

NOTES

1. Aristide R. Zolberg, *A Nation by Design. Immigration Policy in the Fashioning of America*, Russel Sage Foundation Books at Harvard University Press, 2008.
2. The tenth annual Institut des Amériques symposium, organized by a group of researchers from Paris Diderot University, <https://sites.google.com/site/colloqueida2012/>.

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PAUL SCHOR

Paul Schor est maître de conférences en histoire et civilisation américaines à l'Université Paris Diderot, UMR LARCA 8225, où il est responsable de l'axe de recherches « Histoire du politique dans le monde anglophone ». Il est l'auteur de *Compter et classer. Histoire des catégories de la population dans le recensement américain, 1790-1940*, Editions de l'EHESS, 2009, ouvrage récompensé par le Willi Paul Adams Award de l'Organization of American Historians, 2011 (traduction en langue anglaise sous presse à Oxford University Press, prévue courant 2016) et avec Nicolas Barreyre, *De l'émancipation à la ségrégation: le Sud des États-Unis après la guerre de Sécession, 1865-1896*, PUF, 2009. Il a publié de nombreux articles et chapitre d'ouvrages sur l'histoire des catégories raciales aux États-Unis, sur l'histoire de l'immigration aux États-Unis et sur l'histoire des États-Unis écrite en Europe, notamment Manfred Berg, Isabel Soto et Paul Schor, "The Weight of Words: writing about race in the United States and Europe", *The American Historical Review*, 119 (3), June 2014, p. 800-808. Ses recherches actuelles portent sur le rôle des experts et travailleurs sociaux dans l'imposition de nouvelles normes de vie quotidienne aux États-Unis au début du vingtième siècle. Il a été membre du conseil scientifique de l'Institut des Amériques et est membre des comités de rédaction des revues *Sociétés contemporaines* et *Transatlantica*.