

Migration, border crossing and the myth of “free” movement: mapping the déjà vu

Migração, cruzamento de fronteiras e o mito do movimento “livre”: mapeando o déjà vu

Jamal En-nehas

Professor Emeritus, Independent Scholar
jamal.en-nehas@fulbrightmail.org

Palavras-chave: Migration, border crossing, border discourse, travel, mobility, cultural rhetoric.
Keywords: Migração, passagem de fronteira, discurso da fronteira, viagens, mobilidade e retórica cultural.

[...] border culture as a Utopian model for dialog is temporarily bankrupt. But the border as a region of political injustice and great human suffering still exists. The border remains an infected wound on the body of the continent, its contradictions more painful than ever.... Sadly, the border remains unchanged.

Guillermo Gómez-Peña, “Death on the Border: A Eulogy to Border Art”

Change and progress are generally accepted as two quintessential slogans of the present age and as vehicles for the articulation of ideas, principles and value systems which embrace advocacy, liberalism, tolerance, diversity, acceptance of difference, among several altruistic doctrines and political and cultural orientations in the postmodern era. However, rudimentary human acts and rights, such as travel, movement, migration and border crossing, are still deeply entrenched within age-old boundaries and fortifications, conditioned by insular and regressive perceptions and the diehard binary oppositions and dualities of self and other, the local and the foreign, the rich and the poor, the documented and the undocumented. The way human beings undertake physical movement today and narrate their tales of self and travel is still largely inspired by old perceptions which punctuate travelers’ thoughts and evoke either good memories of visited places or painful and sordid experiences of denied ones, of fulfilled or

dashed and deferred hopes and aspirations. This paper explores these paradoxes by placing them in their relevant socio-historical context, demonstrating that the very problems and conflicts the world is facing today regarding mass migration, asylum, displacement, economic disparity, injustice, racism and intolerance are but cyclic phenomena which keep being revisited and that their present-day manifestations are but replicas of the past.

The harrowing images of the dead bodies of migrant Syrian children, including in particular that of the three-year-old Aylan Kurdi who tragically drowned on 2 September 2015 while attempting to cross the Mediterranean with other war escapees, and those of African refugees and migrants flocking to the European Eldorado in search of better lives to eventually live not within the precincts of the developed world but rather on its “periphery,” even if this implies erecting new borders (like Calais in France) beyond natural borders, have awakened our conscience to the reality of migration, human life and border crossing. These images force us to ask whether it is normal for all these refugees and migrants to undergo the ordeal of compulsory passage, its tribulations and uncertainties in an age in which we all make bold claims to basic human rights, invoking universal charters and declarations that we all have the right to life, the right to free movement, the right to asylum, the right to education and the right to be protected by the law. Migrants and refugees, however, do not have access to any of these. On the contrary, they are confronted by the increasing tendencies toward entrenchment, fortification and consolidation of barriers and boundaries, which in reality only force desperate migrants to contrive different ways to bypass these fortified borders, such as by traveling as stowaways and contributing to human trafficking and high-sea tragedies. The persistent questions that we ask today which have direct implications for the issues of “exodus,” “migration” and “frontiers,” are, despite the seemingly postmodern context, in fact the same questions that migrants, border reinforcement officials, legislators, and academics asked more than a century and a half ago when migration started being frowned upon and migrants became *personae non gratae*.

Questions about the causes of mass migration, the fear and uncertainty of being screened, rejected and expelled, the plight of migrants as they confront border agents, immigration regulators and their exclusionary laws, continue to interest academics and policymakers in a number of ways beyond the clichés of forums, conferences and symposia. Some of these questions can be formulated as follows: Why should borders turn into impenetrable and painful sites, where journeys come to tragic halts and where long-cherished expectations and promises are dashed, as the distressful realities of the stories of refugees and economic migrants unravel on a daily basis? How does the quest for self-fulfillment and the liberation from the constraints of space and the defining matrices of place create a shift in the perception of the journey and its subsequent ramifications? How do diehard systems of political insularity, cultural entrenchment and absolutism, border control, screening and profiling, and the various forms of exclusion and rejection hamper the desire to cross borders, embrace others and redefine the self in new territories? What “memorable,” or perhaps unmemorable, images do travelers, migrants and refugees retain from their shocking,

often frustrating and distressful, contacts with a country's border zone, which often appears more of a site of rigidity and denial than acceptance and embracement, or to put it in Ali Behdad's (2005) words, "a site of policing and discipline, control and violence" (p. 144)? How does the traumatic experience of sea crossing relate to the collective human unconscious, to borrow the popular Jungian phraseology, and consequently reveal the "unfathomed depths [which] lie concealed beneath its reflecting surface"? (1985, p. 122). Why should the middle passage turn into horror and tragedy, a burial site for immigrants and refugees instead of an outlet, a moment of relief, joy and celebration?

While admitting that the above questions are reflective of the *Zeitgeist* and are the natural results of the political and social conditions of modern society, by virtue of which they should be resolved in their appropriate political contexts through determination and commitment, they seem nonetheless to echo several of those which prevailed in the not-so-distant past. In fact, these are invariably the same questions which were asked from the middle of the nineteenth century, i.e. when people started moving en masse toward specific destinations for work and settlement and in their pursuit of the spoils of the Industrial Revolution and the Gold Rush, well into the postwar era both in Europe and the United States. In her study of this exodus phenomenon, Dorothee Schneider (2011) notes that just between 1899 and 1909, more than 8.8 million Europeans left for the US, most of whom ended up being classified under the rubric of "public charges" (p. 28). As they landed on terra firma, and after having survived the treacherous Atlantic and debilitating health conditions including all types of known and unknown diseases by the standards of the time, these European as well as Asian migrants had to deal with the ordeals of the border zone, extensive interrogation methods, the risks of deportation, quarantine, confinement and the nascent anti-immigration sentiment in the US. Immigration legislators were quick in reacting to the exodus by levying head taxes and, within a span of fifty years, they enacted prohibitive laws such as the "Anti-Coolie Law" of 1862, "Naturalization Act" of 1870, "Page Act" of 1875, "Chinese Exclusion Act" of 1882, "Alien Contract Labor Law" of 1885, "Immigration Act" of 1891, "Geary Act" of 1892, "United States v. Wong Kim Ark" of 1898, "Anarchist Exclusion Act" of 1903, "Naturalization Act" of 1906 and "Immigration Act" of 1907. Targeting migrants, including in particular the Chinese and the Japanese, the newly required literacy tests exacerbated the burdens of migrants as the government started filtering European migrants at Ellis Island and Angel Island in 1917 and enacting tougher immigration laws, such as the Emergency Quota Act of 1921, among others curbing the exodus of migrants from Western, Central and Eastern Europe. The literature of the frontier and border crossing which documents human migration during this era abounds with narratives depicting the misery of landing and the tense moments of anticipation and fear prior to clearing the health examination, the physical inspection, the prolonged interrogations and other types of immigration hurdles.

But as is usually the case whenever bureaucracy and legislation adopt stringent policies to control, prevent, reprimand and discipline, people ingeniously circumvent border surveillance and the restrictions and barriers imposed by sta-

tes. Instead of using the tightly monitored migration routes, migrants crossed borders clandestinely, often masquerading, hiding their intentions, travelling as stowaways, assuming fake identities, resorting to human trafficking and to the services of middlemen, etc. These acts, quite surprisingly, were very popular at the beginning of the twentieth century, and their manifestation in today's world is but a continuation of the same old process. It seems that instances of the politicization of borders and crossings in many parts of the world are becoming inevitable matters in an age in which migration and resistance to territorialization are transnational phenomena, acts and processes which transcend political institutions, doctrines, legislations, party politics, election slogans, partisanship and lobbying, the pressure of the media and constituencies, etc. Political discourses, conservative and radical as they might officially appear, are often at odds with the realities on the ground. As we face the dilemma of what to do exactly in order to strike a balance between order and dignity, between the dictates of duty and the injunction of conscience, between the rights and prerogatives of society and citizens, on the one hand, and the human values and universal rights of the victims of war, poverty, deprivation and displacement, on the other hand, we need to use reason and exercise caution. Arguably, the concept of the world citizen, the classless society and the borderless nation or state is not feasible today and may even be considered a utopian aberration, despite the fact that many countries have successfully dismantled the barriers that once set their populations apart. Having come a long way from Sir Thomas More's idealized world, and taking into account the conjunctures of realpolitik and geopolitics, as well as commonsense, the modern perception of the border is decidedly here to stay. Though several borders have exhausted their historical usefulness, more and more borders are being erected on land and sea. The most important question we should perhaps ask today is: Can we, or rather, how can we sensibly and realistically stop the flow of human beings in an age which has already defined itself to an irreversible extent as being antithetical to constraints, the fixities of space and many of the referentialities which once clearly defined societal contracts, human relations, communal values and the matrices of self, culture and geography? On the other hand, the question that we may pertinently ask today as we see images of people en masse, who represent different ages and backgrounds, bracing danger to reach the southern shores of Europe is: Why do they leave home? In asking so, however, we perhaps tend to forget that these migrants mostly hail from war-torn zones and evidently have no homes to relocate to, or maybe they were destroyed as a result of conflicts and wars they did not initiate themselves, as is often the case, but which are often engineered by superpowers from remote locations.

Mass migration is, quite understandably, frightening and can be destabilizing for the host country, but so it has been over the centuries given that the same problems of oppression, poverty, exploitation, marginalization, social injustice and political instability which force people to leave home today did exist in the past too. Even the countries, which receive waves of migrants from their southern shores nowadays, namely Italy, were in fact great exporters of migrants toward the New World. The number of destitute migrants who fled Ireland in

the middle of the nineteenth century is by and large the most significant in the recorded history of human migration. Some moderate estimates put the number of Irish migrants fleeing the "Potato Famine" and the subsequent economic disasters at 4.5 million between 1820 and 1930, the overwhelming majority of whom ended up in North America. The immigration situation became so critical at the turn of the twentieth century that the US federal government created task forces to handle it, and in order to curb migration at source the government sent scores of officers and consultants to different parts of Europe, especially to poor countries which were trying to solve their economic problems by inciting the youth and the unemployed to embrace the New World, to find out exactly why waves of migrants were leaving the "comfort" zone, risking their lives for an uncertain voyage and a gloomy future. In her study of the phenomenon, Schneider chronicles several cases of encounters between immigration legislators, migration facilitators and potential migrants. In his endeavors to understand the rationale behind travel and immigration, John Trenor, a US immigration investigator at that time only became convinced through fieldwork that migration was the solution not the problem. A ship doctor in southern Italy told him "your query should rather have been: 'why would they not emigrate?'" (Schneider, p. 33). The economic factors, combined with the quest for a better quality of life, have always been the principal motive, and the other reasons advanced here and there remain, in comparison, largely insignificant. Today, anti-immigration discourse, articulated by politicians and xenophobes, finds it convenient to blame migrants and refugees for the loss of jobs at home, but quite ironically the jobs in question have been voluntarily delocalized to faraway destinations in the name of globalization, transnationalism, free trade and outsourcing. On the other hand, the media keep misleading public opinion by giving an impression which is often deemed erroneous about life in the West. They show luxury and profusion, but they hardly depict the plight of migrants and the grueling life they lead even when they successfully cross the border.

In whatever befalls migrants as a consequence of their "transgressive" acts in hostile territory, the culprits are always easily identified; in fact, they are defined a priori as the migrants themselves and their accomplices, namely the travel facilitators who are usually labeled "human traffickers." While the latter remain most of the time invisible, given the powers they hold and the networks they organize and control, other actors are rarely condemned for their role in the global migration process. For instance, the complicity of the media and civil society in this respect is hardly exposed. When they make it to the world, the narratives of tribulation depict men and women of all ages in precarious situations, thus reflecting the sad reality of travel and migration today. Many of these, unfortunately, often end up being suppressed and hidden from public view. Mass media can actually play a significant role in shaping public opinion, and though some might argue that they are already playing this role either directly or indirectly, it is never up to expectations. The rhetoric of "scapegoating," which is usually conveyed through the media, is often responsible for the repulsive attitude of the public vis-à-vis migrants, as the latter are directly blamed for the loss of jobs, the rise in public expenditure and crime. By engulfing their narratives of migration

within stereotypical frameworks, the media do not influence only public opinion but also policymaking. Pressured by the media, governments enact stringent anti-immigration laws, to the extent that migration narratives are understood in strikingly similar ways by both media and government bureaucrats, which makes them impose “specific ways of understanding” (Happer & Philo, 2013, pp. 322-323).

As an age-old, diehard strategy, the concept of border and its actualization through walls, fences, barbed wire and the other means of conventional and modern control and forms of surveillance, and as a drastic measure to curb the human influx into unwelcoming territories is probably the easiest response in terms of logistics and short-term results. From the Sumerian Amorite Wall to the most recent Israeli Wall, through the Wall of China and the Wall of Berlin, as well as the scores of colossal border fortification projects across the globe and throughout human settlement, the rationale has always been consistently the same: to filter, to select, to exclude, to block, to differentiate, to profile and to implement law and order. The ramifications of these artificial barriers at individual, community and nation levels have always produced only historical tragedies. In the twentieth century, these were reinforced by more sophisticated and devastating barriers along the lines of color and race, using the doctrines of “apartheid” and “the separate development of the races” as legitimate slogans. History, however, keeps reminding us of the absurdity of these measures, for in addition to their failure in achieving an idealized objective and their eventual dismantlement, they have never proven effective in preventing people from crossing to the other side where freedom, democracy, the pursuit of happiness and the fulfilment of economic prospects often make one blind to the consequences of hazardous adventure, transgression and risk. The modern journey is but a series of infinite trials, and the traditional linear and idealistic definition provided by a writer like Joseph Campbell who sees the monomyth or the hero’s journey as a saga that ends in triumph and self-transformation after undergoing the painful phase of initiation does not always translate into reality. Perhaps, the modern journey starts out in the same pattern as the mythical one but only to end in a completely different direction. Before catching sight of the lighthouse of the tiny Italian fishing island of Lampedusa, or the Greek islands of Kos, Lesbos and Samos, the Eldorado is but a mirage as the vulnerable raft might end up dumping the hopeful migrants into the abysses of the ocean. As things fall apart, the myth of the dream journey, as well as the hopes and expectations of the migrants and those of the families they left behind are all dashed.

The fortunate migrants and refugees who succeed in crossing the treacherous seas may find themselves and their destinies suspended at border zones, sometimes even stranded at no man’s land (interstitial spaces denoting un/non-belonging), which exacerbates the uncertainty feeling that accompanies them all the way from the point of departure. The narratives of deception, frustration, fear and uncertainty at borderlines always mark the person even after a successful crossing, though these experiences can vary in terms of severity as some places are more clement and compassionate than others. Many of the distressing sagas occur in places where the impunity of law enforcement agents, immigration authorities and human traffickers reigns supreme and is hardly contested. Landing on

the shores of Sicily is, undoubtedly, more humane than say on Myanmar's. The story of the road taken, or maybe in this case the road not taken, is truly evocative and can inspire feelings of empathy and commiseration. However, in Robert Frost's poem "The Road Not Taken," one perhaps does not feel any profound sympathy for the speaker/traveler who, after all, has options in life and there are prospects ahead of him whether he chooses the "grassy" and "less traveled by" road or the other one, whereas the migrant or refugee is denied choice. Life for them is color-coded with only two colors on offer: red and green. It is, indeed, interesting to relate these two symbolic colors to the phenomenon of passage and migration: one conveying prohibition and expulsion, while the other signifying admission and approval. The use of color to determine the destiny of "people in between" is ingeniously employed by the Mexican-American poet, Américo Paredes (1915-1999), whose creative work focuses on the Rio Grande region at the US-Mexico border, as in the poem entitled "Esquinita de mi Pueblo."

The fate of people living in a state of inbetweenness, the interstitial space, is invariably the same, for the concept of the border as we know it today is not any different from what it was at the turn of the twentieth century or even earlier. It is in fact part of the collective memory of mankind and its shared history despite the prevalent tendencies to deny it when forging arguments about why people flock to other territories in large numbers, transgressing the sanctities of borders and disrupting other peoples' ways of life. By being blind to history, we inevitably become the victims of our own shortsightedness. What is needed today more than at any other time in recorded history is a discerning and rational reading of history, for only this can enable us to "live more humanely." The American historian Carl Becker writes: "The value of history is, indeed, not scientific but moral: by liberalizing the mind, by deepening the sympathies, by fortifying the will, it enables us to control, not society, but ourselves—a much more important thing; it prepares us to live more humanely in the present and to meet rather than to foretell the future" (as cited in Noble, 1967).

In conclusion, the question of border crossing, its various political, economic, social and cultural ramifications, as well as its relation to issues of human rights, freedom of movement and entitlement to "life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness," among other universally cherished ideals, are some of the most contentious and extensively debated matters in academia as in the larger world. As complex theoretical and discursive concepts, they remain volatile and elusive, with the hiatus between the academic sphere and political reality widening at incredible rates. The treacherous world of crossing, its sea and land borders and the airtight systems of surveillance and control will continue to be debated but with no guarantees in sight that the problems which cause the malaise can ever be resolved. The spheres of debate and negotiation remain battlefields of a sort and a test for the role of the intelligentsia in confronting a reality marked by oppression, injustice, prejudice, racism, xenophobia, discrimination and marginalization. By virtue of being the "voices" of nations and the conscience of mankind, Guillermo Gómez-Peña (2008) emphasizes, intellectuals and academics have moral obligations to oppose fences and to expose and challenge

the reactionary politics and xenophobic rhetoric behind the concept and the discourse of border.

References

- Behdad, A. (2005). *A forgetful nation: On immigration and cultural identity in the United States*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Gómez-Peña, G. (2008). Border hysteria and the war against difference. *The Drama Review*, 52 (1), 196-203.
- Happer, C. & Philo, G. (2013). The role of the media in the construction of public belief and social change. *Journal of Social and Political Psychology*, 1(1), 321-336.
- Jung, C. G. (1985). *Dreams* (R. F. C. Hull, Trans.). London: Ark Paperbacks.
- Noble, D. W. (1967). *Historians against history: The frontier thesis and the national covenant in American historical writing since 1830*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Paredes, A. (1991). *Between two worlds*. Houston: Arte Publico Press.
- Schneider, D. (2011). *Crossing borders: Migration and citizenship in the twentieth-century United States*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Abstract

This paper examines some aspects of the modern condition of migration within their various historical, political, social and cultural contexts. Transcending the physical, the constituents of place and identity embrace the symbolic, the virtual and the metaphorical, thus exposing the complex nature and function of borders and making them appear volatile and elusive. However, borders remain in essence physical barriers which dictate their own discourses marked by impenetrability and rigor. Factors like realpolitik, the despondent culture of fear and difference, the suspicion of the other and the foreign, the denaturalization of familiar spaces and the insularity of cultures and value systems impose new realities on a fragile world vitiating by economic and social constraints. These dynamics affect border zones in remarkable ways and determine how these zones of encounter eventually turn into zones of conflict and contestation. In a Kafkaesque climate of suspicion and anxiety, most narratives of border crossing are literally anti-romantic or simple parodies of the once glamorous and intriguing journeys of crossing and jubilation, for they have now given way to the essentialism of border control, filtering, bureaucracy and manipulation. Devoid of any pleasure principle, these narratives can only reflect the negativity of states and encounters, the horrors of war, bereavement, destruction and desolation. In particular, this paper emphasizes that, regardless of its point of departure or arrival, migration is conditioned by several ideological factors which invariably dominate social perceptions and condition their orientations in dealing with others.