Towards Movement Studies

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Towards Movement Studies

Abstract: In this paper I shed critical light on the now established field of migration studies. In particular, highlighting its principal focus on the causes, consequences and meanings of migration in both ‘sending’ and ‘receiving’, I argue that it has neglected the movement of migrants that takes place between these contexts. I go on to propose the need for a focus on the cultural, social, political and economic mechanisms that facilitate the movement involved in different forms of migration. Finally, I explore some of the potential empirical, theoretical, methodological and empirical consequences of a reconfiguration of migration studies as movement studies.

Key words: Migration; migration studies; transnationalism; movement.
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Introduction

The last half of the twentieth century has been characterised as an age of migration (Castles and Miller 1993), with significant increases in numbers of people migrating and greater diversity in their places of origin. More lately and in response, calls within the academy for a pooling of disciplinary insights in a new social science (Castles 1993), migration studies, have begun to materialise (see for example Brettell and Hollifield 2000). Despite differences, the contributory disciplines within migration studies share a fundamental set of concerns, with the causes, consequences and meanings of migration in both ‘sending’ and ‘receiving’ societies, and scholars tend to work at either or both ends of the spectrum.

These are, of course, important concerns. However, the bipolarity of migration studies, a focus on the points of origin and reception of migrants is deeply problematic. It undermines the connectedness of these contexts that develops in conditions of accelerated globalisation. The emergence of transnationalism, a theoretical framework that enables the conceptualisation of the social processes whereby migrants operate within social fields that transgress geographic, political and cultural borders (Basch, Glick Schiller, and Szanton Blanc 1994, Glick Schiller, Basch and Szanton Blanc 1992, Rouse 1992) addresses the problem. However, amongst several critiques that can be levelled at it (see Dawson 2000) the transnationalism framework bypasses another and equally fundamental problem with the bipolarity of migration studies – the privileging of
processes of departure and settlement over those of movement. We have argued elsewhere that movement *per se*, including that involved in migration, but not exclusively, can be regarded as the quintessential experience of the modern age (Rapport and Dawson 1998).

**Towards movement studies**

Recognition of the ubiquity of movement in the modern world raises issues of fundamental significance for the disciplinary terrain of the social sciences. This can be illustrated with reference to migration studies. A great deal of effort within migration studies has been dedicated to the classification of different types of migration and migrant (‘economic migrants’, ‘conflict migrants’ (Gonzalez 1989), ‘leisure migrants’, etc. However, this takes place in a modern world where the possibility of rigid categorisation is increasingly elusive. To illustrate the point, there has been a noticeable separation between the fields of refugee studies and migration studies. With few exceptions (see for example, Kofman 2000; Malkki 1995; Miles and Thranhardt 1995) migration scholars have often overlooked refugees. At the same time asylum-seekers are re-constructed in public and political discourse as ‘disguised economic migrants’. Further categorical shifts of this type are inevitable as, for example, out of disparate national agendas, proposals for the creation of a common European migration policy and harmonisation of asylum procedures begin to take shape (European Commission May 2001). This raises a number of important research questions. For example, what are the processes, often of exclusion and inclusion, whereby migrants and others engaged in movement shift (or ‘move’) between the different categories created by states amongst
others? More importantly, the burgeoning number of studies on migrants of different varieties and, indeed other social groups (categories) such as, refugees and, indeed, slaves, trafficked and smuggled people, nomads and cosmopolitans clearly fail to consider their commonality of experience, an engagement in movement. I would ask what are the structural and experiential features, the similarities as well as differences, involved in different types of movement? In other words, within the modern world, is there a need for the construction of a new and unifying inter-disciplinary field within the social sciences, ‘movement studies’?

The ubiquity of movement has, of course, considerable empirical, theoretical, methodological and political implications for migration studies and the social sciences more generally. By way of establishing an agenda for investigation, I outline some of the major ones here.

**Empirical and theoretical research – migration studies**

The bipolarity of migration studies has led largely to its focus on which people migrate, when, where and why do they migrate, and what are the constraints and opportunities on and impacts of migration. With few exceptions, notably political science and legal studies work on international regulatory frameworks for migration, and post-national citizenship (see, for example Baubock 1994; Jacobson 1996; Soysal 1994), these are questions that are rightly explored in relation to contexts of departure and settlement. In contrast, the body of work in sociology and anthropology on (largely ethnic) migration chains and networks not withstanding, very little has been said about how people migrate. I would
ask what are the cultural, social, political and economic mechanisms that facilitate the movement involved in different forms of migration?

**Empirical and theoretical research – the social sciences**

Castles’ claim that the last half of the twentieth century can be characterised as an age of migration presages a wholly inappropriate reconfiguring of at least a large portion of the social sciences into a new nomadology (Dawson, 2001). Despite increases in numbers of people migrating, the fact is that even in the modern world approximately 98% of the world's population fail to relocate permanently beyond their place of origin (Hammer et al. 1997). The focus on movement that I propose recognises the importance of migration in the modern world, but equally it sets out to capture the nature of lives that are increasingly affected by the increasing ubiquity of transitory non-permanent movement made possible by greater access to communications and, above all, transportation technologies. This takes a number of forms – from the ‘astronaut’ migration of Chinese business people to the emergence of a myriad of new forms of highly mobile professions to new forms of itinerancy created by advanced Capitalism. At one level these have multiplied the existence of what Auge describes as ‘non-places’, waiting-rooms, malls, hotels, refugee reception centres and so on where thousands of individual itineraries coincide and with which their is little sense of identification (1992). At another level they have profoundly transformed the nature of the places people identify with most and where most live permanently, nations, regions and localities, for example. In Clifford’s words (1992), one of the key features of the modern age is the sense in which places are becoming ‘sites of travelling’ as much as of dwelling (see also Massey 1992; Olwig
A central theoretical aim in future research ought to be the conceptualisation of the relationship between permanence and movement, increasingly interdependent modalities (Dawson 1998). Empirically this may involve consideration of questions such as how does human movement impact upon the construction of place in the modern world?

Methodologies of movement

Coming to grips with movement also requires dramatic reconfiguration of social scientific methodologies (participant observation, interviews, social surveys and the like amongst people in their situations of residency in particular) that have, by and large, been designed to research situations of its opposite, fixity. One aim in future research ought to be the systematic development of techniques, such as multi-sited ethnography and tracking, that capture the reality of peoples’ lives in movement.

The politics of movement

Coming to grips with movement also provokes the need for critical reflection on the political practices of social scientists and politics more generally. The case, applicable to many social sciences, can be aptly related to social anthropology. Throughout its history anthropology has tended to rely on a localizing image of separate and self-sufficient worlds. Recent recognition of the centrality of human movement, both contemporary and historic, has led to realisation that the image may never have been more than a useful ideology that served the interests of (some) local people, and a provisional myth that was animated by the practices of (some) anthropologists.
At one level, this realisation demands that anthropologists begin to question their intra-disciplinary political practices. Clearly, the separate socio-cultural place, usually expressed as the ‘field’, has had its uses as a trope of authority. It is represented variously as the locus of a panoptical gaze, as a part through which one can represent the cultural whole, and, evoking the authoritative tones of natural science, as a pseudo-laboratory (Clifford 1992). Indeed, drawing a parallel with the bi-polarity of migration studies, the narratives of entry and departure that the idea of separateness facilitates are crucial, for it is distance that is seen to enable objectivity (Pratt 1986). At another level it has become clear that the image of the separate socio-cultural place resonates with a series of politically reactionary discourses: from modern-day and exclusionary nationalist ideologies (Foster 1991; Kapferer 1988) to, importantly, the kind of hegemonic discourses of sedentarism that serve to marginalise many of those, such as nomads, gypsies and asylum-seekers, who choose or are forced to engage in movement as a more or less permanent way of life (Rapport and Dawson 1998). Clearly then, a further aim of future research should be to consider how movement in the modern world may shed critical light on the political ideologies we live and work by.

Conclusion

In this paper I have shed critical light on the now established field of migration studies. In particular, highlighting its principal focus on the causes, consequences and meanings of migration in both ‘sending’ and ‘receiving’, I argued that it has neglected the movement of migrants that takes place between these contexts. I went on to propose the need for a
focus on the cultural, social, political and economic mechanisms that facilitate the movement involved in different forms of migration. Finally, I explored some of the potential empirical, theoretical, methodological and empirical consequences of a reconfiguration of migration studies as movement studies. Advanced globalization creates, I would argue, the multiplicity of a new range of forms of human movement of which migration is merely one. If migration studies is to prosper in the twenty first century as it did in the twentieth century, through the production of a range of insights and valuable conceptual contributions, it must, I would argue, begin to redress its emphasis on fixity and embrace the study of movement.

References


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