

REVIEWS / RECENSIONS

Judith Adler Hellman

The World of Mexican Migrants: The Rock and the Hard Place

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As in her previous best-selling nonfiction work *Mexican Lives* (1994), this new volume by Judith Adler Hellman presents the multilayered, human side of a vastly complex socioeconomic and cultural subject. *The World of Mexican Migrants* focuses on Mexican migration to the United States. What, Hellman asks, makes Mexican migrants risk their lives, leave their families and communities behind, and head for the US, where they will likely live for years on the margins of society, making minimum or below-minimum wages? While *Mexican Lives* focused on the ways Mexicans were coping with the ravages of neoliberal reform in their country, the new book deals with one of this economic model's key results: the severe hampering of rural Mexico's viability. Hundreds of thousands of peasants have been economically expelled from the land, forcing them to seek a livelihood in undocumented migration north.

The book's subtitle anticipates Hellman's narrative strategy: "The Rock"—Part I—represents the migrants' sending communities in rural Mexico; "The Hard Place"—Part III—represents the places of destination. These realities are mediated by the highly perilous "Journey" across the US-Mexican border—Part II. Part IV, "To Stay or To Return Home," considers those among the migrant population who want to stay in the US to realize the American dream and those who, contrastingly, want to return home to build their own Mexican dream. Methodologically, Hellman focuses first on five most-sending rural communities, from as many Mexican states. The communities are characterized by the fact that half or more of their native-born population is now working in the US. Hellman then chooses two "northern" urban destinations with contrasting migrant policies: Los Angeles, where nativist public policies have been generally anti-migrant, and New York City, where policies have favoured the respect of labour and human rights, regardless of a person's migratory status or lack thereof.

The book's introduction offers a brief overview of the history of Mexican migration and the two major "push" factors behind it: namely, a crumbling agrarian economy and, more recently, urban centres incapable of productively and remuneratively incorporating many workers. Addressing the "big questions" surrounding undocumented migration, Hellman explains how the "get tough" policies of the Clinton and Bush administrations, including practices of wall-building along the US-Mexican border, ended up being futile in stemming the incoming migrant tide. However, instead of dwelling on US government policies, which tend to assume that the United States is the epicentre of all inquiry, Hellman takes a migrant-centred approach, looking at questions ranging from who migrates and why to whether they want to stay in the US or return home.

Part I (Chapters 1 to 5) covers a variety of topics, vividly portraying both the dilemmas and the hardships of rural Mexico and the characteristics that explain the desire of many who have ventured abroad to later return back to "The Rock" to live. Chapter 1, for example, offers a portrait of Don Beto, a Mexican traditionalist who rejects actual migration as an economic strategy, as well as the consumerism it makes possible, but whose traditional activities (maize production and religious art) have been subsidized by 25 years of economic remittances sent by his children.

Part II (Chapters 6 to 13) depicts the cycles in anti-undocumented-migration enforcement, as it details the difficulties of the northward journey. Stories describe the varied ways in which migrants move north through increasingly dangerous routes, a process that costs up to five times as much as it did in the previous decade. One key conclusion of Part II is the futility of US "get tough" policies. Even a border patrol officer is cited as saying: "The wall is totally for show. There's no wall that's going to keep anyone out who's determined to cross. They'll go over, they'll go under, or they'll go around" (103).

Part III (Chapters 14 to 16), with a focus on destination communities in the US, describes a variety of modes of migrant incorporation into "The Hard Place." These vary to a considerable extent (including the relevance or irrelevance of English-language learning in Los Angeles, for example), depending on the numbers of migrants concentrated in a given community.

Chapter 16, the longest in the volume, is devoted to those at the bottom of the migrant work hierarchy. These are the *esquineros*, or day labourers who wait to be hired by a potential employer at a street corner (*esquina*) in New York. The *esquineros* are the latest newcomers who confront not just the traditional "3D" migrant jobs (dirty, dangerous, and difficult), but also dead-end jobs, which offer no possibility of upward mobility and which are highly insecure. The chapter is nicely supplemented with data from a national survey of day workers that shows, among other statistics, that 75%

are undocumented migrants who make an average of \$70 for a 12-hour day, or about 10% under the legal minimum wage. Besides their low pay, these workers have suffered many other work-related injustices. The toughest paradox is that all workers in New York, documented or not, have the same legal rights, but most migrants are too afraid to come forward and demand their enforcement.

With Part IV (Chapters 17 to 19), Hellman turns to consider the migrants' dilemma of whether to stay in the US or to return home, a difficult choice that I have called in my own experience the "migrant syndrome." This consists in the troubling fact that while one comes to appreciate a number of things in the new society (while disliking others), one always remains nostalgic about the society left behind. Clearly, the experiences narrated in this book are highly gendered, with many or most male Mexican migrants tending to confront the everyday necessity of engaging in many activities (e.g., cooking, washing clothes and dishes, and cleaning the house) that used to be regarded as female activities. But when they live in shared arrangements or with working wives, they must accept the new roles, a situation that also results in a challenge to male authority as regarded in patriarchal relations. In contrast, Mexican women may find it liberating to be away from the yoke of in-laws and the community getting involved in and/or gossiping about their daily affairs. In the end, though, few of Hellman's interviewees wanted to realize the American dream, preferring instead to retire in Mexico, build a home, and perhaps start a small business.

In the concluding chapter, the author rightly points out that many of the optimistic accounts of her informants, even though they nearly always mentioned the word "sacrifice," may be due to a sampling bias: failed experiences would not be found among migrants in Los Angeles or New York, as those people would have returned home. Although it is indeed a "hard place," the United States is ultimately a good place for those self-selected for the migration "journey." In Hellman's words, "they bring to the task they set for themselves a strikingly positive spirit" (222). But a transnational existence is available only for those who have achieved immigrant status in the US. One remarkable indicator of how few become transnational is the fact that not a single burial has occurred in the New York parish attended by Hellman's informants: with the assistance of collections from the parish, the bodies of all who died abroad were, in each case, sent back to Mexico.

Finally, Hellman raises the question of "What is to be done?" In this reviewer's opinion her answer is puzzling, as it is not consistent with the terms of the debate the author proposes at the outset. In her introduction, Hellman argues for a shift away from the official US focus—in which the US features as the epicentre of the world—to a migrant focus. If solutions were to focus

on migrants, Hellman suggests, then serious attention should be given to the fact that most want to realize a Mexican, rather than an American, dream. The problem is that Hellman's answers ultimately do shift back to a focus on the US. Stressing her disappointment with the receiving country's bipartisan policies for being mean-spirited and punishing of migrants, her book does an excellent job in showing that "there is little chance that any socially just legislation [for migrants] could be put forward because of the contradictory nature of the demands on policymakers" (231). Thus, given that Hellman finds no hope of devising a public policy toward migrants that will satisfy the highly polarized electorate, she retrenches into the usual policy recommendation for workers: get organized. But after decades of anti-union and anti-worker policies in the US, how can such organizing address migrants' interests? This strategy may be a good solution for US workers, but how can it address the intractable problems for Mexican undocumented migrants in the US policy context?

An alternative policy conclusion could be as follows: if the dismal conditions in rural Mexico stand as the key causal factor that explains out-migration from "The Rock," why not propose a North American policy of compensation and transfer, as existed in the European Union? In the EU, policies were geared to boost the less-developed nations of Greece, Portugal, and Spain upward in economic development, so their workers would not inundate other more-developed countries' labour markets. That these policies have worked in the past 30 years is demonstrated by the case of Spain. For instance, *The Economist* ("The Morning After: A Special Report on Spain," p. 4, 8 November 2008) points out that Spain's standard of living has actually surpassed that of Italy. So, given how prevalent the anti-undocumented-migrants sentiment is in the US, why not suggest that the Mexican government itself could revise its all-out embrace of neoliberalism? Mexico (which is now highly dependent on the importation of basic grains and cereals from the US and which now has the equivalent of about 20% of its electorate working there) could move to reconstruct its countryside, so that its people will reach food self-sufficiency and labour sovereignty again, as before 1986. This could save hundreds of thousands of Mexicans from engaging in the perilous journey north and help reconstruct their crumbling rural communities. For sure, this will also involve a considerable upward push for wages in the US, and that too might help alleviate the huge income disparities that have appeared since the 1970s in that country.

Disagreements with the conclusion apart, Hellman's contribution is of superb value. *The World of Mexican Migrants* offers a great insight into migrants' motivations and experiences, it is a very enjoyable read, and I highly recommend it for any course covering migration's human side.