
Deborah A. Boehm: Intimate Migrations. Gender, Family, and Illegality among Transnational Mexicans

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"Intimate Migrations. Gender, Family, and Illegality among Transnational Mexicans" is the first monograph of Deborah A. Boehm, assistant professor of Anthropology and Women's Studies at the University of Nevada. It is a rich ethnographic study of the lives "neither here, nor there", or maybe more accurately "half here, half there" and their daily negotiations in the transnational US-Mexican space. The author writes: "In my work with transnational Mexicans, I have often asked individuals to imagine a scenario in which there are no barriers to movement between Mexico and the United States, and then I asked them where they would choose to live. Almost always, Mexican (im)migrants tell me they would prefer the freedom to 'go and come [ir y venir],' that ideally they would like to be in both countries and to create the lives that are (...) 'from both sides'" (p. 3). Such statements of her interviewees led Boehm to address the issues of family lives, gendered selves, generational relations and their emic understandings emerging under the state-regulated migration. She traces how "the legal production of migrant 'illegality'" shapes what she calls "intimate migrations", "the gendered and familial actions and interactions" (p. 4).

In three parts (and six chapters respectively), the author subsequently deals with the issues of transborder families (Part I), gendered migrations (Part II) and the migrant children (Part III). All these parts are organically integrated in the book to portray intimate life marked by the migration process, fluidity of family ties and kinship formations, negotiations of gendered selves and gendered relations, and transnational/migrant childhood. Throughout the book, Boehm strongly argues that the lives of transnational migrants are full of contradictions which should be understood as emerging at the intersection of intimacy and production of illegality. The cases of family reunifications or masculinised deportations are pure examples of how illegality is shaped and shaping the very intimate lives of migrants as well as generally the gendered migration flows (as the masculinisation of deportation results in emergent feminised migrations and new configurations of family, p. 146). This book is an ethnographic study which sheds new light on the migratory process, as being shaped and structuring the gendered and familial interactions under the influence of the U.S. state. From my reading of "Intimate Migrations", there are particularly three crucial points which I would appreciate and which make her book exceptional. Boehm comes up with new issues in feminist research on migration, with new perspectives that she employs in the research field which has been under focus for a long time - the U.S.-Mexican borders.

First, it is the depth of Boehm's analysis of family lives. After describing her conceptual and methodological background in Chapter 1, in Part I she deals with how "Mexican (im)migrants build relationships and construct home and family in a manner that transcends nation-states" (p. 31). The contradictory processes of continuity and fragmentation lie in the core of transborder family and kinship ties negotiations. The author builds her argument on the particular case studies which not only make the text more pleasant for readers, but also illuminate the nuances in transnational experiences. Drawing upon the anthropological studies on kinship, Boehm strongly accentuates the fluidity and diversity of the notion of family. Such diversity and fluidity become even more apparent in the migratory context when the migrants "continuously maintain, reassert, reconfigure, and transform family" (p. 33). The author connects the migrants' construction of family and domestic space with their understanding of home. Her analysis uncovers different emic meanings of what home is as her interviewees express home along three (sometimes parallel and intersecting) axes: home as nation, home as place and home as family. This distinction sheds light on how the home is imagined across state borders and how family networks are a constitutive dimension of home. She writes that "as family extends across borders, home is characterised by new forms. Transmigrants construct home as a mobile, building home through translocal rituals and family events, transnational communication and travel, and perceptions of connectedness despite distance and over time" (p. 51). In her analysis of family ties Boehm moves beyond the sole agency of migrants-family members, showing that transmigrants are repeatedly shaped and constrained by state policies. In Chapter 3, the constructions of legality and illegality and their impact on the family lives become the main issue. "It is difficult to celebrate migrant agency in this context," Boehm cites the anthropologist Susan Bibler Coutin (p. 66) referring to how the families construct their lives not in a vacuum but in a restrictive climate of U.S. immigration policies. The bureaucratic process of family reunification with its disciplinary effect illustrates how the state penetrates intimate life. The author concludes that "the study of 'family reunification' brings to the fore the power of the U.S. state to determine how people within - and indeed beyond - its borders construct family, highlighting the persistence of state presence in transnational family life" (p. 67).

Second is the emphasis on the gendered nature of migration flows which pervades in the whole book but becomes most prominent in Part II where the author looks into how gender is performed and gendered subjectivities are constructed in the migration process. What must be accentuated here is her approach to both femininities and masculinities. "If you don't go to the United States, you are not a man" sounds the title of one of her chapters (p. 73-80) where she convincingly demonstrates the interplay between men and women which impacts on the redefinitions of femininities as well as masculinities. Migrations impact what it means to be a man; in the case of her research field, the gender order of masculinity is clear: "to be a man, one must migrate" (p. 73). Hence, as she shows, the creation of masculinity is strongly tied to migration and such understanding also has huge implications for men who stay in Mexico. For them, when the expression of masculinity through migration fails, the exaggerated performances of manliness come to front. Because their manhood is threatened, the men, for instance, turn to violence as a presentation of masculinity. Analysing such cases, Boehm contributes to the less developed agenda in feminist research on migration - the research on gendered migrant masculinities. At the same time, she is interested in the experiences of women which can be summarised in the exclamation of Boehm's interviewee: "I do everything!" (p. 81), meaning that after the men's migration, women become responsible for all the tasks - both those understood as "female" (housework etc.) and those traditionally performed by men. That is also why the title of her chapter - once more using the quotation of her interviewee - is "Now I am man and a woman". The author concludes that "through the interplay of gendered migrations and gendered moves, notions of appropriate gender roles are shifting. Transnational movement, cultural ideologies, the workings of global capital, and the persistence of the nation-state are resulting in a range of new gendered subjectivities: emergent forms of male power and strategies through which women assert themselves, as well as newly defined masculinities and femininities." (p. 89). Boehm offers deep insight into how men and women do gender while living apart and how they understand their gendered subjectivities vis-?-vis the new experiences of family separations and shift in the gendered division of labour.

And third is her analysis of migrant childhood which I found a very fruitful and important contribution. Children play many roles in Boehm's analysis: they are at the core of the motivations of parents to migrate (the parents who migrate do it for their children); they are children who migrate as well as children who stay behind. On the one hand Boehm illustrates how the actions of young migrants are enacted in the shadows of adults who are the primary decision makers, and on the other hand she shows the independence of young migrants - predominantly male - in the migratory process. Here again the author accentuates the necessity to acknowledge the formative role of gender in migration projects by illuminating the gender rites emerging around the maturation of male youth. As already elaborated above, for men migration is not an option; it is an obligation. Thus for young men, migration to the USA becomes a patriarchal rite of passage through which boys become men. In this vein, the young women are discouraged from migrating, as their coming of age occurs differently. Female passage to adulthood, she argues, is characterised by staying in one place, becoming a housewife responsible for domestic tasks. Gendering the migrant youth and differences in young men's and women's experiences with mobility is an important step which the author makes to shed light on the agency of migrant children/children of migrants. Boehm moves the discussion even further and deals with the issue of national belonging and exclusion. She shows how children negotiate their belonging under the impact of US state policies and constitution of illegality and legality. She concludes that belonging of migrants is marked by "placement and displacement - ashore and not here" (p. 132) and it is inflexible citizenship and contingent membership which characterise their transborder lives.

Without any doubts, Deborah A. Boehm importantly contributes to migration and gender studies by illuminating the contradictions and tensions, continuities and ruptures which characterise the daily lives of transmigrants. It is a rich qualitative study of relatedness, kinship ties and gendered relations which successfully profits from the developed feminist scholarship on migration and its synthesis with the modern anthropological theories on kinship and family. It is a must read book for scholars interested in gender analysis of migratory process and provides us with a guide for the gendered research practice which combines policy analysis with deep analysis of intimate daily lives.

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