

— BOOK REVIEWS —

Zana Vathi, Russell King (eds) (2017). *Return Migration and Psychosocial Wellbeing: Discourses, Policy-Making and Outcomes for Migrants and Their Families*. London, New York: Routledge, xviii, 279 pp.

The link between return migration and psychosocial wellbeing has been waiting to be unpacked for well over a decade. In 2004, a seminal paper by Jean-Pierre Cassarino (2004) drew attention to the newfound salience of return in migration policy and discourse. At that time, the rise of return mobility raised hopes for economic development in the countries of origin. The anticipation of wealth and knowledge transfers on the back of return migration was part of a wider trend wherein policymakers started looking towards diasporic networks in the global North to harness political support and inward investment for the global South (see Mohan 2006 and 2008). Cassarino focused on the link between development and return specifically to problematise this narrative. He differentiated between different types of returnee: those who had arrived seeking asylum and those seeking economic opportunity; those who returned to be actors of socioeconomic change and those who did not. He then argued that successful returns depend on resource mobilisation – that is, the tangible assets and social networks necessary to facilitate the move – and returnee’s preparedness – in other words, their readiness and willingness to move. However, his focus was largely on the material and not the emotional aspects of return. Further, as often happens in policy-oriented migration studies, the impact of return on the migrants themselves was not particularly high up on the list of concerns and hence the subsequent debate has remained chiefly oriented towards migratory and economic outcomes and not psychosocial ones.

A new book entitled *Return Migration and Psychosocial Wellbeing*, edited by Zana Vathi and Russell King (2017), aims to address the blind spot of

psychosocial wellbeing in return migration research. It does so by tackling two assumptions that underpin much academic work and dominate policy discourse on return migration. Firstly, studies collected by Vathi and King destabilise the dichotomy of forced versus voluntary return to ‘illustrate the complexity found in the return spectrum’ (2017: 3). Secondly, and more conventionally, the authors also approach wellbeing as a continuum and frame it ‘as a developing, nonlinear experience of migrants, conditioned by circumstantial as well as structural factors’ (2017: 3). While specific definitions of wellbeing differ somewhat from one case study to another, they all cast it as complex and relational – as an emotional response to one’s social position and a sense of agency.

To generate and substantiate these insights, studies collected in the volume proceed from a person-centred perspective and discuss human mobility from the standpoint of returnees as individuals – sentient and social beings who are hopeful at some points of their life-course journey and can be desperate at others. Pursuing this kind of enquiry has to rely on qualitative approaches and so the book is built upon decades of ethnography, often at multiple sites, and hundreds, perhaps thousands, of in-depth interviews. What stands out methodologically is that several of the collected studies take a life-course approach and draw on repeat interviews to capture how returnees’ perspectives of their mobility and wellbeing are reworked in time and space. They are shaped by individual experiences of ageing and mobility, of settlement and return, as well as by multiple external influences. As regards the latter, policy changes and economic crises are the two most often cited factors that affect perceptions of – and decisions to – return.

External and internal factors intersect throughout the volume in various ways; this creates a sense of depth and shows serious engagement with the complexity of the social field. For example, in Chapter 12

(*Migration and Return Migration in Later Life to Albania: The Pendulum Between Subjective Wellbeing and Place*) Eralba Cela describes older men who considered and enacted return from Italy to Albania as their employability diminished with age and their social and family status faded away in a new spatio-temporal setting that had upset traditional age and gender hierarchies. On the other hand, in Chapter 13 (*To Stay or to Go? The Motivations and Experiences of Older British Returnees from Spain*) Kelly Hall, Charles Betty and Jordi Giner show that thoughts and enactments of return from Spain to Britain are more typical in women, especially in the context of family-related return. These two migrations were also differently exposed to the effects of economic crisis: while many Albanians were unable to remain in Italy due to an increasingly competitive labour market, some Britons were impoverished by fluctuations in property prices and currency exchange rates and so were unable to return from Spain. The various dynamics of return therefore stemmed from differing dynamics of arrival and were differently impacted by cultural norms and economic effects. This is just one example, amongst many, to show the impossibility of framing return migration as either forced or voluntary, and to illustrate the wealth of empirical material that substantiates this overarching claim. The framing of willingness to return as a complex equation, alongside the framing of return migration as a process that is not psychosocially safe, bind together all the case studies presented in the volume.

This wealth of empirical material and theoretical insights is organised into four parts, which are introduced by Vathi and followed by concluding remarks from King. The first part, which is entitled *The Forced–Voluntary Continuum in Return Migration*, builds on the key theme from the introduction to disrupt the forced–voluntary dichotomy and instead present return migration as a process where both aspects can be present, and where so-called voluntary mobility is often all but forced. It does so by interrogating the agency of returnees who move from Western and Southern Europe as part of the aptly named Assisted Voluntary Return (AVR) programme. The three stud-

ies forming this part tell the uneasy story of programmes promoted by the International Organisation for Migration (IOM). Nominally AVRs aim to improve migrants' wellbeing, but the actual aims seem to have more to do with alleviating migration pressures on the West and providing another layer of immigration enforcement.

In the second part, *Ancestral Returns, Adaptations and Re-Migration*, the book moves on to discussing roots and life-course migrations into Poland, Portugal and Bosnia. This stretches the concept of return back in time to include not just a lifetime but also past generations. In so doing, this part of the book shifts our focus away from the willingness to return and, instead, unpacks the meaning of return and belonging for those who enact it. In many cases the dream of the homeland turns out to be an illusion and a return to be impossible. This paradox was perhaps best summed up by a root migrant from Moldova, cited in Chapter 5 by Marcin Gońda (*Roots Migration to the Ancestral Homeland and Psychosocial Wellbeing: Young Polish Diasporic Students*), who said: 'The Poles somehow treat me better as a Moldovan than a Russian (...) but in Moldova I've never been a Moldovan, I was there, so to say, a Pole (...) but here I've never been and I will never be a Pole. (...) I'm not a Pole for sure, nor Moldovan either' (2017: 88). This illustrates the broader point made by many cases presented in the volume – the notion of 'homeland', which underpins the notion of 'return', is often itself deeply problematic.

Further paradoxes of return are explored in the third part – *Asylum Systems, Assisted Returns and Post-Return Mobilities* – which picks up on the trade-offs between a life with a precarious migration status and going back to a sometimes even more precarious life in the country of origin. In so doing, the chapters in this part expand Cassarino's framework of preparedness and readiness to return by including post-return outcomes. They show that the relative psychosocial safety – or risk – of return often cannot be known in advance. This points to the importance of reintegration policy within return programmes, which is currently barely existent, and to the multitude of factors affecting wellbeing after return.

Finally, the fourth part entitled *Life Course, Family and Health* spells out the key tensions revealed through return migration. It shows belonging as a multivalent and dialogic process and as a personal feeling that is socially embedded. Importantly, it also shows that, just like any other type of migration, return mobility is intrinsically transnational.

As stated in its preface (p. xvii), the volume emerged from meetings, conferences and discussions that were part of the IMISCOE research network on International Migration, Integration and Social Cohesion in Europe. This has two sets of implications: one is the geographical focus on Europe or, more specifically, on migrations that concern Europe. Migrants who originally came from Asian and African countries are featured prominently in the volume but, apart from Chapter 9 by Nassim Majidi (*The Return of Refugees from Kenya to Somalia: Gender and Psycho-social Wellbeing*), the studies tell the story of migrations to, from or within Europe. Of note, the case studies include Poland, Latvia, Albania and Bosnia, which gives the volume a significant focus on Central and Eastern Europe. This may invite interesting comparisons with Krystyna Iglicka's (2002) book on return migration to Poland, as well as with work on return migration in the wider region.

The second implication of the project's exploratory design is the diversity of research and theoretical approaches within the volume. The aforementioned dominance of qualitative approaches, largely determined by the subject, is a common feature that links up otherwise distinct case studies. The analytical work here unfolds as a series of understated negotiations between empirical findings and diverse theoretical points. While the introduction makes explicit reference to the mobilities approach as a guiding theoretical orientation for the volume, this is only partly followed through. The chapters collected in the volume provide nuanced accounts of human mobility – they do not essentialise place or borders and repeatedly problematise the image of return as a concluding stage of the migration cycle – without necessarily falling back on the mobilities framework. Instead, they draw on a wide range of theoretical influences. This spectrum extends from literary theory, deployed

to analyse negotiations of belonging in a fabulously nuanced Chapter 11 by Aija Lulle (*The Need to Belong: Latvian Youth Returns As Dialogic Work*), to the political economy that informs Barak Kalir's analysis in Chapter 4 (*Between 'Voluntary' Return Programmes and Soft Deportation: Sending Vulnerable Migrants in Spain Back 'Home'*). The latter case is the only one in the volume where a concern for broader migration regimes overshadows the person-centred focus that otherwise guides the chapters and it somewhat jars with presenting the forced–voluntary dichotomy as a spectrum. Nothing ever seems voluntary in a neoliberal world and consent to return is always manufactured through 'a financial and ideological construction' (p. 69) of the neoliberal state.

The upside of this theoretical diversity is that the volume does not just guide a reader through the different modes and spatio-temporal manifestations of 'return' but also the various ways of reading it. To me, frames informed by theories attuned to the processes of emotional and intellectual negotiations of the meaning of home, belonging, mobility and choice – which are shown as *dialogic* constructions in Lulle's study – seem more suited to the volume's objective of problematising return from a returnee's standpoint than the bird's-eye view of a critique of neoliberalism which we find in Kalir's chapter. Some of that theoretical richness also feels slightly lopsided: the vast majority of case studies draw on social network theory and show how transnationalism is not just part of the process of onward migration but is also fundamental for return – but then Lulle's chapter works through the lens of cosmopolitanism instead of transnationalism. This feels like a missed opportunity to elaborate on the insights offered by both transnational and cosmopolitan approaches, particularly in the light of recently published person-centred accounts of cosmopolitanism (Rapport 2012). That being said, there is an intrinsic value to showcasing a range of approaches within the volume, given the pioneering and exploratory nature of the project it concludes.

A person-centred perspective is inherently holistic and so, against literatures that theorise the drivers of migrations – or push and pull factors – this volume's

focus on how such factors intersect in individual people, on how they become embodied and enacted, is moving and inspiring. It provides a series of studies that exhibit the social and emotional complexity of migration and, at the same time, attempts to generate practical knowledge through policy recommendations. It does not provide an overarching theory of return migration and psychosocial wellbeing but it does something far more important than that – it shows that there is not one.

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Christine Mahoney (2016). *Failure and Hope: Fighting for the Rights of the Forcibly Displaced*. Cambridge University Press, 168 pp.

One of the struggles facing the humanitarian sector regarding displaced people is the discrepancy between the ideal of saving lives, on the one hand and, on the other, the often-abysmal living conditions awaiting those who are saved. This discrepancy is es-

pecially pronounced in the case of refugees and internally displaced persons (IDPs) who find shelter but no solutions, leaving them to face increasingly protracted displacement. Christine Mahoney's (2016) *Failure and Hope: Fighting for the Rights of the Forcibly Displaced* investigates global advocacy efforts related to protracted displacement, showing how failures have proliferated at three different levels of governance – the international level, the level of national governance of host countries and the local camp level. Mahoney's focus not only on refugees but also on IDPs provides valuable insights for the humanitarianism literature, which concentrates less on IDPs as a key subject of inquiry.

In Chapter 1, the author lays out her main contribution to the literature on forced displacement and advocacy for displaced people. Although many scholars have analysed global advocacy efforts through cases that successfully achieved their aims, Mahoney's project is different. Indeed, she does something rare in the global advocacy literature: she flips the starting point of her analysis from the rare successful international advocacy cases in order to consider levels of governance where advocacy for the rights of the displaced is unlikely to be successful. In Chapters 2 and 3, through content analysis of the coverage of 61 protracted displacement crises between 2000 and 2010 in the *New York Times* as well as in five different European and American newspapers for 2011, and through fieldwork in seven countries (Colombia, Croatia, Kenya, Nepal, Sri Lanka, Thailand and Uganda) experiencing major protracted displacement, Mahoney demonstrates how and why 'failure is the norm' (2016: 1) in global advocacy today related to displaced people. Although Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro and Serbia hosted more than 380 000 IDPs in Central and Eastern Europe as of 2008 when Mahoney chose the cases, Bosnian refugees in Croatia and Croatian IDPs were chosen to be focused on because the displacement crisis in Croatia had been experienced for at least five years and the Croatian state had more than five camps to host displaced populations. These cases also perfectly demonstrate how the break-up of Yugoslavia affected