Book Review: On the Move: Changing Mechanisms of Mexico-US Migration by Filiz Garip

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Why do Mexicans migrate to the US? In **On the Move: Changing Mechanisms of Mexico-US Migration**, *Filiz Garip seeks to challenge overarching assumptions regarding the 'typical' Mexican migrant by instead showing the diverse experiences and push-pull factors that shape the decision to migrate from Mexico to the US.* **Iván Farías Pelcastre** *welcomes Garip's distinctive approach as enabling scholars to better understand the complex and divergent patterns of movement between nations.*

On the Move: Changing Mechanisms of Mexico-US Migration. **Filiz Garip. Princeton University Press. 2017.**

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The relationship between the United States and Mexico is under significant strain. The incoming administration of President Donald J. Trump has repeatedly attempted to portray Mexico as an enemy of the US, rather than as the close friend that it is. His administration has put Mexican immigration to the US at the top of the bilateral political agenda, depicting it as an existential threat to the latter's people and economy. It has also openly and vehemently expressed its intention to build a wall that will physically – but also, most importantly, symbolically – separate two countries and peoples that have over 200 years of common history.

Rather than an exceptional circumstance, however, the current state of US-Mexico relations reflects the challenges that both countries have had to recurrently overcome to promote and secure increased and mutually-beneficial bilateral cooperation on an ever-growing number of policy issues. On occasion, however, scholars, policymakers and the public in both countries have reverted to partial or outdated accounts and misconceptions to explain and discuss the complex (and controversial) phenomena that shape the bilateral relationship. One of these is Mexican migration to the United States. With *On the Move: Changing Mechanisms of Mexico-US Migration*, Filiz Garip contributes to increasing our collective understanding of this phenomenon, which despite being widely discussed, remains inadequately understood.
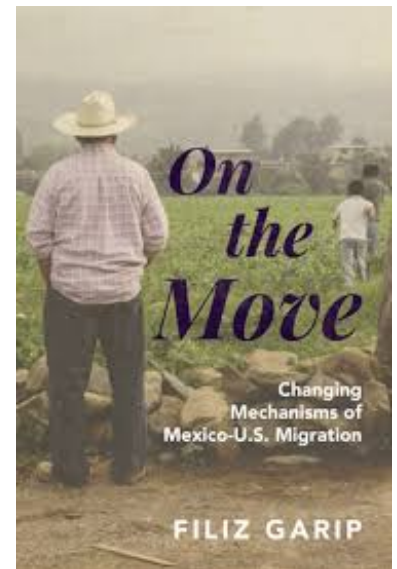
Garip acknowledges that her work joins an already large body of scholarship written by academics from various disciplines and multiple perspectives. She argues that many of such studies, however, have focused on pitting grand theoretical models against one another to provide an all-encompassing explanation of Mexican migration to the US. In her view, most social scientists regard migration as the result of migrants' desire to maximise their income; the strategies of migrants' families to diversify risks to income; or the existence of social ties between future migrants and those already in the destination. All these accounts, however, remain partial as variability amongst immigrant groups makes it difficult to provide universal explanations for individual behaviour and decisions. Hence, Garip takes a significantly different approach.

Image Credit: Wall Mural in Nogales (Jonathan McIntosh CC BY 2.0)

Her book proposes to re-examine and discuss this complex phenomenon by first asking a much simpler question: who are the Mexican migrants who come to the United States? *On the Move* acknowledges that, as the largest immigrant group in the US, Mexicans have a variety of reasons to migrate north, many of which depend on individual interests – far more than has been hitherto acknowledged. Garip provides evidence showing that the socioeconomic and cultural settings that migrants inhabit, or seek to inhabit, determine their interests in migrating. Different theories may or may not be relevant in explaining the decisions of specific groups of individuals to migrate to the US, including where to migrate, what for and for how long. Garip's aim, then, is not to confirm or dismiss one of the above (or other) explanations. In her view, all accounts are equally plausible. The challenge lies then in asking: when, where and for whom might each explanation be most relevant?

Garip shows that previous theoretical accounts have been partial, explaining only the reasons for which the 'average' Mexican migrant has decided to migrate to the US. While in the early 1970s, most scholars regarded migration as resulting mainly from an economic optimisation problem – i.e. the large income differential between the US and Mexico – by the early 1980s, the view among academics had changed towards more social-based explanations. Scholars shifted their attention from the individual towards the family as the key unit in which migration decisions were discussed, evaluated and decided. Later, other scholars provided alternative explanations that linked both economic and sociological explanations e.g. arguing that migration resulted from a dual labour market structure in advanced capitalist societies, where natives fill the high-paying jobs in the capital-intensive sectors while immigrants undertake low-paying, labour-intensive work.

These models, however, can only describe and explain the profile, behaviour and migration decisions of the average Mexican migrant. They dismiss heterogeneity *a priori*. Hence, they fail to recognise, characterise and explain variation across cases. In turn, this constrains the models' ability to explain events and changes in migration flows as they can only account for developments in retrospect. For instance, while scholars using neoclassical economics-based models consider that higher wages in the destination country propel the migration of individuals, scholars using new economics-based models argue that the economic uncertainty in the country of origin economy prompts individuals to migrate from households that face risks to their earnings and, hence, socioeconomic wellbeing. Garip argues that, contrary to common views, empirical studies have provided stronger support for the new economics models rather than those based on neoclassical economics.

This research strategy, however, presumes that these models and theories provide competing accounts of

migration, hence pitting them against each other rather than regarding them as complementary. One of the main innovations in Garip's work is to argue that theories should not be evaluated based on their predictive power, but on their relevance for different groups of migrants at different points in time. Garip contends that this epistemological change would enable scholars to reconnect the theoretical models with the phenomena they are attempting to explain.

Garip's methodological choice builds on this understanding of theory. While most scholars usually reduce theoretical models to only a few variables, Garip looks at multiple attributes including gender, education, job and income level of migrants before migrating, and considers different configurations of such attributes at the same time. Using this method allows her to identify groups of cases that have similar configurations or attributes, and which emerge from data rather than being forced upon it because of the use of a given theoretical model.

These changes in approach to theory, methods and data enable Garip to arrive at significantly different conclusions to other scholars. Garip concludes that both the Mexican population as whole, and the composition of Mexican migrant groups in the US, have changed over time. The profile of a group of migrants might indeed be that of residents of a rural, traditionally migrant-sending community offering limited employment opportunities. However, the profile of another group might be migrants with economic security who live in urban communities and who have access to more and better job opportunities in their communities of origin, hence only migrating to the US when equally desirable opportunities arise. The current use of theories conceals these differences.

Garip concludes that, to make sense of migration, one needs to understand the conditions of both sending and receiving countries, and the socioeconomic and cultural characteristics of the individuals who decide to migrate. Otherwise migration policies in both the sending and receiving states will continue to be symbolic and ineffective at managing migration, and have 'contradictory objectives, hidden agendas, or unintended consequences' (177). In Garip's own words:

> There will never be a global explanation for migration, or a global solution for it (if one takes it as a problem, that is). Different explanations will work at different times for different people. Different policies will be effective in different ways. Each migrant flow must be understood in its own terms. When it comes to policy, what we need is "good sense" and to move more and more towards limited remedies to solve concrete problems (179).

Unfortunately, good sense is not something very common in the current US administration.

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Note: This review gives the views of the author, and not the position of the LSE Review of Books blog, or of the London School of Economics.