

Introduction

Reconceptualizing Diasporas and National Identities in Latin America and the Caribbean, 1850–1950

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What's the recipe for a Turk? Take the 25 de Março Street cocktail shaker and put in a Syrian, an Armenian, a Persian, an Egyptian, a Kurd. Shake it up really well and—boom—out comes a Turk.

Guilherme de Almeida, 1929

Migrations to Latin America and the Caribbean, 1850–1950

Even though Latin America has been a continent primarily of emigration during the last decades, historically the region has been one of mass immigration. One aim of this book is to provide an overview of the history of migrations to Latin America between 1850 and 1950. In contrast to much of the previous scholarship, this volume does so by specifically examining the interaction between transnational migrations and the formation of national identities. Building on the fields of migration studies and nationalism theory, neither the nation-states from which migrants came nor those to which they moved are seen as preexisting but are rather in a continual processes of being (re)defined. By analyzing these processes from a comparative angle, the book seeks to engage Latin American and Caribbean history more firmly with recent approaches to the history of global migrations at the height of the worldwide spread of nationalism. In order to make room for examining less-studied groups such as the Chinese, and for analyzing the long-term repercussions of immigration to Latin America,

the book chooses the unusual time frame of 1850–1950 instead of the more common 1870–1930, the period during which the largest numbers of foreign immigrants arrived.

Although the well-known arrival of conquistadors and African slaves during the period of the Iberian empires had turned Latin America, strictly speaking, into a region of “immigration” well before the period studied in this volume, the inflow of peoples between 1850 and 1950 (concentrated especially in the six decades after 1870) was quantitatively unprecedented, embedded within a larger set of global migrations, of which those across the Atlantic were only the best known.¹ The main destinations within Latin America were, in descending order, Argentina, Brazil, Cuba, Uruguay, and Chile. Roughly 4 million immigrants settled permanently in Argentina between 1870 and 1930, 2 million to 3 million in Brazil, and perhaps 1 million in Cuba and 300,000 in Uruguay. Since in some countries, such as Argentina and Uruguay, the preexisting population was small, the relative impact of these immigrations was sometimes greater than the impact of immigrations to the United States. Uruguay’s population grew sevenfold in the second half of the nineteenth century, and Argentina’s quadrupled, mainly due to immigration.² As was the case in the United States, Europe furnished the greatest numbers of immigrants in Latin America, with Italy and Spain being the two most important sending countries in quantitative terms, followed by a number of other European countries, such as Portugal, Germany, the British Isles, and France. In addition, especially after World War I, there were growing numbers of Eastern Europeans, among them many Jews, migrating to Latin America just as they did to the United States.

But Europe was by no means the only sending region of migrants to Latin America. From the 1850s Chinese workers went to Cuba, other Caribbean countries, and Peru. After 1900 Peru and especially Brazil began to receive significant numbers of Japanese. Middle Easterners, mainly from today’s Lebanon and Syria, arrived in virtually all Latin American countries, and in especially large numbers in Argentina and Brazil. Armenians, too, came to settle in cities such as Buenos Aires, São Paulo, and Montevideo. Migrants from the British West Indies, often working for North American railway or fruit companies, began to form significant, if marginalized, parts of the populations of countries such as Costa Rica, Panama, and Ecuador, while many Haitians went to neighboring Cuba. Colonial Caribbean countries, meanwhile, saw the mass arrival of Asian indentured laborers, who altered the population structure of Surinam, British Guiana, and Trinidad.

Furthermore, migrations within Latin America, both internal and between countries, often neighboring ones, set in on a larger scale, leading to the growth of urban centers such as Mexico City, São Paulo, or Buenos Aires, the latter two of which had initially expanded mainly due to transatlantic migrations. All these movements had far-reaching impacts on the national identities of virtually all Latin American countries, which at the same time were being constructed and continually renegotiated.

Although the broadest population movements are well known to specialists, the histories of the many migrations into Latin America and the Caribbean between 1850 and 1950 remain understudied when compared to the parallel experience of the United States. While there are countless studies of individual migrations, much of the literature on the topic is compartmentalized into individual case studies. In spite of a body of comparative scholarship slowly building up,³ a large proportion of studies, many of which are written by the descendants of immigrants themselves, continue to focus on one “ethnic” or “national” group within one receiving nation-state because of a lack of funds for cross-national research in Latin American universities and the ongoing weight of methodological nationalism both within Latin America and among historians outside the region, who tend to be specialized in individual national histories. As a consequence of this as well as the overwhelming global power of Anglo-American academe in terms of theory-building, Latin American migratory histories have had a limited impact compared to those of the United States. Though in declining measure, theoretical models derived from the Chicago School of sociology—especially the opposition between “assimilation” and “pluralism”—continue to be the framework in which historical migration to Latin America is mostly being discussed. Since mass migration to Latin America declined sharply from 1930, the scholarship on historical migrations to Latin America, eventually left to historians alone, has been less influenced by more recent theoretical models than by the historiography on migration to the United States, where, due to ongoing immigration, disciplines other than history continued to influence the methods and approaches of migration studies. This disjunction is all the more regrettable because the nature of Latin America’s immigration histories can tell us a great deal about migratory processes more generally. Building on a growing literature that complicates straightforward assumptions about the relationship between migrations and national identities, this book seeks to contribute to redressing this problem.

Migration Studies and Theories of Nationalism

One obstacle to setting this right is that, in spite of their obvious relatedness, migration studies and theories of nationalism have developed in a curious separation from one another. The major paradigms of migration studies were long informed by the experience of migration to the United States, in particular the so-called second wave that set in around 1890 and brought primarily Southern and Eastern Europeans to North America. From the 1920s the Chicago School of sociology dominated the field for several decades by studying the “assimilation” of these immigrants into American society. Although the ideas of this school were not monolithic internally, most of the scholars associated with it—ranging from Robert E. Park and W. I. Thomas to Louis Wirth and Milton Gordon—studied the degree to which immigrants retained or gave up their cultural baggage in the process of fusing into what was frequently called the “American mainstream.”⁴ The thrust of the underlying assumptions was that immigrants should and eventually would shed their old-world habits in order to achieve social upward mobility as well as to allow for the creation of a viable American identity.

From the 1960s such arguments were challenged by a new generation of migration scholars, sometimes called “pluralists” or “retentionists.” Although, ironically, “assimilation” as understood by the Chicago School had by then arguably become a reality of American society, the pluralists proclaimed that assimilation was neither realistic nor desirable.⁵ Instead of focusing on macro social developments and statistics, which appeared to corroborate the decline of the importance of distinctions based on ethnic origin, these authors concentrated on the micro level of migratory chains and networks, which they found helped the survival of the immigrants’ and their descendants’ cultural and ethnic particularities. It was no coincidence that this paradigm change in migration studies came alongside the civil rights movement and a general upsurge in identity politics. Being a backlash against earlier assumptions of Anglo-conformity, the writings of “pluralists” sometimes stressed the “roots” of immigrants and “ethnics” as if these were primordial and unchangeable.⁶ Yet both “assimilationists” and “pluralists” spent little time on conceptualizing the “mainstream.” This shortcoming has been pointed out in relation to the Chicago School, but it can also be extended to its “pluralist” challengers.⁷ The problem could well be attributed to a much broader one identified by Nina Glick Schiller and Andreas Wimmer—namely, the blind eye of mainstream sociology for

the rise and ongoing importance of nationalism owing to an implicit and unacknowledged methodological nationalism.⁸

Thinking about the “mainstream” was left to a different field of study: that of nationalism. Similarly to migration studies, theories of nationalism have been bedeviled by a dichotomy, dividing “constructivists” or “modernists” such as Benedict Anderson, Ernest Gellner, and Eric Hobsbawm from “primordialists,” “perennialists” or “ethno-symbolists” such as Anthony Smith. Whereas the former have insisted that nations are “invented” or “imagined” and that “it is nationalism which engenders nations and not the other way round,” the latter have typically stressed that such inventions are restricted by the available “raw material” from which nationalism is built and that “a state’s ethnic core shapes the character and boundaries of a nation.”⁹ Ironically, the constructivist viewpoint in theories of nationalism predominated in the 1970s and ’80s, precisely at the time when the arguably more primordially inclined “retentionists” seemed to be carrying the day in migration studies. Communication between these fields was minimal, further limited by disciplinary boundaries (the best-known migration scholars were often sociologists, while the major theorists of nationalism came more often from history, political science, or anthropology) as well as geographical separation (migration studies were dominated by American academics, while British-based scholars made a greater impact in theories of nationalism).

Just as the most influential authors on migrations showed little concern to conceptualize nationalism, the most-read scholars of nationalism rarely had a major interest in migrations.¹⁰ Although theorists of nationalism such as Anderson, Craig Calhoun, or Elie Kedourie studied how the idea of the nation—what Anderson has called the “modular” form of nationalism—traveled around the globe, they related these movements to intellectual transfers rather than the mass flows of peoples that interested students of migration.¹¹ Moreover, as Rogers Brubaker has remarked, an overriding concern with the *origins* of nations and nationalism gave rise to an implicit tendency, even among constructivists, to see nations as relatively stable entities once they had been invented by nationalists.¹² If migrants did come into the picture, their role was that of real or potential challengers of an already existing national identity.

Over the last two decades, the dichotomous structuring of both migration studies and nationalism theories has largely been worn away. Migration scholars who had been trying to reappraise the concept of “assimilation” are now stressing that this term cannot be understood without granting

serious attention to the transformations of the “mainstream” as a result of migrations.¹³ Numerous studies have shown that, depending on context-specific variables, there is no strict opposition between the retention of ethnic networks and the adjustment into receiving societies. In many instances ethnic networks worked as promoters of, not as obstacles to, assimilation.¹⁴ Nor was there a straightforward relationship between the declining importance of ethnic distinctions and socioeconomic upward mobility.¹⁵ Historians of migrations, including those to Latin America, have moved away from privileging either macro social phenomena or a micro approach. By integrating the two, they have arrived at more nuanced interpretations of how migrations were open-ended processes shaped by conditions in a number of interlinked localities instead of a definite movement from one place to another with a fixed outcome.¹⁶ In theories of nationalism, the old divide between “perennialists” and “constructivists” has survived to this day. But when it comes to concrete historical studies, most scholars would now pursue a combined approach that examines the interaction between the efforts of the state and intellectuals to forge national identities and the popular customs that they belabor.¹⁷

Parallel to the development of theoretically more open frameworks, historical studies of both immigrations and the formation of national identities in Latin America have expanded enormously over the last decades. Nonetheless, in both fields the dearth of historical scholarship on Latin America in comparison to other world regions and, particularly, the limited impact of studies on the region’s history on theory-building continue to be rightfully lamented. The major theorists of nationalism have relegated Latin America to a few uneasy footnotes, admitting that its history may sit uncomfortably with their overarching frameworks. But this has rarely impelled them to question their models.¹⁸ Likewise, the region’s immigration history has usually at best served as a counterexample to the North American case with which it has been compared in terms of the relative “integration” of immigrants into the receiving societies. As summarized by Eduardo Míguez, the most prominent argument has been that “it is likely that the integration of immigrants into the local society was faster and more successful in many of the migrant flows that arrived in Spanish and Portuguese America than in their North American counterparts.”¹⁹ Regardless of whether one concurs with this statement (or whether an agreement can be reached on what “integration” and “successful” mean), the contribution of studies on historical immigrations into Latin America to the conceptual tools of migration studies has been minimal.