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KASTORYANO'S *CONTESTED CONCEPTS IN MIGRATION
STUDIES*



Tightening the conceptual lens in migration research: towards a geography of concepts and a Weberian digression

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ABSTRACT

This brief note deals directly with what is interpreted as John Mollenkopf's epistemological, comparative and regional critique to conceptual thinking in migration studies. The paper is devoted to meta-conceptual thinking. From an analytical point of view, there are three main lines of thought that inspired the author to define a geography of concepts and the need of Weberian approach. First, the distinction between the discussion of a conceptual agenda and the meanings of concepts; second, the definition of what the contextual dependence of concepts may entail; and third, the introduction of a multiscale approach. This conceptual talk is today more necessary than ever, even more so considering the era of great semantic confusion in which we live, where realities and virtuality merge, where evidence sometimes loses its function as an indicator of reality, with so many strategic narratives full of intentions and emotions in migration debates.

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A concept is a lens that we use to examine certain aspects of the reality. John Mollenkopf's critical review raises awareness of several important issues that definitely contribute to *conceptual thinking in migration studies*. Of course, we can steer the talk towards how different disciplines sculpt a concept but in very different ways, or how concepts draw on different traditions and ideologies. I can only endorse this path of reflection, taking a broad sense of the context dependency of concepts, and adopting what I might call comparative geography of concepts. In particular, it seems to suggest a regionally based approach, which in itself may be debatable, since we know how strong the creation of regions is a geopolitical construct. As Mollenkopf himself states:

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From a U.S. perspective, however, the essays display a fair degree of European parochialism, both in the sense that they are skeptical that approaches developed in the American literature cannot be readily applied to European cases and by restricting their universe of examples (with just a few exceptions) to Europe, leaving out other parts of the world, such as Latin America, Southern Africa, or the Middle East.

This is, I believe, primarily an epistemological critique that incorporates regional thinking in the production of knowledge via concepts. Considering this generative understanding, let me enter into a conceptual discussion taking its substantive critique seriously. From an analytical point of view, there are three main lines of reflection that inspired me to define a Weberian approach to conceptual thinking.

Hint 1: when we engage in a conceptual talk in migration studies, we must distinguish a two-wire view. Firstly, a conceptual agenda when we point to the criteria for selecting concepts. For example, we must agree with Modood's chapter that the concept of secularism is probably embedded in French tradition and is difficult to apply in other contexts. In this case, we can accept that our edited book was probably too Eurocentric. As Mollenkopf also suggests, Mansouri's concept of interculturality probably has difficulty entering the US debate. It is then objectively true that the selection of key concepts that map migration research depends on the (e.g.: regional) context. The same can be said of concepts such as race and others more related to the US, Anglo-Saxon, or Asian debates. The second strand is rather semantic: it correctly points to what we place inside a conceptual folder. A content analysis of a concept cannot be achieved outside of its own environment. As Jacobs's chapter suggests, the concept of diversity is understood differently in different regions of the world. In Europe, for example, there is still no consensus if it is necessary to follow a narrow vision (only migrants-producers-of-diversity) assuming some identity and cultural constraints, or a broader vision (including sexual self-identification, people with disabilities, gender, religion, and any marker of difference that is an object of inequality and/or power relation). This ambiguity displays that the bridge between diversity and migration studies cannot be assumed. As Mollenkopf states: "migration is creating very different forms of diversity in very different social and state circumstances in other parts of the world". We can go on with other selected contested concepts in the volume. In short, the context influences both the conceptual agenda and the meanings of concepts, and even its use in the social and political spheres. Of course, we need to be more specific in evaluating this contextual approach. This is the reason why it is necessary to highlight a second and third way of reflection. This is an opportunity to reinforce the importance of alluding to a geography of concepts.

Hint 2: Following a context-based approach to conceptual thinking means a large number of things. We have inferred from Mollenkopf's critical review that context can refer to regions in the world. Indeed, this regional thinking of concepts is striking yet inspiring. Sometimes we emphasize the transatlantic dialogue, Euro-North African talks, and even US-Asian debates. This means that we assume that there is a consubstantial production of meanings related to the political regions in the world. This is probably Mollenkopf's most direct criticism of the edited book. And he is absolutely right that the conceptual agenda in migration research is likely to be different at any cardinal point, and that the meanings of shared concepts may also depend on regional knowledge production.

Hint 3: Following an urban policy/governance lens, there is also a scale approach that is gaining ground in migration research. This multi-scalar approach to concepts is still to be constructed, but we know that this point of view interferes today in most debates on migration since the methodological nationalism critique proposed by the first academics on transnationalism. The need to resize concepts in migration studies means that the concepts can have different meanings depending on the "territorial balcony" from where we interpret the world. Depending of it is a state lens or a city lens, the concept of security probably would take a different form. Welcoming cities and other sanctuary zones provide us a new understanding, much closer to social and human security, to urban justice. This scaling approach probably has a promising future for conceptual thinking in migration studies. Elsewhere, I myself posit multiculturalism as a state-based approach and interculturalism as a city-based approach to diversity governance.

These three hints could be operative when facing into a meta-conceptual analysis. This basically means making a comparative effort, focusing on similarities and variations according to regional contexts. Why are certain concepts more operative in certain regions than others? Why do certain meanings and social/political uses, and even uses of the media, germinate better in one region than in others? Or more directly, why particular concepts are not welcomed in certain regions or are simply ignored. Certainly, history, tradition, and political structures matter, as Mollenkopf seems to suggest. We can hypothesize, by taking the Favell concept of integration, that its meaning and political use may be different in a centralist state and a federal and even multinational state, for example. As Mollenkopf states: "variation in degrees and patterns of federalism, policy decentralization, and multilevel governance would be relevant here". This probably explains why in a centralist state, like France, integration becomes practically synonymous with assimilation. There is still a pending task to articulate a political geography of contested concepts in migration studies.

But let me also point out that within all this epistemological, comparative and regionalist approach, there is a certain essentialism in Mollenkopf's critical revision. He says "If U.S. authors were called upon to write critical essays on the same concepts, would they say the same things?". Well, certainly not. But the same applies to a Spanish and South African scholar, or a researcher from Morocco or Singapore. Or if instead of nationality and origin, we examine discipline or gender, the same can be argued. Even within the US, I am pretty sure that an Afro-American or/and Hispanic scholar would probably address differently the same concept. So, it is important not to adopt an essentialist approach and fall into a "methodological regionalism", assuming that "a region" in the world is a naturally social and political form. At this point, Picasso's reflections come to my mind: "If there were only one truth, you couldn't paint a hundred canvases on the same theme" (Picasso, 1966). I do not want to embrace relativism, but just to highlight that traditions and ideology matter and probably more than regional location. Although this does not diminish the importance of Mollenkopf's perspective, it is decisive to highlight that other drivers may impact the way we approach a concept in migration studies, and that certainly determine research outcomes.

I can also adhere to another set of criticisms, yet not share the intonation. Many concepts are indeed missing in this volume. In ambitious initiatives such as this one, the deficits legitimize the enterprise. But the editors already pointed out that this book was an opportunity to open the door to building a reflexive position toward this conceptual galaxy in migration studies. The fact that all the key concepts are connected in a conceptual web initially created profound conversations among the guest editors. In fact, this was one of the most challenging, but also stimulating and fruitful discussions we have ever had, first as editors, but also with all contributors. We realized that whatever concept we selected is anchored in a network of other concepts and that we are immediately caught in the web of a conceptual system with galactic dimensions. Since the concepts are interconnected, many arguments and ideas began to emerge that underlie many debates. We can even say that migration studies are a network of many conceptually identifiable studies: mobility studies, citizenship studies, ethnic studies, border studies, etc. In the end, we opted to follow common sense and simplicity. What we can say is that, although there are still some substantial missing contested concepts (perhaps to be addressed in a second volume), the ones that were selected are valuable, and that is what ultimately matters to us.

This meta-conceptual reflection is certainly pertinent and generous. I can only endorse the statement between theory and its operationalization, and the conversation it may entail between different methodologies: "At the same time, a great strength of the volume is that it is so thoughtful about the paradox that we need categories and measures to see things like

discrimination but as soon as we develop them, we risk ratifying and reifying categories and overgeneralizing about the individuals who belong to those categories. The volume prompts us to think more deeply about how we square the circle of recognizing the complexity of individuals' lives while developing the conceptual apparatus to understand larger social patterns. This may not be a solvable problem, but it calls for a constant awareness, including a conversation between qualitative and quantitative researchers".

We can also interpret the critical statement put forward by Mollenkopf as a Weberian digression of conceptual thinking. P. Lassman ("Value-Relations and General Theory: Parsons' Critique of Weber", *Zeitschrift für Soziologie*, 1980, 9 (1); 100–111) once stated that "In Weber's view all social science concepts are 'fictions' and no complex of fictional concepts can be exhaustive of reality". Mollenkopf's intervention aims to one dimension that was certainly not considered in the introductory framework chapter: that any conceptual agenda and the multiple ways we understand and use a concept in migration studies are culturally-laden, and that value-judgments (ideologies and traditions) drive most of our conceptual discussions. This hybridism is precisely what makes a concept contested. So, what role objectivity' may play in conceptual thinking?

Weber invites us to think about objectivity as one of the main scientific values of whatever analysis and he put his efforts into how giving up value judgments dependence on data collection, methods, and research outcomes. His advocacy of the radical disjuncture between facts and values is well-known. Let me just remind his "geographical" argument (a way to emphasize the importance of trans-cultural thinking in scientific methods): "it has been and remains true that a systematically correct scientific proof in the social sciences if it is to achieve its purpose, must be acknowledged as correct even by a Chinese" (Weber 1904, in 1949, 58). Applied to conceptual thinking, we already took this Weberian position since we already introduced this debate in terms of "contested" concepts. Thus, we assumed that there is a value-dependency of concepts that is intrinsic to migration studies. Ideology matters, fragmentation of knowledge, segmentation, and polarization of viewpoints also drive most conceptual debates on migration, influence social behaviours and guide political position. So, diving into conceptual thinking, we should probably put aside any universalist and essentialist approaches and adhere to the fact that any conceptual-talk in migration research is always a way of discussing the role that arbitrary stigmatizing conceptualizations play in migration research. For instance, the role of metaphors in migration studies and their impact on the researcher and people's representations and policy legitimations would also belong to this path of reflection.

Max Weber argued that the social sciences are necessarily value-laden. However, they can achieve a certain degree of objectivity by leaving out

the personal views of the social researcher. This is precisely the reflective task in which we want to engage scholars of migration. The fact is that human mobility and migration is one of the key features of our global world, in the sense that no country or region is not affected by it. But each political and cultural system can react differently and sometimes deploy diverse concepts and meanings and practices of the same concepts, and even classify them in their social and political agenda differently. This conceptual talk is more necessary today than ever, even more so considering the era of great semantic confusion in which we live, where realities and virtualization merge, where evidence sometimes loses its function as an indicator of reality, with so many strategic narratives full of intentions and emotions. It is an academic responsibility to continue contributing to migratory studies and to continue plowing in the accumulation of knowledge for the development of research on migration. Mollenkopf's critical contribution and this Book Symposium are certainly part of this effort.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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