
This monograph synthesises and builds on Lacroix’s long-term research on three diasporas: Algerian Kabyles and Moroccan Chleuhs (both Berber sub-groups) living in France and Indian Sikhs living in the UK. Despite their broadly similar migration histories, these three groups vary widely in their transnational engagements with their home areas (of which maps would have been welcome). The book considers a subject of relatively recent, and still under-researched, academic interest – namely, the dynamics of hometown organisations (HTOs) as development actors. The term ‘organisations’ is used deliberately as the author frames them as social formations – widespread and enduring yet diverse, flexible and evolving – rather than as the ‘associations’ more commonly referred to in the literature.

Lacroix’s book covers much ground, both theoretically and empirically. Some lines of argument will be familiar to those working in migration studies: the complex relationships between HTOs, regional/local governments in home countries, and national governments there and in receiving countries; obligation and reciprocity; and space and moral geographies. There are, however, new twists on these dynamics. Refreshingly, the book does not dwell much on ethnic/ethno-religious identity as such, recognising it early on (Chapter 1) as the product of colonial reification of previously fluid groupings. This also turns the book away from being overly concerned with the ‘politics of belonging’ and towards a well-grounded analysis of the many organisations concerned: who they are, what they do, and how the wider social and political contexts, at home and in host countries, shape their actions. In theoretical terms collective remittances are seen as “communicative acts” (p. 50) through which social relations are expressed. A particularly interesting section offers a careful, quantitative (multiple regression) analysis of who the members of Algerian and Moroccan organisations/givers in France are (insofar as they are recorded) and how they view their integration in France, rather than the usual focus on their elite leaders.

Where I find the book’s take more troubling, however, is in its construction of ‘development’ as a mostly unproblematic, consensual activity that can unify people at home and in the diaspora. The only difficulties really discussed in relation to development are exogenous (and again familiar): access to resources and occasional government interference. The terms ‘de-politicisation’ and ‘apolitical’ are used but not unpacked until late on, and then only briefly (Chapter 6). This approach feels confused and contradictory at times, particularly in Chapter 4. Hometown transnationalism itself is often conflated with developmental engagement between diasporas and home, whereas elsewhere development is seen only as one, possible facet of transnationalism. A related point is the labelling of Algerian Kabyles’ lack of developmental activity as “failed engagement” (p. 33), partly due to the “fragmented field” (p. 131) of their associations. The idea of this group’s ‘failure’ recurs in the book although the difficult contexts involved are made clear: violent conflict on the ground in Algeria, reflected in strife within the Algerian diaspora in France. Still, at times Lacroix seems to fall into a trap that he himself identifies: of evaluating diasporas against what he in turn critiques as moralising, patronising, and pernicious expectations from home country governments, where “[r]emittances have replaced vote [sic] as the paragon of citizenship” (p. 159). The ‘failure’ identified is in any case just patchy,
incomplete and under-resourced development activity. This would sound fairly commonplace to researchers working in many parts of sub-Saharan Africa, where desire and plans for development are often not met by sustained and effective diasporic engagement.

Another key theoretical line is ‘temporality’, understood as “the mechanics through which time affects the formation of transnational patterns” (p. 186). In other words, what HTOs are and what they do are both products of particular historical trajectories and moments. The author also, however, slips into somewhat ahistorical language with occasional reference to ‘primordial’ solidarities. This sits uncomfortably in a general narrative of change, and elsewhere in the book solidarity is far from evident amid accounts of diasporic inactivity or schism. Indeed, by the author’s own account, temporality challenges “the false idea that villageness is a homogenous, a-temporal form of belonging” (p. 68); external dependence (i.e. on resources from outside) and internal hierarchies (i.e. local power dynamics) both destabilise it. It would have been helpful here to refer to work on such processes in the Senegal River Valley by Jean Schmitz, who shows how social structures and political relationships, both within villages and between them, have been reshaped over time as a result of outmigration to Dakar and abroad. Similarly I struggled with the claimed “lack of studies addressing not only past occurrence of transnationalism, but also the historical transition from past to contemporary forms of cross-border venturing” (p. 12). This is an odd assertion from someone who has previously worked on the Senegalese diaspora as it ignores the late François Manchuelle’s classic *Willing Migrants*. This work could have helped develop the idea of temporality further by pointing towards the evolution of transnationalism and associated organisational forms partly from internal (rural-urban) migration: even given the book’s focus, it thus feels incomplete, given so little mention of these earlier trajectories.

Still, this is a rich and insightful book and recommended as a resource for migration scholars (faculty and postgraduate students, at least), both theoretically and empirically. For policymakers it points (correctly) to the ambiguities and downright muddle of policy towards migrants in both home and host countries. It is at times a frustrating read because of its conceptual complexities, shaky claims and occasional contradictions; but it clearly seeks to be innovative and provocative – and that is no bad thing.

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