Work and Migration

Life and livelihoods in a globalizing world

Edited by
Ninna Nyberg Sørensen
and Karen Fog Olwig

Transnationalism

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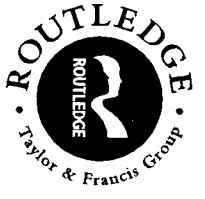

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Mobile livelihoods

Making a living in the world[1]

Karen Fog Olwig and Ninna Nyberg Sørensen

A basic assumption in migration studies is that the search for a better livelihood is a main cause of migratory movements. Nevertheless, such studies rarely take in-depth research into specific livelihoods as their point of departure. This sort of approach would focus on the ways in which making a livelihood links up with larger-scale patterns of population movement, the range and variation in mobility that such movements involve, the social institutions and networks facilitating and sustaining mobile livelihoods, and the social and spatial practices of mobile populations.

It is the contention of this book that a focus on mobile livelihoods can offer a point of departure in migration research that resolves some of the field's definitional and conceptual problems. These problems concern, first and foremost, the habit of viewing migration primarily as a recent historical phenomenon linked to the globalization of capitalism and involving one-way movements between nation states that entail ruptures with former livelihoods. As the empirical case studies in this volume show, contemporary migration movements, whether internal or international, often have historical antecedents. In addition, the case studies demonstrate that mobile populations do not necessarily migrate to start a new life elsewhere, but rather to search out new opportunities that may allow them to enhance and diversify livelihoods practised and valued back home.

Migration research, once a fairly small and specialized subfield within the social sciences, acquired a central place in academia during the last decades of the twentieth century. An important result of this new focus on migration has been that there is now much greater awareness of the significance of movement and the formation and sustaining of long-distance ties in human life and society. This has led to the emergence of new concepts, such as globalization, de/reterritorialization, diaspora and transnationalism, that seek to capture the mobile and spatially ruptured, yet socio-culturally interconnected nature of human life. Within the field of migration research, the concept of transnationalism moved centre stage during the 1990s and figures as a key term in a number of publications from this decade (see, e.g. Featherstone 1990; Rouse 1991, 1995; Appadurai 1991; Glick Schiller *et al.* 1992; Basch *et al.* 1994; Kearney 1991, 1995, 1998; Mahler 1995, 1998; Guarnizo 1997; Smith and Guarnizo 1998; Vertovec and Cohen 1999). This literature, which is mainly based on immigration to the United States, suggests that

contemporary migrants develop transnational identities that challenge the notion of migration as involving settled populations crossing political borders in order to establish a new home in a new nation state. Proponents of transnationalism thus argue that migrants often interact and identify with multiple nations, states, and/or communities, and that their identifications and practices contribute to the development of transnational communities or a new type of transnational social space (Rouse 1991; Fletcher 1999).

In the wake of the sudden prominence given to transnationalism, some scholars have expressed concern about the term's increasing ambiguity, and recently it has been criticized on empirical as well as theoretical grounds (Smith and Guanizo 1998). This book examines two related issues that have emerged in recent discussions of transnationalism. One concerns the need for the further specification and refinement of the concept of transnationalism, which has been used to describe a broad range of movements and networks of interrelations spanning disparate places (various contributions in Smith and Guarnizo 1998; Ong 1999; Glick Schiller 1999; Portes *et al.* 1999). The other is motivated by the fear that the very diffuseness of the notion of transnationalism may narrow the field of investigation to movements and networks of relations that involve the bodily crossing of nation state boundaries, because this is the only explicitly and clearly defined feature of transnationalism (Olwig 1997; Sørensen 2000). The present volume seeks to resolve some of these issues by redirecting migration research away from the narrow focus on international population movements and the concomitant emergence of cross-border networks of relations, calling instead for a broader investigation of mobile livelihoods and the fluid fields of social, economic and political relations and cultural values that these livelihoods imply. We thus advocate shifting the analytical focus from place to mobility, and from 'place of origin' and 'place of destination' to the movements involved in sustaining a livelihood. It is our hope that the shift in focus that characterizes this collection of chapters will contribute towards an understanding of the importance of mobility to the relationship between people, place, identity and belonging.

Notions of livelihood

Livelihood, at least implicitly, is a central concept in migration research. Researchers, and often migrants themselves, explain migration movements in terms of economic factors that imply a notion of livelihood. Researchers have pointed to the role of world capitalism in creating unequal economic relations. They have examined the push/pull factors that lead people in economically less developed areas to migrate to economic centres, and have pointed to the improved means of communication and transportation that have enabled such movements to escalate in number and intensity in recent decades (for a discussion, see Glick Schiller *et al.* 1992: 8–9; Castles and Miller 1993; Skeldon 1997; Van Hear 1998). When asked why they migrate, migrants will often reply that they are moving for 'better opportunities' elsewhere. Yet, there is often no clear correlation

between economic changes and migration movements, and it is difficult to preserve the image of the migrant as a 'homo oeconomicus' who is making decisions about migration on the basis of informed economic calculations. As Hvidt notes (1975: 35), writing of migrants from Europe to America, one 'cannot help sighing a little at the firm, sometimes even heavy-handed and generalizing way in which [. . .] individual human lives have been dragged in and out of diagrams and tables, and have had motives for their momentous decision ascribed to them which they themselves very likely would have regarded without much understanding.' Ideas of 'better (economic) opportunities' and the ways in which they are viewed and acted upon through migration movement therefore need further examination. We believe that the notion of mobile livelihoods will provide a useful concept in this endeavour.

Generally, 'livelihood' tends to be thought of in economic terms. *The Oxford English Dictionary* of 1971 defines the term as a 'means of living, maintenance, sustenance; especially to earn, gain, get, make, seek a livelihood.' This definition, however, leaves open the question of what kinds of 'means' are deemed necessary to secure a desirable 'living, maintenance, sustenance' and the means by which people attempt to achieve this. This aspect of livelihood is brought out in an older notion of livelihood found in *The Oxford English Dictionary*, which refers to 'course of life, life time, kind or manner of life.' This points to a historical shift in the definition of livelihood from an emphasis on the cultural and social to a stress on the more economic, material aspects of livelihood.

The anthropological literature suggests that, while livelihood, at its basis, may involve the control of nature in order to 'wrest a living from it,' the 'working relationship between man and nature is never unembroidered' (Wallman 1979: 1). In his study of patterns of livelihood activities, Gudeman (1986: vii–viii) elucidates several different 'models of livelihood' and argues that the 'activities of livelihood are enacted through a symbolic scheme which is drawn from known features of the social world.' Knowledge of the social world is therefore necessary to understand 'what is being modeled concerning gaining a livelihood' (ibid.: 39). Furthermore, these social worlds are not necessarily confined to local communities but may be informed by global relations with, for example, former colonial empires. This notion of livelihood is apparent in Parkin's ethnographic study of 'work' in coastal Kenya (1979), which demonstrates that wage employment, with its regular provision of income, may be perceived as offering a greater control of resources than fishing or farming, which provide a higher but more irregular income. Parkin relates this to distinctions and value judgements concerning 'good' and 'bad' domestic labour introduced by colonial governments and maintained in the post-colonial society. This, in turn, may lead to migration for a type of work not readily available locally (Parkin 1979: 332; see also Murray 1979).

In a discussion of rural livelihood diversification, Ellis (1998) argues that a livelihood encompasses income (in both cash and kind), as well as the social institutions (kin, family, compound, village, etc.), gender relations, and the property rights required to support and sustain a certain standard of living. Social and kinship networks become particularly important in facilitating and sustaining diversified

livelihoods that involve a range of spatially extended social and economic activities. Any study of livelihood therefore requires an awareness of the wider spatial context of the unit of analysis (whether individual, household, village or nation). For this reason, the notion of livelihood offers a particularly useful concept in analysing the ways in which actors deal with the varying and complex local and global interrelations in which human life is embedded today. Following a similar line of thought, Long argues (2000: 196) that the livelihood concept 'best expresses the idea of individuals and groups striving to make a living, attempting to meet their various consumption and economic necessities, coping with uncertainties, responding to new opportunities, and choosing between different value positions.' He adds that livelihood strategies may be organized in a variety of different contexts – some spanning great geographical as well as social distances – and that it is therefore necessary to identify 'relevant social units and fields of activity' in studies of livelihoods (ibid.: 196–7). Furthermore, these strategies concern 'value choice, status issues, identification with or distantiation from other modes of living and types of social persons' (ibid.: 197) that involve changes as well as continuities through time.

We suggest that migration be conceptualized in relation to an analytical framework concerning the practice of particular livelihoods. This research agenda takes its point of departure in studies of livelihood practices and thus avoids problems of having to define a priori the topical units and forms of movement that comprise the constitutive units within migration research. Rather, it examines various forms of livelihood as practised, and conceived, by specific social actors in particular ethnographic and historical contexts, and the local, regional and more distant spheres of activity that these livelihoods imply. From this point of view, places emerge as sites of particular importance, as people, in the course of practising their livelihoods, develop social and economic relations and cultural values in relation to, and spanning, particular localities under varying historical, social and personal circumstances. In other words, our concern with the ways people make a living puts an equal emphasis on habitus and habitat, on mobile livelihood practices connecting different localities. By studying movement from the point of view of mobile livelihoods that both define and cut across a range of social, economic and cultural boundaries, it is possible to explore critically the topical units and forms of movement that may be of relevance in migratory movements. This approach raises questions about the tradition in migration research which has tended to examine population movements only in relation to formal administrative units, in particular the nation state. The following discussion of some of the constitutive elements in migration research will clarify, and substantiate, this assertion.

Migration as movement between places

In the 1990s, the *Merriam-Webster Collegiate Dictionary* was still offering a definition of migration as the act of 'moving from one country, place, or locality to another'. Though few may quibble with this definition, most would probably agree that it is deceptively simple, begging more questions than it answers. It is,

for example, apparent that many 'moves' are not final in the sense that they do not involve complete 'changes of residence or location' so that one 'residence' or 'location' is abandoned in favour of another. Indeed, a host of recent migration studies have documented an increasing tendency for migrants to engage in repeated moves and to maintain a strong presence in more than one locality through active engagement in fields of socio-economic relations that span more than one locality. Moves, in other words, often do not involve displacement, but rather multi-placement, that is, an expansion of the space for personal or familial livelihood practices to two or more localities (Georges 1990; Olwig 1993; Gardner 1995). Furthermore, migrants' deep involvement in geographically extensive yet socio-economically close-knit fields of relations has led to the very notions of place or locality being questioned. Thus, it is difficult to define clearly demarcated and unambiguous topical units when they are embedded in social and cultural contexts of life that are not confined to particular spots on the geographic map (Appadurai 1995; Olwig and Hastrup 1997). The only spatial units that have a clear, formal demarcation are legal, administrative units, in the sense that they are well defined and governed by a body of laws and regulations. Some of these units have played a central role in the regulation of population movements, and movement in relation to these units has therefore been relatively well documented. This is particularly the case as far as nation states are concerned, and this may be an important reason why population movements between nation states have figured so prominently in migration research.[2]

Place as the legal-administrative unit of the nation state

The role of the nation state in controlling population movements has changed a great deal through time. In Europe, the end of feudalism and the growing influence of the market economy, accompanied by the increasing significance of towns and townspeople, marked the beginning of mass migrations from the rural countryside to nascent cities. Until 1800, European states placed severe restrictions on inhabitants' movements within and particularly out of the country. The state regarded the loss of people through emigration as a serious loss of its resources (Hvidt 1975: 15). After the Napoleonic Wars and the French Revolution, however, the right of citizens to move out of the country was codified in the constitutions of a number of European countries (ibid.: 17). The nineteenth century was generally characterized by substantial population movements within and out of Europe, as well as from Europe to countries in other continents, especially North America. Approximately 2.5 million people migrated from Scandinavia to 'America' in 1850–1930 alone – a third of Scandinavia's mid-nineteenth century population. While these migrations have generally been explained by large population increases in Europe – from 1750 to 1850 the population increased 83 per cent, from 145 million to 265 million – Oivind Fuglerud (2001) points to factors such as rural-urban migrants' inclination to seek livelihoods further away, as well as the importance of networks of information established in private correspondence and commercial advertising.

Thus, historical analyses offer many points of resemblance with contemporary transnational theorizing (see also Hvidt 1975).

The relatively free mobility of people between Europe and North America in the nineteenth century was brought to an abrupt halt with the introduction of immigration quotas in the United States in 1921. This led to a new situation in which nation states began to protect their borders against immigration rather than emigration (Hvidt 1975: 19). The quota system was instituted after mass migration from Europe had peaked (ibid.: 12).[3] The restrictions on migration therefore became targeted primarily at potential immigrants from other parts of the world who had begun to emigrate in increasing numbers. In the course of the twentieth century, most countries have instituted restrictions on immigration. In the developed Western countries, these restrictions were first applied primarily against the inhabitants of former European colonies. Thus, whereas the subjects of, for example, the British colonies were in theory able to move freely to Great Britain, progressively greater restrictions were placed on all immigrants after the 1950s. As former imperial structures have been broken up into smaller units of politically independent nation states, population movements have become further checked by an increasing number of controls within the developing world.[4] However, these restrictions against crossing borders do not seem to have led to a decrease in international migration. Quite the contrary, migration across political borders seems more prevalent than ever, though much of this migration is spurred by increasing political and economic instability in developing countries leading to forced displacements and undocumented entries for those who do not 'qualify' as asylum seekers or refugees (Van Hear 1998).

Due to the emphasis on the gate-keeping function of the political borders of nation states, there has been a long tradition of collecting data on cross-border movements. Though the data gathered often lacks consistency, this means that a large body of information on international migration has been available for statistical analyses of various aspects of this particular form of migration. Much of the early research on international migration has therefore had a rather quantitative orientation and has focused on the demographic and economic implications of migration between different nation states (Hvidt 1975: 32–5; Yans-McLaughlin 1990: 258–9). In Europe, the main research interest concerned the effects of migration out of Europe until well into the latter half of the twentieth century. This changed, however, when considerable migration to Europe began and the focus shifted to the impact of immigration into Europe. In North America, a central topic of investigation has been the effects of immigration on the receiving country, as reflected in the strong tradition of doing research on the integration of immigrants into American or Canadian society.[5] This research is primarily concerned with the creation of, for example, new American citizens and the future development of American society, and only secondarily with the phenomenon of migration itself (see also Olwig 2001). This North American research tradition has had, and continues to have, a major impact on migration studies, even after conceptualizations and understandings of migration changed direction in the last decades of the twentieth century.[6]

In recent decades, as international migration has become subject to greater control and increasing numbers of international migrants travel and live in undocumented ways, researchers have also begun to focus on the ability of migrants to negotiate the legal, social and economic barriers they encounter because of their precarious legal status. This has perhaps been most thoroughly investigated in studies of undocumented migration between Mexico and other Central American countries and the United States (see, e.g. Chavez 1991; Kearney 1991; Smith 1994; Hagan 1994; Fitzgerald 2000; Kyle 2000). In Europe, the Strait of Gibraltar serves the function of separating the European Union from unwanted migration from Africa. Only recently have studies of the effects of heightened migration controls on undocumented migration begun to emerge (Driessen 1998; Harding 2000; Sørensen 2000).

The strong focus on international migration has had the unfortunate result that other kinds of population movement have received less attention. Yet, migration is hardly confined to movements that involve the crossing of international borders. Indeed, the number of people who have migrated within the borders of nation states may be much larger. It is, for example, noticeable that the historical relocation of African-Americans from the South to other parts of the United States – a movement that involved more than five million people – as well as more contemporary massive displacements within developing countries, have not been incorporated into the mainstream of migration research because of its international focus. The historical split between migration and refugee studies partly accounts for this.[7] In this disciplinary partitioning of fields, internal displacement is allocated to 'refugee-studies'. That this split, and the concomitant split categorization of mobile populations into migrants, refugees and internally displaced populations, is problematic to maintain for analytical purposes is argued by Stepputat, Tamagno and Sørensen (this volume).

The strong interest in the relationship between international migration and the development of nation states may be related to the fact that most researchers on migration are located in major Western countries and thus influenced by social, economic and political concerns in these countries. In recent years, these concerns have tended to revolve around the negative and positive impact of foreigners on the receiving societies. In stating this, we do not mean to imply that migration researchers have served the interests of the state. Indeed, a great deal of research has sought to document the adverse effects of migration policies on migrants in Western states. We are instead suggesting that the phenomenon of migration has been defined in the light of issues that are accorded significance in the receiving Western countries, where most researchers live and work, rather than from the vantage point of the migrants themselves or from the sending countries. To the extent that a sending country perspective has been included, Third World migrants have often been viewed through the prism of concern about the migration problems they pose for the Western world due to rapid population growth, poverty and conflict in the source countries (for exceptions, see Georges 1990; Gardner 1995; Wilson 1999; Kyle 2000). Less attention has been paid to how migration and its causes are structured and articulated within the overall pattern of global, political

and economic relations. Even less attention has been paid to the specificities of particular regions, for example differences between the Americas, Africa, Asia and Europe (but see Castles and Miller 1993; Skeldon 1997; Weiner 1997; Rogers 2000). The significance of the dominant though unspecified Western point of view in migration studies is perhaps most apparent in studies of the cultural and social aspects of migration.

Place and the socio-cultural construction of the nation state

While modern nation states have functioned as central administrative entities in the regulation of global migration movements, citizens of such political units do not see their country merely as a bureaucratic unit. Indeed, modern nation states are predicated on the nationalist ideology that nations correspond to specific socio-cultural 'communities' that constitute natural places of belonging and dwelling for their citizens (Anderson 1983). According to this way of thinking, therefore, international migration involves much more than simply crossing a political border protected by a large legal and administrative apparatus – it also means leaving a native country and culture in order to settle in 'foreign' lands with an 'unknown' culture. Migration therefore comes to implicate a rupture and break with former modes of life and, eventually, integration into new ways of living. Yet, as several anthropologists have noted, this '*National Geographic*' approach, which maintains that a nation state corresponds to a particular culture, is not tenable because it ignores both the considerable cultural variation that exists within the borders of a nation state and the cultural continuities that may obtain across political borders (Gupta and Ferguson 1992; Malkki 1992; Hannerz 1992; Lavie and Swedenburg 1996; Olwig and Hastrup 1997). As Smith notes, there is a need to understand the social construction of place beyond essentialist assumptions about the equivalence of locality and culture. He asks, 'just what makes a place a place like no other place ... what about a place persists and what changes over time ... who changes what in alternative representations of any place's future, and how do these changes selectively appropriate or reject particular elements of any place's historical past?' (Smith 2001: 115). Yi-Fu Tuan suggests (1974) that the primary meaning of place refers to one's place in society, and that the term only secondarily refers to locality. In this social sense, one's place in society is tied to one's livelihood.

In light of the critique of the one nation–one culture equation, migrants' place in receiving societies has been the subject of considerable debate in recent years, leading to the emergence of two major critical perspectives. Recognizing the pluralism of North American society, one perspective has raised the question of whether all migrants are integrated into mainstream America, suggesting that some may undergo a kind of segmented integration (Waters 1994, 1999). In the European case, authors such as Stolcke (1993) and Hintjens (1992) have argued that segregation and assimilation are conceptual opposites and that there may be an urgent need for a revitalized notion of assimilationist policy in the light of the increasing marginalization of immigrants in West European countries.

The other critical approach to the incorporation paradigm argues that migration does not mean abandoning one place for another because migrants maintain ties with their country of origin. As they settle more or less permanently into the societies of destination, migrants become part of transnational socio-cultural systems that transcend the political border between the receiving and sending countries. Or, in another theoretical paradigm, migrants form diasporas that cultivate affective-expressive links with past migration histories (Cohen 1997), implying multiple attachments (Clifford 1994) or several 'homelands' (Shuval 2000). In the work of foremost proponents of the transnational approach, such as Glick Schiller, Basch and Blanc (Glick Schiller *et al.* 1992; Basch *et al.* 1994), such systems are interpreted as counterforces to the American hegemonic structures of race, ethnicity and nationalism (Glick Schiller *et al.* 1992: 13). They thus view these systems as allowing migrants to live in 'a new social and cultural space which calls forth a new awareness of who they [migrants] are, a new consciousness, and new identities' (ibid.: 14).

Both these new approaches to migration research question the close relationship between place and culture, arguing that nationalist, racial and ethnic structures may prevent certain people from becoming, or from wishing to become, fully part of the dominant culture and society of the place to which they have migrated. This in turn means that the receiving country, as a place, does not correspond to a single culture and society. Rather, the migrants' culture, which is originally associated with their place of origin, may become extended to the receiving country in the form of a new non-local socio-cultural system. These approaches therefore challenge migration researchers to pay closer attention to what is outside the well-integrated mainstream society and culture of the nation state, which has been the primary unit of analysis in migration research.[8] Whereas these new approaches to the study of migration posit a critical stance toward the one nation – one culture equation, they do this primarily as a critique of the Western nation states' migration policies and the scholarly understandings of integration fostered by Western academia.

Given that most migration is neither international nor directed towards Western countries, we contend that it will be difficult to develop a broad, cross-cultural analytical framework for the analysis of migration as long as migration is seen as movement between places, and as long as such places can only be defined in terms of formal administrative units such as nation states.

Places and the practice of mobile livelihoods

We suggest that migration be conceptualized in relation to an analytical framework concerning the practice of particular livelihoods. Based on the assumption that one of the basic features of human life is mobility, the concept of mobile livelihoods explores the various practices involved in 'making a living', as well as the social relations used to make a living possible, in the different contexts where they take place. This approach makes it possible to delineate changes in mobility patterns through time in the form of, for example, retractions and extensions of livelihood

practices, and the various factors that may have caused these changes to take place. In this way, it becomes possible to examine population movements, and the negotiation of social, economic, cultural and political boundaries that such movements may entail, from a new vantage point.

Central to our notion of mobile livelihoods is the great scope for variation and differentiated experiences that it entails. Mobile livelihoods may be practised over short or long distances, within states and within localities, and/or across national borders. Depending on the context, the study of mobile livelihoods may thus require a local, translocal or transnational perspective. When practised within the borders of a particular nation state, mobile livelihoods may be influenced by transnational processes, as demonstrated in the contributions by Frederiksen, Stepputat and Sørensen in this volume. When practised across national borders, transnationalism as a new and distinct form of identification or practice may or may not develop. But, as the contributions by Duany, Freeman, Olwig and Paerregaard suggest, extensive networks of transnational ties may have developed well before the recent upsurge in mass migration from particular places. Such patterns may vary according to gender (see Freeman, Paerregaard and Tamagno this volume) and class (see Amit, Olwig and Thomas-Hope, this volume). As Paerregaard and Tamagno suggest, they may also be premised on already existing internal migration patterns, whether voluntary or forced.

An important aspect of people's livelihood strategies is the social relationships and cultural values that various strategies involve, the communities of belonging they circumscribe, and the kinds of movement in time and space they make possible or necessitate. It is therefore possible to develop a framework of study where movement can be viewed as an integral aspect of the life trajectories of individuals and groups of people, and not as an abnormal interruption to normal stationary life, depending on the particular circumstances of the livelihoods of the persons studied. In this way, place or locality may be defined in terms of livelihood practices and the communities of socio-economic relations and cultural values with which they are associated. This suggests that 'home' is where one has one's livelihood (Shuval 2000) and that there are many different ways in which people perceive themselves to be 'at home' – as well as homeless – in today's world (Rapport and Dawson 1998).

The contributions

Contemporary mobile livelihoods may be distinguished by their extreme diversification in terms of the many types, labels or categories used to describe the moving subjects (Van Hear 1998; Stepputat and Sørensen 2000). At the outset we do not distinguish between rural–urban migrants and internally displaced populations, political refugees and transmigrants, alien residents, expellees, guest workers, ethnic and racial minorities, expatriate communities, ethnic and racial minorities expatriate communities, and border traders and suitcase peddlers, primarily because many of these categories crosscut one another and because people may shift between them over time. By including case studies concerned with various