



Book Review of Zhou,
Min and Mahmud, Hasan
(eds.) 2023. *Beyond
Economic Migration: Social,
Historical, and Political
Factors in US Immigration*.
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That we live in the age of migration is an understatement. Never before have so many people lived in a country different from where they were born. In 2020, the number of international migrants in the world was estimated to be 281 million, comprising 3.5% of the global population.¹ In the United States alone, the foreign-born population was estimated to be 46.2 million in 2022—around 14% of the total.² Focusing on the US experience, *Beyond Economic Migration*—a collection of texts written by a multidisciplinary group of migration scholars, edited by Min Zhou and Hasan Mahmud—asks how we can understand the drivers of this population movement and how it has changed over time. The authors also ask how the incredibly diverse immigrant population in the US fares in the labor market, deals with the barriers they meet, and orient themselves in an increasingly interconnected world.

The premise of the book, laid out in the introductory chapter authored by the editors, is that a simple distinction between political and economic migration does not capture the enormous variation in motives for migration. Admittedly, the book focuses on ‘economic’ migrants—that is, not refugees or asylees—but takes as its starting point a critique of the concept’s underlying assumption that this category consists of people motivated by economic interests and voluntary choice. On one level, this assumption is problematized by highlighting how noneconomic factors, such as migration histories and cultures, social networks, and state policies in both countries of origin and destination, play crucial roles in shaping patterns of immigration. On another level, the very making of ‘immigrant labor’ as a social category is viewed as a process in which individual motivations and socioeconomic characteristics interact with transnational bonds, immigration regimes, and shifting political and economic circumstances to form the immigrants’ social positioning, their labor market outcomes, and their prospects of social mobility.

¹ Population Division of the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UNDESA). Available at <https://www.un.org/en/global-issues/migration>.

² Congressional Research Service (CRS). Available at <https://sgp.fas.org/crs/homesec/IF11806.pdf>.

BOOK REVIEW

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This premise is most forcefully articulated in Chapter 1 'The Making of Immigrant Labor: Inequality, Digital Capitalism, and Racialized Enforcement,' by Payal Banerjee. Banerjee argues that existing scholarship on economic migration has overwhelmingly focused on migration as employment, disregarding the social and political processes through which foreigners are transformed into devalued 'immigrant workers' that can be exploited in the labor market and that are excluded along both racialized and gendered lines. This critical view of existing scholarship is partly followed up in some of the other chapters in the book, most clearly in Chapter 10 'Transnationalism and Gender among Immigrants: Economic, Political, and Social Challenges,' by Silvia Pedraza, and in Chapter 11 'Remittances as Transnationalism: The Case of Bangladeshi Immigrants in Los Angeles,' by Hasan Mahmud. Pedraza's chapter provides a critical reading of research on migration, assimilation, and transnationalism, arguing that scholars routinely overlook the importance of gender as a differentiating social category. Mahmud zooms in on remittances as a transnational practice, criticizing existing research for being too concerned with the role that immigrant remittances play for the economic situation in the origin countries and for disregarding how migrants themselves perceive their remittances.

The remainder of the chapters, however, take a less critical perspective. Several of the contributions are mostly informative descriptions of changes in migration patterns from selected destination regions. In Chapter 2 'Evolving Trends of Latin American Immigration in the United States: Challenges for the Integration of Skilled Immigrants,' for example, René Zenteno offers an interesting overview of the changing patterns of immigration from Latin America to the United States from 1990 to 2019. Zenteno documents that the Great Recession (2007–2009) led to a change in immigration patterns, both concerning the magnitude of out-migration from Latin America and the socioeconomic profiles of those arriving. Taking an even longer historical perspective in Chapter 3 'East Asian Immigration: Historical Trends and Contemporary Issues in Movement to the United States,' Min Zhou provides a highly informative description of migration and integration patterns among the three largest East Asian origin-groups in the United States; the Chinese, the Japanese, and the Korean. Zhou documents that the history and development of immigration from these three countries to the United States are very different, leading to varied patterns of resettlement and integration, yet she argues that the descendants of these immigrant groups share similar barriers to full acceptance in the US today.

Other chapters focus more specifically on the intricate US visa system and its consequences. In Chapter 4 'The US Visa System: Growing Complexity and Difference without Legislative Change,' Katharine M. Donato and Catalina Amuedo-Dorantes give an overview of shifts in the numbers and types of visas issued since the US Immigration Act in 1990. Most striking is the substantial increase in temporary visas issued to foreign nationals and that the type of visa varies so strongly by national origin characteristics. The subsequent chapters zoom in on specific temporary visa types and how the holders fare in the labor market. B. Lindsay Lowell analyzes the earnings of temporary high-skilled workers on H-1B visas (Chapter 5). Sangay K. Mishra focuses on the same type of visa but changes the perspective to how it produces precarious working conditions (Chapter 6). Terry Wotherspoon looks at mobility and resettlement patterns among those who initially came to the United States on international student visas (Chapter 7).

Finally, two chapters turn attention to specific groups of highly skilled immigrants in the US labor market. In Chapter 8, Kevin J. A. Thomas analyzes the earnings development among highly skilled African immigrants, while in Chapter 9, Misba Bhatti explores the situation for highly skilled female immigrants from Pakistan. Thomas shows that highly skilled Africans have a higher risk than comparable groups of being employed in jobs that do not match their educational levels, but also that the risk of education–occupation mismatch varies considerably by fields of study. Bhatti finds that female Pakistani immigrants face a dual disadvantage in the US labor market. In addition to having their educational credentials from the country of origin devalued, an experience shared with many immigrant groups, female immigrants from Pakistan face an additional set of gender-specific barriers to employment.

Brought together, *Beyond Economic Migration* offers an updated and informative picture of important changes and developments in immigration to the United States. One major strength of the book is its multidisciplinary—chapters are written by sociologists, economists, demographers, and political scientists. Furthermore, the analyses presented draw on both quantitative and qualitative data sources, as well as including more theoretical contributions. This range of approaches is rare and valuable. I would highly recommend the book for scholars interested in getting an overview of current trends in patterns of immigration and integration, as well as a deeper understanding of the transnational connections that shape patterns of incorporation and mobility among the highly diverse immigrant population in the United States.

Nonetheless, the empirical observations and analyses stand out as more novel than the book's theoretical advancements. As mentioned, the basic premise of the book is that scholarship on migration tends to build on a simple distinction between political and economic migration and that economic migration is an undertheorized category that is viewed through the lenses of either neo-classical economics or the New Economics of Labor Migration (NELB). However, the introductory chapter summarizes a much more varied set of theoretical perspectives on migration, assimilation, and transnationalism that, at present, are collectively acknowledged as key to understanding why people migrate and how immigrants fare in their countries of destination, and that goes far beyond these perspectives.

Indeed, my own reading of the literature suggests that much of the scholarly work on migration today is in accordance with the view advanced by the authors, namely that 'international migration is affected not merely by supply and demand at work in labor markets, nor by rationally calculated economic actions of the individual, but by the complex interplay of migration histories, cultures, networks, and state policies and politico-economic circumstances in the countries of origin and destination, as well as capital flows in a globalized world' (p. 28). If I am right that most migration researchers would agree with this broad statement, one implication is simply that most of the book's chapters fit nicely into existing scholarship with updated numbers and nuanced discussions. However, as I find it hard to identify the authors' actual antagonists, the overall theoretical contribution of the book is left somewhere in the dark.

COMPETING INTERESTS

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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