

Review – Migrations: A World on the Move

Written by Anna Finiguerra

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ANNA FINIGUERRA, MAR 20 2022

Migrations: A World on the Move

Produced by Cornell University's Migrations initiative and hosted by Eleanor Paynter

Podcast, Season 1 from January to June 2021

The year 2020 was a year of contrast between immobility and movement. Although local COVID-19 restrictions meant people were unable to travel, go to work or see loved ones, global human and non-human movement did not cease. The virus itself kept crossing borders, both geographically and between species. Similarly, humans themselves kept moving, whether by traveling, migrating, escaping strife or by taking to the streets in protest. The podcast *Migrations: A World on the Move*, hosted by Eleanor Paynter, a postdoc at Cornell University, is born at the intersection of these instances of movement and immobility, and seeks to unpack how interconnected movements shape the world. The “movements” the podcast seeks to highlight are not exclusive to migration or political movements, although these are key recurrent themes in its six episodes, but also include how changes in weather and natural environments might be conducive to migration and political upheaval, shaping the complexity of human life in movement or stasis.

The premise of the podcast is fascinating and quite ambitious. It is indeed a tall order to unpack complex issues such as pandemics, climate migration, or surveillance (just to name a few) in a way that not only does justice to their complexity, but that also seeks to hang on to the entanglement of various different dimensions of these phenomena in terms of their political significance. It is no surprise then that some episodes succeed more readily in this task than others. Indeed, some tensions arise across the various episodes of the podcast in terms of how to think about borders, in all their forms, and how to unpack both border politics itself and the politics of knowledge about borders. For instance, Episode 4 titled “Global Racial Justice” showcases strongly nuanced understandings of human movement, borders and belonging by drawing out the connections between constructions of race, bordering, justice and detention, and how their entanglement determines what migration means and how it is acted upon across different contexts. The self-aware discussion of familiar terms of debate such as “migrant”, “refugee”, “citizen” and the spaces in which they move (“diaspora”, “nation”, “states”) enables listeners to meaningfully engage with the politics of knowledge in the field of mobility or migration studies, and to unpack the practical political consequences that certain categories enact. Moreover, the engagement with recent scholarship and activism on the connections between state power, incarceration, discrimination of racialized peoples and borders complicates any binary understanding of borders as the outside limits of familiar political and territorial units.

Conversely, Episode 2 on pandemics not only entirely fails to provide any engagement with the topic that yields a critical analysis of the present, but it also risks reinforcing particular discriminatory dynamics by failing to name them concretely. In its assessment and critique of the weaponization of public health policies by states to disallow particular kinds of mobility (long-term migration, asylum-seeking), while allowing or even encouraging others (tourism, short-term work migration), this episode fails to address the socio-political structural dynamics which both determine these policies and the incidence of disease on particular racialized groups (Bowleg, 2020). A critique of such policies on the basis of an understanding of migrants and viruses as “exogenous shocks” and aggregate health data entirely misses the point. Claiming that “immigrants and immigrant populations are healthier than the countries to which they travel and that health advantage diminishes over decades, so they become more unhealthy as they live amongst populations of developed countries” (#2, 14:48 – 15:08) not only refutes the linkage between migration and

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disease, but entirely overlooks the socio-economic factors which can determine such decline. The mention of “One Health” approaches does little to truly address this gap. In this episode, there is little acknowledgement of the ways in which unequal global health dynamics are rooted in histories of colonialism, imperialism and racial segregation. This is problematic in light of the fact that those very dynamics are at the basis of particular trends in public health data, and of the discourses used to talk about them, which are part and parcel of the episode’s themes. Not engaging with those histories and resonances only further reifies the connection between racialized “others” and disease, instead of displacing it.

While these two episodes exemplify the range of perspectives taken into account in the podcast, they also showcase the inherent tensions arising out of their understanding of movement and ultimately of politics. For students of International Relations it is especially interesting to note how the way speakers unpack their main working concepts (or fail to do so) goes hand in hand with particular understandings of borders which very well represent current debates in the field. Some, for instance Lorenzo Pezzani in Episode 5, take a critical stance on the meaning of borders and address how their proliferation in spaces beyond external borderlands complicates thinking about migration along inside/outside lines. In a similar vein, Laiken Jordahl (in Episode 6), by focusing on the U.S.-Mexico borderland as an ecology to be protected, shows how the border is not only a space of violence or a space of crisis but also a place where rich ecological histories entwine and provide spaces for resistance. These interventions displace views of the border as a straightforward line of demarcation between inside and outside, and the political discourses which travel along with it.

Other contributions to the podcast seem to be haunted by a more classical and mainstream understanding of borders as external boundaries, which motivates authors’ own intentions to shift certain academic or political discourses. For instance, in Episode 3, the definitions of climate change and climate migration or climate refugees shift throughout the episode’s runtime. Those shifts aim to capture eminently complex and sometimes locally specific social and political dynamics. In particular, both Filiz Garip and Ingrid Boas take issue with the common understanding of climate change as only exemplified by extreme, disastrous events, when instead it is more commonly experienced as gradual and everyday weather changes. Similarly, they problematize the production of knowledge about climate migration in terms of estimates, forecasting and labelling which are often politically motivated and have deep consequences not only for how issues are talked about but also acted upon. They show how discourses which think about climate migration in terms of nationally-bounded communities, and which fail to recognise both the social and geographical patterns of human mobility in all their multiplicity, often fail to truly unpack the characteristics of the phenomenon and thus to address it.

Overall, the podcast “Migrations: A World on the Move” provides a great basis for discussion of phenomena which are crucial to our understanding of the present, whether they are discussions of racial justice, indigenous dispossession, environmental degradation or global health crises. Given its clear aim to draw out the complexity and the entanglements of human and non-human movements for the big political questions of today, it would have been good to see the undercurrents and underlying tensions structuring speakers’ approaches to their areas of expertise brought to the fore and made part of the conversation. This is particularly important as the drawing of boundaries, both intellectual and political, are often a way to tame the complexity of socio-political phenomena, at the expense of truly appreciating their multifaceted character.

References

Bowleg, L. (2020). ‘We’re not all in this together: On COVID-19, intersectionality, and structural inequality’ *American journal of public health*, 110(7), 917-917.

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