

Contested Meanings of Migration Facilitation: Emigration Agents, Coyotes, Rescuers, and Human Traffickers

Virtual symposium held on November 15-16, 2021, organized by the Pacific Office of the German Historical Institute Washington and co-sponsored by the Leibniz-Science Campus "Europe and America in the Modern World" in Regensburg and the Institute of European Studies at UC Berkeley. Conveners: Ulf Brunnbauer (Leibniz Institute for East and Southeast European Studies, Regensburg) and Sören Urbansky (GHI Pacific Office). Participants: Deborah A. Boehm (University of Nevada, Reno); Michael Buschheuer (Sea-Eye, Regensburg); Fabienne Cabaret (Fundación Justicia, Mexico City); Guadalupe Correa-Cabrera (George Mason University); Julia Devlin (Catholic University Eichstätt-Ingolstadt); Andreas Fahrmeir (University of Frankfurt); Gerald Knaus (European Stability Initiative, Brussels/Berlin); Nicolas Lainez (CESSMA / Institut de Recherche pour le Développement, Paris); Akasemi Newsome (University of California, Berkeley); Milena Rizzotti (University of Leicester); Cristina Santoyo (Fundación Justicia, Mexico City); Anastasiia Strakhova (Emory University); Yukari Takai (York University and International Center for Japanese Studies); Sallie Yea (La Trobe University, Melbourne).

The topic of migration facilitation is not merely one of academic interest but is also extremely important for lawmakers, activists, and humanitarian workers who seek to help ensure safe passages for migrants. As migration into the countries of the Global North is on the increase and the trips undertaken turn ever more perilous, new scholarly knowledge and historical contextualization become more pertinent.

In his introductory remarks, Ulf Brunnbauer discussed the motivation behind the symposium. In his research for a connection between migration and innovation, the facilitation of migration appeared to be particularly salient. While governments since the nineteenth century have enhanced their capacity to trace their citizens' movements and control entry and exit across the state border, migrants and their helpers developed new ways of circumventing these rules and restrictions. Borders, in their physical but also administrative dimension, represent the space where migration innovation is constantly produced: in a relationship of mutual causation, the innovation of migration control is inherently connected with practices from "below" aimed at bypassing, undermining, contesting, and overcoming them. This can lead to strange combinations and bedfellows when, for example, a dictatorship cooperates with travel agencies and human traffickers to pressure a neighboring country (i.e., the current situation in Belarus). Brunnbauer pointed to the two main sets of questions that this interdisciplinary symposium was to address: first, how did forms and practices of migrant facilitation, and the public image of them, change since the nineteenth century? Second, which ethical dilemmas were faced by those who helped migrants achieve their migration goals?

The symposium kicked off with a keynote lecture by Andreas Fahrmeir, who presented the crucial context factors of migration facilitation, such as distance of the envisioned journey, cost, information, and regulations. Aiding migrants in reaching their destination can be a well-regarded and potentially lucrative profession, an official project, or a criminalized activity – and sometimes both at the same time. The boundaries between "brokers of migration" and "human traffickers" have shifted back and forth and are highly contentious. However, official and public attitudes towards the brokers of migration changed in the early twentieth century, with hardening official stances towards immigration

and emigration. At the same time, intensifying migration restrictions could only increase the demand for help in the facilitation of migration. After 1945, migration facilitation also increased because of the expansion of transportation infrastructure and cross-border links. As a result, today, many more officials are employed in the prevention than the support of migration. Studying such restrictive efforts helps to understand which migrants are considered desirable and which are not and how “illegality” is socially constructed. One significant change in migration restrictions since the end of the Cold War in Europe is the fact that today, physical and administrative border fences are mainly constructed to keep people out, not in – and this has impacted the activities and images of migration brokers a lot, who might have once been seen as agents of liberty. At the same time, they are now accused of endangering migrants’ lives and state sovereignty.

The first panel on “The Changing Faces of Migrant Facilitators” opened with Yukari Takai, who presented an unknown history of Japanese immigrant hotel owners and housekeepers as migration facilitators. Based on two case studies of Honolulu and Vancouver, Takai showed that immigrant hotel owners were critical agents in the transmigration process from the 1880s to the 1920s, i.e., the period which saw an increase in exclusionary migration laws and regulations. Immigrant hotel owners were either collaborating with or acting in opposition to the local government and the influential sugar plantation owners, encouraging migrants to move to the continental United States. This profitable enterprise saw immigrant hotel owners frequently cross the lines of solidarity and exploitation multiple times over as they tried to maneuver between government, business, and migrant interests, as well as pursue their profits. The story also clarified the importance of ethnicity as a bond of trust linking migrants and their brokers.

Deborah A. Boehm presented a more contemporary story of migration facilitation as activism in the current U.S. context. Yet she, too, examined alternative methods of migration facilitation, namely those created in response to new restrictive government measures in the twenty-first century. Boehm focused on the idea of “accompaniment” as activists increasingly participate in migrants’ journeys to assist them. Accompaniment includes directly traveling with the migrants for a part of the journey, meeting them at borders, crossing the borders with them, or even tending to them in prison, helping ensure their release, and, in case of deportation, safe passage home. Boehm argued that accompaniment is a form of “radical presence” and that activism is not merely humanitarian and individual but also aims at abolishing the structures that impede movement across borders, putting an end to detentions and deportations.

The third panelist, Anastasiia Strakhova, looked at Jewish women as agents assisting emigration in Late Imperial Russia, introducing a gender dimension into migration facilitation. Legal emigration was effectively impossible, and people had to rely on underground routes and transnational connections, such as family ties in Austria or Prussia. Even though illegality made it a highly dangerous enterprise, Strakhova discovered a very high degree of women’s involvement in the process and decided to recover their voices in mass migration. The widespread perception of women as naive and innocent in a patriarchal society enabled them to avoid arrest much more easily than their male counterparts and accomplices. Not only were they less likely to get arrested, they were also very effective at getting their male business partners released from prison by petitioning the authorities.

The final panelist, Julia Devlin, presented a paper on “Zionist underground railways,” which supported Jewish refugees from early postwar Poland. The so-called “Bricha,” estab-

lished in 1944 by Jewish partisans and Zionists, facilitated the migration of Jewish Holocaust survivors to Palestine to escape from antisemitic violence in Poland after the Second World War. In her analysis, Devlin drew mainly on survivors' narratives, studying how the Bricha was presented in these memories. She found that the recollection of the support by the Zionist network lacked emotional attachment. Very little is said about personal contacts, while at the same time, the Bricha organization depended for its success on the very tight network from Poland on the route towards Palestine. However, refugees saw it as something functional and "normal," while Bricha activists portrayed themselves as righteous fighters for a good cause. The refugees did not share their Zionist zeal but mainly wanted to escape unsafe environments.

The second panel, dedicated to ethical dilemmas and moral economies, began with a presentation by Nicolas Lainez and Sallie Yea. They suggested a critical look at discourses of debt bondage, often demonized as a form of quasi-slavery. Yea and Lainez looked at salary deductions, one of the two forms of debt-financed migration, the other being upfront payments. Salary deductions imply that one's migration costs are gradually paid off by employers reducing a migrant's salary in the new place of residence. It is a form of debt bondage and thus also related to human trafficking and contemporary slavery issues. However, it has attracted little scholarly attention despite how widespread it is. Lainez and Yea presented the case study of Vietnamese migrant sex workers in Singapore and Filipina migrant entertainers in Singapore and South Korea. They argued that the liberal attempt to regulate salary reductions through bilateral agreements does little to alleviate the predicament of migrant workers. That debt is a product of the uneven development of global capitalism and can empower mobility.

Milena Rizzotti presented some findings of her recently defended doctoral dissertation on Nigerian sex workers in

Italy. She interviewed both women convicted of trafficking and those who were their victims and found that their perceptions of trafficking do not neatly fall into the “Western” dichotomy of trafficker-victim. Rather, from the perspective of Nigerian women, both the traffickers and victims are seen as migrant sex workers operating within the same system of migration. Both groups see this as the last step in the process of a successful move to the Global North, and that step entails paying off the travel debt. Rizzotti proposed abandoning the victim-trafficker dichotomy and the criminalization it entails, and instead considering all these women as part of the “Immobilized Global Underclass,” which aims to achieve geographical and social mobility.

The final presentation, given by Guadalupe Correa-Cabrera, was a paper she co-wrote with Jaime Scott. It is a story of two Cuban men and their perilous journey through twelve countries of Latin America before reaching the United States, only to be detained at the U.S.-Mexican border. Their journey lasted almost a year, during which they faced constant perils, from human traffickers to drug dealers and corrupt government officials. All of these were, in a way, facilitators of migration, and many of them extorted the two men along their journey. Despite high mortality rates on such routes, especially in places like the Darién Gap, they managed to survive and make it to Mexico. However, they were detained indefinitely by Donald Trump’s zero-tolerance policy, which seems to have continued into the new administration and with a whole new set of challenges posed by the pandemic. While their fate is unknown, Correa-Cabrera considers it implausible they entered the U.S. legally, and the amount of money paid to transport them across the border could have risen to several thousand dollars under the new circumstances.

One of the core questions discussed in the two panels was how we should conceptualize migration facilitators along the routes

taken by migrants and find a non-normative language not overburdened by moral judgments. It became clear that the analysis of migration facilitation helps to decenter political and epistemological hegemonies. However, the challenge is to prevent downplaying structural inequalities and the constraints under which migrants and their brokers pursue their often minimal agency.

Such dilemmas were also addressed by a practitioners' round table, which gathered three representatives from migrant rescue and support organizations and a well-known European migration expert. Cristina Santoyo and Fabienne Cabaret from the Mexican NGO "Fundación Justicia" spoke about the difficulties of providing legal assistance to migrants and their brokers in a context where the state authorities and public opinion usually frames them in criminal terms. Especially drug trafficking is often equated with migration facilitation. Such persecution can become a self-fulfilling prophecy when desperate migrants are forced to seek help from actual criminals. The authorities in Mexico are not interested in providing humanitarian assistance to migrants either. Michael Buschheuer, the founder of the Regensburg-based maritime rescue organization Sea-Eye, highlighted the perils migrants face when crossing the Mediterranean. He criticized the EU and European governments for reducing sea rescue efforts, which are often left to humanitarian organizations such as his, who face opposition from state authorities. Buschheuer suggested ways in which Europe could stop building more walls and find ways to open secure channels for immigration. He also elaborated on the importance of humanitarian efforts, which have one "simple" mission: to save lives. He articulated his frustration that there no longer was any consensus in Europe, even on this issue. Gerald Knaus, from the think tank European Stability Initiative (Brussels/Berlin), started his remarks by pointing to the drama at the Belarus-Poland border, which encapsulated many of the inconsistencies of the EU's approach to

(im)migration. It seems that the EU has agreed to ignore asylum law while insisting a hostile dictator must not blackmail it. Knaus highlighted what is at stake: how to convince European governments that there are ways to maintain control over borders while at the same time opening legal channels of immigration and refugee acceptance. If only the EU were to take in proportionally the same number of refugees as Canada, considerably fewer people would be exposed to the perils of dangerous routes to Europe. Knaus argued that a human refugee resettlement policy could garner majority support, even though many believe building walls works, thus betraying the founding principles of the European Union.

Stefan Gužvica
(University of Regensburg)

