

# Review

*Mobilities, Boundaries, and Travelling Ideas: Rethinking Translocality beyond Central Asia and the Caucasus.* Edited by Manja Stephan-Emmrich and Philipp Schröder. Cambridge: Open Book Publishers, 2018, 380 pp. ISBN 9781783743339.

This edited volume deploys the concept of ‘translocality’ to explore the exchange relations of mobile actors and how these redefine understandings about identity, ethnicity and Islam. The focus on Central Asia and the Caucasus makes sense because the movements of people and ideas in that post-Soviet region have been core sociocultural and political matters. Although migration is not the main theme, it is present in all contributions. Moreover, the generated conceptual and methodological insights are quite relevant for the field of migration studies.

In the Foreword, Nathan Light gives a useful overview of the existing literature on translocal mobilities, offering a nice corrective to the ‘methodological localism’ (p. 8) that besets much migration scholarship. The Introduction, by Manja Stephan-Emmrich and Philipp Schröder, serves to elaborate on the advantages of using translocality as an analytical lens to study the movements, transfers, and exchanges of people, objects and ideas across borders. The relational use of translocality is broader than is common in migration studies, where ‘the term is often simply used as a synonym for transnationalism’ (p. 28). Bringing different disciplinary approaches into conversation with each other, the editors situate the work in the field of ‘new area studies’, combining area-based research with transdisciplinary and global perspectives. The volume is divided into four (overlapping) thematic parts.

The two chapters of Part 1 focus on ‘crossing boundaries’. Kamoludin Abdullaev draws on translocality to reflect on historical Central Asian emigration, particularly to Afghanistan, ‘a place where new forms of identity are formed, which do not fit the customary understanding of nationality and ethnicity’ (p. 82). Abdullah Mirzoev and Manja Stephan-Emmrich analyse how Tajik labour migrants in Dubai act as social mediators, economic middlemen and cultural translators, and ‘create a translocal space of connectedness and belonging, which transgresses cultural and economic boundaries, crosses different regions’ (p. 91).

Part 2 deals with ‘travelling ideas’. Azim Malikov describes the transformation of the translocal links between, and the overlapping relational identities of ‘holy groups’ in Central Asia (e.g. Khoja or Sayyid lineages). This includes an investigation of translocal imagination, ‘a kind of place perception, linking locality to a broader set of processes’ (p. 127) such as identity formation, media usage and knowledge transfer. Elena Kim draws on institutional ethnographic analysis to show how the everyday existence of (largely immobile) people living in the poorest areas of rural Uzbekistan is shaped by invisible but powerful ‘translocal ruling relations’ (p. 151) operating through institutional texts and the institutional actors who use them. Henryk Alff explores the relations and practices among the people of coastal China, Almaty, and south-eastern Kazakhstan and the impact these have on notions of belonging and social change within a Dungan community. He notes

how, paradoxically, the ‘trans-’ in translocality ‘suggests a particularity to locality that contributes to the maintenance of distinctive dynamics or orders’ (p. 185).

Part 3 focuses on ‘movements from below’. Svetlana Jacquesson discusses how practitioners of ‘new history’ (which involves the transgression of conventional professional borders) transfer ‘facts’ from one academic discipline to another, and from Western to Soviet or post-Soviet epistemologies. Susanne Fehlings shows that not all female petty traders working in bazaars and markets and who travel long distances and cross international borders in Central Asia and the Caucasus live translocal lives (in the sense of being linked to translocal space or belongings). Philipp Schröder engages in translocal ethnography to capture the complex (virtual) ‘translocal livelihoods’ of Kyrgyz business (wo)men in China and Russia. His epistemographic approach leads him to identify various methodological boundaries that shape the contours of producing scholarly knowledge in mobile field sites.

The last part of the book covers ‘pious endeavours’. Manja Stephan-Emmrich traces the entangled study and work trajectories of Tajik migrants in the United Arab Emirates, focusing on the role of smart phones. Digital mediations produce a Muslim piety that is translocal because ‘it integrates the locales and the movements between them’ (p. 294). Emil Nasritdinov draws on Deleuze’s concept of ‘folds’ to describe a specific form of transtemporal transformation in an urban neighbourhood in Bishkek, in tandem with the shifting spiritual perspective of its long-time inhabitants, whereby ‘one perceives change not so much as the result of external influences, but as the result of internal spiritual change’ (p. 342).

In his afterword, Barak Kalir argues that translocality is a powerful analytical concept: ‘because it invokes the transitive features of locality’ (p. 350). In his view, using a translocal lens to explore movement in ways and places that matter to those who engage in or experience mobility has three advantages: (1) it stresses the primary function of imagination in mobility; (2) it is based on long-term engagements with localities as crucial research sites; and (3) it reveals the role of emotions. In Kalir’s words, ‘translocality provokes us to reconsider our study of mobility as an examination of an ongoing process of *em-placement* as well as of *re-placement*’ (p. 357). This is what distinguishes the creative potential of translocality from migration studies and transnational approaches, which concentrate on specific geographies (e.g. international migration) and prioritize certain study subjects (e.g. integration).

Whereas the foreword, the introduction and the afterword of this edited volume give the reader a very solid contextual and conceptual background, the various contributors develop and apply the concept of ‘translocality’ in so many ways that it is sometimes hard to distinguish a connecting thread. This is not necessarily a weakness. On the contrary, the conceptual looseness around the edges of translocality allows for a certain productive creativity across disciplinary boundaries. It also implicitly raises the loaded question what the scholarly value is of a purely local perspective (one that neglects the existence or influence of any ‘trans’ elements).

In sum, this is an interesting and well-conceived edited volume that contains some original conceptual as well as methodological contributions. Because most chapters are very descriptive, it would have been nice if all would have had a proper conclusion, where the generated insights are recapitulated. Despite this minor shortcoming, the book is

recommended to all migration scholars and others wishing to learn more about translocal (im)mobilities and how these play out in Central Asia and the Caucasus (and beyond). As a bonus, the text is available in open access format.

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