

## BOOK REVIEW

### **The Ties that Bind: Immigration and the Global Political Economy**

David Leblang and Benjamin Helms, CUP, Cambridge  
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In political economy, the factors leading a person to leave her country have received considerable attention, and diverse authors have evaluated the role played by determinants of migration differently. In their book “The ties that bind,” David Leblang, Professor of Politics at the University of Virginia and the Director of the Batten School of Public Policy Studies, and Benjamin Helms, Assistant Professor of International Affairs at Texas A&M University, rank migration for work or to gain an education as less relevant than is widely believed. In their view, what leads people to move is the desire to participate politically, by voting, and eventually to qualify for citizenship. Disaggregated by skill level, this implies that, to attract a highly skilled migrant, the host state needs to prioritize granting access to political rights, while excessively high scores of linguistic aptitudes must be scrapped. For the lower skilled migrants too, host state politics play a role, but more passively, as in the absence of hostile, right-wing politics and corruption.

The book's first chapters start out by summarizing the Anglo-American political economy literature on migrations' determinants, augmented by selected sociological insights. Here we see Leblang and Helms' research aim taking shape: their goal is to contest the view that political participation plays only an accessory role as a driver of migration and remittances. Hence, they hypothesize that only a migrant with the power to co-shape her political environment will monetize investments at home. Additionally, migrants, who rapidly acquire citizenship, also gain the commercial agility and knowledge needed to successfully create businesses that trade transnationally.

Next, the authors discuss how co-ethnic networks complement the role of political institutions in facilitating foreign direct investment and portfolio investment in home countries. Using levels of corruption as the anti-democratic marker, they find that migrant networks send signals back to the home state about the current circumstances of the democratic institutions in the host state and their flaws. The authors emphasize that further research on the micro-level interplay that determines how networks and institutions communicate is needed. However, despite the authors' valid reasons for excluding the politics of belonging from their investigative framework, the more critical aspects of co-ethnic network formation would have merited mentioning, such as the eruption of violence at Eritrean diaspora festivals during 2023 in Sweden, Germany, and Switzerland, which has generated a signaling effect precisely about the political participation of migrants.

Not all migrant networks act in the best interests of their members. Whereas most migrant networks emit positive signals over time, field studies with Turkish and Kurdish diaspora in Germany show how migrant networks can become highly politicized actors when they absorb the political schisms and societal discord that divide their home country. Diaspora originating from civil war-ridden countries are often instrumentalized by political groupings or the government in their home communities. In cases of infighting, diaspora cannot add trust or augment security, which is necessary to guarantee higher trade and investment flows and which Helms and Leblang would want to see. If the authors trust in a host country's democratic institutions to sufficiently socialize a migrant to become an agent for a corruption-free environment at home, they might omit how the migrant perceived and experienced her immigration and integration trajectory, which should

be equally decisive. As examples from France and Switzerland show, this experience is not always positive. Inadequate education and training opportunities for migrant youth in the host country are linked to social isolation and poor labor market participation, which are hardly likely to help peaceful migrant transnationalism.

In the final two chapters, which read as the most innovative of the monograph, the authors define what ‘statecraft’ means when governing labor migration. The reader learns how governments nudge migrants into giving back to their home communities. Using the example of the macro-level World Bank programs that aim to lower transfer costs, the authors highlight how, in small island or landlocked countries, the ratio of remittances to Gross Domestic Product (GDP) can reach 40% or more. They connect such high volumes of transfer in relation to GDP to the effect of remittances (and thus migration) dismantling clientelism at home in favor of democratic decision-making and meritocratic choices. Coupled with dual citizenship and external voting rights, cash transfers will thus transmit democratic ideals and strengthen good governance at home. Linking ease of access to political rights with programs to lower transfer costs becomes a powerful argument in favor of migration.

Yet, many states refrain from formulating active labor market participation policies for migrants and even renounce diaspora–diplomacy for fear of importing insurgencies. At the same time, voluntary return and reintegration are increasingly promoted to curb unauthorized stays. Could voluntary return aid be linked to such programs to produce greater gains for the country of origin? With the USA having joined the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly, and Regular Migration, should states globally coordinate remittances and diaspora policies? As the authors mention, preferential trade agreements with the World Trade Organization have been a first multilateral measure for liberalizing human mobility, albeit at low rates and without addressing the potential of remittances. More research is needed into how international legal institutions can be put to use to channel migration into a tool for democracy.

Written in an accessible style, there are many leading questions prompting the reader’s thinking, such that the book features as a fine introduction for anyone unfamiliar with the political economy of migration. Most of Leblang and Helms’ findings have been gathered

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from the American political environment and are transferable to Europe. However, with the exception of China in Southeast Asia and findings in Latin America, the distinct patterns of South–South migration are neither included in the dataset nor mentioned by the authors. It would have been useful to alert the reader to this limitation so as to increase the legitimacy of the case study in this book, which is applicable to Global South–North flows.

Nevertheless, the authors are to be commended for making a compelling case why statecraft benefits doubly from expanding migrants' exercise of political rights: On the one hand, the democratic capital of a society is strengthened where migrants are encouraged to identify corrupt business practices and electoral fraud, amongst other irregularities. On the other hand, migrant entrepreneurship, and transnational business practices, as a result of transparency gains, will flow more easily. More broadly, Leblang and Helms convincingly show why migration and democracy, in light of today's polycrisis, are nexuses that should be developed further. In their view, migrants' access to political rights could aspire to stabilize democracies beyond merely strengthening migrant inclusion policies. More specifically, the book offers insights into how states—both sending and receiving—have been activating migrants' resources and returns on investments to take pressure off public service expenditures. This monograph can be recommended to readers wishing to familiarize themselves with the migration–democracy nexus informing every individual decision to move abroad.

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