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Author
Hernandez-Leon, Ruben

Publication Date
2013-02-16

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The Migration Industry: Brokering Mobility in the Mexico-U.S. Migratory System[1]

Rubén Hernández-León, Dept. of Sociology, UCLA

Introduction

In this article I use the concept of the migration industry to shed light on the often overlooked commercialization of human mobility. The migration industry is the ensemble of entrepreneurs, firms and services which, chiefly motivated by financial gain, facilitate international mobility, settlement and adaptation and communication and resource transfers across borders (Hernández-León 2008; Castles and Miller 2003). The actors, organizations and infrastructures of the migration industry bridge the borders and barriers to mobility, resource and information transfer imposed by nation states (Deutsch 1953; Foucher 1991). In the final analysis, it is the existence of borders and other forms of state organized closure, intrinsic to international migration, that constitute the raison d'être of the migration industry (Hernández-León 2008).

At the heart of the migration industry, an ensemble of migration entrepreneurs, firms and organizations develop the specialized know-how, create social and economic infrastructures, make the investments and confront the risks related to both legal and clandestine migration, at times helping migrants circumvent barriers and in other moments assisting people with compliance of bureaucratic regulations. The migration industry is composed of human smuggling and formal and informal labor recruitment, financing of migration, transportation and travel infrastructures, cash and in-kind remittance services, procurement of valid as well as counterfeit documents, legal counseling, advertising of immigration destinations and marketing of housing and real estate investments to potential migrants. Still, the specific activities, services

[1] This article was published in French as «L'industrie de la migration. Organiser la mobilité dans le système migratoire Mexique-Etats-Unis.» *Hommes et Migrations*. 1296 (mars-avril, 2012) : 34-44.

and entrepreneurs that make up the migration industry comprise a field with changing boundaries, depending on state policies, the stage of the migratory cycle, the types and volume of migration as well as prevailing political and economic circumstances.

The role of migration entrepreneurs and the migration industry as a whole have occupied a marginal place in most conceptual schemes of international migration. Traditionally, scholarly and policy analyses have focused on clandestine and informal actors, such as smugglers and recruiters, whose chief role is to support irregular migratory flows. More recently, the interest of governments and multilateral financial institutions to leverage family remittances for economic development has fostered the systematic investigation of the means by which migrants send money home.

I propose to move away from this narrow understanding, broadening the analytical field to include both above-ground and illicit migration entrepreneurs as well as the iterations by which these entrepreneurs straddle the line between formality and informality, legality and illegality. Most important, I argue about the significance of the migration industry in structuring human mobility, namely, initiating, sustaining and managing international migratory flows and 'greasing' the engines of international mobility. By focusing on the migration industry, I seek to show that migration is not "a leaderless social process in which an unorganized free market responds" and that migration brokers and entrepreneurs are deeply involved in the co-creation of migration (Light 2002: 225).

In this article I briefly revisit prior efforts to conceptualize the migration industry and the commercialization of international migration. I then focus on a core yet often taken-for-granted activity of the migration industry: transportation. I then analyze strategic research materials of migrant transportation in the Mexico-U.S. context. A brief concluding section summarizes the main arguments and findings of this article.

The Migration Industry: Historical and Theoretical Antecedents

Scholars and policy makers have long identified the existence of intermediaries encouraging and facilitating European migration and easing immigrant adaptation in the United States. In 1885, the U.S. Congress prohibited the recruitment and immigration of contract workers. The prohibition indirectly targeted *padrones* or labor brokers, who, either independently or on behalf of American employers, recruited foreigners for work in mining, railroad and many other industries. However, these labor brokers found new strategies to stay in business and continue supplying corporate clients with migrant workers (Peck 1996). After the passage of the Chinese Exclusion Act in 1882, an entire international system emerged for the purpose of smuggling Chinese migrants into the United States. Led by agents of the Chinese Six Companies, this system successfully moved and smuggled thousands of laborers from Asia via the Mexican border and Cuba until World War I interrupted the means of transpacific transportation (Romero 2004/2005).

The services and infrastructures developed by these migration entrepreneurs became the target of public debate, legislative initiatives and a growing enforcement apparatus, which often played catch up but also managed to limit ever evolving and clever ways to entice, recruit and move migrants. In 1911 Dillingham Commission identified the indirect yet effective role of individual entrepreneurs as well as large firms, such as labor brokers and steamship companies, as a mechanism exacerbating migration (Harney 1977). Sociologist Henry Fairchild argued that “the [immigrants’] way is made as easy as possible for them, through the agency of interested parties, who profit by their coming.” According to him, “[A]ll the emigrant needs to do is to allow himself to be passed along submissively from one stage to another—provided he has the money to pay. For those who make the way easy must have an ample recompense" (1918: 169). Fairchild recognized not only the profit driven motivations of migration entrepreneurs but also their role in facilitating mobility, remittance transfers, and the formation of migratory networks between Europe and the United States.

After a long hiatus, historians of the great European migration brought the migration industry 'back' into the study of international human mobility. In *The Uprooted*, Handlin noted that "immigrants became men of business" through the opportunities offered by the migration industry where, in essence, they could combine the distinct advantages of ethnic familiarity and acculturation (Handlin 1951: 83). Later, the historian of Italian migration, Robert Harney (1977) wrote about "the commerce of migration" in reference to the activities of intermediaries who profited by offering mobility services to emigrants. In this transatlantic informal economy the middle classes of southern Italy "gained from the commerce of migration" by performing a "mediating and exploiting role" in the process of mobility (Harney 1977: 44, 42). For instance, members of these middle classes often provided the money to finance trips and pay for the many costs associated with migration in exchange for land and other assets which departing sojourners owned.

In *Transnational Peasants*, Kyle analyzed the activities of brokers and intermediaries he called "migration merchants," namely, "anyone profiting, legally or illegally, from the commodification of the international migration process, [forming] a larger system or informal network" (2000: 67). These intermediaries were part of a regional middle class in southern Ecuador, which brokered and financed migration to the United States and Europe during the 1980s and 1990s (Kyle 2000).

The concept of migration industry also has as precedent the notion of "migration as business." Proposed by geographers John Salt and Jeremy Stein to understand the apparatus that sustains migrant trafficking in Europe, migration as business represents "a system of institutionalized networks with complex profit and loss accounts, including a set of institutions, agents and individuals, each of which stands to make a commercial gain" (Salt and Stein 1997: 468). Castles and Miller (2003) use the term migration industry to capture the array of profit-seeking intermediaries facilitating migration. These authors contend that the migration industry constitutes a durable structure of the process of migration, operating between macro and micro levels of analysis and supporting over time the continuation of international human mobility.

Transportation and the Migration Industry

Transportation is a core component of the migration industry. Transport infrastructures facilitate the mass movement and circulation of migrants between home and destination, articulate labor markets, allow for migrant-driven ethnic economies to arise across borders and even reduce the psychological, when not the economic, costs of migration. Still, scholars have paid scant attention to the social organization of migrant transportation, a core activity of the migration industry. Indeed, as de Tapia has eloquently argued, "to speak of migration is to speak of mobility and mobility leads to a transport" (1996: 45; my translation). At the same time, transportation nodes and networks have long been sites of migration control, where government authorities directly and with the help third parties either at a distance or at the gates of the state's territory enforce policies of selection and restriction.

Historical studies of transatlantic transportation have demonstrated how steamship service facilitated mass migration from Europe to North America. The establishment of transatlantic steamship routes in the first half of the 19th century preceded the onset of mass migratory flows. By the second part of the century, a series of technological innovations allowed steamboat companies to move growing numbers of migrants across the ocean, reducing cost, time and risk of travel while increasing comfort. In turn, these companies became financially more dependent on migrants crossing the Atlantic (Keeling 1999). Restrictionist policies in the United States and the onset of World War I upended maritime transportation and migratory flows for, as Keeling argues, “travel innovation and mass migration did not interact in a political vacuum” (1999: 54). Indeed, as de facto members of “immigrationist coalitions” together with employers of immigrant labor (Zolberg 1999), transporters were at risk of sustaining heavy losses when national politics and geopolitical events disrupted the movement and circulation of migrants.

Large transportation companies have also been involved in the movement of migrants from Mexico to the United States but their presence has always been interspersed with self-produced modes of transportation. The history of Mexican migrant transport includes the *carretero* (carter or wagoner) industry in the early days of migration after 1848, the year Mexico’s northern territories became part of the United States. Mexican *carreteros* held a niche in the transportation of commercial cargo between Texas and northeast Mexico. It is not farfetched to assume that these *carreteros* also transported fellow Mexicans escaping peonage and border violence and searching high wages available in the neighboring country (González Quiroga 2001).

During the last two decades of the 19th century, foreign companies built the railroad infrastructure needed to ship raw materials from the Mexican interior to the United States and its burgeoning industrial revolution. Later, these trains became the primary means of transportation for Mexican workers who had been recruited to the mining and agricultural industries of the

Southwest (Coatsworth 1981). Railroad companies and the railway infrastructure also employed these laborers in track maintenance jobs, a task that was seized by sojourners to travel to states distant from the U.S.-Mexico border, where they found opportunities in steel mills and slaughter houses. Later, trains transported masses of temporary workers to the United States under the auspices of the Bracero program (1942-1964) (Durand 1994).

Buses, trucks, vans and automobiles displaced trains and ushered an era of self-produced transportation in which migrants, *raiteros* (informal ride givers), employers and recruiters generated the mobility infrastructures that helped workers get to agricultural labor markets, especially where American bus lines, such as Greyhound, did not reach. The progressive urbanization and continued growth of Mexican migration in the United States starting in the late 1960s and 1970s offered entrepreneurial opportunities, particularly to documented immigrants who could move back and forth between the two countries, to join what would become a burgeoning migrant transportation industry.

The Migrant Transportation Industry in the Post-Bracero Mexico-U.S. Migratory System

In a story with repeated incarnations across the southwestern United States, during the 1970s settled immigrants began offering occasional and then regular transportation services in their cars and station wagons. Realizing the commercial potential of an untapped demand, these emerging migration entrepreneurs started using larger vehicles, chiefly vans that could accommodate up to a dozen travelers. Still, able to shuttle only a handful of passengers in relatively small vehicles, these *camioneteros* (van operators) offered courier services, remittance and parcel shipping, which provided the bulk of their profits and turned their small firms into multiservice operations.

Successful van transporters and couriers took steps to formalize and grow the migrant transport part of the business by acquiring mini buses and full size coaches. Although many failed and retreated to the less visible *camionetas* or vans, others managed to build profitable and expansive enterprises that offered mobility services connecting Mexico's migratory heartland to the borderlands and from there to established and new destinations of migration. More recently, large Mexican and American bus companies have entered the migrant transport market buying out the founders of smaller firms (but keeping their ethnic names) and formalizing alliances with other actors of the migration industry, such as remittance firms. However, vans, buses and also planes coexist and are increasingly articulated in a multi-modal system of the North American migrant transportation (Hernández-León 2008; Valenzuela, Schweitzer and Robles 2005). Evidence from three cases I have studied over the past 15 years illustrates aspects of this general trajectory as well as the specific dynamics of regions and migrant transportation hubs.

The Monterrey-Houston Connection

Geographical location, the growth of settled immigration in the aftermath of the legalization of millions of Mexicans in the late 1980s and the rise of new migratory destinations in the Southeast have turned Houston, Texas, and Monterrey, Mexico, into hubs of migrant transportation operations. But Houston is not only a transportation hub and gateway to states like Georgia and North Carolina. It is also hosts one of the three largest concentrations of Mexican immigrants in the United States. Many of these immigrants circulate between Monterrey and Houston.

Even though most migrants and their families travel from Houston to Monterrey and then to the Mexican interior using buses, small van operastions have not been completely squeezed out of the migrant passenger market. In fact, a rough division of labor between buses and *camionetas* is readily apparent. While a handful of bus lines specialize on the cross-border market with Mexico, using established ports of entry and routes, the vans distribute immigrant workers internally from Houston to numerous labor markets along the eastern seaboard, the Midwest and even California. Often lacking papers, van customers prefer this mode of ground transportation to air travel and the intense surveillance typical of airports nowadays. These travelers rely on the expertise of *camioneta* drivers about the location of Border Patrol highway checkpoints and the back roads to avoid detection. Still, immigration authorities periodically raid the store fronts and parking lots where *camionetas* operate, accusing owners and drivers of participating in migrant 'trafficking.' (Carroll 2010)

Migrant transportation in a new destination: Dalton, Georgia

As Mexican migration to Georgia and the larger eastern seaboard of United States boomed over the past 20 years, a dense network of vans and bus lines emerged to service not only metropolitan locations but also towns and semi-rural areas where immigrants settled. Before the 2008 recession started, at least eight *camioneta* firms operated in the small industrial city of Dalton, Georgia. The network of vans I studied in Dalton largely service rural localities in Mexico's historic region of migration. Despite growing competition from large bus corporations, *camioneta* operations were able to stay in business by providing multiple services to clients and by reaching the underserved populations in Mexico migrants come from, which are often overlooked by mainstream remittance and transportation firms.

Camioneteros also manage competition with each other by dividing up routes among themselves, thus avoiding the saturation of a particular migratory circuit. Van courier operators have always faced risk while conducting their activities and have long negotiated their transit across borders and roads by bribing Mexican customs and highway police officers. But in recent years Dalton's *camioneteros* reported encounters with self-identified members of organized crime, who stole remittances and demanded large sums of money in order allow safe passage. Van operators have responded to this new context by either downsizing or eliminating their remittance services, therefore traveling with substantially less cash, and by focusing on the transportation of passengers and parcels. With many Mexican immigrants unemployed as result of the economic recession and the real estate crisis in the United States, the number of camioneta services in Dalton has declined sharply over the past several years.

Migrant Transportation in the Tijuana-San Diego-Los Angeles Corridor

The Tijuana-San Diego border hosts a distinct node of the migrant transportation industry. Tijuana is too far from populous source areas of migration in western and southern Mexico, making ground transportation costly and inefficient. Instead of using vans and buses, many migrants fly to Tijuana, where they choose between different transportation alternatives to continue their journey. At the airport, travelers can board buses bound for the United States. Airlines also offer shuttles to the San Diego bus station. Alternatively, migrants can take a taxi to the Tijuana-San Ysidro port of entry, the busiest vehicular border crossing point in the world. In San Ysidro, on the American side of the border, buses, vans and taxis reappear as major means of transportation. The parking lots of the fast food restaurants located at the port of entry provide the space for an impromptu transportation hub, where buses pick up passengers who just cleared immigration and customs inspection, employees of camioneta services load luggage onto the roof of the vehicle and taxi drivers haggle with potential customers.

Many of the firms that service the Tijuana-San Diego border are headquartered in the metropolitan area of Los Angeles. Home to millions of Mexican immigrants, Los Angeles boasts multiple migrant transportation hubs. In the South Los Angeles city of Huntington Park, a large concentration of bus and van lines has formed a migrant transportation 'alley.' The store fronts of these bus and *camioneta* operations hold the ticket counters and waiting areas as well as small travel agencies where customers can purchase plane tickets. With only a small parking lot and no platforms to go aboard the buses, passengers line up off the curbside. While some travelers end their trip in Los Angeles, others continue their journey to destinations along the coastal and inland locations of the West, including the agricultural labor markets of the Coachella and Central Valleys in California and Western Washington State.

Conclusion

Analyses of the social organization of international migration have neglected the role that migration entrepreneurs, services and infrastructures play in the structuring of migratory flows. In this article, I propose the concept of migration industry to understand how profit-driven actors cause, facilitate and sustain international human mobility. As a field of action, the migration industry comprises not just migration entrepreneurs but also migrants, employers, states and even non-profit advocates involved in the co-production of migration.

In the North American migratory system, an industry of migrant transportation eases and sustains mobility across the border and different urban and regional labor markets in the United States. A common thread to the history of Mexican migrant transportation over the past 40 years has been the transition from informal, self-produced means of mobility (i.e. personal vehicles and *camionetas*) to formal, corporate-based services (i.e. bus lines owned by small and large firms). As this process unfolded, cities such as Monterrey, Tijuana, Houston, Los Angeles and, more recently, Atlanta, emerged as hubs of migrant transportation services. But a close look at three cases located in different points of this geography suggests a system of intermodal transportation in which migrants continue to produce formal and informal, above and underground mobility alternatives.

In the Monterrey-Houston circuit, where bus lines appear to forcefully displace vans, *camionetas* received an unexpected impetus from undocumented immigrants eager to avoid the stringent identity verification controls now common at airports. In Georgia, van operators survived by parceling out routes and circuits among each other, by offering multiple services and by providing an infrastructure of mobility between new destinations in the United States and underserved rural areas in Mexico. Finally, in the Tijuana-San Diego-Los Angeles corridor, planes, buses, vans and even taxis illustrate a multi modal and dense system of migrant transportation reaching from the Mexican borderlands to the international boundary with Canada.

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