

CONFRONTING THE RISKS OF  
UNDOCUMENTED MIGRATION ON THE  
U.S.-MEXICO BORDER AND BEYOND

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**The World of Mexican Migrants: The Rock and the Hard Place.** By Judith Adler Hellman. New York: New Press, 2008. Pp. xxiv + 546. \$17.95 paper. \$28.50 cloth.

**"I Know It's Dangerous": Why Mexicans Risk Their Lives to Cross the Border.** By Lynnaire M. Sheridan. Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2009. Pp. xv + 206. \$24.95 paper. \$55.00 cloth.

**Clandestine Crossings: Migrants and Coyotes on the Texas-Mexico Border.** By David Spener. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2010. Pp. xiv + 298. \$24.95 paper. \$65.00 cloth.

Immigrant stories well grounded in field research can greatly illuminate the multiple and unintended effects of U.S. border policies that intend to curb the flow of undocumented migrants from Mexico. At a time when debate on immigration is increasingly polarized, descriptive and objective studies focused on how migrants are affected by and react to border controls provide a perspective often missing in political discourse. Since 1993, when the U.S. government began to militarize the U.S.-Mexico border by implementing Operation Blockade in El Paso, Texas, scholars have paid increasing attention to the effects that tightened borders have had on the flow and routes of unauthorized migration, the human costs of the policy, and the strategies undocumented immigrants use in the effort to continue crossing into the United States. The dramatic escalation of migrant deaths on the U.S.-Mexico border, along with the violation of human rights because of harsh immigration policies on the border and in the interior of the United States, have renewed interest by both scholars and citizens in the human consequences of border enforcement.

Seventeen years after Operation Blockade was launched, creating a new model for border control, there is consensus among migration specialists on at least three consequences of tougher enforcement. First, new methods—including the deployment of high-tech sensors and unmanned

aircraft, the construction of a seven-hundred-mile fence, and a dramatic increase in the number of border-patrol officers—have not significantly deterred undocumented migrants, but they have increased the cost and risk of trying to cross the border, with a sharp rise in the number of people who die in the process. Second, migrants have become increasingly dependent on professional coyotes to cross the border, increasing the profits of human smugglers. Third, because of higher human risks and financial costs, migrants who succeed in crossing the border tend to lengthen their stay in the United States, thus increasing the population of undocumented Mexicans in the country.<sup>1</sup>

The books by David Spener, Lynnaire Sheridan, and Judith Hellman reviewed here not only support this assessment with empirical evidence but also expand inquiry into the effects of border enforcement in new and original ways. First, they all examine risk-management strategies that undocumented migrants use to deal with border controls and to avoid detection after entering the United States. Where Spener provides a detailed account of the world of clandestine migrants and their coyotes, and the perils and strategies of crossing into South Texas, Sheridan documents how migrants assess similar risks when crossing the border in San Diego and Arizona, as well as the economic, social, and cultural resources they mobilize to confront those risks. Hellman's focus is somewhat broader: the economic and social benefits that, in the minds of rural and working-class urban Mexicans, outweigh the risks of migration. Together, all three studies build on the analysis of Massey, Durand, and Malone, who conceptualize migration as a risk-management strategy by which low-income families seek to diversify their livelihood.<sup>2</sup> Spener, Sheridan, and Hellman

1. See Wayne A. Cornelius and Jessa M. Lewis, eds., *Impacts of Border Enforcement on Mexican Migration: The View from Sending Communities* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2006); Pia M. Orrenius, "The Effects of U.S. Border Enforcement on the Crossing Behavior of Mexican Migrants," in *Crossing the Border: Research from the Mexican Migration Project*, ed. Jorge Durand and Douglas S. Massey (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 2004); Wayne A. Cornelius, "Death at the Border: Efficacy and Unintended Consequences of U.S. Immigration Control Policy," *Population and Development Review* 27, no. 4 (2001): 661–685; Timothy Dunn, *Blockading the Border and Human Rights: The El Paso Operation That Remade Immigration Enforcement* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2009); Jonathan Hicken, Mollie Cohen, and Jorge Narvaez, "Double Jeopardy: How U.S. Enforcement Policies Shape Tunkaseño Migration," in *Mexican Migration and the U.S. Economic Crisis: A Transnational Perspective*, ed. Wayne A. Cornelius, David Fitzgerald, Pedro Lewin Fisher, and Leah Muse-Orlinoff (La Jolla: Center for Comparative Immigration Studies, University of California, San Diego, 2010), 47–94; Guillermo Alonso Meneses "Los peligros del desierto en la migración clandestina por California y Arizona," in *Antropología del desierto: Paisaje, naturaleza y sociedad*, ed. Rafael Pérez-Taylor, Miguel Olmos Aguilera, and Hernán Salas Quintanal (Mexico City: Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México and El Colegio de la Frontera Norte, 2007), 109–120.

2. D. S. Massey, J. Durand, and N. Malone, *Beyond Smoke and Mirrors: Mexican Immigration in an Era of Economic Integration* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 2003).

add to this paradigm by revealing the decisions that undocumented migrants take to manage the perils of tough border enforcement, a matter with important implications for immigration policy.

The books under review also pay special attention to the cultural dimension of migration, namely the ideas, beliefs, traditions, and institutionalized social practices that commonly inform Mexicans' decisions to try to migrate to the United States. The economic and social factors that drive migration at individual, household, and community levels have been widely studied, with less attention paid to cultural forces. Yet as Marcelo Suárez-Orozco rightly notes, anthropology has long recognized that cultural practices and customs also contribute to migration's persistence in key ways.<sup>3</sup> Sheridan and Hellman provide qualitative data on how gender, class, and inherited values influence the decisions of undocumented migrants. Both authors present compelling case studies of Mexican women who migrate to escape domestic violence; others who seek to escape the social control of extended patriarchal households in rural communities; and yet others, in the United States, who carefully weigh how a return to Mexico might affect their economic and social autonomy. Cultural ideals and norms also shape the use to which remittances from migrant workers in the United States are put and who gets to manage them. In a different vein, Spener dissects how class, shared cultural values, and common interests unite migrants and coyotes in opposition to policies that seek to prevent human movement. All three studies show that the culture of migration matters and that we need to go beyond economic motivations alone to understand the forces that drive Mexicans to the United States, a perspective that, again, has important policy implications.

The three monographs also put a human face on large-scale migration. Unlike studies that rely on surveys to assess the effects of border enforcement, the qualitative approaches of Spener, Sheridan, and Hellman bring the voices of migrants to the fore. Given the prevalence in political discourse of what Leo Chavez aptly calls the Latino threat—a narrative that conflates undocumented immigration with terrorism and drug trafficking to portray Hispanic immigrants as a risk to the national security and cultural integrity of the United States<sup>4</sup>—one can understand the importance of studies like these, which portray a diversity of undocumented migrants arranged along gender, class, ethnic, and age lines, and that insist on the human dimension of migration.

3. Marcelo M. Suárez-Orozco, "Right Moves? Immigration, Globalization, Utopia, and Dystopia," in *American Arrivals: Anthropology Engages the New Immigration*, ed. Nancy Foner (Santa Fe, NM: School of American Research Press, 2003), 57.

4. Leo Chavez, *The Latino Threat: Constructing Immigrants, Citizens, and the Nation* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2008).

Few authors have done more to dispel false myths about undocumented migration from Mexico than Spener. Building on prior scholarship, *Clandestine Crossings* focuses on the border between Northeast Mexico and South Texas, and the material, social, and cultural resources that migrants and coyotes use to circumvent the massive manpower and surveillance of the U.S. government. Spener's central argument is that, in the absence of legal opportunities to work in the United States—"in 2005 only two Mexican workers received employment-based immigrant visas as unskilled workers" (10)—working-class Mexicans engage in clandestine migration as a strategy to survive and resist the structural inequality and violence that act to hold them in place. Following on work by De Genova, Heyman, Ngai, and others who theorize that undocumented migrants are political subjects without political rights,<sup>5</sup> Spener challenges statist views, insisting that unauthorized migration is a historical form of everyday resistance and class struggle—in this case by working-poor Mexicans, who rebel against the state's attempt to control their movement.

The central contribution of *Clandestine Crossings* is, nevertheless, its analysis of *coyotaje* as a sociocultural institution made up of strategies and practices, social capital and networks, and accumulated knowledge (drawn from more than a century of experience) that coyotes use to bring migrants safely across the border to their final destinations in the United States. Not surprisingly, Spener finds that reliance on professional coyotes more than doubled (from about 21 percent to more than 50 percent) after militarization of the border. Yet contrary to what U.S. officials often claim, he shows that large human-smuggling rings, driven only by profit, do not dominate the business of *coyotaje*. Instead, as in the past, in Texas it remains a cottage industry run by small-scale coyotes with close social ties to the migrants that they aid. The coyotes, joined to migrants by bonds of trust, usually operate as independent agents in horizontal social networks rather than in a vertically integrated, impersonal organization. Spener's aim is not to exculpate coyotes but to show that the tendency to blame them for the deaths of undocumented border crossers distracts us from the structural violence and political pressures amid which undocumented migration from Mexico to the United States takes place.

Equally refreshing is Spener's discussion of the complicity in *coyotaje* of U.S. officers stationed at international bridges, consulates in Mexico, highway checkpoints, and the like. This involvement is systematic rather

5. Nicholas De Genova, *Working the Boundaries: Race, Space, and "Illegality" in Mexican Chicago* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005); Josiah Heyman, ed., *States and Illegal Practices* (Oxford: Berg Publishers, 1999); Josiah Heyman, "Why Interdiction: Immigration Control at the United States-Mexican Border," *Regional Studies* 33, no. 7 (1999): 619–630; Mae M. Ngai, *Impossible Subjects: Illegal Aliens and the Making of Modern America* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004).

than an anomaly, as state-centered political discourse maintains. This discussion provides a much-needed balance to the otherwise one-sided focus on how corrupt Mexican officials extort unauthorized migrants, with no mention of the role of U.S. government agents. Meticulously researched and documented, Spener's study is the most complete, nuanced, and detailed portrayal to date of coyotes as social actors on the U.S.-Mexico border. I must ask, however, if in the attempt to desensationalize the hidden world of coyotes, and at the same time provide an alternative to state-dominated discourse, Spener has not gone too far in romanticizing the solidarity between coyotes and migrants based on ethnic, class, and/or kinship ties. After all, some evidence in his study seems to indicate that the growing dependency on coyotes has led to a commodification of such social relations.

The heuristic value of an approach grounded in risk management is evident in Lynnaire Sheridan's *"I Know It's Dangerous,"* which focuses on how Mexican migrants have responded to militarization of the U.S. border; their own perceptions of the risks of unauthorized migration; and the economic, social, and cultural resources deployed to deal with these risks. Mostly based on case studies from San Diego and the Arizona desert, this work nicely complements Spener's account of clandestine migration in South Texas. Especially interesting is Sheridan's analysis of the "pretrip risk assessment" (35) of many of her informants, who, as a strategy to reduce risks, prefer coyotes known to their families and social networks. This is consonant with Spener's data on working-poor migrants. However, Sheridan also discusses the case of a young, urban, middle-class, professional migrant, whose weak social ties in the realm of coyotes put him at higher risk than rural peasants who have the social capital that he lacks.

Both Hellman and Sheridan expand the cultural scope of their studies to include not only migrants and their social networks but also the contributions of civil institutions, printed media, and popular culture in Mexico to the decision making of undocumented migrants. Sheridan finds that, like U.S. policies, those implemented by Mexico's Ministry of Foreign Affairs and National Migration Institute to protect the rights of Mexican migrants after militarization of the border are mainly geared to influence public opinion and have little impact on the decisions of migrants themselves. Meanwhile, civic organizations, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), and local media in Tijuana appear to have had greater success in addressing the risks undocumented border crossers face. In addition, Sheridan shows how Mexican and Mexican American artists, musicians, and writers on both sides of the Tijuana-San Diego border use their creative works to raise public awareness, to foment political activism, and to denounce the deaths and violations of human rights stemming from military operations.

The appeal of accessible accounts of undocumented Mexican migration is well illustrated by Judith Hellman's *The World of Mexican Migrants*. As does Sheridan, Hellman examines why and how migrants decide to migrate despite the high cost and risk to their lives of tougher border controls. Her highly readable collection of snapshots of individual migrants, and of relatives who stay behind in Mexico, ranges across numerous locations and settings, capturing the richness and heterogeneity of the migration experience. It vividly documents the painful effects of the North American Free Trade Agreement on the economy and employment opportunities of rural communities in Mexico, revealing how they have exacerbated labor migration to the United States. The study also dramatically conveys how high-volume emigration has made rural communities completely dependent on remittances, thereby upsetting social and cultural traditions and norms, driving teens to drop out of school to go to the United States as a rite of passage, and finally discouraging migrants from returning home to start new businesses because of the low demand for these among the few people left behind in sending communities. Hellman also finds that the rising desire for foreign goods in rural communities further fuels migration north of the border to capitalize on the spending power of remittances. Her account of this trend beautifully illustrates the idea that globalization creates "structures of desire and consumption fantasies that local economies cannot fulfill."<sup>6</sup>

Hellman's study is best when depicting the powerful cultural and social forces that create opportunities, or impose constraints, for female migrants and other women who stay behind. She shows how gossip and social control by in-laws leave women little room to manage remittances from their husbands, often reducing them to free household labor in rural communities that favor patrilocal rule after marriage. Her account of such cultural norms, which often push young Mexican women to migrate to the United States or dissuade them from returning to their home communities in Mexico, provides additional evidence for the central role that gendered forces play in migration, as feminist scholars have long claimed.<sup>7</sup> Although mostly descriptive, Hellman's cross-sectional compilation of brief, individual stories makes for engaging reading for a nonspecialized audience and has the additional virtue of bringing to the surface the inner thoughts and feelings of undocumented immigrants, which more academic accounts often overlook or bury.

6. Suárez-Orozco, "Right Moves?" 46.

7. Pierrete Hondagneu-Sotelo, *Gendered Transitions: Mexican Experiences of Immigration* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994); Patricia R. Pessar, "Engendering Migration Studies: The Case of New Immigrants in the United States," *American Behavioral Scientist* 42, no. 4 (1999): 577–600; Cecilia Menjivar, "The Intersection of Work and Gender: Central American Immigrant Women and Employment in California," *American Behavioral Scientist* 42, no. 4 (1999): 601–627.

In contrast to Spener, Sheridan and Hellman do not on the whole advance new theories of migration. Rather, they seek to illustrate the remarkably diverse world of migrants, allowing them to voice their individual experiences and decisions. Nevertheless, the richness of the empirical studies illuminates some important issues under discussion in the field of migration studies. First, they show that gender and age, and to a lesser extent class, play a significant role in the decisions of undocumented migrants. They do not argue that these variables determine the course of migration, but they instead demonstrate how specific cultural values affect migration to the United States in combination with other well-documented economic factors.

The three studies also present solid and original evidence that migration, though driven by economic factors, is a socially embedded process, insofar as personal relationships and social networks mediate most transactions among migrants, coyotes, and other actors. Ever since the pioneering work by Douglas S. Massey and his collaborators, studies have argued that social networks mediate most aspects of immigrants' lives: how they cross the border, find employment and housing, obtain financial assistance, and build a sense of community, among other things.<sup>8</sup> In this vein, Spener ably shows that migrants and human smugglers are not bound by an impersonal, economic transaction but by kinship, trust, and common cultural values and goals. Likewise, Sheridan finds that social capital and networks are the most important elements that undocumented migrants use to manage risk on the Tijuana–San Diego border, especially in the case of women and children, the most vulnerable group of border crossers. Hellman provides further ethnographic evidence of the value of social networks for Mexican immigrants in New York's restaurant industry and other low-paying jobs on Staten Island, where immigrants have displaced African American workers, which has fueled ethnic conflict between the groups as they compete in the local housing and job markets. Collectively, the three studies add breadth and depth to an understanding of the role of social and cultural ties in most spheres of Mexican immigrants' everyday lives.

Last but not least, the books reviewed here help broaden the scope of Mexican migration studies by incorporating actors other than migrants, human smugglers, and government officials, and by considering factors beyond policy. More than ever, the U.S.-Mexico border has become a "great political theater," in which diverse actors, groups, and voices seek to shape public opinion and governmental policy.<sup>9</sup> Sheridan and Hell-

8. Douglas S. Massey, Rafael Alarcón, Jorge Durand, and Humberto González, *Return to Aztlán: The Social Process of International Migration from Western Mexico* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987).

9. Massey, Durand, and Malone, *Beyond Smoke and Mirrors*, 164.

man capture the increasing presence of NGOs, pro- and anti-immigrant groups, local media, artists, writers, and other public figures in the debate on undocumented migration. Particularly interesting is Hellman's depiction of grassroots, interfaith organizations such as No More Deaths, which assists migrants in the Arizona desert by providing water, food, and humanitarian help. This is a vivid example of the intersection between religion and migration on the U.S.-Mexico border.<sup>10</sup>

Written in an engaging fashion, Hellman and Sheridan's monographs are easily accessible to scholars and nonspecialists alike, including undergraduate students interested in learning about undocumented Mexican immigrants from firsthand sources. Detailed depictions of the obstacles and perils found in the western and eastern regions of the U.S.-Mexico border, and the savvy use of databases, archives, and printed media from both sides of the border, also make the studies by Spener and Sheridan a valuable contribution. Together, the three books enrich our understanding of the human dimension of undocumented migration and help reveal the unintended and often tragic consequences of strict enforcement of immigration policies on the border and in the interior of the United States.

10. See Pierrete Hondagneu-Sotelo, *God's Heart Has No Borders: How Religious Activists Are Working for Immigrant Rights* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008); Jacqueline M. Hagan, "The Church vs. the State: Borders, Migrants, and Human Rights," in *Religion and Social Justice for Immigrants*, ed. Pierrete Hondagneu-Sotelo (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2007), 93–103; Cecilia Menjivar, "Serving Christ in the Borderlands: Faith Workers Respond to Border Violence," in *Religion and Social Justice for Immigrants*, ed. Pierrete Hondagneu-Sotelo (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2007), 104–121.