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Mapping the Return Migration Research Field

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Abstract

This working paper presents an overview of recent literature on the theme of return migration, with particularly emphasis on works of relevance to our understanding of this topic in a contemporary Portuguese migration context. The discussion integrates insights and perspectives from empirically-informed studies with more long-standing theoretical ideas relating to return migration utilizing the idea of 'generation'. Added to this is emphasis upon the role of social ties in understanding return migration, in particular family relationships, as well as an appreciation of the mythological dimension of the drivers behind return population flows. Also highlighted is a lack of consideration of structural factors in studies, most prominently socio-economic change, a factor which has special significance for present day return migrants in the Portuguese context.

Keywords: Return migration; Portugal; transnationalism; second generation

Introduction

This working paper sets out to map the current state of research on the theme of return migration and related areas, including transnationalism with particular emphasis upon what we have termed the Luso-Descendant context, meaning those living abroad with familial ties to Portugal. The paper constitutes the first output from the Luso-Descendant 'Returnees' in Portugal: Identity, Belonging and Transnationalism project, financed by the Portuguese Foundation for Science and Technology (FCT) (PTDC/ATP-GEO/4567/2012), with a research team comprised of researchers from CIES-IUL, ICS-UL and the co-ordinating institution, the Open University of Lisbon. As the title suggests, the project has as its main scientific aim the study of the offspring of Portuguese migrants involved in moves to their ancestral homeland. This means that we are studying returns to a country about which these research subjects may have relatively little first-hand knowledge. This creates a situation in which a unique form of transnationalism arises, rich in complex and ambiguous views of home and identity, raising a basic question concerning where such people belong. While the REPOR project engages with three specific examples of Luso-Descendant return, from Canada, France and Germany, the present discussion will be broader, enabling us to learn from other studies on related themes and in other spatial milieu. At the same time, it is hoped that this review of literature will help locate the project within its research field, through acknowledging the influence of prior studies of key interest, in addition to addressing the specific scientific aim of understanding the contemporary situations of Luso-Descendants in Portugal.

In more practical terms, this working paper presents an overview of how this subject matter has been studied in the past. As we shall see, this has been predominantly via qualitative methods, usually among relatively small samples of first and second generation returnees. Research subjects are typically defined by the specific spatial trajectory of the returnee, for example, between Germany and Greece or Great Britain and the Caribbean. In this sense, the approach of the REPOR project is broadly consistent in its focus on return movement to Portugal among the second generation from France, Germany and Canada. Further continuity can be found in our theoretical grounding in the idea of transnationalism, with emphasis upon hybrid as opposed to singular identities and lifestyles.¹

As a first step, we what it is we are actually studying. As a starting point, 'return migration' can be defined, somewhat literally, as 'the movement of emigrants back to

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¹ Additionally, we are able to draw upon our own research experience in Sociology and Geography. In regard to migration research experience, the work of David Cairns has largely been in the field of youth mobility (see, for example, Cairns, 2008, 2009, 2010, 2011, 2014a, 2014b, 2014c; Cairns and Smyth, 2011; Cairns et al., 2012, 2013, 2014). Nina Clara Tiesler has particular expertise in exploring the intersection of migration and religion, including the geographical circulation of Muslims (see, for example, Tiesler 2011; Tiesler and Cairns, 2010) and sport and migration (see Tiesler and Coelho 2008; Tiesler 2012; Agergaard and Tiesler 2014), while João Sardinha has more direct experience of studying return migration in Lusophone contexts (Sardinha, 2011a, 2011b, 2011c, 2012).

their homelands to resettle' (Gmelch, 1980: 155). In its 'pure' form, such a return involves the homecoming to the sending country of migrant resident abroad for a substantial period of time, as was the case of for many of those involved in the most high profile exemplar of return in recent Portuguese history: the post-colonial exodus of the mid 1970s (Pires, 2003), although this movement also incorporated many second generation returnees. First generation return is what might be termed the classical form, although this is not the modality upon which we focus in our own Luso-descendant context, which is concerned with second generation returnees. This means that the original migrant was an immediate family member, typically one or more parents, rather than the person who is now in the process of returning. This implies a strong imaginative dimension to the return migration decision in respect to ideas about a 'home' in which the returnee has never physically inhabited, as well as constituting an original approach for the project.

Conceptualising return migration: Learning from first generation studies

While the 'second generation' focus is relatively novel in the context of the research field, return migration is certainly not a new topic within the field of Migration Studies, albeit with the majority of published work concentrating upon first generation returnees.² In fact, such was its past popularity that in their own review of this research field, King and Christou (2011) see the recent upsurge of interest in the issue among migration scholars as a 'retro' phenomenon. Suffice to say while older studies have importance as pioneering perspectives, such as those conducted in the aftermath of the 1970s economic crisis (see, for example, Bovenkerk, 1974; King, 1978, 1986), this work has less of a bearing upon our present research agenda than near contemporary studies, most obviously King and Christou's own work. But what these precedents have established is that return migration happens for a wide variety of often over-lapping social, political and economic reasons. There is also interaction between macro (structural) and micro (personal) levels, and we might also integrate what Faist (1997) terms the 'meso' level into the equation, taking into account factors such as family and peer networks. For instance, Condon and Ogden's (1996) work on French-Caribbean returnees emphasises the importance of the state in mediating circulatory population flows (see also Reynolds, 2008). In regard to micro-personal factors, a further observation concerns the place of familiar conceptual materials, such as ethnicity constructs, and ideas relating to various forms of integration and belonging. This approach is perhaps best exemplified in Tsuda's (2003) book-length treatment of Japanese-Brazilian return migration flows, which employs an ethnicity-based understanding of (non-)integration. His analysis includes taking into account a lack of 'foreign' language capacity as motivation for return (see also Urano and Yamamoto, 2008), and although the analysis is restricted to a specific working habitus, namely that

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² The term 'return migration' is not the only signifier deployed in this research field. For example, this phenomenon has also been studied under the rubric of 'roots migration' (Wessendorf, 2007, 2013; see also Basu, 2004, 2007) and 'counter-diaspora' mobility (King and Kilinc, 2013).

of male manual worker, there is much to learned about 'return' driven by a lack of acceptance in the host society.

For younger returnees, there may be different motivations compared to issues affecting adult workers. For example, a recent study by Haartsen and Thissen (2014) looks at young adults' returns to their rural home region of The Netherlands, with stress upon the importance of non-economic motivations including social, family and partner relationships. Of most interest is their conclusion that for many of these young migrants a 'return' was not interpreted as such since the perception was that they had not, mentally, left the home region. What is most instructive about Haartsen and Thissen's study is the idea that returnees maintain an active engagement with their (family's) place of origin, although many of the key return antecedents related more to generic traits associated with rural locations, such as wishing to live in a rustic location and practice outdoor leisure activities, rather than pertaining to forms of belonging including national identification (see also Dustman et al., 2011).

The strength of these and other similarly themed approaches is in providing an empirically rich understanding of why return migration happens in particular spatial and temporal contexts. The weakness of this work for subsequent studies tends to be the exceptionality of the research subjects of the past, insights from which cannot be generalised to other return migration scenarios due to the passage of time and changed economic, social and political circumstances. Other notable limitations include a propensity to focus on certain socio-demographic cohorts at the expense of others, most notably a strong propensity for studying unskilled workers (see for example, Potter and Phillip, 2005), as well as those in exceptionally distressed circumstances, such as the frequently researched groups of refugees and asylum seekers (see, for example, Blitz, 2008; Binaisa, 2011). It is in fact the lack of engagement with more banal 'return' scenarios, i.e. those returning for ordinary as opposed to exceptional reasons, which emerges as the research field's most obvious absentee.

Engaging with the second generation

Some recent research has more direct relevance to the REPOR research agenda, specifically work on second generation Greek-German returnees (Christou and King, 2010; King and Christou, 2010). This study emphasises the importance of parental discourses of home in regard to returning to what is termed the 'ancestral homeland' (see also Cressey 2006), in the case of Christou and King's study, Greece, as well as migrants' own agency in respect to spatial choices. Depth is also added to the portrait of respondents' transnational lives, and life courses, through elaboration of the importance of mobility as children and adults. Also introduced is the idea that these returnees have multiple (national) belongings, wherein identity is provisional and contingent. This means that 'belonging' to a country may no longer be the overarching aspiration and a state of hybrid identity is perceived as a desirable condition or at least not a significant social deficit.

This assertion represents a major break with the previously outlined idea of a return as a 'problem' or the outcome of a failed adaptation experience; there is no longer an assumed negativity regarding the foreign dislocation period and/or the return. The alternative is to view a capacity to 'return' as being an identity asset, and part of a movement towards a transnational state of being. The King and Christou study also suggests a need for narrativity in studying this issue: looking at family and peer relationships, as well as personal experiences of work, education and growing-up, in different places. Considering the potential broad applicability of these ideas, as opposed to describing reactions to a particular host society context, and a near contemporary Mediterranean research core, it is no surprise that this work has proved influential to our own project in terms of the design of our research materials and the interpretation of our results, which will be outlined in future outputs.

The Portuguese Migration Context

Our national research context, Portugal, has strong traditions in regard to the study of various migration phenomena. This may be due to the presumed popularity of migrating among Portuguese citizens in the past: 'If America is a nation of immigrants, Portugal is a nation of emigrants' (Brettell, 2003: 9). Whether or not contemporary Portugal is a society of outward migration is more contentious. The recent history may be more one of immigration than emigration, but with a shift back towards higher levels of outward movement since 2011, coinciding with the arrival of the International Monetary Fund/European Central Bank/European Commission Troika and acceleration of the austerity programme by the Portuguese government.³ The current Portuguese migration bibliography is nevertheless still more focused on inward as opposed to outward movement, with relatively little work on return migration processes.

Notable exceptions include Afonso (2005) and Sardinha (2011a, 2011b, 2011c). This work helps us appreciate just who the contemporary 'Portuguese' return migrant is: he or she is like to have a strong awareness of the narrative, perhaps stereotypical, version of Portugal as opposed to its crisis-hit actuality, with a strong identification with an idealised culture and history. This implies a strong degree of obliviousness in regard to the harsh reality of contemporary life or that much of what passes for authentic Portuguese-ness abroad is more likely to be viewed as at home, and thus more a sign of inauthenticity. Less contentiously, the importance of family connections is also clear from these studies, as is the previously discussed idea of identification with multiple homelands.

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³ According to Eurostat figures, outward migration among Portuguese citizens was 43,998 and 51,958 in 2011 and 2012. While this represents an increase upon pre-crisis emigration levels, it is proportionately considerably lower than neighbouring Spain but at a similar level to other countries such as Poland or the UK (Eurostat 2014). Breakdowns from the Portuguese Emigration Observatory however suggest a much higher level of outward movement: in the region of 80,000 and 95,000 in 2011 and 2012 respectively (Pires, et al., 2014).

That this should be the case puts transnationalism at the theoretical core of this project. This is a concept that encapsulates the sense of individuals' integrating ontological ideas from disparate cultural, political, social and spatial sources (Gluck Schiller et al., 1992). While the term has been extensively deployed in recent decades, and not exclusively in regard to migratory processes, the idea of transnationalism within our project specifically relates to hybrid Portuguese identities; in this sense, it is an applied transnationalism, rooted in a particular temporal and spatial context. What we will argue in the project is that transnational migration is a process through which individuals 'forge and sustain' simultaneous multi-stranded social relations that link their 'societies of origin and settlement' (Glick Schiller et al., 1999: 73). This means that identities and lifestyles depend upon multiple and constant interconnections which cross international borders, and whose public identities are configured in relationship to more than one nation state. For our subjects, transnationalism is potentially a melding of Portuguese-ness with other national biographical materials, from France, Germany, Canada and perhaps elsewhere, through personal, familial or imagined experience of living in other societies.

On this last point, the idea of a 'return myth' amongst those who never actually left 'home' is already present within certain studies (see, for example, Anwar, 1979). Central to this process is the narrative about 'home' transmitted by parents, friends and other relatives and/or accumulated from secondary sources, such as various forms of cultural bricolage and mediatised imagery. Implicit in the 'myth' is its link with reality which, however tenuous a relationship, may produce the idea of a longed for origin that fails to correspond to expectations on arrival. Studying this tension and observing how returnees deploy their own agency, and 'return preparedness' (Cassarino, 2008: 101), to cope with immediate problems and long-term life planning provides us with a dynamic subject matter and important questions for our interviewees.

Theoretically, stressing the importance of such relationships relates spatial choices to levels of social, and perhaps also economic, capital.⁴ At the same time, we wish to appreciate the importance of the symbolic economy: the amorphous range of materials that connote the real or imaginary Portugal. This ranges from identification with highly visible social phenomena such as football (Domingos, 2012; Moniz, 2008; Pereira, 2012; Sardinha, 2012; Tiesler, 2012), various forms of music and folklore (Klimt and Leal, 2005) and even food (Baptista, 2009; Tiesler and Bergano, 2012). Added to this list might be other more generic ideas relating to climate and beachorientated lifestyles. Another consideration, again following the lead of studies such as King and Christou (2011), concerns the importance of previous encounters with the 'homeland' in the form of visits prior to the return.

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⁴ A study by Reynolds (2011) also draws upon social capital theory in the context of British-Caribbean migrants.

Summary

As this review illustrates, while material has accumulated on various aspects of return migration over a period of decades, much remains to be discovered in regard to how and why people move back to their real or imagined homeland. But we have been able to sketch a basic idea of what return migration means. What we now need to do is adapt these ideas and develop a research agenda that is appropriate for our contemporary Portuguese context. On this latter point, it is particularly obvious that there is a lack of consideration of socio-economic conditions in relation to the decision to return and upon the likelihood of successful (re)settlement. In this sense, the multidisciplinary constitution of the research team should provide a sociological understanding of what has been traditionally a geographical subject. In more basic terms, what the return migration research fields needs is evidence to inform a fresh theorisation of this spatial experience; one that understands this transnational experience as a relatively 'normal' part of the life course of second generation migrants. In this sense, this provides a justification for conducting our research and a goal for future outputs to aspire to meet.

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