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Fall 2014

# Book Review: Humane Migration: Establishing Legitimacy and Rights for Displaced People.

Frances L Ansley



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## Book Review

*Humane Migration: Establishing Legitimacy and Rights for Displaced People.* By Sterling Ho, G. T. Christine, and James Loucky. Boulder, CO: Kumarian Press, 2012. iv, 185 pages, \$ 75.00 hard cover, \$ 24.95 paper, \$ 19.99 E-book.

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An important responsibility facing migration scholars today is educating the “receiving public” about the dynamic of present-day international migration. The issue of migration, whether it is analyzed as a matter of public policy at different levels of governance, as a chapter in local and global labor histories, or as the latest field upon which “race” is being reinvented and reinscribed around the world, is currently aboil with controversy and alive with possibilities for good or ill. The outcomes of all this agitation are going to hinge less on what information is available to those in high places and more on what knowledge is understood by the people at large. How members of the general populace in receiving countries – especially members of the poor and working-class populace – come to view questions of migration will have a huge impact on societies and ecosystems around the globe.

To its great credit, *Humane Migration* has taken up exactly the challenge of this vital task of shaping how questions of migration are framed. Between the covers of this short and accessible volume, the authors set out to present migration in a way that could serve as a first introduction for readers new to the topic, while providing more seasoned readers with a larger context for migration than they may have considered before. In the latter effort, they succeeded with me. I found myself looking with new eyes on previously considered issues when these two anthropologists

directed my attention backward to the role of human movement in the foraging societies that were such an important part of our evolutionary and pre-historic past and, likewise, when they directed me forward to a future that seems to bring climate-led displacement on a massive scale ever closer.

The book paints a very big picture in space, scale, and time. The patterns and policies it selects as examples are drawn from every continent. Although the main discussions deal with relatively recent history, the book’s full timeline is archeological; and its treatment of immigration policy reaches back to earlier centuries. The actors it highlights range from the micro-level of individual and family stories to the macro-level of the World Trade Organization and multinational corporations.

The broadness of the picture that *Humane Migration* attempts to bring into view is in some ways fully appropriate to the task it has set itself. Any of us who have tried to talk in public about migration can surely report the desperate need for a larger lens than people are accustomed to use. This book holds up that larger lens. For instance, Chapter Two asks readers to ponder “why migration happens” and deftly answers that question by indexing those actors whose agency it claims should be recognized and assessed. Moving deliberately from top to bottom, the index begins with players of immense power whose decisions shape the global economy, scaling down only at the end to the role of an individual migrant deciding to leave home. The authors focus broadly in another way as well: They appeal to values and morality, speaking as citizens of the world, not simply academics. They declare unabashed, “Whether humanity can sustain a collective social ethic when crises loom on a global scale is becoming the question at hand” (p. 183). They call unabashedly for open borders.

This is bracing stuff. So much work on migration brackets out the biggest questions as too much to tackle in one’s genre, impossible to fathom with one’s tools, too

difficult to package as a reform proposal, too naïve in general, or too unlikely to impress one's dissertation or tenure-review committee. Surely, migration discourse is the poorer for that shrinking away. If scholars of migration want to radically reframe debates, we need to offer more daring visions and ask people to look more deeply than we often manage. We will indeed have to ask our readers to look at the very biggest pictures we are capable of showing them.

Nevertheless, the breadth of this book's treatment has its costs. The range of topics is vast; and by necessity, many references are glancing ones only. Many discussions telescope too much material for clarity to survive. In these instances, novice readers are likely to have difficulty understanding or assessing what the authors are trying to introduce, and more seasoned readers are unlikely to learn much that is new.

Some simple accuracy problems are probably linked to the breadth of treatment as well. Since my own background is that of a legal scholar, the errors that caught my attention were legal ones. For instance, the authors seem to attribute the whiteness criterion for naturalization to U.S. citizenship to the immigration quota system established in 1924 (pp. 54–55); however, that telling requirement dates originally from the nation's first naturalization law, passed in 1790, which restricted naturalization to "white" persons. Another statement in the book, that "the Fourth Amendment in the United States confers naturalization to children of immigrants," may in part be a typographical error, but in any case is surely intended to mean that the Fourteenth (not the Fourth) Amendment confers birthright (not naturalized) citizenship to all persons born in the United States, regardless of the immigration status of their parents. Let me hasten to say that neither of these points goes to the main argument advanced by the authors in the particular context. But the errors are unfortunate and distracting.

So were I to assign this book in a course, I would accompany it with some advisories about the broad brush with which it must paint, given the territory it covers. In my context here in Tennessee, I might also assign complementary material that would acknowledge and more directly engage some of the dominant understandings of both the global economy and migration's place in it. I understand what I take to be the authors' conscious decision not to chain themselves to the logic of the dominant narrative or weight themselves down with references to texts that contradict their claims in ways that miss their point. But I also want my students to come away with concrete tools for critique when they re-enter the public conversation as it currently exists on real airwaves and over real kitchen tables.

A final point may be in order. Despite *Humane Migration's* wide cross-disciplinary range, it contains a consistent thread of argument about the importance of anthropology in the dual work of studying migration and going public with results. The authors point to features of their discipline they believe well suited to these tasks: anthropology's long study of "difference," its familiarity with comparative investigation across long time-lines, its experience at teaching insiders of a given culture through exposure to perspectives from without, and its expertise in gathering group knowledge transmitted person-to-person rather than from a written record. These are optimistic ways of describing the discipline, of course, but students in an anthropology class will certainly have been exposed to critical treatments as well. Interestingly, it may be that despite its interdisciplinary cast, the book will prove particularly helpful as a way of talking within anthropology about the importance of migration studies and the fruitful ways that present and future anthropologists might use their training. They certainly convinced me in that regard.