Theorising Transnational Migration: The Status Paradox


Status Consistency, that a person's status remains consummate with any status indicators held by the person such as job status and possessions, has long been allowed to remain a basic assumption for most if not all social modelling (p. 128). Moreover, status itself is almost exclusively examined within a given state, or on state-versus-state terms (p. 4). Boris Nieswand challenges these traditions. In this book, status inconsistency, which is the gulf between one's actual status and the status to which one’s indicators point (education, lineage, etc.), is given the spotlight, and status itself is analysed at a personal level and across borders. Using a case study of his own observations gathered in the Dorma District in Ghana’s Brong Ahafo Region (p. 55-67), Nieswand establishes a new and interesting notion - the 'Status Paradox of Migration'. This paradox occurs when a given migrant is simultaneously a member of two classes – usually a lower class in the receiving country and a higher class in the sending country (p. 3; 124; 163). This theory attempts to fill a gap in studies and portrayals of labour migration; one that gives import to the simultaneous maintenance of multiple statuses by a single individual.

To this end, chapter one presents general discussions on migration and society, for example how migration and integration operated in the U.S. during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, and the global rural-urban migrations during the early industrial revolution. In chapter two, Nieswand focuses on his Ghanaian case study, which was originally used in his PhD thesis written under Günther Schlee at the Max Planck Institute. In chapters three and four, Nieswand discusses the processes of localisation and transnationalisation in a broad sense, followed by a more specific discussion of these concepts as they apply to the Ghanaian case. In the final chapter, he presents and explains the status paradox of migration. However, the singular focus of Nieswand's empirical evidence base centres on the analysis of the status of Ghanaian labour migrants, particularly those who go to Berlin, Germany. Nieswand accomplishes this via a methodologically transnational perspective in an effort to minimise paradigm-based biasing. From this case study, the status paradox was born as Nieswand was able to show how these migrants actually have two different statuses ascribed to them at the same time. On one hand, the migrant is usually of low status in the receiving country because of the jobs they often must take (specialised professionals are excluded from the framework). Whilst on the other hand, thanks to the relatively high value of their wage in terms of the sending country's economy, the migrants can often move into a higher class in the sending country. In either place, the migrant suffers a status inconsistency and thus finds him/herself in the status paradox.

An important question the reader may ask is why the situation lending itself to the paradox arose in the first place. While there are a number of factors involved in this phenomenon, ranging from the colonial legacy effects (such as those also discussed by state-building theorists like Miguel Cenento (1997), Jeffery Herbst (1990), and Richard Stubbs (1999), to the influence of mass media, the one that appears repeatedly herein is education. After English colonisation, Ghana was left with a western-type education that stressed, among other things, the value of education in achieving progress and higher status (p. 6-7; 132). Similarly, following independence, the Ghana government promised more domestic opportunities for wealth and modernised global integration (p. 6-7; 133). Lamentably, however, those who went through the educational system and graduated with these aspirations in mind were left disappointed as Ghana's progress, while impressive, fell behind expectations (called 'imaginaries' in the book, a notion mirroring Weber's (1992) ideal types). Thus, the focus for these newly credentialed workers shifted from a picture of a future Ghana in which they might succeed, to a picture of other places where they could more likely seek and attain prosperity (p 6-7). This, when combined with international wealth disparities among states, the needs of families which could be best met by remittances, and the desire for status, led to a large-scale emigration of Ghanaian labourers. This globalisation from below is part of globalisation from above, not something separate. It completes a cycle of resources and information exchange based on the move of human resources from south to north, and the return of wealth and cultural resources to the south (p. 5).
Moreover, Nieswand notes, transnational labour movement mirrors the move from rural to urban experienced the world over at different points in history (p. 155-156). However, as those labourers moving north are mainly from urban zones, it seems to me that it is more a continuation of the rural-to-urban migration pattern rather than a different, yet similar, situation.

This paradox is not merely an academic curiosity and the groundwork for further advances in status-theory; rather, it may also alter how labour migrants are perceived. Nieswand argues that the paradox breaks the standing false dichotomy that labour migrants are either entrepreneurs trying to cheat the system by establishing presence in two places for their own gain, or are hapless victims of anti-immigration policies and sentiments (p. 5). It also challenges the idea that migrants either fully assimilate or are fully otherised. Instead, the paradox demonstrates that immigrants can be socially integrated yet heritage-conscious labourers who are acting fully above board merely for the sake of making a living and supporting themselves and their relations back home (p.5). I posit that such considerations could extend the relevance of the book into the realms of agency and determination, if only tangentially.

Moreover, the book masterfully trounces usual reception barriers by bringing anthropological observation and analysis to the attention of the sociologists and political theorists/philosophers who otherwise might not have exposure to them. The particular value I see in this lies in the assistance it could provide to scholars of status-theory and status-analysis, such as those working in the traditions of Beck, Levitt, or even Foucault by breaking out of old habits and turning their consideration to status at a transnational and international level.

Lamentably, however, this work is far too limited to make any theoretical advances, meaning further research is necessary to achieve such a payoff. Theorising Transnational Migration is essentially a lengthy case study, and while it does an excellent job of establishing the status paradox in this case, it cannot (and in reality does not) extend its conclusions beyond its particular environment. Moreover, as noted in the book’s own conclusion (p. 152-154), the paradox does not even apply to all Ghanaian labour migrants, but only to a select segment of that group. That said, while one will not find any ground breaking theoretical advances in this book, one can find a wealth of sincerely academically interesting material for use towards such an aim.

Bibliography

