

Book Review

Gabriel Echeverría (2020). **Towards a Systemic Theory of Irregular Migration: Explaining Ecuadorian Irregular Migration in Amsterdam and Madrid.** Cham, Switzerland: Springer Open. (ISBN: 978-3-030-40903-6, 258pp.)

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The book covers the subject of irregular international migration, of the legal definitions that relate to it, and the theories that study it from both a social and economic perspective. The book also includes a case-study, that of the Ecuadorian irregular immigration to Spain and to the Netherlands, and attempts to explain it by developing a systemic theory that includes a mixture of legal and socio-economic elements. The book comprises an introduction and three parts, and it is further subdivided into a total of eight chapters.

Dr. Echeverría is, himself, an Ecuadorian citizen who currently works in Europe in a university in Italy. He holds a double Ecuadorian-Italian citizenship, and therefore embodies in his own life the central thematic of the book: that of migration between Ecuador and the European Union, having himself moved across the Atlantic at various points of his life for professional reasons.³ The book is also the continuation of the research work that he had conducted four years earlier within his PhD dissertation, which related to the living conditions of Ecuadorian illegal migrants in Madrid and Amsterdam.

The book begins, appropriately given the life history of the researcher, with a relevant citation by a central author of the Italian literature: Italo Calvino, whose character Palomar has learnt to apply the regularities that he learned while studying common objects, such as strains of grass, to the study of the larger systems to which these objects belong, such as the universe and the cosmos.⁴ In the same manner, Dr. Echeverría attempts in the book to explain irregular migration under a systems, and not normative approach, by generalising over the observations that he had conducted on the specific case of Ecuadorian irregular migration.

Irregular migration is, within the book, treated not as an object but rather as a relationship between objects. The author assumes that irregular migration presupposes the existence of humans that move, which are a feature of nature, and the existence of political states, which

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³ Source: the author's CV, publicly available at: http://www.degasperitn.it/36748/Echeverria_CV_ENG.pdf

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⁴ For a discussion on Palomar in English, see: (Bertolami, 2009)



are not. Inside the relationship between these classes of objects, there emerges tension that causes one, the invisible object, to declare the irregularity of the other. There is also a further subdivision inside the invisible objects that the author identifies: social forces within a state, the author argues, are pushing for increasingly higher human mobility; political forces, however, attempt to stop it or regulate it. As a consequence, a large number of migrants is kept in a condition of irregularity. The research questions that orient the book are based upon the work by Luhmann; and, more specifically, about the application of systems theory and the theory of the autopoiesis of legal systems to the system of international migration and of its regulation (Luhmann & Albrow, 2013).

The book continues by addressing the problem of classifying migrants and creating taxonomies that include the categories of regular and irregular migrants. In that context, the author argues that the choice of a specific label for irregular migrants, such as *sans papier* or “clandestine”, is not devoid of political bias in one direction or another. Therefore, the author argues, when studying the scientific phenomenon and when attempting to avoid the prejudice that is associated to political bias, one could refer to “irregular migration” and not to “irregular migrants”, in order to keep conceptually separated the category associated with the human (migrant) from the category associated with the relationship between humans and laws (regularity of migration).

As it moves to analyse the competing theories that attempt to explain the phenomenon of irregular migration, the author begins by identifying one of the basic research hypotheses that orient the work on irregular migration. This consists of the so-called “gap hypothesis”, which pertains to the existence of a gap between the declared goals of a policy for the management of migration, and the concrete outcomes that arise out of the implementation of such a policy (Cornelius, Martin, & Hollifield, 1994). From the observation that gaps exist between policy goals and concrete outcomes, one can draw a list of policies whose goals are achieved by their concrete outcomes, and distinguish them from the policies that distance themselves from their goals. This approach is equivalent to addressing the “effectiveness” of migration policies, insofar as a policy that achieves its goals can be considered effective; and likewise, a policy that does not achieve its goals cannot. Other scholars have suggested that this approach, based upon the declared goals that a policy pursues as contained in its legal text, is however faulty. In fact, a variety of additional factors, not contained in the list of goals that are present in the text of the policy, can affect whether any given outcome is achieved or not. Namely, the policy’s implementation matters significantly. Therefore, its study in relation to the outcomes for the purpose of assessing policy effectiveness remains a primary direction of research (Czaika & De Haas, 2013).

In the following chapter, the book analyses systems theory and the theory of autopoietic systems in their application to the study of international migration. The application of autopoiesis to social systems is based upon the idea that, for societies to continue to exist, they must have a membrane or a separation boundary of some kind that keeps them distinct from the surrounding environment. This membrane could be the set of physical humans that comprise the social system, in which case it makes sense to think of societies as organisms (Thomas, 1971); but it could also be a set of rules, such as those that allow a legal system to autopoietically continue to exist (Rogowski, 2015). Autopoiesis, in general, refers to the capacity by a system to continue to exist by means of its ability to generate the components that make it. A biological cell, for example, can be seen as a system that is capable to produce



all of the parts that make it; for this reason, it makes sense to think of a cell as an autopoietic system. Analogously, we can think of international migration, and the legal management thereof, as an autopoietic system that is capable of generating all of its components. If, magically and suddenly, irregular migration were to disappear, then this would also necessarily imply the simultaneous disappearance of regular migration. Whereas the underlying physical phenomenon of the humans moving on the surface of this planet may still persist, as indeed it has existed for far longer than political states have, the survival of the political system that manages migration depends upon the continued existence of the irregular migration that it allegedly prevents. For in fact, the best method for creating two from one is to take one and to split it into two: similarly, the creation of a conceptual distinction between regular and irregular migration depends firstly upon the existence of things that are migration, and secondarily upon their further subdivision into things that are regular and things that aren't. Because only then, regular and irregular migration can exist, when one is distinct from the other and both are part of migration. The argument contained in this chapter suggests the idea that the specific nature of the rules that define regular and irregular migration, provided that both categories comprise of distinct elements that can be observed in the real world, is somewhat secondary: in fact, insofar as one exists, so does the other.

The book then analyses the notion of differentiation within a social system, and the way in which various possible forms of differentiation can produce different patterns of behaviour and different degrees of inequality among that system's component. Echeverría, by drawing on Luhmann, identifies four types of social differentiation: segmentation, in which the division between society's members is horizontal and characterised by a high degree of equality; stratification, in which society is differentiated by a vertical hierarchy within which its various layers are in a relationship of control-subordination to one another; the centre/periphery division, according to which society differentiates itself on the basis of the proximity by its elements to some centre and generates inequality in the process; and finally, functional differentiation, which works in a manner analogous to that of biological organisms, within which all of the comprising elements of a system distinguish themselves from one another on the basis of the function that they perform within that system.

In the context of migration, social differentiation leads the single world society that is already in place to have different political sub-systems, regionally located in the areas that correspond to the nation-states, whose primary function consists of the capacity to undertake binding decisions for its members. The political membership into a state arises evolutionarily and historically, out of the application of the idea of citizenship in order to permanently bind a part of the population to a territory. This, in turn, makes the assumption that a territorial political system that binds the decisions for a certain population makes sense, because it is in turn based upon the idea that a population bound to a territory does indeed exist. Immigrants, instead, act as the observable evidence according to which the preservation of the idea that some humans are citizens, and thus belong to the state, and some do not, can therefore be kept in place.

The book then continues by analysing the case study that comprises its title: the case of the Ecuadorian immigration to Amsterdam and Madrid. It initiates this part of the discussion by explaining the general characteristics of Ecuadorian emigration as deriving from the economic and financial difficulties that the country had experienced at the end of the XX century. Then, it explains how the three countries with the largest number of Ecuadorian immigrants are

Spain, the United States, and Italy. By this argument, it is understandable that immigration to Spain is selected by the author as a case study to analyse Ecuadorian migration; however, the selection of the Netherlands as the other case-study appears unrelated and remains unexplained.

While unexplained, it is not however uninteresting as a case study for irregular migration. In the Netherlands, at some point in the early 2000s, the quota of irregular migrants over the total number of foreign-born citizens living in the country comprised around 30% of the total population of foreigners. The government had then adopted a variety of policies aimed at regularising migrants and making it harder for foreign citizens to enter the country illegally. Among these, are counted the lax application of the penalties concerning illegal migration, the granting of the social security number to irregular as well as regular immigrants, and the provision of training courses and education in the language of the principal ethnic minorities.

The second case study, related to Spain, appears better elaborated and more tightly linked to the subject of the book. As mentioned above, Spain holds the place of the country with the highest number of Ecuadorian immigrants, which make it a suitable case-study for this particular book. In Spain, the foreign-born population increased 7-fold between 1990 and 2010, primarily due to the increased demand for specialised workers that could not be satisfied by the local availability of labour. Irregular migrants helped close the gap between job offer and demand, where foreign workers who had initially arrived regularly would prefer to overstay in Spain than to return to the country of origin.

In the final chapter prior to the conclusions, the author presents the content of the field work that he conducted in both countries. This comprises interviews to migrants who undertook a process of regularisation, by analysing which Echeverría attempts to identify the common grounds that might help establish the preferential trajectories along the path to regularisation of irregular migrants. The author identifies four trajectories that characterised the regularisation path of the Ecuadorian immigrants in Amsterdam. In the first one, the irregular migrant never becomes regular, and continues to reside unregistered in the Netherlands for more than a decade. In the second, the migrant achieves regularisation by reason of marriage or civil partnership with a legal resident. These two cases comprise the most common cases encountered by Echeverría; however, the sample he uses is not necessarily representative of the Ecuadorian residents and was selected, as far as it might be inferred, on the basis of the personal contacts that the researcher managed to establish in the country. The two remaining trajectories for regularisation comprise the immigrants who received a residence permit for exceptional circumstances, such as for humanitarian reasons, and the children of irregular migrants who also became irregular as of their 18th birthday.

In Spain, instead, three primary trajectories were identified. The first one characterised the migrants who successfully obtained and retained a permit of residence for the country. The reasons why they could receive one varied, and included the massive regularisation campaigns promoted by the government, the regularisation by rootedness, and the regularisation by work quotas. The second trajectory comprised those migrants who, after obtaining a first permit of residence, failed to obtain its renewal into a second term. This failure was determined primarily by reason of felonies that were committed by the migrant while holding the first permit of residence. The third and last trajectory related to those migrants who never managed to obtain a permit of residence, and therefore permanently remained irregular. These cases were caused by the presence of a criminal record that prevented the issuing of the initial permit of



residence, or by the inability to receive an offer of employment upon which the permit of residence could be grounded.

The book has had a mild (if any) impact on the scientific literature on the subject of irregular migration. Şatiroğlu Güldali and Buz (2021) refer to the work by Echeverría within the context of the existing theoretical attempts to explain irregular migration as the evidence for the existence of a gap between the goals of a policy in relation to migration, and the concrete outcomes that that policy produces. The book has also found usage in the preparation of two Master's thesis. One, defended in 2021 in Ljubljana in Slovenia (Rehar, 2021), where the book by Echeverría is part of the theoretical framework of the research; and the other, comprising the final work for a degree in Social Labour in a university in Tenerife in Spain (Fumanal Hernandez, Benítez Amaro, & Hernández Martín, 2021), which uses Echeverría's work as part of the bibliographic sources.

The usage of the book in other published works is not recorded; but this may be due to the recency of the publication, and may not necessarily indicate an intrinsic lack of value for the researchers who work in the sector of migration studies.

The theoretical argument that lies at the background of the book is worth reading since it contributes to the much needed support for systems approach over the normative approach in migration studies. Additionally, the book challenges the reliance on the institutional approach to study international migration, which is commendable: if political states are not things of the universe, then it is impossible to study international migration as the movement of humans between states because the latter do not exist. Instead, the system approach that is proposed in the book, according to which international migration can be considered as a natural phenomenon of human movement that happens regardless and in spite of the political rules that pretend to regulate it, is interesting and capable of stimulating a much-needed discussion concerning the theoretical foundations of political science and migration studies.

The empirical component of the book is particularly poor if treated as a scientific analysis: the author claims that the “adopted research strategy did not orthodoxly follow any methodological paradigm”,⁵ which is a pretty nice way to say that the author wrote about his private experiences and included them in the book. This does not make the theoretical reasoning any less interesting: simply, one should read this book if they are interested about the application of systems theory to irregular migration, since this is definitely suitable for it; instead, one should skip the book if they are particularly interested on the specific case of Ecuadorian immigration to Europe, and not on the theoretical reasoning. Other works by Echeverría, and in particular his doctoral thesis, might be more suitable to that regard. The discipline of Migration Studies is however not, as of today, at a level of formalism and maturity such that there should necessary be an empirical component to all lines of theoretical inquiry. The expectation that this is the case is however present in the world of academic publishing; and therefore, we cannot blame Dr. Echeverría for attempting to ground his theoretical reasoning over a concrete case study, since the book may never have been published otherwise. With this said, the theoretical reasoning alone makes the book an interesting read for the scholars who are thinking about human mobility as a process of nature and not as a process of the nation-states.

⁵ *Verbatim*, p.134.

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