

The Uprooted

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These papers, and the Kroeber Society meeting at which they were first given, are evidence that the existence of the uprooted is no longer seen as an ephemeral phenomenon, of little interest to anthropologists and other social scientists in comparison with a search for the dynamics of settled communities. American sociologists lost interest in the study of immigrants when the Immigration Act of 1924 stemmed the flow of migrants to the United States. Anthropologists discovered migration primarily in the form of labor migration, about which so much was written by those who worked in Africa from the 1930s on, but much of that literature assumed that the migrants came from ongoing communities to which they would return or that they would settle in the cities to which they went to form new communities. In either case, migration was a phase bracketed by rootedness. Few of us realized that in fact our world is now characterized by a lack of roots, that we spend much of our life in transition without firm ties to any local community to which we give primary allegiance.

This was brought home to me sometime around 1959 when I mistakenly asked someone, "And where is your hometown?" This was once a key question through which Americans placed one another and so defined their relationships with each other. Given place, one had then a chance of discovering links which gave some guarantee of who and what the other was. The young man to whom I put the question replied, "We moved all the time. We had no hometown." A quick check of others in the room found that they too had spent their lives as migrants, moving often with only short stays at any one place, where they usually found themselves surrounded by other temporary residents. When I thought over my own career, I saw that although my childhood was geographically stable, my adult life had been spent as a professional migrant, my loyalties, such as they were being linked to a discipline which remained the same wherever I might be, or to whatever institution employed me. To the last the attachment was always provisional since it might be temporary. I suspect that the great majority of Americans of any age are now in this situation, although our ideology continues to assume stable communities of permanent residents who have long-term common interests. Migrants are seen as disruptive to this stability and a drain on community resources, each of us for the moment denying our own status as people who construct our personal sense of time by the sequence of the places where we have lived.

The rest of the world is as restless. Even those who wish to stay put may be under pressure to leave wherever they are for someplace else. Many are being told to leave homes to which they may be devoted because it is to the advantage of someone else that they move. Their home base is needed for a man-made lake to store the water needed for a hydroelectric project. Those with political and economic power want their land for ranching or plantations. Governments have decided to relieve population pressure here by resettling people there. Or war or revolution or famine is forcing people into what they hope is only temporary migration, even though some will move again and again. Others

are on the move because they are made desperate by the lack of opportunity at home and see opportunity elsewhere, either to gain the wealth that will enable them to reestablish themselves at home or to live wherever opportunity is greatest. The rush from rural areas into cities is going on throughout the world, and migrants also ignore international boundaries in their search for opportunity or refuge. Meantime, the regions which they leave and the cities to which they go are hosts to the many tourists who wander the world, whose restlessness is itself a symptom of the degree to which mobility is now regarded as a human right and desirable in itself.

Yet, the poor or harassed who seek refuge or go to find new opportunities for themselves are seen as subjecting national economies to uncomfortable strains. Bureaucratic migrants, industrialist migrants, journalist migrants, tourist migrants query the right of these others to move: they are told they should remain at home and be content with what they have even though this takes from them their only chance to participate in that mobile world the rest of us enjoy. They refuse and for good reason.

Many of the papers here deal with the obstacles put in the way of migrants, the search for opportunity, and the attempts to find or form new communities in localities filled with transients. The human costs of such mobility are great, and forced resettlement is the cause of much human tragedy. But for many, migration is the only possible route to whatever it is that makes for a better life. In a world whose resources are so unequally distributed among localities it would be unrealistic to expect people to cherish their roots over their future. For that matter, they can cherish their roots from afar, as many migrants of earlier generations have done while at the same time taking comfort in the belief that they are providing a better life for themselves and their children. Here, let Ann Cornelisen have the last word, as she muses on the people of Torresi in southern Italy among whom she had lived in the 1950s and returned to find searching for a better life as migrant laborers in Germany and Northern Italy:

With all its brutalities and its discriminations and its wrenches, emigration has given my Torresi, at least, the only chance they ever had or ever will have for a decent life. They take with them that x-quality, inbred and inescapable, for success or failure, but they can act now where success is possible and failure not inevitable. They have worked and they have suffered and they have cheated and they have misunderstood. . . . They have ignored much that would have been of value to them. They have bought, gorged on much that was useless. . . . They want so desperately to live, and they *know* they have not, so far. . . . I hope—for them—that they are strong enough not to wait longer, . . . that they are strong enough to leave Southern Italy and go anywhere there is work, but that they go—and go now. [from *Strangers and Pilgrims: The Last Italian Migration* 1980:302, New York: McGraw-Hill]