Migration and the search for home: mapping domestic space in migrants’ everyday lives [book review]

This item was submitted to Loughborough University’s Institutional Repository by the/an author.


Additional Information:


Metadata Record: https://dspace.lboro.ac.uk/2134/33975

Version: Accepted for publication

Publisher: Taylor & Francis © Marco Antonsich

Rights: This work is made available according to the conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International (CC BY-NC-ND 4.0) licence. Full details of this licence are available at: https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/

Please cite the published version.
Migration and the search for home: Mapping domestic space in migrants’ everyday lives,
by Paolo Boccagni, Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan, 2017, xvi+pp136, £53.49 (hardback),

The first thing that captures the reader is the style. The book is beautifully written or, as one of the endorsements reads, its style is “philosophical, poetic, reflective, insightful and always engaging”. The unrelentlessly going back and for from empirical description to theoretical reflections captivates the reader from beginning to end. Interestingly, the book is only partially based on empirical data directly collected by Boccagni. Most of these data come from other studies. I am not sure whether I disclose a secret here, but the book is actually an extended version of a research proposal Boccagni successfully submitted to the European Research Council.

The book revolves around a central question: how home is perceived, negotiated and enacted under conditions of displacement and extended mobility? Although the primary focus is on low-skilled migrants, various considerations in the book apply to a sense of home more broadly understood. The book is articulated around six chapters. In the first, Boccagni explores multifarious definitions of home and concludes that home can be best defined as a meaningful and emotional relationship with place: ‘[home] refers to a set of social practices, values and symbols that, while setting-specific, can be transferred and reproduced into different settings over time […]’ (p. 5). Accordingly, Boccagni speaks of homing as the process through which people, given their different circumstances, negotiate a sense of home in time and space. The following chapter is a review of the methodological literature on home, i.e. it discusses the ways in which home has been operationalized in both quantitative and qualitative empirical studies. The central chapters of the book are a sustained discussion of what Boccagni sees as two important dimensions of home, namely spatiality (chapter 3) and temporality (chapter 4). Two key concepts are relevant when one attends to the spatiality of home: portability and reproducibility. The former refers ‘to the potential to retain a meaningful sense of home away from the physical milieus that used to underpin it […] and to the ability to reattach it to one, or more, new life environments’, while the latter ‘points to the variable attitudes and abilities of mobile (or displaced) people to reproduce some traits of their past home experience […]’ (p. 52).
The idea is that migrants always strive to recreate their past home experience in their new socio-spatial settings. Being closely interlinked with spatiality, temporality refers to the role domestic routinization, individual and family memories and a sense of biographic continuity are implicated in generating home feelings. From the migrants perspective, time plays a key role, since home is often narrated by them as ‘an ideal(ized) life condition referred to the past or projected into the future’ (p. 66). Chapter 5 addresses the more political aspects of home. In this perspective home becomes homeland, a discursive register essential to the drawing of lines of socio-spatial inclusion/exclusion. Boccagni rightly observes that home is not fixed to any given scale and therefore also the nation can be treated as ‘home’. However, this dimension is maybe the least discussed in the book and, more importantly, whenever the nation enters the picture the focus of attention is always on the nation left behind, the homeland of origin, never the new homeland. The final chapter nicely summarises the content of the book, making a good case for why home might be a useful analytical window through which one can study transnational migrants, their origins (roots) and their evolving milieus (routes), a well as, more broadly, people’s feelings of belonging and identification with places.

An additional merit of the book is that it engages with a rich multidisciplinary literature. As a geographer, for instance, I was very pleased to see a competent discussion of the long-standing debate on place, space and home. If I had to make one critical observation, though, this would concern the ways spatiality and temporality are deployed in the definition of home. The end result of this operationalization is in fact the apparent declination of home in the singular. The only or principal way migrants can feel at home in any new country is indeed to reproduce some traits of the past home experience (p. 52), by retaining the language (p. 52), life styles (p. 54), and traditions (p. 75) of the past home(land). In this sense, whatever new home migrants might recreate will always be a copy of the old home. It cannot be a new home in itself, thus leading to a plurality of homes. This is also the reason why, to use the metaphor of home, I would argue that the relationship between natives and migrants will always be, respectively, one of landlords and tenants. Being the migrants the first to consider their home(land) ‘there’, where they ‘roots’ are, the natives will always feel empowered to assert a moral ownership over their homeland ‘here’, thus treating migrants and their children as tenants, whose entitlement to this homeland will never be guaranteed, being always conditional to a series of clauses (e.g., having a job, obeying the law, adopting the same political culture). Boccagni seems aware of this tension
and in fact he proposes to move away from a conception of home(land) as fixed, sedentary and naturalized and to adopt instead a notion of home as mobile, open-ended and potentially multi-sited ones (p. 102). Yet, at the same time, he acknowledges that, among migrants, this conceptual switch is often a reactive choice against marginalization. In other words, their aspiration, like for the majority of the native population, is to have a ‘rooted’ conception of home. If so, we are left with a worrying tension. The hope is that, upon the completion of his ERC grant, Boccagni will be able to find a solution. Maybe in a new book.

Marco Antonsich

Department of Geography

Loughborough University

m.antsich@lboro.ac.uk