Review
Using video to promote empathy, reduce xenophobia, and illustrate concepts in the study of international migration

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Abstract

Documentary films and nonfiction videos can go a long way toward enriching courses on international migration by helping students visualize concepts, places, and situations they may have difficulty imagining from written and oral descriptions alone. The vivid portrayals offered by films and videos can also help students empathize with and better understand people they may never come into contact with in their daily lives. In this essay, I will discuss some of the films and videos that I find particularly useful for illustrating concepts and perspectives in the study of migration. In selecting these videos, I am interested in demonstrating that migrants are active agents who are motivated to go abroad for clear social, economic, and political reasons, that they are people who solve problems and overcome challenges, and that many migrants make important contributions to their origin countries and destination countries. I am furthermore interested in showing films and videos that provide a window into some of the challenges and complexities involved with immigration policymaking.

1. Introduction

Documentary films and non-fiction videos can go a long way toward enriching courses on international migration. It is well known that videos of all kinds enhance learning by helping students visualize concepts, places, and situations they may have difficulty imagining from written and oral descriptions alone (Mayer 2003; Tibus et al. 2013). Documentaries furthermore promote empathy when they humanize migration issues and expose students to perspectives they typically do not encounter in their daily lives or hear about in mainstream media coverage and political rhetoric about immigration. The

impact of this exposure can be profound. In his seminal book *The Nature of Prejudice*, social psychologist Gordon Allport (1954) argued that negative stereotypes and prejudices are perpetuated by the absence of contact between social groups. When in-group and out-group members come together under conditions of equality and common purpose, on the one hand, and learn about the richness of one another's perspectives and experiences, on the other hand, negative stereotypes are likely disproven and prejudice reduced. As a practical matter, however, segregation, language barriers, and distance often prevent the kind of rich contact between the 'native-born' and the 'foreign-born' that Allport envisioned. This absence of contact, combined with fear-mongering politicians and sensational media coverage of migrants and refugees, perpetuate xenophobia. Videos and other media, however, may mimic the effects of actual contact when they challenge negative stereotypes and help in-group members identify with the experiences of out-group members (Allport 1954; Paluck 2009; Paluck and Green 2009; Vezzali et al. 2015). Documentaries and videos that humanize the migrant experience may therefore play an important role in combating xenophobia.

Because of their social and pedagogical benefits, I integrate about a dozen documentaries and online videos, some of which I produced myself while conducting fieldwork, into courses I teach on international migration. In this essay, I will discuss some of the films and videos that I find particularly useful for illustrating key concepts and perspectives. This essay is not a review of what I necessarily consider to be the best migration documentaries in terms of their artistic or journalistic contributions, but rather a discussion of those films and videos that I find effective in bringing lectures to life, complementing readings, provoking classroom debate, and promoting empathy. In selecting these videos, I am interested in demonstrating that migrants are active agents who are motivated to go abroad for clear social, economic, and political reasons, that they are people who solve problems and overcome challenges, and that many migrants make important contributions to their origin countries and destination countries. I am furthermore interested in showing films and videos that provide a window into some of the challenges and complexities involved with immigration policymaking. In addition to these considerations, the films and videos I select are determined by the content of my courses, which focus primarily on migration from Latin America to the United States, and to a lesser extent, from Africa and the Middle East to Western Europe. In the masters-level and undergraduate courses I teach on global migration, I typically cover the following themes:

- the root causes of international migration,
- clandestine journeys,
- borders and sovereignty,
- immigration policymaking,
- assimilation,
- remittances and homeland development,
- anti-immigrant backlash in destination countries,
- legality and citizenship, and
- enforcement and deportation.

I use non-fiction video to illustrate concepts and humanize the migrant experience in many of these areas.

2. Economic and social causes of migration

Why do people migrate? Sociologists, anthropologists, and economists have developed a number of theoretical perspectives that address the push and pull factors that drive global migration flows (Massey and Espinosa 1997; Massey et al. 1998). The neoclassical theory of migration, for instance, argues that wage differentials drive global migration (Todaro 1969). The new economics of labor migration conceptualizes the migration decision as an effort on the part of households to self-insure against economic shocks and a reaction to the relative—not absolute—deprivation people experience within their own communities (Stark and Levhari 1982; Taylor 1999). Segment labor market theory argues that advanced capitalist economies naturally attract foreign workers to fill particular 'immigrant jobs' (Piore 1979). World systems theory views migration as a natural outgrowth of the disruptions and dislocations associated with global capitalist penetration (Sassen 1988). Social network theory argues that transnational social networks reduce the costs of migration to the migrant, thus making some migration flows self-perpetuating (Massey et al. 1987).

I illustrate some of these theories by presenting and discussing clips from *The Other Side of Immigration* (Germano 2010), a documentary I filmed while conducting survey research in high-emigration areas of Michoacán, Mexico. Through interviews with return migrants and the relatives of emigrants, the first 15 minutes of *The Other Side of Immigration* sketch out a number of reasons why people from these towns emigrate. Many of these reasons and examples correspond to the theories of migration discussed above. Early in the film, for instance, a return migrant explains that he can make $70 for a day's work in the USA compared to just $13 for a day's work in Mexico (neoclassical perspective). Another man explains how the sight of neighbors coming back from the USA with new clothes and nice trucks compels other people to leave so they can have the same (relative deprivation). He also notes that family members abroad speak highly of working in the USA and urge others to follow them abroad (social network theory). Some interviewees add that Mexicans are lured by all of the jobs in the USA (segmented labor market theory). Interviewees furthermore explain how emigration has become a strategy that corn, bean, strawberry, and pork farmers use to self-insure against market losses (new economics of labor migration). As part of the discussion about emigration and agricultural markets, *The Other Side of Immigration* argues that the penetration of global capitalist forces into the Mexican countryside in the form of the North American Free Trade Agreement caused labor market dislocations that prompted many farmers to seek work in the USA to support their families (world systems theory).

After watching these clips, I typically open the floor to discussion. Students are instructed to identify statements made in the film that correspond (even if only loosely) to the various theoretical perspectives we have learned about in readings and lectures. While *The Other Side of Immigration* does not cover every reason why people migrate, these clips help students think beyond the idea that people simply migrate 'in search of a better life.' This discussion can help students see that there are a number of specific social, economic,

and political forces operating at the macro, community, household, and individual levels that combine to influence a person or family's decision to go abroad.

3. Clandestine journeys

Whether motivated by the economic and social factors mentioned above or any number of other factors, including war, gang violence, or family reunification, many international migrants are forced to move through clandestine channels in order to avoid detection from immigration authorities. A number of documentary films and journalistic reports are valuable for helping students visualize the danger and despair of many clandestine journeys.

Some of the most dangerous clandestine journeys occur at sea. A 15-minute online video called 'Death in the Mediterranean' (Joyce 2015) offers a wide-ranging look at the welfare of migrants from Africa and the Middle East who cross the Mediterranean Sea bound for Europe on crowded rafts and boats. A growing number of overcrowded boats have capsized off the coasts of Greece, Italy, and Libya in recent years, killing many thousands of people. This piece examines this phenomenon from a variety of locations in a relatively short, high-quality report that was originally broadcast on the CBS News program *60 Minutes*. The piece interviews Eritrean men rescued near Italy who discuss the harrowing journey into the Mediterranean and their experiences with human smugglers in Libya. These interviews are complemented by statements from the Italian Coast Guard on their efforts to save lives as sea. The piece concludes by following a Syrian family as they prepare to travel from Turkey to Greece on a rubber raft. This section of the report includes hidden camera interviews with human smugglers and details their fees and practices. In addition to highlighting the plight of migrants crossing the Mediterranean, this report is valuable in demonstrating the critical role that human smugglers play in the global movement of people and revealing how smugglers prioritize their own economic interests above the safety of the people they are paid to transport.

Other clandestine journeys take place on foot. *Mojados: Through the Night* (Davis 2004), a 60-minute *vérité* documentary, follows four Mexican men as they spend nearly a week trekking through Texas ranch land to a migrant safe house. In addition to highlighting the tedium of walking more than 100 miles over sparsely populated land, the film shows the dangers undocumented migrants face when they run out of water or face punishing weather. *The Undocumented* (Williams 2013) is another moving *vérité* documentary about the dangers of crossing the US–Mexico border. This film picks up where *Mojados* leaves off in the sense that it follows Border Patrol agents, humanitarian volunteers, medical examiners, officials from the Mexican consulate, and family members whose lives are touched by the deaths of undocumented people crossing through the punishing Arizona desert. *Mojados* and *The Undocumented* reinforce readings about the human costs of the US government's border fortification policies and reveal the extreme risks many migrants accept in their efforts to enter the USA clandestinely (Massey et al. 2003; Urrea 2004).

Which Way Home (Cammisa 2009), another feature-length documentary, takes viewers on a particular kind of clandestine journey: that taken by unaccompanied Central American children. Some unaccompanied children from Central America spend weeks riding atop cargo trains from Mexico's southern border to the USA. The film shows how

the children do this and how migrating alone leaves them so vulnerable to injury and abuse. *Which Way Home* is also valuable for its explanations of the factors that drive child migration and in illuminating how these motivations differ from the adult-centered theories of migration discussed in the previous section (Bhabha 2014). For example, some child migrants, like 14-year-old Kevin, are fleeing domestic abuse. Others, like nine-year-old Olga, make the journey to reunite with parents who are already abroad. The film is masterful in how it provides insight into these motivations.

Finally, the opening scenes of *God Grew Tired of Us* (Quinn 2007) show the grim reality of human movement driven by violent conflict. Archival footage explains how the Second Sudanese War forced thousands of boys and young men to flee Sudan. Images of children walking in the desert toward Ethiopia, and later Kenya, are difficult to watch, but they provide an important perspective on forced displacement. This film is also valuable for how it shows the boredom and lack of opportunity that young people face living in refugee camps and the difficult processes of assimilation that refugees face when they are resettled in cultures very different from their own.

4. Borders and sovereignty

Clandestine journeys like these raise important questions about whether states can actually regulate 'unwanted immigration' across their borders and how states seek to maintain sovereignty in an era of increasing globalization (Messina 2007). 'Watching the Border: The Virtual Fence' (Sharman 2010), an online video originally broadcast on *60 Minutes*, focuses on a US government program called SBInet. Initiated under President George W. Bush and continued by the Obama administration, SBInet was to result in a series of towers and advanced surveillance technologies along the entire 2000-mile US–Mexico border. With laser-like precision, these surveillance technologies would be used to pinpoint the locations of unauthorized entrants, who could then be found and arrested by the Border Patrol. 'Watching the Border: The Virtual Fence' shows that even with billions of dollars in funding and the leadership of a former NASA rocket scientist, the project failed at every stage due to the unanticipated complexity of monitoring such a large and varied geographical space. The project was eventually abandoned after only covering a small fraction of the southwest border. I use this video to stimulate class discussion about the feasibility of 'securing' the US–Mexico border, which many American politicians argue should be a precondition for any comprehensive immigration reform plan.

A 10-minute video called 'Dublin Regulation Leaves Asylum Seekers with Their Fingers Burnt' (Grant and Domokos 2011) explores how European governments manage 'unwanted' immigration in light of the European Union's lack of internal borders. The Dublin Regulation forces those seeking asylum in Europe to remain in the first European country they entered. The objective of this restriction is to prevent people from requesting asylum in more than one EU member state and reduce the flow of asylum seekers to European countries with the most generous welfare states. Through interviews with asylum-seekers deported from the United Kingdom to Italy, this short piece explains the logic of the Dublin Regulation and how it leaves migrants living in limbo. This video raises questions for class discussion around national sovereignty,

supranational immigration management structures, and the disproportionate responsibility EU border states, like Italy, Greece, and Hungary, have in terms of processing asylum claims.

5. Remittances and homeland development

Why do migrants send money home and how do their contributions affect their communities of origin? *The Sixth Section* (Rivera 2003), a 27-minute documentary originally broadcast on PBS, examines these questions through the lens of Hometown Associations, or HTAs. HTAs are groups of immigrants who pool their money and invest it in community projects back home. *The Sixth Section* follows the members of a small Mexican HTA in Newburgh, New York, called Grupo Union. Over the course of this short film, Grupo Union funds the construction of a large baseball stadium, the purchase of an ambulance, and the construction of a well in its members' hometown, Boqueron, Mexico. The film provides insight into why migrant associations choose to spend money on big recreational projects like stadiums and the impact this kind of spending has on sustainable development. An argument implied in the film is that while a project like the baseball stadium appears wasteful, it could serve two development functions in the long run. First, recreational projects like the stadium keep migrants engaged in the affairs of their hometown, leading to future investment in projects whose direct developmental impacts are greater, such as the well. Second, ostentatious projects like stadiums get the attention of politicians. As the film shows, this attention can result in political influence and government funding for public works projects like roads.

Although hometown associations like Grupo Union are an important force for development in some migrant-sending communities (Iskander 2010; Lopez 2015), most migrants send remittances directly to family back home to fund the purchase of basic goods and services like food, clothing, housing, healthcare, and education (see, e.g. Bangko Sentral ng Pilipinas 2009; Ramocan 2011; Ratha et al. 2011; Elezaj et al. 2012; Orozco 2013). To illustrate the household and community-wide impacts of these more common remittances, I complement *The Sixth Section* with two scenes from *The Other Side of Immigration* (Germano 2010). In a section called 'The Money,' people in high-emigration areas of Mexico explain that remittances are used to fund basic consumption. Then Alejo Froylan Guzmán, a return migrant, makes a critical point: even families who do not receive remittances directly benefit from the multiplier effects associated with these cash injections. Remittances, he explains, stimulate spending in small towns like his, which benefits the local shopkeepers and farmers who sell their products at markets. The following section of *The Other Side of Immigration*, 'The Family,' demonstrates that remittances come with a cost. A family member who goes abroad to support those back home financially are not there to support them socially and emotionally. Interviewees explain how rising emigration has contributed to the division of families and the erosion of the family as a core social institution. In many cases, the result is heartache, as witnessed through the story of Carolina Coria Rueda's family. But interviewees argue that the costs of mass emigration are not purely emotional. Consistent with studies on the topic, one man argues that the mass

emigration of parents has led to increases in crime and drug addiction among children who grow up without a secure parental attachment (Smith 2006; Bhabha 2014).

6. Anti-immigrant backlash

Xenophobia is on the rise in a number of liberal democracies. In the USA, Donald Trump won the 2016 Republican Party presidential nomination by demonizing Mexican immigrants, Syrian refugees, and Muslims. In many areas of the United Kingdom, immigration was the leading reason why people voted to leave the European Union. In Germany, dozens of refugee shelters have been attacked and burnt down in response to the German government's decision to welcome hundreds of thousands of asylum-seekers. Border fences have been built in Eastern European countries such as Hungary and Macedonia in response to immigration from the Middle East. In France and Switzerland, anti-immigrant parties like the National Front and the Swiss People's Party enjoy mainstream support.

I use a variety of videos to illustrate the grassroots underpinnings of anti-immigrant sentiment in the USA and the varying degrees of anti-immigrant political organization in Europe. At the grassroots level, I show scenes from a feature-length film called *Farmingville*. *Farmingville* (Sandoval and Tambini 2004) chronicles an anti-immigrant movement in Farmingville, New York, a small, predominantly white community on Long Island. *Farmingville* shows that anti-immigrant movements are in many ways driven more by community members' own subjective fears than evidence that the newcomers are a true economic or security threat (Sides and Citrin 2007). For example, many of the Latino immigrants who moved to Farmingville at the time of filming were day laborers. To save money on rent, large groups of men would live together in the same home. Throughout the movie, Farmingville residents claim that this kind of cohabitation has put their community at risk, but no one articulates exactly how. Other residents say they feel intimidated by large groups of day laborers waiting for work in front of convenience stores. Again, there is never a specific threat or act of criminality identified. The problem, rather, is that Farmingville residents *feel* intimidated when they see these men. One cannot help but wonder if they would still feel so intimidated if they knew more about the new members of their community. In this respect, documentaries on immigration have a role to play in reducing subjective fears because they allow for the transfer of information between groups that may otherwise have little contact. Community organizations also have an important role to play, both in organizing community events that show films about immigrants and in bringing newcomers and long-time residents together to learn about one another and work toward common causes. As the documentary *Adelante* (Osband 2014) shows through the story of Mexican immigrants and Irish-American residents working to revitalize a Catholic church in Norristown, Pennsylvania, sustained interaction between groups can, rather serendipitously, give way to the kind of understanding and compassion that seemed so elusive in *Farmingville* (Allport 1954).

In Europe, anti-immigrant backlash has been far more politically organized than the mostly local level backlash we see in some parts of the United States. Anti-immigrant groups and political parties opposed to immigration have amassed great political power in many European countries. Messina (2007) classifies these groups and parties into five

categories: 'generic' anti-immigrant groups, neo-fascist groups, the opportunistic right, the new radical right, and the ethnonational right.

I integrate a number of short videos into my lecture on organized anti-immigrant backlash in Europe to illustrate some of the key characteristics of groups and political parties that fall into Messina's (2007) categories and emphasize how these groups are similar and different in practice. For example, a video called 'Anti-Immigration Movement Splits Germany' (Olsen and Eddy 2015) looks at an anti-immigrant movement in Germany called PEDIGA to show how anti-immigrant groups that do not wield much formal political power sometimes use large marches to bring attention to their grievances. The opening scenes of a Channel 4 documentary called *Young, Nazi and Proud* (Modell 2002) shows how neo-fascist groups such as the British National Party are more politically organized than protest groups like PEGIDA, but nevertheless maintain a narrow long-term focus on their white supremacist goals. A short video on the Swiss People's Party called 'Swiss Opposition Proposes Tougher Asylum Laws' (Al Jazeera English 2014) shows that the opportunistic right is more mainstream in its approach than the protest groups and neo-fascist parties. As the name implies, the opportunistic right tends to capitalize on anti-immigrant sentiment when doing so is political advantageous. Finally, a short video called 'Can Marine Le Pen Transform France's National Front' (Kelly 2015) examines the history of the National Front, the political party many people associate with Europe's new radical right. This video explores how the National Front has become an increasingly formidable political force and how its leaders make appeals to national identity as part of their opposition to immigration and globalization.

7. Interior enforcement

Calls to deport noncitizens are a natural outgrowth of the kind of anti-immigrant backlash discussed above. In the USA, deportations have risen steadily since the passage of the 1996 Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act. This law greatly expanded the US government's powers to deport noncitizens, created bans on reentry for deportees found to be in the country illegally, and permitted federal immigration authorities to enlist the cooperation of local law enforcement agencies in the enforcement of immigration laws (Kanstroom 2012). Cooperation between federal and local authorities increased precipitously in the wake of the 11 September 2001 terrorist attacks on Washington DC and New York City, and increased further after 2008 with the creation of a controversial program called Secure Communities. In 2010, the state legislatures of Arizona and a handful of other US states passed laws that would allow local authorities to ask for the immigration papers of anyone they suspected of being in the country illegally. Many Americans have viewed these developments as an invitation by local authorities to profile Latinos. Meanwhile, immigrants who have lived in the USA for long periods of time remain in limbo and live in fear of deportation due to the unwillingness of the US Congress to debate and pass a comprehensive immigration reform bill.

I use two episodes from an online documentary series that I produced for Vice News to illustrate some of the political and social dynamics of interior enforcement, racial profiling, and deportation in the USA. The first episode, 'Immigrant America: They Steal Our Jobs?'

(Germano 2014a) explores tensions that have arisen around immigration enforcement in agricultural communities of New York State. The video highlights the pressure regional immigration officials feel to meet arbitrary arrest and deportation targets, and how they collaborate with local authorities to find unauthorized workers. A number of people in the video explain how this pressure and collaboration has created a situation where Latinos, even those who are native-born citizens, feel watched and profiled by the police. Meanwhile, local farm owners express frustration over how the immigration policy stalemate in Washington continues to keep their workers in the crosshairs of agencies that enforce laws that are, in the farm owners' view, in conflict with local economic interests. This video is helpful for stimulating class discussion about the complex local effects of federal immigration policy and the various channels through which cooperation between local and federal officials affects community life.

Another episode in this series, 'Immigrant America: The High Cost of Deporting Parents' (Germano 2014b), continues with the theme of interior enforcement by exploring the effect of deportation on mixed status families. An estimated 4.5 million US citizen children are raised by one or more undocumented parents, and according to one estimate, about 80,000 parents of US citizens are deported in the USA each year. 'High Cost' follows one of those parents. Ray Jesus was deported to Guatemala in 2011 after living in the USA for more than 20 years. In addition to showing the palpable emotional suffering endured by Ray and his wife and children (all of whom are US citizens), the video highlights the many economic costs associated with deporting parents, such as lost tax revenue (Ray, like about half of unauthorized immigrants, paid taxes despite his undocumented status) and the cost of welfare benefits that Ray's children depended on in his absence. This video can be used to stimulate classroom discussion around who wins and who loses when the parents of US citizens are deported, whether immigration enforcement goals should trump the rights of US citizen children, and whether, as the Obama administration proposed, the undocumented parents of US citizens should be given relief from deportation.

8. Conclusion

Allport (1954) noted that 'vicarious experience'—the use of videos, books, and other media—can be an effective first step in promoting empathy and understanding between groups that might otherwise engage in conflict. My interest in using video in migration courses is driven by the objective of providing this kind of experience. In my courses I aim to go beyond theory and the nitty gritty details of policy and history to introduce students to some of the real people who migrate in the 21st century. I am also interested in providing an alternative to fear-mongering politicians that portray migrants as criminals and terrorists and journalists who show migrants only as faceless victims who perish from time to time in rough seas and scorching deserts. These approaches deprive migrants of their humanity and their agency. These approaches also overlook the impressive steps many migrants take to manage poverty, risk, and danger. Surely due to the influence of popular portrayals of migrants, the idea they could be 'insightful' and 'articulate' never occurs to some people. In fact, on numerous occasions, I have shown *The Other Side of Immigration* to audiences in the American Midwest that, after viewing the film, express awe that

Mexican immigrants could possess these qualities. Audience members mean no harm by these comments. It is just that everything they have ever been told about Mexican immigrants simply does not square with what they see in the film. It is in this respect that videos can be a useful substitute for contact when contact between foreign-born and native-born people is unlikely or impossible.

Popular portrayals of the migration issue furthermore fail to appreciate the complexity of managing migration. How do governments actually go about securing their borders in practice? How should we manage the human costs and unintended consequences of our immigration policies? How do we make sense of immigration policies that damage local economies and divide families? How do we manage immigration in a way that preserves both the sovereignty of the nation-state and the humanity of people who migrate across national borders? The tough rhetoric of enforcement, although attractive to many constituencies in Europe and the USA, can only get us so far. The films and videos discussed in this essay aim to provide a more nuanced look at the complexities of managing migration in the 21st century and raise important moral questions for discussion and debate.

This is not just an academic exercise. Many of my students, like many of yours, go on to careers in journalism, education, law, business, social work, and policy. The decisions they make in their careers affect people in ways large and small. These and other videos, I hope, play a small role in broadening their perspective on this complex issue and making them more empathetic people in light of growing calls throughout the world to otherize, blame, and disparage people born in different lands. Feedback from students has been positive in this regard. Many have expressed in course evaluations that they find the integration of these videos into lectures to be among the most effective aspects of my migration courses, and some especially seem to appreciate the opportunity to gain a window into my research by watching videos I produce in the field. For these reasons, I consider increasingly powerful, user-friendly, and inexpensive digital video technologies an important asset for scholars who are interested in finding new ways to communicate scholarly knowledge to students and the public (Germano 2014c). The question for me, however, has not been whether students appreciate the videos or find them interesting, but how critically they watch them, think about them, and write about them. Most students are accustomed to watching videos passively, so the challenge in my courses has been to train students to think of the videos as texts that communicate arguments and complement course readings and lectures. Although this way of viewing videos does not come naturally or easily to some students, it is a skill they can begin to develop over the course of a semester and which will serve them as they navigate an increasingly visual media landscape in their daily lives.

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