

***Democratization through Migration? Political Remittances and Participation of Philippine Return Migrants.* By Christl Kessler and Stefan Rother. Lanham, Maryland: Lexington Books, 2016. Hardcover: 181pp.**

This book presents a convincing narrative on the political socialization of Filipino migrant workers in both democratic and authoritarian host countries, and the extent and ways by which such socialization affects the workers' attitudes towards politics in their home country. It is convincing because it nuances what is obviously a complex nexus: migration and politics.

The main strength of the book lies in the mixed quantitative-qualitative research methodology employed by the authors. The book draws largely from surveys among first time and returned migrants, but it also allows the migrants' voices to speak for themselves. It is this combination of data and voice that makes the reader pay close attention to every page. Throughout the book there are tables and figures, as well as vignettes of real-life stories and first-person accounts. The "respondents" thus come to life and the reader is provided with a fascinating, broad picture of transnationalism, not just of migrant work but also of political ideas and values.

The research design is thorough from start to finish. The theoretical assumptions of the authors are carefully laid out in the first chapter and are backed by a comprehensive literature review on a range of pertinent topics such as social remittances, migration and development, the history of Filipino outmigration, issues and problems of Filipino migrants, and politics in the Philippines and the host countries. In addition, the development of the research design — from the selection of respondents to the choice of survey questions, to the choice of research implementers (i.e. Social Weather Station for the surveys and the Department of Political Science of the University of the Philippines-Diliman for the in-depth interviews) — is convincingly explained which further strengthens the book's credibility.

The outcomes of the research are clearly useful. The surveys on the profiles of the respondents present baseline data that point to empirical evidence for narratives that hitherto relied on anecdotal evidence. The book, for example, has an entire chapter (Chapter 5) on the "migration experience" in Saudi Arabia, Qatar, the United Arab Emirates, Taiwan, Japan and Hong Kong where survey results

on working conditions and salaries, discrimination, freedom of movement and integration are presented (pp. 49–96). The chapter is capped with an “overall assessment” as well as “country differences” relating to the migration experience of the respondents.

The “overall assessment” of the respondents deserves particular attention. The survey results show that there was a “generally positive” assessment and that “only 21 percent reported any problems in the host country” (p. 87). It also shows that “more men often reported problems (26 percent) than women (19 percent)” (p. 87). Moreover, even in Saudi Arabia where the respondents had “the highest number of negative answers with 45 percent on the *sad* side... the *happy* OFWs [Overseas Filipino Workers] were still in the majority (55 percent)” (p. 93).

These findings are noteworthy because they go against conventional, stereotypical notions that migration is a negative rather than a positive experience, and that women are more emotional and less resilient than men. The book does not stop at presenting these figures, and proceeds to show the necessary nuances that could explain the assessments. It reveals, for instance, that based on in-depth interviews, the notion of the “happy” migrant workers actually refers to “putting on a happy face” and is to be understood contextually, i.e. within the narrative of migrants having to make a choice between “the dollar versus being homesick” (p. 91).

At the end of the book, the authors present their findings regarding the political attitudes of the migrant workers and conclude that they do remit political ideas, and that conditions in both the host and home countries shape these ideas.

For this reviewer, the book’s most significant contribution is its assertion that the political ideas and values of migrant workers — and not just the dollars that they send home — have worth. Thus far, the worth of migrant workers has only been valued in economic and not political terms. Academics and advocates for migrant rights should develop the concept of political remittances, not simply because it fills a gap in the literature but more importantly because it rectifies the existing undervaluation of the migration experience and of the migrant worker. The concept also offers an important reminder that migrant workers do have agency and are not just at the receiving end of political developments or policies of both host and home countries.

The logical next step to this book involves a shift of focus from the political ideas of migrant workers to their political behaviour

or actions. The findings, for example, should be linked to data on overseas absentee voting and should lead to further examining of the importance of OFWs in Philippine elections.

According to data presented by a Commission on Elections representative during a recent roundtable discussion organized by the Center for Migrant Advocacy Philippines, for the 2016 presidential elections there were 1,376,067 registered overseas voters, 814,601 of whom were new registrants. But voter turnout was only 432,076 (or 31 per cent). The 2016 numbers though are higher than those for the 2010 presidential elections where only 153,323 out of 589,830 registered overseas Filipinos voted (or 25 per cent). As such, does political socialization have anything to do with low (but increasing) voter turnout in overseas voting?

The book prods readers to reflect on the extent and ways by which OFWs act on the political ideas and values that they acquire through the migration experience. Moreover, questions regarding the significance of these political actions need to be raised. Do the political actions of OFWs contribute to the mere reproduction of Philippine politics or are these actions transformative? Is the Philippines better off as a nation when OFWs participate in its politics and not just in its economy?

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