



Book review

I Know It's Dangerous: Why Mexicans Risk Their Lives to Cross the Border

By Lynnaire M. Sheridan; Tucson, AZ: The University of Arizona Press, 2009, 206 pp.

I Know It's Dangerous is an exploration of unauthorized migration from Mexico to the United States. The book offers a holistic, lived experience perspective of a social phenomenon most commonly portrayed in statistical or ideological forms. The author, an Australian, brings a relatively neutral perspective to the subject often clouded by regional and political interests. This 'outsider' status also likely influenced her sources to be more open and personal than would be the case with an American or Mexican researcher. This work is a valuable contribution to a field typically dominated by narrow viewpoints and ideological bias.

Sheridan utilizes primarily an ethnographic approach to the subject. Her study, conducted in 2003–2004, is comprised of interviews, observations, and analysis of a broad range of perspectives and data. Sources include migrants, government entities, non-government organizations, print media, visual arts, and popular music. Her qualitative analysis includes the lived experience of various stakeholders, along with semiological and sociolinguistic examinations of media representations.

The book is relevant to a broad audience, and recommended particularly to direct stakeholders in immigration matters. Social scientists, policy makers, law enforcement personnel, journalists, and residents of areas directly affected by immigration policies will profit most from the material. Most importantly, the book may provide objective insights to those considering the risks, costs, and benefits of unauthorized migration to the U.S.

Sheridan begins with an overview of the subject, including historical trends of economic, policy, and theoretical viewpoints. She traces the evolution of migration issues from the Mexican–American War through the post-September 11th era. Economic factors such as oil prices, debt, poverty, and wage differences have created structural influences that have rapidly increased unauthorized migrations since the 1970s. Individual motivations for migration include basic economic factors, plus social status, quality of life, and the possibility of a better future for one's children.

Government policies have been overwhelmingly unilateral, with little or no influence from Mexican stakeholders. Most policy changes have had the result of increasing the risk of unauthorized migration, without having any real deterrent effect. The end result is that migrants can only manage, but not influence, the risk of border crossings. Unauthorized migration was criminalized during the Great Depression, with stricter policies over time being the rule. Increased border security near urban centers has shifted much of the crossings to remote, inhospitable areas. This shift also meant that migrants were more dependent on human traffickers ('coyotes') for assistance. These traffickers represent the single most important risk factor for those making the crossing. An unintended consequence of increased risk is that migrants are pressured into staying longer in the U.S. instead of risking multiple crossings.

The case studies provide a glimpse into the lived experiences of migrants. Reasons for undergoing the risk of unauthorized migration include escaping domestic violence, a better life for self and children, inability to obtain a visa, and the need for advanced medical care. Not only are there more opportunities for work in the U.S. for undereducated workers, there is also a better chance of obtaining marketable job and language skills that may be used upon returning to Mexico. Individuals may feel the need to migrate to avoid family fragmentation, as loved ones working in the U.S. cannot easily make frequent trips home.

Varieties of experience are often rooted in the different ways of managing risk, mostly driven by cost and availability of trusted contacts. The least risky option is to overstay a valid tourist visa, which are difficult to acquire. The risk increases when borrowed, forged, or stolen documents are used. Still riskier is to cross at a port of entry hidden in a vehicle. The riskiest choice of all, physically and psychologically, is to cross undocumented at a remote location. Increased security near urban centers has shifted the crossing points to rugged desert and mountain terrain, for which the migrant may not be prepared. A recurring theme in all of these experiences is the need for a trustworthy network of guides and contacts. Vulnerable migrants often fall prey to bandits or untrustworthy traffickers and guides. It is safest in these situations to have a relative on the U.S. side to pay the coyotes or guides upon safe arrival.

Mexican and U.S. governments both traditionally ignored migration issues until the combination of NAFTA

and tighter border security brought it to the fore. Mexican government policy focuses on diplomatic dialogue with the U.S., and protection of migrant human rights. Consulates act to protect and advocate for migrants, while other programs focus on risk awareness and rescue operations. Mexico also has its own issues similar to the U.S. at its southern border, with migrants from Guatemala and Honduras entering Mexico illegally on their way to the U.S.

Civil organizations in Mexico responding to migration issues include civil rights groups, churches, and advocacy groups. They function primarily as sources of issue awareness, lobbying, and rescue, and are a valuable adjunct to official government entities. The print media in northern Mexico tend to focus on a combination of death statistics, risks, and crimes against migrants. These crimes include abduction, robbery, and coercion into sex or drug trades. The blame for most of the individual incidents typically goes to novice or exploitative traffickers. Other dangers reported include racists and vigilantes, accidental shootings by hunters, and aggressive border patrol agents.

Sheridan analyzes the imagery of border art and graffiti concerning migration, which typically depict the dangers of crossing the border, rather than positive symbols. Revolutionary symbols are also popular, keeping with the tradition of mural artists such as Diego Rivera. Popular music also contains references to the migration experience, in both traditional ballads (*corridos*), and in more modern pop songs. As with the visual arts, the lyrics more commonly portray themes related to dangers and risks.

The author concludes that the recent increase in danger to migrants has not materially affected the numbers of people willing to risk the journey, although the increased risk has reduced the number of return trips. This places more pressure on migrants to keep families together in the U.S., rather than risk repeated trips home to visit family, which has long-term demographic implications. Sheridan is a lecturer in Western Australia (Edith Cowan University), a cultural researcher, and has a specialty in Tourism impact management. Sheridan has provided a valuable addition to the discourse on migration issues, which should appeal to those in various fields of the social sciences, public policy, and human rights.

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