

Book Review

Living an Impossible Living in a Transborder World. Culture, Confianza, and Economy of Mexican-Origin Populations. Carlos G. Vélez-Ibáñez. Tucson: University of Arizona Press 2010. 241 pp.

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Carlos Vélez-Ibáñez's *Living an Impossible Living in a Transborder World. Culture, Confianza, and Economy of Mexican-Origin Populations* is an expanded version of the work he published in 1983 with *Bonds of mutual trust: The Cultural Systems of Rotating Credit Association among Urban Mexicans and Chicanos*. *Bonds of Trust* analyzed Rotating Credit and Saving Associations (ROSCA) along the US-Mexico border region. Large scale political and economic changes affecting life at the Mexican-American border demanded a revision of this prior work. ROSCAs are understood in Vélez-Ibáñez's work as a particular Mexican organization centered around "confianza" (translated to "trust" in English, though the word bears wider connotations of trust as well) that:

...represent[s] attempts to reduce the uncertainty of people's lives and as far as possible create wealth and security. They are part of what some might call informal economy or third economy (MacGaffey, 1991). However, they also respond to much larger and intertwined global, national and local economic exchanges, which are expressed in diverse ways at each of these levels (Vélez-Ibáñez 2010:6).

The approach Carlos Vélez-Ibáñez takes to understand ROSCAs includes the cognitive, social, economic, and cultural "transborder and transnational features" of these organizations. The practice of ROSCAs is in fact an everyday strategy

that people along the border use to cope with larger scale political and economic decisions that affect their livelihoods and force them to adapt.

The first chapter introduces the reader to the theoretical background for the analysis of ROSCAs. The concept "transnational" is key in understanding ROSCAs because participants all have in common the experience of "transnational lives." This concept proves itself a better theoretical frame than "citizenship" if we consider the local influence of global decisions such as the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) or the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT).

The second chapter focuses on the central concept essential to the functioning of ROSCAs: *confianza*. Vélez-Ibáñez states that "[a]mong Mexicans *confianza* designates generosity and intimacy as well as personal investment in others; ... it also indicates willingness to establish such generosity and intimacy. ... it is a psycho-cultural construct organizing expectations for intended relationships" (45). This concept is also not limited to trust.

The third chapter explains the functioning and the organization of the ROSCAs as well as the existing typologies: residential, occupational and "familial". Vélez-Ibáñez argues that "ROSCAs touch most class sectors and occupational niches in Mexico" and those in the Southwestern-US border were originally found in the working class and economically marginal sectors in the research done up to 1983. However, recent research has shown that ROSCAs were actually practiced in middle and upper class areas.

The fourth chapter discusses the transborder reality and its presence along the southwestern boarder of the United States and the way it determines the creation of individual strategies meant to overcome larger scale economic and political barriers. Through detailed ethnographic description, Vélez-Ibáñez exemplifies the presence and importance of

ROSCAs as a coping strategy in the lives of “dos mujeres sin fin¹” (121). This depiction positions ROSCAs not only in a “border” context, where the border region is understood as the “central axis and node for trade, commerce, population crossing and re-crossing” (122), but at the margins of legality and illegality. The aim of all efforts to get by in the border region is analyzed through the larger cultural framework of “megascripts”. In the transborder region the underlying megascript is the “quest for individual and familial success and material gain, with the accompanying social, political and cultural peeks, with rationalization utilizing the presence of melanin sometimes thrown in as justification” (123).

The fifth chapter discusses the core of what keeps ROSCAs alive by outlining the reasons for their existence. Among marginal populations, the ROSCAs respond to a perpetual quest for stability and makes possible planning for everyday life at the margins of the economy. Essential to ROSCAs is the capacity to reciprocate trust: ROSCAs “contribute to the continuation and expansion of such reciprocal networks and they thus increase the probability of cultural and biologically needs met under conditions of extreme scarcity” (159). It is in this chapter when the book makes the case for one of the greatest contributions to the understanding of saving mechanisms for the very poor and the formation of trust: the ability for reciprocation.

The most important contribution this book brings is to the understanding of some understudied concepts such as “social ties,” trust, and social capital. The scarcity of anthropological work on these concepts can be explained by the long term durations of research which is required. Understanding what unites people and the nature of the bonds that lead to social ties is essential in development theory and practice, especially as it pertains to economically vulnerable contexts. This understanding can also contribute to the building of “social

¹ In English: “two women who never quit”.

capital" in development initiatives. Specifically, social capital cannot be built from above or outside of the social order. Vélez-Ibáñez chooses to talk about social ties, and not focus on "social capital." I believe that this semantic choice most likely stems from the very limited understandings and definitions of class, gender or social status found in most writing on "social capital." The most interesting fact about trust revealed in this study is how it is reciprocated through the practice of ROSCAs. In the 1983 volume on ROSCAs, Vélez-Ibáñez also emphasized the element of trust, but this updated analysis he offers brings a more in-depth comprehension of how reciprocation actually occurs in the modern world.

In addition, this book brings a better understanding to the functioning and practice of saving mechanisms used by the very poor and found in development theory and practice. The specific reward will influence the rate of further expansion and lead to a process of expanded learning of saving. Therefore, savings appear to be a very resilient coping mechanism, and used as long-practiced adaptation tool of Mexicans along the border to cope with economic instability.

Another important contribution of this book, is its understanding of the vulnerable status of many migrants which prevents them from engaging in long-term life planning or gaining access to the formal market, credit in particular. In these contexts, ROSCAs appear as one of the few strategies such people are able to put in place to add stability when the future is not clear cut. Through the bonds of trust that connect people living similar experiences where ethnicity plays a key role, participating in ROSCAs helps fulfill the need for attaining some control over their own very precarious lives and economic status.

Carlos Vélez-Ibáñez's work brings more information to the field of economic anthropology. It builds on work conducted by anthropologists since the 1970s in understanding the mechanisms through which the informal economy—although

suppressed—supports and contributes to the functioning of the formal economy. Past research conducted on street vendors, black markets and immigrant communities has contributed to an understanding of the informal economy as the true “invisible hand” that supports the formal economy.

In terms of methodology, this book gives more credence to the importance of fieldwork in order to understand deeply embedded concept such as “trust” or “social ties”. Fieldwork extended over several years is becoming rare in cultural anthropology, but this work reminds us of the importance such work can provide. Though the use of this “middle scale” approach between global economic phenomena and the smallest daily economic practices, the use of social network analysis allows the readers to see how this innovative method provides the mechanism for saving and creating social ties.

In the end, Carlos G. Vélez-Ibáñez’s work approaches one of the most fundamental concepts in anthropology: exchange. Exchange is a practice that cuts across classes. With accompanying acts of reciprocity, exchange acts like a social glue leading to the creation of networks of support and cooperation. Future works can build on Vélez-Ibáñez’ contribution by seeking to understand the limitations of social networks, whether institutionalization or formalization limits their efficiency, and the broader social contexts that allow and maintain the existence of ROSCAs. In Romania where I am from, ROSCAs are known as “gypsy credit,” but their presence tends to have diminished through time due in part to the country’s rising economic strength. However ROSCAs still exist throughout the developing world. A comparative study could shed light on what is common to such practices on a global scale, leading to an essential question: What is the cross-cultural experience of forming “trust ties”?

References Cited

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