

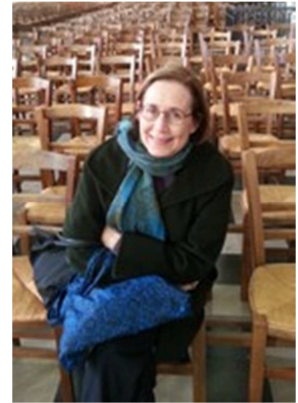
HOMInG INTERVIEW

with NANCY FONER

Distinguished Professor of Sociology at Hunter College and the Graduate Center, CUNY
Conducted by Paolo Boccagni and Sara Bonfanti
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Nancy Foner is a Distinguished Professor of Sociology at Hunter College and the Graduate Center, City University of New York. She received her B.A. from Brandeis University and Ph.D. from the University of Chicago. Her main area of interest is immigration. She has studied Jamaicans in their home society as well as in New York and London and written extensively on immigration to New York City, past and present. She is particularly interested in the comparative study of immigration – comparing immigration today with earlier periods in the United States and immigrants in the United States and Europe.

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What does ‘home’, as a concept and an ethnographic object, mean to you as a sociologist, in light of your research expertise and experience?

Over the course of my career, two dimensions stand out in terms of how I have used home or similar notions in my own work. First, my research on Jamaicans in New York and London involved migrant conceptions of home and their impact. The people I interviewed often referred to Jamaica as home and I reproduced this usage when I was writing about them. To put it another way, I wrote about Jamaicans’ home society and the desire of many to return home.

At the time, when I was researching and writing in the 1970s and 1980s, my concern was whether the migrants who said they intended to return home to Jamaica would actually do so. I suspected that many, probably most, would in fact remain abroad, partly because they wanted to be close to their second-generation children who would end up living in the US or Britain. Also, the migrants had become used to London or New York and the standard of living they could maintain there. In New York City, many migrants spoke of the possibility of commuting back and forth to Jamaica or of eventually moving to Florida, where the weather is warm, rents and house prices are lower than in New York, and they would be closer to Jamaica.

In thinking about “home” and Jamaican migrants, I was also influenced by my earlier fieldwork in a Jamaican rural community in the late 1960s. A number of people in the community had returned after living for several years in London, often to find it difficult to adjust and, in the case of one man whom I wrote about in my first book, *Status and Power in Rural Jamaica*, being accused of using *obeah* (black magic) to cause harm to villagers who were jealous of his success.

In truth, migrants often have romanticized views of home. These views may provide comfort in the migrant setting when they, like Jamaicans in London and New York, experience disappointments and prejudice and discrimination. But if they do actually return, they face a home that is less ideal than they remembered and that often has undergone significant change since they left. As the novelist Thomas Wolfe famously wrote, you can’t go home again.

Second, I have considered the topic of feeling at home in the context of my comparisons of the integration of immigrants and their children in Europe and the United States --- and the links

between feeling at home and national identity and belonging. The argument developed in my book with Richard Alba, *Strangers No More*, is that it seems to be easier for the second generation to feel at home – and that they belong -- in the United States because Americans feel more comfortable with extending a national identity to immigrants and their children. Legal permanent residents are treated as Americans-in-the-making, and hyphenated identities that combine a national identity with an ethnic or religious label are widely accepted as normal and expected. In France, Germany, and the Netherlands the second generation feels pressured to express an exclusive national identity even though at the same time they often are not accepted on the same footing as long-established natives.

The analysis points to historically rooted factors that explain the transatlantic difference. As a classic settler society since its founding, the US, out of necessity, encouraged new arrivals to see themselves as part of the new nation as rapidly as possible. European countries, by contrast, in the course of their development as nation states constructed identities based on histories going back centuries, even millennia, making it more difficult for newcomers and their children to link their origins to these historical roots. Even more significant, especially when it comes to the widespread American acceptance of hyphenated identities, are more recent developments: the mid-20th century incorporation of the once-despised 19th and early 20th century eastern and southern European immigrants into American society which led to the greater acceptance of ethnic identities, either with or without the hyphen, and the civil rights movement and legislation of the 1950s and 1960s, which created a more inclusive national identity that acknowledged the experiences of racial and ethnic minorities.

What is in your view the sociological relevance of concepts such as "home" and "feeling at home"? And what about their implications?

The benefit of a new concept such as “home,” I believe, is that it can lead researchers to call attention to or focus on social and cultural elements and dynamics that they might otherwise minimize, overlook, ignore, or take for granted. Indeed, now that I have become more familiar with your and others’ work on home, the challenge for me is to go back to my own material and see if the concept of and literature on home can illuminate my own research in new ways. And of course, the concept is already stimulating new research. Had I focused more on notions of home in my research on Jamaicans many years ago, I might well have probed the extent to which they began to think of New York and London as home --- and in what situations – and the degree to which views of home varied among them on the basis of such factors as gender, occupation, and length of time in the country of reception.

Would you see a merit in expanding on the conceptual distinction between Feeling at home, (National) belonging and Identity? And on the empirical ways of researching them?

National belonging and identity represent only one aspect or dimension of feeling at home, and included, in the society in which migrants and their children are living. If we equate feeling at home with a sense of inclusion in the receiving society, then we are not just talking about the extent to which immigrants and their children are included in the national identity but also about a range of other factors that shape inclusion and exclusion, for example, racial, ethnic, and religious inequalities.

As to how to research “feeling at home,” the ideal would be to combine qualitative and quantitative methods. Studying feelings of home and national identity is a tricky business. On the one hand, evidence from surveys suffers from inherent limitations. Identity – and notions of home --- are fluid and situational, often shifting from one context to another in ways that questionnaires and surveys have trouble adequately capturing. Moreover, those US surveys and large data sets we have to study immigrants and the second generation do not ask questions about feeling at home but instead pose questions about ethnic and racial identity. On the other hand, small-scale studies based on in-depth interviews and participant observation have a different problem: how can we generalize from a small number of cases? Ideally, what would work best is a study that involves intensive ethnographic research along with a large-scale survey based on a random sample.

What are the challenges you identify in researching home in relation to migration? And what are the challenges you identify in researching home as a public and political phenomenon?

In thinking about the challenges of researching home in relation to migration, I think it is important to emphasize that immigration has led to a situation where many long-established natives in Europe and the US do not feel at home the way they used to given increased, and immigration-driven, racial and ethnic diversity in their societies. Certainly, in the US the remarkable demographic changes owing to post 1965 immigration --- and the explosion of the Latino and Asian populations --- in combination with changes brought about by the civil rights and the women’s movements have played a key role in creating a feeling among many white Americans, especially working class males, that America is not the home they once knew. This feeling, among other factors, helps explain support for Donald Trump. In short, studies of migration and home need to look at the reaction of long-established natives to migration --- not just the views of migrants and their descendants.

Moreover, the social study of home brings to the fore domesticity, everyday life, family life - all of them, emplaced in specially meaningful contexts. Do you think migration studies has done justice to the migrant family experience so far? If not, why?

Unfortunately, there has not been enough attention to family life among migrants. It is lower in status in the hierarchy of topics or areas in the migration field, and is often linked with gender studies. But if family life has not received the attention it deserves in the migration field this is not because it is unimportant. Far from it. We know a fair amount about how family relations and networks help migrants cope with settling and adjusting to life in a new society, but less about how family patterns change in the migrant situation. And we have a lot to learn about how family dynamics influence relations and trajectories outside the family, including success in school and occupational careers. Recently, family life has received more notice in the migration field in the US, in large part due to its connection to undocumented immigration --- which is a major research topic in American migration studies. A number of widely-cited recent studies have focused on children who have been left behind in the sending community by undocumented parents --- and relations between them in these transnational families. Similarly, work on the second generation -- a central topic in US migration studies -- has led to an interest in relations in the family between immigrant parents and their second generation children, a theme of my edited book *Across Generations*.

One understudied topic I think is the impact of mixed unions for relations in the family, especially given the growing rates of mixed unions, involving partners with different racial or ethnic backgrounds, in both the US and Europe. Of particular interest is how interaction among relatives in mixed families in various “home settings” may affect and indeed contribute to changing attitudes toward, and the very social construction of, racial, ethnic, and religious differences.

As our literature review shows, the social study of home (and migration) is relatively undeveloped in the US, compared with Europe, Australia, or even Canada. Why is that? Maybe "home" has a lesser relevance in the US public and academic discourse, compared with other countries?

I am not sure why. Partly it is a matter of which individuals are dominant in the field of migration and play a major role in shaping research directions. Also, in the US case, migration studies in sociology have focused on other areas, among them race and ethnicity and the integration of the second generation. Undocumented immigration has been high on the agenda, which is not surprising given that one in four immigrants in the US is undocumented and that undocumented immigration is a key policy concern and common subject of public and political discourse. As for political scientists in the U.S. migration field, they have been studying voting behavior, for example, civil society organizations, and local level and national government policy. When U.S. economists look at immigration (and not many do) they are, as one would expect, concerned with the economic incorporation of immigrants and their economic impact.

Summing up, could you give us some final advice and recommendation for our work? What are the promises and pitfalls of doing research into migrants' view, feelings and practices of home?

As I have said, one promise of a research focus on migrants' feelings and practices of home is that it will lead to new questions and reveal aspects of the migrant situation that have previously been missed or overlooked. One pitfall is that it may end up narrowing researchers' field of vision, leading them to ignore other important aspects of the migrant (and second generation) experience and to overemphasize the importance of “home.” There is a risk, to put it somewhat differently, of seeing “home” everywhere and downplaying the role of other factors in shaping the lives of migrants and their children. It might be useful, in this regard, to bring together migration scholars who have not used the concept of home to see if they think it will be valuable in their own work --- and how --- and, overall, to evaluate the utility of the concept.

Thanks so much for sharing this all with us!