

Livi-Bacci, M. (2023). *Over Land and Sea: Migration from Antiquity to the Present Day*. Polity Press, 163 pages, ISBN:978150955 (translated by David Broder)

Reviewed by David Pearson*

Massimo Livi-Bacci is a prolific demographer with a reputation for tackling large questions in a very concise fashion. Several of the author's previous books—for example, *A concise history of world population* (Oxford, 1996), *The population of Europe* (Oxford, Blackwell, 2000), and what might be seen as a companion volume to this latest book, *A short history of migration* (Polity, 2012)—all traversed expansive geographical areas and spanned extensive historical periods within very short formats. *Over land and sea* does not stray from this pattern. In a volume falling well short of 200 pages, Livi-Bacci relates a wide variety of stories describing and analysing 15 journeys that cross several centuries and encompass numerous terrains.

Many readers might applaud the author's brevity when confronting challenging, complex and often politically emotive subjects. Others, particularly academic area and period specialists, may consider these ventures overly superficial if not imprudent. So, it is important to recognise the caveats the author marks out in his introductory chapter. From the outset, Livi-Bacci sees migration as a biodemographic phenomenon with an important emphasis on that prefix. Hence, he sees people's migratory movements as more than particular social, economic and political actions and events; rather, they are viewed as a fundamental quality of being human. This universality, or so the author asserts, defies general paradigms or models, although these assist us in making sense of multifaceted and wide-ranging contexts. Thus, Livi-Bacci states, the stories he has chosen to convey:

...do not and cannot constitute an embryo of a history of migrations and are not integrated into any systematic, chronological or geographical treatment of my subject. They are, however, interconnected by a criterion that allows us to compare different eras, peoples and contexts. For if the inclination towards mobility is intrinsic to human nature, it is also true that migrations are not necessarily a voluntary act, a matter of free choice, resulting from an individual decision. (p.2)

Indeed, most of this volume is concerned with varying forms of forced migration since the author avers free movements are a rare and recent phenomenon. Livi-Bacci's chosen vignettes sometimes include much-debated topics like Indigenous peoples, slavery and diasporas, but they often only get a fleeting mention. Mainly because, as the author reasonably points out, there are abundant sources on these topics for readers to peruse, which include his many previous publications. Yet footnotes are noticeably absent, and the endnotes are hardly copious in this work.

The bulk of the text is divided into four parts that each appraise different forms of non-free migration with illustrative cases. First, in a section called "Antiquity", drawing mainly on the writings of ancient scholars, Livi-Bacci convincingly argues how thousands of years ago human mobility was in many ways not vastly different from what it is today, given many similarities between the causal factors that provoked forced and unforced population movements within ancient empires and contemporary national

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states and globalisation and despite major differences in sources and destinations and the balance between voluntary and involuntary journeys. The author shows how the boundaries of Greek and Roman city-states exemplified short-range individual and familial free movement within largely homogeneous ethnic settings. But just as evident were the signs of organised longer-range mobility caused by economic, political and military cross-border conflicts and ties with diverse peoples, as well as environmental and demographic upheavals.

The depiction of selected facets of antiquity neatly expresses the difficulties of conceptualising voluntary and involuntary movement and distinguishing individual and familial motivations from wider structural causal influences like the forces of militaristic centralised authorities. The fate of migrants is even more graphically described in the “cases of expulsion, displacement or deportation” (p. 28) contained in Section II of this book, “In the Hands of the State”. Here, while recognising the obvious importance of debates and extensive literature about slavery in the Americas and other continents, we are presented with other interesting cases of forced translocation. Movements of Inca peoples in Peru, the displacement of populations in the fading years of the Ottoman Empire, and the resettlement of millions of persons in the Stalin era of the Soviet Union are concisely described and analysed. Thus, demonstrating the power of states to provoke forced transfers of population that ranged from “reasonably orderly” to “brutal deportations” (p. 54).

Section III, on the “Misdeeds of Nature”, still focuses on forced migration but zeroes in on ecological and medical states as prime causes of significant population movements. Once again, the author seeks to show how climactic and bodily conditions are not only major concerns in the current world but were also evident in earlier periods of history, with varying degrees of public and scholarly recognition. On the one hand, he appraises the well-known exodus from the USA Dust Bowl in the 1930s and the similar effect of the Irish potato famine almost 100 years earlier as cases of natural trauma that provoked massive population upheavals within and across continents. And on the other, we are presented with illuminating less-familiar portrayals of drought in the 1870s in North Eastern Brazil and the effects of Malthusian overpopulation in Haiti since the 1940s, which had results of similar magnitude.

We get closer to home in Section IV, “Organised Migration”, where the author examines cases of migratory movements promoted by institutions—which might be “a lord, a corporation, a religious order or a state” (p. 77) who provide incentives and modes of travel for people to leave their homes. These vary greatly in intensity, motivation and impact, ranging from what might be called demographic engineering to economic and political expansionary aims. The former focuses on a small group of young women (the *Filles du Roi*) sent to Quebec by Louis XIV in the seventeenth century to procreate with male settlers to enable them more effectively to restrain and economically exploit the Indigenes and contend with British interests. Striking increases in fertility proved highly successful, at least for the monarch and his distant subjects. In contrast, the other cases stretched over much longer periods and territories with often far more expansive results. Extending over three centuries (beginning in the eleventh) the “drive to the East” of Germanic families in Europe (p. 78) demonstrates how religious and monarchical elites organised planned migrations that resulted in millions of people resettling. Similarly, Catherine the Great’s efforts to bring large tracts of land between the Rhine and the Volga under European influence are explored by examining her encouragement of large-scale German immigration in the eighteenth century.

As noted earlier, one of Livi-Bacci’s major themes is his stress on the relative recency and rarity of voluntary population movements in human history, although he fully acknowledges the lack of consensus on what constitutes freedom and unfreedom. This reappears as a key focus in the final section of the book, which addresses “Free Migration” (p. 103). This concept is exemplified, he argues, in the internal countryside-to-city migrations that could be seen in Europe in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, and more graphically, in the overseas mass migrations from Europe to the Americas, North and South, a century later, with parallel movement from East to West in the United States. Australian immigration only

gets a brief mention, but the author firmly demonstrates how the freedom to move across oceans and perceived “empty territories” (p. 125) is inextricably linked to the unfreedom of dispossession of earlier human inhabitants.

Of course, this fateful irony is still playing out politically in Aotearoa and beyond, and this is fully recognised in the author’s concluding “Reconsiderations”. The book has a memorable image on its cover, showing a newly arrived migrant family looking across at the Statue of Liberty on Ellis Island. Yet, this icon is a somewhat misleading portrayal of what this book is about. The author wants us to consider many examples of migration that we are less conversant with. He also reemphasises in his final pages that recent decades have seen personal motivations increasingly entangled with “rules that decide who is entitled to migrate, regardless of individual inclinations” (p. 133). As the author wryly notes, the highly politicised, often emotive and factually suspect assumptions that now influence public policy and personal opinions on international migration make estimations of success as difficult to judge as what is freedom.

Overall, does Livi-Bacci succeed in seeking to “prompt reflection” on these weighty questions (p. 129). *Over land and sea* is enhanced by an excellent translation, appealing illustrations and a pleasing lack of jargon and surfeit of numbers. This accessible survey of highly varied cases is aimed, in the very best sense, at non-specialist academic audiences and those apocryphal intelligent laypersons. Local students, despite the absence of Aotearoa New Zealand in the index, should benefit from its comparative focus. Doubtless, they will be encouraged to turn to other sources that sociologically analyse migration at greater length and depth (see, for example, De Haas, 2023), but this book is an engaging and thoughtful entrée which fully merits consideration for their course lists.

References

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