

Paolo Boccagni

María Eugenia Verdaguer, Class, Ethnicity, Gender and Latino Entrepreneurship. New York: Routledge, 2009, 215 pp.

(doi: 10.2383/32728)

Sociologica (ISSN 1971-8853)

Fascicolo 2, maggio-giugno 2010

Ente di afferenza:

()

Copyright © by Società editrice il Mulino, Bologna. Tutti i diritti sono riservati.
Per altre informazioni si veda <https://www.rivisteweb.it>

Licenza d'uso

Questo articolo è reso disponibile con licenza CC BY NC ND. Per altre informazioni si veda <https://www.rivisteweb.it/>

Book reviews

María Eugenia Verdaguer, *Class, Ethnicity, Gender and Latino Entrepreneurship*. New York: Routledge, 2009, 215 pp.

doi: 10.2383/32728

Latino immigrant entrepreneurship in a gender perspective is, even in the US, a relatively neglected topic. The book of Verdaguer marks a step ahead in this respect, by analyzing the entrepreneurial activities of relatively “new” Latino groups – Peruvian and Salvadoran immigrants – in the Greater Washington area. The author, herself a *Latina* immigrant with bilingual abilities, builds on a multi-method case study including several research stages: secondary census analysis, interviews to key informants, preliminary surveys to immigrant entrepreneurs and – more critically – in-depth interviews with a selected number of them.

Based also on an extended literature review, primarily concerned with economic and migration sociology, Verdaguer provides a systematic comparison of Peruvian and Salvadoran small-scale and non-employer enterprises, in four main respects:

1) The factors leading to self employment and business development in terms of personal motivations and skills, as well as of community endowments and external opportunities and constraints;

2) The ways in which they mobilize their differential economic, social, and cultural resources, thus redefining the social boundaries within their co-ethnic groups and vis-à-vis the mainstream society;

3) The role of their family and co-national social networks. This typically entails a gender division of labour whereby wage work may be a source of autonomy, no less than vulnerability, for migrant women;

4) The entrepreneurial behaviours and strategies they articulate. This includes access (however limited) to credit and financial institutions, along with labour hiring practices, management and marketing.

To put it very briefly, Verdaguer’s argument is that Washington Peruvian entrepreneurs have on average lesser ethnic-based resources (i.e. lesser intra-group cohesion, trust and reactive ethnicity), but a greater endowment of class-based resources (higher levels of human capital, acculturation and bridging social capital). The difference, she argues, “pave[s] the way for their [Peruvian] faster economic and social incorporation into American society, including their breaking away from ethnic niches into mainstream markets” [p. 165]. While stimulating, the point leads one to wonder whether any trade-off necessarily exists between class-based and ethnicity-based resources. However, rather than going into details on the differences she finds between Peruvian respondents and their Salvadoran counterparts, some remarks are worth making, here, on the author’s frame of analysis.

Verdaguer selects social class, ethnicity (in this case overlapping with *nationality*) and gender as key categories for her study, in the light of the local opportunity structure of the Washington area. The author examines, through the evidence provided by her rich fieldwork material, the concomitant effects of these three “structures of difference,” and of their “overlapping boundaries,” in immigrant entrepreneurial practices. While

the centrality – indeed, the intersectionality – of these dimensions is a major point, other independent variables have perhaps a lesser visibility than they would deserve. Relatively neglected is, for instance, the role played by immigrants' length of stay, by their societal reception and by their religious belonging and affiliations.

Now and then, it seems to me, the book errs on the side of social determinism. This is particularly evident in Verdaguer's approach to gender issues, which at some points results in a monolithically black-and-white account. Her emphasis on invariably fixed role ideologies and stereotypes, however (often) real, does not do justice to immigrants' scope for agency (nor, by the way, to the richness of their narratives). While blaming overarching "patriarchal gender ideologies" for gender-based inequalities, she seems to neglect that the differential opportunity structure, and gender-based discriminations in the host society may also have a stake. Sometimes the author tends also to present her field results in overdescriptive terms, following a mere "report of research" logic – rather than building on them for an original elaboration.

That said, quite appreciable is her contribution to a more nuanced understanding of ethnic minority entrepreneurship, both empirically sound and sensible to the selective and changing ways in which it is structurally and relationally embedded. The same applies to Verdaguer's accurate analysis of the reach, density and internal differentiation of entrepreneurs' social networks. Particularly rich and stimulating is, in my opinion, the author's critical analysis of Latino supposed panethnicity and co-ethnic solidarity. Once "deglamourized," migrants' relationships with co-nationals prove to be far more complex and ambivalent. While cases of mutual assistance obviously do exist, overall immigrant commercial practices seem to be perceived and enacted as a life sphere in its own right; one impervious to the social obligations that apply, rhetorically at least, to the day-to-day interactions with co-nationals overseas.

All in all, Verdaguer makes a convincing case for Peruvian and Salvadoran entrepreneurship as a source of personal empowerment as well as of survival and, to some degree, of economic advancement: self-employment "allowed men and women study participants to develop a deeper sense of belonging to American society, nurturing hope, self-confidence and motivation" [p. 5].

Paolo Boccagni
University of Trento