

Eduardo Barberis

Monica W. Varsanyi (ed.), **Taking Local Control. Immigration Policy Activism in U.S. Cities and States.** Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2010, 308 pp.

(doi: 10.2383/36910)

Sociologica (ISSN 1971-8853)

Fascicolo 1, gennaio-aprile 2012

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## Book reviews

**Monica W. Varsanyi (ed.), *Taking Local Control. Immigration Policy Activism in U.S. Cities and States*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2010, 308 pp.**

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This interesting book analyses the political and policy positions taken by state and local authorities in the U.S. in the field of immigration. Starting with Proposition 187 (1994), which aimed at denying undocumented foreigners access to welfare services in California, the authors show an escalation of local policy activism in a field that had been almost undisputedly under federal control for more than a century, notwithstanding the implementation variability that can happen in a country with a federal system of government. Such policy activism affects, directly or indirectly, not only immigrant policy (integration policy, welfare access, and the like), where the local role is widely acknowledged, but also immigration policy fields (entry conditions and legal status) that are usually under the responsibility – and not only in the U.S. – of central authorities. Whether it is (often) anti-immigrant – denying access to welfare or claiming collaboration with federal authorities to counter undocumented migration – or (rarely) pro-immigrant – issuing “sanctuary” ordinances stating noncooperation with federal immigration authorities – the outcome of these measures is a blurring of boundaries.

The editor, in her introductory chapter, considers three main and interwoven causes that the following chapters address in a more or less consistent way:

- Economic factors that increase push and pull factors for undocumented immigration;
- Demographic factors that drive settlement patterns toward new gateways, mainly Latino immigration toward rural and micropolitan areas, with an unprecedented phenomenon of spatial dispersal and visibility;
- Political factors, tied with security obsessions after 9/11 and an increase and devolution of control functions. It adds up to Congress' aphasia in passing new immigration reform, which opened up space in public arenas for political entrepreneurs building on fear.

After the introduction, the book is divided into four sections, authored by scholars with backgrounds in law, sociology, political science, geography, demography, and anthropology. The first section aims at providing a general overview of the governance of immigration policy between federal and local actors. In this respect, the most interesting contribution for an international audience is that of Mitnik and Halpern-Finnerty on inclusionary local policies, which links the issue of policy activism with the debate on state rescaling. Immigration policy has been linked to this debate quite recently, with an article written by Monica Varsanyi herself in 2008 in the *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* and another written by Glick-Schiller and Caglar in 2009 in the *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, later followed by an edited book published by Cornell University Press. Unfortunately, the latter is never cited in this book, a missed opportunity to elaborate more on a rising debate. Nevertheless, it is a quite relevant contribution because there was not only theorising on the issue but also

strong concern regarding policy instruments that put rescaling in immigration policy into practice.

The second section elaborates on devolution and grassroots policy activism, with particular attention to the pros, cons, consequences for local communities, and unintended consequences; the involvement of local authorities in the enforcement of federal immigration policies and the use of improper legal tools at the disposal of local governments (e.g., land use ordinances) increase the risk of racial profiling and discrimination and the loss of trust in local institutions. Furthermore, it can cause “venue shopping” (exploiting the postcode lottery of immigration policy regimes at the local level), leading to great ineffectiveness and inefficiency, at least from the national point of view, while at local level – as already highlighted by Ivan Light in *Deflecting Immigration* – ordinances can be effective in redirecting immigration flows away from areas where it has been becoming politically unsustainable.

The third section focuses on new gateways mentioned under the demographic factors above by examining four local case studies from Pennsylvania, North Carolina, Arizona, and Virginia. Notwithstanding their micro-focus, some local cases show interesting profiles since the authors were able to associate “sociographic” accounts with consistent generalisations and problematisations. For example, Fleury-Steiner and Longazel, studying community development in Hazleton, Pennsylvania, elaborated convincingly on the connections between discourses on “useful invaders” and anti-immigrant policies and backlashes in the framework of criminalisation consistent with the neoliberal disciplining of the labour force, working conditions, and wages.

Finally, the fourth section stresses political foundations and anti-immigrant discourses that framed local policies, sometimes returning to cases analysed in previous sections, approached from this particular point of view. Even though chapters in this section did not seem always very consistent with the general frame of the book, discourse analysis provided some specific insights into the legitimisation and implementation of anti-immigrant measures. In this respect, the term “illegal” is (not so surprisingly) loaded with a number of absolutised and dehumanising negative meanings and implications – a kind of door to chaos where diversity becomes the enemy and a challenge to the moral order of local communities.

The most interesting chapter in this section may be the one by Hinda Seif on drivers’ licenses in California due to the dataset used: the starting point is a state law requiring a Social Security number and proof of lawful immigration status to obtain a drivers’ licence – thus adversely affecting millions of undocumented migrants: in a decade, it was repealed and then re-enacted. Seif analysed a hundred letters of protest sent to a senator who opposed restrictive regulations on drivers’ licences; she tried to identify media influence on the oversimplification of immigrants’ labelling and restrictionist discourses.

To sum up, this book provided insight into the rising debate on local immigration policy and politics with a number of interesting and relevant cases and an analysis pointing toward the causes of new power balances and grassroots policy activism. Local measures were linked with changing state and federal legal, political and economic landscapes. However, the addition of a concluding chapter could have been very helpful in framing individual chapters into a general debate on state rescaling and immigration

policy-making and in widening the scope of such a rich effort: it could have been a chance to overcome U.S.-centrism and the risk of navel-gazing in micro-local cases and to put processes, mechanisms, and causes in context. In particular, such a chapter would have offered a chance to introduce to the debate the issue of legal frames and policy instruments, probably one of the most detailed focuses in every chapter of the book. A pity, since the editor handled these dimensions in a creative and penetrating way in her above-mentioned 2008 article, and this book could be a chance to further elaborate on that.

*Eduardo Barberis*  
Università di Urbino