Ethnographic Experiences Around Imagined Emigration

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Abstract

This article develops a theoretical and ethnographic analysis of the concept of imagined emigration, understood as the set of representations, narratives, aspirations, and symbolic projections that precede the migratory experience and provide it with social, moral, and biographical meaning. Far from conceiving migration solely as a physical displacement or an instrumental strategy, the text is grounded in the premise that every migratory experience is preceded by an intense imaginative process through which individuals shape expectations, construct horizons of possibility, and confer coherence upon their life trajectories.

Drawing on a reflection based on an ethnographic study conducted with young people in situations of vulnerability in northern Morocco, the article examines how the social imaginaries of emigration become an organizing principle of life projects, future expectations, and identity processes. These imaginaries not only guide the decision to migrate, but also shape specific ways of interpreting the present, resignifying precariousness, and projecting an alternative future marked by promises of social mobility, recognition, and dignity.

From a constructivist and interpretive perspective, grounded in the theory of social imaginaries, it is argued that migration cannot be understood exclusively as an automatic response to structural factors such as poverty, unemployment, or global inequality. Rather, the migratory decision emerges as the result of a complex ecology of meanings in which material conditions of precariousness, the circulation of narratives of migratory success, aspirations for social recognition, cultural models of success, and dynamics of youth socialization converge. Within this framework, the accounts of those who have migrated, media images, and indirect experiences of contact with Europe play a central role in the production and reproduction of migratory desire.

Imagined emigration thus operates as a symbolic device of orientation, compensation, and legitimation of action. It makes it possible to give meaning to waiting, justify risk, and resignify sacrifice, especially in contexts marked by the absence of immediate horizons, institutional fragility, and a lack of stable adult role models. In such scenarios, imagining migration becomes a way of inhabiting the present and sustaining hope, even when the actual possibility of migrating is uncertain or limited.

Keywords: social imaginaries, imagined emigration, ethnography, vulnerable youth, migration.

1. Introduction

Over recent decades, international migratory processes have become one of the most significant social phenomena for understanding contemporary transformations in terms of inequality, mobility, citizenship, and the production of subjectivities. The intensification of migratory flows, their increasing politicization, and their impact on both origin and destination societies have made migration a central object of analysis for disciplines such as sociology, anthropology, human geography, and political studies.

Traditionally, migration has been approached from structuralist perspectives focused on economic inequalities between countries, labor markets, demographic dynamics, and migration policies. These approaches have made it possible to identify key macrostructural factors, such as wage gaps, labor market segmentation, and border control regimes. However, they have also revealed important limitations in explaining why, in similar socioeconomic contexts, some individuals migrate while others do not, or why migration persists even when conditions in destination countries become increasingly precarious and the risks associated with mobility intensify.

In response to these limitations, various scholars have emphasized the need to incorporate the subjective and symbolic dimensions into the analysis of migration. From this perspective, migrating is not merely a rational decision aimed at maximizing economic benefits, but rather a process deeply mediated by aspirations, desires, expectations, and collective narratives of the future. As Carling and Collins (2018) argue, migration should be understood as the outcome of socially constructed aspirations that give meaning to mobility beyond its objective profitability and immediate material success.

Within this framework, migration is always, first and foremost, imagined. Before becoming a lived experience, emigration is configured as a project, a promise, and a horizon of possibility. Imagined emigration does not constitute a merely instrumental preliminary stage or a simple moment of planning, but rather a central process in the construction of life projects. This process is particularly relevant among youth populations in situations of vulnerability, for whom opportunities for social, labor, and educational integration appear severely limited.

In such contexts, migration often emerges as one of the few imaginable ways out of material precariousness, the absence of stable employment opportunities, the fragility of family ties, and the lack of social recognition. Imagining emigration makes it possible to articulate a coherent narrative about the future, give meaning to waiting, and transform the experience of exclusion into a project imbued with hope and moral legitimacy (Diz, Leiva, & Matas, 2020).

This article aims to analyze ethnographic experiences surrounding imagined emigration based on a study conducted with young people in situations of vulnerability in the city of Tetouan, in northern Morocco. Although the text adopts a fundamentally theoretical orientation, it draws on the interpretive density of ethnographic work to develop a conceptual reflection on the role of social imaginaries in shaping migratory projects. Ethnography is not presented here merely as a source of empirical data, but as an epistemological anchor that enables an understanding of how imaginaries become embodied in everyday practices, discourses, and experiences.

The main objective of the article is to demonstrate that emigration cannot be understood solely as a response to structural factors, but rather as a complex symbolic construction that articulates aspirations, biographical narratives, and identity processes. To this end, the text is structured into six sections: a theoretical framework on social imaginaries, a discussion of migratory imaginaries, a methodological reflection on the ethnographic approach, an analysis of imagined emigration as a symbolic horizon, a discussion of identity and masculinity, and a final section of conclusions.

2. Theoretical Framework: Social Imaginaries and the Production of Meaning

2.1. Genealogy of the Concept of Social Imaginaries

The concept of social imaginaries occupies a central place in contemporary social sciences as a means of explaining how human collectives produce meaning, interpret reality, and orient action. Its origins can be traced back to classical sociology, particularly to the work of Émile Durkheim, who emphasized that collective representations constitute a fundamental element of social life by functioning as shared interpretive frameworks that transcend individual actors.

However, the most influential and systematic formulation of the concept is attributed to Cornelius Castoriadis. For this author, society cannot be reduced to a functional system or to a set of objective relations determined by the economy or instrumental rationality. Rather, society is instituted through imaginary

significations that create worlds of meaning and make social life possible (Castoriadis, 1975). These significations do not reflect a pre-existing reality; instead, they actively produce it by delimiting what a society considers real, legitimate, desirable, and possible.

Castoriadis distinguishes between the instituting imaginary and the instituted imaginary. The instituting imaginary refers to society's creative capacity to generate new significations and transform the existing order, whereas the instituted imaginary refers to those significations that have become stabilized, naturalized, and turned into unquestionable evidence (Diz, 2018). This distinction is key to understanding how certain migratory imaginaries become consolidated and acquire normative force, even when the material conditions that sustain them are fragile, contradictory, or subject to change.

Within the Spanish-speaking academic context, Pintos (2000) develops an operative perspective on social imaginaries, defining them as shared perceptual schemes that enable individuals to interpret reality and orient their action. From this viewpoint, imaginaries function as cognitive and symbolic filters that organize social experience, hierarchize values, establish expectations, and delimit horizons of possibility. They are therefore not mere ideas or beliefs, but rather deep structures of meaning that directly shape social practices.

2.2. Imaginaries, Aspirations, and Social Action

One of the fundamental contributions of social imaginary theory lies in its emphasis on the relationship between signification and action (Diz, 2019). Far from conceiving social action as the exclusive outcome of rational interests or structural constraints, this approach highlights the central role of subjective interpretations, collective narratives, and future-oriented projections in shaping action.

Action is thus configured as a situated process in which individuals evaluate their present circumstances in light of imagined horizons. In this regard, Appadurai (2004) introduces the notion of the capacity to aspire in order to emphasize that aspirations are not individual attributes or mere personal preferences, but culturally distributed capacities deeply influenced by social conditions and the symbolic repertoires available to individuals. The ability to imagine a different future depends, to a large extent, on the cultural and narrative frameworks to which subjects have access.

In contexts of precariousness and social exclusion, imaginaries acquire a particularly significant compensatory function. They make it possible to project alternative futures when the present appears blocked, acting both as drivers of action and as sources of meaning. As Carling and Schewel (2018) point out, migratory aspirations arise from the interaction between socially constructed desires and actual capacities to act, rather than from a simple rational evaluation of objective opportunities. In this way, migration is configured as a practice imbued with meaning, in which the desire for mobility expresses not only a search for material improvement, but also a demand for recognition and belonging.

3. Migratory Imaginaries and Imagined Emigration

3.1. Migration as a Symbolic Project

The notion of migratory imaginaries has been widely developed in contemporary migration studies in order to understand why human mobility persists even in contexts of high restriction, risk, and precariousness. In contrast to explanations based exclusively on economic or structural factors, numerous scholars have shown that migration is always preceded by a process of social imagination through which individuals construct images of the destination, anticipate trajectories of improvement, and attribute moral, identity-related, and emotional meanings to mobility (De Haas, 2021).

From this perspective, migrating does not constitute merely a reactive response to poverty or unemployment, but rather a symbolic project imbued with meaning. Imagined emigration is configured as a horizon of possibility that allows individuals to reorganize their experience of the present and project a desirable future. This horizon is not limited to expectations of material improvement, but also incorporates aspirations for social recognition, personal autonomy, and identity transformation. In many cases,

migrating means "becoming someone," gaining access to a socially valued position and escaping identities associated with marginality or failure.

Within this framework, Europe appears less as a concrete geographical space than as a symbol that condenses multiple meanings. It is represented as a place of modernity, dignity, rights, and opportunities, in contrast to a context of origin perceived as blocked or lacking a future. This symbolic construction depends less on detailed knowledge of actual living conditions in destination countries than on the circulation of idealized images that reinforce the promise of social mobility.

In northern Morocco, these imaginaries acquire a particular intensity. Geographical proximity to Europe, a shared colonial history, and the density of transnational migratory networks contribute to the deep integration of migration into the collective imaginary. The border is not perceived merely as a physical limit, but as a symbolic threshold between two radically different worlds. In this context, narratives of success from those who have migrated—often amplified and stylized—play a central role in the reproduction of migratory desire.

Digital social networks intensify this process by facilitating the constant circulation of images of consumption, narratives of prosperity, and scenes of everyday life in Europe that reinforce the idea that mobility is not only possible, but necessary. Even when these representations are partial or idealized, their symbolic effectiveness lies in their capacity to offer a coherent narrative of the future capable of sustaining the migratory project in the face of uncertainty.

3.2. Circulation of Narratives and the Normalization of Migratory Desire

Migratory imaginaries are not produced individually or spontaneously, but rather through collective processes of narrative circulation. Stories of success, images of consumption, accounts of rewarded sacrifice, and rumors about employment opportunities form a symbolic repertoire that legitimizes emigration as a viable and desirable option (Pintos, 2000). These narratives function as interpretive frameworks that make mobility meaningful and reduce perceptions of risk.

The effectiveness of these narratives does not depend on their statistical representativeness, but on their ability to generate identification and provide aspirational models. A small number of successful stories can have a disproportionate impact on the collective imagination, especially when they are repeatedly circulated across different social spaces. Narrative reiteration contributes to the naturalization of emigration as a normative horizon, transforming it into a socially shared expectation rather than an exceptional decision.

Even when negative experiences are known—such as migratory failure, labor exploitation, or legal precariousness—they tend to be reinterpreted as exceptions, individual errors, or necessary trials preceding success. This process of reinterpretation makes it possible to preserve the coherence of the migratory imaginary and to prevent its deep questioning. Migration continues to be conceived as a legitimate, albeit risky, gamble whose failure does not invalidate the symbolic promise that sustains it.

In contexts of youth socialization, peer groups play a central role in the production, validation, and reproduction of these imaginaries. Everyday conversations, jokes, shared stories, and constant comparisons between those who have migrated and those who remain reinforce the idea that mobility is a marker of ambition, courage, and determination. In this sense, not migrating may be perceived as a sign of lack of initiative or resignation.

The normalization of migratory desire also entails a reconfiguration of the social value of risk. Willingness to assume dangers—such as crossing borders, incurring debt, or accepting precarious working conditions—is resignified as evidence of commitment to the migratory project and as a marker of maturity. In this way, the migratory imaginary not only orients action, but also establishes moral criteria for its evaluation.

4. Methodological Approach and Ethnographic Experience

4.1. Interpretive Epistemology and Ethnography

The analysis developed in this article is grounded in an interpretive and constructivist epistemology that conceives social reality as a construction of shared meanings. From this perspective, the aim of research is not to establish universal causal relationships or identify statistical regularities, but rather to understand the frameworks of meaning through which individuals interpret their experience and orient their action.

The study of social imaginaries requires methodologies capable of capturing symbolic, emotional, and relational dimensions that are not always expressed explicitly. In this regard, ethnography constitutes a privileged tool, as it enables prolonged immersion in participants' life contexts and provides situated access to their everyday practices. Participant observation, cohabitation, and attentive listening to informal discourse facilitate the identification of implicit meanings that rarely emerge in structured interviews (Diz & Braña, 2017).

Ethnography makes it possible to observe how imaginaries become embodied in gestures, silences, jokes, everyday rituals, and fragmented narratives. Imagined emigration does not necessarily appear as an explicit plan, but rather as a constant presence that structures conversations, expectations, and evaluations of the future. This diffuse and omnipresent character of the migratory imaginary reinforces the relevance of the ethnographic approach for its analysis.

4.2. Vulnerable Youth and the Construction of the Future

The ethnographic research underpinning this reflection was conducted in a residential care facility for young people in situations of vulnerability in the city of Tetouan. Prolonged coexistence made it possible to identify the centrality of migration in young people's future projections, even when it was not articulated as an immediate or clearly defined plan (Diz, Felipe, & Buenaño, 2020).

The absence of short-term horizons, material precariousness, and the fragility of adult reference figures configure a context in which the future appears uncertain and weakly structured. In this scenario, emigration becomes a space of symbolic compensation that allows young people to project a future identity that is socially recognized and valued. Imagining migration does not necessarily imply having the resources to carry it out, but rather keeping open the possibility of a different future.

Imagined emigration thus fulfills a function of temporal ordering. It allows individuals to organize the present in relation to an anticipated future, to give meaning to waiting, and to justify current sacrifices. Even when migration does not materialize, its imaginary continues to operate as an organizing principle of expectations and aspirations.

4.3. Emigration, Identity, and Masculinity

One of the central elements of migratory imaginaries is their articulation with identity processes, particularly with regard to youth masculinity. In various contexts across the Maghreb, irregular migration has been interpreted as a test of courage, endurance, and determination, closely associated with the transition to adulthood.

Emigration is thus configured as a symbolic rite of passage in which risk, sacrifice, and the capacity to withstand adversity acquire moral value. For young people in situations of vulnerability, this rite of passage offers an alternative pathway to adult status, especially when other transitions—such as stable employment, economic independence, or formal education—appear blocked or inaccessible.

Migratory success is not measured solely in economic terms, but also in the ability to have "endured" the migratory process. Even the mere attempt to migrate may be valued as an act of courage, reinforcing the symbolic centrality of emigration in the construction of masculinity.

4.4. Imaginaries, Experience, and Disenchantment

Migration literature has extensively documented the gap between imaginaries formed in contexts of origin and the realities encountered in destination countries. Sayad (2010) describes this gap as a "double

absence," in which the migrant becomes trapped between the illusions of the place of origin and the difficulties of the host country.

However, this tension does not necessarily lead to the disappearance of migratory imaginaries. On the contrary, negative experiences tend to be reinterpreted in ways that preserve the coherence of the migratory project. Failure may be attributed to individual circumstances, bad luck, or strategic mistakes, without questioning the symbolic value of migration itself.

This capacity for reinterpretation confirms that imaginaries are not primarily oriented toward describing reality, but toward endowing it with meaning. Imagined emigration persists even in the face of disenchantment, functioning as an interpretive framework that allows individuals to resignify experience and keep the promise of mobility open (Monteros & Diz, 2017).

Conclusions

The analysis developed throughout this article highlights the significant analytical power of the concept of imagined emigration for understanding the migratory projects of young people in situations of social vulnerability. Far from conceiving migration solely as a reactive response to adverse structural conditions, the study has shown that mobility is configured, first and foremost, as a symbolic horizon that organizes expectations, aspirations, and biographical narratives. In contexts marked by precariousness, uncertainty, and the absence of immediate opportunities, imagined emigration makes it possible to project alternative futures, give meaning to the present, and sustain the hope of a possible life transformation.

Migration thus emerges not only as a geographical displacement, but as a process deeply linked to the construction of identity and to the meaning of one's own life trajectory. For the young people analyzed, imagining emigration involves redefining who they are and who they might become, articulating life projects that combine desires for material improvement with aspirations for social recognition, dignity, and belonging. In this sense, imagined emigration functions as a symbolic device that allows the experience of exclusion to be resignified and transformed into a future-oriented narrative endowed with moral legitimacy.

From a theoretical standpoint, the social imaginaries approach proves particularly fruitful for integrating subjective and structural dimensions in the analysis of migration. By attending to the frameworks of meaning that orient action, this approach makes it possible to move beyond reductionist explanations focused exclusively on economic or demographic factors, showing how material conditions are interpreted, filtered, and resignified through shared collective imaginaries. Migration thus appears as the outcome of an ecology of meanings in which aspirations, narratives, social relations, and structural constraints interact.

Methodologically, the article has demonstrated the value of ethnography as a privileged tool for the study of migratory imaginaries. Prolonged immersion in young people's life contexts allows for the capture of symbolic, emotional, and relational dimensions that rarely emerge in more standardized approaches. Ethnography makes it possible to observe how imagined emigration is manifested not only in explicit discourse, but also in everyday practices, silences, gestures, and ways of anticipating the future, thereby providing a deeper and more situated understanding of the migratory experience.

Finally, recognizing the centrality of imagined emigration has significant implications for the design of public policies and social intervention strategies. Understanding migration as an imagined phenomenon requires rethinking youth- and mobility-oriented policies from a perspective that goes beyond deterrence or flow control. Ignoring the imaginaries that orient young people's migratory projects may lead to interventions that are disconnected from the subjects' own frameworks of meaning. By contrast, expanding the range of life horizons available in contexts of origin—through real opportunities for education, participation, and recognition—constitutes a fundamental condition for offering meaningful alternatives to emigration conceived as the only possible way out.

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