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Robert C. Kloosterman

13 Mixed Embeddedness Re-assembled

Abstract: Mixed embeddedness has been an important approach in the field of migrant entrepreneurship research in the past two decades. In these two decades, both the societal context and the field itself have changed. This contribution aims to provide a few building blocks for a reflection on these changes and their implications for the mixed embeddedness approach. It starts with a brief positioning of mixed embeddedness. It then sketches the transformation of the societal context that has impacted on patterns of migrant entrepreneurship, thereby distinguishing between changes on the supply side – the (aspiring) migrant entrepreneurs – and those on the demand side or opportunity structure. This is followed by observations regarding the field of research itself which has expanded and has become much more diverse. It concludes by suggesting how the basic model of mixed embeddedness can be used to address transnational migrant entrepreneurship and also proposes to explore the opportunity structure.

Keywords: Migrant entrepreneurship, mixed embeddedness, opportunity structure, cognitive-cultural economy, migration

The Lay of the Land

Only a few decades ago, the lay of the land of the field of migrant entrepreneurship research was relatively easy to map. There were just a handful of researchers; at first mostly from the United States and the United Kingdom, later on also from a small number of other countries in the North. These researchers were chiefly looking at migrant entrepreneurs from the South who had set up shop in the North. It was also very much a small and, arguably, also somewhat isolated niche which, according to your viewpoint, either fruitfully straddled different social science disciplines or fell in between in some kind of no-man's land. Initially, the field was dominated by anthropologists highlighting *ethnic* aspects of the migrant entrepreneurs, somewhat later on sociologists and geographers entered the debate emphasizing, in their turn, the role of class and place (Kloosterman & Rath, 2003).

The societal context of migrant entrepreneurship in the 1980s can, with some exaggeration, also be summarized (Kloosterman & Rath, 2018). On the supply side, there were migrants from former colonies or who came as guest workers. These migrants were typically not well endowed with financial and human capital. The latter because either they were lacking formal educational qualifications or their qualifications from

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the country of origin were not recognized in the country of settlement, limiting their chances on the job market and also access to opportunities for businesses. These entrepreneurs often compensated for this by putting in long hours and, hence, exploiting themselves, and, frequently, their families and co-ethnics. They typically also deployed their social capital to get access to funding, connect to suppliers, and obtain strategic information on markets, and also on the prevailing regime of rules and regulations in their place of settlement.

On the demand side, the opportunity structure, the rise of migrant entrepreneurship in countries in the global North occurred against the backdrop of a fundamental process of transformation in many cities. These cities went through an interrelated demographic and economic transition in the 1970s and 1980s. Suburbanization of middle-class families, restructuring of retailing, as well as deindustrialization impacted on the urban economy and, hence, also on the opportunities for businesses. Migrant entrepreneurs were first and foremost to be found in vacancy-chain types of businesses such as bakeries, groceries, cheap restaurants with, on the one hand, relatively low barriers to entry which, on the other, also often resulted in fierce competition in terms of pricing (Kloosterman, 2010). Researchers, accordingly, situated migrant entrepreneurs in these contexts and explored how they coped with cities in decline and how they perceived and exploited opportunities that nevertheless arose.

This, admittedly, rather simplified vignette of the field of migrant entrepreneurship research, has very much become a thing of the past. The topic of the research itself has altered as the societal context has fundamentally changed, both in terms of the supply side – the composition of population of migrant entrepreneurs – and the demand side or opportunity structure. Many cities around the globe have (re)gained population, notably through migration, both domestic and cross-border. Cities have also shifted to a diverse palette of knowledge-intensive economic activities with a strong growth potential and which are typically part of global value chains (Scott, 2017).

The group of researchers looking at these migrant entrepreneurs has not only sharply increased, but has also become much more diverse and now includes a considerable number from the South. As Alaa Hamieh (2023, p. 47) has observed: “[g]lobal interest has developed in the phenomenon of immigrant entrepreneurship”. This development is obviously related to a significant broadening of the geographical scope way beyond cities in the North. Hundreds of articles on migrant entrepreneurship have been published in the past decade (Dheer, 2018; Hamieh, 2023). In addition, the field has become much more institutionalized with, for instance, large conferences on migrant entrepreneurship and centres like the Centre for Research in Ethnic Minority Entrepreneurship (CREME) in Birmingham. A burgeoning global community of researchers (including many juniors) has evolved around the topic. Likewise, the societal context has fundamentally changed, both in terms of the supply side – the composition of the population of migrant entrepreneurs – and the demand side or opportunity structure.

Below is, first, a brief positioning of the mixed embeddedness approach within this shifting field of migrant entrepreneurship research (see section “A Brief Positioning of

Mixed Embeddedness”). This is followed by a very basic overview of changes in the overall context which can be seen as relevant from a mixed embeddedness perspective (see section “A Changing Context”). The next section presents a short reflection on the field of research and how this has responded to these societal transformations based on various recent literature overviews. The final section provides a repositioning of mixed embeddedness and suggests a few new avenues of research.

Given the rapid expansion of the field in the past decades, there is no pretension here of an exhaustive overview of the current literature, nor of a comprehensive analysis of global urban change. The intention, instead, is to offer some building blocks for investigating current forms of migrant entrepreneurship.

A Brief Positioning of Mixed Embeddedness

The mixed embeddedness approach was developed in the late 1990s to grasp the development of migrant entrepreneurship in the Netherlands. In many Dutch cities, migrant-run shops had become ever more visible, and this prompted the question of whether entrepreneurship could function as an avenue of upward mobility for migrants (Kloosterman, van der Leun & Rath, 1999). A crucial point of departure for the mixed embeddedness approach was the interactionist model presented by Roger Waldinger et al., (1990) in their jointly authored book, *Ethnic Entrepreneurs: Immigrant Businesses in Industrial Societies* (Kloosterman & Rath, 2018). This interactionist model, to quote Craig Mitchell (2015, p. 45), has “acted as a benchmark upon which the mixed embeddedness perspective has been elaborated and developed”. Whereas earlier approaches to migrant entrepreneurship focused on the entrepreneurs and their resources (human, financial, and/or social and cultural capital), or zoomed in on the structural conditions (e.g., discrimination) pushing migrants towards entrepreneurship, this interactionist model enabled an analysis of patterns of migrant entrepreneurship as the outcome of the interplay between agency and structure. In addition, Waldinger et al. (1990) were keen to stress that opportunities for migrant entrepreneurs are not solely to be found in ethnic enclaves which may generate demand for specific ethnic products giving migrant entrepreneurs an edge over indigenous suppliers, but also in more mainstream markets deemed less attractive by the indigenous entrepreneurs thereby creating opportunities for immigrants. These latter opportunities – vacancy-chain opportunities – typically arise when indigenous (or longer established migrant) entrepreneurs opt out of market segments where competition is fierce and rewards are low.

Looking at what was happening in the larger Dutch cities at the turn of the century, it was obvious that this view of the opportunity structure could not capture the evolving patterns of migrant entrepreneurship of that time. What we were seeing were not just migrants exploiting vacancy-chain or ethnic enclave openings, we also observed migrants starting businesses as, for instance, consultants for small firms,

computer specialists, or in fashion design. Moreover, the rules and regulations regarding employment, self-employment, and social benefits impacting both on the set of choices for migrants and the opportunity structure were (partly) contingent on the national framework. In addition, urban economies clearly generated a much broader set of opportunities. What was needed in our view was to link the concept of the opportunity structure to the wider context – both on the scale of the national institutional framework and on that of the urban economy (Kloosterman & Rath, 2001). For the first component, we were very much inspired by the comparative political economy framework developed by Esping-Andersen (1990, 1999). Building blocks for the transformation of urban economies were notably provided by Sassen (1990, 2001) and, at a later stage, Scott (2008, 2012, 2017). Mixed embeddedness thus became multi-scalar with embeddedness in a specific national framework on a macro-level; in a specific urban economy on the meso-level; and in social networks on a micro-level.

The mixed embeddedness approach was later schematically presented in a 2×2 matrix model (Kloosterman, 2010). The two main dimensions of this model were, on the one hand, the level of human capital to capture the resources of the entrepreneurs, and the growth potential of the market segments to grasp the opportunity structure (see Figure 13.1). Migrants could set up shop in structurally growing market segments outside more narrow ethnic markets. This, however, it was assumed, required knowledge of mainstream markets which necessitated more heterogeneous social networks. The model also allowed for dynamics: entrepreneurs could start in vacancy-chain openings, but move to more sunlit uplands by acquiring more knowledge of mainstream markets. This model was intended as a tool and, obviously, not as a perfect mirror of reality.

In a recent overview of academic articles on migrant entrepreneurship, Alaa Hamieh (2023, p. 54) summarizes this as follows:

In mixed embeddedness theory, the research takes into account both the structure of opportunities and the players acting in a particular setting (immigrant entrepreneurs). Therefore, this idea includes socially entrenched actors, the market, and the institutional framework of the host nation. Mixed embeddedness is a concept or research norm that both coordinates the activities of researchers and permits multiple interpretations; it is nondeterministic.

The mixed embeddedness approach has become a widely used approach in the field of migrant entrepreneurship research (Aytar & Rath, 2012; Aliaga-Isla & Rialp, 2013; Ma et al., 2013; Jones et al., 2014; Mitchell, 2015; Dheer, 2018; Jones et al., 2018; Kloosterman & Rath, 2018, Hamieh, 2023). According to Ratan Dheer (2018, pp. 5–8), in his thoughtful analytical overview, mixed embeddedness combines four analytically distinct key aspects of migrant entrepreneurship as distinguished by (i) the opportunities, (ii) “enterprising individuals” (the resources of the migrant entrepreneurs), (iii) the environment (the wider socio-cultural and institutional context), and (iv) “the modes of organizing” (business strategies) in systematic but non-deterministic way (Hamieh, 2023).

< Growth potential >			
< Human capital >		Stagnating	Expanding
		High thresholds	
Low threshold	Vacancy-chain openings	"Servile" activities	

Figure 13.1: A typology of the opportunity structure: markets split according to accessibility and growth potential.

Source: Kloosterman (2010, p. 10).

Because of this openness, the model can be used for a wide variety of settings of entrepreneurship and not just those of migrants (cf. Cunningham & Tolonen, 2017). What, then, are the consequences of the more recent changes impacting on migrant entrepreneurship both on the supply side and on the demand side or opportunity structure?

A Changing Context

From a mixed embedded perspective, it makes sense to look at two main developments. We start with the potential supply of migrant entrepreneurs. According to De Haas et al. (2019, p. 888), migration has gone up in terms of absolute numbers, but not as a share of the global population, for which it remained fairly stable, fluctuating between 2.7% and 3.3%, between 1960 and 2017. If we zoom in on a lower level of spatial aggregation, the picture becomes more nuanced. De Haas et al. (2019, p. 893) observe “a trend toward greater concentration of international migrants in a limited number of major migration destinations . . . Migrants from an increasingly diverse array of non-European origin countries have concentrated in a relatively small and shrinking pool of prime destination countries predominantly located in western Europe, North America, and the Gulf” (cf. Czaika & de Haas, 2014). Within these prime destination countries, migrants first flock to larger or gateway cities where there are already established migrant communities and, moreover, opportunities for getting a job and starting a business. These cities have become much more diverse in terms of

region of origin, nationality, ethnicity, religion, and economic, social, and cultural resources, and they tend to display the rich palette of migrants that Vertovec has dubbed superdiversity (2007).

In their overview of international migration trends, De Haas et al. (2019, p. 891) also point to changes in the levels of human capital of the migrants. Their skill levels have gone up, reflecting an overall increase in education levels worldwide, but this increase is also related to “the growing demand for skilled labor in the highly specialized and segmented labor markets of middle- and high-income countries” (De Haas et al., 2019, p. 891). Notwithstanding this overall trend towards a rise in human capital of migrants, even in these middle- and high-income countries, there is still a considerable demand for lower-skilled activities in agriculture, construction, catering, and domestic and care work which creates opportunities for migrants as workers and as entrepreneurs (Czaika & De Haas, 2014).

In conjunction with these demographic shifts, we can also observe changes in the economic structure of many cities. Driven by an unextractable combination of technological change (ICT), institutional changes (part of a widespread political program of neoliberalism: liberalization of trade, deregulation, and privatization); accelerated processes of globalization and unbundling of value chains, increasing financialization; and socio-cultural changes (emancipation, individualization, and informalization), a new urban landscape has arisen in advanced cities in the global North and South. Allen Scott (2008, 2012, 2017) has analysed the emergence of these cognitive-cultural urban economies on a global scale. These urban economies form part of global production networks, and their competitiveness is rooted in highly specialized (hard-to-copy) knowledge in activities such as high tech, high finance, high concept (e.g., consultancy and law), high-craft (e.g., fashion design), and high care (health care in a broader sense). These activities are not just global in the sense of catering to international markets, they are also global in employing high-skilled workers from abroad – often on a temporary basis. These so-called expats leading economic sectors of these cities are nowadays not just high-skilled workers from high-income countries, but they can also be from middle-income countries moving to jobs elsewhere (Kloosterman, 2014).

The emergence of cultural-cognitive urban economies is not just about leading sectors. We can also observe a rising demand for a whole raft of services to sustain and maintain the leading sectors either directly by providing services to firms in the leading sectors (e.g., surveillance, cleaning) or by doing that for highly paid workers in these activities who outsource (part) of their social reproduction (e.g., preparation of food, shopping, caring).

What we see, then, is a more polarized opportunity structure with opportunities at the high end of the distribution, where, typically, formal educational qualifications are needed (e.g., a degree in law, economics or medicine) and a set of opportunities at the low end, which also typically do not require such qualifications. The latter often take place as part of the gig economy where the border between regular employment

and self-employment is often vague as employers try to shift the risk (and self-management) to the workers (e.g., Uber).

This dual opportunity structure is in itself nothing new. The fact that high-skilled migrants from the South now can start a business in a leading cognitive-cultural sector somewhere else is rather more of a departure. In addition, not just the competitive basis of advanced cities has changed, there are also other contextual factors that have increased opportunities or made it easier for migrants to start a business. Deregulation has made starting a firm, notably for migrants, much easier in many countries. In addition, the decrease in costs of both cross-border transport and communication has made it easier for migrants to keep in touch with their region of origin and maintain links with networks there. Furthermore, not just (super)diversity in an ethnic sense, but also more general processes of individualization have created myriad niche markets that cater a wide range of subcultures by providing identity-sensitive goods and service such as vegan food, forms of leisure (e.g., music or yoga), or special clothing (e.g., dance or gothic). Migrants may be able to exploit these niches as they might possess specific product knowledge and they may also be able to convey a specific sense of identity especially when it comes to selling of foodstuffs.

With the emergence of cognitive-creative urban economies, an integrated ecosystem with opportunities for entrepreneurs with poor resources as well as entrepreneurs with more abundant resources has evolved. This duality is also reflected in the composition of the migration flows. Migrant entrepreneurs can thus be located at both ends of the distribution of the opportunity structure. It may make sense to transpose the dual labour market theory into a dual entrepreneurship theory. The intersection of demographic and economic changes can be observed in many cities not just in the Global North, but increasingly also in cities in the Global East and South (Wang, 2012; Tranos et al., 2015; Dheer, 2018; Kloosterman & Rath, 2018). These changes, though, may play out very differently, given the composition of the migrant population in terms of resources and, evidently, the embeddedness in the wider structures of these urban economies and the national contexts. That's in a nutshell, what mixed embeddedness is about.

Changes in the Field of Research on Migrant Entrepreneurship

The number of studies is rising rather rapidly and one might even argue that the study of migrant entrepreneurship is evolving into a more or less distinct interdisciplinary academic field with an increasing intellectual influence (Dheer, 2018). At several stages of this development, authors have provided overviews and meta-analyses of the ever-growing body of literature on migrant and ethnic entrepreneurship (Waldinger et al., 1990; Light & Gold, 2000, Kloosterman & Rath, 2003; Panayiotopoulos,

2006; Dana, 2007; Nestorowicz, 2011; Wang, 2012; Aliaga-Isla & Rialp 2013; Mitchell, 2015; Dheer 2018; Wiers & Chabaud, 2019; Hamieh, 2023). Many of these overviews point to the broadening of the geographical scope of the growing field of migrant entrepreneurship, but they also highlight other characteristics.

First, extensive empirical research in many countries has shown that migrant entrepreneurs are anything but a relic of the past, nor can they be seen solely as just a defensive and temporary response to job loss due to deindustrialization. On the contrary, in many cases, migrant entrepreneurship has been depicted very much as part and parcel of the socio-economic fabric of advanced cities. Migrant entrepreneurs provide essential services both to other firms and to the general public based on their specific endowment of resources. The mixed embeddedness approach helps to explain their role in advanced urban economies by highlighting how they are able to match the arising opportunities with their resources.

Second, the development of the field of migrant entrepreneurship has shown not just a broadening of the geographical horizon but also the involvement of a widening range of scientific disciplines (Kloosterman & Rath, 2003; Wang, 2012; Aliaga-Isla & Rialp, 2013; Dheer, 2018). The “discovery” and subsequent establishment of migrant entrepreneurship as an important research object in advanced cities was very much the work of sociologists (in the United States and Western Europe) and anthropologists and geographers (mainly in Western Europe). The field of migrant entrepreneurship increasingly also involves other scientific disciplines such as economics, political science and policy studies, (social) psychology, history, as well as business and management studies. This broadening of the disciplinary base of the field of migrant entrepreneurship is also reflected in the increasing number of publications on migrant entrepreneurship in academic journals with different disciplinary orientations (Aliaga-Isla & Rialp, 2013; Dheer, 2018; Wiers & Chabaud, 2019; Hamieh, 2023).

Third, with the field of migrant entrepreneurship studies becoming more multi-disciplinary, we can also observe an increase in the diversity of theoretical lenses. Aliaga-Isla and Rialp (2013, p. 19) in their overview distinguish no fewer than 17 distinct theoretical approaches, whereas Hamieh (2023) distinguishes 6 “theoretical underpinnings” (theories focusing on capital, embeddedness, intersectionality, institutions, cultural frameworks, and migration). This pluralism, inevitably, also brings a large variety in topics and research questions related to migrants and their businesses, methodologies, and methods. We find quantitative studies based on data from institutional organizations and/or self-collected data, but we also come across qualitative studies based on semi-structured interviews with respondents found through, for instance, the census, chamber of commerce registers, fieldwork observation, and the yellow pages (Aliaga-Isla & Rialp, 2013).

Fourth, there has been an increasing interest in transnational ties (Katila & Wahlbeck, 2012; Ambrosini, 2012; Guercini et al., 2017; Bolzani & Foo, 2018). Migrant entrepreneurs basically embody globalization. As Drori et al. (2009) have noted, exploring migrant entrepreneurship can contribute to a better grasp of processes of globaliza-

tion more generally. With the marked rise in cross-border linkages, they can, in principle, fulfil strategic roles in connecting the various parts of value chains located in different places by utilizing their social networks, language skills, and specific knowledge of at least two (if not more, given the increase in diasporas) settings.

Fifth, with the development of migrant entrepreneurship as a mature and separate, multidisciplinary field, we can also observe the emergence of subthemes. These subthemes can be based on characteristics of the migrant entrepreneurs, such as female migrant entrepreneurship (cf. Humbert & Essersybura et al., 2018) or refugee entrepreneurship (Freiling & Harima, 2019; Ram et al., 2022). It can also be based on a particular sector, for instance, their role in cultural industries (Brandellero, 2009).

Sixth, whereas the field of migrant entrepreneurship has evolved into a distinct field of research, the connection between migrant entrepreneurship research and general management business literature is still rather limited. This, according to Dheer (2018, p. 8), “may also reflect the bias and limited openness of mainstream management journals towards appreciating unique theoretical perspectives from other disciplines”.

Mixed Embeddedness Re-assembled

Mixed embeddedness has opened up a new way of looking at migrant entrepreneurship. Combining different strands of insights from sociology, geography, and comparative political economy, it presents a non-determinist approach to comprehend patterns of migrant entrepreneurship in a variety of contexts. In my view, it can still generate important insights by connecting structural conditions to individual agency. Matching opportunities with resources is at the very core of entrepreneurship. I do disagree, then, with Wiers and Chabaud (2022, p. 457), who state “that the last seminal field concept – the mixed embeddedness theory – has lost contemporary applicability but at the same time encourage scholars to extend on its structuralist merits toward frameworks that capture the magnitude of contextual multifocality in shaping the phenomenon”. It seems to me, though, that it makes much sense to link the mixed embeddedness model to other theoretical approaches to explain specific phenomena. The genesis of mixed embeddedness has been of pluralistic assemblage, and there is no reason why other conceptual elements cannot be latched onto it.

The rise of transnational migrant entrepreneurship, for instance, can be viewed by using a mixed embeddedness lens which is linked to the global production network approach which has been developed by Coe and Yeung (2015). They emphasize the role of different kinds of embeddedness (social, territorial, and institutional) to comprehend how and why various phases of the value chain are located in different places (which may be located on different continents). Each of these places has its own distinct opportunity structure which (migrant or otherwise) entrepreneurs may

seek to exploit using their particular set of resources. Both territorial and the institutional embeddedness are clearly rooted, but the social networks may become crucial in initiating, organizing, and managing the transnational network. The mixed embeddedness approach still departs very much from a more nationally contained way of migrant entrepreneurship, but embeddedness in concrete places has become no less relevant with the rise of transnationalism.

Another example of such a conceptual extension would be to delve much deeper into entrepreneurship strategies. The mixed embeddedness model obviously has room for such strategies, but this element is clearly underdeveloped. It would be interesting to explore which strategies migrant entrepreneurs pursue to construct and maintain their social networks, what the composition of the network looks like, what aims they have when building these networks, and how they benefit from them or are even constrained by them in running their businesses (Elfring et al., 2021). This would deepen the understanding of how social capital is transferred, generated, and utilized. Which type of social capital (along dimensions of family/relatives, cultural distance, ethnic backgrounds, physical distance/proximity, and transnational/cognitive distance) would be crucial in which phase?

Another interesting avenue of future research would be to investigate how openings or opportunities are discovered – not just when starting a business, but also when looking for opportunities to expand an existing one. What determines this scan of the opportunity structure? Which resources are relevant in this discovery process? This can also be linked to the dynamics of niche markets in highly fragmented urban societies. There are notably many examples of food – from döner to boba tea and from falafel to hummus – that have jumped out of particular ethnic niches into mainstream markets (and have, in part, been appropriated by mainstream businesses).

Many articles on migrant entrepreneurship conclude with suggestions for future research and above are a few of mine. The field of migrant entrepreneurship has fortunately become much more diverse – in terms of gender, origin, disciplinary background, object of research, and place. It has also, maybe because of this diversity, maintained its openness and curiosity and not fallen into the trap of prioritizing moral posturing over doing actual research. The mixed embeddedness model has, I tend to think, contributed to this field, by proposing new questions and suggesting new relationships, though it is certainly not the be-all end-all of migrant entrepreneurship research.

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