

Book Review

Sheila M. Puffer, Daniel J. McCarthy and Daniel M. Satinsky
Hammer and Silicon: The Soviet Diaspora in the US Innovation Economy – Immigration, Innovation, Institutions, Imprinting, and Identity
Cambridge, UK; Cambridge University Press, 2018

Reviewed by Howard A. Doughty

1.

Diasporas come and go. Some are prompted by physical threats from either internal or external powers and result in mass escapes by refugees and asylum-seekers. Examples include the United Empire Loyalists fleeing the American Revolution after 1783, Hungarian insurrectionists running from Soviet tanks at the close of their abortive uprising in 1956, Vietnamese “boat-people” abandoning their homeland following the US withdrawal from Southeast Asia in 1975, the contemporary dispersion of various peoples because of civil strife in Somalia and Syria, and religious minorities seeking refuge from discrimination and worse—the Bahá’i from Iran, the Rohingya from Burma, the Huguenots who came to England in 1608 and the members of the English Separatist Church (the radical Puritans or “pilgrims”) who, claiming religious persecution, left England for the City of Leiden in the Netherlands in 1607 and then decamped for North America, heaving up upon the much-venerated Plymouth Rock in 1620 where they established the Massachusetts Bay Colony and promptly started persecuting their own dissenters—amply demonstrating that intolerance is not a one-way street.

The British Empire, where the Sun never set, and the blood never dried.

– Ernest Jones, 1851

Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free,
The wretched refuse of your teeming shore.

– Emma Lazarus, 1883

Other diasporas appear in the form of vast imperial expansion, colonization, settlement and at least temporary domination by metropolitan countries. One example is the Spanish Empire. It began in earnest in the sixteenth-century and led to the presence of over 300 million people of Spanish heritage in the Americas and 30 million more in the Philippines. Even greater was the British Empire—sometimes divided into various phases arguably beginning with first plantation economy in Ireland in the twelfth century, but fully taking off in the Elizabethan era, pivoting on the loss of the American colonies in 1783, and coming to its full fruition in the Victorian age—before collapsing in the twentieth century as the United Kingdom “won” two World Wars, but paid the price by losing its “great power” status. Thereafter, it has languished as a middling (but still nuclear-armed) collection of islands just off the coast of Europe. Its once

glorious flag, the Union Jack, is now firmly planted on just a few dependencies— the detritus of world domination. In the process of winning and losing an immense world-wide imperial order, however, Great Britain sponsored massive movements of people from the British Isles to occupy parts of North America, Africa, Southern and Southeast Asia and too many islands to tally in the Caribbean Sea as well as the Atlantic, Pacific and Indian Oceans. Its language and mementoes of its culture remain. Even remnants of its legal heritage of “common law” and “parliamentary government” linger more-or-less intact even after the unsettling process of decolonization.

Still other diasporas are encouraged either by the positive economic lure of security and prosperity abroad or by the negative pressure of poverty in stagnant or declining economies at home. They not only involve movements from country to country and continent to continent, but also from rural areas to cities within nations and regions. Again in the United Kingdom provides a clear example: from the onset of mercantile capitalism, local populations were deemed to be impediments to development and “cleared” from common, ancestral lands in Scotland (Prebble, 1968), while others were declared redundant to the requirements of the “reserve army of unemployed” (Engels, 1844) during the Industrial Revolution in England and “shoveled out” as paupers to distant colonies (Johnston, 1972).

"None is too many" – response given by an unnamed high-level Canadian government official when asked how many Jews should be accepted into the Canada in 1939.
– Irving Abella & Harold Troper, 2012

“Canada has succeeded—culturally, politically, economically—because of our diversity, not in spite of it.”
–Justin Trudeau, 2015

In all such cases, the adventure of emigration was undertaken with a fluid mixture of optimism and desperation. Such “push” and “pull” variables were also in play in the enormous evacuation of Europe in the decades following World War II, and the imperial “human blowback” of people from the Caribbean and Southeast Asia (whether Vietnam, Hong Kong or the Philippines) to North America in the late-twentieth and early twenty-first centuries.

Diasporas are nothing new. They have helped define the evolution of our species since time immemorial. Perhaps the largest and least recognized of these were the movements out of Africa in a series of waves that took place as our earliest known ancestors occupied Europe, Asia and the Americas many tens of thousands of years ago. Antiquity’s most prominent recorded examples include the several movements of Jews, whether in the eighth, sixth or first centuries BCE, or in their modern flight from Germany and Austria in the 1930s. All count as illustrations of the dynamics of diaspora, as does the “negation of the diaspora” in Zionism, the related Palestinian claim of “right of return,” and the multiple suggestions that were made by and to the descendents of African-American slaves to repair back to Africa in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries. The largest contemporary diaspora, of course, involves at least 50 million Chinese and well over 200 million people of Chinese descent now living in Southeast Asia, North America, Europe, South Africa, the Philippines, Indonesia, Australia and New Zealand.

Although it is fair to say that most mass migrations are not easily or willingly undertaken, diasporas can be experienced and understood as positive or negative (but seldom neutral)

events—both in the perception of the people who are migrating and the sensitivities of the people whose lands they are entering. Imperialism, nationalism and tribalism being what they are, migrants may impose themselves on indigenous cultures and ruthlessly exploit, enslave or even try (though rarely successfully) to exterminate them; or, they may be treated with scepticism sinking to disdain, hostility, rejection and violent attempts to expel them by indigenous populations that resent their intrusion either as conquerors or as unwanted interlopers allegedly undermining the economy or the cultural, ethno-religious or racial “purity” of the country into which they have moved. Whichever set of attitudes prevails, of course, will reflect the power relations and demographic balances between the immigrants and the “host” populations. What cannot be disputed, however, is that huge dislocations, relocations and mixings of human populations are predictable and inescapable. Whether they are voluntary or involuntary and whether they are induced by economic demands and distress, regional or geopolitical conflict, or growing ecological degradation and anthropogenic climate change are contingent variables. Looking ahead, it is plain that these movements as well as efforts to resist or repel them are destined to increase with growing tensions and the need to respond creatively to them being among the foreseeable results.

2.

Not all attitudes toward immigration, of course, are fraught with fear and foreboding. There are many among us who genuinely delight in the pleasures of diversity, the value of multiculturalism and the tensile strength that social complexity provides in a rapidly changing world. And, if that is not enough, there are many more who at least realize that modern economies require increasing populations to provide labour and domestic markets for the dominant (albeit ultimately cancerous) late capitalist economies (McMurtry, 2013).

The “push” factors of religious persecution, political oppression and economic hardships in many “sending countries” persist. But, if the first six years are any indication, the “pull” factors of family reunification, economic opportunity and well-established immigrant networks will be the dominant motivations of the 21st century.

– Patricia Hatch

The limited carrying capacity of the planet and the consequent constraints both on economic and population growth notwithstanding, it is obvious that current rates of natural population increase are declining in many advanced societies. So, despite the disturbing increases in anti-immigrant sentiments in the United States, parts of Europe and elsewhere, the serious questions facing policy makers are not *how to disrupt or delay* the inevitable by crude and cruel obstructions to migration, but *how to accommodate and enhance* what is prettily called the “immigration experience” by innovative policy options that are both reasonable and humane.

Especially today, when the humanitarian crises in the Middle and the Near East, North and Central Africa, and parts of Central America are causing tremendous apprehension, pain and death, it is at least superficially consoling to pick up a book that does not dwell on the tragedies of departure, the hardships of arrival and the many social, cultural and political obstacles that can make life miserable for migrants at the beginning, the middle and the end of their journeys.

3.

Hammer and Silicon is not without its mentions of adversity, but it is mainly about the courage, ambition and ultimate success of a small portion of the estimated over one million current immigrants to the United States (US Census Bureau, 2015). Not only are we introduced to over 150 individuals who emigrated from the failing Union of Soviet Socialist Republics and post-Soviet states (mostly from Russia and Ukraine), but we also learn snippet and summaries of their stories of success in brief, anecdotal and encapsulated forms. We are thus treated to an inventory of accomplishment not only for the migrants, but for the communities which they have joined. True, some find their travel to the United States to have been a mistake and return home, but the large majority cannot lose for winning.

There are few stories of people being attacked or undermined for their strange accents, their exotic cuisine or their alien ideas. No one has to spend multiple generations moving from depressed ghettos to the respectable working classes and eventually to full acceptance, assimilation and advancement. No one is seriously tempted to join or to create organized crime syndicates in order to parallel the class structure of legitimate society as was the case with previous waves of immigrants including the Irish and the Italians. None of these people is lured into the “Russian mafia,” notable in South Florida and in Brighton Beach.

<p>It is time to begin moving towards a merit-based immigration system—one that admits people who are skilled, who want to work, who will contribute to our society, and who will love and respect our country</p> <p>– Donald J. Trump, 2018</p>

The book is not a fantasy. It represents a roster of real people making real contributions to the American economy and society. Its authors are not only much impressed with their subjects, but they are also committed to the idea that xenophobia is a mark of weakness. Immigrants, they seldom fail to remind us, are positive assets in any nation with hopes for maintaining and increasing prosperity. Discrimination and prejudice are not just moral failings; we are led to conclude that they are bad policies and bad practices in political economies seeking to thrive in the twenty-first centuries. They therefore take pains to caution against nativist concerns and anti-Russian sentiments. They worry about the possibility that the United States may revert to a restrictive immigration policy. They want everyone to get along.

The authors allocate their subjects to three main chronological/contextual categories: (1972-1986) during the stagnation of the USSR under the likes of Brezhnev, Andropov and Chernenko when most managed to escape anti-Semitism despite severe restrictions on emigration in the decades before the implosion of the USSR and who remain possessed of ultra-conservative views (Khazan, 2016); (1986-1999) during the disruptive transition under Gorbachev and the semi-controlled chaos under Yeltsin following the dissolution of the Soviet system; and (2000-2015) the current era dominated by Vladimir Putin. Each period presents its own circumstances and problems. The authors do a creditable job of outlining the living conditions—educational, economic, and social—and the political/legal constrictions on the Russian people in general, but mostly upon the rather select group which has now chosen to relocate in the United States.

The 157 subjects of the book are mainly well-educated professionals destined to enjoy the free pursuit of happiness as well-compensated corporate employees doing meaningful work or as entrepreneurs taking advantage of good opportunities for high technology start-ups. They have mainly collected around high-tech hubs in or near Cambridge, Massachusetts and San Francisco, California. They are seekers of success in situations where they can, in stark contrast to their experience in their homelands, live the American immigrant dream. If they experience restrictions, it seems that they are largely self-imposed: early immigrants, we are told, “must still erase that could have occurred during their time in the former USSR ... [especially] experiences [that] often muted creativity and taking responsibility and thus stifled entrepreneurship.” For those with the wit, the will, the flexibility and the gumption, there is a plain path to prosperity.

Russia doesn't make anything. Immigrants aren't rushing to Moscow in search of opportunity.
– Barack Obama, 2014

[Obama's] comments on a lack of immigrants in Moscow revealed a blind spot—immigrants *have* been rushing to Moscow for the last twenty years. If there are no jobs in Uzbekistan or Kyrgyzstan, trying your luck in Russia is likely your best option.
– Mary Elizabeth Malinkin, 2014

In the course of the book, we meet biotechnologists, pharmacologists and medical product inventors. We encounter software, Internet and IT developers. We hear the words of (mostly young) company founders and venture capitalists. We are also treated to short excerpts from in-depth interviews with private sector executives and academics who have found places in large public and private institutions and who are advancing the interests of themselves, their employers and, presumeably, the greater public good. The pattern is unique in some respects, but the overall narrative is generally positive. Like other immigrants, they face difficulties and overcome them. Complications arise, but they are resolved. Unlike many others, however, the silicon migrants do not encounter multi-generational discrimination. They are largely “fast-tracked” to comparative success.

4.

Hammer and Silicon does not stop with a litany of inspiring and reassuring stories. Puffer, McCarthy and Satinsky also want their readers to understand their reports of personal mini-sagas in a larger, more social scientifically astute narrative. The authors have excellent backgrounds and qualifications for such a project. Sheila M. Puffer brought formidable qualifications as an academic expert on Russian business practices to her position as University Distinguished Professor, Professor of International Business and Strategy at Northeastern University's D'Amore-McKim School of Business and an affiliate of Harvard University's Davis Center for Russian and Eurasian Studies. Daniel J. McCarthy holds a similar position at Northeastern and is likewise affiliated with the Davis Center. Combined, Puffer and McCarthy can boast close to 300 academic and professional publications. In addition, Daniel M. Satinsky is an attorney, business consultant and an independent scholar, also associated with the Davis Center. They make an impressive, well-connected team.

The authors helpfully explain their title by reminding us that the “Soviet hammer of industry and sickle of agriculture were the symbolic representation of the forced transformation that turned the Russian Empire of the nineteenth-century czars into a world power.” This, they say, was a “technological threat” to the United States, which cleverly responded with the silicon chip. When the USSR unexpectedly managed to launch the first orbital satellite in 1957—a scant forty years after the first Russian revolution—it was, they tell us, “the impetus for ... increasing government spending to accelerate technology that depended on semiconductors” which, in turn, sparked the “technological explosion [that] enabled the United States to leapfrog over the Soviet Union and, in many respects, contributed to the USSR’s economic demise.”

Problematic as that historical account might be, it certainly sets the stage for authors to structure their description and explanation of the post-Soviet silicon diaspora. Not only, it seems, did the USA use its technological advantage to smite the “evil empire,” but it seems to have cashed in on the “spoils of war” in the form of enticing some of the best and brightest post-communist innovators to seek their personal fortunes in the most technologically advanced centres of the most powerful empire that the world has yet seen.

You don’t have to be Khrushchev’s granddaughter to feel the pain from watching Trump’s daily destruction of *our* deal with America: tolerance, democracy, decency. In the age of Trump, we are America’s Trojan horse, Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde, Raskolnikov and Svidrigailov in one person. If the Russians didn’t exist, it would have been a good idea to invent us.

– Anastasia Edel, 2016

5.

Puffer, McCarthy and Satinsky take pains to present a “theory” that purports to account for the nature and impact of the silicon migrants on the USA. In her “Foreword,” AnnaLee Saxenian says that the book is “a model of social science research, but its subject matter would make a great novel. She may have said more than she knew. *Hammer and Silicon* is actually built on more of a low-energy conceptual scheme with a taxonomic turn than a powerful explanatory theory. That is to say, the authors cobble together some alliterative language in a five-part linking of themes; namely, “immigration, innovation, institutions, imprinting and identity.” Institutional theory, imprinting theory, and identity theory are all applied in the effort to “analyze” immigration and innovation. This is well and good if the objective is to provide some handy labels or even some organizing devices to arrange the montage of memories and perspectives that the interviewees provide. The result, however, falls far short of anything approaching a “scientific” inquiry. The result, therefore, is an interesting, informative inventory of personal optics and opinions that lacks the rigour evident in serious studies elsewhere (e.g. Robinson, 2013), much less the basis for drawing any convincing conclusions from the combination of author-generated descriptions of the approaches they took when interviewing their subjects.

The approaches themselves are rather obviously value-laden. The authors begin with an “overview of the fundamental components of the Soviet system and its institutions and explains how they were catalysts for emigration through the inequities and other issues of discontent experienced by many talented professionals and intellectuals.” Knowing what they intended to

find, it mustn't have been difficult to find it. So, they report "how interviewees evolved from being objects acted on by the Soviet system to becoming persons of action based on their own fundamental beliefs or values..." This seems to be as much an assumption as a finding.

This is not to say that the research is valueless, that their work is irredeemably tainted, or even that their conclusions are necessarily wrong. It is, however, a little pretentious to call this social "science." Rather, it falls within the elastic category of subjective, interpretive and possibly even hermeneutical inquiry that can yield impressionistic, qualitative insights without bringing the requirements of elementary empirical techniques. Such loose methodology invites the accusation that the researchers were (as the lawyers say) "leading the witnesses." They appear to have established a formula and shaped their interviews to fill in the blanks of an already structured set of possible replies. Indeed, in some places, quotations seem to have been selected chiefly for the purpose of illustrating a point being made by the authors.

This is also not to disparage the interviewees who may have had their perceptions, recollections and opinions faithfully represented by the authors and might well agree in whole or in large part with the account as presented. Some of their stories of suppression, repression, immediate dangers and harrowing escapes are genuinely gripping and emotionally uplifting. The problem, however, is that there is no way to verify, dispute or falsify the more general claims made by the authors. This is a problem inherent in wide-ranging, in-depth interviews when we are not permitted to see the interview schedules, transcripts or any other evidentiary basis for the research as reported. It results in what, in this case, is an elegant exercise in confirmation bias.

<p>When the Berlin Wall came down and everyone was saying democracy is coming to the East. I said, "I don't think it's going to happen that way. I don't think this is such a good idea." - Leonard Cohen 1993</p>
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Confirmation bias is the predisposition to seek out, interpret and report information that confirms pre-existing presumptions and beliefs. It is a cognitive bias in the collection and arrangement of information and a fallacy of inductive reasoning. In making this criticism, I am *not* imputing bad faith or ill intent. What is at work here is no different from what shows up in almost any personal biography, case study or other piece of research that is not performed under strict experimental conditions or after meticulous and exhaustive aggregate data collection. And even then, implicit "values" are apt to shape our observations and our assembly and arrangement of "facts." There is nothing wrong with such endeavours, as long as they are seen for what they are, and what they are is something other and something less than scientific.

If, then, we were to consider this book and the many thousands of others like it that present themselves as scientific or even just as factual, dispassionate descriptions, explanations or "analyses" of events and trends in society as akin to barristers' briefs intending to persuade us of the veracity of an account in support of some larger interest than as a laboratory report on a topic prepared by a disinterested technician, we could assess them with due diligence and appropriate scepticism. Again, this is certainly not to imply academic or any other dishonesty—merely a lack of sufficient rigour that makes the reader want to reach out for additional (not "alternative") facts and a more cogent, coherent theory to test.

6.

There is, I think, more to this “story” than appears here and the “story” itself is surely embedded in a larger context than appears in *Hammer and Silicon*—some part of which begs an inquiry into the more complex, sometimes contradictory and sometimes complementary technological, business and political relations between Russia and the United States that are increasingly apparent today. I am not suggesting that the interview transcripts be subpoenaed by the Mueller inquiry, but there is more at issue than even the most evocative and often heroic personal stories of individuals taken up by the desire to expand their horizons and be free.

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