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Remitting subjects: migrants, money and states

Ester Hernandez and Susan Bibler Coutin

Abstract

Scholars' and policy-makers' interest in the remittances that migrants send home to relatives has increased dramatically in the past two decades. Focusing on remittances from the United States to El Salvador, we examine how academic studies, public discourse, and state accounting practices simultaneously produce and reveal the nature of this phenomenon. By treating the money that migrants send home as both national resource and foreign currency, central banks and international financial institutions define remittances as a 'cost-free' source of national income. Further, debates about remittances' social and economic impact focus on whether remitting promotes or undermines particular values associated with neoliberalism, such as self-sufficiency, entrepreneurship and empowerment. Our analysis thus sheds light on new configurations through which money, states and migrant citizens are linked.

Keywords: migration; remittances; accounting; El Salvador; the United States.

In the past two decades, academic interest in the remittances that migrants send home to family members and communities has increased dramatically. Originally used to estimate the size of immigrant populations (Gamio 1930) or to assess migrants' commitment to home versus host countries (Piore 1979), remittances have become the focus of a new set of questions about the costs and benefits of migration itself. Analysts have observed that, as numbers of migrants have increased in the wake of economic restructuring plans, remittances have injected currency into cash-starved economies and have

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become critical to national financial plans. Debates have arisen over whether remittances foster dependency or autonomy, promote development or consumerism, and fuel the banking industry or the black market. Remittances seem to be the result of individual or household-level decisions, yet they are treated as both a national resource and as foreign donations. Though migration can entail financial deprivation and physical danger, remittances have been depicted as 'cost free', a bonanza for states that are seeking to stabilize their economies. Remittances – and the labour through which they are generated – are claimed by nations, yet remittances arise through the transnationalization of families, communities and countries (Baker-Cristales 2004; Hernandez 2002; Hochschild 2000; Hondagneu-Sotelo 2001). Remittances have been described as impossible to quantify accurately, and yet calculations of world-wide remittance transfers abound. What explains these contradictory claims?

To answer this question, we interrogate the academic and policy discourse surrounding remittances, focusing on how this phenomenon is defined, measured and evaluated. Our interest in 'expert' discourses of various sorts derives from the idea that characteristics (in this case, of remittances) are simultaneously *intrinsic* in that they emerge when measured and *extrinsic* in that, without studies or assessments of various sorts, goods would not have particular qualities (Callon 1998; Callon *et al*. 2002). Thus, analyses of remittances both assess and help to define remitting. Moreover, 'qualities...have the strange characteristic of being constituent of the good but nonetheless reconfigurable' (Callon *et al*. 2002: 200). Remittances, for example, are positioned and repositioned in relation to other sources of currency, other forms of income, other strategies for development. Examining processes of qualification and re-qualification sheds light not only on remitting, but also on the societies, nations, families, international financial systems and citizens that are produced as remittances are assessed. As Hacking has noted, 'Enumeration requires categorization, and...defining new classes of people for the purposes of statistics has consequences for the ways in which we conceive of others and think of our own possibilities and potentialities' (1990: 6). Here, we focus on three puzzles that shape debates about these possibilities and potentialities: first, how is it that remittances are considered to be both foreign and national, both donations and export income? Second, what makes remittances, which are produced through great sacrifice, appear to states as a cost-free source of income? And, third, why do debates about remittances' societal impact cluster around an axis of autonomy and dependency, rather than, say, social justice and exploitation? Our answers to these questions locate analyses of remitting within a strange intersection of neoliberal economic strategies and grass-roots empowerment efforts.

Our analysis of remittance discourse is based not only on our reading of academic and policy literature but also on our familiarity with the case of El Salvador, where each of us has conducted research. From 1999 to 2001, Ester Hernandez (2002) analysed the relationship between transnational familial ties, legal status, remittance behaviour and discourse about the role of remittances in El Salvador. From 2000 to 2002, Susan Coutin investigated ways that policies devised by US immigration authorities and Salvadoran diplomats incorporated Salvadoran immigrants into the United States and El Salvador.[1] In addition, the two of us conducted a joint research trip to El Salvador in March 2001. This paper grew out of our observation that remittances were at the heart of claims about the significance of the expatriate Salvadoran community to El Salvador. Broader policy debates about remittances are therefore very much alive within El Salvador.

The first section of our paper analyses the dual nature of remittances as both national resources and foreign donations. The second section examines national and international accounting procedures, identifying the practices that count in the calculation of remittances. The third section considers how assessments of remittances' societal impact are related to notions of subjectivity associated with neoliberalism. Throughout, we use discourse surrounding remittances to analyse the new configurations through which money, states and migrant citizens are linked.

International resources and the politics of comparison

A recent article in *Foreign Policy* opens with the following teaser:

> Every day, migrants working in rich countries send money to their families in the developing world. It's just a few hundred dollars here, a few hundred dollars there. But last year, these remittances added up to $80 billion, outstripping foreign aid and ranking as one of the biggest sources of foreign exchange for poor countries.
>
> (Kapur and McHale 2003: 49)

This powerful comparison may dazzle readers, producing a reaction of 'Wow!' A few hundred dollars here and there are aggregated, turned into a world-wide flow and compared to foreign aid, thus transforming the money migrants send their families into a source of foreign exchange for nations.[2] Such comparisons are now commonplace. To give another example, Díaz-Briquets and Pérez-López write: 'This flow [of remittances worldwide] is second in size only to the financial transactions associated with crude oil world trade and exceeds global development assistance' (1997: 411). Treating remittances as akin to foreign aid and export income creates financial possibilities and pitfalls that have come to intrigue scholars and policy-makers.[3] It was only in the mid-1980s, however, that it became common for central banks and international financial institutions to list remittances in balance of payment statements (Chami *et al*. 2003). Excitement about remittances' potentialities therefore arose in a particular context; namely the late-twentieth-century debt and currency crises that in turn provoked structural adjustment programmes on the parts of poorer nations. This context gave remittances new visibility and imbued remittances with dual characters as national yet foreign, as the return on a national product *and* as a gift from other nations (cf. Tsing 2000).

Foreign currency – particularly, strong currencies, such as the US dollar – became a scarce commodity during the 1970s and 1980s, as poor nations reeled from the effects of deep indebtedness. Civil conflicts and military campaigns had drained numerous national treasuries even as authoritarian governments fed elite financial interests. Development schemas, such as the green revolution of the 1960s, made national economies more dependent on the global market, causing crises when prices of a key commodity, such as coffee or sugar, plummeted. Rampant inflation rates in certain countries, such as Argentina, led citizens to convert national currency into a more stable foreign currency, when possible. Countries that found themselves on the 'periphery' (Kearney 1986) found it increasingly difficult to make loan payments. To avert a world-wide crisis, international financial institutions, such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF), World Bank and Interamerican Development Bank (Banco Interamericano de Desarrollo, or BID) intervened, allowing governments to renegotiate loan payments and secure additional funds in exchange for implementing structural adjustment or 'austerity' programmes. Such programmes reduced government spending on social programmes, established new financial priorities (e.g. building infrastructure), promoted the privatization of state enterprises and sought to attract foreign investment. Welfare increasingly became a private matter, as citizens were encouraged to 'do for themselves'.

Neoliberal economic policies focused new attention on the possibility that remittances might play a significant role in national development, or at least national solvency. Structural adjustment programmes contributed to increased migration, as social services were cut and as sometimes short-lived assembly plants owned by foreign or international corporations displaced workers from other, more sustainable positions (Ong 1987). Increased foreign investment also drew workers abroad by exposing them to new employment opportunities in their foreign employers' countries of origin (Sassen 1989). Although the amount of remittances sent by workers from different countries varies (Menjívar *et al*. 1998), more migration generally creates the potential for more remittances, particularly if family members who remain behind face worsening economic circumstances and diminished prospects of state assistance. An influential series of studies by Díaz and Weintraub (see 1991) – supported, ironically, by 1986 Immigration Reform and Control Act funding for research on ways to deter immigration – concluded that the most consistent way to increase remittances was to encourage remitters to use 'official channels' (Baver 1995). During the 1980s, central banks began to track remittances more carefully, and governments reformed banking and exchange laws so that a greater proportion of remittances would pass through official sources (Díaz-Briquets and Pérez-López 1997; Kapur and McHale 2003). Reforms included 'allowing the free convertibility of financial flows, permitting migrants to open local convertible currencies bank accounts, removing bureaucratic impediments, maintaining appropriate monetary and exchange rates policies, making accessible safe economic and efficient transfer mechanisms, and providing a safe and secure economic environment' (Díaz-Briquets and Pérez-López 1997: 415). Reportedly, there was a worldwide boom in remittances during the 1990s, although it is not clear whether the amount of money transferred actually increased or whether reforms simply permitted banks to record a larger percentage of these transactions (Gammeltoft 2002; Kapur and McHale 2003).[4] Regardless, states benefited as the quantity of recorded remittances increased (García 1994, 1997). Claiming remittances as a national resource nationalizes migrant labour in several ways. First, labour is treated as an export, akin to other national products. Remittances then become the return that nations receive in exchange for exporting labour. J. E. Taylor explicates this idea: 'If one considers labour as an export, then remittances are the part of the payment for exporting labour services that returns to the country of origin' (1999: 67). Such 'exporting' may be official or *de facto*. When official, nations and companies or other governments reach agreements that specify quotas of workers to be sent, wages, working conditions, length of employment and compensation for the exporting nation (Athukorala 1992). When *de facto*, workers themselves leave their country of origin to secure employment elsewhere, sometimes travelling without immigration documents and often working in highly exploitative conditions. In such cases, the costs of migration – costs that include paying smugglers' fees, risking physical danger, enduring painful family separations, living in substandard housing – are borne by the migrant rather than by the 'exporting' nation. As we shall see in the next section, however, though national balance of payment statements normally deduct the costs of exports from the profits, in the case of remittances, these costs are not recorded.

Second, migrant labour is nationalized through the claim that nations 'own' the labour of their citizenries. This notion of ownership is implicit in the following quote from an article on remittances:

> If highly skilled migrants are more likely to establish permanent ties abroad and less likely to remit funds home, or to remit smaller amounts, then sending countries experience a double deprivation: not only do they lose valuable human capital; they do not receive a return flow of capital to compensate the loss.
>
> (Taylor *et al*. 1996: 192–3)

In this quote, it is assumed that nations have some claim on the 'human capital' of their citizens, and therefore have a right to compensation in the form of remittances should that labour be 'lost'. Assuming that nations are entitled to a 'return' on this human capital displaces the sale of labour from the labourer to the nation to whom the labourer is presumably indebted. Inserting the nation into this exchange suggests that, much like exported coffee, 'exported' workers have national essences.

Third, migrant labour is nationalized through the notion of investment. According to this notion, nations invest in workers through the educational systems, by providing food and shelter, and by enabling families to flourish. Having 'invested' in the worker, they therefore have a right to expect some return. In the literature on remittances, the family is often depicted as the unit that explicitly invests in migrants. For example, in a RAND report, Asch and Reichmann write: 'The family pays for the education of the family member so that the individual can emigrate and send remittances as a payback to the family' (1994: 36; see also Lianos 1997; Lucas and Stark 1985; Schiller *et al.* 1995). Attaching impoverished migrants to the nation through remittances thus compensates for this investment.[5] By calculating labour revenue, states simultaneously produce national economic indicators *and* national resources.

The financial context in which remittances assumed global significance grants remittances a double character: in addition to being produced through the export of labour, a presumed *national* product, they are considered to be *foreign* in origin and therefore resemble donations that arrive as 'gifts' rather than as products of an exchange. Thus, Orozco *et al.* write: 'Compared to foreign aid, remittances have exceeded the official amounts of U.S. assistance to [Latin American] countries' (1997: 54, translation ours). Similarly, Durand *et al.* praise remitters as the most egalitarian of foreign donors:

> Unlike other sources of foreign exchange, migradollars flow directly to the people who need them the most, without being filtered through intervening social and economic structures. . . .The $2 billion sent each year by poor migrants working in the United States goes directly to households at the bottom of Mexico's economic pyramid.
>
> (Durand *et al.* 1996: 441)

Comparing remittances to foreign aid suggests that this currency simply arrives, much as a river irrigates land. In fact, in the literature on remittances, uses of the term 'flow' abound. For instance, Massey and Parrado write: 'According to our results, 24.4 million dollars in US funds flowed into. . .communities' (1994: 18).[6]

As quasi-donations, remittances are sometimes treated as products of *love* rather than of *labour*. Critiquing contract theories of remittance obligations, Lianos writes: 'How is the existence of family related to remittances? One answer could simply be love' (1997: 75). Families are not the only entities presumed to be the objects of migrants' love. In a report commissioned by the OECD, Libercier and Schneider assert:

> The strong economic links emigrants maintain with their home region are the principal manifestation of attachment to their communities. Whatever the form and nature of their transfers and contributions, this is a way for emigrants to show their solidarity and support to all those who have stayed in the home country.
>
> (Libercier and Schneider 1996: 43)

As products of love, remittances are altruistic gifts, rather than the return on a prior exchange often over-determined by economic need (Hernandez 2002).

Comparing remittances to foreign aid elevates these exchanges to the level of state transactions, and permits governments to claim credit for generating remittances. After the January and February 2001 Salvadoran earthquake, both US and Salvadoran authorities hailed the conferral of Temporary Protected Status (TPS) on Salvadorans living in the United States as a means of enabling these migrants to send remittances to earthquake victims. Salvadoran newspapers added estimates of these remittances to the totals of foreign assistance that Salvadoran officials had secured from Spain and other countries for earthquake victims. During a March 2001 interview, a US embassy official confirmed that migrant remittances were considered part of the assistance that the United States provided to El Salvador: 'That's right. It's [TPS is] part of the foreign aid packet. And I think that TPS is going to be beyond what they are receiving through other forms of assistance that are being provided. It's the most important thing that we could have done.' If temporary legal status becomes part of an 'aid package', then both the US and Salvadoran government can claim some credit for exchanges that do not actually transfer state revenues and that result from an initially unauthorized movement of people. Thus, in 2004, faced with the prospect that a leftist candidate might win the Salvadoran presidency, US Congressional Representative Thomas Tancredo commented: 'It may be necessary for the United States authorities to examine closely and possibly apply special controls to the flow of $2 billion in remittances from the United States to El Salvador' (US House of Representatives 2004: E389). Such comments imply that migrants are, in a sense, acting as agents of foreign governments. These comments also suggest that the United States can determine the appropriate 'deserving' government to receive the aid that the US claims to be distributing via migrants.

Claims that remittances are akin to international aid elide questions about how remittances have come to substitute for some amount of foreign assistance, serve as alternatives to formal loans and even play a role in empowering or challenging governments. Further, the migrants who are sending this assistance are not often permitted to migrate legally. El Salvador has no formal guest worker agreement with the US, but the volume of unauthorized migration is high, most migration is unauthorized and migrants who earn the least and who have the most precarious legal status are likely to remit the most (Hernandez 2002; Mountz *et al*. 2002). Remittances may well be a fringe benefit of producing *illicit* migrants, but this fact is not considered to 'tarnish' this source of national income.

Elevating remittances to the level of national resources and foreign donations suggests that governments ought to capitalize on remittances. Thus, García writes that, in El Salvador, it is important for the government 'to promote a national policy to protect migrants and to encourage development through remittances. Let's remember that the very future of the country, at least in the short term, depends on the expulsion of surplus population and the constant foreign exchange [thereby produced]' (1994: 3). Similarly, El-Sakka and McNabb assert: 'It is clearly of some importance for the economies of labor exporting countries that the determinants of remittance flows are understood so that appropriate policies can be developed to access this important source of foreign exchange' (1999: 1493). Analysts suggest several strategies that governments can employ to take advantage of remittances. These include (1) encouraging expatriates to invest in local businesses, (2) influencing how recipients spend their money, (3) channelling remittances through the formal banking system, and (4) utilizing the value that is added to migrants themselves through their experiences abroad.[7]

Interestingly, efforts to capitalize on remittances may appeal both to proponents of neoliberal economic policies *and* to analysts and advocates interested in grass-roots empowerment. As Mitchell (2001: 167–8) has observed regarding Asian immigrants in Canada, '[p]hilanthropic and volunteerist activities dovetailed with the neo-liberal project of deregulation, privatization, and the decrease of direct social service provisioning'. If migrants are providing the equivalent of foreign assistance, then they are assuming the role of states in an era of belt-tightening and reduced public services. At the same time, the notion that the poor, including poor migrants, may have the capacity to determine not only their own destinies, but also those of their communities and nations, can be attractive to those who believe that the 'base' – peasants, workers, the marginalized – is key to overturning social hierarchies (Scott 1985). Kapur and McHale remark that remittances 'fit in with a communitarian, "third way" approach – neither inefficient socialism nor savage capitalism' (2003: 50). Thus, on both sides of debates over neoliberalism, remittances may be viewed favourably.

Qualifying remittances as a source of national income requires particular accounting practices. We turn now to an examination of these procedures.

Discounting procedures

We use the term, 'discounting procedures' to point out that calculating national and international remittance flows is made possible by pre-defining the regime of value within which remittances circulate and by *not* counting certain other transactions associated with remitting (see also Appadurai 1986). Accounting procedures purport merely to describe or to record a pre-existing reality. However, given that accounting is also supposed to present information in a 'decision-useful' form, accounting also comprises a 'modality of argument' (Maurer 2002: 662, 2003; Miller 1998). This modality of argument is implicit in calculations themselves. For example, in the case of remittances, calculations rest on the claims that remitting is distinct from other transactions, that remittances are commensurate and that it is possible to aggregate remittances both within countries and worldwide. In that they depend on such claims, accounting practices can help to produce the very phenomena that they measure. As Callon notes, '[t]he most interesting element [of accounting] is to be found in the relationship between what is to be measured and the tools used to measure it. The latter do not merely record a reality independent of themselves; they contribute powerfully to shaping, simply by measuring it, the reality they measure' (1998: 23). When governments position remittances as national funds, they make remittances cohere in value. Somewhat magically, remittances are extricated from the other regimes of value within which they circulate and are rid of their prior associations. Through financial 'conjuring', transactions between family members are 'opened up' to global finance (Tsing 2000: 140). Traces of their other social meanings continue to haunt remittances, however, fuelling speculation about the long-term value of these transactions.

To calculate national remittance income, central banks must distinguish remitting from other transactions. When formal contract or guest worker programmes exist, central banks track remittances by deducting estimates of workers' expenses from workers' earnings. This difference is then added to the share of funds that governments receive directly from workers' total wages to produce the total income that a contract worker is introducing into a national economy. In the absence of formal contract worker programmes, governments monitor foreign currency exchanges and international transfers to estimate remittances (see Chaney 1986). It is widely known that many migrants hire couriers to hand-deliver cash to relatives in their home countries. As the amounts are usually in non-national currency, it is possible to track such money as it eventually makes its way into national banks. Additionally, agencies such as Western Union can report on transfers that originate abroad. A Central Bank official in El Salvador explained to us how national remittance income is calculated:

> Our sources to track remittances. . .the banks, the exchange houses, they must report their transactions to us. They report to us daily. Then, here [at the Central Bank], we receive accounting of the monies that flow in those banks and exchange houses. We go over their reports, looking record by record and in some cases what they report as a remittance isn't one, you see? We look at amounts, whether it is a Salvadoran last name or not, and depending on such details, we can sort out family remittances from their reports.

The 'dollarization' of national economies (see Gilbert and Helleiner 1999), including that of El Salvador, has made foreign currency exchange less critical to tracking remittances, given that all currency in El Salvador is now 'foreign'. Origins, destinations and amounts are now the clues that are used to identify transactions as remittances.

Methods of calculating remittances are notoriously unreliable.[8] As Montes notes, many of the figures quoted in relation to remittances are '"symbols," and "magical numbers"' (1990: 20, translation ours). First, family remittances may be lumped together with other sources of foreign currency, such as tourism. Second, exchanges that are made informally, through a black market, may be omitted or only partially recorded. Third, not all remittances actually circulate within the recipient's country. It is possible that $1200 is brought into

El Salvador through a courier, for example, and then is used to pay for a journey north. In this case, the $1200 never circulates within El Salvador, because the recipient spends the money in the United States. Money used to pay for smuggling persons circulates in various countries and may not affect transactions that are of interest to central banks. Fourth, surnames do not always indicate national origin. If Vicente Fox, the current Mexican president, sent money from the US to a relative in Mexico, his transaction might be misclassified.

Although the remittance data gathered by central banks are known to be estimates, these figures become part of World Bank and International Monetary Fund comparative economic reports on national economies. Such reports *purify* remittances. The World Bank reports remittances in a column called 'unrequited transfers' – meaning that remittances are neither repaid nor a repayment (Asch and Reichmann 1994). Again, remittances are like both products and gifts. Remittance income is grouped with profits from coffee, oil, sugar and other exports. At the same time, remittance income is *unrequited*; it is a gift. Remittances presumably originate in the moment that a migrant sends money, rather than through a *prior* exchange. Thus, unlike the sale of coffee, in which coffee might travel to the United States in exchange for dollars that travel to El Salvador, nothing that bears monetary value is thought to leave El Salvador in exchange for the remittances that return. Through financial wizardry, there is therefore no *cost* to deduct from remittance income. Moreover unlike other gifts (e.g. foreign loans), remittances do not have to be repaid. As a government economist explained to us during an interview that we conducted in El Salvador:

> When one calculates *maquila* [assembly plant earnings], you have to subtract, right? You have to subtract what was invested in creating the conditions to have the *maquila* [assembly plant], and also with the remittances, it's like a, you don't have to subtract anything. That is, it's a transfer, well, in economic terms, right? A transfer is everything that enters the economy and that does not require an expenditure on our part, right? So, we never have to pay anything, it's not like a loan or a sale of goods, in which we receive currency but we give away the good, or a loan in which we receive currency but we have to pay it back in the future, right? Here, there is no payment, right? It is a pure transfer.

The view that remittances are cost-free income is not limited to El Salvador. For instance, Kapur and McHale comment, 'In financial terms, remittances are a free lunch. While other sources of capital carry a cost for the receiving country, be it interest payments for loans or profit repatriation for investments, remittances require no fees or services' (2003: 50).

Remittances circulate not only within the regimes of value privileged by central banks and international financial institutions, but also within other cultural, social and economic circuits. Within these other circuits, remittances may be differentiated in ways that make them incommensurate. Appadurai points out that commodities travel within '*regimes of value*, which does *not* imply that every act of commodity exchange presupposes a complete cultural sharing of assumptions, but rather that the degree of value coherence may be highly variable from situation to situation, and from commodity to commodity' (1986: 15, emphasis in original). Remitters and recipients may attach multiple social meanings to remittances, and may embed them in a variety of exchanges (see also Belk 1990; Carruthers and Espeland 1990; Fine and Lapavitsas 2000; Zelizer 1998). To produce remittances, undocumented migrants have to gather the money to pay an alien-smuggler, cover additional costs of their trip, obtain a job and earn money, defer purchases on which their earnings would otherwise have been spent and pay any fees entailed in sending their money to family members in their country of origin. Recipients may have to pay fees to cash cheques or to convert money, they may be taxed when they use remittances to purchase goods, remittances may be dedicated to 'normal' household costs (such as the expense of raising migrants' children) and some remittances may even be spent on financing another migrant's clandestine journey. Remittances are part of a broader circulation of money and, in some cases, are very much like regular expenses that individuals assume (e.g. the upkeep of one's home, the maintenance of one's family members), with the key difference that, given the dispersal of household members, payments cross national boundaries. Furthermore, money that migrants send home may not actually be given to family members. For example, the remitter who sends $1200 a year may instruct the recipient to pay $400 on a loan incurred prior to migration. Although they regularly encounter newspaper and televised reports on the total amount of migrant remittances, migrants generally do not conceive of themselves as donating to a remittance 'fund', designed to benefit their country of origin (Hernandez 2002).

Clearly, although remittances may appear to states as pure profit, in the other regimes of value within which they circulate, remitting bears costs. These costs range from loss of life in attempts to become remitters, as when people die crossing the US–Mexico border (Andreas 2000), to financial costs, such as paying an alien-smuggler and forgoing work during one's journey. Those who successfully migrate do so at further cost, labouring in exploitative conditions, in many cases at the expense of their citizenship rights in either the sending or receiving country. Many endure lengthy family separations and are caught up in the informal economy, where their activities often straddle the licit/illicit divide. As Miller (1998) notes, rather than being obvious and a simple matter of measurement, costs are at least in part products of decisions about what to count.

Some non-governmental organizations have sought to count these costs. For example, Mobilidad Humana (Human Mobility), a pastoral project supported by the Catholic Church, produced an informational brochure that resembles a dollar bill. This brochure, aimed at potential migrants who are still in El Salvador, uses the phrase, 'Dolor por Dólar' or 'Suffering for the Dollar', and thus plays on the similarity between the Spanish words for 'suffering' (*dolor*) and 'dollar' (*dolar*). The '*dolor* bill' is a different accounting practice than that used to add up the 'dollar bill' into a remittance aggregate. The '*dolor* bill' links the possible dangers to which migrants are exposed when they migrate without authorization, the degree of exploitation to which they may be subjected and the economic conditions that propel their emigration. In contrast to financial reports in which remittances originate at the moment that they are sent, the '*dolor*' bill locates remittances' origins in earlier transactions, not all of which assume financial forms.

In that they detach remittances from the prior exchanges within which they are embedded, purifying remittances and rendering them commensurable is a bit like money-laundering. As Segundo Montes explains:

> The [remittance] phenomenon is predominantly 'illegal' and 'clandestine' and remittances neither course through the banks nor register in the national accounts – in large measure, they do not even arrive in the country being only bank notes immediately re-exported to the US or simply money orders to be paid in the national currency.
>
> (Montes 1990: 19, translation ours)

Remittances can be produced through legal or unauthorized labour, through drug trafficking (Orozco *et al*. 1997) or legal employment, to finance further unauthorized migration as well as to pay basic expenses, and can fuel black markets as well as banking industries. Aggregations of remittance flows treat remittances merely as dollars and thus disavow ways that these exchanges are linked to practices that states prohibit. Sending money home to family members is often deemed a moral act, even though migrating illegally or working without authorization, both of which, in some cases, are essential to the production of remittances, may be considered immoral, by some.

Though state accounting practices extricate remittances from other regimes of value, state and other analysts have been very interested in currency's subsequent biographies within these very regimes. Like water, which makes barren land fertile, remittances are said by some to produce 'multiplier' effects (Alarcon 2000). These effects are presumed to flow from the migrant abroad to local communities and then to national economies. In this optimistic view, remittances course through national economies, flowing, multiplying and expanding. Remittances' *productivity* – or lack thereof – has therefore become a topic of debate.

Monetary cycles and (in)fertility

Despite careful calculations of national and international remittance flows, remitting is associated with uncertainty. Analysts note that it is unclear whether migrants will continue to remit, whether remittances will increase or decrease, and whether remittances fertilize or threaten national economies. In the face of this uncertainty, anecdotes about remitting flourish. During interviews that we conducted with officials and NGO-members in El Salvador in 2001, we were regaled with stories about idle workers, ghost towns, impractical donations and English street signs. These stories cluster around what Pat O'Malley (2000) has called the 'uncertain subject' of neoliberalism. O'Malley points out that 'risk societies' privilege expert knowledge that enables individuals to calculate and insure against risk. In contrast, neoliberalism privileges practical knowledge that enables individuals who are confronted with uncertainty to devise appropriate strategies and to assume risks themselves. This notion of practical knowledge is key to debates over remittances' effects. Optimistic accounts of remitting suggest that migrants and their relatives are acting on practical knowledge, whereas pessimistic accounts suggest that remittances may sap the entrepreneurial spirit that ought to animate action. Academic efforts to resolve this debate attempt to track remittances as they move through economies. Such tracking maintains remittances as a distinct financial form, akin to a currency, and transforms remittances' productivity into a technical problem. Presumably, if remittances were put to particular uses (such as investment), their economic benefits would increase. Focusing attention on this technical problem potentially depoliticizes both migration and development (cf. Ferguson 1994; Riles 2004). Moreover, in that they encourage the poor to use remittances in ways that benefit national economies, debates over remittances' effects are themselves a form of governmentality.

Remittances' association with uncertainty takes two forms. On the one hand, remittances are considered a *response to* uncertainty. According to the new economics of labour migration (NELM) literature, remitting is a rational strategy through which poor families cope with the uncertainties of poverty (Gubert 2002). By sending a family member to work abroad, migrant families can diversify their sources of income, reduce risks and locate sources of credit and capital (Gubert 2002; Schiller *et al*. 1995). Remittances are also considered to be a way for impoverished nations to cope with their marginalized position in the global economy. Remittances give poor nations access to foreign capital, migrant workers can become a market for national products, and remittances permit countries to avoid financial collapses that they might otherwise have experienced (García 1994). At the same time, remittances are *sources* of uncertainty. As Diaz-Briquets and Pérez-López observe, 'Countries highly dependent on remittances are at grave risk given that remittances are notorious for their volatility – their volume is highly sensitive to fluctuations in economic conditions and political developments' (1997: 414–15; see also García 1994; Orellana Merlos 1992).[9] The macroeconomic impacts of remittances are also unclear. If remittances are put to productive uses, then they can presumably contribute to economic growth. If they are frittered away, then remittances may weaken economies' productive base. Furthermore, the benefits that remittances may provide to poor families may be undermined by a 'moral hazard problem' created by the distance between remitters and recipients. Chami *et al*. (2003) point out that, as they negotiate transactions, remitters can understate their resources, recipients can exaggerate their needs and remittances can be used for purposes (such as drug purchases) that senders would consider inappropriate.

The notion that remittances are creative responses to economic uncertainty draws on notions of pragmatic expertise associated with neoliberalism. As O'Malley notes:

> Uncertainty is a characteristic modality of liberal governance that relies both on a *creative* constitution of the future with respect to positive and enterprising dispositions of risk taking and on a corresponding stance of reasonable foresight or everyday prudence (distinct from both statistical and expert-based calculation) with respect to potential harms.
>
> (O'Malley 2000: 461, emphasis in original)

Analyses of remittances suggest that migrants and their families rely on this practical, everyday expertise, and therefore may provide more effective services than state or other experts. For instance, in interviews that we conducted in El Salvador shortly after the January and February 2001 earthquakes, we were told that remittances were likely to be the most egalitarian and direct form of assistance. They would reach everywhere, even rural areas, and would go directly into the pockets of recipients. In the case of El Salvador, remittances have also been deemed a substitute for foreign aid (particularly from the United States), which had been plentiful during the 1980s but diminished abruptly after the 1992 peace accords (García 1994). In the face of banking systems that may be insecure (Pederson 2002; Libercier and Schneider 1996) and that provide the poor with few opportunities for loans, remittances are coming to be seen as an informal credit system (Zaráte-Hoyos 1999: 19; Alarcon 2000: 25; Taylor 1999). Remittances have also been characterized as an informal insurance system, in that they provide the poor with a source of security in the event of unexpected tragedies. Remittances are made possible through informal mail systems, in which couriers deliver goods and letters directly from senders to recipients. Such services also permit individuals to exchange currency, and thus constitute an informal banking system.

An emphasis on pragmatic expertise is consistent with the neoliberal espousal of limited government. If the everyday knowledge of the poor is superior to the expertise of government economists, then presumably the government should step back and allow private citizens to solve their own problems (O'Malley 2000). The Salvadoran government, for example, has created a programme called 'Unidos por la Solidaridad' ('United in Solidarity'), through which Salvadoran migrant associations can seek national and municipal matching funds to implement development projects in their communities of origin (Baker-Cristales 2004). By financing hospitals, clinics and schools, migrant groups participate in the privatization of public services (García 1994). Orozco *et al*. (1997: 60) conclude: 'To some extent, remittances have become "safety nets" that the governments of each country could not have created with their scant resources' – although one would think that impoverished migrants' resources are more scarce than those of governments. An emphasis on indigenous governance may appeal to those who, though critical of neoliberal policies, favour grass-roots empowerment. García writes:

> It is interesting that this individual effort to relieve the situation of poverty has been realized at the margin of state actions and in the midst of one of the worst and longest economic crises in the history of the country. This converts migrants into the true subjects [agents?] of recent history and the social group that, paradoxically, upon escaping poverty has facilitated things for dominant groups and for the state, which, on the other hand, has not known how to make productive use of remittances.
>
> (García 1994: 9–10)

Consistent with this valorization of pragmatic knowledge, officials and analysts use anecdotal evidence, alongside their estimates of remittance flows, to assess remittances' significance. As Holmes and Marcus (2005, 2006; see also Riles 2004) have noted, neoliberal economic policies require state financial officers to relinquish certain functions to the market. What Holmes and Marcus refer to as 'paraethnography' or the collection of anecdotal evidence may be a way for such officers to re-engage with the social. In El Salvador, numerous anecdotes about the effects of remittances circulated among the officials and NGO-members we interviewed. For example, interviewees marvelled at the town of Intipucá, which has become known as a modern, highly Americanized community supported almost entirely by remittances. An official in the ministry of foreign affairs told us: 'Intipucá used to be dead. Now there is Burger King, now there are banks, and there are money exchanges. These are examples of transculturation. The street signs, for example, are in English. If you go to the entrance of the town, you'll see the sign that says [in English], "Welcome to Intipucá".' Other anecdotes focused on remittances' negative effects. We were told repeatedly of migrants who shipped refrigerators and other appliances to rural relatives whose homes lacked electricity (see also de Laet 2002), of workers idled by a dependency on remittances (but see Zilberg and Lungo 1999), of 'ghost towns' populated only by migrant workers' young children and elderly relatives, and of youth who became delinquents in the absence of their migrant parents. These anecdotes reveal great anxiety about El Salvador's transition from a coffee-exporting to a remittance-receiving economy (García 1994).

Like the view that remittances put resources in the hands of pragmatic individuals, concerns about remittances' societal impact centre on whether recipients act in an enterprising fashion. For example, García (1994) argues that remittances produce a tendency towards consumerism. Motivated by the lifestyles that remittances make possible, García contends, those who receive remittances simply spend them, rather than saving them or investing them. The poor come to rely on remittances, instead of on jobs, for financial security. Thus, García concludes, remittances reduce industriousness, making not only individuals but also the nation dependent on access to foreign currency. García's analysis is not unique. Scholars have remarked on the pejorative imagery associated with migration in general and remittances in particular. Durand *et al*. (1996: 425) observe that analysts have used such terms as 'syndrome', 'addiction' and 'dangerous dependence' to refer to remittances, while Kritz and Keely (1981: xxv, quoted in Keely and Tran 1989: 501) note that remittances have been compared to drug dependency in that they may 'primarily feed the need for more foreign exchange'. According to this pejorative imagery, rather than sustaining autonomy, remittances (like welfare) foster dependency. Although remittances may be 'pure transfers', subsequent transactions introduce impurities.

To resolve debates over whether remittances fuel or reduce enterprise, some scholars have examined the trajectories of remittances within national and international economies. Like the accounting practices that make remittances cohere in value, tracking distinguishes remittances from other financial forms, making them currency-like (Callon 1998). Focusing on remittances' continued circulation can make the distinction between productive and consumptive uses of remittances appear insignificant. As Asch and Reichmann explain:

> Many previous studies have interpreted this evidence [of spending on consumption goods] as implying that remittances do not enhance economic development because so little of the remittance flows are devoted toward traditional investment purchases. . ..This conclusion is specious for a number reasons [*sic*.] First, the recipients of the remittances are not the final beneficiaries of this income. The owners of the businesses from whom the recipients buy consumer goods may invest and expand their businesses or farms in response to the increased demand for their goods. If the recipients deposit the remittances in a bank, the funds are available to be lent out to potential investors. Second, there is some evidence that remittances increase aggregate demand and thereby increase job opportunities and growth. Third, the recipients of remittances are better off because their standard of living is improved. Finally, the evidence indicates that remittances improve a country's balance of payments and help it finance imports.
>
> (Asch and Reichmann 1994: xvii)

Similarly, Durand *et al*. have traced how what they call 'migradollars' enable recipients to purchase beer and other goods, and thus affect the Mexican economy. These analysts write: 'As migradollars work their way through the Mexican economy, therefore, they steadily multiply to increase income, production, and investment indirectly' (1996: 425; see also Taylor 1999).

Efforts to track the trajectories of remittances suggest that states can create a 'fertile ground' in which the development potential of remittances can be maximized (Taylor 1999). Such policies might include financial reforms that promote banking, micro-credit programmes and investment opportunities. Yet, as migrants are exhorted to continue to remit, to remit in larger quantities and to send remittances via channels that will benefit state financial institutions, debates over the future of remittances become a form of governmentality. As Keeley and Tran observe, criticizing migrants' families for spending remittances on consumption rather than depositing them in a bank:

> assumes that remittance receivers are supposed to save at rates far above national norms, in addition to spending on current consumption. . ..If they do not save at above normal rates, migrants and their families are somehow selfish and unpatriotic for acting like everyone else. Too many people, it seems, can make decisions. Concepts like meeting basic needs are dismissed with references to short-term horizons and a narrow, selfish focus on meeting personal needs of migrant laborers' families.
>
> (Keeley and Tran 1989: 502)

Debates over remittances' development potential can valorize and thus contribute to producing the enterprising subjects of neoliberalism. Efforts to capitalize on remitting, like uncertainty more generally, can constitute 'a distinctive way of governing through the future, whose place in the formation of rationalities of neo-liberalism, and of "enterprising subjects", is vital' (O'Malley 2000: 460). Qualifying remittances, whether as productive or wasteful, brings particular subjects, states and currencies into being.

Conclusion: remitting subjects

The studies, accounting practices, policy recommendations and anecdotal observations that simultaneously make remittances visible and imbue these transactions with particular qualities situate remitting within a broader configuration of states, currencies and citizen-subjects. There is thus a 'citizenship' of remitting. As remittances are qualified, states are defined as competitive entities that sell particular national products (in this case, migrant labour) in the global marketplace. By developing market niches, poor nations become 'globally linked' and thus gain access to the resources (e.g. dollars) available in more powerful countries. By permitting linkages to develop, more powerful countries can appear to be benevolent providers of resources, and thus elide their own roles in producing global inequalities in the first place. Migrants' earnings sent to the homeland thus appear to be 'donations' from rich countries to poorer nations. The accounting practices that define remittances as a 'pure transfer' make such transactions possible. By defining remittances as altruistic gifts or unrequited transfers, central banks ignore certain costs (such as alien-smuggling fees or fees charged by money transfer agencies) born by migrants and make remittances appear to be cost-free. '*Migradólares*' or remittances are thus, in a sense, the ideal neoliberal currency. Produced by private citizens who assume the necessary financial risks, *migradólares* travel into the formal banking system, where they become 'pure profit' for states that have not had to spend in order to produce them. In fact, reductions in public spending may produce more migration and thus more remittances. National development plans can then rely on citizens' own pragmatic strategies, which, if citizens are enterprising enough, will bring more resources to the nation. In this way, debates over whether or not remittances are productive create the impression that, ideally, citizens should invest, establish businesses and develop new skills rather than meeting their own immediate economic needs.

When migrants remit, they become citizen-subjects within this configuration. In the case of El Salvador, citizens who fled the country during the 1980–92 civil war and its aftermath were reclaimed during the late 1990s and early 2000s as remittances became increasingly important to the Salvadoran economy. This 'reclaiming' took a variety of forms, primarily addressing the remitting migrant. The Salvadoran government has increased its political campaigning and official presence aimed at Salvadoran communities in the United States. It has erected a monument acknowledging the '*Hermano lejano*' or 'distant brother' in the nation's capital,[10] a Directorate of Attention to the Community Living Abroad was established within the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, a vice-ministry post to attend to migrants was established, the Salvadoran embassy and consulates now promote migrants' immigration rights in the host society, the programme '*Unidos por la Solidaridad*' or 'United in Solidarity' enables migrants living abroad to compete for matching funds to support development projects in their home communities, and Salvadorans living abroad have been characterized as the 'fifteenth department' ('*departamento quince*') of El Salvador (Baker-Cristales 2004; Coutin N.d.). In this case, remitting subjects are particular *kinds* of citizens. Positioned outside national territory, migrants are made present by, among other things, their financial contributions to relatives, communities and, thus, indirectly, the nation. Paradoxically, much as remittances themselves are costly yet cost-free, migrant citizens are an *absent presence* within the nation. For instance, speaking to migrant associations in Los Angeles, California, at a public ceremony there in 2003, a Salvadoran official (speaking via video from El Salvador) stated: 'Although it is true that there are many miles of distance between the United States and El Salvador, it is also true that your presence is felt. I, personally, have felt your presence through the projects that you realize.' Since many lack the ability to travel, remittances become a way to assert virtual presence. As the fifteenth department, migrants *earn* the right to spatialize their belonging within the national imaginary. The money migrants send is aggregated and reported in official accounts; migrants infuse the national economy with much needed currency. These aggregate figures appear to have no strings attached, and thus become 'pure transfers'.

With what seems to be a worldwide growth in remittances, governments and analysts appear to agree that prosperity and productivity can come from 'below' through the migrants who produce remittances and the family members who receive them. Both government analysts and non-governmental organizations that advocate immigrants' rights have argued that remittances are a 'direct' form of support (i.e. remittances go 'directly' into the pockets of the poor). Relying on such support makes the personal success of migrants and their families an instrument for national development. Excitement about this development possibility may need to be tempered, however, by the realization that remittances are made possible by a lack of opportunities in the home country, the hardships of migrating and the exploitation that generally characterizes migrant labour. As the '*dolor*' bill suggests, it may be time for remittances to be re-qualified.

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Notes

1 Ester Hernandez's analysis was based on interviews with Salvadoran immigrants and their families in southern California, participant observation in community service organizations, and content analysis of newspapers, and NGO and governmental reports. Susan Coutin's research entailed conducting interviews with 140 US and Salvadoran officials and NGO members, as well as with Salvadoran immigrants themselves.

2 We do not mean to imply that, without such statements, remittances would not serve as a source of foreign exchange. Our point is rather that, whereas in the past remittances might have seemed incidental to national economic plans, now they are being recognized, incorporated and made objects of policy-making.

3 As Stoler notes, political projects can underlie assumptions that phenomena are commensurate. She suggests that 'we might historicize the *politics of comparison*, tracing the changing stakes for polities and their bureaucratic apparatuses. What did agents of empire think to compare and what political projects made them do so? What did comparison as a state project entail?' (2004: para. 86, emphasis in original).

4 In this sense, remittances create potential for the 'spectacular accumulation' described by Tsing: 'Spectacular accumulation occurs when investors speculate on a product that may or may not exist. Investors are looking for the appearance of success. They cannot afford to find out if the product is solid; by then their chances for profit will be gone' (2000: 141). Similarly, remittances are not a 'sure thing', though recently some sources have begun to describe them as such. There is some uncertainty – will migration continue? Will migrants continue to remit? How much will migrants remit? Will the US allow migrants to remain in the US and to keep working? Although these

things are unknown, governments and international financial institutions are already 'banking' on remittances. Note too that, although the amount of remittances cannot be accurately calculated, the potential for profiting from remittances still exists.

5 In contrast, according to the 'brain drain' argument, the migration of the talented and better educated creates a loss for the nation.

6 It is noteworthy that other financial transactions are not referred to as flows. For example, income does not 'flow', it is 'earned' (Massey and Parrado 1994: 21). It sounds odd to say, 'Every year, billions of dollars flow from employers to employees' or 'The income from their investments flowed to stockholders'. 'Flow' implies abundance, distance, a certain lack of agency and an uncontrollable natural force, though these meanings may not be intended by those who use this term. On the relationship between money and place, see Gilbert and Helleiner (1999).

7 Orellana Merlos (1994: 18) provides an example of the first two of these methods. He notes that, in El Salvador, the 1989–94 Plan de Desarrollo Económico Social (Socio-economic Development Plan) proposes to '1) encourage Salvadorans who work abroad to invest in the country; and 2) create conditions in El Salvador that promote the productive use of remittances.' Given that the recipients of remittances are concentrated in the poor and middle-income sectors of the population, such recommendations focus on the behaviour of the poor, a point to which we will return below. El-Sakka and McNabb emphasize the third approach: 'It is important to establish the factors that influence the amount of migrants' savings that go through official channels as opposed to those that find their way into unofficial channels, most notably the black market' (1999: 1493). Finally, Libercier and Schneider provide an illustration of the fourth approach, the idea that, through migration, migrants themselves become 'value-added' resources for their countries of origin. Describing development projects that expatriate Africans initiate in their home communities, Libercier and Schneider write: 'Although the village residents are associated with projects so as to guarantee that they will be appropriate, projects are initiated by emigrants who possess new knowledge, experience and financial means. The innovative character of the emigrants' intervention and approaches can shake up the village social order and functioning' (1996: 43).

8 Scholars' efforts to estimate remittance payments are also fraught with difficulties (Durand and Massey 1992). In the 1920s, Gamio (1930) estimated remittances on the basis of money orders sent to Mexico from the United States. This method did not distinguish money sent by relatives from money that came from another source. In the 1920s and early 1930s, P. Taylor (1933) relied on telegraphs and money orders to estimate remittances. This method omitted money that arrived through another route, such as in a private letter. Díaz Canedo (1984) tracked checks and money orders sent to Mexico by individuals who had non-Spanish surnames in order to estimate remittance totals (Durand and Massey 1992). Other methods that have been used include interviewing migrants and their families regarding the amounts sent and/or received (Cornelius 1978). Durand and Massey complain that such methods are also inaccurate: 'Researchers have tended to exaggerate remittances by multiplying a large number of undocumented migrants (often derived by extrapolating apprehension figures) by an average remittance derived from some field study (which may or may not be representative)' (1992: 11).

9 Not all see remittances as volatile. For example, Orozco *et al*. state: 'The most important aspect of this phenomenon of remittances is the stable flow [of money] that benefits both societies and economies' (1997: 60; see also Gubert 2002; Keely and Tran 1989; Kapur and McHale 2003).

10 As migrants themselves considered the name 'Hermano lejano' offensive, this monument was renamed 'Hermano, Bienvendo a Casa' or 'Brother, Welcome Home' (Ábrego 2004).

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