Part VI
Society
14. Individuals and families
International migration in the world-system

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Neoclassical economics and push-pull

World-systems analyses of international migration developed in response to studies grounded in neoclassical economics and the “push-pull” approach. The study of international migration was initiated with the publication of Ravenstein’s “laws of migration” (1885, 1889), a set of empirical observations later developed by Lee (1966). These explanations of migration identified the factors that compelled (“pushed”) people to change locations and the factors that attracted (“pulled”) them to specific locations. The push-pull was closely aligned with, and influenced by, neoclassical economic theory. Together, neoclassical economic theory and the “push-pull” approach were the conventional intellectual framework for studying international migration for most of the twentieth century, orienting the classic works of Thomas (1941), Lewis (1954), Ranis and Fei (1961), Todaro (1969), and Thomas (1973).

Neoclassical economic theory takes as its point of departure the assumption that migrants are rational, utility-maximizing individuals who make the decision to move on the basis of cost–benefit considerations, the primary consideration being the expected wage gains from moving into the labor market in a destination country where labor is remunerated at a relatively higher level. At the macro-level, international wage differentials are the key explanation of international migration. International wage differentials are an outcome of differences in the relative supply of and demand for labor: wages will be lower in countries in which the supply of labor exceeds the demand for labor, and higher in countries in which the supply of labor is insufficient to meet demand. Migrants are “pushed” by relatively lower wages in the origin country and “pulled” to relatively higher wages in the destination country. International migration should therefore reduce wage differentials between countries, moving them closer to an equilibrium level that reflects only the costs of moving, and ultimately minimizing much of the economic incentive to move. At the micro-level, migrants act rationally in exploiting differentials in international wage levels.

Although this perspective remains the conventional framework, it is increasingly criticized for its inability to account for empirical regularities. Most importantly, wage differentials have been shown to be only a weak explanation of international migration. Despite widening differences in cross-country wage levels, the propensity to send migrants varies dramatically across countries and the stock of international migrants has remained relatively stable at 3 percent of world population since the 1960s. Moreover, wages across countries have not come close to converging, despite the fact that there are more international migrants today in absolute numbers (215 million) than at any time in modern history (UN 2009).
A world-systems perspective

The limitations of the conventional perspective opened intellectual space for alternative perspectives. In the late 1970s, an alternative perspective emerged that drew upon the burgeoning literature in world-systems analysis to investigate international migration. Inspired by Wallerstein (1974), Amin (1976), and Gunder Frank (1966), scholars working from this perspective varied in their degree of association with world-systems analysis per se, but they shared a common interest in exploring the systemic, structural, and historical context of international migration.

In contrast to the ahistorical conventional model, the world-systems perspective placed international migration in a broader historical context. Three overlapping types of population movements were identified, of which international labor migration is but the latest form (Morawska 1990; Petras 1981; Portes and Walton 1981; Sassen-Koob 1981): forced movements in which labor was mobilized coercively within the periphery through slavery, indentured labor contracts, and peonage; colonizing movements in which labor moved from core to periphery to settle frontier areas; and international labor migration characterized by the relatively "free" movement of labor from the periphery to the core. Collectively, this work argued that international migration was critical to the incorporation of peripheral areas and the consolidation of the capitalist world-system: "The movement of human populations has been an intrinsic component of major processes of structural change throughout history … Thus defined, migration is almost coterminous with history" (Portes and Walton 1981: 21).

In contrast to the neoclassical economics concept of the rational, utility-maximizing migrant, world-systems approaches to international migration focus on the structures that condition and constrain individual action. Migration is part of a system: individuals may indeed migrate on the basis of cost–benefit considerations, but both the costs and benefits of movement are structured by an historical context of unequal exchange in a hierarchical international division of labor. By definition, international migration involves the transgression of national boundaries. But for those working from a world-systems perspective, it is not only a movement across national boundaries; it is more importantly a movement within an integrated political-economic system.

Placing international migration in this broader, world-historical context addresses a key limitation in the conventional, push-pull framework: that cross-country wage differentials are not strong explanations of international migrations. By expanding the scope of inquiry from national to world-scale processes, the world-systems perspective opens up for examination the relationship between trans-national political-economic processes and international migration. This is an important analytical advance because these global processes ultimately create the context for individual-level decision-making: "It is within the context of extensive social and economic penetration of peripheral societies by the institutions of advanced capitalism that individual cost-benefit calculations make sense" (Portes 2007: 77). In this sense: "Migrants can be viewed as stepping or falling into a migratory flow, rather than initiating or constituting such a flow through their individual decisions and actions" (Sassen-Koob 1978: 515).

By focusing almost exclusively on wage differentials, the conventional perspective also de-politicizes the world political-economic context in which migrants make decisions. In doing so, it misses key long-term, structural dynamics that motivate and sustain international migration. Here, the concept of unequal exchange is paramount. Over time, unequal exchange between core and non-core zones produces uneven development across zones in the world-economy. International migration is a consequence of this process: if not for (widening) global income disparities, international migration would not exist. In this sense, both the conventional approach and a world-systems perspective view wage differentials as a necessary cause of international migration. However, wage differentials become an explanandum for world-systems analysis; they
are foregrounded and explained, whereas they remain “exogenous” to the conventional approach.

International migration, however, is not only an outcome of unequal exchange; it is also a form of it, reproducing uneven development in the modern world-system. Burawoy (1976) provides one of the earliest discussions. International migration is a labor supply system. In this sense, migrants are a labor force, and like all labor forces, it must be maintained and renewed, or reproduced. What differentiates an international labor supply system from a domestic one, however, is that the process of reproduction (i.e., of maintenance and renewal) occurs across national boundaries, so that different institutions are responsible for organizing, and bearing the costs of, the reproduction of the labor force. This opens up the possibility that the benefits of migrant labor may not accrue to the institutions bearing the costs of reproducing the migrant labor system. For example, in the case of Mexican emigration to the United States, the costs of educating, training, and reproducing the labor force are borne largely by the Mexican state and economy, but the benefits of capital accumulation derived from their application to production processes are reaped mainly by the United States:

Thus, for Mexican migrants, processes of renewal are organized under the Mexican state in the Mexican economy, and those of maintenance in the United States … the activities of maintenance and renewal are separated … In other words, a proportion of the costs of renewal is externalized to an alternate economy and/or state.  
*(Burawoy 1976: 1052–53)*

Thus, international migration is a form of unequal exchange, reproducing uneven development: “The significance of migrant labor lies in the separation of the processes of maintenance and renewal, so that renewal takes place where living standards are low and maintenance takes place within easy access of employment” (Burawoy 1976: 1082). By capitalizing on uneven levels of wage remuneration across countries, international migration tends to exacerbate those differences, leaving the origin country with sunk costs associated with education, training, and reproducing labor while enhancing capital accumulation in the destination country: “The very sale of labor power by an underdeveloped country … to an economically advanced nation serves only to reinforce the relations of economic subjugation and domination” (Burawoy 1976: 1068).

Understanding international migration as a global labor supply system means understanding migration as an unequal exchange between nation-states within a hierarchical world-system and not across autonomous, self-contained nation-states. That is, international migration is inherently relational.

The State plays a key role in reproducing the global system of migrant labor because it demarcates the line between migrant and domestic labor (Massey 1999; Zolberg 1978, 1989). Sovereignty means that States can endow upon their citizens legal, political, and civil rights, and protections that they need not afford to non-citizens. Without access to these rights and protections, migrants remain politically and economically vulnerable. Their precarious position is associated with their trans-national status as laborers in the world-economy (Fernandez-Kelly and Massey 2007; Petras 1980, 1981). This vulnerability, rooted in the principle of state sovereignty, creates the political basis for unequal exchange from labor migration in an integrated capitalist world-economy:

The state organizes the dependence of the productive worker on the reproductive worker, while the economy organizes the dependence of the reproductive worker on the productive worker. The interdependence. … links the state supplying labor and the state employing
labor: the former requires revenue and employment for its population, the latter requires labor at low wage rates.

(Burawoy 1976: 1053)

The inherently relational nature of international migration, and the role of states in perpetuating the global system of migrant labor, make world-systems approaches better-suited to understand international migration than the conventional perspective: “Nothing invalidates traditional approaches to migration as effectively as border control policies … Border controls reduce the applicability of standard economic models by impeding the free circulation of labor” (Massey et al 2005: 14).

Research on international migration

World-systems approaches to international migration gained traction in the 1980s and 1990s, with seminal pieces by Alejandro Portes and colleagues, and Saskia Sassen. Together, these works constructed a theoretical framework supported by empirical research that explains how world-system dynamics both initiate international migrations and direct them to specific destinations.

International migration is initiated as markets expand into, or penetrate, pre-capitalist and non-capitalist societies, disrupting pre-existing social relations, and mobilizing segments of the population into migration streams, some of which are directed toward domestic urban areas and some of which spills over across national boundaries: “Sustained labor migration requires the penetration of the political and economic institutions of the dominant unit … into the subordinate one … (creating) internal imbalances between sectors and institutions in the subordinated unit” (Portes and Walton 1981: 31). As local economies are restructured to fit into the international division of labor, new domestic classes emerge with closer ties to foreign capital, and consumption habits, values, and norms are reoriented toward the core: “Structural imbalances between newer and older elements eventually produce migratory pressures” (Portes and Walton 1981: 32). International migrations do not originate “spontaneously” from individual cost-benefit analyses, but these movements are produced by political-economic processes that imbalance the subordinate society (Portes 1978b, 1978a, 1979). The concept of structural imbalancing is supported with case studies that range from South African manual labor migrations to the emigration of Argentine doctors, providing empirical evidence that “… common forces underlie superficially different movements” (Portes and Walton 1981: 30).

Sassen (1988) extends the concept of structural imbalancing by focusing on the role of foreign direct investments (FDI) by core firms into non-core countries during the late twentieth century. Neoclassical economic theory argues that capital and labor are substitutes: capital inflows from core countries should reduce the need for labor to emigrate from non-core countries. From the world-systems perspective, however, capital flows from core countries do not necessarily inhibit emigration from non-core countries; indeed, they may actually promote emigration. In this respect, FDI in the export agriculture and export manufacturing sectors of non-core countries has three effects that make emigration more likely over time: it mobilizes segments of the population through direct incorporation as wage labor or by indirectly promoting rural-urban migration streams; it disrupts traditional work structures by feminizing labor structures and mobilizing labor; and it generates cultural-ideological linkages between non-core and core countries by westernizing incorporated segments of the labor force (Sassen 1988). Thus, FDI penetration is a manifestation of the broader process of incorporation into the world-system, which results in increased international migration: “In an ‘isolated’ country, that is one lacking extensive direct foreign investment, emigration would be quite unlikely to emerge as an option” (Sassen 1988: 20).
Incorporation into the world-system, however, does not only entail increased push-type pressures from penetration; it also creates pull-type influences that structure the destination points for international migrants. An important pull influence is economic restructuring in the core (Piore 1979). Here, the value of a global political-economic perspective is particularly apparent, as these two movements are viewed as flip-sides of a single trans-national process: the restructuring of world capital accumulation beginning in the 1960s. Deindustrialization in the core and the restructuring of core economies into service-oriented economies increased demand for both high-wage and low-wage service sector jobs, polarizing occupational and income distributions, and increasing the demand for immigrant labor, particularly in the low-wage service sector. Motivated by the need to sustain profitability in the face of rising wages in the core, corporations invest in production abroad, and this investment ultimately mobilizes segments of non-core populations into migration streams that are directed back toward the core to fill positions in the expanding service sectors of core economies:

It can be argued that the recent large-scale emigration of capital from the northeastern United States, and the recent, large-scale immigration of workers from the periphery to the northeast, are two processes with a common origin.

(Sassen-Koob 1981: 77)

Thus, Sassen extends and refines previous work by establishing an empirical association between three processes hitherto considered as analytically distinct: capital flows from the core to the non-core, emigration from the non-core to the core, and global economic restructuring. This thesis is expanded to include Southeast Asian migration to Japan (Sassen 1993), and is fully elaborated in The Global City (1991), which links the processes of deindustrialization in the core, foreign investment flows into the periphery, and international migration to the formation of “global cities” that serve as command and control centers for geographically dispersed global production networks. Sassen’s framework is a push-pull perspective that is significantly modified to account for the global political-economic context. As such, it represents a significant advance in international migration research.

World-systems analysis continues to motivate research on international migration that builds upon the foundational works of Portes and Sassen. This research applies both qualitative and quantitative methodologies and marshals an extensive array of empirical data to extend and refine theoretical frameworks (see e.g., Mielants and Jones 2010). Again, what unites this body of research is an emphasis on identifying how the global political-economic context influences international migration.

Several studies use case studies to explore the relationship between world-system dynamics and international migration. Mac Laughlin (1994) relates Irish emigration to the peripheralization of the country, illustrating the processes through which Ireland was transformed into a “global emigrant nursery” for Great Britain and the United States (Mac Laughlin 1994: 257). Sione (1994) traces the movement of textile workers from Northern Italy to New Jersey in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. She documents how these international migrations were associated with economic restructuring in the European textile industry, which expanded corporate connections to the United States and channeled the subsequent labor migration to the United States.

Migration from the Latin America and the Caribbean has garnered significant attention. Fernandez-Kelly’s (1983; Nash and Fernandez-Kelly 1983) seminal work on Mexican migrants, gender, and the world division of labor laid the groundwork for a generation of research on the topic (see in particular Bickham-Mendez 2005; Parrenas 2001). Hamilton and Stoltz Chinchilla (1991, 1996) relate emigration from Central America to foreign capital penetration and structural
change in the global political economy. Robinson (1992) places Latino migration to the United States in a world-systems context and more recent work develops this thesis (see in particular Chapters 3–4 of Robinson 2008). Delgado Wise and colleagues (2006; Delgado Wise and Covarrubias 2007, 2008; Delgado Wise and Cypher 2007) examine Mexican migration to the United States in the context of the NAFTA, arguing that economic integration between the two countries is based not only on international trade, but a “labor export-led model” comprised of maquiladoras, “disguised maquilas,” and direct labor migration to the United States. Several studies expand the discussion beyond economic factors and consequences. Grosfoguel (1997) illustrates the historical connection between the United States’ geopolitical strategies, both symbolic-ideological and military-security, and international migrations from the Caribbean in the Cold War and post-Cold War eras. Subsequent works examine Puerto Rican migration, focusing on incorporation and identity formation in the United States (Grosfoguel 1999, 2003). Nanton (1999) describes the process of identity formation among Caribbean migrants in Great Britain, focusing on the role of the state in defining and “othering,” migrants. Sansone (1999) uses the cases of Surinamese and Antillean migration to the Netherlands to explore ethnic identity and allegiance against the common background of Dutch colonialism. More recent studies explore the concept of “transnationalism” among migrants in the world-system (Cervantes-Rodriguez et al 2009; Kyle 2000).

Other studies have applied quantitative techniques to cross-national datasets in order to explain how structural features of the world-economy are related to international migration flows in the late twentieth century. Ricketts’ (1987) analysis of 18 Caribbean countries over the period 1970 to 1979 found that FDI increased both legal and illegal migration to the United States. Yang (1998) demonstrated that a composite measure of US trade and FDI increased the prevalence of emigration to the United States from less-developed countries over the period 1984 to 1993. Sanderson and Kentor (2008) found that stocks of foreign investment have a ten-year lagged positive effect on net emigration in LDCs between 1985 and 2000. They argued that this effect of FDI stocks on net emigration is due to the long-term negative effect of foreign capital dominance on economic growth. In a subsequent study, Sanderson and Kentor (2009) decomposed FDI stocks by sector (i.e., primary and secondary), to more explicitly test the FDI-migration hypothesis, and extended the time period to 1970–2000. Their findings indicated that the effects of FDI differed across sectors: primary sector FDI increased emigration, but secondary sector FDI decreased emigration. They also found empirical support for two other migration theories: the migration transition theory, in which emigration rises and then falls as GDP per capita levels increase (Martin and Taylor 1996); and the theory of cumulative causation, which argues that prior levels of emigration generate social networks that promote further emigration (Massey 1990). While most of the previous quantitative research on international migration tries to explain variation in emigration levels, recent work by Sanderson (2010) established the importance of international migration as an explanation of variation in development outcomes across countries, as immigration was found to be associated with lower scores on the Human Development Index in a sample of less-developed countries over a series of 10-year periods.

The promise of world-systems analysis

Over the past 35 years, world-systems approaches have significantly advanced knowledge in the area of international migration. Yet much work remains. In general, the literature on international migration remains limited by a disconnect between theory and empirical research and a lack of comparative research. World-systems analysis is particularly well suited to overcome these two obstacles, but it too suffers from these limitations.
Past research demonstrates a strong theoretical orientation and a relatively close connection with empirical data. Yet the use of data often remains illustrative, and with a few exceptions, world-systems studies do not often assess theoretical frameworks against competing theories: “Although the paradigm yields clear and researchable hypotheses … relatively little has been done to test these propositions systematically, and even less has been done to contrast them with competing theoretical models” (Massey et al 2005: 96).

Future work that assesses the relative explanatory or descriptive power of world-systems analysis would help incorporate world-systems approaches more thoroughly into the broader literature on international migration. This is not an argument to dilute or modify world-systems approaches; it is instead an appeal to strengthen these approaches through more systematic tests against competing explanations and theoretical frameworks.

Similarly, with a few exceptions, comparisons across countries, regions, and zones in the world-economy have not been sufficiently explored. There is a real need for research that identifies causal mechanisms linking international migration to world-system dynamics. Comparative research is crucial in order to move beyond country-specific knowledge:

… what we have today is mostly an amorphous mass of data on immigration to different countries and a series of concepts whose scope seldom exceeds those of a particular nation-state … Needed are explicitly comparative projects that focus on research topics at a higher level of abstraction than those guiding policy concerns and that employ a common cross-national methodology. (Portes 1997: 819)

World-systems approaches are well suited to comparative research, using both qualitative and quantitative methodologies to elucidate how world-systemic processes are associated with international migration in particular historical contexts. However, country-specific case studies of migration that rely on anecdotal or illustrative data are all too common.

Future work incorporating empirical data to investigate international migrations across national contexts is especially warranted. There are many areas of research that merit further attention, but two are particularly worthwhile. We are only beginning to understand the multifaceted association between world-systemic processes, environmental change, and migration dynamics, yet these relationships will only become more important as climate change accelerates. World-system analysts have much to offer in this area by elaborating how, and when, the global political economy impinges on the environment–migration nexus. Similarly, as the world population urbanizes, it is becoming even more crucial to understand how world-systemic processes structure social change across the global urban hierarchy and within particular sites. There is already an established research agenda, drawing upon world-system analysis, that links transnational capital and migration flows with forms of social polarization in “global cities” (Sassen 2001; Smith and Timberlake 2001), but much work remains in identifying more specifically the role of migration in these processes and on the question of whether migration has similar consequences for social polarization in places less central in the world city-system.

In sum, the past 35 years of world-systems research on international migration has laid a strong foundation for future research, but the promise of world-systems analysis in this area has yet to be fulfilled.

References
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