

# Explaining migration: a critical view

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## Introduction

Ever since the dawn of the age of mass migration, well over a century ago, scholars have striven to provide general explanations for the phenomenon of human migration, more or less abstracted from its specific manifestations. Economics, sociology and geography have been the most propitious disciplinary grounds for such plants, but by no means the only ones. The end result of such efforts has been models, analytical frameworks, conceptual approaches, empirical generalisations, simple notions, and only seldom real theories. A number of these explanations were not originally conceived to explain migration, but rather born to explain other facets of human behaviour and then imported and adapted for the explanation of migration. Efforts at theory-building have not been cumulative: the relatively short history of theorising about migration takes the form of a string of separate, generally unconnected theories, models or frameworks, rather than a cumulative sequence of contributions that build upon previous blocks.

If the success of such efforts had to be measured by their ability to erect a general theory of migration, it could be easily concluded that none has been successful. Indeed, there is no such thing as a general theory of migration.

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But it is highly doubtful that this could be a good yardstick, as the level of aggregation at which such an overarching and all-encompassing theory should operate would be so high as to render it useless for all practical purposes. Migration is too diverse and multifaceted to be explained by a single theory. Efforts at theory-building should rather be evaluated by their potential to guide research and provide cogent hypotheses to be tested against empirical evidence, and by their contribution to a better understanding of specific facets, dimensions and processes of migration. From this vantage point, there can be no doubt that students of migration count nowadays with a much richer reservoir of conceptual and theoretical approaches than ever before from which to draw upon. Yet, the overall balance sheet of theoretical contributions still mixes lights and shadows.

This article proposes a succinct description and critical evaluation of the major contemporary explanations of migration. Theory building in this realm is practically a matter of the second half of the twentieth century, and especially of its last third. Most contributions prior to the 1960s are nowadays of only historical interest, except for a number of contributions to the vocabulary of migration and the epoch-making significance of a few outstanding forerunners. These include *The Laws of*

*Migration* of Ernest-George Ravenstein (1885–1889), the undisputed founding father of the modern thinking about migration, and the seminal *The Polish Peasant in Europe and America* by William Thomas and Florian Znaniecki (1918–1920), probably the most impressive book ever written on the subject of migration. A preliminary caveat is in order: the terms *theory* and *explanation* will be liberally construed all along, and extended to all sorts of conceptual and analytical approaches, although not to typologies.

The survey starts with the neo-classical explanation of migration, the first theory deserving the name. Seen in retrospect, its appearance represented a true watershed in the short history of thinking about migration, which it presided over in the 1960s and 1970s. Special attention is given to its increasing difficulties in coming to terms with the rapidly changing reality of international migration since the mid-1970s. An array of new or renovated theories and conceptual frameworks has flourished in the last quarter of the century with that aim, mirroring the increasing relevance socially and politically accorded to the phenomenon. After a critical evaluation of both contributions and shortcomings, some reasons will be put forth that may help to understand the relative weaknesses of theoretical thinking about migration, and some areas which deserve greater attention will be suggested.

## The neo-classical explanation

In the course of the third quarter of the twentieth century, rapid and sustained economic growth, the increasing internationalisation of economic activity, decolonisation, and emergent processes of economic development in the Third World, all brought about an intensification of migration, both internal and international. Thinking about migration at that time tended to mirror both the overall climate of the period and the characteristics of migration flows. It is hardly surprising that the major contributions to migration theorising in this period should come from the realm of economics. The general primacy of economic motivations in migration had already been recognised by Ravenstein several decades before: ‘bad or oppressive laws, heavy

taxation, an unattractive climate, uncongenial social surroundings, and even compulsion (slave trade, transportation), all have produced and are still producing currents of migration, but none of these currents can compare in volume with that which arises from the desire inherent in most men to “better” themselves in material respects’ (Ravenstein 1888/1889, 286). Such a primacy was paramount in the third quarter of the century, after the hectic period of massive resettlement of displaced populations and accommodation to new borders that followed the Second World War.

The direct predecessor of the neo-classical theory, and probably the first instance of a truly theoretical explanation of migration, was W. Arthur Lewis’ model of ‘Economic Development with Unlimited Supply of Labour’, an influential model of development in dual economies in which migration plays a pivotal role (Lewis 1954). ‘Dual’ economies are economies in development, usually in post-colonial contexts, in which a modern sector, connected with the outside world, coexists with a traditional one which relies on subsistence agriculture for survival. When the modern sector expands, it draws labour from the traditional sector, where its marginal productivity is zero. Lewis estimated that a ‘cliff’ of about 30% was bound to exist between the wages of the two sectors, and that that differential would suffice for workers to move. For the advanced sector, having at its disposal an unlimited supply of migrant labour makes it possible to expand while keeping wages low, thus securing a high rate of profit. For the traditional sector, outmigration is the only way to get rid of surplus labour and to proceed in the production function towards higher capital-output ratios, and thus constitutes the precondition to embark in a process of development, out of economic backwardness. Therefore, in Lewis’ model migration is a crucial mechanism of development for the economy as a whole, exploiting the potential of growth inherent in economic disparities, and both sectors, traditional and modern, sending and receiving, greatly benefit from it.

Even though Lewis placed himself in what was known at the time as ‘development economics’, his model contained in a nutshell the basic elements of the equilibrium models which would dominate the social sciences, and

migration theorising within it, at least in the ensuing two decades. Yet, it was not primarily a theory of migration, but a model of development.

The first theory about migration, and probably the most influential so far, was the theory of migration that emanates from neo-classical economics, based on such familiar tenets as rational choice, utility maximisation, expected net returns, factor mobility and wage differentials. A paradigm so versatile, which has been applied to so many dimensions of human behaviour, and whose influences still spill over from economics to other social sciences, could hardly disregard migration, to which it seems to fit naturally.

Simple, elegant, akin to common sense, it has the advantage of combining a micro-perspective of individual decision-making and a macro-counterpart of structural determinants. At a macro level, it is a theory about the spatial redistribution of the factors of production responding to different relative prices (Ranis and Fei 1961, Todaro 1976). Migration results from the uneven geographical distribution of labour and capital. In some countries, or regions, labour is scarce relative to capital, and its price—the wage level—correspondingly high, while in other countries or regions the opposite obtains. As a result, workers tend to go from countries or regions where labour is abundant and wages low to labour-scarce countries where wages are high. In so doing, they contribute to the redistribution of the factors of production and to the equalisation of wages between countries in the long run, redressing original inequalities. It can be concluded, therefore, that in the neo-classical view, the origin of migration is to be sought in disparities in wage rates between countries, which in turn mirror income and welfare disparities. Migration will bring about the elimination of wage differentials, and this disappearance will in turn entail the cessation of migration.

The reason why individuals respond to structural differences between countries or regions and engage in migration is given by the micro version of neo-classical theory (Todaro 1969, 1976). Migration is the result of individual decisions made by rational actors who seek to improve their well-being by moving to places where the reward of their labour will be higher

than the one they get at home, in a measure sufficient to offset the tangible and intangible costs involved in the move. It is therefore an individual, spontaneous, and voluntary act, which rests on the comparison between the present situation of the actor and the expected net gain of moving, and results from a cost-benefit calculus. It follows that migrants will tend to go to the destination where a higher net return is expected, after pondering all the available alternatives. Insofar as it implies incurring certain costs in order to reap higher returns from one's labour, migration constitutes a form of investment in human capital (Sjaastad 1962).

In the third quarter of the twentieth century, the predominance of the neo-classical persuasion (and of its correlates, the functionalist paradigm in sociology and, more generally, modernisation theory) was contested, with limited success, by a school of thought located at the opposite side of the ideological spectrum, which saw social processes in terms of conflict rather than of equilibrium. In the 1960s and 1970s, this historical-structural inspiration, with its strong Marxist overtones, was embodied in dependency theory, which posited that the evolution of capitalism had given way to an international order composed of core industrialised countries and peripheral agrarian ones linked by uneven and asymmetrical relations. The advancement of the former rested on their exploitation of the latter, whose development was primarily hampered by their subordinate status. Underdevelopment was thus seen as a by-product of development. Dependency theory had little to say about migration, and that little was more about the rural-urban variety (Singer 1973) than about its international counterpart. The latter constituted one of the mechanisms through which inequalities between countries were perpetuated and reinforced, especially through the brain drain.

Yet, the relative demise of the neo-classical explanation of migration in the course of the last quarter of the twentieth century was not caused by the rather ineffectual challenge of dependency theory, but by its own intrinsic shortcomings, magnified by the profound changes undergone by the nature and characteristics of international migration since the mid-1970s. These changes have increased the hetero-

geneity and complexity of the phenomenon and have given rise to a migratory reality not very congenial with the neo-classical world.

## The challenge of a changing reality

The contemporary problems of the neo-classical theory of migration do not stem primarily from its insufficiencies as a theory, but rather from its difficulties to come to terms with reality.

The first fact that runs counter the neo-classical explanation is why so few people move, given the huge differences in income, wages and levels of welfare that exist among countries. This is clearly the Achilles' heel of neo-classical theory. If migration flows between countries were to conform to the prescriptions of neo-classical theory, the number of international migrants should be many times higher than the one that obtains in reality. In fact, economic disparities are important, no doubt, but by no means sufficient for migration flows to take place. In fact, they do not explain much nowadays.

The second, connected problem of the theory is its inability to explain differential migration. In itself, it fails to explain why some countries have relatively high outmigration rates and others, structurally similar, do not. The same can be said, *mutatis mutandis*, of different immigration rates among receiving countries. The reasonable corollary that can be inferred of the theory that the volume of migration between sets of sending and receiving areas should keep a certain proportion with the magnitude of economic imbalances separating them does not hold either.

No doubt, these shortcomings of the neo-classical explanation of migration can be partly traced to its one-dimensionality, and more precisely to the exclusion of the political dimension from the picture at a time in which it has risen to pre-eminence. Being in essence a theory of the mobility of factors of production in accordance with relative prices, the neo-classical theory is increasingly at odds, when not incapable to come to terms, with a world bristled with barriers which severely curtail the movement of labour. Certainly, the contemporary international system—in which the free cir-

culcation of workers is the exception and restriction the rule—does hardly conform to the image of an ideal environment in which individuals move freely and spontaneously to pursue their own interest and maximise utility. Generalised restrictive admission policies reduce mobility and deter would-be migrants, in a proportion impossible to ascertain but likely very large. In theory this factor—in the cases where there is a possibility of overcoming entry restrictions—could be included in the calculus of the would-be migrant, taken both as an additional cost and as an aggravation of the uncertainty of the investment implied by migration. But in practice its influence is so overriding that it deprives the theory of any use. It is true that almost everything can be translated into costs and benefits, and even that a value in monetary terms can be attached to it, but the price of such effort may often be the practical irrelevance, close to tautology, of finding that people move to enhance their well-being. In practice, the cost of overcoming entry obstacles is often so staggering that it dissuades the majority of those who might be candidates to migration if only economic considerations were at play. In the cases when such barriers cannot be overcome, it would make little sense to explain the decision to stay on the basis of the neo-classical calculus. Therefore, political factors are nowadays much more influential than differential wages in determining mobility or immobility, and the selectivity of migration can be explained more in terms of legal entitlements, or of personal characteristics in the case of undocumented moves, than in terms of wage differentials. As a result, when applied to international movements in the contemporary world, the neo-classical explanation floats between the obvious and the unrealistic. Obviously, a different matter is the explanation of internal migration, where mobility is normally unrestricted and the costs of cultural adaptation lower. The paradigm can also be successfully applied to the past, when entry barriers were less prominent than in the present.

Yet, the insufficiencies of the paradigm do not stem only from restrictive entry policies. It can also be unable to explain reality even in spaces where mobility is unfettered. We mention only one example: the case of the European Union casts doubts about the general propensity

to move whenever wage differentials clearly offset the cost of moving, as posited by the theory. There, the principle of free movement for nationals of the 15 member-states coincides nowadays with a very limited volume of labour migration, despite the fact that important differences in levels of wages and welfare still remain. The scant labour mobility between European Union countries in our days suggests that such a propensity is not independent from absolute levels of income or welfare at home, and that beyond a certain threshold in welfare it declines to the point of vanishing. Therefore, the idea that migration only ceases when wage differentials have been reduced to the mere cost of moving does not seem to hold. Neither does the correlative prescription of the theory that posits that migration will bring about an equalisation of levels of welfare between countries. Whatever the data used, the idea that international migration has brought about a significant reduction in economic disparities among sending and receiving countries in recent decades seems hard to sustain.

Indeed, the neo-classical theory of migration has been often criticised on the grounds that it downplays non-economic factors (particularly cultural determinants, bound to be influential in such an existential decision as migration), that it mechanically reduces the determinants of migration, that treats migrants and societies as if they were homogeneous, and that its perspective is static. In addition, it equates migrants with workers, and disregards all migration that is not labour migration.

Indeed, the theory has been criticised even by some of its initial proponents. A number of relevant amendments or improvements were introduced from an early date. The most relevant one was Michael Todaro's addition of a coefficient that accounts for the probability of finding employment—or of being unemployed—at destination in the calculation of the expected wage advantage (Todaro 1969). Yet, this and other refinements to meet objections have not been sufficient to solve its difficult relations with a changing reality, especially in the international sphere.

## The contemporary mosaic

In the last quarter of the twentieth century, *grosso modo*, international migration has undergone deep changes. *Inter alia*, flows have become more global and heterogeneous in composition. Asia, Africa and Latin America have replaced Europe as the major region of origin. Both the relative volume and the nature of labour demand in receiving societies have changed. Restrictive admission policies have proliferated. New forms of migration based upon entitlements have become paramount. Undocumented flows and clandestine traffics have acquired an increasing saliency. Social integration in the receiving society has become less linear. Finally, transnational spaces and communities have emerged. There are signs that suggest that international migration may be entering a new era. And since theories usually follow facts, these changes may have ushered in a new era in the ways of thinking about migration as well. The effects of such changes is compounded by the fact that thinking about migration seems to be presided over nowadays by the reality of international migration, while in the past it often mirrored internal migration.

As a result of increasing interest in migration and the increasingly complex and different reality, an array of conceptual and theoretical approaches have either developed anew, or been invigorated with new air, or else brought to bear and adapted from other areas of human behaviour. Indeed, rather than new migration theories *qua se*, they are either modified versions of previous strands or adaptations of theoretical frameworks built for different purposes. They do not amount to a new paradigm, but rather form a colourful, variegated mosaic (Massey et al. 1998).

## The new economics of labour migration

One of the new theories, probably the most migration-specific of all—the *new economics of labour migration*—has developed out of the neo-classical tradition. Associated primarily with the name of Oded Stark (Stark 1991), it can be seen either as an inside criticism of the micro version of neo-classical theory, or as a variant of it that refines and enriches it with a

number of amendments and additions. It shares with the latter its basic cornerstone, rational choice, but differs from it in that the actor who seeks to enhance its utility is more the family or the household than the individual migrant. Migration is a family strategy geared not so much to maximise income as to diversify sources of income, in order to minimise risks—such as unemployment, loss of income, or crop failures—and loosen constraints, given the imperfections that usually plague credit and insurance markets in sending countries. Insofar as migrants aim at maximising income, they do not necessarily do so in absolute terms, but rather relative to other households in its reference group, thus retaking the old notion of relative deprivation (Stark and Taylor 1989). From this it can be inferred that the more unequal the distribution of income in a given community, the more intensely relative deprivation will be felt, and the more incentives will there be for further migration to occur. In this connection, the new economics of migration lends attention to income distribution, contrary to the neo-classical explanation.

The new economics of migration presents a number of improvements over neo-classical theory. To start with, the central importance accorded to wage differentials is considerably downplayed: they do not necessarily entail migration and they are not indispensable for migration to occur. In addition, it highlights the role of families and households, underlines the importance of remittances, and pays more attention to information and to the complex interdependence between migrants and the context in which they operate. The pivotal role that the family often plays in migration had already been pointed out by Jacob Mincer, but in a different perspective and with different purposes, underlining the fact that often it is not so much workers as complete families who migrate (Mincer 1978).

Yet, it is doubtful whether the disparate ingredients that make up the new economics of migration are sufficiently woven and logically integrated as to constitute a coherent theory, or whether it is no more than a critical, sophisticated variant of neo-classical theory. In any case, if anything detracts seriously from the value of the new economics of migration it is not so much its possible lack of theoretical

autonomy as its limited applicability. The contexts of migration it describes seem to be rather peculiar ones, characterised by decades-long migration relationships. Indeed, although some of the evidence presented relates at times to other world regions, the new economics of migration seems to draw its inspiration, as well as the bulk of the evidence on which it rests, from a small number of rural villages in Mexico. Its versatility vis-à-vis other, less established migration contexts—especially those that involve considerable degrees of societal disorganisation, not to speak of life-threatening circumstances—looks uncertain at best. It is not applicable either to the movement of complete households, as Mincer's model was. Finally, the new economics of migration concerns itself only with the causes of migration at the sending side.

### Dual labour market theory

The opposite happens with another theory which contributes to a better understanding of contemporary realities, the *dual labour market theory* of Michael Piore (1979), insofar as it pays attention only to the receiving end of migration and places its explanation at the macro level of structural determinants. According to it, international migration is caused by a permanent demand for foreign labour that stems from certain intrinsic characteristics of advanced industrial societies, which in turn result in the segmentation of their labour markets. For a number of reasons, highly developed economies require foreign workers to fill jobs that native workers refuse and that are no longer discharged—if they ever were—by women and teenagers. Piore (1979) mentions four factors responsible for such demand, which is satisfied by means of recruitment.

It can be said that both the starting point of dual labour market theory—the fact that in advanced economies there is a permanent demand for foreign labour—and the basic explanation for this demand—that native workers in advanced societies shun low-paid, unstable, unskilled, dangerous, demeaning, low-prestige jobs—are well-known empirical observations. In fact, the merit of the theory lies in explaining in a complex and technical way why all this happens. More precisely, although structured in a different way, the theory explains (i) why in



Emigrants bound for Australia, at the port of Tilbury near London around 1930, are given a speech by Sir Edward Lucas. Roger Viollet

advanced economies there are unstable and low-productivity jobs; (ii) why local workers shun such jobs; (iii) why the local workers' reluctance to occupy unattractive jobs cannot be solved through standard markets mechanisms, i.e., by raising the wages attached to such jobs; (iv) why foreign workers from low-income countries are willing to accept such jobs; and, finally, (v) why such structural labour demand can no longer be filled as before by women and teenagers.

In advanced economies there are unstable jobs due to the division of the economy in a capital-intensive primary sector and a labour-intensive, low-productivity secondary sector, which gives rise to a segmented labour market. Local workers shun such jobs because they confer low status and prestige and promise scant upward mobility, and because they entail motivation problems. The local workers' reluctance to occupy unattractive jobs cannot be solved through standard market mechanisms, because raising salaries at the bottom of the occupational

scale would require raising proportionately wages at the following echelons, in order to respect the occupational hierarchy, and that would result in structural inflation. Foreign workers from low-income countries, especially temporary ones or those who entertain prospects of returning home some day, are willing to accept such jobs because low wages are usually high if compared with standards back home, and because the status and prestige that counts for them are the ones they have at home. Finally, such structural labour demand for entry-level jobs can no longer be filled as before by women and teenagers. This is because female work has lost its secondary, dependent status in favour of an autonomous, career-oriented one, and lower fertility and longer education have diminished the availability of youngsters (Massey et al. 1998, 33).

The value of dual labour markets theory does not lie principally in providing a general explanation of the causes of international migration. Rather, it lies in highlighting an

important factor for the occurrence of international migration, namely the structural demand for foreign labour that is inherent in the economic structure of contemporary advanced societies. It also provides cogent explanations for such demand—although certainly not the only plausible ones—which help to understand, among other things, the apparently anomalous coexistence of a chronic demand for foreign labour with significant rates of structural unemployment in a number of receiving countries. Another merit is its contribution to dispel the idea that immigrant workers necessarily compete with native ones and affect the latter's level of wages and employment prospects.

Indeed, as a general explanation of the causes of international migration, dual labour markets theory is far from flawless. In the first place, a theory that posits that all international migration is demand-driven and excludes altogether 'push' factors cannot aspire to explain but a part of reality. Stating that most migrants end up finding employment at destination is one thing, and positing that migration flows are triggered by such demand a different one. Secondly, today's immigration flows do not seem to result primarily, let alone uniquely, from recruitment practices, especially in the advanced economies that the theory envisages, such as those of North America or Western Europe. No doubt, recruitment was an important mechanism of immigration in those societies in the third quarter of the century, in the decades that preceded the formulation of the theory, and it is still practised today, particularly in the Persian Gulf and Asia-Pacific regions. But in advanced industrial economies most migrants come on their own initiative, and not necessarily to fill pre-existing jobs. In many cases, immigrants constitute a supply of labour that creates its own demand, that is, jobs that would not exist without their previous presence. Finally, the theory does not explain differential immigration rates, i.e., why different advanced industrial economies, which have similar economic structures, exhibit rates of immigration that may vary by a factor of ten, say between Denmark or Norway on the one hand and Switzerland or Canada on the other.

## World system theory

Both the focus on macrosocial processes and the idea that highly developed economies need foreign labour to work for low wages in certain sectors are shared by *world system theory*. However, its explanation of international migration does not so much rest on this demand, but rather in the dislocations brought about by capitalist penetration in less developed countries. A number of scholars, among them Alejandro Portes and Saskia Sassen, have put forth historical-structural explanations of international migration (Portes and Walton 1981, Sassen 1988). The conceptual cornerstone of world system theory is the notion of a 'modern world-system' coined in the mid-1970s by historian-sociologist Immanuel Wallerstein, a world system of European hegemony that took shape since the sixteenth century and which consists of three concentric spheres—core-states, semi-periphery and peripheral areas (Wallerstein 1974). World system theory belongs in the historical-structural tradition that inspired dependency theory in the 1960s. Although it differs in many respects from the latter, it shares with it the view of migration as one more product of the domination exerted by core countries over peripheral areas, in the context of international relationships fraught with conflict and tension. Therefore, migration also stems from inequality—in this case an unbalanced international order—but, contrary to equilibrium models, it reinforces the inequality instead of leading to its reduction.

The kernel of the explanation of international migration has to be found primarily in the extension of the capitalist mode of production from core countries to peripheral ones, and the ensuing incorporation of new regions into an increasingly unified world economy. In the past this penetration was assisted by colonial regimes; in the present it is assured by neo-colonial regimes and multinational corporations, and direct foreign investment plays a crucial role in it. In order to counteract a declining rate of profit as domestic wages rise, and to accrue additional benefits, core countries intervene in peripheral ones in search of raw materials and to profit from cheap labour (Massey et al. 1998). This penetration, in combination with processes of modernisation and

commercialisation of agriculture, entails the substitution of capitalist practices and processes for traditional ones, especially in agriculture and manufacturing.

A number of dislocations and disruptions ensue, including the displacement of workers who lose their traditional ways of life. Typically a large labour surplus develops that the still small non-agricultural sector is incapable of absorbing. This leads to migration to the cities, and to the swelling there of a traditional tertiary sector characterised by an extremely low productivity. An uprooted proletariat, prone to move abroad, is thus first created and in turn siphoned to the core countries through the same channels that were opened by the economic penetration, and through the cultural, transportation and communication links that followed. In the core-countries migrants find employment in certain sectors which rely on cheap labour to maintain a high rate of profit. Migration thus operates as a global labour supply system (Sassen 1988).

World system theory may shed light on the importance of past and present linkages between countries at different stages of development, and about some mechanisms of development which cause uprootedness. It also lends some flesh to the common-sense empirical observation that migration often connects countries that were linked in the past by colonial bonds, on account of the many vestiges left by such bonds.

Rather than a theory of migration, world systems theory is a grand historical generalisation, a by-product of a univocal, reductionist and sense-loaded interpretation of history in which all countries pass through similar processes, as if following a grand script or some rigid laws of historical development. It is only applicable at the global level (Papademetriou and Martin 1991, 10), and migrants are little more than passive pawns in the play of big powers and world processes presided over by the logic of capital accumulation. It may provide a background for the study of specific migration relationships between countries, but not so much for its investigation, as it is an explanation given *ex ante*, and formulated in a way that cannot be subject to empirical test. In addition, it seems difficult to reconcile with the increasing tendency towards the diversification of migration flows and paths, which runs paral-

lel to the process of globalisation and questions the validity of one of the basic tenets of world system theory. In effect, migration flows between hitherto unconnected or weakly connected countries are increasingly frequent, thus not following the channels of penetration that allegedly created uprootedness.

## Migration networks

Few things, if any, are as characteristic of the contemporary way of looking into migration as the central attention accorded to *migration networks*, a notion that has a long tradition, going back to Thomas and Znaniecki. What is new is the central role that the notion plays in the investigation and the explanation of migration. The notion is so well known that it does not require much elaboration. Migration networks can be defined as sets of interpersonal relations that link migrants or returned migrants with relatives, friends or fellow countrymen at home. They convey information, provide financial assistance, facilitate employment and accommodation, and give support in various forms. In so doing, they reduce the costs and uncertainty of migration and therefore facilitate it (Massey et al. 1998, 42–43). Networks can also induce migration through demonstration effects.

Migration networks can be seen as a form of social capital, insofar as they are social relations that permit access to other goods of economic significance, such as employment or higher wages. This viewpoint was first suggested by Douglas Massey (Massey et al. 1987), drawing on social capital theory, associated with such prominent names as James Coleman and Pierre Bourdieu. Likewise, this larger framework might also accommodate, as it has been suggested, other intermediary institutions—such as smuggling rings or benevolent, humanitarian groups—which, with different purposes and aims, assist migrants to overcome entry barriers. Yet, the inclusion of such institutions in the notion of social capital, which is made up of interpersonal ties, does not seem as straightforward as in the case of networks.

The importance of social networks for migration can hardly be overstated. It can be safely said that networks rank among the most important explanatory factors of migration. Many migrants move because others with whom

they are connected migrated before. Migration networks have a multiplier effect, which is implicit in the formerly fashionable expression 'chain migration'. Moreover, the capital role that networks have usually played in migration flows is greatly enhanced nowadays in a world in which circulation is widely restricted. On the one hand, family reunion accounts for a substantial part of immigration flows in many countries. On the other, the importance of social networks is bound to increase as entry into receiving countries becomes more difficult, on account of their capacity to reduce the costs and risks of moving, including uncertainty.

In addition, networks are the main mechanism that makes migration a self-perpetuating phenomenon. Indeed, networks are cumulative in nature. They tend to grow ever larger and denser, as every move constitutes a resource for those who stay back, and facilitate further moves, which in turn widen the networks and the probability of their further expansion. The development of social networks may explain the continuation of migration independently from the causes that led to the initial movement. In fact, social networks may often be the foremost predictors of future flows. Because of this, migration networks may contribute to the explanation of differential migration. Yet, experience shows that ever-expanding dynamics cannot go forever. At some moment a saturation point must be reached, after which de-acceleration sets in. The dynamics of migration networks growth and stagnation constitute an area that calls for further investigation.

Last but not least, networks constitute an intermediate, relational level that stands between the micro level of individual decision-making and the macro level of structural determinants (Faist 1997), thus contributing to bridge a gap that is one of the major limitations in migration thinking. Yet, all this notwithstanding, theorising about migration networks has not gone beyond the stage of a conceptual framework.

### Systems approach

Ever since the seminal contribution of Akin Mabogunje, in his study of rural-urban migration in Africa, a *systems approach* is repeatedly proposed as a fruitful, comprehensive framework for the study of migration. Migration

systems are spaces characterised by the relatively stable association of a group of receiving countries with a number of areas of origin. Such association does not only result from migration flows, but is buttressed by connections and links of a varied nature. These linkages, and their multiple interactions, constitute the most appropriate context for the analysis of migration. Such a framework should ultimately be able to integrate the contributions of the remaining theoretical explanations, together with all the actors relevant in the process of migration, including networks and intermediary institutions, and some usually neglected dimensions, particularly the state (Kritz, Lim and Zlotnik 1992).

Nevertheless, the migration systems approach to migration, which aspired to draw on the analytic power of general system analysis, is as yet no more than a *desideratum* which has never been fulfilled, at least as far as international migration is concerned. It has hardly gone beyond the identification of international migration systems, at a purely descriptive level. Moreover, such identification has confined itself so far to the most stable part of the system, the countries that stand at the receiving end. The same can be said about the enumeration of the elements that define the existence of a migration system, such as relative structural homogeneity, geographic contiguity or proximity, similarity of policies, and common belonging to supranational organisations (Zlotnik 1992). While no one would deny the advisability of studying migration flows as part of other flows and exchanges of various nature, the fact is that the full potential of the approach still remains at the stage of promise.

### Cumulative causation

A third theoretical strand that has received fresh air in recent times is the idea that migration is a self-sustaining and self-perpetuating phenomenon. This idea was first put forth by Gunnar Myrdal several decades ago, under the label *cumulative causation*, in the context of the 'backwash effects' put in motion by uneven development in underdeveloped areas. Douglas Massey has recently retaken and enlarged the notion, identifying several factors and mechanisms that are responsible for the self-perpetu-

ation of migration. The basic idea is that migration changes reality in a way that induces subsequent moves through a number of socio-economic processes. The most important of them all, the expansion of networks, has already been referred to. Other relevant mechanisms which stem from migration and which in turn induce further migration include relative deprivation, the development of a culture of migration, a perverse distribution of human capital, and the stigmatisation of jobs usually performed by immigrants (Massey et al. 1998).

## A critical evaluation

Recent theoretical contributions are contributing to a better understanding of the causes of migration, and of the mechanisms that contribute to its self-perpetuation. Yet, the overall picture is still far from satisfactory. A number of clouds obscure the sky of migration theorising.

To start with, it can be surmised that the focus of existing theories may be somewhat misplaced. The first and foremost, often the only dimension of migration that theories have aimed at explaining is why people move, or variants of the same question, such as what determines the volume of migration; that is, root causes, not even proximate determinants. This is clearly the case with neo-classical theory, the new economics of migration, world system theory, dual labour markets, and even the venerable 'push-pull' framework, only that in abstract terms. Yet, it is not clear that investigating the causes constitutes the most useful and interesting line of enquiry nowadays.

As stated before, the usefulness of theories that try to explain why people move is in our days dimmed by their inability to explain why so few people move. Clearly, theories of migration should not only look to mobility but also to immobility, not only to centrifugal forces but also to centripetal ones. The classic pair 'push' and 'pull' should at least be complemented with 'retain' and 'repel'. The existence of centripetal forces that lead to staying has been generally ignored by theories, although there are signs of increasing interest towards them in very recent years (Hammar et al. 1997). This implies that more attention than hitherto should be bestowed upon family types, kinship

systems, social systems, and social structures in general. Much the same can be said about the cultural dimensions and contexts of migration, including, but not stopping there, the costs of cultural adaptation.

In addition to social and cultural factors, it is obvious that the explanation of limited mobility has to be sought in the realm of politics, more precisely in the crucial role played by states. The relevance of the political dimension nowadays can hardly be overstated. Nothing shapes migratory flows and types more than admission policies. As Kingsley Davis aptly put it, migration is a creature of policy (Davis 1988, 259). Any theory built primarily with economic materials is bound to be in trouble in an international migration scene in which political considerations and the states intervene so prominently. In some of the most important contemporary migratory regions labour migration is severely curtailed—although a number of exceptions are generally recognised—and the largest migration flows result from legal entitlements, such as family reunion and asylum. Clearly, politics and the state are usually missing in theories of migration, and urgently need to be brought back (Zolberg 1989). In particular, the powerful impact of admission restrictions on processes, determinants and selectivity should be incorporated as an essential ingredient in models.

Some doubts can be raised as well about the usefulness of the over-arching emphasis put so far on the causes of migration. As someone has said, international migration is both very complex and straightforward. On the one hand, providing general answers apt to account for an endless variety of situations is exceedingly difficult. As both surveys and life histories show, the causes of migration are legion. General answers are bound to be reductionistic. On the other hand, migration is rather straightforward. If something is in abundance, it is reasons to move, and quite a few of them can be given for granted.

The time seems to have come to switch the bulk of theoretical attention away from causes and into other dimensions of migration which are of paramount interest, both in intellectual and in policy terms.

These include, to mention but a few: processes and consequences, including modes of

migrant incorporation and societal transformations associated with international migration; the ‘unsettled relationship’ between migration and development, as Papademetriou and Martin rightly labelled it; social structures, including family and kinship ties; emerging processes of transnationalisation and their implications; and the state and the political context in which migration takes place. In addition, refugees, traditionally overlooked on account of the exclusionary emphasis on voluntary migration, have to be included as essential actors in the theoretical explanation of migration. More thought should be devoted to migration networks and linkages of various types which stand between the macro and the micro dimensions.

All the above notwithstanding, dissatisfaction with existing migration theories, insofar as it is felt, may also have to do with matters of style. Existing theories generally promise more than they deliver. They tend to be partial and limited, in the sense that they are useful to explain a facet, or a dimension, or shed light on a particular feature, or are applicable to certain types of migration in certain contexts and not to others. To begin with, most theories only explain labour migration, and this is a considerable limitation in a contemporary scene in which other forms of migration are prominent. This partiality would not need to imply any problem in itself, were it not for the fact that—as often happens in the social sciences—theories tend to make ‘grand claims’, out of proportion with their applicability and explanatory potential. The ambition to provide *the* explanation for migration, or for international migration for that matter, often betrays them. The aspiration at general applicability that can be presumed of a theory is generally neither met nor disclaimed.

Finally, migration theories generally suffer from epistemological frailty. If by theory is meant a set of logically interconnected propositions from which empirically testable statements can be formally derived, then almost no theory about migration meets these standards, with a couple of exceptions at best. But even if the standards are considerably lowered, most would still not qualify as a theory, whatever their empirical relevance and heuristic value. All of them provide useful points of view, but there should be more than that to qualify as a theory. Were it a purely formal matter, a ques-

tion of logical status, it would not matter much. Yet, such weaknesses are far from inconsequential, as they have to do with the very nature and usefulness of theories, affect their ability to guide empirical research, and diminish their testability. In their discharge, it has to be added that this frailty tends to plague the social sciences as a whole.

Rather than fulfilling the function of guiding empirical research and providing testable hypotheses that can be contrasted with facts, existing migration theories are mainly useful for providing explanations *ex-post*. The starting point is usually one or more common-sense, empirical observations, which are then dressed in more or less formal and abstract terms with fitting explanations, drawn at times from the general reservoir of the social sciences. In so doing, theories or conceptual frameworks play the function of upgrading the formal status of empirical observations. In some cases, they are not abstract enough to go beyond empirical generalisation. Paraphrasing a famous metaphor that related theories with street lamps, in the case of migration existing theories are more useful to lean on than to provide illumination. This may explain the fact that efforts at theorising have not led to cumulative advances in knowledge.

## Concluding remarks

In the course of the second half of the twentieth century, and especially in its last quarter, our understanding of the complexities of migration has made considerable progress. However, this deepened understanding has resulted more from empirical research, often divorced from theory, than from the enlightening effect of theories. It is true that the reservoir of theories, and especially of conceptual frameworks, available nowadays represents a clear improvement over the state of things that prevailed a few decades ago. Yet, as a whole, the contribution of theories to the knowledge of migration is still limited, more than what could be reasonably expected from theories. The wealth of forms and processes constantly revealed by empirical research, the dynamism manifested by an ever-changing reality, contrast with the limitations of theory building.

Such limitations are part and parcel of the general difficulties that the social sciences experience when trying to explain human behaviour, affected by a large number of inter-related variables.

But, in addition to that, in the case of migration they have to do with difficulties that are inherent to the phenomenon under scrutiny. Indeed, migration is hard to define, difficult to measure, multifaceted and multiform, and resistant to theory-building (Arango 1985), 'opaque to theoretical reasoning in general, and to formal models in particular' (Davis 1988, 245). The first two obstacles make for ambiguity and oppose operationalisation. The third calls for interdisciplinary approaches which seldom happen.

Perhaps the greatest difficulty of studying migration lies in its extreme diversity, in terms of forms, types, processes, actors, motivations, socio-economic and cultural contexts, and so on. It is no wonder that theories are at odds when trying to account for such complexity. As Anthony Fielding put it, 'perhaps migration is another "chaotic concept", one that needs to be "unpacked" so that each part can be seen in its proper historical and social context so that its significance in each context can be separately understood' (Fielding 1983, 3).

This 'unpacking' calls for a better integration of theory and empirical research. Unfortunately there are no simple and easy prescriptions for such a reconciliation.

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