

A Brief Overview of Theories of International Migration

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Causes and impacts of external and internal migration are diverse. This diversity is not only reflected in empirical analyses but also in different theories and models of migration. The following short summary of migration theories is far from complete, but places the study at hand in the wider context of migration research. There is at present no single, coherent theory of international migration, but rather a fragmented set of theories, sometimes segmented by disciplinary boundaries. The major subjects involved in migration research are demography, sociology, economics, geography and political science (Lebhart 2002). The major distinction drawn is between theories explaining the initiation and consequences of international migration, which are often summarized as 'classical migration research' in the literature and theories explaining the perpetuation of migration. However, in all theoretical concepts aspects can be found to better understand migration processes.

Classical Migration Research

The oldest concept in understanding migration dates from 1885, when Ernest Georg Ravenstein formulated the 'laws of migration' (Ravenstein 1885; 1889; Bähr 2004).

Since that time, a variety of explanations has been proposed to explain how international migration is initiated and which social, cultural, economic or political consequences it has on the destination. What is common to all these approaches is that migration processes are mainly seen as an uni- or bidirectional movement brought about by emigration, immigration or return migration caused by isolated factors, such as economic or political ones. This idea is very much reflected in push-pull models, where pull and push factors initiating migration are present in the source as well as in the receiving regions of migrants (Lee 1966). Neoclassical economics focuses on differentials in wages and employment conditions between countries, and on migration costs. It generally conceives movement as an individual decision for income maximization (Lewis 1952; Todaro 1969; Borjas 1989). New economics of migration, in contrast, consider not only the labour market as reasons to migrate, but also conditions of other markets, such as the capital market or unemployment insurance market. It views migration as a household strategy to minimize family income risks or to overcome capital constraints on family production activities (Stark 1991). Decision-making models (Langenheder 1968; Esser 1980) consider a variety of factors influencing migration decision, but still remain in the push-pull framework.

Dual labour market theory, world systems theory and the world society approach focus on forces operating at an aggregated macro-level. Dual labour market theory links immigration to the structural requirements of modern industrial economies (Piore 1979). World systems theory sees migration as a natural consequence of economic globalization and market penetration across national boundaries (Wallerstein 1974). The world society approach focuses on cultural globalisation, where people increasingly share cultural values world wide, and therefore also perceive economic imbalances and migrate as a consequence (Hoffmann-Nowotny 1989).

Theories Explaining the Perpetuation of Migration

Starting with Tilly and Brown (1967) and Lomnitz (1977) the 1970s scholars emphasize the importance of kin and friendship networks in shaping and sustaining internal as well as international migration. These interpersonal ties connect migrants, former migrants and non-migrants in origin and destination. They encourage circular migration and reduce migration risks. This is accompanied by the theory of cumulative causation, which states that migration sustains itself by creating more migration (Massey 1990).

In all approaches migration is seen as an integral part of life for many people and a continuing social process. Migration is embedded in societal rules and norms by migrants' 'home society' and their 'society of arrival'. All approaches aim to explain complex migration processes in answer to the question: what does migration perpetuate and is there a new quality of migration caused by globalisation?

One example of migration networks are ethnic economies or ethnic enclaves or niches (Granovetter 1985; Portes 1994). Studies of immigrants and their entrepreneurship show that their kinship networks are a key resource for the creation of small businesses. An ethnic economy exists whenever any immigrant or ethnic minority maintains a private economic sector in which it has a controlling ownership stake (Light and Karageorgis 1994). Ethnic enclave economies are dense concentrations of immigrant or ethnic firms that employ a significant proportion of their co-ethnic labour force and develop a distinctive physical presence in urban space (Light and Karageorgis 1994). Ethnic niches emerge when a group is able to colonize a particular sector of employment in such a way that members have privileged access to new job openings, while restricting that of outsiders (Portes 1998). As in the case of enclaves, mobility opportunities through niches are completely network-driven as members find jobs for others and teach them the necessary skills.

The various network approaches and theory of cumulative causation all suggest that migration flows acquire a measure of stability and structure over space and time. The migration system theory allows the identification of stable international migration systems. It includes a core-receiving region, and a set of specific sending countries. They are linked by intense exchanges of people, goods, and financial capital, as Zolberg and Smith (1996) identified and compared on the basis of the Inter-American and the Mediterranean-European migration systems.

A last trend in migration approaches is the discussion about transnationalism and transmigration. To summarize, migration requires regular and sustained social contacts over time across space in these approaches. It involves individuals, their networks of social relations, their communities, and broader institutionalized structures such as local and national governments. The approach of transnationalism is based on the unit of countries, while transmigration refers to the social unit of transnational communities (Glick-Schiller et al. 1992; Portes et al. 1999; Pries 1999; Vertovec 1999).

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