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Session 1: Theories of global mobility

Stephen Castles
Understanding Global Migration:
A Social Transformation Perspective

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this paper is to examine some of the difficulties of theory formation in international migration studies, and to suggest a way forward. The starting point is an examination of the dominant perception of 'migration as a problem'. This is followed by a discussion of some key obstacles to theoretical advancement in migration studies. I argue that a general theory of migration is neither possible nor desirable, but that we can make significant progress by re-embedding migration research in a more general understanding of contemporary society, and linking it to broader theories of social change across a range of social scientific disciplines. A conceptual framework for migration studies should take social transformation as its central category, in order to facilitate understanding of the complexity, interconnectness, variability, contexuality and multi-level mediations of migratory processes in the context of rapid global change. The argument is illustrated through the example of the changing dynamics of labour forces in highly-developed countries. The paper does not put forward a conceptual framework but does suggest some of its possible characteristics.

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Introduction

Ten years ago Massey and his collaborators argued that:

> The theoretical concepts now employed by social scientists to analyse and
> explain international migration were forged primarily in the industrial era and
> reflect its particular economic arrangements, social institutions, technology,
> demography and politics…. The classical approach has now entered a state of
> crisis, challenged by new ideas, concepts, and hypotheses (1998, 3).

Although, as they pointed out, 'these new ways of thinking have not yet cohered into
a single theory', Massey et al. believed that 'the time has come… to reassess theories
of international migration and bring them into conformity with new empirical
conditions'. The 'post-industrial, post-Cold War world' needed a new theory of
migration appropriate for 'a brand new century'. (Massey, et al. 1998, 3). This was
the programmatic statement of a very important book, which did indeed set out to
present a new synthesis as a basis for a 'single' (and implicitly general) theory.

Ten years later, the exponential growth of social-scientific research into international
mobility of people shows no sign of abating: we have more researchers, university
courses, students, research projects, institutes, conferences, journals and publications
than ever before. Yet the quest for a generally accepted theoretical framework for
migration studies remains elusive. We still lack a body of cumulative knowledge to
explain why some people become mobile, while most do not, and what this means for
the societies where migrants come from, pass through and settle in (not forgetting that
most societies are all of these to some extent). Although there does seem to be
widespread agreement on some matters – the importance of migration networks for
example – we do not have a common conceptual framework that could serve as the
starting point for intellectual debates and the formulation of research questions.

This paper starts by examining the current 'sedentary bias' in migration debates, and
goes on to discuss why it is so difficult to develop and agree on a conceptual
framework for migration studies. A key problem is the attempt to see migration as
something distinct from broader social relationships and change processes. I will
argue that a general theory of migration is neither possible nor desirable, but that we
can make significant progress by re-embedding migration research in a more general
understanding of contemporary society. This requires forms of inquiry that start from
a situation of very rapid and generalised changes. I refer to these processes as *social
transformation*, as a convenient label to facilitate discussion of the *complexity,
interconnectness, variability, contexuality and multi-level mediations of global
change*. The paper puts forward an argument for the importance of a social
transformation framework for migration studies, and suggests the possible
requirements of such a framework. I link the analysis of migration to important trends
in the theory and methodology of several social scientific disciplines, and illustrate
the value of interdisciplinary social transformation research by looking at the example
of labour force change in northern economies.

Migration, mobility and the 'sedentary bias'

We originally named this session 'theories of global mobility', following an influential current trend. Some analysts have suggested that we should abandon the term migration, because it is thought to imply permanent (or at least long term) movement from one nation-state to another, following the patterns of labour migration and settlement migration seen as typical of the 19th and 20th centuries. The 21st century by contrast is seen as an era of fluidity and openness, in which changes in transportation, technology and culture are making it normal for people to think beyond borders and to cross them frequently for many reasons. Movements for purposes of study, professional advancement, marriage, retirement or lifestyle are assuming greater significance, so that older ideas on migration are thought to be no longer relevant.

But this picture seems overdrawn. The right to be mobile is more class-specific and selective than ever, as Bauman has pointed out (Bauman 1998). National border controls and international cooperation on migration management have become highly restrictive. Most people have neither the economic resources nor the political rights needed for free movement. Only 3 per cent of the world's population are international migrants (UNDESA 2005). The post-modern utopia of a borderless world of mobility has not yet dawned, so that it still seems appropriate to focus on the analysis of migration as a process based on inequality and discrimination, and controlled and limited by states.

The migration-mobility debate can be located in a political discourse. For demographic, economic and social reasons, all highly-developed economies find themselves increasingly reliant on immigrant labour – at all skill levels (Castles 2006; CEC 2005b). Virtually everywhere, international recruitment of highly-skilled personnel is considered a good thing, while lower-skilled migrant workers are seen as out-of-place in shiny new post-industrial economies. This is linked to the very hostile public climate towards migrant workers, asylum seekers and poor people from the South. The solution is to designate movement of the highly-skilled as professional *mobility,* and that of the lower-skilled as unwanted *migration*. Mobility equals good, because it is the badge of a modern open society; migration equals bad because it re-awakens archaic memories of invasion and displacement. To focus on migration, rather than mobility, better reflects current power relations and conflicts.

There is a more important point here, which is a key focus of the work of the International Migration Institute (IMI) at Oxford (IMI 2006). A dominant political discourse today is that migration is a *problem* that needs to be fixed by appropriate policies. The repressive variant is tight border control, the more liberal one is addressing the 'root causes' of migration – usually defined as poverty and violence in origin countries – so that people do not have to migrate. Either way, migration is seen as harmful and dysfunctional – something to be stopped. Bakewell (2007) has shown how this discourse – which he calls the *sedentary bias* – continues a long tradition which started with colonial policies and is continued by most contemporary development agencies, according to which the poor constitute a threat to prosperity and public order if they move, and should therefore stay at home.

The sedentary bias has become dominant in the analysis of contemporary migration – especially since UN Population Division studies have shown that virtually all growth in global migration after 1990 has been in South-North movements (UNDESA 2005; UNPD 2002). However, since rich countries need migrant workers, the current expression of the sedentary bias is not a complete prohibition on South-North movements of the lower-skilled, but rather the idea that *circular migration* is a 'win-win-win situation' for labour-importing countries, origin countries and the migrants themselves (CEC 2005a).

By contrast, the IMI argues that migration is a normal aspect of social life, which can be found throughout history. Migration grows in periods of social change. The reason for the expansion of migration – especially over long distances – since the 16th century is the accelerated pace of change connected with the development of the capitalist world market. Cross-border economic flows led to cross-border labour flows and the evolution of a world labour market. Nation-state formation, colonial expansion and imperialism meant conflict, violence, development-induced displacement and the growth of forced migration. Migration in the colonial period took both the form of movement of administrators, traders and military personnel (in modern terms, professional mobility), and migration based on inequality and coercion: slaves, indentured workers etc (Cohen 1995). The great wave of industrialisation from the 19th to the early 20th century led to what Hatton and Williamson call the first 'age of mass migration' (1998); (2005), while the accelerated globalisation of the post-1945 period led to a second 'age of migration'. As Mark Miller and I argue (2008), this current wave has gone much further than the first, because it has drawn in virtually all regions of the world, while the first focused mainly on the 'Atlantic economy'.

Thus migration has grown more than ever in the last 30 years because of the accelerated pace of globalisation. The 'only 3 per cent of global population' figure hides the significance of migration as an expression of social change and a ferment for further change, because it glosses over the highly-concentrated nature of migration: cultures of emigration have become established in certain origin areas, while settlement of immigrants is concentrated in developed countries (10-25 per cent of the population of OECD states) and cities (20-45 per cent in many global cities). In addition, far more people move within their own countries than internationally (Skeldon 2006) – although they too may encounter legal, economic, cultural and social obstacles. The problem is not migration itself – who sees the circulation of professionals between developed countries as problematic? Rather it lies in the conditions of inequality of wealth and power under which most South-North migration takes place, which lead to marginalisation and exploitation for many migrants. Development will not reduce migration (de Haas 2006). If there were less inequality (and therefore less poverty and human insecurity) there would not be less migration, but it would take place under very different circumstances.

These considerations reflect the difficulty of separating between the social scientific and the political in understanding migration. Claims of academic neutrality can mask a sedentary bias – an unquestioning assumption that migration is a bad thing. By contrast, this paper argues that theories of global migration should not be based on the objective of dealing with migration as a problem and finding ways of helping people to stay at home. Rather theories of global migration should be based on the postulate

that migration is a normal part of social relations. Such theories should help us analyse the dynamics of migration, not in isolation, but as a part of complex and varied processes of societal change. If there is a normative goal, it should not be to reduce migration but to find ways in which it could take place under conditions of equality and respect for human rights.

The rocky road towards a 'single theory' of migration

There are formidable obstacles to theoretical advancement in migration studies. These include the difficulties of working across disciplinary boundaries, the fragmentation of migration research into poorly-connected sub-fields, the close links of migration research with political and bureaucratic agendas, and the problems of theorising highly complex and diverse migratory experiences. All these topics have been dealt with extensively in the literature, so I will only address them briefly here. This section will go on to ask whether a general theory of migration is possible and desirable.

Interdisciplinarity

Natural sciences build on an accepted and cumulative body of knowledge, arising from past theoretical and empirical work, and serving as a basis for formulating research questions and suggesting methodology for new research. This does not imply static and dogmatic theory, since 'scientific revolutions' (Kuhn 1996) may lead to a revision of fundamental ideas. Some social sciences (such as economics and demography) try to emulate the natural scientific model (with mixed success), but others (such as anthropology and sociology) cannot, due to the unpredictability and complexity of the groups and relationships they deal with.

It is even harder for an interdisciplinary field like migration studies to develop an agreed body of knowledge, and this problem has been compounded by the rapid growth of the field, over the last 20-30 years. As new researchers have been drawn into the study of migration, they have, not surprisingly, applied the conceptual and methodological tools of their disciplines. The incentive structures of the discipline-based academic hierarchy make this hard to avoid. The result is that migration research is compartmentalised, with little analytical and methodological collaboration across boundaries. The disciplinary bias has often meant reductionist approaches that focus on limited aspects of migratory experiences, blocking understanding of the whole migratory process.

Migration embraces all dimensions of social existence, and therefore demands an interdisciplinary approach. Efforts have been made to achieve this through interdisciplinary research teams, as well as through theoretical work designed to 'talk across disciplines' (Brettell and Hollifield 2007). However, all-too-often attempts at interdisciplinarity have been more additive than integrative – with each discipline contributing aspects susceptible to its mode of analysis, but without an overarching synthesis. Indeed the problem of fragmentation is not just between but also within disciplines. For instance the schisms between neo-classical economic theory and the 'new economics of labour migration', or between functionalist and historical-institutional approaches in sociology, seem as profound as those between, say economic or legal approaches to migration.

Fragmentation on the basis of spatial or functional criteria.

Massey and his collaborators point out that migration studies is split into research on the causes, processes and patterns of migration itself (they speak of 'determinants of migration'), and research on how migrants become incorporated into receiving societies ('immigrant assimilation') (compare Massey, et al. 1998, 3). In fact there are several other divisions.

Researchers on internal migration often have little interchange with those working on international migration. Studies of migration in less-developed countries often take poverty research as a starting point, and may be poorly linked to other areas of migration research. Studies of migration in specific regions are often linked to area studies (African studies, Middle Eastern studies and so on), and nay be formulated in spatially-specific terms, with little dialogue with social scientists working elsewhere. Forced migration research is often quite separate from other areas of migration studies, and has two distinct prongs: work emerging from discourses on asylum and refugees in the North, and work based on analysis of humanitarian issues in the South. The emerging sub-field of migration and development has tried to cross disciplinary boundaries, but has been too bound up with politics and policies in its relatively short history to contribute strongly to theory formation.

Migration scholars tend to be highly specialised, and each sub-field has distinct literatures and bodies of knowledge. There are separate research centres, academic journals and conferences for different areas. Results include a failure to understand the historical character of migration, false assumptions of one-way causality, and an inability to understand the overall dynamics of migratory processes and their embeddedness in processes of societal change.

Closeness to political and bureaucratic agendas

The social sciences originated in industrial societies where all types of social relationships were seen as politically and culturally framed by the nation-state (Connell 1997; Faist 2000). Beck argues that contemporary social theory is still trapped in the 'dead end of 'methodological nationalism'' (Beck 2007). The problem is particularly severe for migration studies (Wimmer and Glick Schiller 2003) because control of belonging to the national community has always been central to nation-state sovereignty. Today migration research still tends to be linked to specific historical experiences of managing migration and diversity (Vasta and Vuddamalay 2006).

The recent politicisation of issues of migration and incorporation of migrants into receiving societies has sharpened the dilemma of policy-driven research. Governments have commissioned a large volume of research on these topics. This has provided funding for empirical work, opened up new research areas and encouraged the expansion of migration studies. However, government-commissioned work can also mean that research questions, methods and even findings may be shaped by policy interests. Policy-driven research often provides simplistic, short-term remedies to complex, long-term social issues. Much policy-driven research is not only bad social science – it is also a poor guide to successful policy formation, and one reason for the poor record of many governments in the area (Bhagwati 2003; Castles 2004; Cornelius, et al. 1994).

Most migration research has taken the situation in northern destination countries as its starting point and has neglected the perspectives of origin and transit countries, and of the migrants themselves. This is not surprising, since research funding and capacities (such as specialised centres, journals and research networks) are concentrated in the North. When the US Social Science Research Council (SSRC) held its first major conference on migration theory in 1996, it commissioned papers only from US scholars. The resulting publications (Hirschman, et al. 1999; Portes 1997) did include work on migration motivations, but the main focus was on issues of incorporation of immigrants into society (assimilation, pluralism etc.) and on the impact on 'American life and institutions'. A few years later, the SSRC and Princeton University sought to extend the debate by including 'immigration scholars from both sides of the Atlantic' (Portes and DeWind 2004a, 828). European efforts to review the 'state-of-the-art' in migration theory have also been mainly northern-centric (Penninx, et al. 2006).

The recent debates on migration and development and the growing realisation of the need to build cooperation between destination, transit and receiving countries have led to a broadening of approach. International agencies (such as IOM, ILO and UNESCO) have tried to build networks that include southern researchers. Other networks have been based on academic institutions. Publications like the Manila-based A*sian and Pacific Migration Journal* increase the dissemination of southern research. The US SSRC's latest initiative focussed on migration and development, and included several southern scholars. The Global Commission on Migration and Development (GCIM 2005) and more recently the Global Forum on Migration and Development (GFMD) included southern policy-makers, civil society and academics. The 'perspective from the south' (Castles and Delgado Wise 2008; Manuh 2005) is beginning to be included in international debates.

And yet there is little sign that such trends have had much effect on the dominant approaches in migration studies. Certainly, in Europe, the main emphasis is still on the costs and benefits for receiving societies, and on questions of migration control (or, more euphemistically, 'migration management'). One reflection of this is the renewed preoccupation with theories of assimilation. In the 1970s and 1980s, many countries had shifted away from assimilationist approaches to migrants and minorities. But the trend towards multiculturalism or pluralism came to a halt in the 1990s, in the face of political and media claims of supposed threats to national identity and security from migrants (especially Muslims) who allegedly refuse to get integrated and who carry on 'parallel lives'.

The result has been a revamping of assimilationist theories to fit contemporary northern societies. Neo-assimilationist approaches (Alba and Nee 1997; Entzinger 2003; Joppke and Morawaska 2003) have recently been joined by discourses on social cohesion and social capital, which claim that diversity endangers the solidarity on which democratic nation-states are founded (see Vasta 2007). Such social scientific accounts have been linked to changes in national policies, such as the introduction of 'integration contracts' and citizenship tests in a range of states, including France, Germany, Britain, the Netherlands and Australia.

Isolation of migration studies from broader trends in contemporary social theory

Migration scholars have often found themselves marginalised within the social sciences because migration is not seen as an important area of investigation by many leading social theorists. This is exacerbated by the problems of interdisciplinarity referred to above. The fact that migration studies has to cut across social-scientific boundaries is one reason why it has (at least until recently) gained little acceptance in conventional departments. As a result migration research often takes place outside core social science research contexts, usually in dedicated research centres heavily dependent on external funding. This forces migration researchers to take on policy-driven consultancy work – which in turn confirms the prejudice against interdisciplinary study on the part of mainstream social scientists.

To understand this fully would require a detailed study of the institutional and intellectual characteristics of the social sciences in each country. In Britain for instance, the initial response to the New Commonwealth immigration of the 1950 and 1960s was the reworking of the pre-World War II Chicago School of sociology's theories of assimilation and acculturation. However, by the 1970s, issues of racism, culture identity, class and gender – influenced considerably by black, feminist and Marxist scholars – began to play an important role. In the meantime such approaches have become parts of the accepted body of social analysis, but have not always moved on to embrace the newer complex forms of global mobility affecting the UK. In recent years, the problem of disciplinary barriers has got worse in the UK, because the Research Assessment Exercise has put such a premium on publication in disciplinary journals that young academics fear the consequences of publishing in migration journals.

Globalisation theory is now at the centre of international social science debates, and the mobility of people is a crucial form of globalisation. Yet many of the seminal works on globalisation, like those of Castells (Castells 1996; 1997; 1998), Albrow (Albrow 1996) and Beck (Beck 1997), pay scant attention to mobility of people. There are contrasting examples, as will be discussed below, yet the analysis of migration as a central element of global social change is still the exception. The social scientists who specialise in such themes – in Europe at least – tend to be located in migration research centres – rather than in sociology departments.

Complexity, diversity and context

A major obstacle to theorisation is the complexity and diversity of migration experiences. This has posed problems for economists in particular. Their methodological principle is to start with simple models, and then use quantitative data to test and refine them. The Harris-Todaro model that underpins the neo-classical approach to migration assumes that movement is motivated by the desire for individual income maximisation, based on rational comparison of the relative costs and benefits of remaining at home or moving. According to this model, the mere existence of economic disparities between various areas should be sufficient to generate migrant flows. In the long run, such flows should help to equalize wages and conditions in underdeveloped and developed regions, leading towards economic equilibrium (Massey, et al. 1998, Chapter 2). This model was developed to analyse internal movements in developing countries, but is seen as applicable to international

migration too, provided consideration is given to constraints arising from the role of states and their uneven power. This model suggests a long-term transition to 'a one-sector, relatively full-employment neo-classical world'[1].

The problem is that the neo-classical model has not proved very useful for analysing and explaining actual migration experiences. Its narrow focus on income maximisation and its assumption of rational economic decision-making based on full information have little to do with the reality of most migration flows. The 'new economics of labour migration' theorists (Stark 1991; Taylor 1999b) criticised the methodological individualism of the Harris-Todaro approach, and shifted the focus to family strategies for income maximisation and risk diversification. But the emphasis on rational economic decision-making remained. Such theories fail to take account of all the many non-economic factors that shape migration. Collinson[2] suggests that these include:

- inter-linkages between different migration streams;
- the importance of agency, autonomy, perceptions, cultural and historical factors and institutional constraints;
- the complex multi-level and transnational nature of migration; and
- the importance of social groups and relationship – including migration networks – for shaping migration dynamics and migration experiences, straddling migration 'sending', 'receiving' and 'transit' locations, and a range of actors within them.

This list indicates the great *complexity* of migratory processes. Economic factors are important, but hardly ever sufficient to understand any specific experience. But this is not just an issue for economics: I have focused on this discipline so far because economic data and models are so popular with policy-makers, but any mono-causal explanation of migration is equally problematic, because it cannot do justice to the complexity of migration.

Complexity also implies *diversity*: if there are so many factors at work, the possible combinations become infinite: there is no such thing as a 'typical migratory process'. This in turn points to the crucial role of *context* – the links between migration and all the other economic, social, political and cultural relationships at work in particular places at a particular historical juncture. An historical understanding of societies and the relationships between them is crucial. For instance, no analysis of migration to Britain could be complete without understanding of the history of British colonialism and racism; no analysis of Mexican migration to the USA could be valid without consideration of the historical expansion of the USA and its past labour recruitment policies.

The trouble with general theory

Migration theory needs to provide a framework for understanding the multi-level dynamics of international migration and incorporation in a situation of rapid and complex transformation (compare King 2002). But can a single (or general) theory do this? In view of the complexity of migration, Portes has pointed out that it is

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[1] As development economist Gustav Ranis puts it in a draft paper for the US Social Science Research Council.

[2] In an as yet unpublished draft Working Paper for the IMI.

unrealistic to expect the emergence of a single all-embracing theory. A theory that took account of all the possible forms and variations of migration would be so abstract as to be without any useful explanatory content. Indeed it would end up 'redefining the problem until it was coterminous with its explanation' (Portes 1997, 811). The sociology of migration needs to abandon attempts at grand theory and to focus instead on complexity, contradictions and the unintended consequences of social action (Portes 1997; Portes and DeWind 2004b). Portes argues for the idea of *sociology as analysis of the unexpected'* (Portes 1999). This implies returning to Merton's concept of 'theories of the middle-range': 'special theories applicable to limited ranges of data – theories for example of class dynamics, of conflicting group pressures, of the flow of power and the exercise of interpersonal influence…' (Merton 1957, 9).

By contrast, Massey and colleagues (1998) do seem to be advocating a single theory of migration. After summarising and examining the various approaches, they come to the conclusion that:

> …all theories play some role in accounting for international migration in the contemporary world, although different models predominate at different phases of the migration process, and different explanations carry different weights in different regions depending on the local circumstances of history, politics and geography. (Massey, et al. 1998, 281).

They go on to say that: 'Our review suggests the outlines of what an integrated theory of international migration should look like' (Massey, et al. 1998, 281). Apparently it is a matter of taking parts of the various paradigms and using them when and where they fit the various stages and specific situations. It is hard to see this eclectic approach as an 'integrated theory'. Indeed there seems to be a risk of making fairly arbitrary choices about which bit of theory to use in which circumstances.

On balance then it seems better to abandon ideas of a single theory of migration, and to concentrate instead on developing a broad conceptual framework for migration studies. Such a framework should be historical in character – in other words it must link up with key contemporary trends, which means taking the current processes of global social transformation as a starting point.

A social transformation framework for migration studies

Awareness of complexity, diversity and contextuality might lead to resignation, to the idea that theory formation is pointless, since each case appears specific. This could encourage a post-modern fragmentation of knowledge, based on the idea that everything is specific and that there are no broad social trends or institutional patterns. Yet such a perspective seems to ignore the reality of today's globalisation processes that lead to higher and more pervasive levels of economic, political, social and cultural integration than ever before. Contemporary social relations do offer great diversity, but it is diversity within increasingly universal relationships of power and inequality. Thus consciousness of complexity, diversity and contextuality does not mean that theory is unnecessary or impossible. Rather it makes it easier to understand what is required of social theory.

Characteristics of a conceptual framework for migration studies

In my view, the objective of theory formation in the international migration field should be the elaboration of a *conceptual framework* designed to provide theoretical and methodological orientation to social science researchers examining migratory processes of all kinds. This framework should be:

- *Comprehensive*: it needs to include all *factors* thought to influence migratory processes, as well as the *linkages* between them and the *contexts* that shape them.
- *Holistic*: it would cover entire migratory processes as they develop across space and time – that is starting with migration decision-making processes in places of origin, then including experiences at all stages of the actual process of movement, and finally analysing processes of incorporation (and possibly) return that may affect destination and origin countries over long periods.
- *Capable of contextualising specific migration experiences*: the comprehensive and holistic nature of the conceptual framework does not imply that every researcher needs to analyse whole migratory processes, but rather than any study of a specific event, group or stage needs to be informed by awareness of the dynamics and context of the whole process.
- *Suitable for analysing relationships between various socio-spatial levels: global, local, national and regional* (compare Pries 2007). Global factors that shape migration have different local effects in various locations, due to the presence of mediating historical experiences and cultural patterns. This principle also underpins the need for interdisciplinarity, since the various disciplines often address different socio-spatial levels.
- *Able to incorporate both structure* and *agency*. Structure includes *macro-social* structures (states, corporations, international agencies), *micro-social* structures (families, groups, social networks, local communities), and *meso-social* structures (intermediate networks or collectivities like the migration industry, transnational communities). Agency refers to individual and group action, which helps people to survive and cope in specific situations of change or crisis.
- *Historical*: it would not claim to present a universally valid theory of migration, but rather serve as an analytical tool appropriate to the current epoch of globalisation and social transformation.
- *Dynamic*, meaning that no conceptual framework in the social sciences is ever final, but is merely a distillation of the current state of understanding, to be tested and modified through further empirical work.

On this basis, the process of theory formation in migration may be summarised in four stages. The first consists of empirical studies on specific migration experiences: a particular form of migrant labour recruitment for instance, or a certain pattern of refugee migration and settlement. A second stage consists of the construction of middle-range theories of migratory processes linking specific countries of origin, transit and destination, within the context of the wider social relations of globalisation and social transformation. The third stage consists of drawing out the key lessons of the middle-range theories to build a broader conceptual framework, to provide theoretical and methodological orientation for future migration research. The fourth stage then would be to use the conceptual framework as a basis for developing the themes, research questions and methods for the next round of empirical research.

However, this apparently grounded theory approach is in fact cyclical, and we are not starting with a *tabula rasa*. Social scientists can already build on many years of

migration research to start their work at any of these stages. The great expansion of empirical research on migration provides the basis for comparative analysis and theory formation. The third stage – building a conceptual framework – is increasingly urgent. But because theory is always only valid as long as it provides useful guidance for on-the-ground research, the fourth stage – testing the conceptual framework through new empirical work – must be closely linked.

Re-embedding migration in social transformation

Analysis of *processes of social transformation* could provide the basis for a new understanding of the links between human mobility and global change. Social transformation can be defined as a fundamental shift in the way society is organised that goes beyond the continual processes of incremental social change that are always at work. This implies a 'step-change' in which all existing social patterns are questioned and many are reconfigured. Social transformations are closely linked to major shifts in dominant economic, political and strategic relationships. The industrial revolution and the rise of market liberalism as a dominant ideology in the 19th century set the context for a massive social transformation. Today, economic globalisation and new patterns of political and military power are shaping a new social transformation all over the world.

A useful point of departure for a contemporary theory of social transformation is therefore Polanyi's (2001) work (first published in 1944) on the 'great transformation' of European societies. According to Polyani, the market liberalism of the 19th century ignored the *embeddedness* of the economy in society (i.e. its role in achieving social goals laid down by politics, religion and social custom). The liberal attempt to *disembed* the market was a 'stark utopia' leading to a *double movement* – a protective countermovement to re-subordinate the economy to society. Unfortunately, in the early 20th century, the countermovement lead inexorably to fascism and world war (Block and Polanyi 2003; Polanyi 2001).

The closely linked processes of accelerated economic globalisation and the reshaping of political and military power relationships since the end of the Cold War represent a contemporary step change – a new 'great transformation'. These fundamental economic and political shifts are closely interwoven with a transformation of social relationships. The social transformation *in developed countries* can be seen in the closure of older industries, the restructuring of labour forces, the erosion of welfare states. the fragmentation of communities and the reshaping of social identities. *In less-developed countries*, forms of social transformation include intensification of agriculture, destruction of rural livelihoods, erosion of local social orders, rural-urban migration and formation of vast shanty-towns within new mega-cities. The recent upsurge in South-North migration can best be understood through examination of these complementary changes and their complex linkages.

In the past, research on migration has had little impact on core theories of social order and differentiation. However, in recent times, globalisation has challenged national models in the social sciences and drawn attention to cross-border flows as key instruments of change. There are signs of a new emphasis on human mobility in social theory, and some major works on global change (such as (Bauman 1998; Beck 2007; Cohen and Kennedy 2000; Held, et al. 1999) now stress the centrality of migration in

contemporary social relations. This shift is not surprising: if the principle of the 'container society' in which all social relationships take place within the nation-state (Faist 2000) is no longer sustainable (even as a myth), then flows across borders become a crucial area of investigation for the social sciences. Economics recognised this for commodity and capital flows before political science and sociology learnt the lesson for governance, cultural and social relations, but now this priority is inescapable for all social scientists.

The concept of *embeddedness* can play an important part in understanding globalisation and its consequences for human mobility. Just as 19th liberals portrayed economic affairs as something separate from the rest of society, neo-liberals today portray globalisation as a predominantly economic phenomenon. The emergence of a new economy is depicted as the result of growing foreign direct investment, the deregulation of cross-border flows of capital, technology and services, and the creation of a global production system (Petras and Veltmayer 2000, 2). The key actors in this new economic world are the multinational corporations (MNCs) and the global financial and commodity markets. The basic premise of globalisation is 'the leadership of civilization by economics' (Saul 2006, xi). This ideology is summed up in the 'Washington consensus' on the importance of market liberalisation, privatisation and deregulation (Stiglitz 2002, 67).

But disembedding economic globalisation from its societal context is in fact deeply political, because it makes global change appear as something objective and inevitable. Clearly globalisation is not just about economics: it is also a *political process*, conceived in normative or ideological terms:

> For the theorists of this process and its many advocates these flows…, together with the resulting economic integration and social transformation, have created a new world order with its own institutions and configurations of power that have replaced the previous structures associated with the nation-state, and that have created new conditions of peoples' lives all over the world. (Petras and Veltmayer 2000, 2)

Radical proponents of globalisation regard the nation-state as obsolete – to be replaced by the power of markets and consumer choice (Ohmae 1995). This view is linked to the neo-liberal principles of a 'small state', privatisation of utilities and services, economic deregulation and the opening of markets (especially those of developing countries) to global competition.

An historical perspective shows that the globalisation paradigm emerged in the context of political strategies – led by the Reagan administration in the USA and the Thatcher government in the UK – designed to roll back the welfare states and the relatively high wage levels of the post-war boom period. The opening of markets, the weakening of trade unions and the removal of protection from organised labour led to massive social changes. Even a neo-liberal world economy needs control mechanisms, but these are to be provided not by national governments (which, in some cases at least, are democratically elected), but by international institutions, especially the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the World Bank and the World Trade Organisation (WTO). Their task is not to protect weak economies or vulnerable social groups, but rather to ensure that all economies and societies are opened up to the cold winds of competition – particularly through the mechanism of 'structural adjustment programmes'. These institutions have close links with the US Treasury,

and their policies are strongly influenced by US and European interests (Stiglitz 2002).

A theory of global change in which the economy is seen as disembedded from society, and the political and social consequences are treated as inevitable 'externalities' (as economists put it), leads also to a disembedded understanding of migration. In a narrow economistic view, this means seeking the determinants of migration in a range of rational choices based on economic interests. The essential link to massive changes in global economic and political power relationships and the resulting social transformation processes is absent.

An alternative approach is to conceptualise migration not as merely as a result of social transformation, nor as one of its cause, but as an integral and essential part of social transformation processes. That means that theories of migration should be embedded in broader social theory. It also means that research on any specific migration phenomenon must always include research on the societal context in which it takes place. Finally, because awareness of change starts usually at the local level, it is important to link local level experiences of migration (whether in origin or receiving areas) with other socio-spatial levels – and particularly with global processes.

Social transformation theory and migration theory

It is possible to draw on emerging ideas from a range of disciplines to develop a new approach to understanding transformation-migration relationships. In economics, Stiglitz has provided a critique of neo-liberal economic globalisation, derived from Polanyi's concept of transformation (Stiglitz 1998; 2002). For him, the 'double movement' is represented by anti-globalisation activism (see Stiglitz's Foreword to (Polanyi 2001). Milanovic shows that the neo-liberal claim of improving economic outcomes for poor countries has masked a vast increase in inequality (Milanovic 2007). In political economy, the neo-liberal model is criticised as a new utopia of a self-regulating world economy (Freeman and Kagarlitsky 2004; Petras and Veltmayer 2000; Weiss 1998). Such ideas echo Polanyi's critique of attempts to disembed the economy from society, but they are essentially top-down critiques, which fail to analyse the local effects of global economic and political forces. In order to overcome this disjuncture, it is necessary to apply concepts and methodologies suggested by sociologists, geographers and anthropologists.

The International Sociological Association (ISA) Research Committee on 'Social Transformation and Sociology of Development' (Schuerkens 2004) use the concept of 'glocalisation' to analyse links between global forces and local life-worlds, and has applied this approach to the study of migration and ethnicity (Berking 2003; Binder and Tosic 2005; Schuerkens 2005). Other sociologists show how identity movements arise in reaction to globalisation (Castells 1997). Social geographers have developed new ways of understanding the changing meaning of 'territory' and the relationships between spatial levels (Lussault 2007; Sassen 2006). Social anthropology has moved away from older ideals of authenticity and singularity to study individual and group reactions to globalising forces (Levitt and Glick Schiller 2004). This implies analysing 'a simultaneous dialectic of indigenisation … and cosmopolitanisation' (Friedman 2004). Concepts and methods for ethnographic work on globally-dispersed

communities are discussed by Hage (Hage 2005), while recent examples of studies on local mediation of global change include (Hogan 2004; Wise and Velayutham 2008).

Such trends in social theory have already had considerable influence on migration studies. As already mentioned, economists have become increasingly critical of the emphasis on individual rational choice within neo-classical theory, and are investigating the role of families, communities, and other social actors in migratory processes. The 'new economics of labour migration' may maintain assumptions about economic rationality, but seeks to overcome neo-classical methodological individualism by using qualitative studies and household surveys to understand the complexity of migration decisions and their relationship with other factors (Stark 1991; Taylor 1999a). In political economy a new approach designed to correct the traditional top-down macro bias is the development 'micro-political economy' research on livelihoods and commodity chains in conflict areas (Collinson 2003).

One of the most widely accepted innovations in migration theory since the 1980s has been the adoption of network theories, which focus on the collective agency of migrants and communities in organising processes of migration and incorporation (Boyd 1989; Portes and Bach 1985)[3]. Informal networks provide vital resources for individuals and groups. In the context of sending countries they are often analysed as transmission mechanisms for *cultural capital*, while in the context of migrant incorporation into receiving societies the emphasis is more on *social capital* (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992, 119), which includes personal relationships, family and household patterns, friendship and community ties, and mutual help in economic and social matters. A newer trend towards analysing migrant agency is to be found in transnational theory (Guarnizo, et al. 2003; Portes, et al. 2007; Vertovec 2004). Critical analyses of the relationship between migration and security emphasise the important role of demographic trends, institutional change, and the decline of multilateralism (Bigo and Guild 2005; Humphrey 2005; Weiner and Russell 2001).

These brief examples reflect the strength of new thinking about global connectivity in social theory, and show how such ideas are influencing many aspects of migration research. Thus the project of elaborating a social transformation framework for the analysis of migration does not require starting from scratch. Rather the task is to bring together new approaches and insights in a detailed and systematic way so that they can serve as a coherent frame for migration theory and research methodology. This task cannot be attempted here. Rather one example will be presented to show briefly how the understanding of local experiences of migration can be enhanced through analysis of global social transformations.

For example: migration and labour force dynamics in the new economy

One of the most dramatic – and perhaps – surprising trends of the last 20 years has been the restructuring of labour forces in rich countries through the increased use of employment practices such as sub-contracting, spurious self-employment, temporary employment and casual work. Closely linked has been the growth of informal economies. A further trend has been the growth of domestic service and care worker jobs, usually employing women – frequently under highly exploitative conditions.

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[3] In fact network theories were foreshadowed much earlier by theories of chain migration Price (1963).

Such forms of work affect natives as well as migrants, but international migration has been crucial to their growth, and migrants are more likely than natives to find themselves in situations of precarious employment.

Conventional analyses of such trends often attribute the decline in working conditions and the increasing polarisation of labour markets to the ready availability of – frequently irregular – migrant workers. This allows politicians and sections of the media to advocate strategies of tighter immigration control, ostensibly to 'protect local workers'. But some social scientists argue that the causality is the other way round: economic deregulation and employer practices have created informal sector jobs, forming a pull factor for irregular migrants (Reyneri 2003). This applies most obviously in Southern Europe, but informal work is widespread, for instance in British agriculture, cleaning and catering, but also in the case of traffic wardens and security work – both services devolved by public authorities to subcontractors.

Analysis based on a social transformation framework would start from the position that changes in the work situation and social position of workers in advanced economies are linked to global restructuring of investment, production and trade. This has led to simultaneous processes of transformation in North and South. The social transformation in developed countries can be seen in the closure of older industries, the restructuring of labour forces, the erosion of welfare states and the decline of traditional working-class communities. Combined with demographic change (especially population ageing) and requirements for labour for new types of service industries, this leads to demand for migrant labour. In less-developed countries, forms of social transformation include intensification of agriculture, destruction of rural livelihoods, erosion of local social orders, rural-urban migration and formation of vast shanty-towns within new mega-cities. Violence and denial of human rights also leads to displacement. Such factors encourage emigration in search of better livelihoods and greater security. The upsurge in South-North migration can best be understood through examination of these complementary changes and their complex linkages.

Thus neo-liberal restructuring has led a new global social geography, which favours migration of both the highly-skilled and those without formal qualifications. In the 1980s, Sassen (1988) showed how foreign investment and displacement of manufacturing jobs abroad had fostered new migratory streams to the USA. Linkages between global cities and distant hinterlands created situations where enormous wealth and highly remunerated professional employment coexisted with growing unskilled service industry employment and Third-World-like employment conditions in underground industries. The subsequent development of the new global social geography is perhaps best illustrated through local or national level studies.

For instance, Ness has examined the economic transformation of New York City (Ness 2005, Chapter 2). In the early twentieth century, immigrant labour from Southern and Eastern Europe had been crucial to the emergence of the garment, printing, meatpacking, construction and transportation industries. Industry was concentrated in 'ethnic neighbourhoods' and immigrants came to form the backbone of the city's strong labour movement. In the late twentieth century, these traditional industries were restructured, with most production jobs being moved to non-unionised 'sunbelt' states or off-shore to the Caribbean, Latin America and Asia. Many new jobs were created in retailing, personal services, and business services (see also

Waldinger 1996). The new economy is heavily stratified on the basis of ethnicity. The worst jobs are done by undocumented migrants from the Dominican Republic, Mexico and French West Africa, who compete for precarious and exploitative posts as supermarket workers, delivery drivers and kitchen workers (Ness 2005).

The Berlin construction industry provides another example. Following German reunification in 1990 and the move of the government to Berlin, the city experienced an unprecedented building boom. Yet by 1996, 25 per cent of unemployed persons in Berlin were building workers. Some employers took on workers from Poland, who came through temporary labour schemes. Another option was to sub-contract work to Portuguese firms, who could bring their own workers (at lower wages) through EU free movement provisions. In addition, many workers came as daily commuters from the former East German hinterland of Brandenburg. This competition had adverse effects on unionised building workers, many of whom were long-term foreign residents of Berlin. In the old German model of long-term employment, the firm and the trade union had been sites of inter-ethnic communication and integration. Racism against migrants had been less pronounced at work than in other social areas. The decline of this model and its replacement with contract workers thus had negative effects on social integration and inter-group relations. This was no doubt one factor behind the increase in racism and racist violence following German reunification (Hunger and Thränhardt 2001).

The garment industry provides many examples of ethnic entrepreneurship and hierarchies based on race and gender around the world (Rath 2002). In Britain, ethnic and gender-based divisions allowed the revival of clothing production after it seemed doomed to extinction through outsourcing to low wage economies (see Phizacklea 1990). From the 1970s, management, design, and marketing of clothing became heavily concentrated in a few big and highly capitalized British retail clothing companies (Mitter 1986). Domestic clothing production declined steeply. During the 1960s and 1970s the immigrant workforce in the garment industry had mainly been first-generation male immigrants: Pakistanis, Indians, Bangladeshis and others. Many of these workers lost their jobs, and then became contractors to the big clothing houses, setting up small formally independent sweatshops based on cheap ethnic minority or immigrant family labour. Migrant women made up the bulk of the workforce in the new sweatshops. Cost reduction was accomplished through this sector's nature as a hidden economy - which also helped the producers to evade taxation. This state of informality suited both the economic interests of the big retailers and the male ethnic middlemen contractors, who managed to keep their female workforce under control through bonds of family and ethnic community allegiance and dominance (Mitter 1986; Schierup, et al. 2006, 235-7).

Each of the above cases has specific characteristics, but also reveals recurring patterns that show the connections between specific experiences and global shifts. Taken together, these examples of labour force restructuring add up to a new process of *labour market segmentation*. People's chances of getting jobs depend not only on their human capital (i.e. their education and skills) but also on gender, race, ethnicity, origins and legal status. Each case reflects the complex links between labour force change and processes of social transformation in both North and South. Research strategies that concentrate on specific experiences of migrant employment and ignore such connections cannot unravel the broader dynamics of change.

Conclusions

The central aim of this paper has been to discuss some of the difficulties of theory formation in the field of migration studies, and to suggest a possible solution. The problems include surmounting disciplinary boundaries, preventing fragmentation into isolated sub-fields, fending off political or bureaucratic cooption, overcoming an overemphasis on receiving country perspectives and – most important – finding appropriate theories and methodologies to reflect the complexity, diversity and contextuality of migratory processes. The solution does not appear to lie in seeking to formulate a single (or general) theory of migration, which would almost inevitably degenerate into banality and abstraction. But nor are answers to be found by abandoning the quest for theoretical advancement on the grounds that all migratory processes are different and unique.

The suggested way forward is to develop a conceptual framework, which takes contemporary social transformation processes as a starting point, for understanding shifting patterns of human mobility. Such a conceptual framework would consist of a detailed mapping of the factors that influence migratory processes and of the connections between these factors. It should meet the requirements of being:
- comprehensive;
- holistic;
- capable of contextualising specific migration experiences;
- suitable for analysing relationships between various socio-spatial levels;
- able to incorporate both structure and agency;
- historical; and
- dynamic, that is not understood as final, but as something to be tested and modified through further empirical work.

A key aspect of this conceptual framework would be that it should not restrict itself to migration, but rather seek to link analysis of migratory processes to broader social theory and through this to the analysis of societal change in general. The development of migration theory at this historical juncture should therefore be linked to the analysis of social transformation processes at a range of socio-spatial levels: whether a specific piece of research starts with a local phenomenon or a global one, or somewhere in-between, it needs to be based on an awareness of connectivity between localities and mediations between levels.

What this paper does not try to do is to map out the precise components of a social transformation framework for migration studies. That task has yet to be undertaken and would be a major project in itself. I regard it as crucial to move on to carry out this work, through a collective effort of migration researchers across disciplines, thematic specialisations and geographical locations.

17

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