

# Notes Towards A General Theory of Migration

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This essay by Marios Nikolinakos, Professor of Economics at the Free University of Berlin, traces some of the main structural features for migration towards the metropolitan country. Although primarily concerned with the migration of labour Professor Nikolinakos' arguments are equally illuminative of the migration of professionals.

This should be seen as a first and incomplete attempt to develop a general theory of migration in late capitalism. It has concentrated only on the outlines of this theory.

## The Need for a Theory of Migration

It is widely asserted, especially in traditional economics, that there is no need for a special theory to explain the phenomenon of migration. Migration is explained by the law of supply and demand. The varying returns to the factors of production in different areas lead to the mobility of the factors of production, which results in the adjustment of their prices and the development of the economically less-developed areas. This concept is allied to the fundamental ideas of classical and neo-classical economic theory, according to which economic laws create a harmonious world in which everything functions in the best possible manner.

But—to remain in the area of 'pure' economics for a moment—the general theory of the factors of production is inadequate to explain the problem of migration. A theory must explain a phenomenon, describe the laws of its development, the validity of its premises and, on the basis of these, enable us to make statements about the possibility of controlling and directing the phenomenon. Gunnar Myrdal has shown that the law of supply and demand at the international level leads in fact to the polarization of development: the centres, into which the factors of production move, continue to develop while the areas out of which the factors of production move continue to decline. The experience of the

post-war years has further shown that capital is not attracted to those countries with surplus man power merely by the prospect of low wages and high profits; it also requires security of tenure (political factors) and guaranteed profit (monopoly position). Economic theory on its own leaves unexplained the fact that some countries were unable to go through the same development process which characterized the industrialized countries of today.

Economic theory, therefore, is not only historical and abstract, but also one-sided. It does not consider the political factors, which influence economic processes, nor does it take into account the social relationships within the framework of which economic phenomena occur. Finally, it completely overlooks demographic factors and their relationship to given economic conditions.

Economic development itself affects the determinants of population, which in turn influence the production function, demand, and employment potential, and, consequently, the entire process of accumulation and growth.

Migration is a many-sided phenomenon and can be viewed from different perspectives. It is a movement of population within a country or between countries; it is an individual phenomenon, affecting the lives of entire families; it is a class phenomenon involving the proletarianization of masses of people. The reasons for migration, its mechanics and consequences, are different from the reasons for the movement of capital. In fact—to pursue the thinking of bourgeois economists—each factor of production would require a theory of its own which would then have to be integrated into a general theory of the capitalist system of production.

## Elements of a Theory of Migration

The structural problem of late capitalism.

Two main factors are responsible for the dimensions of the migratory

movement in Western Europe since the Second World War: first, demographic developments, and secondly, the accumulation of capital and the consequent increase in demand for man power. To deal with the latter first, Europe's post-war growth was so rapid that the period of reconstruction was all but over by the end of the 1950s. From the beginning of the 1960s a process of growth set in which was marked by technical progress and increased foreign trade. This led to certain structural changes:

Extensive accumulation of capital caused by technological progress, and characterized by an increasing replacement of labour by capital (automation, etc.). The increase in the organic composition of capital meant of course an increase in the productivity of labour. The accumulation of capital induced by technological progress produced pressures towards the internationalization of capital, an item which had stood on the agenda of Western European capitalism only since the end of the 1960s.

A precondition for this accumulation of capital was the expansion of the market, which makes possible the utilization of capital. The expansion of the internal market was achieved through wage increases and the reduction of customs duties (EEC), the expansion of the foreign market through increased foreign trade.

The rise in income resulted in a shifting of demand towards services and an expansion of the services sector in which higher incomes obtained. Native workers at the outset moved increasingly into this sector, partly for economic (higher income), and partly for social (higher social status) reasons.

The accumulation of capital was accompanied by an increase in demand for qualified workers, recruited from the native labour-force. The structure of the labour market was first altered through a horizontal movement of native workers into the services sector and then by a vertical shifting of the same workers towards highly-qualified, better-paid and socially-valued positions. The resulting gaps in the labour market were filled by the import of foreign workers. Since the process of replacing labour by capital is limited

and since a certain percentage of semi-skilled and unskilled workers is also necessary in highly automated firms and other branches of the economy, the import of foreign workers—which as a structural requirement of the late capitalist countries of Western Europe promises to remain a lasting phenomenon—internationalizes the labour market. And the founding of the EEC, aimed at capturing the expansionist tendencies of late capitalism, fulfils the ‘internationalization requirement’ both of capital and of labour. In the event, however, these tendencies proved stronger than the EEC itself, both in extending the labour market (through the import of non-EEC labour) beyond the borders of the EEC and in transferring capital not to the emigrant countries or within the EEC but to the USA—especially in the last three or four years.

The anarchistic accumulation of capital in Western Europe led, towards the end of the 1960s, to the sharpening of the contradiction between the drive towards maximizing private profit on the one hand and inadequate provision of the necessary infrastructure for the population (in particular for the foreign workers) on the other. The accumulation of capital thus reached the limits of what could be borne by the existing system.

The above arguments lead to conclusions which are fundamental to a theory of migration in late capitalism:

The emigrants took on the role of a reserve army, secured the growth and the standard of living in the Western European countries, made possible the realization of capital and saved the system. Without the emigrants, the achieved growth and standard of living could only have been guaranteed by the planning mechanisms.

Capitalism, after the war—when traditional colonial rule was being abandoned—transferred the object of exploitation, labour power, to the metropole itself through the import of foreign workers. Since, ‘colonial material’ could no longer be exploited on the spot, facilities for its exploitation were created in the metropole (internal colonization).

As long as reserves of labour power existed in the countries of origin and

the limits of what could be borne by the system in the metropole had not yet been reached, there was no reason for the export of capital. The export of capital has taken place to a limited extent in recent years to areas in which the profit margin in the metropole was narrow, and to countries which guaranteed a minimal risk and a comparatively high profit—those Southern European and Third World countries in which fascist governments predominate.

The system in the metropole appears to have run up against certain limits which endanger its existence through potential crises. It can thus save itself only by means of structural changes. These imply a controlled inflow of labour, more export of capital and controlled growth. All of these can only result from the introduction of planning methods, which require at least the partial removal of the traditional bases of the capitalist system (private property, private initiative). This does not imply, however, the ‘removal’ of the system itself or the introduction of socialism. All it means is the creation and regulation of mechanisms by the state to serve capital better, especially monopoly capital which most benefits from the processes of concentration and centralization. State capitalism now appears in undisguised form. The state in the service of capital is the only possible means of saving the system. Hence the traditional system of parliamentary democracy becomes outmoded—a child’s hat on an adult head.

#### *Population Development and Capitalism*

A theory of migration must also take into account the supply side of the labour market in the immigrant countries. Migration is a mechanism which is intended to remove the existing disequilibrium between supply and demand in the labour market. But to understand this statement in its proper context and not as an expression of the harmonious functioning of the system (as bourgeois theory would have it), it is necessary to note the following:

Population growth is not governed by autonomous laws, but is a function of social processes and the accumulation of capital itself. It is not

simply that technical progress in public health influences the birth and death rates, but, rather, that increasing income due to higher productivity and the achievement of full employment influences the size of families. The fall in the birth rate in industrialized capitalist countries is an aspect of their economic development and the social changes following therefrom. The comparatively high birth rates in many of the emigrant countries can be traced back to their economic backwardness and the deformation of their population development by colonialism.

The surplus labour in the emigrant countries and the prevailing unemployment there are the results of the low accumulation of capital and allied economic backwardness coupled with their past dependence on imperialism. These countries are not by definition ‘poor in material riches’ and rich ‘in human resources’. They are so because of relationships of dependence enforced by powerful economic interests.

Thus, what the migratory mechanism is designed to achieve is not just the balance between the supply and demand of labour but the perpetuation of the dependency relationship between periphery and centre. Basically, the internationalization of labour through the expansion of migration reflects the inherent thrust of capitalism towards expansion and internationalization. And population growth is no longer controlled within a national framework, but beyond national borders through the international accumulation of capital.

#### *The Countries of Emigration and the International Division of Labour*

If we now examine the supply side further, it becomes apparent that countries of emigration exhibit particular characteristics:

They were all formally or informally dependent on the colonial powers at some point in their history. The structure of their economies and their economic development were determined by this imperialist dependence and their class structures are marked by this dependent relationship. Until the Second World War and for approximately fifteen years afterwards

these countries were assigned to the production of agricultural products and raw materials. Their economic development was not autonomous; it served the interests of foreign monopoly capital and the metropolises. They were able to a limited extent to build up a primitive manufacturing industry, which produced consumer goods of low quality for the internal market.

In the post-war period, formal political independence was followed by a transformation, in the sense that the bourgeois class, if only outwardly, threw its comprador character overboard and established itself as independent. A measure of industrialization was introduced, which nevertheless continued to remain dependent on foreign capital, on the technology of the metropole, on the division of labour in the metropole. The areas of industrialization were precisely those in which production in the metropole, especially after the 1960s, had become unprofitable and were therefore transferred to the periphery. It is also the case in these countries that, even in the labour-intensive branches of production, capital being capital uses capital-intensive methods, which, of course means unemployment. And as the development of the population in these countries faces the type of accumulation process outlined above, unemployment is perpetuated.

These countries are ruled almost without exception by dictatorial governments, which permit and secure the above processes. Without these governments the type of development process described here, the ensuing class structure, as well as the expansionist interests of Western European capitalism, would have been impossible.

The expansionist tendencies of Western European capital as well as the development of a new division of labour between immigrant and emigrant countries are leading to a stronger integration of a number of emigrant countries into the economic system of Western Europe. In these countries (mainly Southern European) which have shown negative demographic developments, the same phenomena and the same mechanisms obtain: dependent industrialization

on the one hand, and emigration on the other, produce labour shortages which can only be covered by the import of migrants from even less-developed countries. And since the Western European metropolises must obtain their labour from other countries, new countries are annexed to the migration mechanism and the system of agreements, whereby these reserves are made available to the metropole, is further extended. In the process, the emigrant countries become graded and a basis laid for a sub-imperialism on the part of these emigrant countries which become immigrant countries. Within these countries themselves—Greece, Italy, Spain and Portugal—there exist regional imbalances which are in the nature of 'internal colonization'. The cleft between north and south in Italy is the clearest example of this.

#### *The Stabilizing Function of Migration*

The stabilizing function of migration is fulfilled both in the emigrant and in the immigrant countries. Through emigration the governments in the emigrant countries export potential social disturbances, arising from unemployment, and thus avert the overthrow of the existing regimes and of the capitalist system itself. This is the 'buffer-function' of emigration, which secures the political and economic position of the oligarchy and the bourgeois class as a whole in the emigrant countries. This 'buffer-function' serves to stabilize the system in the short run.

In the long run the system in the emigrant countries is stabilized by both types of migration, permanent migration—mainly overseas—and migration based on a system of rotation, characteristic of Western Europe in the post-war period. In the first case, the system rids itself of the unemployed once and for all. In the second case, during their stay in the Western European metropolises the emigrants become familiar with the prevailing parliamentary system there, take up the style of living of the native working class and become 'de-revolutionized'. On their return home they are ready to advocate similar relationships in their native land to those which they found in Western Europe. The semi-feudal, patriarchal, dictatorial or pseudo-

parliamentary systems are accordingly 'modernized' after the parliamentary pattern which prevails in Western Europe.

At this point the so-called advantages of emigration for the emigrant countries should be taken into account. These, in so far as they exist, must be looked at within the framework of class relationships. The only positive effect of emigration arises from the remittances sent home, but these only serve to lessen the balance of payments deficits and thereby advance the process of development introduced by the oligarchy and the bourgeois class. These remittances further contribute to the increase in imports of consumer goods from those very countries in which the emigrants live and work. What they support, in the final analysis, is capital in the immigrant countries and the development policies of the ruling oligarchy in the emigrant countries.

The 'buffer-function' of migration also acts as a stabilizer of the system in the metropole. In times of recession or of structural crisis leading to unemployment, migrant workers through inter-state agreements can be sent home. Their dictatorial home governments are better equipped to deal with the dangers arising from unemployment.

Thus a system has been established which keeps the migrants as a reserve army continually in motion, dependent on the respective interests of capital.

#### *The Exploitative Character of Migration and the System of Discrimination*

The migratory mechanism of late capitalism in Western Europe is supported by an institutionalized system of discrimination which is anchored in legislation regarding foreigners and in inter-state agreements. The foreign worker can be deported when the trade cycle requires it, he is underprivileged in comparison to the native workers and has no political rights. He is assigned the role of sub-proletariat, which guarantees the working of the system. Discrimination creates a split in the working class. Through it the indigenous workers come to support the system

since they are led to believe that discrimination protects their interests against the threat of an alien workforce. The trade unions tolerate such discrimination even if they do not themselves support it. Their attitude stems both from their position in late capitalism in which they function with capital and the state as guardians of order, and also from the short-term conflict of interests that does exist between native and foreign workers. The discrimination against foreigners in employment, housing and education which is usually understood as a psychological phenomenon is in reality integral to a system of migration engendered by the capitalist process of accumulation.

The final reason for discrimination is that it raises the rate of exploitation. Capital succeeds in maximising surplus value through dividing the working class and granting privileges to a section of it. This can also be proved mathematically.

The exploitation which results from migration is realized on three levels: first, on the level of the individual immigrant; secondly on a class level: as a sub-proletariat, migrant workers are exploited more intensely than the native proletariat, while at the same time being exploited by the native oligarchy at home; thirdly, on the country level, since the emigrant countries are exploited by the immigrant countries in that they provide labour free of infrastructure costs.

The question of 'integration' can thus be understood as an attempt by remove the contradictions of the system and to ward off the social conflicts which derive from the increasing political awareness of the migrants. A genuine integration would mean at least the removal of the system of discrimination and of the divisions in the working class, as well as guarantees of political rights to migrants. The social, psychological and other handicaps of the foreigners which 'integration' attempts to remove can only be understood within the framework of a political-economic analysis and the exploitative character of migration which bases itself on the system of discrimination.

### *The Class Character of Migration and the Migrant as an Individual*

For the majority of the migrants, migration, despite separation from their families, despite the risk of mental illness, despite proletarianization, means an improvement in their living conditions, as well as in those of their dependants.... This is only true, however, as long as the boom in the immigrant countries continues. Their fate both as individuals and as a class is determined by the laws of accumulation. Migration for the individual may afford (in the short run) a measure of security, but for the class as a whole there is nothing but the insecurity of a proletariat wholly dependent on—and subservient to—the process of accumulation. Nor is this contradicted by their tendency, on their return home, to set up in business for themselves—for their opportunities are limited by the movement into towns of a middle-class peasantry dispossessed and proletarianized by the penetration of capital into native agriculture. The 'rotation of migration', however, ensures that—should his business venture not materialize—the migrant worker would be returned once more to the migratory flow. The short-term independence of the individual migrant cannot, therefore, conceal the class character of migration.

Internal migration is exposed to the same laws as international migration. Both result from either the underdevelopment or the mechanization of agriculture on the one hand, and the accumulation of capital and the process of industrialization in the urban centres on the other. Internal migration or urbanization means the proletarianization of the masses, a pre-condition of the accumulation process. International migration is governed by the same laws except that the capital relationship is set within an international framework. International migration is one element in the dependence of peripheral countries on the metropolises. The Sicilian is just as alienated in Milan as in West Germany.

### **The Political Dimensions of the General Theory of Migration**

The general theory, as it has emerged so far, relates every aspect of the phenomenon of migration

to its class character. It also closes the laws which regulate these phenomena even as it points to their future development. It remains to be examined as a basis for political action. Such political action refers immediately to those who are exploited through migration: the migrant workers. It also refers to all workers, both in the receiving countries and in the countries of origin, who are divided by migration.

It follows that the system cannot have any interest in removing the exploitative character of migration. The ruling classes are prepared to humanize the migratory mechanism only in so far as it will enable them to ward off the real or potential social unrest that would endanger the system. Hence it is only through their own struggle that the emigrants could improve their conditions. Their demand can be no less than complete equality with the indigenous workers, with full political rights. Only in this way can the facilities be created for the removal of discrimination.

Some go as far as to regard the migrant worker as the prime agent for the destruction of the capitalist system. But migration is only one aspect of the capital relationship. The abolition of the system means the total removal of the capital relationship. All of those who are held in a position of dependence because of the capital relationship have, objectively, an interest in its removal, i.e. the entire working class. Therefore, to regard the emigrants as a vanguard is to put the cart before the horse, and leads in the end to the widening of the existing split in the working class. The crisis of the capitalist system arises out of the capital relationship, not out of migration.

The concrete political implications of the general theory can be briefly outlined as follows:

#### **For the emigrants:**

- (a) Struggle not only against the oligarchy and the political regimes in their native lands, but also against the ruling class in the immigrant countries.
- (b) The immediate aim of this struggle should be the removal of the system of discrimination and the attainment of political rights.

- (c) Unity with the native working class, because the split brought about by the system of discrimination favours capital and weakens the working class.
- (d) Removal of the de facto division of the emigrants in the receiving countries into nationalities, since it is the worker-migrant and not his nationality that interests capital. The division into nationalities weakens the emigrants as a social group.
- (e) Trade Union organization of the emigrants within native unions on the basis of their specific interests as a group.
- (f) Political organization of the emigrants at every level (local, national, regional etc.) but on the basis of the international character of the phenomenon of migration and the existing tendencies towards internationalization of labour and capital.

For the indigenous working class:

- (a) Recognition of the fact that there exists a system of discrimination against the foreigners, and of its divisive consequences for the working class as a whole.
- (b) Struggle against the system of discrimination and recognition of the specific interests of the emigrants.
- (c) Struggle for the political rights of the emigrants and their complete equality with the native workers.

**Note:** The division between native and foreign workers exists de facto. Capital has succeeded in presenting this division to the native working class as being advantageous to it. Such a consciousness prevails among the native workers. Given the identification of the trade unions with the status quo it must, I believe, remain debatable how far the objective implications of the general theory of migration for the native working class described above can be subjectively acceptable. Capital has defined immigration as based on the nationality of the worker and in this way distorted the problem and achieved the division. In fact, capital is concerned primarily with labour, which it needs for its expansion, and it makes no difference where it comes from. In this sense there is no competition between native and foreign employees, no more than exists between all the workers in one economy who must compete for work. In the final analysis, there are objectively no interests specific to migrant workers. Their specificity arises out of their national membership and out of their cultural, social and psychological connections, not out of a different economic situation. The problem of foreign worker in the metropole is not an economic, but primarily a political and social problem.