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# Migrants are not variables: a critique of the migration literature and associated policy developments

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**Abstract**

This paper provides an overview of the evolution of the migration literature as it has sought to adapt to changing realities, and argues that this adaptation has not shaken off the in-built assumption that migrants are variables controlled by their structures. This has influenced the attitude of European countries to skilled migrants, who are seen as enabling EU member states to meet the objectives of the Lisbon Agenda. However, skilled migrants working in knowledge industries, which are central to the Lisbon Agenda's goals, are more mobile than workers in more traditional industries, meaning that it is far from certain whether they will act in the way that policy-makers wish and expect them to. The inability to foresee this possibility can be traced back to the reluctance of the migration literature to engage seriously with the notion that skilled migrants have significant autonomy over their lives. They are not variables but active agents that help to shape political, social and economic outcomes.

## Introduction: what is migration?[1]

Studies of immigration have been hampered by a theoretical framework that overstayed its welcome beyond the end of the *Gastarbeiter* schemes prevalent in many western European countries in the decades following the end of World War II. As a result, immigration scholars tended to adopt a series of inflexible positions based on a generic and, importantly, static conception of 'immigration'. In the literature's eyes immigration was the consequence of a combination of push and pull factors which served to accelerate processes of urbanisation and de-ruralisation within the

[1] I would like to thank Sandy Hager for comments which helped tighten up the argument and improve the paper as a whole.

country and the movement of peoples from poor to rich economies across countries (see Castles and Miller 2003). This text will concentrate on the second of these processes.

A series of assumptions were built into the theoretical frameworks that reflected the political assumptions of the *Gastarbeiter* programmes: (male) immigrants moved to rich countries because of the income differential between the host and destination country; they were needed by the destination country in order to maintain profitability in manufacturing industries through exploitation of migrant labour that trade unions would not allow for domestic employees; and (male) immigrants enabled the maintenance of a reserve army of domestic unemployed that would check the wage-raising aspirations of unions and thus ensure low inflation. In other words, migrants were victims of discriminatory social structures that reproduced over time their exploitation and function in developed countries.

Developments in the composition and flows of immigration from the 1970s onwards challenged this approach – although, as will be argued later, the emphasis on structures rather than the migrants themselves remained in place. Regarding the composition of immigration cohorts, immigrants became increasingly differentiated: no longer were they overwhelmingly male, low-skill manual labour. They could also be asylum seekers, women, refugees, families reuniting with the male immigrant, and, most importantly for this paper, high-skill and white-collar labour (Castles and Miller 2003). With the advent of both the internationalisation of economic activity and the increasing importance of service industries such as information technology, high-skill immigrants have come to play an increasingly important role in advanced political economies.[2]

In consequence, the most recent and appropriate evolution in migration theory argues that maybe we should no longer use the term 'migration' because of the connotations associated with the traditional approach. As John Salt (2001, 87) says:

> When we use the term 'migration', it is not immediately clear what is meant. Traditionally, it has been associated with some notion of permanent settlement, or at least long-term sojourn. In reality, it is a sub-category of a more general concept of 'movement', embracing a wide variety of types and forms of human mobility, each capable of metamorphosing into something else through a set of processes which are increasingly institutionally driven. What we then define as migration is an arbitrary choice, and may be time-specific.

Such an approach has, in some respects, more in common with the emerging mobilities paradigm advocated by *inter alia* sociologists and geographers than with

[2] Castles and Miller (2003) provide the best overview of the evolution of the literature, but for other sources see: Brettell and Hollifield 2000; Massey *et al*. 1993; Castles 2000; Siddique 2001.

the migration literature (for example, see Hannam *et al*. 2006; Larsen 2006). However, there is a risk in opening up the term 'migration' to mean anything along a "mobility continuum" (Salt 2001, 95; see also Koser and Salt 1997). What is gained in multi-dimensionality and sophistication potentially leads us away from making any concrete statements about flows of people. Thankfully, the European Union (EU) provides an excellent case study of the processes taking place, because its politico-economic strategy is to some extent predicated on the mobility of skilled migrants, be they from countries within the EU or from countries outside the EU.

## The European model of capitalism and migration

The EU's development allows many potential differences across countries to be accounted for without losing sight of the flows of people. For example, the Single European Market, while incomplete – not least because many EU15 member states still maintain restrictions on the movement of workers from the EU10 countries that joined in 2004 – is far more encouraging of the movement of labour across borders than movement between EU and non-EU countries. Furthermore, declining transportation costs makes it physically easier for migrants to move between different countries, something helped by the creation of the common currency for half of the EU and the increasing dominance of the English language across the continent (something that is particularly the case in high-skill sectors such as I.T. (Khadria 2001; Iredale 2001)). Finally, the development of regional production networks and the rising inter-dependence of EU member economies (Hay 2004; Wade 1996) enables companies to transfer staff around the continent with relative ease.

In addition, the EU has become increasingly concerned about the viability of its welfare states in the face of rising pension costs, low birth rates and high unemployment rates. France hit the headlines when it recently achieved the replacement rate needed to maintain a stable population, but many European countries are well below the 2.1 children threshold. However, France, again like many European countries, suffers from high general and long-term unemployment, which is a reflection of both economic failures and future cost control problems for the welfare state as a whole. The declining number of workers per welfare recipients, driven by rising pension costs and life expectancy, makes it imperative that as many of working age as possible are in employment in order for the dependency ratio to remain as low as possible.

So how should this be achieved? Here we enter the debate about the European 'model' of capitalism, which is viewed by many to be a model that, in contrast to the more unequal and individualised American model, is underpinned by collective goals linked to a commitment to social justice (Streeck 1992; Ferrera and Rhodes 2000;

Hemerijck 2002).[3] These goals are embedded in many policy programmes and institutions – which include a relatively comprehensive and generous welfare state, government intervention and subsidies, higher than average taxation and government expenditure, and dense regulation – and necessitate a political economy that focuses on high-value products, because this way the economy does not have to compete on price. For this strong 'social' element of the political economy to be maintained in the long-term great emphasis must be placed on the ability of the labour market to deliver the goods (Hemerijck and Schludi 2000). In turn, for the labour market to deliver the goods it must, in an era which has seen manufacturing activity and employment move away from Europe to low-cost locations around the world, exploit the potential of the service industries – and in particular the high-value sectors.

Hence the Lisbon Agenda, which since 2000 has sought to transform the EU into the world's most dynamic knowledge-based economic region by 2010 (for more, see Hager's article in Theme 2). For it is the knowledge industries – for example, software, telecommunications, mobile technologies – that will deliver the wealth and employment needed to guarantee the future viability of the European model of capitalism. However, the rapid expansion of these industries over the past two decades has left countries unable to keep up with the change, resulting in skills shortages and thus limits to economic expansion.[4] For this reason many EU countries are now encouraging skilled migrants to work and possibly settle in their jurisdictions. This extends to migrants from outside the EU as well as from within, with numerous fast-track visa programmes for and points systems skewed towards skilled migrants either in place or being introduced across the continent. This is because, through participating in high-value economic activities, migrants will help save the European model through the generation of tax revenues for the welfare state. Moreover, they will, via the stimulus for the expansion of the knowledge industries that their employment enables, improve the health of the wider economy by way of the multiplier effect. Unfortunately, this rosy scenario is flawed.

## Problems

The elephant in the room is the migrants themselves. The literature on migration rarely takes into account the decision-making process behind the migration – that is, the *timing* and the *destination* of the movement – preferring instead to highlight the structures and mechanisms enabling movement (e.g. intra-company transfer) and also the economic incentives for movement. According to the literature skilled migrants are, like less skilled migrants, subjected to and interpellated by discriminatory social

[3] Please note that here I am referring to the *continental* European model of capitalism. The UK and Ireland are too close to the American model to be considered in this analysis, and indeed are often excluded from discussions of the European 'model' of capitalism on this basis.
[4] See my article on Ireland in this theme for more on the consequences of skills shortages.

structures that give them little control over their own lives. While this is true in many cases, it does not mean that skilled and less skilled migrants can be analysed in the same way, with the former enjoying considerably greater mobility, plus considerably greater control over their career path, than the latter (as will be argued below). Furthermore, movement across the EU is easier than ever before, and skilled migrants from outside the EU are increasingly the target of state policies designed to encourage them to move to and settle in that country. In other words, while we should not see migrants as free-floating spirits (for example, networks of national communities in particular countries could be an important factor), neither should we analyse them as if they are an atom that responds in the same way to the same circumstances. Again, this is especially the case for skilled migrants.

The literature's shunning of skilled migrant agency has shaped the assumptions of the policy-making communities, and can be illustrated by the drive for a more dynamic knowledge-based European economy. For example, at present there are EU projects – such as the Skilled Migrations Integration Assessment Model project (see http://www.smiam.org/) – seeking to devise better means of studying, and thus achieving, the integration of skilled migrants in European societies. However, the assumption is that migrants *want* to integrate, which is rather convenient given the need for skilled migrants to fill skills gaps in knowledge industries. It is of course true that some migrants wish to integrate and settle in the countries they move to, but to treat all of the cohort in this way is to analyse them as variables and not human beings capable of acting differently should they so choose.

This is especially the case when one considers the nature of the knowledge industries themselves. It is not necessary to agree fully with Florida's (2002, 2005) argument that the employees – termed 'creative' workers by Florida – enjoy the autonomy to put lifestyle considerations above economic ones, to appreciate that knowledge workers are more mobile than those employed in more traditional industries. The principal reason is that, seemingly paradoxically, knowledge skills are often generic and global. Despite the fact that the intangible nature of knowledge-based human capital makes it possible for each employee to construct a personalised CV containing unique attributes, in practice different companies are looking for similar things. Furthermore, the speed at which these industries – in particular the information technology sectors at the core of all of the knowledge industries – have developed has resulted in industry requirements driving standards of professional qualification rather than national associations (see Iredale 2001 for the I.T. industry). Thus there is little exclusivity across different countries due to the absence of national regulations and procedures, which, combined with the dominance of the English language in many of these industries, further entrenches the inclusivity of the skills requirement. Therefore, it is possible for migrants to work in similar positions across the globe (again for the I.T. industry see Aneesh 2006; Khadria 2001).

So the question, therefore, is this: *what happens if migrants don't act in the way that the Lisbon Agenda and European government policies expect them to?* What happens if they go elsewhere, for example the US? What happens if there is a surplus of skilled migrants in one European country and a shortage in others? What happens if the sources of many of the migrants, the Chinese, Indian and Russian economies, strengthen to the point at which the workers do not even migrate?[5] What happens if they continue to migrate but leave again so quickly that economies become dependent on continuous inflows of skilled labour to replace those that have left? (not least because domestic workers are employed in other industries – see the article on Ireland in this theme).

In other words, what kind of European model will we have if any of the above scenarios become reality? Such potential consequences expose the one-dimensional nature of the Lisbon Agenda, yet, curiously, it has yet to be picked up on by either the academic community or policy-makers. This truly is an example of theory and policy going hand-in-hand; the problem is that this theory-policy relationship was initiated under a flawed theoretical premise about migrants. It would be beneficial for the literature, and thus policy-makers, to study the various contributions in the social science and humanities literatures to the structure-agency debate – that is, the degree to which individuals control their lives and the degree to which their lives are conditioned by their political, social and economic environment (see Hay 2002; McAnulla 2002; King 2004). Both the academic and policy-making communities should become more sensitive to the dialectical relationship between structure and agency in the shaping of political, social and economic outcomes, and move away from their current focus on structures. This way a more nuanced and realistic understanding of the role of immigration, and especially skilled immigration, in European political economies can be developed.

## Conclusion

To conclude, this paper agrees with the literature and with policy-makers that

[5] India's economic boom has persuaded many nationals working abroad to return home (Schifferes 2007), and even if they do not the strength of the economy is forecast to produce a supply shortage of 500,000 workers in the industry by 2010 (Merchant 2006), which will push up wage levels and thus reduce the incentive to migrate.

It should be made clear that this paper is not advocating a theoretical position which ignores the economic incentives to migrate, or indeed the economic incentives to stay at home. Instead I am arguing for the need to be much more aware of the autonomy of skilled migrants to choose when and where to migrate. Furthermore, even if some skilled migrants do respond to economic incentives, then the possibilities of working across the globe make planning for future migration compositions and flows a difficult task for any country, not least because the economic incentives to stay at home in India, China and Russia are rising rapidly. See also my paper on this website on why immigration should not be seen as the saviour of the welfare state, and also Scott's paper in this theme on the limitations of world city theory.

migration and mobility are increasingly integral to the trajectory of European political economies. The question this author believes that is not being asked, and should be asked, is *in what way* they are integral. That is not something for this paper to discuss, and can only be assessed properly through rigorous empirical research. Nevertheless, it is clear that across the continent there exists the belief that a well-designed and targeted immigration policy framework can help resolve or at least ameliorate the problems caused by an ageing population and/or persistent high unemployment due to the flight of manufacturing jobs. However, history tells us that immigration policy is not immune to the problem of unintended consequences of policy changes, the most obvious example being the permanent settlement in host countries by 'guest workers' expected to leave once the employment opportunities dried up after the first oil price shock in 1973. The problem today is that policy-makers assume that skilled migration can be managed in a manner which a) helps maintain the welfare state through the improvement of the dependency ratio, and b) enables industries working at full capacity to expand and thus generate a multiplier effect beneficial for the wider economy.

The downsides associated with this approach to immigration revolve around the literature's in-built assumption that migrants are variables,[6] which in turn stems from the decades-old view of the migrant as the victim of wider discriminatory structures. This is of course still the case, even among skilled migrants. Nevertheless, skilled workers, particularly in the knowledge industries, are able to escape more easily from Weber's 'iron cage' and utilise the autonomy that their human capital and their industries have given them (Ó Riain 2004). Therefore, if we are to theorise adequately the role of migration in the trajectory of European political economies then we need to take more seriously the potential for migrant agency to play a role in shaping politico-economic outcomes, particularly with regard to skilled knowledge workers. Until we do this, the full, multi-dimensional connection between mobility and economy will remain obscured, allowing a one-dimensional, misleading assumption that migrants can be treated as a variable to continue to inform both theory and policy.

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[6] See Hager's paper in Theme 2 on the downsides associated with this approach with regard to citizenship issues.

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