

Key Concepts in Migration

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2 Migration

Definition: international migration is the movement of people to another country, leading to temporary or permanent resettlement; in the aggregate it commonly raises questions about national identities and social membership.

In a perspective that is content with common sense, migration is the relocation of individuals to some distant place, i.e., at least beyond one's own city or town. In these basic terms, it is primarily a geographic phenomenon. It is also a very common experience: as is often noted, migration is a universal feature of human history, reaching back many thousands of years.

This book focuses mainly on international migration, however, and the definition in the previous paragraph is then too broad. What really matters about international migration – the reason many people find it interesting (and some find it challenging) – is the international part. Internal (domestic) migration is much more common, especially in the USA: every year significant percentages of Americans move between cities or states. But migration to another country is different – often more difficult, more fraught, and arguably more consequential despite the lower numbers of people who do it (relative to internal migration). The geographic nature of migration is hardly unimportant, but international migration is better understood more broadly as a *social* phenomenon that connects with a comprehensive range of life domains – politics, economics, culture, identity, etc.

To understand international migration at a conceptual level, consider that at the heart of the word 'international' is the word 'nation'. Migration from one country to another is usually consequential because of differences in nationality, or because of differences among people that are understood to correspond to nationality. An immigrant in any particular destination country is often noticeable, meriting attention as unusual, for being 'foreign'. This is a form of difference typically perceived as highly salient, one that marks 'immigrants' as distinct from those who migrate within a country; in some cases this perception contributes to a feeling that people who are immigrants are 'out of place' and really belong elsewhere (i.e., not 'here').

The word 'perceived' in the previous sentence is important. Immigrants are not different from natives in some sort of essential or inherent way; in many respects they can have a great deal in common with natives.¹ But in modern societies where nation-states are core institutions, nationality and 'foreignness' are *constructed* as central points of difference (Waldinger and Lichter 2003). People latch onto these points of difference, endowing them with meaning and significance, often reinforcing them in the process (see Gilroy 1993). As Martin et al. (2006) argue, international migration is a *response* to differences between countries (e.g. economic inequality, or variations in political freedom or repression): individuals migrate

because they want something not available in their own country. But the point can be taken further: the concept of international migration is *animated by* (perceptions of) difference. Again, differences are identified and labelled in terms relating to nationality but are understood to correspond to other forms of difference – social, economic, cultural, etc. As a matter of intuition, someone moving to New York from El Salvador is defined as different in ways that someone moving from Cleveland (Ohio) is not.

We can appreciate the utility of the conception provided here by considering instances of international migration that depart in interesting ways from more typical cases. The population of Israel consists of a very high percentage of immigrants; almost one million people migrated to Israel in the 1990s alone, adding more than 20 per cent to the population. Israel is very keen to welcome Jewish immigrants, even to the point of offering virtually unconditional citizenship to Jews upon arrival, prior to leaving the airport. Jewish immigrants are then eligible for substantial benefits and support for integration and settlement. The apparent contrast with other countries, where quite restrictive attitudes and policies prevail, could hardly be greater. Even in Canada immigrants are desired only to a point: one's chances of admission are higher if one is relatively young, well-educated, etc. In Israel the age and education of immigrants are unimportant at least in policy terms, as are other characteristics that might affect one's economic prospects (Cohen 2009).

What is important, however, is being Jewish. The reason Jewish immigrants are welcome in Israel – indeed, are eagerly sought – is that Jews who live in other countries are not considered foreign. Instead, insofar as Israel is the 'Jewish state', Jews everywhere are already considered part of the Israeli/Jewish nation (what matters here is Jewishness not as religious practice but as national identity/belonging). This point is apparent in the way certain words are used to describe the immigration of Jews. Many people do not use the Hebrew word for immigration (*hagirah*) when discussing Jewish immigrants (Shuval and Leshem 1998). Instead, the term used in normal conversation and official discourse alike is *aliyah*, meaning ascent: Jews who move to Israel are 'going up'. The term has highly positive connotations, not least for the fact that it also describes the ancient practice of ascent to Jerusalem for religious festivals when the Temple was standing; it also denotes being called to recite a blessing before and after a Torah reading during synagogue services.

From this perspective, in being so welcoming to Jewish immigrants Israel is not quite the exception it might otherwise appear to be. Again, in most countries immigrants are 'foreigners', and the presence of large numbers of foreigners amounts to an anomaly that (for many) requires resolution, e.g. via departure or integration/naturalization. For Israel, it is the fact that Jews are living somewhere else that (for many) constitutes an anomaly, and immigration (of Jews) is the resolution of the anomaly.² The law regulating Jewish immigration to Israel is the 'Law of Return': Jews who move to Israel are understood to be 'returning' to the land of their ancestors. In English one sometimes speaks of the diaspora – but the Hebrew term *galut* (meaning exile) carries a stronger connotation of not being

where one belongs. From a mainstream Zionist point of view, Israel is where Jews belong, even if they are also members of other nations. From this perspective, the movement of Jews to Israel is hardly international migration at all.

That perspective is in certain respects a peculiar one, and it overstates the differences between Israel and other cases in some unhelpful ways. (Similar points apply to *'Aussiedler'* / 'returnees' in Germany, where the notion of 'return' informs policies and attitudes but should not lead us to perceive something other than immigration.) From a point of view that does not begin with mainstream Zionism, Jewish immigrants in Israel are indeed immigrants, and they share certain characteristics and experiences with immigrants elsewhere. But the Israeli/Zionist way of looking at these matters is useful for our consideration here, because it shows how important perceptions of national belonging vs. foreignness are to the concept of international migration. If one already belongs to the nation, then perhaps one is not quite an 'immigrant' in the way 'foreigners' are. By the same token, foreignness is a key component of the definition of international migration. International migration is thus necessarily specific to the (modern) period characterized by the dominance of nation-states (Joppke 1999a).

Israel is not the only country that helps makes this point. At the risk of provoking ire among Canadians: consider whether migration from Detroit to Windsor is 'international migration' in the same way that that term applies to migration from China to Canada. In legal terms, the two flows are similar: the USA and Canada are distinct nation-states, and the citizens of one cannot legally migrate to the other without the latter's permission. But in some respects the differences between American and Canadian national identity are not so great, and someone who moves across the Detroit River into Ontario is perhaps less of an 'immigrant' than someone who moves there from Hong Kong.³ (No doubt some Canadians and others with a broadly cosmopolitan outlook would disagree.) Legal status (e.g. citizenship) is not as important (for conceptual purposes, at least) as perceptions of culture and nationality – a point evident also in the experience of many immigrants in the UK who in earlier decades arrived from the 'New Commonwealth' as British citizens but who were nonetheless surely 'immigrants' (Entzinger 1990; see Hansen 2000). International migration involves crossing borders, but some borders matter more than others (and matter differently for different people as well).

This at any rate is how immigration figures in many people's experiences, and those experiences matter insofar as they form part of the context for the way immigration is identified as such a significant issue in social, political and economic terms. In modern societies, populations and socio-political processes are defined, to a great extent, with reference to nation-states. A key element of identity is one's nationality: individuals are different (via self-definition and/or perception) by virtue of being British, not French, or Korean, not Japanese. Moreover, nationality is often 'sticky': when someone migrates from France to Britain, one does not instantly become British. Indeed, some immigrants find that the identity associated with their country of origin becomes deeper after moving to another country (see Ryan 2010: 'Becoming Polish in London').

International migration is thus defined primarily with reference to national differences and a world of sovereign nation-states. Even so, these differences and institutions are not immutable. On the contrary: migration presents a significant challenge to the nation-state (Joppke 1998, 1999a), as well as a challenge to a wide range of other institutions in both destination and origin countries (Koslowski 2000). Mass migration to the wealthy democracies, in particular, has resulted in a diversification of legal statuses (e.g. citizenship) and identities; Castles (2010) argues persuasively that migration is a key component of ‘social transformation’ more generally. While some migration scholars perceive the emergence of a ‘post-national’ period (Soysal 1994), a more moderate view sees nation-states as altered by migration but nonetheless resilient in response to it (Joppke 1999a).

For many people, the salience of national identity is very much a matter of regret, in part because of its consequences for how immigrants are sometimes treated by natives. In addition, modern nationalism has fed vicious wars and other actions ranging from individual acts of cruelty to instances of genocide in Germany, Armenia and Rwanda. In a cosmopolitan orientation, national identity does not matter: we are all equal as individuals, as ‘global citizens’ – and nationalism is something to be resisted or suppressed, particularly when one considers its consequences in places like Bosnia. That orientation is perhaps normatively compelling (though some advocates of a ‘liberal nationalism’ believe it is utopian and even undesirable), but it does not describe the world as it is, even if there are certain trends in that direction. Again, however, the idea is useful by way of contrast to a counterfactual: if we lived in a world where national identities and national borders did not matter, then ‘international migration’ would not be what it is in the world as it is.

In application to particular cases, the general concept of international migration often requires qualifications of various sorts, e.g. ‘transnational’ migration (connoting that immigration is often not a ‘complete’ process, as migrants sustain ties with the country of origin). Most of these qualifications are dealt with here as separate chapters exploring the more specific concepts. Any number of additional cautions are useful, to avoid some common misconceptions. For example, many people in the USA believe that there is rampant ‘illegal’ immigration from Mexico – when in fact Mexicans are increasingly likely to migrate internally and net migration from Mexico to the USA in recent years has fallen dramatically, perhaps even to zero (Cave 2011, 2012). (Mexico itself is becoming a significant destination for migrants from other countries, including the USA, Germany and South Korea, Cave 2013.) Analogous concerns in the UK might be alleviated if there were better understanding that a large proportion of ‘immigrants’ are students, most of whom do leave the UK soon after their studies are completed. We would also want to avoid drawing ‘global’ conclusions via analysis of ‘Western’ countries only, and so many of the chapters to follow consider migration experiences in middle-income and poorer countries as well. As with any social phenomenon it is possible to discern patterns and trends, but contemporary international migration is characterized by relentlessly increasing complexity and change (Castles and Miller 2009), so that it resists simplification even at a conceptual level.

NOTES

- 1 As Castles and Miller (2009) note, nation-states themselves are typically characterized by considerable internal heterogeneity. Benedict Anderson's (1983) analysis of nation-states as 'imagined communities' is an important corrective to 'essentialist' understandings.
- 2 By contrast, many Palestinian/Arab citizens of Israel experience a lesser degree of social membership in Israel despite having been born there: they are citizens with formal equality, but they do not share the 'nationality' that underpins the Israeli nation-state.
- 3 By the same token, an American who moves to China is arguably more of an immigrant there than someone who moves from Taiwan to China. The point does not depend on any inherent qualities of Chinese people but rather on the salience of national differences in particular contexts.

KEY READINGS

- Castles, S. and Miller, M.J. (2009) *The Age of Migration: International Population Movements in the Modern World*. London: Macmillan Press.
- Joppke, C. (1999a) *Immigration and the Nation-state: the United States, Germany, and Great Britain*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Martin, P.L., Abella, M.I. and Kuptsch, C. (2006) *Managing Labor Migration in the Twenty-first Century*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.

3 Acculturation

Definition: A process by which the cultural patterns of distinct groups change when those groups come into contact with each other – sometimes resulting in the groups becoming less distinct culturally.

The concept of acculturation has a long and contentious history in migration studies. One might say the concept grew up with the history of migration to the USA, especially beginning with the second great wave of immigration at the turn of the twentieth century. The term has been used widely in the North American and European contexts, though increasingly with criticism, especially in societies that identify with a 'multiculturalist' ideology.

Early anthropologists and sociologists took an interactive approach to the concept of acculturation, defining it as a process by which the cultural patterns of distinct cultural groups change over time as they have contact with each other. Noted anthropologists Robert Redfield, Ralph Linton and Melville J. Herskovits (1936: 149), working as a subcommittee to the Social Science Research Council, defined acculturation as occurring 'when groups of individuals having different