

MIGRATION AND INEQUALITY



Mirna Safi

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Introduction: Rethinking Migration beyond Securitarianism, Humanitarianism, and Culturalism

Despite variability in demographic, political and socioeconomic contexts, immigration has been increasingly depicted as a “social problem” in public debate across Western democracies. Cross-national population movements are most commonly presented as exogenously and illegitimately affecting the economic, political, social, and cultural stability of nation-states. In most societies, immigration is thus incessantly linked to the rise of unemployment, crime, segregation, poverty, and terrorism, and is more generally presented as undermining social cohesion.

These representations generally draw on three distinct “repertoires” that fuel similar narratives about immigration in public discourse despite some variation in their combination across countries: “securitarianism,” humanitarianism and culturalism. Securitarianism denotes the increasing tendency to relate migration to the issue of security of

physical borders in the nation-state. This entails the now well-established restrictive turn in immigration policy, with harsher entry rules and increasingly militarized border controls becoming a worldwide model of migration governance. Humanitarianism refers to the inclination to present migrant reception as a “humanitarian act” in wealthy and stable societies that cannot close their eyes to the political, economic, or social injustice usually depicted in the global South. Receiving migrants who seek a better life is therefore a question of generosity, and the political debate is concerned by the degree to which such an aim should and could be fulfilled, as clearly shown by the recent “refugee crisis.” Finally, culturalism pertains to the tendency to perceive immigration as injecting cultural differences in receiving societies (religion, language, norms and values, ways of being, etc.). Whether politically framed as involving cultural “diversity” or cultural “fragmentation,” culturalism draws on the substantive association of immigration with increasing heterogeneity in nation-states originally perceived as ethnically or culturally homogeneous. Although they may bear upon distinctive political and philosophical backgrounds, these three repertoires (securitarianism, humanitarianism, and culturalism) share the common assumption that the nation-state’s perimeter naturally and legitimately limits equal access to political, economic, cultural, and symbolic resources between migrants and non-migrants. Notwithstanding the preconceptions they convey, the public debates surrounding migration are indicative of the degree to which the subject touches central social issues with implications of social justice and the distribution of economic, political, cultural, and symbolic resources.

These repertoires have impacted social science research on migration and fueled its impressive proliferation over the last several decades. Stepping back from immediate policy debates, this book offers a synthesis of this vast literature with a social stratification lens highlighting the specific channels through which migration contributes to the (re)making of inequality. Social inequality is defined in

a broad sense: it refers to the fact that some individuals, families, groups, countries (or any other relevant social category) enjoy a disproportionate share of some desired good (income, wealth, rights, respect, etc.). Textbooks on inequality overwhelmingly focus on the triptych class/race/gender. Migration is sporadically tackled through its relation to class and/or race and is rarely treated as a specific component of inequality. This book presents a unified framework relating migration to social inequality. It therefore aims at bridging the gap between three relatively distinct social science fields: migration and immigration studies, ethnic and racial studies, and social stratification and inequality studies. Positioning migration research at the crossroads of these scientific streams fosters our understanding of both migratory dynamics and social inequality mechanisms.

The first chapter maps the terrain of the book. It summarizes contemporary patterns and trends in migration and discusses definition and measurement issues. It also identifies the main areas of inquiry in the field, covering a variety of disciplinary perspectives and theoretical approaches. Chapter 2 moves to the field of stratification and discusses its contemporary developments. Drawing on an analytical framework that summarizes social stratification elementary mechanisms, this chapter attempts to synthetically conceptualize the relation between migration and inequality by identifying three main channels. The next three chapters elaborate on each of these channels. Chapter 3 reviews the literature that has traditionally associated migration with the global division of labor, thus entailing the joint mechanisms of workers' categorization and redistribution of economic resources. Chapter 4 builds on insights from legal and political scholarship that insist on the way in which migration creates and reshapes inequality through the joint mechanisms of citizenship categorization and redistribution of legal resources. Chapter 5 deals with the symbolic channel through which migration impacts inequality by reconfiguring group boundary dynamics

and reshaping ethnoracial classifications. Each chapter starts with an assessment of theories informing the effect of migration on inequality, before moving to the main empirical findings in the corresponding literature. The conclusion discusses current concerns about migration in the light of its conceptualization as a case-study for inequality research.

From National to Migration Societies

This chapter provides an overview of the demographic scope of international migration and examines the main challenges it raises in contemporary societies. First, I present the definition of international migration and introduce related concepts such as immigrant generations and immigrant origins. I then move to summarizing the long-term trends in migration flows with a particular focus on Western societies. The final section summarizes the state of the field, identifying three main directions in which migration research has been developing: the driving factors of population movements, the process of assimilation of immigrants and their descendants in host societies, and the effects of migration in sending and receiving societies.

Basic Definitions and Measurements Issues

From geographic mobility to international migration

Migration is central to human history (Fisher 2014). The concept is very broad, and it concerns each one of us to varying degrees. While some people spend most of their lives migrating (nomadic groups, seasonal workers,

diplomats, travelers, etc.), moving to a new place during the life course is likely to occur at least a few times, usually in relation to individual events, such as unions, family separation and re-composition, childbearing and job seeking; or collective ones, such as wars, revolutions, famines, natural disasters, etc. Major historical processes such as conquests and military conflicts, slavery, empire building, colonization and decolonization, urbanization and environmental change have all occurred in relation to intense population movements. So have most technological advancements and innovations, like hunting, sailing, agriculture, industrialization, etc.

A definition of migration that encompasses the wide diversity of migratory patterns emphasizes the “cross-community movement” that it entails (Manning 2013).¹ While spatial mobility can be fundamentally understood as core human behavior, the scope and delimitation of human communities have continually changed over history, which in turn has affected the definition of human migration. Languages have been a central marker of community boundaries, and processes of differentiation and convergence of languages have been closely related to human movements across the globe; along with genetics, linguistic evidence is the most commonly used indicator for inferring ancient patterns of migration. The focus of this book is on a particular type of “modern migration,” which can be called “cross-political-community migration” in a context where all the earth’s land has been virtually claimed by fewer than 200 globally recognized national entities.² It is this particular type of modern geographic mobility, referred to as *international migration*, that will be most relevant in the following pages. Much like the evolution of language boundaries, nation-building processes have been intertwined with human migration and continue to be affected by it.

In parallel to international migration, internal migration constitutes a considerable share of overall human migration.³ Sometimes referred to as residential mobility, it is a major

phenomenon in large countries such as India and China. Despite occurring within nation-states, internal migration sometimes entails the crossing of administrative and political boundaries (states, regions, provinces, etc.). Although I do not elaborate in this book on internal migration, we should bear in mind that its relationship to labor and to its socio-legal status, as well as its effects on group boundary-making, share many aspects with international migration.

Who counts as a migrant? An ascriptive, durable, and transmissible status

When I discuss the definition of international migration with students, it is not unusual to notice that some of them are quite surprised, if not troubled, when they realize that they may fit the description. One of them once told me: “According to your definition, I would be an immigrant. There is something wrong there.” The student in question was born in Egypt and lived there for only a few years, during which time his parents were working there. His family, of relatively high socioeconomic background, moved back to France, where he grew up, went to school, and attended college. The word “immigrant” was obviously negatively charged for him, and his reaction was to challenge any identification of his personal experience with the subject matter of the course.

Migrants are among the most stigmatized population categories in Western democracies. Social representations spread by the media and political debates tend to draw strong associations with the undocumented, the poor, the minorities, etc. Western workers who settle in developing countries are rarely referred to as immigrants – they are most often called “expats.” And this is true even within developed countries: immigrants in France are rarely portrayed as Germans or Swiss, for example, even though these countries are the birthplaces of a considerable share of French residents and are included in immigration national statistics. The use of words such as migrant or immigrant in the public debate conveys a variety of

connotations (socioeconomic, ethnoracial, legal, etc.), thus diverging from its scientific definition. But how then do we define international migrants?

One needs to migrate to be a migrant, and migration is a movement in place between two observational moments. The very concept of migration consequently requires delimiting boundaries of space and time. As mentioned above, international migration is usually defined by relying on national categorization of space: international migrants move across national boundaries. The definition also uses birth date as a time reference: international migrants move away from their country of birth.⁴

When one considers a given country c at a given time t , it thus becomes possible to define the immigrant population as being composed of persons who live in c at time t even though they were born in another country (c').⁵ This population is also referred to as “foreign-born.” Relying on this definition, the international migrant population can be estimated worldwide: in 2015, the number of immigrants stood at almost 244 million, according to the UN Population Division; this means that about 3.3 percent of the earth’s inhabitants currently live in a country different from their country of birth. A major share of current migration moves to the “developed countries”; 23 percent of migrants actually migrate within the Northern part of the globe, and 35 percent take the South–North migration path. South–South migration remains nonetheless considerable (around 35 percent of worldwide international migration). Top sending countries are India (15.6 million), Mexico (12.3 million), Russia (10.6 million) and China (9.5 million), while top receiving countries are the United States (46.6 million), Germany (12 million), Russia (11.6 million) and Saudi Arabia (10.2 million). In relative terms, the proportion of the foreign-born exceeds 80 percent in several Persian Gulf countries, such as the United Arab Emirates and Qatar. This share is around 13 percent in OECD countries, exceeding 25 percent in countries such as Luxembourg, Switzerland,

and Australia, while countries such as the United States, the United Kingdom, Germany, and France are closer to the OECD average (see Figure 1.1 for more details).

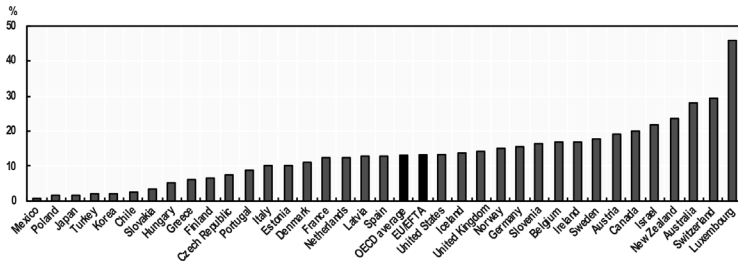


Figure 1.1 The foreign-born as a percentage of the total population in OECD countries, 2017

Source: OECD International Migration Database

Since it is closely linked to the delimitation of national boundaries, the definition of migration is subject to political disputation. An instructive example can be found in the definition of “immigrant” in postcolonial contexts. In France, for instance, the “foreign-born” definition has been considered unsatisfactory, since it includes French return colonials (“repatriates”) and French emigrants’ children born abroad.⁶ France’s public statistics institutions thus prefer a more complex definition, adding a nationality-at-birth criterion: an immigrant is a person who was born abroad and is non-French at birth. This two-criteria definition is intrinsically political, since both categories are, strictly speaking, migrants: they moved away from their place of birth and across national borders (Beauchemin and Safi 2019). Yet their migration is not considered to have crossed the “political community” borders, either because the geographic borders themselves moved in the meantime (in the case of return colonials), or because transmitting political membership (nationality) is made possible beyond the geographic limits of the state (in the case of emigrants’ children). The decision to exclude

them from the immigrant population is also justified by the fact that the social trajectories of these populations, who were recognized as French citizens at birth, sharply differ from those of other foreign-born populations (on political, socioeconomic, linguistic, cultural, and symbolic grounds).

This example clearly shows that while the definition of international migration derives from a country-level classification, it also relates to the concept of “society,” thus involving a combination of geographic, political, social, cultural, and symbolic dimensions. Other examples can be found in complex migration settings such as return colonial migration from South Africa to the United Kingdom, national overseas migrants in France, internal rural migrants in China, Puerto Rican migrants in the United States, etc. International statistics on migration tend to overlook these specific cases, using the foreign-born definition as an operational one in comparative perspective.

From the point of view of the receiving country, one important implication of the definition of international migration lies in the fact that, as long as settlement endures, immigrants remain immigrants: one can therefore speak of immigrant status as a stable one in host societies. It may also be regarded as an ascriptive status⁷ since it is linked to a place of birth criterion, which renders it a characteristic that individuals cannot alter (Shachar 2009).⁸ Here it is important to distinguish the concept of immigrant from the neighboring concept of foreigner: while foreigners can acquire citizenship and thus become nationals – more or less easily, depending on the host country’s citizenship legislation – it is only when immigrants return to live in their country of birth that they stop being immigrants.⁹ In other words, immigrants remain immigrants even when they acquire their host country’s citizenship. Moreover, the immigrant status itself tends to be transmissible. Indeed, debates on migration often go beyond the experience of migrants themselves to encompass that of their offspring, usually referred to as second-generation immigrants. Even when born in the host country – which means that they did not experience migration