

The Politics of Migration

‘Who needs migration?’

Migration grows in periods of social change. The expansion of long-distance migration since the 16th century holds its foundations in global capitalism and the evolution of a time-space compressed labour market. Migration today has given rise to “transnationalism”; a new “type of consciousness...a mode of cultural reproduction, an avenue of capital, a site of political engagement, and a reconstruction of ‘place’ and locality” (Vertovec, 2004). Contextually, and with a view to the current migrational discourse, this concept of “transnationalism” holds significant political sway. It is increasingly acknowledged that the transnational sphere precipitates an erosion of the nation-state, an undermining of the social cohesion and capital of modern democracies. As Ohmae states, a new world order, driven “by the power of markets and consumer choice” has replaced the previous structures of the nation-state. These slow-seeping acids of modernity, coupled with the rise of eastern-western post-9/11 rifts, have reawakened nationalistic fears over the necessity of migration: who, indeed, does need migration? Converse, however, to this self-defeating pessimism, one argues that migration and the creation of transnational society and politics are necessary both for the individual and the collective organism’s progress; as a means to which the irrationalities of old fascisms and ideologies can be transgressed. Migrants, in this sense, are seen not as mere subjects of assimilation or acculturation, political rights or demographic generalisations, but rather as humans, whose journeys, redolent of longings and desires, transcend normal experience to strengthen social bonds and reaffirm cultural values. As Bataille would write in 1985, Nietzsche firmly occupying the small space between the ears, “reason promotes the values of homogeneous societies - societies which are standardized and regulated and lacking vitality and force”, yet in acts of mere bordered transgression humans shatter their egos, breathe life into the faltering diaphragm.

Migration is vital for economic development, collective remittances giving rise to processes of co-development to generate a triple win effect “benefiting migrants, the home country and the host country” (Annan, 2006). Indeed the Harris-Todaro model that underpins the neo-classical approach of migration alludes to a gradual convergence of societies. Assuming that movement is motivated by the desire for individual income maximisation, and a rational comparison of the relative costs and benefits, 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 between societies. The transport and telecommunication revolutions of the 20th Century have created a transnational social field, such that migrants perform economic functions simultaneous in both home and host countries. As Cohen elucidates: “These two shores of migration path are linked by different types of connections: flows of goods, money, communications [and] ideas [that] connect them every day.”

Economic remittances have a “direct effect on poverty reduction” (Newland, 2007), in India in 2005, remittances were equivalent to more than twice the Indian government’s expenditure on education or health. Increasingly, remittances are pooled, such as in the hometown associations of Mexico, to provide stable investment channels over space and time. Returning to India, such pooled investment initiatives provide the “growth in equity and property markets” within the major northern Indian cities. (Chishti, 2007) Yet this economic benefit is offset by the social fragmentation experienced between Indian migrants and non-migrants, specific investment “creates land and resource price inflation” that catalyses underlying inequalities. (Massey et. al, 1998). The double edged sword of remittance-investment reveals that it is not so much a question of who needs migration, but rather one of who needs well-managed remittance migration, well-mediated between the competing interest groups. In the Philippines, the government actively supports migration (a quarter of the domestic workforce is overseas) and the establishment of diaspora networks that enhance resource transfers by “reducing the hindrances of investment flows”. (IMF, 2008). The government controls the inflationary and multiplier effects of remittances by channeling the flows towards domestically-consuming regions, often rural. The danger for the Philippines is the ephemerality of these investments. Once migrants, irrational actors, susceptible to non-economic factors such as family, settle abroad, these investment channels may dry up, a historical axiom summarised by Frisch: ‘We asked for workers and got people.’ Thus, and in essence, the positive link between remittances and economic growth “only applies if appropriate governmental and economic policies and incentives (sound financial systems, stable currencies transparency) are emplaced in the country of origin.”

Social remittances, the “ideas, behaviours, identities and social capitals” associated with transnational flows, have replaced the notion of brain drain with those of brain gain and circulation (Levitt, 1998). Taiwan exemplifies this cyclical concept; its growth since the 1970s was founded upon the rationale of sending qualified migrants abroad in the 1950s, such that in the short run remittance flows were increased, and in the long run, once industrial advancement had begun, an experienced workforce would return. However, and in particular with Francophone African countries like Senegal, social remittances have created a drain on resources through the creation of “cultures of emigration” and the depletion and subsequent “absence of men and women in their most productive years.” The diffuse, HIV/AIDS epidemic in Malawi is exacerbated by the fact that “many of its doctors and nurses are attracted away by better pay and conditions in the UK (GCIM, 2005) Thus the discourse surrounding social remittances lies between these two schools of thought, one suggesting the infallibility of social exchange, the other, shaking its very foundations. Furthermore, migration is a contentious issue with the geopolitics of nation states, in that migratory diasporas “undermine and subvert the territorial and ideological integrity of the nation-state and its power to constitute individual subjectivity and loyalty” (McKeown, 1999). Such diasporic

nationalisms, with their shifting, multiple loyalties are not coterminous with existing nation-states because they threaten the survival of current democratic institutions; the US election illuminated the evolving politics of transnationalism, Hispanic and Afro-american communities predominating over the white vote.

For demographic, economic and social reasons, all highly-developed economies find themselves increasingly reliant on immigrant labour – at all skill levels (Castles 2006). Employer demand for migrant workers has become a key feature of the UK's labour market. System effects, stemming from the institutional structure and regulatory framework of the British labour market, such as post-Thatcherite deregulation and privatisation, have reproduced domestic labour shortages. Migrant workers are significant actors in the reduction of these perceived specific staff shortages in occasions “when the demand for labour exceeds supply at the prevailing wages and employment conditions.” (Cohen, 2003). On a macro-scale immigration further functions in the provision of a high level of ‘human capital’ in order to promote long-term economic growth and competitiveness. The global recession of 2008-09, revealed differing behavioural reactions between native and migrant workers. Native workers are often reluctant and resistant to labour and wage market restructuring, thus the low status jobs are filled effectively by migrants, who, having eligibilities dependent upon work, are more proactive. Migration, thus, is significant in times of Keynesian recession and mass unemployment, immigrants providing a stable, anti-inflationary workforce in the depressed wage sub-economies. Neoclassical theorists portray the capitalist economy as being founded upon the liberty of the individual. International migration is portrayed as a market in which workers make the free choice, however as Cohen shows in his marxist critique, the system has created both “free and unfree workers in every phase of its development”. Labour migrants have frequently been unfree workers because they are taken by force to the place where their labour is needed. The feminisation of the labour market occurring in tandem with proliferation in the human trafficking industry is one such example of shackled migration. Migration such as this is universally regarded as an unneeded bacteria within the global organism.

Further economic growth can arise from within migrant sub-economies, particularly urban ones. In the early twentieth century, immigrant labour from Southern and Eastern Europe was crucial to the emergence of New York's garment, construction and transportation industries. Industry was concentrated in “ethnic neighbourhoods” with immigrants coming 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’ and heavily stratified on the basis of ethnicity. In ‘The Rise of The Creative Class’ Richard Florida aligns the foundations of growth in New York's knowledge economy with the accumulation of these highly segmented proletarian divisions. Migration thus provides a city with dynamism, the very

foundations of the human capital theory of city growth being that “high skilled people in high skilled industries effectively and efficiently produce new ideas.”

Migration that is advantageous to the economy can be disadvantageous to society. Clark documents the uneven attainment of the "American Dream", noting that acculturation starts with “language acquisition and continues through intermarriage, residential assimilation and economic gains”. Language, as Frantz Fanon expounded throughout his revolutionary life, holds the key to one’s conscious existence, “to speak means above all to assume a culture, to support the weight of a civilisation.” The sinking effect, as it were, of not being able to ‘support the weight of civilisation’ manifests itself in a disorientating non-existence, one “particularly evident in US migrant children...due to the burden of poverty and welfare dependency of their families”. Such are the effects of social dissonance that the human capital of many immigrants is seen to be in decline relative to the native population. This raises the pertinent question of whether migration is truly necessary if it leads to social unknowns, such as the balkanisation of neighbourhoods, and psychological maladies of non-belonging. As Albert Camus, a pied-noir migrant of France would write: “In a universe suddenly divested of illusions and lights, man feels an alien, a stranger” even to himself. His exile is “without remedy...deprived of the memory of a lost home or the hope of a promised land”

Migration is a necessary function of a capitalist model founded upon the liberty of the individual. In terms of the question, ‘who needs migration’, it is significant that the answer lies in humanity as a whole. Drawing upon the writings and philosophies of Hegel, “civilisation as such consists in the annulment of natural difference.” His thoughts are themselves redolent of desire and longing like that of the migrant. Hegel reproduces an Achaean analogy, a Greece in which culture did not rely on ‘the natural bond’ of patriarchal structures, but the vital impulses from the arrival of strangers. Greek culture, he argues, precisely came into its own by ‘overcoming’ the strangeness’. The organism “owed its life to a heterogeneity constitutive of its own being”, yet it had to efface this internal heterogeneity in order to “unfold the totality of its organic moments.” According to Hegel, such homogenization constitutes the beginning of any civilization. Migrants are existent, independent of borders and political artificialities, in order to further civilisation in the 21st Century. Recalling Bataille, their journeys transcend normal experience, strengthen social bonds and reaffirm cultural values, breathing life into the faltering diaphragms of the past.