

# Mass Migrations across the World-System's History

Written by Yoan Molinero Gerbeau

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Moving has been an essential human characteristic since the beginning of history. From the worldwide expansion of hominids departing from Africa 40.000 million years ago to the actual massive migrations of populations, humans have demonstrated that settling is as intrinsic to our nature as it is changing our residence. But this natural impulse has been limited since the establishment of states as the way societies are mainly organized. While it is true that Kingdoms and Empires had borders and their populations had certain ties to these political units (vassalage for instance), borders were not millimetrically delimited lines separating national spaces of sovereignty. With the establishment of states, individuals became nationals and crossing borders (either intra-national or international) was not 'moving' anymore, but migrating. International migration is the process when nationals of a state leave their social unit to enter into a different social unit or, according to Abdelmalek Sayad, it is the presence of non-nationals in the core of the nation (2004). A similar logic applies to internal migrations too, showing that migrating is a political act not just involving the individual but also states as it has to be with their first principle: controlling their territory. Since then, a complex debate (Massey *et al.*, 1998; Johns and Mielants, 2011) has been introduced in the study of migrations: is migration a decision made by individuals or is it a phenomenon induced by a larger structure? This article will try to contribute to this debate arguing that the phenomenon of migration is neither directly driven and controlled by states, nor a pure individual decision, but rather it is the consequence of the way the superstructure of global capitalism is articulated. By studying three historical cases representing three key periods of the world-system's development (the pre-industrial, the industrial and the post-industrial eras) it will be argued that global capitalism has been, and still is, the main driver of mass migrations. At the same time, it will be explained that even if individuals are subjected to this superstructure, migration is not an imposition (except in some cases of forced migration) or a pure rational choice, but it is the result of the migrant's decisions (what it is called agency) taken in the restrictive frame of the global world-system.

### Migrations in Human History and the Rise of the World-System

It took only 10,000 years for the human race to expand all over the planet from the first appearance of hominids in eastern Africa (in today's Ethiopia) about 4-6 million years ago (Hall and Kardulias, 2010). Humans have always moved from one place to another as part of their nature. The reasons to move have varied from each concrete migratory process as environmental, political, economic, social or cultural reasons may have been between the drivers that explain these movements. Sometimes migrating was not a choice (survival is a primary instinct) and humans fled from wars, droughts and such, but moving has not necessarily been a dramatic or forced project as nomadic cultures showed that not settling anywhere can be also a way of life. The dynamism of human groups suggests that each historical movement of population can be particularly studied to identify its own characteristics. But until the 16th century, there was no global project that connected different regions of the world, so human mobility could be still considered as local or regional process.

What changed in the 16th century? As Immanuel Wallerstein says in his essay "The modern world-system" (1974), this is a turning point in human history, as it is when capitalism established itself not only as the main economic system but as the global social-political-cultural and ecological project that will rule the world until our days. Capitalism[1], as a mode of production, was widely adopted by Europe at that time and was supported by states. In the context of a competitive world-economy, states primary interest oriented their action towards occupying spaces in the core of the world-system as the main source of power. Since then, as Wallerstein argues, the history of

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International Relations is the history of capitalism as a world-system. The world-system analysis suggests that capitalism is not a mere economic system, it is a global social-political-economic and ecological system dividing states (the main political actors of International Relations) depending on whether they belong to the core or to the periphery of the system. The core possesses a high rate of constant capital (machinery) accumulating the means of production and thus concentrating power while the periphery is a variable capital provider (workforce and raw materials). This distinction is extremely important to understand as capitalism-driven migration constitutes the most important part of mass migration movements since the 16th century and they moved from the periphery to the core.

Identifying all the mass migratory processes that have taken place in the frame of the global world-system during the last five centuries is a titanic job that would exceed the limits of this article. Instead of it, three concrete mass-migrations that occurred (and in the case of the last one, still occur) in different but extremely relevant phases of the world-system's history will be analyzed in order to illustrate how global capitalism has been its main driver.

## Pre-industrial, Industrial and Post-Industrial Mass Migrations

Ever since its creation, the world-system has experienced different phases. Capitalism is based on accumulation, it needs to be continuously expanding, but accumulation is not an eternal cycle. Each production model has its limits, that is why capitalism always needs to find new techniques to avoid the system's depletion. This cycle is unavoidable as Kondratiev's waves theory shows, so each phase of capitalism is characterized by three steps: expansion, stagnation and recession. The system enters in a new phase when a reconfiguration of the production model allows reactivating expansion. Jason Moore (2015) shows that each phase is based on the cheap appropriation of what he calls "the four cheaps": labor, raw materials, energy and food. When the system is able to produce them at a low cost, the accumulation process continues, but the model is depleted when it is not able anymore to produce one or more of these four elements at a low cost. The reproduction of the four cheaps is fundamental for capitalism's maintenance.

Why are migrations connected to the phases of capitalism? As the periphery of the world-system is the main supplier of workforce to the system's core, each change in the production model has provoked mass migrations to supply cheap labor needs in different ways. This can be illustrated with the following mass migration processes.

### *A Pre-Industrial Mass Migration: The Atlantic Slave Trade*

The Atlantic slave trade was one of the first mass migration capitalism-driven movements of the pre-industrial era. From the extraction of raw materials to food production in the colonies, as well as any other work done by slaves - until their trade was forbidden in the 19<sup>th</sup> century- everything was oriented to the core's accumulation. The strong competition between European powers pushed them to find new frontiers of production that would expand their economies and thus gain power by occupying a bigger space in the world-system's core. The colonization of extra-European territories was a direct effect of that and the conversion of some American territories in extractive enclaves oriented to supply materials to metropolitan states provoked a massive need of cheap workforce for that.

African and indigenous slaves represented the cheaper workforce that states could employ to work in the colonies so a huge part of the accumulation process relied on their unpaid work (that maximized production's surplus value) and provoked the forced migration of about 12 million people from Africa to the Americas. No other previous mass migration movement can be explained by economic reasons in a world-system perspective. In the pre-industrial era, slaves became the main source of cheap/unpaid workforce required by the accumulation process. Africa suffered the consequences from mass killings in slave hunt raids to an unprecedented depopulation of the territory that two centuries after, is still considered one of the main causes of Africa's current underdevelopment (Nunn 2008)

### *The Metabolic Rift: Rural to Urban Migrations in the Industrial Era*

The second selected case of a relevant capitalist-driven mass migration process accelerated in the early Industrial era is the rural exodus. This phenomenon has been directly provoked by the industrial revolution that has been the biggest step forward done by global capitalism since its beginning. Industries changed the way commodities were

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produced and state's power in the world-system became tightly linked to the possession of industrial means of production. These implied enormous changes in the productive structure of the world-system that affected the way the four cheaps were obtained and used so there was a global reconversion of capitalism's structure. In the national context, core states rapidly competed to develop their industrial sector and based it in big cities that grew in an unprecedented way (in terms of demography and urbanization). This choice was not random. Cities, where central political powers were based, usually had ports and railways connected to the colonies ensuring the constant functioning of global capitalist production. This implied that cities now will concentrate country's technologies and knowledge as well as their means of production, that required an available mass of workers.

The main source of workforce for this new productive model was national and came from the rural zones. The isolation of non-urban areas was directly fostered by states that relegated the rural space to be only a source of workforce for the urban-industrial complex (Camarero 1993). Peasants became urban migrants and served as cheap workforce for the industrial complex. Later, when the countryside will remain practically depopulated, migrants from the colonies and then from the global periphery will be the main suppliers of cheap workforce.

The process of de-ruralization of populations is not limited to this period as states (China in the 21st century for instance) that started their industrialization process in a later historical moment are still experiencing the metabolic rift (the capitalist division between the urban and rural world).

The rural exodus is one of the best cases to show how the evolution of the capitalist system has provoked the migration of millions of people and changed national landscapes depopulating the countryside and overpopulating big cities.

## *Post-Industrial Migrations to the Core's Agriculture*

The acceleration of the globalization process after World War II interconnected even more the different regions of the world-system and redefined these interactions thanks to the development of new technologies. Now the world became smaller and the possibilities to move increased in an unprecedented way. The last phase of capitalism, the neoliberal era was also characterized by a progressive flexibility of state's borders: while barriers for commerce between states diminished, the liberty of worker's movement became selective and individual's freedom to move was increasingly hampered. There have been exceptions to this, like the case of the European Union, where commercial barriers do not exist and there is freedom of movement for EU workers and nationals, but the previous trend refers to core-periphery relations.

The world-system also evolved diversifying capital's sources (financialization became central and even if the industry was still determinant, services gained much importance in core states GDPs) and the way commodities were produced. Economies became more complex and societies changed and so did economic, and above all, workforce needs.

In this period, many different capitalism-driven mass migrations occurred, like those linked to economic growth in semi peripheral countries –Italy and Spain for instance– converting former emigration states to immigration ones. Other effects, like the development of global care chains linked to women's access to work but also to the ageing of core societies, are connected to these processes and provoked the migration of thousands of women migrants from the periphery to do domestic work.

Even if a longer list of “new migrations” caused by capitalism's evolution in the neoliberal period can be done, no mass migration like those under temporary foreign worker's programs can show better how capitalism can be at the origin of mass movements of population.

Sayad (2004) said that all migration processes involve two stories: stories of emigration and immigration, but often studies (mainly coming from the core) tend to only analyze the ones happening in destination or both, but as separate spheres. This is the case of an important part of the research done studying migrant farm workers in some core states.

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To understand how capitalism is at the very origin of these kind of migrations that grew enormously during the second half of the 20th century and the first decade of the 21st century, it is crucial to analyze the causes of emigration of those who migrate to work in core's agriculture.

## *Land Dispossession and the Growth of Industrial Agriculture*

After World War II, most of the core states started to develop "the green revolution", a process aimed at technologizing agriculture in order to produce more food at a cheaper cost. The new techniques included the use of genetically modified organisms (GMOs), chemical fertilizers and so on. As well, agriculture was progressively penetrated by market logics oriented to industrialize production (introducing greenhouse techniques for instance) and abandon the extended family-farm-oriented model. Producing cheap food was not a systemic need (Moore 2015), and capitalist competition also converted agriculture into the agribusiness.

This "new agriculture" had an important need of workforce but it coincided with a period when after the rural exodus there were not enough peasants in the core to meet these needs. Also, working in agriculture became more and more undesirable for local populations as it was a bad-paid, hard-working and social-discredited job associated to the past and not connected with the activities that the new economies required (López-Sala, 2016). "Importing" workers from the periphery solved the problem of limited workforce for undesirable jobs.

Most researches consider that migrants accepted these jobs due to a combination of factors: salaries were still much higher than in their home countries, they were used to hard work and it was an opportunity to establish themselves in the core. Employers also saw an opportunity in their subaltern condition as the fact of being non-nationals make them more productive and less protesters. These reasons are partially valid as they do not take into account the world-system's structural conditions pushing migrants to work in the core's agriculture.

First of all, we have to consider these migrants identities. Like Sayad (2004) highlights, migrants from the periphery are the old colonized, they come from countries that were forced to serve to their metropolises, essentially by supplying on the one hand raw materials and food and in the other, soldiers and workers. The current peripheral position of these countries is mainly a consequence of how their economies were looted and oriented to serve the core. A neo-colonial logic underlies to the continuation of this supply of workforce.

Additionally, Araghi (2009) shows that first colonialism followed by neoliberalism were the original causes of the conversion of rural populations from the periphery into potential migrants aimed at working in the core. During the colonial period, peasants were dispossessed by being displaced from their lands as metropolises organized agricultural work around monocultures following their interests. Rural populations were proletarianised after being forced to move into cities for capital's needs. Another kind of land dispossession that also took place was the one called by Araghi as dispossession by differentiation. In this case, the application of liberal (and then neoliberal) policies to land access aimed at favoring the rise of big companies to compete in global markets introducing a difference between capitalists and peasants in the rural zone that forced them to sell their lands and abandon production as peasants were not able to compete with companies.

As seen, colonization, land dispossession and liberal/neo liberal policies created the structural conditions to convert periphery's population into a reserve army of poor and dispossessed urban proletarians, that is into potential migrants. The next section will show how their workforce was supplied to the core's agriculture.

## *Migrant Farm Workers in the 20th and 21st Centuries*

As the core's agricultural sector became industrialized and production was expanded, labor shortages became more pronounced all along the 20th century, in a sector where finding workers has been always difficult. The fact that nationals did not want to come back to rural spaces to do this profession coincided with producers' needs to make production as much profitable as they could, this is using cheap work. Migrants became the perfect actors for that as their situation in origin prepared them for migrating and their social aspirations in hosting countries were not

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incompatible with doing this kind of work.

By the end of the 20th and the beginning of the 21st century, the presence of migrants working in the core's agriculture was systemic (Molinero and Avallone 2016). Practically all industrialized, competitive and intensive-production agricultural sectors of the core had a relevant share of migrants working as farm workers. By accepting low salaries and bad working conditions, migrants maintained the core's agricultural profitability. In fact, in countries including but not limited to the United States, Canada, Great Britain, Italy, Spain, Israel, South Korea, New Zealand migrants occupy a key role in the composition of the agricultural workforce.

It is clear that global capitalism's needs are at the origin of this process and also have been the main driver of these migrations, but how did companies ensured the availability of a massive workforce coming from the world-system's periphery?

In this process states have been key actors as they have acted as agents for capitalism either by creating legal mechanisms allowing a flexible way to recruit migrants in origin or by deregulating the sector leaving space for *laissez-faire* (Molinero and Avallone 2016). The second case refers to models like the Italian one, for instance, where the constant inflow of irregular migrants entering in the country each year was channeled into the agriculture sector (mainly in southern Italy). This kind of models already have available workforce in the place so no instruments to recruit workers in origin are needed here, only state's passivity is required as thousands of irregular migrants are exploited for very low salaries.

The other model, referred to recruitment in origin, is even more characteristic of how capitalism can be the direct driver of mass migrations. In those territories where labor shortages were chronic, employers pushed states to develop new instruments to get them. This is how Temporary Foreign Workers Programs (TFWPs) were born.

TFWPs are the main expression of how capitalism's needs are at the origin of mass migrations. The first one was implemented in the United States in 1942, under the name of "*Bracero*" (laborer in Spanish) but after World War II countries like France or Germany implemented also this kind of programs and, from the 70's until now, they were extended all around the core of the world-system.

TFWPs are usually legal mechanisms by which employers from core countries are allowed to go directly to peripheral countries (frequently those having signed bilateral agreements with the hosting country) to recruit laborers for working temporarily in their farms. Employers pay transport from origin to destination and provide accommodation. Workers receive a temporary permit (usually no longer than 9 months) and, after its expiration, they have to return to their countries of origin. If employers are satisfied, in the next season the same migrants that participated in the program may be recruited again generating what has been called "circular migration".

Except in some cases, under these programs, migrants don't have the possibility of settling in destination country and their mobility is often limited to the province where they work. The rationale of this mechanisms is clear: migrants are needed as workforce and their presence in destination states is merely due to productive needs but states want to avoid the social costs of integrating these populations.

## Conclusion

The selected cases show that capitalism has been the main driver of some of the most relevant mass migrations that occurred since its rise in the 16th century. These were only three significant cases reflecting three different historical moments of world-system's history (taking industrial revolution as the reference point).

In all these phenomena, it is important to note that even if these populations have massively moved to meet capitalism's needs, this does not mean that migrants did not have agency in these processes (except in the case of forced migrations, like the slave trade). Agency, in the words of Patricia Duff "refers to people's ability to make choices, take control, self-regulate, and thereby pursue their goals as individuals leading, potentially, to personal or social transformation" (2012 p.413) as many studies have shown, migrants always exert some kind of agency in all

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these processes. In these concrete cases, capitalism was the structure creating systemic restrictions and conditioning individuals' lives, but under this framework (that varies from one case to another) migrants took decisions and were not passive actors. Even slaves had some space for agency when they decided to resist and revolt. The birth of the Haitian state is one of the bigger examples of how slave's agency led to a revolution that created the first abolitionist state.

World-system's structure conditions migrant's movements but these are always active actors whose actions shape the way these historical processes happen. In the case of migrant farm workers there are many examples like the movement of César Chávez, an activist who led massive strikes in the United States defending Mexican agricultural worker's rights with his association, United Farm Workers (UFW), that caused Bracero's program closure. But agency has not always adopted the form of protests, sometimes, like in the case of Bolivian migrants in Argentina's agriculture, it can be an empowerment process where migrants manage to do an upward social mobility and become landowners and then control the market. Each concrete case needs to be studied in order to highlight in which way migrant's agency is exerted, but it's always an element that has not to be neglected from the analysis, even when capitalism seems to be the unique major force moving these populations.

As seen, the structure of the capitalistic world-system has been the main driver of some of the most relevant mass migrations that took place since the 16th century and this trend does not seem to be affected by the current economic crisis. The rise of new nationalisms having anti-migratory discourses in countries like the United States under Donald Trump's presidency or re-nationalization processes like Brexit, induce to think that the core states may tend to close even more their borders which will make migration more difficult. But until capitalism will rule the global arena, the core will still demand migrant workforce so probably new forms of "controlled" migration will take place and new instruments will be developed to ensure the availability of workers generating new kinds of mass migrations in the future.

## Note

[1] Wallerstein (2000, p.270) defined Capitalism as "a [global] system based on the endless accumulation of capital. It is therefore a system which requires the maximum appropriation of surplus-value. There are two ways to increase the appropriation of surplus-value. One is that workers work harder and more efficiently, thereby creating greater output with the same amount of inputs (other than human labor-time). The second way is to return less of the value that is produced to the direct producers. In short, capitalism by definition involves a pressure on all direct producers to work more and to be paid less."

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**Yoan Molinero Gerbeau** is a political scientist, who holds an MA in International Relations and African Studies from the Autonomous University of Madrid (UAM). He is currently working at the Institute of Economy, Geography and Demography (IEGD), part of the Spanish National Research Council (CSIC) for the EU-project TEMPER (temporary vs. permanent migration). Currently his research is focused on developing the world-ecology paradigm by studying migrant farm worker's conditions and their systemic role in global capitalism's maintenance. This research is at the core of the PhD project that he has been preparing at the Autonomous University of Madrid (UAM) since 2016.