

## **Remaking Migration Theory**

Intersections and Cross-fertilisations

13 -14 May 2009 - Brighton

This two-day conference of the Population Geography Research Group of the RGS-IBG and the International Geographical Union Population Commission was jointly hosted by the University of Brighton and the University of Sussex and was organized by Darren Smith, Rusell King, Rebecca Elmhirst and Ron Skeldon. It gathered around 50 participants coming, mainly, from the UK but also from Canada, Denmark, Germany, India, Ireland, Italy, Latvia, Mexico, Switzerland and the USA.

Summarizing and quoting the organizers, the topic of the conference was based on the following statement: *“Theories of migration and population mobility have a substantive legacy of often being founded on dichotomous relationships, such as origin–destination, agency–structure, production–consumption, supply–demand, and economy–culture. Other binaries which fragment the study of migration include the divisions between internal versus international migration, forced versus voluntary migration, legal versus illegal, temporary versus permanent, developed versus developing world, historical versus contemporary, and so on. Arguably, the resonance of these historical theorisations of migration are increasingly challenged by changing economic, societal and global conditions, such as the shrinkage of time–space distancing by technological and communication advancements, and as borders and boundaries of nation states and political alliances are recast in dynamic global contexts. Such growing diversity, and the unfolding plurality, of contemporary migration flows and experiences will require new ways to capture the complexities and complications of population changes. Notable accounts of such migration flows and experiences are often infused with social theories from other areas of the social sciences, for example new theories of families and households, employment and work practices, gender, sexuality and lifecourse, and performativity. It can be argued that Migration Studies have not fully embraced such social theories, and could more effectively engage with such academic discourses to deepen understandings of the ways in which populations move and change.”*

The conference thus aimed at exploring *“the many ways in which different, yet possibly interconnected, forms of contemporary migration are being reconfigured in the developed and developing worlds, and how these shifts are being theorised by academics from different (sub)disciplines of academia.”*

No definitions of “Migration theory” were given by the organizers in the call for paper of the conference. Meanwhile most of the presenters did implicitly adopt – often in order to question it - the narrow definition used by Cohen in his *Theories of migration* reader and by Massey et al. in their *Theories of International Migration* namely that migration theory is the attempt at explaining *durable displacements* or in other words *movements*. A minority of papers adopted a broader definition of migration theory comparable to the one used by Portes and DeWind in their *Rethinking Migration* or in Bretell's *Migration Theory: Talking Across Disciplines*. These papers thus addressed integration/assimilation theory, social inequalities among migrants, or spatial segregation. These second type of papers were very valuable inputs to the conference although – and this is the one and only (very mild) criticism one could address to the organizers – they arguably were too diverse and – in rare cases - blurred the focus of the debates ending the different sessions.

Five sessions and three keynotes were organized.

Keynote 1: Adrian Favell (Aarhus University, Denmark) "Mobility, creativity, and security: limits of migration in the fast-lane, flat world"

Session 1: Rethinking International Migration

Session 2: Rethinking Internal Migration

Keynote 2: Keith Halfacree (University of Wales Swansea, UK) "Transnationalism coming home?: rethinking second homes and counterurbanisation in the era of mobility"

Keynote 3: Rachel Silvey (University of Toronto, Canada) "Transnational Methods: Critical Global Ethnographies of Migration"

Session 3: New Theoretical Insights

Session 4: Rethinking Migrants In Place

Session 5: Rethinking Migration and the Future

A total of 24 papers were presented during the conference. The present report doesn't give justice to all and will probably frustrate some. In my view, one could nevertheless subsume the papers and keynote speeches presented around *two pleas* made by most presenters in order to rethink, remake or enrich migration theory. If one were to judge by the debates which followed the sessions, these points were quite consensual among the participants:

- A plea for **widening the panel of ACTORS** taken into account when theorizing migration
- A plea for **questioning and redefining the CONCEPTS**, and especially some **DICHOTOMIES**, in order to take into account the changing structural context of migration

### **Widening the panel of ACTORS**

Researchers identified many population groups that have not been adequately included in traditional migration theory. Such actors might include elites, children, partners within the family and students. The migration of **Elites/Highly qualified professional was identified** by many participants who questioned the way in which the present era of globalisation has impacted on their mobility. Elite migration, it was argued, is not only important to study in order to contrast its apparent unlimited liberty of movement with the limited mobility of the less affluent. It is also pertinent to study it in order to show, critically, how mobility has become a core positive value of 'our' society. Elite migrant also illustrates the power of human agency in shaping the socio-spatial itineraries of this group as they respond to many contradictory constraints ranging from economic structure to family life. In this sense, the life of highly qualified professionals has often nothing to do with the myth of mobile happiness branded by lifestyle magazines or by state discourses about the desirable/non-desirable migrant.

The importance of a better conceptualisation of the role of the **Family and/or partners** in migration studies was also underlined as they play a critical role in shaping mobility forms over the life course. Despite an apparent recent slowdown, long distance family migration research (LDFM) appears as a specific topic, which embraces **the family as a central unit of investigation** and encompasses a wide variety of migrations. In general, family migration should get rid of a focus on typical partnered families to encompass lone parents, same sex

couples, etc... and needs a more spatially aware understanding and a better conceptualisation of the Family-work-home balance. **Children** should not be forgotten although they are absent from most migration statistics and studies and are considered as dependant, vulnerable, passive and devoid of any own volition. Presenters developed a critique of adult-centrism in migration studies and showed that children can be active in migration decision process, that more age-specific migration statistics are needed as well as more inclusive research methods and recognition of the heterogeneity of child migration. More generally the whole migratory experience of migrant children should be better understood.

**Students** also deserve to be considered as specific actors of international migration. Although this lacuna has been identified a long time ago, international student mobility is still under theorized. Rather than considering student migration decisions as shaped by individual characteristics, a plea was made at the conference to broaden significantly the theoretical framework in which this type of migration is conceptualised. Among others connections, this theoretical broadening could imply connections with social theory which would allow one to consider student migration as a prelude to skilled migration to form the international managerial class ("Global talent recruitment starting with students"). The concept of cultural capital acquisition as a strategy (and not only human capital acquisition) could also help to understand why middle class parents choose to send their children abroad. Connections with theories of globalisation could help to understand the choice of students in targeting universities at the top of the – new – international academic hit-parade.

Different **Ethnic and socio-economic groups** also deserve attention. First, to assess the classic but still crucial "race versus class" question in a context of mobility, but also to show how these two dimensions intersect. In this context, several methodological papers underlined the difficulties raised by the creation and transformation of ethnic categories and the sensitivity of empirical results to the geographical scale of analysis chosen.

Finally, the necessity to bring **the state** and more generally **power relations** back in migration studies, and the fact that the politics of migration have not been explored enough, appeared clearly in numerous papers. It was also noted how powerful the State is in producing and enforcing a discourse on migration. The state is also a major force to be considered in widening the scope of migration theory in relation to the renewed role that the **natural environment** appears to be playing in human displacement in the context of global warming.

### **Questioning the concepts**

Too clear-cut conceptual dichotomies were identified as needing critical examination by the organizers of the conference. This point was echoed by several of the papers presented at the meeting. The distinction between **short-term and long-term migration** and more generally the **temporality** of displacement was questioned with the usual statistical definitions being shown to often be obsolete. The distinction between **here and there** and the very concept of **home** were also questioned, among other terms in relation to **transnationalism**. Cases of hybridities responding to structural constraints were noted: simultaneous job engagements in two or several different areas, very short term stays abroad, long-distance pendularity, daily moves, seasonal moves, semi permanent moves, etc. Some papers made a fruitful use of Hagerstrand's space-time path schematisation to visualize these phenomena. In his keynote, Halfacree argued that transnationalism, a concept that emerged simply by definition from studies of international migration, could be applied fruitfully to internal migration as well.

Referring to the new motilities paradigm advocated by Urry or Creswell, the questions of **mobility versus immobility / movement versus fixity / national versus international** were also raised. A nicely formulated question was framed around these concepts and about research careers of academics: can one be international and not mobile or mobile and not international?

The **Transition perspective** originally brought to migration/mobility studies by Zelinsky might be a pertinent way to take into account the issues mentioned above; not in order to identify universal models at global level, but to look how migration and mobility patterns evolve and intersect over time.

The distinction between **Internal and International migration** was questioned by many authors who noted the fact that internal migration appears as insufficiently investigated. A decline in the amount of research on internal migration was even noted in the social sciences (but not geography) in the US. This is astonishing if one considers the transforming impact of internal migration on US society and economy. A plea was thus clearly made for reinventing internal migration studies in a broader theoretical framework rather than the very formal quantitative approach which characterizes most of existing studies. This reinvention should be made in constant connection with international migration considering their numerous connections: internal migration can lead to international migration and in certain circumstances the analytic tools can be interchanged. Additionally, in countries like China, the levels of the flows, the barriers to mobility and the discrimination encountered by migrants are not significantly different than those encountered in international migration. Finally, the distinction between **Emigration and Return migration** was discussed. Although outward and return migration have been traditionally been studied separately, papers showed how fruitful it can be to consider these movements in a continuum of interrelated stages in a life course framework at the scale of the household.

## Conclusion

As noted by Russell King in his concluding remarks, there still is something specific in migration which makes this phenomenon different from mobility in general. One can thus wonder how far one can push the idea of an all encompassing mobility paradigm – advocated among others by Urry or Creswell . Broadening the scope of migration theory, as this conference did, nevertheless appeared a very fruitful move and the different enlargements and conceptual redefinitions which were advocated remained mostly firmly connected with the contemporaneous peculiar reality of migration. On that basis, my personal impression is that this was **a very successful conference** confirming the value of small but nicely focused research meetings. As noted by William Clark at the end of the first day, migration theory probably doesn't really need to be *remade* but, as most delegates would have agreed by the end of the second day, it certainly can be significantly *enriched*.