

INTRODUCTION

It is only because miners sweat their guts out that superior persons can remain superior. . . . All of us really owe the comparative decency of our lives to poor drudges underground.

—Orwell, *Down the Mine*¹

BETWEEN THE SIXTEENTH AND NINETEENTH CENTURIES, “labor shortage!” was the constant lament of European colonists, slave-owners, colonial planters, and mining operators.² Transnational and transregional laborers were usually seized through military force, slavery, “coolie” labor, and indenture. From the Cape of Good Hope to the Caribbean, from Shanghai to Peru, migrant workers were connected to processes of production and accumulation through directly exercised forms of overt physical and legal coercion. Many an astute nineteenth-century thinker had not even considered the possibility that one day perennial colonial labor shortage might turn to labor surplus.³ Yet, as the nineteenth century wore on, complaints about labor shortages were heard less and less. Even indentured labor no longer seemed necessary to many, as persons prepared to sell long hours of hard, stigmatized, and disciplined labor for low wages, or to work in crowded and competitive self-employment, started to leave Ireland, southern and eastern Europe, Asia, Africa, and Latin America in tens of millions.⁴ The hundreds of thousands of Ottoman subjects—Lebanese and Syrian—who left the eastern Mediterranean province of the *bilad ash-sham* for the Americas, West Africa, and beyond between the 1870s and 1920s were merely one group amid this more general mass migration. By the First World War, the world had entered an epoch of seemingly limitless supplies of international migrant “labor power.”⁵ In this new context, far from expending resources seizing slaves by force in the tropics, and then in maintaining and controlling them, metropolitan receiving countries started to speak the language of “overpopulation” and the “yellow peril.” Governments began putting up barriers, developing guest-worker systems to prevent settlement, and,

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ultimately, in the 1920s and 1930s, restricting entry altogether.⁶ Thus the age, extending in various recognizable forms to the present, of so-called voluntary, spontaneous, self-initiated, and economic migration on a transnational scale, was born.⁷

Why were the whip of the slave master, property in the person, or the formally enforced rules and contracts of indenture no longer necessary in the mass production of mental labor involving long hours, low pay, hard work, obedience, stigma, and insecurity?⁸ What was the nature of these forms of apparently “economic” force?⁹ Why was it that what had once required coercion was now achieved through apparently voluntary effort, or via ostensibly economic and indirect means? How were legally free persons and their energies now bound to a migratory labor regime and structures of transnational accumulation? Through a detailed and as yet untold history of a prolonged case of circular labor migration between Syria and Lebanon, this book argues that existing answers to the question of “economic force” are unsatisfactory, and suggests an alternative.

Histories of migration drawing on theories of modernization and economic development, as well as migrant-centered, agency-recovering accounts inspired by cultural studies and postcolonialism, arguably efface the forms of power at work in the migratory labor regime. Accounts drawing on the Marxist tradition, furthermore, are problematic in their tendency to automate processes of labor subordination: Migrants are not simply human jetsam and flotsam—faceless stocks, pools, and reserves maintained or drained by the hydraulics of capitalism and imperialism. An important failing of existing approaches is that they only inadequately link agents to structures and vice versa, thereby missing and eviscerating the operations of the forms of agency-incorporating control and discipline in which I am interested. Strong forms of both agency *and* structural determination are heavily present throughout the history related in this book: the bold, masculinist and pan-Arabist claims of dignified workers engaged in remunerative labor, the acquisition of skills and the broadening of horizons, the personal satisfactions of providing for kith and kin against the odds, the harsh pressures of family expectations and cash and land hunger in villages on the Syrian plains, grinding exploitation and physical abuse at work, mental indignity and slum living in Lebanon, lives of poverty, the bitter frustrations of failed projects, and prolonged exilic rotation, violence, expulsion, and killing.

This history of an almost completely unknown but important case of migration and return combines the methods of ethnography and social history. Through a particular appropriation of the concepts of hegemony and elective affinities, it examines and explores the ways in which migrants are unfixed, made mobile, channeled, enmeshed, and subordinated within objectifying structures of accumulation by combinations of coercion and consent, repression and choice. Whereas the standard justification for the exploitation of migrant workers by host populations is that they “choose to come here,” in what ways are these choices, which are undoubtedly made at some level, embedded in structures that distinguish them from empowerment? I argue that while forms of direct and unmediated discipline disappeared from the world of migrant labor, in their place came the direct and indirect discipline of a constructed “labour market,” comprised less of the benign forces of the “invisible hand” and more of the ensnaring operations of an invisible cage.

STORIES ABOUT MIGRANTS

Existing scholarship on migration, whether based on conventional economics, Marxism, modernization theory, economic sociology, or cultural studies, has done remarkably little to explore the particular work of hegemonic incorporation in which I am interested. In conventional economics, migrants motivated by rational calculations as to individual material gain (based on Smith’s natural human “propensity to truck and barter”) flow from labor-abundant, capital-poor areas to labor-scarce, capital-rich regions in accordance with the operations of supply and demand. Migratory processes are seen to be rooted in specialization, the deepening division of labor, and the development of cash exchange; they contribute through factor mobility to wealth creation. Free movement is expected to equilibrate wages and profit rates in the long term and diminish macroeconomic and demographic imbalances. Migrants’ position in host societies is largely determined by their own choices, market advantages, and skill endowments.¹⁰

In this view, migratory processes and social relations more generally are constructed out of the rational choices of exchanging acquisitive individuals who are, in principle, equally potent. As such, inequality, coercion, politics, alienation, and structural power tend to disappear from view, and the multiply determined and purposeful social subject is reduced to a *homo economicus*. This approach misses what Francis Wilson called “the importance of the

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distribution of power in moulding the forces THAT shape even a micro-economic structure and determine the range of choices within it.”¹¹ Social relations are transformed into relations between quantities and objects—Marx’s commodity fetishism. Conventional economics ultimately comprise a powerful ratification of economic inequality and of what Friedrich Engels saw as the “domination over men *by virtue of*, and *through the intermediary of*, the domination over things.”¹² The language of choice and exchange is better seen therefore as part of the unfinished and unstably “fixed” hegemonic apparatus of the market economy, rather than an analytical tool for actually understanding the hegemonic incorporation of migrant subjects.

The depoliticizing, uncritical, and technocratic stance of conventional economics has long been opposed by research inspired by Marxism. Here, the circulation and exploitation of migrant workers is understood in terms of the development of capitalism, imperialism, and neo-colonialism.¹³ Marx ridiculed Adam Smith’s rosy account of labor market formation in which “the idyllic reigns from time immemorial.” In place of exchange and specialization, Marx spoke of conquest, enslavement, murder, plunder, and force, which, during the prehistory of capital, divorced direct producers from control over means of production, shattered feudal bonds of protection, and left immediate producers with no way to live except by selling their labor power to capitalists controlling the means of production, a sale often involving migration.¹⁴ Once capitalism was established, its fundamental secular tendencies—a shift in the organic composition of capital reducing both the share of variable capital (wages), and the number of surplus hours extracted per unit of capital, reductions that imply a declining rate of profit and employment—create a floating population, an industrial reserve army forced to migrate in search of increasingly elusive wage labor.¹⁵ A related reading links mass migration to capitalism’s tendency to undergo crises of overaccumulation, boom and bust, and its fundamental instability and constant restructuring, forcing masses of people to move in search of employment.¹⁶ Other Marxist accounts understand migration less in terms of the operations of “pure” capitalism, but in terms of how capitalism, linked to imperialism, distorted development in the colonial and Third World by imperial policy and surplus extraction, preventing normal capitalist development and forcing those unable to find a living to migrate to the world of advanced capitalism.¹⁷ A variation of this account understands circulatory migrant labor as a subsidy to advanced capitalism, in

which social costs of reproduction are defrayed in preserved-dissolved forms of precapitalist domestic community in the sending areas.¹⁸

These profoundly structuralist readings are problematic because they automate mechanisms of circulation and subordination. The question of how purposeful and acculturated subjects are articulated to objectifying structures is sidelined. Migrants are discharged and absorbed as jetsam and flotsam according to the hydraulics of capitalism, class, reification, and commodity fetishism. In this schema, the discussion of the unfinished cultural and political work of relations of subordination and domination, the qualities of migrants—their ideas, projects, purposes, subjectivities, moral economies, household dynamics, and political statuses and relationships—become epiphenomenal. If conventional economics stresses only choice, structuralist Marxism sharply underplays the decisions and initiative of migrants themselves. There is no sense that subjectivity and politics operate substantively to constitute multiple forms of accumulation. What matters are the laws of capital accumulation, the actions of capitalists and imperialists, or the actions of those who set out as an organized working class to overthrow those capitalists. Other forms of agency become residual, obstructive, unscientific, and backward. Ultimately, in much Marxism, the problem is that there is no subject left to hegemonize.

A homologous problem appears in migration studies inspired by linear and teleological forms of modernization theory. Adam Smith linked the free movement of factors of production (including labor) to a secular shift from societies that were poor, rude, barbarous, and miserable to those that were wealthy, flourishing, and civilized. The languages of modernization and Orientalism alike have depicted both migrants and sending societies as mired in tradition, backwardness, overpopulation, and stagnation, and described migrant journeys and transitions to a usually Western modernity embodying a better life—advanced, rational, mobile, and free.¹⁹ In this context, the key task for migrants is assimilation into host societies, conceived problematically as relatively homogeneous and internally harmonious.²⁰ In these accounts, in which dominant values and overly linear historical trajectories are both assumed and naturalized, the problem of hegemonic incorporation disappears from view. Where subject positions, social structures, and the direction of historical change is given in advance, there is little room for considering the complex processes that construct dominant order and link active and diverse subjects to them.

Economic sociology eschewed the historical metanarratives and political commitments of Marxism and modernization theory alike, and sought to modify the disembodied economism of conventional economics. Economic sociologists have explored, ostensibly in a value-free mode, the importance of social context by adopting Max Weber's notion of socially oriented economic action, and appropriating the Hungarian economist Karl Polanyi's concept of embeddedness.²¹ Core-periphery linkages (transportation, media, recruitment agencies) are said to help account for why migrant flows are strongly associated with structures established during a bygone age of colonial rule. Social networks play an important role in structuring, sustaining, and even initiating migrant flows. Social capital, not just individual market advantage, plays an equally decisive role in upward mobility, entrepreneurship, and success in the receiving country. The structure and nature of the job market, such as in the formation of a "secondary sector" for migrants, is also seen to be important.²²

Nonetheless, issues of hegemony, and power relations more broadly, remain curiously absent and undertheorized in the economic sociology of migration. Although some attention is paid to racial prejudice, political indifference or even hostility, colonialism, and imperialism either barely exist, or are considered an irrelevant artifact of some distant past. This lens is partly allowed to stand unchallenged by a relentless Westcentrism or a focus on the interests of host societies. Piore's seminal book, for example, fails even to mention the global South in the list of phenomena explicitly excluded from his theory. Piore identified the central problem in migration processes not as the exploitation of cheap labor, nor as the subordination or racialization of those struggling to reestablish structures of community and identification. Instead, according to Piore, the so-called immigrant problem is the fact that conflicts develop between native labor and immigrants once the latter, usually after settlement processes are well developed, start to seek out the jobs that natives want.²³ For Piore, the key problem with migration, in other words, is that at some point, settled or second-generation migrants want to escape the world of menial, humiliating, and dirty labor, which conflicts with the interests not only of native labor but also of industrial society at large. Industrial society is seen to require a "secondary labor market" as a matter of demand-side necessity, conceived in homogenizing and objectivist terms. The problem turns out to be one of assimilation read in terms of the host society's "interests."