Migration, the great human story

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Human beings are mobile.[i] It is because we are mobile that we are so successful; that we have grown from a small and threatened species roaming the African Savanna into the dominant and now threatening species, with over seven billion descendants today; that we have adapted and established ourselves in the most varied climates and regions; that we have been able to build up the most inventive - but also the most destructive - cultures and economies. The most inhospitable areas are now inhabited and we travel around the entire surface of the Earth. In other words, the world has become the human stage, the theatre for the unceasing exchange and confrontation of different interests and ideas, of expertise and techniques, of hopes and fears.

Today, over 200 million people migrate every year to other countries. The majority go in search of a better life. They provide for an enormous money flow back to their countries of origin, currently estimated at 340 billion Euros per annum. Around 15 million people are recognized as international refugees; 27 million are refugees in their own country. Moreover, every year four times as many people - the figure stands at almost 800 million - move within their own country. Most leave for the fast growing cities. For the first time in history, there are now more urban dwellers than rural dwellers. China currently has 250 million rural migrants who work in the country's growing cities. In fact, the exodus to the city of hundreds of millions of Chinese people since the 1980s is by far the largest migration movement the world has ever known up to this point. As a result, one in seven of today's world citizens is an economic migrant. In addition, we also collectively make over a billion international tourism trips annually. Expenditure on travel has risen to nearly 10% of total GDP. It is clear that we are a mobile species in a mobile world. We are mobile because we travel, discover, and meet. We are also mobile because we conquer, pillage and colonize. Sometimes we are forced to leave, sometimes we have to flee. Mostly we are looking for a new life elsewhere. There are few things more human than to migrate.

Migration renews the human gene pool, creates new spaces for growth and expansion, exchanges experiences, ideas and convictions, and lies at the basis of confrontation, tension and conflict. Migration has played - and still plays - a central role in human experience, in the story of the constantly changing human journey. The oldest (and for a long time the most important) form of migration is the migration of *entire communities*. During the first (and also longest) phase of our existence, groups of hunter-gatherers and later of herders and nomads followed the rhythm of the seasons and the movements of wild or domesticated animals. The crossing of diverging ecological spaces is a continuous cyclical process, which in more recent times has almost completely disappeared. In more sedentary agricultural societies the role of migration *within one's own community* became more important. The offspring seeks its fortune away from the parental home, setting up a new family and creating a new settlement. The successive sequence of these small steps not only guarantees population growth but also systematically pushes outwards the boundaries of the community. The prolonged and highly influential migration of Bantu people from West Africa over the whole continent is the outcome of such a slow but steady process of internal colonization.

The growth of larger civilizations in turn stimulates the processes of *external colonization*. Members of a community travel a long way to re-establish the same community at a more distant location. This inevitably goes hand in hand with the seizure of new land, which is often coupled with the physical disappearance of the former population. This form of migration has existed since the days of our early ancestors, but over the past six centuries has acquired a more institutionalized and a larger-scale character, with the expansion of colonial empires. The recent rapid growth in the world's population and the resulting increase in contact between communities that in the past were much more remote from each other, means that migration *between communities* is also on the increase. Migrants move from one community - their own - to another community - someone else's. Successful migration in these circumstances presupposes forms of cooperation between the locals and the newcomers, via economic, social and cultural contacts and exchange. Once again, this often coincides with new tensions in the fields of work, language, religion and culture.

In search of a better life, running for your life or just continuing your journey: the reasons for leaving your homeland - permanently or otherwise - are highly diverse. Migration is far from being an exclusively voluntary process. The trading of slaves (mainly from Africa), systems of compulsory contract labour (mainly in south and east Asia), the large-scale expulsion of entire population groups (such as the Jews in the past and the Palestinians today) and enforced colonization (as in Siberia) are all part of human history. The impact of these types of migration is very often destructive. Partly as a result of the slave trade, the African continent's proportion in the world's population fell from almost 20% in 1500 to just 8% in 1900. Voluntary migration is also a broad concept; central in this instance is the ability of people and groups to take their fate (at least in part) into their own hands. In these circumstances, people nearly always move in the hope of finding a better life elsewhere, if possible in the short term, but often with an eye to the next generation. The primary motivation is fear emanating from things that have gone wrong (or may in future go wrong) in the homeland, combined with the hope that it may be possible to somewhere find a new land of milk and honey. But one thing is certain - nobody takes the decision to migrate lightly.

In the past, migration often used to mean the final severing of all links with the homeland. Today, the choice to migrate is, to an increasing extent, part of a dual strategy: improving your own lot and also supporting the community that you have left behind. In this way, migration has become part of a combined survival plan, both for the individual who leaves and for the family and community that stays behind. Lastly, migration can also be seen as a choice to learn, discover and travel. Religious pilgrimages have mobilized large population groups since time immemorial. The annual Hajj to the holy sites of Mecca has been at the basis of massive migration flows since the 8th century, and today still involves millions of Muslim believers. Transport and communication revolutions and the spectacular fall in travel costs have also led to the rise of mass tourism since the mid-20th century.

Every voluntary and long-term migration is preceded by a weighing up of the pros and cons. People balance the expected income against the expected expenditure. This is not simply restricted to straightforward financial matters (although every migration calls for some form of saving). Emotional and physical capital is also at stake. The chances of bankruptcy, conflict, violence and death all increase when you leave your own community. In extreme cases, disease and plagues can

be transmitted that are capable of disrupting or even wiping out whole societies. The most important strategy to reduce individual cost is to form migration networks. These networks are created between the sending and receiving community and are further developed within the latter. Knowledge, information, support and solidarity are crucial within such networks. In the home country there are 'recruiters', who spread information and help to make the departure of migrants possible; on arrival in the new country, there are 'distributors', who help to receive the newcomers and make possible their integration. The migration route itself is made possible by 'travel agents' in the form of guides, accommodation or transport companies. In this sense, migration is almost always a group-bound process that takes shape within networks between the points of departure and arrival.

Migration is one of the most important driving forces behind social evolution and social innovation. Products, resources and knowledge are shared and spread. Ideas and processes are given more space, change and variety become the norm. With the spread of *Homo sapiens* beyond the African continent, a multitude of different groups, languages and cultures was created (divergence). Over the course of centuries, these groups have found their way back to each other, with an uncommonly large exchange of genes, diseases, products and knowledge as a result (convergence).

Since *Homo sapiens* first came into being some 200,000 years ago, modern man has always sought to extend his boundaries. From 70,000 to 80,000 years ago, groups left Africa for other continents, where the older human species such as the Neanderthals were driven away or assimilated. This slow, long-term migration flow lies at the basis of the successful colonization of large parts of the Earth's surface, a process that only came to an end with the inhabitation of the remote islands in the Pacific Ocean just a few thousand years ago. The successful spread and exchange of genes by Palaeolithic humans was coupled with a slow yet steady growth in world population. This growth was supported by remarkable technological, economic and cultural progress: techniques for hunting, fishing and gathering, as well as clothing, housing, trading, and the evolution of linguistic and cultural patterns all developed exponentially. The most important innovation of all is entirely unique to the human species: cultural exchange. Over many tens of thousands of years, modern man has acquired the art of collective learning, of accumulating, preserving and passing on knowledge. The use of fire, the improvement and remodelling of technologies, the learning of (symbolic) language: without collective learning none of this would have been possible.

The development of agricultural communities some 10,000 years ago allowed for the growth of larger, sedentary societies. The gradual spread of crops such as wheat, rice and bananas in Eurasia, sorghum in Africa and corn and potatoes in America points to more intensive contact between different communities. This in turn stimulated the growth of systematic long-distance trade networks, roughly since 3,000 to 4,000 years ago. This created networks of direct trade contacts that connected large parts of the world - with the major exception the American continent. For example, the silk routes connected China to the Mediterranean Sea and Africa, while specialized trade diasporas of (amongst others) Armenians and later Jews created permanent connections between the Mediterranean Sea and the Indian Ocean. Later, the Vikings were to play a crucial role in

interlocking trade between northern, eastern and southern Europe. Although only a relatively small number of traders were active in this process, this gradual expansion and intensification of trade networks connected at the beginning of the Christian calendar an extensive area stretching from Japan to the west coast of Africa. In other words, this marked a process of slow convergence. These networks were further extended during the period 500-1500 as a result of the large-scale migration of nomadic 'horse people' from the East, the Arabian expansion in North Africa and the Viking penetration into western and eastern Europe. At the same time, contacts within the continents of North and South America were increasing. As a result of the expansion of these networks, there was an observable growth in the long-distance dissemination of people and (above all) goods, knowledge, techniques, but also diseases (such as bubonic plague in the 14th century). The only barriers that remained on a global scale were the Pacific Ocean and the Atlantic Ocean, which ensured that America and the majority of the Pacific Islands remained isolated from the rest of the world.

During the period 1400-1700, the scale of global migration increased still further. The expansion of territorial empires (such as the Chinese and the Ottoman Empires) and colonial realms (exemplified by the European overseas empires) was accompanied by new and unprecedented migration flows. Partly thanks to improvements in maritime technology, intercontinental voyages now became possible, which had far-reaching economic, cultural and social effects. Crucial in this respect was the European 'discovery' of the Americas and the opening up of the Indian trade route via the Cape of Good Hope at the end of the 15th century. This meant that European traders now had direct access to American mineral resources, African labour resources and the blossoming Asian economies. This not only led to an increase in trade and the spread of new products on a global scale, but also stimulated further new and large-scale migration flows between the continents. This involved both forced and free migration. The most well-known and largest example of the former are the millions of slaves from West Africa who were transported to the Caribbean, Brazil and (to a lesser extent) the southern states of what was to become the United States of America. The numbers are mind-boggling: approximately 300,000 in the 16th century, almost two million in the 17th century and almost seven million in the 18th century. In addition, the growing world economy stimulated the migration of millions of free and non-free migrants from Europe. A third large migration flow was the departure of Europeans to Asia through the Portuguese, Dutch and (later) English trading channels. In addition, migration flows were also on the increase from south-east Asia to southern and central America and from Europe to Siberia and northern America. Recent studies have estimated the number of Europeans leaving their own country (either temporarily or permanently) during each ten-year period was 2.3 million in the 16th century, 3.8 million in the 17th century and 4.7 million in the 18th century (which represents on average 2.7%, 3.9% and 3.5% of the total population per decade). The vast majority were soldiers and sailors, with a minority leaving for the colonies as traders, administrators, etc. In this way, for example, between 1500 and 1650 some 3,000 to 5,000 Spaniards settled each year in the New World. The cumulative effect of this process in the long term was immense. Circa 1800, 8.5 million 'whites' were already living on the American continent. In comparison, during the same period migration from China remained quite stable, and was estimated at 4 million per ten-year period, or less than 2% of the total population.

In the years between 1850 and 1930, the most intensive migration flows in terms of proportion took place. Excepting the large-scale labour migrations within Africa, Europe and America, the number of long-distance migrants is estimated at around 150 million. In the period 1850-1900, the number of European migrants per decade rose to 20 million, or more than 6% of the total population. Tens of millions of Europeans crossed the Atlantic Ocean to settle in North and South America, while comparable numbers of Chinese and Indians found work in north and south-east Asia respectively, including the mines of Manchuria and the rubber plantations of Burma. The causes of this growth in worldwide long-distance mobility are not hard to find: the revolutions in transport (steam ships) and communication (telegraph, telephone and postal service), the expansion of colonial realms (with the British Empire leading the way), and the creation of an integrated world market. The result was that capital and labour could be mobilized on an unprecedented scale. In the eighty years between 1850 and 1930, the three largest growth centres with a labour shortage (Europe to North America, eastern Asia to northern Asia, India and southern China to south-east Asia) attracted migrant flows that were almost equally as large (45 to 55 million). In this respect, all three flows also demonstrated a remarkable degree of convergence, with high numbers in the 1870s, around 1900 and at the end of the 1920s, with declines at the start of the 1890s, during the First World War and in the 1930s.

From the 1960s onwards, a new period of increasing international migration has been taking shape. Today, also, several new patterns are visible, both in terms of the direction of migration flows (to Europe and North America, within eastern and southern Asia, etc.) and their form (free and non-voluntary migration). However, this new wave of migration is taking place in a different kind of world, a world with more people, more general prosperity but also greater disparities of wealth than ever before. Moreover, the current globalization process lacks the same almost unrestricted freedom of migration that typified the period 1850-1914. The capacity of the 20th century state to control mobility is a new phenomenon in world (and migration) history. After 1914, states aggregated to themselves greater powers to control migration and to define if and on what conditions migrants would be allowed to enter their territories. In this way, for example, from the 1970s onwards the Gulf States in the Middle East recruited millions of Asian migrants, but only granted them limited rights and did not hesitate to deport them once their usefulness had expired. In the liberal democracies, this has proven to be a more delicate issue, as the history of 'foreign labour' in Western Europe demonstrates, but here too migration controls have influenced the scale, direction and selectiveness of migration to a large extent. Much more than ever before, migration flows are now deemed to be 'illegal' if they are not recognized by the state. Whereas migration flows between 1850 and 1914 were a major driving force of economic growth and increasing convergence, the migration patterns of today seem instead to reinforce differences and divergence. Even so, the new wave of economic globalization continues to generate new migration flows from the poorer to the richer parts of the world. And even the most stringent new forms of regulation and repression seem to have little chance of stopping this movement.

Migration has helped to write the story of human history: the spread of *Homo sapiens*, the growth and interaction of farming cultures, imperial and colonial expansion, urbanization and the new waves of globalization. It is also clear that we in the 21st century will write yet another new and

unique chapter in this global migration story. Precisely what shape this chapter will take is to a large extent dependent on the way we approach the new forms of human mobility: as a threat or as a source of renewal and regeneration.

[i] Literature: Barbier, 2011; Feys, 2012; Hoerder, 2002; Marks, 2007; Livi-Bacci, 2001; Lucassen etc., 2010; Manning, 2013; McKeown, 2004; Nauwelaerts, 2008, Vanhaute, 2012 and http://pstalker.com/migration/