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Presentation

Understanding migration: Challenges pending

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Following Sayad Abdelmalek 's contributions (2010), migration can be understood as a «total social fact,» that is, a phenomenon involving multiple dimensions that can only be understood through a comprehensive analysis. Migration not only transforms the lives of individuals who migrate but also reshapes the societies of origin and destination. In this sense, it is essential to study migration trajectories in their interdependence with contextual factors, thus foregrounding how migration processes are embedded in broader social, economic, and political processes of change.

The study of migration clearly requires an approach that goes beyond traditional, one-dimensional approaches. Migration is not a problem to be solved, but a multidimensional process intrinsic to global structural changes. Its analysis requires integrating economic, cultural, political, religious, and gender dimensions, as well as recognizing the interaction between the structure and the agency of migrants. Rather than describing simple patterns of cause and effect, it is essential to advance toward a deeper understanding of migration as a dynamic and changing phenomenon.

To understand migration today, we need to place it within its historical context. In the modern era, the advance of capitalism saw migrants as people forced to move, whether in chains or other forms of labor, in conditions of servitude. Today, in the first quarter of the 21st century, we are seeing, as Gambino and Sacchetto describe, «various attempts to re-discipline migratory flows» (Gambino & Sacchetto, 2014: 19). These migrants, considered a threat to society, face the most explicit and severe barriers. There is also, as they describe, an insidious «regimentation of migrant flows through bureaucratic

procedures» (Ibid), above all, through the formal and informal recruitment of workers in destination countries.

The global economic crisis of 2008, first, and the one caused by the Covid-19 pandemic of 2020/2021 later, exacerbated the trends of uneven economic growth, generating a restructuring of the labor market that impacted on the patterns of migration. Migrants have been one of the social sectors most affected by the pandemic, especially in the Global South. Practices to control the spread of the virus resulted in practices of migration control and exclusion, inaugurating a new stage of the migration governance paradigm, which aims to make human movement «safe, orderly, and regular.» In this way, «we are witnessing a process of rebordering of the world» and the reemergence of politically produced crisis discourses associated with human movement (Domenech, 2023).

This is compounded by the effects of environmental degradation on the changing climate, which is generating new population displacements. But this intensification of migration and border controls at the global, regional, national, and local levels, as well as the escalation of violence in the world in general, and in the global south in particular, has also revived migrant struggles.

Migrants' agency and autonomous strategies for movement and survival constantly confront a migration machinery that seeks to regulate their flows and move them through unified and controllable channels. The turbulence of migration, now as in the past, is not so easily controlled in practice. Migrants pursue their own legitimate interests and goals that drive them to move, most often outside of state objectives. It is crucial to recognize that «mobility policies» in the context of capitalism do not simply represent a unilateral exercise of exclusion and domination by the state and the law, but rather a dynamic and conflictual process, where subjective movements and migratory struggles play an active and essential role (Mezzadra, 2012).

We need to understand the complexity of migration in the era of globalization, as it is a process with multiple intersections. It is not simply a matter of globalization, removing barriers to the movement of people, as it has done with the flow of capital, finance, images, and consumer goods. As Papastergiadis says, «the turbulence of migration is evident not only in the multiplicity of paths, but also in the unpredictability of the changes associated with these movements» (Papastergiadis, 2000: 56). Only through this lens of complexity can we make sense of migration flows today. There are no concrete and strict boundaries between forced and voluntary migration, regular and irregular migration, or between «economic» and «non-economic»

migrants. Migration flows «include people on the move with mixed motivations and life circumstances, who trace complex trajectories in transnational social fields (with previous migrations in Africa and/or the EU, multiple experiences in border-crossing, work, among others)» (Espiro and Vecchioni, 2024: 235). Overall, as John Urry puts it, «these migration patterns should be seen as a series of turbulent waves. With a hierarchy of eddies and vortices, with globalism like a virus that stimulates resistance, and the migratory system like a cascade that moves away from any apparent state of equilibrium» (Urry, 2000: 23).

Our emphasis, in general, is on the complexity of migratory movements and drawing attention to South-South migration, decentering the migration ‘corridors’ emphasized from a European or North American perspective. Migration has occupied a central place in political debates in various parts of the world in recent years and transforms (for better or worse) the lives of hundreds of millions of people who migrate each year. Beyond this, migration dynamics involve people from communities of origin who, voluntarily or involuntarily, remain immobile but participate. of the migration process, as well as transforming entire societies at all points along migration routes into an origin-destination continuum, integrating non-migrators into the transnational migration field. Thus, clearly, we must look beyond the nation-state as a self-sufficient domain where migration occurs in isolation, a still dominant tendency today when ‘methodological nationalism’ is not really questioned (Wimmer & Glick Schiller, 2002).

Beyond methodological nationalism

The study of migration faces the challenge of understanding human mobility in its transnational dimensions, challenging traditional frameworks that have confined the phenomenon within the confines of the nation-state. Wimmer and Glick Schiller (2002) defined methodological nationalism as the assumption that the nation, the state, and society constitute the natural form of social and political organization of the modern world. This perspective has profoundly influenced migration studies, leading to the consideration of nation-states as immutable and self-sufficient units of analysis and generating a bias in the interpretation of human mobility.

Historically, nation-state building processes have shaped how migration is perceived and regulated. After World War II, concepts such as democracy, citizenship, and social security were consolidated as pillars of the nation-state-based world order, generating a narrative in which migration was presented as an exception that challenges territorial homogeneity. As a result, migration

studies have focused on international migration from a nation-state perspective, neglecting the ongoing processes of internal mobility.

To overcome these limitations, the transnational perspective has established itself as a key approach in the study of migration. Far from being a novelty, this analytical lens allows us to understand the connections between countries of origin, transit, and destination, as well as the transformations that occur in the spaces in between. If we pay attention to «transmigrant» experiences (Schiller et al., 1995), there are lives that depend on constant interconnections across borders, challenging the idea that mobility is limited to a point of departure and a final destination.

Transnational social fields (Levitt and Glick Schiller, 2004) reveal that migration involves individuals who do not necessarily move but rather remain in their places of origin while actively participating in transnational networks. These networks facilitate the exchange of resources, ideas, and practices, demonstrating that the migration phenomenon cannot be reduced to a simple matter of state regulation. From European expansion in the 15th century to the current era of globalization, societies have been interconnected through flows of people, goods, ideas, and capital. During the 19th and early 20th centuries, international labor migration was a common practice, with workers moving between countries without significant restrictions and maintaining ties to their places of origin by sending remittances and correspondence. This demonstrates that the analysis of migration cannot focus exclusively on those who move but must also include those who remain in their places of origin, as they are an integral part of these processes. Migrants and non-migrants alike are dialectically redefining their positions. This also debunks the myth and resulting assumptions (political, media, and grassroots) that we live in an era of unprecedented mass migration, since migration is not a new phenomenon but a constant in human history. What has changed are migration patterns, and, paradoxically, we actually live in an era of increasing immobility or fragmented mobility due to the restrictions imposed on global mobility.

The need to adopt a transnational methodology also implies decentralizing migration studies away from large metropolises to analyze the connections between spaces at diverse scales based on the practices of migrants. In this sense, the global economy and flexible capitalism have reconfigured migration dynamics, giving rise to a wide variety of adaptation strategies in response to job insecurity and the expansion of transnational capital (Suárez Navaz, 2008), but also to other sociocultural dynamics inherent to the coexistence of newcomers—or not so newcomers.

Despite the relevance of transnationalism in the study of migration, it is essential to recognize that nationalism (or the nation-state) remains a determining political force in the regulation of mobility. Restrictive migration policies, xenophobic discourses, and legislation that reinforces citizenship as a limited privilege continue to structure migrants' access to rights and opportunities (Wimmer and Glick Schiller, 2002). In this context, overcoming methodological nationalism does not mean denying the importance of the nation-state, but rather rethinking the analytical frameworks from which migration is studied, incorporating a perspective that considers mobility in its multidimensionality.

To advance in this direction, it is necessary to develop conceptual tools that allow us to analyze migration beyond state borders and understand mobility processes from a holistic perspective. Adopting a transnational approach facilitates understanding migration trajectories and the networks that sustain them, allowing for a more critical and inclusive analysis of human mobility in the contemporary world.

Beyond a Northern Optic

Migration studies have been dominated by a vision focused on receiving countries in the Global North, prioritizing the analysis of South-North flows and neglecting other mobility dynamics. This perspective has reinforced the idea that migration is a problem mainly affecting destination countries, without paying sufficient attention to the structural causes and experiences of those who migrate. As a result, explanations of human mobility have been formulated primarily from the perspective of receiving states, imposing interpretive frameworks that respond to their interests and political needs rather than to a broader understanding of the migration phenomenon.

One of the most evident effects of this bias is the criminalization of migration in political and media discourse. As Bigo (2002) points out, the State is represented as a threatened body, while migrants are constructed as dangerous figures who threaten security and social order. This rhetoric has contributed to the creation of securitization and border control policies that respond to a logic of exclusion, reinforcing the idea that migration is a challenge to national sovereignty. In this framework, migrants are associated with illegal activities such as drug trafficking and arms smuggling or even seen as carriers of diseases. Furthermore, in contexts where the nation is defined in ethnic terms, migrants are perceived as a threat to cultural identity, which reinforces discourses of forced assimilation or exclusion.

Although at least one-third of global migration flows correspond to South-South migration, migration studies have prioritized the analysis of South-

North movements, which has contributed to a fragmented understanding of human mobility. This bias is partly due to the influence of receiving countries on the production of academic knowledge and the formulation of migration policies, which receive little attention from the vast amount of migration studies. In this sense, concepts such as «immigration» and «integration» are often designed from the perspective of states in the Global North, without considering the dynamics that drive mobility in countries of origin. This partial and incomplete view has reinforced the myth of development as a factor in reducing migration, promoting international cooperation programs that assume that economic growth in sending countries will reduce migration flows. However, multiple studies have shown that migration is not simply a consequence of a lack of development, but a multidimensional process involving interconnected economic, social, and political factors. Development and globalization can generate less, more, or different forms of migration, given that the structural conditions that drive these movements are complex and non-linear (de Haas, 2021).

Far from reducing mobility, development can generate new forms of migration or intensify existing ones. In some cases, technological advances have facilitated sedentarization, but in others, they have allowed for the emergence of more complex transnational networks. Furthermore, migration is not a phenomenon exclusive to the poorest populations, as it requires resources to carry it out. Many people experience impoverishment during the migration process, which is reflected in job insecurity and the professional downgrading of highly skilled migrant women.

Another problem arising from this approach is the invisibility of South-South migration. While migration studies have paid great attention to movements destined for North America and Europe, flows between countries in the Global South have been treated as secondary phenomena. However, these migrations constitute a fundamental part of the contemporary migration landscape. From a Southern perspective, precarious labor conditions and socioeconomic instability have historically been part of local economic structures, challenging analytical models based on the welfare states of the Global North. Understanding migration from this perspective requires abandoning simplistic explanations that reduce human mobility to a matter of development or security.

To overcome the South-North bias in migration studies, it is necessary to rethink the epistemological foundations from which human mobility is analyzed. This entails recognizing the importance of South-South flows, questioning the idea that development reduces migration, and adopting a perspective

that considers the interconnectedness between countries of origin, transit, and destination. It is also essential to promote interdisciplinary approaches that integrate diverse methodologies and allow for a broader and more inclusive analysis of migration processes.

In this context, a key challenge is the disciplinary fragmentation in the study of migration. The lack of dialogue between different disciplines has generated a fragmented and limited understanding of the phenomenon, preventing a more comprehensive understanding of mobility. Overcoming this fragmentation is crucial to moving toward more holistic and critical approaches capable of capturing the complexity of migration processes in the contemporary world.

Beyond disciplinary constraints

Despite the fact that migration is a complex phenomenon that encompasses economic, political, social, and cultural dimensions, migration studies have tended to approach human mobility from fragmented perspectives and poorly integrated methodologies. Hein de Haas (2021) points out that, far from making theoretical progress, the field of migration studies has experienced a regression, characterized by a lack of conceptual integration and an overemphasis on simplistic explanations. This situation has not only limited the capacity to understand migration in all its complexity but has also generated analytical frameworks that fall short of the realities of contemporary mobility.

One of the predominant approaches has been economic, particularly the «push-pull» model, which explains migration as a rational movement motivated by differences in wages and living conditions between countries. This approach still permeates public policies and discourse on migration. However, this model is based on a reductionist view of the individual, assuming that all migration decisions are driven by rational economic calculations. As de Haas (2021) points out, this perspective is insufficient to explain, for example, why many people do not migrate despite income inequality between countries, or why certain places generate more emigration than others. Migration is not simply a mechanical response to economic opportunities; it is a process shaped by historical, political, cultural, and subjective factors that cannot be captured by one-dimensional models.

Disciplinary fragmentation has been one of the main barriers to the development of a deeper understanding of migration. Brettell and Hollifield (2008) highlight that, although the study of human mobility is often considered intrinsically interdisciplinary, in practice the different disciplines have operated autonomously, with little communication between them. Each field has es-

established its own research questions, hypotheses, and methodologies, which has generated a scenario in which approaches overlap without integration. Thus, migration studies have oscillated between macrostructural frameworks focused on state policies and the labor market, and micro-focused approaches on the individual experiences of migrants, without effective dialogue or attempts at mediation between the two levels of analysis.

This lack of integration has impeded the construction of a more holistic explanatory framework. Therefore, we emphasize the need to build bridges between disciplines, promoting greater academic cooperation and connecting causal explanations with interpretive approaches, combining general patterns with specific events, on the one hand, and overcoming the traditional separation between quantitative and qualitative methods, on the other, by incorporating more comparative and transnational analyses that allow us to understand the multiple dynamics of human mobility.

Stephen Castles (2007) has also pointed out the urgency of conceiving migration as a field of study in its own right within the social sciences, with an integrated theoretical and methodological basis. This implies abandoning rigid disciplinary divisions between economics, sociology, anthropology, demography, and political science, in order to generate knowledge that foregrounds the interaction between the structural factors that shape migration and the individual decisions of migrants.

Overcoming disciplinary fragmentation is not only an academic challenge but also a political necessity. In a context where migration is used as a tool of social control and a central element in security discourses, having more robust analytical frameworks is essential to dismantle reductionist narratives and promote more informed policies. The assumption that migration restrictions reduce migration is another fallacy that, in practice, ends up generating unintended effects on certain social groups and modifying migration flows, rather than reversing the structural causes of migration (de Haas, 2021).

The categories used in migration studies have been adopted without critical questioning, reproducing artificial distinctions such as the opposition between immigration and emigration, or between internal and international migration. These categories respond to state logics that impose the border as the central criterion of analysis, without considering the multiple scales at which migration processes unfold.

Other traditional dichotomies, such as the distinction between legal and illegal migration, also need to be revisited. Legality is a social and political construct, which varies according to context and responds to economic and geopolitical interests. In many communities, «irregular» migration is not seen as a

transgression, but as a survival strategy supported by family and community networks. Similarly, the separation between forced and voluntary migration ignores the fact that all people who migrate face some form of restriction, and that even refugees have some degree of agency in choosing their destination.

Abandoning these rigid categories allows us to understand migration as a dynamic and multilayered process. More than just a problem that states must manage; human mobility is part of the structural processes of social change. This requires a perspective that transcends simplistic causal models and integrates more complex analyses of the interaction between structure and agency.

In political and media discourse, increasingly dominated by the far right globally, an anti-immigration narrative prevails (Garcés, 2025) in which migrants are portrayed at opposite extremes: as dangerous subjects who threaten national security, as opportunists seeking to take advantage of welfare systems, or as victims without agency. However, migrant agency cannot be reduced to a matter of free choice; rather, it must be understood in terms of negotiation strategies within a global system of structural inequalities.

Migration, therefore, cannot be understood as an autonomous or isolated phenomenon. As de Haas (2021), Brettell and Hollifield (2008), and Castles (2007) have shown, it is essential to overcome reductionist approaches and develop analytical frameworks that recognize the complexity of human mobility. This requires integrating diverse methodologies, fostering dialogue between disciplines, and adopting a perspective that considers the interactions between structural processes and migrants' individual strategies. Only in this way can we build a more critical and thus accurate understanding of migration in the contemporary world.

Integrative approaches to human mobility

Rather than viewing migration as a phenomenon that can be understood from a single perspective or a set of rigid categories, it is crucial to recognize its inherent complexity and fluid dynamics. Migration cannot be simply explained through distinctions such as economic versus non-economic migrants, or forced versus voluntary migration, as these boundaries blur in the reality of human movement. In a globalized context, migrants not only react to external conditions but also make decisions within a framework of opportunity and constraint, challenging the traditional categories that often describe them as passive subjects or victims of structures beyond their control.

As Papastergiadis (2000) argues, migration is a process marked by turbulence and the unpredictability of its trajectories, which highlights the increasingly blurred boundaries between different types of migration. Human mo-

bility, in this sense, is constantly changing, and migrants' own imaginings of a better future drive many of their movements. This phenomenon not only challenges physical borders but also the social and political constructs that seek to limit mobility.

In this context, it is necessary to abandon an approach that centers migration solely on national frameworks and state interests, which have often dictated the conditions for migrants' inclusion and exclusion. Human mobility must be understood in terms of a global dynamic, in which migrants play an active role in shaping their trajectories and, at the same time, interact with migration policies. It is not just a phenomenon of control, but a process of conflict and negotiation, where migrant actors can influence, resist, and transform the control structures that seek to regulate their movement.

From this perspective, migrant agency must be understood as a process that is not reduced to a passive response to circumstances but rather is configured within power relations and social structures. As authors such as Mainwaring (2016) and Ortner (2005) have pointed out, migration should not be seen solely as a result of inequality or structural violence, but as an active field in which migrants make decisions within the constraints imposed on them. Thus, migratory trajectories must be understood as life projects under construction, where migrants not only seek to escape poverty or violence, but also resist and negotiate the possibilities for transformation within the frameworks offered to them. «In this sense, migrants also become agents of knowledge and develop strategies based on their own experience, which allow other migrants to achieve the goals they failed to achieve» (Guevara González 2018, 188). All of which takes on great relevance when conceiving how migration policies are designed and how mobility is publicly perceived.

In this context, the autonomy of migration, as defined by Mezzadra (2011), proposes that migration should be viewed not as a crisis to be managed, but as a phenomenon that occurs despite restrictive state policies. This autonomy does not imply a total neglect of control policies but rather highlights how migrants are not only subjects of control, but also actors who challenge and transform border regimes and migration policies through an active role. Migration, therefore, should not be viewed as a passive phenomenon or as an isolated problem, but as a field of contestation in which migratory movements constitute a constant challenge to the policies of exclusion and the dynamics of global capitalism.

The intersectional turn proposed by Floya Anthias (2006) and others was a key contribution to rethinking migration experiences from a perspective that articulates gender, class, ethnicity, and generation. Today, it is necessary to

recognize that this approach has evolved and been enriched by decolonial and intersectional feminist contributions. Far from being a simple novelty, the intersectional perspective has established itself as an indispensable tool for avoiding simplistic and homogenizing explanations of migration, making it possible to make visible the diversity and complexity of migrant trajectories.

This analysis recognizes that no person is vulnerable by nature; vulnerability arises from the position individuals occupy at the intersection of multiple inequalities and oppressions. As París-Pombo (2018: 13) points out, the vulnerability of migrants is the result of the combination of restrictive migration policies, state control mechanisms, and the action of transnational criminal networks. In this context, gender redefines and complicates the power relations that permeate migration and asylum processes, in conjunction with other axes of inequality such as social class, race, age, and nationality.

The intersectional perspective, then, not only allows us to understand these experiences at the individual level, but also to analyze the social organization of migration, migrant networks and agencies, public policies, and legislative frameworks. As Herrera (2013: 472) argues, this approach makes it possible to identify the existence of «interlocking systems of oppression as constitutive of migration systems.» Furthermore, Herrera (2013: 483) warns that, although many migration policies are presented as gender-neutral, they are permeated by gender biases that reinforce inequitable social structures. These biases are reflected in dichotomous representations—such as female dependence versus male independence—that differentially shape the routes to legality and access to rights for migrant women and men. In this way, intersectionality is consolidated as an indispensable approach for analyzing structural inequalities and migration experiences in all their complexities.

Thus, understanding migration as a whole requires an approach that encompasses not only the processes of displacement but also the transnational interactions between migrants, global structures, and national policies, as well as the intersection of inequalities that shape migrants' positions in their lived experience. Overcoming methodological nationalism and disciplinary fragmentation implies recognizing that migration is not an isolated or homogeneous phenomenon, but rather a dynamic and multidimensional process that involves complex interactions between agency, structure, and resistance. By integrating these approaches, we can advance toward a deeper and more nuanced understanding of migration processes in the contemporary world.

Presentation of the articles

This special issue seeks to make this collection of texts greater than the sum of its parts so as to articulate a new critical migration problematic. Each contribution engages with the issues from different disciplines, approaches, and scales of analysis, thus contributing to a transdisciplinary and transnational perspective on contemporary migrations that we hope will offer new explanations for a phenomenon that is intrinsically human and, therefore, affects us all in the particular context of extreme right-wing movements and information overload. «When explanations are urgent and our perception of reality can change from one moment to the next, we cannot remain on the sidelines,» says Blanca Garcés (2025: 6).

The proposed order of presentation of the articles in this special issue follows a logic that begins with broad conceptual frameworks followed seamlessly by case studies and thematic perspectives that illuminate in diverse ways the complexity of human mobility in the current global context.

Ronaldo Munck, from a sociological perspective, opens this volume by recovering a broad perspective on labor mobility as a key element for understanding migration processes within the framework of the structural transformations of global capitalism. The author debunks the main myths surrounding migration—such as the idea that development reduces migration flows—and raises the need for a more robust theory that integrates migration as a central component of processes of social change worldwide.

Luz Espiro and Régis Minvielle, from an anthropological perspective, approach South-South migration through multi-sited ethnographies that shed light on the economic, cultural, religious, and familial practices that structure the migration corridors between Africa and South America. They break with the dominant paradigm, centered on the Global North, and give voice to migrants themselves, showing how these mobilities contribute to the construction of transnational social spaces and force us to rethink the rigid categories that still dominate the academic field.

Oriol Puig, from the field of international relations, explores critically the link between migration and climate change. Beyond the media hype, he analyzes the structural causes and local responses emerging in the face of environmental degradation, showing how migrant populations develop resilience and adaptation strategies in the face of a scenario of increasing vulnerability.

Marluce da Silva Santana, drawing on socio-anthropology and African studies, explore the central role of religion in migration trajectories, analyzing the transnational networks of the Mouride brotherhood. The text shows how religion not only sustains social and economic ties on a global scale but also organizes practices of mobility, resource circulation, and identity construction.

Claudia Pedone, drawing on human geography and gender studies, revisits the debates on gender and migration. Beyond global care chains, she analyzes the trajectories of highly skilled migrant women and highlights the structural barriers, job insecurity, and the intersection of gender, ethnicity, and class that continue to shape their migration projects.

Nicholas Maple and Caroline Wanjiku Kihato, working within international law, present an innovative approach that integrates refugee status into global labor flows. Rather than treating refugees as a separate category, their contributions show how forced displacement and labor migration respond to common structural logics, challenging traditional conceptual divisions and highlighting the continuity between different forms of forced and economic mobility.

Erhan Doğan, from a political science perspective, analyzes the phenomenon of digital nomadism as a new form of human mobility that reconfigures the relationships between labor, social inequality, and state sovereignty. His article examines how migration policies, particularly specific visa regimes, affect the decisions and trajectories of these remote workers, while revealing the precariousness and exclusion from social protection systems they face. This contribution invites reflection on the new North-South inequalities and hierarchies that are being reconfigured under the guise of freedom of movement.

Finally, Delphine Perrin, drawing on international law and public policy analysis, examines the crisis of the free movement model within the ECOWAS region. Through detailed analysis, she shows how regional institutional fragility, external pressures, and the rise of nationalism limit the right to mobility in West Africa, challenging optimistic discourses on regional integration and revealing tensions between state sovereignty and migration rights.

This collective journey offers a wide-ranging, diverse and critical lens on contemporary migrations from perspectives that challenge conventional approaches, integrate different scales and disciplines, and shed new light on practices and actors that are typically marginalized by mainstream analysis. We hope that these contributions will open up new debates and deepen our understanding of human mobility in a world marked by global inequalities, structural transformations, and struggles for recognition of the human right to mobility.

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