IMMIGRATION FUTURES*

ABSTRACT

This article provides a wide-ranging overview of what migration may look like in the future. The author examines the impact of skilled migration, irregular migration, the sourcing of unskilled labour and new forms of migration. He notes that one of the greatest "unknowns" is the ways in which nation-states will respond to the changes that we are likely to see in migration.

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Concern about migration has emerged despite the fact that the number of international migrants in the world was estimated at 191 million in 2005, or only some 3% of the world's population (United Nations 2006). Even if problems with this figure exist, the number of people who have moved across an international boundary represents but a tiny minority of the world's population. However, migrants come from a relatively small number of source countries and, even more importantly, go to a yet smaller number of destination countries, mainly those in the developed countries of the "North" but also to some more developed countries in the so-called "South" (United Nations 2006).

Nevertheless, the destinations include the most powerful economies and the most open societies, where debate on immigration has revealed that certain groups are fearful that their jobs and way of life might be threatened by the admission of peoples of very different appearance and persuasion. Thus, future immigration policy takes on a growing importance.

Any discussion on immigration futures has to take into account the way in which the world economy is likely to move. A recession would almost certainly lead to protectionist pressures, rising nationalism and yet more anti-immigration rhetoric and restrictive policies. Yet, despite 9/11, a second war in Iraq and a sharp increase in the price of oil, between 2001 and 2005 the global economy showed its most robust growth in 30 years.

Continued globalization will see a sustained demand for the mobility of labour. Many of the reasons creating immigration pressures, such as the ageing of human populations and the emergence of core regions of advanced economic development, are already well established and are unlikely to change markedly in the immediate future. Thus, some speculation upon immigration futures that is based not entirely upon fancy can perhaps be made.

Towards convergence?

"Management of migration" has emerged as an area of common ground among countries. Officials from most countries, as well as representatives of NGOs and international organizations appear to agree that migration needs to be better "managed" for the benefit of countries of origin, countries of destination and, ultimately, migrants themselves. However, just what "managing" means in practice is not easy to define. To some it means further opening legal channels of migration – many would like to see issues of migrant rights and protection as an integral part of any effective management. To others, management implies greater control and monitoring of those who enter – essentially a security issue.

The transition of western and southern European countries from emigration to immigration was one of the remarkable shifts during the last half of the 20th century. Even today, several European countries do not see themselves as countries of immigration. A basic tension exists between freedom of movement within the European Union, particularly between Schengen countries, and the wish to control movement into the Union as a whole, to the extent that the idea of a "fortress Europe" emerged (Harris 2002). However, and despite the legal immigration of almost 1 million immigrants per year, the United States is increasingly giving the impression of a "fortress U.S." Increased immigration and border control, particularly along the border with Mexico, contribute to this image. The developed economies of East and Southeast Asia are also faced with immigration pressures, but none of them implements a policy for permanent settlement that might lead to citizenship; instead, they rely almost exclusively on temporary immigrant-worker programs for their labour needs.

The most obvious conclusion might be that the developed world is either closing the borders or keeping them closed. Yet, such a conclusion would be wrong. It is unlikely for the United States to significantly restrict its existing legal channels of immigration, which currently allow some 1 million

people per year to enter, live and work in the country. The United Kingdom has introduced a new immigration policy and even a country like South Korea is considering a program for the long-term entry of certain categories of people. Two general trends appear to exist across the developed world: a wish to keep unauthorized immigrants out and the need to attract highly skilled migrants. Increasingly, the latter are coming in through non-immigrant, temporary entrant channels or under specially created categories such as the H-1B in the United States, as well as through channels specifically designed for this purpose.

Skilled migration

Given that the developed countries will wish to remain competitive in a global economy, the competition for the highly skilled is almost certain to intensify. One of the critical questions for the future is where the highly trained and skilled migrants will come from. At present, English is the international language and most of the centres of training are to be found in North America, Europe and Australasia. While no logical reason exists for English to retain indefinitely its position as the dominant language of science and technology, in the near term no rival seems likely to replace it. However, training in English need not be carried out within the confines of English-speaking countries. Already we see British and American schools establishing campuses in the developing world.

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Thus, key centres of excellence are emerging in the periphery to produce increasing proportions of highly skilled workers for local and global markets. Urban centres in China and India will be among the leaders in this process, but smaller countries are also participating in this trend. So, although skilled migration will continue in any immigration future, I see significant shifts in the composition of these flows by origin and by place of training. A more multi-nodal international system of the circulation of the highly skilled will emerge, which may have profound implications for the relative power of states and even for the global languages of communication.

Irregular migration

Conversely, irregular or illegal migrants are to be universally excluded unless they have a valid claim for political asylum. The perceived abuse of the asylum system as a channel for illegal entry into Europe by so-called "economic migrants" was one of the major points of the anti-immigration debate in the countries in question. However, the large number of people simply walking into a country – often, it must be emphasized, in extremely hazardous circumstances – gives the impression that states have lost control of their borders. Increased surveillance and construction of border defences are the result.

Not that freedom to enter need be a bad thing. There are a number of economic arguments for doing away with border controls altogether and allowing the market to regulate the flows: immigration will continue until surplus labour at destinations depresses wages to the point where the returns from migration do not warrant the cost. During the transition to a new equilibrium, surplus labour keeps wages and inflation down in the destination area, to the overall benefit of the economy.

The jury still appears to be out on the real economic impact of immigration on native populations, but immigration is about much more than economics. Within liberal democratic political systems, where the rights of citizens are perceived to be under threat from outsiders, anti-immigration movements are likely to emerge. Irregular migrants themselves are in vulnerable positions and open to exploitation, and it is not in their interest to have a large disenfranchized community. Removing immigration procedures would essentially remove the critical difference between regular and irregular migrants and undermine the issue of migrant protection. However, given that native-born peoples, as citizens of the state, make up the largest lobby group and have clear rights under present democratic systems, "thinking the unthinkable" (Harris 2002) and doing away with immigration controls does not seem to be a realistic part of any immigration future. This argument is quite independent of the organizational view that once bureaucracies are established, they take on an inertia of their own. So many vested interests are tied up in the "migration-control industry" that it will be exceedingly difficult to dismantle.

The demand for entering developed countries will continue to exceed the supply of legal authorizations to enter. Although opening legal channels of migration might reduce irregular migration, it is not going to eliminate it. Trafficking, particularly of women and children, is seen as an unmitigated evil. However, the only way to eliminate trafficking is to remove either the demand or the supply. The demand can be changed by moving the activity offshore, perhaps even to the source of supply. Clearly, however, not all activities can be so moved.

The supply of workers shifts because of changing age structures and education levels in areas of origin. For example, with sustained fertility decline, children become a scarce commodity, which, in turn, leads to an increase in their value as reflected in rising education. For example, in northern Thailand, Thai entrants at the lower end of the sex industry in a provincial city became increasingly scarce with fertility decline, and workers were sourced from neighbouring countries with higher fertility and lower levels of education.

Different contexts

The sourcing of unskilled labour

Areas of convergence in future immigration with respect to skilled migration and to irregular migration and trafficking have been identified. However, differences among the principal destination areas also exist. Critical here, though, is that skilled and unskilled migrations can be identified as separate mobility systems, though clearly linked. Skilled migrants generate a demand for particular services that are essentially staffed by the unskilled. To consider one without the other is a denial of the whole nature of the division of urban labour. The way in which the three major regions of immigration pressure (traditional settler societies, Europe and East Asia) are planning for lower-skilled labour seems different, even if an eventual convergence may emerge.

To some extent, these differences will be a function of the relative rates of ageing among the populations. The United States, with a higher fertility rate than any European country and most East Asian economies, partly as a result of its large immigrant intake, will age more slowly than the other two regions. Thus, pressures to import labour will not be so intense in the United States which, with its increased border control, appears to be seeking to provide for its needs through a regular migration program. European countries, on the other hand, seek to provide for the supply of less-skilled labour in the countries of new accession. In 2005, roughly 300,000 people entered the United Kingdom to work, mainly from Poland but also from the Czech Republic. After Bulgaria and Romania joined the European Union in January 2007, up to 70,000 immigrants from these countries were expected to migrate to other European Union states. If the experience of the Polish migrants is typical, most will find work and many will either return home after a spell in the United Kingdom or circulate back and forth.

The critical aspect here is that Europe is essentially extending its borders to incorporate its future unskilled labour force. The United States, built, according to one interpretation, on the concept of a moving and inclusive frontier (Turner 1894), now seems to be following a strategy based on a fixed and exclusive frontier along the Mexican border. Europe on the other hand is opting for a moving frontier. Yet, this latter strategy is unlikely to provide a lasting solution for an indefinite immigration future. The age-sex structures of the countries of new accession show that they, too, will age and that cohorts of those most likely to migrate will decline. These economies will alsi be looking for immigrants ere long.

The East Asian economies, as stressed above, make no provision for permanent immigration, but rely on temporary migrant programs for both skilled and unskilled labour. These are advanced economies of immigration, but not of settlement, and they are looking closely at the experiences of both traditional settler societies and European countries for pointers on where they should move in terms of their own immigration future. Japan, the most rapidly ageing society in the world, has turned to its overseas population as a source of labour: people who look Japanese and who should "fit in" but who are also culturally quite different. The *nikkeijin*, who came from Brazil in 2004, numbered some 231,000, about one-quarter of all foreign workers in Japan at that time. Almost half of the foreign workers in Japan, however, came from other countries in East Asia, showing that Japan had developed a regional as well as an ethnic dimension to its immigration.

Perhaps paradoxically, the Asian economies may have found the model upon which the other two regions may increasingly come to rely: the well-managed temporary worker program (Martin 2004). Thus, a convergence may emerge from the three different contexts in the near future. Nevertheless, the disadvantages of temporary worker programs are well known. Most critically, workers are separated from their families and make up a constantly circulating group of migrants without a stake in the destination society. Such a situation is anathema to the traditional settler societies that have been built on the ethic of immigration as central to nation building. Also, although the Asian economies may provide a model for well-managed temporary programs, these are managed primarily with the interests of the destination-states and of companies in those states in mind. Whether the programs represent models of best practice for migrants themselves, managed as they are through subcontractors and sub-subcontractors (see Lee 2006, for example), is much more questionable.

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Outsourcing and new migrations

Over the medium term, the direction of immigration will be profoundly influenced by what happens in the regions of origin. From this point of view, what has happened and what is likely to happen in East Asia is particularly instructive. New nodes of attraction have emerged in several parts of the region. While not all the economies might have experienced a clear-cut "migration transition" (Abella 1994), the model of a shift from net emigration towards net immigration very generally describes the complex process. Japan, South Korea, Taiwan,

Malaysia and Thailand, as well as the cities of Singapore and Hong Kong, have emerged as significant destinations for international migration. Will these trends intensify and will other nodes emerge, providing alternative destinations to those who might have migrated to more traditional destinations in North America or Australasia, or the more recent destinations in Europe?

Perhaps the most intriguing potential destinations are the demographic giants, China and India. It may sound far-fetched to suggest that these economies will have to resort to importing labour, even in the more distant future; yet, in 2004, 2 million job vacancies were reported in the south-east coastal region of China (*Economist*, October 9-15, 2004) and in 2005 labour shortages spread north up to the Yangtze River and the northern coastal region (Wang, Fang and Weshu 2005). Although these shortages reflect bottlenecks in China's internal labour market for certain types of labour, more recent evidence suggests that the shortages in question may be more structural than cyclical. China's accession to the World Trade Organization and programs to diffuse development into the interior have created opportunities closer to the areas of origin of internal migrants. The result has been severe labour shortages in coastal regions and increases of around 25% in the basic wage (*International Herald Tribune*, March 3, 2006). China is not yet seeking to import workers from overseas, but already the era of cheap labour in China is ending.

India, like China, is characterized by huge internal differences in levels of development. Both countries, among others in Asia, are also benefiting from the movement offshore of industries and services from developed countries, where labour costs are high, in a process of "outsourcing." This began initially with labour-intensive industrialization and moved on to labour-intensive services such as telephone call centres, but also to more skill-intensive industries such as computer software (Khadria 2003). The emergence of Bangalore in southern India may be the classic example of this process, but several nodes in Asia and elsewhere can perhaps be identified for future development, and particularly in the area of health care. The ageing populations of the developed world, with their patterns of recurrent and degenerative diseases, are experiencing strains to their medical services. These problems are exacerbated by personnel shortages in the health sector, rising costs of medical care and increasing waiting times for non-emergency surgeries. One way for non-emergency care to be provided is to allow the patients to travel to a place where treatment can be delivered more quickly and at a lower cost than at home.

Not that there is anything particularly new about travel for health care, but these days a global market appears to be emerging, with India, South Africa, Cuba, Costa Rica, Malaysia and Thailand all promoting medical care for patients from overseas. The principal market for India is likely to be its expatriate community, who can combine non-emergency medical care with trips back home. However, regional markets are emerging, with people from the Middle East going to South and Southeast Asia for treatment, and hospitals in Bangkok treating patients from Hong Kong, Bangladesh and Australia.

Much of the future potential for the development of this kind of outsourcing depends on the public confidence in developed countries with regards to the kinds of treatment being offered. Longer-term aftercare, for example, presumably depends on the continued availability of relatively cheap international air travel. The extent to which programs to outsource medical care can encourage migrant doctors to return or even to retain local talent remains unproven. Nevertheless, cases to date suggest that regional markets are emerging for health care, as middle-class or middle-income groups emerge in developing economies.

Education, too, is likely to diffuse from core to periphery. The role of skilled migrants in the investment of new industrial or service industries in their home countries, or simply returning to participate in those activities, is as yet poorly understood. Nevertheless, many do return and they may be the pioneers in laying the tracks for the development of significant immigration futures. For example, it is reported that there may be as many as 500,000 migrants from Taiwan working on a long- or short-term basis in Shanghai (Lee 2006). This is suggestive of a future migration towards a global city such as we have seen in the West. Initially, this migration will come from internal sources, but later on, international movements may become just as important, depending on the range of industries and services that evolves.

Clearly, not all countries will be able to follow such a route; developments will depend on a number of conditions and will only be possible:

- where prior demand exists from an expatriate population;
- where regional and, ideally, global networks of air transportation are available;
- where, in the case of medical outsourcing, there is a local supply of high-quality health professionals and, in the case of educational outsourcing, teachers can readily be recruited on acceptable conditions;
- where the government acknowledges the significance of the private sector in promoting health and educational activities.

The combination of such factors is likely to be found only in the larger cities of middle-income developing countries: throughout Southeast Asia, in coastal China, parts of India, Mexico, coastal Brazil and Argentina, South Africa, North African countries, and Nigeria and possibly Ghana in West Africa. Geography matters and not all countries will be able to deal with the flows of the skilled in the same way. Equally clearly, not all countries generate skills in similar numbers, not all have the same demand for skills and the impact of the movement of skills both in and out is variable. The location and the size of the labour market are critical in any assessment of the impact of the exodus of the highly skilled, and policy responses need to be adjusted accordingly.

Conclusion

Any attempt to envisage what future immigration will look like is fraught with danger. However, future migration will not simply be more of the same. New destinations will emerge and competition for skills will intensify. Perhaps the greatest unknown refers to the

future global architecture and, particularly, to the structure of the state. Over the centuries, the way in which territory has been governed has changed and it would seem unlikely that this process of change has ceased. That is, the nation-state, still the key building block of our present world, may not be the primary basis for the "management" of migration in years ahead. Whether some entity such as the "market state" (Bobbitt 2002) supersedes the nation-state need not detain us here. However, it does appear certain that some functions of the nation – such as access to employment, health, education and perhaps even some of the services of protection, including prisons – may be hived off to the private sector. This process will certainly be facilitated by the increasing mobility of populations, on a shorter- or longer-term basis, to access the services. Some of the nodes for these services will be overseas but concentrated in a few key areas. We are likely to see the emergence of new regional patterns of migration centred around these economies.

Although migrants are required in the rural sector, and particularly in agricultural activities in the more developed economies, the majority of future migrants will move to the present and future global cities. Where decentralization of power has occurred, metropolitan governments may take on a greater role in the management of migration, once the preserve of national governments. Paradoxically, supra-national organizations, too, are likely to become more important. Initially, their role may be to set common standards for recruitment but, in time, regional entities such as the present European Union are likely to play a more proactive role in the management of population movement. Thus, the actual migration management process is likely to become ever more complex, with a whole series of players involved at different political levels. It may be too early to say which entities are likely to emerge as the key players, but the global management role of metropolitan governments within a context of market states may see them emerge as among the most powerful drivers in the management of future immigration.

Speculative though these trends might seem, they appear solid when compared with my last point: future migrations that result from environmental change. Evidence for global warming seems increasingly plausible. As yet unknown proportions of the polar ice caps will melt, leading to a rise in mean sea levels. Projecting the likely areas and populations that will be affected by such a rise is highly problematic. However, assuming a (conservative?) rise of 1 metre this century, and taking present populations into account, it has been estimated that some 6 million people in Egypt, 13 million in Bangladesh and 72 million in China will be directly displaced (Gommes et al. 1998). Tens of thousands of hectares of agricultural land will also be inundated.

Global warming will not simply result in rising sea levels but will bring changes to regional and local climates, with some areas likely to become hotter and drier and others colder and wetter, each with implications for population movement. How many people will be affected and where they may move is simply unknown, but they will be part of any future migrations.

Looking into an immigration future, certain trends appear clearer than others. The competition for skills will increase globally. The outsourcing of some basic services will stimulate immigration to a relatively small number of centres as regional migration systems intensify. Management will also entail greater control as governments seek to reduce, if not eliminate, irregular migration and particularly that which is the result of trafficking. As local populations perceive themselves to be under greater threat from apparently "uncontrolled" immigration, more authoritarian governments may emerge. Even if this should be the case, those governments will still have to manage immigration to bring in the necessary skills.

Political pressures to keep the number of migrants to a minimum are likely to increase pressures for outsourcing of some services as well as industries. Essentially, it is difficult to envisage a highly developed economy without high levels of labour-market flexibility and of population mobility. More spatially static societies are likely to be economically less competitive.

Although the consequences of migration, such as remittances channelled back to poorer origins, will continue to be important for development, the fundamental driver of future immigration will be the path taken by the global economy. And that is the great unknown. Continued steady growth will surely guarantee a steady increase in the numbers and types of future migrants. Economic collapse, or even a dip in the economic cycle, is likely to lead to fewer migrants and strategies to close the borders to outsiders. A shift towards a growing pessimism in recent development thinking seems to be emerging, perhaps less strident and more cautious than that of the neo-Malthusians of the 1960s, but certainly less self-assured than the writings of just a few years ago (see, for example, Diamond 2005, Saul 2005, Osborne 2006). Such thinking occurs against the background of possibly major environmental change as the world reaches a "tipping point" on a path of global warming. If collapse in the face of geographical change is indeed the likely scenario, immigration futures will be variable and unpredictable, but perhaps that itself is a speculation too far.

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