

LABOUR MIGRATION

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Migration, of course, means moving from one area to settle in another, but it could suggest more. For the individual it is an escape from want and destitution and a change for the better; for some the dream turns into a nightmare. For society as a whole it represents the disappearance of traditional rural cultures and their replacement by an unprecedented mass culture. Certainly, this deracination is often painful, but assimilation is basically a levelling process. Millions of migrants have succeeded in building their own social and cultural environment, ensuring a transition from the old one that they left behind. This was the price of survival, and in such a struggle foreigners were more severely handicapped, especially among proletarians. Inequality is accentuated by migration in conditions where so many moves appear to be random and as such highly risky, where alienation balances creativeness, where achievements occur side by side with failures. Thus, ambiguity and destabilization are the common experience.

In most West-European countries today, migration is such a pervasive experience that it raises passionate disputes among decision-makers as well as in public opinion. Where emotion prevails, artificial problems drive out real ones. Dislocation, migration, and resettlement are processes that deserve careful scrutiny, *i.e.* they should be

understood in their historical context. Many people still believe that large-scale geographic mobility is a recent phenomenon and that migration is a one-sided and cumulative process. Historical evidence asserts that since the end of the Old Regime huge crowds have moved from countryside to cities, crossing national borders and even oceans.

In early modern times *thousands* of West European cottagers unable to feed themselves and their households had to join seasonal labor migrations simply to survive. During the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries about 30,000 *Hollandgängers*, *i.e.* cotters from North-western Germany, came every year to the northern Netherlands where they were assigned the vilest tasks in agriculture, digging peat, or textile industries. Thousands of married men from the poorest rural parts of France spent three years or more working in Spain as water carriers, peddlars, lemonade-sellers, street-sweepers, latrine cleaners, *etc.* They came home as soon as they had put aside enough money to buy some cattle or a field.

Since Old Regime towns had to rely upon continuous immigration, the whole process of urbanization might be considered an indicator of the growing number of uprooted peasants. Problems occurred when labor markets could not keep pace with the flood of newcomers. In eighteenth-century Lyon, for instance, there was no self-regulating mechanism connecting local economic cycles with fluctuations in migration. Paupers coming from the countryside flocked to towns without any job opportunities during crises and periods of low-employment. Even though most people came from neighboring places – within a 25 kilometer radius – their assimilation was a long and difficult process. The majority found employment only in poorly paid and unstable sectors of the economy. They had to accommodate themselves to the most cheap housing in overcrowded neighborhoods that tended to become ghettos. In some cases, differences in language, in clothes or other folk customs were considered social stigmas and made assimilation more difficult. Whatever the cultural hindrances, most antagonisms originated in competition on the labor market.

Such a long-term outlook should be kept in mind when reading the eight papers contributed to this special issue about nineteenth- and twentieth-century migration. The latter has been the experience of more

and more people and takes place over greater distances, but it requires the same basic survival strategies. From the Old Regime to the present migration has always produced conflicting influences and tendencies. The mere presence of foreigners has economic, social, political, cultural and ideological implications which make one-sided definitions irrelevant. Migrants' problems are Janus-faced. That is why behavior toward them is socially significant: it discloses stresses and unrest within a community.

Eight authors contributed to papers to this B.T.N.G/R.B.H.C. special issue, in which migration is a theme not a thesis. No guidelines were laid down, however, a common tendency is at work. Quantitative and qualitative methods are used together without exclusion. Perhaps this is due to the recent close merging of demographic, economic, and social explanations, in itself a significant tendency not only for the historians' microcosm but as a step toward modernity. The present issue definitely does not pretend to achieve a synthesis. Each contribution, however, goes beyond previous research. Let us consider them individually.

René Leboutte's paper underlines both Walloon peculiarities and the quite general character of changes induced by World War I. The *Annuaire statistique* are his main source. Each volume confines itself to the narrow perspective of one year and thus offers little commentary and ignores trends. One could certainly devote more attention to the short-term fluctuations in these data, but Leboutte draws attention to the continuities. There are consistent patterns and regularities in such diverse phenomena as numbers of migrants, their origins and destinations, settlement patterns, and the density of the foreign-born population. After 1914-1918 dramatic changes occurred not only in defeated Germany but also in neighboring France and the Netherlands. Migratory flows lost their earlier character of regional cross-border exchanges. Immigrants became not only more numerous but also more foreign.

Differences are quite obvious in the case of the Belgians settled almost astride the French border and working in Tourcoing's woolen mills. V. Aelbrecht bases his inquiry on a variety of reliable French sources which reveal how Belgians were perceived by Frenchmen.

Moreover, we see how increasingly proletarianized Flemish families coped with a French bureaucracy determined to ensure order and prosperity. The paper deals not only with hostility during crises but also with a constant underlying rivalry; with attempts to educate the illiterate and with opposition based upon xenophobia. In short, this is an analysis based on a firm statistical foundation which goes well beyond mere quantitative problems.

Crowds of migrants are not only found in industrial regions. Functions specific to capital cities also act as "pull" factors. This explains, according to Machteld de Metsenaere, why 45 percent of the inhabitants of Brussels were born elsewhere. Such substantial immigration resulted in important social divisions: on one hand, the growth of a middle-class and of french-speaking elites; on the other hand, a continuous flow of proletarianized immigrants, including numerous young female servants. Since that kind of migration was not induced by compulsion, the process of assimilation was not in question. Nevertheless, family networks and neighborhood communities smoothed the process of acculturation, which was facilitated by the fact that social and linguistic boundaries were congruent.

Els Deslé makes it clear that a century later the situation in Brussels was thoroughly changed. Just as coal mines in Limbourg and in Walloon provinces could not work without imported manpower, building contractors in Brussels badly needed foreign workers. As more and more Flemish workers found occupational opportunities in their own country, the supply of cheap labor for the building sector in the capital was reduced. Nevertheless, nothing was prepared to accomodate this new "reserve army." Whereas Belgian workers were accustomed to shuttle-migration and came back home every night, foreigners had to pay escalating rentals. They gathered in slums, becoming the helpless prey of landlords who divided the most meager spaces into as many lodgings as possible. It is no accident that the communes in which foreigners are concentrated also show the least interest in public housing.

What were the most significant considerations in the process of making migration policies? Dirk Van Damme's study asserts that economic and political incentives were overwhelmingly important in

regulating immigration and internal migrations. Laws defining which commune had to assume the domiciliation of paupers were not aimed at solving a social problem. Rather, the upperclasses used these laws for their own purposes. During the first half of the nineteenth century, as long as urban and rural elites had the same interests, they agreed upon a policy aimed at settling paupers on the spot. This consensus was broken in the second half of the century, and the burden of relieving migrant paupers became the subject of conflicting financial interests. Changes in regulating the *onderstandswoonst* led to indirect subsidization of urban treasuries to the prejudice of rural communities.

Frank Caestecker shows how Polish migrants have been at stake in another kind of political conflict. Pleas for schooling were in fact attempts to influence choices about the language that Poles would use and hence about their future political commitments. Caestecker detects governmental as well as ecclesiastical pressures, bureaucratic inefficiency, and the interventions of employers in Limburg's coal mines. This is by no means an easy puzzle.

Since migration poses such complex and demanding problems, methods and technical issues stand in the foreground. Suzy Pasleau's paper deals with maps considered as a specific language with its own meanings and peculiar signs which are used as words but imbricated in an artificial syntax. For too long historians have been satisfied with maps used as a mere tool to visualize features that they had already worked out with words or numbers. Computers are now so fast and so efficient that they can manipulate huge amounts of data and display them on an array of maps. A tool has become a laboratory, and the static vision changes into a time machine. All migrations are time-related whether as a turning point in an individual life-story or as part of a long-term process of population change. The new technical possibilities challenge historians by placing them before a choice: among the limitless possibilities of computerized maps we must select those most relevant to the sources and suggestive of further research.

Etienne Hélin's odyssey among methodological pitfalls and along a dubious no-man's land between History and Sociology leads to a verdict against one-sided, over-specialized explanations and a plea for a more critical use of a variety of methods, as well as the recognition

of migrations as multidimensional phenomena. Since out-migration is currently underregistered, all sources must be carefully verified. Instead of being a mere quantified variable, ready to use for well defined demographic purposes, migration appears as a test of the ability of society to endure the risks of change. It acts as an indicator of cultural innovation. It is part of social mobility, a fairly universal and many sided process, more familiar to sociologists than to historians. As such, migration should not be disjoined from other major issues, namely demographic transition, capitalist industrialization, and pluri-ethnic acculturation. It requires broader syntheses which should find favor in the recent open-mindedness of Belgian public opinion.¹

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