African Migrations Workshop

The Contribution of African Research to Migration Theory

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Theory and the Study of Migration in Africa

(Keynote Lecture)

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Introduction

The focus of this African Migration Workshop is on migration theory. In much of the research in the field of migration studies, theoretical concerns are often kept in the background, especially in the face of pressing social, economic and political problems which demand urgent policy attention. In particular, given the many challenges facing the continent, few African scholars have the resources to invest in what might be seen as the luxury of theoretical research. However, as I will try to show, any research process involves an engagement with theory. This begs some important questions: what are the origins of that theory and what are it implications for both the conduct of the research and its findings?

In preparing this workshop, we started with the view that much of the body of theory used in the study of migration has been developed on the basis of research outside Africa. This may or may not be a problem; we do not claim that the African continent necessarily provides an exception. However, it is only possible to ensure that theory is being used appropriately or to suggest enhancements – or even radical changes – if one can step back from the details of the particular case study and explicitly reflect on its theoretical foundations.

This workshop aims to provide an opportunity for such reflection and to focus quite narrowly on the theoretical basis for migration research in Africa. In this introductory session, I aim to provide some starting points for this process by elaborating on what is meant by theory in general – and migration theory in particular – and posing some questions for consideration.

I am not going to make any attempt to provide an overview of migration theories. Here I am concerned more with the general nature of theory. Moreover, I do not aim to persuade you of the merits of any body of theory over another. Perhaps I can avoid being partisan more easily than many others as I come from quite a mixed disciplinary background. However, this comes with the disadvantage of a shallower immersion in the fundamental theoretical basis of any one discipline. Hence, what I

offer here is quite a personal take on theory, drawn from my own reflections of why I think it matters. I apologise in advance if I tread clumsily on any disciplinary toes.

Why are we concerned with theory?

Why are we concerned with theory? To some extent, I would argue, it is theoretical concerns that mark academics out from various groups of colleagues working in different (but related) arenas of knowledge.

First, we might consider policy makers. They attempt to shape what the world should become based on a given understanding of the world – that understanding is provided either by political interests or academic insights. They work with given concepts, such as *migrants*, *development*, *citizens*, *integration*, and attempt to devise strategies that they hope will bring about what they see as desirable outcomes.

The second group are the practitioners. They deal with the interaction between these strategies (or policies) and the practical realities of the social world in order to change people's behaviour, the distribution of resources and power relations (among many other things) towards desirable outcomes (which of course may not match the desirable outcomes proposed by the policy makers). Through their dealing with the messy realities of the social world, practitioners are likely to call into question the concepts and ideas underlying the strategies of policy-makers.

For example, a sharp distinction between refugees and labour migrants is embedded in the policies of most states. However, this is very difficult to sustain when faced with a migrant's personal story. This translation of policy into what actually works on the ground is one of the major challenges practitioners face. Nonetheless, in general, they are likely to work around the disjuncture between policy and reality. They may highlight the problems but they are less likely to attempt to reformulate the rules of the game or refine the concepts.

These arenas of policy and practice are liable to intensive scrutiny from a wider range of observers, including journalists, civil society organisations (such as human rights bodies), those providing the basic checks and balances embedded into the

functioning of many (but by no means all) states – and finally academics. Any of these may expose underlying assumptions, raise unasked questions, challenge the interests and power relations at play, and highlight patterns and relationships between actions and consequences.

So what is the distinction between academic research and that conducted by these other observers? To describe research as journalistic is damning criticism within the academy; but what is it that marks out a careful study of the migration of, say, Ethiopian migration to Lusaka conducted by university researchers from an in-depth study by the International Organisations for Migration (IOM), Human Rights Watch or the Post, a Zambian newspaper?

Here I would suggest that it is the engagement with theory that is one of the key elements that will mark out the academic contribution. For the academic, theoretical concerns are likely to frame the questions asked, the approach taken to answer them and the presentation of the results.

What is theory

So what is theory in this context? One can start answering this question by turning to dictionary definitions. First, the Oxford English Dictionary defines theory as follows:

> A scheme or system of ideas or statements held as an explanation or account
> of a group of facts or phenomena; a hypothesis that has been confirmed or
> established by observation or experiment, and is propounded or accepted as
> accounting for the known facts; a statement of what are held to be the general
> laws, principles, or causes of something known or observed.[1]

A definition that is more tailored to the social sciences is found in the Dictionary of the Sociology,

> A theory is an account of the world which goes beyond what we can see and
> measure. It embraces a set of interrelated definitions and relationships that

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[1] "theory, 4.ᵃ" *The Oxford English Dictionary*. 2nd ed. 1989. <u>OED Online</u>. Oxford University Press. 4 Apr. 2000 http://dictionary.oed.com/cgi/entry/50250688.

organizes our concepts of and understanding of the empirical world in a systematic way.[2]

A more detailed elaboration of theory is provided by Calhoun in the Dictionary of the Social Sciences, where three broad approaches to theory are outlined. I present these separately but inevitably there are many overlaps.

Theory as a summary of propositions

First, there is theory as *a summary of propositions about a particular field of knowledge that have been confirmed by empirical enquiry*. This form of theory might be particularly apt for the analysis of historical migrations such as the European migration to the Americas in the late nineteenth century. It relates the mass movement of different groups of people to the industrial revolution, urbanisation, economic restructuring and so forth. In the sciences, such theory might be the basis for the development of proven laws that carry across into other contexts, such as the Theory of General Relativity. However, in the social sciences such generalisations are more problematic, although it was attempted by Ravenstein (1885; 1889) in his famous articles on the Laws of Migration, which elaborated a general theory for internal migration in the UK.

We might perceive this approach to theory in Hatton and Williamson's (2002) study, in which they analyse the data on the mass emigration of Europeans in the late 19th century to project the potential for future mass movement out of Africa. They argue that the same three fundamental forces which drove millions of Europeans to the New World will drive huge numbers of Africans to Europe and North America. These forces are the gap in living standards, modest development in origin areas will fund migrants' journeys and, most importantly, demographic pressures generated by a slow demographic transition.

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[2] "theory" *A Dictionary of Sociology*. John Scott and Gordon Marshall. Oxford University Press 2009. *Oxford Reference Online*. Oxford University Press. University of Oxford. 28 April 2010 http://www.oxfordreference.com/views/ENTRY.html?subview=Main&entry=t88.e2349

They are developing a theory that relates one situation (19th century Europe) to another (21st century Africa). Along the way they make a range of assumptions – many of which I think are open to challenge. On the basis of this theoretical approach they make a set of, rather alarming, claims, which reach beyond the theoretical:

> Efforts to restrict migration and to seal porous borders may be partially successful, but, if so, they are certain to create unpleasant side effects: European restrictions may choke of African emigration, but by doing so they will create bigger social problems at home; European restrictions will induce a rising share of illegals, and by so doing they will create greater social problems in recipient countries; and European restrictions will create increasing diplomatic problems between the two regions. Many young African adults will, sadly, perish in the AIDS epidemic, but the surviving number of potential emigrants will still be very great (Hatton and Williamson 2002: 556).

Theory as propositions about relationships between concepts

Second, we have theory as *a set of more or less abstract propositions that express formal relationships between concepts*. This is a form of theory that is most familiar to economists, who will often use mathematical symbols and notation to express these theoretical relationships in a very concise way.

For example, according to van Dalen et al. (2005), the 'basic economic theory of migration states that differences in (expected) net returns across countries are the prime driving force behind emigration movements.' They summarise this in the following way.

'The individual living in a poor country will migrate as long as:

$$E[W_R(S) - C(S)] > E[W_P(S)]$$

Here $W_R(S)$ is wage at skill level S in rich country and $W_P(S)$ is wage at skill level S in poor country, $C(S)$ is the cost of migration. $E[W(S)]$ is the expected wage over the workers lifetime. This theoretical starting point generates a set of questions about the

relationship between a set of concepts which have to be defined – expectations, skill, and rich and poor countries – and hypotheses that can be empirically tested. The body of theory described as the New Economics of Labour Migration further refines such basic theory by suggesting that migration decisions are made by households (another new concept) concerned with a view to both maximising income and minimising risk (yet another). Such insights have helped to develop the concept of relative deprivation and the hypothesis that increasing levels of relative deprivation may increase incentives to out-migration (Massey, Arango, Hugo, Kouaouci, Pellegrino, and Taylor 1993: 439; Stark and Bloom 1985). Hence, in this sense, theory can become a way of guiding empirical research, identifying critical research questions to be addressed and offering hypotheses that can be contrasted with observable facts.

To be even-handed, perhaps we should also consider the theoretical position of anthropology. While they do not employ the same formal notation as economists – although the notation of some of the earlier texts might suggest that some could aspire to – they do employ concepts and explore relations between them. Going back to the mid-twentieth century, the structural-functionalist school of thought conceived societies as essentially stable structures (akin to a biological organism) in which individuals adopted particular roles, which served to maintain and reproduce the structure over generations (Radcliffe-Brown 1952). Migration featured very little in their conservative analysis of many African societies, which portrayed them as homogeneous, largely unchanging and isolated from other groups.

The establishment of the Rhodes-Livingstone Institute (RLI) in 1937 and the development of the 'Manchester School' of anthropologists associated with the RLI's second director Max Gluckman created a decisive theoretical break with this consensual view of 'tribal' life. Their use of detailed case studies and analysis of social interaction, exemplified by Victor Turner's 'social dramas' (Turner 1957), focused on issues of conflict, economic relations and labour migration.

The classic ethnographies by Watson on the Mambwe (1958), van Velsen on the Tonga (1960) and Long on the Lala (1968) based on detailed case studies provided a

rich and complex pictures of the relationship between migration and change in rural and urban societies. Colson's (1971) longitudinal study of the displacement of the Gwembe Tonga by the construction of the Kariba Dam remains one of the foundational works for the study of forced migration and refugees.

While it is a very different approach from the economists, they are concerned with drawing connections between the different case studies. Watson's study on the Mambwe is not interesting just for what it says about the Mambwe but also for the way it resonates with the experience in other settings. It contributes to a body of research that helps us understand how different societies operate.

Theory as relation between abstract concepts based on philosophical assumptions

The field of migration has generated many different theories of this second form, however, they remain fractured and often contradictory (Arango 2000: 294; Massey et al. 1993). One of the common grounds for contradiction is found in the assumptions underlying the abstract propositions; this is related to the third approach to theory as *expressing relations between the abstract concepts which rest on a set of fundamental, often philosophical, assumptions about the social world*.

This orientation to the social world tends to set the directions for research and the methodologies adopted to explore it. For example, a structuralist theory of migration that looks for explanations of patterns of movement to the development of global capitalism is unlikely to be easily reconciled with a neo-classical theory that explains movement by reference to the rational choices of utility maximising individuals. Amin writing from a structuralist position argues that the endeavour to understand migration through the analysis of individuals' motivations is futile since the migrant 'rationalizes the objective needs of his situation' (Amin 1974: 92).

Levels of theory

Given that these theoretical positions reflect philosophical assumptions which cannot be 'proven' by empirical enquiry, it becomes impossible to resolve such contradictions.

Hence, some make a distinction between the grand theory of high level abstractions with limited empirical basis and 'theories of the middle range' (Merton 1968), which draw on empirical data to provide some level of generalisation in different contexts. For example, the theory of segmented assimilation (Portes 2007) – which suggests that migrants are incorporated into destination societies in different ways depending on their immigration status – could be described as a theory of the middle range.

In a conference on migration theory held in Oxford in 2008, a number of people argued that the ambition of migration scholars should be limited to developing such theories of the middle range. It may be true that the complexity and diversity of migration experiences defies broader systematic theorising and general explanation. Few would suggest that it is feasible, or even desirable, to develop an overarching grand theory that explains all facets of the migration process. However, there is much room for debate about the most appropriate level of theory for migration studies. For example, in their detailed survey of migration theories, Massey et al. (1993) distinguished between theories that explain the initiation of migration (such as neo-classical economics) and those that explain the continuation of migration flows once started (such as cumulative causation). Should we be looking for a higher level of theory that might apply more generally in both these contexts? This is something we are aspiring to do in a current project at Oxford where we are looking at the way that migration systems come into being.

Some general features of theory

While the theory generated by these different approaches may look rather different, we can identify some features that they all share (if you like this exercise can be seen as building a theory about theory – or *meta*-theory). At the most basic level, all theory is concerned with specifying the relationship between concepts. By concepts, we

refer to abstract descriptions of things (e.g. migrant, livestock), processes (e.g. migration, integration, alienation) or other entities (ethnicity, class, state), which can be identified in different contexts. For example, if we see people moving around with their cattle in Ghana and another set of people moving with their camels in Libya, we may only start to think of these groups possibly having something in common when we develop the concept of 'pastoralist'. This step of abstraction is critical to theory building.

Theoretical statements provide general ways – some might use the terms 'rules' or possibly even 'laws' – for describing relationships between (abstract) concepts that will apply in a more general context. We would not consider a statement about Fulani pastoralists going to Kumasi market on Thursdays as theoretical. However, a statement about the general conditions under which pastoralists move into markets may be seen as making a theoretical claim. Of course, the boundaries are blurred but abstraction and this possibility of generalising to other contexts are important elements of theory.

Academics then have to present their arguments for new theoretical claims or generalisations; what are the theoretical advances that they offer?

Perhaps they refine existing concepts – this refinement can be clearly seen in the development of the new economics of labour migration which moved from the analysis of individuals to work with households as the unit of analysis.

Or develop new concepts - such as the notion of social remittances by Peggy Levitt (1998) which draw attention to previous unobserved patterns of behaviour and make connections between different phenomena which were previously seen as separate entities. The notion of social remittances brings the social transfers into the same orbits as the financial transfers.

Or they may suggest new links between fields of study which were previously disconnected. For example, in his seminal paper on migration systems, Mabogunje took a popular strand of scientific theory of the time – general systems theory - and

applied it to the analysis of migration. While it is easy to critique the functionalism of the theory – it suggests that migrants act in response to systemic forces to keep the whole thing going – it was a theoretical advance which helped develop new thinking about migration processes beyond simple push and pull models.

What is distinctive about academic generalisation?

Of course, others, such as journalists can also make generalisations and they often do. But they rarely make theoretical claims. What marks out the academic generalisation embodied in theory is the explicit appeal to a logical argument, which lays out the basis for the making the claim of generality and its limitations. Our theories are liable to testing both in terms of the coherence – do they include any inconsistencies or internal contradictions – and how far they fit the available evidence.

To build up the case, the academic argument will draw on a wider body of knowledge in the existing literature– the earlier work of scholars. When academics develop new concepts or put forward new theories, they follow a set of scholarly practices which are recognised within each particular academic discipline. First, they need to show that they are aware of and understand previous work in this field; what are the current theoretical claims that are being made (if any)? Second, they demonstrate how their own research (whether empirical research or their abstract reasoning) relates to this body of existing knowledge; to what extent does their research support or contradict current theory?

Moreover, when they draw on empirical findings, they have to explain their findings carefully – what is the source of the data, how was it gathered, how have they analysed and why did they do it that way?

We have to prepare a robust argument, using sound methodology – consistency between the underlying theory and the data collected. This is a much denser set of requirements than the average journalist – hence it takes much more time and is expensive. I am not claiming that such academic study is 'better' in any normative sense, but that is the business in which we are engaged.

Where does theory come from?

The account so far has perhaps suggested that theory is out there to be discovered – as if social sciences can follow the physical sciences in searching for external given laws of nature which can explain the world in which we live (not that physical scientists hold such views these days). Our theory does have a provenance and it is important to ask where it comes from.

It is a truism to say that theory is not the same as fact. Of course, we can debate at great length the extent to which we can claim anything as a fact. Nonetheless, when we (as an assembly of interested people) are presented with what we can all agree is self-evident fact, we are not in need of theory. For example, it may be known that a boatload of people moved from Senegal in pirogues to the Canary Islands. Moreover, we might agree that these people have not registered with any official bodies; in other words their journey is unauthorised. We might take these as facts. However, when we come to explain why this event took place in this way, why some move and not others, its significance for other people moving between Senegal and the Canary Islands and so forth, we move into the realm of theory. We build up an argument in the ways outlined above to put forward a particular theory, either to address a new puzzle or supplant an existing theory.

I have chosen this example deliberately. There are many theories about why people move from Senegal to the Canary Islands; it has been the subject of much research. There are many other movements of people which have not generated so much interest. Theory building follows both the recognition of a puzzle – something to explain – and the dedication of resources to it. It is therefore a function of power. It is not too hard to recognise the power relations driving the large volume of research into the migration of Africans to Europe.

As might be expected, when we want to hear about power, we can turn to the political scientists, so here I make my first foray into the work of political science. This is discussed in more detail in another session of the workshop so here I am

simply going to draw on the work of Robert Cox about the nature of theory from an article on international relations theory.

> 'Academic conventions divide up the seamless web of the real social world into separate spheres, each with its own theorising; this is a necessary and practical way of gaining understanding. Conceptualisations of undivided totality may lead to profound abstractions or mystical revelations, but practical knowledge (that which can be put to work through action) is always partial or fragmentary in origin' (Cox 1981:126).

He goes on to argue that:

> 'Theory is always *for* someone and *for* some purpose. All theories have some perspective. Perspectives derive from a position in time and space, specifically social and political time and space.' (Cox 1981: 128 emphasis in original).

He points us towards a choice in our theorising. We can focus on theory that aims to solve problems – perhaps this seems the most important when faced with some of the critical problems such as people leaving on boats for the Canary Islands.

Or we can develop a more critical body of theory, taking normative positions with respect to existing structures of power. Here we do not frame our research around the problem but we call into question the nature of the problem. In Africa, the field of migration is so frequently cast as a problem that to my mind it is begging for a large dose of critical theory. For example, why are we looking at transit migration as distinct from other forms of migration – have we developed an adequate theory or simply accepted a concept developed to serve the priorities of the EU? Immediately after this workshop, I am going to a roundtable on South-South migration – another concept which has clear political roots but, to my mind, very little analytical value.

Theory and practice

I want to conclude with some reflections on the relationship between theory and practice.

Academics are likely to ask a different set of questions, which may seem of very limited interest to other observers (or perhaps upset them). Hence the accusations of living in 'ivory towers' – which is of course a common charge we face in Oxford. In a recent meeting about a new research project looking at migration and development, my objections to framing our research too quickly around the questions posed by policy makers was challenged by a partner from a developing country – 'it is okay for you in Oxford to want to do pure research but we have to connect to the real world.'

My argument is simply this. I recognise that there are huge pressures on academics in poorer regions of the world and they may have very limited opportunities for 'blue skies thinking', abstract theoretical work or simply developing their own research questions without reference to the funding 'partner'. Nonetheless, I do believe that it is very important to conduct such research and that may be the only way to get solutions to urgent problems. In particular, across Africa, theory, certainly migration theory, has tended to be delivered as a package to be empirically tested and proven in the 'field'. But when it fails, it is taken back to the European laboratory for further refinement before being shipped out again for another test run.

Our theorising is useless if it never leads to engagement in the messy world of blurred lines, untidy boundaries and complex unpredictable relationships. However, policy and practice is going to be much more limited and constrained if it is not subject to theoretical challenge, enquiry and occasionally revolution. Both theoretical research and practical action have their place; for now, I am primarily in the world of the former.

Social science theory takes us beyond our immediate context and to make connections with the experiences of others. It shapes our perceptions and ways of thinking about the world. Changing our theoretical view can be like putting on a new pair of glasses – we can see some things more clearly, and perhaps others less clearly (speaking as someone getting to that age where correcting short sight means I have to struggle to read small print!). As researchers who aim to increase our understanding and knowledge of the world, it is important that we understand the

operation of our theoretical lenses, recognise their weaknesses and limitations, and are always aware of the possibility of changing prescriptions.

I hope in the rest of this workshop we will have the chance to get excited about going to the theoretical opticians and have our lenses checked.

I leave many questions unanswered – I am hoping others here will be able to take some of these up in discussion. In particular, the question posed in my introduction.

- What are the implications of different theoretical choices for both the conduct of the research and its findings?

- Do we need coherence in our theories – do we need consensus or can we agree to disagree?

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