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Social Theory and Migration Workshop – Report

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Introduction

This report attempts to capture and summarise the main themes that arose from the reactions to the papers and the subsequent wide-ranging discussions at the workshop. It should be read in conjunction with the three papers which will be made available on the IMI website. It starts with a review of the rationale for the workshop and then elaborates the points which arose in discussion: emergence and social becoming; social systems and migration systems; agency; micro, macro, meso levels; and, causality and causal mechanisms. It concludes with brief thoughts of how this initiative may be taken forward in the future.

Rationale for the workshop

First, there is the separation between migration studies as an avenue for intellectual exploration and broader currents of social theory. As Stephen Castles, among others, has noted migration studies is often marginalised from this mainstream social theory. For many, the study of migration is automatically related to the realm of policy and concerns for changing the situation of migrants. Too much talk of theory takes one into abstract debate that is thought to serve no purpose. However, Castles calls for the development of a 'sociology of migration which is both critical and engaged with social reality, both empirical and grounded in theory' (Castles 2007: 364).

Second, while the study of migration may be under-theorised, there is a deep fissure running through the field which is related to one of the most profound (or at least longstanding) theoretical debates in the social sciences: the structure-agency debate. This is most visible in the separation between the study of 'forced' and 'voluntary' migration. How we know whether a movement is 'forced' or 'voluntary', or why we should assume that this is significant is rarely considered. This makes it difficult either, a) to explore the extent to which refugees exercise agency, while recognising the structural constraints shaping their movements; or, b) to take account of the structural conditions which shape the 'free' movement of labour migrants. Such questions about the relationships between structure and agency are prevalent in many aspects of migration processes including the analysis of movement – why particular people choose to go from A to B at particular times – settlement, integration and so forth.

In general, the way the problem of structure and agency has been addressed in migration studies is unsatisfactory. Many studies suggest that we must take account of people's agency, but then give a predominantly structuralist account, or they claim the context is important while the analysis is based simply on the aggregation of individual responses to questionnaires. Those who attempt to find the balance have tended to draw on Gidden's theory of structuration. However, migration scholars have rarely paid enough attention to either to important critiques of Giddens or to more recent debates about approaches to post-positivist social science, in particular those drawing on critical realist perspectives.

With this in mind, the International Migration Institute organised this workshop in order to stimulate new conversations between researchers working in the field of migration studies and those specialising in social theory. As a starting point for this dialogue, the workshop set out to examine what critical realist theoretical perspectives might bring to the study of migration. How might its theoretical insights enrich our analysis of migration processes, in particular the role of structure and

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agency in shaping migration outcomes? How adopting a critical realist epistemology change the practice and findings of empirical research?

The programme of the workshop was based around three main sessions, for each of which a detailed paper was prepared by expert authors, followed by commentary from two discussants and then open discussion. The first session provided a general overview of critical realism and post-positivist social science based on a paper by Justin Cruickshank. The next session examined the application of post-positivist theory to the study of migration. Ewa Morawska's paper showed how she responded to the critical realism/ structuration debate by developing her own 'neo-structuration' model, which she used to explain the changes in migration dynamics over time in the case of Polish out-migration from the 1870s to the 1930s. The third session focused on the implications of adopting critical realism for the conduct of research, with a paper by Theodore Iwsifidis examining the applicability of critically realist oriented qualitative methodologies in migration studies. The workshop concluded with a more general discussion.

Themes arising in discussion

There was a general agreement that the workshop provided a valuable forum for reflection and brought to the fore issues which were all too rarely discussed. There was considerable enthusiasm for developing post-positivist approaches which could be applied to migration research but it was recognised that there are many hurdles yet to tackle. While it may be agreed that critical realism might provide a valuable counterpoint to the simplistic adoption of structuration theory, there was no consensus that it yet provided a viable approach that is both theoretically and methodologically robust. Archer's morphogenetic approach offers a strong critique of Giddens but introduces further problems. Therefore, many participants felt it would be counterproductive to adhere rigidly to any given schema, such as morphogenesis. Instead it was more important to identify theoretical approaches which were intellectually rigorous and useful, in the sense that they helped address the questions in which researchers are interested.

A number of themes recurred throughout the discussion at the workshop and these are summarised here. The report concludes with some ideas how these themes may be developed further in future dialogue.

Emergence and social becoming
The concept of emergence lay at the heart of many of the discussions. It refers to the way in which social structures can be seen to take a form or develop properties which cannot be understood as simply the aggregate of the properties of its constituent parts. The 'emergent' properties of social structures are not in predictable from complete knowledge of the properties and relations of the constituent parts (Jones 2000, 54), reflecting Durkheim's assertion that the qualities of social wholes are more than the sum of their parts.

Emergent properties are often considered as qualities that can be discerned over time; this requires a richer understanding and appreciation of historical trajectories. Given the focus of the workshop on migration, the questions was raised of whether equally consideration should be given to spatial dimensions of emergence. For example, the notion of 'cultures of migration' suggests recurrent patterns of practices occurring over particular spaces and an elaboration of the concept must take account of both the dimension of time and of space.

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Conceptually emergence can be linked to ideas of social becoming, and – particularly in migration studies – theories of influx and change, motion and mobility. Emergence seems particularly relevant when single direction of movement – toward settlement and assimilation – become challenged by return migration, circularity, oscillating migration. It was even suggested that it might be more fruitful to think of the emergent properties of systems rather limiting it to social structures.

Social Systems and Migration Systems – beyond structuralism and functionalism

The concept of systems became the second recurrent theme for the workshop. As it was noted in the discussion, systems theorists adopted the idea of emergence (for example see Bunge 2003, 2004, Mayr 1982, Wimstatt 2007 – references provided by Claudia Schneider), noting that the characteristics of a system cannot be deduced solely from knowledge of its components, taken separately or in other partial combinations.

The conceptualization of emergence in this more recent systems' theory lends itself to application to migration systems. The degree of organization of migration systems can be said to be emergent if there is a sense in which it has arisen out of some 'lower' level, being conditioned by and dependent upon, but not predictable from, the properties found at the lower level. Hence, a migration system cannot be identified solely by the number of people moving between particular places; these movements become systemic when they exhibit emergent properties that cannot be captured by aggregating the migration behaviour of these individuals. This may reflect historical determinants, the role of migrant networks and exchange of information, or wider causal factors.

Agency

The nature of agency stimulated much discussion throughout the workshop; in particular the extent to which it is an attribute of individuals persons, social actors, or collectivities. Can agency be identified with the behaviour individuals (actors) at the 'lower' level in migration system (as Morawska's analysis of Myszkenice's pioneer migrants to America at the turn of 20th century might suggest)?

Or is agency an irreducible collective attribute. As Robert Carter paraphrasing Archer observed agents are collectivities sharing the same life chances and therefore, the term 'agency' is 'always and only employed in the plural' (Archer, 2000:261). As collectivities, agents are contrasted to "actors", who are always singular (Carter, forthcoming).

Following Emirbayer and Mische (1998), agency can be conceptualized at three levels: habitual, projective and practical-evaluative. Is their sophisticated theorization of agency applicable if the latter is not reducible to social actors (i.e. projective/ habitual collective agency)?

The (always) plural understanding of agency, as a property of collectives sharing similar life chances, precludes that everyone is necessarily an agent since everyone occupies a position in society's distribution of scarce resources (c.f. Bruno Latour – Actor-Network theory). What stirred most controversies during the discussion was the stance that one's agentic position may be conceived as involuntary – 'we are born into a certain place at a certain moment – and, because these distributions predate our arrival, they do not require our consent or complicity' (Carter, forthcoming).

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Micro/Macro/Meso

These debates about agency were closely related to the question of how one can analytically distinguish between various levels of analysis, be it with respect to structures, or agency. Structures cannot be conceived as operating at the macro-level and it was observed that some of the most durable social structures, such as patterns of household residence, operate at the low, micro-level. Likewise, the discussion above implies that agency cannot be conceived only at the micro level. In social conditions of flat networks (as opposed to hierarchical ones), micro-scale changes might have long term macro effects (path dependency). At the same time, macro-changes have (un)intended implications on other levels also.

Causality and causal mechanisms

Another fundamental concern for the workshop was the nature of causality. While there was a consensus that positivist approaches could not provide an adequate of account causality, there was some uncertainty how critical realist or post-positivist approaches – which provide a richer theoretical account – could guide research in practice. One suggestion, made citing James Ladyman, was that we can consider causation as a way of 'book-keeping change'. With this in mind, the starting point for research is to understand – to record and analyse – social change, which then provides a basis for developing theories of causation.

Rather than starting research by looking for structures, it was argued that it should start with people 'doing things' – who wants to do what, who can do what and who cannot? We are then looking to understand what determines people's ability to do things and what accounts for different outcomes. This requires an analysis of causality or causal mechanisms that shape the structural and agentic conditions for action. Can these be identified with the conditions under which the action of agents (individual/ collective) lead to the emergence (and endurance) of social structures? What are the conditions under which this does not happen (counter-factual forces of non-emergence)?

Ways forward

As expected this workshop started a dialogue and left many of the participants with as many, if not more, questions as they had at the outset. While many of the examples used arose from the study of migration, much of the discussion remained at quite an abstract level. Hence, it did not become clear what different adopting a more rigorous post-positivist ontological and epistemological stance would make to the practice of research. How would we do things differently? Perhaps, even more importantly, it was not clear how taking such a position would change the outcomes of research. Justin Cruickshank started the workshop by calling for a critical stance to theory rather than looking for justification of theory. However, it was noted that if we cannot provide justification, others would step in to provide it on their own (positivist) terms.

Therefore, it seems the next logical step in the dialogue is to explore how we can apply post-positivist (critical realist in the broad sense) theoretical approaches in more concrete migration studies. Given the discussion around systems, Ewa Morawska's paper which provided an excellent historical study of the start of a migration systems from Poland to the US, and the ongoing project being led by IMI on the evolution of migration systems (THEMIS), a tentative suggestion was made to make migration systems the focus for a second workshop in spring 2012. It is possible that further theoretical discussion may crystallise into proposal for substantive research that compares the

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outcomes of different forms of analysis: potentially a head to head challenge between positivist, constructionist and realist approaches to the same basic research question! At the least it would provide valuable insights for existing research and throw further light on the contributions of greater theoretical rigour to enhancing our understanding of patterns of mobility and social change.

We would welcome comments on the discussion points raised in this report. If you are interested to know more about the ideas for a subsequent workshop as they develop, please sign up to the IMI mailing list. If you have specific suggestions or enquiries please contact the workshop convenors:

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