

8

Migrant Labor and the State

The great South African anthropologist Max Gluckman, founder and director of the Manchester School of Anthropology, would send his doctoral students to Africa with the required reading of two classics of the English industrial revolution, written by J. L. and Barbara Hammond: *The Village Labourer* (1911) and *The Town Labourer* (1917). Students were to read them on the long boat journey – this was the 1950s – so they should not get transfixed by the exoticism of Africa, but see it through the lens of the English industrial revolution. In the same aversion to the “othering” of Africa, when they returned to Manchester after completing their three years of fieldwork, Gluckman would expect them to undertake an ethnography of some institution or organization that was parallel to the one they studied in Africa. Thus, Victor Turner, perhaps the most famous of Gluckman’s students, became entranced by rituals of the Ndembe of Northern Rhodesia, so he was steered into studying the rituals in the Roman Catholic Church – with fateful consequences: from being a committed communist he became a deeply religious Roman Catholic. With it came a new tableau of cultural anthropology.

This lesson has never left me. Too much of social science is fragmented into area studies, making it impossible to compare across areas, to compare less developed

with more developed countries. How often have I heard colleagues declare a particular comparison across areas as inadmissible. You can't compare Israel and Serbia, they would declare, that's apples and oranges. But in comparing apples and oranges, we can demonstrate that they are both species of fruit and thereby learn things about both that had been beyond a fruitless methodology. The challenge of the sociological imagination is precisely to compare the incomparable. But we should do it systematically. Too often social science runs with unstated, implicit comparisons: the reality of one place with a stereotype or idealization of another – the reality of Africa (dictatorship, corruption, tribalism) against the idealization of the US (democracy, freedom, justice). To reveal these assumptions makes them laughable, so they are generally left implicit. There's a simple principle here: first, compare reality with reality, to establish the commonality between phenomena in different countries, and only *then* ask in what ways they differ and why. Out of this arises sociology with global dimensions. This methodological strategy inspired my comparison of migrant labor in South Africa and California, as well as many dissertations I directed.²

As I have said my interest in migrant labor began with my teacher, Jaap van Velsen, who also trained under Max Gluckman. Originally from the Netherlands, he studied the Lakeside Tonga of Malawi in the early 1950s (then Nyasaland). The Tonga claimed to be a matrilineal and matrilocal tribe but, as he discovered, in reality there were many deviations. Whereas other anthropologists had swept such exceptions to kinship rules under the rug, van Velsen (1964) turned them into a “poststructuralist” anthropology in which “norms” are not blindly followed but manipulated in pursuit of interests defined by a broader field of action. In his case, the kinship politics in the village he studied was shaped, at least in part, by labor migration to the South African mines, a thousand miles away. Where others, such as the famous anthropologist Audrey Richards, had claimed the absence of men due to labor

migration was destroying the rural economy, van Velsen (1960) showed how the gender division of labor adapted to migration and, together with remittances, strengthened the rural economy. In this way, van Velsen demonstrated how a village in Malawi could not be disentangled from the wider political economy of Southern Africa. While his own field research had been focused on the response of villagers to migration, van Velsen was convinced that the mining industry in South Africa had conspired with the colonial administration in Malawi to turn the latter into a reservoir of African labor. He never found the smoking gun, although that was what became of Malawi.

This was a very different perspective than was current in the “modernization” literature that saw African labor migration – the cyclical movement between town and country – as a function of the primordial attachments to tribe and kinship. In that account, Africans couldn’t free themselves from the heavy weight of tradition. Van Velsen painted a different picture. He saw labor migration as a function of capitalism’s search for cheap labor power: laborers need only be paid a wage for their individual survival while the costs of rearing the family would be borne by the sending community. This separation between what I call “maintenance” and “renewal” of labor power was orchestrated and enforced by the South African state that taxed the rural population, thereby compelling them to seek wage labor (Burawoy 1976a). At the same time, the South African state outlawed permanent residence in the urban areas, so workers had to return periodically to their home villages. Under the influence of van Velsen, Giovanni Arrighi (1970) studied the history of capitalism in Southern Rhodesia. He was the first to elaborate the political economy approach to labor migration, before he became a distinguished sociologist of world systems.

My ideas were also influenced by Harold Wolpe. A South African freedom fighter in exile in England and a member of the South African Communist Party, he became

a sociologist at a time when Marxism was flourishing in UK universities. In 1972 Wolpe published his seminal article on labor migration within South Africa, arguing that the racial order of apartheid emerged from the state's design to produce cheap labor power for capital by recreating the reserves, later called Bantustans. There African families – women, elderly men, and children – were supposed to cultivate a subsistence existence while able-bodied men were compelled to migrate to the mines on short-term contracts. The racial order was not at odds with capitalism, as liberal historiography and modernization theory claimed. Rather it functioned to reproduce capitalism, not by dividing the working class but through the detailed regulation of both the social and geographical mobility of African labor. Further, Wolpe (1972) argued, with land erosion subsistence existence was made more difficult, and cheap labor could only be secured through political repression – this was the transition from “segregation” to “apartheid.”

Wolpe's article as well as his subsequent research led to new questions for the Marxist historiography of South Africa (Burawoy 1989, 2004). How was it that the South African state undertook precisely the policies that would produce a distinctive racial capitalism based on Black migrant labor? Was it the result of class struggles by white or Black workers? Did it result from the interest of the state itself in preventing revolutionary ferment in the cities? Was it the effect of the changing relations among different fractions of the capitalist class? A vibrant literature emerged, largely debated by South African scholars living in the UK and influenced by the French Marxism developed across the Channel.

This literature, however, was specific to South Africa. Like modernization theory, it implied that labor migration was a peculiarity of Africa – now associated with the colonial or apartheid state rather than the cultural backwardness of Africans. In studying migrant labor, I had another goal – to examine how far this framework applied

to advanced capitalism. I wanted to show that similar patterns of labor migration with similar “functions” could be found elsewhere. Indeed, at that time social scientists were beginning to study labor migration to Germany, France, and the UK. Manuel Castells (1975) had attributed the cheapness and thus appeal of migrant labor to its political weakness relative to established labor. I argued that the cheapness of migrant labor lay, first and foremost, in its material basis, namely, the forcible separation of maintenance from renewal. My case was California.

At the end of my first year in Chicago, fellow graduate student Ida Susser and I went off in search of Mexican migrant laborers employed by Californian agribusiness. It turned out that this was a period of escalating class struggle organized by the United Farm Workers and there were strikes across the fields. At that time the United Farm Workers had mounted a very successful nationwide grape boycott and had been making substantial challenges to agribusiness. I began thinking of the similarities and differences between the “systems” of migrant labor in South African mining and Californian agriculture. In both cases workers came from different national or ethnic labor forces: in South Africa from the artificially created Bantustans and neighboring countries; in California from a succession of imported ethnic-national labor forces, one succeeding the next as they abandoned agriculture for more stable employment.

The Bracero Program that imported single laborers on contract from Mexico was the prototype for the production of cheap labor power – with their families back in Mexico, men worked the fields for low wages but still enough to send remittances back home. Those same laborers couldn’t settle in California, but were forced back to Mexico at the end of their contracts. The Bracero Program ended in 1964 and a new regime of migrant labor was installed that rested on “undocumented” labor. This might be said to parallel Wolpe’s shift from “segregation”

to “apartheid” (Paret 2011). Still, there seemed to be a difference. While in South Africa migrant labor had a systemic character, definitive of the entire racial order, in California it was of a more conjunctural character, with agribusiness taking advantage of labor reserves in a neighboring country, aided and abetted by the state.

The study not only advanced a comparative analysis of systems of labor migration; it was also designed to debunk stereotypes about Africa and Africans. Circulating migrant labor was not a function of traditional African culture or weak labor commitment but of the coercive regimes of collaboration between capital and the state that forced workers into migratory patterns. Such regimes could be found elsewhere in the world, not just under colonialism. Moreover, I showed that theories developed in Africa could generate new insights into social phenomena found in advanced capitalism. The reigning theories of migration at the time were based on “push and pull” factors, treated as independent forces. Such theories, largely pioneered by demographers, missed the critical role of states operating in reproducing systems of cheap labor. It would bring the study of migrant labor to the heart of Marxism – the relationship between capitalism, labor, and the state. How is cheap labor produced? Cheap for whom? It could be cheap for capital but expensive for the state, as it takes on complex functions to regulate the social and geographical mobility of labor.

This framework has since been advanced in different directions. The first critical move was to undertake ethnographies at both ends of the migration stream. I still remember the excitement of reading Pierrette Hondagneu-Sotelo’s MA thesis on Mexican migration to California that explored the connection between the sending community and the receiving community. Her dissertation made two more critical moves: the centering of gender in patterns of migration and a more nuanced understanding of the role of the receiving state. Thus, she investigated the strategies of households in organizing the migration of men and

women and how this changed with the new immigration policies of the US state (Hondagneu-Sotelo 1994).

But it was also important to understand the role of the sending state. Thus, Sheba George (2005) studied state-regulated migration of Kerala nurses to Chicago, showing how women came first and men followed, giving rise to a gender reversal of domestic roles. Robyn Rodriguez (2010) focused on the way the Philippine state orchestrates the training and distribution of laborers across the globe, and how consequently the Philippine state becomes the object of struggle by which laborers seek to protect themselves from inhumane employers. Andy Chang (forthcoming) takes the program further, studying how, together with labor brokers, sending *and* receiving states organized gendered streams of migration from Indonesia to Taiwan, but with the added complication that both states were embedded in competitive relations with yet other states. One cannot understand a migration pattern between two countries without embedding it in the multilateral relations among states competing to send or attract migrants.

Recent research has become more ambitious, comparing migration streams from different communities within the same country. Abigail Andrews (2018) followed migrants from different villages in Mexico with different destinations in California – in the one case a more linear pattern sustained by a community bound by traditional mores and in the other case a more circular pattern in which gender norms were reconstituted. Aya Fabros is studying two villages in the Philippines, one concentrating on sending migrants to Italy as domestic workers and the other sending migrants to different countries in the Middle East. She shows how the sending and receiving communities are mutually constitutive so as to form two systems of migration shaped by the relations among states. Cinzia Solari (2017) compared the circular migration of single women between Ukraine and Italy, where they became homecare workers, with unidirectional family migration of Ukrainian families to California. The migrants to Italy were grandmothers,

displaced from caregiving by their daughters, who had lost their jobs in the post-communist economic collapse. In each study it was important to explore the interaction of sending and receiving states. A student of Michael Piore, Natasha Iskander (2010) compares Mexico and Morocco, grappling with the developmental contribution of migrant labor through the sending state's promotion of remittances and investment in the home community.

The same theoretical framework can work for internal migration. As in apartheid South Africa, the Chinese state organized the circular migration of workers between town and country through the *hukou* system, a variant of the South African pass laws, which made permanent urban residence difficult for rural migrants (Alexander and Chan 2004). Julia Chuang (2020) studied this system from the perspective of the rural regions, showing how it was being destabilized by a new mode of accumulation based on land expropriation that eroded the basis of cheap labor power.

My own comparison between California and South Africa began as a critical sociology, critical of modernization theory for its ethnocentric assumptions and demographers for their models of push and pull factors. It blossomed into a full-fledged political economy, stimulated by the turn to the state in the renaissance of Marxism. Today, no one can possibly ignore the role of the state in studying migratory labor, and it has become part and parcel of an exciting research program.