

# Neoliberal globalization and migration

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The 1970s witnessed the beginning of a new world order conceptualized by leading political economists as neoliberal globalization. This has been accompanied by a profound restructuring of the world's economy under the influence of large multinational corporations, the globe's most powerful governments led by the United States, and a triad of international bodies: the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund (IMF), and the World Trade Organization (WTO) (Petras & Veltmeyer 2000). This new scenario has reshaped the scope and nature of contemporary human mobility.

## Basic features of neoliberal globalization

- 1 *The internationalization of capital.* The global economy's expansion strategy is based on a profound economic restructuring based on the establishment of subcontracting chains owned by large multinational corporations, which are spread across the world's geography. This form of expansion seeks to economically reinsert peripheral countries that are rich in natural resources and to ensure an abundant and cheap workforce. The new export platforms, in fact, operate as enclaves. These types of platforms currently employ around 66 million southern workers (Singa Boyenge 2007) and the strategy is widely implemented by large manufacturing, financial, agricultural, commercial, and service sector multinationals (Robinson 2008).
- 2 *Financialization.* Financial capital generates speculative strategies that foster the channeling of investment funds, sovereign funds, and social surplus toward new financial instruments that offer short-term high-profit margins but can entail recurrent crises and massive fraud; the latter obstruct and affect the functioning of the so-called real economy (Foster & Magdof 2009).
- 3 *Environmental degradation.* Biodiversity, natural resources, and communal and national wealth are privatized for the benefit of large corporations that favor profits while ignoring social and environmental costs. This leads to increased environmental degradation, pollution, famine, and disease, as well as climate changes (global warming and increasingly frequent extreme climatic events) that threaten the symbiotic relationship between humans and the environment.
- 4 *The restructuring of innovation systems.* Advances in information technology, telecommunications, biotechnology, new materials, and nanotechnology cater to the needs of large corporations looking for increased profits. Scientific and technological research have been restructured under mechanisms such as outsourcing and offshore outsourcing, which allow corporations to have employ southern scientists, transfer risk and responsibility, and capitalize on resultant benefits by amassing patents. This has led to unprecedented mercantilism in scientific research, short-term perspectives, and a lack of social concern.
- 5 *Labor precariousness.* Cheapening labor is one of the main engines behind the new capitalist machine. Massive labor supply originating in Africa, Latin America, Asia, and the former Soviet Union supports this dynamic and has led to the growing transnationalization, differentiation, and precariousness of labor markets. We should also consider that the incorporation of

China and the former Soviet bloc into the global capitalist economy has more than doubled the available workforce. The result is a new set of divisions at the heart of the working class: labor, national, racial, and cultural hierarchies allow large corporations to benefit from cheap and flexible workforce sources (Schierup et al. 2006; [Harvey 2007](#)).

- 6 *The new migration dynamics.* While migration is a historical process with a certain degree of continuity, it has undergone a dramatic transformation under neoliberal globalization. It is now characterized by (a) strong pressure to emigrate given the lack of job opportunities in sending areas, and (b) the growing vulnerability and extreme exploitation of migrant workers in origin, transit, and destination countries. Most new migration waves comprise South–North (82 million) and South–South (74 million) flows; there is also a significant volume of internal migrants (750 million). Overall, migration has become an essential component of the process of capitalist restructuring ([Delgado Wise & Márquez 2007, 2009](#)).

In short, the process of capitalist restructuring that is currently taking place under neoliberal globalization has very little to do with a free market ideology; rather, it entails the growing monopolization of global production, finance, services, and commerce along with increasing labor exploitation and environmental degradation.

### Unequal development

The architecture of neoliberal globalization is based on the implementation of structural adjustment programs in southern nations. These programs are centered on the precepts of privatization, deregulation, and liberalization, and have been a tool with which to insert peripheral economies – including most of the ex-Soviet bloc member countries – into the dynamics of globalization. As a result, production systems have been dismantled, facilitating

the influx of foreign capital and generating a massive oversupply of labor ([Delgado & Márquez 2007](#)).

Generally speaking, these processes have resulted in the entrenchment of two particularly relevant phenomena:

- 1 *Deepening asymmetries within countries and between countries and regions.* From a geostrategic standpoint, we can observe a deepening differentiation between developed and peripheral countries, and between their national territories and regional area, which leads to increasing social and economic (financial, technological, and productive) gaps that reflect a complex system of asymmetric power relations between regions, countries, and localities.
- 2 *Increase in social inequalities.* Social inequality is one of the most distressing aspects of our times. It is expressed in the unprecedented concentration of capital, power, and wealth in a few hands while a growing segment of the population suffers poverty, exploitation, and exclusion. Increasing disparities are also expressed in: (a) growing racial, ethnic, and gender discrimination; (b) reduced access to production and employment; (c) a sharp decline in living and working conditions; and (d) the progressive dismantling and segmentation of social security systems.

The concept of uneven development encapsulates this dominant trend and refers to the historical, economic, social, and political processes of polarization (between regions, countries, and social classes) derived from the dynamics of capital accumulation, the international division of labor, the new geopolitical atlas, and class conflict across space and hierarchies.

A key underlying factor is the emergence of a new international division of labor whereby the exploitation of the workforce – via labor migration and export platforms established in peripheral nations – has become a central factor. This in turn is related to the emergence of new forms of unequal exchange ([Delgado Wise & Márquez 2007](#)).

## Forced migration

Uneven development in the neoliberal context generates a new type of migration that can be characterized as forced. Although the concept of forced migration does not apply to all migrants, it does characterize, to a great extent, current migration flows. In the field of human rights, the term refers specifically to asylum-seekers, refugees, or displaced persons. From a dominant perspective, most migrants cannot be grouped under this category since these population movements are supposedly carried out voluntarily and freely. However, it is a fact that the dynamics of uneven development have led to structural conditions that foster the massive migration of dispossessed, marginalized, and excluded populations. People are literally expelled from their places of origin as they search for better livelihoods and social mobility opportunities. Migration entails substantial risks and danger (especially for less qualified workers), as well as permanent exposure to labor precariousness and social exclusion in destination countries. Moreover, international migrants are subjected to criminalization and racist and discriminatory practices and policies that not only render them vulnerable and marginal but can also imperil their lives ([Delgado Wise & Márquez 2009](#)).

The above factors outline the reasons why the concept of forced migration should be used to characterize the majority of contemporary population movements, which includes at least the following categories ([Castles 2003](#); [Delgado Wise & Márquez 2009](#)):

- 1 *Migration due to violence, conflict, and catastrophe.* Social, political, and communitarian conflicts, natural disasters, major infrastructure developments, and urbanization can severely affect communities, social groups, families, and individuals, to the point of forcing them to abandon their place of origin and sometimes their country. This category includes refugees, asylum-seekers, and displaced persons. These modalities, which tend to affect populations in developing nations, have been

acknowledged in international law and there are protection instruments in place. The number of refugees and asylum-seekers is currently estimated at 15 million.

- 2 Climate change and environmental degradation are a source of forced migration that falls outside asylum and refugee-seeking categories. To understand it adequately requires an analytic approach that, on the one hand, avoids numerical speculation and, on the other, does not trivialize the negative impact of environmental changes. For this reason, it is important to focus on the impact of unequal development and, consequently, on the adaptive capabilities of the poorest populations, who are the most vulnerable to environmental and anthropogenic contingencies (McAdam 2010).
- 3 *Human trafficking and smuggling.* This has increased at an alarming rate in recent years, becoming a highly lucrative business due to the restrictive policies of receiving countries and increasing hardship in less developed ones. Human trafficking is associated with coercion, abduction, and fraud and includes sexual exploitation and illicit adoptions among other serious violations of human rights. The global response to the sustained increase in this form of criminal activity includes the United Nations' Convention against Transnational Organized Crime, signed in Palermo in 2000, and the subsequent Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, especially Women and Children. It is estimated that at least 2.45 million people are currently engaged in forced labor as a consequence of internal and international human trafficking.
- 4 *Migration due to dispossession, exclusion, and unemployment.* Neoliberal globalization has led to permanent social tensions in underdeveloped nations, depriving large sectors of the population of production and subsistence means and forcing them to emigrate in search of better livelihoods, both for themselves and for their families. Most current labor migration falls under this category, which is characterized

by extreme vulnerability and exploitation. According to the International Labour Organization (ILO), there are some 100 million labor migrants across the world. While this type of migration is addressed by certain protection instruments – including those incorporated in the 1990 International Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of Their Families – these lack effective implementation. Instead of adequately categorizing the problems and risks to which these migrants are exposed, such instruments generally place them under the category of “economic migrants,” which assumes that they travel in a context of freedom and social mobility.

In a less strict sense, migration due to over-qualification and lack of opportunities can be considered as a fourth type of forced migration. It ensues from structural imbalances in the labor market and limited institutional backing, which results in many highly qualified workers being unable to find fitting occupational opportunities in their own country. While these migrants do not face serious problems when moving or seeking to cover their basic needs, they migrate in order to fulfill their labor and intellectual potential, even if they are often subjected to labor degradation and wage discrimination in destination countries.

In its diverse manifestations, forced migration constitutes a source of cheap labor and, subsequently, plays a key role in the current dynamics of uneven development and the new global architecture.

SEE ALSO: Forced migration; Labor migration, poverty, and inequality; Marxist theories of

migration; Mexico–United States labor migration, 1980s to present; Reserve army of labor and migration

### References and further reading

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