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## Migration Theory

Quo Vadis?

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- analyse migration as part of broader global change
- contribute to new theoretical approaches
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## Abstract

This paper elaborates an aspirations–capabilities framework to advance our understanding of human mobility. Arguing in favour of conceptual eclecticism to bridge disciplinary and paradigmatic divides, the paper conceives migration as an intrinsic part of broader processes of social transformation and development. In this perspective, theoretical assumptions are seen as contextualised statements rather than mutually exclusive truth claims. On the macro-level, such conceptualisation of migration requires embedding the analysis of migration into broader theories of social change without reverting back to the top-down causal determinism of many historical-structural and functionalist theories. To develop a more meaningful understanding of agency in migration processes, and building upon Carling’s (2002) earlier work, the paper proposes a meta-theoretical conceptualisation of migration as a function of aspirations and capabilities to migrate within a given set of opportunity structures. Drawing on Sen’s capabilities approach, this paper defines human mobility as people’s capability (freedom) to choose where to live, including the option to stay. While distinguishing between the instrumental (means to an end) and intrinsic (directly wellbeing-enhancing) dimensions of human mobility, this conceptualises moving and staying as complementary manifestations of the same migratory agency. This allows to move beyond the rather futile debate over whether migration or sedentary behaviour is the norm and to overcome dichotomous and simplistic classifications such as between forced and voluntary migration. The paper draws on Berlin’s concepts of positive and negative liberty to conceptualise the complex and non-linear ways in which structural conditions shape migration aspirations and capabilities. The resulting expanded aspirations-capabilities framework is used to elaborate a theoretical categorisation of five ideal, typical mobility types. The concepts of positive and negative liberty (as manifestations of different structural conditions under which migration occurs) are used to elaborate a categorisation of four contextual migration categories, to which different migration theories have different degrees of explanatory power.

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# 1 Introduction

Migration theory has been in an impasse for several decades. To a considerable extent, Massey et al (1993: 432) complaint that migration theory remains largely mired into 19th century concepts, models and assumptions is still valid. Although conventional historical-structural and neo-classical theories and push-pull models have been widely criticised by post-modern scholars, the latter have generally been much better at deconstructing and subsequently debunking prior theories than coming up with viable alternatives. At the same time, and on a completely separate scientific track, economists and other quantitatively oriented social scientists have continued to base their research on simplistic neo-classical individual income (or utility) maximising assumptions and related ‘gravity’ and push-pull models that have remained remarkably popular despite their manifest inability to explain real-world migration patterns.

Migration studies has remained an under-theorised research field. This is partly because of its proximity to policy. This is unfortunate because, as an important dimension of contemporary social change, a more fundamental understanding of migration processes provides a valuable angle to better understand societal change more generally. We can only develop a richer understanding of migration processes if we do not conceptually separate it from the broader processes of social change of which it is a constituent part. In an attempt to overcome this impasse, this paper elaborates a theoretical framework – inspired by Carling (2002) concept of involuntary immobility and Sen’s (1999) capabilities approach – that conceives of migration as a function of people’s capabilities and aspirations to migrate within a given set of opportunity structures. This framework can advance a more nuanced and realistic understanding of human mobility by conceiving (at the macro-level) migration processes as an intrinsic part of broader processes of social transformation and development.

Applying Sen’s capabilities framework to migration, this paper defines *human mobility* as people’s capability (freedom) to choose where to live – including the option to stay – instead of a more or less automated, passive and predictable response to a set of static push and pull factors. The paper argues that this alternative conceptualisation creates considerable conceptual space to integrate existing theories and develop a richer understanding of human mobility, while acknowledging the simultaneous role of structure and agency in migration processes. This paper draws on Berlin’s (1969) concepts of positive and negative liberty to conceptualise the complex and non-linear ways in which structural conditions shape migration aspirations and capabilities. This expanded aspirations–capabilities framework will provide the basis for the elaboration of new categories of human mobility and migration.

## 2 Migration theory: What is the problem?

Migration studies as a field of socio-scientific inquiry is under-theorised. At best, theories exist at the meso-level, such as network theory, but even these have remained underdeveloped (Bakewell, de Haas and Kubal 2011; de Haas 2010c). Big-picture migration theory making has been largely abandoned, particularly since the rise of ‘postmodern’ approaches, which have stressed the role of agency and the unique character of migration experiences. While ‘grand theory’, state-focus and ‘methodological nationalism’ (Wimmer and Glick Schiller 2002) of prior research came under increasing attack, much recent research has focused studying and conceptualising the (transnational, multicultural, diasporic, creolized) lives, identities and experiences of migrants themselves (cf. Cohen 1997; Cohen and Toninato 2010; Portes, Guarnizo and Landolt 1999; Vertovec 1999).

This partly coincided with an increasing appreciation for qualitative research methods. It also led to an increasing gap between sociologists, anthropologists and geographers conducting qualitative, interpretative micro-studies on migrants' experiences and those branches of economics, sociology, geography and demography that have continued to focus on quantitative methods and, increasingly, regression analyses in order to formally analyse the 'causes' and 'impacts' of migration. While the former seem to have rejected the ideas of explanatory migration theories altogether as naively positivist, the theoretical veneer of quantitative approaches has remained extremely thin, and does not generally go beyond a (largely implicit) functionalist perspective,<sup>1</sup> according to which migrants are actors seeking to maximising income or 'utility'. This went along with a growing ignorance of perhaps less sophisticated, but still very insightful, descriptive quantitative methods used by earlier scholars to analyse migration patterns (cf. Hägerstrand 1957).

Functionalist assumptions are also the explicit or implicit basis underlying most work on migrant networks, in which social capital in the form of connections to migrants is seen as reducing the costs and risks of migration. Without denying that this is a powerful insight, which can for instance explain the continuation of migration across formally closed borders (Böcker 1994; Massey et al. 1993), we cannot simply assume that migrants will always be eager to help prospective migrants. As I argued in an earlier paper (de Haas 2010c) the critical social capital literature (Bourdieu 1979; Portes 1998) offers ready-made insights into the way in which strong group ties and migrant networks include insiders (eg families of migrants) but simultaneously exclude outsiders (eg people without family members abroad), while some studies showed that excessive demands on 'network assistance' can transform migrants from facilitating bridgeheads into reluctant gatekeepers (Böcker 1994; Collyer 2005). Particularly by excluding non-group members, social networks (and social capital more generally) may well increase intergroup inequality (DiMaggio and Garip 2012). In the South-Moroccan Todgha valley, for instance, international migration has given rise to a new socio-economic divide between families with and those without access to international migration. Sustained inequality between international migration 'haves' and 'have-nots' seems to be reinforced by the mainly kinship-based access to migration networks (de Haas 2006).

The findings of recent quantitative studies that, on average, the number of migrants from a particular origin country in a destination country (presumed to 'proxy' the strength of migrant networks) have a positive effect on subsequent migration from the origin to the destination (cf. Beine, Docquier and Özden 2011) confirms insights from decades of survey and case-study based research. Yet it barely helps us understand which groups benefit from network help, which are excluded, and under which circumstances such network effects may be absent or diminish over time (de Haas 2010c). The methodological assumption that 'bigger is stronger' is therefore simplistic, ignores underlying inequalities, and exemplifies that empirical work often suffers from under-theorisation, and does not really help us to detect and understand socially differentiated patterns.

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<sup>1</sup> Functionalist social theory tends to see society as a system – a set of interdependent parts – with an inherent tendency toward equilibrium. It originates from 19th century social science pioneered by Comte and his contemporaries, which aimed to emulate the natural sciences. Functionalist schools of social thought tend to be 'positivist' in the sense that they believe that there is an objective social reality, which can thus be 'objectively' measured by empirical observation, from which social laws can be derived. Neo-classical equilibrium theory and related methods of mathematical modelling and econometric analyses focusing on proving causality are a good contemporary example of functionalist social science. From the early 20th century, such views have been contested by 'interpretative' social sciences, which argue that societies cannot be compared to natural phenomena, that there exists no 'objective' social reality outside of people's perceptions, interpretations and active construction of what is seen as social reality through language (discourse), culture, and, more generally, symbols. At the same time critical theory, rooted in Marxist political economy, has criticised the unrealistic assumptions of functionalist theories, particularly because of their ignorance of structural inequalities and their related assumption of free rational choice.

This epitomises the frequent lack of connection between theory and empirical work in migration studies. While qualitative work that focuses on people's motivations and perceptions of migration tend to reject or ignore explanatory theories, quantitative empirical work on migration determinants has become increasingly data-driven and focused on proving causality (aided by the increasing availability of large data sets and advanced multivariate statistical techniques,<sup>2</sup> which enable to control for selection bias). While most quantitative studies confirm that factors such as wage gaps, networks and geographical distance have an, on average, positive effect on migration, this is hardly surprising. Yet because of the inherent bias of regression towards the average, they tend to give limited insights into how larger social, economic and political structures affect the migration behaviour of different ethnic, skills and class groups. This reflects an overall ignorance of inequality issues.

### 3 Is migration too complex for meaningful theorisation?

There is no central body of conceptual frameworks or theories on migration that can guide and be informed by empirical work. The use of theories has been, at best, ad-hoc (Arango 2000; Bakewell 2010). There are many reasons for the lack of progress in our generalised understanding of migration, which include:

- The 'receiving country bias' and the concomitant ignorance of origin country factors, leading to biased views on causes, consequences and experiences of migration;
- The dominance of state and governmental perspectives and the related frequent uncritical adoption of policy categories to classify migrants and migration;
- Disciplinary divides and the related inability (or unwillingness) to communicate;
- Methodological divides, particularly quantitative (positivist) vs qualitative (interpretative) approaches;
- Paradigmatic divides in social theory (mainly between functionalist, historical-structural and symbolic interactionist paradigms);
- The divide between the study of 'forced' and 'voluntary' migration;
- The divide between the study of international and internal migration; and
- The divide between theories and empirical work on the causes, consequences and experiences of migration.

Migration scholars have often argued that a comprehensive or universal migration theory will never arise because migration is too complex and diverse a phenomenon (Castles and Miller 2009; Salt 1987). Or, as Arango (2000: 283) stated: 'Migration is too diverse and multifaceted to be explained by a single theory'. Yet the probably sensible observation that a single, all-explaining universal migration theory will never arise (and this seems to hold for social theory in general) has unfortunately coincided with a strong tendency to abandon theorising altogether. Complexity, however, can never be a reason to abandon efforts to build better theories. After all, most social phenomena are complex by nature, and complexity has not stood in the way of theoretical advancement in other fields of social inquiry.

Complexity does not mean that a phenomenon is chaotic or is devoid of regularities, patterns or structure, only that there are many parts in elaborate, multi-layered arrangements. The complexity and 'muddiness' of social phenomena such as migration should encourage scholars to come up with

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<sup>2</sup> Also dubbed as 'econometrics' by economists. While there is nothing intrinsically economic about advanced statistics, economists such as Heckman have been at the forefront of the development of advanced statistical techniques to control for selection bias ('endogeneity'), which are now widely used in all fields of quantitative social science such as large parts of sociology, demography and political science.

better interpretative and/or explanatory concepts. One can even argue that (perhaps more than many other social phenomena) migration processes tend to be strongly patterned and show many regularities. From a micro-perspective, the diversity of migration may seem bewildering but if we zoom out patterns tend to emerge. As Mabogunje (1970) and also Lee (1966) already argued, migration is anything but a random phenomenon, with most migrants moving along spatially clustered pathways between particular origins and destination. On a macro-level, Zelinsky (1971), Skeldon (1990) and Hatton and Williamson (1998) have observed clear long-term regularities between demographic, economic and social transitions on the one hand and the emergence of particular forms of internal and international migration on the other.

## 4 The limitations of functionalist and historical-structural theories

It would certainly be unrealistic to expect that a one-size-fits-all theory explaining migration for all places and times will ever arise. The same could indeed be said, however, for virtually all social processes. To expect this would indeed be to apply 19th century (Comtian and Durkheimian) expectations according to which social sciences was expected to emulate the natural sciences. In fact, formal mathematical theoretical modelling in (migration) economics is still based on functionalist equilibrium assumptions derived from the natural sciences and the associated cornerstone assumption that people's migratory (and other) behaviour is based on income maximisation. Perhaps in reaction to a critique on the narrow pecuniary focus of such theory, economists have often framed human behaviour as based on *utility* (instead of income) maximisation. While this expands the theory to include a potentially infinite range of motives, this 'catch-all' attempt also makes the theory vague and open for ad-hoc theorising, as any motive which people value can subsequently be defined as 'utility'.

In practice income has remained the dominant focus in economic migration research praxis, while the two other assumptions – that behaviour is based on individual efforts at income maximisation – have remained even less challenged. The only major exception is probably the new economics of labour migration (NELM) pioneered by Stark (1978; 1991), which conceptualised migration occurring in developing countries as a household or family (instead of individual) co-insurance strategy aimed at diversifying (instead of maximising) income through risk spreading. This theory has gained relatively limited traction in mainstream migration economics, which has remained firmly based on the neo-classical income maximising assumption. One could also argue that, ultimately, NELM is still based on the assumption that households are rational actors engaging in a long-term optimisation strategy, and should therefore still be situated within the broader realm of neoclassical theory.

Push-pull theories are basically a prototype version of neo-classical migration theories, and like neo-classical theory they see migration at the macro-level as a function of income and other opportunity gaps between origin and destination areas. Likewise, 'gravity' models developed by geographers from the early 20th century (and later adopted by demographers and economists) were derived from Newton's law of gravity and predict the volume of migration between places and countries on the basis of distance, population size and economic opportunities in destination and origin areas (Castles, de Haas and Miller 2014).

These functionalist models are based on the assumption that people make rational decisions to optimise income. At the macro-level, these individual optimisation decisions are expected to equate to an optimal allocation of factors of production, the transfer of labour from poor to rich areas and countries, and concomitant reverse flows of capital from rich to poor countries to decrease economic

gaps between origin and destination areas and countries (de Haas 2010a). Such accounts, however, which see migration as rational optimising behaviour ‘to the benefit of all,’ typically ignore how inequality and government restrictions can prevent poor people from migrating or force migrants into exploitative work conditions; the benefits of migration therefore often accrue disproportionately to the already better-off in origin and destination societies (migrants and non-migrant ‘natives’ alike) and can actually reinforce social (‘vertical’) and geographical (‘horizontal’) inequalities. This is related to a more general critique that mainstream economics has, for too long, paid insufficient attention to the distribution of wealth and structural inequalities, partly through their ‘undue enthusiasm for simplistic mathematical models based on so-called representative agents’ (Piketty 2014: 16)<sup>3</sup>. The focus on the ‘representative agent’ (in our case the average migrant) is reinforced by the widespread diffusion of regression analysis as the gold standard for quantitative empirical analysis and the concomitant tendency to ignore distributional issues and, more generally, power. As Garip (2014 ) recently argued in a powerful critique, this has also pushed migration scholars to mould questions and theories to fit the method, instead of the other way around.

Although these theories are problematic in the face of empirical reality and have limited value in explaining migration patterns, it would be unfortunate to reject the entire neoclassic theoretical edifice out of hand without evaluating its advantages and disadvantages. After all, even if we reject the idea that migration behaviour and, on higher levels of aggregation, migration patterns, can be explained through the individual income maximising assumption, this does not mean that such motives do not play a role at all in migration decision making. Quite the contrary! Empirical work as well as neo-Marxist and other historical-structural theoretical approaches have rightly pointed out that migrants face enormous constraints in realising their ambitions to improve living standards and overall wellbeing, but, as such, this does not mean that economic motives do not play a central role. In fact, time and again, surveys have shown the importance of ‘bread and butter’ issues, particularly for poor migrants. Furthermore, macro-level analyses show the importance of economic growth and labour demand in explaining fluctuations in immigration rates. While rationality is always ‘bounded’ (cf. Gigerenzer and Selten 2002), for instance because people can only access and process limited amounts of information, it does not mean that people are not rational at all. Empirical studies have discerned clear regularities with regards to social mechanisms of migration decision making, for instance that young, single, educated people migrate more and farther, and that the inclination to emigrate abroad is highest in middle-income countries.

If we reformulate the functionalist cornerstone assumption by stating that ‘most people migrate in the expectation to find better opportunities at the destination’, few people would probably disagree. This assumption, however, is so general and universal that it is of little use explaining the spatially patterned and socially differentiated nature of real-life migration processes. This led Skeldon to comment that push-pull theory is ‘but a platitude at best’ (Skeldon 1990: 125-6): knowing why most people migrate does not necessarily help us much to explain migration processes. Numerous quantitative studies have indeed confirmed that, on average, factors such as distance (affecting migration costs), network size (also affecting migration costs) and income gaps have a strong effect on migration. Yet such obvious regularities have very little power to explain real-life migration patterns. Many empirical puzzles remain, for which we need more sophisticated theories. The real questions are more complex and beg less straightforward and all-too-obvious answers. For instance, why do

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<sup>3</sup> These representative-agent models assume that ‘each agent receives the same wage, is endowed with the same wealth, and enjoys the same sources of income, so that growth proportionately benefits all social groups by definition’ (Piketty 2014: 581). Such assumptions also underlie naively optimistic accounts according to which free migration will lift poor countries out of poverty and close international income gaps.

wealthier, more ‘developed’ societies tend to have *higher levels* of immigration and emigration than poor and ‘underdeveloped’ societies, while push-pull and neoclassical models predict the contrary? Why does ‘development’ in origin countries often lead to increased emigration propensities despite declining opportunity gaps with destination countries? How can we explain that most migration does not occur from the poorest to richest societies? Under which circumstance do migrant networks improve access of the poor to migration opportunities by lowering costs and risks of moving, and under which circumstances do networks exclude the poor and reinforce privilege and inequality by facilitating the movement of the already better-off? How can we explain that migration from poorer to wealthy areas and countries does often not coincide with increasing geographical equality in terms of income and development levels as predicted by neoclassical theories?

While quantitative studies repeatedly observe that, on average, income differences have a positive effect on migration, this is hardly surprising and does often not help explain the underlying variations, patterns and inequalities. For instance, there is lot of migration between areas and countries despite the absence of significant income differences, and we see very little or no migration between many countries despite the existence of huge income gaps. It seems tempting to attribute migration from, say, Sub-Saharan Africa to Europe to poverty, but poverty is not new to this region, and how can we explain increasing emigration over the last decade? Another example is the use of a dichotomous (‘dummy’) variable to measure the effect of colonial ties on migration. Rather unsurprisingly, regression analyses generally find that colonial ties (or a common language) have, on average, a positive effect on migration. But as Vezzoli (2014) has argued based on her research on post-colonial migration in the Caribbean, such average effects conceal enormous variation, with emigration from some countries being almost exclusively focused on the former colonial power (eg Suriname and the Netherlands) but in other cases not (eg Guyana and the United Kingdom).

Functionalist theories have inherent difficulties explaining the socially differentiated nature of migration processes, in which structural inequality and discriminatory practices strongly favour access of particular social groups and classes to favourable (legal) migration opportunities, while excluding others from such opportunities or depriving them of rights and compelling them into exploitative labour situations. At best neo-classical theory conceptualises such factors as efficiency-decreasing market imperfections or (in push-pull models) as cost-increasing ‘intermediate obstacles’ (that can be overcome). They also do not explain how, in the real world, structural inequalities reinforce social (vertical) and spatial (horizontal) inequalities, which is exactly the opposite of the convergence and ‘balanced growth’ predicted by neoclassical theory.

This points to two other fundamental limitations of functionalist migration theories and their empirical applications. The first is, their inability to conceptualise how structures shape migration behaviour. People’s capability to make independent migration choices is strongly constrained by states and other structures such as family, community, networks and culture, which ultimately determine the social, economic and human resources they are able and willing to use. At best, functionalist theories incorporate such structural constraints as cost-increasing factors, which rational actors have to include in their cost-benefit analysis, but not as factors that can set in motion and actively shape migration in their own right. Colonialism, labour recruitment, immigration policy, land dispossession, eviction due to infrastructure projects (eg dam construction), and family migration fuelled by the demand for co-ethnic marriage partners in immigrant communities, are examples of such macro- and meso-level structural factors that cannot simply be reduced to migration costs, but can initiate and mold migration in their own right. This shows the necessity to conceptualise the role of states in actively shaping migration processes instead of cost-increasing constraining factors in the way of otherwise naturally

occurring migration processes. This is a biased view anyway, as states can also stimulate and reduce costs of particular forms of migration (through migration and non-migration policies), so their conceptualisation as ‘constraints’ is one-sided.

Linked to the previous point, the awareness that structures affect migration patterns in their own right – and are thus more than ‘intermediate factors’ increasing (eg policy restrictions) or decreasing (eg migrant networks) costs and risks of migration – also upsets the underlying equilibrium assumption of functionalist theories, according to which social and market forces, if left on their own, would automatically tend towards an equilibrium. This is part of the dominant ‘balanced growth’ paradigm in economics, which predicts decreasing inequality between and within societies if market forces are allowed to work freely and efficiently without government interference.

Myrdal (1958) already argued, however, that, without (redistributive) government intervention, socio-economic processes of ‘cumulative causation’ tend to reinforce inequalities between poor areas and rich centres, rather than the other way around. In the same vein, neo-Marxist and historical-structural theories argue that structures have in fact the tendency to reproduce or even reinforce inequalities, both ‘vertically’ between social groups (such as classes) and ‘horizontally’ across space (ie between rural areas and cities; or between rich and poor countries).

This also seems to frequently apply to migration. For instance, instead of ‘equalising’ conditions between rural and urban areas, rural-urban migration often reinforces the concentration of economic activities and accelerated growth in cities (cf. Lipton 1980) for which remittances can only partly compensate. This is not necessarily ‘good’ or ‘bad’. Rather, it shows that it is naïve to assume that ‘equilibrium’ conditions will ever occur, because, by their very nature, social processes tend to reproduce or deepen existing inequalities or (in the case of economic or political revolutions) replace previous inequalities by new inequalities. In other words: in the real world structures generally affect migration behaviour and patterns in such a way that they yield the opposite results than those functionalist theories predict.

Migration from poor to wealthy countries is a case in point. For instance, in the poorest countries of Africa and Asia, legal migration opportunities to Europe, North America, Australia and New Zealand are mainly the prerogative of elite groups, who have the right diplomas to qualify for a work or study visa and who have the financial means to pay for migration. If it is mainly the elite who gain access to the most lucrative forms of legal migration, while others remain stuck in immobility or are pushed in exploitative forms of (often irregular) migration, this is likely to sustain or even deepen inequalities within origin societies. A telling fact alone is that Sub-Saharan Africans are among the best educated immigrant groups in the US (Capps, McCabe and Fix 2012) should be reason for scepticism that international migration can be a great equaliser. This also applies to educational migration, if we for instance consider the role that universities such as the American ‘Ivy League’, Cambridge, Oxford and the London School of Economics play in the reproduction of global privilege. As Van Hear (2014) has recently argued in his plea to renew attention to the role of class in studying migration processes, migration and its outcomes are ‘shaped by the resources that would-be migrants can muster and that in turn the capacity to mobilise such resources is largely determined by socio-economic background or class’ (Van Hear 2014: 100).

Rooted in neo-Marxist political economy, historical-structural theories – such as world systems (Wallerstein 1974; Wallerstein 1980) and dependency theory (Frank 1969) – emphasise how social, economic, cultural and political structures constrain and direct the behaviour of individuals in ways that

do not generally create greater equilibrium, but rather reinforce such disequilibria. They argue that economic and political power is unequally distributed, and that cultural beliefs and social practices tend to reproduce such structural inequalities. They emphasise the role of states and businesses in shaping migration and they tend to see labour migration as providing a cheap, exploitable labour force, which mainly serves the interests of the wealthy, and therefore reinforces social and geographical inequalities (Castles, de Haas and Miller 2014).

Yet the obvious drawback of historical-structural theories is that their deterministic, top-down nature leaves little room for *human agency*. Historical-structural views tend to depict migrants as passive pawns or victims of capitalism who have no choice but to migrate to survive. Such views do no justice to the diversity of migration and the fact that many people succeed in significantly improving their livelihoods through migration. Numerous (predominantly qualitative) studies have highlighted the ability of migrants to defy government restrictions, discrimination and xenophobia by forging networks, new identities, communities and their own economic structures in destination societies. It would therefore be just as unrealistic to depict all migrants as passive victims of capitalism as it would be to depict them as entirely rational and free actors who constantly make cost-benefit calculations. This shows that neither functionalist nor historical-structural theories provide realistic accounts of migratory agency. More generally, the central challenge in advancing migration theory is to develop conceptual tools that improved our ability to simultaneously account for structure and agency in understanding and explaining migration.

## 5 Theoretical exclusivism versus conceptual eclecticism

In order to advance migration theory, it is important to acknowledge that the assumptions of neither functionalist nor historical-structural theory have universal value. More generally, in trying to understand social processes such as migration, there is little room for exclusive theoretical truth claims. Rather, the validity of the assumptions of paradigms and theories seems to depend on the specific conditions in which migration occurs. In the real world, migration can be an empowering experience, but can in other cases take exploitative forms. Both paradigms may thus hold to different degrees.

This leaves us with the thorny questions of whether and how such theories can be combined. In particular, what conceptual tools can we develop to simultaneously incorporate agency *and* structure to explain migration? I would argue that the way forward is not to develop entirely new theories, but to find concepts and analytical tools that help us build upon and bridge existing theories. In this context, I would like to make a strong case for conceptual eclecticism. Scholars have often argued that we cannot combine different theories if they are based on different assumptions. On this basis, neoclassical interpretations of migration seem to be ‘incommensurable’ with neo-Marxist interpretations, because the former sees migration as an optimising strategy for the benefit of all, while the latter sees migration as an exploitation mechanism.

Is it really that difficult to combine insights from these two theories? For instance, from a macro-level perspective, some forms of migration are clearly exploitative, such as in the case of irregular migration from Mexico to the US or from Morocco to the EU, where ‘illegality’ enables employers to hire and fire migrant workers as they please and pay low wages. At the macro-level, such ‘exploitative’ forms of migration can exacerbate economic gaps between origin and destination areas by supplying cheap labour and boosting profits and income growth in destination areas for which remittances cannot compensate. Unequal terms of trade, higher productivity and economies of scale in wealthy countries can lead to further concentration of economic activities in wealthy countries along

with sustained migration of labourers to support them (cf. Martin and Taylor 1996). On the micro-level, however, it may still be 'rational' for individual migrants to migrate if this increases family income significantly and enables them to build a decent house, send their children to school or to invest in a small enterprise. The second insight does not prove the first wrong, and *vice versa*.

In the Massey et al seminal paper on migration theories, they argue that there is considerable scope to combine insights from different theories:

a full understanding of contemporary migration processes will not be achieved by relying on the tools of one discipline alone, or by focusing on a single level of analysis. Rather, their complex, multifaceted nature requires a sophisticated theory that incorporates a variety of perspectives, levels, and assumptions (Massey et al. 1993: 432)

Others have countered this argument by arguing that theories with conflicting assumptions are difficult to combine. For instance, Bakewell (2010: 1692) argued that the Massey et al 'claim that there are no inherent contradictions in the different theories is hard to sustain . . . when one considers very different ontological and epistemological foundations of migration theories'.

In essence, this is a Kuhnian argument on the incommensurability of different paradigms. As Kuhn (1962) argued in *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, proponents of different paradigms live in different worlds, use different vocabularies and criteria determining the legitimacy both of problems and of proposed solutions in terms of methodology and analysis. Each paradigm therefore has the tendency to satisfy the criteria it sets for itself and to reject the problem definition as well as evaluation criteria used by other paradigms (Kuhn 1962:109). Because of this circularity, there are no objective, 'scientific' criteria against which the superiority of competing paradigms can be externally examined, as the evaluation of which inevitably involves non-scientific values. Importantly, such a Kuhnian view excludes combination or comparison across scientific paradigms, which would be *incommensurable* because of the fundamentally different assumptions and methodological values they would adhere to.

There is, however, reason to question the applicability of the Kuhnian incommensurability principle in a social scientific context. Kuhn's argument was based on his analysis of cases of the history of science. In contrast to natural sciences, most social theories have no universal bearing but are specific to particular historical contexts or levels of analysis. The universality claims of theories in the natural sciences can, therefore, not be simply extended to the social sciences, where theories need to be contextualised. Hence, in social sciences, theories (and even paradigms) do not need to be mutually exclusive *a priori*. Rather, they offer competing explanations of social phenomena, and can frequently be combined, particularly if they apply to different historical or social contexts, different social groups or different levels of analysis. They then provide different angles through which to analyse a social phenomenon, which can all have explanatory power, depending on the specific context and levels of analysis.

It is therefore dangerous to blindly apply the Popperian method of falsifying theories to the social sciences. For instance, if empirical analyses from a particular context show that neoclassical 'predictor variables' such as wage differences do not have a significant effect on a particular form of migration, this does not provide evidence to reject the theory as a whole. It can mean that a particular theory may have little explanatory power in those particular contexts. Instead of a case for 'anything goes' or a license for ad-hoc theorising, this is rather a call for more precision in the applicability of particular theories in particular settings and at particular levels of analysis. In recent decades, there has been a sharp increase in the number of studies (in migration studies and social sciences generally),

which excel in statistical empirical analysis but disappoint in theoretical interpretation of results, particularly in their inability to elaborate alternative explanations if hypotheses are not confirmed. Instead of ‘rejecting’ and ‘confirming’ hypotheses and theories *sui generis*, empirical work would gain interpretative depth by indicating which contextual factors may explain certain expected or unexpected empirical results.

For instance, one single experiment proving Newton's law of universal gravitation wrong should suffice to reject theory once and for all. In social sciences, it is often not about one theory being ‘right’ or ‘wrong’, let alone testing the validity of a theory by plugging in a predictor variable ‘representing’ the theory. In the same vein, Garip (2012: 425) argued that migration researchers tend to ‘reduce theories to competing sets of independent variables ... [that] inevitably leads to either/or theoretical stances, rather than an emphasis on the complementarity of different theories’. Such research praxis and use of theory tends to ignore the complexity and context-specific nature of social processes. Contrary to the natural sciences, in social sciences the exception can prove the rule, and rules may differ across contexts. Therefore, social science theory building can be a relatively eclectic affair, where, to a significant extent, different theoretical perspectives can be combined to develop more comprehensive conceptual frameworks.

Thus, ‘universality’ is not what social theory should be about in the first place. This would leave us reiterating truisms such as ‘most people migrate because they expect to find better opportunities at the destination’. As I argued above, such statements are so universal they become meaningless because they do not help us much to understand real-world, strongly patterned and socially differentiated nature of migration processes. On the other hand, social theories should take ‘exceptions’ seriously, particularly when are no random deviations from an average but they reveal underlying inequalities and social stratification. Social theory formation is precisely about striking a delicate balance between the desire to acknowledge the intricate complexities and the richness of social life on the one hand and the scientific need to discern underlying regularities, patterns and trends on the other. Social theory formation is about generalising, which is a reductionist process by definition, where the exception may well prove the rule.

Rather than elaborating a ‘universal’ theory of migration, the goal should be to develop an improved *contextualised* theorisation of migration, which is systematic, precise but eclectic. For instance, ‘neo-classical’ individual income maximising motives may be more powerful in explaining relatively ‘unconstrained’ migration of high-skilled workers within or between wealthy countries, while risk spreading motives emphasised by NELM (Stark 1978; Stark 1991) may be more valuable in migration of lower skilled migrants living under higher social and financial constraints. In the same vein ‘migration transition theory’ (de Haas 2010b; Skeldon 2012; Zelinsky 1971) is not a universal theory of migration, but a contextualised theory of how migration has evolved under ‘modern’ conditions of capitalist expansion, industrialisation, urbanisation and demographic transitions. Because different theories have often been formulated to explain specific forms of migration occurring in particularly geographical and historical contexts, a greater awareness of the history of theories would be helpful to understand their particular claims and applicability.

Migration theorists should therefore focus on analysing the applicability of different theories to migration happening in different contexts. For instance, although it was initially developed to analyse rural-urban migration in developing countries, the NELM framework has been successfully applied to explain the role of inequality in Mexican-US international migration (Stark, Taylor and Yitzhaki 1988) and the role of origin country welfare systems in explaining migration of relatively deprived people

from Central and Eastern Europe (Kurekova 2013). Another example are theories of immigrant incorporation, transnationalism and diasporas. Although these have largely developed in the context of migration to Europe and North America, there is no *a priori* reason why these should not be applicable to study immigration to countries in other regions such as Africa (cf. Bakewell 2008; Van Hear 1998).

In brief, migration theories can potentially be combined across four analytical dimensions:

- Across different *levels of analysis*: macro-, meso- and micro-level explanations of migration may require different conceptual tools. For instance, forms of exploitative labour migration that seem to fit within the neo-Marxist paradigm can still be rational for individual migrants and their families.
- Across different (*geographical, regional national*) contexts. For instance, neo-classical theories may work better to explain migration in wealthy countries where most people face relatively few mobility constraints, while NELM or historical-structural approaches may be more useful to explain migration in poor countries and areas.
- At *different points of time*. The drivers and internal dynamics of migration processes often change over time and therefore also the social, cultural and economic mechanisms explaining such migration. For instance, applying cluster analysis to data from the Mexican Migration Project over the 1970–2000 period, Garip (2012) identified four distinct types of Mexico-US migrants and argued that these types correspond to specific theoretical accounts and gained prevalence during specific time periods depending on the changing conditions in both countries.
- Across *different social groups*: even at the same point of time and in the same geographical and national context, migration is a socially differentiated process, and different theories are likely to have different degrees of applicability to different occupational, skill, income or ethnic groups. Here, class still seems to matter a great deal, and perhaps more than ever in the context of immigration policies which have increasingly favoured the wealthy and skilled. For instance neoclassical assumptions may hold relatively well to explain migration from high-skilled and wealthy migrants from Sub-Saharan Africa to OECD countries whereas neo-Marxist, segmented labour market and network theories may be more useful to understand patterns of (regular or irregular) migration of Africans within Africa or across the Mediterranean. Different social and class groups often engage in different types of migration, and this is often directly huge differences in their access to social, economic and human capital resources. It is a myth that the poor do not migrate. They do migrate, but they generally do so over shorter distances and under more adverse conditions, particularly when their ‘illegal’ status facilitates exploitation and discrimination.

There is considerable potential to combine different theories to understand migration across different levels of analysis (and aggregation), different contexts, social groups and eras. Migration theory formation is neither ‘either/or’ or ‘anything goes’, but should be a conceptually eclectic affair in which prior theories should not be rejected out of hand, but in which researchers should find more precision in analysing their different levels and contexts of applicability. Using the existing conceptual toolbox in open, creative yet precise ways will allow for the elaboration of improved theories.

## 6 Theoretical integration within paradigms and the importance of 'going native'

Acknowledging the potential to combine theories; a first and fairly straightforward step towards theoretical integration is to recognise that the migration theories that have been developed with the different social-science disciplines are not inherently contradictory and can be combined as long as they are situated within the same paradigms, which share base assumptions about the nature of society and how society should be studied. For instance, neo-classical equilibrium models (from economics), push-pull models and migration systems theories (from geography and demography) and dominant interpretations of migrant network theories (primarily from sociology) can all be situated within the *functionalist* paradigm of social theory, according to which migration is an optimisation strategy of individuals or families making cost-benefit calculations.

Likewise, despite differences in nuance and level of analysis, neo-Marxist conflict theory, dependency theory (Frank 1966), world systems theory (Wallerstein 1974; Wallerstein 1980), dual (and segmented) labour market theory (Piore 1979) and critical globalisation theory (cf. Sassen 1991) have similar takes on migration as being shaped by structural economic and power inequalities within and between societies, which it tends to reproduce. They can therefore be situated within the *historical-structural paradigm*, also known as 'conflict' theory, which focuses on how the powerful oppress the poor and vulnerable. Similarly, theories that focus on migrants' everyday experiences, perceptions and identity (such as transnational, diaspora, and creolization theories) can generally be situated within the *symbolic interactionist perspective* in social theory. We can perhaps distinguish a fourth, slightly more hybrid group of meso-level theories that focus on the continuation or the 'internal dynamics' (de Haas 2010c) of migration, such as network theories, migration systems theory (Mabogunje 1970) and cumulative causation theory (Massey 1990), although these contain elements of all three general paradigms.

We can thus reduce what may initially appear as a rather dizzying theoretical complexity by combining the myriad of existing disciplinary theories (ranging from economics to anthropology) under the conceptual umbrella of the three main paradigms of social theory. As soon as we break down the semantic-linguistic and methodological barriers between disciplines – which tend to use different jargons to analyse similar phenomena – migration theories within these paradigms can easily be combined. In many ways, the disciplinary divides are thus easiest to overcome.

Unfortunately, in some social science environments, students are still taught along lines of 'theoretical exclusivity', which often evolves into 'testing' theories against each other, more or less emulating natural science methodology. In the social sciences, the aim of theoretical research (and teaching) should rather be to immerse ourselves into the specific social, cultural, and ideological contexts within which particular theories and paradigms have emerged, and, from that, to develop an understanding of social theories as different angles to understand particular social processes and phenomena occurring in particular historical-geographical contexts. This is not a plea for total theoretical relativism, but rather one for training ourselves to 'go native' in the sense of truly understanding the historical emergence, logic and thought-world of each theory, discipline and paradigm 'from within', rather than making them think they should 'choose' one particular theory.

Real interdisciplinarity can only be achieved if social scientists make an active effort to see the world through the eyes of other disciplines. Malinowski famously stated that the goal of the ethnographer should be 'to grasp the native's point of view, his relation to life, to realise *his* vision of

*his world*' (Malinowski 1922: 25). This device should also apply to the responsibility of migration researchers to 'go native' by making an active effort to understand the thought world of other disciplines. In my own doctoral research, for instance, I learnt much from reading work by migration economists (despite my background in cultural anthropology and geography), and this has made me less dismissive of economic (neo-classical and new economics of labour migration) approaches than many of my colleagues in the non-economic social sciences and taught me to see parallels with migration theories that evolved in other disciplines.

Openness towards and a real understanding of other disciplines and theories will increase our ability to play with concepts, use our imagination and creativity in drawing insights from different perspectives, which will ultimately enhance our interpretative understanding of social phenomena like migration. Disciplines, theories and paradigms are interpretative frameworks that reflect a particular way of viewing the world or dominating particular societies or periods. Such different perspectives can be complementary (when they stress different dimensions of the same phenomenon) or may seem conflicting (when their fundamental assumptions clash), although what initially appears to be a clash or assumptions may partly reflect their different applicability to different contexts or levels of analyses. This shows the danger of buying into one particular train of thought, through which theory can easily become an intellectual straightjacket rather than a toolbox allowing for a richer understanding of concrete, historical social realities. Such an openness principle has methodological implications. Instead of choosing sides between 'quantitative' and 'qualitative' methodologies, the appropriate method depends on the particular topic and research question at stake, and that disciplinary or methodological monism impoverishes rather than enriches our understanding of social processes such as migration.

## 7 Conditions for achieving theoretical progress

The need to contextualise our understanding of migration and the argument that the theoretical complexity and confusion can be reduced by clustering them under the umbrella of the main paradigms of social-scientific theory reveals the next condition for theoretical advancement in migration studies. Rather than developing new theories, considerable conceptual progress can be achieved by connecting particular migration theories to general social-scientific theories. This shows the need to (*re*) *conceptualise migration as an intrinsic part of broader processes of social, economic and cultural change* embodied in concepts such as social transformation, 'development' and globalisation.<sup>4</sup>

As Castles (2010) argued earlier, there is problematic tendency to see migration as quite distinct from broader social relationships and social processes, and that there is therefore a need to 'embed migration research in a more general understanding of contemporary society' (Castles 2010: 1566). We can only improve our understanding of migration if we understand the broader change processes of which it is a constituent part. Migration studies, then, becomes an angle through which to improve our understanding of social, cultural and economic change. In other words: to understand society is to understand migration, and to understand migration is to better understand society. Such embedded understanding of migration also creates conceptual space to study causes and consequences of migration simultaneously, instead of conceptually separating them (cf. de Haas 2010, Taylor 1999).

A second useful step is to distinguish between 'substantive' or 'middle-range' theories about particular forms or historical manifestations of migration (eg rural-urban migration under conditions of

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<sup>4</sup> This paper is not the appropriate place to extensively discuss the pros and cons of these concepts, which all refer to social change but have different foci and disciplinary origins. For the sake of brevity, this paper will use the shorthand "social transformation and development" to indicate broader processes of social change.

industrialisation and urbanisation; high-skilled migration under conditions of neo-liberal globalisation; the new economic of labour migration; or migration transition theory) and a more general ‘meta’ theory (cf. O’Reilly 2012) about the factors shaping migration behaviour that can be applied in most if not all specific historical, geographical and social contexts in which migration occurs. Substantive migration theories (which to explain or interpret particular migratory phenomena occurring in particular contexts) are relatively well-developed. In this context, Castles (2010) referred to Merton’s concept of ‘theories of the middle-range’, which are ‘special theories applicable to limited ranges of data—theories for example of class dynamics, of conflicting group pressures, of the flow of power and the exercise of interpersonal influence...’ (Merton 1957: 9; quoted in Castles 2010: 10). What is particularly missing, however, is a more overarching meta-theoretical framework about the factors shaping migration behaviour which goes beyond the income (or utility) maximising paradigm and acknowledges the embeddedness of migratory agency within larger structural change.

As argued above, both functionalist and historical-structural theories have limited, if any, conceptualisation of migratory agency. Historical-structural theories tend to portray migrants as relatively passive actors (or ‘forced’ economic migrants) who are pushed around the globe by macro-forces of global capitalism. Functionalist theories basically argue the same. Although they focus on actors (individual migrants), if we look closer functionalist theories do not ascribe much if any agency and, therefore, power to these individual-atomistic actors. Push-pull and neo-classical gravity models (borrowed from the natural sciences) simply assume that people will migrate if the costs of migration exceed the benefits. This is based the assumption that people will react in similar, automatic and predictable ways to external stimuli, or ‘push’ and ‘pull’ factors. This conceptually reduces people to objects that lack an own will, perception and are deprived of social relations. This also exemplifies the fundamental problem of transposing natural science notions of causality to the social sciences.

With regards to migration, this ignores two vital issues. First, people need access to economic (material), social (other people) and human (knowledge and skills) resources or ‘capitals’ in order to be able to move (or, conversely, in the case of adverse conditions at home, to be able to stay), where to move and the conditions under which this takes place. Because of social hierarchies, such access is usually highly unequally distributed within communities and societies. Second, this ignores the fact that people’s perceptions of the ‘good life’ and their life aspirations differ enormously across social and cultural contexts. People have no fixed sets of attributes: they vary across contexts and change over time. Depending on people’s subjective life aspirations and as well as their subjective perceptions of opportunities ‘here’ and ‘there’, migration aspirations may or may not emerge. However, even if these aspirations are present, people need to have access economic, social and human capital in order to be able to realise such migratory aspirations. So, we cannot simply assume that people will portray similar migration aspirations and migration behaviour when confronted with a similar set of external factors or stimuli.

A second aspect of migratory agency that functionalist and historical-structural migration theories fail to capture is that people may not migrate out of a (instrumental) desire to achieve aspired material, social or cultural (sedentary) lifestyles at particularly destinations, but that people may also value migration only for the sake of moving, out of wanderlust, curiosity and the desire to discover new horizons. Considering the rise of mass tourism, this is a fundamental and rather universal human desire, which means that the intrinsic (and not only instrumental or ‘functional’) value which people ascribe to migration and mobility more generally should be given a serious place in migration theories. Young people, in particular, exhibit a strong desire to leave home, at least temporarily, for a variety of reasons, ranging from the psychological need to separate from their parents, to prove their independence and

coming-of-age and to satisfy their curiosity. ‘Gap years’ and working holidays are not necessarily a prerogative of privileged Western youth, but can also be seen as a modern manifestation of a more intrinsic or innate desire of many young people to move before settling down. This also exemplifies that movement is as much the norm as is sedentary life – most people experience both over their lifetimes. Modern sedentary lifestyles assume residency, but changing residency requires migration.

A third aspect of migratory agency that functionalist and historical-structural theories find difficult to conceptualise is how migrants alter structural conditions. For instance, people may defy immigration restrictions through migrating through other (legal or illegal) channels and the formation of migrant networks, which facilitate movement by bringing down costs and risks of movement. In the end, this can fundamentally alter structural conditions under which migration aspirations are formed and migration decisions are taken.<sup>5</sup> The ignorance of migratory agency by ‘grand’ functionalist and historical-structural theories has been the core critique of researchers doing micro-level, often qualitative empirical research on the experiences and identities of migrants, the way in which people and families try to use migration as a livelihood strategy to overcome social and economic constraints, and how they actively defy governments restrictions by migrating through networks. Such empirical studies, many of which can be situated within the symbolic interactionist paradigm, have questioned the explanatory value of rational income-maximising paradigm. There has unfortunately also been a tendency to debunk ‘grand’ theories altogether (and often too easily, and too dismissively), without coming up with an alternative conceptualisations of migratory agency through the elaboration of new sets of assumptions and hypotheses.

This lack of theoretical ambition can be partly explained by a more general ‘post-modern’ aversion towards explanatory and grand theory as well as the flawed assumption that migration is too complex a phenomenon to develop more comprehensive theories. On the contrary, I have argued that there is considerable scope to elaborate more comprehensive migration theories through combining insights from existing theories and conceptualising migration as an intrinsic part of broader social change and, hence, better connecting them to general theories of social transformation and development.

## **8 Migration as an intrinsic part of broader social change**

How should we concretely understand the perhaps vaguely sounding argument that we need to conceptualise migration as an intrinsic part of broader processes of social change known under different conceptual guises such as social transformation, development or globalisation? First and foremost, this shows that we need to go beyond arguing that migration is both cause and consequence of broader social change by acknowledging that migration is part of change itself, and can therefore not really be conceptualised separately.

The modern experience of urbanisation is a good example to illustrate the latter point. It is as difficult to understand the experience of urbanisation without rural-to-urban migration as it is difficult to conceive rural-to-urban migration without urbanisation. In many ways, the increasing concentration of economic activities in urban centres and the concomitant transfer of population from rural to urban areas is also the great migration story of the modern era. Migration and urbanisation are intrinsically intertwined processes. This also show the flawed assumptions underlying attempts by government to curb rural-to-urban migration through rural development programmes. These have had marginal effects

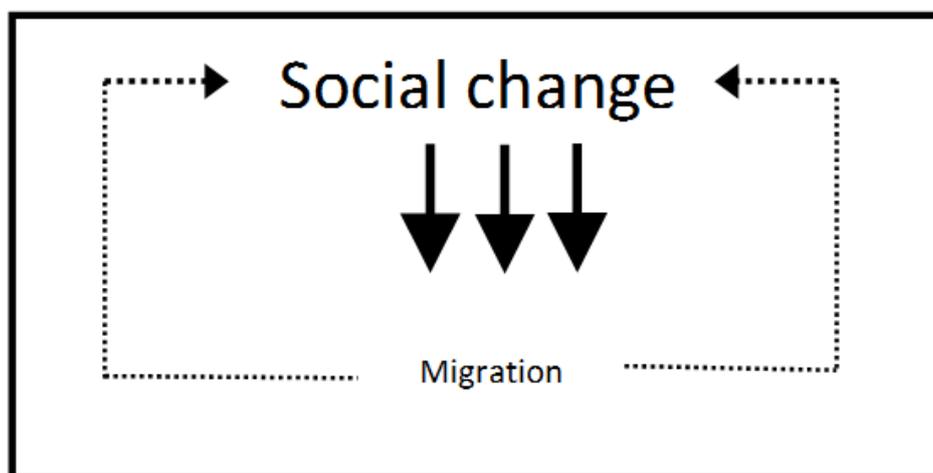
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<sup>5</sup> For instance, large-scale settlement of Moroccan migrants in many European countries (in defiance of immigration restrictions) have led to a rapid increase in flight connections between European cities and Morocco, which further patterns (or ‘structures’) the movement of ideas, goods and people along particular spatial pathways.

or failed entirely (cf. Rhoda 1983), as such policies cannot stop broader processes of social transformation and capitalist development which inevitably undermine traditional agrarian livelihoods and speed up growth of the modern urban sector. Rural development and infrastructure programmes – such as the proverbial road construction project – can therefore have the paradoxical result of *stimulating* migration.

While broader processes of change shape migration, migration also affects these processes in its own right through its social, economic, cultural and political repercussions in origin and destination societies. This relationship is thus reciprocal but also highly asymmetrical, because migration is one of the sub-processes of broader change processes. The effect of social transformation on migration is therefore of a generally larger magnitude than the feedback effect of migration. While larger processes of social transformation drive migration, migration is generally unlikely to affect the deep structures of society unless it takes truly massive proportions (cf. Portes 2010) or if colonisers subjugate native populations through military force. Figure 1 illustrates the asymmetric nature of the relationship between the migration sub-processes and the larger processes of social change of which it is part.<sup>6</sup>

**Figure 1. Migration as an intrinsic part of broader social transformation and development<sup>7</sup>**



This perspective can for instance be helpful in generating more nuanced and realistic insights into the relationship between migration and development in origin countries. Migration affects origin communities and societies through the effects of remittances on investments, income and inequality (Taylor 1999) and migration driven processes of cultural, political and social change (conceptualized as 'social remittances' by Levitt 1998) in origin communities and societies. These nature of these effects are strongly contested, opposing functionalist analyses arguing that migration, remittances and return boost development ('brain gain') to historical-structural analyses arguing that migration undermines development through depriving communities and nations of their most productive members (de Haas

<sup>6</sup> This also shows the epistemological limits of empirical studies that try to study the 'impacts' of immigration on, for instance, unemployment in destination countries. Because labour migration itself is primarily a response to labour demand it becomes questionable whether it is possible to objectively measure the 'causal impact' of migration on labour markets processes of which it is an intrinsic part. In the same vein, it is difficult to conceive of measuring the impact of rural-to-urban migration on urban growth. Obviously, we can measure how much migration contributes to urban population growth, but this is a descriptive fact rather than an analysis of the mechanisms contributing to urban growth and that compel people to move to the city, which are reflect much deeper transformation processes.

<sup>7</sup> In this representation, 'development' is seen as one manifestation or dimension of social change, which can also include other social change processes, such as social transformation or globalisation, and which may partly overlap with concepts such as 'development'. Although development is a highly contested concept, but central is the (potentially teleological) notion of progress, which is also embedded in Sen's definition of development as the expansion of substantive human freedoms. See also earlier footnote.

2010a). The reality is that both scenarios are possible, depending on the conditions under which migration takes place, which determine the selectivity of migration (who migrates? Is the elite or the relatively poor?); the position and social mobility of migrants in destination societies; and the extent to which conditions in origin societies compel migrants to invest and/or return.

The more fundamental critique on the migration and development debate is that it attributes too much transformative influence to migrants' agency. Instead of being a development 'game changer', migration tends to reinforce already existing trends of social, economic and political change – whether these are negative or positive – of which migration is an intrinsic part. It is therefore unfortunate that causes and consequences of migration are generally studied separately. After all, the developmental factors influencing migration patterns are also likely to shape the developmental consequences (Taylor 1999).

Despite their benefits for individuals and communities involved, migration can neither be blamed for a lack of development nor be expected to trigger 'take-off' development in generally unattractive investment environments. If origin states fail to implement reform and it is mainly the already better off who migrate, migration is unlikely to fuel development – and can actually sustain situations of remittance-dependency, disinvestment and authoritarianism. If, however, structural 'development' conditions take a positive turn through political and economic reform, migrants are likely to recognise new opportunities and, and can then reinforce these positive trends through investing and returning (de Haas 2010a).

The reverse relation – that is, how development affects migration – has been much less studied. This reflects a 'receiving country' bias in migration and often a complete ignorance and flagrant misunderstanding of the developmental causes of migration. Also in this case, the conceptualisation of migration as an intrinsic part of more general processes of social change can yield important insights. Development often shapes migration in often quite counter-intuitive ways. Particularly in poor societies, increasing incomes, improving education, infrastructure expansion and concomitant economic transformations can lead to stark increases in migration. This happens in a hypothesised sequence in which internal (rural-to-urban) migration peaks first, after which it increasingly spills over into international emigration at later stages. When countries become wealthy, emigration decreases and immigration increases, although wealthy societies remain characterised by generally high levels of mobility and migration. Such mobility or migration transitions have first been hypothesised by Zelinsky (1971) and confirmed by later studies (Clemens 2014; de Haas 2010b; Hatton and Williamson 1998; Skeldon 1990; Skeldon 2012).<sup>8</sup> This not only defies functionalist and historical-structural migration theories, which assume that reduction of poverty and economic gaps will reduce migration.

These examples of urbanisation and development illustrate that migration is an intrinsic part of these processes. The idea that migration will be low under 'equilibrium' conditions is naïve and ahistorical. As long as societies change and social stratifications exist, people will keep on migrating. Societies and migration are in constant mutation, and migration should therefore be seen as a normal (instead of 'good' or 'bad') process. These examples also show that we need to go beyond the question whether or how many people migrate, or whether migration or non-migration is the norm. The relevant issue is rather how spatially and socially differentiated patterns and experiences of migration are

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<sup>8</sup> There is no space here to further explain this relation (see de Haas 2010b). Macro-structural explanations why development often boosts migration include the increasing concentration of economic activities in urban areas alongside with a structural shift from agrarian to industrial and service based economies, education and occupational specialisation, alongside growing structural complexity and segmentation of labour markets. On the micro-level these macro-level processes are often manifested in people's increasing aspirations and capabilities to migrate.

constantly reshaped by broader processes of social change. A better understanding of the drivers of migration therefore requires an analysis of how broader processes of development and social transformation shape the geographical orientation, timing, internal composition and volume of internal and international migration.

Conceptualising migration as an intrinsic part of broader social change also shows the need for migration studies to go beyond the conventional but somehow myopic focus on the effects of migration policies (Czaika and de Haas 2014; Czaika and Hobolth 2014; Mayda 2010; Ortega and Peri 2013) in studying the role of states in migration processes. The more indirect role of the state in shaping long-term migration patterns has remained relatively understudied. This is a critical gap, as states exert a huge influence on immigration and emigration through ‘non-migration’ policies, which shape the social, economic, political and cultural fabric of origin and destination societies and therefore migration in powerful, albeit predominantly indirect, ways.

## 9 Conceptualising structure and agency in migration processes

The main problem with macro-structural accounts of migration remains their deterministic overtones and their inability to meaningfully conceptualise how individual migrants and groups of migrants exert agency within broader structural constraints. For instance, transition theories (Skeldon 2012; Zelinsky 1971) excel in describing the patterned relationships between migration and broader social, economic and demographic transitions, but do not really address the mechanisms *explaining* why people often move more and farther away under conditions of ‘development’ and social transformation. In other words, they struggle to provide an agentic account of migration.

Although many definitions exist, *structure* can perhaps be best defined as patterns of relations, beliefs and behaviour. The term ‘pattern’ refers to regularity or routine, which leads people to repeat the same behaviour without constantly making conscious, rational choices between a, theoretically infinite, number of options. Factors or institutions such as social class, religion, gender, ethnicity, networks, power, and markets (and the belief systems underpinning them) limit the opportunities that people perceive they have (and/or have in reality) and thus constrain their freedom. Within such structural constraints, however, there is almost always a certain bandwidth within which people can make choices, and structures can actually facilitate migration along particular pathways. Agency reflects the limited but real ability of human beings (or social groups) to make independent choices and to impose these on the world and, hence, to alter the structures that shape people’s opportunities or freedoms. This shows that agency is closely linked to the notion of *power*, which in the Weberian definition refers to the ‘causal’ ability of people to realise their will and to control the behaviour of others, which is in turn based on people’s ability to control resources.

It is therefore appropriate to conceive of a continuum running from low to high constraints under which migration occurs, in which all (potential) migrants have agency and deal with structural constraints, although to highly varying degrees. In this way, artificial, reductionist classifications, such as between forced and voluntary migration (see also Richmond 1988), can be overcome *to include virtually all forms of migration into one conceptual framework*. Because individuals and groups have agency, their mobility is also a potential force for structural change by affecting people’s stratified access to social, economic and human resources and through the emergence of meso-level structures such as migrant networks. As I argued above, however, the degree to which migrants can exercise agency and affect structural change is limited, because migration is generally only one sub-process of broader processes of social transformation and development.

To move migration theory (and social theories more generally) forward, theories should simultaneously account for agency and structure and their interplay. Yet the crucial question is *how* to incorporate structure and agency in conceptualising the concrete manifestations of migration? Although the need to incorporate agency and structure in migration theories is widely acknowledged, it risks becoming a mantra, which is repeated time and again, while it often remains vague how this should be done in practice.

In the following sections, I will argue how a meta-theoretical conceptualisation of migration as a function of *aspirations* and *capabilities* to move (1) expands the theoretical concept of human mobility to include movement and non-movement; (2) improves our ability to develop a richer and more realistic understanding of the ways in which macro-level change affects people's migratory agency; and (3) enables to develop theory-driven migration and mobility categories which can help us to move beyond conventional, largely policy-driven, migration categories.

## 10 Migration as a function of capabilities and aspirations

In 2002, Carling published a seminal article exploring the role of aspirations and 'abilities' in the migration process. In the paper, based on his doctoral fieldwork in Cape Verde, he advanced the term 'involuntary immobility' to denote the phenomenon of the growing numbers of people living in Cape Verde (and poorer countries more generally), who wish but do not have the ability to migrate (Carling 2002). Analysing the case of wartime migration in Mozambique, Lubkemann (2008) applied the concept of involuntary immobility to argue that the usual conflation of migration with displacement conceals a large category of people who suffer from 'displacement in place' through 'involuntary immobilisation' because warfare trapped them in the places they wanted to leave. Carling (2002), Lubkemann (2008) and others (cf. Haugen 2012; Jónsson 2008) have applied the concept to origin societies, but involuntary immobility can also be used to describe situations in places of destination when aspiring return migrants cannot go back because of a lack of resources or border controls. It may also describe situations in which migrants 'in transit' are immobilised, if they become 'stuck' as a consequence of a lack of resources, violence, border controls or a combination thereof.

The basic underlying theoretical innovation, however, is the systematic distinction of the ability (or capability) from the aspiration to migrate, which allows for richer, nuanced and more realistic migration categorisations. This also resonated with my own research in Morocco. My own MA and PhD fieldwork experiences in the oases of Southern Morocco (1993–1994 (de Haas 1998) and 1998–2000 (de Haas 2003), respectively) inspired me to think about different ways of theorising migration, because conventional migration theories struck me as rather useless in explaining some of the migration dynamics I observed. Particularly during my doctoral fieldwork in the Todgha valley between 1998 and 2000, I was confronted with the following puzzle: despite significant increases in income and general living conditions over the previous decades, migration from the Todgha valley to big cities in Morocco and, particularly, Europe had continued unabatedly. This did not fit at all within neo-classical migration theories and push-pull models, which would have predicted decreasing emigration improved living standards in the Todgha valley. The well-known migration facilitating-function of social networks alone was no sufficient explanation for this continued migration, as many new migrations had occurred amongst ethnic groups and families without prior migration experience.

This compelled me to adopt aspirations and capabilities as conceptual tools to explain what I was seeing (de Haas 2003). In the Todgha valley, growing aspirations and capabilities to migrate had inspired and enabled increasing numbers of people to leave the valley. I argued that, although local

living conditions had significantly improved, people's life aspirations had increased even faster, leading to increasing migration aspirations. Improved education, increased media exposure alongside the regular return of the migrant 'role models' and exposure to their relative wealth had contributed to rapidly increasing material and changing social aspirations of people living in the valley. In particular, international migration had become so strongly associated with material and social success that many youngsters had become virtually obsessed with leaving. This 'culture of migration' also contributed to an increasing antipathy towards traditional, agrarian lifestyles and rapidly changing notions of the 'good life'.

For my PhD thesis I initially used Sen's capabilities approach (cf. Sen 1999) to evaluate the origin country development impacts of migration not in terms of income increases, but rather in terms of wellbeing-enhancing improvements in living standards (de Haas 2003).<sup>9</sup> The capabilities approach also turned out to be a valuable approach to understand how, conversely, development may affect migration. I argued that the local development context may affect migration propensities in two different ways. First, the extent to which local opportunities allow people to lead the lives they aspire to (which is how Sen defines development) is likely to affect their migration aspirations. Second, economic growth and other improvement in living standards are likely to increase people's capability to migrate by increasing their ability to bear the costs and risks of migration. In a later paper on Mobility and Human Development (de Haas 2009) that served as a conceptual background paper for the UNDP report on human mobility (UNDP 2009), I applied Sen's capabilities approach (which had hitherto not been applied to migration) to theoretically understand the paradox that development can lead to more migration.

Drawing on previous work by Carling (cf. Carling 2001; Carling 2002), and myself (cf. de Haas 2003; de Haas 2009) on aspirations and capabilities, this paper further expands these concepts and embed them in wider theoretical perspectives on capabilities and liberties developed by Sen (1999) and Berlin (1969), respectively. The paper will argue that the application of Sen's capabilities perspective to migration theory allows for a deeper understanding of the role of capabilities in shaping migration aspirations and enable to make a vital analytical distinction between the *instrumental* and the *intrinsic* dimension of human mobility. At the same time, Berlin's concepts of positive and negative liberty are introduced as useful ways to develop a more refined view of the complex ways in which macro-structural change processes affect migration aspirations *and* capabilities. While neither Sen nor Berlin have developed their ideas to explain migration, I argue that these general concepts can be applied to migration to provide a richer understanding of migration as an intrinsic part of broader change.

The core argument is the following: the fragmented insights from different disciplinary theories can be integrated to a considerable extent through conceptualising virtually all forms of migration as a function of migration *capabilities* and migration *aspirations*.

- Migration *aspirations* are a function of people's general life aspirations and perceived spatial opportunity structures
- Migration *capabilities* are contingent on positive ('freedom to') and negative liberties ('freedom from')

The concept of migration aspirations expands the notion of migratory agency into the subjective realm. It addresses the central shortcoming of functionalist and historical-structural theories, which assume that people respond to external 'stimuli' in rather uniform ways. Migration aspirations depend on

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<sup>9</sup> See later sections for Sen's definition of development and the capabilities approach.

people's life preferences and perceptions about opportunities and life elsewhere. Migration aspirations are affected by culture, education, personal disposition, identification, information, and images.

Aspirations are conceptually distinct, but not independent from capabilities. A good example is education in rural areas, which expands not only skills and knowledge, but also people's awareness of alternative, consumerist, and urban lifestyles. This may change people's notions of the good life, and they may subsequently start to aspire to migrate. However, the fact that people are better educated may also increase their aspirations as they start to think that these new material and cultural lifestyles are actually within their reach (cf the 'capacity to aspire' (Appadurai 2004, see also Czaika and Vothknecht 2012). So, increased capabilities can increase aspirations. Generally, preferences tend to change and life aspirations tend to increase with broader processes of 'development'. This, however, only translates into migration aspirations if people perceive that their (new) subjective needs and desires cannot be fulfilled locally.

It is useful to make a distinction between *instrumental* and *intrinsic* dimensions of migration aspirations. 'Gap years' and 'lifestyle migration' can be examples of the latter, and labour and student migration examples of the former, although, in practice, intrinsic and instrument aspirations may occur simultaneously. Instrumental aspirations receive most attention in research and are related to migration as a 'functional' or 'utilitarian' means to achieve another end, such as higher incomes, higher social status, better education or protection from persecution. Intrinsic aspirations refer to the value people attach to the migration experience itself, such as the joy and pleasure derived from exploring new societies, to indeed see the 'bright lights of the city', or the social prestige attached to enduring the suffering often associated to migration and to be seen as a 'man (or woman) of the world'.

People can also derive wellbeing from mobility freedom itself, whether they use that freedom or not. Irrespective of whether people make use of that freedom or not, the very awareness of having the freedom to move and migrate can add to people's life satisfaction, in the same vein as the freedom of speech and religion, the right to organise protest marches, or to run for president, can contribute to people's wellbeing although many will never use it. Conversely, many young Moroccans I interviewed for my PhD research felt 'imprisoned' in their own country because of European migration restrictions (de Haas 2003), which does not mean that they will all really go if given the chance. From this, we can perhaps hypothesise that a border wall or other migration restrictions might actually fuel the desire to get to the other side by creating an obsession with 'getting out' as soon as the opportunity presents itself, while full mobility rights might decrease such aspirations.

The intrinsic dimensions of migration capabilities and aspirations are often not taken seriously in the predominantly 'functionalist' migration literature, or set apart as different categories of migration (eg 'lifestyle migration' (Benson and O'Reilly 2009)) that cannot really be compared to more mainstream forms of migration such as labour migration. We do know from empirical research, however, that intrinsic 'adventure' and 'lifestyle' motives are not the prerogative of privileged Europeans or North Americans, but can also be common among other migrant groups such as undocumented migrants in England (Bloch, Sigona and Zetter 2011) or African migrants crossing the Sahara (cf. Bredeloup and Pliez 2005; Bredeloup 2008). Life aspirations can include mobility as an intrinsically valuable experience. Hence, migration theories cannot reason away or set apart such intrinsic forms of migratory aspirations. In the following section, I argue how Sen's (1999) capabilities approach may provide useful conceptual tools to come to grips with the instrumental and intrinsic dimensions of migration capabilities and aspirations.

## 11 Migration capabilities: migration *as* development

Sen (1999) conceptualised development as the process of expanding the substantive freedoms that people enjoy. He operationalised this through the concept of human capability, which is the ability of human beings to lead lives they have reason to value and to enhance the substantive choices they have. Within the context of development studies, Sen argued that income growth itself should not be the litmus test for development theorists, but whether the capabilities (or freedoms) of people to control their own lives have expanded. The fundamental assumption here is that the expansion of human capabilities is desirable because it adds to the quality of people's lives. The idea that freedom of choice is essential to leading a 'good life' is not new and was, for instance, discussed by Aristotle (Sen 1988: 269). Sen argued that freedom is central to the process of development for two reasons. First of all, there is the *intrinsic* importance of human freedoms in directly adding to people's quality of life, which has to be distinguished from the *instrumental* value of freedoms in also contributing to human and economic progress (Sen 1999).

Drawing on Sen's capabilities approach, migration should not only be conceptualised as an instrumental-functional means-to-an-end to improve people's ability to 'live the lives they have reason to value', but also as a potentially wellbeing enhancing factor in its own right. This alludes to the intrinsic 'developmental' value of migration, and also expands our understanding of mobility as the ability to decide where to live. People may enjoy mobility freedoms without ever using them, while migration is only generally wellbeing enhancing and empowering if people also have the option to stay. This distinction between *intrinsic* and *instrumental* dimensions of migration enables us to go beyond common functionalist, instrumentalist views on migration

- The *intrinsic dimension of migration* is the direct contribution of the freedom of mobility to people's wellbeing, irrespective of the fact of they move or not ('migration as freedom'). It relates to (particularly young) people's innate desire for adventure, discovery and separation from (the parental) home for shorter or longer period as well as the intrinsic wellbeing derived from the awareness of having the optional freedom to move.
- The *instrumental dimension of migration* (capabilities) reflects the role of migration as an instrument to achieve other personal goals such as increased income, education and personal safety.

Usually, migratory agency is associated to the act of moving and setting up residency in another place or country. This reflects, however, a one-sided view on agency, since, after all, agency can also involve the choice not to act (cf. Emirbayer and Mische 1998) is that choice is present. A truly agentic view on migration should therefore capture both non-migratory and migratory behaviour. There is a long-standing controversy in migration studies about whether migration or sedentary behaviour is the norm. Some scholars argue that migration is a universal part of the human experience that we tend to erroneously misrepresent past societies as largely 'immobile' and that migration is the 'normal' pattern. Others argue that most people, if given the choice, prefer to stay at home (the 'home preference'), and that migration is actually very small if we consider the huge economic inequalities across the globe.

This debate, however, seems somehow futile. First, a truly agentic view on migration does not presume either moving or not moving as the norm, but acknowledges that they are the two sides of the same freedom-of-mobility coin. Second, on a more practical level, the paradox is that migration enables sedentary lifestyles, while sedentary lifestyles require migration. For instance, the residential lifestyles of contemporary societies (in contrast to the more permanent inherent to hunter-gathering, shifting

cultivation or pastoral lifestyles) create the need for migration as a continuous adaptive response to social transformation. Another example is the situation in which the migration of one family member actually enables others family members to stay because of the money and goods send back by migrants remit money (Heinemeijer et al. 1977).<sup>10</sup> The co-dependency of non-migrant and migrant family members is for instance one of the core tenets of the new economics of labour migration (Stark 1991). So, families and social groups usually engage simultaneously in migratory and non-migratory livelihood strategies. Although less than three per cent of the world population migrates across borders, many more move internally, and almost anybody is affected by migration in direct or indirect ways.

From a conceptual point of view, there is a need to simultaneously capture movement and non-movement into an agentic definition of mobility. Inspired by Sen's emphasis on the intrinsic value of human freedom, we can also conceptualise the very capability to move (migrate) as a fundamental human freedom, which enables us to transcend usual instrumental, functionalist views which can only conceptualise migration as a means-to-an-end. To capture that notion of migration as a freedom in its own right, I propose to define concept of *human mobility* not by the criterion of actual movement, but as *people's capability (freedom) to choose where to live* – with residential human movement (ie migration) as the associated functioning (see also de Haas and Rodríguez 2010). Essentially, human mobility thus includes the freedom to stay, which we can classify as *voluntary immobility* (to contrast Carling's (2002) concept of *involuntary immobility*).

This is intrinsically related to capabilities in two different ways: first, people need access to social (other people), economic (material) and human (knowledge and skills) resources to exert migratory agency. Under highly constrained conditions, people often lack the resources to leave, which partly explains why poor people are generally underrepresented in long distance international migration. Second, if people have no realistic choice to stay, for instance through war, persecution or environmental hazards, or are pressured by their families to work abroad, they are deprived of an essential part of their human mobility freedoms, that is, the capability to stay. On the other hand, if people feel deprived of their mobility freedoms, the concomitant feeling of being 'trapped' may further fuel their migration aspirations.

## 12 Positive and negative liberty as manifestations of structural conditions

Sen's capabilities approach focuses on freedoms at the individual level and enables us to conceptualise human mobility (people's freedom to choose where to live) as a wellbeing-enhancing capability in its own right ('migration as freedom'). In order to develop a richer understanding of how individual migration capabilities and aspirations are shaped by, and interact with, macro-structural factors and processes, it is useful to draw on Berlin's distinction between positive and negative liberties.

Berlin made a fundamental distinction between negative and positive liberty (or freedom) in his *Four Essays on Liberty* (Berlin 1969). Berlin's concept of *negative liberty* refers to the absence of obstacles, barriers or constraints. This comes close to common ways of conceiving freedom, which tend to focus on the role of states and politics (including war and violent oppression) in imposing constraints on people's freedom or even being an outright threat to people's lives, which may force them to flee. *Positive liberty* refers to the ability to take control of one's life and to realise one's fundamental purposes. In Berlin's own words, positive liberty 'derives from the wish on the part of the individual to

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<sup>10</sup> Heinemeijer et al (1977) therefore saw migration as a family strategy serving "partir pour rester" (to leave in order to stay).

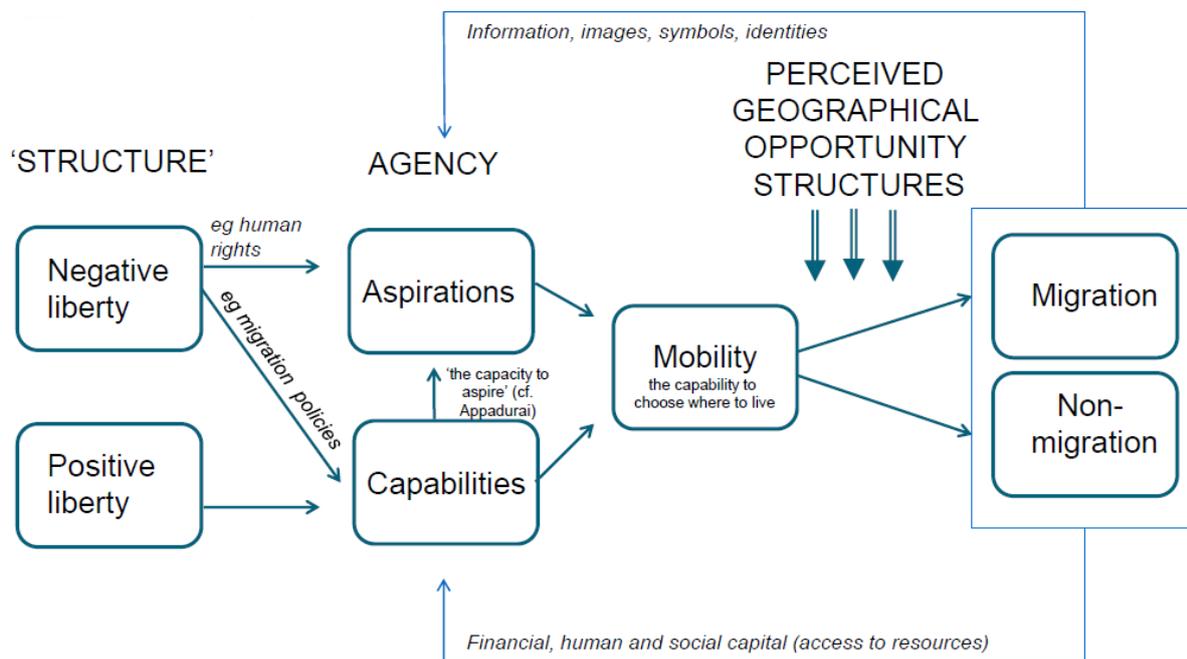
be his own master' (Berlin 1969: 131). Berlin's own account focuses on having a role in choosing who governs society – but this concept also seems applicable to the agency of individuals and groups to change their life circumstances and to escape from disadvantaged positions. This comes very close to Sen's concept of capabilities as the ability of human beings to lead lives they have reason to value and to enhance the substantive choices they have; and it also comes closer to notions of 'empowerment' in development theory. In many ways, the concept of positive liberty embodies the agency of individuals and groups to change their life circumstances and to escape from disadvantaged positions.

The twin concepts of negative and positive liberties provide a useful first conceptual link between structural conditions that shape such liberties, and people's individual aspirations and capabilities, concepts which embody choice and agency but which are ultimately constrained by these structurally determined liberties. It is essential to realise that, as such, the absence of external constraint (negative liberty) is not a sufficient condition for people to exert agency. A minimum of negative and positive liberties is necessary for people to exert migratory agency, and a lack thereof may constrain people's mobility. The concepts of negative and positive liberty capture how structures affect people's agency through simultaneously impinging upon people's capabilities and aspirations, which, in their interaction, yield various, socially stratified and sometimes counterintuitive outcomes. For instance, a state may be formally democratic and there may freedom of movement, but illiterate and poor people may still lack the capabilities and resources to make use of such theoretical liberties, such as the right to stand for elections or their preference to move, or, conversely, to stay home. Conversely, people may aspire to flee situations of distress and danger, but they still need certain capabilities to realise this wish.

In that sense, a term like 'forced migration' may sound like an oxymoron, as people still need 'positive liberty' (capabilities) to be able to migrate, unless people are literally displaced by external force, such as in the case of eviction, deportation or enslavement. Let me be clear: This is not to argue that refugees have no good reasons to flee and should not have the right to seek and receive protection. The international refugee regime is there to protect people who have no reasonable option of staying, and are therefore deprived of their mobility rights (which, in my definition, includes the freedom to stay). In order to be able to flee, however, people need certain capabilities in the form of resources such as money, social connections, knowledge and physical ability. The most vulnerable populations may therefore have no option to flee. The poorest often only migrate if forced by conflict or disasters, and then mainly move over short distances, while the extremely poor are often deprived of the possibility to move at all. For instance, when Hurricane Katrina hit New Orleans in 2005, many of the (car-less) poor were trapped in the city (Castles, de Haas and Miller 2014: 47). In the civil conflict that broke out in Libya in 2011, hundreds of thousands of guest workers from Sub-Saharan Africa were trapped in the country and exposed to abuse, violence, imprisonment and murder (de Haas and Sigona 2012).

This perspective may also help to understand the complex, non-linear and sometimes counter-intuitive ways in which structural conditions shape migration aspirations and capabilities. This is essentially because negative and positive freedoms may impinge in rather different ways upon migration aspirations and capabilities. This makes the migratory effect of decreases or increases in freedoms far from straightforward. The fundamental puzzle is the following: although deprivation of negative and positive freedoms and awareness of better opportunities elsewhere may increase people's migration aspirations, absolute deprivation of either negative or positive freedoms, or both, may prevent them from exerting migratory agency. On the other hand, increases in positive and positive freedoms increases their mobility freedoms, but this does not necessarily lead to more migration, as under such conditions more people may start to exert the choice to stay.

**Figure 2. Expanded aspirations-capabilities framework for conceptualising migratory agency**



### 13 The structural formation of migration aspirations and capabilities

Figure 2 depicts the various ways in which life aspirations and capabilities are affected by structurally determined positive and negative liberties, and how these affect mobility freedoms and people’s actual migration decisions. We can only expect people to migrate if they have both the aspirations and capabilities to do so. Negative freedoms affect both people’s life aspirations and capabilities, and the interaction between these factors explains complex, sometimes counterintuitive outcomes. For instance, a lack of human rights can instil aspirations to live in a freer society whilst the same lack of human rights can also deprive people from agentic power to fulfil this wish, which may explain why a multivariate analysis of global migrant stock data showed that low levels of political freedom have no significant effect on emigration (de Haas 2010b: 39). While autocratic governance and political oppression may on the one hand increase migration aspirations, this hypothetically positive effect might be counterbalanced by the fact that autocratic states often create obstacles for emigration of their own citizens, thus lowering their negative freedoms and, hence, capabilities to migrate.

Positive freedoms primarily affect people’s capabilities in the form of their access to social, economic and human resources. Indirectly – based on the notion of the ‘capacity to aspire’ (Appadurai 2004; Czaika and Vothknecht 2012) – increased capabilities are also likely to influence aspirations positively, by leading people to believe that migration is ‘within their reach’. For instance, having a higher education degree is not only likely increase knowledge and awareness about opportunities elsewhere, but also to instil a belief that it is actually possible to find a job and secure a visa.

Increased general life aspirations do not inevitably lead to increased migration. This will only happen if people perceive that their aspirations cannot be fulfilled locally *and* they believe that better opportunities exist elsewhere, or if their migration aspirations are more intrinsically motivated. This also relates to the extent to which people believe that local opportunities will improve within the near

future, and the extent to which they believe they can or should make a difference through contributing to positive change, for instance through investing or political activism. Drawing on Hirschman's (1978) 'exit or voice' hypothesis, we can argue that if people are discontent with a given situation, they can either try to change these circumstances there where they are, or leave (or accept). So, the imagined opportunities for future local change and people's believe about their own power and moral obligation to actively contribute to such change will also affect the extent to which increased life aspirations will translate into migration aspirations. Different or higher life aspirations thus do not necessarily translate into migration: they can also be fulfilled in home-preferenced ways, for instance by starting one's own enterprise, pursuing higher education, joining trade unions and political movements, or taking up arms. Based on this analysis, we can for instance hypothesise that the lack of emigration opportunities as a consequence of the economic recession in Europe has increased internal pressure for radical political reform in a country like Tunisia in 2011. So, the closing of the emigration 'safety valve' (exit) may have reinforced revolutionary forces (voice).

The concept of negative freedom also provides an avenue for meaningfully incorporating the role of states and policies in migration theories. When people have migration aspirations but are deprived of negative or positive freedoms to realise this desire, they are often forced to stay, creating situations which Carling (2002) has conceptualised as 'involuntary immobility'. For instance, authoritarian states often have larger power to deprive their citizens of the right to exit. Even under liberal migration policies, however, where people may enjoy abundant negative freedoms, if they are deprived of the positive freedoms through a lack of access to social, human and economic resources, many people will still be unable to migrate, particularly over longer distances and internationally.

A key condition for the successful incorporation of structure and agency in migration theories is to connect both concepts and understand their dialectics. In this respect, 'structure' is often erroneously seen as a set of constraints, whereas in reality structures simultaneously constrain the migration of particular groups while facilitating the migration of other groups. In this way, structures shape socially differentiated and geographically clustered patterns of migration. States and their policies alongside networks have a strong structuring effect on migration, which means that they facilitate the movement of some (age, gender, skill, class, ethnic, regional) groups and hinder the movement of others. In many ways, the essence of migration policies pursued by modern states is not so much to affect the number but the selection of migrants in terms of their education, job status, wealth and national origin (de Haas, Natter and Vezzoli 2014). In this way, states and their policies are patterning migration to occur along certain specialised, geographically clustered pathways linking very particular spaces and social groups over space.

The ensemble of structural conditions in origin and imagined migration destinations therefore creates complex opportunity structures, endowing different individuals and social groups with different sets of negative and positive freedoms, which, depending on how these structural conditions simultaneously affect their capabilities and aspirations, and how people perceive these conditions through their social, cultural and personal lenses, may or may not lead them to decide to migrate. In its turn, such migratory agency will reciprocally affect these initial conditions through feedback effects. This pertains to more than the well-known potential of networks and transnational community and identity formation to facilitate more migration. For instance, remittance driven increases in income inequality in origin communities may instil migration aspirations amongst those left behind, while the establishment of migrant communities at the destination may create a demand for specialised workers in 'ethnic' businesses (Castles, de Haas and Miller 2014). Such processes of 'cumulative causation'

(Massey 1990) or ‘contextual feedback effects’ (de Haas 2010c) exemplify the dialectics of structure and agency in migration processes.

The aspirations–capabilities framework helps to explain the paradox of why social transformation or ‘development’ and its key manifestations such as increasing incomes, better education and access to information often coincides with increasing instead of decreasing levels of internal and international migration. Particularly if societies transform from a poor, rural and marginal situation to a middle-income, industrialising and urbanising status, both aspirations and capabilities tend to increase quickly, resulting in development-driven emigration booms. While such capabilities and aspirations manifest themselves on an individual level, they are affected by macro-structural changes such as the development of infrastructure, schooling and media. From this, it seems that people are most inclined to migrate when they enjoy a high degree of negative freedoms and ‘moderate’ level of positive freedoms, which should be high enough to enable people to migrate, but not so high that declining spatial opportunity differentials with potential destinations would substantially decrease migration aspirations.<sup>11</sup>

With the exception of extreme situations like slavery and deportation, people are not passive subjects that can be moved. They need to move by themselves, and a fundamental precondition for that to happen is that they have the aspiration and capability to do so. Classical functionalist and historical-structural migration theories implicitly assume that people’s preferences and, hence, aspirations are constant across societies and over time, and basically boil down to individual income (or ‘utility’) maximisation. This is what makes functionalist migration theory inherently mechanistic and their micro-models devoid of any real sense of agency, as individual choices are entirely predictable and human beings are conceptualised to be ‘pulled’ and ‘pushed’ in space like atoms through abstract causal forces. This ignores the fact that culture, education and access and exposure to particular forms of information are likely to have a huge impact on (1) people’s notions of the good life and, hence, personal life aspirations; and (2) their awareness and perception of opportunities elsewhere.

## 14 Theoretical synthesis

The expanded aspirations-capabilities framework creates scope to bring different migration theories under one meta-conceptual umbrella. Instead of being mutually exclusive, different theories may apply to particular manifestations of migration occurring under specific conditions, with particular social categories and/or to particular levels of analysis. Positive and negative liberty (as manifestations of structure) seem useful ways to operationalise such ‘conditions’ or ‘context’ and to develop a tentative typology of four theoretically informed contextual migration categories presented in Table 1. The table also indicates how some of the main theories seem to apply to these different migration categories. This table is tentative and would benefit from future elaboration and refinement, but its main purpose is not to propose a ‘definitive’ categorisation of migration, but rather to show how the meta-theoretical framework presented in this paper can be helpful to develop a systematic way of ‘contextualising’ the assumptions of the different theories. This exemplifies that theoretical assumptions should be seen as contextualised statements rather than mutually exclusive truth claims.

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<sup>11</sup> With higher levels of ‘development’, people’s capabilities to migrate further increase, but migration aspirations would hypothetically decrease because of increased opportunities in countries of residence and the potential migration-reducing effect of commuting, production outsourcing and distance-working. This effect, however, is at least partly counter-balanced by the increasing structural complexity, segmentation and specialisation of labour markets in wealthy capitalist economies, which fuels occupational migration of the skilled.

For instance, under relatively unconstrained conditions of high positive and negative liberty, ‘neoclassical’ models have higher explanatory power for more or less ‘free migration’ within wealthy countries or by well-resourced people from poorer countries. However, ‘neo-Marxist’ and other historical-structural theories may have considerable power to understand and interpret ‘precarious migration’ happening under highly constrained conditions such as migration restrictions or lack of state protection against abuse and discrimination, in which migrants are susceptible to exploitation by employers, recruiters, state agents, or smugglers, in which the agency of migrants is severely limited, and few people are able to achieve significant socio-economic mobility through migrating. This category could also include failed asylum seekers

**Table 1. Positive and negative liberty and categories of migration**

		Positive liberty (capabilities)	
		Low	High
<b>Negative liberty</b> (external constraints)	Low	<b>‘Precarious migration’</b> internal and international, by relatively poor or impoverished people vulnerable to exploitation, such as irregular labour migrants, failed asylum seekers, IDPs, trafficking,) (eg Historical structural theories, segmented labour market theory)	<b>‘Distress migration’</b> eg refugees, fleeing from adverse and/or potentially life-threatening conditions possessing the resources to move abroad legally
	High	<b>‘Improvement migration’</b> internal and international, often through networks, recruitment or pooling of family resources (eg New Economics of Labour Migration theory; Network theories; Cumulative causation)	<b>‘Free migration’</b> relatively unconstrained movement in and between wealthy countries or by wealthy people, skilled workers, ‘lifestyle’ migrants (eg neo-classical theory)

In the category of ‘improvement migration’, people have relatively low levels of positive liberties but face relatively high negative liberties and poverty, such as access to legal migration opportunities and residency in wealthier countries through which migration can be a successful way of achieving considerable upward socio-economic mobility. Under such circumstances, family members are more likely to pool resources to ‘invest’ in the migration of one family member. Because of their relative poverty, migrants in this category are also likely to have a high relative dependency on cost- and risk-reducing networks (social capital) to facilitate their migration. This category seems to fit relatively well with the assumptions of the new economics of labour migration (NELM) and other household approaches according to which migration is a risk-sharing strategy of households aiming to diversify income, generate remittances and improve the wellbeing of the families in origin areas.

In other situations, people may face high levels of external constraint (negative liberty, such as persecution or violent conflict) but manage to get out through access to financial, social and human resources (high positive liberty). Examples of this category could include skilled and/or relatively wealthy international refugees who are able to receive a legal status at in the destination country and are economically successful. This category, which I have tentatively named ‘distress migration’ (to overcome the aforementioned conceptual problems with ‘forced migration’)<sup>12</sup> needs further elaboration and existing theories seem to apply less easily to this category.

<sup>12</sup> There may be two basic ways to conceptualise ‘forced’ mobility, which can either be a conscious act to escape external threats (negative liberty deprivation) or livelihood insecurity (positive liberty deprivation) or can be literally forced, such as through eviction, deportation, or slavery. In the first case migrants still have agency and migration can be instrumentally voluntary, in the latter case agency is almost entirely ruled out.

While table 1 gives an indication which migration theories seem the ‘best fit’ for these migration categories, it does not mean they exclusively apply to that category, rather where they seem to have the strongest explanatory power. As I argued earlier, there is considerable leeway to combine theories, particularly when applied to different levels of analysis. Finally, migrants may shift category over time, for instance if a restrictive turn in policies or increasing racism turns ‘improvement migration’ into ‘precarious migration’, while the reverse may for instance apply if ‘precarious migrants’ get access to legal status through a regularisation campaign. The place of people in these categorisations also depends on the type of migration. For instance, the same individual may have the positive and negative liberties to migrate internally but may be unable to migrate internationally. In the same vein, rural-urban migration might be ‘improvement migration’ for one family – whereas if that same family tried to migrate abroad it may result in ‘precarious migration’, but the reverse is also possible, if migrants manage to secure legal status and achieve substantial socio-economic mobility in much wealthier destination countries.

While table 1 elaborated an ideal-typical categorisation of concrete manifestations of migration (ie residential movement) under different contextual configurations of high and low positive and negative liberty; table 2 draws on the capabilities-aspirations framework to elaborate a theoretical categorisation of five ideal-typical individual mobility types. Because our earlier definition of mobility as ‘people’s capability (freedom) to choose where to live’, this categorisation of mobility types also includes various forms of immobility. This allows the inclusion of both movement and non-movement within the same theoretical ambit.

The categorisation in table 2 builds upon Carling’s original (2002) ‘involuntary immobility’ idea, but expands with four other mobility types. In other words, it is only possible to speak about ‘voluntariness’ of mobility or immobility if there was a reasonable option to stay. That does not mean that refugees and other groups of ‘distress migrants’ do not have any agency (otherwise they could not have moved in the first place), but that they had no reasonable option to stay. For them, migration was primarily a response to severe distress at home rather than a positive response to opportunities elsewhere. Obviously, once a decision to leave has been made, such opportunities will play a role in migration decisions, but they cannot be conceptualised as the main reason to migrate.

**Table 2. Aspirations-capabilities derived individual mobility types**

		Migration capabilities	
		<i>Low</i>	<i>High</i>
<b>Migration aspirations</b> (intrinsic and/or instrumental)	<i>High</i>	<b>Involuntary immobility</b> (Carling 2002) (feeling ‘trapped’)	<b>Voluntary mobility</b> (most forms of migration)
	<i>Low</i>	<b>Acquiescent immobility</b> (Schewel 2015)	<b>Voluntary immobility</b> <i>and</i> <b>Involuntary mobility</b> (eg refugees, ‘soft deportation’) <sup>13</sup>

Similarly, migrants who are classified by governments and agencies such as the International Organisation for Migration (IOM) as ‘voluntary return migrants’ may only be ‘willing’ to return not out of a real desire to return, but because they either have no access to social amenities and shelter, or

<sup>13</sup> See Boersema, Leerkes and van Os (2014)

risk imprisonment, violence and other abuse. Under such situations of distress and pressure, migrants may eventually decide to return, even if this is against their own intrinsic preferences or desire. Boersema, Leerkes and van Os (2014) referred to this category as 'soft deportation'. More generally, we can call this 'involuntary mobility'. People are not literally forced to move (ie by violent means) but decide to move against their own intrinsic desire. Yet the term 'forced' migration is not appropriate here because these migrants still have a certain albeit small amount of agency. The term 'forced migration' seems more appropriate for people who are deported, enslaved or evicted by direct means of violence.

'Voluntary mobility' and 'voluntary immobility' concerns all people who have the capability to migrate, but also have a reasonable choice to stay (implying that this would not put them in dangerous or life-threatening situations), and for whom the decision whether or not to go is primarily affected by their (instrumental or intrinsic) migration aspirations. Theoretically, the most challenging category concerns people with low capabilities and aspirations to move. How can we categorise a person living in poverty who does not have migration aspirations, but neither have they ever imagined being able to migrate? To what extent can we call this form of immobility 'voluntary'? This person is not capable moving, but also does not aspire to do so. Based on the idea that capabilities affect aspirations, we may perhaps say that that person is deprived of the capability to aspire as well as the capability to move. Schewel (2015) proposed the category of 'acquiescent immobility' to describe situations in which people are both unable to migrate but neither do they desire to do so. Schewel argues that because 'acquiescent' implies an acceptance of constraints (the Latin origins of the word meaning 'to remain at rest') this is an appropriate term to describe this mobility category. More empirical research is certainly needed to shed more light on the formation of aspirations to move or to stay, and the extent the decision to stay can indeed be 'acquiescent'.

## 15 Conclusion

In this paper, I have tried to elaborate an aspirations–capabilities framework to advance understanding of human mobility. Arguing in favour of conceptual eclecticism to bridge disciplinary and paradigmatic divides, the paper has conceived of migration as an intrinsic part of broader processes of social transformation and development. On the macro-level, such conceptualisation of migration requires embedding the analysis of migration into broader theories of societal change without reverting back to the top-down causal determinism of historical-structural and functionalist theories. To develop a more meaningful understanding of agency in migration processes, and building upon Carling's (2002) earlier work, the paper proposed a meta-theoretical conceptualisation of virtually all forms of migration as a function of aspirations and capabilities to migrate within a given set of opportunity structures.

On this basis, I define human mobility as *people's capability to choose where to live* – including the option to stay. By conceptualising moving and staying as complementary manifestations of the same migratory agency, we are able to move beyond the rather futile debate whether migration or sedentary behaviour is the norm. It also enables us to overcome dichotomous and simplistic classifications such as between forced and voluntary migration and to integrate the analysis of most forms of migration within one meta-conceptual framework. In order to develop a more systematic understanding of the dialectics between structure and migratory agency, the paper has drawn on Berlin's concepts of positive and negative liberty to conceptualise the complex and non-linear ways in which structural conditions tend to shape migration aspirations and capabilities. In this context, positive and negative liberties are conceptualised as manifestations of the diverse structural conditions under which migration occurs. This expanded aspirations-capabilities framework served to elaborate a theoretical categorisation of five

ideal-typical mobility types. The concepts of positive and negative liberty enabled the elaboration of a categorisation of four contextual migration categories, to which different migration theories have different degrees of explanatory power. This exemplifies the broader point that theoretical assumptions should be seen as contextualised statements rather than mutually exclusive truth claims.

While I hope that this paper is useful in efforts to develop more comprehensive migration theories, the proposed framework is only one potential way forward. For instance, our understanding of how migration is shaped by broader processes of social transformation can also benefit by drawing on insights accumulated by migration historians (cf. Hoerder 2002; Lucassen and Lucassen 2009), in the interest of steering away from the dominant short-term focus of migration studies. Significant theoretical progress can be achieved in the future by further embedding migration studies within broader theories of social change, but also by applying insights from fields such as social psychology and behavioural economics, which have yielded advanced insights into people's (often non-rational) behaviour and factors that may affect migration aspirations but which have as yet been hardly applied in migration studies.

This can help us to address several remaining conceptual puzzles. For instance, to what extent can we really separate intrinsic from instrumental migration aspirations, because they often seem conflated in practice? For instance, what appears to be an intrinsic desire to discover new horizons, could also fulfil a functional role (at least subconsciously) in the psychological separation-individuation process of adolescents and young adults vis-à-vis their parents and other family, as way to acquire new knowledge, meet future partners, or find a job. Conversely, what appears to be a move abroad to earn more money can be difficult to separate from the social prestige migration can bring, particularly in communities where migration has become a rite of passage.

Another, related conceptual puzzle is the concept of voluntariness. To what extent can we classify migration as voluntary if a migrant does not want to move, but does so for the sake of the long-term economic future of the family? Perhaps we can argue here that this person has no intrinsic desire to move, but that the decision to move still emanates from an autonomous decision to sacrifice short-term individual wellbeing (eg being separated from your loved ones; the alienating experiences of living in a strange society) from the (instrumental) wish to improve the long-term wellbeing of the family (after return or family reunion). But what if individual members of families or households are put under immense social pressure to migrate against their own desire? This could for instance apply to adolescents sent to boarding school abroad by their parents, but also labour migrants who move abroad to work because of social expectations, although they may personally resent the idea to leave the family.

This shows the inherently blurred lines between the concepts of 'voluntary' and 'forced' migration. Obviously, there are parallels with similar debates such as about the difficulties in conceptualising forced versus voluntary prostitution (cf. Doezema 1998) and forced versus voluntary marriage (cf. Enright 2009). In such situations there is often a conflict between the desire to be a member of social groups for psychological and social security reasons and the personal drive towards autonomy. This shows the importance of developing conceptual tools that can help us to develop more nuanced understandings of the interaction between structure and agency in social action. It also suggests that the expanded aspirations-capabilities framework developed in this paper could be useful in other domains of social inquiry.

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