

19 Forced Migration

Definition: Migration that results from some sort of compulsion or threat to well-being or survival, emerging in conditions ranging from violent conflict to severe economic hardship.

Initially, the notion of forced migration might seem relatively straightforward, referring to instances of migration that are not chosen freely but are instead the consequence of compulsion. The difficulty, however, is in determining what to count as compulsion, and a significant amount of scholarly effort has been devoted in recent years to clarification – and extension – of the forced migration concept (see Castles 2003a). One result is that many migration scholars no longer believe that a conventional dichotomy between economic migrants and refugees is cogent or persuasive. ‘Economic migration’, rather than being entirely voluntary, is in many instances better understood as rooted in compulsion of various sorts – especially when the economic deprivation that constitutes its proximate cause is rooted in deeper socio-economic structures that are determined primarily by the decisions and activities of states, corporations and individuals elsewhere (e.g. in wealthier countries). A range of factors – perhaps including environmental difficulties (particularly global warming) and development initiatives – can make the notion of compulsion relevant beyond the obvious category of refugees fleeing persecution and violent political conflicts. Instead of a binary opposition between refugees and economic migrants, then, we can perceive a continuum wherein compulsion plays a greater role in some migration flows and a lesser role in others (Turton 2003; Richmond 1994).

The archetypical instance of forced migration is displacement or refugee flows arising from violent conflicts, persecution and/or deliberate expulsion. ‘Migrants’ are sometimes created at the point of a gun or a cluster-bomb, and such instances seem clear-cut given the obvious persecution that induces people to leave. Even so, an essential element of many refugees’ situations often remains implicit (though not in Zolberg et al. 1989, on which the following point is based). In some cases, refugees could avoid persecution or expulsion by submitting to the demands of their persecutors, e.g. to convert to a different religion or to cease engaging in certain forms of political activity. The observation is both analytical and normative: modern notions of freedom of religion and conscience dictate that individuals should not have to change their religion or refrain from political activity, and persecution on these grounds is a grave violation of human rights. The point, then, is simply that the concept of forced migration is more complicated than it otherwise

appears: some refugees are forced out in part because of their 'voluntary' insistence on exercising their human rights. Emphasizing this element of the analysis is useful insofar as it facilitates arguments favouring extension of the bases on which refugee claims should be recognized: for example, one should not have to refrain from expressing one's (homo)sexuality in order to avoid persecution, and individuals persecuted on this basis should have their asylum claims accepted.

Refugees are at one end of the 'forced vs. voluntary' continuum. It is more difficult to find a term that effectively captures the experience of migrants at the other end;¹ 'economic migration' is a term that arguably hides more than it reveals, particularly in its implication that such migration is entirely voluntary. Some people choose migration as a strategy for improving their lives in economic terms without facing a significant challenge to their prospects for survival. In other instances, however, individuals encounter a challenge significant enough to make the 'forced migration' concept at least potentially relevant. Bacon (2008) describes the situation of corn farmers in Oaxaca, whose livelihoods were threatened by adoption of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), which eliminated Mexican corn subsidies and opened the market to competition from corn produced in the USA by large-scale mechanized and government-subsidized methods. These farmers, unable to get a sufficient price for their produce to enable them to feed themselves and their families, effectively had no option other than migration (though Bacon is perhaps less successful in making the case that they had no option other than migration *to the US*): their migration was forced in the sense that they faced a strong likelihood of death by starvation, equivalent in essential ways to the prospect of death at the hands of soldiers or a militia.

In some instances, however, it is more difficult to reach such a clear conclusion. Some migrants leave because of challenges that are significant but less severe: one faces a dramatic decline in one's standard of living, not death. Is migration in such instances forced? The answer one gives likely depends in part on one's more general attitude to migration, and in particular on the conditions under which a particular destination country can be deemed to have an obligation to admit prospective migrants. When it is possible to establish the kind of causal chain described for Oaxacan corn farmers as above, then when they succeed in gaining entry to the USA it is arguably reasonable to describe their migration as forced, even if they had another option, i.e., of 'merely' becoming impoverished (as against outright starvation). The argument, not always stated quite so nakedly, is that powerful forces in the US are responsible for their displacement, and so the US has an obligation to accept them as immigrants.

The central question here thus seems to be: how restricted or undesirable must one's options be to justify the conclusion that it is reasonable for someone to reject those options and choose migration? The words 'reject' and 'choose' imply agency, not compulsion – but if forced migration is to have any scope beyond instances where the alternative is death, then the conceptual determination depends heavily on this judgement of reasonableness. One might perceive an affinity here with the point made above about insisting on exercising one's human rights: perhaps people should not have to suffer dramatic declines in their standard of living as the price

that goes with remaining in their community of origin. There is undoubtedly a difference insofar as economic compulsion often does not involve a persecuting agent – but the socio-economic processes leading to impoverishment are not always mysterious or ineluctable (and sometimes even have identifiable agents). Alternatively, some might take the view that impoverishment is sometimes inevitable and individuals should make the best of things where they are, rather than seeking to impose immigration on a country that doesn't want it.

In any event, decisions about applicability of this concept turn on this inescapably normative judgement – and it is surely better to make that judgement explicit than to leave it hidden. Again, when migration is described as forced, one implication is that destination countries ought to accept the migrants (as with refugees in a conventional sense). This is an essential point, in an historical context in which many destination countries are grudging in their acceptance even of conventional refugees (when they accept them at all).

In some instances the concept of forced migration is perhaps easier to invoke, even though it is not a matter of persecution or violent force as with conventional refugees. Large-scale migration from coastal regions of low-lying countries like Bangladesh will surely be 'forced' by rising sea levels; even before people drown, their crops will fail (for a broader treatment of climate change and migration, see No. 31 of *Forced Migration Review*, 2008). Nor is it difficult to perceive other instances of forced migration emerging already from global warming, as with drought-induced migration from Burkina Faso to Côte d'Ivoire (Sachs 2007); the contribution of this migration stream to subsequent civil war in Côte d'Ivoire with consequent refugee flows shows also that one forced migration flow can lead to another. All the same, global warming is by no means the sole explanation for these migration streams, and the argument that the migration is forced depends on the cogency of a number of claims that might be considered contentious – which again means that the concept of 'forced migration' itself is inescapably contentious. As with many concepts in migration studies, it can be used to construct narratives for discernible political purposes (see Hartmann 2009), and it is therefore worth asking: who advocates adoption of the concept, for which applications, on the basis of what interests?

Another type of migration that might be forced is migration with root causes in development projects such as dams, where migrants' homes and fields are inundated over a short timescale. But (as with the Oaxacan example above) in instances such as the Three Gorges Dam in China (e.g. Heming et al. 2001), it is less clear that migration to another country was forced in a deep sense. Individuals' options would have depended in part on alternative economic opportunities within China – and the high rate of economic growth in China during this period suggests that opportunities might have been available for many, though those forced to become migrants (at least internally) no doubt would have preferred being able to remain where they were instead. We are confronted again by the question: was it reasonable under the circumstances to reject all options apart from emigration?

Some migrants are, unambiguously, forced out – and in some cases the element of compulsion is obvious even though it is not a matter of violence or persecution. But further extension of the concept requires engagement with a basic tenet of

sociology (or the social sciences more generally): people's lives are determined in part by structures and forces beyond their control. Individuals always face restrictions on their options, and these restrictions vary in place and over time. As restrictions increase, the plausibility of describing migration as forced arguably increases as well. But this aspect of the concept makes categorization in many instances a matter of debate, to an even greater extent than with other concepts in migration studies.

See also: *Displacement and internally displaced persons; Refugees and asylum seekers*

NOTE

- 1 Perhaps 'lifestyle migration' (Benson and O'Reilly 2009) would be appropriate, but this term captures only a small slice of what seems relevant at the other end of this continuum.

KEY READINGS

- Bacon, D. (2008) *Illegal People: How Globalization Creates Migration and Criminalizes Immigrants*. Boston, MA: Beacon Press.
- Castles, S. (2003a) 'Towards a sociology of forced migration and social transformation', *Sociology*, 37 (1): 13–34.
- Zolberg, A.R., Suhrke, A. and Aguayo, S. (1989) *Escape from Violence: Conflict and the Refugee Crisis in the Developing World*. New York: Oxford University Press.

20 Gendered Migration

Definition: Patterns of migration – undertaken by men as well as women – that are shaped quite powerfully by gender, and in particular by deeply rooted understandings of gender roles.

A common perception about migration processes is that people migrate primarily for structural reasons related to the global and local economic systems (economic migration) or to the dangers and persecutions they face in their country of origin (forced migration). When migration is framed this way, the connection of migration processes to gender relations and roles is often overlooked, even in research by social scientists (Morokvasic 1984). The mainstream media also generally neglect or misrepresent gender when they deal with migration: the typical image