Mechanisms and Effects of International Migration

The question of why millions of people travel long distances to unknown places has attracted the vigorous attention of immigration scholars: nearly a dozen different theories explain the mechanisms of these transnational movements. In *Worlds in Motion* Massey et al. (1998) (see also Lucassen and Lucassen 1997) provide a comprehensive critical review of these models, so there is no need to reiterate it here. Instead, I propose an encompassing framework to account for international migration which, drawing on these particular theories, reflects the explanatory logic of the structuration model as outlined in the Introduction. This attempt makes up the first section of the chapter. In the next section I comparatively examine the interplay of structural circumstances and agentic considerations which account for migration to the United States of members of the eight contemporary immigrant groups selected for analysis in this volume. In the third, last section I identify the main effects of the departure of migrant actors in these different groups on the sender- and receiver-society structures.

Structuring international migration

Any satisfactory theoretical synthesis of the existing accounts of international migration, Massey et al. (1998) conclude in their assessment of the existing models, must recognize the multiplicity of mechanisms that simultaneously initiate and sustain transnational population flows. In their own widely recognized explanatory account of international migration they include, therefore, macro-level societal structures, local conditions, and migrants’ personal motivations and purposes. The premise of the multiplicity of contributing factors informs also the here-proposed conceptualization of international migration as a
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Structuration process. It recognizes, too, non-identical constellations of factors contributing to the triggering and sustaining phases of transnational population movements distinguished by the authors of Worlds in Motion. But, I argue, it also elaborates and improves on the account of this phenomenon by Massey et al. which they present as the “laying of the groundwork” toward an encompassing theory of transnational movements. The interpretation of international migration within the structuration framework ameliorates this account in three directions. First, it integrates the structural and agentic mechanisms into a theoretically coherent account of migration as a dynamic process in which causes and effects (re)constitute each other over time. Massey et al. identify these components as the simultaneous contributors to international population movements but do not explain their theoretical relationship. Second, it recognizes the role of culture as both a cause and an effect in sustaining international migration. In Worlds in Motion the impact of cultural factors on the perpetuation of population movement, conceived of alternately in structural [“culture of migration”] and individual [“perceptions and motives”] terms, remains theoretically unelaborated. And third, it incorporates the state as a consequential actor in structuring international migration. Having assessed sender and receiver state policies as by and large ineffective in controlling the volume of international migration once it has entered the self-sustaining phase, Massey et al. leave political structures out of their explanatory framework.

In reconstructing international migration as a structuration process, we shall move down what Fernand Braudel (1981) called multistoried societal structures: beginning with the top levels of the operation of world capitalism and international political organizations and legal systems traversing the globe in “seven-league boots,” to the intermediate levels of labor markets and national immigration policies, and to the lowest local “structures of everyday life” of potential migrants and, finally, in this multi-level context, to these people’s motivations and decisions to travel abroad.

Rapidly advancing communication and transportation technologies, globalization of the capitalist economy, which incorporates today practically the entire world, and the emergence of international bodies and legal regulations founded on the principle of universal human rights, including the freedom of movement, constitute the outermost frame of the multilayer structures providing the context for the prospective migrants’ decisions to leave their countries. The technological revolution greatly facilitates transnational exchange and travel between the remotest parts of the world. The contemporary