Migration and Migration Narratives in the Era of Globalization

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Introduction

Globalization has been a major new phase in the history of world capitalism which, directly and indirectly, has had a major impact on international migration. Globalization is not an absolutely new phase of development, but a new cycle in the history of world capitalism. Previous systematic relationships between migration and the functioning of the world system have not been changed substantially (Chase-Dunn, 1999). In the early 1980s and late 1970s, globalization as a new discursive and social order based on the integrity of the global financial system and the conditions for transnational corporate capitalism ended a historic epoch, a period based on the competition of capitalist and socialist modernization projects organized in the framework of nation-states and their block alliances like the Comecon and EEC (Melegh, 2006a). This change was not just a phenomenon effecting the so-called West, but also the ‘socialist world’ too, due to its strong connections with world capitalism (McMichael, 2000). We can even say that the socialist experiment ended as a result of the penetration of capitalism into the economic system of centrally planned economies and the related social arrangements. In these dramatic changes migration played an important role, as the movement of people was a direct factor in the rearrangement of global power structures. (On globalization and migration, see among others: Staring in Kalb et al., 2000; Sassen, 1996, 1999, 2001; Orozco, 2002; Mittelman, 2000; Lutz, 2002; Phizacklea in Koser and Lutz, 1998; Okólski, 1999; Forsander, 2002; Böröcz, 2002; Melegh, 2003; Baumann, 1996; Beck, 2000; Appadurai, 1996.)

The key point is that world capitalism, as it emerged in the early modern period, has always been a hierarchical system in which different areas of the world have been configured into core areas, semi-peripheral areas and peripheries. The aim of this article is to show how migration operates within such a system, or rather within the hierarchical system which re-emerged in
eastern Europe from the 1980s when East European state socialism first decomposed and was then replaced by a certain pattern of capitalist economy with very low saving rates and a high dependence on foreign investment. In other words, our concern is with migration and migration narratives as individual reflections on such life-changing events in East European countries which have been reintegrated into the hierarchical system of world capitalism which they partially left during the state socialist period. The concrete major issues for us are the following:

- As a new phase of world capitalism, globalization is a powerful macro-structure increasing global inequality and hierarchy. It is linked to migration. We must then consider the different links between the movement of capital and labour.
- Under the auspices of the state and capital, class, race/ethnicity and gender as a combined power structure contain the room for manoeuvre for migrants.
- How do macro and micro structures formulate the life course and the life-course perspective of migrants?


The late history of state socialism can be told as a gradual reintegration of planned economies into the capitalist world system under the East–West civilizational ideological umbrella. Financial and international debt links were established between state-socialist systems and the ‘world economy’ in the context of the energy crisis of the 1970s, which then led to market-oriented reforms and ‘dual dependency’ of smaller East European countries (Böröcz, 1999). In this respect the change in the global political economy (from a modernizationist political economic scenario based on the nation-state to globalization and the dominance of financial aspects) provides the proper context for understanding the fall of socialism.

As Figure 1 clearly indicates, all East European states suffered a severe economic crisis between 1989 and at least 1996. In this period, the key point is that it led to a major collapse and restructuring of the state socialist economy, especially industry. This collapse ‘freed’ a lot of employees, especially in the ‘countryside’, and some of the local communities started building up migratory networks in order to secure casual labour either in the West (the most eastern border in this respect Romania, western Ukraine and Moldova) or in the East, namely Russia.

The East–West border can be clearly located around Ukraine, Moldova and
Romania. They are the countries which are at the bottom of the league (at least during the 1990s, early 2000s) as inequalities in gross domestic product widen. In the 1980s, there were gaps between the state-socialist economies but these gaps have increased, and it seems that these countries are on a gradual, differentiated ‘slope’ of economic well-being. East European countries have been reintegrated into a hierarchical slope of world capitalism, which has also been clearly reflected on the ideological construct of an East–West slope (Melegh 2006a).

Global and Local Inequality Versus Migration from 1995

The above described differentiation is almost directly linked to migration. For the sake of the reintegration of the state-socialist economies’ industries, huge groups of people have been ‘abandoned’, some of whom have become involved in transnational migration. Countries like Hungary, the Czech Republic, Slovakia and Poland (which are also countries of emigration) have become targets of immigrants coming from Ukraine, Russia, Romania and even from...
further east (China, Vietnam). Migration is an extremely complex phenomenon and historical links are crucial of course, but it seems that global inequality plays a major role in this, and thus the reintegration of eastern Europe into a more differentiated global capitalist hierarchy has been a major engine of migration.

We can illustrate this with the relationship between Romania and Hungary, two countries bound together historically. As Figure 2 illustrates, in Hungary with regard to Romanian citizens the immigrating population (flow) and labour permit follow changes of GDP differences.

Local inequality is not to be separated from global inequalities, and with the more intensive integration of local economies into global capitalism there are certain patterns which influence local regional patterns of migration. As it has been pointed out above, East European economies are very dependent on foreign capital, especially on the ruins of the state-socialist economies which have collapsed due to the reintegration into global hierarchies.

As can be shown in the case of Hungary (a rather small and homogenous country), foreign subscribed capital and the regional distribution of resident international migrants are strongly related, even if the link is not without complications. The central region with the highest per capita foreign subscribed capital is the region in which international migrants reside in the highest ratios compared to the resident non-migrant population. None the less, there are regions in which migrants are not so numerous but foreign capital is heavily invested and vice versa. Thus capital and migration are definitely related to each other, and we can even argue that the local
consequences of global inequalities are also a structural factor in international migration in eastern Europe.

But global inequalities also appear in other ways in immigration patterns in eastern Europe (Melegh, 2003). Looking at the immigrating population in terms of occupational structure with regard to resident migrants and work-permit holders, we can also observe the consequences of global inequalities. A country like Hungary receives low-skilled and deskilled labour migrants from the East (Ukraine, Romania) or, in a special niche of the global/local economy, the Chinese diaspora. From the West, a kind of a secondary elite comes and resides in eastern Europe, often with the aim of buying property, looking for marriage partners, or seeking job opportunities. Central Europe is a meeting place for these different migrant groups, even if they rarely meet physically.

Cognitive Mechanisms and Migration

Public Discourses in Central and Eastern Europe: Hierarchical Imagination in a Hierarchical World

Migrants are put into a web of discourses and motivated by them. Discourses
are major centres of power in the sense that they provide interpretative frameworks for social action and identities. Migrants are especially vulnerable, in the sense that they move from one area to another and they must adapt to different discourses. With regard to eastern Europe, the most important cognitive shift, related to changes in the political economy, is that from the early 1980s the geopolitical and geo-cultural imagination has been recaptured by the idea of a ‘civilizational’ or East/West slope, providing the main interpretative framework for reorganizing international and socio-political regimes in the eastern part of the European continent. In this radical ‘normalization’ and ‘transition’ process, almost all political and social actors in ‘East’ and ‘West’ identify themselves on a descending scale from ‘civilization to barbarism’, from ‘developed to non-developed’ status. This discursive structure appears in very different forms and areas of knowledge, and is utilized by very different speakers ranging from the European Union to restaurant owners and migrants (Melegh, 2006a). This idea of an East/West slope has a major impact on the perception and management of migration. Migrants are perceived and perceive themselves as who is coming from where, and in which direction, on the slope. The migrant, and in this respect the receiving social self, is constructed in the web of different perspectives on the slope. The identity and the life-course perspective of migrants is a really inventive work, as migrant individuals must find ways in which they can legitimate themselves in the web of different perspectives hierarchically related to each other (Melegh, 2006b; Hegyesi and Melegh, 2003).

This hierarchical imagination can be seen very clearly in the following caricature on labour migrants from the ‘East’ to Hungary.

‘Before we go to work, both of us should sing our own national anthem’
The context of this caricature was allowing Romanian citizens to work in Hungary irrespective of ethnicity. The hierarchy is very clear in contrasting a ‘clean’ and hard-working Hungarian peasant (an identity which does not exist any more in post-communist society) to a drunken, badly dressed Romanian rural figure. Migrants are supposed to counterbalance in their legitimacy strategies such hierarchical images.

Hierarchical imagination also appears in narratives of migrants when they present their life-story (Kovács and Melegh, 2001, 2004) The most important point is that there are only a limited amount of patterns which migrants find legitimate in presenting their life-story. Among these patterns, they rarely use assimilation or even integration perspectives, even though these are a major requirement of the ‘civilized’ receiving countries in their own discourses on migration. Instead they suffer in retelling stories of subordination, suppression and traumas.

One of the most important findings is that migrants (men and women alike) present their migration story in a passive manner, that is to say, as being ‘taken’ to the target country which is a major sign of social and cultural oppression. Also they often ‘rediscover’ their ethnic origin, and in the narrations they actively work on presenting an ethnic identity which they did not have before migration. Thus we can see that the ‘fundamentalism’ of migrants is a post-migration creation (interaction between migrants and host societies) and not something originally taken from the sending society. It is important to note that they often struggle to present a refugee story, since it is probably the only legitimate way of self-presentation in European societies. If they succeed in presenting themselves as refugees, then they can give a much more active impression of themselves. None the less, subordination also appears in the reporting on the fight against discrimination and very importantly in ‘paper narratives’ in which they organize their life-story according to sagas of gaining legitimate status in the host society.

Conclusion

European discourses on migration are extremely simplified, in the sense that migrants are seen as guests whom it is necessary to select. The above article shows that with regard to eastern Europe, such political discourses are misleading, as migration is a complex phenomenon which is driven by major changes in the global political economy (an interplay between global/local capital, the state and the migrant and their sending society). In our analysis, we therefore must see the whole picture, or else, out of sheer political will, we will not only miss important points but will actually push migrants into the a position of a semi-criminal, semi-civilized person who wants to disturb us.
Taking a more macroscopic perspective, and also looking at the related individual struggles of migrants, we are able to settle some of the emerging cultural and social conflicts which increasingly ‘unsettle’ European societies.

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NOTE

1 Parts of this article have already been published in Melegh (2006b). They have been re-edited and substantially revised for this article.