

## Introducing Critical Perspectives on Migration

Written by Marianna Karakoulaki, Laura Southgate and Jakob Steiner

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# Introducing Critical Perspectives on Migration

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MARIANNA KARAKOULAKI, LAURA SOUTHGATE AND JAKOB STEINER, AUG 12 2018

**This is an excerpt from *Critical Perspectives on Migration in the Twenty-First Century*. Download your free copy here.**

In the summer of 2015 the island of Lesbos in Greece, located just a few miles from the shores of Turkey, became a symbol of the so-called migration crisis in Europe. In an island of less than 87,000 residents, thousands of people were arriving on a daily basis. In some ways, Lesbos represented the European dream: the first step to safety and prosperity for thousands of people, far from the conflicts of the Middle East. That summer the 'migration crisis', so dubbed by the media, had just reached its climax. Two years later, Lesbos still struggles to cope with overcrowded camps, and has become the symbol of Europe's mismanagement of migration (Broderick 2017; Holland 2017; Sallet 2017; Stone 2017). How did we get here? How can we place this in a wider debate on migration? And what is missing to lead that debate?

Central to this edited collection is the individual plight of millions of displaced peoples in what has been referred to as the 'century of the migrant' (Nail 2015, 1). Since the start of the twenty-first century, the number of international migrants has grown rapidly, from 173 million in 2000, to 244 million in 2015, and to 258 million in 2017 (UN 2015, 1; 2017). Of those, 65.6 million were forced to flee their countries due to conflict and persecution in 2016, leading the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) to conclude that forced displacement was at its highest peak in decades (UNHCR 2017). The routes taken are often dangerous, putting refugees at continuous risk even after they have left a war zone. On 9 November 2017, an article listed the names of 33,293 migrants who died on their way to reach Europe. That list was an attempt to 'identify thousands of dead as human beings, with an origin, a past, a life' (Casdorff and Maroldt 2017).

Domestic debate as to the relative costs and benefits of migration is extensive and fractious. As of 2008, more than 30 million foreign citizens were living in the 27 Member States of the European Union (Spencer 2011, 1). In the United Kingdom, a 2012 poll showed that 68% of the British public believed that migration had a negative effect on Britain (YouGov 2012). Germany, which accepted 890,000 migrants in 2015, held pro- and anti-migration marches following the European migration crisis (Amnesty International 2016). In France, which declared it would accept 24,000 refugees in the wake of the migrant crisis, public opinion was split, with at least half opposing the arrival of more refugees (Chrisafis 2016). What these figures show is both the degree to which migration dominates domestic policy, particularly during election periods and in the wake of specific crises, and the mixed feelings citizens hold towards the issue. Indeed, recent studies suggest that the United Kingdom's decision to leave the European Union (EU) following the controversial 'Brexit' campaign held in 2016, was due in part to anti-migrant prejudice and fears of uncontrolled migration (Meleady et al., 2017).

Current academic debate on the subject of migration is equally varied and contested. Whilst some scholars focus on the economic and cultural impact of migration (Eckstein and Najam 2013), others focus on political borders and boundaries (De Genova 2017; Bacas and Kavanagh 2013), state and institution migration policies (Boswell and Geddes 2011), human rights (Gammeltoft-Hansen and Vedsted-Hansen 2017) and gender (Yucesahin and Yazgan 2017) to name but a few. Acknowledging the importance of these contributions to the study of migration, this edited collection seeks to build on their work by providing an inter-disciplinary analysis of migration in the twenty-first century. Straddling the political, legal and humanitarian disciplines, this collection shines a light on underlying

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perspectives and drivers of migration, and critically appraises current international and regional responses. It addresses the long-running academic, policy and domestic debate, drawing on case studies of migration in Europe, the Middle East and the Asia Pacific.

The media's sudden focus on migration and the rising number of people arriving on Europe's shores has sparked a debate on terminology. If one looks at a variety of reports from 2015 and before, the terms migrant, refugee and asylum seeker were used interchangeably, as the debate over terminology became heated. In August 2015, Al Jazeera decided to stop using the word 'migrant' in an attempt to avoid any negative connotations with that term, and substituted it with the word 'refugee' (Malone, 2015). Other media outlets published articles explaining these terms in more detail, with reasons why people needed to take care when using them due to the potential legal implications of using the wrong term (Sengupta 2015; Spencer 2015; Travis 2015; UNHCR 2016b).

The way a migrant is defined, however, is a complex issue. For the International Organisation of Migration (IOM), a migrant is someone who is moving across borders or within a state, despite their legal status, the reasons and causes of the movement, or the length of the stay in the host country (IOM n.d.). The UNHCR, on the other hand, defines a migrant as someone who chooses to move mainly to improve his or her life (2016b). One of the reasons why the definition of 'migrant' is so complex is that it includes a wide range of people who are all in a different situation, who cross borders because of different reasons, yet all have their movement as a common factor (Koser 2007).

A 'refugee', on the other hand, is strictly defined by legal texts and international conventions. According to the Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees (1951) defines a refugee as someone who:

owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality and is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country; or who, not having a nationality and being outside the country of his former habitual residence as a result of such events, is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to return to it.

Finally, an 'asylum seeker' is someone who has fled their country of origin and has made a claim for asylum under the 1951 Refugee Convention, and their status has not yet been determined (O' Neil 2010, 6; UNHCR 2011).

In his book 'The Figure of the Migrant' (2015), Thomas Nail adopts the use of the word 'migrant'. He explains, however, that whilst everyone who crosses borders is a migrant, their movement differs as '[f]or some movement offers opportunity, recreation, and profit with only a temporary expulsion. For others, movement is dangerous and constrained, and their social expulsions are much more severe and permanent' (2015, 2). While this book's contributors use the terms interchangeably, Thomas Nail provides a history of the theory of the migrant in the first chapter of the book, providing an important guideline to this underlying challenge of terminology.

During the twentieth century, those who studied migration mainly focused on its economic aspects. Thus, the theories that developed during that period were mostly of an economic nature. The type of migration that characterises the most recent migratory flow – and the one that most contributors of this book focus on – is different, with a majority appearing to flee from conflict-affected areas.

An attempt to explain the reasons why people migrate was made by Ernest Ravenstein in 1885, when he published the 'Laws of Migration'. Ravenstein came to the conclusion that migration is the result of a push and pull process that makes people cross borders, either by being *pushed* by their unfavourable countries' conditions, or *pulled* by the host countries' favourable conditions. The following suppositions are central to Ravenstein's Laws: that migrants are less likely to move long distances; there is a process of absorption in which people who surround a rapidly growing town are drawn to it, thus leaving rural areas to migrants from distant areas; there is an inverse process of absorption with similar characteristics; each migration flow produces a counter-flow; migrants who move long distances usually prefer large centres with economic growth; those who live in a town are less likely to migrate than those in rural areas; and that women migrate more than men (Ravenstein 1885).

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Migration theories of the twentieth century draw upon Ravenstein's Laws of Migration, whilst focusing on the economics of migration (either internal migration or international migration). Everett Lee (1966) attempted to provide a Theory of Migration by emphasising push and pull factors, the difficulties migrants face, and migrant profiling (age, gender, class, education). The Neoclassical Economic Theory, which is mainly used to describe migration between two countries, suggests that there is a correlation between the global supply and demand for labour and the reason people migrate, effectively driven by a wage gap among geographical areas (Sjaastad 1962; Todaro 1969; Jennissen 2007). The Dual Labour Market Theory suggests that it is pull factors that lead people to migrate, because there is always demand for migrant workers in developed countries – something that is inherent in their economic structure (Piore 1979; Massey et al. 1993, 440–1; Jennissen 2007). Additionally, the World Systems Theory focuses on a more sociological examination of migration, suggesting that due to the interaction among global societies, migration is influenced by the capitalist development of the global market (Massey et al. 1993).

These dominant theories have been subjected to criticism (Arango 2000; Massey et al. 1998), notably that they are overtly focused on why some people move whilst ignoring why others do not, as well as a lack of attention to state policies as influencers of migration. As Arango (2000) notes, migration is 'both very complex and straightforward'. General explanations are therefore bound to be 'reductionistic'. However, the basic unequal distribution of resources (including a 'safe living environment') lies convincingly at the basis of many migration patterns. In any case, in order to adequately describe migration in the twenty-first century these commonly applied theories need to be expanded to include a number of other dimensions beyond the economic 'push and pull'. These should include societal factors and broader social processes and changes. Recent attempts to expand the theoretical debate have led to more interdisciplinary approaches to theorising migration (Massey et al. 1993; Favell 2008; Bretell and Hollifield 2000; Castles 2008). This book seeks to contribute to this growing interdisciplinary debate.

One critical dimension is evident from recent developments: the inclusion of refugees in the larger debate. And while the development of an actual theory to describe current developments may be too farfetched – and considering the complexity of the problem also not necessarily desirable – a collection of critical approaches to discuss the topic should provide a guide to what is relevant in this increasingly complex field.

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## About the author:

**Marianna Karakoulaki** is Articles Editor and a Director of E-International Relations. She is an award winning journalist and foreign correspondent. She regularly reports as a freelance foreign correspondent for Deutsche Welle and has worked with IRIN, The Telegraph, Middle East Eye, CBC Radio, Voice of America, BBC Radio, Channel 4 News, Radio Television Suisse, Human Rights Watch and Refugees International among others.

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