

Student Feature - Theory in Action: Marxism, Migrants and Borders

Written by Maïa Pal

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<https://www.e-ir.info/2019/06/24/student-feature-theory-in-action-marxism-migrants-and-borders/>

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This is adapted from *International Relations Theory* (2017). Get your free copy of the textbook here.

A Marxist IR approach to migration shows the importance of historical materialism as an approach to IR. First, Marxists are critical of the fixed aspect of borders because they create relations of dependency and inequality between peoples by restricting and controlling their access to resources and labour. Some Marxists argue that we need a global concept of citizenship to counter how states exclude non-citizens from benefits and access to labour and resources. After all, from a Marxist point of view, peoples of all nations are united in their oppression by capitalism and the modern state system that separates them and sets them against each other, so people should be freed (or emancipated) from this status.

The Basic Economics of Immigration

Consequently, Marxists see borders as fixtures that unfairly determine relations of dependency and inequality – or in other words, who has the right to what. Second, we need to think of who decides who is a migrant and what that category entails. For example, being a migrant who is fleeing a country because of persecution is a necessary condition according to international law for applying for asylum and becoming a refugee in a host state. Most states have signed the 1951 Refugee Convention and have agreed to this definition. Hence, the reality of being this particular type of migrant is dependent on a specific treaty and the will of states to consent to it. In other words, the category of persecuted migrant or refugee is relative – it is not real in the sense that the colour of your eyes is real and cannot be decided differently by someone else.

Migration and its Effects on Development

Migration and Development

People who flee from poverty related to conflict, climate change, or lack of jobs are often designated as economic migrants. Their status does not depend on a definition as clear as that of a refugee, and it also does not lead to the same rights and opportunities. Many people move towards Europe because it offers more economic opportunities and a relatively safer political environment. However, decisions at the European and state level are increasingly resulting in the strengthening (or closing) of borders, because some feel that economic migration is not a sufficient reason to freely admit a person. In contrast, being an economic migrant who has a particular skill needed by the host country *is* considered legitimate. In other words, the ‘reality’ of being a ‘good’ economic migrant – who is allowed to move across countries – depends on factors that are often independent of the person migrating.

How Far Will the EU Go to Seal its Borders?

<https://www.eurozine.com/far-will-eu-go-seal-borders/>

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Marxism provides us with an original angle that makes us reconsider migration and shows why closing borders is a sociologically and politically blind policy in relation to the system we all live in. In effect, capitalism started a simultaneous process of territorial bordering and of social change through wage-labour. Mainstream IR separates those processes historically and theoretically by taking the separation between the domestic and international as fixed and real. Marxism argues that this leads to obscuring the social relations and processes linking movements of people and the creation of borders. In other words, dissociating the domestic and international levels leads to thinking that being a migrant is the reserve of certain people rather than a condition we are all subjected to. Crucially, it justifies treating migrants as second-class people and therefore leads to further racial and social inequalities.

Anti-immigration Laws and Profit

Movement of peoples occurred long before capitalism, but capitalism shapes those movements in conjunction with the creation of borders and economic productivity. The process of enclosure at the beginning of capitalism led to people moving away from the land on which they hunted, gathered and grew food. The process involved landowners closing off or fencing common land so as to graze sheep and develop more intensive methods of agriculture. This gradually transformed social relations – the ways in which people could survive and reproduce. Without land to survive on, people had to start selling their ability to work – what Marxists call labour power – and often had to work far from their homes. Although people move for a variety of reasons, one that is particularly familiar is the necessity to move to sell our labour. This can involve transferring from the countryside to an urban centre within a state or from one state to another. In other words, it is the same imperative to work that makes this move happen, whether one crosses an international border or not. In a capitalist system, it is hard to survive without working and working implies moving or being prepared to move. In other words, we are all in theory migrants. Acknowledging this means that closing borders, which involves fixing peoples' status as 'good' or 'bad' economic migrants, is based on two illusions revealed by Marxism and should therefore be questioned and reconsidered. The first is the distinction between domestic and international. Capitalism is an expanding international system and allows domestic borders only in so far as it can transcend them economically. The second illusion is the distinction between categories of people as real and fixed. Capitalism allows the elite to transcend borders economically but also allows the potential to close them politically. Thus, it allows certain people (the most wealthy) to decide that others (the least wealthy) cannot try and change their situations.

About the author:

Maïa Pal is a Senior Lecturer in International Relations at Oxford Brookes University. Her work reconstructs modern histories of European state formation and their empires through the practice of extraterritorial jurisdiction.