

The Global Migration Turn
Inequality, Labor, and Conflict in an Age of Transformation
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Short preliminary version

Introduction

This chapter examines the transformation of global migration flows around the long 1970s, shedding light on the forces that reshaped migration patterns and the resulting tensions that emerged. While existing scholarship has explored aspects of this shift, such as changing immigration policies in Western nations, this study transcends the current literature by connecting global demographic and economic trends to various national policy developments across multiple world regions.¹ By tracing both structural factors and government responses, this chapter provides a novel, integrated perspective on the complex dynamics of the “global migration turn.” The analysis explains how unprecedented inequality between industrialized and developing nations, surging demography in the Global South, and declining transportation costs drove a surge of migration from the Third World to Europe and North America. As migrants filled low-wage jobs, their large-scale economic integration soon gave way to social conflicts and increasingly restrictive immigration policies in the 1970s. With legal entry limited, illegal immigration rose, further straining inter-state relations. Ultimately, the contentious divide between migrant-receiving and migrant-sending states culminated in the protracted negotiation of UN Migrant Worker Convention, which starkly revealed a fractured world order. Thus, by connecting global transformations to national policies and experiences, this analysis provides an integrated perspective on a pivotal era in global history.

I. Turning Tides: Global Inequality, Demography, and Transportation

During the nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth century, the income differential between Europe and regions like Asia or Africa had expanded, moving from a ratio of 1:3 in 1820 to 1:9 in 1950.² The latter half of the twentieth century unveiled a concerning picture of diverging paths among these regions, marked by pronounced disparities in growth, income, and development. Sub-Saharan Africa’s growth rates were strikingly stagnant, even characterized by a negative annualized per capita growth rate.³ In stark contrast, Western Europe and North America benefited from capital concentration and superior economic infrastructure.⁴ Regions such as the Middle East, Latin America, and particularly Africa found themselves ensnared in a spiral of poverty, their development lagging behind.⁵ This widening gap was evident in the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) per capita, where European figures were at least 4 to 12 times higher than those of Sub-Saharan Africa, the Middle East, and North

¹ For example: Gary Freeman, *Immigrant Labor and Racial Conflict in Industrial Societies* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1979). Klaus J. Bade, *Migration in European History* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2003). Steven Castles and Mark J. Miller, *The Age of Migration: International Population Movements in the Modern World*, 4th revised ed. (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2009).

² Bourguignon, François, and Christian Morrisson, "Inequality among World Citizens, 1820-1990," *American Economic Review* 92, no. 4 (2002): 737.

³ Institute for International Economics, *The Pattern of Economic Growth 1950-2000*, https://piie.com/publications/chapters_preview/348/2iie3489.pdf.

⁴ Max Roser and Esteban Ortiz-Ospina, “Global Income Distribution in 1800, 1975 and 2010,” Data from GapMinder, October 2016.

⁵ Jennifer A. Miller, *Turkish Guest Workers in Germany: Hidden Lives and Contested Borders, 1960s to 1980s*, (University of Toronto Press, 2018), 38.

Africa.⁶ The global inequality meant that migrant workers from Turkey and other areas, seeking employment in Western Europe, could escape dire conditions and earn four times as much as they could in their home countries.⁷ These disparities, particularly between the European North-West and Mediterranean countries, stoked migration pressures. Thus, inequality among nations created powerful incentives to bridge the gaps separating the different parts of the world, especially toward Europe.

In parallel, the Global South experienced a dramatic and unprecedented surge in population. The case of North Africa provides a particularly vivid illustration of this phenomenon. Since antiquity, the population of North Africa had remained relatively stable, with an increase of only about one-third between the year 1 and 1820. But the years between 1820 and 2001 witnessed a demographic explosion, with the population of North Africa multiplying over 13.5 times, reaching a staggering 149,229,000 from a modest 10,985,000.⁸ Unprecedented demographic growth in the Global South, coupled with economic and social changes, was a powerful factor shifting migration patterns. Concurrently, lower transport costs enabled increased mobility from the Global South. A dramatic shift took place as air travel supplanted sea routes, further lowering costs beginning in the 1970s.⁹ The 1970s then saw Third World nations replacing Europe as the major sending regions to the United States.¹⁰ Thus, the surge in population was a transformative force, reshaping migration patterns and influencing economic and social dynamics globally.

As a result of those various forces, global migration flows underwent a transformation, with a significant increase in migration from the Third World to Europe and North America. Pull factors such as labor demand and inclusive citizenship policies in former colonial metropolises attracted migrants from their erstwhile colonies.¹¹ Initially, migrants from the Caribbean predominated in Britain, but larger flows from South Asia soon followed. During the interwar period, immigration to Britain was modest, but by 1962, over 500,000 people had settled from the New Commonwealth.¹² In a similar vein, large numbers arrived in Europe from Asia, Africa, and the Caribbean.¹³ Substantial postcolonial immigration occurred in France, Belgium, and the Netherlands.¹⁴ Major labor migration from Latin America, Africa, and Asia reached Europe and the US but also the thriving oil economies of the Middle East and the Persian Gulf.¹⁵ Thus, in response to vast global inequalities, improvements in communication and declining transport costs contributed to a surge in migration from developing to industrialized countries.¹⁶

⁶ The World Bank, World Development Indicators, <http://databank.worldbank.org/data/home.aspx>. Commission des Communautés Européennes, SEC (77) 3954, Brussels, 1 December 1977, *Le Logement des travailleurs migrants: Un cas d'imprévoyance sociale? Résultats de l'enquête sur les conditions de logement des travailleurs étrangers dans la Communauté Européenne, Produit intérieur brut par habitant aux prix du marché dans les pays méditerranéens et quelques pays de la C.E.E. (situation en 1974)*.

⁷ Miller, *Turkish Guest Workers in Germany*, 38.

⁸ A. Madison, *The World Economy: A Millennial Perspective* (Paris: OECD, 2001), <http://www.theworlddeconomy.org/histostats/histostats-table06-1.pdf>.

⁹ Barry R. Chiswick and Timothy J. Hatton, "International Migration and the Integration of Labor Markets." In Michael D. Bordo, Alan M. Taylor and Jeffrey G. Williamson (eds.), *Globalization in Historical Perspective* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 74.

¹⁰ David M. Reimers, "Post-World War II Immigration to the United States: America's Latest Newcomers." *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 454 (1981): 1.

¹¹ Castles and Miller, *The Age of Migration*, 125.

¹² *Ibid.*, pp. 32, 84-5. Castles and Miller, *The Age of Migration*, 73.

¹³ Hansen, Citizenship and Immigration in Postwar Britain, 2000, p. 84. Rita Chin, *The Crisis of Multiculturalism in Europe: A History* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2017), 71-2.

¹⁴ Bade, *Migration in European History*, 222, 277.

¹⁵ Castles and Miller, *Age of Migration*, 2009, 141; Chiswick and Hatton, "International Migration," 2003, 77.

¹⁶ Branko Milanović, "Global Income Inequality in Numbers: In History and Now." *Global Policy* 4, 2 (2013), 198.

II. From Integration to Fracture: Labor Integration, Social Tensions, and Immigration Policy

The 1960s marked what can aptly be described as the golden age of labor migrants, a period characterized by an unprecedented integration into low-skilled, low-paid positions throughout the developed world. During this era, there was an overwhelming influx of migrants, primarily from the developing South to the industrialized North, channeled into unskilled manual jobs across various sectors including industry, services, and agriculture. In Britain, for example, the employment statistics for 1966 showed that 94 percent of Jamaicans, 87 percent of Pakistanis, and 61 percent of Indians were engaged in manual positions.¹⁷ A similar pattern was observed in Germany, where, in 1973, every sixth worker in manufacturing was foreign, and 35.7 percent of all guest workers were employed in the iron and metals industry.¹⁸ The substantial presence of migrants in the labor force during this period was, in part, facilitated by policies that allowed for permit renewal and family reunification.¹⁹ The Bracero Program in the United States—specifically focused on enlisting agricultural laborers from Mexico—further exemplified the need for migrants for “hard, hot, dirty, backbreaking” farm labor, while attempts to enforce controls on the Mexican border were inconsistent at best.²⁰ Such migration patterns resulted in a notable increase in remittances to developing countries, with money sent to these nations growing from US\$2 billion in 1970 to \$17.7 billion in 1980.²¹ In sum, the integration of migrants into low-skilled, low-paid positions during the 1960s established new and significant connections between the Global South and North.

During the 1970s, immigrants’ employment opportunities were met with challenges as local workers were fearful of the potential consequences of a growing workforce from the Third World on their wages and working conditions. The fear was most notably exemplified in Britain, where the Trades Union Congress (TUC) and the Left protested Commonwealth immigration, claiming that it undermined standards.²² They called for immigration limits based on “employment needs.”²³ Widespread racism within unions also led to non-whites encountering barriers to leadership positions.²⁴ Enoch Powell, a Conservative MP, further intensified tensions with his inflammatory “Rivers of Blood” speech in April 1968, which denounced immigration and multiculturalism, catalyzing anti-immigrant sentiment.²⁵ Powell’s speech resonated with working-class supporters, including London dockworkers who protested his removal. This period also saw mounting strikes, which at times reinforced anti-immigrant views.²⁶ In other Western countries experiencing immigration too, local workers and governments allied to fight against the lower wages that immigrants might accept. These restrictions came in the form of statutory minimum wages or in collective agreements.²⁷ In

¹⁷ Freeman, “Immigrant Labor and Working-Class Politics: The French and British Experience.” *Comparative Politics* (1978): 25. See also: Castles and Miller. *The Age of Migration*, 73.

¹⁸ Miller, *Turkish Guest Workers in Germany*, 138.

¹⁹ Chin, *The Crisis of Multiculturalism in Europe*, 62.

²⁰ Marc Linder, *Migrant Workers and Minimum Wages: Regulating the Exploitation of Agricultural Labor in the United States* (Boulder, Colorado: Westview, 1992), 14. Martin Schain, *The Politics of Immigration in France, Britain, and the United States: A Comparative Study*, 2nd ed. (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 226.

²¹ Hein De Haas, “International migration, remittances, and development: myths and facts.” *Third World Quarterly* 26.8 (2005): 1276.

²² Freeman, *Immigrant Labor and Racial Conflict in Industrial Societies*, 243.

²³ *Ibid*, 223.

²⁴ *Ibid*, 226-227.

²⁵ “Rivers of Blood Speech,” Conservative Association meeting, Birmingham, 20 April 1968.

²⁶ E. Meyers, *International Immigration Policy. A Theoretical and Comparative Analysis* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), 82.

²⁷ Ellora Derenoncourt and Claire Montialoux, “Minimum Wages and Racial Inequality,” *Quarterly Journal of Economics* (2020). Janice Fine and Daniel J. Tichenor, “An Enduring Dilemma: Immigration and Organized Labor

some cases, immigrant workers joined the struggle, but they soon became the primary victims of layoffs or reduced hiring when companies faced higher labor costs as a result of new regulation.²⁸ Additional costs to employers included not only wages, but also indirect spending on workers' needs, such as housing, which became increasingly mandatory by the early 1970s.

These various changes culminated in a shift in the pattern of employment that had been established in the 1960s. Especially evident in Britain and France, this shift caused immigrants' employment to become increasingly precarious in the 1970s.²⁹ The situation was further exacerbated by the so-called "first oil shock" in November 1973, after which immigrants' employment plummeted, even in countries like Germany.³⁰

Following those developments, many Western nations implemented new policies that severely restricted immigration, particularly from non-European countries.³¹ France and Britain progressively imposed tighter immigration controls, especially between 1968 and 1972.³² The Commonwealth Immigrants Acts of 1962 and 1968 in Britain increasingly excluded non-whites from former colonies.³³ Meanwhile, Germany banned the recruitment of foreign workers in 1973 and required visas for Turks beginning in 1980.³⁴ After the 1965 Immigration and Nationality-Hart-Celler Act imposed a limit of 120,000 immigrants per year from the Western Hemisphere, the United States implemented its first numerical limits per country on immigration from the Western hemisphere in 1976, including Mexico.³⁵ Australia, too, curtailed immigration levels in the 1970s and introduced a points system that favored skilled migrants.³⁶ Even the oil-rich Gulf states reduced migrant worker flows from Arab countries during the 1970s, preferring Asians who could more easily be sent home after their contracts expired.³⁷ These restrictive policies concerning employment-based immigration had the unintended effect of increasing family reunification immigration, which the receiving

in Western Europe and the United States," in *The Oxford Handbook of the Politics of International Migration*, ed. Marc R. Rosenblum and Daniel J. Tichenor (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 559.

²⁸ Samuel Brittan, "Economic Viewpoint: Home truths on union power." *Financial Times*, 19 July 1984, 19. Brittan, "Economic Viewpoint: A closer look at pay and jobs." *Financial Times*, 26 July 1984, 17. Miller, *Turkish Guest Workers in Germany*, 135, 140-4.

²⁹ Leonard Downie Jr., "Riots in London Reveal Deteriorating Race Relations; Clashes in London's Brixton Area Injure 200," *The Washington Post*, 13 April 1981. William Borders, "Britain Discovers a Race Problem, to Its Surprise," *The New York Times*, 19 April 1981. Rafaela Dancygier, *Immigration and Conflict in Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 71.

³⁰ John Vinocur, "Foreign Workers in West Germany Live Under the Shadow of Prejudice," *The New York Times*, 22 February 1982. Marcel Berlinghoff, "An den Grenzen der Aufnahmefähigkeit: Die Europäisierung der Anwerbestopps 1970–1974. Ein Vergleich der restriktiven Migrationspolitik in der Schweiz, der Bundesrepublik Deutschland und in Frankreich." Dissertation, Universität Heidelberg, 2011.

³¹ Fine and Tichenor, "An Enduring Dilemma," 535-6. Schain, *The Politics of Immigration in France, Britain, and the United States*, 126-7.

³² Freeman, "Immigrant Labor and Working-Class Politics," 28-9. Fine, and Tichenor, "An Enduring Dilemma," 539.

³³ Chin, *The Crisis of Multiculturalism in Europe*, 87, 69-70. Bade, *Migration in European History*, 226.

³⁴ Hans-Peter Schwarz, *Die Bundesrepublik Deutschland: Eine Bilanz nach 60 Jahren* (Köln / Weimar / Wien: Böhlau Verlag, 2008), 581. Berlinghoff, "Der europäisierte Anwerbestopp," in *Das "Gastarbeiter"-System: Arbeitsmigration und ihre Folgen in der Bundesrepublik Deutschland und Westeuropa*, ed. Jochen Oltmer, Axel Kreienbrink, and Carlos Sanz Díaz (Munich: Oldenburg Verlage, 2012), 161. Can Mery, *Der ewige Gast: Wie mein türkischer Vater versuchte, Deutscher zu werden* (Munich: Karl Blessing Verlag, 2018), chapter 1, last section.

³⁵ Schain, *The Politics of Immigration in France, Britain, and the United States*, 194-5, 227. Miller Center, "Ted Kennedy, LBJ, and Immigration Reform," June 15, 2016, Edward M. Kennedy Oral History Project.

³⁶ Stephen Castles, Ellie Vasta, and Derya Ozkul, "Australia: A Classical Immigration Country in Transition," in *Controlling Immigration: A Global Perspective*, ed. James Hollifield, Philip L. Martin, and Pia Orrenius, 3rd ed. (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2014), 130.

³⁷ Douglas S. Massey, *Patterns and Processes of International Migration in the 21st Century* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003), 8. Castles and Miller, *The Age of Migration*, 117.

countries then also sought to limit.³⁸ Housing and education policies were certainly perceived as essential for integrating immigrant workers into a new environment, but these policies had also the perverse effect of creating a strong pull effect on migrants from the Third World, thereby undermining the objectives of government.³⁹ As economic growth stalled during the 1970s, immigrant workers went from being seen as essential contributors to being viewed as burdens on state welfare systems, and governments attempted to close their gates.

III. The Age of Contentions: Rising Conflicts in a Globalized World

In the 1970s, Western European governments grappled with the challenge of limiting immigration through restrictive policies. Legislation in Britain until the 1971 Immigration Act effectively reduced yearly net Commonwealth immigration from over 100,000 around 1961 to almost 20,000 by the 1980s.⁴⁰ France, by contrast, encountered more difficulty in curtailing immigration from its former colonies in North and Sub-Saharan Africa. The permeability of European borders coupled with visa overstays facilitated ongoing entry and settlement.⁴¹ Concurrently, many factories and farms depended on immigrant workers, and some sought to circumvent newly established wage standards by hiring undocumented migrants.⁴²

The early 1980s brought increased government pressures against illicit employment, and the ramifications of the so-called “second oil shock” led to a dramatic rise in unemployment. This surge exacerbated anti-immigrant sentiment, as this population was increasingly excluded from employment and began to drift into criminality. In 1981, riots erupted between predominantly Jamaican immigrants and police in south London, mirroring broader racial tensions and economic distress.⁴³ A similar occurrence unfolded in France, where the riots also served as a call for increased public aid. In contrast to the approach of the French socialist government, the Thatcher government in the UK responded with austerity measures, slashing social services in immigrant neighborhoods and dismissing pleas for augmented public spending.⁴⁴

As legal avenues for immigration were progressively restricted, migrants increasingly resorted to illegal channels. This shift prompted European governments to call for enhanced border enforcement from their neighboring countries.⁴⁵

As low-skilled, low-paid work in developed nations became increasingly difficult due to the combined effects of new employment standards and increasing immigration restrictions, the economic competition from South-East Asian nations marked a profound transformation.⁴⁶ The increase in protections against wage pressures facilitated this eastward migration of production. East Asian nations were then able to capitalize on their labor-intensive manufacturing exports that other countries had either failed to tap into or had abandoned. Emerging economies such as Japan, China, India, and other South-East Asian nations, buoyed by inexpensive labor and the growing mobility of goods, experienced significant economic

³⁸ Dancygier, *Immigration and Conflict in Europe*, 80. Meyers, *International Immigration Policy*, 73.

³⁹ Dancygier, *Immigration and Conflict in Europe*, 80.

⁴⁰ H. Rieben, “Intra-European Migration of Labour and Migration of High-Level Manpower from Europe to North America,” in *North American and Western Economic Policies*, ed. C. P. Kindleberger and A. Shonfield (London: Macmillan, 1971), 470. Dancygier, *Immigration and Conflict in Europe*, 77-8.

⁴¹ James M. Markham, “Western Europe Seeks to Stem Tide of Illegal Aliens.” *The New York Times*, 9 July 1984.

⁴² Schain, *The Politics of Immigration in France, Britain, and the United States*, 213. Douglas Massey, “Anatomy of a Train Wreck: U.S. Immigration Policy Before and After Trump,” (Keynote Lecture, IMISCOE 2019 Conference, Malmö, Sweden, June 26-28, 2019).

⁴³ Rafaela Dancygier, *Immigration and Conflict in Europe*, 66, 89.

⁴⁴ William Borders, “Britain Discovers a Race Problem, to Its Surprise,” *New York Times*, April 19, 1981.

⁴⁵ Markham, “Western Europe Seeks to Stem Tide of Illegal Aliens.”

⁴⁶ Lindert, Peter H, and Jeffrey G Williamson, “Does Globalization Make the World More Unequal?” in *Globalization in Historical Perspective*, 227-76 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 253.

growth. The factory floors of East Asian cities bustled, becoming filled with workers laboring at machines once operated in the Western world.

Between Western nations and the countries of origin of their immigrants, the contention over migrant workers and their families became a significant fracture. The primary country of emigration to the US, Mexico, and a principal country of emigration to Europe, Algeria, joined forces. They successfully lobbied in 1979 for the initiation of the drafting process of a convention concerning the rights of those migrants under the auspices of the United Nations.⁴⁷ The Franco-Algerian situation and the United States-Mexico relationship both operated to connect labor migration policies, nationalistic orientations, and diplomatic concerns.⁴⁸

The difficult negotiations took more than a decade, culminating in the 1990 adoption of the United Nations' International Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of Their Families (CMW). This milestone revealed a fractured international landscape. In the following decades, fewer than fifty countries ratified the convention, and notably, none of them were major immigration countries.⁴⁹ These ratifying countries were primarily low- or middle-income, migrant-sending nations.⁵⁰ Migrant-receiving nations like the UK and Canada argued that ratification would hinder their ability to regulate employment sectors and control access to public funds for migrants.⁵¹ Germany's refusal to sign the CMW epitomized the apprehension about perceived financial burdens, a contentious point that illustrates the deep divide migration policy created on the global stage.⁵² This division cast a long shadow over global tensions in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries.

Conclusion

This chapter has provided an integrated perspective on the global migration turn in the long 1970s. It traced how structural transformations, including vast inequality between regions, unprecedented population growth, and declining transportation costs, drove a surge of migration from the developing world to Western nations. Initially welcomed as a vital labor source, immigrants soon faced backlash as their large-scale influx raised social concerns over wages, housing, and welfare resources. New policies affecting both the labor market and immigration restrictions ensued, fueling illegal immigration, irregular employment, criminality, and diplomatic conflicts between migrant-sending and migrant-receiving states. The fractured adoption of the 1990 UN Migrant Worker Convention revealed a divided world order, unable to reconcile policies with the forces of globalization. By connecting global trends to national policies and experiences across multiple regions, this analysis sheds new light on the complex dynamics of the global migration turn, which shaped migration as a globally prominent issue.

⁴⁷ Martin Ruhs, *The Price of Rights: Regulating International Labor Migration* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2013), 20-2.

⁴⁸ Mark Miller, "Reluctant Partnership: Foreign Workers in Franco-Algerian Relations 1962-1979." *Journal of International Affairs* 33.2 (Fall 1979): 219.

⁴⁹ Ruhs, *The Price of Rights*, 13.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 16.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 20.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 108.