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Michael J. Piore

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**Introduction**

In the last twenty years most industrialized Western countries have experienced extremely heavy in-migration of foreign workers. By 1975 foreign workers had come to constitute 10 percent of the labor force in Western Europe as a whole. They represented 11 percent of the labor force in France and 9 percent in West Germany.<sup>1</sup> In some countries the proportion of foreign workers is even higher. In Switzerland it surpasses 25 percent.<sup>2</sup> Since the middle 1960s the United States has also been experiencing a considerable influx of foreign workers: The bulk of our migrant labor force is clandestine and its exact size is consequently unknown. Estimates run from two to twelve million.<sup>3</sup>

In their origins these migrations often went unnoticed. Where they were officially recognized, as in Germany and Northern Europe, they were generally thought to benefit both the sending and the receiving nations. Both countries thought of the migrants as temporary. In the sending country the migration was supposed to relieve population pressure and overcome rural unemployment, to generate scarce foreign exchange, and to develop the skills requisite for an industrial labor force. In the receiving country, migrants were supposed to complement native labor, taking jobs that the latter did not want and in this way overcome critical labor shortages. Over time, however, the migration process has been the source of an increasing number of problems and a focal point of clashes between native and foreign populations.<sup>4</sup> The host countries have been forced to worry about whether to permit workers they initially thought of as temporary to bring their families,

and how, when and if they do, to house those families, educate their children, and provide for their health and general social welfare. The migrants themselves, who were initially accepting of wages and working conditions that native workers would not tolerate, have begun to resist these jobs, to organize for improvements in the workplace, and to pressure for access to more attractive job opportunities that natives *do* want.<sup>5</sup> These pressures for better housing, jobs, and social services have brought foreigners into direct conflicts with natives. Such conflicts have been aggravated by latent racial and national prejudices, which the antagonisms between natives and migrants seem to have brought to the fore. The result has often been policy reversals and efforts by the recipient country to curtail the migration process, but that process has turned out to be extremely resistant to these efforts. Even when it originated in governmental efforts and institutions, the government seems unable to bring the population movement to a halt once it has begun. Authorities either lack the techniques for doing so or are unable to command through the political process resources comparable to the rhetoric of official policy; in response to efforts to stop it, the migration goes underground.

The migrations have also created problems for the donor country, which have aggravated its own internal politics and contributed to strained relationships between the receiving and sending nations. The return migrants have proved very resistant to the kinds of industrial jobs in their native lands that they were supposedly learning to fill. Instead, they have more often tended, on returning to their home villages, to use their earnings to buy land or foreign consumption goods. The foreign exchange they bring back thus often serves simply to increase the import of luxury consumer durables, and when it does not, it inflates land prices.<sup>6</sup> The return migrants are often also unwilling to perform traditional agricultural work, and their attitudes have served to degrade such work, even to make it unacceptable among those who have not migrated. In the extreme, return migration has killed traditional agriculture or forced these countries in turn to recruit migrants from still less-developed nations to perform the work. Finally, the migration has served to transmit the economic fluctuations in the

industrialized world to the underdeveloped nations that send the manpower: When economic activity declines abroad, remittance falls off; workers are unemployed and sent home; youth, who had anticipated migration, are denied visas. These effects become stronger over time as the sending economy increasingly adjusts to and orients itself toward the migration process.

### **Characteristics of the migration process and its implications**

The migration process out of which these policy problems grow has several distinct characteristics. Some of these characteristics are surprising to our conventional notions of industrial development and economic growth and of the way in which industrial economies operate. But the characteristics of migration seem to provide the clues to an alternative understanding, one which at least serves to resolve some of the paradoxes of the migration process. Perhaps it can resolve some of the dilemmas of policy as well. The first characteristic of the migration process is that it seems to respond to the attraction of the industrial countries. In Europe many governments have in fact organized programs that deliberately recruit migrants and manage their stay. In the United States the process is considerably less institutionalized, and because it is clandestine, its exact nature is somewhat obscure, but here also the strategic factor in initiating the migration and controlling its evolution appears to be the search of American employers for new sources of labor. Second, the migrants appear to be coming to take a distinct set of jobs, jobs that the native labor force refuses to accept. Third, the migrants initially see themselves as temporary workers and plan to return home; however, many of them fail to realize their plans and either never return or come back repeatedly to the industrial country, becoming more or less permanent members of the labor force. Fourth, the migrants themselves appear to be largely unskilled; typically they cannot speak the language of the host country; often they are unschooled and illiterate even in their own language; they sometimes come from backward rural areas with little contact with the kind of urban, industrial environment where they work and live.

The last characteristic is a real paradox, given conventional

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notions of industrial society. We are accustomed to thinking of industrialization and economic growth as a process that in some basic way involves increasingly sophisticated technologies and a progressively more highly educated and well-trained labor force. Indeed, just a few years ago we were beset by fears that the educational requirements of the economy were surpassing the preparation of the labor force and were leaving a growing residue of technologically unemployed. Why, if this is true, do industrial economies seem to generate these particular migration streams? What are these jobs that native workers do not want? How is it that industrial economies seem not only able to absorb, but in fact are actively seeking out uneducated, illiterate workers from the very types of societies to which they are, in the conventional view of what industrialization is all about, generally contrasted?

If the process of migration in the host country contradicts the conventional notions about industrialization and underdevelopment, then perhaps it is not so surprising that the return migrants should fail to play the role anticipated for them in the country of origin. Those roles after all are also derived from these same conventional notions. Moreover, if the developed nations need unskilled, illiterate workers to fill industrial jobs, perhaps the lack of a skilled labor force is not the obstacle to development it has been thought to be: Perhaps underdeveloped countries also tend to need for their internal development the kind of unskilled, illiterate workers they are sending abroad. And if there is something about industrial society that renders its own labor force ill-adapted to its productive requirements, it should not be surprising – though it is certainly paradoxical – that prolonged exposure to that society should render the migrants less suited, rather than more suited, to the needs of industrialization.

Further exploration of the migration process raises fundamental questions not simply about what the process of economic development and industrialization is about but about how developed economies seem to operate. It is generally supposed that the motivation of the migration process is an income differential between that of the sending region and the employment opportunities at the other end of the migration

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stream. Such a differential does indeed exist, but it does not seem to govern the migration process in any of the conventional senses of the term. The donor countries are not typically the countries with the lowest incomes, which would provide the widest income differential. There are large surpluses of labor in the home country, but the migration seems to be confined to the numbers of people who can get jobs. Unemployment among migrants in the receiving country seems to be relatively low. The surplus labor might be thought to create jobs in the receiving country, but it doesn't seem to have that effect. This could be attributed to institutional restraints, such as the minimum wage, minimal health and safety standards, and so on, but whenever these restraints operate to curtail labor for jobs that already exist, migration manages to persist by circumventing the law. The surplus labor might be thought to act as a drag upon wages, but relative wages at the bottom of the market do not seem to decline. This too might be the result of an institutional restraint imposed by the minimum wage, but there are sectors of the economy that exploit alien workers by paying them below the minimum. The existence of these sectors raises further questions: Why, if some sectors pay below the minimum, don't all sectors violate the law in this regard? If the minimum wage can be more or less effectively enforced, why can't similar restraints be imposed upon migration itself?

This book is an attempt to answer these questions about the long-distance migration to industrialized areas, to work out the puzzles and resolve the paradoxes out of which these questions arise. It seeks to do this in terms of a single, sustained argument, or theory, about the nature of the migrants and the roles they play within the industrial world. That theory grows out of a variety of research projects, spread over a number of years. In some of these, migration was only peripherally connected to what was being studied. In others, it was the focal point of concern. The most important pieces of research in the development of the argument were: a series of studies of the labor-market problems of black workers in the United States;<sup>7</sup> a study of the nature and origins of Puerto Rican migration to Boston;<sup>8</sup> a continuing investigation of clandestine migration

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and undocumented workers from the Caribbean basin and Mexico to industrial areas in the United States;<sup>9</sup> studies of the structure and characteristics of low-wage labor markets in Europe.<sup>10</sup> A last body of research material reflected in what follows concerns the historical development of the structure of the American labor market and the role of immigrant workers within it.<sup>11</sup>

Much of the material presented here has been covered elsewhere, in the articles, research reports, and policy papers that result from individual research projects. The principal reason for drawing them together in book form is to present the elements of the theory as parts of a single, unified argument and thereby to emphasize the coherence of the perspective upon the migration phenomenon that is being developed. This seems particularly important for the policy debates toward which much of the research has been directed and in terms of which this book is bound to be read. There has been a tendency for the participants in that debate to pick and choose from the various research reports separate pieces of evidence or distinct analytical points with which they happen to agree and to discard other components as unacceptable or irrelevant, or to combine them with views about migration drawn from a completely different analytical perspective. This is not necessarily wrong. But because the particular view of migration developed here grows out of the inadequacies and paradoxes of other, more traditional views and because a good deal of the plausibility of any one of the elements of the argument derives from the plausibility of the larger story of which it appears to be a part, the argument cannot be *arbitrarily* broken into a series of components.

What is true of the policy debate is true, in a somewhat different sense, of debates within the economic profession, and a second reason for this book is to clarify the relationship between the perspective developed in earlier work and that of conventional economic theory. The perspective upon migration developed here is concerned with the same set of analytical and policy issues that conventional economic theory addresses. It also shares with conventional theory a set of standards for logical consistency and coherence and is meant to be evaluated

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against those standards. But the argument itself is definitely unconventional. It derives from a perspective upon the nature of economic activity that is fundamentally different from that of conventional economic analysis. Because it is so different, it leads not only to an alternative view of the phenomenon of migration with which it starts but also to a range of issues apparently removed from migration, such as the minimum wage, unemployment, and ultimately the very nature of industrial society.

The contrast to conventional theory can be overdrawn. There is very little in the analytical structure of the argument that conventional theory explicitly rejects and, hence, very little that actually *conflicts* with orthodox analytical approaches. In this sense, the contention is simply that conventional theory is irrelevant to the problem being considered. On the other hand, the argument hinges upon aspects of socioeconomic behavior from which orthodox theory explicitly abstracts and deliberately neglects. It is the role and function of theory to simplify, to repress detail, and, in so doing, to call to the attention of the analyst, the researchers, and, in the case of economic theory, the policy maker, the essential elements of a process. If it fails in this role, by suppressing the details that are essential and bringing to the fore elements that are, in fact, irrelevant or incidental, then the theory itself must be counted a failure. It is basically the conviction that conventional theory fails in this sense and the desire to provide an alternative theory of economic behavior in at least that segment of the labor market that migrants occupy that motivates this book.

All of this can be exemplified by one of the principal theoretical issues raised below, that of how to *describe* jobs and workers. Conventional theory seeks to do this in terms of income. The principal difference among jobs that it recognizes are the differences in the incomes that they offer, and the principal differences among workers are the income opportunities available to them and their own income-generating capacities. Other job attributes and worker traits are suppressed or, more precisely, moved by the nature of the theoretical apparatus to the background of the analyst's perspective. In this, conventional theory treats the market for labor like the market for a shirt or any other commodity that is bought and sold freely and regu-

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larly. In so doing, it does not mean to imply that workers *are* shirts, only that by focusing upon those ways in which they resemble shirts and suppressing those ways in which they do not, one can better understand the phenomenon of migration.

This book starts from the proposition that income is not the critical analytical variable, but rather that it is the attempt to view income as such that leads to the paradoxes with which the problem was introduced at the beginning of the chapter. One can better understand migration by ignoring income differences and recognizing instead that people are rooted in a social context in ways that other commodities are not; migrant behavior can be better understood in terms of the specific attributes of the jobs available to migrants and the meaning attached to those attributes in the social context in which work is performed. Again, the contention is not that income makes no difference; nor will it never be an important variable in understanding population movements. The argument, in other words, is not that workers are in *no* way like shirts, nor that there is never any point in recognizing the similarities between workers and shirts. But there *is* a very strong contention that the phenomenon of migration cannot be understood by treating workers like shirts; that the critical factors governing the migration process are the social forces that differentiate the market for men from the market for shirts, and that it is those social forces that the analytical apparatus must bring to the fore.

Because much of the policy debate on immigration has been structured by conventional economic theory, the role accorded income differentials also illustrates misunderstandings that this book seeks to overcome in that area as well. In trying to cope with the flow of undocumented workers to the United States, for example, the emphasis upon income has led people to focus upon the underdeveloped state of the Mexican economy from which many of the migrants came and the population pressures in that country. The notion is that the migrants are coming from Mexico because of the higher wages in the States and that if Mexican per capita income could be raised, either through development or a reduced birthrate or both, the flow of workers would be halted. By the same token, the low-wage



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scale of the jobs that the migrants take in the United States is attributed to the plentiful supply of labor in Mexico, and it is believed that by reducing migrant flows from Mexico, the jobs would be forced to pay higher wages and be able to attract native workers. Thus, some of my colleagues have wanted to add to the list of policy proposals in the last chapter measures designed to raise the income and reduce the birthrate in Mexico.

The basic thrust of the argument in the book, however, is that job characteristics other than income operate both to make the society tremendously resistant to their elimination and to make native workers reluctant to accept them. This implies that if the income differential between the United States and Mexico were somehow to disappear, the American economy would simply seek elsewhere for other workers. The theory, therefore, deliberately ignores income in order to focus on an alternative set of attributes that will explain why the economy needs these jobs, why native workers reject them, how the society would seek other workers if Mexican labor became scarce, and where it would be likely to find them. The policy suggestions at the end of the book grow out of the answers developed to these questions. To add Mexican economic development to the list, however desirable it may be for other reasons, would thus do violence to the basic thrust of the undertaking.

Having attempted to distinguish the perspective developed here from that of conventional economic and policy analysis, something should be said about its relationship to the Marxian analytical perspective as well. This is required not only because Marx provides the principal alternative approach to conventional analysis but also because Marxian economics as an *analytical endeavor* is very similar to that of the present undertaking. Both seek to understand the behavior of workers and managers in terms of the larger social systems in which their lives are rooted. And both understand as well the structure of employment opportunities as governed by social and historical processes that dominate and overcome the kinds of forces upon which conventional theory focuses, that is, employers' interest in the relative prices of the different types of labor that alternative employment structures imply. It is in the identification of

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the social and historical processes that govern the evolution of the job structure that the following analysis departs from orthodox Marxian analysis.

In orthodox Marxian analysis the central historical process affecting the job structure is the *division of labor*. That process is envisaged as one in which productive operations are broken into increasingly specialized and more finely divided tasks, and all jobs in the economy tend toward those in Adam Smith's pin factory or on the modern automobile assembly line. Work under these circumstances comes to involve very little inherent skill; it also loses any intrinsic meaning that it might have as the creation of a product useful, or even recognizable, divorced from the larger social context in which it occurs. In and of itself, in other words, the output of one isolated task on an automobile assembly line is useless, and the task itself taken in isolation is meaningless. These characteristics of the process of division of labor play two critical roles in the historical trajectory of the capitalist system as envisaged by Marx. First, because the productive process is the ultimate determinate of human attitudes and behavior in the Marxian system, the progressive reduction of work through the division of labor into inherently simple, and very similar, single operations leads to the homogenization and eventual unity of the working class, and this, in turn, is a critical factor in the Marxian view of the inevitability of revolution. Second, because these single-task jobs have no intrinsic meaning and are defined only as parts of a broader productive process, their emergence implies the "socialization" of production. As constituent elements of production and work lose inherent, independent meaning, in other words, it is increasingly difficult for them to be coordinated and controlled through market mechanisms. And they come instead to be explicitly planned and coordinated either within the firm or through the social relationships that develop among firms doing business with each other. In this sense, the division of labor is a process that not only prepares the groundwork for socialism but also leads, itself, toward the socialization of productive operations.

The view of industrialization that underlies the subsequent