Immigration is a central concern for the practices and study of decolonization and postcolonial theory. The legacy of colonialism set in place many of the patterns of movement, processes, and practices by which the contemporary system of nation-states mutates human mobility – the fact of migration – into the problematic we call immigration. In short, what postcolonial theory does, or can do, is challenge the entire discourse wherein a people (defined as such) is endowed with a proper relationship to a “place of origin” and therefore to a particular set of juridico-political institutions such as nationality, citizenship, and the law. Traditional discourses of immigration consider movement at only one scale: the movement of people from one state to another across an international border. Postcolonial theory, first, pushes us to consider movement at a number of other scales, and second, brings to the fore the role that governance plays in (re)producing global inequality by legitimizing or delegitimizing forms of mobility through a multiplication of the figures of migration.

SITUATING IMMIGRATION AND THE POSTCOLONIAL

Immigration is one of the most contested issues in the contemporary world. It is most often today viewed through an explicitly economic lens, only picking up political valence secondarily, usually to justify exclusion or the lack of benefits extended to new migrants. Such presentist economic overtones, however, obscure the ways in which the contemporary phenomenon of immigration is overdetermined by its colonial roots. The fact of migration is understood as a historically significant aspect of the human condition; but, perhaps counterintuitively, immigration is a much more recent phenomenon, tied to the historical emergence both of a regime of fixed national borders and the international legal, political, and military frameworks which enforce them, and a colonial system that inscribed inequality into the world system. Fixed borders and an international legal framework were integral to the colonial project, therefore “immigration” is a direct legacy of colonialism and the notions of race, nation, and culture that fueled the carving up of the world by Europeans from the fifteenth to the twentieth centuries.

A very clear example of the lingering effects that colonialism has had upon patterns of human migration were the movements set in motion during and after the decolonization of Africa. The map of Africa has changed drastically, and many new states adopted territorial boundaries that had less to do with historic population demographics on the continent, by ethnic group or tribe, and more to do with the persistence of borders between former colonial territories. Not only did relatively arbitrary borders then become fixed in space and time, but the introduction of self-determination and nationalist independence movements produced conflicts that persist into the present: Tutsis and Hutus in Rwanda, for example. Decolonization also shifted the relationship between the newly independent, the formerly colonized, and the metropole: Algerians in France became immigrants almost overnight, requiring documentation and work authorizations whereas before they were considered mobile labor within the French empire.
The legacy of colonialism not only produced arbitrary borders between historically allied groups, it also fixed animosities across borders in ways that lost the fluidity of precolonial eras. Such fixed animosities as those between the newly divided Pakistan and India or between Palestine and Israel, have produced some of the world's most intractable conflicts, which in turn have produced their own migrations and diasporas.

Further examples of patterns of migration, border conflicts, and diasporas directly linked to the legacies of colonialism can be found in Latin America, the Indian subcontinent, and Asia. Although each individual migration has its own specific history and character – it should not be mistaken that there is a single postcolonial immigration phenomenon that simply hops from place to place – there are at least some broad commonalities that can be interrogated under the banner of “postcolonial studies.”

One way to consider immigration and the postcolonial is from a temporal standpoint – or the immigration that is set in motion within postcolonial time. This presumes, of course, that the postcolonial is a time, something that occurs after the colonial, and indicates, perhaps, that if the postcolonial has its roots (primarily) in the twentieth century, it then coincides with the most recent wave of immigration–related anxiety (to contrast a previous wave in the United States, occurring roughly between 1840 and 1924). We can locate, then, several postcolonial migrations in the twentieth century: the 1920s (after World War I), the 1940s (the British withdrawal from India and Pakistan), the 1950s (after World War II), the 1960s (African decolonization, among others), and the 1990s (after the collapse of the USSR) especially. What is at stake here is the radical reconfiguration of people and place, nation and citizen, state and sovereignty that occurs in the temporal aftermath of decolonization.

Immigration and the postcolonial may not be a time as much as it is a relation in space. Is the postcolonial confined to the former colonies? Does an immigrant bring the postcolonial with her to the metropole? Can we even speak of metropole and periphery any longer? If postcolonial immigration can mean a relation in time, as in after, can it also imply a relation of space? Postcolonial theory has critiqued the nation, the nation–form, and nationalism through the reconfiguration of the interior–exterior relation, instigated in large part through mass migration or diaspora.

In and of itself, the term “immigration” is non–specific, leading to a number of definitional and conceptual issues, not least because it naturalizes the nation–state and the colonial legacy of national borders in parts of the world that prior to the nineteenth century had been unaccustomed to thinking about political space in terms of territory and sovereignty (Storey 2011). It will help, then, to have at least a basic understanding of some of the primary figures of mobility, viewed through the legacy of the colonial era.

FIGURES OF MIGRATION AND MOBILITY

The term “immigration” is a product of the nation–state–centric ordering of the globe which presumes that particular people belong in specific areas, and that movement requires state authorization within that order. What has emerged within the legacy of postcolonial immigration has been a proliferation of figures of migration that stress aspects of migrant motivation, as well as an evolving and intensifying process of legitimizing and delegitimizing mobility. Postcolonial theory turns these figures of migration back upon the state to foreground subjective experience and new claims to citizenship and rights, providing new discourses and practices of inclusion and exclusion (Mezzadra 2015).

Immigrant

The term “immigrant” is most often figured as individuals or small groups of individuals who leave their “country of origin” to settle in a new country for the purposes of mid– to long–term residence. Emigration designates the movement from a state; immigration designates the movement to a state. Essential to this mobility type are the determinate structures that turn migration into immigration, or the presence and jurisdiction of the system of nation–states. Immigration, therefore, is not a universal process without a history. Instead, immigration implies a juridico–political process that adheres to a set of international norms and laws regarding the movement of people between nation–states for the purposes of changing residence. Each state establishes legal codes regarding the movement of its citizens and those who wish to become its citizens. This has given rise recently to the increased use of the term “illegal immigrant” being applied to those who do not adhere to these international norms and instead move autonomously. It should be noted that underlying the seeming naturalness of “legal” and “illegal” immigration is in fact an active process of being made illegal, or “illegalization” (De Genova 2004), highlighting the role of governance in the subjective experience of mobility.

Key to understanding the figure of the immigrant, then, is the juridico–political process and its consequent institutions, and whether the mobile individual adheres to state–sanctioned processes within the purview of national and international institutions. Motivation for movement means little within the juridico–political structures that produce this figuration, as one’s motivations matter only inasmuch as they adhere to the set of processes set forth by the state as “proper” motivations: Do you have a formal offer of employment or not? Did you marry for love or for a green card? Do you have family in your adopted country or not?

Refugee

Unlike immigrants, who are usually determined to have free choice in the process of migrating, refugees are defined as those fleeing from a threat and therefore forced to move. Significant to this type is also a juridico–political definition,
but one in which the “proper/improper” distinction hinges upon motivation. The 1951 UN Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees asserts that the term refugee applies to any person 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.*

(UNHCR 2010, 14; emphasis added)

Refugees are widely considered to be the *cause célèbre* of the international human rights regime constructed after World War II, the presence of which has fundamentally altered the geopolitical landscape since 1951. Protection of refugees and internally displaced persons, or the potential for a large group to become refugees, are now utilized as a justification for humanitarian interventions, such as those in Somalia (1992–94), Rwanda (1994), the former Yugoslavia (1994–99), and others. Such interventions are as much about preventing large-scale human migration as they are about preventing ethnic cleansing, disease, or other humanitarian crises.

The definition of refugee that has become universalized throughout the globe embodies essentially *liberal* political protections, such as those against persecution due to race, religion, and political opinion. However, it does not include guarantees against economic destitution or climate/environment change due to human influence or corporate malfeasance. First, this is a product of the early Cold War, at which time Western liberal political and economic values were normalized into the international refugee protection system (Long 2013). Second, this relationship has produced a set of conditions that will and can only intensify as the terrains of global, political, and identitarian struggles shift, and as the climate continues to be ravaged by the growth-and-extraction paradigm of capitalism.

As figures of human mobility, then, refugees are subject to the system of nation-states as the determinate structure governing their mobility, just as is the immigrant. The specific exceptions granted to refugees as a category of human movement are the motivation of the fear of loss of life; loss of political, religious, or national rights; racial persecution; or sudden shifts in the territorial definition of national boundaries.

**Economic migrant**

This figure of migration is perhaps the most politically visible, as many politicians globally employ migrants motivated by economic concerns as scapegoats that allow for particular interventions into issues as diverse as welfare entitlements, prison reform, employment, and language concerns. Whereas “immigrants” and “refugees” are deemed legitimate due to their adherence to juridico-political norms established at the state level, “economic migrants” are designated as such almost exclusively when individuals are poor and move autonomously, without state authorization. This is the category of migrants who are popularly seen to be “taking away jobs” from “native-born” or “naturalized” citizens. “Economic migrants” are almost invariably composed of the global poor, as wealthy migrants who move to take specialized positions by invitation are generally just considered “immigrants” or, increasingly, “foreign talent.” In fact, in most countries, migration regimes differ greatly for these poor migrants. Migrants having specialized skills are granted permanent residence or citizenship — and are classified as legitimate immigrants — while economic migrants are only granted temporary residence through “guest worker” programs specifically designed to ensure they do not stay.

However, there is another prism through which economic migration must be viewed, which is through global capitalism as itself a cause of forced migration. This is less about a question of legality or the ability for a labor market to absorb a certain class of workers, and more about the relationship between developed and developing states within late capitalism. A paradigmatic example of this relationship would be the explosion of migration from Mexico to the United States after the implementation of the North American Free Trade Agreement, which facilitated the decimation of small-scale, traditional farming in Mexico. As noted above regarding the 1951 Refugee Convention, the market relationship is considered “natural” in the current international regime, and therefore displacement due to economic factors is not an automatically legitimate reason to seek to migrate to another state even if the economy might be able to absorb them. This market relationship is conflated with questions of identity, leading to the co-incidence of racist xenophobia and economic anti-immigrantism (Doty 2003), and the rise of non-state violence and asymmetrical warfare (Appadurai 2006).

**Climate refugee/migrant**

This category of migration is perhaps the most contested, as current attitudes toward denying the validity of human-driven climate change would *ipso facto* make a climate refugee illegitimate. However, the scientific evidence for climate change clearly indicates significant patterns of mobility driven by environmental crises and the likelihood that this will continue. Entire island countries, such as the Maldives, are at risk, as well as coastal cities from New York to Mumbai. It is already known that drought played a role in the conflicts in Somalia in the early 1990s, which initiated mass refugee movements. In the Somali case it is perhaps less controversial that states would consider the refugees legitimate, since there were clearly other human rights issues at stake; but at what point does outright conflict fade into abject conditions such as mass starvation initiated by climate decimation? Does there need to be a civil war before we
acknowledge the effects of climate change in a particular locale? These questions remain unanswered given this category's increasing relevance but conceptual and legal ambiguity.

These figures of migration (the immigrant, the refugee, the economic migrant, and the climate refugee/migrant) are not by any means exhaustive; but they should give some indication that “immigration” is not an undifferentiated concept, and that as structures and institutions of global governance proliferate, migrant experience will continue to be figured by a multiplying list of legitimating and delegitimating structures. Each of these figures relates to the legacy of colonialism in different ways, either through the adoption of liberal political rights in former colonies and in international law, the spread of the nation-form, the enforcement of capitalist economic systems and structural adjustment policies, and so on.

IMMIGRATION AND POSTCOLONIAL STUDIES

The lasting legacy of colonialism in regard to human migration has drastic material consequences for human life. The patterns of movement set in place by colonialism created the pathways and channels by which people still mostly move today. And not only in terms of direction, from the colony to the metropole, from the periphery to the center, but also the patterns of slavery and indentured labor we see today in the global sex trade, or the patterns of the movement of intellectual labor (“brain drain”) we continue to witness today in fields such as medicine or engineering.

Postcolonial studies, or theory, pose clear and significant challenges to the categories of race, nation, and culture, upon which the epistemology and ontology of Western dominance rest. Postcolonial theory undermines the very distinctions of inside and outside, of inclusion and exclusion, that form the basis of the very notion of immigration and its taken-for-granted assumptions: that a group belongs in a place and to move to a new place requires permission from the proper authorities. Postcolonial theory draws attention to the fact that “immigration” is, at its most basic level, a political technology of division that allows for the existence and replication of intense inequality, a system of global apartheid.

SEE ALSO: Diaspora; Refugees

REFERENCES


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