

- Demography, Migration, and Jobs -

The study of post-war migrants to Western Europe has been largely left to sociologists and other non-numerate species. Why have demographers (and statisticians) contributed so little? And why are demographers seen as irrelevant or peripheral to this area of research? In trying to answer these questions, and incidentally to understand why I am to be made redundant, thereby no doubt precipitating my own migration, I have set out the following thoughts. Does anyone have any comments? Send them to me, Heather Booth, RUER, St Peter's College, College^{RA}_b Saltley, Birmingham B8 3TE.

Migration and Sociology

Kubat and Hoffmann-Nowotny (1981) give an interesting clue to this question in their statement: 'Traditionally, within sociology, migration has been the domain of demography' (p. 308). Given this intimate location of demography in the sociological treatment of migration, one might expect to see in some studies at least a significant demographic contribution. But this is not the case. Indeed, it is precisely this location of the demography of migration, and of migration itself, principally within the discipline of sociology that has contributed to the dearth of demography analysis. Sociologists are not generally familiar with the technicalities of the approach and methods of demographers, and many of them have little time or patience for what they see as tedious or unfathomable figure-work without proper theoretical (sociological, of course) basis. Their studies thus have no need for a demographic contribution, and any basic material used is quickly presented before the more important business of sociological analysis and theorising can begin. A demographic approach to the subject of migration is seen as peripheral, or as providing background information. Indeed in Britain's Social Science Research Council Research Unit on Ethnic Relations where migrants are studied, demography is officially described as a luxury and is the first to go when financial restrictions are imposed.

At the same time, however, we are seeing an increase in the amount of data on migration that is collected and available, which according to Kubat and Hoffmann-Nowotny (1981) is occurring 'at a very rapid pace' (p. 307). With such an increase, one might expect to see more numerical analysis by demographers included in studies on migration and migrants, but this has not been the case. Instead, Kubat and Hoffmann-Nowotny (1981) observe that the 'transition (of data) into substantive sociological statements is often difficult' (p.307). One reason for this must be the reluctance to include a proper demographic approach to deal with the volume and detail of data on migration, data that are essentially demographic. Might it not be the case that demographers could provide a useful role not only in analysing the data in itself but also in translating those data into more readily digestible forms for sociological analysis? Curiously, Kubat and Hoffman-Nowotny (1981) later lend support to this idea:

It seems useful to situate the study of migration first in demography and then in sociology in order to make explicit and analytically accessible the underlying assumption of migration theories.

(p. 308)

In that this approach allows space for the demographic process of migration to be included in migration studies, it is to be encouraged.

Migration and Demography

Turning now to a search within demography for reasons why the discipline has contributed so little to the study of post-war migrants to Western Europe, the subject of migration in general is first considered. The earliest work in demography was concerned with mortality, reflecting the concerns of the day and the fact that trends were discernible. To this has been added a more recent interest in fertility, most notably in the Third World, fuelled by the threat - or reality - of a population explosion. As well as data gathering exercises, descriptive and analytical work, it has been possible to study both of these in an abstract, mathematical way and numerous models have been produced. Reflecting the colonial roots of demographic research, much of the funding for such work has been available from government agencies of developed countries dealing with overseas aid and development or with medical research, and from international bodies such as the United Nations. Apart from this latter source of funding, research in migration is not likely to attract support from these traditional funding agencies of demographic research. It is perhaps for this reason that migration has not yet received the same scale of attention as mortality and fertility. Indeed it might be argued that hitherto migration has not presented a recognised global crisis to which western nations should turn their attention: migration is not yet on a large enough scale to merit international intervention.

Within Western Europe, concern about post-war migration and migrants has resulted in the collection of increased amounts of data for administrative, rather than research, purposes. On the whole these data have not been fully taken advantage of by demographers. Indeed, there has not been much call for demographic analysis from a governmental point of view, since all governments have sought simply to put an end to further immigration by the introduction of restrictive immigration legislation and to encourage migrants to leave. Energies have been directed towards legislation rather than towards trying to understand population movements and the migration process.

It cannot be denied, however, that interest in the demographic study of European migrants is slowly beginning to develop. This concentration on migrants within the receiving country, rather than on migration as such, has its roots in the threat posed to society in that country by the migrants' presence. As a result of this, much of the work is 'problem' orientated in that such topics as particularly high fertility rates among some migrants are investigated rather than, for example, the mortality experience of migrants. Even here, then, coverage is patchy and piecemeal. It is, however, a start, and it is perhaps now only a matter of time before demographic analysis becomes more recognised. For, as Lebon (1981) has observed.

even if there is no special research on this subject (of the demographic significance of international migration), it exists and has grown larger in the last few years. It arises from the mere presence in the host countries, and the mere exodus from their country of origin, of millions of men and women who live and work every day in a country not their own.

(p. 1)

The existence of large scale post-war migration to western Europe provides scope for a substantial amount of demographic analysis both concerning migration itself and migrant populations within receiving nations. The research already undertaken provides a foundation on which further research can be built. Only by demographers themselves demonstrating the usefulness of their research will a demographic approach become acknowledged and accepted as an important contribution to the study of migration. And only then will there be a greater probability that a demographic element will be included in other, for example more sociological, studies. This process has already begun to take place, albeit gradually:

For a long time the prevalent approach was the economic one, the worker overshadowing all the many aspects of the individual; but now the demographic factor is gradually taking its proper place, not rivalling the economic approach but complementing it, and as experience shows, inseparable from it.

(Lebon, 1981, p. 1)

Without a real understanding of the demographic process of migration and of the development of a migrant population, the study of European migration cannot fully encompass the complexities of the subject. The relevance of demography as a discipline must be fully acknowledged, and its approach afforded the position it deserves as an integral part of that study.

References

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