

Article

Privileged Mobility in an Age of Globality

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Abstract: By 2050, the world's population of international migrants is estimated to top 400 million. A small but growing number of those migrants are leaving well-developed, affluent countries best known for receiving immigrants to settle in less well-developed countries better known for sending migrants. These migrants of relative privilege, many of them retirees, are motivated primarily by a desire to enhance their quality of life. Although this migratory flow receives much less attention than more familiar, and reverse, movements of laborers or refugees, its implications for the destination sites, sites of origin, and study of international migration generally are significant. This article will examine the contemporary border crossing of privileged migrants, the economic, political and cultural stakes for the countries and individuals involved, and the implications of incorporating privileged mobility into the study of global migration and transnationalism.

Keywords: expatriates; globalization; lifestyle migration; retirement migration; transnationalism

For a rich person from a rich country, a person who tends towards the cosmopolitan (and whose passport increasingly signifies not just mere national belonging, protection and a right of citizenship, but a surplus of rights—in particular a world right to circulate unhindered), the border has become an embarkation formality, a point of symbolic acknowledgment of his social status, to be passed at a jog-trot. For a poor person from a poor country, however, the border tends to be something quite different: not only is it an obstacle which is very difficult to surmount, but it is a place he runs up against repeatedly. . .

Etienne Balibar, 2002

In 2010, the number of international migrants worldwide reached 214 million, or 3.1 percent of the world's population. The International Organization for Migration [IOM] predicts that number will rise to 405 million by 2050, and warns that: "The world will be taken by surprise by the relentless pace of migration unless States, international organizations and civil society make a concerted effort to invest in how they respond to it" [1]. The IOM and others who monitor global migration are careful to emphasize new trends in human mobility, such as increased migration to emerging economic powers (Brazil, China, India), and growing south-south migration [2]. Unacknowledged or under-analyzed in many contemporary treatments of international migration is another emerging trend: the movement of relatively affluent individuals from well-developed countries in the global north to less economically developed countries in the global south. Many of these migrants are retirees, some are younger adventure-seekers, and some are pursuing economic opportunity in a global marketplace. The volume of this migratory flow is admittedly smaller than that of more familiar south-north flows of labor migrants, but its implications are arguably no less significant for the destination sites, sites of origin, the migrants, and the study of international migration.

This article makes the case for deeper and more sustained investigation into the international migration of relatively privileged individuals whose migration experiences are rarely characterized by economic or political hardship, and whose motivation to cross borders lies primarily in a desire to enhance their quality of life. This call for moving the study of international migration beyond a near-myopic focus on marginalization is not intended to downplay the significance of global inequalities, but rather to use the case of privileged mobility as a way to better highlight the nature and implications of global inequality. The first section provides an overview of the migration trend in question. The second section outlines the economic, cultural, and political implications of privileged mobility for sites of destination and the sites of origin.

Moving Beyond Marginality

From Oscar Handlin's 1951 classic, *The Uprooted*, to Alejandro Portes and Rubén Rumbaut's 1990 *Immigrant America*, immigration to the U.S. has been portrayed largely in terms of hardship, desperation and alienation. Handlin's portrayal of immigration was, in his own words, one of "broken homes, interruptions of a familiar life, separation from known surroundings, the becoming a foreigner and ceasing to belong" [3]. Fifty years later, Portes and Rumbaut emphasized that: "Moving to a foreign country is not easy . . . It requires elaborate preparations, much expense, giving up personal relations at home, and often learning a new language and culture" [4]. A similar emphasis on hardship and marginality has pervaded scholarship on immigration to Europe [5,6]. Etienne Balibar, for example, refers to immigrants as "today's proletarians" [7]. Similarly, in a recent volume on *Migration in the Global Economy*, editor Nicola Phillips makes the case for incorporating immigration into the field of political economy by arguing that: "the relationship between structure and agency looks very different when the focus is on informal, unorganized, and/or disenfranchised actors who have few or no possibilities for influence or participation, face a very different set of political realities, and operate in local and 'private' (including domestic) contexts" [7]. These and countless other analyses capture well the challenges many migrants confront when crossing international borders and settling in new lands. They do not, however, fit an expanding category of border crossing variably described as

amenity migration [8], lifestyle migration [9], privileged migration [10], international retirement migration [11,12], or residential tourism [13].

The category of ‘privileged mobility’ is a broad one, potentially encompassing skilled workers and investors, students, sojourners, and retirees [10,14]. International retirement migration is the trend that most fully informs the analysis presented here, but many of the experiences, insights, and implications of privileged mobility are consistent across categories of movement. British migration to Southern Spain comprises one well-known international flow of retirees [12,15,16], and the settlement of U.S. citizens in Mexico comprises another [17–20]. The population of privileged migrants and their respective journeys are, however, diverse and growing. In Europe, the British move to Portugal and Italy as well as Spain [21]; Germans and Swedes also join the trek southward to the Iberian Peninsula [22], and French migrants are settling in Morocco [23]. In North America, Canadians contribute significantly to the growing flow of southward migration in the Americas; and the list of countries where they and their U.S. counterparts settle extends well beyond the most popular destination of Mexico to locales throughout Central and South America [24–26]. Nor is emigration from wealthier countries unique to North America and Europe. A growing number of Japanese retirees, for example, are migrating to Thailand and Malaysia [27].

Any number of factors work to pull these migrants toward certain settlement sites and, often simultaneously, to push them from familiar homes and lives in their countries of birth. Rachida Bousta’s depiction of what draws French migrants to Marrakesh captures well the motivations of a large majority of privileged migrants in many parts of the world: “Endless sun, a magnificent material and non-material heritage—especially as an ‘exotic’ change of scenery—an infrastructure of hotels and other residences for every budget, a particularly high-quality lifestyle for western pockets . . . all very important assets” [23]. Studies of the British in Southern Spain similarly conclude that the migrants are attracted by the weather, opportunities for leisure, cheap prices on real estate and other commodities, and the prevalence of English [15,28]. Americans living in Mexico and Central America also report being drawn south of the border by amazing bargains and hospitable climates—not only meteorologically, but socially, and culturally as well. These migrants routinely describe their host societies as warm and welcoming and themselves as assets to the local community and economy. They express appreciation for, even pride in, having the opportunity to partake of exotic landscapes and customs without out sacrificing the familiar comforts of home, including their native tongue [17,18,20,24].

On the whole, these migrants of privilege are not assimilating. In many cases, they live their lives in what has been described as an, ‘expatriate bubble’ [29], not unlike the lifestyles characteristic of earlier colonial settlements [30]. They are, however, maintaining close ties—social, cultural and political—with their homelands and their national brethren. This is especially true of US emigrants who seem to carry the American proclivity for civic associating with them overseas—forming an array of clubs and organizations designed to build community among Americans abroad and fostering networks with the homeland. All of these activities—migration, community formation and the maintenance of transnational ties—are facilitated by advanced communications technology: Skype, Vonage, a plethora of ‘expat,’ retirement and international living websites, Yahoo Groups, *etc.*

Some interesting similarities exist between the experiences of privileged migrants and others: both groups have re-settled across an international border, economic factors figure prominently into the

decision to do so, and they sustain multiple transnational ties. Notably, however, privileged border crossers are rarely referred to as migrants. These “foreigners who stay permanently” are more likely to be described as “new residents” [21], “long-stay tourists” [25], or residential tourists [13] than ‘immigrants.’ “Expatriate” is also a widely used term for this population, particularly in the media outlets and social groups that cater to privileged migrants. Rarely, however, is this term used in the historical sense of banishment, or withdrawal of allegiance, from, one’s native country [29]. Instead, as Pauline Leonard argues, it is used in an exclusionary sense, to connote “classed Western whiteness” and “middle class professionalism” [31].

Also running throughout the narratives and analyses of this migration trend is an emphasis on lifestyle enhancement. Michaela Benson and Karen O’Reilly, in their volume on *Lifestyle Migration*, define the phenomenon as: “Spatial mobility of relatively affluent individuals of all ages, moving either part-time or full-time, to places that are meaningful because, for various reasons, they offer the potential for a better quality of life” [9]. Edward Jackiewicz also advocates use of the term ‘lifestyle’ over retirement migration or residential tourism, arguing that the former is more encompassing and hence more pragmatic for capturing the heterogeneity of this group [11]. The growing scholarship on lifestyle migration has contributed significantly to understanding privileged mobility, but, in actuality, all migrants are aiming to enhance their quality of life. The central distinction that needs to be emphasized is the wide variation in the options available for lifestyle enhancement, the ease with which those options can be pursued, and the attitude underlying the movement—ambivalence, even desperation, in some cases, and relative nonchalance in others [32].

Greater terminological precision will be key to moving this field of study forward, and an important step in that process lies in unmasking how privilege itself resides in and is perpetuated by the multiplicity of terms other than “immigrant” employed to characterize privileged mobility. In the public and political imagination, “immigrants” are not “white.” They do not voluntarily leave wealthy and powerful countries for those that are less so, and they do not typically arrive at their destination possessing greater economic, cultural and political power than the majority of their hosts. Rather, the term ‘immigrant’ imputes “powerlessness, minority status, and often color” [15]. The privileged movers themselves seem also to have internalized these stereotypes, rarely identifying as ‘immigrants’ and preferring instead to self-describe simply as, for example, “an American living in Mexico” [18]. Ultimately, what appears to exempt these individuals from the category of ‘immigrant,’ and warrant for them an alternative label, is their privilege. It is privilege that derives not only from their individual economic and social status (particularly in relation to members of the ‘host’ society), but also from their membership in countries of origin that tend to possess greater economic, political, and cultural power in the international system than do the countries where many privileged migrants are settling [31].

The multiplicity of terms and qualifiers other than ‘immigrant’ that circulate to describe migrants of privilege, not only reveal elements of privilege, but also contribute to perpetuating it. The same is true of contemporary scholarship on migrant identity and belonging. An expansive literature on transnationalism has rejected the notion of immigration as an abrupt rupture between ‘there’ and ‘here.’ International migrants are now widely recognized as taking actions, making decisions, and developing identities “embedded in networks of relationships that connect them simultaneously to two or more nation-states” [33]. The scholarship on transnationalism is, however, framed largely in terms of “resistance to domination by larger processes” [34] and, in particular, resistance to the dominant logic

of the global capitalist economy on the part of those who are peripherally positioned within it [33,35,36]. As a result, neither the label nor the framework have been widely applied to migrants of privilege, despite the fact that, as noted above, they are as likely, if not more so, to live their lives and form their subjectivities across the borders of two or more nation-states.

The related and equally expansive scholarship on ‘diaspora’ explores how growing populations of migrants, who are maintaining ties with the homeland and forging networks with ethnic brethren worldwide, challenge the meaning and centrality of the modern nation-state. The term ‘diaspora,’ although having undergone a massive ‘inflation’ in recent decades [37], still retains an association with forced dispersal and trauma. That association limits the concept’s perceived applicability to the voluntary migration of relatively privileged groups who nonetheless are engaging in activities and forming subjectivities that could appropriately be described as diasporic. In other words, while the contributions of the scholarship on transnationalism and diaspora have been profound, because the paradigm is one that largely assumes marginality, privileged migrants have not figured prominently into the analysis. Their absence limits potentially valuable insights both in the areas of policy-making and theory building.

Assessing the Implications of Privileged Movement

The case for more intensive focus on privileged mobility lies not only in unpacking assumptions of marginality that continue to inform much scholarship on migration and transnational belonging, but also in identifying the implications of this human movement for the countries of settlement and the countries of origin. Given the relative infancy of the field in terms of accumulated empirical data on the economic, social and political consequences of this human movement, the discussion that follows is necessarily speculative in places. Nevertheless, it serves to outline a call for future research on the nature and impact of privileged mobility in an age of globality.

Economic issues figure prominently in scholarship and policy debates about international migration. Of primary interest in the largely immigrant-receiving countries, such as the US, Europe and Australia, have been concerns about the impact of immigration on domestic labor markets. Incredible resources have been devoted, for the most part unsuccessfully, to determining whether immigrants take jobs and/or depress the wages of ‘native’ workers [38]. Some studies have focused on the potential economic benefits of migrants’ cross-border ties—primarily in terms of the remittances that immigrants send back to their cash-strapped home countries [2,39]. When the lens shifts to privileged mobility, so, too, do the likely implications of the migration.

As is the case with the reverse migration flow, the debate over whether immigration leads to job loss *versus* job creation is a complicated and unsettled one. There is as of yet little indication that migrants of privilege are displacing native-born workers in popular settlement sites, and several factors would suggest otherwise. The sizeable proportion of retirees among these migrants is one reason, but so too is the fact that when ‘residential tourists’ labor in the country of settlement they typically do so in professions that either cater to their fellow immigrants, or for which locals are not deemed appropriately qualified. O’Reilly uncovered evidence of an ‘informal economy’ among the British in southern Spain and the same exists among Americans and Canadians in Mexico. [15,18] This reality resembles, in some respects, phenomena described in the scholarship on ‘ethnic enclave economies’ in

the US [40]. For their part, the privileged immigrants themselves, and their supporters in the settlement locales, often maintain that the influx of retirees and residential tourists creates jobs for native workers and infuses local economies with much-needed capital. One American living in Mexico insisted the following: “Look, let’s just say there are half a million gringos in Mexico, a low estimate, . . . and, say, each has an income of \$1,000 a month, the average Social Security check, and also a low-ball estimate, that amounts to \$500 million being pumped into Mexico every year by us gringos [18]. Other observers offer more cynical assessments, even pointing to evidence of undocumented activity on the part of the privileged migrants. Cristobal Franyuti, Director of International Relations for the Mexican municipality of San Miguel de Allende, remarked: “Just look on Vrbo.com [Vacation Rentals By Owner]. At least 150 houses are listed in San Miguel, and 95 percent are owned by foreigners. They are not registered as rental properties. They are not paying income tax or lodging tax. They are typically not paying Mexican Social Security to their domestic help” [41].

Franyuti’s comments are a reminder that although the arrival of privileged migrants may create jobs and bring an infusion of capital, the broader implications of this influx of people and money are more ambiguous. The types of jobs created tend to be heavily concentrated in the service sector: maids, cooks, gardeners, restaurant workers, and construction. Some locals complain that the wages in these professions have not kept pace with the rising costs in the immigrant towns for everything from real estate to basic foodstuffs [15,18]. The rising cost of real estate is a particular problem. Boustia describes ‘perverse effects’ on the local Moroccan population in Marrakech who are being squeezed out of the housing market by foreign newcomers [23]. Similar problems have been documented in foreign settlements throughout Mexico [17]. Not only do foreigners own most of the prime real estate in ‘U.S. colonies’ such as San Miguel de Allende and Los Cabos, they dominate the real estate business: ‘buying at low prices, selling for exorbitant sums, renting only to foreigners and only for U.S. dollars’ [19].

The ecological impact of privileged mobility also poses concerns. Data compiled by the Oakland-based think tank, *Redefining Progress*, suggest, for example, that the ecological footprint of the average U.S. resident is five times as heavy as that of the average Mexican. As more Americans move south, the environmental weight of those large feet is being felt in towns such as those that surround Mexico’s largest lake, Lake Chapala. Writing for *Inside Mexico*, Stan Cox acknowledges that Lake Chapala would be threatened even without the foreign presence, but he goes on to insist that:

“...there is no doubt a greater ecological price to pay from the growing collection of big houses on the north shore slopes, with their acres of pavement, swimming pools (always full in spite of frequent water shortages), well-watered lawns and dryers running full blast despite the hot sun and availability of clotheslines” [42].

Culture also figures prominently into conventional debates on immigration. Scholarly and popular literature probes questions such as: are immigrants assimilating into their host societies, should they be, do transnational networks preclude such integration, *etc.* In general, privileged migrants whether in Mexico, Panama, Costa Rica, Spain, Portugal or Morocco, are not assimilating. Remarkably few speak the language of communities where they settle and they tend to live out their lives in ethnic enclaves with other foreigners [15,18,23,29,31]. One journalist’s depiction of British migrants in Spain is revealing and representative: “Brits tends to live in a bubble. With more and more information

available in English, there's less reason to learn Spanish and, as a consequence, less opportunity to understand the local culture. Many residents speak no more than 10 Spanish words in an average week—usually restaurant Spanish—and they pride themselves on 'getting by'" [43].

The existence and increase in 'expat bubbles' may seem culturally inconsequential for the host communities, but studies like Bousta's research in Marrakech identify brewing tensions related to what is perceived as culturally-inappropriate behavior on the part of foreign newcomers, the potentially negative influence of that behavior on local youth, and the related threats to the local community's traditions and heritage [23]. Similar tensions have emerged in the Mexican town of San Miguel around issues such as foreigners taking pampered pets into local restaurants (in violation of health codes), the opposition of some foreigners to the practice of bullfighting, and differing cultural perspectives on the appropriate conduct of women [18].

The *economic* and *cultural* implications of privileged movement are likely to be of greater concern to receiving states than sending ones owing to what, in this case, is the typically greater economic and cultural power on the part of the latter. When it comes to the realm of *politics*, however, the implications of this migratory trend are equally visible and significant for the sending states. As scholars of political transnationalism have demonstrated, the fact that growing numbers of people are moving across international borders and continuing to practice citizenship in a homeland where they do not reside, while also practicing forms of citizenship (formal and substantive) in a new land, challenges longstanding assumptions about democracy, sovereignty and the centrality of territory to cultural and political belonging [44–46]. In spite of concerns in the U.S. and Europe about the loyalty and integration of immigrants who maintain close ties with their homelands, the literature on transnationalism suggests that these concerns are largely unfounded. Migrants' continued involvement with their homelands, political and otherwise, appears not to impede and may be positively correlated with incorporation into the society of settlement [46,47]. It remains to be seen whether those conclusions hold when the migrants in question, and the countries from where they hail, possess more economic, cultural and political power than the receiving state and society.

In the case of American migrants in Mexico, very few are pursuing dual citizenship. Notably, the Mexican constitution prohibits foreigners from involving themselves in the country's politics. The migrants are aware of this prohibition, but do engage local Mexican governments on issues of concern to the immigrant community—whether development, safety and security, garbage collection, or historical preservation [48]. For Mexico, concern about foreigners, particularly Americans, meddling in the country's affairs is not new (and hence the reason for the Constitutional prohibition against it). Currently, there is no clear indication that the growing presence of American immigrants is significantly heightening that concern, but this could change.

From the U.S. perspective, the growing number of citizens residing outside the sovereign borders of the U.S. can affect domestic policies and politics in various ways. Organizations such as American Citizens Abroad, Association of Americans Resident Overseas, Democrats Abroad and Republicans Abroad, have and will continue to lobby U.S. officials on a range of issues that include the extension of Medicare outside of the U.S., overseas taxation and banking regulations, voting procedures, and citizenship laws [48–50]. As the size and the political mobilization of this emigrant population increase, U.S. political parties will increase their engagement with the American electorate abroad, and

the U.S., like other immigrant sending states, will confront questions about the proper role in American politics of citizens who have lived many years abroad [50].

The political situation is distinct in Europe due to the supranational nature of citizenship and political belonging in the European Union. British residents in Spain are, for example, eligible to vote in municipal elections. To date, their engagement in Spanish politics has been limited, but observers note that their potential to influence local electoral outcomes is significant [51]. Meanwhile, politicians in the UK, like their counterparts in the US, have become increasingly aware of their constituents abroad, and of the potential of the expatriate vote to influence British elections [52].

Conclusions

“The importance of the U.S. migration to Mexico has so far been underestimated, not just as a general event but also as a factor of economic, social, political, and cultural significance” [19].

Lizarraga’s observation about north-south migration in the Americas holds true for privileged migration everywhere, and attests to the need for deeper investigation. In the realm of economics, countless questions remain regarding the potential benefits and liabilities of this mobility in terms jobs, wages, and long-term development implications in the locales where large numbers of privileged migrants are settling. Moreover, as retirees continue to grow as a proportion of the populations in the US (the ‘baby boomer’ generation) and Europe, the migratory trend and the need to understand its impact will intensify. Receiving states, who in this relationship, are typically less economically well off than the sending states, should consider strategies for maximizing the potential benefits of an influx of privileged migrants. In Mexico, for example, migrants from the US and Canada are amazed and gleeful at the remarkably low property taxes they pay on their foreign dream homes. A marginal increase in that tax rate for foreigners could benefit local Mexicans without frightening off the proverbial goose that lays the golden eggs. Meanwhile, sending states, in this case the US, must begin to grapple seriously with the implications of growing demands from its emigrant population—such as the call for extending Medicare payments abroad [53].

In terms of social and cultural implications, pervasive and long-standing anxiety over cultural pluralism and assimilation in traditionally immigrant-receiving countries such as the US and Europe would suggest that the topic also warrants attention in the case of a reverse migratory flow. Nativism and xenophobia of the sort that is familiar in Europe, Australia, and the US has not surfaced in relation to privileged migrants living in Central and South America, Southern Europe or Northern Africa, but the potential for growing tensions exists. Politically, this under-studied migration trend is significant as well, particularly in terms of the implications for the meaning and practice of citizenship and democracy in an increasingly transnational world. Observers in the US have fretted over the dual attachments and extra-territorial political engagement of immigrants coming into the country, but are not questioning the implications of an American emigrant population that is growing in both size and cross-border mobilization [54].

As scholars hopefully continue to pursue these topics, several caveats are in order. First, border crossing by the relatively ‘well to do’ is not a new phenomenon. Globalization, however, has fueled and facilitated the trend, as it has with international migration generally. Secondly, participants in this global movement admittedly number fewer than is the case with south-north migration; but, the

significance of migratory flows has never been wholly determined by, or restricted to, their size. Third, caution is necessary to avoid over-generalization. For example, studies show that privileged migrants in Spain, Portugal, Morocco, and Mexico tend not to assimilate into the local culture or society. This does not mean that none do. To date, this emerging field of study is dominated by ethnographic and qualitative analysis that, while rich in description and insight, relies heavily on anecdote. The accumulation of additional data, qualitative and quantitative, will strengthen current findings. However, it is also worth noting that generalizations have always pervaded the scholarship on migration. They are not more or less prevalent or problematic when the subjects are wealthier and whiter.

Caution with regard to broad generalization invites a fourth caveat—namely that privilege is relative. The migrants who are leaving Great Britain, Germany, France, Sweden, Canada and the US are generally wealthier than the average local inhabitants in towns where they settle. One report found, for example, that US seniors living in Mexico have an average monthly income four times higher than Mexicans and reside in larger homes with fewer residents [24]. In spite of economic advantages in settlement sites, these migrants are not necessarily wealthy relative to their fellow citizens back home. In fact, the rising costs of health care and real estate, declining pensions, and overall insecurities related to the crisis of the contemporary welfare state are among the key factors the *push* migrants to leave relatively wealthy, politically powerfully, and culturally hegemonic homelands [15,18]. In this vein, Vered Amit has recently called attention to “a much broader reorientation of global long-distance travel and movement around middle-class rather than either very affluent or very poor voyagers” [10]. Finally, in spite of this call to widen the migration lens, it is important to acknowledge that valuable work has been done on this topic as indicated by the works cited here and others [55–57]. Still, the implications of privileged mobility for policy making and theory building are significant and warrant more sustained, systematic analysis.

The promises of pursuing this line of inquiry are many, but one final caution is in order. Widening the migration lens to include privileged forms of mobility must not be read simply as a claim that ‘we’re all global migrants now.’ Goods, services, ideas, and people are moving faster and further than ever before, new networks are being formed, new subjectivities are emerging, and familiar forms of belonging are being challenged. But, the harsh realities of global inequality persist and are highlighted by the phenomenon of privileged (however relative) mobility. In fact, one recent study of human mobility concluded that of all possible international voyages only 23.8 percent are visa-free, and that nationality and wealth significantly determine the freedom to cross international borders [58].

Privileged mobility does not, however, exist outside the purview of state sovereignty, even though the relationship between these migrants and the states they straddle is typically benign, if not mutually supportive. Widening the migration lens beyond marginality confirms that states are still central players in international migration—whether as entities that open and close borders, bestow and withhold membership, or regulate markets and labor. At the same time, the forces and factors surrounding privileged mobility also point to what may be obscured by a reliance on the nation-state lens. Arguing that, “methodological nationalism is increasingly inadequate in a globalizing world,” particularly with regard to assessing inequality, Anja Weiss insightfully concludes that social positions in the world system are structured not only by resource values, but also increasingly by spatial autonomy and the transnationally recognized cultural capital to which migrants populations have access [59]. Ironically, the study of privileged mobility simultaneously reveals the persistent relevance

of nation-states and the need to move beyond methodological nationalism in order to better conceptualize inequality on a global scale.

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