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A critical approach to economic accounts of migration and inequality

Title: *Global Migration beyond Limits: Ecology, Economics, and Political Economy*

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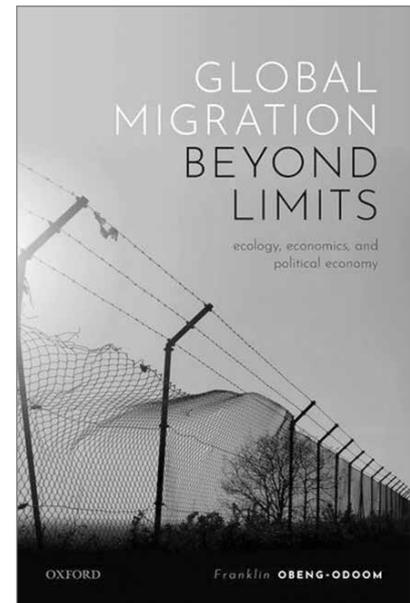
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International migration has not only increased in absolute numbers in recent decades, but it has also become increasingly diversified as migrants come from different geographic areas. In addition, the majority of them are now women and children. Although the global COVID-19 pandemic has affected migration processes, historical experience around the world reminds us that they cannot be permanently stopped. Nevertheless, given the increasingly anti-migration climate in many countries, it is no surprise that the pandemic has disproportionately affected migrants and migrant communities. In Obeng-Odoom's view, such a socio-political context presents an opportune moment to analyse the issue of mass migration (p. 2), which is increasingly framed as a crisis in political and media discussions of the topic. In particular, mainstream economic discourses barely mention the importance of internal migration as opposed to international migration. These theories, despite common differences, are still embedded in push-and-pull models of migration as an (individual) rational choice, rather than examining the institutional dynamics and links between countries of origin and destination at the local, regional, national, and global levels. Moreover, the

predominant focus is on global migration in relation to (economic) growth, whereas researchers pay less attention to processes of social inequality and various layers of social stratification, such as gender, ethnicity, race, class, migrant status, and so on.

Global Migration beyond Limits uses these layers as central points of analysis. Drawing on a wide range of case studies from around the world, Obeng-Odoom examines a variety of migrant categories – migrant farmers, street workers and other migrant workers, refugees, international students, and others – to present the intersections and similarities between these categories and their embeddedness in political and economic systems. His central concern is to examine the impact of migration on the economy, society, and the environment. The stratification economics approach to migration that he proposes examines land, in addition to labour, capital, and the state, to develop a more nuanced land-based analysis of global inequalities (pp. 9, 11).

In this way, Obeng-Odoom examines the various proponents of dominant migration currents, such as the conservative, neoliberal, and humanist views,



which he argues share a similar conceptual framework despite their plurality. He argues that migration is not an autonomous individual choice, as these conceptions claim, but that it is primarily shaped by institutions and colonial and other histories that also reflect class differences. Within such a framework, for example, one can understand the ubiquity of racism as an expression of the historical treatment of particular races, reflecting political and economic structural discrimination and stereotyping, rather than as a problem allegedly perpetuated by 'too much migration' per se. Although structuralist-oriented accounts have theorized these issues to some degree, there has been a lack of further theorizing of connections between land, property rights, race, class, nationality, and migration on a global scale (p. 36).

For this reason, the next chapter of the book aims to develop a more holistic

approach to the study of migration, drawing on modified versions of Henry George's political economy, J. R. Commons' institutional economics, and the emerging field of stratification economics. The combination of these three theoretical strands forms a methodology that the author proposes as an alternative to mainstream economic theory as well as its current alternatives. Georgian political economy focuses on the structural contradictions in rent, value, and wealth (p. 51), which explain not only structural inequalities and discrimination, but also their effects, such as global systemic poverty. Henry George based his migration theory on the Irish migration experience and examined the social, political, and economic underpinnings of both the Irish famine and conditions in the United States, where many Irish had moved. In his view, migration from Ireland was driven and sustained by the concentration and monopolization of land and the enslavement of labour, downplaying the crucial role of race in this process. Institutional economics analyses various aspects of the state apparatus and other related institutions such as the church, the market, and the university, as well as their intersections and webs of relationships, which Obeng-Odoom sees as key levels of analysis. From this perspective, individuals do matter, but their decisions are inevitably influenced by other social forces and institutions. Stratification economists add important aspects to this point: the constant reproduction and transformation of identities in the migration process, and the role of economic interests in stratifying between race, gender, colour, caste, class, and other social identities. Obeng-Odoom's approach emphasizes property rights, land, and rent in relation to capital and labour, while also methodologically taking an intersectional and multidimensional approach to examining the causes, effects, and policies of migration (p. 64).

The subsequent chapters put these theoretical starting points into an empirical light by examining a wide range of empirical cases, including internal migration between rural and urban areas in Africa, particularly in Ghana; the position of international students in Australia and their experiences of housing; and the role of remittances in the migration process. Obeng-Odoom presents a wealth of empirical data and previous studies on this topic, but he also meticulously adheres to the theoretical approach outlined in earlier parts of the book. He emphasises that institutional and structural processes, rather than individual and household motives, also shape internal migration processes (p. 67). Against this background, he examines the experiences of urban peasants, traders, and head porters in Ghana and elsewhere in Africa. In this context, for example, he documents the privileges of male farmers in southern Ghana in terms of access to land and other agricultural resources, whereas in northern Ghana, especially for women and internal migrants, the relationship to land is more insecure and uncertain. Structural issues are also evident in the problems faced by women and children as migrants, as evidenced by the various economic and psychosocial challenges faced by female head porters and street children. Such divisions again highlight the role of gender, ethnicity, class, migrant status, and other identities described in previous chapters that are mostly absent from current migration policies.

The complex history of colonialism, imperialism, and unequal access to land and resources (p. 103) is also important for contextualizing and analysing the political economy of wars. Not only refugees, but also other migrant groups are portrayed in both research and media as those that put pressure on host communities and are consequently seen as non-deserving and non-contributing actors to welfare states. Such percep-

tions are particularly prevalent in urban agglomerations. Using the Australian city of Lidcombe, a suburb of Sydney, as an example, Obeng-Odoom shows how gentrification forces triggered by private interests lead to rising property prices. They also displace different groups of people, including migrants, who are often victims of exploitative labour conditions (p. 125), and class and race play an important role in this process as well. However, migrants were also among the groups that contributed to the transformation of social and moral economies in the city, and their presence continues to be visible in various aspects of the built environment and in the city's food systems. In the next chapter, the author analyses the dynamics of Afro-Chinese labour migration to show that, although migrants can contribute to economic growth, they often do so at the cost of socio-spatial displacement and socio-environmental degradation, as well as a life of insecurity (pp. 159, 167). In this regard, Obeng-Odoom argues that economic success must be conceptualized in terms of working conditions and inequalities, and their consequences for society as a whole, not only in terms of growth.

Unlike forced migration and some forms of labour migration, international student migration is generally praised as a win-win situation in both origin and destination countries. Yet the social conditions under which such education takes place are rarely considered in such research and policy efforts. Obeng-Odoom believes that education can also institutionalize stratification (p. 183), and he therefore presents an in-depth qualitative and quantitative analysis of the housing market situation in Sydney, Australia, for this group of students. The analysis suggests that students face a limited market for affordable housing and that most of their housing problems are related to landlords, who often take advantage of the vulnerability of international students, especially in times of

economic, environmental, and health crises (p. 198). Thus, housing is both a symptom and a cause of economic disadvantage, and neither education nor housing policies alone will address the disparities between international and domestic students on the one hand, and, on the other, between those that are non-white and from the Global South versus their wealthier, predominantly white peers (pp. 208, 210).

The final empirical chapter, which concludes the themes of migration and return, addresses how the characteristics of different families are altered by institutions such as the state and property rights, using transnational family life analysis (p. 213). Although remittances and their effects are important to both migrants and countries of origin and destination, their social costs are disproportionately borne by migrants, especially non-white migrants, making return a complex and often-impossible process. In this regard, remittance behaviour can take a significant toll on migrants and affect their quality of life in host countries. Looking at the situation of Ghanaian workers in Australia, the author notes that they participate in the global economy of remittances because remittances put less or no pressure on states to provide social protection (p. 238).

Returning to the title question of this volume: Could we consider global migration as migration beyond limits? Obeng-Odoom clearly contextualizes migration within the cycle of global inequalities and the various axes of social stratification, pointing to the institutional drivers of the social and ecological crisis. He argues that a particular focus on equal access to and control over land and the simultaneous reconstruction of other institutions, such as systems of social protection for migrants, could actually lead to a reduction in global long-term inequalities. A particularly interesting part of

the book is the policy recommendations the author makes at the end of the empirical chapters. In doing so, he remains faithful to the volume's main theoretical premises: for example, that improving inclusion and integration is insufficient without changing institutions, that migration cannot provide a spatial solution to a fundamental social problem, and that housing-related remittances do not guarantee a fixed return of migrants to their countries of origin. In turn, he argues that it is necessary to address historical, socio-political, and economic connections and partnerships between labour and capital in relation to land (p. 253). Although he is a proponent of open border policies, he insists that they do not suffice and that we need greater awareness of class-based land issues. This would lead to the creation of more equal access to land, easier granting of citizenship status and rights, and the expansion of social protection for various immigrant groups.

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Biography

Franklin Obeng-Odoom is an associate professor in global development studies at the Helsinki Institute of Sustainability Science, based at the University of Helsinki in Finland. Previously, he taught at various universities in Australia, including the University of Technology Sydney. Obeng-Odoom's research and teaching interests are centred on the political economy of development, urban and regional economics, natural resources, and the environment, fields in which he has written six books, including *Property, Institutions, and Social Stratification in Africa* (Cambridge, 2020) and *The Commons in an Age of Uncertainty: Decolonizing Nature, Economy, and Society* (University of Toronto Press, 2021).

Information about the book

<https://oxford.universitypressscholarship.com/view/10.1093/oso/9780198867180.001.0001/oso-9780198867180>