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Problems in the history of European emigration, 1815–1930

The movement of large numbers of people from Europe to the Americas and other parts of the world was one of the most important features of the international economy in the years after the Napoleonic wars. More than 50 million people were directly involved. Emigration could not fail to have profound effects on both the sending and the receiving countries.

There are some ambiguities in both the emigration and immigration statistics of individual countries but they are not important enough to obscure the main features of the movement. The temporal pattern was that the volume and the rate of emigration rose to the First World War, continued at a lower rate in the 1920s, and collapsed in the international depression of the early 1930s. There were large fluctuations around the upward trend, however. Emigration rates peaked in 1854, 1873, 1883, 1907 and 1913. The geographical pattern was that, in general, European emigration spread from west to east. In the early nineteenth century, most emigrants came from Britain and Ireland. By the 1850s, emigration had become important from some of the German States and Scandinavia. By the early twentieth century, emigration from Norway, Sweden, Germany, Ireland and Switzerland had passed its peak. But very large numbers of emigrants were leaving from Italy and from many parts of southern and eastern Europe (Ferenczi and Willcox, 1929–31, I, 236–88).

About 52 million people were recorded as having left European countries for overseas destinations between 1815 and 1930. Rather more were recorded as having arrived. It is thought that the true number of emigrants was closer to 60 million. The reason for the discrepancy is that ‘emigrant’ and ‘immigrant’ were often rather

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Table 1 *Recorded immigration (passenger arrivals) in the main immigration countries, 1815–1930*

| | Millions |
|-------------------------------|------------|
| United States | |
| (from Europe) | 32.6 |
| (from the Americas) | 4.7 |
| Canada | 4.7 (7.2)* |
| Australia | 3.5 |
| Brazil | 4.3 |
| Argentina | 6.4 |
| Total immigration from Europe | 54.0 |

*At least 2.5 million subsequently moved from Canada to the USA. These numbers include people who, strictly speaking, were not immigrants.
 Ferenczi and Willcox, 1929–31, I, 230–1; Mitchell, 1983, 139–47.

loosely defined. They could, for example, include people who were really visitors or on business.

The United States was by far the most important destination with some 33 million immigrants between 1815 and 1930. The other main destinations were Argentina, Canada, Brazil and Australia. Argentina had about 6 million immigrants, Canada at least 5 million, Brazil about 4 million and Australia about 3.5 million (Table 1).

About 11 million of the 52 million recorded emigrants came from Britain, 10 million from Italy, 7 million from Ireland, nearly 5 million from Germany or its component states, and over 5.5 million from Spain and Portugal. Less than a quarter of the emigrants came from the rest of Europe – Russia, eastern Europe, the Low Countries, France and Scandinavia (Table 2).

There was considerable variance in the average rate of emigration from the individual European countries. For example, Norway lost an average of two people out of every 300 in each year 1861–1910. France lost one person in every 5000. Table 3 shows the relative incidence of emigration. The countries most affected were Ireland, Norway, Scotland, Italy, England, Sweden, Portugal and Spain. These data can be misleading, however. In the first

Table 2 *Recorded emigration from European countries, 1815–1930*
 (1914 boundaries)

| | Millions |
|-----------------|----------|
| Britain | 11.4 |
| Italy | 9.9 |
| Ireland | 7.3 |
| Austria-Hungary | 5.0 |
| Germany* | 4.8 |
| Spain | 4.4 |
| Russia† | 3.1 |
| Portugal | 1.8 |
| Sweden | 1.2 |
| Norway | 0.8 |
| Finland | 0.4 |
| France | 0.4 |
| Denmark | 0.4 |
| Switzerland | 0.3 |
| Netherlands | 0.2 |
| Belgium | 0.2 |
| Europe | 51.7 |

* Includes Prussian Poland.

† Includes Russian Poland.

Ferenczi and Willcox, 1929–31, I, 230–1; Mitchell, 1980, 146–58.

place, emigration from some of the southern and eastern European countries was important only towards the end of the period and was seriously curtailed by the introduction of restrictions after the First World War. Most important, some countries (notably Germany and Austria-Hungary) were very large and heterogeneous. In general, when emigration rates from the individual ‘provinces’, ‘counties’ or ‘states’ of the European countries can be calculated, we find that some regions within the European countries produced relatively large numbers of emigrants and other regions produced relatively few. The variance in regional emigration rates suggests that the country may not be the appropriate unit of analysis.

The most important characteristic of European emigration was diversity. There were emigrants from every European country who

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Table 3 *Overseas emigration. European countries (1914 boundaries), 1851-1930*

| | Annual average rate per 1000 population | | | | |
|-----------------|---|---------|---------|---------|-----------|
| | 1851-60 | 1861-70 | 1871-80 | 1881-90 | 1891-1900 |
| Ireland | 14.0 | 14.6 | 6.6 | 14.2 | 8.9 |
| Norway | 2.4 | 5.8 | 4.7 | 9.5 | 4.5 |
| Scotland | 5.0 | 4.6 | 4.7 | 7.1 | 4.4 |
| Italy | | | 1.1 | 3.4 | 5.0 |
| England | 2.6 | 2.8 | 4.0 | 5.6 | 3.6 |
| Sweden | 0.5 | 3.1 | 2.4 | 7.0 | 4.1 |
| Portugal | | 1.9 | 2.9 | 3.8 | 5.1 |
| Spain | | | | 3.6 | 4.4 |
| Denmark | | | 2.1 | 3.9 | 2.2 |
| Finland | | | | 1.3 | 2.3 |
| Austria-Hungary | | | 0.3 | 1.1 | 1.6 |
| Switzerland | | | 1.3 | 3.2 | 1.4 |
| Germany | | | 1.5 | 2.9 | 1.0 |
| Netherlands | 0.5 | 0.6 | 0.5 | 1.2 | 0.5 |
| Belgium | | | | 0.9 | 0.4 |
| France | 0.1 | 0.2 | 0.2 | 0.3 | 0.1 |

| | 1901-10 | (1913) | 1921-30 |
|-----------------|---------|--------|---------|
| Ireland | 7.0 | 6.8 | 5.9 |
| Norway | 8.3 | 4.2 | 3.1 |
| Scotland | 9.9 | 14.4 | 9.2 |
| Italy | 10.8 | 16.3 | 3.4 |
| England | 5.5 | 7.6 | 2.7 |
| Sweden | 4.2 | 3.1 | 1.8 |
| Portugal | 5.7 | 13.0 | 3.2 |
| Spain | 5.7 | 10.5 | 6.3 |
| Denmark | 2.8 | 3.2 | 1.7 |
| Finland | 5.5 | 6.4 | 2.1 |
| Austria-Hungary | 4.8 | 6.1 | 1.4 |
| Switzerland | 1.4 | 1.7 | 1.4 |
| Germany | 0.5 | 0.4 | 1.0 |
| Netherlands | 0.5 | 0.4 | 0.5 |
| Belgium | 0.6 | 1.0 | 0.3 |
| France | 0.1 | 0.2 | |

Adapted from Ferenczi and Willcox, 1929-31, I, 200-1 and Mitchell, 1980, 150-3.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-55783-2 - Emigration from Europe 1815-1930

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went to a wide range of destinations. They included people from every occupation and social class. Some emigrants were escaping famine or pogrom but some were rich. On arrival, a few became 'pioneers' and moved into unsettled territory. More took up farms in areas that were already settled. Even more took urban jobs. Some of the emigrants returned to Europe as failures but, as we shall see, many more of those who returned had always intended to return home. We must also remember that in most countries, internal migration affected more people than emigration. And in some countries 'emigration' could mean a move to another country within Europe.

The phenomenon of European emigration was not confined to the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Emigration was well established from Britain and Ireland in the seventeenth century, for example. Nor was it a uniquely European phenomenon. Migration from Russia into Siberia is thought to have involved 10 million people between 1815 and 1914 (Hoerder, 1985, 10). India, China and Japan were also important sources of emigrants in this period. We must remember, too, that the enforced emigration of blacks to the Americas was numerically more important than white emigration until the third decade of the nineteenth century. About 8,000,000 blacks had entered the Americas before 1820 compared with fewer than 2,500,000 whites (Eltis, 1983, 28).

How can we make sense out of this diversity? One way is to consider emigration as part of the development of an international economy (e.g. Hansen, 1940; Taylor, 1971). We know that the industrialisation of Europe led to an increase in the interdependence of Europe and some of the overseas countries. Industrialisation affected transport and communications, the availability of European capital for overseas investment and the growth of markets in Europe for overseas products (see Foreman-Peck, 1983, 102–6, 144–52; Kenwood and Lougheed, 1983, 133–43). In the international economy model, the direction of migration flows is determined by the relative availability of factors of production. In general, the European countries in the nineteenth century had an abundant supply of capital and labour relative to the available resources (widely defined) but there were overseas countries where resources were scarce relative to capital and labour. At the margin, investment was likely to be more profitable in these countries and

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incomes higher than in Europe. This led to a redistribution of the European population. Only 4 per cent of ethnic Europeans were living outside Europe and Siberia around 1800. By the First World War this proportion was 21 per cent and rising.

The 'international economy' model could be viewed in a different way, however. We can call this alternative view the 'core-periphery' model. The idea owes a great deal to studies of contemporary migration from the third world (e.g. Piore, 1979; Harris and Todaro, 1970). These studies suggest that emigration does not necessarily lead to the narrowing of income differentials between the origin and destination countries. Instead, it is argued, advanced capitalist development in the 'core' countries increases the demand for unskilled labour. The demand is often met by immigrants from the 'peripheral' countries. The labour market in the 'core' countries tends to be segmented and the immigrants find it difficult to improve their position. This is partly because of ignorance and prejudice. Many of the immigrants are 'target earners' or 'birds of passage', who return to the periphery where their earnings partially support other people. We should note that both the 'international economy' model and the 'core-periphery' model have political implications. Essentially, they are about the ability of capitalist development to increase welfare generally, or only partially.

The core-periphery model is a useful way of considering European emigration in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. By that time, a high proportion of emigration – from the south and east of Europe – was temporary and was undertaken for the purpose of supplementing the family income. Some historians have described these emigrants as 'labour migrants' which distinguishes them from the 'settlers' who were predominant among the earlier emigrants from northern and western Europe. It is possible, however, that this distinction is too rigid. Not all southern and eastern European emigrants were temporary nor were all northern and western European emigrants 'settlers'. The key question is whether the emigrants *intended* to 'settle', to stay for a long period or to return quickly. This decision must have been profoundly affected by transport changes, for example.

Underlying both the international economy and the core-periphery models are judgements about the behaviour of individuals

and the influence affecting the emigration decision. In effect, we start with an assumption that potential emigrants were in possession of sufficient information about one or more possible destinations. This is a large assumption, of course. We can then say that individuals calculated how high their lifetime welfare would be if they emigrated, and compared it to their expected lifetime welfare if they remained where they were. 'Welfare', in this sense, would include all benefits, both material and non-material. If the difference in their expected welfare was substantial, they could be expected to leave – assuming that the prospective emigrants were prepared to accept the degree of uncertainty and could afford the cost of passage, including the income that was forgone before they could take up employment.

Many historians have implicitly used this simple model. Various characteristics of the European and overseas countries, for example, 'population pressure', 'poverty', 'free land' are related to the growth and fluctuations in the emigration rate (e.g. Thomas, 1954).

We will discuss the idea of push-pull more fully below. One problem is that 'push' and 'pull' factors are not independent of each other. We can be fairly sure that potential emigrants weighed both the advantages and the disadvantages of moving to another country against the advantages and disadvantages of staying. In other words, the majority of emigrants – i.e. those who were not escaping from pogrom or famine – would have had great difficulty in explaining whether they had been 'pushed' out of Europe or 'pulled' towards their destination.

If the 'push-pull' formulation were applicable to European experience we would expect that emigration rates from individual European countries would be inversely related to their degree of economic development, or perhaps inversely related to their rate of economic development. And we would expect emigration rates to fall as European countries developed. Strictly, emigration rates would fall if the income differentials between the European and overseas countries narrowed. On the other hand, if emigration was largely a consequence of the increasing integration of the international economy, so that many of the uncertainties of emigration were reduced, we would expect that emigration rates would increase as countries became more developed.

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We must be careful, however, about any explanation which depends on the characteristics of the environment from which the emigrants came or to which they were going. People chose to emigrate. It was a *selective* process and emigrants were rarely a random sample of the population from which they were drawn. The most frequent selection was by age. Most groups of emigrants contained more young adults and fewer children and old people than the home population. There was also selection by gender. In general, men were more likely to emigrate than women. But the emigrant sex ratio was not the same in every country. It could depend on whether the emigrants were likely to return, for example. Selection by occupation and income was also common but, again, occupational selection varied from one country to another. It is also possible that emigrants were selected psychologically. We will return to this point later.

We must not forget that economic growth was occurring in the European economies in the nineteenth century. In some cases, incomes were, on average, rising faster in the countries that were losing emigrants than in the countries that were gaining them. Does that mean that emigrants from countries with strong economic growth tended to be economically ‘peripheral’? Would we expect that the emigrants came from the more remote areas or perhaps had followed occupations that were threatened? This would be the implication if emigration was determined by the ‘push’ and the ‘pull’. As we have seen, it is possible to take a different view. The key to emigration may have been the availability of information. Information was important because it reduced uncertainty. And, of course, the development of economic relations between countries made it much easier to acquire the information that made emigration possible. In this case, we would expect that the emigrants would tend to come from places that were closer to the centre of economic change – perhaps from the capital city. Nor would there be any particular reason to expect that the emigrants were from redundant occupations.

Another aspect of emigrant selection is the question of ‘deviance’. Did an emigrant tend to be an ‘outsider’ – someone who was rejecting some aspect of the society in which he or she was living? There are many examples of ‘deviant’ behaviour among those people who left for religious reasons, e.g. the Mormons

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-55783-2 - Emigration from Europe 1815-1930

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(Rundblom and Norman, 1976, 116–18; Walker, 1964, 16–18, 78–80; Taylor, 1965, 148–55). Is it possible to go beyond these examples, however? Did people who chose to face the uncertainties of emigration always tend to be socially ‘radical’? And did those who chose to stay behind tend to be socially ‘conservative’? Or were emigrants ‘radical’ by definition? Unfortunately, this proposition is very difficult to test, not least because we do not have an objective definition of ‘radical’ or ‘conservative’. Consider a place which produced large numbers of emigrants. In this case, would it be ‘radical’ to consider emigration and ‘conservative’ not to? For example, a letter arrives from Chicago encouraging someone to join the writer. The letter says that well paid jobs are currently available. It also contains money. A move to Chicago is obviously a step into the unknown. But in this scenario – which is not particularly extreme – how big is the step? And if the reason for going to Chicago is to earn money to maintain a ‘traditional’ lifestyle in Europe, as in the core-periphery model, would emigration be ‘radical’ behaviour?

This brings us back to our original question. In what sense can we think of all European emigration as part of a single, although complex, phenomenon? Should we expect to find similarities in the economies and societies of, for example, Britain, Norway, Ireland and Italy which had the highest emigration rates, that we would not find in France, the Netherlands and Switzerland, which had the lowest emigration rates? Or do we need a different explanation for the emigration from each country? Or should we look for similarities in the way that emigration occurred and the institutions which facilitated it, rather than in the characteristics of the places from which the emigrants came?

There is, however, a more important problem. We cannot know what actually passed through the minds of potential emigrants. We can be fairly sure that personal motives, often connected with particular stages in the life-cycle, played a large part in the decision to emigrate. And we can be fairly sure that there were psychological barriers to emigration that had to be overcome. Historians have been able to gain valuable insights into the motives of individual emigrants. The letters that passed between the emigrants and their original home have been the most important source (Erickson, 1972; Thomas and Znaniecki, 1918/1984). But we face a difficult

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problem here. Our knowledge of the personal reasons that must have affected the decision to emigrate relate only to a minute proportion of European emigrants. On the other hand, there is a large body of evidence about economic and social conditions in the areas from which the emigrants came or, in some cases, the economic and social condition of the emigrants themselves. It is not surprising that research has tended to emphasise the economic and social causes of emigration – in so far as they can be identified. The same point can be made about the experience of emigration itself. Individual emigrants were facing a break with home, often a difficult journey and an uncertain future. Emigration may have been the most important single experience that many of them would face. But it is an experience about which we have little direct evidence.