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WHY DO PEOPLE BECOME IMMIGRANTS?

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

1. Apply the Push-Pull Theory vocabulary to any sender–receiver country relationship
2. Articulate how macro-level economic factors in both origin (World Systems Theory) and destination societies (Segmented Labor Market Theory) can explain increases in immigration
3. Understand how migration relationships persist over time with Social Capital Theory

At the beginning of the previous chapter, we considered how much goes into the process of becoming an immigrant. We thought about the effort and sacrifice it requires to not only do it, but to be successful. It would be a difficult undertaking for most of us, yet this doesn't stop millions of people from doing it every year. But why do they do this? Why do people leave their old life behind and start a new one in another part of the world? Why are they willing to go through so much? Of course, there are many reasons. Some have to do with the choices of individuals. Some have to do with the circumstances around individuals. And every story is different. There is no-one-size-fits-all motivation. This chapter will explore the most common explanations and introduce some of the classic and contemporary social science theories that answer the question: Why do people become immigrants?

I recall in elementary school having to complete family tree assignments in which I compiled background information about my ancestors. I remember gathering data from my grandmother and asking her why her parents left Europe. Her response was simple and straightforward: “for a better life.” I didn't question it at the time because it makes sense. If your life is difficult and there is a more appealing option somewhere else, then logically you would move toward that somewhere else. Today, I find this response very unsatisfying. This is not to complain about my grandmother; she didn't know any of the details herself. However, the response leaves my adult self with many unanswered questions—what does a better life look like? Better than what? What was so unappealing about the origin and so appealing about the destination? Why choose the United States over the other options that exist throughout the world? Why not settle in Argentina, Canada, or somewhere in Europe that would be much closer to their family? Why New York City rather than another place in the United States? What was different about my

great-grandparents that led to their immigration, while millions of others stayed behind? Why were my great-great-grandparents able to tolerate living in Europe, while my great-grandparents were not?

Unfortunately, my grandmother has since passed away, so I will never get to hear how she would answer my questions. The details of my ancestors' personal motivations are lost to me, but the immigration scholarship, which includes several theories designed to explain why people become immigrants, can help to fill some of the gaps. The scientific literature won't tell me about my ancestors' biographies, but it will point to typical motivations and variables that explain why an individual would migrate or why millions more people might migrate in one decade compared to the previous one. These sources will provide more than just the "better life" explanation. Some of these theories are classics. Some are still useful today. But each explains migration from a unique perspective. The following sections will provide a basic understanding of some of the most famous and widely used theories explaining why immigration takes place.

THE FAMOUS PUSH-PULL THEORY OF MIGRATION

Lee's (1966) Push-Pull Theory is the most classic of the migration theories. Even today, its vocabulary of "push" and "pull" persists in conversations about immigration. While it is not particularly useful for hypothesis generation and it can lead to overly simplistic or inaccurate ideas about the causes of immigration, it provides a useful framework for people just beginning to study migration. Its vocabulary is useful for understanding and categorizing the complex array of immigrant motivations. It can also serve to demonstrate one of the key arguments of sociology—that immigration (and all other social phenomena for that matter) is not simply the choice of an individual. While we do have a degree of free will, there are many structural forces that influence us. They provide and restrict the opportunities of millions of individuals simultaneously. Either way, the Push-Pull Theory provides a useful basis through which to discuss the most common, real-life motivations that have led people to become immigrants throughout history.

Essentially, Push-Pull Theory is an exercise in the **Sociological Imagination**—sociologists' unique way of thinking about social phenomena that simultaneously considers biographical and contextual influences (Mills 1959). We look at every phenomenon—behaviors, actions, decisions, attitudes—as simultaneously existing at two levels: the personal and the structural. The former finds explanations in the unique biographies and personalities of individuals. The latter finds explanations in the historical, cultural, economic factors—the structure of society—that shape biographies and personalities across entire populations. Take divorce as an example, which is mostly unrelated to the subject of this book. There are many personal reasons why a couple might get divorced—fighting, infidelity, abuse, growing apart, etc. It is easy to think of possible causes, and they are all useful for understanding an individual couple. However, at any given time, there is a divorce **rate**. It may be high, or it may be low. It may be increasing or decreasing. Either way it characterizes the behaviors of millions of people simultaneously. Sociologists would use structural explanations to explain changes in the rate of divorce. For example, the culture has changed, and there is less stigma around divorce, making it socially

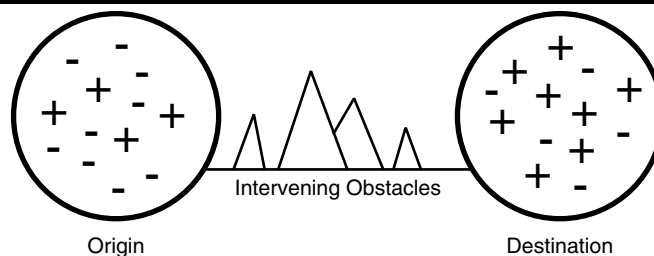
much easier to file for one. Technological advances like social media and dating apps have made infidelity easier than ever. A poor economy could put greater financial strain on couples, leading to more fighting. All these explanations look at the social context to explain why millions of people might divorce in any given year. To understand a phenomenon fully, like divorce, one must consider it at both the individual and structural levels. To be able to shift between these two levels is how we use our sociological imagination. We can do the same thing with the phenomenon of immigration with the Push-Pull Theory acting as a useful organizing framework.

The **Push-Pull Theory**, summarized in Figure 2.1, assumes that the decision to migrate results from a rational calculus that considers four sets of factors: personal factors, push factors, pull factors, and intervening obstacles. These sets of factors coalesce into what is essentially a weighing of the pros and cons by the potential migrant who ultimately decides what will provide the most benefit. If one determines that they could have a better life somewhere else overall, then rationally they would choose to go to that somewhere else. Push-Pull Theory helps us organize the potential pros and cons into individual factors, which correspond to the personal side of the sociological imagination, and the push, pull, and intervening factors, which are all part of the structure of the societies. To understand immigration one must consider all of these factors simultaneously.

Individual Factors

The first set of motivations includes all the biographical factors that distinguish individuals. Essentially, what characteristics would make person A more likely to migrate than person B. Across individuals there is a wide variation in strengths and weaknesses, talents, desires, and personalities that could prime someone to become a migrant or not. Think about what characteristics would make the ideal migrant in terms of probability of emigrating and probability of success. Such a person would need to be a risk-taker. Migrating involves many unknowns—*Will I like it in the new society? Will I be able to make friends? Will I be able to get and hold a job? Will I be happy?* There is certainly the risk of failure and embarrassment if they return unsuccessfully to the origin country. Someone who is risk averse would be less likely to put their happiness, well-being, and reputation on the line.

FIGURE 2.1 ■ Lee's Push-Pull Model



Source: A Theory of Migration [jstor.org].

A migrant would need to be adaptable and open to change. Leaving your culture, family, friends, and social institutions behind in exchange for a new life will require a lot of change. Those more set in their ways would be less likely to migrate. Being flexible with one's lifestyle and relationships is essential.

There is also variation in things like language acquisition ability and cultural competency. Are you able to navigate new cultures seamlessly? Are you comfortable interacting with people who have a different belief system than your own? Are you one of those individuals who can learn a foreign language in adulthood? Answering no to any of these questions will likely make immigration seem much too daunting.

Other factors like a strong work ethic, perseverance, outgoingness, adventurousness, willingness to delay gratification, tolerance of uncomfortable situations, sociability, and friendliness could also make the difference between a migrant or a non-migrant. Each can be a component of an individual's personality. They are internal to the biography of a single individual and vary across migrants and potential migrants. Can you think of any others?

Another individual-level factor that deserves attention here is family. Connection to family in the origin could deter an individual from migrating. It can be hard to leave your parents and siblings behind. However, family living abroad can also increase the likelihood of migration with the goal of reunification. It is common for one family member to emigrate, leaving the rest behind. In some cases, the initial migrant may work to generate funds in the destination country to finance the rest of the family's travel. In other cases, it may simply take a long time to process the necessary immigration paperwork. Other situations may require members to remain behind to tie up loose ends in the origin country. Perhaps children need to finish schooling, or a parent may need to sell their house or close their business. Regardless, if you can imagine one of your parents living abroad, would you have a strong desire to reunite with them? What if you were a parent leaving your children behind? Anthropologist Kristin Elizabeth Yarris' (2014) considered this in her study on Nicaraguan children whose mothers emigrated to the United States. In doing so, they left their children behind with their grandmothers. She interviewed the children to learn about their lives and relationships with their mothers abroad. Most were keenly aware of their family's situation and understood why their mothers lived in another country, sometimes for years. However, the separation can be emotionally straining, and many seek to reunite with their parents. After her mother was unable to visit, one young girl named Juliana said, "I wish I could go fly and grab onto her" (301).

This desire is quite common, and many immigrants eventually seek to bring their children, spouses, siblings, parents, or other extended family members to the destination country. In fact, family migration constitutes the largest source of legal immigration into the United States. According to the National Immigration Forum—an immigrant/immigration advocacy organization—family-sponsored immigration constitutes 65 percent of all legal immigration to the United States each year (2018). Further, the typical immigrant in the United States sponsors 3.5 family members—most often spouses and children. We will go into greater detail about the family sponsored migration policies in Chapter 6.

There is no doubt that these factors matter in the decision to migrate, but there is something else at play. In Chapter 4 we will consider rates of migration into the United States over time. You can follow the rate across the decades and see it increase and decrease. It will be flat for periods and then rise exponentially. In any given year, a million people may migrate, but the following year this number may double or triple. The year after that it may settle down and decrease. It is unlikely that populations experience a sudden increase or decrease in risk-taking or adaptability or any of the personality traits listed above. Biographical and personality explanations are inadequate for understanding changes in rates of immigration, which simultaneously describe the behavior of millions of people—not just one. Rather, structural factors influence masses of people all at once, causing the rate of migration to fluctuate. This is where the pushes, pulls, and intervening obstacles come in.

Push Factors

Push factors include the characteristics of the origin country that motivate people to emigrate. What is it about the place where immigrants are leaving behind that makes it unappealing? What is “pushing” people out and motivating them to seek opportunities elsewhere? One will not find the answers solely within individual personalities or biographies. Rather they have to do with the structure of the origin country, and there are countless examples.

Often the first push factor that people consider is the economy, which is indeed important. Poor economic conditions, high levels of poverty, and few job opportunities within the origin country would all logically create an unappealing set of conditions that could “push” citizens out. Indeed, **economic migrants** are quite common throughout the world. There are migrant laborers in all destination countries in search of more lucrative employment opportunities. Through one visa program alone—the H-2A agricultural visas—more than 200,000 farm workers entered the United States in 2019 (CRS 2020). Economic migrants can include anyone from folks picking strawberries to highly trained professionals and wealthy business investors. Regardless, they are often leaving behind a lack of opportunity—low wages, high unemployment, impediments to starting a business, government mismanagement of the economy, unsafe and exploitative working conditions, etc. The migration relationship between Mexico and the United States remains one of the largest in the world, with the former sending millions of economic migrants to the latter. In 2016, the average wage for a worker in Mexico was about \$291 per month (Perez 2017). The average for Mexican workers in the United States was \$1870 per month—six times higher. Clearly, vast income differentials like this can serve to push citizens out in search of opportunities abroad. The immigrants did not create these economic conditions themselves. Rather, the economic conditions are part of the social structure to which immigrants must respond.



PHOTO 2.1 Image of the destruction in Homs, Syria.

Photo by [Ammar Safarjalani/Xinhua via Getty] [Xinhua/Ammar Safarjalani] via Getty Images.

While economic opportunities are certainly important, it is equally important not to conclude that the economy is everything. One might assume that because of economic motivations, the poorest countries in the world are the most common sources of immigrants. They would have the most pushing them out from an economic sense and the most to gain by leaving. However, this is not the case. The largest immigration sources—Mexico, China, and India—are upper middle or lower middle-income countries according to the World Bank, which are not completely devoid of opportunity (2021). Whereas nations in sub-Saharan Africa, which are among the poorest in the world, have relatively low rates of out-migration. According to the data from Pew Research depicted in Figure 2.2, most immigrants throughout the world originate in middle-income countries, while only 15 percent come from the poorest (2013). In fact, immigrants are more likely to originate in high-income countries than low-income ones. Clearly, the pushes are more complicated than simply economic factors.

Beyond money, historical events like war can create populations of displaced peoples—we often use the term refugees—who have no other choice but to become an immigrant. They are “pushed” out of their origin country as well, but for different reasons than economic migrants. We saw this in 2022 when 14 million Ukrainians were pushed out of their home due to the Russian invasion (BBC 2022). Many sought refuge in Poland or other EU nations.

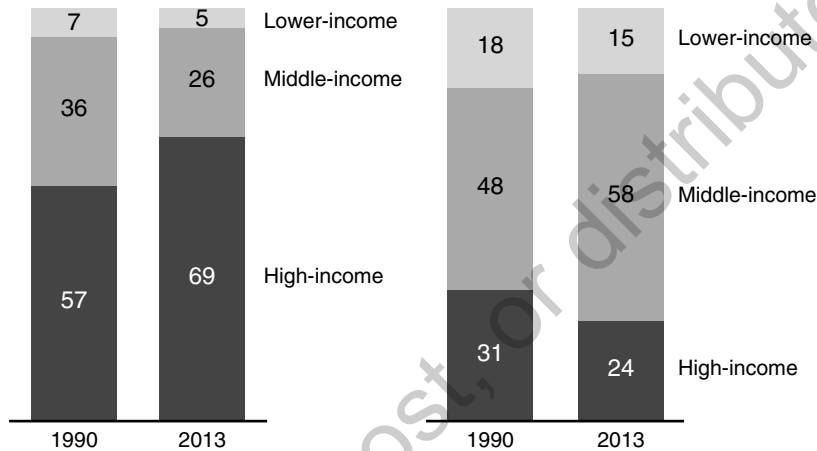
The Syrian Civil War provides another recent example. The conflict began in 2011 and remains unresolved. It has pitted the Syrian government led by President Bashar al-Assad

FIGURE 2.2 ■ Immigrants Generally Do Not Originate in the Poorest Countries in the World

International Migrants Increasingly Are Living in High-income Nations ... and Increasingly Were Born in Middle-income Nations

% of international migrants by current country of residence

% of international migrants by birth country



Source: Changing Patterns of Global Migration and Remittances | Pew Research Center.

against various groups including the Free Syrian Army (antigovernment rebels), Kurdish forces in the north (a minority ethnic group), and the Islamic State (a religious fundamentalist terrorist organization). Through different stages of the conflict, each group has carved out its own territory and established their own governments. The fighting has left hundreds of thousands of dead, countless more injured, cities and towns destroyed, and millions of people displaced among whom emigration is the only option for survival (Agence 2021). Photo 2.1 shows some of the devastation in the city of Homs in Syria. This is just a shot of a single block, but much of the city looked like this after the most extreme fighting. People are largely absent. The destroyed buildings used to be homes, schools, stores, libraries, mosques—all the things that create a community. These are now gone. People's way of life is gone. What option remains but for them to seek safety elsewhere? The Syrian Civil War created the Syrian Migration crisis, which grabbed headlines throughout the world during the mid-2010s, as millions attempted to seek refuge in Europe. War is a structural factor that can push people away from their origin country. It exists outside of the decisions of any individual migrant—none of the refugees chose for this war to happen, but it altered their lives, nonetheless. It is an external factor that simultaneously pushed millions of individuals away from their homes and lives.

Natural disasters, disease outbreaks, and crop failures within nations can also act as push factors that drive people out. During the 1930s, the Dust Bowl disaster in which drought,

over-farming, and dust storms left large areas of the U.S. Plains States unsuitable for farming. It famously led to mass migration to California. More recently, the devastating impact of Hurricane Katrina in 2005 pushed hundreds of thousands of Louisiana residents out, seeking refuge in Texas. Disasters can cause international migration as well. Researchers from the University of Michigan (Yang and Mahajan 2017) used statistical data to show that when severe hurricanes hit Central America and the Caribbean, the United States often experiences a bump in new immigrants. One example, Hurricane Cesar, which hit Nicaragua in 1996, led to a 50 percent increase in Nicaraguan green card holders in 1996 and 1997.

Crime and gang activity is an important push factor for immigrants coming to the United States. In what some have dubbed the United States–Mexico Border Crisis, which is ongoing, tens of thousands of Central American migrants have been arriving at the border seeking asylum. Another wave of Honduran migrants made the journey in early 2021. Caravans of immigrants travel by foot to their destination. The Trump administration reacted with hostility denying entry, detaining migrants, and infamously separating children from their parents. Many families remained separated even into late 2021 (Alfonsi 2021). However, for the migrants who are determining the best course of action—to migrate or not migrate—what they are leaving behind is much worse. The nations of Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador comprise Central America’s Northern Triangle, which have the highest rates of violent crime and gang activity in the world. Many gangs force young children and teenagers to join under threat of violence. Domestic violence rates, particularly against women, are also very high. A Twitter post from Jari Dixon, a Honduran politician, perfectly captures the motives of these migrants: “*No van buscando el sueño americano, van huyendo de la pesadilla hondureña,*” which means, “They are not looking for the American dream, they are running away from the Honduran nightmare.” This is not an economic endeavor for the vast majority. It is a life-or-death decision.

Government oppression and lack of freedom constitute other push factors that are not strictly economic. Many readers in the United States will recall that religious persecution motivated the Pilgrims to flee England. After they separated from the Church of England, the British government passed religious laws, levied special fines, and imprisoned parishioners. Eventually the Pilgrims settled in what would become the state of Massachusetts in 1625 where they were free to worship as they saw fit.

Government oppression need not be religious to push citizens out. Today, the African nation of Eritrea provides a unique example. This single-party dictatorship maintains an extreme policy of forced conscription. All citizens aged 18–40 must complete mandatory national military service. This is not necessarily out of the ordinary throughout the world. Places like Israel, Russia, and South Korea have 12 months of compulsory military service—most often for male citizens. However, in Eritrea this obligation lasts for an indefinite amount of time—2 years? 5 years? 10 years? Who knows? It also applies to both men and women, and there are few exceptions permitted. Forget about pursuing your dreams, like we tell young people in the United States. In Eritrea, either you join the military, or the government will find you and force you to do so. The requirement blocks young people from pursuing higher education, getting a job, starting a business, or pursuing other aspirations. One conscripted man characterized the experience thusly: “They are making us into slaves, not educating us” (HRW 2019). Consequently,

many young Eritreans have fled their country, with many relocating to Europe. In 2015, an estimated 5,000 young Eritreans emigrated each month (Smith 2015).

Overpopulation is another factor that pushes immigrants out. In traditional agrarian economies, large families see children as an economic boost. The more members you have, the more there are to contribute to the household. They can help with farming and increase output. However, when the parents pass away, who will inherit the farm? Should each child get an equal portion? This would likely create too many small farms that wouldn't produce enough crop yield on their own. Centuries ago in Europe, the practice of primogeniture prevailed in which the entire farm would be passed down to the oldest son. This is great for him, but what about the other siblings? Such a practice in England and Ireland led many second, third, and fourth children to emigrate to the New World to seek other opportunities.

Lastly, in most cases, the “pushing” is a metaphor and not literal. However, there have been instances in which governments literally push people out of an origin society. Centuries ago in Spain, the Alhambra Decree of 1492 initiated the expulsion of Jews from all Spanish territories and possessions. This was one of many policies throughout the continent over the centuries where Jewish people were forcibly relocated. More recently, during the Bosnian War in the 1990s, after the multiethnic state of Bosnia-Herzegovina declared its independence from Yugoslavia, ethnic Serbs went about a violent process of “ethnic cleansing,” in which they attacked, sent to concentration camps, murdered, raped, and forcibly deported Bosnian Muslims from their territory. Many sought refuge throughout the European Union and the United States.

At times, the literal pushes have been capricious and subject to the whims of totalitarian despots. For instance, the 1972 expulsion of South Asians from the African nation of Uganda occurred allegedly after their dictator, Idi Amin, got the idea in a dream. During the late 1800s, the British colonizers brought contract laborers from India to Uganda to work on development projects. While many left after their contract concluded, many stayed and found economic success. Their prosperity generated resentment among the indigenous Ugandan population. Amin believed that Allah gave him an order to expel the population—even those who possessed Ugandan citizenship. His argument was essentially that Uganda belongs to Ugandans. Afterward he stated: “There are now Black faces in every shop and industry. All the big cars in Uganda are now driven by Africans, and not the former bloodsuckers. The rest of Africa can learn from us” (Seftel 1994). The refugees created by the expulsion settled mostly in the United Kingdom, Canada, and the United States.

Pull Factors

The second set of structural factors motivating migration within the Push-Pull Theory are the **pull factors**. These characteristics of the host society make it appealing and metaphorically pull people in. Why choose the United States over the nearly 200 countries that exist in the world? What makes the United States the type of place that pulls immigrants? Often pull factors are the opposite of the aforementioned push factors. If a lack of economic opportunities pushes people out, they will likely seek a place where such opportunities are more plentiful. If they are seeking physical safety, they will be “pulled” toward places away from conflict and disasters.

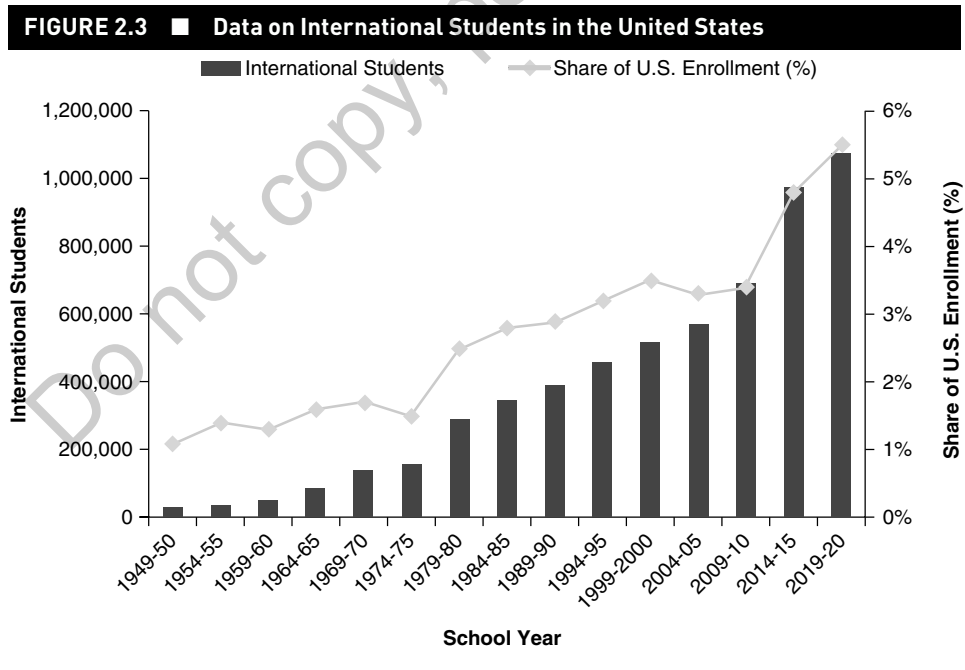
As with push factors, the pulls are normally metaphorical. But there have been many instances in which the pull can be literal. Forced migration, such as the Transatlantic Slave

Trade, brought Africans to colonies throughout the New World to fulfill the labor needs of the agricultural industries in the United States, Brazil, and the many nations of the Caribbean. Countries continue to pull immigrant labor today, only in less brutal forms.

International labor recruitment efforts conducted by governments and business interests are a common practice among developed countries. Germany famously recruited temporary guest workers from Italy, Spain, Greece, and Turkey to rebuild their economy after World War II, starting in the 1950s. The workers filled unskilled manual labor roles in the manufacturing, mining, and construction industries. The United States does this today through various work visa programs.

Education often provides a significant pull for migrants. They seek knowledge and training that may not be as available or as high quality in their origin country. You likely have a population of international students at your college or university. These folks are often “pulled” to American or European institutions of higher education because of the prestige that they carry worldwide. People around the world view a degree from one of these institutions as high quality and a valuable form of human capital that can open opportunities everywhere. Further, for many students, Western universities offer more flexibility and choice to pursue the degree that you want. In China, for example, one’s standardized test scores determine eligibility for higher education as well as the subjects that one will study at university (Svoboda 2015). Those who don’t make the cut may seek higher education in another country.

The popularity of U.S. education is clear in the data depicted in Figure 2.3, which shows the number and percentage of international students enrolled over the span of 70 years. During the 1949–1959 school year, there were only about 26,000 international students in the United



Source: Article: International Students in the United States | migrationpolicy.org.

States. This number grew to about 1.1 million in 2019–2020 (Israel and Batalova 2021). Of course, the university system has expanded greatly across this span. There are many more colleges and universities and many more students overall, so it is important to consider growth in the relative number of immigrants. Across the time span, the proportion of international students has expanded from about 1 percent in 1949–1950 to between 5 and 6 percent in 2019–2020. Students from China have been the largest source of education immigrants in the United States. This population will likely continue to grow as the world recovers from the COVID-19 pandemic (ICEF Monitor 2021).

Political and social freedoms, which aren't universally available, can also pull immigrants toward certain parts of the world. The United States has long characterized itself as a "beacon of freedom," with our extensive rights and freedoms viewed as unique throughout the world. This reputation has served to pull immigrants to settle in America for generations. During the Cold War, the United States was a primary destination for individuals fleeing Communist states throughout the world—regimes with far fewer social, economic, and political freedoms. Historically, the United States has adopted policies granting special statuses for such migrants. Refugees fleeing a failed anti-Communist revolution in Hungary during the 1950s, Vietnamese and Hmong refugees during the 1970s after the Vietnam War, and Guatemalan, Nicaraguan, and Salvadoran refugees in the 1990s all provide illustrative examples.

However, one of the most famous and sustained of such flows has been that of Cuban exiles fleeing the Communist regime installed by Fidel Castro and the Cuban Revolution of 1959. In the wake of the overthrow of the Batista regime, 200,000 anti-Communist Cubans fled to Southern Florida. Many were former government officials and members of the upper and middle classes—those who would lose most in the establishment of a Communist regime that would redistribute a society's wealth and resources (Powell 2005). In the years following the revolution, the U.S. government designated Cuban exiles as having a special status, which included waiving immigration restrictions and providing a fast track into legal status. The United States also offered public services to Cubans that weren't available to immigrants from other origins. We even organized air transportation. Nicknamed "Freedom Flights," this air service operated twice daily between Miami and Cuba between 1965 and 1973 and moved more than one quarter of a million individuals at a cost of \$12 million to U.S. taxpayers. America's reputation, along with these measures, served as a strong pull for Cubans to emigrate. With over 1 million immigrants in the United States today and many members of the U.S.-born second and third generations, Cubans represent the third largest Hispanic nationality in the United States after Mexicans and Puerto Ricans.

Intervening Obstacles

The final group of structural factors in the Push-Pull framework has to do with the journey in between the origin and destination. What factors might encourage or deter movement between countries? Often these are physical. Something as simple as distance between countries would fit under this category. Getting from China to the United States is not necessarily easy—though considerably easier than it was a century ago. It involves travel across the Pacific Ocean, which requires expensive airline fares. It may be more appealing to seek opportunities closer-to-home,

perhaps in Singapore or Australia. It would also be much easier to reach a destination country right on the other side of a land border versus one on the other side of an ocean.

Geographic features like oceans, mountains, and deserts can all act as **intervening obstacles**. The desert between the United States and Mexico and the Mediterranean Sea between The EU and North Africa present real and dangerous obstacles for migrants. Thousands have died while attempting to cross. We'll talk more about this in Chapters 10 and 11 when we discuss undocumented immigrants and refugees respectively. The Atlantic Ocean existed as a formidable obstacle between Europe and the New World for migrants during the 18th and 19th centuries. But technological advances like the development of the Ocean Liner and the establishment of regular shipping routes between Europe and America increased the ease and lowered the cost of the journey. One can observe spikes in the rate of migration to the United States a few years after the founding of the Hamburg-America Line in 1847 and a few decades later with the Red Star Line in 1871 and the Holland-America Line in 1873.

Obstacles can be legal as well. Both sending and receiving countries enact policies that either make migration easier or more difficult. For instance, the U.S. Border Patrol acts as an intervening obstacle as they work to prevent unlawful crossings. Their efforts deter and alter migration flows, often in unexpected ways. We will discuss this more in Chapter 10. Similarly, the United States has a history of banning immigration through legislation. The Chinese Exclusion Act of 1822 halted Chinese immigration to the United States, and kept the doors closed until the 1940s.

OTHER THEORIES OF IMMIGRATION

The Push-Pull framework has some value in that it can help students to think of migration as something beyond the decision of an individual, and it encourages consideration of a wide array of possible motivations. It also provides us with useful terminology and categorization. However, there isn't too much more that we can get from the theory today. It is highly speculative, so it often leads to assumptions about migration that do not reflect reality (i.e. poverty is a major cause of migration). It also isn't particularly useful for hypothesis generation or predicting future trends, since it doesn't offer any specific expectations. However, a number of other theories fill this void. The following paragraphs will discuss these, focusing primarily on economic and sociological theories of migration (Massey et al. 2003). These all consider a combination of personal and structural causes.

Migration as a Rational Economic Decision

An early theory from Economics, known as the **Neo-Classical Economics Theory** (Borjas 1989; Ranis and Fei 1961), assumes that the decision to migrate occurs through an individual's rational decision-making and their desire to maximize their income. Essentially, people will move if they can earn more money elsewhere. Each actor responds to structural conditions of both their sending and potential receiving countries, which tie into the laws of supply and demand. There are some places in the world where labor is in short supply and as a result, laborers can command a

higher salary. Simultaneously, there are other places where a surplus of labor exists where wages are relatively low. Potential immigrants will leave the labor surplus countries with the goal of achieving higher wages in the labor shortage countries. Over time, things will balance out as the immigrants fulfill the destination country's labor shortage and by leaving, reduce the origin's labor surplus. It's a simplistic and rational theory, which doesn't consider many of the noneconomic motivations for migration, but it serves as a useful starting point.

A subsequent theory, known as the **New Economics of Migration** (Stark and Bloom 1985), accepted some of the logic of the Neo-Classical Theory, but removed the exclusive focus on the individual actor. Rather than immigration being a decision made by an individual, a household or community makes it collectively. Often families, to maximize income and protect themselves from hardship, will send a representative abroad to work and send money back to the household. During the Syrian Migration Crisis, many of the photographs of large migrant crowds included mostly young men. This raised suspicions among cynical, anti-immigration commentators wondering why these seemingly able-bodied young men weren't fighting for their country. Some speculated that they were terrorists disguised as refugees (Abbas 2018). However, the reason for the high percentage of young males is because of family units electing to send a member to Europe to earn money to remit back to the family. Especially in societies with traditional gender norms, it will be common to view young men as the most likely to be successful in such a venture.

One way to think about the New Economics of Migration logic is with an investment analogy. Immigration for families is a way to diversify their portfolio. When one does this with their stocks, they do not put all their money into one company or sector of the economy. Instead, they spread it around to buffer against potential losses in one area. Take a hypothetical family in Mexico. They live in a rural village without much opportunity. There is some farm work locally, but it's seasonal and doesn't pay much. To earn more, the family may make an investment by sending a member to Mexico City to find work. They may also send members north to the United States. Perhaps one works in the domestic service industry in California, another in the agricultural industry in Texas, and another to a meatpacking plant in the Midwest. By spreading members around—diversifying their portfolio—the family generates multiple and diverse income streams. If things do not work out for the brother in Mexico City, the family can manage the loss because of the sisters working in the United States.

Migration as a Response to Macro-Level Push and Pull Factors

The next two theories, Segmented Labor Market Theory and World Systems Theory, focus on how economic development in wealthy and poor countries can create both a need for immigrants and a surplus of potential emigrants, respectively. In other words, the former focuses on a major pull factor in destination countries, while the latter focuses on push factors in origin countries.

Segmented Labor Market Theory (Piore 1979) argues that when nations industrialize, it creates a need for immigrant laborers. Advanced economies develop a two-part labor market, the primary sector and the secondary sector. These are generally separate as individuals work only in one sector, not both. The primary sector involves desirable, high-paying jobs characterized

by autonomy, benefits, flexibility, opportunities for advancement, and generous compensation. They also require a high degree of skills and education. They are the type of jobs that most college students desire for their careers—professionals, lawyers, doctors, investors, etc. Conversely, the secondary sector includes unskilled jobs that involve repetitive and menial tasks. They bring low pay, few benefits, and limited opportunities for advancement. They are often viewed as low status, unglamorous, and undesirable—agricultural labor, food service, janitorial services, etc.

Within such a segmented labor market, those in the primary and secondary sectors do not compete with one another. Janitors are not applying for positions for lawyers and stockbrokers, and surgeons aren't applying for jobs as cashiers or agricultural laborers. Yet both sectors are required for an industrialized economy. Low level, secondary sector service jobs abound, and destination countries must fill them. The problem is that many citizens eschew this type of work. They are either unwilling to accept the low pay, avoid taking a position with such low status, or are uninterested in completing physical or repetitive types of work. Thus, it can be a challenge to fill secondary sector positions solely with the native-born population.

If only there was a population that would be willing to accept low paying jobs. Perhaps the low wages are higher than what they could earn elsewhere. If only there was a population for whom the low status of secondary sector employment isn't a problem. Perhaps they might come from a different culture that does not define such work as unglamorous or undesirable. If only there was a population that would overlook the limited opportunities for advancement in the secondary sector. Perhaps they are more oriented toward their life somewhere else outside of the industrialized country and do not see themselves as staying permanently. In case you haven't picked up on the clues here, immigrants often fit this description. Thus, industrialized economies create an entire set of jobs for which immigrants are perfectly suited. In other words, industrialization pulls new immigrants—specifically low-skilled immigrants—in.

One can look no further than the aforementioned immigrant guest worker programs that are common in industrialized nations throughout the world. The Bracero Program in the United States and the more recent temporary visa programs have attracted secondary sector laborer, generally from Mexico. In 2017, Canada had 550,000 temporary foreign workers, employed particularly in the agricultural, forestry, fishing, and hunting industries (Lu 2020). Many other industrialized European nations—the United Kingdom, Netherlands, Switzerland, etc.—similarly turned to either foreign guest workers programs or recruited workers from their colonial possessions as a means to fill secondary sector jobs.

Industrialization can cause internal migration as well. This has been the case in China whose rapidly industrializing cities have not attracted many international migrants, but rather massive waves of rural migrants from other parts of China, with many seeking opportunities in the secondary sector of the economy. By 2017, there were 245 million internal migrants in the country, which is close to the total number of international migrants in the entire world (Shi et al. 2020)!

World Systems Theory

While Segmented Labor Market Theory considers how industrialization can pull immigrants into wealthy countries, the **World Systems Theory** considers the circumstances that push immigrants out of poor countries (Wallerstein 1974). Globalization, modernization, the

expansion of market capitalism, and generally any involvement of industrialized countries in lesser-developed countries are all viewed as such factors. When these things happen, it results in substantial changes to the way of life and the ways to earn a living in the eventual sender nation. As these processes disrupt and replace traditional ways, it can create a surplus of laborers with little other option besides migration. If one follows the changes from the colonial period to the era of large multinational corporations it becomes clear that traditional economies have changed greatly, creating the conditions that produce an immigrant source country.

Take the following scenario as an example: The traditional economies in many societies in the Global South involve small family farms that practice subsistence agriculture. This is small-scale farming where a family grows what they need to subsist throughout the year. They will grow rice, wheat, potatoes, other vegetables, raise livestock, hunt, fish—whatever is necessary to fulfill the family's nutritional needs. Perhaps they could sell or trade some of their surplus at a local market, but this is far from industrial capitalism. Their main goal is the family's subsistence. Under such circumstances, large families can be beneficial. More children mean more people to work the land and more laborers mean a greater crop yield, assuming each person can produce more than they consume.

Enter **globalization, industrialization**, and market capitalism. The agricultural industry seeks to expand with the goal of maximizing profits. They desire new markets to sell their goods and new resources—farmland—to produce more and varied products. They acquire land and focus not on subsistence agriculture, but on cash crops—they are mass-producing with the goal of making a profit. So they will grow only coffee beans or bananas, which they will sell. If local farmers follow suit in search of profit, it will alter their traditional way of life. Their goals and methods change. Successful growers will consolidate land and grow larger as they compete. Technology and mechanization reduce the requirements for laborers. The result is the displacement of peasant farmers with few other opportunities to earn a living. Thus, we have a population that is primed to migrate in search of other opportunities.

And it's not just agriculture. Industrial firms from the developed world often build factories in lesser-developed countries. The labor costs are lower, the taxes are cheaper, and the environmental regulations more relaxed, so it makes sense economically for them to do so. However, the mass production of goods within the origin country competes with traditional small-scale craftspeople and the competition can put them out of business. The factories can provide a means to earn a living in the newly evolving economy, but these do not pay much. Perhaps not enough to keep pace with new ideas about consumption within the new capitalist system. The desire for new products and luxuries may be at odds with the incomes and opportunities available. Further, many of these factories have employed women, while providing little opportunity for men. What will they do to provide for their household? Emigration might be a viable option.

These last few paragraphs have described world systems processes in generalities, but the patterns have created real life populations of potential migrants throughout the world. It is also not the intention of these paragraphs to criticize the forces of globalization and capitalism. Many people welcome these changes and many benefit in the long run. Rather, the wide-ranging effects of these economic, technological, and ultimately cultural changes can lead to increases in emigration as a side effect.

SOCIAL CAPITAL THEORY: CHAIN MIGRATION

The previous theories help to understand how migration happens in the first place. The purpose of **Social Capital Theory**—sometimes referred to as chain migration—is to understand how migration can continue after an initial trailblazing migrant and be sustained over time (Massey et al. 1994). The causes of initiation and maintenance are not necessarily the same.

For chain migration, the underlying cause for the continued flow of migration is **social capital**. This term has to do with the value of your social connections—who do you know and what can they do for you? We derive all sorts of social and emotional benefits from our connections to family, friends, neighbors, and coworkers, but there are also potential benefits to your socioeconomic status and ability to attain mobility. Think about what other people can do for you. If you want to start a business or pursue higher education, those people in your network can loan you money to get started. That would be you cashing in—quite literally—your social capital. Beyond money, people in your network can also provide advice, especially if they have entrepreneurial experience or completed higher education. They can tell you what to expect, what will be difficult, what will be easy, and what pitfalls to watch out for along the way. Cashing in your social capital and obtaining this information can be valuable and direct you toward success. Further, your networks can provide you with recommendations, whether that be an actual letter of recommendation as you apply to college or referrals and recommendations to potential business partners. The latter is an example of how your networks can expand beyond the people that you know and include the people known by the people you know. Connections with powerful and knowledgeable people amount to valuable social capital. Just like financial capital, social capital has an unequal distribution throughout societies. Some people have valuable network connections while others do not.

Under the theory of chain migration, social capital connects with migration when someone in your network has emigrated and lives in a host country. Through your connection to this person, you have a source of advice about the immigration process. They've been through it, so they can tell you all about getting to the host country, how to follow the legal process to gain entry and remain permanently, how to get established, what to expect when you interact with members of the host society, what are the easy parts of the process, and what are the hard parts. They can provide you with a place to live and maybe connect you to opportunities for employment, some start-up funds, or even act as a legal sponsor facilitating your migration. Such a resource would be tremendously valuable for someone considering migration. It would also make someone who has such a connection more likely to become a migrant compared to someone without.

Discussions of chain migration often refer to the cost of migration. This is not necessarily just financial cost, but also the difficulty, frustration, uncertainty, and effort required to migrate. For the initial migrant, the cost is quite high. Without social capital in the host country, they must figure everything out on their own. They must be a trailblazer, which is not easy. However, once established, the initial migrant lowers the cost of migration for each subsequent migrant because they can act as social capital for others. Each migrant changes the context for the next migrant. The cost becomes lower and lower as more migrants come in and expand the

network connections between individuals in the origin and destination. In essence, they establish a chain between countries that sustains a flow of immigrants over time.

There exist several **migration chains** between the United States and various countries throughout the world. Immigration from the Dominican Republic represents a useful example. The Caribbean nation occupying the Eastern two-thirds of the island of Hispaniola is the origin of more than 2 million individuals in the United States, making Dominicans the fifth largest Hispanic group in the country. While there were small numbers of Dominicans arriving in the United States prior to the 20th century, the flows became substantial after repeated U.S. military interventions in the nation's affairs. This included a U.S. military occupation from 1916 to 1924, a CIA-backed plot to assassinate the dictator Rafael Trujillo in 1961, and a second U.S. military occupation in 1965. Through each of these interventions, social network connections are established. Military collaborations between American and Dominican troops, coordination between American and Dominican politicians, cooperation between American and Dominican business, or even an American soldier falling in love with a Dominican resident can all provide the first link in a future migration chain. Each of the Dominicans listed in these scenarios have immediate family, extended family, friends, and neighbors who could all now follow with the trail blazed. This is indeed what occurred between the United States and the Dominican Republic as a vast majority of Dominicans who migrate permanently to the United States do so through family reunification (Zong and Batalova 2018).

More recently in 2021, the United States decided to pull its troops out of Afghanistan, officially ending the war that began in 2001. However, the Taliban—the strict and repressive Islamic fundamentalist regime that the United States removed from power—almost immediately retook control of the country. What will be the fate of the many Afghans who aided in the U.S. military effort? Some provided crucial intelligence that may have aided in the Taliban's initial defeat. With the Taliban back in control, Afghanistan may no longer be safe for these individuals. In response, the United States began offering visas allowing them to come and live permanently in America (Crowley 2021). Morally, this seems like the right thing to do, but it could be the seeds for a migration chain. Those who accept the visas will likely have family members who are ineligible. However, with legal status, the Afghan immigrants can sponsor new immigrants through family reunification. It will be interesting to see if the United States experiences a significant increase in immigration from Afghanistan over the next few years.

Where else has the United States intervened during the last century that might explain a migration chain or perhaps result in one in the future? And it doesn't have to be the military. Business connections establish migration chains as well. What about European nations? We will see in the following chapters that many Western European countries often have sustained migrations from countries that were former colonies—the United Kingdom and India, France and Algeria, Netherlands and Indonesia.

This is not to say that migration flows will last forever once the dominoes start falling. To the contrary, chain migration theory predicts that the point of saturation will slow or stop the migrant stream altogether based on assumptions about supply and demand. If too many immigrants settle in the host country, it will drive down the wages in the destination country. If too many emigrants leave, it'll increase the scarcity and cost of labor in the origin country, providing incentive to stay.

CONCLUSION

In truth, there are countless possible motivations for why someone might become an immigrant. It is important to understand the wide diversity of circumstances that can lead one down this path. It is also crucial to understand the difference between individual choices and structural forces. The former explains what would lead one individual to migrate. The latter explains changes in immigration rates, which involve millions of people all at once. Throughout this book, we will consider both personal and structural factors as we discuss the details of immigration.

While this chapter set out to consider why people migrate, the following chapter considers a different question: who migrates? When examining what type of people would go through this process, many demographic variables are potentially important. Are men more likely to be immigrants than women? Is it primarily poor people, middle class people, or those who are well off? How old is the typical immigrant? We will answer these questions by developing a demographic profile. Admittedly, this is a bit of a fruitless endeavor since immigrants are highly diverse and there is no one-size-fits-all characterization. Nevertheless, it is worthwhile to examine what immigrants in the United States look like.

KEY TERMS

Economic Migrants	Push Factors
Globalization	Push-Pull Theory
Industrialization	Rates
Intervening Obstacles	Segmented Labor Market Theory
Migration Chains	Social Capital
Neo-Classical Economics Theory	Social Capital Theory
New Economics of Migration	Sociological Imagination
Pull Factors	World Systems Theory