

Rethinking Migration from a Global Perspective

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In recent years, the scale of migration and displacement across the world has generated a sense of crisis in many societies. In 2015-2016, for example, Europe experienced the largest influx of migrants since the Second World War. Many of these were asylum seekers from the Middle East and Africa, seeking security and well-being in Europe; over one million people applied for asylum in 2015 alone¹. The European “migration crisis” received tremendous attention in news outlets around the world, yet the most dramatic consequences of displacement were arguably happening elsewhere. That same year, over 65.3 million people were forcibly displaced worldwide as a result of persecution, conflict, generalized violence, or human rights violations.² The vast majority of refugees were not hosted in Europe, but rather Turkey, Pakistan, Lebanon, Iran, Ethiopia and Jordan. Beyond those who count as forcibly displaced were a far greater number of peoples moving for other reasons, including education, work, or family. In 2015, there were over 244 million international migrants worldwide.

Although large-scale population movements are nothing new – global international migration rates have remained surprisingly stable, hovering around some three percent of the world’s population since at least the 1960s³ – the sense of crisis that present-day migration generates provides an opportunity to reflect on the root causes of this movement, to see the ways in which migration and displacement are expressions of deeper processes of integration and disintegration transforming our world.

In response to a letter seeking guidance about how to respond to the migration crisis in Europe in 2015, the Universal House of Justice wrote to one National Spiritual Assembly, “It is all too easy to be swept up in the immediacy of the crisis and echo the cries arising on one side or another of the contemporary debate surrounding the flow of refugees and migrants, seeking a rapid solution to a problem which is but the latest symptom of a much deeper and far-reaching concern.”⁴ The message goes on to suggest that, rather than becoming enmeshed in the political divisiveness migration-related issues are now generating, a more productive line of inquiry is to consider the underlying drivers of migration and displacement and the teachings of the Bahá’í Faith that address them.

This article aims to make a modest contribution to the task suggested by the Universal House of Justice by examining the root causes of migration in the contemporary period. First, it reframes migration as a consequence of social transformation, a perspective that shows why migration is an intrinsic part of humanity’s collective life, and why any fundamental shift in patterns of migration will

require transforming the very fabric of global society. Second, it describes elements of a Bahá'í view of the present moment that can help us see beyond the tumult of today and look with hope towards a future of global integration. In doing so, this article argues that migration provides a lens to better understand the social forces shaping our world order, and the depth of transformation required to realize peace and prosperity for all of humanity.

Migration and Social Transformation

In debates about migration, there are two common yet polarized perspectives. The first sees migration as a problem to be solved, a temporary response to “push” and “pull” factors that may be remedied as socioeconomic opportunities become more equal between places. This perspective assumes sedentary life as the normal human condition, and migration as an aberration requiring explanation or intervention.⁵ It is often from this vantagepoint that governments and non-governmental organizations seek to address the root causes of migration. If livelihood opportunities can increase, development policy assumes, less people should need to leave their homes. A second perspective alternatively emphasizes that human beings have always moved, and that there is nothing unnatural about migration. “Ours is a migratory species,” the author Mohsin Hamid reminds us.⁶ Indeed, almost everyone can find a story of migration in their family history. Rather than a problem to be solved, this perspective emphasizes that migration is the means by which human beings throughout history have solved their problems, explored the world and improved their lives.

Both perspectives contain a kernel of truth, yet both obscure important realities about migration trends today. The first perspective, for example, neglects a growing body of research that shows rising levels of income, health and education in poorer countries are associated with *greater* emigration.⁷ The pursuit of “development” in the modern period appears to stimulate, rather than reduce, migration. In particular, development ideologies that emphasize the free movement of goods, capital and ideas also seem to propel the movement of people. Similarly, the second perspective, which emphasizes the naturalness of migration, can fail to appreciate how and why migration patterns have changed over time. Indeed, people have always moved, but the forces driving and shaping migration patterns have changed in rather dramatic ways across the ages. Further, a singular emphasis on migration as “normal” can risk ignoring or even naturalizing the unjust social structures that widen inequalities between people and places and also motivate population movements.

Dissatisfied with prevalent framings and theories of migration, a group of researchers associated with the *International Migration Institute* at the University of Oxford and later the University of Amsterdam began articulating a “social transformation perspective” for the study of migration.⁸ This theoretical approach assumes that the ways in which people move and settle transform in patterned ways whenever social transformation, defined here as a “fundamental shift in the way society is organized that goes beyond the incremental processes of social change that are always at work,”⁹ occurs. Migration is not *inherently* “good” or “bad” – indeed, examples abound of both – but rather reflects how humanity organizes its social life. A core implication of a social transformation perspective is that to understand the underlying causes of migration, we must look to the nature and transformation of society itself.

The relationship between migration and social transformation is easier to discern from a historical perspective, when one can step outside the complexities and sensitivities that surround migration today. Taking a long-term perspective, there are at least three fundamental turning points in the migration history of humankind, each of which corresponds to important shifts in the deep structure of humanity's collective life. The first occurred when human beings first ventured off the African continent. It is perhaps no coincidence that these new ventures overlapped with another new development: speech, which emerged sometime between 90,000 to 40,000 years ago. Speech gave unprecedented advantages for survival by enabling heightened levels of collective organization. While we cannot be sure of the exact causes of our early human ancestors' first great migrations, historians note a remarkable dispersal of human beings out of Africa across the globe relatively soon thereafter, between 40,000 and 10,000 BCE.¹⁰

Another turning point in humanity's migration history began to take place around 10,000 BCE. Innovations surrounding the storage of food, and later the domestication of plants and animals, enabled and encouraged human beings to live together in larger groups, giving rise to the first agricultural villages. This Neolithic Revolution brought profound mobility consequences: it allowed human beings to settle down, seasonally or more permanently. The very act of settling created the conditions out of which the first cities, and later civilizations, emerged. In the several thousand years thereafter, the possibility of settlement gave rise to three distinct yet interlocking ways of life: the rural agricultural, the nomadic pastoral, and the urban complex—each playing distinct and important roles in the emergence and spread of civilization throughout the centuries to come. The political strength and economic diversification possible in urban centers rested upon the acquisition and production of rural hinterlands, and pastoral communities played a crucial part of “trade and raid,” twin drivers of human movement and exchange.¹¹ During this time, urban centers were often perceived as the seats of civilization, yet the vast majority of humanity lived in rural settings.

Over the last several centuries, another fundamental shift in our collective migration history has been unfolding: urbanization, that is, the gradual displacement of rural and pastoral livelihoods by urban-centric social and economic organization. This process of urbanization, from a global perspective, has witnessed the mass movement of humanity from rural areas to urban centers, within their homelands or outside of them. While in 1800, only 15-20 percent of humanity lived in urban areas, this share increased to 34 percent in 1960 and by 2007 humanity reached a tipping point; the majority of humanity now lives in urban areas, a share that is projected to increase to 68 percent by 2050.¹² Transformations in recent international migration trends may be seen as an integral part of this global urbanization process. While a relatively high proportion of international migration in the 17th through 19th centuries was directed towards settling or conquering less population-dense territories – a kind of “frontier” or “settler” migration – today a growing share of international migration is directed towards “global cities” and large urban areas in wealthier countries. Humanity is thus in the midst of another migration transition,¹³ and the causes and consequences of these new population movements are what we are grappling to understand today.

The social forces driving humanity's urban transition are complex. Technological innovations in manufacturing and transport led to the wide-scale displacement of

traditional systems of economic production, which often relied on producing goods by hand, with machine-based systems of production that tend to concentrate production processes in urban areas. This Industrial Revolution is intimately tied to a range of other social shifts: new conceptions of work based on wages rather than subsistence; the expansion of formal education designed to prepare students for the specialization and division of labor in industrial and post-industrial societies; rising levels of consumption and changing notions of the good life; investments in infrastructure to facilitate heightened levels of connectivity, to name but a few. As societies around the world experienced the political, economic, technological and cultural changes associated with industrialization, more people began to leave rural ways of life to work in neighboring towns or cities elsewhere.¹⁴ And as the world becomes increasingly connected, the destinations potential migrants consider become increasingly distant.

Globalization, what has been described as the “widening, deepening and speeding up of worldwide interconnectedness in all aspects of contemporary social life,”¹⁵ is thus another important process of social change shaping the nature and direction of migration trends. As processes of globalization accelerate, international migration flows follow global geopolitical and economic shifts. Consider the rise of the Gulf States after the discovery of vast reservoirs of oil in the mid-20th century, and the 1973 Oil Shock that suddenly increased the price of oil. This generated new financial resources to undertake major development projects in the region, as well as greater demand for foreign workers to carry out the work. While there were only some two million migrant workers in the Gulf region in 1975, some 68 percent of whom were from other Arab countries,¹⁶ the scale of migration increased dramatically over the following decades. By 2017, Saudi Arabia alone hosted some 12.1 million migrants, comprising some 37 percent of its total population, and making it the second major migration destination after the United States.¹⁷ Most migrant workers now come from countries like India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh. The incomes migrant workers can earn in Saudi Arabia far exceed any opportunity available to them at home, while in Saudi Arabia, the work they provide is considered “cheap.” Economic globalization has contributed to the emergence of new “migration systems” across long distances, to such a degree that a young woman in rural Ethiopia, for example, may find it easier to migrate to Saudi Arabia as a domestic worker than to find sustainable work in her home region.¹⁸

Given the uneven nature of globalization in the modern period, particularly the growing divide between the richest and poorest countries and peoples, it is perhaps not surprising that, from a global perspective, migration scholars Mathias Czaika and Hein de Haas find that international migration occurs from an increasingly diverse array of origin countries, but concentrates on a shrinking pool of destination countries.¹⁹ While theorists once hoped that globalization would “flatten” the world and reduce levels of inequality in opportunity and welfare, globalization has thus far been a highly asymmetrical process, favoring particular countries, or powerful groups within these countries, at the expense of others.²⁰ Migration patterns, it seems, have followed these asymmetries.²¹

Because of these asymmetries, the drivers of internal and international migration should not be analyzed separately from patterns of displacement and refugee migration. The widescale displacement of populations around the world – due to

conflict, natural disasters, or livelihood constraints – are also part of the social transformations of the modern period. The modern transformation has forged a global civilization, and today, more than ever before, “the welfare of any segment of humanity is inextricably bound up with the welfare of the whole.”²² Yet, despite this reality, individuals, companies, and countries continue to prioritize their own well-being in isolation from their neighbors’. The gap between the humanity’s richest and poorest is widening as unprecedented quantities of wealth are amassed by a relative few.²³ The pursuit of power and economic gain continues to overrule concern for how the environment, which sustains all of humanity, is affected.²⁴ These social ills nurture the conditions within which prejudice, insecurity, and conflict take root. In this light, it is easier to see why, although common discourse and legal pathways for migration often make a hard distinction between “refugees” and “economic migrants,” the reality is much more blurred. People’s movement in response to these shifting forces may be conceptualized as occurring along a spectrum of “forced” to “voluntary,” with much contemporary migration occurring somewhere in the middle.

Humanity’s response to migration and displacement

Many governments remain ill-prepared to respond to the opportunities and challenges migration presents to their societies. Migration policies in many countries tend to favor the entry of the so-called “highly skilled” while restricting the entry of “low-skilled” workers, asylum seekers and refugees.²⁵ Yet, as one migration researcher Stephen Castles observed, “the more that states and supranational bodies do to restrict and manage migration, the less successful they seem to be.”²⁶ Stronger border controls, because they do not address the underlying reasons why people leave, push many migrants into more dangerous and precarious trajectories.²⁷ Development aid that does seek to address migration’s root causes is simply not large enough to meaningfully stymie the complex forces driving people’s movement,²⁸ nor eliminate the persistent demand for immigrant labor in wealthy countries.²⁹ Further, millions of refugees now live in precarious situations, and despite unprecedented levels of generosity, the gap between needs and humanitarian funding is widening.³⁰

Recognizing that contemporary migration patterns stem from the structure of society complicates the hope that addressing its root causes is an easy task. On the contrary, it points to the depth of transformation required to fundamentally reshape the drivers and dynamics of migration in the world today. As humanity grapples with the opportunities and challenges posed by migration, the Baha’i Writings provide a perspective from which we can situate our reading of the present reality and orient long-term approaches to migration and social change.

First, concerning the present: implicit within the Baha’i teachings is the assurance that we are living through a period of global transformation, in which humanity is progressing towards its collective maturity, characterized by the unity of the human race within one social order. In this period of transition, Bahá’ís are “encouraged to see in the revolutionary changes taking place in every sphere of life the interaction of two fundamental processes. One is destructive in nature, while the other is integrative; both serve to carry humanity, each in its own way, along the path leading towards its full maturity.”³¹ As humanity proceeds through its collective adolescence and into maturity, all of humanity is affected by these twin forces of

integration and disintegration simultaneously, and migration is but one of innumerable social processes affected by them.

In this light, the patterned relationships described above between industrialization and urbanization, or globalization and international migration, are not inevitable in any absolute sense. After all, the pursuit of industrialization and globalization have been highly political and ideological processes, often shaped by narrow economic conceptions about how “modernization” or “development” ought to be achieved. While these processes most likely cannot be reversed, they can evolve in new directions. “However much such conditions are the outcome of history, they do not have to define the future,” the Universal House of Justice writes, “and even if current approaches to economic life satisfied humanity's stage of adolescence, they are certainly inadequate for its dawning age of maturity. There is no justification for continuing to perpetuate structures, rules, and systems that manifestly fail to serve the interests of all peoples.”³² To fundamentally reshape patterns of migration or to alleviate the structural drivers of displacement, then, will require long-term approaches to social change that strive for the material and spiritual prosperity of all of humankind while recognizing our global interconnectedness.

Second, concerning the future: the Baha’i Writings envisage a future global society unified in all aspects of its political and economic life, where “the flow of goods and persons from place to place is vastly freer than anything which now obtains in the world as a whole.”³³ As Bahá’u’lláh wrote in 1882, “*The earth is but one country, and mankind its citizens.*” The task Bahá’u’lláh set before humanity is to recognize its fundamental oneness and transform its collective life in light of this reality. The principle of the oneness of humankind is, as Shoghi Effendi declared, “no mere outburst of ignorant emotionalism or an expression of vague and pious hope.” Its implications are deeper: “its message is applicable not only to the individual, but concerns itself primarily with the nature of those essential relationships that must bind all the states and nations as members of one human family. [...] It implies an organic change in the structure of present-day society, a change such as the world has not yet experienced.”³⁴ This perspective suggests that debates surrounding migration must go far beyond the question of whether countries should open or close their borders. Only when the earth functions as the common homeland of humankind can the full benefits of migration be realized and the drivers of displacement eliminated.

The magnitude of transformation the Bahá’i Writings envision could lead to a sense of paralysis in the face of the immediate and weighty challenges associated with migration: the needlessly lost lives of migrant men, women, and children seeking opportunities for a better life (in the Mediterranean Sea alone, more than 18,500 people have been recorded dead or missing since 2014)³⁵; the strength of anti-immigrant sentiment and the flourishing of prejudice and racism that eclipse any opportunity for meaningful public debate about migration; the reality that young generations in many societies around the world can no longer envision building a future where they are. These challenges cannot be addressed by a single country or movement, no matter how benevolently motivated.

And yet, alongside these manifestations of disintegration, promising signs of global solidarity and new forms of international cooperation provide hope that processes of integration are also gaining strength. At the local level, examples abound of individuals and communities organizing in ways that increasingly reflect the counsel ‘Abdu’l-Bahá gave to humanity over a century ago: “*Let them see no one as*

*their enemy, or as wishing them ill, but think of all humankind as their friends; regarding the alien as an intimate, the stranger as a companion, staying free of prejudice, drawing no lines.*³⁶ This is not only the case in Europe or North America, whose immigration dynamics receive the bulk of scholarly and public attention, but also in countries like Uganda, which in 2018, hosted the largest number of refugees after Turkey and Pakistan. While migration brings many social and economic challenges in a country where poverty levels remain high, many Ugandans are proud of their country's welcoming stance towards refugees. "They are our brothers and sisters" is a common sentiment.³⁷ One might also consider the way the inhabitants of small Mexican towns fed, clothed, and sheltered thousands of Central American migrants traveling North in 2018. "This is a poor town, but we still did all this," one city councilwoman in Pijijiapan expressed. Another woman serving food explained, "We know that we are all brothers. What God gives us, we should share."³⁸ Although the media and public discourse often suggest rising levels of social strain or xenophobia associated with migration around the world, examples of everyday kindnesses and solidarity, motivated by consciousness of our common humanity, are everywhere if one looks for them.

At the institutional level, an increasing number of spaces are also being created for national governments and international organizations to go beyond a focus on crisis management to consult on the positive potential of migration, and the need for greater policy coherence and global cooperation. The 2018 Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration is one such example. It is the first-ever United Nations global agreement on a common approach to international migration in all its dimensions, endorsed by 164 countries. Its objectives highlight the global cooperation required to alleviate the adverse structural conditions that hinder people from building and maintaining sustainable livelihoods in their countries of origin.³⁹ At the same time, many countries that express strong fears about immigration in public and political discourse also experience a strong economic demand for immigration as their native populations age. Nation-states and international organizations are considering new ways to facilitate migration that can realize migration's powerful potential for good, for migrants themselves as well as origin and destination societies.⁴⁰

Nevertheless, all actors involved recognize that such compacts and other promising developments will fail to achieve their aims without concerted effort on the part of individuals, communities, and institutions around the world to realize more profound transformations in the fabric of society and the relationships that govern it. This will require an approach to migration, development, and international cooperation that recognizes our common humanity and global interconnectedness and that the well-being of one place cannot be pursued in isolation from the well-being of the whole. This is the direction towards which the Bahá'í community and like-minded individuals and organizations are striving. Migration, then, is but one lens to better understand Baha'u'llah's injunction that, "*The well-being of mankind, its peace and security, are unattainable unless and until its unity is firmly established.*"⁴¹

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Notes

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