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**" MIGRATION, LABOUR MARKETS AND EMBEDDEDNESS:  
THE SOCIAL CONSTRAINTS OF THE INTERNATIONAL MIGRATION OF  
LABOUR"**

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MIGRATION, LABOUR MARKETS AND EMBEDDEDNESS:  
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**Introduction**

Among its aims, migration theories have to tackle factors that explain migration. These can be viewed either from an individualistic standpoint, in which an explanation is given as to why social agents decide to move, or from a structural standpoint, where claims are made as to why individuals are channelled through certain paths. In this paper, we will try to develop a different approach. Our aim is to establish reasons why migration does not occur. This view enjoys some empirical support: most of the populations – whether they are regional or national – are strongly attached to some geographical location. Each day they move within their personal life spaces, occasionally migrate within a small geographical area, less frequently go beyond the span of regional borders – and even less they cross international ones. The rate of migratory movements certainly varies according to contexts: some regions and countries are more “mobile” than others. But our point still stands: there are many reasons to explain why migrations do not take place,

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and these are complementary to (and may be more effective than) others that account for the causes of the movement. From the theoretical point of view, authors such as Hammar *et al.* (1997) and Faist (2000) have also recently developed this perspective.

In this essay, we will firstly examine the particularity of labour geographic movements faced with the mobility of other production factors, namely capital and land. Secondly, we will deal with the reasons that either stimulate or restrain labour mobility (economic migrations). We will introduce reasons of an economic and social nature, either from a "micro" or "macro" perspective. As for the reasons that constitute obstacles to migration, we will more clearly broaden the discussion to include policy factors. At this point, we will consider the relative improvement that the "social" factors represent in the face of other explanations for migration and non-migration, namely the economic and political ones. Thirdly, we will consider an additional argument: there is a need to segment the migrants, i.e., establish different "types" of migrants. When considering the skill factor in particular, we will argue – on the basis of our recent research (Peixoto, 1998, 1999a, 1999b and forthcoming) - that the constraints to mobility apply not only to the low and medium skilled migrants but to highly skilled migrants as well. Finally, we will conclude by reviewing the main trends focussed in the paper and the possibilities of future change.

### **Labour and the Mobility of Production Factors**

Labour is one of the less mobile economic variables. This is a widespread belief amongst theories involving the spatial mobility of economic factors. However, its meaning is not perhaps always understood. Let us start by comparing the spatial mobility of two other factors of production, namely capital and land. Capital is certainly the most mobile factor. Even if we ignore the current globalisation of financial markets, it is to be acknowledged that, for a long time,

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capital has stood out on its own, as being highly mobile within and between nations. Land is not mobile at all. The symbolic status of this factor is partly explained by its intrinsic condition. As it is geographically rigid, it may be regarded as a symbol of attachment to a "homeland", whose "price" is not the result of its market value, but often is a symbolic one. For that reason its economic value is often difficult to quantify, and it varies from context to context (in space and/or in time); sometimes, it is even a good that "has no price". Its contrast with capital is enormous: "capital has no homeland" - such was the admission in the classical theories of the social sciences, namely by Marx. Instead, land has - or is -, by definition, a homeland. The first - capital - may trace its path in a social vacuum, linking agents in the most disparate contexts. The second has stories (and biographies) to tell, and represents a link which is far more than "economic". Increasingly, land becomes marketable, as all post-agrarian societies are fully aware. However, it is an intrinsically different factor of production compared to capital.

Labour seems to be positioned somewhere between capital and land. As for geographical attachment, it is not so mobile as capital, and is less rigid than land. It is certainly more difficult to move men - or women - than capital. The latter can be transferred whenever an economic opportunity arises, and whenever the regulations in force permit it (whether they be internal to a nation or, in a broader context, external ones). Even in the presence of opportunity and permission, the movement of labour remains problematic - as any would-be migrant can attest. The personal - and family - costs of disruption, be they economic, social or cultural, always create constraints to geographical movement. This explains why some movements do not occur, even when circumstances are favourable to their manifestation.

This discussion may be particularly relevant in the current world context. When we transcend the nation-state realm of economic operations, we enter the "globalisation" age (or some other "international" notion), whose range of potential mobility is comparatively vast. We must admit that the mobility of

economic factors has increased dramatically over the last few decades. To a certain extent, this is an unquestionable assumption. The overall circulation of goods and services (i.e., international trade, an indicator of economic inter-linkage) has reached unprecedented levels. The world circulation of capital shares a similar status – although its rapid increase is far more timid than that of goods and services. Nevertheless, the increase in foreign investment and financial flows is reaching levels that permit one to talk of the “global age”. The “world economy” is not a recent occurrence. But only at the close of the second millennium does a veritable “world-level” circulation of economic factors seem to have been reached (Dicken, 1992).

It is difficult to quantify and compare different rates of mobility of the factors of production. As for capital, we attempt to evaluate capital assets in a given (national) economy, and compare it with the volume of assets transferred to – or emanating from – a different country. It is easy to recognise the fact that, contrary to enthusiastic forecasts, the resulting figures are not overwhelming. Most of the capital flows in the (national) economies remain “internal”, and only a small (though rapidly increasing) fraction is “international”. The economic liberalisation of capital circulation, i.e., the removal of national regulations concerning movements of capital, explains its increasing level – although still low, in terms of quantitative volume. Its rate is certainly lower than that of commodity flows in increasingly “open” economies, whose volumes of imports and exports account for a growing share of national production and consumption.

A similar argument can be put forward for labour mobility. Although “migration rates” are complex in construction, due to the difficulties of measuring flows and questions concerning the “risk” population to be considered (the home or the host population), some effort can be made in this direction. One may consider that – taking international flows alone - we are currently entering an “age of migration” (Castles and Miller, 1993). I.e., as opposed to some assumptions, which admit that the movements of labour are being increasingly

restrained, some overall growth may be registered. It is true that the “golden age” of migration is probably over. This includes the colonisation period (the almost “free” movement of labour to different continents in the late XIXth and early XXth century) and the post-Second World War period (with vast “legal” migrations towards Europe, the so-called “gastarbeiter” – temporary workers - period). However, after an episodic contraction in the 1970s, international migrations resumed, assuming different statuses (irregular or temporary ones) and different routes (non-European migrations). Appleyard (1991) has endeavoured to quantify these movements. However huge they are – Appleyard states that almost 80 million migrants could be found every year, in the early 1990s -, its volume is incredibly modest compared to the world population. Whether we compare the volume of migrants with that of individual home or host countries (mainly the more populated ones) or with the overall world population (6 billion inhabitants), we can hardly talk of a “world on the move” (see also Faist, 2000). From another perspective, we can acknowledge that most labour markets remain strongly “national” in their make-up, including those of the most developed (and immigrant-attractive) countries.

Our discussion concerns the particularity of labour markets compared to other types of economic markets. Our main focus rests on the potential and actual geographic mobility of this type of economic factor - labour. If it were a “pure” economic factor – and none perhaps is, as recent economic sociology has clearly stated (Smelser and Swedberg, 1994) -, a socially “neutral” fluidity could be implied. But, instead, we find clear “embeddedness” factors in these markets (see Granovetter, 1985 and 1992, and Tilly and Tilly, 1994). In this sense, we wish to argue that a broad perspective is also called for in migration studies. Clearly, it is not individuals and their rational decisions that are the only locus of migration facts. We must account for the different involvement of social factors, cultural habits and state regulations. A clear mix of “micro” and “macro” variables must therefore be found, since the structural constraints cannot be acknowledged without a comprehensive approach to individual behaviour (and rationality). Contrary to certain assumptions in migration theories, we shall

maintain that the role of state regulations is weaker than is sometimes argued. It is its cross-referencing with other variables – including social ones - that can explain both the acceptance and the obstacles to the flows.

We must also stress that this area – labour migration issues – is often neglected in economic sociology, a promising theoretical field for the understanding of the phenomenon (see Smelser and Swedberg, 1994, for an example). Whilst labour markets have a consensual location in this domain, such is not the case with the migration theme – whether we consider “economic” or “non-economic” flows. We may agree that this largely results from the dispersed status of economic sociology, compared to other more or less established sub-disciplinary areas of sociology. A first important exception to the “exclusion” of migration issues from the field may be found in the work of Martinelli and Smelser (1990 - see Öncü, 1990). Another are episodic references made by authors that use an economic sociology’ perspective on the labour markets (see Tilly and Tilly, 1994). However, more systematically, it is the seminal work of Portes (see 1995a and 1995b, for a synthesis) that has tried to relate these areas of concern. One of our aims is to reintroduce the migration theme in the current debates, by availing ourselves of Portes’ (and others’) contributions, besides turning the focus to other neglected areas – all migration flows (not only immigration, as in Portes), the labour market and the skills variable.

### **The Reasons for Migration and Low Mobility**

The relationship between migrations and labour markets is not a simple one. Generally, we can regard as economic or labour migrations those movements targeted to some specific positions in the labour market that differ from the initial ones, whenever this implies a geographical displacement of the worker. If we are dealing with an individual movement within the same local labour market, we may talk of social (or professional) mobility, but rarely of migration. If we are dealing with a movement that involves the crossing of a geographical



frontier, whether a national or an international one, we are probably facing a change in labour market. In this case, an economic migration will be taking place. Clearly, it is not easy to demarcate “frontiers” in the case of labour markets. Besides this, the geographical “borders” are sometimes useless as a means of individualising markets. If we add the fact that there are multiple types of migration, including both long-term and temporary ones, one cannot fail to acknowledge that this phenomenon is difficult to evaluate.

The factors that may explain either the mobility or the non-mobility – in geographic terms - of social agents can be found in a wide array of domains. They are valid for the case of “economic” and also to “non-economic” migrants. A synopsis of the contributions of different migration theories in this field – causes for migration - can be found in another work by the author (Peixoto, 1998: 39-68; for a different kind of approach, see Massey *et al.*, 1993). There, we argued that available theories of migration could be distinguished between those presenting an “individualistic” (or micro) perspective of social action, and those displaying a “holistic” (or macro) perspective. Furthermore, we distinguished between those focussing on the “economic” empirical domain (labour markets, economic structures...) and those more related to “social” areas (including social, cultural and political variables). The outcome was a matrix, presented in *Table 1*. There, we can follow the different available explanations for migration, by considering the perspective of social action and that of the empirical domain.

The most common explanations for migration – namely for the labour flows – are those based either on a push-pull or a segmented perspective of the labour market. The push-pull analysis is the more popular one, underlying the mainstream economic approaches in this field. The (almost common sense) idea is that migration occurs whenever there is an imbalance of incomes or employment. Typically, regions with low incomes and high unemployment may potentially face severe outflows directed to regions with higher incomes and lower unemployment. This theoretical framework, although simple and easily

recognisable in the day-to-day economic life, is often confronted with a more “structural” approach, that of the segmented labour markets (Piore, 1979). The idea is that, more than an “individualised” explanatory framework - i.e., a vision that instils migratory decisions in the minds of (rational) migrants -, a structural imbalance often occurs, attracting migrants to “secondary” locations in host labour markets. If we couple this latter theory with the world systems theory – including the international division of labour – or the migratory systems approach (Kritz *et al.*, 1992), we have reasons to believe that a structural explanation is relevant. The collective “paths” for migration are therefore created by the world economy, following the imbalances of power and wealth occurring worldwide.

**Table 1**  
**Migration Theories – A Framework for the Different Explanations of Migration**

		Empirical Domain	
		<i>Economy</i>	<i>Society</i>
Perspective on Social Action	<i>Individualistic (Micro)</i>	Rational Actors / Push-Pull Theories (Income and Employment in the Labour Markets) / Investment in Human Capital	Life Cycle / Career / Social Mobility / Non-Rational Action
	<i>Holistic (Macro)</i>	Segmented Labour Markets / Flexibilisation (Post-Fordism) / Spatial Systems / World Systems / Migratory Systems	Family / Institutions / Organisations (Firm, Non-firm) / Migratory Networks / Ethnic Enclaves / Norms and Images

Source: Peixoto, 1998: 48

The labour markets’ explanations have shared a common perspective in stressing the role of economic factors, although they do differ in their angle of analysis, insofar as they are either a more individualistic or a more structural

approach. However, both fail to embrace other kinds of determinants. Again, these may be considered from the “micro” or “macro” standpoint. To postulate but a few simpler ones, we may acknowledge that (economic) migration seldom occurs if upward social mobility is not the aim. The analysis of social mobility – and social stratification – can (again) be juxtaposed through a more “individualistic” or “holistic” division, but it always supposes that there must be a sense of social “improvement”. The social construction of the hierarchic scales cannot be reduced to a picture of wages and employment – which points to an impoverishment of the “economic” explanations. From another point of view, the importance of migrants’ networks is decisive in explaining actual flows – namely their durable renewal –, much more so than an “atomised” vision can do.

The reasons why migration may not occur encompass a similar broad theoretical horizon. Firstly, from the “economic” perspective, we can admit that different types of “imbalances” are not verified, i.e., differences in wages and employment or a structural asymmetry are missing. Thus, there is no clear “push-pull” or “path” effect for an economic migration to occur. Whenever migrations fail to take place in the presence of an economic rationale for moving, further obstacles must be noted. Secondly, migration does always constitute a “risk” for the individual. Even an “individualistic” economic framework can accept the fact that, in the presence of bounded rationality, it is always difficult to “measure” the gains and benefits from migration and, therefore, to ascertain the net advantages of moving. (This is not a novelty in the mainstream economic analysis: for instance, to consider migration as an “investment” in human capital suggests risks common to all other types of investments.)

Thirdly, social and cultural differences between populations also create constraints to mobility. Reluctance to migrate stems from the individual’s day-to-day attachments (derived from routine), social ties and symbolic ones. These links include a set of routines and habits, family life, social status, values and

norms. Ensemble, they are responsible for a high volume of social and cultural capital, which may constitute a decisive resource in several life circumstances and create a strong inertia towards movements (Faist, 2000). The social and cultural links to a given locale are much more difficult to quantify than the economic ones. These ties explain not only the “strength” that bonds individuals to a given territory, but also the difficulties they have when crossing geographical and social frontiers – since they are removed of those resources.

Looking in detail to the “social” obstacles in the host society, the most commonly cited variable is language: the poor knowledge of the host country language leads to particular difficulties the migrants have in adapting. Their chances of performing well in the workplace and, more clearly, of achieving upward social mobility, are strongly conditioned by this variable. To this we must add overall social integration in the host society. Even if we consider that an existence in “enclaves” facilitates adaptation and, sometimes, the migratory investment return, we must recognise that total incorporation in the host society and absolute completion of the upward mobility path are conditioned. Here we must, naturally, include a certain degree of internalisation of the host society’s values and norms. These arguments must be weighted with the possibility that different modes of incorporation may exist. Broadly speaking, “assimilationism” and “pluralism” are two acceptable - and polar - modes of integration in a society, and only the first imposes homogeneity. Nonetheless, we may argue that particular frictions exist for the ill-assimilated migrants. This is due to the more restricted domain of social and cultural capital and to the lack of information, when compared to that of the “indigenous” population.

Fourthly, migrants are confronted by institutional barriers, which are erected in the field of the labour market. These obstacles are of a varied kind, and have been treated by various “institutionalist” approaches to the phenomenon. Among others, the social construction of professions is a first “national” constraint. As Boltanski (1982) argued, in the case of “cadres”, completion of a “professional” entity - including a name, specific functions, adequate

credentials, public legitimacy and a professional association – is a lengthy, conflicting process. On the whole it usually takes place within the national framework. Almost by definition, a (national) professional corpus acts in a corporative way, defending its members either from other national professional groups or, when needed, from comparable international ones. The social nature of skills and credentials - either professional or academic - is another related barrier. Here, what we find is the development of skills and their formal recognition. This happens as much within a strict “technical” framework as in the everyday working and social life. Consequently, the process of recognising credentials and diplomas is always complex, since what is involved are not only “technical” (non social) issues, but also contextual frameworks (Marsden, 1992). Finally, the state regulations governing the labour market are often national-specific (when they are not national-protective), and require a prolonged experience in the country – or even citizenship – to acquire greater awareness and the capacity to adapt.

Finally, political resistance to mobility is a clear obstacle to migration. It is the one most often emphasised by public opinion when talking about international migration flows. It is true that the “political” factor is the distinctive mark of international migrations, when compared to internal migrations flows (Zolberg, 1981). It is the nation-state regulations that have created an “artificial” barrier to labour movements. Such regulations seldom existed before. All policies directly concerning migration, such as emigration and immigration regulations (quotas or other inflow mechanisms) and policies for migrant integration (housing, welfare, etc.) belong to this realm. Moreover, attention must also be drawn to all policies that indirectly concern migrations. Here we must mention more specific policies, such as those concerning credential recognition, and the broader ones, such as citizenship policies. As is fairly well known, migration is currently an area that strenuously resists globalisation, insofar as “national” regulations remain strong in this field (Morris, 1997). In a sense, the policy factor’s strength is clear. Since the 70s, practically no country in the world willingly accepts large amounts of foreign workers. Instead, they all impose

stringent constraints to entry. It is not difficult to see that the volume of world migrations could be larger if political barriers were not erected.

In considering this point, we would like to argue that the relative potential of the different explanations is not the same. This does not mean that some explanations are consistently “better” than others. Instead, we think that an eclectic approach is called for when dealing with migration. I.e., an appropriate choice of theoretical models depends on the specific contexts (Peixoto, 1998). The advantages and disadvantages of the different frameworks must therefore be discussed, and confronted with the specific circumstances in order to make an adequate decision. From this stance, the “economic” and “political” explanations seem very powerful, but also lacking in some basic knowledge of the phenomena. The economic explanation has often been confronted with its vulnerability: if everything occurred as the push-pull or the segmented labour market theories predict, the actual migrations would be easy to foresee and - in a sense – be socially amorphous (in following the appropriate economic paths). Instead, we encounter apparent paradoxes: non-migration, when economic differentials in fact exist, and specific channels linking “linguistic” or culturally homogeneous areas, indifferent to blind economic differentials.

The political explanations have been less often criticised. It is true that they too wield considerable power when it comes to explaining migrations - or the absence of them. But we may feel that it is perhaps the (once again political) will to remove these kinds of obstacles that leads certain authors to sometimes over-emphasise its effects. In fact, the actual outcomes of policy regulations very often seem remote from the intended consequences. On the one hand, the simultaneity of stringent regulations and abundant (irregular) migration has very often been identified. This means that, even when state policies deem migrations to be undesirable, migrants continue to come, defying the political fences and finding a way of surreptitiously entering the labour markets. A more cynical approach suggests that this apparent paradox is, on the contrary, a very transparent decision. The existence of stop policies leads to increased migrant

vulnerability. This weakness perfectly fits the post-fordist (or, in another sense, the secondary labour market's) need for fragile and flexible manpower. Hence, the swing between regularisation policies and the continuous presence of informal situations. On the other hand, the political opening-up of borders to migrants (but rarely of citizenship rights) is often paralleled by deeply rigid labour movements. This has systematically happened with the European Union. Ever since enlargement towards the more peripheral countries, the fear of mass migrations has been felt. Recurrently - the last episode being the accession of Portugal and Spain in 1986 - this form of migration did not occur, and the "transitory" barriers proved to be useless (Penninx and Muus, 1989; Ardittis, 1990). In brief, official policies towards migration are relatively ineffective: we often find sizeable migrations devoid of political consent and modest flows in the presence of political acceptance.

The "social" explanations seem more adaptable - perhaps because they are not systematically tied to "individualistic" approaches, as happens in the push-pull model, or to "holistic" ones, as in the segmented labour market or certain policy approaches. As Granovetter (1985) puts it, the limits of an under-socialised perspective of human action are as evident as those of an over-socialised one. It is the combination of both perspectives, and its association to concrete social relations (space and time episodes) that calls for specific theories. It is in this sense that we may grant that labour markets fit the embeddedness hypothesis well (see Granovetter, 1992). In other words, this important feature of economic action - labour mobility - seems to be embedded in social relations. Using Granovetter's words, these economic flows take place in a context of concrete and ongoing social relations. Labour markets appear, therefore, to be highly "social" in nature, adapting in a variable way to different internal and external contexts. Should one take the spatial mobility of labour factor - i.e., economic migrations -, the social character of this event appears to be clearer. The "human" factor cannot be moved whenever there is an "economic" appeal, nor can it be halted whenever a "political" stop is exerted. It is the concrete social agents that, rationally or less rationally, decide whether to move or to

stay, in the presence of structural constraints that may attain a reflective status or else remain invisible to them (Giddens, 1986).

### **Typologies and Skill Level: the Case of Highly Skilled Migration**

Any observer of migrations knows that it is often useless to speak of a “general” or abstract migrant. Instead, it is essential to draw some kind of typology, in order to grasp the different nuances and features present in the act of moving. The number of migration typologies is huge. We can find types ranging from abstract and systematic classifications (applicable to every space and time context) to concrete descriptions of actual movements. There are also simple classifications, with a very restricted number of categories, extending to highly discriminated classifications. Finally, we find classifications based on simple criteria, ranging to types created on the basis of multiple variables. An important analysis derived from the building of migration types is that of migration selectivity, or migration differentials. What has been observed, in this area, are the variables that most strongly influence the ability to move - or the propensity to migrate. From such a study, one can conclude that some categories of population are far more mobile than others, i.e., there are some recurrent types of migrants. The only regularity that has been systematically found to date in this area is the variation of migration according to age. Thus, we can expect to find a majority of migrants in their young adult ages. Besides this variable, some observations demonstrate that other factors often influence migrations, though there are significant exceptions to the rule.

Among the more relevant factors – besides age – to account for migration, we find the skill level. Most analysts agree that, in relative terms, the more highly skilled fraction of the labour force is more mobile than the lower skilled one. The variation of mobility with skills can be adequately explained. It firstly depends on the relative scarcity or abundance of the demand and supply of specific skills. Generally speaking, it is expected that low skills are widespread, and that it is comparatively more difficult to find adequate professionals with



medium or high levels of skills. Given the supply and demand mechanism, one may expect a relative major pressure on skilled labour to move, both within the same labour market (professional mobility) and between different labour markets (migrations). This also results from the amount of information the agents have and their ability to “monitor” the more relevant variables. In general, the higher skilled elements are better informed as regards the conditions to move, i.e., both the anticipated costs and returns. From those arguments, we may conclude that the propensity of the highly skilled labour to move is generally greater than that of the lower skilled – although in absolute quantitative terms it is usually the reverse that occurs. These are not universal assertions: as is often stated, the amount of lowly skilled moving labour is enormous, and sometimes its rates are considerable. It can, however, be stressed that, proportionally speaking, they often display a lesser mobility compared to the highly skilled.

We can go further, and, within migrants at the same skill level, distinguish some significant categories. It has been argued in previous studies that, considering the institutional framework of migration, there lies an important distinction. If we analyse the movements occurring “individually” or, on the other hand, within the framework of an organisation (a firm or a governmental organisation, for instance), we expect the movements taking place along the organisational path – i.e., in the internal labour markets – to share a distinctive trait (Salt, 1983/84; Salt and Findlay, 1989). In *Table 2* we have a map of the possible distinctions. Bearing in mind that firms and other non-firm organisations relocate, in the main, their rarest skills – whenever they are needed in another location and no such adequate supply is forthcoming -, we applied the “institutional” criteria only to the highly skilled elements. In contemporary economies, it is expected that migrations taking place within a firm are (relatively speaking) the largest among the various organisational frameworks – for reasons that will be shown below. In the specific case of the highly skilled, we are comparing the movements of, say, an expatriate working

for a transnational corporation and the typical brain drain (for more on this topic, see Peixoto, 1998, 1999a, 1999b and forthcoming).

**Table 2**  
**Typology of Migrants by Level of Skill and Organisational Framework**

<i>Skill Level</i>	<i>Framework of migration</i>	<i>Type of Organisation</i>	<i>Duration</i>
Low and medium skilled migrants	Mostly individual		
Highly skilled migrants	Individual ( <i>brain drain</i> )		
	Organisational	Firm ( <i>multi-regional and transnational corporations</i> )	Long/medium-term ( <i>expatriations / assignments</i> )
			Short/medium-term ( <i>business travels</i> )
		Non-firm ( <i>State and non-profit-making organisations/NGOs</i> )	

Source: adapted from Peixoto, 1999a

The potential fluidity of highly skilled labour and, particularly, that which moves within the framework of an international firm, is due to a number of reasons (some of the following points are taken from a previous paper by the author: Peixoto, 1999a). Firstly, these migrants are well received in different societies, either from the policy or the public opinion perspective. This happens because they accompany the flows of international capital and foreign investment; they provide the skills missing at local level; and, socially, they are non-problematic. Secondly, they display an excellent knowledge of migratory variables, namely income conditions at home and abroad (wages and other complementary benefits) and opportunities of promotion. Thirdly, their rupture with the original workplace is minimal: they remain in the same firm (and, sometimes, job), they have the possibility of returning, and they are situated in a similar firm and task environment. Fourthly, the fact that they speak a common language, as a rule

English – an internationally recognised means of communication for this skill level -, cushions their dislocations. Fifthly, the movement has institutional support, in the form of organisational careers, relocation packages and mobility incentives. Sixthly, these migrants are often exempt from the institutional barriers designed to deter individual migrants – even the skilled ones -, including procedures regarding the recognition of skills and diplomas. Finally, they often live in separate urban settings (quasi-enclaves) and enjoy a wide array of services that support their integration (see, for these points, Peixoto, 1998 and 1999b).

It should thus be expected that the skilled migrants moving within their international organisational company framework be almost perfectly mobile. On the macro side, given the need that firms have to allocate resources, those individuals should obtain optimum conditions when it comes to migrating. The economic advantage of moving skilled resources should be rewarded insofar as their profitability would be higher (and it is high in this case). On the micro side, by gaining sufficient rewards, and given the smoothness of their dislocation, the reluctance of such individuals to migrate could be minimal. In fact, they could master their environment optimally, by taking rational decisions, minimising the risks and negotiating the conditions of their movement. In this sense, they are not only undergoing structural “pulls” or “pushes”, like other less (or sometimes equally highly) skilled migrants, but they can be reflective – as the prototype of the rational migrant is - and can master their migratory condition. As a result, the fluidity of these highly skilled agents could, to some extent, be likened to that of capital or commodities. Their situation would, at least, be markedly different from that of traditional mass labour flows or even some brain drain movements. In these, the economic need to move human resources also exists (if we are referring to real “economic migration”, and not genuine refugee flows); however, vulnerability to the market, the risks of moving and the friction regarding mobility are greater than among the organisational elite migrants.

However, we intend to argue that, even for these higher skilled elements of the labour force, significant inertia, conducive to immobility, remains. Thus, they too are no exception to the “low mobility rule” (for social reasons) that we emphasise in this paper. In reality, notwithstanding both the necessity felt by transnational firms to allocate skilled human resources and their privileged situation, the number of highly skilled migrants moving within the organisational structure of transnational corporations remains exceedingly low. The “migrant” staff in foreign countries remains small, in absolute and relative terms, and the proportion of “national” staff continues to prevail in all national branches (Marsden, 1992). Nowadays, the sharper growth of skilled flows in international economies seems to happen mainly in the case of short-term movements – business travels -, as demonstrated by data from statistical surveys and by the recent growth of air travel (Salt and Ford, 1993). This situation is best encompassed by the theoretical notion of “circulation” than that of “migration”.

The reasons for low mobility – or, from another perspective, the obstacles to migration - of highly skilled labour are various. Firstly, they are of an economic and financial nature. In fact, the costs of these movements are very high. They result from the income levels of the mobile group and the incentives to its mobility (rises in income, special packages, etc.). Secondly, the social nature of the work introduces some serious obstacles to top-level mobility. This is tantamount to saying that the framework of internal and external labour markets, the development of professionalism and direct professional performance - always happen in the context of particular social relationships. Thirdly, the existence of national career patterns creates further friction to mobility. We must admit that, despite the tendency to create an international internal labour market in a given company, thus uniting the entire labour force in a common international space, a strong national logic continues to exist. Fourthly, we should mention individual and family resistance to mobility. On the one hand, the individuals’ position in the life cycle implies particular constraints. On the other hand, instances of specific family resistance also occur. In general,

the fact that family migration involves a multiplication of individual calculus (gains and costs, risk evaluation) causes migration of married individuals (mainly in dual-career households) to be problematic, with or without children. Fifthly, we must add the existence of political and juridical obstacles. Even when a highly skilled migrant has easy access to a "legal" status, the respective broad citizenship condition may, to some extent, involve exclusion - if, for instance, the right to acquire nationality or the right to vote (in national or other elections) is not granted.

### **Final Considerations**

The main point focused in this paper is that labour is a particular category of the production factors, and that its mobility is constrained by variables uncommon to others. In a general sense, it may suffice to say that labour is the only "human" factor, i.e., the one whose mobility automatically entails the displacement of persons. In this paper, what we have seen is, firstly, evidence in support of the idea of this low mobility. Despite the abundance of migrants nowadays, both in the literature – which tells about an "age of migration" - and public opinion, the truth is that migrants remain a very small fraction of overall populations. Comparison of demographic volumes of home and host countries and the actual volume of migrations often leads to very low rates of migration. In terms of total world population, migration is a disappointing feature, particularly if we believe in any "global" trend. The vast majority of the world population remains fiercely local – although the noise one more often hears is that of the movers.

Secondly, we examined the factors that can lead to migration or to spatial rigidity. Some types of factors display very powerful arguments. On the "moving" side, there are "micro" and "macro" reasons, "economic" and "social" motives that apparently push and pull people from and towards different regions. Economic imbalances, social inequalities, are both felt at individual level besides acting at structural level. For different reasons, there are many

motives that lead people to change their place of residence. This is amazingly true: as Petersen (1958) once argued, a world where hardly anyone dies in the same place as he/she was born cannot be termed as “sedentary”. However, equally powerful motives lead to resistance to moving or, at the most, to short displacements (residential mobility and regional migration). These reasons are again micro and macro, economic and others. Clearly, the political factor does play a role in this latter area, since widespread resistance to migration is currently felt at world level. In sum, the “risks” involved in moving, bounded rationality, the cosiness of local habits, life space’ ties, failure to adapt to host regions, multiplication of the decision-making units (individuals versus families) – all lead to a strong spatial inertia and an immobility trend.

The main argument of our paper is that, on balance, the tendency is still for quietude. This is mainly explained by “social” factors, rather than factors of an economic or political nature. The economy accounts for movements rather than stability – but the former are less frequent than the latter. Policy effects are sometimes puzzling: unexpected outcomes often arise as compared to the “intended” consequences. A social explanation of labour mobility – i.e., of economic migration – must therefore require a flexible combination of under- and over-socialised accounts of human action. In each specific context, we must find different sorts of reasons to explain both migration and, mostly, rigidity to movement. The overall social ties of the social actors, including the directly “economic” ones (labour position) and the more “social” ones, must be emphasised. The social nature of work, the institutional framework of economies and labour markets, the social ties of agents (day-to-day life, family...) – explain the social embeddedness of labour. What should be an “economic” movement, that of a particular production factor (labour), is therefore a social phenomenon, carrying the irregularities (and sometimes irrationalities) common herein.

Examination of a skill-based typology was our last argument. In separating low from highly skilled agents and, within the latter, the “individual” and

“organisational” ones, different propensities to move are expected. I.e., we can find that the tendency toward spatial rigidity is typical of some segments of the labour force and less stringent in others. The most mobile portion of the labour force seems, theoretically, to be the highly skilled organisational one. Here, everything is favourable to moving: prior knowledge of incomes and work conditions, incentives to move, a generous policy and public opinion regarding its movements, a high status condition, residential and social “enclaves” in the host countries (providing low degrees of rupture with the original social space). However, again, even at the level of these highly skilled professionals, international space remains too hazardous for migrations. Rather than constituting a neutral or geometrical place for movements, as happens with capital flows, the space for human flows still remains too imperfect (we might say: too social) for a purely rational economic circulation of factors.

The possibilities of change are numerous – though, perhaps, limited. The economic basis for a vast circulation of labour already seems to exist. The huge increase in international commerce and foreign investment is creating the conditions for a broad inter-linking of economic space. Networks of firms, joint programmes, multinational initiatives – all call for an increasing amount of labour movement. The opposing trend of firms to set up business wherever there is appropriate labour (the delocalisation of transnational corporations towards developing countries, involving a fall in labour movements - it is capital, not labour, that moves) is a first negation of the argument. As a result, it may be acknowledged that, in the main, only selected fringes of the labour force (the most highly skilled) will be invited to move (although a low skilled flow towards the unprotected parts of the labour markets will always be expectable). In social terms, some factors contributing to movement also arose. These include the improved worldwide circulation of information and communication, contributing to a better knowledge of potential destinations; the expansion of specific “mobility cultures”, inciting migration in the minds of the still quiet members of a community; and the creation of international social relationships – such as the ones of transnational communities -, installing a

social support for movement (Faist, 2000). However, in general terms, it will be only a vaster "homogenisation" that will, in the future, prevent the frictions that continue to beset migrant labour. This should imply less political national closures, less local institutional buildings, less local career ladders and less local and national languages and norms. This kind of world is not to be expected in the foreseeable 3<sup>rd</sup> millennium –at the best, it may only materialise in the 4<sup>th</sup>.



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## **Abstract**

It is a widely known phenomenon that labour is one of the less mobile factors of production. As opposed to capital, the main geographical tendency of this factor is that of inertia. Even when international trends are economically dominant, such as the constitution of world economies or the present globalisation, the result is an intense circulation of capital (and, naturally, goods and services) and, in contrast, a sharp stability of local (and national) labour forces. Social and cultural differences among populations, the ever-present risks of migration and political resistance to mobility are the most cited reasons for the inertia of labour movements. These types of obstacles boldly contrast with the powerful forces, either from the macro (economies) or micro (individuals) side, which promote migration. Such forces include the widespread inequalities of income, job opportunities and chances of social mobility. Indeed, labour markets appear to be highly "social" in nature and react in a complex way to their multiple determinants. As a result, social ties often prevent the mobility of the human factor and explain the rigidity to migrations. The aim of this paper is to list the determinants of migration and immobility, to examine their particular strengths and to discuss the possible ways in which this spatial inertia is changing.