

Igloos in Borneo:
Variation and Conceptualization in
Research on Foreign Workers

In:

*Research Methods Choices in Interdisciplinary Contexts:
War Stories of New Scholars*

edited by

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New York: Social Science Research Council, 2007

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Anyone who has completed a big research project know that success requires not only hard work and good decisions but a bit of serendipity as well. * I could write a convincing account of my research on international labor migration in which I made sensible decisions at every stage, so that the results flowed like clear water. It would read like a good grant proposal, and it would describe the past just as well (or, rather, just as poorly) as a typical grant proposal describes how a project actually turns out.

But even if serendipity accounts for some of my research trajectory, it is nonetheless true that key decisions regarding research methods were influential in leading me to the findings and arguments I have made. The most important of these decisions had to do with research design and, in particular, the decision to study Japan as a “negative case” of labor migration. This strategy was reinforced by a second: to consider closely the conceptualization of “foreign workers,” instead of being content with the definition implicit in the data commonly used to measure their presence in receiving countries. The research design, in which I gave explicit attention to variation in wealthy countries’ use of foreign labor, was novel (as far as I am aware), and in retrospect it is no great surprise to me that it led to an innovative explanation for labor migration. The experience has been salutary: I now routinely look for opportunities for similar twists in relation to existing research, and I also make considerations of this sort a central feature of my teaching.

To place what follows in context: my major research project in recent years was to explain why Israel has imported large numbers of foreign workers while Japan has not (and to suggest a more general explanation for why some countries experience significant labor

* Support for this research was provide by the Social Science Research Council (International Migration Program), with funds from the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, and by the Nuffield Foundation.

immigration while others do not). Japan faced labor shortages in the early 1970s and late 1980s/early 1990s, but, unlike many other advanced capitalist economies, it resolved those shortages in ways that did not involve large-scale recourse to low-wage foreign labor, despite pressures from employers. In Israel, on the other hand, employers' demands in the mid-1990s led to an opening of the floodgates, so that by the late 1990s low-wage foreign workers had come to constitute approximately ten percent of the labor force. When viewed from the perspectives of common migration theories, these contrasting paths suggested a puzzle: Israel and Japan were not very different in the ways that mattered according to these theories, so that it was not clear why the outcomes would be so different.

To explain the divergence, I argued that labor migration flows reach significant dimensions when the receiving country state is unable to constrain rent-seeking behavior on the part of private sector (employer) interests. There are alternative solutions for addressing labor shortages (such as increased investment to achieve higher labor productivity), but those solutions require inducing employers to make difficult choices and to forego some of their profits. Importing foreign workers is the path of least resistance, the cheap and easy solution from employers' point of view – though from other points of view importing labor carries many long-term costs. But receiving country governments can frustrate this preference only if they work from a position of strength *vis-à-vis* capital and are therefore able to impose a mode of economic development that transcends a pure market logic (as in Japan). When the state is relatively weak – when, in particular, policy making authority is held primarily by politicians instead of civil servants – it is much harder to resist pressures from employers for access to foreign workers; these pressures are all the more successful when the state is unable to provide an alternative solution to labor shortages (as in Israel).

Whether a country imports low-skilled labor, then, depends heavily on state policy making processes, concerning not only immigration policy but economic governance more generally.

Variation and Negative Cases

Scholars have studied migration mainly by investigating cases where migration has in fact occurred. At first glance, this is an entirely sensible approach. Why should migration scholars spend valuable time and resources looking at, say, Finland when Finland has few immigrants? The problem is that this approach overlooks a core principle of research methods: the importance of making *variation* the main focus of one's explanations (King et al. 1994). To the extent that migration scholars study only immigration countries, they overlook an important dimension of variation in relation to their central concern.

My primary research interest emerged from the initiation of foreign labor flows to Israel that occurred in the mid-1990s. The evolution of this interest was almost entirely serendipitous. I went to Israel in 1994 to conduct research on a completely different topic. This project fell apart almost immediately after I arrived: despite having received a nice grant from an institution that will remain nameless, my understanding of the situation I wanted to study was fundamentally flawed. I floundered for months – until another sociologist mentioned to me in passing that Israel had begun importing tens of thousands of workers from Romania and Thailand (among other places). I had written a master's thesis on Palestinian workers employed in Israel (who, it seemed, were being replaced), and so I instantly had a new project.

Learning about foreign workers in Israel was easy: the newspapers were full of stories, and interviewees were willing to talk. But my sociology methods courses at Wisconsin¹ had prepared me to ask: how was I going to have a foundation that would enable me to say something about labor migration more generally? At the very least, I needed another case.

This is where the counsel I had received about paying attention to variation became important. To account for the initiation of labor migration flows to Israel, I would have to offer an argument that did two things. Obviously, it would have to work not only for Israel but for other countries with similar experiences. But it would also have to explain what made Israel (and other positive cases) *different* from countries that had refrained from importing significant numbers of foreign workers. While it would have been desirable to work with variation via a continuous measure (percent of foreign workers in the labor force) and to study the entire range of cases, a useful (and more readily achievable) first step was to work with a conceptual dichotomy that highlights the fact that some wealthy countries have not used significant numbers of foreign workers.

The decision, then, was to include Japan as a contrasting case and to search for an explanation that emphasized factors that distinguished between Israel and Japan (and, I would hope, between positive and negative cases more generally).

Migration researchers had of course written quite a lot about migration to Japan. But they usually set for themselves the task of explaining why there were increasing numbers of

¹ Thanks are due to Charles Halaby, Jess Gilbert, Ann Orloff, and, in a more general way, to Erik Olin Wright.

foreign workers in Japan.² This question made sense in its own terms: Japan had mostly refrained from importing workers during the period when most other wealthy capitalist countries were employing foreigners on a significant scale, but in the 1990s there was indeed an increase. Researchers are not unreasonable in wanting to understand an emerging trend.

With a proper basis of comparison, however, I believe this was not the most compelling question. Although there are something like one million employed foreigners in Japan, this number represents less than 1.5 percent of the Japanese labor force. In comparison to other countries, where the figures have approached ten percent, what matters is not the similarity but rather the contrast between Japan and other countries. If the numbers continue to increase, then perhaps one day it will make sense to put Japan in the same category as, say, Germany. But even if that happened, it would still be necessary to account for Japan's divergent history.

On this basis, it seemed to me that the most productive questions were: why are the numbers of foreign workers in Japan so low? And: given that the numbers were starting to increase, why have they nonetheless remained so low for so long, in contrast to the experience of other countries?

In general terms, a negative case is a country that has few immigrants despite embodying some of the factors that migration scholars believe generally lead to immigration.³ The point is not simply that there are few immigrants. Guyana probably has few immigrants – but then given

² There are exceptions: for example, Edwin Reubens wrote an article (1981) entitled "Low-level work in Japan without foreign workers." In the 1990s, however, the direction of research was quite different.

³ On negative case methodology more generally, see Emigh 1997.

theoretical understandings of migration no one would *expect* that it would have many.⁴ In other words, negative cases are anomalies with respect to existing theory. The value of studying such cases would seem to be obvious.

It was apparent that research on labor migration hadn't worked systematically with questions focused on variation in the dependent variable (why some countries have many foreign workers while others have few). In my judgment, widely held perspectives suffered accordingly: they offered explanations for migration that invoked factors present in both positive and negative cases, and they thus failed to explain variation. This is evident both in a general evaluation of those theories and in the fact that, if one examined Israel and Japan in reference to the independent variables the theories invoke and then predicted migration outcomes, those predictions would either be the opposite of what exists (*i.e.*, Japan would have more foreign workers than Israel) or at best the two countries would have similar outcomes. Significantly, common explanations for migration focused on the factors that would lead individuals in poor countries to *want* to move to wealthy countries, without theorizing the possibility that governments in receiving countries might not allow them to enter. In other words, until recently migration scholars have paid insufficient attention to policy (Hollifield 2000, Zolberg 1999) – and in particular to variation in receiving countries' policies.

The most obvious challenge arises in relation to a standard neo-classical economic perspective, *i.e.*, the basic notion that migration is driven by differences in levels of economic development, as high-wage economies draw in excess low-wage workers in poor countries (*e.g.*

⁴ On the other hand, I have simply assumed that Guyana has few immigrants. The truth is that I am unaware that there is any research at all about Guyana concerning immigration. I think it is reasonable to consider this a gap in our understanding, even if there are in fact few immigrants and research would merely confirm existing ideas.

Stahl 1995). If we think within that perspective, it is difficult to understand why Japan has not experienced more labor immigration than has in fact occurred. The experience of countries such as Japan and Finland, among others, shows in a straightforward manner that it is quite possible for a country to be much wealthier than potential sending countries without the development of an actual migration flow. It is obvious enough that restrictive policies in potential receiving countries can interfere with processes of supply and demand for labor in international markets; the problem is simply that this fact is not easily theorized within a standard neo-classical economic perspective.

This point was useful in rebutting a commonly held notion concerning why Israel had imported foreign workers. According to some Israelis, the answer was that Israel had finally become a “developed” country – so obviously it was going to have foreign workers just like all other developed countries. The trouble with this notion is simply that there are several developed (or wealthy) countries that do not have significant numbers of foreign workers. It is especially unhelpful in trying to explain the difference between Israel and Japan: the “development” gaps between Japan and its regional neighbors are significantly larger than those between Israel and the countries from which it draws its foreign workers, yet Israel’s labor force contains a much higher percentage of foreigners.

A similar analysis can be applied to other schools of thought concerning the causes of migration. Japan, for example, poses a challenge to Piore’s dual labor market theory of migration (1979): Japan has a highly dualistic economy and labor market (Pempel 1978), the key factor that in this view leads to demand for immigrant workers. (Israel is also highly dualistic – which would suggest the two countries would share similar migration outcomes.) Indeed,

Piore's analysis seems to rest on the notion that dualism of this sort is a universal feature of advanced capitalist societies; it is not clear why Japan, Finland, and other negative cases would be exempt from this dynamic. There is some discussion of the role institutional differences concerning job security might play in accounting for why different sectors attract immigrants in different countries, but this is an underdeveloped addendum to the main conclusion concerning dualism as a cause of migration. Dualism might well contribute to employer demand for immigrant workers, but there is no guarantee that that demand will actually be satisfied: employers sometimes go hungry (*cf.* Weiner 1995, Lim 1992) and have to adjust in other ways. Again, restrictive policies can get in the way of market processes that would otherwise enable employers to satisfy their interests.

World-systems theory raises some similar issues. The key factor leading to migration in this view is incorporation into the capitalist world-system, through the formation of ties of trade, investment, colonization, etc., between core and peripheral countries (Sassen 1988). These ties have two significant consequences: they disrupt local "survival strategies," and the ties themselves constitute "bridges" that people exploit to gain access to core countries (where demand for cheap immigrant labor arises in a way not terribly different from the process described by dual labor market theory). Thus Britain's colonial legacy creates opportunities for people to move from these (former) colonies to Britain; likewise for more recent relationships between the US and, say, Vietnam.

The difficulty is similar to that encountered previously: the explanation for migration invokes factors that also characterize countries with few immigrants. Japan's experience is the most relevant here: as a regional (not to mention global) economic superpower, Japan has long

had ties of the type described in this perspective. These links are undoubtedly a key factor in accounting for the migration of those people (*e.g.* Koreans) who have in fact moved to Japan. But the problem is that, with a world-systems understanding of migration, we would have to wonder why the level of immigration to Japan is not in fact much higher. World-systems theory helps us understand why immigrants to a certain place come from some countries and not from others, but it seems limited in its ability to explain why some countries have considerably more immigrants than others.

Another theoretical approach involves attempts to explain features of migration policy, *i.e.*, to bring politics back in (*e.g.* Hollifield 2000). This is a promising perspective and the one most likely to benefit from consideration of negative cases. As matters stand, however, scholars concerned with policy have constructed questions in ways that obscure the existence of negative cases. Typically, the questions asked resemble the following: how do we explain the significant increase in international migration in the post-war period? In other words, why do advanced industrial countries maintain relatively open immigration policies? We can accept the premise of these questions in their own terms – there has been an increase in international migration in the post-war period – while still noting that that premise presents an incomplete picture of the relevant reality: this increase has been uneven, occurring in some countries but not in others.

The difficulty is apparent in the otherwise insightful work of Gary Freeman (1995). Freeman argues that liberal democracies maintain open immigration policies because of a key feature of interest politics: the interests that benefit from immigration (mainly employers) are smaller and more easily organized, while the interests that oppose immigration (mainly labor) are diffuse and more difficult to coordinate in an attempt to affect government policy. This

argument is challenged by the need to explain why some liberal democracies do *not* maintain open immigration policies. Freeman tells us what many immigration countries have in common (liberal democracy, with opportunity structures that benefit certain kinds of interests over others) – but this feature is also shared by some countries that have few immigrants. It is worth noting that both Israel and Japan are reasonably described as liberal democracies – or at least they are not significantly different in the degree to which that description applies – yet they have experienced very different migration outcomes.

These considerations relating to theory reinforced the value of looking closely at countries with few foreign workers. It is true in a basic formal sense that migration scholars have not done this systematically – but the point is only important if it has substantive implications. In other words, before embarking on a new strategy we would want to have some confidence that it would lead us to new ideas. In my case that confidence was strengthened by the reflections on theory summarized above.

Conceptualization of “Foreign Workers”

The utility of investigating negative cases is reinforced by another consideration: some people counted as foreign workers in standard data sources should be not be included in that category. When we pay close attention to the conceptualization of “foreign workers,” the extent of variation in (potential) receiving countries’ experiences is even greater, because the bottom end of the range is lower than it otherwise appears. The premise of this part of the analysis is that the notion of a “foreign worker” is quite complex. While the concept might seem

straightforward for any individual case, important subtleties and variations become apparent when one turns to a comparative analysis of diverse cases.

To begin to elaborate principles for categorizing different types, it is helpful to make explicit a general, intuitive sense of what we mean when we invoke the notion of a “foreign worker.” The key point here is that scholars and others are typically interested in the foreign worker phenomenon because it constitutes a particular kind of social problem for the receiving country. (I hasten to add that the problem may not be the presence of the workers themselves but the way they are or are not accepted by the receiving country.) To anticipate: the problem is rooted in the fact that the workers are viewed as too different in too many ways from the “host” country population to be anything other than mere workers; in particular, they are considered unacceptable as potential members of the society. Foreign workers – to use the term for the moment in a less precise sense – who do not constitute such a problem, perhaps because they “fit in” more easily, are in this approach something different. To support this point I suggest simply that, if all foreign workers were accepted by receiving countries with no difficulty, there would likely be much less scholarly interest in the phenomenon.

The paradigmatic case of foreign workers is Turkish “guestworkers” in Germany. The problem – to use the word deliberately – is well known: Turkish workers (and others) were brought to West Germany in the 1960s with the assumption that their presence would be temporary, as a solution for cyclical labor shortages – but then they failed to leave as expected. The prospect that they would become permanent members of German society was both unanticipated and unwelcome. This is something that German governments and society have been trying to address for several decades now, with little success in the eyes of many observers.

What, then, makes someone a foreign worker? There are several simple, person-in-the-street understandings, but it seems unwise to rely on them. The reason is that these “rules” lead to decisions that are counterintuitive with respect to the discussion in the previous paragraphs. The most common example: many laypersons (and perhaps scholars as well) would probably assert that an employed person is a foreign worker if he or she does not hold *citizenship* in the country where the employment takes place. Alternatively, some people might believe that a person is a foreign worker if he or she was *born* outside the country of employment (and thus perhaps remains a foreigner even after naturalization). As we will see, however, these views lead to seemingly strange results: certain types of people are categorized as foreign workers despite being part of a group that does not constitute the type of problem identified above. To foreshadow this particular argument: it probably does not make sense to think of Norwegians working in Sweden as the same type of foreign worker as Turks in Germany or Thais in Israel.

The main claim here, then, is that foreign workers, as understood in much of the research and popular literatures, are international migrants (and perhaps their offspring born in receiving countries that do not adhere to *jus solis* citizenship traditions) whose presence increases the supply of low-wage labor in the host country, under conditions of restricted political or civil rights that impair their ability to compete in the labor market. It is a truism that foreign workers are viewed solely as workers and not as people. They are not full members of the receiving country’s society and polity; if they *were* full members, they would not be useful as foreign workers. This incomplete membership – which often does not even amount to what Hammar (1990) refers to as denizenship – encapsulates the “problem” as defined above: foreign workers are typically segregated into ghettos, their children receive inferior education, they feel

aggrieved about their diminished and restricted status and rights, etc. Foreign workers, then, to be counted as such, must be significantly *disadvantaged* by their foreignness, relative to citizens. Foreign birth and non-citizen status are typical markers that signal and maintain that disadvantage, but they mean different things in different contexts, and our use of these markers must be flexible and sensitive to those contexts.

Some types of cases are obvious. For example, there is no difficulty in counting guestworkers on temporary restricted contracts as foreign workers. Contract workers are often not permitted free mobility in the labor market: the visa often ties the worker to a specific job with a specific employer, or at least to a certain region and/or occupation. Likewise, it is easy to conclude that illegal/undocumented immigrants are foreign workers as that term is being used here. Their presence as workers is desired by employers and perhaps implicitly by others who benefit from their inexpensive labor, but they are clearly unwelcome as members of the society. The stereotype – which contains more than a kernel of truth – is that such workers do the most undesirable jobs for low wages. Are there illegal immigrants who would not be considered foreign workers as per the approach here? I can think only of a time when, while conducting research abroad, I myself violated the terms of my student visa by editing a manuscript for a sociologist whose native language was not English – an exception that seems to prove the rule.

There are several types, however, that might constitute *prima facie* cases of foreign workers – but on further consideration there are convincing reasons to exclude them from this category. I contend we should exclude workers that move within a common labor market arrangement such as the European Union or the Nordic Common Labor Market. Again, Norwegians working in Sweden probably have more in common with Swedish workers/citizens

than they do with Turks in Germany or even Turks in Sweden (*i.e.*, those who have not gained Swedish citizenship). The most obvious reason is that Norway itself is quite similar to Sweden in wage levels, labor rights, political development, etc. While it would go too far to assert that Sweden and Norway are really one country in every respect, in regard to the labor market the relationship between them shares notable similarities to that between, say, Illinois and Michigan. Common labor markets are typically formed among countries that do not worry about being swamped with one another's "cheap" labor; new members are usually admitted when their economies have advanced to the point that membership will not stimulate a mass exodus to the richer countries, as with the accession of Portugal, Spain and Greece to the EEC.

The category "foreign workers" should also not include professional and managerial workers, such as the large number of managers of international corporations in Britain or foreign teachers in Ireland. The fact that there is no common labor market arrangement between the US and Britain does not mean that US managerial staff of multi-national corporations are properly conceived as foreign workers. Integration in receiving countries of professionals and managers receiving high salaries has apparently been much less problematic: in many respects such individuals remain "invisible" (Böhning 1991; see also Castles and Miller 2003), in part because they are less likely to create close ethnic communities (Portes and Rumbaut 1996). Another personal note is appropriate here: as an American sociologist employed by a British university, I am confident I do not face anything approaching the degree of exclusion encountered even by some non-white UK *citizens*, despite the fact that I have precisely the kind of visa and work permit typically held by guestworkers as described above.

The ideas discussed in the previous two paragraphs lead on to the notion that workers from wealthy countries should not be considered foreign workers even when they are not professionals or managers and even when there is no common labor market. Even a semi-skilled worker from Germany who seeks work in Switzerland would seem to have more in common with Swiss citizens than with (to invoke another paradigmatic case) Moroccans working in France. The numbers of such persons is probably not large, but the exception is necessary to deal properly with the fact that some countries – Switzerland in particular – employ many workers from other wealthy countries despite not being part of the EU or some other similar arrangement. Canadians working in the US and vice versa are another important example.

There are other types, including more troublesome ones where the decisions are not as easy. But the arguments presented so far are sufficient to make the central point. Excluding the workers in the three categories identified here (workers covered by a common labor market arrangement, people employed at a high level such as professionals and managers, and workers from other wealthy countries) reduces the number of people properly counted as foreign workers, and the result is that there are a number of countries that can reasonably be designated as negative cases. In Japan the effect is quite modest: with approximately one million foreign workers in 2000 (including undocumented workers), the foreign share of the labor force is 1.5 percent, and if we subtract fifty thousand people from other wealthy countries such as the USA nothing much happens to that percentage. There is a slightly stronger effect for Finland, where the gross figure in 2001 was 1.5 percent of the labor force: subtracting those in the exclusion categories identified above reduces that figure to less than one percent (data from SOPEMI).

But the effect for other countries is more dramatic. Ireland has received a great deal of attention recently as a new destination. Gross figures are indeed remarkable: in 2000 there were approximately 60,000 foreign workers, amounting to 3.4 percent of the labor force. But more than 47,000 of these were from elsewhere in the European Union (mainly the UK), and another 3,000 were from other wealthy countries and/or employed at a relatively high level (see Bartram 2005a for further details and sources). The reasonable conclusion is that in Ireland there are very few foreign workers of the paradigmatic type – less than 0.6 percent of the labor force. For some other countries long viewed as standard receivers of foreign labor migrants, the picture changes significantly with this adjustment. Belgium in 1999 had a foreign labor force of almost nine percent, but removing intra-EU workers (many of whom are no doubt associated directly or indirectly with EU institutions in Brussels) reduces that figure to less than three percent. Similarly, the percentage for Luxemburg decreases from 57.3 to 4.1.

This analysis reinforces the point that there are some countries where the presence of foreign workers is quite limited (though I do not mean to imply that Belgium and Luxemburg belong in that category). This presence would be adjudged quite low in some cases even without the modifications just applied to the rough figures, but sometimes those modifications lead to a significant reduction. These countries constitute significant anomalies with respect to extant theories of labor migration and thus ought to be of great interest to migration scholars. The point can be expressed also in terms of variation: if we compare Japan, Finland, and Ireland to Germany, Austria and Switzerland (where the adjusted figures are approximately six percent), we see that the foreign share of the labor force in the latter group is approximately six times that in the former. Claims in the globalization literature to the effect that migration has become a

universal feature of wealthy societies might bear reconsideration in light of this way of seeing the data.

Findings & Arguments

The arguments above point to a research question different from the one normally invoked when trying to account for international labor migration. The question is generally some variant of the following: why do wealthy countries import workers? Having gained a clear understanding of the extent of variation in stocks of foreign workers, the question is better phrased: why do some wealthy countries import workers while others do not? I have approached this question via my research on Israel and Japan: why is the foreign share of Israel's labor force almost ten percent while in Japan the foreign share has remained below 1.5 percent?

When the question is specified in terms of variation, the explanation must also point to variation. We may invoke a well-known methodological axiom: you cannot explain a variable with a constant. Thus it is no surprise that the argument I have constructed is different from others that conceive of labor migration as a constant, a universal feature of wealthy societies in a globalizing world.

The approach I take is rooted in comparative political economy. I begin with a presumption that using foreign workers to address labor shortages is a policy that governments would turn to only with reluctance in recent decades. The experience of labor importers in the 1960s and 1970s showed that "guestworkers" in democratic societies inevitably turn into permanent settlers, in a way receiving countries neither anticipated nor wanted. Importing workers was profitable for employers, but these programs resulted in substantial externalized costs for the receiving society more generally. Policy makers that have faced labor shortages

since roughly 1970 onwards have had good reason to doubt the general utility of importing foreign workers.⁵ The question then becomes: when labor shortages arise, why do some countries resolve those shortages by importing workers while other countries are able to achieve an alternative solution?

The argument I offer draws on well-developed ideas concerning variations in state and institutional structures and the capacity for economic governance (*e.g.* Evans 1995). The pursuit of profits via employment of guestworkers can be construed as rent-seeking. States can be described as developmentalist or clientelist⁶; opportunities for successful rent-seeking are more constrained in the former than in the latter. In a developmentalist state, authority for policy making rests mainly in a civil service largely insulated from the political pressures employers would naturally bring to bear on politicians. The ability of policy makers to pursue coherent objectives (when those objectives are divergent from employers' fundamental interest in maximizing profits) is further enhanced by long-term single-party dominance. These states are able to pursue a long-term objective of structural economic transformation that increases labor productivity and thus reduces the "need" for cheap labor. In contrast, authority for policy making in a clientelist state rests with politicians, not bureaucrats; the former are "reachable" by private interests and are constrained in their vision of economic policy by a short-term electoral cycle. A clientelist state therefore perceives that it has "no alternative" to importing workers as employers demand.

⁵ This is a specific statement, and it does not address the issue of whether there are disadvantages to immigration more generally. The point is that when countries try to import workers without offering them the prospect of full social membership, there are serious negative repercussions not just for the workers but for the society as a whole.

⁶ This is a modification to Evans' typology suggested by Wright (1996).

This perspective has close affinities with Freeman's model of immigration policy making in liberal democratic countries (1995). That model, however, does not exploit the fact that some democratic countries embody quite restrictive immigration policies. I contend that the reason those countries succeed in holding down the portion of (potential) immigration that is normally driven by employers' desires is that there is sufficient state autonomy and capacity for implementing a demanding economic policy that helps overcome the (perceived) need for low-level foreign labor.

The notion of a developmentalist state was elaborated early in relation to Japan (Johnson 1982), and in this regard it is no surprise that Japan has largely succeeded in attempts to reduce the need for cheap labor. Avoiding immigrant labor was not the primary purpose of Japan's economic policy, but its overall policy mode was certainly conducive to its success in addressing the labor shortages that arose in the early 1970s and again in the late 1980s. Employers lobbied hard for access to foreign labor, but the government was able to avoid succumbing to this pressure because of its success in facilitating structural transformation in various sectors. Increasing mechanization of the construction sector (including a turn to prefabrication) was a key element of this policy: construction workers in Japan are mainly Japanese, in part because construction wages in Japan have risen to a level above the average Japanese wage – in marked contrast to countries where many construction workers are foreigners.

Such an approach was not possible in Israel, where the civil service is much weaker in relation to the political parties (and where employers are quite powerful in the parties themselves). There was rhetoric embracing the kind of economic policies Japan pursued (and some feeble attempts as well), but these were bound to fail – in no small measure because

employers were successful in pressing their demands for access to foreign workers, undermining incentives for investment that might have resulted in greater labor productivity and thus the ability to pay wages sufficient to attract Israeli workers. Construction employers, in particular, have enjoyed very significant profits as a result of importing workers – though many believe the society as a whole pays a high price.

These arguments have been published in a book (2005a) and extended in several articles, in *International Migration Review* (1998, 2000), *Migrations Société* (2005b), and *Politics & Society* (2004). Having developed the notion of negative cases in relation to potential receiving countries, I am currently moving beyond Japan to investigate more intensively the other two wealthy countries where foreign workers (properly conceived) constitute only a very small portion of the labor force: Finland and Ireland.

Conclusion

When I began research on the question of why the Israeli government was allowing employers to import workers from low-wage countries, I struggled to formulate ideas that transcended the common-sense claims voiced by politicians and other public figures (and that would thus have something to add to migration scholarship). While common sense often gets it right (sociology sometimes deserves the epithet often leveled at economics: the painful elaboration of the obvious), in this case it was unsatisfying. Migration theory didn't seem to take me much further – or rather, Israel didn't seem to take me very far in relation to migration theory. Serendipity led me to the topic of foreign workers in Israel, but it would take more than simple luck to arrive at a viable research project.

The decision to study Japan as a contrasting case was the key turning point in the project, where attention to research methods really made a difference. I was no longer bound by the terms of the obvious question (why did Israel do what it did?). I suddenly had access to a more powerful question: why did Israel *not* pursue a different strategy for resolving its problems with labor shortages? This question seemed particularly appropriate to Israel, where the prospect of large-scale non-Jewish immigration was extremely discordant with dominant ideas about the nature of the society and its politics.

Stated in the abstract, the claim that there are benefits from studying variation in the dependent variable is not terribly remarkable. Consider the parallel in another type of research: someone investigating the effectiveness of a new drug would never dream of looking only at cases where the treatment outcome is successful (or, for that matter, of studying only patients who actually receive the drug). Nevertheless, it seems that some fields of social science do not always take full advantage of it. Scholars with particular interests often focus their efforts on cases where those interests are embodied; it is perhaps not immediately apparent why one should conduct research on igloos in Borneo. Fortunately, there are many fields of research where that notion, generalized, is by no means absurd.

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