

Mobility in times of uncertainty: a geographical perspective

Riassunto: LA MOBILITÀ UMANA IN TEMPI DI INCERTEZZA: UNA PROSPETTIVA GEOGRAFICA

Dopo un lungo periodo di ristrutturazione post-fordista, il capitalismo senza frontiere ha portato ad una profonda crisi, al di là dell'economia, provocando grande incertezza. In questo contesto è opportuno domandarsi come la crisi economica possa riflettersi su uno dei temi più importanti della geografia: la mobilità umana e le sue cause. Il presente saggio offre degli spunti per una riflessione preliminare sulla flessibilità e la complessità delle migrazioni attuali. La capacità di mettere insieme territori e comunità, di agire come catalizzatore della dialettica tra il globale e il locale, fornisce alla mobilità umana un ruolo di primo piano in tempi di incertezza.

Parole chiave: Crisi Economica, Mobilità Umana, Globalizzazione, Migrazione.

Summary: LA MOBILITÀ UMANA IN TEMPI DI INCERTEZZA: UNA PROSPETTIVA GEOGRAFICA

After a long post-fordist restructuring process, the capitalism without borders contributed to a deep recession that is creating uncertainty beyond the pure economic effects. In this context, we ask ourselves how this financial situation is affecting one of the most important areas of the Geography: the human mobility and its framework. This text offers a first look at the complexity and flexibility of the current migratory trends. The human mobility, thanks to its ability of putting together locations and societies and connecting local and global processes, keeps a crucial role during these uncertain times.

Keywords: Economic Crisis, Human Mobility, Globalization, Migrations.

Introduction

The crisis of the post-fordism has generated a general feeling of uncertainty among the citizens of the world. The planet has become more complex and unstable than before, and this makes us revisit the human relationships within this new environment. The economic changes brought by the recession define a heterogeneous scenario between the human mobility and the new global economic processes. This article offers a first study about the impact of the crisis into the human mobility, an impact as uncertain as the dimension of the crisis itself.

1. Economic uncertainty

The restructuring of the post-fordist period brought a new dimension of the capitalism and free markets mechanism, which has been an essential means of communication and social interaction since the 1980s. With this new background, the technological innovations and the accelerated capital circulation play an important role, at the

same time as there is a restructuring process of the social-spatial relationships and their correlations at every possible level.

The concept of a global economy was first coined at the beginning of the 1980s by different consultants from North America's most important business schools. The underlying idea was a borderless world, supported by the development of new information technologies and international business, and by the removal of international trading barriers (Méndez, 1997). Once the centralized planning systems of the so called real socialism countries had almost vanished and the internal consumption had lost significance, the economic activity remained at the sake of the global capitalism system. This scheme created dependency among an increasing number of production systems linked through a dense network of tangible (people, goods, services) and intangible (capital, IT) flows. In this context, the freedom of nations and the social democracy (The Welfare State) do not apply anymore and we can talk about a post-political period and about a borderless capitalism. The political paradigm, in form of optimal structure, is given by China.



The key feature of the post-fordism is then an increasing global mindset, which has derived into the terms of “globalization” (set of political processes aiming at the deployment of the markets regional organizations and/or single planetary organization), “internationalization” (use of a set of techniques and processes reducing space-time, exchanges of resources, goods and services between the planet territories) and “universality” (implementation by Alterare companies of worldwide strategies responding to globalization and internationalization) (Dumont, 2006). These processes have defined along with the technological revolution, the most advanced stage of capitalism, and have transformed the three basic pillars of a society: the way of producing, the way of living and the forms of government (Castells, 1998).

Globalization has created a concentration of the international capital markets without precedents, an attribute of post-industrial societies which has reshaped the planet. At the same time, the years of economic growth had given autonomy to the financial markets and reduced the influence of the sovereign nations. All these factors have contributed to the most important economic crisis since 1929. Since its start during the third quarter of 2008 in the United States of America with the pair financial markets-real estate, it has had ramifications in every corner of the world and industry. Experts have defined it as a cyclical recession of the capitalism, with systematic characteristics and structural components as well as economical and political ramifications.

In order to overcome this situation, governments around the world have intervened with new mechanisms and policies, closed important international agreements and urged their central banks to keep their deficit low and to incentivize the economic recovery. However, the key performance indicators are still poor and the analysts keep delaying the turning point. And all this creates a general feeling of discontent among citizens.

2. A complex mobility

In the context of the human mobility, large transformations and migratory transitions have taken place in the last few years in countries as different as Poland, Mexico, Dominican Republic, Turkey and South Korea (Castles & Miller, 2009). However, the economic internationalization derived from the capital markets has not directly derived into migratory consequences. In fact, the main explanatory factors of migrations

are not related with globalization, and the current levels of human mobility is lower in relative terms than those associated to the transoceanic flows of the XIX century and first part of the XX century (Domínguez & Godenau, 2010). Nevertheless, migratory movements have persisted as a consequence of the different impact that the globalization has had in the standard of life on different populations.

The revolution of transportation, communications and information has favored a global mindset for the emigrants, who could consider any given country as a potential destination as they move around the world (Arango, 2007). At the same time, these new technologies allow migrants to sustain more frequent, less expensive, and more intimate connections than before, and the spread of a global culture is reducing some of the distinctions between home and host societies that migrants must bridge in order to live in more than one country (Levitt, DeWind & Vertovec, 2003). Hence, the main challenge of geography might be the study of the meaning that people give to locations: what is their use and how these spaces drive the behaviour of the different populations (Mendoza, 2006).

The answer to these issues can explain a human mobility that has become more heterogeneous during the downturn. In fact, the forecasts of large waves of migrants returning from countries with high unemployment have been proven wrong. Even if the labor market is traditionally the central driver of the migratory processes, there are other important factors such as housing, family, healthcare, education, relationship between culture and religion or political and social implication; in short, every aspect of the society itself (Aja & Díez, 2005). As a consequence, the policies of the governments and international organizations to regulate the migratory flows (including visa restrictions, return-friendly measures and stronger illegal immigration punishments) have not been as effective as expected.

Other aspect that must be considered when analyzing the labor migrations is the different reaction from people from the same country to the same recession or migration policy. The individual behavior and response of every migrant is different and driven by multiple circumstances, among them their roots in the host community and their evaluation of a potential return back home. At the same time, the impact of a difficult economy prevents a lot of migrants from moving, especially when the conditions have not got worse in the poorest countries (Boo, 2012). Consequently, we



could assert that in the context of a recession, it is easier for a rooted emigrant to stay, than it is for a first-time emigrant to leave.

On the one hand, a country can be a sender and a receiver of labor migrants simultaneously, implying that it cannot satisfy the labor internal demand but it requires at the same time another kind of workers. This has been the case of Spain, Greece, Italy, Portugal and Ireland, where the demand of non-qualified workers in the secondary market (domestic and elders' helpers, farmers) has barely been affected, but there are no jobs for qualified young and adult professionals, who start leaving the country. This brain drain is creating an important impoverishment of the human capital and an investment in the migratory balance, regardless of the historical migratory trends of each of the mentioned countries.

On the other hand, a country could also be the place of origin, transit and destination for migrants simultaneously. This happens in many of the countries that are experiencing a migratory transition such as Morocco, where the strong historical emigration is joined by an immigration wave from Sub-Saharan populations. These migrants from relatively less developed nations are chiefly motivated by a potential "jump" into the European Union. On top of these factors, there is a large return from emigrants or their families, who come back temporarily in order to lower their living costs in the hosting country.

But the human migratory flows can also be associated to other causes especially significant in other geographical locations. For the purpose of our analysis, we can divide these into three main groups: those triggered by political or environmental issues, those motivated by living standards, and those related to retirement; each of them with its own singularities.

The first group has a clear example in the movement of refugees during the last few years throughout the so called Arab Spring, especially in Libya. Other political conflicts have created severe humanitarian crisis in other countries such as Iraq, Ivory Coast, Somalia, South Sudan and more recently, Mali. At the same time, the climate change and the environmental deterioration are still inciting instability and large movements of people as they fight for natural resources. Certain international organizations such as UNHCR and certain countries such as Russia have however tried to minimize these effects with new programs and policies to facilitate the returns.

Second, the search for better living conditions is equally important in times of uncertainty, due

to factors such as better schooling for children, urban crime or availability of state-sponsored housing. The rural-urban migration flow is still very intense in developing nations of Africa, Latin America and Asia, and is also helped by the climate change. In developed countries too, the mortgage snowball has modified the housing patterns and contributed to new movements thanks to the family reunification and an increase of the rental market.

Last, the mobility of retired workers does not seem to be affected by the economic situation. In fact, real estate agencies are targeting this community for the sale of coast vacation houses affected by the bubble. In Spain for instance, the number of retired migrants has not decreased significantly and the transactions from foreign residents increased in 2010 and 2011 when compared to previous years, according to public data.

3. A flexible mobility

The acceleration of the migrations due to the mentioned transportation and communication revolution has derived into a more flexible mobility, multi-residential processes, one-way or two-ways migration, swinging fluxes, etc. Such development has strengthened the links between different geographical locations, with the migrant as the catalyst between local and global elements.

The emergence of "places" has been one of the effects of the globalization. A delayed capitalism has brought the fission, the particularities, the geopolitical break-up and phenomena with different identities. Therefore, universality and fragmentation are directly correlated events. This is why many authors argue that globalization, contrary to popular beliefs, stimulates the spatial consolidation (Nogué y Vicente, 2001).

The link between local and global has become one of the most crucial questions at present in geography. General processes at global level configure particular geographical spaces, and the world is organized from a local logic that goes beyond to group or link other locations. Local processes become global and these are sustained throughout local situations and individual behaviors.

From this perspective, human mankind configures a moving world and a link between different physical locations, as defended by the supporters of the trans-nationalism and confirmed by the current financial crisis. Trans-migrants are defined as those whose lived experiences transcend the boundaries of nation-states and who develop



and maintain multiple relationships – familial, economic, social, organizational, religious and political – that span those borders (Bailey, 2001). In this context, the comparative advantage of the trans-nationalism becomes evident: a new paradigm which argues that immigrants redefine but do not break their ties to their country of origin. They create a multiplicity of ties in different areas of social action that transcend national barriers. In addition, there is growing recognition that developments in transportation and communication technologies, which have rather increased with the crisis, have qualitatively transformed the character of immigrant trans-nationalism, turning it into a far more dense and dynamic cross-border than anything that would have been possible in earlier times (Portes & DeWind, 2004).

Lastly, the increasing feminization of the migratory flows has been critical. During the last twenty or thirty years, the mobility features have discarded the image of international migration as a matter of men, immigrant male workers and his families (Gregorio, 2010). This is due to the increasing share of women involved in these processes, the repercussion of their entry into the labor market and the link between the origin and hosting community through trans-national networks. Stronger ties with the physical location and closer family relationships from women that have favored the flexibility of the mobility, as gender is one of the oldest, if not the oldest, forces shaping human life and it influences migration and migrants' lives (Pessar & Mahler, 2003).

In this context, we ask ourselves if the economic crisis has been able to face a more flexible mobility between countries and spaces. It is true that the remittances of foreign workers have decreased in sending countries, but not as much as we would expect, as emigrants have adopted different strategies to keep sending money back home (e.g. getting personal savings for the receptors, waiting for favorable exchange rates or eliminating unnecessary expenses). This clearly shows the ability of the human being to adapt to new situations.

4. Conclusions

A first assessment of the human mobility in times of uncertainty tells us that the migrant

“on the move” is still the main link between local and global processes. Since the start of the current economic crisis, the migratory flows have not decreased, but have rather become more complex and flexible. From a geographical point of view, human mobility is still crucial for the connection between different locations and it has demonstrated to be a tour de force by overcoming the continuous political and economical difficulties.

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