



Unequal access to land and the current migration crisis



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ABSTRACT

How does the crisis of migration relate to unequal access to land? In what ways can unequal access to land help to explain the migration crisis today? And, how does a focus on land differ from and is superior to existing mainstream analyses and hence extend our understanding of the crisis of migration? Based on comments made by Henry George in *Social Problems* (1883) and a methodology he espoused in *The Science of Political Economy* (1898), I argue that much of the crisis of migration can be understood as driven or accentuated by the crisis of land, to wit, inequality, poverty, and other social problems arising from unequal access to land. The role of land in the story of migration varies over time and this temporal feature influences the direction or spatial aspect of migration. The argument is not that all forms of migration in all their complexities arise from unequal access to land but that the myriad of social problems and policies driving the mass migration of people cannot be satisfactorily resolved or fully understood without addressing the class-based land question. If so, mere pro-migration policy – whether it is of the neoliberal or humanistic hue – is not a panacea, especially when the destination settlements have similarly monopolistic land ownership structures. The conservative, nationalist, and nativist stance linked to Garrett Hardin's ideas in the 'tragedy of the commons' (1968) and 'lifeboat ethics: the case against helping the poor' (1974) is worse because erecting borders is another form of monopolising the commons and land and hence is likely to intensify the inequality and social problems that underpin the global migration crisis. Creating equal access to land in both origin and destination settlements, granting social protection to migrants, especially those in work relations, and granting permanent status to migrants, while providing them and locals with excellent public services and enabling them to contribute to the common wealth in the destination settlement would constitute a much better approach to addressing the migration crisis. This Georgist approach, focusing on the class and the resulting social problems engendered by unequal access to land at different scales in the migration process is more holistic, distinct from and superior to the mainstream approach centred on dysfunctional states, the erection of borders, individual self-interest in driving the migration process, the commodification of labour without social protection, and economic growth without structural redistribution.

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1. Enclosing the commons

According to the latest *World Migration Report* (International Organization for Migration (IOM), 2015), there are nearly 1 billion migrants – people born in areas other than where they are located – in the world today. This figure is expected to increase sharply, especially in Europe, North America, and Australia. The current mass migration has led to dramatic decisions and heated debates. Indeed, the most commonly cited reason for the 'Leave' vote in Brexit was migration: the idea that migration and migrants are the source of socio-economic problems in Britain. This concern is particularly strong as the number of migrants becomes more

and more substantial. So dire is this 'migration crisis' that it drew extensive commentary in the last papal exhortation to the world – *Amoris Lætitia* – in which the grand pontiff describes the trend of global migration as 'dramatic' and 'devastating' to all, destroying both families who migrate and those who stay behind. For *The Economist Intelligence Unit* (2016, p. 6), 'We live in an era of unprecedented human mobility, in which over 244 m international migrants worldwide are searching for economic opportunity, peace and security'. What is not usually emphasised in such observations is that the majority of the current migration crisis is, in fact, internal migration, currently pegged at 76 per cent of all human migration. Most of the migration crisis is happening in and will continue to be in cities. For instance, every day, an estimated 120,000 people migrate to cities in the Asia-Pacific region (IOM, 2015, pp. 2–3). So, the idea of a 'global migration crisis' in this paper refers to the

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new socio-economic conditions and social relations engendered by human mobility within nations and regions and across the whole world.

Existing attempts to analyse the migration crisis are centred on dysfunctional states and the courage or self-interest of migrants to seek better conditions elsewhere rather than structural socio-economic processes, especially the denial of equal access to land and its resulting social problems. But focussing on land is particularly important now because the land on which we live is increasingly becoming the private property of a few people, states, and transnational companies (Costantino, 2016). In *Extinction*, Ashley Dawson (2016) shows how this process of privatising land, driven by a new regime of capitalism, for which the motor of accumulation is centred on privatising land and nature more generally has led to the migration and extinction of different species of animals on our planet. The linkages between how turning the ecosystem into grounds for production and the death of animals and plants is quite intuitive. What remains undeveloped is how studying the process of privatising land can help us to better understand global human mobility (Beck, 2012).

There is much critical research in the political economy of migration which investigates structural forces, but it is mainly centred on a critique of the commodification of labour in the international migration process, typically pointing to labour-capital contradictions (see, for example, Rosewarne, 2010, 2014, 2016), not migration resulting from the contradictions in monopolising the land – except the work of John Beck (2012) published in *The American Journal of Economics and Sociology*. There is a tradition in Marxian analysis centred on ‘deagrarianisation’ and how landless peasants become migrants, of course, but the analysis is typically left at the rural scale and the axis of contradiction located in the relationship between the class of capitalists and labour without carefully considering the relationship between landlords and other classes across scales (see, for a discussion, Yaro, 2006). Similar limitations apply in the use of dependency theory to explain the ‘development of underdevelopment’ and how that, in turn, drives migration.

A different sort of analysis in the mainstream is pervasive, to wit, enclosing land as a panacea. In two controversial polemics, ‘the tragedy of the commons’ (1968) and ‘life boat politics: the case against helping the poor’ (1975), Garrett Hardin (1968) posed the questions under study in the reverse: does enclosing the commons solve all social problems such as mass migration? He proceeded to answer the question in the affirmative, arguing for a world with borders, the enclosure of land, because for Hardin the problems of the world are but problems of free movement and population size in relation to nature, or our common heritage. This Malthusian analysis of social problems has most recently been challenged by Richard Faye Giles (2016) in his book, *The Theory of Charges on Common Land* in which he argues that Hardin posed the questions in the wrong way. According to Giles (2016), much public policy and social analyses today intensify social problems by seeking to answer the questions posed by Hardin and hence concentrating on restricting access to common land in cities, regions, and nations around the world. A recent special issue on overpopulation published in *The American Journal of Economics and Sociology* (Cobb, 2016) offers a similar challenge.

In the context of migration, then, it is more useful to ask three questions. First, how does the crisis of migration relate to unequal access to land? Second, in what ways can unequal access to land help to explain the migration crisis today? Third, and more fundamentally, how does a focus on land differ from and is superior to existing mainstream analyses and hence extend our understanding of the crisis of migration?

Based on comments made by Henry George in *Social Problems* (1883) and a methodology he espoused in *The Science of Political*

Economy (1898), I argue that much of the crisis of migration can be understood as driven or accentuated by the crisis of land, to wit, inequality, poverty, and social problems arising from unequal access to land. The role of land in the story of migration varies over time and this temporal feature influences the direction or spatial aspect of migration. The argument is not that all forms of migration in all their complexities arise from unequal access to land but that the myriad of social problems and policies driving the mass migration of people cannot be satisfactorily resolved or fully understood without addressing the class-based land question. If so, mere migration – whether it is of the neoliberal or humanistic hue – is not a panacea, especially when the destination settlements have similarly monopolistic land ownership structures. The conservative and nationalist stance is worse because erecting borders is another form of monopolising the commons and land and hence is likely to intensify the inequality and social problems that underpin the global migration crisis. Creating equal access to land in both origin and destination settlements, granting social protection to migrants, especially those in work relations, offering public services to all migrants, and granting permanent status to migrants, while enabling them to contribute to the common wealth in the destination settlement would constitute a much better approach to addressing the migration crisis. This Georgist approach, focusing on the class and the resulting social problems engendered by unequal access to land at different scales in the migration process is more holistic, distinct from and superior to the mainstream approach centred on dysfunctional states, individual self-interest in driving the migration process, the commodification of labour without social protection, and economic growth without structural redistribution. This argument extends existing body of research that seeks to develop Georgist analysis of the commons (e.g., Obeng-Odoom, 2016c) and global migration (Beck, 2012).

To emphasise this argument, the next two sections describe the orthodoxy (Section 2) and show why it ought to be jettisoned (Section 3), while the last two sections critically analyse the Georgist alternative (Section 4) and highlight its superiority to the mainstream (Section 5).

2. The orthodoxy: conservatives, neoliberals, and humanists

To understand the orthodoxy in all its forms (conservative, neoliberal, and humanistic), it is important to first examine the conceptual framework on which it is based. The key idea in this framework is that it is individual choices that drive labour migration. According to this view, individuals make an assessment of their current conditions, especially income, work out the prospects of migrating to new areas and, on balance, decide whether to migrate. If the conditions in the area of destination are better, they migrate; if worse; they remain at the origin. It is this calculus that was formalised by Ravenstein (1885, 1889) as the ‘laws of migration’. Later, these were organised into a ‘push-pull’ framework by Lee (1966, 52) who sees the model as a ‘conceptualization of migration as involving a set of factors at origin and destination, a set of intervening obstacles, and a series of personal factors’. These intervening factors are often discussed in terms of ‘transaction costs’, that is, the individual costs (especially monetary and informational) incurred in the process of migration (Obeng-Odoom, 2016b).

There are three important versions of this basic individual (for E.S. Lee, ‘personal’), rational choice framework. The first is usually attributed to John Harris and Michael Todaro who famously used this framework to analyse rural-urban migration in developing countries, showing that in such countries the pull factors are typically expectational. In other words, it is *expected income differences* rather than actual income differences that serve as the

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