Migration, social policy, and power in historical perspective

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Abstract
Migration and social policy have become fiercely contested issues in Europe and North America. In this article, I highlight how mobility and migration, on one hand, and social policy, on the other hand, have historically been closely interwoven and shaped by power relations. It is argued that European states actively assisted their poor to leave ‘home’ and settle in far-away places. I will elaborate some of the tensions between freedom of movement and the role of social policy in the North German Confederation (Norddeutscher Bund [NDB]) and the British Empire. Finally, it is argued that many of the current challenges and issues associated with migration and social policy in Europe are historically not unique.

Keywords
Assisted emigration, migration, transnational social policy

Introduction
Migration has become a salient political issue in many European countries and North America during the past decade. In the social sciences, it is discussed to what extent welfare states constitute welfare magnets (Borjas, 1999) – populist politicians have used the derogatory terms of ‘benefit tourists’, ‘asylum tourists’, or ‘poverty migrants’ to characterize current migrants. Much of the contemporary political debate is about closing borders or significantly restricting migration from poorer countries. In a 2016 referendum, the British electorate decided for the country to leave the European Union (EU) and ‘take back control’ of its borders to end ‘uncontrolled’ migration by EU migrant citizens. US President Donald Trump has promised to build a wall at the Mexican border, paid for by the Mexican people, to stop undocumented migration from Latin America. In 2018, the Italian Secretary of the Interior, Matteo Salvini, has denied ships with migrants

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rescued in the Mediterranean Sea access to Italian harbors. In an arrangement with the EU, Turkey has agreed to stop the migration into the EU and European institutions are trying to find arrangements with North-African countries to severely restrict migration. German local municipalities have called for restricting access to social rights by EU migrant citizens, as too many of them are said to have exploited or defrauded the welfare system.

Although long-distance migration may seem a relatively new phenomenon to many contemporary citizens in affluent OECD-countries, this is historically not the case. Long-distance migration has occurred during different times in history. Between 1620 and the beginning of World War I, approximately 32 million people emigrated from Europe to North America, mostly for economic reasons. Between 1881 and 1915, each year approximately 900,000 people left Europe (Held et al., 1999: 290; O’Brien, 1999). The current phase of migration has, however, occurred against the backdrop of relatively low levels of immigration during much of European history since World War II (WWII).

In this article, I highlight how mobility and migration, on one hand, and social policy, on the other hand, have historically been closely interwoven and shaped by power relations. I will discuss examples of assisted emigration as a public social policy instrument in different European states during the 19th century, before discussing remittances in the 19th century as an early form of ‘private’ transnational social policy; the link between freedom of movement and the role of social policy in the North German Confederation (Norddeutscher Bund [NDB]) and the British Empire will also be discussed. In a final section, I will compare these historical developments with contemporary approaches to migration.

**Mobility, migration, and social policy in historical perspectives**

Historically, in many European jurisdictions, landowners and (home) communities of residence were responsible to support the poor. Thus, poor people were regularly sent back to their ‘home’ community of residence (Hennock, 2007; Tennstedt, 1981). This institutional arrangement also created the category of vagrants moving between municipalities. Increasing mobility and the need for workers in industrial urban centers required a reform of the system of poor support, hitherto based on promoting immobility. In England, the 1834 Poor Law Amendment Act created 647 Poor Law Unions responsible for the poor at a regional level, encouraging migration of able-bodied rural poor to manufacturing districts. At the same time, the New Poor Law also created the possibility of assisted emigration (Anderson, 2013).

**Emigration and social policy**

Assisted emigration became an option for municipalities for ‘shoveling out paupers’ and for the poor to escape dire socioeconomic conditions. It was justified as a measure to deal with surplus labor in rural regions of industrializing England, while constituting a
measure to populate the empire. However, promoters of assisted emigration as a form of social policy had to deal with the conflict resulting from emigration also being used as a form of punishment known in England as ‘transportation’ (Howells, 1996). As the Law of Settlement remained in force, local parishes continued to be financially responsible for their poor in union workhouses. Thus, assisted emigration was one way for a parish to relieve itself of the future financial obligations of supporting its poor.

The English counties with the highest number of assisted emigrants were areas with low wages and a depressed agricultural economy. Prior to the New Poor Law, parishes could also support poor agricultural workers; the new law, however, no longer provided the possibility of outdoor relief for able-bodied laborers, but only the ‘option’ of support in the union workhouse. Workhouses were feared and hated by the poor, which in some instances lead to riots and incendiarism. Under these circumstances, it would only seem rational for local parishes to support the emigration of their paupers. Howells (1996: 90) identified a positive statistical relationship between the cost for annual relief per head and the emigration rate among parishes in Norfolk. The overwhelming majority of those supported to leave the country were young families. Howells (1996: 122) wrote,

... [P]arish officers were assisting people who might produce more children in the future, but were not overly burdened with children at the present moment. By not being overburdened with children, emigrants also offered the emigrators a chance of saving money. The fewer children people had the cheaper they were to emigrate.

At the same time, stigma and the threat of the workhouse combined with stories of opportunities in far-away places are very likely to have had a positive impact on triggering also ‘un-assisted’ emigration of poor people.

Britain was not alone in ‘exporting’ its poor. For instance, in the 19th century, communities in Württemberg, a small state north of Switzerland, also assisted emigration of surplus laborers and paid for the passage of poor local families to North America. The emigration from Württemberg to North America in the 19th century took place in two waves subsequent to economic crises in 1817 and between 1846 and 1855. Assisted emigration was considered an effective social policy instrument, as it was perceived to be cheaper to assist the poor who ‘voluntarily’ wanted to emigrate, than to support them for long periods in the municipality. Often ‘agents’ were used to arrange and facilitate the journey. Approximately 8% of all emigrants from Württemberg to North America were poor emigrants assisted by local parishes as well as private and religious foundations. Although not on the same level as in England, the authorities of Württemberg also deported convicts to North America (Krebber, 2014: 47). Assisted emigration was a coercive social policy instrument that simultaneously provided people from socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds in Europe with the opportunity, and more often with the dream, of upward mobility in far-away lands. Its logic was rooted in asymmetrical power relations in the countries of origin, largely undemocratic class societies, and in the asymmetrical power relations in the territories of destination, which had to be populated and where the indigenous populations had been suppressed.

England and Württemberg are only two examples of European territorial entities that used assisted emigration as an instrument of coercive social policy within their poor
relief arrangements in the 19th century. Ireland would be another example. How many other European jurisdictions made use of poor relief arrangements to ‘export’ their poor requires further systematic research. Nevertheless, what seems to be clear already from these two examples is that in times of economic crisis and surplus labor, European countries promoted and assisted emigration as part of their early social policy approaches.

However, emigration had an additional social policy dimension, namely, in the form of remittances from the emigrants to their communities of origin. The 19th-century remittances by British emigrants were of utmost importance in supporting families and poor communities. Within the Empire, remittances were handled by the Money Order Office (in 1904 formally becoming the Imperial Postal Order Service) of the Royal Mail (Magee and Thompson, 2006: 543f.). Although at an aggregate level the amounts of money that were remitted back to Britain constituted less than 1% of GDP per annum in the late 19th century (Magee and Thompson, 2006: 554), regionally remittances were of great importance for local communities. In this context, the relationship between Cornish-born miners in South Africa and the communities of origin in Cornwall is particularly noteworthy. Magee and Thompson (2006: 557) report,

families who they [the Cornish miners; MSK] left behind anxiously awaited the arrival of a regular remittance in the South African mail. . . . Hence when the Cape mail arrived, people would flock into the towns from the surrounding villages to collect their money, and the business in local shops would boom. Conversely, when the ‘home pay’ did not arrive, the county’s Board of Guardians were left to pick up the pieces – though they themselves were helped by the charitable work of several Cornish associations on the Rand, organizations that had played a key role in raising relief funds for the widows and orphans of the miners killed by accidents and lung disease. . . . With its constant flow of money orders back home, the colony was a lifeline for Cornwall until at least the 1920s.

It is very likely that emigrants from other parts of Europe, such as Württemberg, also sent remittances to support relatives and communities left behind. In other words, not only did local parishes benefit of a reduced caseload of paupers to support by assisted emigration but also by emigrants’ remittances to families that otherwise would have had to rely on poor relief paid by local authorities.

**Immigration and social policy**

Despite relatively high levels of emigration, European countries were also countries of destination for regional migrants, albeit at a much lower rate. Although poor relief and social protection was for a long time tied to the local parish or the nation-state, we find historical examples of confederations of states where eligibility to poor relief and social protection was extended to include subjects and citizens of other Member States. The North German Federation (NDB), established in 1867, was such a case. One of the first legislative acts of the NDB was to establish *freedom of movement* among the subjects and citizens of the Member States of the Confederation, which was considered a vital catalyst for industrialization. Preexisting poor relief regulations of the Member States, however, remained in force, leading to significant variation of poor relief arrangements. Differing residency requirements in Member States could even lead to complete disentitlement and
destitution of mobile people. Otto von Bismarck, Governor of Prussia and Chancellor of the NDB, understood that the fragmented system of poor relief was incompatible with the principle of freedom of movement among Member States of the NDB and, in 1869, introduced the ‘Bill to Support Residents’ (Unterstützungswohnsitzgesetz). The bill stipulated that every ‘Northern German’ should be treated as a ‘native’ with regard to poor relief in every Member State. Bismarck’s proposal was highly contentious politically. For instance, the State of Saxony highlighted that it received significantly more migrants than other States within the confederation (NN, 1869: 108, 113), while smaller states argued that the proposed legislation would constitute an ‘unbearable burden’ for them (Pergler and Joseph, 1870). Again, other states objected to the proposal as it would infringe on their sovereignty (NN, 1870: 186). Despite the opposition by a significant number of Member States, Bismarck was successful in garnering a legislative majority for the law, providing access to poor relief to mobile Northern Germans irrespective of the duration of residence in a Member State (Bruzelius and Seeleib-Kaiser, 2018).

The British Empire can also be understood as a form of confederation. As the sun was already slowly setting on the Empire, the British Nationality Act of 1948 was enacted by Parliament with the aim to maintain the formal indivisibility of British subjecthood within the Empire. The Nationality Act defined in statute who was considered a British subject: citizens of the United Kingdom and Colonies, citizens of independent Commonwealth countries, and a residual group of British subjects without citizenship. These three groups had the freedom to move to Great Britain and new residents from the Empire had unconditional access to the newly established British welfare state (Anderson, 2013: 38–40; Gosewinkel, 2016: 299–301).7

The examples provided in this section demonstrate how mobility, emigration, and immigration have been closely linked with social policy. Assisted emigration from England and Württemberg was a social policy instrument used to export surplus laborers while providing those that were assisted the opportunity of a better life in the territory of destination. The examples of the NDB and the British Empire highlight that the issues and tensions associated with accessing social policies by intra-EU migrants today have not been unprecedented. Moreover, access to poor relief and social protection beyond citizens of the nation-state within confederations was possible, if it was politically and economically perceived to be opportune or pertinent by the power elite.

**Conclusion: 21st-century migration and social policy in historical perspective**

Although it is at times argued that welfare states constitute a major pull factor for today’s migration to Europe (Borjas, 1999), there is no systematic evidence supporting this claim and the desire for a better life continues to be one of the main factors for migration (Castles, 2013), very similar to the motivations of European migrants in the 19th century. Although no systematic information seems to be available with regard to the degree and extent of formal state-assisted emigration as a social policy instrument in the main countries of origin of today’s immigrants in Europe and North America, it would seem quite rational for local communities to support emigration in the hope to reduce the problem
of surplus labor and for emigrants to support the community of origin through remittances in the future. Moreover, the current debates relating to freedom of movement and access to social protection in the EU are not unprecedented. However, contrary to today’s untenable situation of blocking access to social assistance for newly arrived intra-EU migrants (Bruzelius et al., 2017), Bismarck understood that it is dysfunctional to create freedom of movement in a supranational territory while maintaining a system of regionalized poor relief. After WWII, British politicians fathomed that, if they wanted to maintain the Empire, all its subjects living in Britain should be treated based on the principle of equality.

As has been shown, remittances have played an important role of transnational social policy in 19th-century Europe. The role of remittances is quite similar in many low- and middle-income countries of today’s world, albeit at a much higher level, contributing to the welfare and stability in many countries of emigration. In this context, Germano (2018) speaks of ‘outsourcing welfare’, whereby access to welfare services is not primarily provided by the state, but through the availability of remittances. International migrants sent an estimated 443 billion US$ to low-income countries in 2014, whereas the world’s richest countries donated only 135 billion US$ in the form of aid and official development aid (Germano, 2018: location 136). Remittances constitute a considerable proportion of GDP in many countries and can function as a rudimentary safety net for families and assist them in acquiring basic goods and services, can have countercyclical effects, and reduce conflict. Thus, remittances can contribute to socially and politically stabilizing countries of origin.

Overall, mobility and migration have historically been in tension with social protection provisions. However, European states have explicitly used social policies to assist emigration of ‘their’ poor. In the context of current discussions of restricting ‘undeserving’ or ‘unwanted’ economic migrants from poorer countries coming to Europe and North America, it seems more than appropriate to remind the peoples of Europe and North America of these historical processes. The practices of the past and the rhetoric and practices of today are reflections of power relations. The difference of then and now is that the emigrants of the 19th century were the subjects and citizens of powerful colonial European countries and it is the same powerful countries or their democratic successors that today aim to close their borders or severely restrict migration from poorer countries.

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Notes

1. Held et al. (1999) differentiate four phases of global migration. Although the intensity of migration was relatively low in premodern times, the extensity of premodern migration was at times global, for instance, the migration of nomadic Mongols. The early-modern times from 1500 to 1760 witnessed an increased intensity with transatlantic settlers and slave trade constituting new global flows. This phase was followed by migration in the modern era constituting largely of overland migrations by Russian colonists, transatlantic and Indian Ocean slave trades, and by European colonizers to Africa and the Americas. The contemporary phase saw new migratory flows, including increasing numbers of tourists, travelers, and international exchange students and more recently the increase of refugees and migrants from low-income countries.

2. Globally, the number of migrants reached more than 250 million in 2017. Of those 250 million migrants, approximately only half lives in affluent Europe (78 million) and North America (58 million), while the other half lives in Asia (80 million), Africa (25 million) Latin America and the Caribbean (10 million), and Oceania (8 million). In 2016, the total number of refugees and asylum seekers in the world reached almost 26 million people; a minority of them have headed to Europe and North America. With 3.1 million refugees and asylum seekers, Turkey hosted the largest number, followed by Jordan (2.9 million), the State of Palestine (2.2 million), Lebanon (1.6 million), and Pakistan (1.4 million). Despite Europe not being the primary destination of global migration, migration to Europe and intra-EU mobility have increased significantly during the past decade (United Nations, 2017).

3. However, it needs to be highlighted that most emigrants were not assisted.

4. A phrase that was initially used by Charles Buller, a contemporary of John Stuart Mill, in his critique of assisted emigration; cf. Howells (1996: 18).

5. The number of those assisted to emigrate was comparatively small; only 26,000 people were assisted to leave over the 26-year period during which assisted emigration was employed (Howells, 1996: 54).

6. This section mainly draws on the excellent doctoral dissertation on the topic by Howells (1996).

7. As it turned out, migration was considerably higher than expected and restrictions were soon demanded and implemented. However, it should be noted that there are no statistical figures regarding the number of immigrants from Commonwealth countries available. Since 1968, the passport of a British subject was no longer sufficient to enter and settle in the United Kingdom; in addition to it, the person either needed to be born, or to have a parent or grandparent who had been born, in the United Kingdom.

8. A number of Asian countries, for example, the Philippines, formally support emigration. However, they do not seem to use their poor relief arrangements to ‘export’ poor families but have a much more sophisticated system (cf. Asis, 2017).

9. In the Kyrgyz Republic, Moldova, and the Gambia, remittances are equivalent to more than 20% of GDP. In Algeria, Lebanon, and Jordan about 10% and in Nigeria, Mali, and Senegal more than 20% of the population have reported receiving remittances (Germano, 2018: location 163). For the role of remittances played in the poorer countries of the European Union (EU), see Obrzut (2017).

10. The support by migrants of relatives and friends in countries of origin can go beyond sending money. In some cases, immigrants have set up innovative institutional arrangements to provide social services for communities in the country of origin. One such example is the partnering of Congolese immigrants in Belgium with Belgian mutual insurance funds to set up special schemes that provide diaspora members in Belgium the opportunity to purchase health insurance for their relatives in Congo (Lafleur and Lizin, 2017: 217).

11. Germano (2018) also acknowledges that remittances may also contribute to supporting unresponsive and authoritarian regimes.
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