

## The Neogramscian Approach

Using 'Critical' Theories to explain Migration Systems

Robert Westermann

*Until now World System approaches, also known as Critical Theories, are mainly applied in International Relation research. In the following I will illustrate on one example, the Neogramscian approach of Robert Cox, how global correlations of social forces, forms of state and global orders profoundly affect International Migration processes and should be considered by theoretical debates in Migration Studies. Furthermore, I will show how the specific perspective of social transformation in combination with the awareness of local rescaling processes can be a promising extension for the research of Migration Systems.*

**Keywords:** Neogramscian approach, world system theory, critical theory, migration systems, historic bloc, local rescaling.

### The Revival of Critical Theories

In the 80ies, Robert Cox distinguished two types of methodological approaches for research within the broad field of International Relations (IR): 'Problem-solving' and 'Critical' Theories (Cox 1981). According to Cox, the first one was meant to deal with dysfunctional problems of contemporary world order structures through the use of positivistic methods and by providing practical guidelines for public policy. The second one, the 'Critical' Theories approach, is rather concerned about long term social changes and prospective developments through the application of historiographical and 'explaining' methods. The expression 'critical' was based on the fact that 'problem-solving' theories were basically seen as 'helping hands' for the perpetuation of hegemonic systems.

Although Cox's ideas provided inspiration to other IR-scholars and helped to break through the domination of (neo-)realistic theory building, the 'critical' method never became a 'mainstream alternative' in IR-research and emerging schools, because the Neogramscian-, thus Critical-, or the larger category of World Theories, were mostly connected to old-fashioned communist research traditions. Thus the distinction between 'problem-solving' and 'critical' were recognized within the scientific community, but in the eyes of many, seemed too ideologically charged to become a common base for theory building in IR-research.

This might be changing within the next years, also because of new historiographical reflections of IR-research pathways, especially in the Anglo-Saxon based International Political Economy (IPE) Research. Within his 'intellectual history' Benjamin Jerry Cohen used the term 'British School' to conceptualize different trajectories in IPE (Cohen 2008). In comparison with the 'American School', 'British Scholars', according to Cohen, are mainly

concerned about transformations of and within existing structures and not in the giving of advice for 'best practices'. For Cohen they are concerned with 'the Really Big Question' (RBQ), resulting in the fact that positivistic methods have to be replaced with a diachronic historical perspective.

This, again, strongly recalls the distinction made by Cox, between the 'problem-solving' and 'Critical' Theory, remaining however free of any 'ideological touch'. 'British School' means therefore to do research that is focused on structural changes without being *per se* critical to systemic constellations whereas the 'American School' offers 'problem-solving' theories within contemporary systems without being *per se* hegemonic. This 'neutral potential' was recognized by Cox when he wrote in 2009 about 'The *British School* in the Global Context' (Cox 2009).

*What does this mean for Migration Studies? At this point I will reflect upon the current debate on 'Migration and Social Change' and the need to implement broader theories of social sciences.*

### **Adapting the Neogramscian Approach**

The 'Neogramscian approach' of Robert Cox offers a theoretical model for describing the correlation between social forces, forms of state and global order. It therefore attempts to explain how hegemonic projects and social transformation change the structure of societies.

Before transferring this concept to the field of International Migration it is crucial to explain the unique understanding of hegemony Cox had in mind when developing his approach: Different to other 'traditional' theories of International Relations, hegemony is not understood as the dominance of one powerful nation state, especially in terms of economics and military, but as a consensual mode of transnational socialisation. Thus hegemony is a product of social processes and includes social, cultural and ideological dimensions.

Hegemonic structures appear under the circumstances of a certain composition of different forces. Cox differentiates between three types of reciprocal interacting forces: First, material capabilities appearing as natural resources as well as technological and organisational abilities. Second, ideas understood as interactive beliefs or as collective imaginations of social order. And third, institutions used to stabilize a certain order.

One important function of institutions is finding solutions for areas of conflict and minimizing the input of power. In this way institutions are a crucial element of the Neogramscian understanding of hegemony: "Institutions may become the anchor for such a hegemonic strategy since they lend themselves both to the representations of diverse interests and to the universalization of policy." But as Cox indicates, hegemony cannot be reduced only to an institutional dimension because especially new constellations of material forces and ideological change, which might influence an existing (institutional) dominant order, could be overseen (Cox 1981).

Constellations of power and forces emerge within a concrete ‘historical structure’, thus within a specific period, on three levels (or spheres) of activity: First, the balance of *social forces* formed by the organisation of production processes. Second, the *state form* based on a complex and historically grounded interrelation of state and society. And third, *world orders* resulting from the constellation of forces negotiating the problem of war or peace.

It is highly interesting to adapt this theoretical concept to the field of International Migration: The level of activity might be transferred to a triangular constellation of ‘Migration States’ (distinguished by forms of actions and interventions), a global ‘Migration Regime’ (forced by international organisations and influencing international relations) and Migrant Formations (Individuals, Organizations and Movements which have serious political impact from below). Secondly, there are categories of power (ideas, institutions and material capabilities), which could be related to new trends in migration politics (as the outcome of a certain social order), institutionalization of migration processes (as the stabilization of a certain social order) and material access to the ‘equipment’ of the migration processes.

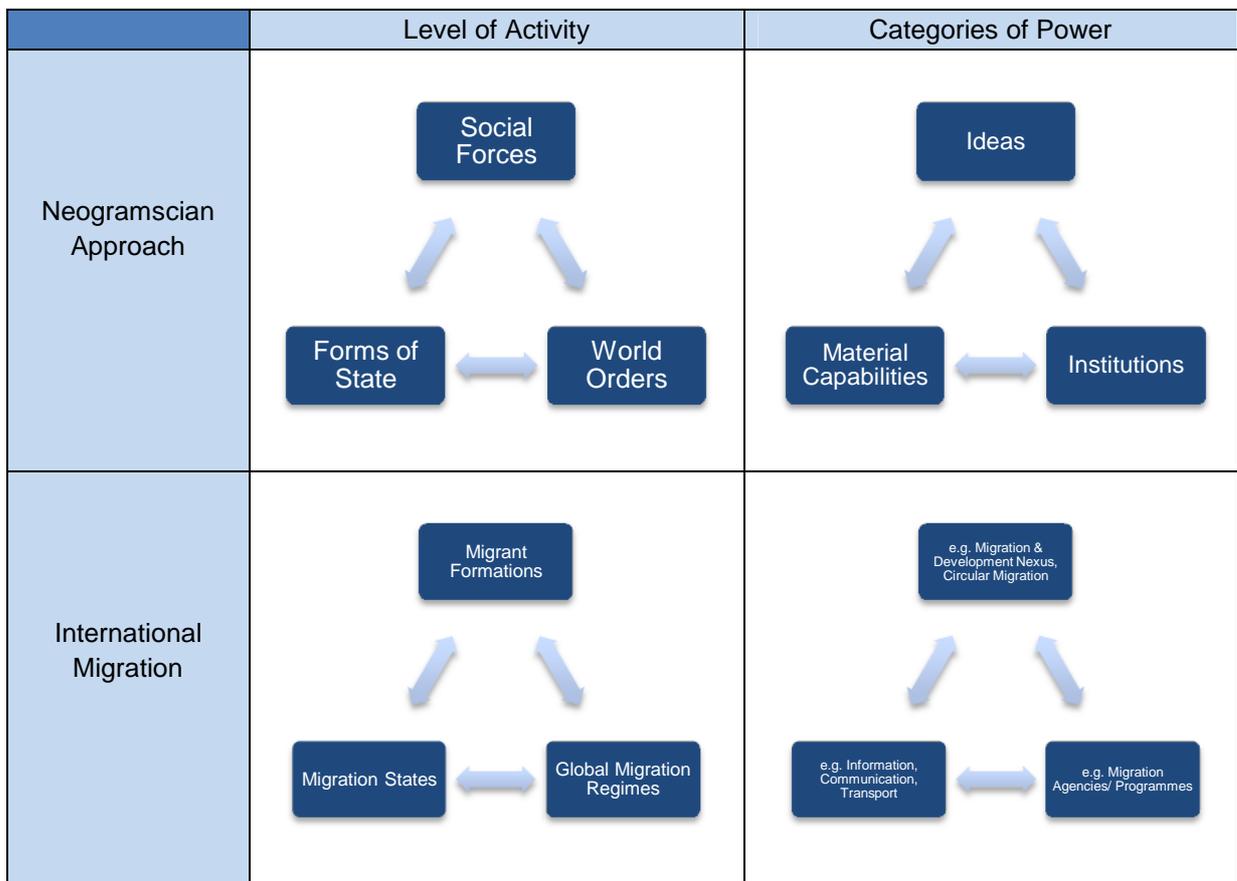


Fig. 1.: The adaptation of the ‘Neogramscian Approach’ in the field of International Migration: Reciprocal influences between different levels of activity and categories of power leading to hegemonic and anti-hegemonic structures.

*As part of my presentation I seek to explain why I have chosen the terms 'Migration states', 'Migration Regimes' and 'Migrant Formations' and in which way ideas, institutions and material capabilities are influencing dynamics and interactions in International Migration.*

## **The Concept of Historic Blocs**

A historical perspective of social transformation and structural changes should play an important role in future migration theories. As generally in World System theories, a core element of the Neogramscian approach is the concept of 'Historic Bloc' that is characterized by a condensation of class interests and the implementation of a specific mode of production beyond national borders. As Cox says:

“Hegemony at the international level is thus not merely an order among states. It is an order within a world economy with a dominant mode of production which penetrates into all countries and links into other subordinate modes of production. It is also a complex of international social relationships which connect the social classes of the different countries. World hegemony is describable as a social structure, an economic structure, and a political structure; and it cannot be simply one of these things but must all three.” (Cox 1983: 171f.)

In my opinion there are two types of scientific specifications of 'Historic Blocs': The first one in general describes the long routes into times of industrialisation and modernisation (used by Wallerstein and Polanyi) and the second type centres mainly on economical and political aspects of regulation and deregulation (Cox, Sassen et al.). Often, these 'postmodern' types of 'Historic Blocs' focus on the transition period in the late '70s, when the time of the 'Embedded Liberalism' ended and the 'Age of Post-Fordism' began.

To work with these allocations in respect to grounding migration theories on historic patterns, there is a need for a revision of the latest Historic Bloc: The key question is how the central transformations of the 'Age of Post-Fordism', the internationalisation and the deregulation within politics and production modes, changed until now?

Other Neogramscian scholars agreed that an international 'Historic Bloc' established in the late 70ies but in reference to globalisation and universalization of neoliberal political projects recommended to put a stronger focus on the condensation of a new *transnational* 'Historic Bloc'. (Gill 1990)

*I will thus argue that especially migration research has to offer a lot of promising approaches (e.g. transnationalism from below, migrant transnationalism, transnationalisation) to concretise the latest 'Historic Bloc' and in this manner place migration topics into a broader discussion of social change.*

## Local Rescaling Processes

The idea of using a Critical Theory to enhance the concept of Migration Systems is to put social transformation first and afterwards explain the migration-related outcomes. One of the main problems with this method is the question of agency: As Stephen Castles wrote, “critical theories and neoliberal approaches show a certain similarity in their determinism and exclusion of agency” (Castle 2010). Nevertheless, with the ‘transnational hegemony approach’ developed by Cox allows for a broader discussion about agency in International Migration research.

For Cox, the interrelation between politics and social ‘everyday life’ is crucial: The characteristics of states and their societies are defined as opposite poles and only in case of a condensation of different class interests can hegemonic projects be stabilised. This refers to a broader understanding of an influence of civil-society, which is also significant for his theoretical measures of analysis: “Beware of underrating the state power, but in addition give proper attention to social forces and processes and see how they relate to the development of state and world orders.” (Cox 1981)

The question is now how to define ‘social forces and processes’ in the field of International Migration. The term ‘Migrant Formations’, as used above, seems to be practical, but could not express alone the current participation of migrants within general developments of power settings. The solution must be found in terms and topics, which furthermore include non-migrants and their organizational forms. In my opinion, this is a very particular a problem with the methodology within Migration Studies: In the case of using surveys and questionnaires that are formulated mostly for members of specific ethnic groups, there should be more openness to social science methods of class structures and elite groups grouped under Terminologies such as decision making, reputation, position, network, cleavages or social-activity approaches. The aim would be to identify the influence of migrant formations within all social categories and not, as tends to be done, to follow methodological ethnocentrism.

As Robert Cox pointed out, the implementation of hegemonic projects depends profoundly on the interdependency between an institutionalized world polity (the macro structure) and the social ‘everyday life’ (the micro structure). In Migration Studies there are a lot of new concepts and methodologies (mostly geographical, anthropological, sociological, ethnographic) which realise the fact that “locality matters in migration research in a more differentiated way than it has been acknowledged in migration scholarship”. Especially the influence of urban and regional “socio-spatiality and neoliberal restructuring” form part of this new interest. (Glick Schiller; Caglar 2011) In my view, the theoretical topic of ‘local rescaling processes’ should be integrated into a wider *systematic approach* of International Migration for two reasons: Firstly, it approaches ‘migrant formations’ as actors and in particular, as social forces (and not as separate ethnic communities) and secondly, it highlights the relevance of space in times of a *transnational Historic Bloc*.

*This brings me to describe the possibilities and changes of using specific social science methods and their adaptability to combining structure and agency in International Migration research.*

## Redesign Migration Systems

Looking for a framework to analyse International Migration in a more interdisciplinary way, the Migration System approach offers the possibility to see migration as a reciprocal process of movements between places of origin, transit and destination in relation to the social, economic, political and demographic contexts. (Kritz; Zlotnik 1992)

This holistic perspective changed the way we see migration today (thus not anymore as a simple result of push- und pull factors) and despite the fact that some reviews look critically upon the *skeletal form* and the limited explanation power for system changes and developments (Blackwell 2012), it is exactly the non-static character of Migration Systems that makes this approach suitable for further theoretical development. However, one has to recognize that crucial lacks of Migration Systems as an analytical framework is the absence of explanation for conflict, co-operation and forms of regulation on different levels:

„By providing a unifying perspective for the study of migration and its interactions with other processes linking nation states, the systems approach also suggests the need to consider migration policies from a broader perspective, where both conflict and co-operation between different actors at the national and international levels are taken into account in understanding the forces that shape grand policies and those determining the relative effectiveness of their implementation.” (Kritz; Zlotnik 1992: 15)

This is where the Neogramscian approach comes in and provides an additional tool to understand international migration processes. Thus, integrating part of the above explicated theory, I would suggest to 1) analyse Migration Systems within the context of a specific historic bloc constellation respectively from a social transformation perspective; 2) to identify regulation modes enforced by social forces, forms of state and global orders through ideas, institutions and material capabilities; 3) to be aware of rescaling processes and forms of resistance on the local level.



A. Historic Bloc Constellation

B. Modes of Regulation

C. Rescaling Processes

Fig. 2.: The Neogramscian approach – An additional tool to analyse Migration Systems

*Finally there are remaining questions of operationalization: What is the right unit of analysis and how can empirical work be embedded? Hence this presentation will show what ultimately would be crucial factors of a ‘critical’ research project in Migration Studies.*

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