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A Reverse Brain Drain? Western Scholars in Academic Peripheries

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Abstract:

This paper discusses motivations of scholars raised and educated in the centres of global academic production who decided to pursue their career in a peripheral region (Wallerstein 2007). The study employs the extended case method (Burawoy 1998) to reformulate the general theory of 'brain gain' (Singh, Krishna 2015) and 'creative regions' (Florida and Mellander 2015) and adjust them to the reality of peripheral regions. The paper focuses on the four patterns characteristic for migration to academic peripheries: the role of family ties, lifestyle migration, good career prospects for expats and regional interest. The paper is based on 49 in-depth unstructured interviews with Western scholars employed in Poland and Slovakia and the analysis of secondary data sources: three case studies on different types of academic peripheries (Gulf countries, Korea, a remote part of Australia).

Paper:

Introduction

This paper discusses motivations of scholars raised and educated in the centres of global academic production who decided to pursue their career in a peripheral region (Wallerstein 2007). The study employs the extended case method (Burawoy 1998) to reformulate the general theory of 'brain gain' (Singh, Krishna 2015) and 'creative regions' (Florida and Mellander 2015) and adjust them to the reality of peripheral regions.

The basic data source was a project on foreign-born academics in Poland and Slovakia. Forty-nine expatriates coming from Western, or core countries, such as the USA, UK, Australia, New Zealand, Italy, Germany or France, were interviewed about their decision to leave the traditional country of immigration and get a job in a traditional country of emigration. Their life trajectories can be referred to as a 'reverse brain drain', as they use their skill and knowledge produced in the global centres to [em]power an institution located in a periphery. The findings were contextualized using secondary data sources – three case studies on different type of academic peripheries. Gulf Cooperation Council (Lehn 2016), South Korea (Froese 2012), and Tasmania, an island state of Australia, relatively

removed from the global metropolises of the 'mainland' (Verdich 2010). Despite basic differences between those regions, a general pattern or 'special mark' of peripheral academic migration, recur in these cases.

Methodology

The choice of a qualitative approach is aligned with the central research objective, which is to provide in-depth, 'thick' descriptions (Geertz 1973) of life trajectories of migrant scholars that go beyond a very general statistical picture. The use of qualitative methodology, especially in the form of life stories (Bertaux and Kohli 1984), to investigate academic careers in Western societies is widespread (Skachkova 2007; Riemsdijk 2015; Vysotskaya 2015; Yanasmayan 2015; Maximova-Mentzoni et al. 2016). These studies illustrate that migration is not a purely economic decision and relocation rarely can be attributed to clear-cut factors; instead, it much more often takes the form of a long, non-linear process that is difficult to quantify by the means of survey.

Key Findings

1. Family and Heritage Ties

Unlike Western academic systems, CEE and other peripheries attract international academics not because of competitive salaries, reputation, or working conditions (Stephan, Franzoni, Scellato 2013), but due to other non-professional, contingent factors. One of the contingencies common among my interviewees was a willingness to live and work in a place with which one felt strongly related, most often because of a personal between a Western foreign-born academic and a Pole or Slovak for whom CEE was home. Usually a transnational couple decided to live in CEE having carefully analysed personal circumstances, such as a stable position for a spouse in CEE, his or her inability to find an appropriate job abroad, or elderly parents who needed care. Other studies provide other subtypes of family-related academic migration, with triggers such as a spouse transfer (Lehn 2016: 170) or 'the aspiration to bring children up closer to one's immediate family' (Verdich 2010: 134) [\[1\]](#). This life path is a clear-cut example of how non-professional circumstances intervene with a career strategy. Moreover, this scenario is typical for peripheries, where contingent factors play a role comparable to traditional career scripts (Barley 1989; Dany, Louvel, Valette 2011).

2. Lifestyle migration

The lifestyle migration, understood as a 'a route to a better and more fulfilling way of life, especially in contrast to the one left behind' (Benson and O'Reilly 2009: 1), is an adequate label for many biographies of scholars migrating to peripheries. Lifestyle academic migrants are the antitypes of inhabitants of Richard Florida's 'creative cities', attracted by the cultural infrastructure, vivid urban culture, and tolerant atmosphere. Academic migrants to peripheries actually seek the opposite – a life stabilization in a form of 'a safe haven to escape the rat race of the city' (Verdich 2010: 139), or a country with very low crime rates (Lehn 2016: 189). In the context of CEE the most compelling factors

were better career prospects for expats (e.g. high demand for native speakers), and a possibility to settle there for a longer period, as opposed to the 'flexible' forms of employment offered in many Western systems.

3. Lack of promising employment prospects in global centres

Academic peripheries are also attractive destinations for academics who can be referred to as 'middling migrants' to distinguish them from elite academics (see: Rutten, Verstappen 2014). They typically experienced a setback in their career due to unsuccessful projects, job cuts, or downsizing and do not aspire to be the most prominent scholars in their disciplines but still have achievements and call themselves 'midlevel prestige professors' (Lehn 2016: 174). Very often, they submitted multiple applications to very different regions of the world in hopes of succeeding somewhere. Some applied specifically to the peripheries, knowing that they would have a better chance of being hired there (e.g. because of lower pre-entry expectations). By the virtue of their institutionalized cultural capital (Western diploma), they – rather than other 'last resort' candidates from developing countries – usually got a post.

4. Regional interest (as a major pull factor)

Some foreign-born academics have a deep regional or research interest affiliated with the country they live in. Those scholars usually have a background in language or cultural studies with a special focus on a particular region, e.g. Slavistics. This category also embraces historians, philosophers or political scientists. Often, they make their first contact with the country in the course of studies – they come to various kinds of exchanges and internships. A fruitful cooperation can translate, subsequently, into a professional opportunity, which in the context of a competitive job market at home, is a choice worth considering. Similar categories were also found in other countries (Froese 2012: 1106; Lehn 2016: 169). Furthermore, in all those cultural contexts, people declaring a love for a new country (without any regional research interests) were also found (Siegert 2011). This pattern is one of the most prominent motivators in the case of the peripheries, whereas it remains marginal in the centres. Even if core countries do attract a certain number of regional studies scholars, those remain relatively invisible in the massive inflow of academics motivated by other factors.

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[\[1\]](#) Due to word count limit, quotations could not be presented here.