

## ***Interactive comment on “Un-restricted agents? International migration of the highly skilled revisited” by H. Pethe***

**H. Pethe**

Received and published: 15 October 2007

My thank goes to both anonymous referees for their comments. Both referees focus on the structure agency debate in their discussion of the article. They give different advice to restructure the article. Referee #2 suggests to find a better balance between theoretical discussion and empirical evidence, referee #1 additionally remarks that chapter 4 does not link to the rest of the comment. Furthermore, an array of minor mistakes are listed. The last is appreciated very much and can be integrated in the article.

Central concern for the referees is the structure - agency debate. Before I want to respond to these remarks, I want point to a second, equally important issue in the article. The article wants to review of different research approaches in the past and it makes suggestion about possible new research fields. Research on certain fields cannot be holistic. It focuses on certain aspects for several reasons. One reason might be that

fundamental empirical changes occur which questions current models and their validity, another reason might be the wish to implement new theoretical approaches which open up new research perspectives. Seldom, however, I would say, it is pure ignorance. Rethinking common conceptions is necessary, because scientific models need to be updated and policy recommendation should be based state of the art findings. In the turn of 40 years of research on highly skilled migration, those readjustments of research perspectives are not surprising. Although Kuhn and different biographical accounts of scientists' peer judgements brought to the fore that the younger generation often looks down on the older generation of scientists as paradigmatic (Kuhn 1962; Watson 1993), but also constant revisions in specific fields occur, I do not want to say that ignorance of the older generation is the main variable of explanation for the need to implement revolutionary and everyday changes in science.

My article opens the field for two points which might be worthwhile rethinking. Firstly, it reviews the main research perspectives in the field of highly skilled international migration. Thereby it shows, that there are certain lacunae in the analysis which have effects on the current modelling and political judgement of highly skilled migration. Reviewing existing models and comparing them to actual international flows of highly skilled migrants shows that the emphasis in the scientific debates is put on economic migration. Given this, it often appears that highly skilled migration is the avenue to economic success which is not always the case (see e.g. Forster 2000). Furthermore, literature on migration research can give detailed account about the effects and the migration processes of certain groups of international highly skilled migration such as economic migrants. For other groups, it is still unclear why and how they migrate. Although Jöns gave recently a detailed account of the mobility of scientists (Jöns 2003), it is still unclear what factors influence the international mobility of school teachers, nurses, entertainers and artists and so on. Finally, whereas the situation of economic migrants is often discussed, accounts on the situation of humanitarian migrants with a tertiary education are still rare. It is not clear, if the experiences of both groups of highly skilled migrants can be compared and transferred to each other. By identifying and comparing

different groups, insights might appear which can improve the situation of highly skilled migrants who migrated for humanitarian reasons .

The second discussion, which I want to address in the article, does not want to contribute to the migration of the highly skilled in general, but it makes a contribution to the existing imagination in the realm of economically motivated migration. In the 1990s, the literature agreed that the migration flow of highly skilled migrants is structured by transnational companies. Is that also the case after the turn of the millennium? Or is the flow and the composition of international migration streams of highly skilled migrants changing? These questions are discussed in a second line of argument. This second intention of the article addresses observed changes in the migration process, and it discusses the consequences for understanding the international flow of highly skilled economic migration. The Greencard scheme can be seen as a new form of international migration which is based on economic grounds. Given various changes like the internet, the article wants to analyse, if the migration process is still structured by transnational companies. The article argues that there has been a change and it identifies the changes in the interrelation between agency and structure. Here the emphasis is on an analysis of agency. Changes of structural elements are not systematically discussed. Finally, the article links those changes back to the general migration flow of highly skilled migrants. It is argued that the convergence in the migration progress. The migration process is increasingly organised by individual migrants. Individual migrants, however, face several barriers as they integrate in destination countries. The investigation of the low labour market success of highly skilled migrants who left their home countries because of humanitarian reasons gives various examples of possible barriers. At the moment however, those possible problems are overlooked, because international migration research tends to focus on international transferees who are served by transnational companies. As a result, international migration is seen as a unproblematic flow of persons and it maintains a very positive image.

The reviews of my article focused on the second aim of my article. I'm very thankful

for the additional literature, especially in relation to non skilled migrants. By using social networks and focussing on certain niches in the labour markets (Waldinger 1986; Portes and Bach 1985), it is true that low skilled migrants were able to overcome structural barriers. In addition to that, two new points can be observed for the highly skilled migrants who received a Greencard in Germany. Firstly, they were not forced to rely on social networks to find work abroad. New communication devices like the internet allowed them to contact their prospective employers directly. This is not to say that social networks have no influence on the selection of employers, since friends might give recommendations or partners accepted job offers in certain geographical territories. The degree of freedom and the access to information is easier for this groups than for low skilled migrants. Secondly, the labour market situation is fundamentally different in both cases. Low skilled migrants tried to enter a labour market of industries which lost importance in the overall economy. They succeeded by finding niche productions and products. This is not the case in the software industry. In opposition, the high demand of skilled labour facilitated this new migration flows of software engineers. As one referee observed, the Greencard might be discussed as a response to the structural changes resulting from developments associated with global capitalism. I agree that new regulations like the Greencard are rooted in the new strategies in which capitalism seeks to access new labour market resources. At the moment, however, those strategies are rather discursive as the results of my study suggests. In practice, the economic system has not changed. Although pressure groups strongly lobby for the opening of national labour markets and governments agree and pass new regulations (see the German case), the internal division of labour within large multinational companies did not change fundamentally. Instead of bringing labour to Germany and other Western countries, those companies tend to send existing work in countries with low labour costs. The global solution to a massive demand of highly skilled labour is not to bring highly skilled personnel from Third World countries to industrialised countries, but to find outsourcing solutions or the establishment of new branches in those low cost countries. Instead of fuelling international migration, transnational companies maintain

the existing structure and confine international migration streams.

Companies which are smaller or work on a local scale are not able to outsource and subcontract their work internationally. They are theoretically in need for highly skilled labour from abroad. At the moment, however, they are not able to integrate highly skilled personnel who is not able to communicate in the national languages. This is at least true for many larger European countries like Germany, Italy, Poland, Portugal, Spain, which do not have a long tradition of using English as a second working language (e.g. the Netherlands or Sweden). Given this background, I would rather not discuss the Greencard in relation to the restructuring of global capitalism. Practical reasons support existing structures. Therefore, I did not discuss the structural side of the new migration flow in detail, but I focused on agency.

The referees observed that I discussed approaches to the study of migration as well as empirical patterns. They saw a certain tension in doing both. It was suggested to focus on either side and to draw on Tyner (2004) for a methodology which is informed by Foucault's work. As described above, new research perspectives in the analyses of international migration of the highly skilled open up, if both, a theoretical discussion and empirical data is brought together. At the moment certain lacunae exist because very interesting theoretical ideas were followed and then empirically tested. Empirical data has not received new attention. Bringing empirical observations and existing theoretical framework together leads to new insights in my view. Therefore, I would like to reject to exchange the theoretical part for the empirical part and vice versa. But I agree that certain parts of the article such as the discussion of the Greencard scheme need little expansion. I'm very thankful for this comment.

Tyner analysed the manner in which Philippine government controlled meanings and discourse about migration. Of course, thus a methodology would lead to interesting results, if applied on the academic literature or governmental documents for highly skilled migration. This methodology, however, relies on a particular ontology. But I'm sceptical that I followed this ontology in my literature review. Foucault's work relies

on the idea that language sharpens and forms interpretations of reality. He puts an emphasis on language. Although it is difficult to show at this stage what shaped the evolution of research approaches, I would argue that language as well as empirical entities influenced their evolution. In the first articles which were written against the brain drain approach and which tried to identify a brain exchange movement, empirical data is often cited (Findlay 1988; Salt 1992). I rather understand this remark as an invitation to expand on the explanation of my methodological approach, as I reviewed the existing literature.

Another valuable remark was made on chapter 4 and its interrelation to the rest of the article. It was felt that chapter 4 does not support the argument of the whole article and it stands isolated from the rest. In the current article the position of chapter 4 might not be sufficiently explained. I agree that the interlinkages to the rest of the document must be strengthened. This part of the article deserves importance for two reasons: Although non-labour migrants constitute the largest part of the migration flow of highly skilled to Germany, this group does not receive adequate attention. Furthermore, the human capital of those older migrants who come due to humanitarian reasons appears to be higher compared to the relatively young and professionally inexperienced computer scientist. Their failure rate in the labour market lies by 40 to 50 percent (Gruber und Rüssler 2002). This questions the often positive role which agency plays in international migration flows for individual migrants. However, I think the situation of non-labour migrants and labour migrants should be discussed together in order to give a more complete account about the international movement of the highly skilled. By doing so, problems, but also new solutions are made available and in addition, a better understanding of the situation would lead to better political responses.

Reaction to the minor remarks:

All smaller remarks will be considered in the revised paper, although I would like to comment some:

- page 216, line 19-20 It is not true that the remaining paper does not address this gap. This gap is one of the reasons why researcher working with the brain drain approach did not dwell on the role of agency and why the migration process did not stand on the fore in their approach.

- Definition of highly skilled Highly skilled persons either can have a tertiary education or working experience. The Greencard and other labour permits accept both criteria. It will be specified in more detail where necessary in the paper.

- Assessment of the importance of British researchers The working group on "Skilled International Migration" published nearly 40 articles in high ranking journals from 1987 to 2002. It is the most active groups of researchers. The impact is much larger than the activities of individual academics in other countries, because they were able to formulate a research programme in the late 1980s and developed distinctive research approaches. Therefore, I would consider those publications as the most active and most influential contributions in the field culminating to several hundred citations in the Social Science Citation Index (SSCI). Articles by M.C. Brandi are not cited at the moment (see also SSCI).

-Statement about positive effects of highly skilled migration on the nation states (page 212, line 24) There are at least three different fields in which this statement can be found:

Firstly, after the Greencard was introduced, German economists underlined the positive effects of this work permit for the economy. The argumentation was as following: Due to the shortage of labour, there is a danger that companies outsource their work to foreign countries or that they cannot accept new tasks, because they have not enough personnel. In each case a prospective economic gain for the German economy would be reduced (vgl. Bitkom 2000; Müller 2000; Zimmermann 2000). In the course of reworking the German immigration law during the period 2002-2004, economists investigated the effects of the immigration of highly skilled professionals. They also con-

cluded that the immigration of highly skilled is accompanied by positive effects, and they rejected that other highly skilled persons wages would be under pressure (Zimmermann et al. 2002). Furthermore, the immigration of highly skilled professionals and foreign direct investments are complementary. That is the result of Wolter's work (Wolter 1997). Therefore, economists can refer to this migration movement as a signifier of foreign direct investment. Secondly, several additional positive effects of the immigration of highly skilled professionals were expected by politicians: The Greencard was also seen as a crucial step towards successful economic change to a "information society" (Greifenstein 2001, 7). It would increase the competitiveness in a knowledge society (Welsch 2001, 47). The increase in the budget for scientific exchange since 2000, and German initiatives like Hi Potential! that try to stimulate the immigration of scientists to Germany are based on those positive assumptions. Positive effects of immigration of highly skilled are often described for the US.. E.g. universities profit from the inflow of foreign talent (Mahroum 2000). Furthermore, it was also hoped in Germany that the future decline of the workforce could be cushioned by the immigration of highly skilled (Zuwanderungskommission 2001, 26ff). Thirdly, geographers also describe positive impacts of the immigration of the highly skilled. The articles by White and Freund provide a good examples (Freund 1998, 57; White 1988, 411; 1998). In addition to that, the presence of foreign highly skilled professionals was seen as an indicator for global cities (Beaverstock and 2000). This migration flow of highly skilled is seen as an essential part of global capitalism (Beaverstock 1994, 1996).

- Language

I very thankful for the identification of language mistakes. Still I would very much appreciate a detailed explanation in which respect the use of grammar, the language flow and the style of the article is not adequate for an academic article. Maybe the referee could still respond here.

Literature:



Beaverstock , J.V. 1994. Rethinking Skilled International Labor Migration. *Geoforum*. 25. 323-338.

Beaverstock , J.V. 1996. Revisiting High-Waged Labor-Market Demand in the Global Cities. *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research*. 20. 422-445.

Beaverstock , J.V. and Broadwell, J. T. 2000. Negotiating globalisation, transnational corporations and global cities financial centres in transient migration studies. *Applied Geography*. 20. 277-304.

Bitkom 2000. Stellungnahme: Beschäftigung ausländischer IT-Fachkräfte. Nationalitäten und IT-Qualifikationen. Berlin 25. Februar 2000. Berlin. [www.bitkom.org](http://www.bitkom.org) abgerufen am 14.1.2005

Findlay, A. M. 1988. From Settlers to Skilled Transients. *Geoforum*. 19. 401-410.

Forster, N. 2000. The Myth of the International Manager. *International Journal of Human Resource Management*. 11. 126-142.

Freund 1998. Frankfurter Raum als Ziel qualifizierter Migranten. *Zeitschrift für Wirtschaftsgeographie*. 42. 57-81.

Greifenstein, 2001. Die Green Card: Ambitionen, Fakten und Zukunftsaussichten des deutschen Modellversuches, Bonn: Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung.

Gruber und Rüssler 2002. Hochqualifiziert und arbeitslos. Opladen. Leske und Buchdrich.

Jöns, H. 2003. Grenzüberschreitende Mobilität und Kooperation in den Wissenschaften. Heidelberg.

Kuhn, T. 1962. *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*. Chicago

Mahroum 2000. Highly Skilled Globetrotters. *Mapping the International Migration of Human-Capital*. *R&D Management*. 30. 23-31.

Müller 2000. Eine Green Card für EDV-Spezialisten? Wirtschaftsdienst, 80 (IV), 199-201.

Salt, J 1992. Migration Processes among the Highly Skilled in Europe. International Migration Review. 26.484-505.

Watson, James D. 1993. Die Doppel-Helix. Rowohlt.

Welsch 2001. Wachstum- und Beschäftigungsmotor IT-Branche. Fachkräftemangel, Green Card und Beschäftigungspotenziale. Bonn: Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung.

White, P. 1988. Skilled International Migrants and Urban Structure in Western Europe. Geoforum. 4. 411-422.

White, P. 1998. The Settlement-Pattern of Developed World Migrants. Urban Studies. 10. 1725-1744.

Wolter, A. 1997. Globalisierung der Beschäftigung. Baden-Baden: Nomos.

Zimmermann et al. 2002. Fachkräftebedarf bei hoher Arbeitslosigkeit. Ein ökonomisches Zuwanderungskonzept für Deutschland. Berlin: Springer.

Zimmermann, K. F. 2000. Von der Green Card zum Einwanderungsgesetz. Wirtschaftsdienst. 80 (IV). 206-209.

Zuwanderungskommission (Ed.) 2001. Zuwanderung gestalten, Integration fordern. Berlin: Bundesministerium des Innern.

---

Interactive comment on Soc. Geogr. Discuss., 3, 211, 2007.

[Full Screen / Esc](#)[Printer-friendly Version](#)[Interactive Discussion](#)[Discussion Paper](#)