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To cite this article: Kristin VandenBelt, “A Call for a Unified Theoretical Approach to the Study of Migration: Network Analysis of International Migration Systems”, *Uluslararası İlişkiler*, Advanced Online Publication, 06 January 2021, pp. 1-15, DOI: [10.33458/uidergisi.856875](https://doi.org/10.33458/uidergisi.856875)

To link to this article: <https://dx.doi.org/10.33458/uidergisi.856875>

Submitted: 28 June 2020
Last Revision: 07 December 2020
Advanced Online Publication: 06 January 2021

Uluslararası İlişkiler Konseyi Derneği | International Relations Council of Turkey
Uluslararası İlişkiler – Journal of International Relations

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A Call for a Unified Theoretical Approach to the Study of Migration: Network Analysis of International Migration Systems

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ABSTRACT

The field of migration studies has long suffered from a weak theoretical base upon which to ground its work. This article proposes a new theoretical approach – network analysis of international migration systems – to serve as a unifying theory for the study of migration. This new approach seeks to combine the best elements of the compatible approaches of network theory and the migration systems.. This will also allow scholars to engage in theoretically informed concept formation and variable identification, allowing for an interdisciplinary cumulation of knowledge, thereby allowing scholars to predict future migration flows and assist in making meaningful migration policy.

Keywords: International Migration, Migration Theory, Network Theory, Migration Systems, Interdisciplinary Studies Approach

Göç Çalışmaları İçin Birleşik Teorik Yaklaşım Önerisi: Uluslararası Göç Sistemlerinin Ağ Analizi

ÖZET

Göç çalışmaları alanı, uzun süre boyunca, zayıf bir teorik temele sahip oldu. Bu makale, göç çalışmalarında birleştirici teori işlevi görmesi amacıyla, uluslararası göç sistemlerinin ağ analizi adında yeni bir teorik yaklaşım önermektedir. Bu yaklaşım, ağ teorisi ve göç sistemlerinin en iyi unsurlarını birleştirmeyi amaçlamaktadır. Yeni teori, araştırmacılara, uygun kavramları geliştirme ve değişkenleri belirleme fırsatı sağlayacak, aynı zamanda disiplinlerarası bilgi birikimine fırsat tanıyacaktır. Yeni yaklaşım sayesinde, aynı zamanda, gelecekteki göç dalgaları tahmin edilebilecek ve anlamlı göç politikaları oluşturulmasına yardımcı olacaktır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Uluslararası Göç, Göç Teorisi, Ağ Teorisi, Göç Sistemleri, İnterdisipliner Çalışmalar Yaklaşımı

About international migration theory, there are only two things upon which most scholars can agree: the need for a multidisciplinary approach and the weak theoretical base upon which migration studies stand.¹ Michael Bommers and Ewa Morawska explain that the “study of international migration ‘naturally’ transcends disciplinary divisions and cannot be accomplished comprehensively within a single scholarly discipline such as law, politics, economics, linguistics, or education.”² Yet, other scholars posit the reason for this theoretical weakness to be that there are “only a fragmented set of theories that have developed largely in isolation from one another – sometimes, but not always, separated by disciplinary boundaries.”³ The fundamental problem facing migration scholars, therefore, is how to reconcile these two opposing forces. But in their attempts at reconciliation, scholars face a hard road, littered with potential mine-fields: the differing levels and units of analysis across theories; the differing areas of focus (dependent variable) across disciplines; disagreements over the very meaning of multidisciplinary; and diverging opinions on whether a comprehensive, “grand” theory of international immigration is wise, or even possible.⁴ However, the trend in the field of migration studies has been toward increasingly broader conceptual frameworks,⁵ seemingly moving in the direction of a “comprehensive, empirically grounded theory of international migration.”⁶

This movement is largely the result of increasing awareness within the field of migration studies that without the coherent framework that (commonly accepted) theory provides along with agreed upon concepts, tools and standards, the cumulation of knowledge cannot take place.⁷ As academic, scholarly research is about producing a body of knowledge that enhances our understanding of the phenomena of interest⁸ with the ultimate goal of cumulation – building upon previous work to increase knowledge and understanding⁹ – then, if the study of international migration is to advance, it needs a cumulative sequence of work that builds upon previous contribu-

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- 1 Virginia Yans-McLaughlin, “Introduction”, Virginia Yans-McLaughlin, (ed.), *Immigration Reconsidered: History, Sociology, and Politics*, New York, University Oxford Press, 1990, p. 3-18; Jon Goss and Bruce Lindquist, “Conceptualizing International Labor Migration: A Structuration Perspective”, *International Migration Review*, Vol. 29, No 2, 1995, p. 317-351.
 - 2 Michael Bommers and Ewa Morawska, *International Migration Research: Constructions, Omissions and the Promises of Interdisciplinarity*, Burlington, Ashgate, 2005, p. 2-3.
 - 3 Anthony Messina and Gallya Lahav, *The Migration Reader: Exploring Politics and Policies*, Boulder, Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2006, p. 31.
 - 4 Alejandro Portes and Josh DeWind, *Rethinking Migration: New Theoretical and Empirical Perspectives*, New York, Berghahn Books, 2007; Caroline B. Brettell and James F. Hollifield (eds.), *Migration Theory: Talking across Disciplines*, New York, Routledge, 2008.
 - 5 Stephen Castles and Mark Miller, *The Age of Migration: International Population Movements in the Modern World*, 4th Edition, New York, The Guilford Press, 2009, p. 27.
 - 6 Douglas Massey, et al., “An Evaluation of International Migration Theory: The North American Case”, *Population and Development Review*, Vol. 20, No 4, 1994, p. 699.
 - 7 Alejandro Portes, “Immigration Theory for a New Century: Some Problems and Opportunities”, *International Migration Review*, Vol. 31, No 4, 1997, p. 809; Massey, et al., *Worlds in Motion: Understanding International Migration at the End of the Millennium*, New York, Oxford University Press, 1998, p. 69.
 - 8 Milja Kurki and Colin Wight, “International Relations and Social Science”, Tim Dunne, Milja Kurki and Steve Smith (eds.), *International Relations Theories: Discipline and Diversity*, New York, Oxford University Press, 2007, p. 16.
 - 9 Kenneth Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*, New York, McGraw Hill, 1979, p. 8-10; Joaquín Arango, “Theories of International Migration”, Danièle Joly (ed.), *International Migration in the New Millennium: Global Movement and Settlement*, Burlington, VT, Ashgate, 15-35.

tions.¹⁰ And it is in this area that the current article attempts to make a contribution, by proposing a theoretical framework that can serve as the basis for future studies of international immigration – a “commonly accepted theoretical framework”¹¹ – leading, ultimately, to a cumulative body of knowledge of international migration.

The theoretical framework proposed in this study – network analysis of international migration systems (to be referred to from now on as NAIMS) – will be explained in detail in the theoretical framework section later on, but, briefly, NAIMS represents an improvement over existing migration theory and can serve as a theoretical framework for the discipline for two main reasons: 1) It begins with “the model used by most immigration scholars,”¹² network theory. As Arango explains, “Few things, if any, are as characteristic of the contemporary way of looking into migration as the central attention accorded to migration networks.”¹³ The existing “nearly unanimous support” within the scholarly community of the migration network concept makes it much more likely that the modified network analysis proposed here will gain acceptance within the scholarly community.¹⁴ 2) Incorporating the highly compatible international migration systems approach into network analysis serves to address the key theoretical weaknesses from which network analysis suffers¹⁵ while also making it “applicable to all migration types” and, therefore, making it applicable across academic disciplines.¹⁶

But, before getting into the details of the NAIMS approach, a brief look at the existing theoretical approaches to the study of migration is necessary. The paper will then examine the weaknesses of those approaches and why the study of migration deserves a new unified theoretical approach. The NAIMS approach will then be explained in detail followed by a discussion of how it improves upon existing theoretical approaches. Finally, the paper will conclude with a look at possible international migration systems and areas of knowledge that can be built upon using the NAIMS approach moving forward.

10 Joaquín Arango, “Explaining Migration: A Critical View”, *International Social Science Journal*, Vol. 52, No 165, 2000, p. 283.

11 Massey et al., “An Evaluation of International Migration Theory”.

12 Fred Krissman, “Sin Coyote Ni Patrón: Why the “Migrant Network” Fails to Explain International Migration”, *International Migration Review*, Vol. 39, No 1, 2005, p. 4.

13 Arango, “Theories of International Migration”, p. 27.

14 Krissman, “Sin Coyote Ni Patrón”, p. 25.

15 Mary Kritz and Hania Zlotnik, “Global Interactions: Migration Systems, Processes and Policies”, Mary M. Kritz, Lin Lean Lim and Hania Zlotnik (eds.), *International Migration Systems: A Global Approach*, New York, Oxford University Press, 1992, p. 1-16; Monica Boyd “Family and Personal Networks in International Migration: Recent Developments and New Agendas”, *International Migration Review*, Vol. 23, No 3, 1989, p. 638-670.

16 Gustav Lebhart, “Migration Theories, Hypotheses and Paradigms: An Overview”, Heinz Fassmann, Josef Kohlbacher, Ursula Reeger and Wiebke Sievers (eds.), *International Migration and its Regulation*, Amsterdam, IMISCOE, 2005, p. 28.; Roel Jennissen, “Causality Chains in the International Migration Systems Approach”, *Population Research and Policy Review*, Vol. 26, 2007, p. 411; Mary M. Kritz, et al., (eds.), *International Migration Systems: A Global Approach*, New York, Oxford University Press, 1992.

Theoretical Approaches to Migration

Modern theoretical approaches to migration fall into two broad categories: those explaining the initiation of migration, and those explaining the perpetuation of migration.¹⁷

While initiation theories such as the neoclassical economic theory of migration, the new economics of labor migration, dual labor market theory, and world systems are useful and important theories, for the purposes of this article, the focus will be on those theories attempting to explain the perpetuation of migration. The conditions that initiate international migration flows are often quite different from those that perpetuate them across time and space. Although “wage differentials, relative risks, recruitment efforts, and market penetration may continue to cause people to move, new conditions that arise in the course of migration come to function as independent causes themselves” so that each act of migration makes further migration more likely.¹⁸ And since the perpetuation of migration involves new independent causes, it also requires new theories to explain the phenomenon. The ‘perpetuation of migration’ category includes transnational theory, network theory and the international migration systems approach. Unfortunately, transnationalism suffers from issues like “conceptual muddiness,” which is exacerbated by the insistence of some scholars on using terms like transmigrant to identify those individuals who participate in migration-based transnational communities. Such terms do not lend themselves to precise definitions and there is considerable debate about when and how (and if) it should be utilized.¹⁹ Transnationalism studies face an even more significant challenge in that many question the importance of and/or need for transnational studies of migration.²⁰ Which brings us back to the most common and widely accepted theoretical approach to migration

Rooted in sociology and anthropology, network theory seeks to “provide a basis for dialogue across social science disciplines.”²¹ Network theory argues, briefly, that the creation of migration networks between sending and receiving areas will vastly increase migration flows between those areas and maintain those flows over time, as migration networks act as intermediaries that facilitate migration. Given that migration networks constitute an intermediate, relational level between the macro and micro, they can illuminate the connections between the two levels and “the incorporation of networks into theoretical and empirical analyses provides a means of articulating agency and structure and reconciling the functional and structural perspectives.”²² Network theory’s incorporation of a so-

17 Following the approach utilized by numerous scholars including, Jeannette School, “Determinants of International Migration: Theoretical Approaches and Implications for Survey Research”, Rob van der Erf and Liesbeth Heering (eds.), *Causes of International Migration*, Luxembourg, Office for Official Publications of the European Communities, 1995, p. 3-14.

18 Douglas Massey et al., “Theories of International Migration”, p. 448.

19 Peggy Levitt et al., “International Perspectives on Transnational Migration: An Introduction”, *International Migration Review*, Vol. 37, No 3, 2003, p. 571; Luis Eduardo Guarnizo et al., “Assimilation and transnationalism: determinants of transnational political action among contemporary migrants”, *American Journal of Sociology*, Vol. 108, No 6, 2003, p. 1212.

20 Peggy Levitt et al., “International Perspectives on Transnational Migration”, p. 565.

21 Castles and Miller, *The Age of Migration*, p 27.; Douglas T. Gurak and Fe Caces, “Migration Networks and the Shaping of Migration Systems”, Mary M. Kritz, Lin Lean Lim and Hania Zlotnik (eds.), *International Migration Systems: A Global Approach*, New York, Oxford University Press, 1992, p. 150.

22 Goss and Lindquist, “Conceptualizing International Labor Migration”, p. 318; Arango, “Explaining Migration”, p. 292.; Boyd, “Family and Personal Networks in International Migration”, p. 641; Light et al., “Migration Networks and Immigrant Entrepreneurship”, *UCLA: Institute for Social Science Research*, Vol. 5: California Immigrants in World Perspective, 1989; Arango, “Explaining Migration”, p. 292.; Natalia Kovaleva, “Box 3: The Theory of Migratory Networks in Migration Studies”, Gustav Lehart (ed.), *Migration Theories, Hypotheses and Paradigms: An Overview*, IMSCOE Working Paper, IMSCOE, 2005, p. 21.

ciological element and networks' intermediate/connecting position represent an improvement over previous approaches and theories of international migration.

The sociological dimension introduced to the study of international migration comes from network theory's basis in social capital theory, which helped network theory to improve upon "the mechanical and economistic "push and pull" conceptions that prevailed earlier."²³ Social capital theory conceptualizes social capital as a productive and fungible resource that "inheres in the structure of relations between actors and among actors" and that rational actors can draw upon to achieve their goals.²⁴ It includes "personal relationships, family and household patterns, friendship and community ties, and mutual help in economic and social matters"²⁵ and is "the sum of the resources, actual or virtual, that accrue to an individual or a group by virtue of possessing a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition."²⁶ These durable networks are referred to as social networks, upon which the migration network is built. In addition to being derived from social networks, migration networks can be seen to constitute a form of social capital that people can draw upon to gain access to goods of economic significance, such as foreign employment or higher wages.²⁷ Migration networks, which Massey, et al. conceptualize as "sets of interpersonal ties that connect migrants, former migrants, and non-migrants in origin and destination areas through ties of kinship, friendship, and shared community origin,"²⁸ develop out of these social networks as individuals and groups begin to draw on the social capital inherent in these networks. They exploit the social relationships of kinship, friendship, community, etc. in order to support migration.²⁹

Migrants are able to do this, and thereby increase the likelihood of migration, by taking advantage of another form of social capital, the information-flow capability. Potential migrants are able to call upon their family/kinship relationship with those who have already migrated in order to receive information and assistance in the migration process. Charles Tilly even claims that "the vast majority of potential long-distance migrants anywhere in the world draw their chief information for migra-

23 Light et al., "Migration Networks and Immigrant Entrepreneurship"; Krissman, "Sin Coyote Ni Patrón", p. 8.

24 Hames S. Coleman, "Social Capital in the Creation of Human Capital", *American Journal of Sociology*, Vol. 94, Supplement: Organizations and Institutions: Sociological and Economic Approaches to the Analysis of Social Structure, 1988, p. 98-100.

25 Castles and Miller, *The Age of Migration*, p. 28

26 Pierre Bourdieu and Loïc J. D. Wacquant, *An Invitation to Reflexive Sociology*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1992, p. 119; Şebnem Köşer Akçapar, "Re-Thinking Migrants' Networks and Social Capital: A Case Study of Iranians in Turkey", *International Migration*, Vol. 48, No 2, 2009, p. 162.

27 Douglas Massey et al., "Theories of International Migration", p. 448; Arango, "Theories of International Migration", p. 291.

28 Douglas Massey et al., "Theories of International Migration", p. 448.

29 Goss and Lindquist, "Conceptualizing International Labor Migration", p. 329; Charles Tilly and C. Harold Brown, "On Uprooting, Kinship, and the Auspices of Migration", *International Journal of Comparative Sociology*, Vol. 8, No 2, 1967, p. 139-164.; Ivan Light, *Ethnic Enterprise in America*, Berkeley, University of California, 1972.; H.M. Cholden, "Kinship networks in the migration process", *Demography*, Vol. 10, No 1, 1973, p. 163-175.; Mildred Levy and Walter J. Wadycki, "The Influence of Family and Friends on Geographic Labor Mobility: An International Comparison", *The Review of Economics and Statistics*, Vol. 55, No 2, 1973, 198-203.; John MacDonald and Leatrice D. MacDonald, "Chain Migration, Ethnic Neighborhood Formation, and Social Networks", Charles Tilly (ed.), *An Urban World*, Boston, Little, Brown, 1974, p. 226-235.; Douglas Massey and Felipe García España, "The Social Process of International Migration", *Science*, Vol. 237, 1987, p. 733-738.; Douglas Massey, "Social structure, household strategies, and the cumulative causation of migration", *Population Index*, Vol. 56, No 1, 1990, p. 3-26.

tion decisions (including the decision to stay put) from members of their interpersonal networks.”³⁰ Migrant networks also assist with functions like providing job information and contacts with gatekeepers, funds for transportation and other fees, and other resources, like temporary housing, to buffer migrants from the “costs and disruptions of migration.”³¹ This illustrates the reciprocal nature of the migrant-migrant network relationship, for the migrant’s very decision to migrate expanded the migration network upon which that same migrant now relies, “migrations forge networks which then feed the very migrations that produced them.”³² This reciprocal relationship between migration and networks results in one of the most important elements for understanding international migration – cumulative causation. Each act of migration alters the social context/reality within which subsequent migration decisions are made, and it does so in ways that makes further migration more likely.³³ Migrants are obligated/expected to provide information and assistance to those in their social networks, thereby lowering the costs of migration for those left behind, which increases the odds of subsequent migration – migration creates more migration – making migration a self-sustaining diffusion process.³⁴ And this process of cumulative causation means that “whatever macro-societal political/economic conditions may initially have caused migration, the originating pushes and pulls, the expanding migratory process becomes ‘progressively independent’ of the original causal conditions.”³⁵ Migration flows become self-sustaining independent of the circumstances and causes that initiated it because it creates the social structure to sustain itself.³⁶

In the end, this explanation of migration offers a number of improvements over other theories of international migration, such as being able to explain the continuation of migration flows indepen-

30 Russell King, “Towards a new map of European migration”, *Population, Space and Place*, Vol. 8, No 2, 2002, p. 89-106; Charles Tilly, “Transplanted Networks”, Virginia Yans-McLaughlin (ed.), *Immigration Reconsidered: History, Sociology, and Politics*, New York, University Oxford Press, 1990, p. 84.; Some scholars now talk about cultural, in addition to social capital. Cultural capital includes “information, knowledge of other countries, capabilities for organizing travel, finding work and adapting to a new environment”. For further information on the issue see Castles and Miller, *The Age of Migration*, p. 28.

31 Gurak and Caces, “Migration Networks and the Shaping of Migration Systems”, p. 152; Boyd, “Family and Personal Networks in International Migration”, p. 651.

32 Light et al., “Migration Networks and Immigrant Entrepreneurship.”

33 Massey et al., “Theories of International Migration,” p. 451.; Sune Ackerman, “Theories and methods of migration research”, Harald Runblom and Hans Norman (eds.), *From Sweden to America*, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1976, p. 19-75.; Philip L. Martin and J. Edward Taylor, “The Anatomy of a Migration Hump”, J. Edward Taylor (ed.), *Development Strategy, Employment, and Migration: Insights from Models*, Paris, OECD, 1996, p. 43-62.

34 W.R. Böehning, *Studies in Labor Migration*, New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 1985.; Tilly, “Transplanted Networks,” p. 84.

35 Light et al., “Migration Networks and Immigrant Entrepreneurship.”; Goss and Lindquist, “Conceptualizing International Labor Migration”, p. 329.

36 It is true that networks are not always converted into strong social capital (or vice versa), and it has been suggested that “a more critical approach to social networks and to the theory of social capital is necessary in terms of the mobilization of social capital through migrant networks.” See Akcapar, “Re-Thinking Migrants’ Networks and Social Capital”, p. 171. It is true that networks do not always create strong social capital that we would expect to lead to a perpetuation of migration. However, numerous studies have found that “weak ties play an especially important role” in certain types of migration, and are certainly more important than had previously been thought. See Mao-Mei Liu, “Migrant Networks and International Migration: Testing Weak Ties,” *Demography*, Vol. 50, No 4, 2013, p. 1243; Wells, Karen, “The strength of weak ties: the social networks of young separated asylum seekers and refugees in London”, *Children’s Geographies*, Vol. 9, No 3-4, p. 319-329.). In other words, even if networks are not strongly converted into social capital, they can still lead to the perpetuation of migration. Finally, the NAIMS approach that will be discussed can actually help us problematize and investigate networks, for whether or not networks are converted into strong social capital is often based on the individual characteristics of migrants (micro forces) and the structural forces and context (macro) within which those migration flows are occurring – something that the migration systems approach (part of NAIMS) brings in and examines, thereby strengthening our understanding of networks and convertibility. See Filiz Garip, “Social Capital and Migration: How do Similar Resources Lead to Divergent Outcomes?”, *Demography*, Vol. 45, No 3, 2008, p. 591–617.

dent of the initial causes of the movement as well as explaining differential migration. This is possible given that migrant networks may be the main predictors of future migration flows, yet, experience has shown us that ever-expanding migration dynamics do not go on forever – during some part of the process a saturation point is reached, following which, deceleration begins; it is in this area that further research is needed.³⁷ Yet, network theory, despite its widespread acceptance, also suffers from several key theoretical weaknesses. First, and foremost, network theory cannot explain how migration flows initiate, a weakness that even network theory's strongest advocates admit.³⁸ This makes network theory both ahistorical and post factum.³⁹ Second, network theory, and the broader development of the network concept, was developed as part of an effort to incorporate both agency and structure – micro and macro determinants – into analyses of migration.⁴⁰ However, macro conditions are only considered within network analyses during the period in which the migration flows first originate, after that they are considered fixed over time. Additionally, network theory argues that migration flows can become self-sustaining, despite any changes in the macro conditions that may have played a part in initiating the migration flow to begin with.⁴¹ And this is where the migration systems approach was seen as a potential improvement on network theory.

The international migration systems approach emerged from the field of geography in the late 1980's and hoped to improve the theoretical basis of the study of international migration by drawing on the "analytic power of general system analysis" in order to "integrate the contributions of the remaining theoretical explanations, together with all the actors relevant in the process of migration, including networks and intermediary institutions, and some usually neglected dimensions, particularly the state."⁴² The systems approach was seen to enhance the study of international migration in several important ways: by calling attention to both ends of a migration flow, by bringing into focus the interconnectedness of the system, and by reinforcing the view that migration is a dynamic process, a "sequence of events occurring over time."⁴³ Basically, a systems approach provides the researcher with the analytical tools needed to capture the changing trends and patterns of contemporary migration flows, flows that are taking place within a global context that is fundamentally different from the one that existed when the orthodox theories of migration were developed.⁴⁴

At the core of this approach is the concept of the migration system, which is constituted, at a minimum, by a "group of countries that exchange relatively large numbers of migrants with each other."⁴⁵ A simple migration system is comprised of one or more receiving countries, what is called a "core receiving region" as well as a set of sending countries, which are linked to the receiving region by

37 Arango, "Explaining Migration," p. 292.

38 Massey et al., "Theories of International Migration."

39 Krissman, "Sin Coyote Ni Patrón," p. 4-5.

40 Goss and Lindquist, "Conceptualizing International Labor Migration", p. 318; Boyd 1989, 638

41 Krissman, "Sin Coyote Ni Patrón," p. 10.

42 Arango, "Explaining Migration", p. 292-294.; Castles and Miller, *The Age of Migration*, p. 27

43 James T. Fawcett, "Networks, Linkages, and Migration Systems", *International Migration Review*, Vol. 23, No 3, 1989, p. 672-673.

44 Kritz and Zlotnik, "Global Interactions", p. 2.; James T. Fawcett and Fred Arnold, "Explaining Diversity: Asian and Pacific Immigration Systems", James T. Fawcett and Benjamin V. Cariño (eds.), *Pacific Bridges: The New Immigration from Asia and the Pacific Islands*, New York, Center for Migration Studies, 1987, p. 453-473; Alejandro Portes and József Böröcz, "Contemporary Immigration: Theoretical Perspectives on Its Determinants and Modes of Incorporation", *International Migration Review*, Vol. 23, No 3, 1989, p. 606-630.

45 Kritz and Zlotnik, "Global Interactions", p. 2.

unusually large flows and counter-flows of migrants. Overall, the system is characterized by numerous connections, linkages and interactions, such as relatively intense exchanges of goods, capital and people.⁴⁶ Migration between the member-states creates a “unified space” encompassing both the region of origin and of destination.⁴⁷ This unified space forms the spatial dimension of the migration system and this geographic element is one organizing basis that has been identified for migration systems.⁴⁸ But geographical proximity is only one potential organizing basis for migration systems because the sending and receiving regions are linked by more than just migratory processes. These regions are also linked by other processes – historical, cultural, colonial and technological – that play just as significant a role as geographical distance.⁴⁹ Migratory movements generally arise from the existence of prior links between the member-states and are also closely associated with these other processes, so that migration flows should be higher between areas that already have some non-migratory linkages, such as a colonial past.⁵⁰

The other essential dimension of a migration system is time. The unified space (spatial dimension) of the migration system is situated within a specific demographic, economic, political and social context. The demographic context includes things like fertility differentials and short-term travel links, the economic context includes wage and price differentials and regional blocks, the social context involves welfare differentials and migrant networks, while the political context includes exit, entry, and settlement policies as well as international relations.⁵¹ As economic, demographic, political and social conditions change, the system evolves, so that while migration systems are largely stable, they do not have a fixed structure.⁵² Changes in the context of a migration system and changes in the linkages between member-states form the time dimension of that migration system.⁵³

The time dimension is essential in order to capture the flow and counterflow dynamics that are at the heart of migration systems theory. The idea behind the approach is that the “processes linking areas of origin and destination modify the conditions in both areas over time, giving rise to feedback mechanisms likely to transform the initial processes.”⁵⁴ In other words, due to the feedback and circular effects present within the migration system, along with the interdependent and self-modifying nature of the linkage processes, a change in one part of the system may have ripple effects on other parts of the system and, therefore, on the process as a whole. Changes in the context of a migration system and changes in the linkages between the member-states can actually be caused by the international migration process itself.⁵⁵ As we saw in the previous discussion of network theory, “migration move-

46 Hania Zlotnik, “Empirical Identification of International Migration Systems”, Mary M. Kritz, Lin Lean Lim and Hania Zlotnik (eds.), *International Migration Systems: A Global Approach*, New York, Oxford University Press, 1992, p. 19; Massey et al., “Theories of International Migration”, p. 454.; Arango, “Explaining Migration”, p. 292.; Dirk Hoerder, “From Immigration to Migration Systems: New Concepts in Migration History”, *OAH Magazine of History*, Vol. 14, No 1, 1999, p. 5-11.

47 Lebhart, “Migration Theories, Hypotheses and Paradigms”, p. 24.

48 Kritz and Zlotnik, “Global Interactions”, p. 4-5.

49 Lebhart, “Migration Theories, Hypotheses and Paradigms”, p. 24.; Jennissen, “Causality Chains in the International Migration Systems Approach”, p. 415.; Alan Taylor, *American Colonies: The Settling of North America*, New York, Penguin Books, 2002.

50 Castles and Miller, *The Age of Migration*, p. 27.; Kritz and Zlotnik, “Global Interactions”, p. 5.

51 *Ibid.*, p. 3.

52 Massey et al., “Theories of International Migration”, p. 454.

53 Jennissen, “Causality Chains in the International Migration Systems Approach”, p. 415.

54 Lebhart, “Migration Theories, Hypotheses and Paradigms”, p. 24- 25.

55 Jennissen, “Causality Chains in the International Migration Systems Approach”, p. 415.

ments, once started, become self-sustaining social processes”⁵⁶ because migration networks and institutions form to help facilitate processes of migration, settlement and community formation, thereby increasing the numbers of migrants.⁵⁷ Therefore, a migration system can be conceptualized as a group of countries “linked by migration interactions whose dynamics are largely shaped by the functioning of a variety of networks linking migration actors at different levels of aggregation.”⁵⁸

As a result of these linkages across levels of aggregation, the mechanisms that influence migration processes at the macro-level also have significant impacts at the micro-level so that any migratory movement is the result of interacting macro- and micro-structures.⁵⁹ Macro-structures include the political economy of the world market, interstate relations and the laws, practices and structures established by the sending and receiving countries to control migration while micro-structures include the individual migrants along with the informal social networks they create. The networks that link these two levels together are referred to as meso-structures.⁶⁰

Systems theory was seen as an improvement over existing theories because it incorporated elements of the classic theories of international migration, took into account feedback effects, examined flows within the context of other flows, forced attention on both stability and movement in sending and receiving areas, and was applicable to all migration types.⁶¹ This approach tries to provide a framework for studying the linkages and interactions involved in international migration, but “has not been fully successful in integrating the various elements that need to be taken into account. Consequently, its analytical usefulness remains to some extent untested.”⁶² In addition, the migration systems approach suffers from some conceptual vagueness, making it difficult, for example, to determine the difference between the context of a migration system and the ‘other linkages.’⁶³ Once heralded as an approach to the study of international migration that could “capture the changing reality of international population movements,”⁶⁴ the migration systems method is now often considered to be a “desideratum which has never been fulfilled.”⁶⁵

New Theoretical Framework: NAIMS Approach

It is at the intersection of these two approaches – in their integration (NAIMS) – that we find the solutions to the weaknesses from which both theories suffer. By combining these two approaches, the strengths of one help to compensate for the weaknesses in the other. We are thereby creating a more theoretically informed and robust way to study international migration. This integration of network and systems theories is possible because of the inherent compatibility of these approaches – as Monica Boyd explains, the current “interest in these networks [family, friendship and community]

56 Castles and Miller, *The Age of Migration*, p. 229

57 Jennissen, “Causality Chains in the International Migration Systems Approach”, p. 415.

58 Kritz and Zlotnik, “Global Interactions,” p. 15.

59 Lebhart, “Migration Theories, Hypotheses and Paradigms”, p. 25.

60 Castles and Miller, *The Age of Migration*, p. 28

61 Boyd, “Family and Personal Networks in International Migration”, p. 641.; Lebhart, “Migration Theories, Hypotheses and Paradigms”, p. 28.; Jennissen, “Causality Chains in the International Migration Systems Approach”, p. 412.

62 Lebhart, “Migration Theories, Hypotheses and Paradigms”, p. 26.

63 Jennissen, “Causality Chains in the International Migration Systems Approach”, p. 414.

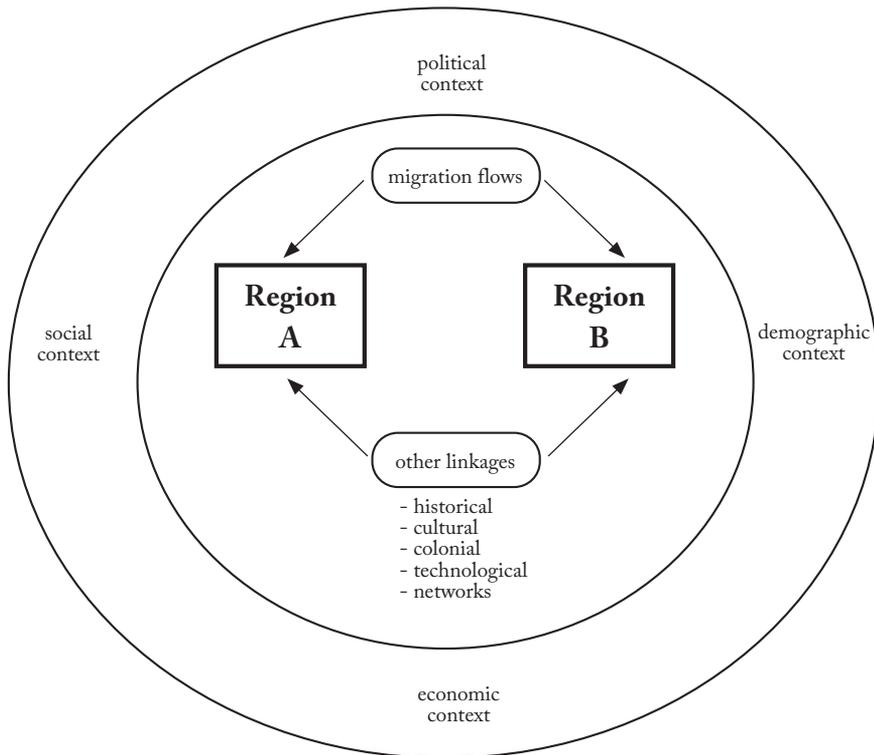
64 Kritz and Zlotnik, “Global Interactions”, p. 3.

65 Arango, “Explaining Migration”, p. 292.

accompany the development of a migration system perspective” – these approaches developed largely in tandem with each other.⁶⁶ From its inception, network theory held that “migration flows acquire a measure of stability and structure over space and time, allowing for the identification of stable international migration systems.”⁶⁷ And for the migration systems approach, the “attention given to the role of institutional and migrant networks in channeling and sustaining migration is a key aspect.”⁶⁸ Within migration systems, networks represent one of the many linkages between sending and receiving countries, ensuring that movements are not limited in time, unidirectional or permanent.⁶⁹

As seen in Figure 1 below, the sending and receiving regions in a migration system are tied together by a series of linkages, historical, cultural, colonial and technological. Migration networks (and migration network theory) are incorporated in the NAIMS approach as another such set of linkages between the two core regions. So, in addition to examining the historical, cultural, colonial and technological ties, we also need to examine the migration networks operating within the system and linking the two core regions. This simple incorporation allows us to benefit from the advantages each theory brings to the table, while also addressing the weaknesses of each.

Figure 1: Network Analysis of an International Migration System



Source: Adapted from Jennissen, “Causality Chains in the International Migration Systems Approach”, Population Research and Policy Review, Vol. 26, p. 415.

66 Boyd, “Family and Personal Networks in International Migration”, p. 638.

67 Massey et al., “Theories of International Migration”, p. 454.

68 Kritz and Zlotnik, “Global Interactions”, p. 15.

69 Boyd, “Family and Personal Networks in International Migration”, p. 641; Lebhart, “Migration Theories, Hypotheses and Paradigms”, p. 25.

International migration systems literature argues that migration networks form one of the key linkages between sending and receiving countries within the system.⁷⁰ According to network theory, the creation of extensive migration networks, as occurs between members of a migration system, then leads to the perpetuation of migration flows between those sending and receiving areas.⁷¹ What the NAIMS approach predicts, therefore, is that membership within a migration system can lead to the initiation of migration, that migrants from one member-state are more likely to migrate to another member-state, rather than a third-party country, and that this migration will be facilitated by, and eventually become durable, as a result of, the creation of migration networks across the migration system.

As explained above, network theory has a difficult time explaining how migration flows initiate, yet Kritz and Zlotnik argue that that “[i]n most cases the roots of migration flows are found in historical factors.”⁷² The initiation of migration flows, what shapes its direction, composition and persistence is “conditioned by historically generated social, political and economic structures of both sending and receiving societies,” variables that are at the heart of the migration systems explanation of migration.⁷³ Network theory’s two main weaknesses – inability to explain the initiation of migration flows and failure to incorporate macro conditions beyond the initiation of migration – are also the two main strengths of the migration system approach, which emphasizes the dynamic structural linkages that exist (and evolve) between sending and receiving countries within the migration system.

However, understanding the economic and political macro-structures as well as the historical and cultural ties that define migration systems does not explain which persons are likely to migrate or why only a certain subset of people actually migrate. In order to answer these questions,

“it is necessary to look at the actual processes whereby macro conditions and policies connect to potential migrants. Those processes include networks of both institutions and individuals that assist with the mobilization and recruitment of migrants and with the actual organization of migration. Operating at and between macro and micro levels, networks link the various countries together into a coherent migration system.”⁷⁴

In other words, if we are to fully understand migration systems and how they function, we must study networks.⁷⁵ Additionally, the study of migration networks is, according to Boyd, closely associ-

70 Ibid.

71 Arango, “Explaining Migration”, p. 292; Massey et al., *Worlds in Motion: Understanding International Migration at the End of the Millennium*, New York, Oxford University Press, 1998.

72 Kritz and Zlotnik, “Global Interactions”, p. 8.

73 Boyd, “Family and Personal Networks in International Migration”, p. 641-642.

74 Kritz and Zlotnik, “Global Interactions”, p. 6.

75 While the NAIMS approach may not identify the first migrant who chooses to migrate from one place to another, it can identify the structural elements that make migration more likely, and once even the most basic network connections are formed, the costs in the cost-benefit analysis made by potential future migrants are drastically reduced and taken into account when examining future migration flows. In fact, this approach “not only brings the migrant as decision-maker back into focus but also reintroduces the social and cultural variables that must be considered in conjunction with socio-economic variables” See Caroline Brettell, “Theorizing Migration in Anthropology: The Social Construction of Networks, Identities, Communities, and Globalscapes”, C. B. Brettell and J. F. Hollifield (eds), *Migration Theory: Talking Across Disciplines*, Routledge, New York, 2000, p. 107; Kritz and Zlotnik, “Global Interactions”, p. 8; Winters, Paul, Alain de Janvry, and Elisabeth Sadoulet, “Family and Community Networks in Mexico-U.S. Migration”, *The Journal of Human Resources*, Vol. 36, No 1, 2001, p.159-184.

ated with “calls for further empirical and conceptual refinements in the study of migration systems.”⁷⁶ If we are to clear up the conceptual fuzziness within the migration systems approach, we must better understand the component parts of the migration systems themselves, such as migration networks.⁷⁷ Network theory, therefore, is the key to addressing the main weaknesses of the migration systems approach, and vice versa.

Moreover, the NAIMS approach allows scholars to study and explain nearly all different types of migration, from economic to forced, regular to irregular, and temporary to protracted due to the importance of migration networks in all of these types of migration. It can be expected that migration flows occurring within an identified international migration system will include several different types, each operating along their own established networks, with flows increasing or decreasing in response to the individual (micro) and structural forces (macro) within the migration system. There has been numerous research done on the importance of networks in economic, regular, irregular, temporary, and protracted migration – both in terms of the decision to migrate, but also in terms of the decision to stay and the ability to adapt to the new host country environment, and regularize one’s status, if necessary.⁷⁸ But, increasingly, researchers are also recognizing the importance of migration networks in forced migration as well. This may be a migrant brought into a country through a human smuggling network, or a refugee/asylum seeker who utilized one of the “informal networks of mobility, subsistence, and information” when deciding where to flee to and how best to seek help.⁷⁹ This, along with the importance of context (political, economic, social, and demographic) brought in by incorporating migration networks into systems theory, allows scholars to anticipate where migration flows might originate from, when they might be stronger or weaker, and to and from which countries/regions those flows will occur across all migration types.

And it is in the incorporation of migrant networks (with their emphasis on social capital) into the migration systems approach that also allows the NAIMS theory to cross disciplinary lines. While the study of migration has been carried out across numerous fields – anthropology, sociology, international relations, social work, public health, and more – the one through line in many of these fields is the focus on networks and social capital; these concepts cross disciplinary boundaries.⁸⁰ Scholars in anthropology and sociology have been studying migration networks since the 1960’s, while scholars of social work and public health have more recently begun to emphasize the importance of migrant

76 Boyd, “Family and Personal Networks in International Migration”, p. 655.

77 Gurak and Caces, “Migration Networks and the Shaping of Migration Systems”, p. 151.

78 Haug, Sonja, “Migration Networks and Migration Decision-Making”, *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, Vol. 34, No 4, 2008, p. 585-605; Borjas, George, Economic Theory and International Migration, *The International Migration Review*, Vol. 23, No 3, 1989, p. 457-485; Cvajner, Martina and Giuseppe Sciortino, “A Tale of Networks and Policies: Prolegomena to an Analysis of Irregular Migration Careers and Their Developmental Paths”, *Population, Space and Place*, No. 16, p. 213-225; Koser, Khalid, “Dimensions and Dynamics of Irregular Migration”, *Population, Space and Place*, No. 16, p. 181-193; Ketter, Roger and Katy Long, “Unlocking protracted displacement”, *Forced Migration Review*, No 40, 2012, p. 34-37; White, Anne and Louise Ryan, “Polish ‘Temporary Migration: The Formation and Significance of Social Networks”, *Europe-Asia Studies*, Vol. 60, No 9, 2008, p. 1467-1502.

79 Palmgren, Pei A. “Irregular Networks: Bangkok Refugees in the City and Region”, *Journal of Refugee Studies*, Vol. 27, No 1, p. 21; Triandafyllidou, A. and T. Maroukis, *Migrant Smuggling. Irregular Migration from Asia and Africa to Europe*, London, Palgrave Macmillan, 2012; Dorai, Kamel, “Palestinian Emigration from Lebanon to Northern Europe: Refugees, Networks and Transnational Practices”, *Refuge*, Vol. 21, No 3, 2003, p. 23-31.

80 Castles and Miller, *The Age of Migration*, p. 27

networks and the social capital inherent within those networks.⁸¹ Moreover, incorporating the systems approach allows migration scholars to identify and incorporate larger structural forces (macro), such as government health policy and social institutions, identified by scholars of social work and public health, alongside the individual (micro) factors, such as migrants' religion and language skills identified by anthropology and sociology as impacting migrants' incorporation into the receiving community.⁸² The NAIMS approach gives scholars the ability to build upon and incorporate the hard work done across multiple disciplines, while also working toward unified concepts and approaches that can be adopted across social science disciplines.

In so doing, NAIMS resolves the opposing forces outlined at the beginning of this section – multi-disciplinarity and a weak theoretical foundation – while also satisfying the conditions laid down by Douglas Massey, et al., who claim that

“Current patterns and trends in international migration suggest, however, that a full understanding of contemporary migratory processes will not be achieved by relying on the tools of one discipline alone, or by focusing on a single level of analysis or one conceptual model. Rather, their complex, multifaceted nature requires a sophisticated theory that incorporates a variety of perspectives, levels, and assumptions.”⁸³

By utilizing this approach to examine modern patterns of migration, we can begin to establish a “commonly accepted theoretical framework” for the field, thus strengthening the theoretical foundation upon which studies of international migration stand and furthering the process of knowledge cumulation.

It will do this by working toward fixing another major criticism leveled at the methods used to study migration: that it is only studied “at a purely descriptive level and that it has only analyzed international migration from the perspective of the receiving countries.”⁸⁴ To date, studies of migration have been largely data-driven, focusing on a particular migrant group or official migration policies in a single country.⁸⁵ If the study of migration is to progress, it must resolve these weaknesses⁸⁶ so that cumulation of knowledge can begin and effective policy recommendations can be made.⁸⁷ Alejandro Portes explains that in the absence of theory,

81 Dahinden, Janine, “Contesting transnationalism? Lessons from the study of Albanian migration networks from former Yugoslavia”, *Global Networks*, Vol. 5, No 2, 2005, p. 191; Martinez-Brawley, Emilia E. and Paz M-B. Zorita, “The Neglect of Network Theory in Practice with Immigrants in the Southwest”, *The Journal of Sociology and Social Welfare*, Vol. 41, No 1, 2014, p. 124-125; Evans, Jeffrey, “Introduction: Migration and Health”, *The International Migration Review*, Vol. 21, No 3, 1987, p. v-vi.

82 Vertovec, Steven, “Introduction: New directions in the anthropology of migration and multiculturalism”, *Racial and Ethnic Studies*, Vol. 30, No 6, 2007, p. 961-962; Torres, Jacqueline M. and Steven P. Wallace, “Migration Circumstances, Psychological Distress, and Self-Rated Physical Health for Latino Immigrants in the United States”, *American Journal of Public Health*, Vol. 103, No 9, 2013, p. 1619-1620; Valtonen, Kathleen, *Social Work and Migration: Immigrant and Refugee Settlement and Integration*, Surrey, England, Ashgate, 2008, p. 2-3.

83 Massey et al., *Worlds in Motion*, p. 17.

84 Arango, “Explaining Migration”, p. 292.

85 Portes, “Immigration Theory for a New Century,” p. 799, 819.

86 Messina and Lahav, *The Migration Reader*, p. 31.

87 Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*, p. 8-10.; Kurki and Wight, “International Relations and Social Science”, p. 16.; Krissman, “Sin Coyote Ni Patrón,” p. 5-6.; Alexander L. and Andrew Bennett, *Case Studies and Theory Development in the Social Sciences*, Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press, 2004, p. 7.

“what we have today is mostly an amorphous mass of data on immigration to different countries and a series of concepts whose scope seldom exceeds those of a particular nation-state. Needed are explicitly comparative projects that focus on research topics at a higher level of abstraction than those guiding policy concerns and that employ a common cross-national methodology.”⁸⁸

The multi-level, cross-national comparative case studies required for utilizing the NAIMS approach is exactly what Portes sees as necessary to solve the theoretical weakness problem in the field of migration. By systematically examining the phenomenon of migration across case countries (cross-national comparative) at the meso- and structural-levels (higher levels of abstraction than the typical individual-level studies), studies will help to resolve the theoretical weaknesses in the field of migration studies.⁸⁹

Moreover, Natalia Kovaleva, among others, argues that to truly understand the mechanisms of migration processes, multiple levels of analysis are required.⁹⁰ This makes the case study approach ideal for studies of migration as it “rests implicitly on the existence of a macro-micro link in social behavior,”⁹¹ a sentiment shared by the NAIMS approach. The macro-level, structural determinants of migration systems theory and the intermediate, meso-level focus of network theory is a perfect complement to the case study method.⁹² This theoretical and methodological compatibility results in a cross-national comparative study that explores the “structural determinants of contemporary migrant flows and the microstructures that sustain them over time,” thereby addressing a key weakness in the study of international migration.⁹³

Finally, in addition to trying to address the fact that migration literature “tends to be a-theoretical and descriptive,” studies using the NAIMS method will attempt to move away from the majority of migration studies, which “consist of ad hoc case studies that are difficult to aggregate.”⁹⁴ Much migration research tends to be intensive, micro-case studies of individual communities of migrants. Extensive interviews are conducted within the community to learn about how/why those communities migrated, etc.⁹⁵ While these small-scale, intensive analyses are interesting and useful, they are rarely aggregated and studied from a higher level of analysis (structural, rather than individual, for example). Without this aggregation, the important lessons that could be gleaned from those studies are lost. The research carried out using the NAIMS approach will be purposefully done at higher levels of analysis (meso and structural), using numerous individual-level studies as sources of information. By aggregating small-scale studies, scholars will be able to identify core variables and linkages within each

88 Portes, “Immigration Theory for a New Century”, p. 799; 819.

89 Hooghe et al., “Migration to European Countries: A Structural Explanation of Patterns, 1980 – 2004”, *International Migration Review*, Vol. 42, No 2, 2008, p. 476-504.

90 Kovaleva, “Box 3: The Theory of Migratory Networks in Migration Studies”, p. 21.; See also Massey et al., “Theories of International Migration.”; Adam Przeworski and Henry Teune, *The Logic of Comparative Social Inquiry*, New York, Wiley-Interscience, 1970.

91 John Gerring, *Case Study Research: Principles and Practices*, New York, Cambridge University Press, 2007, p. 1.

92 Arango, “Theories of International Migration”, p. 29.

93 Portes, “Immigration Theory for a New Century”, p. 812.

94 Gary P. Freeman, “Political Science and Comparative Immigration Politics”, Michael Bommers and Ewa Morawska (eds.), *International Migration Research: Constructions, Omissions and the Promises of Interdisciplinarity*, Burlington, VT, Ashgate, 2005, p. 117.

95 David Kyle, *Transnational Peasants: Migrations, Networks, and Ethnicity in Andean Ecuador*, Baltimore, Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000, p. 81-85.; Portes, “Immigration Theory for a New Century”, p. 799; 819.

migration system, thereby explaining more of the phenomena of migration, and doing so in a more theoretically informed manner.⁹⁶

All of this meaning that adoption of the NAIMS approach on a wide scale within the migration studies community (across all disciplines – a multidisciplinary approach) will result in theoretically informed and robust work carried out at multiple levels of analysis. This will lead to quality concept formation and variable identification, as well as agreement across the migration studies community on core concepts, leading to an all-important cumulation of knowledge.

Conclusion

The NAIMS approach proposed here offers a way forward for the study of migration – a way to address the reasonable criticisms leveled at studies of migration and to correct those issues and strengthen the work produced. By harnessing the best elements of the network theory and the migration systems approach, the NAIMS approach offers a way for migration scholars to improve concept formation, and create widely agreed upon, theoretically informed concepts that allow for knowledge cumulation. And with these widely shared concepts and knowledge cumulation comes the ability for migration scholars to take their work to the next level – predicting future migration flows. Once the work of identifying a migration system and analyzing the linkages and macro-structural environment within which the migration flows take place is completed,⁹⁷ scholars will then be able to anticipate future migration flows and offer information to potentially help policy makers to craft policy that meaningfully aids or disrupts those flows.

Moreover, while some may argue that not all migration occurs within the confines of a migration system, the vast majority of it certainly does.⁹⁸ And new migration systems are being created all the time. A Syrian-European Union (EU) migration system did not exist until relatively recently, but based on the linkages and networks already created in the short time that Syrian migration has been occurring to the EU, we can see that migration, and return migration, will continue to operate for years within that system. An understanding of the individual, meso, and macro variables at play in that system will allow us to better understand and predict future migration flows; which will also give politicians the resources to make better migration policy, if they so choose. And migration systems are not limited by region or time, meaning that scholars can study the migration system in the Southern Cone of Latin America, and some of the information gleaned there will be useful in studying the migration system that exists between Latin America and Latin Europe (Spain, Portugal, and Italy). But the important point is that by utilizing the NAIMS approach on a wide scale, the study of migration will be improved, and our ability to meaningful effect migration flows enhanced.

96 Freeman, “Political Science and Comparative Immigration Politics”, p. 116-117.

97 While the initial identification and evaluation of a migration system will be a lengthy/cumbersome process, once completed, all future work in the area can serve to build upon that initial work and enrich and strengthen our understanding of that migration system. This not only allows scholars to better identify the relevant variables within that system but allows all future work to be more focused on the gaps remaining in our knowledge of that system, helping to eliminate redundancies.

98 Hoerder, “From Immigration to Migration Systems”, p. 5-6.