

Consumption needs and Quality of Life: Austrian Economics and the causes of migration

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Abstract

This paper re-introduces the view on migration causes by the Austrian School of Economics. Austrian economics has not earned its fame in the field of migration, but rather on advocating libertarian economics. Nonetheless Mises outlined a migration model, which can be understood by adding some clarifications by Hayek. Given that the institutional barriers to migration raised by the state are removed, the interplay between market wages, standard wages, attachment component and cost component will determine the migration. While the attachment component relates to fundamental freedoms and to what is referred to as quality-of-life aspects today, the cost component relates to subjective consumption needs. Hitherto unexplored, this model offers new insights to the complex interplay between economic and sociological aspects determining migration drivers.

Keywords: *Migration causes; Quality of Life; consumption; wages; institutional barriers*

Introduction

When discussing what causes migration, the ideas of the Austrian School of Economics are not the first one to pop up in one's mind. Rather, one thinks of libertarian ideas of economic and political freedom. In fact, did the Austrian School of Economics say anything about the causes of migration? The answer is actually yes.

Already in 1922 Mises (2019) briefly discusses how workers will move and why under a capitalist and a socialist economic system.² The free mobility of labour will result in a more efficient allocation of labour relative an administratively organised allocation. The arguments were developed and refined in 1949 (Mises, 1998).³ The free-market economy not only is superior to any government-planned system, but ultimately serves as the foundation of civilization itself. Moreover, Mises (1998) outlined a method to understand the structure of human decision-making. The original version of *Human Action* contained about 900 pages and the four pages where Mises outlines a migration theory under a laissez-faire capitalist system have received little attention. In several aspects, the ideas outlined by Mises are original and improves our understanding of the complex and multifaceted phenomenon called migration.

If Mises ideas on the *causes* of migration have attracted little interest, the ideas on the *implications and consequences* of (im)migration by him and other members of the Austrian School of Economics are more widely debated (Gregory, and Block, 2007; Powell, 2016, 2019; Block, and Callahan, 2003). While Hayek thought an unrestricted immigration would lead to a

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² *Die Gemeinwirtschaft: Untersuchungen über Den Sozialismus* was published in 1922 and a second edition was published in 1932. The English translation, *Socialism: An Economic and Sociological Analysis*, is based on the second edition in German (Mises, 2019).

³ *Nationalökonomie: Theorie des Handelns und Wirtschaftens* was published in 1940. The *Human Action* is based on it and expands its arguments (Hülsmann, 2007).



xenophobic reaction in the host country (Hayek, 1979), Mises held a more ambiguous position. Powell (2019) considers Mises to be stuck in a conundrum when it comes to the impacts of immigration. Hoppe (1999) and Rothbard (1994), also key scholars in Austrian economics, are explicitly anti-immigration. Just for clarification, as the Austrian School of Economics' view on the *consequences* of migration is well-surveyed, we have no ambition to intervene into that debate here. Notably, while the abovementioned studies mainly discuss the *economic* consequences of immigration, this study, however, is not restricted to economic aspects alone.

This paper aims at discussing the causes of migration outlined by the Austrian School of Economics represented by Mises and Hayek. Three research questions are proposed to be answered: (1) what are the main elements referring to migration within the Austrian theory, and (2) how is the model formally formulated? (3) What are the similarities and differences between the Austrian migration theory and the other main migration theories?

The paper starts by describing the theoretical and methodological premises in which the Austrian migration theory is formulated. The third section outlines the migration theory by Mises and how it considers the causes of migration. In the sections four to seven, different elements of the migration theory outlined in section three are specified, and in section eight a formal migration model is defined. The Austrian migration theory is compared to other migration theories in section nine. The paper closes with some concluding remarks.

Theoretical and methodological premises

The Austrian economics generally rejects mathematical modelling, econometrics and macroeconomic analysis, something which has placed this economic school outside mainstream economics (Meijer, 1995). While many other economic theories focus on aggregate variables, equilibrium analyses and societal groups, Austrian economics focus on the subjective choices of *individuals*. It is postulated that individual knowledge, time, expectation, and other subjective factors cause all economic activity, and Austrian economics seeks to understand the economy by examining the social ramifications of individual choice (White, 2003).

Austrian economics considers *methodological subjectivism* a key tenet (Kirzner, 1992). When explaining economic phenomena, judgments and choices made by individuals on the basis of the knowledge they have or believe to have are central. So are the expectations individuals have on external developments and especially the perceived consequences of their own intended actions. Tastes and preferences of goods and services determine the demand for them, and their prices are influenced by (actual and potential) consumers (Menger, 2007; Roll, 1992).

We can assume that the *opportunity costs* matter when an individual decides to migrate or not. It refers to the costs with which producers and other economic actors calculate the alternative opportunities that must be foregone; as productive services are employed for one purpose, all alternative uses have to be sacrificed (Backhouse, 1991). In migration, the decision to migrate reflects the alternative opportunities forgone by staying or leaving.

Only when individuals are given full economic freedom will it be possible to secure political and moral freedom. Restrictions on economic freedom lead, sooner or later, to an extension of the coercive activities of the state into the political domain, undermining and eventually



destroying the essential individual liberties in capitalistic societies (Hayek, 1960; Menger, 2007; Mises, 1998; Rothbard, 2007). Austrian Economics postulates that there should be no institutional barriers to the mobility of capital, commodities, and labour (Mises, 1944). For labour, this does not only include geographical mobility, but also between occupations (Mises, 2011). In the name of ‘planning’, the state tends to raise institutional barriers and hence reducing the economic freedom (Hayek, 2006).

Outlining a migration model

Workers move to where conditions are most favourable for them. In a capitalist economy, says Mises (2019:227), “men migrate continually from the places where conditions are less favourable to places where they are more favourable for production”. However, workers can also be pushed to migration due to unemployment (Mises, 2015). Migration in a socialist planned economy is based on administrative decisions, which does not allocate capital and labour efficiently (Mises, 2019).

A worker and a consumer are one and the same person. Such person does not only want to increase his/her incomes, but also maximise lifestyle factors, living conditions and other aspects influencing a person’s life in general. Mises (1998:622) argues that the

“height of wage rates for definite types of labor which would prevail on the market if the workers did not discriminate between various places and, wage rates being equal, did not prefer one working place to another, standard wage rates (S). If, however, the wage earners, out of the above-mentioned considerations, value differently work in different places, the height of market wage rates (M) can permanently deviate from the standard rates. We may call the maximum difference between the market rate and the standard rate which does not yet result in the migration of workers from the places of lower market wage rates to those of higher market wage rates the attachment component (A).”

Place attachment plays an important role here, and Mises considers place attachment either positive or negative. The provision of consumer goods influences place attachment. In some places the supply is high, yet in other low. Prices on the desired goods differ to some extent on transportation costs. This leads Mises (1998:622-23) to conclude that in

“some places a man must expend more in order to attain the same degree of want-satisfaction which, apart from the circumstances determining the amount of the attachment component, he could attain elsewhere more cheaply. On the other hand, a man can in some places avoid certain expenses without any impairment of his want-satisfaction while renunciation of these expenses would curtail his satisfaction in other places. We may call the expenses which a worker must incur in certain places in order to attain in this sense the same degree of want-satisfaction, or which he can spare without curtailing his want-satisfaction, the cost component (C).”

If the cost component has no impact on people, they will migrate to places where the market wage is the highest. People are attracted to places where productivity is high. This leads to what Mises call overpopulation in some places. Over time, the wages will equalise over the world if the component is assumed to have no impact. However, the cost component cannot be disregarded.

“We may call an area comparatively overpopulated if in it market wage rates are lower than the standard rates plus both the (positive or negative) attachment component and the (positive or negative) cost component, that is where $M < (S + A + C)$. Accordingly an area is to be called comparatively underpopulated in which $M > (S + A + C)$. In the absence of institutional migration barriers workers move from the comparatively overpopulated areas to the comparatively underpopulated until everywhere $M = S + A + C$ ” (Mises 1998:623).

This model applies to both persons selling their labour to production of goods or services (workers) as well as to persons working on their own account (entrepreneurs). However, the behaviour and decisions regarding migration by persons who have their incomes from capital or pensions is not specified. Given the assumption that workers and consumers are one and the same person, persons living on incomes of capital and pensions can also be considered consumers. Hence, the attachment and the cost components will play just as an important role in migration for persons living on incomes from capital and pensions as for entrepreneurs and workers.

When Mises formulated his view on why migration occurs, institutional barriers confined international migration which made him conclude that his ideas are “operative only within each nation’s boundaries” (Mises 1998:624). This is a logical conclusion given the times when he formulated this theory.

Specifying market wages and standard wages

The definition of Mises’ market wages (M) and standard wages (S) appears somewhat intricate, and, even, outdated. However, M reflects the subjective valuation of workplace by the worker. It is also explicit that there is a spatial or geographical aspect related to where the workplace is situated; given the same wage rate for a profession (S), the geographical location of the workplace may lead to variations in the actual wage rate paid by the employer. This is close to what Mises call M. Given this interpretation, M and S will then reflect some sort of relative wages, i.e. how the wage of the specific individual compares to others in the same profession in different geographic/spatial places. Moving from one place to another, still working in the same profession, may then, *ceteris paribus*, change the relative wage in a way Mises describes with M and S.

Specifying the attachment component

Any group of consumers will consider “the special conditions and circumstances [that] interfere with [their] enjoyment of life and to what extent” (Mises 1998:622). As Mises does not provide a clarification, this has to be made to understand the migration model. In a broader sense, the ‘attachment component’ can be understood as what quality of life a person enjoys in a certain place. There are factors (‘conditions’ and ‘circumstances’) with a varying impact on quality of life, differing from person to person and from place to place. However, aspects related to quality of life cover a wide canvas, and hence needs further clarification. Mises does not do this himself, but Hayek (2006) does. He outlines three factors that qualifies as ‘conditions’ and ‘circumstances’. *Freedom of opinion* is the first, relates closely to the political individualism advocated by the Austrian economics. In totalitarian systems, all aspects of life are covered by an official doctrine to which the individual has to adhere to; there is no room for individualism in opinions.



Economic freedom of the individual is at the core of a free and functioning society. This is a second factor qualifying as ‘conditions’ and ‘circumstances’. The central economic planning, and the empowerment of the state over the individual, by socialism, fascism and Nazism. Hayek (2006) argues that abandoning economic liberalism and individualism creates an oppressive society. Moreover, it leads to the serfdom of individuals.

A third factor qualifying as ‘conditions’ and ‘circumstances’ is *equality before the law*. Equality before the law is a key tenet for Hayek. The government should provide a stable and known framework of rules (Hayek, 2006), which implies that the government should let the players play and ensure that the game is played according to the rules (Hayek, 1960). Hence, an active intervention of the government through e.g. egalitarianism, subsidies and central planning efforts will bias the rule of law (Bengtsson, and Raubut, 2021).

These three aspects of fundamental freedoms are relevant to include when talking about migration: with no room for an individual opinion, economic serfdom, and arbitrary rule of law there cannot be any quality of life. An individual will always choose a place with e.g. a high degree of economic freedom instead of one with little; a place with a high degree of economic freedom will enable the individual to achieve self-fulfilment (Hayek, 1960). The three ‘conditions’ and ‘circumstances’ Hayek mentions have a varying impact on quality of life, and hence, these propositions affect the migration decision of the individual.

Specifying the cost component

The cost component is about meeting a person’s ‘want-satisfaction’, and this can be understood as meeting the individual’s consumption needs. Such consumption needs will vary over time and space. In economics, ‘consumption’ contains a variety of things: everything from luxury items to basic commodities for physical survival; from entertainment and social activities to experiences and environment. Leisure time can also be consumed.

Institutional barriers and opportunity costs

Mises thought his explanation to migration drivers only was valid within the national borders of one country, which is the case in many situations. However, the European Union has removed the institutional barriers to stimulate the mobility of capital, labour, goods, and services between the member states, which actually extends the applicability of his ideas beyond the boundaries of a single nation.

Although Mises never explicitly mentions the importance of opportunity costs in relation to migration, these play a key role in the migration decision. How would it be possible for the individual to evaluate if $M < (S+A+C)$ or $M > (S+A+C)$ unless the opportunity costs are calculated? Mises explicitly argues that when $M = (S+A+C)$ migration flows will stop, which reflects that the differences in alternative opportunities forgone are negligible whether the individual decide to stay or migrate. The opportunity costs also include the potential costs for the actual moving, the estimated costs for leaving friends and family behind/making new friends in the place of destination, as well as the estimated costs for, in case it is needed, invest in place specific knowledge (e.g., language, customs, traditions).

Defining the model

The migration model of the Austrian School of Economics contains the following constituents: institutional barriers to migration (I), market wages (M), standard wages (S), consumption (C), attachment (A) and opportunity costs (O). A has several constituents: ‘enjoyments in life’, which can be understood as a quality of life in a general perspective (Q), and important freedoms related to political individualism (F): economic freedom, political freedom and equality before the law. Hence, A can be seen as a function of Q and F , $A = f(Q, F)$.

The reasoning related to market wages and standard wages are difficult to translate to our contemporary time, but they reflect geographical relative wages; within the same profession, people move where they get the most ‘bang for the bucks’. Hence, the geographical relative wages (R) can be seen as a function of M and S , $R = f(M, S)$.

The willingness to migrate (W_m) can then be formalised as:

$$W_m(0) = \int_0^n [I(t)R_i(t)A_i(t)C_i(t) - R_j(t)A_j(t)C_j(t)]e^{-rt}(t) - O(0)$$

$W_m(0)$ is the expected willingness to migrate calculated just before the departure time 0; t is time; $I(t)$ is the probability of avoiding deportation from the area of destination (1.0 for legal immigrants, <1.0 for undocumented migrants); $R_i(t)$ is the probability of a higher relative wage at the destination; $A_i(t)$ is the attachment if residing in the place of destination; $C_i(t)$ is the consumption if residing in the place of destination; $R_j(t)$ is the probability of higher relative wage in community of origin; $A_j(t)$ is the attachment if remaining in the community of origin; $C_j(t)$ is the consumption if remaining in the community of origin; r is the discount factor; and $O(0)$ is the total opportunity costs of migration at the departure time 0, including social and psychological costs as well as costs for moving.

If the quantity $W_m(0)$ is perceived positive for some potential destinations, the potential migrant will change location; if it is negative, i.e. migration will not improve the situation, the potential migrant stays; and if it is zero the potential migrant is indifferent between moving and staying.

Comparison to other migration models

One of the first to formulate a concise and coherent economic migration theory was Adam Smith in 1776 (Rauhut, 2010). This migration theory has been known as the ‘classical’ economic migration theory (Lewis, 1954). In short, wages and unemployment in the places of origin and destination will level out due to migration between the two places. The Austrian migration theory predicts the same levelling out process.

Ravenstein (1885, 1889) formulated a migration theory based on empirical observations, predicting that migratory flows were headed towards bigger cities. Prospects of jobs and income were the drivers behind migration. To Ravenstein, migration is always directed towards the cities or from a small city to a bigger city; reverse migratory flows, from cities to the countryside or from a big city to a smaller city, are unexplained. The Austrian migration theory can explain the migratory flows to and from cities depending on if $M < (S+A+C)$ or $M > (S+A+C)$.



In the neoclassical macro theory of migration, Lee (1966) argued that migration is based on push and pull factors at an aggregate level. The push factors are e.g. unemployment, low incomes, poverty, prosecution, war and political instability, while the pull factors are the inverted push factors. The Austrian migration theory also focuses on the importance of economic conditions in the area of origin and the area of destination, but the inclusion of *economic freedoms* into the migration theory makes it more advanced than the push/pull model.

The neoclassical micro theory on migration focuses the individual and on income maximization. The individual is also assumed to possess full information and make rational decisions. Comparing the income in the area of origin to the income in the area of destination is a part of this assumed rationality (Ranis, and Fei, 1961; Sjaastad, 1962; Todaro, 1969). Income, of course, can be assumed to determine the individual's consumption, but the neoclassical micro theory on migration says nothing about consumption, nor on quality of life aspects as the Austrian migration theory.

The New Economics of Migration theory questions the key postulates in neoclassical economics; migration decisions are made by households and not individuals, and risk minimising is more important than income maximation for migration decision (Stark, and Levhari, 1982; Stark, 1984). Quality of life aspects are not discussed by the New Economics of Migration theory, but the consumption of the immigrant will be low as a consequence of low incomes, actively saving money and sending remittances (Stark, 1991).

To find a migration theory which highlights consumption and quality of life aspects as migration drivers, leaves us with one theory: the *lifestyle migration* theory, which originates from sociology. This theory is about the material and social construction of particular places offering an alternative way of living, and explains the exact destinations chosen, revealing the role of imagination, myth and landscape within the decision to migrate (O'Reilly, and Benson, 2009). Rather than being an assessment of where a person can find better economic opportunities (O'Reilly, 2012), a person enjoys a more fulfilling way of life by changing their place of residence (Torkington, 2010). Lifestyle migration is also a response to materialism and consumerism of contemporary lifestyles (Benson, and O'Reilly, 2009). This relates to the quality of life aspects Mises outlined. Although lifestyle migration may be a reaction against the consumption in an affluent society, lifestyle migration underlines the importance consumption has in the migration decision. However, from a different perspective, Mises also consider consumption an important migration driver. Lastly, in the lifestyle migration theory migrants assess the perceived gains and losses of their migration, either in the short and/or in the long run (Åkerlund, and Sandberg, 2015; Ryan, and Mulholland, 2015). The Austrian migration theory would agree to this statement.

Concluding remarks

This paper discusses the causes of migration outlined by the Austrian School of Economics. Mises is the one outlining the main characteristics in this model, but some of Hayek's ideas are needed to understand how Austrian economics consider the causes of migration. Three questions were put forward to be answered: (1) what are the main elements referring to migration within the Austrian theory? Regarding what the main elements are, Mises specifies them as market wages, standard wages, an attachment component and a cost component. Market wages and standard wages refer to relative wages between different geographical places. The attachment component is a function of quality of life aspects in a wider sense,

what Mises calls ‘enjoyments in life’, and important freedoms related to political individualism (e.g. economic freedom, political freedom and equality before the law). The cost component is about meeting the individual’s consumption needs; Mises calls this meeting a person’s ‘want-satisfaction’.

(2) When a formal model is formulated, the different elements mentioned above need to be complemented by two additional elements. Although Mises does not discuss *opportunity costs* when outlining his model, these need to be included. Unless the opportunity costs are calculated, it is impossible for the individual to evaluate if $M < (S+A+C)$ or $M > (S+A+C)$. Moreover, the *institutional barriers to migration* between countries have to be considered in a formal model of migration.

No doubt, the formalisation of the Austrian theory of migration into an econometric model can be considered blasphemous as the Austrian School of Economics is well-known for rejecting mathematical modelling and econometrics. The formalisation of the migration theory conducted in this paper does not aim at testing its validity econometrically, but to check if the model is logical in its construction.

(3) The Austrian migration theory display similarities as well as differences to other main migration theories. That wage differences between different places have an impact on migration, and that there is a push/pull aspect corresponds with most economic migration theories; the quality of life aspect and the desire for consumption corresponds with the sociological lifestyle migration theory. Moreover, the neoclassical macro theory of migration points at political prosecution and arbitrary exercise of authority as push factors; the Austrian migration theory talks about the importance of political and economic freedoms for the individual, which is an overlapping discussion.

The differences relate to the uniqueness of the Austrian migration theory: it combines economic aspects (wages levels) with consumption and quality of life aspects. The two latter aspects relate mainly to sociological aspects. Furthermore, the quality of life aspect includes fundamental freedoms – economic and political freedoms as well as equality before the law. No other migration theory includes all these aspects in one and the same theory.

Some avenues for future research can be identified. One task for future research would be to test to what extent the Austrian migration theory can explain migration flows within and between countries. Another task would be to develop a methodology to analyse migration flows. If e.g. quality of life – including fundamental freedoms – play a role in migration flows, there are no statistical indicators surveying such aspect that could be used for mathematical modelling. Moreover, what desire an individual has to consume different services and products is highly subjective and hence cannot be reduced to a statistical variable in mathematical modelling. The methodological work ahead has to focus on what kind of interview question that are best suitable to survey the importance of these aspects.

The causes of migration are multifaceted and complex. Economic theories on migration focus on the economic drivers, sociological theories on the sociological drivers. Hitherto unexplored, the Austrian migration theory offers new insights to the complex interplay between economic and sociological aspects determining migration. Indeed, this is an added value to understand the causes of migration – not only in theory, but also to understand how migration materialises in reality.



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