PART I

HISTORICAL APPROACHES
Migration is the talk of the town. It is difficult to read a newspaper without stumbling upon the ubiquitous phenomenon of human geographical mobility, its consequences and the reactions it provokes: boat refugees from Africa, dead bodies washed up on Mediterranean shores, Chinese peasants in Shanghai and other booming towns, Filipino servants and nannies in Rome and Dubai, Mexicans illegally crossing the border of the United States, Polish and Romanian workers all over Western Europe and Chinese mainland brides in Taiwan, to mention just a few examples. On the whole, the current situation is seen as resulting from unique political upheavals (the fall of the Iron Curtain, the wars in Iraq and Sudan, etc.). Others point to the process of globalisation, which is regarded as unprecedented and characterised by increasing cultural, social, political and economic global interaction and interpenetration since the 1980s or so. Contemporary predictions about migration and its effects have often been proved wrong, largely due to an insufficient understanding of the past. Think of the forecasts at the beginning of the 1990s that 25 million Russians would leave the Soviet Union and of a massive stream of labour migrants from other Eastern European countries after the fall of the Iron Curtain. Moreover, such a-historical interpretations are not particularly helpful in understanding the nature of the migration experience. Quite the reverse, recent studies show, for example, that the current global migration is more diverse, but that its scale is strikingly similar to a century ago, whereas more long ranging observations show that migration has been a structural aspect of human life since the very beginnings. So far, however, the work by

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3. Thranhardt 1996.
