Making Sense of a Minor Migrant Stream

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The relatively few Norwegians who migrated to Latin America between 1820 and 1940 represented a miniscule share of the transatlantic migration system. More than fifty million Europeans crossed the Atlantic between 1815 and 1939. Nearly one million of these were Norwegians. But only about ten thousand of them were Norwegians who went to one or more Latin American countries.

The purpose of this chapter is to discuss possible similarities and differences between the small stream of Norwegians to Latin America and the other streams of the mass transatlantic movement. In order to do that, I will first present a general model of migration processes developed by Thomas Faist, which will in turn allow us to examine why Norwegian migration to Latin America between 1820 and 1940 never reached a substantial level. Using the best available statistics, the second part of the chapter discusses how this migration fits into Faist’s model. The last section describes the three main phases of the Norwegian migration stream to Latin America during the same period, and introduces some of the more specific questions that will be explored in more detail in subsequent chapters.

The transatlantic migration was in itself just a small part of a major migratory trend which affected all of Europe and the Americas during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Internal migration, from rural to urban areas and from older settled rural areas to new frontiers, was the general tendency involving millions of persons who sought at first land and then increasingly salaried jobs in the main manufacturing centers of Europe and the Americas. Within both continents, new centers and new peripheries emerged. “New” industrial cities such as Berlin, Bremen, Bilbao, and Buenos Aires, which were connected to the ever-expanding modern transportation networks of railways and steam ships, replaced the “old” administrative and agricultural centers such as Madrid, and Mexico City.

Migrants responded to the economic and political shifts in various and complex ways. They moved within countries (from rural areas to cities), across borders, and across the sea. The goal of many was not to become modern or live in a city, but to acquire land and set up a farm. For most migrants, this was

just a dream. The stereotypical nineteenth-century European rural families – those who left their home community and settled in the first place where they could get land cheaply in the Americas – were never actually the norm. Already by the 1840s, more than 60 percent of the immigrants to the United States went into wage labor.\(^2\) Cheap land was usually only available where the soil was poor and infrastructure weak or inexistent.

Norwegians who migrated to Latin America were simultaneously typical and atypical. They shared with other migrants the decision to cross borders and oceans to try their luck elsewhere. Like other migrants, they came from all classes of society, although the laboring classes dominated numerically. Like their fellow migrants from other parts of Europe, they left largely for economic reasons, in search of better conditions for work or farming. The Norwegians who went to Latin America were also typically young, and they had relatives or more distant acquaintances forming networks of information in their new home countries. In other words, although the Norwegian stream of migrants to Latin America was small, it did form part of the great transatlantic migratory wave.

Still, the wave was composed of larger and smaller streams, and each of them had their own idiosyncrasies. One of our principal questions concerns how to explain that such a limited number of Norwegians ended up in Latin America between 1820 and 1940, when the general Norwegian rate of emigration was so high and when Latin America received so many millions of immigrants. This may seem at first sight to be a counterfactual question of the type that is highly problematical for historians to tackle. Explaining why something did not occur is even more difficult than explaining why something did occur, and the possible causes for something not happening may in principle be endless. On the other hand, the question is not that far-fetched – after all, there was a sizeable emigration from Norway in general, so why not to Latin America in particular? Moreover, there were Norwegians in Latin America from early on who stayed in touch with family and friends in Norway. Land and jobs were available in many areas of Latin America, and migrants from other countries in Europe and elsewhere did in fact enter on a massive scale.

At a more general level, certain questions relating to minor migrant streams are important to raise. The tendency in migration studies has been to focus on the largest groups that gave rise to the large migration waves, and to understand the mechanisms of their growth and decline. But we often forget that minor streams were more numerous and in many instances counted for more migrants in sum than the major waves. And – perhaps even more importantly

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2 Ibid., 336.