There is no question that the phenomenon of international migration of labor defies easy explanation. It is fair to say that dependency theories did not set out to tackle this issue. Some partial and isolated contributions, such as those by Paul Singer, have been duly recognized (José L. Hernández 2008) while more radical sociologists from the region, such as the founders of the marxist school of marginality, mainly Aníbal Quijano (1977) and José Nun (2001) seem to have found no reason to engage in the discussion of the problem. In this case, international labor mobility was not seen as representing any serious theoretical challenge as it was basically solved in the international production of a relative surplus population. The assumption that underlies this is that Marx’s general theory of capital satisfies most requirements concerning contemporary explanations of the realities of imperialism. General propositions are supposed to directly serve as a base to tackle actual phenomena. In fact, marginality, i.e., the existence of a surplus population beyond that of the reserve army of labor, was represented as a characteristic phenomenon of capitalism in general. But this falls far short of a fully adequate and useful explanation of migration under today’s conditions.

The organization of capital changes as development proceeds and the manifestation of its inherent tendencies becomes modified accordingly. At first glance, it would seem obvious that the emergence of imperialism led to a new manifestation in the form of the tendency to create a surplus population at the international level. This can clearly be seen through migratory movements. Since the 1950s, labor migration experienced a unilateral shift that flowed from the region outward to developed countries. The real process that unfolded suggests to us that Marx’s law regarding population does not operate in the same way in both developed and underdeveloped countries. Indeed, this is the case, but still the operation of this law is determined by the social relations of production and therefore the capital relation itself should account for the difference in its manifestation form. The solution to
related problems such as wage differentials are also to be found using these same assumptions as a point of departure.

In this essay, I will attempt to outline some mediating propositions that should allow us to reconcile general theory with unfolding historical processes as we build an overall theoretical explanation of migration. I will start off with a brief presentation of Marx’s theory of relative surplus population, calling attention to what we see as its shortcomings and suggesting a solution designed to overcome them. Next, I will present some pertinent theses regarding underdeveloped societies and on these grounds propose the outlines of a solution to some of the most serious problems posed by contemporary migration.

A Necessary Amendment to Marx’s Theory of Relative Surplus Population

Marx upholds that capital accumulation produces “in direct ratio of its own energy and extent” a relatively redundant population of laborers, a population of greater number than that which suffices for the “average needs of the valorization of capital, and therefore a surplus population” (Marx 1975, Vol. I: 184). This overpopulation is “an industrial reserve army at the disposal of capital” and creates (contains) “for the changing needs of the valorization of capital, a mass of human material always ready for exploitation” regardless of the limits of population (Marx 1975, Vol. I: 786).

The relative character of this surplus population comes from the fact that it serves capital whenever new industries are created or existing ones expand. Thus, the expression “excessive for the average needs of the valorization of capital” must be understood as referring to a surplus-population in relation to capital in motion. The relative overpopulation referred to by Marx is the essential human material for future capital, i.e., for the capital that will be realized upon the further expansion of existing industrial branches or creation of new industries. That is how the definition of surplus population as a given “condition of the existence of the capitalist mode of production” makes sense. In short, relative overpopulation is a working population that exceeds the present needs of capital but is entirely necessary for a pending, cyclical expansion of capital. This is precisely why it grows in magnitude during periods of stagnation and shrinks during periods of expansion.