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Birds of passage: Return migration, self-selection and immigration quotas

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ABSTRACT

A key feature of migration in the late 19th and early 20th century is that many migrants returned to Europe after a few years in the United States. A common view is that most temporary migrants planned, upon entry, to eventually return home, yet there is little direct evidence to support this claim. I collect the first dataset on migrants' intentions to stay or return home from Ellis Island arrival records between 1917 and 1924. I find that fewer migrants planned to return home than actually did; many migrants, especially from Eastern and Southern Europe, left the United States unexpectedly. The high rate of unplanned returns implies that the first few years after arrival were more difficult than expected. However, this high rate of unexpected returns lowered after the 1920s migration quotas, suggesting improved outcomes for those lucky enough to enter.

“The steerage passengers may be roughly divided into two classes: those who go home because they have succeeded, and those who go home because they have failed.”

– Edward A. Steiner, *On the Trail of the Immigrant* (1906)

1. Introduction

Fundamentally, migration is about the flow of people across borders, but a fact often overlooked is that flows occur both into and out of a country. Return flows can be substantial: in the early 20th century United States they were up to three-fourths of the size of inflows, suggesting that the average incoming migrant was temporary rather than permanent. Numerous scholars have claimed that many of these returns were planned from the beginning, as migrants purposely stayed a few years to accumulate savings for investment or consumption at home (Baines, 1995; Piore, 1979; Wyman, 1993).¹ However, these claims are based on indirect evidence; an equally likely hypothesis is that migrants' return trips were decided upon after arrival, perhaps because conditions in the United States were worse than expected (Borjas and Bratsberg, 1996; Cerase, 1974).

The answer to this question is key for understanding migrant assimilation: if temporary migrants planned to return home, then they would have exerted little effort to assimilate. For example, planned temporary migrants are less likely to invest in United States-

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¹ There are a range of estimates for the ratio of out-migrants to in-migrants in the early 20th century, from 39 percent (Willcox, 1931, Table 17), 45 percent (Kuznets and Rubin, 1954, Table 6), and 60 to 75 percent (Bandiera et al., 2013, Table 4). These are demographic estimates based on the change in foreign-born population from census to census; the change in population should reflect additions from new arrivals and subtractions from departures and deaths. Most recently Bandiera et al. (2013) aim to improve on prior estimates by using newly digitized data on the universe of Ellis Island arrivals, which contain more accurate counts of arrivals than the official US data.

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specific human capital, such as the ability to speak English, which has little return at home. On the other hand, if most returned home unexpectedly, then it would suggest that the United States was not a “land of opportunity” because outcomes for migrants were poor despite efforts to assimilate. Alternatively, unplanned returners may have had unrealistic expectations about the United States because information about the migrant experience was biased (McKenzie et al., 2013).

I aim to determine whether most return migration in the early 20th century was planned or unplanned by collecting a unique dataset; in 1917, the Bureau of Immigration started to ask entering migrants whether they planned to stay permanently or to return home. Migrants who planned to return home were also required to report the length of time, whether days, weeks or years, that they intended to stay.²

Using a sample of 27,000 Ellis Island arrivals between 1917 and 1924, I can answer numerous questions about temporary migration including at what rate migrants planned to return, who selected into planned temporary migration, and how migration policy, such as the 1920s migration quotas, affected planned returns. I can also compare the rates and characteristics of planned returners to those of actual returners by using a dataset on departures back to Europe. This out-going data is unique because the early 20th century was the only time period in United States history when the government collected information on departures, a practice that no longer exists today.

I find that most migrants did not plan to return home at arrival: in the years prior to the migration quota of 1921, only 15 percent of entrants *intended* to eventually return home. This can be contrasted with estimates that at least 40 percent of migrants *actually* returned home, suggesting that most eventual returns prior to the immigration quotas were unexpected at the time of arrival.⁴ It appears that the discrepancy between planned and actual return rates is mostly due to single males from Southern and Eastern Europe unexpectedly returning home at high rates; this could reflect a large amount of failures in the labor market, perhaps due to unemployment after arrival. In contrast with the Southern and Eastern European experience, many Northern and Western European countries unexpectedly *stayed* in the United States, perhaps because outcomes were better than expected.³

After the implementation of the quotas in 1921 and 1924, which caused a 60% fall of inflows over a four-year period, the pattern of a high rate of unplanned returns for Southern and Eastern Europeans completely changed. After the quotas, the rate of actual return migration decreased (Greenwood and Ward, 2015); but in this paper, I show that the quotas had no effect on the rate of planned return migration. A combination of these two results suggests that the migration quotas lowered unplanned returns, especially of those holding low-skilled jobs in the United States. The fact that more low-skilled migrants remained in the United States helps to explain why the self-selection of return migrants became less negative for the countries most restricted, as seen in Fig. 1.

A simple reason for the results could be that the labor market was difficult prior to the quotas and then became easier for workers as the quotas reduced incoming competitors. In other words, the quotas improved outcomes for those lucky enough to enter. Evidence of a tightening labor market can be clearly seen when examining the rapid increase of inflows of those with highly substitutable characteristics following the quotas: black migration from southern states, Mexican migration from across the border, and Canadian migration from the north (Collins, 1997; Kosack and Ward, 2014). Thus, this paper supports recent arguments that a voluminous inflow affects other migrants more strongly than natives (Ottaviano and Peri, 2012).

Another reason for the decreased rate of unplanned returns is that the quotas screened out those most likely to unexpectedly return: single males from Southern and Eastern Europe. Prior to the quotas, these migrants had high return rates but relatively low planned return rates, suggesting that they often changed duration plans after arrival – likely because it was cheaper for them to switch decisions compared with the costs for other migrants with families. Following the quotas, there were fewer single male entrants, reducing the number of unplanned returns.

This paper complements and extends prior work on return migration during this time period by Greenwood and Ward (GW, 2015) in many ways. Primarily, GW are silent on whether migrants planned to return home or stay at arrival; this paper's main contribution is the data on migrants' duration plans, which is the first data, to my knowledge, on migrants' return intentions at any point prior to the 1980s.⁵ Further, GW limit their main analysis to the *rate* of return migration and never compare returners to the migrant stock on observables (i.e., the *selection* of returners). This paper estimates that return migrants were negatively selected using data that directly observes out-migrants; this additionally contributes to the literature by verifying the use of indirect methods to estimate return migrant selection (Abramitzky et al., 2014). Finally, this paper complements GW's results on the effects of the migration quotas by examining how the policies influenced return intentions; the results in this paper stress that the decrease in the overall return rate during the 1920s was primarily driven by a decrease in unplanned returns.

² Importantly, there was no penalty for lying about one's intentions to stay. Further, I show that a migrant's stated intention to return correlates with not being found in a later census, suggesting that many reported their true plans and returned home.

⁴ Planned return rates were 15% between 1917 and 1921 before the quotas, and 7% between 1921 and 1924. Recent estimates of outflows to inflows by Bandiera et al. at 60–75% are much higher than prior estimates, closer to 40 to 45% (Kuznets and Rubin, 1954).

³ Interestingly, there is a negative correlation – albeit statistically insignificant – between the size of an ethnicity's migrant stock and the rate of unplanned returns. This may be because ethnicities with larger flows had more information available to potential migrants back home, and sources with smaller flows had less information.

⁵ The German Socio-Economic Panel (SOEP) started in 1984 and recorded migrants' intended duration of stay. The only other data that I am aware of that also observes return intentions is the New Immigrant Survey in the United States and the National Immigrant Survey in Spain, both of which collect data post 1990s (Dustmann and Görlach, 2016).

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