“Labour Mobility”
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Labour mobility consists of changes in the location of workers both across physical space (geographic mobility) and across a set of jobs (occupational mobility). Geographic mobility can be further subdivided into short-distance and long-distance moves, as well as into voluntary and coerced migration. Occupational mobility can be lateral (within a broad class of jobs similar in socioeconomic status) or vertical (from one job to a better or worse job). The availability of large, nationally-representative longitudinal surveys in the late twentieth century has made it possible to measure the extent of mobility in all these dimensions, and how they are related, in several developed economies. Our understanding of the extent of labour mobility through history has been enhanced by work conducted since the 1970s in which the careers of individual workers are reconstructed by locating them in censuses and census-like enumerations (city directories, tax lists, population registers) at successive dates.

At the aggregate level, labour mobility conveys important economic benefits. The reallocation of workers across regions permits the exploitation of complementary resources as they are discovered in new places, while reallocation across sectors makes possible the use of new technologies and the growth of new industries. At the individual level, mobility allows for improvements in the economic circumstances of those whose skills or aspirations are a poor match for the job or location in which they find themselves.

The impact of labour mobility extends well beyond these economic considerations, however. The ability of fluid U.S. labour markets to deter labour radicalization has been recognized by Karl Marx, Selig Perlman, and Stephan Thernstrom. Since the work of Frederick Jackson Turner more than a century ago, scholars have debated the role of the frontier in forging a particularly American political economy in the U.S. Sociologists have examined the impact of mobility on the operation of communities and interpersonal relationships, and political scientists have considered how mobility effects political participation and coalition formation.

Labour Mobility in Europe

Information on the occupational mobility of labour in Europe is rare before the nineteenth century. Parish records and civilian population registers, however, provide a glimpse of labour’s geographic mobility. High rates of geographic mobility can be seen well before the advent of modern industrial economies. Young workers in agriculture were employed off the family farm as farm servants in Britain throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, moving to different farms at the end of each year. On the Continent, gangs of workers followed the harvest across national borders, returning to their home villages after months at a time on the road. Though much of this movement was only temporary, more permanent movement to villages and towns was essential to the growth of cottage industry. Several trans-national migrations (the Irish into Britain, the Belgians into France, Poles into Germany) were prominent features of European industrial and urban growth.

Recent research on labour mobility in Britain has produced more detailed conclusions. The British populace of the nineteenth century was highly mobile. England, Wales, and Scotland were virtually free of institutional barriers to geographic mobility. Though the Poor Law’s provision of a degree of economic security created some disincentive to mobility, it was small compared to the effects of large-scale social welfare programs of the twentieth century. Nineteenth century Britain saw both high rates of internal mobility and overseas emigration. Emigrants left primarily for the United States, though many also went to Canada and Australia. These long-distance movers tended to be young, single, and male. Internal migration within England, Wales, and Scotland was a very different phenomenon. Between 1851 and 1881, approximately one in four people changed their county of residence; more than half moved from one town to another. Like overseas migrants, internal movers tended to be young. Unlike overseas migrants, more females moved within the country than did males, and single people were no more likely to move than were married people.

Most strikingly, internal moves tended to cover very short distances. Between 1851 and 1881, the average internal migrant moved only 35 miles; one quarter moved less than five miles. There was no clear regional pattern to nineteenth century internal migration, unlike the steady flow of westward migrants in the U.S. at the time. One of the most distinctive patterns of British internal migration was the prevalence of rural-to-urban moves. Virtually all of Britain's nineteenth century population growth was accruing to the cities, which expanded both by natural increase and by population influx from the rural areas. In the mid 1800s, more than one out of every three rural residents of Great Britain left for an urban area. Most left for the nearest city, though London drew migrants from all over the country, as it had since the seventeenth century. The industrialized urban areas of Lancashire and Yorkshire also drew many rural migrants.

Overseas emigrants and internal migrants within Britain moved for many reasons, but chief among them was the search for economic gain. Wage gaps and the chance for upward occupational mobility drew migrants to the U.S. and to the cities. The British labour market did not exhibit as much occupational mobility, either between or within generations, as it did geographic. Nineteenth century marriage registries indicate that well over half of all sons worked in jobs of similar socioeconomic status to their fathers. Following males across censuses reveals a similar pattern over the individual career history: more than half of all males did not change socioeconomic status over their careers. The socioeconomic status and occupation of the father exerted a strong influence on the socioeconomic status of the son; however, opportunity did exist to improve the odds of mobility. The cities provided one such opportunity. Males who moved from a rural to an urban area experienced more upward mobility than they would have had they remained. Education provided another avenue of mobility. Sons from all economic backgrounds were more likely to exceed their father's socioeconomic status if they attended some elementary school than if they did not, and the likelihood increased with years of schooling.

Labour Mobility in the U.S.

The most important form of labour mobility in the first century of European settlement of North America was voluntary immigration from Europe by whites and coerced immigration from Africa by blacks. In the absence of immigration, many of the initial settlements would not have survived, given the high mortality rates and low rates of natural increase. Three quarters of the white arrivals may have been indentured servants who agreed to work for a period of four to seven years to repay their passage fare. By the 1680s, blacks slaves were being imported as well to work in Southern tobacco and rice cultivation.

Since the start of the seventeenth century, Americans have experienced high rates of labour mobility within the colonies and later within the U.S. This stems from the propensity of those who have migrated once (like trans-Atlantic immigrants) to make subsequent moves. Even among the native-born, though, mobility was frequent, because of both the availability of largely unsettled land through the end of the nineteenth century and an absence of restrictions on movement across locations or across jobs. Though colonial governments attempted to reduce mobility by requiring permission for travel and imposing severe penalties on runaway workers, there is little reason to believe these measures were successful. The absence of strong craft guilds and the absence of organized labour generally down through the 1880s made occupational mobility similarly free from restrictions. Before 1900, American workers were employed largely through "spot" markets in which job attachment was weak and turnover rates were high. By the 1920s, as more formal systems of recruitment and labour monitoring evolved, job tenure increased, though it remained substantially below levels observed in other developed counties throughout the twentieth century.

Measurement of labour mobility requires examination of sources that either record an individual's location or occupation at two or more points in time or allow inferences to be drawn regarding how the locations or occupations of a particular group of individuals have changed over time. For the colonial period, only a few generalizations are possible. Indentured servants in the South had good success in improving their socioeconomic status after their term of service ended through the 1660s, but were apparently less successful later. As land prices rose in the late seventeenth century tobacco boom, more found it necessary to migrate to another colony to find success. Colonial army muster rolls show high rates of geographic mobility by the Revolutionary War.

For the middle of the nineteenth century, it is possible to measure labour mobility directly by following individuals from one census to another. Between 1850 and 1860, roughly two thirds of adult males moved from one county to another, with higher migration rates among less skilled workers. Migrants experienced more occupational mobility (both upward and downward) than otherwise similar non-migrants. The work of Frederick Jackson Turner and a generation of historians examined the importance of the frontier as a place where workers could improve their circumstances. More recent research validates this view of the frontier: workers who went there indeed did better than they would have done at their places of origin. Beginning in the 1840s, workers also migrated in large numbers from farms to cities. Many of these were young women and children employed in New England textile mills, and the younger sons of farm households whose prospects were unfavorable in the farm sector.

The available evidence on wages in the first half of the nineteenth century demonstrates that the movement of workers to the west was successful in eliminating inter-regional wage differences within both the northern and southern tiers of states (though pronounced north-south differentials remained). Movement of workers from farms to cities and towns eliminated any substantial wage gap between farm and urban workers, after adjusting for cost-of-living differences.

Among those who remained in agriculture, both geographic and occupational mobility can be seen throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Farmers migrated in large numbers from the Middle Atlantic and South Atlantic states to regions farther west, generally moving along lines of latitude both to economize on the direct cost of migration and to take better advantage of latitude-specific farming skills. As farm making costs and the prices of existing farms increased, some individuals found it increasingly difficult to purchase farms early in their careers. By 1900, as many as a quarter of the nation's farms were occupied by tenants, with higher tenancy rates in the South. Though concern increased in the 1920s and 1930s that mobility from tenant to owner was becoming increasingly difficult, particularly in the South, recent evidence finds that tenancy remained merely a stage in the eventual transition to ownership.

Throughout the second half of the nineteenth century and into the 1920s, voluntary immigration from Europe provided millions of new workers for the economy. Most were able to enter better jobs after their entry than they possessed in Europe. Beginning in the 1910s, an additional form of labour mobility can be seen: large numbers of black farm workers (the descendants of slaves forcibly transported to the South from Africa) migrated voluntarily to Northern cities where they took up urban employment.

Few sources make possible long-run comparisons of labour mobility in different eras. In the 1850s, migration across county boundaries was more common than it was in the 1970s. Upward occupational mobility was also somewhat more common in the 1850s than in the 1970, both in comparisons of fathers' and sons' occupations and in comparisons of individuals' first and last occupations.

Comparative Perspectives on Labour Mobility

A recent research project that follows the careers of thousands of young men from the early 1850s to the early 1880s in both the U.S. and the U.K. makes it possible to compare the extent of labour mobility in these two developing economies. Both de Tocqueville and Marx claimed that mobility was far more common in the U.S. than in the U.K. This study supports their assertions: in both geography and occupation, U.S. workers were twice as mobile as U.K. workers. Sons improved upon the occupational status of their fathers more often in the U.S., and occupational ascent between first and last jobs was also more frequent in the U.S.

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