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# **Migrants and Expatriates: Double Standards or Coloniality**

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# Migrants and Expatriates: Double Standards or Coloniality

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## Abstract

In recent years, states have exported wars and "produced" millions of refugees and internally displaced persons. We have Ukraine with over 8 million, Syria with about 6 million, Venezuela (about 5 million), South Sudan (between 2 and 3 million), and so on. Scholarship has evidenced that different groups of migrants receive different types of support and treatment. "Immigrants" (migrants, displaced persons, refugees, and asylum seekers) are often seen as low-skilled workers from developing countries and are ethnically marked (Leinonen, 2012). On the other hand, expatriates are stereotyped as white, high-skilled workers from rich countries (Cranston, 2017). Another example is digital nomads, modern "premium migrants." These categories illustrate how global inequalities and power relations are embedded in the migration structure (Sandoz & Santi, 2019), reproducing exclusion and classification. Economic migrants, expatriates, and digital nomads are groups directly affected by the power relations inherent to the dynamics of the global economy and international politics. Through a literature review and theoretical discussion and using the example of economic migrants, expatriates, and digital nomads, this paper aims to draw attention to how colonial and historical processes have led to the construction and perception of contemporary mobilities. These epistemological constructions play a crucial role in how host societies and policymakers deal with migration, what tools they choose, how policies are implemented, and how problems are identified, understood, and addressed (as a problem or not).

*JEL-Codes:* F54, K37, F22, J60, J15, K37

*Keywords:* colonialism; international law; expatriate; migrant; digital nomads.

## 1. Introduction

The terms colonialism, coloniality, and postcolonialism are often used interchangeably. They are distinct concepts that describe different phases of the relationship between colonizing and colonized societies.

Colonialism indicates the historical process of European expansion and domination over other parts of the world. European nations like Spain, Portugal, France, and Great Britain established colonies in the Americas, Africa, and Asia in the 16th century. Through a combination of military force, economic exploitation, and cultural hegemony, these European powers imposed their systems of governance,

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economics, and culture on the people of their colonies. The lasting effects of colonialism profoundly impact the global distribution of power, resources, and wealth (Mignolo, 2011).

Coloniality, on the other hand, refers to colonialism's lingering effects and legacies, even after formal colonial independence has been achieved. The "darker side of modernity" encompasses the division of the world into separate and unequal spheres of power and influence, with Europe at the center and the global North's continued exploitation of the global South (Mignolo, 2011). According to the same author (2020), coloniality includes both physical and psychological aspects of colonialism and is rooted in the structures of power and domination established during the colonial period. This cultural and intellectual domination of non-European peoples perpetuates European cultural norms and values (Mignolo, 2011).

Postcolonialism refers to the period after formal independence and the end of colonialism. It encompasses the postcolonial period's cultural, political, and economic developments and the continuing legacy of coloniality in formerly colonized societies. It is characterized by the efforts of formerly colonized populations to reclaim their cultural heritage and resist the lingering effects of colonialism. This includes the development of critical theories and practices that challenge the dominant cultural, political, and economic structures and practices created and maintained by colonialism (Said, 1978). It also includes efforts by colonized peoples to reclaim their heritage and assert their independence and autonomy in both the political and cultural spheres (Spivak, 1988).

Migration is a fertile terrain on which colonial power relations have been reproduced and reinforced. In this sense, migration categories are central to how intersecting material and symbolic inequalities occur today (Kunz, 2023). International law shapes policy and the rights and protections of migrants. However, the limitations and shortcomings of international law in protecting the rights of migrants must also be recognized when it reinforces power dynamics and exposes the double standards and unequal treatment of different groups.

Economic migrants, expatriates, and digital nomads represent distinct groups whose experiences are intricately intertwined with the power dynamics inherent in the global economy and international politics. This paper seeks to delve into the complexities of these three categories—economic migrants, expatriates, and digital nomads—shedding light on the influence of colonial legacies and historical processes in shaping and defining contemporary mobility patterns. Ultimately, this paper is an invitation (or provocation) to reflect on how historical ties have long influenced migration practices.

Through a literature review and a theoretical discussion, this paper reflects on the uneven relationship between the concepts of (economic) migrants and expatriates, considered modern equivalents of European colonials and settlers (Fechter & Walsh, 2010). The same is true of the more recent concept of digital nomads. These distinctions reinforce particular perspectives, subordinate others, and (de)legitimize others institutionally. They illustrate that different practices have been constructed around issues that are not so different from one another.

## 2. Historical Connections and Power Relations

The experiences of migrants and expatriates are intricately linked to these historical and ongoing processes of colonialism and coloniality. Through historical processes, international migration routes have been repeatedly reconfigured, with Europe often at the center. Many Europeans moved to colonial territories for fortune during the colonial period. Between the 16th and 20th centuries, approximately 65 million Europeans went overseas (Miège, 1993). This movement of people and natural resources also took the opposite direction, as they were needed to project political power and establish the colonial empire (Achiume, 2017).

During this period, the term "expatriate" was coined in English. Etymologically, the word comes from Latin and means out ("ex") and of one's country ("Patria"). Initially, it referred to anyone who left their country or went into exile. However, during colonialism, it was used to refer to officials of colonial governments who were temporarily stationed in foreign colonies (Kunz, 2019a; Macleod, 2021). These individuals were representatives of the order and civilization of the Metropole.

European jurists conceived the right to travel to foreign territories in the early modern period to facilitate colonial expansion. The free movement remained the dominant legal framework for international migration for about three and a half centuries until the end of slavery. Decolonization led to a reversal of (voluntary) migration flows (de Vries & Spijkerboer, 2021).

After the II World War, the pattern of migration changed. Instead of sending migrants, Europe began to attract them. Migration flows were central to the reconstruction of Europe, which was struggling with low birth rates and a labor shortage to support the economic boom of the 1930s (Pahuja, 2009).

Facilitated by the decolonization processes characterized by the independence of former colonies and the influence of the two world wars, people began to leave their own countries due to poverty and the pressure of significant population growth. This large movement of migrants after decolonization shed light on the resurgence of victorious anti-colonialists and Third World<sup>2</sup> idealisms. Decolonization restructured social organizations, creating new mobility patterns and solidified power structures. Since then, migration began to be based on the relationship between development and dependency between countries (Matos, 2012).

The formal recognition of former colonies as sovereign, independent states has yet to be accompanied by actual independence. These states remain economically and politically intertwined with and dominated by former colonial powers, a structure of domination maintained by international law (de Vries & Spijkerboer, 2021).

Sassen (2016) points out that the 1980s ushered in a new form of capitalism, characterized by the assumption of economic growth that was considered harmful to most people due to its restructuring measures in the service of public debt and more significant attacks on the biosphere with increased extraction capacities. This

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<sup>2</sup> The use of the term First and Third world in this work is intentional, due to colonial roots or out of respect for the author's choice. More than geopolitical, they represent ideological categories. The term "Third World" refers to the territories and peoples primarily colonized by Europeans in the colonialism era - between the mid-eighteenth and twentieth centuries (Rajagopal, 2000). And "First World" relates to the European metropolis, the colonial powers, and the settler colonies that preserved their European identities (i.e., Canada, United States of America, Australia)

context led to the displacement of communities from their territories, triggering wars and local conflicts in a struggle for habitat. Another essential factor is global climate change, which has further reduced the habitable territory and caused the displacement of several populations, including the Indigenous (Ferreira & Cardin, 2020).

At the same time, the phenomenon of globalization has become the engine of migration and has increased its causes (Massey et al., 1998). The perverse globalization led to unfavorable human development, promoted competitive behavior in a hegemonic market, and widened the social and economic gap between people and territories (Santos, 2008). This imbalance reinforces interdependence between postcolonial worlds and causes international migration to exacerbate asymmetries between countries (CEPAL, 2002).

Migration controls stabilize the capitalist system by regulating inequalities and restricting specific populations to a particular space (Georgi & Schatral, 2011). Economically marginalized populations desire better survival opportunities and more prosperous countries (Achieme, 2017). Within the globalized capitalist project supported by most central states, there is a liberality in the circulation of capital and goods that contradicts the strict controls imposed on the unrestricted mobility of workers and the attachment of people to the national territories of these states (Pellegrino, 2003).

The right to travel and the power of the state to restrict it are protected by current international migration law. Ironically, this is not considered a violation at all. Instead, the historical constitution of international migration law has evolved according to the ideology of protecting the interests of the global North (Achieme, 2017, 2019b, 2019a; de Vries & Spijkerboer, 2021). In doing so, the right to travel and the power of states to restrict this right have always been defined in terms of protecting the interests of the predominantly white population of the contemporary First World (de Vries & Spijkerboer, 2021). Instrumentalized through international and bilateral agreements between wealthy nations, they played an essential role in maintaining the status quo (Achieme, 2017).

This situation underpins the notion that power relations shape migration as they influence it. As a result, most people in the periphery do not have effective exit options to escape inhumane living conditions and are subject to the hypocrisy of border controls (Georgi & Schatral, 2011). This state law includes border controls and the "power" to distinguish between "citizens" and residents or aliens in those areas. This means that understandings of nationality and notions of who is a "foreigner" are altered and socially shared through the legal relationships and information to which they are exposed (Sayad, 1998).

These power relations go hand in hand with metropolitan and colonial sociability (Ricotta et al., 2021; Sousa Santos, 2019). The former is characterized by reciprocity and equal interactions among those considered human. While the latter is based on exclusion, domination, invisibility, and "otherness" (as not fully human). These dichotomous interactions lead to exclusion and dehumanization, reinforced by ontological and epistemic superiority (Ricotta et al., 2021). The migration context translates into specific populations subject to their "sovereigns" tutelage and the violence of civilizing missions (Reis, 2022).

The law legitimizes certain types of international mobilities while others remain in chaos and inhumanity. International law, which is supposed to protect the

vulnerable, has a dysfunctional relationship with global mobility because it reliably protects a state's supreme right to exclude non-citizens (Achieme, 2017).

In colonial times, the right to travel legitimized European expansion. However, as formerly dependent countries gained sovereignty under international law, the right to control migration became one of the mechanisms through which the economic interests of the First World were preserved, and the burden of addressing global inequality was shifted to states in the Third World. This cemented the relationship between migration control and colonial history, a political association that denies its members equal and reciprocal terms of cooperation (de Vries & Spijkerboer, 2021). The colonial dynamic exploited colonized peoples for the benefit of the colonizers. Colonialism seeks political entanglement based on the subordination of certain community members, granting "certain prerogatives" to the colonizers and permission to deny them to the colonized. This means that colonialism creates and embodies morally reprehensible political relations and is closely linked to other configurations, including the oppression of minorities (Ypi, 2013).

Translated in inequality, colonial difference modulated subjectivities according to the positions they occupied in a binary classification related to the Eurocentric paradigm of humanity defined as superior in contrast to non-Western and non-white subjects (Sousa Santos, 2019).

The construction of stereotypical notions and representations of race resulted from dialog with an epistemology subordinate to colonial processes (Mignolo, 2020). Racialization was based on the "essential" differences between the colonized and the colonizers, which included a set of advantages, disadvantages, and privileges between races that were supposedly inscribed in their own "human nature" (Reis, 2022).

This dynamic links to a hierarchization and classification of populations reproduced in all social contexts, whose structuring axis is based on race (Quijano, 2005). This hierarchization and variety of populations are produced in all social contexts as structuring is based on race.

By conceptualizing race as the defining axis of social relations, racism is a foundational element in perpetuating difference (Reis, 2020). Those considered outcasts are typically demeaned and targeted for systematic practices of dehumanization and violation of rights, as colonial exploitation primarily usurps the recognition of humanity and agency of subaltern populations (Derrida, 1991).

A person's nationality determines the extent of their freedom of movement in a way that completely refutes the claim that all people are equal (Achieme, 2019a; Favell, 2022). Individuals enjoy different freedom of movement depending on whether they are citizens of a country. First World citizens have a much greater capacity for international legal mobility than their Third World counterparts.

According to the Global Passport Power Rank 20223, the top ten "strongest passports" include 9 European countries (Germany, Sweden, Finland, Luxembourg, Spain, France, Italy, Netherlands, and Austria). All of them can enter 171 countries without a visa through a network of visa agreements that privilege First World passport holders and dictate their movement around the globe. Indeed, freedom of movement is politically determined and racially differentiated (Mau, 2010).

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<sup>3</sup> Passport Index: <https://www.passportindex.org/byRank.php>



These ambiguities and contradictions reveal the coloniality in contemporary nation-states and their citizenship regimes. In short, we can relate them to colonial forms of power that produce governable subjects and regulate mobility, which is closely linked to accumulation processes (Çağlar, 2022).

The colonial legacy was critical in transferring and concentrating power and creating the new order (Miège, 1993). The processes of social classification are directly related to the issue of social power, which is defined by the places and positions that individuals and social groups occupy in controlling the basic dimensions of social life (Porto-Gonçalves & Quental, 2012).

Some colonial migrants were traders, others were settlers, and many moved in search of a better life. Some were sponsored in whole or in part by metropolitan authorities who saw colonial emigration as beneficial to metropolitan economic well-being. These European migrants were the original economic migrants. As they traveled to the non-European world, they traversed and appropriated it, relying on the same justifications that First World states use today to militarize their borders against today's economic migrants (Achiume, 2019b).

### 3. Coloniality and Shifting Borders

Some migrants are considered more 'migrant' than others. In the structure of codependency in the contemporary global order of colonial history, migration categories are rarely neutral and tend to be racialized (Leinonen, 2012; Schinkel, 2017). In this work, the taxonomies of economic migrants, expatriates, and digital nomads were chosen for analysis. These terms contain many semantic and symbolic meanings, ranging from pragmatic to political perspectives (Kunz, 2019b). Despite the differences, some characteristics remain.

Economic migrants are persons whose movement is popularly and legally understood as a matter of preference. Considered political-economic migration, they are defined by a degree of political action and are primarily motivated by a desire for a better life (Achiume, 2019a).

The idea of "earning a living" that for many years has been a primary characteristic when defining an economic migrant, for example, has recently become an official precondition for migration in many countries. However, economic and cultural perceptions might be determinant in classifying those who deserve or do not have the right to stay in those countries and those considered a burden to the State (Shachar, 2020).

Scholars have argued that migration is not a neutral process but is shaped by inequalities between the global North and South, including differences in wealth, access to resources, and political power. This has resulted in a situation in which many people from the global South are forced to migrate to the global North for better economic opportunities while facing discrimination and marginalization in their new communities (Bauman, 2007).

Often viewed with suspicion and hostility, these individuals from the Third World (former colonial territories) that attempt to enter the First World (metropolitan

former colonial powers) with or without legal permission become a stigma in international migration (Achiume, 2019a).

Unlike refugees or asylum seekers, they have no legal support to secure their stay, as they are subject to the sovereign right to exclude foreigners. As a rule, the territorial admission of migrants who arrive in search of economic opportunities is at the complete discretion of the host state (Achiume, 2017).

At the other end of the spectrum, "expatriates" are associated with white Europeans who live outside their home countries for professional reasons (Koutonin, 2015). It is a controversial term widely used in the English language, not only in the media but also in political discourse. Even though not included in international migration laws and policies, the notion of expatriates describes a specific type of migrant (Macleod, 2021). It is a social category applied since the late 19th century (Kunz, 2023).

A sense of "foreignness" goes beyond merely describing a legal "migration status." Immigration categories intersect with race, gender, and class (Korteweg & Triadafilopoulos, 2013; Schinkel, 2017).

Modern expatriates live abroad to seek new socioeconomic opportunities, career advancement, cultural experience, and exotic adventure to return to their home country after acquiring skills and knowledge on their journey. Their voluntary migration is based on their professional and/or personal interest in living abroad (Kunz, 2019a). They become a symbol of white privilege, westernized and reminiscent of colonial settlers, as a continuation of colonial power relations in the ecosystem of migration (Kunz, 2016).

The term (economic) migrant often refers to unskilled, persecuted people, usually with an 'illegal' status (Kunz, 2019b), who may or may not take advantage of the welfare system in developed countries.

Digital nomadism emerged in 2010, but after the outbreak of COVID-19, it quickly became a potent factor in reshaping the corporate world (Shawkat et al., 2021). According to calculations by Fragomen, a market-based body that studies global migration trends, there are already 35 million worldwide (Zakaria, 2022). Digital nomads are mobile workers who can work geographically from almost anywhere. Their lifestyle is characterized by constant travel enabled by digital technologies and digital practices (Wang et al., 2020).

Many countries have made it easier to issue visas to attract these "premium migrants" out of interest in this growing class of international remote workers. A digital nomad visa provides short-term access to countries worldwide and typically lasts six to 12 months for remote workers. Other countries have expanded their short-term work visas to accommodate those working remotely, including several members of the European Union and many Southeast Asian countries (Choudhury, 2022).

Becoming a digital nomad is only for some. Visa programs typically cost around \$1,000 and exempt visa holders from local income taxes for their six- to two-year stay. They also have income and employment requirements that ensure these visa holders can make a living without taking local jobs (Choudhury, 2022).

Examples such as the digital nomad illustrate the complexity and diversity of mobility taxonomies. Their changes and shifting alliances shed light on broader reconfigurations of power and reveal a degree of permeability that transcends ethnicity. Today's migration governance is rooted in differentiation, racialization,



and porousness of frontiers, with border policies ensuring the flexible management of differently dispossessed and devalued labor (Çağlar, 2022). As a result, the rights of politically invisible groups are rejected as part of the colonial heritage.

Borders are not a "spontaneous" result of a natural, historical process in the history of humankind but were created at the birth of the modern/colonial world. It is also only possible to think of a globalized subject by considering coloniality. In a temporal sense, physical/geographical and epistemological borders are emblematic of the coloniality of time and the coloniality of space (Mignolo & Tlostanova, 2006). They are cultural, political, and economic dividing lines that determine who has access to resources and opportunities (McCorkle, 2020).

In their seminal work *Borders as Marque of the State* (2011), Wallerstein and Rauch argue that borders play a critical role in creating and maintaining nation-states and the global capitalist system. The authors argue that borders are both symbols and instruments of state power and that their creation and reinforcement contribute to the unequal distribution of wealth and power in the world.

In recent years, borders have become invisible. According to Shachar (2020), these invisible walls rely on sophisticated legal techniques to detach migration control from a fixed territorial location and extend the state's power beyond the edge of its spatial territory. These mobile borders, which are not tied to a specific place and time, are what the author calls "shifting borders" (Shachar, 2020).

Because of their flexibility, they consist of mobile legal portals extending along the arm of the state and within it, creating constitution-free zones or waiting for areas where fundamental constitutional rights are partially suspended or restricted, particularly concerning people without proper documentation or legal status. As a result, we have witnessed the proliferation of instrumental, flexible, and market-based approaches to citizenship activated by governments. A legal arsenal in operation, where obligations are circumvented without being formally revoked. Despite official discourse proclaiming a commitment to human rights (Shachar, 2020).

The different treatment of time, place, and space for different categories of migrants, the restrictive closure, and the selective opening of borders reveal the confusing features of the new landscape of shifting borders. States maneuver the border by controlling the physical reality of territorial access and the legal requirements for admission while abandoning these conditions for the economically advantaged (Shachar, 2020).

The assumptions encounter the idea that multiple identities and transnational practice have become the norm, meaning that we might be entering a post-racial era, in which factors such as birth origin and nationality do not necessarily determine the politics of diversity; factors such as social class, gender, age, current legal situation, and working conditions also come into play (Zapata-Barrero, 2017).

This is reminiscent of what Shachar (2020) calls the "great transformation of citizenship." The idea is that borders are fluid and can selectively and strategically expand or contract depending on the population (Çağlar, 2022).

It is inevitable to reflect on the "great transformation of citizenship" without returning to the idea of coloniality, without recognizing that borders are inextricably intertwined with a colonial power that continues to operate through the rhetoric of modernity.

In resistance to these dynamics, global political-economic migration today can be understood as an attempt to balance an asymmetrical system initiated by many of the same state sovereigns that now self-righteously seek the exclusion of these migrants (Flahaux & de Haas, 2016).

Deconstructing views of borders can naturally lead to a critique of how we view immigration and migrant rights. It is essential to recognize and understand the legacy of colonialism and its influence on constructing epistemologies and ideas about international migrations and, ultimately, migration practices.

Mignolo and Tlostanova (2006) encourage adopting "critical boundary thinking" that offers a symbiotic reading of time and space as constituted by coloniality. Critical border thinking is based on the experiences of colonies and subaltern empires and is a path to decolonial displacement.

By challenging the structures of the dominant power structure and the colonial paradigm of knowledge, decolonization as thought and practice refuses the dyads and binarism of dominant thought that conceives modernity and rationality "as exclusively European experiences and products" (Quijano, 2005). The redimensioning of practices and knowledge guided exclusively by Eurocentric perspectives reverberates with perceptions of their eminently political and historical construction, overlaid with the ideological premises that underlie modern/colonial power structures.

The decolonial shift ultimately represents the detachment from the epistemic and cultural oppression of the modern world sustained by the coloniality of knowledge. Detachment does not mean simply ignoring the colonial legacy. Border critical thinking proposes confronting this past and simultaneously freeing oneself from the spell and enchantment of colonial modernity to initiate a kind of decolonization process (Mignolo & Tlostanova, 2006).

To achieve that, the way is towards the idea that 'another world is possible' in opposition to alternative modernity. A world in which multiple worlds coexist cannot be based on collective universalism. Instead must sustain as a universal project, a plurality. Critical border thinking and decolonial change are a path to this possible future.

## **Final Considerations**

Formal colonialism may be over, but the lingering effects of colonial hierarchies continue to shape the experiences of those who migrate, shifting borders, imposing double standards, making classifications, etc.

Recognizing and striving for greater equality and justice is an essential step toward a more just world. However, this requires a critical examination of the legacy of colonialism and the lingering consequences of coloniality. The way migration categories are created, used, and practiced is political. It is too simplistic to understand migrants' identities through their residence abroad. We need to be more sensitive to how researchers imagine the objects (I would rather say subjects) of study (Cranston, 2017).

This article seeks to enliven the debate about the international migration system and its practices and the influence of colonialism by discussing the terms migration,

expatriate, and digital nomad as examples. For many years, this vocabulary has been used freely in academia, in the media, and by policymakers. Ironically, this article and its examples are written in English, considered a lingua franca, another legacy of the colonial era. Nonetheless, these mobility categories' meaning is reproduced in other societies and languages through other terms, but still with the same colonial solid legacy.

We are in a transitional period in which the analytical lenses and hegemonic narratives of scholarship are being reconsidered. It is about challenging assumptions inscribed in fields structurally imbued with a binary logic of race and gender to foster forms of knowledge construction and vocabularies that contribute to ongoing contestations.

In this context, the emergence of new epistemologies and practices, as well as political subjects that exert pressure on agendas, can be understood as an attempt to politico-epistemically actualize and construct alternatives that impose themselves to problematize the premises, privileges, and silences of the field institutionalized through eminently colonial perspectives.

For both epistemological and non-epistemological reasons, scholars need to be aware of the implications of their research beyond the knowledge they produce, so it is vital that we use our concepts and measurements reflexively. How knowledge is produced affects how we understand a particular phenomenon and how policymakers and societies perceive and address it.

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