

## Superdiversity: another Eurocentric idea?



The current issue of [Begegnung](#) (“Encounter”), the magazine of German International Schools, has a feature about the [German School in Montevideo](#), Uruguay. The school was founded in 1857, at a time when increasing numbers of German-speaking immigrants arrived in Uruguay, as they did in other parts of the Americas. Today, some of the great-great-grandchildren of the first student generation still attend the school. However, the student composition has changed: from a school catering exclusively to the children of German migrants, it has changed to a school attractive to parents who want a high-quality bilingual education for their children, irrespective of their ethnic background.

The reason for this demographic change is simple: while Uruguay used to be highly attractive to European immigrants until the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, their number today is small.

By way of background: when Uruguay gained independence in 1830, the country’s population is estimated to have been around 74,000. By the time of [the first national census in 1852](#), the number of inhabitants was 131,969 and by the time of the second census, only eight years later in 1860, there were 223,238 inhabitants. Within half a century, by the time of the third national census in 1908, the population further increased dramatically to 1,042,686. Throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the population kept increasing to 3,286,314 in 2011.

Most of these population gains were achieved through immigration. In 1843, 60% of Montevideo’s population of 31,000, for instance, was foreign-born; in 1860 and 1889, that percentage was 48% (Finch 1995, p. 205). While migrants from Spain, Italy and France predominated throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> century, immigration to Uruguay became increasingly diversified in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century:

It is likely that about a quarter of the 105,000 arrivals in the 1920s [...] were from Spain but the distinctive features of the decade were Jewish immigration, and the diversity of non-traditional origins in central and eastern Europe and the Near East. (Finch 1995, p. 207)

It would seem that the Montevideo of the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> was a “super-diverse” society. The “super-diversity” concept (coined by Steven Vertovec and enthusiastically embraced in contemporary Applied Linguistics) is intended to capture a [“kind of complexity surpassing anything previously experienced.”](#) As Vertovec writes on his website [“over the past twenty years globally more people have moved from more](#)

[places to more places; wholly new and increasingly complex social formations have ensued \[...\].”](#)

[A visit to Istanbul has previously motivated me to question why evidence of contemporary diversity strikes many analysts as more novel and unique than it actually is.](#) However, it had not occurred to me before to question the actual fact of an increased complexity of contemporary migration (“more people moving from more places to more places”). A recent article in *International Migration Review* by [Mathias Czaika](#) and [Hein De Haas](#) does precisely that. Based on data from the [World Bank’s Global Bilateral Migration Database \(GBMD\)](#), which covers the period from 1960 to 2000, the authors set out to investigate whether during this period global migration really did increase in volume, diversity, geographical scope, and overall complexity (as is routinely assumed today).

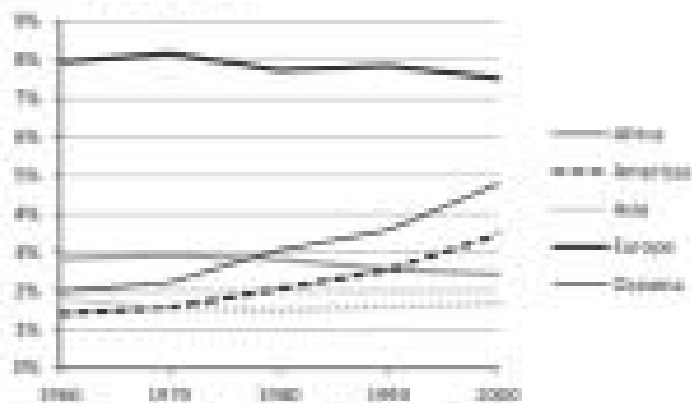
Their results are highly surprising: in 1960, 3.06% of the world’s people were on the move internationally; however, instead of going up, this figure has shrunk slightly and by 2000 it was 2.73% (Czaika & De Haas 2014, p. 14). As a percentage of the global population, there were in fact fewer people on the move internationally in 2000 than there were in 1960!

So what about the diversification of origin and destination countries (“from more places to more places”)? The first part of this assumption holds: international migrants come from an increasing array of countries of origin. However, all these diverse migrants move to fewer rather than more places:

“collectively” they tend to increasingly concentrate in particular destination countries. Country-level emigration patterns are increasingly resembling each other, with emigrants going to an increasingly similar set of dominant destination countries, such as the U.S., Germany, France, Canada, Australia, and the Gulf countries. (Czaika & De Haas 2014, p. 19)

Figure 15

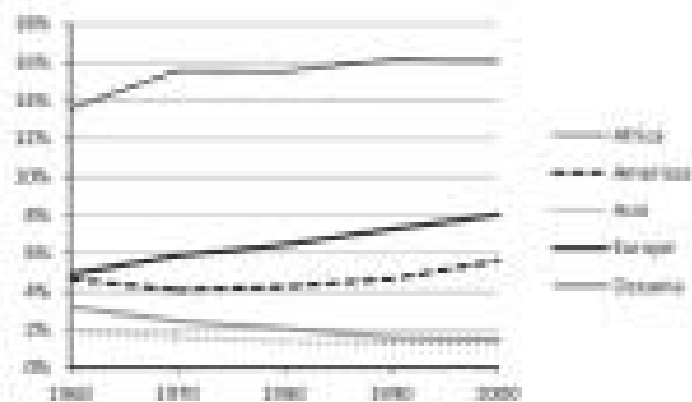
Emigration Intensity by Region, Weighted by Emigrant Stock at Country Level, 1960-2000



Source: Author's calculations

Figure 16

Immigration Intensity by Region, Weighted by Immigrant Stock at Country Level, 1960-2000



Source: Author's calculations

There are interesting differences by world regions: emigration intensity from Europe (where emigrants account for a larger proportion of the population than anywhere else in the world) has declined whereas emigration intensity from Oceania and the Americas has gone up.

As regards immigration intensity, Oceania has the world's largest proportion of international migrants as a percentage of the population (the figures here are obviously dominated by Australia). Immigration intensity has been rising perceptibly in Europe and the Americas but has, in fact, declined in Africa and Asia.

Within these regions there have been significant shifts and concentrations, too: for instance, in the Americas, immigration used to be high across the continent (as in the example of Uruguay above) but has now concentrated on the USA, as the world's prime international migration destination.

The final variable is migration distance. Do people move ever further away from their countries of origin? Not necessarily: in Oceania, migration distance has shrunk significantly, as more and more migrants to Australia come from Asia rather than extremely distant Europe. Similarly, in the Americas, migration distances have been reduced as fewer and fewer Europeans arrive and as intra-American migration has intensified.

So, no super-diversity?! Not more people moving from more places to more places?! How could we have got it so wrong collectively? According to Czaika & De Haas (2014, p. 32), "the idea that immigration has become more diverse may partly reveal a Eurocentric worldview."

With declining European emigration toward other continents, there has been a major shift in global directionality of migration, with the transformation of Europe from a global source region of emigrants and settlers into a global migration magnet. This has led to an increased presence of phenotypically and culturally distinct immigrants in Europe as well as settler societies of European descent in North America and the Pacific. In other words, rather than an increasing spread in terms of origin countries of migrants per se, the national and ethnic origin of immigrant populations has become increasingly non-European. (Czaika & De Haas 2014, p. 32)

As regards Uruguay, the experience of “super-diversity” was at the heart of state formation. However, today Uruguay loses more people to emigration than arrive through immigration; and when Uruguayans go to Europe they may well seem exotic to Europeans who have been used to being the source of “super-diversity” in far-flung corners of the globe but are yet to come to terms with the fact that the tide has turned.



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### **References**

- Czaika, Mathias & de Haas, Hein. (2014). The Globalization of Migration: Has the World Become More Migratory? *International Migration Review* DOI: [10.1111/imre.12095](https://doi.org/10.1111/imre.12095)
- Finch, Henry. (1995). Uruguayan Migration. In R. Cohen (Ed.), *The Cambridge Survey of World Migration* (pp. 205-207). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

### **Further reading about multicultural Uruguay**