
Inquiring Minds topic – 31 March 2017

John Moore, Moderator

Immigration policy is at the forefront of political discussions here and elsewhere in the world. President Trump's proposals to secure our borders with a giant wall, to limit legal immigration, and to restrict travel to the U.S. by persons from certain countries have captured the headlines for months. But concerns over immigration are also the subject of intense discussion in Europe.

All of these involve closing national borders or otherwise controlling immigration. This article proposes a radically different approach to immigration: open borders. As is pointed out at the beginning, this idea has precedent in the 19th century. Similarly, under the Schengen plan, EU citizens do not require passports for travel within the Community.

Is the open borders idea simply crazy? Apart from the seeming political impossibility of having it adopted in the foreseeable future, does it contain principles or ideas that could guide the development of immigration policy?

The article raises many questions. Here are a few to consider:

-
- The open borders argument foresees the migration of "billions" of people. What are the cultural and political implications for the receiving nations? For the sending nations?
 - Can a nation, as a group of people with shared experiences, descent, language, or culture survive massive immigration of peoples from elsewhere? What are the lessons from recent European experience? Does this matter?
 - A seeming paradox: Open borders seem to be consistent with the ideal of freedom; but, without broad consent to the policy, the reaction to waves of immigrants might well be to adopt legal and institutional forms that decrease freedom. How can this paradox be resolved?
 - The author thinks that massive immigration would lead to a major reduction in the social safety net, which, in turn, would cause an increase in visible extreme poverty in the rich nations. Would this be socially, morally, or politically acceptable? Would it even be viable in the longer term?
 - The author argues that the migration would double the size of the world economy. Although he does not say so, the migration would presumably be from poor to rich nations and would almost certainly be a migration of the

more able persons from the poor nations. If so, how would those nations benefit from the migration? How would they participate in the doubling of the global economy?

A World Without Borders

Richer, Fairer, and More Free

By *Nathan Smith*

Foreign Affairs, February 28, 2017

Across the West today, a rising populist right is blaming established elites for letting in too many immigrants. The immigrants, the populists complain, lower wages, dilute the local culture, and pose a threat to national security. But even as anti-immigrant sentiment gains ground, a small but growing band of open borders advocates is reaching the opposite conclusion: Western elites aren't letting in too many immigrants—they are letting in too few. These advocates, including the author, call for a regime of nearly complete freedom of migration worldwide, with rare exceptions for preventing terrorism or the spread of contagious disease. Borders would still exist in such a world, but as jurisdictional boundaries rather than as barriers to human movement. Ending migration controls in this way would increase liberty, reduce global poverty, and accelerate economic growth. But more fundamentally, it would challenge the right of governments to regulate migration on the arbitrary grounds of sovereignty.

ANCIENT LIBERTIES

The open borders position may sound new and radical, but it is simply a call for the return of lost liberties. When the Statue of Liberty was erected in 1886, most of the world's borders could be freely crossed without passports. Passport requirements had sometimes existed before and were still in place in backward tsarist Russia, but the more liberal governments of advanced European nations regulated migration, as modern democracies regulate speech, only rather lightly and in exceptional cases, if at all. Comprehensive restrictions on international movement, which almost everyone today regards as a normal and necessary government function, are really an innovation of the twentieth century, which emerged as liberalism gave way to nationalism and socialism in the wake of World War I. Although the reasons for border control were often explicitly racist—such as the national origins quotas of the 1924 U.S. Immigration Act—the restrictions were also motivated by

bona fide national security concerns, as well as a desire to protect native wages and welfare states from immigrant competition and foreign dependents.

More so than in the nineteenth century, open borders today would lead to an epic migration of peoples. Gallup has estimated that 640 million people worldwide want to emigrate from their current country of residence. Yet the true number could be much greater—economists such as John Kennan predict that in the absence of border controls, global labor markets would tend toward equilibrium, which in practice would mean the migration of several billion people to the West. (In the short to medium run, the true number of immigrants would be closer to Gallup's estimates, but over the long run that figure might reach into the billions, as stocks of immigrants and their descendants accumulate in destination countries.) The more efficient allocation of labor would result in global increases in productivity, leading the world economy to nearly double in size. This increased economic activity would, moreover, disproportionately benefit the world's poorest people.

Despite the potential gains, however, a common—and natural—reaction to the prospective migration of billions of people is to dismiss it as an absurd and intolerable outcome. This may be an irrational response, but that does not necessarily make it wrong. The conservative political theorist Edmund Burke shrewdly recognized, in his 1790 pamphlet *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, that supposedly irrational prejudice can be a force for good in politics, as it favors the accumulated wisdom of generations against a type of abstract thinking that is prone to dangerous naiveté. Yet complete deference to irrational prejudice would preclude rational reform and moral progress altogether. With that in mind, there are two compelling reasons why people should override their instinctive aversion to open borders and give the proposal rational consideration. First, open borders could plausibly ameliorate or even end world poverty, a result that it is worth taking risks to achieve. Second, immigration enforcement is an ugly business, separating families and leading to preventable deaths, but it is still not sufficiently effective to prevent large-scale undocumented immigration. It is wise to look for alternatives for the sake of the West's own moral and legal integrity.

A MORAL QUESTION

The issue of borders is as much a moral question as it is one of policy calculation. Assessing any given outcome requires deciding on an ethical framework by which to evaluate and compare alternatives. That is a question for moral philosophy. And today, the prevailing modern moral philosophies, such as those derived from the

works of Jeremy Bentham, Immanuel Kant, and John Rawls, are all universalist and egalitarian—that is, they treat all human beings as having the same inherent value and moral nature, even if their concrete rights and duties vary owing to circumstance. These theories are inhospitable to those features of premodern ethical thought, such as prescriptive communal loyalties and the differentiation of people by race, sex, and other traits, that still seem to influence the thinking of most immigration critics. The theories thus tend to favor open borders.

This is the case regardless of which specific theory is chosen. Utilitarianism, for instance, attempts to maximize the total happiness, or “utility,” experienced by individuals, all of whom are valued equally. On the question of open borders, a utilitarian would argue that even if some Westerners might suffer, the utility gained by billions of migrants from sub-Saharan Africa, South Asia, and other impoverished places easily outweighs the Westerners’ inconvenience. Another popular moral theory, laid out by John Rawls in his 1971 book, *A Theory of Justice*, asks what kind of social order people would design if placed behind a “veil of ignorance”—that is, if they did not know what their own place in the social order would be. Open borders advocates argue that no one, from behind the veil of ignorance, would design a world in which they had an 80 percent chance of being born in a poor country and trapped there, just so that if they turned out to be part of the lucky 20 percent born in rich countries, they would avoid having some awkward neighbors.

Immigration critics tend not to make counterarguments within these universalist frameworks but rather reject the frameworks altogether, arguing, for instance, that countries should privilege the interests of their citizens over foreigners. In his 2013 book, *Exodus*, Paul Collier, a leading development economist and another immigration critic, dismisses utilitarian universalist ethics as “the stuff of teenage dreams,” before suggesting that nations have something called “existence value,” such that the people of Mali should not be allowed to extinguish Mali through a universal exodus. Yet the strongest argument for migration restrictions is one that applies even if utilitarian universalism is accepted. For if open borders would somehow ruin the special something that makes the rich countries rich, the benefit to immigrants not only might be reduced but could be overwhelmed by the loss of global public goods, such as technological innovation and international law, that are largely supplied by developed countries. That is, mass migration could make mankind as a whole worse off.

RISK AND REWARD

It is difficult to say with any finality why some countries are rich and others are poor, meaning that it is also difficult to evaluate how mass migration might affect global well-being. Some explanations are more favorable to the prospect of open borders than others. If geography is the determining factor in comparative development, as the geographer Jared Diamond has argued, then letting people move from poorly endowed and unproductive places to more wealthy and productive ones may have little downside. If human capital is more important—if the people in rich countries are more productive for reasons of nature or nurture—then open borders will do little good, since migrants will bring their low productivity with them, but also little harm, since citizens of the rich West will retain their own high productivity and consequent high living standards. But probably the most influential explanation of the relative wealth and poverty of nations holds that successful development is the result of high-quality institutions. There would be reason to oppose immigration, therefore, if a massive influx of immigrants from developing countries would dilute and damage the precious institutional heritage of the West, thus killing the goose that lays the golden eggs.

Evaluating whether it would do so requires making a distinction between productivity-enhancing institutions, such as sophisticated financial and legal systems undergirded by a robust rule of law, and social safety-net institutions. The former enable the West to produce an abundance of goods and services, and the latter redistribute those goods and services to the relatively needy among Western populations. Although the distinction is not always clear-cut, some institutions, such as corporate finance law and intellectual property rights, are valued mainly because they foster wealth creation, while others, such as state-run health insurance or old-age pensions, are valued mainly because they alleviate poverty. The latter have good reason to exist even if they reduce GDP.

It is these social safety-net institutions that, in a world with open borders, might have to go. Without migration controls it would probably be impossible for Western governments to maintain social safety nets, in the sense of public programs guaranteeing a decent standard of living to all residents residing within a country's territory. At current levels of benefits, a vast influx of immigrants would bankrupt the welfare state, as newcomers would not be able to pay enough in taxes to finance the benefits to which they would be entitled. (A possible solution might involve curtailing welfare programs, or at least their generosity to the foreign-born.) It follows that open borders would probably lead to a large increase in visible extreme poverty in the West. Yet impoverishment by Western standards looks like affluence to much of the world. And far from creating such poverty,

open borders would actually be alleviating it. The new huddled masses, although worse off than the average Western natives, would be better off in their new countries than they were at home. The only difference would be that without borders, Westerners would see the poverty that today is kept comfortably out of sight.

There is no obvious reason, however, why the West's wealth-fostering institutions could not operate as least as effectively amid much larger and poorer populations as they do today. The United States during the Gilded Age and the United Kingdom during the Victorian era had impoverished proletariats, but that did not prevent them from achieving rapid economic growth. On the contrary, economists and economic historians such as Tyler Cowen, Robert Gordon, and Alexander Field have argued that the period from 1880 to 1940 was the zenith of technological progress, especially compared with the relative stagnation of recent decades. Of course, the proletariat of Victorian England was British, and a foreign-born proletariat might conceivably be more destabilizing to wealth-fostering institutions than a native one. And although history provides few if any examples of a country's institutions being damaged, or its productivity being reduced, by peaceful migration, it also affords few if any examples of peaceful migration on the scale predicted by economic models of open borders. So caution is reasonable.

Yet it is also reasonable to ask how much coercion caution can justify. Enforcing today's border regime requires separating families and imperiling people's lives—a difficult thing to justify on the basis not of clear and present dangers but of speculative fears about long-run harms. A 2013 study by Human Impact Partners found that about 150,000 children are separated from one or both parents every year by U.S. deportation policies, and smaller numbers have been murdered as a direct and foreseeable consequence of deportation to countries where they had reason to fear violence. There is, moreover, a fundamental tension between the ideal of due process and the reality of immigration enforcement regimes that give officials enormous and arbitrary power over people's lives. In the United States, immigration enforcement often clashes with the right of habeas corpus, since people who have committed no imprisonable offense can get stuck in indefinite detention. With due process compromised, mistakes happen, and U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement has mistakenly deported thousands of U.S. citizens. Such practices would be troubling even if they were the desperate expedients of a nation during wartime.

But as harsh as U.S. immigration enforcement is, it does not prevent millions from coming, because the benefits of living in the United States are so great. If enforcement were still harsher, the incentive to come would be reduced but not eliminated, and human rights, including those of native-born citizens, would be violated even more severely. Many prefer amnesty as a solution: large majorities of Americans—a recent Gallup poll put the number at 65 percent—favor granting a path to citizenship for undocumented immigrants. But amnesty gives foreigners a strong incentive to illegally migrate in the hope of benefiting from the next amnesty. In the two decades after U.S. President Ronald Reagan signed the 1986 Immigration Reform and Control Act, which gave amnesty to three million undocumented immigrants, the number of undocumented immigrants in the United States swelled to 12 million. Taken together, amnesty and undocumented immigration threaten to create a slippery slope to open borders. Ironically, this scenario is most clearly seen by the anti-immigrant right, which fears it, and by open borders advocates, who welcome it; mainstream politicians, however, advocate for gentler policies toward today's immigrants while naively assuming that effective border enforcement can be achieved in the future. Open borders advocates, by contrast, can deplore the procedural injustices of immigration enforcement without inconsistency, for they oppose the goal of immigration enforcement as well as the harsh means by which it is achieved.

RICHER AND MORE FREE

Immigration restrictionists often argue that citizens of a nation have the democratic right to decide who enters their country and who does not. Open borders advocates also want a democratic form of government in which leaders are elected, but they want to limit the powers enjoyed by democratic governments, such as the right to restrict movement. Letting people choose the jurisdiction in which they live is at least as good a method as voting when it comes to implementing the principle of rule by consent of the governed. And even more important than democracy in this regard is freedom. These usually go together in today's world, but not because democracy inherently favors freedom. Individual rights such as free speech are, in a sense, undemocratic, for they mean that no matter how much the majority of people hate what someone says, they cannot silence him. The concept of rights means that there are some things even democratic governments are forbidden to do.

Opening borders would expand the scope of freedom, strengthen respect for rights, and widen the realm of actions that governments, including democratic ones, are not allowed to take. This endeavor is an extension of the liberal project that has

animated the West since the Enlightenment. And those who sympathize with abolishing migration restrictions, but fear how popular backlash against immigration has recently affected Western democracy, should ask themselves whether freedom can really be secure if its growth is curtailed; whether respect for rights can be compatible with the exclusion of the foreign-born; and whether, in the United States, immigrants are really a greater threat to freedom and the rule of law than are native-born devotees of the president, Donald Trump.

