

Mass migration and border policy

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I heard a radio interview on the BBC with the Swedish minister of migration in which he was repeatedly asked by the interviewer, “How many immigrants should Sweden accept? What is the limit of Sweden's capacity to absorb immigrants?” The minister repeatedly deflected the question, preferring to talk instead about the European Union's lack of a coherent policy. The interviewer became insistent. Finally, the minister said that as long as the economy is growing there is no reason to limit immigration. Pointing to past periods of rapid growth of the Swedish economy, he noted the absence at those times of an immigration problem. Therefore, he concluded, the way to deal with immigration demands on Sweden is to increase its economic growth. I looked up the BBC interview online, and it was as I remembered it, except that the last point about economic growth as the solution was omitted. Maybe the migration minister, Mr Tobias Billstrom, had second thoughts about that, or maybe the BBC edited it out of the interview. Be that as it may, growth is usually considered the panacea, not only in Sweden, and not only for immigration. For those who see that aggregate growth has become uneconomic in a full world, and that a steady-state economy is both a biophysical and moral necessity, this answer is ultimately unsatisfactory – in spite of its being a generous response to a crisis situation. If immigration continues to increase, maybe the difficult question put to the minister will, in democratic Sweden, eventually be answered by Parliament, or by a referendum. Or maybe not.

In a *Washington Post* article (“The Growth that Refugees Drive” 10/2/15, p. A23), World Bank President Jim Yong Kim extended the Swedish minister's position that growth will make room for immigration by arguing that immigration will promote growth. From his family's remarkable experience as legal immigrants in the U.S., he generalized to the mass extra-legal immigration into Europe, arguing that these immigrants will contribute to growth in Europe. Minister Billstrom in Sweden will be pleased to learn from the World Bank president that not only does economic growth make room for mass immigration, but that mass immigration itself will provide the needed growth. So we have a self-reinforcing positive feedback of growth in which the many children of migrants to Sweden can grow up to be World Bank presidents like Mr. Kim. Such a bright silver lining makes the European migrant crisis seem almost benign.

The immigration problem in Europe is currently more severe than in the U.S. because many migrants, especially Syrians, are actually refugees driven from their country by war and the literal destruction of their homes and livelihoods. Where do you draw the line between refugees and economic migrants, and how many of each should Europe take? Sweden has taken a generous number, as has Germany, whose announced intention to take some 800,000 is stimulating more inflow (there are millions of potential immigrants), and causing second thoughts among Germans. Some other European countries frankly do not want the influx, feeling that they have a responsibility first to solve the problems of the unemployed and poor among their own citizens, including past immigrants. It is sometimes forgotten that the open-borders policy within the European Union is premised on enforcement of border control at the boundaries of the Union with the rest of the world. If the latter fails, so will the former.

A stationary population is part of the definition of a steady-state economy, and in the U.S., Western Europe, and Canada, population growth is almost entirely due to net immigration. So it is hard to evade the difficult and divisive issue of immigration in discussing population policy for a steady-state economy, although we do tend to avoid it precisely because it is so difficult, both ethically and politically. Without claiming to have a solution, I would at least like to stop avoiding the issue and try to face some of its underlying problems.

There are three fundamental philosophical divergences that contribute to the difficulty of immigration policy. ([Elsewhere, I have considered the political conflicts of immigration policy in the U.S.](#)). These philosophical problems do not have simple answers, and differences must be both respected and debated.

First, there are differing visions of world community. Some people think that a world without borders is the key to universal peace. Others think that it is the short road to post-national corporate feudalism in a global commons. Count me as sympathetic to the latter view, with the stipulation that the road to true global community is through the UN model of a federation of interdependent nations. The alternative to be avoided is the WTO model of integration of former nations into a single global economy by free trade, free capital mobility, and free migration, dissolving national communities rather than federating them into a global “community of communities”. In the WTO model of global economic integration, local autonomy at the national and sub-national level is replaced either by the centralized control of a world government, or by unregulated corporate feudalism in a global commons. Neither alternative is appealing. But that is how I see things. Others will rightly remind me of the dangers of nationalism, and the catastrophe of two world wars and threats of another, and will argue that anything that weakens the nation state is probably a good idea. They may be right, even if I am not convinced.

A second philosophical divide is the ethical divergence between deontologists and consequentialists, illustrated some years ago in Garrett Hardin’s agonizing parable of “lifeboat ethics”. It demonstrates a social trap. Shipwrecked passengers on an already full lifeboat face the dilemma of what to do about other survivors still in the water trying to board. Helping everyone board will overload and sink the lifeboat – everyone drowns, but no one is favored (complete justice, complete disaster). Keeping some out is unjust – survival of some at the sacrifice of others. Once we are in the trap there is no acceptable way out – a classic tragedy. The lesson of the parable is that we must by all means avoid the trap in the first place – provide more lifeboats on the ship, take fewer passengers on each cruise, and go more slowly through safer passages. That is what a steady-state economy seeks to do. The drowning of people on overloaded boats in the Mediterranean witnessed on the TV news every day underlines the tragic prescience of Hardin’s parable. The difficulty with deontology is that in its devotion to absolute rules of rightness, it is sometimes blind to foreseeable evil consequences. The difficulty with consequentialism is that it can be wrong in its prediction of consequences, especially if they are complex or far in the future. It can also be too willing to employ bad means in the service of good ends.

A third philosophical divide is the conception of people either as isolated individuals, or as persons-in-community. Are we independently defined atomistic individuals related to each other only externally? Or is our personal identity itself constituted by internal relations in community? For the individualist (most economists), external relations, largely mediated by the market, are basic. Consequently, labor mobility and free migration, along with free trade

and free capital mobility, are favored policies. But these policies abstract from relations in community, provided by families, places, nations, traditions, religious communities, language, culture – relations that largely define our identity as persons. The focus of immigration policy is usually on costs and benefits to migrants as individuals. But there are also social costs and benefits to migration. The social benefit of cultural diversity is real, but its cost in terms of disunity is also real. Two social costs are often underestimated – the cost of migration to the receiving community of absorbing the new members (both economically and culturally), and the cost to the sending community of losing mainly its younger and more capable members. For individualism the costs and benefits to the individual migrant dominate the social costs and benefits. The person-in-community view opposes excessive individualism, but courts the opposite danger of shading into identity politics by privileging membership in a particular community as the essence of one's personal identity.

While there is deep disagreement on these three philosophical issues, there is basic agreement that the rich have a duty to help the poor, and that includes poor migrants. The question remains, how best to do it – to try to help them repair their failing country of origin, or to abandon the failing country and help them immigrate into a more successful country? Those left behind in the failing country (too old, or too ill, or too needed by others to be able to leave) merit help as well as those capable of migrating. And when the young and capable flee, it is harder to rebuild a failing country. Also, the poor, homeless, or unemployed in the receiving country, who will have to compete for jobs and social services with the new immigrants, should not all be self-righteously written off by cosmopolitan elites as “nativists” or “racists” when they object to mass immigration, any more than all Muslim immigrants should be written off as probable terrorists.

Ultimately, we all must all play the hand that we are dealt by fate, and at least initially bloom where we were planted. We do not choose our parents, our generation, or our genetic inheritance any more than we chose our original nationality. However, we can change the last by migration. That, however, does not make migration the solution to the fundamental unfairness of the world. Individual or small-scale migration is not a problem. Mass migration is a different matter. It may be inevitable in a bloody revolution. But like a revolution, or a natural disaster, it reshuffles the entire deck, altering the hands previously dealt, by changing risks, wages, property values, and prices. Every relative price change in land, labor, and capital caused by mass migration entails both winners and losers throughout the whole population. Whether that will make the world more just, or simply more uncertain, with a new set of arbitrarily determined winners and losers, is a question with no clear answer.

All peoples need to think honestly and clearly about these difficult questions. A first step toward clear and honest thinking is to insist on distinguishing legal from illegal immigrants, and economic migrants from refugees. Lumping them all together as “immigrants” and then referring to any policy of border control or selectivity as “nativism” or “bigotry” is unhelpful, unfair, and unrealistic. A second step is to better distinguish winners and losers resulting from mass immigration, and to share the costs and benefits more equitably between them.

A third important step is to realize that the growth economy in the U.S. and other countries, protected by militarism, is contributing to wars over remaining resources and ecological space, and will increase the numbers of people displaced by war and by ecological destruction. The growth strategy of the “bigger pie” – more things for more people – will just lead to a larger ecological and social disaster. In the empty world of two billion people into which I was born, one could share the growth optimism of Minister Billstrom and World Bank

President Kim. But in today's full world of over seven billion, it is past time to stop whistling in the dark, and to seek a steady-state economy. Growth can no longer substitute for living within, and equitably sharing, the carrying capacity of Creation. And erasing national borders, while it has some appeal, unfortunately leads to the tragedy of open access commons, which is a bad way to share.

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