

Should Borders Be Open?
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I address the question of open borders from a political perspective. Policy decisions are not taken in the abstract but in the context of concrete political institutions including the geopolitical reality of nation states. The contemporary state is undergoing profound changes regarding membership, territorial integrity, and sovereignty. Despite continuing contests over such fundamental aspects of the state, rumors of the death of the state are greatly exaggerated. To proceed as if the state does not or should not exist would misdirect any political analysis that has the slightest hope of being realistic.

A state's claim to sovereignty, territory, and citizen loyalty depends on the identity of the people as a nation, whether conceived civically or ethnically. There is no need to rehearse the evils of nationalism gone bad. I would suggest, however, at least one cheer for nationalism. I suspect few favor a global homogenization dominated by MacDonald's, CNN, Disney, and Coca Cola.

We accept the validity of national variation in political life. Think, for example, of interpretations of freedom of speech. Germany forbids certain speech regarding national socialism and the reality of the Holocaust. France forbids the sale of Nazi artifacts. The UK permits both of these but has an expansive interpretation of official secrets that prohibits some publicizing of official misconduct that is more a protection of the establishment than a protection

of national security.

Would anyone deny that these three exemplary democracies do not respect the human right of free speech? While interpretations of permissible conduct under the banner of human rights change and are even disputed, this does not translate into a position that there is one and only one correct and acceptable interpretation about the policy and practice of free speech. The same holds for immigration policy.

As an American writer, my cultural experience is that immigration is beneficial on balance and that my country has been and still is well served by immigration on an comparatively expansive scale. Despite significant differences of opinion even in the US on immigration policy, large scale immigration continues as a matter of policy and practice. That, however, does not mean that the US policy should be replicated in France, or French policy in Brazil, or Brazilian policy in Japan. The introductory remarks to this International Conference on Population by the Brazilian Vice President about the benefits of ethnic mixing and intermarriage would have been greeted with profound confusion and misgivings if delivered to a Japanese audience as an appropriate social policy for Japan.

One policy fits all - borders should be open - is institutionally, culturally, and politically naive. It is hardly a supportable proposition in the real world.

My second argument against the proposition calls on recent European history. Asylum policy in Western European countries generally during the Cold War went well beyond treaty obligations and customary international law in the direction of openness to asylum applicants and the grant of permanent residence. The policy was developed within a specific geopolitical context and was part of a Western strategy of containment of Communist states led by the former

Soviet Union. When asylum applications started to rise appreciably in 1984 by citizens from countries well beyond the Soviet orbit, states not only took notice but began to question the asylum practices in place. This questioning was not a simple matter of racism directed toward Third World asylum seekers by elected political leaders and senior civil servants. Still fresh in officials' minds were events such as the Munich massacre in the Olympic village by terrorists, the actions of the Red Brigade, the use of Europe by political dissidents to launch activities elsewhere, such as Khomeini in Iran, and the death of the Swedish Prime Minister, Olaf Palme, widely believed at the time to be a terrorist assassination. Thus began a process of securitization of asylum policy. Additionally, there was good evidence, since strengthened, that Soviet authorities were facilitating movement of asylum seekers into Europe to discomfort the West in return for the West's attempts to embarrass the East by its open asylum policy for those from Communist countries.

The effect of these Cold War policies was an attempt in the mid 1980s for European countries to change asylum practice. This set up political controversy within European democracies about whether narrowing asylum practice to adhere only to what was required by international conventions was acceptable. Opponents charged that a fortress Europe was evolving based on racist motives toward Third World asylum seekers. My point is not to go into detailed analysis of the political controversy within Europe over asylum policies in the last 15 years, much less to settle them. I telegraphically present the subject to illustrate that once a policy of expanded immigration is adopted - which is what permanent settlement of asylum seekers amounts to - it is difficult and costly to reverse course. To cut back on a generous asylum policy to what was strictly required by treaty law has led to internal political controversy

and, to a large extent, has proved ineffective in practice.

My final argument against the proposition that borders should be open is based on historical analogy. We are not experiencing the first wave of globalization in human history. In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, for example, there also were large increases in trade, penetration of investment, increases in communication and the speed of transportation, increased international migration, and other attributes of globalizing tendencies.

There were nationalist backlashes also to more open or liberal trade, investment, and migration regimes. Protectionism and restrictionism had severe consequences in the 1920s and 1930s. Today, opposition in Seattle, Genoa, and Washington to globalization and more liberal trade and investment regimes makes allies of anarchists and extreme nationalists. Anti-immigrant sentiments are part of the anti-globalization mix.

Liberal trade, investment, and immigration policies have evoked and currently evoke nationalist backlashes. States would do well to pay close attention to the pace and impact of changes in these areas. A blithe call for open borders overlooks the pedestrian requirements of political leadership needed to introduce, to explain, to allow voicing of concerns and even opposition to policy changes as part of a process of building the consent of the governed.

In summary, the concrete operation of the nation state system dictates that the simple slogan of open borders will not be accepted. Second, history counts. Opening immigration is not an easily reversible process and involves many interests and values beyond immigration, even going to the heart of national identity itself. Third, history indicates that far reaching and rapid moves to liberal trade, investment, and migration policies globally spawn deeply divisive backlashes within states. That is happening now. Open border policies has implications well

beyond migration policy.

While I fondly hope many countries will move in the direction of more open immigration policies, I find the simplistic proposition of that borders should be more open conducive more to moral self righteousness than to being equal to the task of a reliable and realistic guide to sustainable immigration policy.