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Why The UK should have open borders

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Being able to move is a freedom, and humans have always migrated. People travel to escape war, repression, environmental disaster and economic hardship. They move to reunite with family, find better life chances, study, and for tourism and life experience. But states have been clamping down more and more in recent decades, not on movement in general, but on mobility across national boundaries. Dominant discourses are that international migration is a mass phenomenon and a threat.

Political ideologies are split on the issue. On the left social democrats have traditionally used nation-states as instruments to achieve their ends, and see their constituency as national working classes. Workers from other countries are viewed as a threat to their own. Marxists, on the other hand, see class as transcending national identity, and workers of all countries united globally by common class interests. The right includes conservative nationalists, on one hand, for whom immigration is a threat to national community and identity; on the other, those who see free movement as an issue of liberty or business success. Liberals are split between those who see rights as secured through national states and others who regard rights and obligations as global and applying to individuals regardless of nation. Some greens are internationalist and view ecological problems as global and uniting us across national boundaries. Others see migration as environmentally damaging and undermining local community.

Open borders in principle

Arguments for the free movement of people are sometimes about its economic and social benefits. But some argue we should support open borders regardless of the gains for receiving countries, because they're right in principle. (See Cole and Hayter for some of the arguments discussed below).

Liberal societies emphasise freedom of speech, assembly, belief and from state coercion, but less so freedom of movement and from state restrictions on that. Restrictions on movement lead to further limits on rights and freedoms. Migrants are sometimes fleeing torture, or are subject to detention without trial and torture in places they go to, as a consequence just of crossing a border without permission. They may not be allowed welfare rights or work in receiving countries. Blocks on migration can prevent rights to a family life. Policing the movement of people generates other threats to rights, in the form of surveillance, checks and detention.

Free movement is an issue of humanism and moral equality. Movement is a kind of self-determination and agency, but border restrictions constrain these. Open borders are based on treating all people equally morally, so we don't draw the line at national boundaries in terms of obligations to others, and we see ourselves as part of a global as much as a national community. So rights and obligations are wider than to members of our nation. Free movement is also about economic equality as it gives people the chance to move from places where they have less economic chances, or even poverty, to those where they have more.

There are inconsistencies in restrictions on people crossing borders. People in liberal states have argued for rights of emigration, for instance from Communist countries, but less so for rights of immigration. They think people should be able to leave other countries, but are not so sure about letting them into ours. The place of our birth is arbitrary, but we don't say we should place restrictions on people because of other aspects of birth out of our control, for instance eye or hair colour. We don't draw the line at people crossing intra-national borders to seek chances, for instance the borders of states or counties within nations, but we do for people crossing national borders. We don't think that the elderly or children should be excluded from a society because they will be a burden on it, but we do give this as a reason to exclude needy foreigners. We say contributors to the community should have a bigger claim on residence and citizenship, but why exclude people from outside from being contributors?

Immigration restrictions are discriminatory by their very nature. They exclude people on the basis of nation, so encourage xenophobia, and there's sometimes a racist dimension to this. It involves rich countries keeping out the poor, and discriminating between migrants according to skills or low wages they're willing to take. This involves the exercise of power.

The benefits of migration

When the effects of migration are discussed we often look at them for receiving countries, rather than for migrants themselves or the countries they come from. Media coverage about Romanian workers coming to the UK is usually about the effects on the UK. It rarely has anything to say about the effects for the Romanian workers, or for Romania. Dominant views, promoted by the media and politicians, are that migrants arrive in unsustainable numbers, take jobs, lower wages, and undermine culture and community. Irresponsible journalists and politicians ignore that systematic research doesn't support these claims.

One image is of tidal waves of migrants. Migration numbers have risen but because of population growth. The proportion of international migrants globally has fallen from a 19th century level of about 10% to 3.2% now (Dicken, 515, OECD 2013), with tightening immigration controls. Most people think the proportion is several times higher. In a 2011 survey British respondents estimated a foreign-born UK population of, on average, 31.8%. 11.3% of the population was actually foreign-born (Transatlantic Trends, 7). 33% of migrants are between developing countries and 22% between developed countries, so it's not all poor people fleeing to the rich world (IOM, 25). The refusal rate for asylum is high and many EU migrants are temporary. There is plenty of space for more people. 6% of the UK is urban, which includes green space in towns and cities and rural built areas. 50% is agriculture and 44% wood or grassland. The world's population could fit into Texas, at New York City density (Sharro).

International migration contributes to global productivity, income and growth (for some of the arguments about these aspects see Portes and Centre for Labour and Social Studies). It turns workers who are unproductive where they come from (for instance, because of unemployment) to productive in the place they go to. Migrants in the USA are twice as likely as locals to start a new business (Fairlie). Average wages don't drop with migration. There is some evidence that wages at the bottom do. But it's not migrants who cut those wages. It's employers. So this is to do with employer power, and the solution is

not less migration but wage regulation, such as a decent minimum wage, and strong trade unions.

The idea that migrants take jobs is based on the fallacy that there are a fixed number of jobs to go about. But new workers, such as migrants, can create a supply-side boost when they bring labour and skills that stimulate an industrial sector, like construction, to grow, so leading to new jobs. They create a demand-side stimulus because they spend their wages, boosting other businesses, promoting growth and jobs. They provide key workers in service industries, in the UK the National Health Service is an example, and they fill vacancies at the top and bottom that are difficult to recruit for because of high skills or low wages respectively.

People often migrate to find work, so are not a drain on welfare and public services. Migrants in the UK pay taxes that support public services and the ageing population. They are less likely to claim welfare benefits than the British, recent immigrants 45% less likely, and they contribute more in tax. EEA migrants in the UK make a 34% net contribution while British citizens contribute 89% of what they receive (Dustmann and Frattini, 27-8). Immigration control is expensive, so relaxing migration restrictions would reduce the burden on public spending.

Some arguments against migration are cultural and anthropological rather than economic. It's said that migration dilutes or undermines national culture. But this starts from a fixed moment and is ahistorical. It picks culture arbitrarily as it is now as the authentic national culture, when culture is a process and is where it is following centuries of change, including via migration. It implies current citizens are the indigenous population, when this itself is the result of centuries of migration. In the UK this is from European invasions and people movements long before post-war commonwealth arrivals that are sometimes seen as the start of immigrant Britain.

There has been discussion about migration and diversity undermining community and trust. The evidence is mixed. In a recent study in London the decline of community argument is seen not to hold when factors as such economic status are controlled for, and when the communities used in the study are defined by residents rather than by researchers (Sturgis et al).

There are dangers in open borders for developing countries, of brain drain for instance. These should not be underplayed. But poor countries receive remittances from migrants, often higher than the overseas aid or foreign direct investment they get, sometimes more than both combined. A counter to brain drain could be opposite movements encouraged by governments. And if governments are anti-immigration, overwhelmingly the case in rich countries, this could be used to create pressure to look at causes of emigration in poorer countries, and not just at the symptom of people movements themselves.

Open Borders can work

Closing borders doesn't work. As well as being expensive, it bars migration but without stopping people from doing it, instead just making it dangerous for them. It deters migrants from returning home in case they can't get back again, so can be a counterproductive way of restricting immigration. Alternatives to open borders are siege borders and, as mentioned, surveillance, random checks, and detention centres where people are held, often for long periods, without trial. If this sounds like a futurological

fascist state, it's already a reality. And it's not possible to make border restrictions fair because, as discussed, inherently they discriminate on grounds such as skills, income and nationality. So we should abandon closed borders, for these reasons and for the principled reasons and evidence of benefits discussed above.

But wouldn't open borders just lead to mass movement and chaos? This isn't what's happened in practice. Before many immigration restrictions were imposed from the 1970s onwards we didn't have mass chaotic migration. At the high point of pre-1914 international migration it was manageable. In the postwar period the British actively encouraged labour migration from the Caribbean, offering passports and jobs. But between 1950-80 only 0.6% of the population emigrated (Hayter, 153). Even when proactively pursued migration doesn't come in great hordes. Extrapolating from actual cases of relaxed restrictions Moses says open borders would lead to an international migrant population of up to 205m (168-173), about twice the actual figure when he made this estimate in 2006, out of a world population of 6.5 billion then.

The rational choice perspective of economists assumes that if you open the border to a country where wages are higher then people in countries where wages are lower will move there. But this isn't what happens mostly because people are social and not just economically self-interested beings. They have family and community roots and migration has costs, human and social as well as financial. Many migrants return home, and a considerable number are unwilling. So we shouldn't extrapolate from them when discussing who would choose to relocate under open borders. People would also leave the rich countries that other people go to. And we should address the root causes of migration if it happens in large volumes, not just the symptom of people moving.

But who is going to support this? In rich countries anti-immigration is a virulent attitude. 75% of people in the UK want a reduction in immigration, and 3% feel it should increase (Ford et al, 30). The scale of anti-immigration feeling should not be underestimated. But attitudes aren't the same as votes. People often vote on other issues. Some who think immigration is an important issue for the country say it's not important for them (Kellner). So politicians don't necessarily need to pander to anti-immigration sentiments, so encouraging them, in the search to win elections. And it can be explained that problems attributed to immigration are rooted in other factors – housing problems in the sell-off of council housing in the UK, for instance, and, as argued above, low wages in the political weakening of trade unions and a low minimum wage.

Rather than resigning ourselves to being servile to prejudice and misinformation, we should disaggregate anti-immigration attitudes and look for cracks and weaknesses. British people are more positive about immigration by students, skilled workers, and temporary and legal migrants than about other categories of migration (Ford et al, Oxford Migration Observatory). In the UK these forms have been most highlighted in recent anti-immigration discourses. More positive attitudes about these forms than others give a basis which politicians could work with to encourage more positive attitudes to migration.

The young are more pro-immigration than the old. 23% of 18-to-24-year-olds in Britain say they would be more likely to vote for a party that promised to halt all immigration, compared to 54% of those aged above 60 (Goodwin). Those who live in areas with more migrants are more positive about it (Clarke and Gibson). If the more favourable views of the young are generational rather than a lifecycle phenomenon they will continue when

the young become middle-aged and older. If experience of migrants encourages pro-migration sentiment then increasing migration can have positive attitudinal consequences for open borders. So there are social bases for arguing for the benefits of migration.

When people look at globalisation they often look at the free movement of money or culture. I'm saying we should encourage the free movement of the most important entities of all, humans. Some envisage alternative global societies as configured around global governance or cosmopolitan culture. But such visions overlook the power, inequalities and conflicts between material interests that undermine them. We should look at an alternative global society based on open borders and free movement.

What would a future global society of open borders be like? It would have the positive consequences of current migration I've outlined. It would be about equal rights regardless of where you were born, an extension of freedom beyond freedoms of assembly, belief, and speech, greater opportunities for people and increased life chances. Open borders allow for a form of redistribution through people themselves as much as through investment, aid or governments. It would not solve problems of war, poverty and persecution. But it would give people a better chance to escape these. And it can bring the richness and experience of cultural intermixing and hybridity, and greater productivity and growth.

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