

The Ethics of Immigration and Economic Recovery

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COVID-19 has changed our world. One of the ways it has is by massively reducing international mobility. We travel much less for business and pleasure, of course. But international migration has been limited significantly as well. To name but one example, early on in the crisis, the Trump administration banned issuing new green cards for most immigrants.

The green card ban was initially imposed for 60 days, in line with the cited justification of stopping the spread of the virus from one country to another. But the President has expressed the desire for the measure (or something approximating it) to become permanent.

Can such more permanent measures be justified in a world containing viruses like COVID-19? At some point, this virus will cease to be the threat it is today. But other viruses like it may appear in the future. So, what's to be done? Looking towards economic and social recovery, post-crisis, the question of immigration will become increasingly important again.

The point of this piece is to address this question's *justification*. It will address, that is, the question whether, from an economic and an ethical point of view, the restrictions on immigration that exist today can be defensibly continued once the current threat of COVID-19 has been brought under control. It may be tempting today to accept a kind of reasoning of "as in crisis, so in normal times." Our question is whether we should.

Let us begin with a point about normal times, and the balance of economic and ethical reasons which we will (although it may seem far off right now) once again face in the future. And these reasons overwhelmingly point in the direction of relaxing restrictions on immigration. We can divide these reasons into two kinds: self-interested and humanitarian reasons.

Consider first the familiar humanitarian reasons for relaxing immigration restrictions. The differences in life prospects across the US-Mexican border, for example, are the difference between having the option to live in Arizona, California, New York, or Texas,

versus Sonora, Chihuahua, and Sinaloa. By OECD estimates, this represents a difference between a median household income of \$41,355 and \$13,085.¹ And, of course, life in many countries around the world is much worse than Mexico. According to the United Nations Development Programme's data, people born in Sierra Leone, for example, have a per capita income of \$684 (in 2015 dollars), with more than 60 percent of the population living on less than \$1.25 a day.²

The difference is not just money. To stay alive in Sierra Leone for more than 54 years is already to beat the odds.³ Where we are born affects our health, the chances of our children surviving past the age of five, our life satisfaction, and much, much more.

By far, the best thing we can do for people in these countries is to let them move elsewhere. History is littered with (sometimes) well-intentioned attempts to "fix" or improve poor societies elsewhere. That history includes at least as many failures as successes. There are few if any stories of foreign aid significantly boosting living standards abroad. The track record of military interventions is worse yet. The one thing that *does* make a difference is letting people work and live in better places. They want to come. And typically, they just want to work. It's up to us to let them.⁴

The familiarity of these humanitarian reasons can sometimes obscure another set of reasons: *self-interested ones*. The case for relaxing immigration restrictions is not just that it's a good thing to do for others. It's not *just* because the best thing we can do for people from developing countries is to let them seek out a better life for themselves. Instead, the case for relaxing immigration restrictions is also a self-interested one. It's by far the best thing we can do for the American economy.

When immigrants come to the US, we win as a result. And when immigrants are prevented from coming to the US, we lose. We lose because we can't hire, cooperate, and interact with the people whom we would like to hire, cooperate, and interact with. We lose because there are fewer customers in our stores, potential employees who can do work for us, colleagues to rely on, sup-

pliers to buy from, renters to rent to, and so on. Even those who don't directly interact with migrants lose as a result of restrictions. The balance of empirical evidence indicates that immigration has almost entirely positive economic effects for Americans. The only drawback may be temporary negative effects on wages for a small group of American workers. But these disappear over time and are vastly outweighed by the positive impact for others.⁵

From an ethical point of view, the fact that both sets of reasons exist matters. The fact that self-interested and altruistic reasons line up in favor of relaxing immigration restrictions shows that this is a case of *mutual advantage*. Cases like trade or ordinary cases of exchange are cases of mutual advantage. These are situations in which people typically walk away from a deal feeling better than they did before. Immigration represents a similar situation. It, too, involves people interacting and cooperating in ways that make them better off. The confluence of altruistic and self-interested reasons for relaxing immigration restrictions means this, too, is a win-win proposition. We will benefit from letting people immigrate to our country. And people around the world will benefit as much.

Ethically, when people want to do things that make them all better off, the right thing to do is usually to just let them. In this sense, the question is not whether immigrants have a right to come here. The question is whether we have a right to *prevent* them. And, absent some compelling circumstance or justification, we simply do not.

To see this, consider the following (stylized) thought experiment:⁶

Jane lives in rural Montana. She wants to leave as she is poor and there are not many jobs around. After careful consideration, Jane decides to move to Texas. A willing landlord in Texas is happy to rent her an apartment, and some employers in Texas want to interview her. However, when Jane shows up at the Texan border, she finds Jim blocking the road. Jim, who has long lived in Texas, tells Jane to leave. Jane politely explains that all she wants is to work hard and live in Texas, but Jim is unfazed. When Jane tries to enter Texas anyway, Jim pulls out his gun and forces Jane to turn around.

Clearly, Jim is in the wrong here. Indeed, Jim clearly and grossly violates Jane's rights (in this case, the right to move around freely). He has no business interfering with Jane in this way. As long as she does not threaten or wrong anyone else, Jim should just leave her be. When he forces her to turn around, it's Jim who is in the wrong, not Jane.

Note also that telling Jim to step aside is *not* asking Jim to help Jane. All we're asking Jim is not to use violence to *interfere* with Jane and her freedom (as well as with the people who want to make trades with her). When Jim does use violence and threats of violence to stop Jane, he's actively harming her.

Sometimes, of course, such threats of violence can be justified. We can use violence against criminals. And we can use violence

in war. By extension, none of this means that it's never justifiable to use force to restrict immigration. Perhaps there exist good reasons for it, good enough to deny people their rights to get on with mutually advantageous interactions and exchanges. But such reasons must be established before we can conclude immigration restrictions are acceptable.

The COVID-19 crisis provided just such a justification. The danger of the virus was and is a compelling justification to prevent people from moving. And the reason is that allowing them would greatly increase the risk of a public health crisis. If Jim can tell Jane that he needs to stop her because there's a global pandemic going on, we will think he's indeed got a point.

But once that reason is gone, the justification it provides is gone as well. Once the pandemic is over, Jim can no longer rely on that (non-existent pandemic) to justify his threats. And in that case, we're back at our question: can Jim stop Jane without seriously and gravely doing her wrong?

You might think that cases like this simply aren't relevant for immigration. Isn't there an important difference between *domestic* movement and *international* movement? Don't people who are already in this country have a right to move freely? And don't people outside lack such a right? But note that *this* argument is a perfectly general one. Perhaps Americans don't owe the same to Mexicans, say, that they owe to other Americans. I doubt it, but perhaps I'm wrong, and you are right. But even if I am wrong, the same would have been true before the present crisis. And so this (purported) difference does nothing to support continuing restrictions justified by the threat of a virus in a time without that threat.

So, the conclusion remains: the ethics of immigration post-COVID will be similar to before. And, as we've seen, the balance of evidence on that question strongly points towards relaxing immigration restrictions. When people want to move here and make us and themselves better off, our job is just to let them.

Indeed, the economic reasons above make a case for relaxing immigration even stronger post-COVID than they were before. We will need a massive economic recovery, something that will require labor, innovation, and investment. In situations like that, we can't afford to leave money on the table. To put it bluntly: we will need all the help we can get.

One of the dangers of a crisis is that measures are initially put in place as temporary yet remain thereafter. It's happened before. But it's important to recognize the ethical and economic truths underlying the question of immigration. It's one thing to restrict people's freedom in the face of a potentially deadly pandemic. It's quite another to restrict their freedom as a matter of course. The former is a good idea. But it does nothing to help justify the latter. When the crisis is over, we need to relax immigration restrictions quickly.

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The Immigration and Economic Recovery Symposium explores what role immigrants play in the economic recovery of the United States post-COVID crisis.

The views expressed in this paper are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Center for Growth and Opportunity at Utah State University or the views of Utah State University.

Endnotes

1 See the OECD's Better Life Index: <http://www.oecdbetterlifeindex.org/topics/income/>. The US Census Bureau offers a significantly higher estimate of US median household income of \$53,657. See the Census Bureau's report, Income and Poverty in the United States: 2014 <http://www.census.gov/content/dam/Census/library/publications/2015/demo/p60-252.pdf>.

2 United Nations Development Programme, "About Sierra Leone," 2020, <https://www.sl.undp.org/content/sierraleone/en/home/countryinfo.html>.

3 World Health Organization. "Sierra Leone." 2020. <http://www.who.int/countries/sle/en/>.

4 For detailed discussion of the empirical evidence for these claims, see: Bas van der Vossen and Jason Brennan, *In Defense of Openness: Why Global Freedom Is the Humane Solution to Global Poverty*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018); Fernando Tesón and Bas van der Vossen, *Debating Humanitarian Intervention: Should We Try to Save Strangers?* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017).

5 Rachel Friedberg and Jennifer Hunt "The Impact of Immigrants on Host Wages," *Journal of Economic Perspectives* 9 (1995): 23-44; Simonetta Longhi, Peter Nijkamp, and James Poot, "A Meta-Analytic Assessment of the Effect of Immigration on Wages," *Journal of Economic Surveys* 19 (2005): 451-477; Simonetta Longhi, Peter Nijkamp, and James Poot, "The Impact of Immigration on the Employment of Natives in Regional Labour Markets: A Meta-Analysis," *IZA Discussion Paper*, 2006, <https://www.iza.org/publications/dp/2044/the-impact-of-immigration-on-the-employment-of-natives-in-regional-labour-markets-a-meta-analysis>; Liesbet Okkerse, "How to Measure Labour Market Effect of Immigration: A Review," *Journal of Economic Surveys*, 22 (2008): 1-30; Simonetta Longhi, Peter Nijkamp, and James Poot, "Joint Impacts of Immigration on Wages and Employment: Review and Meta-Analysis," *Journal of Geographical Systems*, 12 (2010): 355-387; Sari Pekkela Kerr and William R. Kerr, "Economic Impacts of Immigration: A Survey," *Finnish Economic Papers* 24, no. 1 (Spring 2011): 1-32, <https://www.hbs.edu/faculty/Pages/item.aspx?num=40774>.

6 For the thought-experiment, as well as far more detailed discussion of these issues, see Bas van der Vossen & Jason Brennan 2018, chapters 2-4.