

THE NEW YORKER

The case for open borders

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February 20, 2020

In the past decade, the government of Australia spent more than fifteen million dollars on an advertising campaign designed to deter prospective migrants. The multimedia effort, which has been lauded by President Trump, featured bold, red text —“no way: you will not make Australia home”—over images of dark, choppy seas. The Department of Homeland Security has distributed similar flyers at migrant shelters in Mexico, near the border: “The next time you try to cross the border without documents, you could end up a victim of the desert,” they warn. Canada has mounted billboards in Hungary to deter Roma asylum seekers; Germany has sponsored posters on the sides of Kabul buses; Norway has purchased Facebook ads targeted at young men from Afghanistan, Ethiopia, and Eritrea whose profiles indicate interest in “travelling” or “Europe.”

Activists and observers have criticized the hostile tone of these ad campaigns. Still, the ads’ underlying premise—that governments have a right to control entry into their countries—seems beyond dispute. Even immigration activists implicitly accept that it must be controlled: the movement to abolish U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement, for example, speaks to the question of how American borders are policed, not to whether they ought to be policed in the first place. In a new graphic-nonfiction book, “Open Borders: The Science and Ethics of Immigration,” Bryan Caplan, a libertarian economist at George Mason University, makes the radical pro-immigration argument that others don’t. In his view, immigration should be essentially unlimited. He envisions a future in which Democrats and Republicans vie to become the country’s “open border party,” each calling for nearly unrestricted immigration.

The difference between Caplan’s world and our own is that Caplan presents immigrants not as threats—to low-skilled workers, to social services, to public culture—but as generators of wealth. Citing the work of the development economist Michael Clemens, Caplan claims that global freedom of movement would increase the gross world product by between fifty and a hundred and fifty per cent. The basic principle of his claim is that workers in poor countries are underutilized. (“How productive would you be in Haiti?” Caplan asks.) If people could travel as freely as commodities and capital do, they could produce “vastly more stuff,” insuring that “almost everyone ends up better off.” Restrictions on immigration, Caplan writes, are the equivalent of leaving “trillion-dollar bills on the sidewalk.” (He borrows that phrase from Clemens; Zach Weinersmith, the book’s illustrator, draws a cartoon Caplan and Clemens making angels in snowdrifts of cash.)

Opening the world's borders wouldn't mean abolishing them, Caplan explains. Countries could still issue passports and maintain territorial notions of belonging. But immigrants—perhaps after passing some sort of criminal background check—would be automatically accepted at all standard ports of entry. Governments would relinquish their exclusionary authority, so that anyone, regardless of citizenship, could “accept a job offer from a willing employer or rent an apartment from a willing landlord.” In one illustration, a cartoon Caplan serves a trillion-dollar blueberry pie; its slices are distributed to landlords with apartments to rent, retirees with newly affordable elder care, and mothers reentering the workforce thanks to lower child-care costs. Caplan concedes that, in countries like the U.S., wages could decrease for some native workers. But he argues that the influx of new consumers would stimulate the economy, and that many members of America's working class would end up “managing and training new arrivals, not competing with them!” Big businesses are notably absent from Caplan's list of beneficiaries, although they would profit from an expanded labor pool, too. Partly for this reason, Charles Koch has come out in favor of open borders. (In 2015, Bernie Sanders characterized the idea as “a Koch brothers proposal” designed to “bring in people who will work for two or three dollars an hour.”)

What about poorer countries, with low returns on labor, from which immigrants would flow? Presumably, an open-border policy would lead to a mass exodus. And yet an illustrated version of Caplan, working as a Western Union teller, reassures these countries that they would be rewarded with compensatory, monumental remittances. Brain drain wouldn't be an issue, since the total liberalization of movement would allow everyone—not just the highly skilled—to emigrate. Caplan writes that a “ghost town,” in which a dwindling labor pool keeps wages high, is preferable to the “zombie” towns, which trap their residents in moribund economies, that are created by the current system. (A sign on a zombie-infested Main Street reads “brains 50% off!”)

Caplan imagines a debate with Milton Friedman, who once declared that free immigration and a welfare state couldn't coexist. Caplan, pictured alongside Friedman in a maternity ward, explains why the fact that some immigrants end up depending on social services is a weak argument: some native-born babies grow up to depend on social services, too, and yet no one argues that we ought to restrict reproduction. Anyway, Caplan tells Friedman, “when we crunch the numbers,” immigrants represent a net fiscal benefit to the U.S. government. According to data from the National Academy of Sciences, the average new arrival generates two hundred and fifty-nine thousand dollars in tax revenue. Data also shows that American-born citizens tend to impose a larger fiscal burden, and are more likely to commit crimes, than immigrants. In the book's fantasia, Friedman, who died in 2006, doesn't contest Caplan's assertion that “most immigrants pull their own weight—and then some.”

Caplan's case isn't entirely about economics: he also makes a moral appeal. Consider the case of “Starving Marvin,” who needs food and is prepared to purchase it legally. On his way to the market, he is turned away by an armed guard. If Marvin subsequently dies of starvation, Caplan asks, is the guard guilty of murder? The philosopher Michael Huemer, who first introduced this hypothetical, in 2012, concluded that the answer was yes. He writes, “If a person is starving, and you refuse to give him food, then you allow him to starve, but if you take the extra step of coercively interfering with his obtaining food from someone else, then you do not merely allow him to starve; you starve him.” Caplan doesn't go that far, but he does argue that the guard is wrong to prevent Marvin from feeding himself.

As a libertarian, Caplan generally seeks to avoid distinguishing between citizens of different countries. Instead, he condemns the “global apartheid” that borders perpetuate. Exclusion on the basis of one’s country of birth, he maintains, is no less reprehensible than discrimination on the grounds of gender, race, or religion. We are right to value equality of opportunity—but, if it’s valued at home, then it should also be valued on a global scale, where inequality is much starker.

Many people see inequality within a country as morally urgent in a way that they do not consider inequality across borders to be. The philosopher Christopher Wellman offers an explanation for this attitude: he points out that, although we might quickly condemn parents who pay for their sons to attend college but not their daughters, we could forgive cash-strapped parents who pay no one’s tuition. The latter situation is worse, strictly speaking, but at least it feels unavoidable. We might conclude that global inequality, though lamentable, is the result of vast historical forces that we can’t be expected to change. It’s just the way the world is.

In Caplan’s estimation, though, global inequality isn’t inevitable, and immigration isn’t a zero-sum game. Opening the world’s borders would be an act of revenue-generating humanitarianism—a form of laissez-faire global distributive justice, on the order of seventy-five trillion dollars a year. Letting in Starving Marvin isn’t just “the decent thing to do” but also “the smart thing to do.” Turning him away would be wrong both morally and financially. We aren’t the impoverished parents who can’t afford to send anybody to college. We’re the rich parents who choose to send some kids but not others.

The illustrations in “Open Borders” are playful, bright, and irreverent; their simple style evokes Caplan’s relentless optimism. And yet, when they aren’t harmlessly humorous—statistics floating in hot-air balloons; Americans eating “Conspicuous Pecansumption” ice cream—they tend to reduce their subjects to caricature. “Poor countries” are depicted using images of generic slums and anonymous, emaciated brown people; a person who smuggles migrants in the desert is represented as an actual coyote, wearing sunglasses. At times, the images embrace stereotypes in glib ways: a Chinese couple running a restaurant stand in for high-skilled immigrants, and a pickup truck crossing the border is presumed to contain those who are low-skilled. At other times, perhaps intentionally, the figures are dissonantly cartoonish. It’s hard to reckon with a cartoon version of Alan Kurdi, the three-year-old boy who drowned while fleeing Syria, lying face down on the beach. Caplan and Weinersmith may be trying to reach those who looked away from the original photo: elsewhere in the book, Caplan suggests that open borders would make poverty more visible. “Immigration restrictions hide even more poverty than they create,” he writes.

Caplan’s “Open Borders” isn’t the only recent book on the subject of free immigration. In September, the far-right polemicist Michelle Malkin published “Open Borders Inc.: Who’s Funding America’s Destruction?,” an exploration of how “foreign and domestic enemies”—among them George Soros, Silicon Valley billionaires, and assorted “globalists”—are working together, under humanitarian cover, to throw open the nation’s gates. Caplan doesn’t engage with the immigration-as-a-conspiracy crowd, but he does seek to address the concerns of a socially conservative audience. He acknowledges worries about adult immigrants who never achieve full English fluency, but notes that their children surely will; he also suggests that America, a country without an official national language, could impose an English-language entrance test, if it wanted to. He frames cosmopolitanism as a route to cultural superiority—a way of aggregating “the best lifestyles! The best art! The best food!” And he imagines the opening of borders as a

strategic move in the clash of civilizations. “Westernization is quietly winning” around the world, he writes, but it “will win faster if people stuck in closed societies can freely vote with their feet.”

Caplan sometimes ventures into territory that liberal readers will find unsettling. He disputes Donald Trump, Jr.,’s provocation about Syrian refugees—“If I had a bowl of skittles and I told you just three would kill you, would you take a handful?”—noting that a realistic bowl would be so large as to fatally undermine the metaphor. He also argues that, if Muslims “were evenly distributed throughout the world, they wouldn’t be the dominant culture anywhere,” and suggests that a country might “raise non-Muslim immigration” as a pro-immigration alternative to a Muslim ban. As a concession to conservatives who worry about new arrivals not assimilating culturally or politically, he allows that laws could make immigrants “wait years and years to naturalize, so they have ample time to learn to love our political ideals.” (In an illustration, an immigrant leans despondently against an hourglass.) For any remaining skeptics, Caplan cites Alex Nowrasteh, of the libertarian Cato Institute, who advises a “wall around the welfare state, instead of the country.”

Caplan also points out that increased immigration doesn’t have to go hand in hand with permanent settlement or political representation. Most people migrate for work, he writes, and not for “the subtle satisfaction of voting.” In a recent piece for *Foreign Policy*, Caplan praised the Gulf states, such as Qatar, whose temporary-worker programs, which don’t offer paths to citizenship, have made them “more open to immigration than almost anywhere else on Earth.” Such programs have attracted migrants—but they have also proved to be fertile ground for human-rights violations, including passport confiscation and physical abuse. Ideas like immigration without representation look one way against the backdrop of “global apartheid” and another in the context of these realities. As in his previous books, such as “The Case Against Education” and “The Myth of the Rational Voter,” Caplan sometimes assumes the lightened burden of the provocateur, pulling out all the stops in an effort to challenge widely held beliefs. By the end of “Open Borders”—when a cartoon narrator pushes the Overton window to the far edge of the page, revealing the sun shining over an open-bordered world—one might wonder how seriously to take his ideas, and how seriously he takes them. His open-borders proposal, of course, is almost certainly political non-starter.

Still, there are reasons not to discount open-border thinking as mere provocation, or to see it as an idea confined solely to libertarianism. Caplan argues that birthright citizenship is a lottery of opportunity—in an accompanying illustration, a gambler at an immigration slot machine hits the jackpot (“U\$A”)—and other thinkers agree. Instead of invoking the metaphor of apartheid, the egalitarian political philosopher Joseph Carens suggests that our current system is a contemporary equivalent of feudalism: routine restrictions on mobility compound existing disadvantages, denying the global “peasantry” the resources to escape their position. (Today, one loophole in the system is citizenship by investment: one can become a citizen of Malta, for example, which is part of the European Union, by spending about eight hundred thousand euros on property or other projects there.)

Caplan doesn’t address asylum explicitly, in part because he doesn’t need to: an open-bordered world wouldn’t distinguish between those who are escaping persecution and those who are seeking opportunity. But such a world would likely benefit asylum seekers whose situations diverge from the classic definition of the refugee, laid out by the United Nations’ 1951 Refugee

Convention. (Starving Marvin doesn't flee persecution, which is at the center of the current definition, but his country's failure to meet his basic needs.) An open-borders system could likewise address the coming displacement of millions, by rising sea levels, droughts, fires, and storms. The Global North, which is responsible for the great majority of greenhouse-gas emissions, might consider the opening of borders a fair exchange for almost two centuries of pollution. Some activists see migration policy as a tool for reparative justice more generally. If today's migrations can be understood as resulting, in part, from a history of colonialism, then the opening of the world's borders might be a form of reparations.

Today, as American immigration reformers confront the detention of children and the building of border walls, arguments in favor of open borders might seem frivolous. A 2018 poll conducted by the Pew Research Center found that only a third of Americans think that legal immigration should be increased; a quarter want it decreased. Caplan notes that the average immigrant to the U.S. holds political views similar to the ones held by the average American; this, he writes, suggests that the United States could open its borders without substantially transforming its political culture. But he also acknowledges that citizens might respond to increased immigration by changing their political outlooks. In one of Weinersmith's illustrations, a Norwegian woman with long blond hair smiles approvingly as she imagines a portion of her salary being redistributed to a fellow-Norwegian, in a universal-basic-income scheme; she looks displeased, however, when she hears that the program includes non-citizens. (Two-thirds of Norwegians support such programs, but, when non-Norwegians are involved, approval drops to less than half.)

In the United States, the 2016 election revealed that even a perceived increase in immigration could inspire a political backlash. Immigration advocates, for the most part, have responded to anti-immigrant sentiment by making empathy-based, humanitarian appeals. In "Open Borders," Caplan takes a different approach. He makes a pragmatic argument about collective self-interest, expressed in terms of gross world product. His presumption—perhaps a good one—is that moral arguments will be of limited effect compared with the trillion-dollar potential of his open-bordered world.