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Open Borders Are Not Libertarian So Long As America Is A Welfare State

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President Trump’s campaign proposal for “The Wall” is front and center again, as he considers a government shutdown if it is not funded. He also took to Twitter to challenge Charles and David Koch, who announce they will fund some Democrats (not Libertarians?) challenging President Trump on policies like immigration and tariffs.

“Progressives” have been calling for unrestricted immigration, for abolishing Immigration and Customs Enforcement, and for granting voting rights to illegal immigrants. “Open borders” advocates decry opponents as racist. Advocates of open borders—whose derangement in the face of Trump lead them to declare they will “fight dirty”—desire to import voters who will displace American voters who have recently taken more than 1,000 offices away from the Democrats.

Others are more rational and less anti-American: the libertarian, and usually Koch-funded, advocates of open borders. You can find libertarians who accuse you of bigotry when you repeat Milton Friedman’s observation you can’t have both free immigration and a welfare state, since the impoverished would move to the wealthiest countries they could and consume everything produced there. You can find libertarians who will assert, oddly, that Americans deserve to be forced to pay for relocation and services for immigrants, because the U.S. foreign policy establishment made their home countries violent and inhospitable.

Major libertarian advocates of open borders—George Mason University’s Bryan Caplan, the Cato Institute’s Alex Nowrasteh, and Reason Foundation’s Shikha Sood Dalmia—tend to “go high” when making their case. They would like to have the immigration policy they say the United States had in 1776.

“Progressive” open borders advocates often quote the poem of socialist Emma Lazarus that was added to the Statue of Liberty: America accepts the tired, the poor, and the huddled masses. Libertarians look to the actual statue, and view freedom of movement as part of individual freedom, not a social service benefit for refugees.

Libertarians of course make the argument about the gains of (international) trade. Just as allowing U.S. companies to import cheap Canadian lumber without tariffs allows U.S. consumers to have cheaper furniture and housing, and may even create more U.S. jobs in

producing furniture, paper products, etc. than are lost in lumber yards, allowing the U.S. economy to “import” labor allows at least some Americans to have cheaper landscaping, gardening, chicken processing, cleaning, and construction, and might create more jobs in businesses that use this labor than the low-wage American jobs lost.

Dalmia in a 2012 survey reported that economists’ estimates of the increase in U.S. gross domestic product produced by immigrant labor was between \$6 billion and \$22 billion. Dalmia quotes Caplan on how immigrant labor *overall* increases or has no effect on American wages, although it does specifically lower the wages of less-skilled and less-educated American workers.

This illustrates the granularity of the effects immigration has in the economy. Dalmia claims immigrants tend to move to states that do not have extensive welfare programs, minimizing immigrants’ effects on the taxpayer. One could rephrase this: Why should working and middle-class people in rural counties, the people who gave their Electoral College votes to Trump, not Hillary Clinton (or Gary Johnson), be happy to vote for people supporting unrestricted immigration, when these Americans have worked to own a middle-class home, a home now subjected to property taxes to pay for the daycare of illegal immigrant children (and the children of illegal immigrants) that is necessary for those immigrants to take jobs in the local chicken processing plant?

On social media, libertarians tend to argue that immigrants, even illegals, pay taxes too, through their rent to their property-tax-paying landlords. The average annual per child expenditure of an American public school is \$12,000, and as high as \$29,000 in Washington, D.C. and other jurisdictions. The idea that many immigrants, living crowded into low tax assessment properties, pay anything like \$12,000 annually in property taxes per child they commit to the local school is *prima facie* ridiculous.

Rank and file libertarians often go further into absurdity, arguing that many Americans never pay enough taxes to cover the cost of the public schooling of their children. Dalmia says middle-class people probably don’t pay enough to cover the cost of three children, so if one opposes unrestricted immigration one must also deport underperforming Americans.

Slightly over one-fourth of the children in the United States are now either immigrants or the children of immigrants. Since the total expenditures on public schooling in the U.S. is almost \$700 billion per year, this cost is far greater than the GDP gains cited by Dalmia, and greater than the \$50 billion she cites for “The Wall.” It’s also greater than the annual \$104 billion for food stamps, the \$46 billion for Section 8 housing programs, or the \$30 billion for Aid to Families with Dependent Children for all residents, citizen or non-citizen.

Immigrants also use other social services, but public education for all children residing in the United States is mandatory. In nineteenth-century America, supposedly with the open borders policies libertarians favor, immigrant children were not legally excluded from the labor market or mandated a public education.

The Cato Institute regularly publishes on the welfare costs of immigrants, but in this area its studies seem deeply flawed, claiming that immigrants use fewer social services than do native-born Americans, a claim made by excluding public education from the accounting. One Cato analyst, Daniel Griswold, makes a hand-waving argument that educating immigrant children is

acceptable, since it pays for itself in their future productivity. Yet Caplan himself has devoted an entire book to debunking the idea that U.S. public education uniquely adds much, if any, to labor productivity, and libertarian work on education is replete with studies showing how ineffective U.S. public schools are.

The government centrally planning investment in (human) capital is not very libertarian, but Griswold assumes that the billions spent educating immigrants would not increase productivity as much or more if instead used to provide Americans with smaller class sizes, or with capital investments in more advanced tools at their future jobs, etc.

A better policy would do what libertarians are supposed to believe in: protecting Americans from being subjected to force and fraud, to robbery and expropriation. Anyone in the United States who is a net tax consumer activates the apparatus that has a gun aimed at and a jail cell (lien, fines, interest, and penalties) waiting for every American who is a net taxpayer.

The fact that we have a population in which roughly half of Americans are net tax consumers does not in any way justify imposing even more exploitation of net taxpayers by importing impoverished people. It makes it more necessary to protect taxpayers from more people exploiting them.

In practice, this has some similarities with “merit based” proposals, but without the government deciding which professions, educational credentials, etc. are desirable. Instead one would simply not be given a green card or a path to citizenship unless one’s wealth or income insured that he would be paying at least as much in taxes as any social service expenditures he and his children trigger.

Libertarians object that in denying a Honduran family the freedom to cross the U.S.-Mexican border we limit their freedom. But in allowing them in, they force American citizens to work to pay for schooling and other social services for their families. What morality—and what electoral strategy—prioritizes the right of a Honduran (who has already escaped violence in having reached Mexico) to cross the border, over the right of an American not to be subjected to forced labor to feed, house, and clothe her family? This is a question libertarian open borders advocates in any political party cannot answer.