Influx: Why Everyone Benefits from Migration

In Exodus: How Migration is Changing Our World author Paul Collier attempts to have an unbiased and civilized discussion on the effects of immigration on society. This contentious issue, Collier explains, is usually split between economists on the one hand, who generally support open borders, and the public on the other, which often feels as if immigration dilutes national culture and weakens societal cohesion. Instead of asking whether immigration as a whole is either good or bad (some immigration is always desirable), Collier looks to explain immigration policy at the margins, that is, should there be more or less of it? In deciding this question we should take into account the three groups of people who are affected by immigration: the immigrants themselves, the population of host societies, and those left behind. He concludes in his opening chapter that “new and highly rigorous research” suggests that for many of the bottom billion, current emigration rates are likely to be excessive. Then, to remind everyone of his impartiality he states “some migration is almost certainly better that no migration. But just as eating too much can lead to obesity so migration can be excessive.” With this odd comparison readers are meant to be left with the impression that Collier isn’t rooting for one side or another, he is simply stating objective fact.

Collier then proceeds to elucidate a simple model of immigration, which is determined by the income gap and the origin society’s diaspora in the host country. Keeping the income gap constant, the higher the diaspora in the host country, the higher the rate of immigration. At the same time a higher rate of immigration leads to a larger diaspora, which means that immigration should continue until origin societies are empty. The only mechanism keeping the migration rate in check is the absorption or assimilation of immigrants into the host country. The absorption rate is determined by the cultural proximity of the host society to the society or origin. For example a native Mexican would more quickly assimilate into American society than he/she could possibly into China. Finally, a high absorption rate will decrease the size of the diaspora and thus the immigration rate. Based on this model, Collier concludes the current absorption rate for most immigrants in Western countries is far too low and restrictions should be put into place to reduce the increase of foreign diasporas. This is because large foreign diasporas tend to interact negatively with indigenous societies and can somehow even hurt indigenous citizens’ ability to trust one another. For evidence Collier alludes to insular clusters of North Africans in France and Somalians in Great Britain.

Collier states that the economic effects of immigration are at best small and therefore we must justify immigration policy with other social effects. There are two problems with
this statement. The first is that it severely underestimates the economic benefits of open borders. For instance, it is widely known that immigration does not decrease native wages on the whole, in fact the opposite occurs. Even for low skilled natives immigration has at worst a small negative effect and at best a significant positive effect. While one might expect immigration to increase the supply of workers and thus decrease wages, one must not overlook the fact that immigrants bring with them a new demand that cancels out any wage suppression effect. Additionally, immigrant labor skills do not substitute for but in fact complement nativist labor, which improves productive processes. This increased efficiency produces shockwaves throughout the economy that stimulate innovation, allows for a greater increase in the division of labor, and ends up creating more jobs for all citizens.

The second problem with Collier’s social argument is that many of the social explanations for restricting immigration that Collier provides are completely bizarre. At one point he cites a study that says that immigrants tend to be less happy than those left behind. But to base policy on this finding would be cringingly paternalistic. Imagine a border control agent turning back an immigrant and telling him/her that despite the four times higher wage they will receive, they are making a huge mistake and therefore must leave. As this review of the book in foreign affairs brilliantly points out, this policy would also set a dangerous precedent for other policies, such as banning women with children from working full time as some studies show they tend to be less happy. The truth is that immigration has and always will have a positive effect on all the three groups Collier says are affected by migration. The immigrants themselves benefit from higher wages, better education, and opportunities for long-term wealth accumulation. Benefits come to those left behind in origin societies in the form of remittances, which equate to about $400 billion dollars a year and would increase with more liberal immigration policies. Those left behind also benefit from immigrants who return more educated and transmit their knowledge to origin countries and are also often role models for uneducated non-migrants. The positive brain gain effect of immigration thus outweighs the infamous brain drain. In the poorest countries, like Haiti, the 85% of the educated population that emigrates would be unlikely to improve the plight of the country by remaining under the exclusive political and economic institutions that would erase the remittances and the greater opportunity for political dissidence that lay abroad. Finally, host societies benefit from the economic growth and the jobs that come with it, greater diversity, and even innovation, as historically immigrants tend to be more innovative than natives.

Collier recognizes all these benefits in the book but still comes to the conclusion that most Western countries would be better off with less migration, providing ample intellectual ammunition for the xenophobic civilian anti-immigration supporters like the vigilantes who proudly “defend” the Mexican-American border with actual firepower. According to Collier, despite these benefits, excessive migration tends to disrupt the “mutual regard” of host societies. Ignoring his stated purpose to take into account the benefits that fall to migrants and those left behind, the ability of host country citizens to trust one another is irreparably damaged by immigration, even among non-migrants. How can I trust you, for example, when there are a bunch of immigrants from country X in our city?

Even though the logic behind this argument in nonsensical, Collier provides some persuasive empirical evidence that this has indeed occurred. However, the conclusion that immigration should be restricted does not follow from this evidence. Rather, host governments should implement policies that aim to improve the mutual regard of host country citizens to immigrants while at the same time attempting to increase the rate of assimilation of immigrants into society. Compared to restrictions, these types of policies, such as public school desegregation and civil society engagement, have had considerable success in the past and would allow rich societies to maintain the economic and cultural benefits of immigration. Rather than turn our back on those in search of a better life, we should embrace their entrance to our society and reap the rewards that follow.