

Open Borders: The case against immigration controls

by Teresa Hayter (Pluto Press 2000)

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” Excellencies, gentlemen — members and those responsible in Europe. It is to your solidarity and generosity that we appeal for your Help in Africa. If you see that we have sacrificed ourselves and lost our lives it is because we suffer so much in Africa and need your help to struggle against poverty and war — Please excuse us very much for daring to write this letter”

Note found on the body of one of two teenagers from Guinea who were found in the landing gear of a plane when it arrived at Brussels airport in August 1999

I suppose it goes without saying that anarchists are opposed to all borders and frontiers. These things could never form any part of a free society. However every activist realises there is a difference between long term ambition and what is immediately possible. The question for many antiracist and pro-immigrant groups is if such a demand can be realised in the context of the system we now live in. Most mainstream groups eventually come down clearly in favour of immigration controls and deportations, though arguing for “generosity.” This book takes a position that so far has only won over a small but growing minority and argues for the immediate ending of all border controls.

Migration in History

Migration has always been a part of human history but population borders and the nation state are a relatively new development. From the sixteenth century to the present day twice as many Europeans have moved to America and Africa than people from there have arrived in Europe. In the process they wiped out Tasmanian aborigines, most of the peoples of the Caribbean, decimated the Australian population by 80% and wiped out between 33% and 80% of native American people. In total there have been roughly 4 major periods of movement since the beginning of capitalism in the Sixteenth Century.

The first was the mass forced transportation of between 10 to 20 million people as slaves from Africa to assist in the development of everyone’s favourite free world democracy. Up to 100 million slaves, in total, are estimated to have been transported from Africa throughout the world. The second wave was that of bonded or indentured labour from India and China. Though they signed a contract with their bosses, in practise they were little better than slaves. 30 million of such “workers” left India up to World War One and provided the work force for mines and plantations in Burma, Sri Lanka, Malaysia, Singapore, Mauritius, South Africa, Guyana and Jamaica. Several million Chinese were moved through South East Asia, the Pacific islands, the Caribbean and South Africa. Ironically the main use these workers and slaves were put to was to replace the peoples already wiped out by European colonists in the first place! The third major wave was the mass economic migration from Europe to America which began in the eighteenth century and peaked in the Twentieth. A total of about 60 million Europeans moved (or were transported) to America and Australasia. The fourth major migration has been the beginnings of movement from South to North. According to UN estimates roughly 35 million people from the third world, including 6 million “illegals” have immigrated to Europe between 1960 and 1990. Though this figure seems relatively large it amounts only to 1% of the 1990 population of the third world moving over the entire 30 years and increased the population in the receiving countries by only 0.2% each year.

Open Your Borders

This sets the context for present day movements from South to North. As can be seen they are still relatively small (especially given that the present total world population is over 6 billion). What would happen if border controls were to be dropped?

Most of Hayter's arguments against border controls are political and moral. The book dwells in depth on how immigration controls are by their nature racist (in that they always aim to exclude particular distinct groups) in that they cause massive suffering, cost billions and promote racism. This is indisputable and it is passionately argued from the perspective of an activist closely involved in struggle for example around Campsfield detention centre in England. Only in the last chapter does she examine other arguments commonly put forward by the other side as to how we would be swamped by tides of immigrants etc. I think that a book addressed to the case against immigration controls would be much better ammunition for activists if it took some of these arguments at length.

When she does get on to some of these arguments she deals with them well. There are several examples of countries which had open border arrangements with former colonies. For example the USA allowed open migration from the Caribbean. Between 1950 and 1980 when borders were closed only 0.6% of the Caribbean population moved to the US and England, despite the obvious economic attractions. If this figure were to be applied world wide now the figure would be about 24 million per year or a growth of about 2.4% in population of the industrialised countries — probably under the anticipated labour demand in several European countries. The truth is just because people can go doesn't mean they will. In general no matter how bad things are, very few people have the desire, the ability or the wherewithal to just uproot, leave every thing and move. Often the pattern is small groups of young able bodied men (usually) who can get the fare move over for a number of years, send money back and then return home in their old age. Ironically when England decided to take away citizenship rights for former colonies there was a huge last minute increase in migration as people realised this was the last chance.

Immigration Yes Welfare No

What about jobs? Unemployment is mainly a cyclical problem associated with the boom and bust system in which we live. It reached its highest level in Europe in the 1930s with almost no movement of peoples but there was barely any unemployment in the post war boom despite massive immigration levels. Developing economies absorb labour voraciously. When Algeria gained independence in 1962 — 900,000 white settlers moved back to France. Unemployment in Marseille rose to 20% within in months but was back down to 6% within a year and 4% in two years. Right now according to the OECD by 2050 the ratio of working people to over 65s will be 2:1 to keep this ratio at its current level of around 4:1 Italy would need 2.2 million immigrants — Germany 3.4 million. In fact it looks like the capitalists are already well aware of this and wish to keep large numbers of "illegals" around as a cheap and easily exploitable labour source. The Financial Times of 23rd February 2000 went so far as to attribute to economic boom at the end of the 1990s to the "illicit angels of America's Economic miracle" specifically the 3- 12 million Mexican and South American "illegals" doing all the shitty jobs. "Immigration Yes welfare No" is the unspoken watchword of Wall Street.

There's a lesson here for workers in the host countries as well. If they feel their wages are being devalued by immigrants it is surely in their interests firstly to argue for full union membership and to fight for equal terms and conditions but secondly to smash border controls and end the situation where people can be made "illegal" and subjected to sweatshop conditions..

The cost

Finally the North is spending vast amounts on keeping the borders shut. This cost is massive, both financially and in terms of human rights. The Schengen Information System was set up by the EU in 1985 and now has more than 30,000 terminals with vast amounts of personal information. 90% of those on it are termed "unwanted immigrants." According to OECD estimates from the early 1990s European governments spent between \$4 and 8 billion per year on refugee control and assessment. Meanwhile the cost of detaining 800 people in British detention centers and prisons, based on government figures, is estimated by Hayter at ~£48 million per year or twelve times what it would cost if they were on income support and housing benefit!

Similarly in Ireland a system of direct provision is administered at massive cost to the tax payer. In fact governments are prepared to spend many times more on making life difficult for refugees than they would gain under full welfare entitlements! The idea that people would travel thousands of miles, pay over every penny they have to smugglers and give up well paid jobs to "milk our system," living in a bed and breakfast on less than 20 euro a week, hardly merits discussion especially in the light of the above figures.

The cost in human lives is also rising. Between 1993 and 2000 an estimated 2063 people died trying to get into Europe (www.united.non-profit.nl for the full, gruesome list). Without doubt this rate of death is accelerating. It's not just asylum seekers who bear the costs. In England fingerprinting and ID cards have been introduced for asylum seekers. The system is in place and now it is quite easy to begin to introduce it for other groups. According to the Guardian (12/09/02) this "salami slicing" approach is the way to introduce "entitlement cards." Mean time the massive Schengen Information System contains information not just on immigrants and asylum seekers but "political subversives" and other undesirables. The crack down will effect us all EU or non-EU !

To sum up, this is a well written nonacademic book. But it focuses too much on making the moral case for abolishing immigration controls and too little on refuting the scare stories. Also, at 21 Euros, it is fairly pricey though I would still highly recommend it as a collective purchase for anti-racist groups who wish to begin to open their minds as a prelude to opening the borders.

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