A Borderless World: Dream or Nightmare?[1]

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Imagine there's no countries,
It isn't hard to do.

John Lennon (1971)

The moral stance that global justice can be served by a world of open borders in which individuals are free to move wherever they wish presumes a world without borders, without states, without repressive regimes, without vast differences in the health, education and welfare services offered by governing authorities, and without vast differences in incomes and employment. In the absence of these conditions the noble vision becomes a nightmare…

Myron Weiner (1996, p. 177)

I enjoyed reading Harald Bauder's plea for a world without immigration restrictions because it represents a fresh perspective, at least for geographers, on globalization and migration. I also appreciate the clarity of vision that Bauder offers, free of moral ambiguity and free of *realpolitic*. His stance is as simple as can be: remove all mobility restrictions because they are, by definition, associated with inequality. I do not challenge this point; entry restrictions are created by states for many reasons, and one of them is to defend the privilege of citizens relative to those living in other countries. However, in this brief note I wish to pose an argument against Bauder's view based on two points. First, I believe he ignores politics by asserting that national 'communities' should not have the right to define their membership. Second, while migration restrictions are based on the protection of privilege, removing those restrictions would not end

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privilege. In fact, along with Weiner, I believe that such an effort could just as easily lead to mass harm as mass good. Above all, I do not think that complex issues like international migration are amenable to systems of absolute morality. I am inherently suspicious of universalism in all cases (which, ironically, is in itself a universalist statement!), but particularly so in the field of migration. Rules of entry are deeply political, created out of intricate processes that involve many voices and many interests.

While it is easy to imagine a world without countries or borders, how exactly would this come to be? Let's begin with the example of Canada used by Bauder. What would it take for Canada to decide to remove all immigration restrictions and, in effect, "take in all comers". In a way this idea seems plausible since that was approximately the situation immediately after the formation of Canada as a nation state in 1867. It took the government of the new country two years to pass an immigration law and longer, of course, to establish the required infrastructure necessary to implement any restrictions. There was a moment, then, when entry was effectively free to all. Canada's first rules prohibited entry to those with criminal records, people with disabilities, and those without financial resources to sustain themselves in a new country. By the end of the century restrictions were added to prevent migration from outside Europe, especially China. One could hardly imagine a more politically-incorrect set of rules, at least from the vantage point of our time. In the 20th century these regulations were progressively toughened and then in the 1960s dramatically altered to reflect economic objectives, as Bauder explains in his paper. But can the clock be turned back to 1867? How? Are Canadians ready to reconsider the whole idea of restricted entry?

It would seem not. In one public opinion survey after another Canadians demonstrate that they support the immigration system roughly as it is constituted at present. Although numbers rise and fall, the general picture is that about one half of those surveyed believe Canada admits the right number of immigrants, while one-third believe the number is too high and one-sixth think it is too low. Interestingly, while I will not go into detail here, there is evidence that Canadians actually evince more public support for immigration than the citizens of any other country (see The Pew Research Center, 2002). To my knowledge no one has ever tried to gauge public support for unrestricted migration to Canada, but I believe a statement to that effect would be rejected by nearly 100 percent of the respondents to any survey. I reach this conclusion after analyzing the results of a survey conducted with 2,000 respondents in Greater Vancouver (the metropolitan area in Canada with the most immigrant-friendly public; see Palmer, 1999). In an open-ended question on the benefits of immigration, exactly 1 out of 2,000 respondents voiced a desire for a completely open border, while many advocated greater restrictions.

If Canadians are resolutely against dissolving the border, how would Bauder's vision be realized? The only possible answer is: undemocratically. I can't think of *any* democratic process, now or in the future, that would yield such an outcome, at least within Canada. The only plausible method would be to enact a new regime at the international level, and hold some sort of global referendum. In that case, results would have to be imposed on Canada by an international level of government. Given that the last half-century of international activities (such as the UN) has intensified rather than undermined the sovereignty of the nation state, such a process seems to me utterly impossible. In any case, if it somehow came to pass, it would negate Canada's existence as a national

'community' able to set its own policies and practices. I have always accepted the truism that all systems of inclusion are also, by definition, systems of exclusion, and *vice versa*.

By removing the right of a nation state to *exclude*, its right to *include* would also be nullified; for better or worse, the idea of a nation state with a distinct set of socio-political goals, with a relatively known polity, would be rendered impossible.! Of course it is worth noting that the Canadian situation is actually more complex, since the national government has signed agreements that devolve some aspects of immigrant selection to the provincial scale.! This has been done to the largest extent with respect to Québec, which has different admission standards (i.e., it has an independent points assessments system for determining which applicants will be accepted).! The degree of sovereignty is less for other provinces, but each has some element of independence, which is defined by a specific Provincial Nominee Program agreement (these are negotiated between provincial governments and Ottawa).

I guess at the end of the day I am not willing, as is Bauder, to toss out the nation state as the site of primary sovereignty. I suspect that if the nation state eroded in significance, institutions at other scales, such as cities or provinces/states, would step into the regulatory vacuum. The privileged always find ways to protect themselves, whether behind national immigration policies, gated local communities, or something in-between…for example, by restricting access to the social welfare system at the provincial/state scale.

This brings me to my second point. If migration regulations were lifted, who would benefit? More specifically, would allowing people from poor countries free access to live in wealthier countries help narrow the gap between rich and poor? Would it lead to a better world characterized by a greater degree of equity? In my opinion, it would not. I'll begin with a common example. Given the way the Canadian immigration system works, almost anyone, anywhere in the world, who holds a completed engineering degree can pass the points assessment test required to immigrate to Canada. Each year, literally thousands of people around the world do just that. However, when they get to Canada, they quickly find that their degree, acquired elsewhere, does not automatically mean they are qualified to work as an engineer in their adopted home. Instead, they have to be recognized by a professional association of engineers to gain appropriate credentials. Without them, it is illegal to practice as an engineer. Ditto for doctors, lawyers, teachers, and so on. Many who come to Canada re-qualify by taking courses at colleges and universities. Others choose a different career path, sometimes in a related field and sometimes in quite another one (everyone has heard the story of the proverbial cab driver with an engineering degree, for example).

What this example illustrates is that allowing someone to enter a country is just a small part of a much larger picture. The larger picture is addressed in the quotation by Weiner with which I began this response. Allowing everyone unlimited mobility would be great if a number of other pre-conditions were met, especially economic and political equality between countries, where regulations in one place matched those in another. Interestingly, when the EU opened internal borders to migrants from all member countries, it also engaged in a redistribution exercise that shifted economic resources from wealthier to poorer parts of the union. This had the effect of creating a situation of approximate political *and* economic uniformity across the member countries and reduced the potential

consequences of open borders. It is also worth remembering that, even within the EU, mobility rights are far from absolute. It is not easy, for example, for a citizen of, say, Portugal, to move to Germany and immediately take up social assistance.

What if it were easy? What if anyone, anywhere, could come to Germany, or Canada, or any other wealthy country, and immediately gain full entitlement to social assistance, health care, education for their children, and all the other aspects of the welfare state? Something like 1 billion people in the world live on less than $1 per day; western welfare rates, as stingy as they are, and despite the stigma attached to them, would seem massive by comparison. As an aside, I would be happy to see people struggling with abject poverty to gain an immediate, large rise in income; the world's wealth (including my own) should be shared much more widely. But back to the matter at hand. How many people would migrate under these conditions? According to Bauder, "…Hayter, referring to a book by Bob Sutcliffe, estimates that a worldwide removal of immigration restriction would generate an additional 24 million global migrants, causing a possible average population increase of 2.4 percent in industrialized countries" (p. 167). This sounds quite sustainable. However, he omits some very important words from Sutcliffe's estimate. I do not have access to the original book, but Hayter (on the same page to which Bauder refers) states, "Sutcliffe …has ventured an estimate that … there would be an extra 24 million migrants *per year*, leading to a growth of 2.4 per cent *per year* in the population of the industrialized countries." (my emphasis).

This figure suggests a seven-fold increase in the scale of international migration, from the current state of around 4 million people per year, to 28 million. For Canada, that would mean a jump from 250,000 immigrants admitted per year to 750,000, under the 2.4 percent per annum estimate, or 1,750,000 assuming a seven-fold increase. For the USA it would mean an increase from around 800,000 per year to 6,720,000 (2.4 percent assumption). And 6.7 million the next year, and 6.7 the next year, etc., to the tune of 67 million over a decade. There is no need to continue listing relevant numbers, such as those for Europe or Australia. My point is obvious: how long would welfare systems cope with these populations? Would any political party that decided to extend benefits so widely remain in power? Likely not. How long would it be before the wealthier countries introduced legislation limiting social benefits to already-resident populations? What would it be like to have 6.7 million permanent residents show up in the USA each year *without* access to the welfare state? What if many, as is the case now, were denied recognition of their educational credentials and previous work experience?

Given the scale of movement and (in my opinion) inevitable collapse of the welfare state, migrants would represent a "reserve army of labour" on a scale never experienced in the industrialized world, or at least not since the industrial revolution. In a way it would serve *us* right for this to happen. After all, the prosperity of industrialized countries is based on unearned privilege. Perhaps it would do us all good to see more people in abject poverty on our streets rather than far away in countries that are all too easy to ignore. Perhaps. But the more important point is that the supposed beneficiaries of Bauder's plan to remove mobility restrictions, would end up paying huge costs. I have no idea how to estimate the balance of gains versus losses for potential migrants, but I am certain tens of millions would suffer.

In a way, Bauder anticipates this argument, though in a different guise. It seems to me that his quotation of Castells ("*immigrant workers do not exist because there are 'arduous and badly paid' jobs to be done, but, rather, arduous and badly paid jobs exist because immigrant workers are present or can be sent for to do them*", p. 171) actually proves my point. If immigrants are already an exploited work force, surely *many more* immigrants – in the absence of other institutional change – would only increase the potential for exploitation.

The key phrase in the previous paragraph is "in the absence of other institutional change". I believe migration could occur in much larger numbers *if* a number of institutional changes were made. These bring us back to Weiner's point. The fundamental development, for me, would be a grand redistribution of wealth and income from the more to the less fortunate. Presumably, this would lead to a more even level of economic well-being around the world and would benefit vast numbers of people. Ironically, this would lessen the demand for migration in the first place. In my opinion the "real" problem is one of uneven wealth/income distribution in the world. Moving people from poor to rich countries would do little to resolve this issue. In fact, there are already rich people living in poor countries and poor people living in rich countries. Adding to the number of the latter will not help.

I can do no better to end, as I began, with another quotation from Weiner's thoughtful essay:

> Finally, the incorporation of moral reasoning into public policy requires that we recognize that we cannot resolve debates over migration with reference to principles of absolute justice. (p. 195)

The point "it is wrong to restrict people's mobility" seems so simple, so reasonable, in that it emerges from what could well be a principle of absolute justice. We *should* be able to live where we want. And it seems particularly unfair that some of us get to live where we want while others do not share this fortune. How can this be justified? One reason (which Bauder rejects too easily, in my opinion) is that migration restrictions are enacted by 'communities' of interest, i.e., nation states. They are products of all sorts of political engagement and compromise, and reflect many voices in many debates. Altering the nature of migration by imposing a moral absolute sweeps aside all of the political machination involved, and renders debate and compromise useless. It is, as is the case with any absolute logic, an uncompromising way of looking at the world. On that note, Harvey's "restless dream" of migration controlled by an "electronic bulletin board [that] manages the in- and outflow of migrants to balance skill levels and prevent regions from collapsing due to massive brain-drain" (p. 177) makes me shiver, and reminds me that a Marxist utilitarian utopia would not be much fun. For better or worse, I prefer to live in a world of compromise, of shades of gray, above all in a world where debate *matters*, instead of a world governed by absolutes or utilitarian logic. For this reason I do not think Canada's immigration policy is "incredibly cynical" but is the outcome of decades of politics, sometimes cynical to be sure, but also sometimes progressive and humanitarian. I support continued immigration, and would welcome more, but at a level endorsed by the Canadian polity rather than one imposed upon it. As I've tried to show, immigration rules are enmeshed with a host of other institutional practices, such as the nature of the welfare state, the education system, and the regulation of labour markets.

Changing just one of these practices without also changing all the others is, I believe, a recipe for disaster, a potential nightmare created out of a dream of equity.

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