



The Last Word ... ?¹

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I am grateful for the comments by Ulrich Best, Franck Düvell, Daniel Hiebert, Valerie Preston and Michael Samers (who affectionately calls me Dr. Bauder, as he told me, to emulate Marx who also addressed his critics in this way). What pleases me most is that their comments are constructive and contribute new perspectives to my original argument. These comments exemplify how fertile the intellectual terrain of border politics and the possibility of open borders is.

Overall, I do not feel that the comments fundamentally challenge my original argument. So, rather than using this space to defend my position, I have chosen to productively engage with the commentators, widen the debate and outline the possible move from mere critique to an alternative future. My response is organized around three themes: (1) questioning existing migration regimes, (2) envisioning alternatives and (3) debating avenues for political activism.

Questioning Existing Migration Regimes

Most of the commentators seem to agree that liberal reasoning does not lie at the core of current systems of the border regime in North America or Europe. Furthermore, they expand on my perhaps too narrowly-focused, 'capitalocentric' perspective and remind me (us) that immigration controls relate also to racial and patriarchal practices, class divisions, colonial history, public opinion processes and political self-interest. The crucial point is that we question the existing regime of regulating the international movement of people.

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Valerie Preston makes the important point that the border reinforces and heightens “gender, class, and race inequalities.” Abolishing borders, or at least migration controls, would certainly not eliminate these inequalities, but it would de-commission one of many mechanisms that enforces them. I agree with Dan Hiebert who warns that open borders “would not end privilege”. However, it would reduce privilege associated with citizenship, which enables Canadians, for example, to cross the Canadian border relatively unrestrictedly and grants access to the Canadian labour market and welfare system, while denying these rights to others. This fundamental inequality must be opposed, just like gender, class and race inequality.

A healthy dose of self-criticism should be incorporated into our arguments. Living in Canada or the EU, the commentators and I benefit from rigorous migration controls that protect our ‘interests’. We are the privileged. If international mobility levels the playing field between rich and poor countries, then it would erode our own privilege. Recognizing this issue is an important step in carrying this debate forward. In addition, we need to hear and listen to the voices of the less privileged to put our own arguments into perspective.

I also agree with Hiebert’s statement that open borders can “just as easily lead to mass harm as mass good.” Liberal and neo-liberal economists call for more open borders to subjugate workers to a ‘deregulated’ global labour market, as Samers implies. Other regimes of oppression could equally assume global dimensions. Our task is, in my view, to confront hegemonic forces of globalization and, rather than retreating into national discourse, steer globalization into a direction that accommodates the free movement of people, as well as equality and social justice. In the context of such a project we need to offer tangible as well as utopian visions of a different world. If we do not, we may soon be left with no alternative but to accept the visions conceived by others.

Envisioning Alternatives

In utopia, “migration is not a problem”, Ulrich Best writes. One of the tasks of critical geography is to draw attention to the incompatibility of closed borders with visions of an equitable world. These commentaries illustrate the multitude of directions into which this task can be carried forward.

Any pondering of open borders will inevitably lead to a wider discussion of the role of citizenship and the nation state, as some of the commentators correctly remark. A critical issue, I think, is that we do not essentialize the nation state. The nation state is a political construction, and, likewise, as Düvell stresses, “immigration controls are a rather new feature.” In a recent political debate, Nandita Sharma observes that border controls and the nation state both function as ideological tools of capitalism (Sharma, 2003).

As geographers we know how unstable territorial political structures are, how quickly they can emerge and disappear. Leading intellectuals have recently launched a public offensive to envision new cultural and political roles for Europe as an emerging political configuration (Habermas and Derrida, 2003). Ironically, Habermas and

Derrida refer to the same political entity as model of a “postnational constellation,” which Best deplores as “anti-utopia” in respect to border practices. The re-scaling of political constellations does not mean that restrictions of movement of people somehow disappear. Rather, new ideas for political, social and economic organization are needed. Perhaps continuing international integration, but this time along the lines of democracy, labour solidarity and welfare systems that apply to migrants and non-migrants alike, as advocated by Duvell, will provide solutions.

For the real-politician, the project of envisioning alternatives leaves room for the discussion of the equal treatment of migrants independent of gender, class, race and citizenship. It also could include debates of universal international policies towards migrants. Having multiple perspectives and approaches represented in a discourse of open borders is not contradictory but will, as the above comments effectively demonstrate, strengthen our push for a more just and equitable world.

Avenues for Political Activism

But, how do we get from one to the other? So asks Ulrich Best in reference to contemporary closed borders and the alternative borderless worlds. Hiebert suggests that this would be a difficult, if not impossible, endeavour because contemporary political culture and institutional structures would not permit the opening of borders. I agree that neither Canadian society nor Canadian politicians currently support an open borders policy. But “[t]he state is not monolithic”, as Samers explains, neither is public opinion static, institutional configuration fixed or the nation state immortal.

In fact, political activism around the issue of open borders is moving into public view. Organizations such as Open the Borders and No One is Illegal are gaining momentum. Recent issues of magazines on the Left, including the *New Internationalist* (October 2002), the *New Socialist* (September 2002), and *Canadian Dimensions* (May/June 2003) had major reports and debates on these movements and the issue of open borders. Borders are at the core of our discipline, and the contribution critical geography can make to these activist movements is to offer geographical visions of a possible future.

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