THE PROGRESS REPORT

Immigration

By Fred E. Foldvary

Should a country allow anyone abroad to immigrate? Do all people have a moral right to live in any country they wish? If a foreigner wants to rent a house from a willing owner and get a job from a willing employer, is it morally wrong for the government to prohibit these transactions?

The key question is whether the citizens of a country own some rights of possession for their whole national territory aside from their individual rights as owners of particular plots of land. In a way, a democratic country is like a cooperative. Each person, no matter how wealthy, has one vote, and the citizens in effect own the country and determine through their representatives what the rules are.

Sometimes it is clearer to imagine a simple, primitive case, and then apply conclusions to the more complex cases. Suppose a tribe which has been wandering settles into a valley that was previously unoccupied. As first comers, they have the right to possess the land. After they have been happily living in their valley, another wandering tribe also wants to settle in the valley.

The first tribe already occupies the entire valley, so there is no space that the entire second tribe could settle in without displacing the first ones. The second tribe could as individuals spread out over the valley and get housing and employment. There are enough economic resources for both peoples to flourish with. But with a population equal to that of the first tribe, having both tribes in the same territory would change the culture.

Both languages would now be in use, both religions practiced, and the customs of both tribes would be visible. If there were a clash of cultural rules, the first tribe would no longer be able to live as purely within their culture as before. For example, if they believed that Saturday was holy and that there should be no work on that day, but the others did not believe this, the first tribe would have to suffer seeing their holy day violated every week. If they were opposed to idols and the second tribe worshipped idols, the first tribe would suffer from having to view the wicked idols.

The first tribe would therefore suffer cultural damage. There would also be intermarriage, and eventually the first tribe might even disappear, along with the second, as a mixture of both ethnic groups and a new hybrid culture developed. Given this damage to their culture and their future as a distinct people, the first tribe would be justified in telling the second tribe that they were sorry, but they would not allow the second tribe to settle, and to please find some other valley to settle into.

Thus, the citizens of a country with a distinct native culture have rights of possession to their national territory and may rightfully exclude foreigners from permanently settling. However, once the culture is not homogenous, and once there are already minorities in the country, the moral case for exclusion is weakened.

In the United States, for example, the first tribes, the native American Indians, Alaskan Innuits, and Hawaiians, became swamped by the second tribe, the European invaders, and the first tribes lost their lands and much of their cultures. The Europeans brought in a third tribe, Africans, as slaves. Asians then immigrated. So we now have a multicultural and multi-ethnic American society. We have a new American culture that is a synthesis of the old cultures plus its own developments such as jazz and Hollywood movies.

The citizens still own the USA as a national cooperative, but with a large population, a mixed culture, and a language that is international, there is little cultural damage that could be inflicted by immigrants. Indeed, immigrants now enrich the American culture with new foods, music, art, and literature. So the moral case against immigration in the USA has greatly diminished. If suddenly ten million immigrants wanted in, and there was no emergency, there could be a case for rationing the flow, but in the normal situation, the US should not place barriers to healthy, non-criminal immigrants able to work.

One objection to open immigration is that the newcomers could become burdens to the taxpayers. Elderly immigrants with no means of support should be excluded if they come in simply to obtain government welfare greater than what they would get at home. But for immigrants able and willing to work, there is no economic harm in letting them in. Indeed, a worker in her twenties adds to American productivity, because her education has already been paid for, so Americans in effect receive her schooling as a gift (see her).

The US could reform its citizenship laws so that illegal immigrant children are not automatically citizens. Immigration should still be a legal process so that Americans controls and records who enters. But the law should be generous: if foreigners are able and willing to work, are not known criminals, and have no communicable diseases, let them in and welcome them.