

available at www.sciencedirect.comwww.elsevier.com/locate/ecolecon

The environment: One more reason to keep immigrants out?

Eric Neumayer

London School of Economics, United Kingdom

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 8 July 2005

Received in revised form

29 September 2005

Accepted 30 November 2005

Available online 21 April 2006

ABSTRACT

Some Neo-Malthusians and anti-immigration groups in the United States have recently argued that migration of people to developed countries is damaging to sustainable development and environmental protection. This paper argues that it is inappropriate and ethically indefensible to employ environmental reasons in support of calls for restrictions on immigration to developed countries. Keeping migrants out neither solves environmental problems nor tackles the root causes of migration. Instead, developed countries should prevent armed conflicts and should promote sustainable development at home and in developing countries. If managed competently and fairly, international migration and other forms of globalization present a promise, not a threat, to a more sustainable world.

© 2006 Published by Elsevier B.V.

Should developed countries close their borders to immigrants for environmental reasons? Some like the Carrying Capacity Network (CCN), an interest group pressing for strict immigration limits to the United States, and its supporters as well as Neo-Malthusians like [Hardin \(1974\)](#), [Abemethy \(1993, 2002\)](#) and [Daly \(2004\)](#) call for such policies. The argument of CCN is that whereas immigrants consume few resources and produce little pollution in their home country, once they come to America (or any other developed country for that matter) they consume more resources and produce more pollution since they command greater wealth and adopt a different lifestyle. In the words of CCN: “The last thing the world needs is more Americans. The world just cannot afford what Americans do to the earth, air, and water” ([DinAlt, 1997](#)). Keeping immigrants out of America to prevent a further increase in Americans is the conclusion drawn from this reasoning.

I would define eco-fascism as a position that holds that some people have the right to consume a lot of resources and pollute much based on nationality, citizenship or race, but all the rest, which is the vast majority of people, do not have this right. And to ensure this, they need to be kept where they are. The position of CCN and its supporters is not identical to eco-

fascism as defined above since they deny of course that, say, Americans have the right to consume lots of resources and pollute much at the expense of people from other nations. However, if the American way of living really is a danger to the global environment, then this way of living needs to be changed. Full stop. To say that as long as this way of living is not or cannot be changed, immigrants should stay outside is, to repeat, not eco-fascism, but it will find support among eco-fascists since the immediate conclusions with respect to restrictions on immigration are the same.

It is therefore no wonder that extremist right-wing parties like these kind of arguments. In Germany, a country with one of the oldest environmental movements and some of the oldest ecologically oriented parties, environmental justifications for anti-immigration policies have been around since the 1970s. They have been made first by Herbert Gruhl, one of the founding fathers of the German Green Party. The Green Party itself never shared such a proposition and Gruhl soon left the party and founded his own right-wing ecological party *Ökologisch-Demokratische Partei* (ÖDP). Later, Neonazi parties such as the *National-Demokratische Partei Deutschlands* (NPD) also jumped on the ecological bandwagon in the

E-mail address: e.neumayer@lse.ac.uk.

URL: <http://personal.lse.ac.uk/neumayer/>.

1980s declaring that immigrants are major environmental polluters to provide further justification for their anti-immigration propaganda.

Why mention this? Because whatever one might think about the substantive merit of the propositions put forward by CCN and its supporters, one should at least be aware that these are propositions that extremist right-wing parties have propagated for much longer. I have argued elsewhere that ecological economics is at its heart a left-wing political project and is more likely to be supported by left-wing parties and individuals (Neumayer, 2004). However, the anti-immigration stance of CCN and its supporters clearly appeals to those on the far right of the political spectrum. Of course, just because one has some ugly people as bedfellows does not mean that one is not allowed to hold a certain position. I agree with Meyerson (2004, p. 62) that ‘playing the race card virtually ensures the end of intelligent debate on immigration (or any other) policy’. In other words, it must be possible to seriously discuss and call for strict restrictions to immigration without being called a racist or fascist. But one would wish that CCN and its supporters showed some awareness of this sensitive issue and tried to explicate what distinguishes them from the far right. To be fair to Daly (2004), he makes it very clear that his position should be understood as anti-immigration, but not anti-immigrant, i.e. he is in favour of strict limits on (further) immigration, not in favour of policies directed against existing immigrants. To my knowledge, he also does not share the termination of food and other aid to developing countries favored by Hardin (1974) and Abernethy (1993).

With its simplistic anti-immigration stance CCN makes no effort to understand, let alone tackle the root causes of migration. In my own work on the determinants of asylum migration to Western Europe, I have provided evidence that economic hardship, discrimination against ethnic minorities, political oppression, human rights abuse, violent conflict and state failure are all important determinants of asylum migration (Neumayer, 2005). They push people out of their countries of origin. It is highly likely that large-scale environmental degradation in the wake of global climate change will add another cause to (forced) migration. Conversely, people are pulled toward developed countries where they have hope for a more secure life and for improving their living standards. If developed countries want to tackle the root causes of forced migration, a major component of overall migration, then they need to undertake policy measures that promote economic development, democracy, respect for human rights and peaceful conflict resolution in countries of origin and promote sustainable development on a global scale. Restrictive immigration measures merely pass the burden of migration on to third countries or the countries of origin (witness the rising number of internally displaced persons), but they do not tackle the root causes. In comparison to forced migration, voluntary labor migration is more determined by purely economic factors where people migrate if the economic incentive is strong enough to compensate for the costs of migration. But here as well, developed countries can mitigate migration pressures by helping developing countries in the form of aid, technical assistance and preferential trade agreements. Most people do not want to leave their country of origin for language, cultural and other reasons. Few people will see a need for taking up paid

employment in foreign countries if they can improve their living standards within their own countries.

How does globalization come into this picture? In the eyes of Neo-Malthusians globalization is bad news. As Daly (2004, p. 43) puts it: ‘In the scramble to attract capital and jobs, there will be a standards-lowering competition to keep wages low and to reduce any social, safety and environmental standards that raise costs.’ This view is widely shared and seems intuitively plausible. However, it is often at odds with empirical evidence. For example, Neumayer (2002) finds that trade openness promotes multilateral environmental cooperation. Neumayer and de Soysa (2005a) demonstrate that countries that are more open to trade and are more heavily penetrated by foreign direct investment have a lower incidence of child labor than more closed countries. While Neumayer and de Soysa (2005b) show that more open countries are also more protective of workers’ rights to free association and collective bargaining. Of course, there are many instances in which the current regimes of trade and investment are biased against the interests of the environment and future generations as well as developing countries. However, if managed wisely, globalization can improve the environment and can bolster sustainability (Neumayer, 2001). If managed fairly, trade liberalization and increased foreign direct investment can improve living conditions in poor countries, thus mitigating one of the causes of migration.¹

Of course, some of the drivers of globalization also spur migration. This is true for improved communication links and cheaper travel opportunities. The irony is that many supporters of a liberal trade and investment regime are vigorous opponents to a more liberal migration regime and to more open borders for potential immigrants. Obviously, there are reasons for controlling and containing migration. Otherwise, there could be a drastic rise in the supply of labor in high-income countries, driving down the wages of many native workers or making them lose their jobs with undesirable consequences on income inequality, social cohesion and the social security systems. The social welfare state in developed countries would simply collapse if people from poor countries were allowed to settle and claim benefits without restrictions or it would have to deny benefits to new immigrants in order to remain financially viable. Also, a multi-cultural society can only function if immigrants are met with tolerance, but at the same time aspire to fit into the existing society. They must learn the language and they must respect the constitution, the laws and customs of their new country. A multi-cultural society based on these principles is desirable, the mere co-existence of multiple (‘parallel’) societies is not as it will eventually lead to violent conflict. Cultural identity, social cohesion and political stability would be threatened if a country faced an uncontrolled entry of immigrants from societies with starkly different social, cultural and political values. The old dream of some left-libertarian parties such as

¹ Daly (2004) argues that population control policies should not be condemned just because they can be abused, saying that birth control per se is not the problem, but employing birth control for immoral purposes such as gender determination of the baby. I agree. But in a similar vein, globalization itself is not the problem, but the way it is managed and employed by certain groups to further their own selfish interests.

the German Greens (“A world without borders”) must remain a dream for many years to come. But it is hypocritical to allow goods, services and financial flows to cross borders without restriction, but to restrain completely the cross-border flow of people. I agree with Stiglitz (2004, p. 471) who argues that ‘the fact that the globalization agenda has focused on the free movement of capital, and virtually ignored the movement of labor, reflects in part who is controlling that agenda’.

Indeed, for developed countries with their ageing populations, closing the borders is even contrary to their own economic interests. Controlled immigration from developing countries by young people with eager aspirations and a strong willingness to improve their personal circumstances represents the best option to mitigate the temporary problems of extremely high ratios of pensioners to working adults in developed countries (Ayres, 2004). At the same time, emigration will bring some relief to developing countries suffering from a huge youth bulge. Many developing countries have populations with up to 40% or 50% of non-adults. This is a consequence of not yet having achieved the demographic transition to low fertility rates. Of course, some migration can hurt the sending developing countries. For example, if the most highly skilled individuals leave a country (“brain drain”), this is likely to be damaging to the country’s economic development (Docquier and Rapoport, 2004). Developed countries like to close their borders for economic migrants in general, but selectively allow in immigrants with the right skills and high human capital to boost the country’s “competitiveness”. Germany with its policy of attracting highly skilled computer experts is a good example for this, but more generally there is an international competition among developed countries for highly skilled migrants from developing countries (Docquier and Rapoport, 2004). These and other problems need to be taken seriously and need to be tackled, e.g. by incentives for the highly skilled to return to their countries of origin after some time. But closing borders will not be the solution to the problem. I therefore agree with Jagdish Bhagwati (2003) that the creation of a World Migration Organization (WMO) would be helpful to manage this flow of people, much in the same way that the World Trade Organization (WTO) manages the flow of goods and services. The existing International Organization for Migration (IOM) deals more with refugees and internally displaced persons, but lacks a clear focus on governing the flow of labor migration. And much in the same way that the WTO needs to reflect better the interests of developing countries, so a newly created WMO needs to be designed in a way that it is not biased toward developed country interests. Rodrik (2004) estimates that even a moderate flow of migrants from developing countries can generate economic benefits to them and to relatives remaining back home that are larger than any gains to developing countries from a new trade round.

Where I agree with Herman Daly, CCN and other Neo-Malthusians such as Ehrlich and Ehrlich (2004) is with respect to the general desirability of population control for environmental reasons. Discussing population control is often difficult as it is clouded by strong religious and political convictions and emotions. Yet we must not shy away from engaging in such discussions. Bringing population levels down to sustainable levels represents an important ingredient of a

policy aimed at preserving the remaining biodiversity and granting more space to other species across the earth. Technological progress and environmental regulation can hopefully solve pollution problems and natural resource scarcities. Even then, a solution would be easier with smaller populations since more people quite simply consume more resources and pollute more (Ehrlich and Ehrlich, 2004; Cole and Neumayer, 2004). Population control becomes indispensable, however, to solve the seemingly unstoppable expansion of human beings and the simultaneous assault on other species and their habitats. There are too many people in most countries of this world, including the developed ones.

Daly (2004, p. 42) suggests that emigration of youths from developing to developed countries will have a positive feedback effect on population growth in developing countries: ‘Would any country any longer try to limit its birth rate, since youths who migrate abroad and send back remittances can be a good investment, a fact that might increase the birth rate?’. Hardin (1974), Abernethy (1993) and Ehrlich and Ehrlich (2004) share this conviction. I believe such fears are unfounded. First, whilst immigrants to developed countries typically have a higher fertility rate than the native people, this rate is typically soon falling and assimilating to the average fertility rate of their chosen country. In any case, if forced to remain in their developing sending country, these would-be emigrants are likely to have more children than they will in their chosen country of destination. Second, whilst remittance payments from migrants living in developed countries represent an important capital flow to many developing countries (a point stressed by the contributions of both Conrad Heilmann and Roldan Muradian in this issue), such remittance payments are likely to spur economic development and it is well known that more developed countries have lower fertility rates. It is therefore likely that remittance payments have a negative rather than positive effect on birth rates in receiving countries. Third, to my knowledge there is not much evidence that any country uses the ‘safety valve’ of migration (Ehrlich and Ehrlich, 2004, p. 108) to avoid tackling domestic demographic problems.

In conclusion, it is misleading and ethically indefensible to use environmental arguments against immigration. Sierra Club members were therefore right to reject anti-immigration candidates from its board (Barringer, 2004). A sustainable development strategy must tackle the root causes of migration rather than deflect problems to other countries by keeping immigrants out. Globalization, wisely and fairly managed, represents a great promise for sustainable development and for tackling the causes of migration. However, some migration will always take place and immigration is often in the economic interest of developed countries and helps sending countries to cope with some of the problems associated with delayed demographic transition.

Acknowledgements

Thanks to two reviewers for valuable comments. Financial assistance from the Leverhulme Trust is gratefully acknowledged.

REFERENCES

- Abernethy, Virginia Deane, 1993. The demographic transition revisited: lessons for foreign aid and U.S. immigration policy. *Ecological Economics* 8 (3), 235–252.
- Abernethy, Virginia Deane, 2002. Population dynamics: poverty, inequality, and self-regulating fertility rates. *Population and Environment* 24 (1), 69–96.
- Ayres, Robert, 2004. The economic conundrum of an aging population. *Worldwatch Magazine* 17 (5), 45–49.
- Barringer, Felicity, 2004. Establishment candidates defeat challenges in sierra club voting. *New York Times* 22 (April).
- Bhagwati, Jagdish, 2003. Borders beyond control. *Foreign Affairs* 98–104 (January/February).
- Cole, Matthew A., Neumayer, Eric, 2004. Examining the impact of demographic factors on air pollution. *Population and Environment* 26 (1), 5–21.
- Daly, Herman, 2004. Population, migration and globalization. *Worldwatch Magazine* 17 (5), 41–44 (Reprinted in this volume).
- DinAlt, Jason, 1997. The environmental impact of immigration into the United States. *Carrying Capacity Network's Focus* 4 (2) (available at www.carryingcapacity.org/DinAlt.htm).
- Docquier, Frédéric, Rapoport, Hillel, 2004. Skilled Migration: The Perspective of Developing Countries. Working Paper No. 3382. World Bank, Washington D.C.
- Ehrlich, Paul R., Ehrlich, Anne H., 2004. *One with Nineveh—Politics, Consumption, and the Human Future*. Island Press, Washington, DC.
- Hardin, Garrett, 1974. Living on a lifeboat. *BioScience* 24 (10), 561–568.
- Meyerson, Frederick A.B., 2004. Policy view: immigration, population policy, and the sierra club. *Population and Environment* 26 (1), 61–69.
- Neumayer, Eric, 2001. *Greening Trade and Investment—Environmental Protection Without Protectionism*. Earthscan, London.
- Neumayer, Eric, 2002. Trade openness and environmental cooperation. *World Economy* 25 (6), 815–832.
- Neumayer, Eric, 2004. The environment, left-wing political orientation and *Ecological Economics*. *Ecological Economics* 51 (3–4), 167–175.
- Neumayer, Eric, 2005. Bogus refugees? The determinants of asylum migration to western Europe. *International Studies Quarterly* 49 (4), 389–409.
- Neumayer, Eric, de Soysa, Indra, 2005a. Trade openness, foreign direct investment and child labor. *World Development* 33 (1), 43–63.
- Neumayer, Eric, de Soysa, Indra, 2005b. Globalization and the Right to Free Association and Collective Bargaining. Working Paper. London School of Economics and Political Science and Norwegian University of Science and Technology.
- Rodrik, Dani, 2004. Globalization and growth—looking in the wrong places. *Journal of Policy Modeling* 26 (4), 513–517.
- Stiglitz, Joseph E., 2004. Globalization and growth in emerging markets. *Journal of Policy Modeling* 26 (4), 465–484.