



This is a repository copy of *Open Borders: The Science and Ethics of Immigration*, Bryan Caplan (author) and Zach Weinersmith (illustrator).

White Rose Research Online URL for this paper:

<https://eprints.whiterose.ac.uk/228976/>

Version: Accepted Version

Book review:

Collinson, J. orcid.org/0000-0001-7049-2192 (2021) Review of: *Open Borders: The Science and Ethics of Immigration*, Bryan Caplan (author) and Zach Weinersmith (illustrator). *Journal of Immigration Asylum and Nationality Law*, 35 (3). p. 293. ISSN 1746-7632

© 2021 Thomson Reuters. This is an author-produced version of a paper subsequently published in *Journal of Immigration Asylum and Nationality Law*. Uploaded in accordance with the publisher's self-archiving policy.

Reuse

This article is distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) licence. This licence allows you to distribute, remix, tweak, and build upon the work, even commercially, as long as you credit the authors for the original work. More information and the full terms of the licence here:

<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/>

Takedown

If you consider content in White Rose Research Online to be in breach of UK law, please notify us by emailing eprints@whiterose.ac.uk including the URL of the record and the reason for the withdrawal request.



eprints@whiterose.ac.uk
<https://eprints.whiterose.ac.uk/>

Open Borders: The Science and Ethics of Immigration

Bryan Caplan (author) and Zach Weinersmith (illustrator)

New York: First Second Books, 2019

ISBN: 978-1-250-31697

248pp

£19.99 (hardback)

This book – a work of graphic non-fiction – seeks to present both a free-market economics and an ethical case for unrestricted global migration. It is more successful in the former than latter enterprise. The focus of the work is the United States, with the statistical arguments derived from US experience, but the authors aim to address a global audience (p198).

Caplan attempts to underpin his economics case with an ethical one. Chapter 7 is dedicated to how a variety of philosophical positions lead inevitably to a position in favour of open borders, including utilitarianism, egalitarianism, libertarianism, cost-benefit analysis meritocracy, Christianity, and Kantianism. However, the main ethical basis of the book is Michael Heumer's 'Starving Marvin' hypothetical¹ (explained at p17-20). In this ethical thought experiment, Marvin is in danger of starvation, so plans to go to the local marketplace to buy bread. However, he is forcibly prevented from reaching the marketplace by Sam, who is aware of Marvin's situation. As a result, Marvin returns home, where he dies of starvation. 'Sam's behavior in the scenario described violates Marvin's rights, because it is an act of extremely harmful coercion, and there are no relevant extenuating circumstances.' (p20). However, there is a problem with the 'Starving Marvin' hypothetical: *open* borders do not equate to *free* borders. Caplan himself uses the costs of migration as a response to the argument that open borders would lead to 'an influx of migrants more massive than any country can handle.' Caplan points out that 'transportation alone is a major bottleneck and many migrants will wait until they can line up jobs and housing' and 'History tells us the first movers will be relatives and friends of existing migrants.' (p45). These are social and financial barriers to migration which will still stand in Starving Marvin's way. Yet Caplan seeks to have it both ways, arguing migration as a response to economic distress yet that the costs of migration will mean that the Global North will not be instantly subject to 'swamping' (Caplan's word, p45).

Although the underlying instinct of this book is undeniably to try to make an ethical case for open borders, the stronger arguments in this book are the economic rather than ethical ones. Chapter 2 which makes the case that the world economy, and the individuals within it, are economically better off for the free movement of labour. Caplan argues that the free movement of labour increases global wealth, and that where labour movement is restricted, 'zombie' economies arise (p50). The case for genuinely open borders as a driver of global economic prosperity is more convincing than as an immediate response to Starving Marvin's hardship: if the moral imperative for open humanitarian flows was the same as economic migration, then the world would look very different already.

However, there remain weaknesses to the economic case too because of the book's close adherence to free-market economic norms. The economic case is partially predicated on the basis that open borders would lead to greater wealth creation because more people means more

¹ Michael Heumer, 'Is There a Right to Immigrate?' (2010) 36 Social Theory and Practice 429

producers and more consumers (p36-38), despite growing acceptance in many quarters that perpetual economic growth is a barrier to economic and climate sustainability. This is not acknowledged in either the main text or chapter notes. There are also jarring, blink-and-you'd-miss, references to a flat tax as utopian (p57) and social security as a problem (p79).

The economic argument in this book is also unapologetically macro. Caplan argues that the net-benefit to the global economy (and Caplan aims to demonstrate how open borders would be an economic net-benefit to the Global North as much as the Global South) overwhelms the arguments against open borders. As positive examples of the economic benefits of free migration, Caplan uses the example of Puerto Rico (whose residents have had the right to unrestricted migration to the US since 1902) and is now 'virtually the richest island in the Caribbean' (p48) and rural Nebraska, where 'decline could have been far uglier. Since residents were free to migrate anywhere in the U.S., many left. Falling labor supply cushioned wages for those who chose to remain.' (p50). However, Caplan can be too flippant about the costs to individuals who miss out on the economic benefits of open borders. At p53, he rhetorically asks 'could the other effects [of open borders] possibly be bad enough to outweigh trillions of dollars in material gains?' On p39 a panel shows Caplan sitting outside an Afghan cuisine restaurant with a friends from Canada and Columbia, with Caplan saying 'my gains from immigration far exceed my [economic] losses!'

Chapters 3-5 presents economic responses to some critiques of open borders, namely fiscal collapse (ch3), cultural disintegration (ch4), and undermining freedom (ch5). Caplan is much more convincing when dealing with the statistical evidence about how immigration inflows mediate the demographic timebomb of aging populations in the Global North and when presenting statistical evidence of effective immigrant integration, than with some of the political points (for example, Caplan is very ambivalent about immigrant political participation (p119, 154 & 211)).

At p104, Caplan suggests that 'If your idea of "cultural greatness" is just freezing ancient glories, immigration is pretty disturbing. But if your idea of "cultural greatness" is a nonstop cornucopia of creativity immigration is awesome.' On p203, Caplan identified that in the context of the UK's Brexit vote, 'As usual, it's the places least affected by immigration that most oppose it. Nationalist ideology, not life experience, drives opposition.' Yet Caplan never really connects these ideas to his main, economics driven argument, let alone explains how an argument based on macroeconomic net-benefits is supposed to bridge this emotional divide.

The key weakness of the graphic non-fiction genre is that it does not provide a great deal of space for nuance (even the most word heavy pages come in at well under 200 words each), although the detailed chapter notes at the end of the book do provide additional insight. However, one could also say that this is also a weakness of the popular non-fiction category in general, and that the limited nuance is as much an editorial decision as one that is imposed by the graphic presentation.

The art style will be familiar to anyone who reads Weinersmith's daily *Saturday Morning Breakfast Cereal* (www.smbc-comics.com), which explores questions of economics, science, ethics and philosophy. This is not Weinersmith's first explicitly "political" project: his ongoing *Laws and Sausages* webseries (www.lawsandsausagescomic.com) is framed as an introductory class to American government.

The illustrations help drive the reader along. They are generally broad-brush context-setting backgrounds but with some nice, unobtrusive details. The illustrations are generally successful in the tightrope between visual shorthand and stereotype: although the Red Square military parade to illustrate 'socialism' (p179) is a rare misstep. The images of Americans and migrants are never monochromatic: both Americans and migrants are presented as being both white and people of colour, with the exceptions being pursuant to a political point. For example, on p23, the Americans imposing border controls in the 1920s are white and the stereotyped depictions of southern Europeans, eastern Europeans, and Jews are figments of the white American's imaginations. However, the academic voices represented are all men and, bar one, those of white men (although this is a consequence of the voices that the author chooses to engage with, rather than the illustrator's choice of who to depict).

Overall, this is a worthy attempt to bring a series of complex debates to life for a larger audience. The tone is refreshingly optimistic at a time when much of the debate is largely pessimistic in its assessment of the political moment.

Jonathan Collinson
University of Huddersfield