

## **On a mystery of immigration**

*Author:* Terence Rajivan Edward

*Abstract.* This paper addresses a puzzle some people have about immigration. We are told that the immigrants we are taking in are talented, but then why don't their own societies keep them?

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*“We buy what bad men sell—*

*What any ordinary suburban school would expel”*

*Introduction.* Forgive me, I wish to take up a theme I have taken up before (Edward 2022)! Various members of the general public have puzzles about certain features of their country. If you send them to the library, they should be able to find books on a theme related to their puzzle but I believe the books do not formulate the puzzle clearly. They do not formulate it so that you have to give up on at least one component of the puzzle. Then the question is “Which commitment are you giving up and why?” For example, a plumber of mine once asked me: if the immigrants we are taking in are so talented, why don't their own societies keep them? He was referring to immigrants from the European Union, I believe, but the question can be applied generally. It is easy to find accounts of factors influencing immigration patterns, such as that a certain country needed to rebuild after war and it offered jobs to people from another country as part of that. But I think what you won't find is a statement of the puzzle this plumber is facing.

We can present it as composed of these three commitments – these three propositions:

- (a) Some of the immigrants that a certain country are taking in are very talented.
- (b) If these immigrants are so talented, then people in their native country would value them.
- (c) If people in their native country value them, then they would provide them with sufficient incentives to stay.

The puzzle is: which proposition are you getting rid of and why? But a reason for not bothering to present the puzzle is because when we consider actual scenarios, it is not clear which proposition to give up nor is it obviously of interest for researchers to look into this matter. It seems there is a problem with the whole combination, but different people may disagree without resolution on where exactly the problem lies. I shall present a range of cases where it seems we are going to have to abandon at least one of these propositions, some of which involve this unclarity over which proposition. (I am setting aside people with antisocial talents by the way.)

*Oppressed minorities.* An obvious point is that sometimes a nationalist government has very oppressive policies towards a minority, its ideal being a homogeneous state in a crucial respect – people of entirely or almost entirely the majority ethnic group. Given the situation, most members of that minority would prefer to leave. In that situation, another country might attract them, for example as refugees. It seems proposition (b) needs to be qualified in some way when faced with this case: “We, the majority, don’t value talented members of a minority while they are in our country; or we don’t value them unless they are also prepared to take certain kinds of very unpleasant treatment.”

*Career reasons.* Let us suppose that there is a person in a certain country, call it “Z,” who is ambitious and is close to being a leading figure in their field. But most of the leading

figures in their field are in country X. Country Z is liberal and so is country X. People in country Z value this person and offer them incentives to stay but country X offers them a deal as well. The nature of their field is such that the only way in which they can compete with the leading figures is by moving to country X. It seems this kind of case involves giving up on proposition (c) – their native country values them but does not provide them with sufficient incentives to stay. Sufficient incentives for them would be turning their native country into the place where the leading figures are! There are a range of variations on this case, where career incentives lead to a move.

*Imperialism.* Talented people might be encouraged to leave one country and move to another, as part of an imperialistic programme. “The talent we are sending there will bring this country under our control.” Perhaps someone in England thinks that the best way to attract talent here is to appear as if various institutions within the country can easily be brought under the control of another country, but as that imperialistic goal appears to get closer things get very complicated and the imperialistic aspiration fails. This kind of case also involves giving up on proposition (c). A native country does value some people but as imperialists and so sends them on imperialistic projects, rather than giving them sufficient incentives to stay.

*Structural gap.* There can be talented people in a country who are unsuited to the structure in that country. “We can give a good deal to people slightly better than you and slightly worse than you, but not at your level.” The only way to give them a better deal would be to change the structure, which people find difficult. And so these misfits have an incentive to migrate. There are different ways of responding to this case, given (a) to (c) above. For example, you might say that what counts as very talented depends on the structure in place and these people are not counted as very talented within their native country’s structure,

contrary to (a). Perhaps in some countries, the main positions, or the main positions in some fields, are superhuman genius and the rest. They are like systems oriented towards strong man dictators.

*Overproduction.* If we unpleasantly think of people as rather like goods, then there can be overproduction of a good. A country might produce a lot of people with certain skills, more than it needs. So they do not provide incentives against at least some of them leaving.

## **Appendix**

I fear there is someone who is going to read this and feel it is all just the blandest common sense. Well, it is not really common sense prior to investigation that with some actual cases it is unclear whether the puzzle formulated is even worth trying to solve. Anyway, a question for them: how easy is it to get someone who can state such common sense with this level of clarity? Probably various people I know can in theory, but I am not sure about in practice. If you ask some people to do such work, perhaps what you will get is a cleverly-laid trap for unwary readers – what they say on a topic sounds right but it would be picked apart by anyone with more experience in that topic (see Dimmock 1955: 450). “I am very pessimistic about human nature and the nature of crowds, and what I can get for properly providing that kind of service.”

## **References**

Dimmock Jr., G.E. 1955. Robert Graves and Greek Mythology. *The Hudson Review* 8 (3): 449-455.

Edward, T.R. 2022. How well do we understand our own societies? *Kakonomia* again and Kathleen Stock on the perspective of love. Available at: <https://philpapers.org/rec/EDWHWD>