Borders, Movement, and Global Egalitarianism

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Abstract: Despite their theoretical attractiveness, global egalitarian arguments for open borders face the worry that open borders would in fact exacerbate inequality. In this paper, I offer a response to such egalitarian consequentialist concerns. I argue that they fail to attend to the larger political and economic forces that create and maintain inequality. Even in cases where immigration conflicts with egalitarian goals, the conflicts tend to be due to contingent circumstances that egalitarians have reason to change. As such, they do not pose a deep challenge for egalitarian defenses of open borders. However, they do illuminate an important and overlooked point: egalitarians should construe open borders as part of a broad and coherent global egalitarian program, both politically and philosophically. This is in contrast to an approach that sees the border question as an isolated and abstract philosophical question. Furthermore, egalitarians would do well to engage the political economic factors that drive migration in our world, and to buttress their concerns of distributive justice with arguments emphasizing the negative effects of the global border regime on social and relational equality.

Keywords: global egalitarianism, open borders, immigration, migration

1. Introduction

The issue of cross-border migration tends to pull egalitarians in different directions. For example, while some argue that the discretionary exclusion of potential immigrants is fundamentally incompatible with a commitment to equality, others claim that there is no such incompatibility.[1] Perhaps this is not surprising; egalitarianism is a big tent and is bound to produce different takes on such a complicated issue.

If we narrow our focus to *global* egalitarianism, the picture becomes slightly more unified. Broadly, this is the view that justice requires mitigating global inequalities.[2] Global egalitarianism tends to be more univocally antagonistic toward the control of movement across borders and thus

[1] See, e.g., (Cole 2012) versus (Blake 2020, 119–22).

[2] My definition here follows that of Christian Barry and Laura Valentini (2009, 487), according to whom "[g]lobal egalitarianism indicates a family of views holding that, at a fundamental level, justice places limits on permissible global inequalities." Like Barry and Valentini, I am trying to be neutral as to what grounds such commitments, as well as what kinds of inequalities are rendered impermissible. The point is that inequalities *qua* inequalities are objects of concern, though note that this is not the same as saying that they are intrinsically or necessarily wrong.

more friendly toward the idea of open borders or something like it.[3] At the heart of the most well-known argument to this effect is a trio of observations: first, that citizenship in certain states rather than others confers to its holders massively different rights, opportunities, privileges, and general life prospects; second, that citizenship is distributed almost entirely on a morally arbitrary basis (for the most part, by birth); and third, that border restrictions, in preventing people from accessing the goods associated with citizenship in places other than those of their birth, effectively entrench the inequalities that the distribution of citizenship creates. These points are summarized famously and elegantly by Joseph Carens (1987, 252; 2013, 226), who likens citizenship in Western democracies to a modern version of feudal class privilege. The unequal privileges maintained by the system are various, and any one of them can potentially ground a critique of the system. Carens (2013, 228), for example, argues that equality of opportunity alone is a reason for open borders, but notes that commitments to economic, social, and political equality also point in the same direction. For all such egalitarian commitments, his claim is that freedom of movement would contribute to their realization. In short, the state system is effectively a caste system, and restrictive borders are a primary method with which this system is maintained. As such, there is a (global) egalitarian presumption against them.

Many deny the conclusion of this argument by denying the global egalitarianism on which it is premised.[4] This is not my concern in what follows. My concern is that even if we accept global egalitarianism, there may yet be reasons from that perspective to be wary of open borders. One worry is that uncontrolled immigration would threaten the ability of wealthy liberal democracies

[3] Throughout the paper, I'll use the phrase "open borders" to refer to the view that state restrictions on movement across borders are generally unjustified, and thus that there is a strong presumption against exclusion. This does not rule out there being circumstances in which exclusion is justified, all things considered. For variation, I'll sometimes use "open borders" interchangeably with "free movement."

[4] These roughly fall into two categories: those that deny egalitarianism altogether, and those what deny global egalitarianism as I have defined it here. For a response to egalitarians who deny global egalitarianism, see (C. Barry and Valentini 2009).

to regulate inequalities within their jurisdiction. Another is that only the most advantaged members of poor states would be able to take advantage of open borders. The departure of these members would leave their home countries even poorer, thus exacerbating global inequality. These egalitarian consequentialist arguments, as we might call them, threaten to render the global egalitarian case for open borders either incoherent or purely an exercise in ideal theory.[5]

This criticism is often buttressed by the claim that global egalitarians have an alternative to open borders—namely, states can retain the right to exclude immigrants, but wealthy states should do more to lessen inequality in the world (Carens 2013, 233; Tan 2004, 127–28). This would include but would not be limited to massive wealth transfers and significant reform of international institutions. We can interpret this view as a certain way of responding to the argument laid out above, one that agrees that the state system is riddled with objectionable inequalities but denies that open borders are the appropriate response. These egalitarians point out that it is a contingent fact that restrictive borders entrench inequality; in their version of a just world, restrictive borders would not have such an effect. If this is right, then global egalitarianism's connection to open borders is put into doubt.

In this paper, my primary goal is to salvage that connection in the face of these considerations. In sections 2 and 3, I'll discuss the two groups of criticisms identified above. A secondary goal is to make a point about strategy and method, which I bring out in section 4. For while I do not find these criticisms wholly successful, I do think that they illustrate an important point: global egalitarians must construe open borders as part of a larger project aimed at changing the features of the

[5] These worries are compounded by the fact that egalitarians' companions in the open borders camp include many libertarians and classical liberals, who have quite different moral priorities. See, e.g., (Van der Vossen and Brennan 2018; Freiman 2018), though for complications to this picture, see also (Joshi 2022). This has caused some trouble for the Left's commitment to open borders. A famous recent example is Bernie Sanders's (2015) labelling of open borders as "a Koch brothers proposal" that "would make everybody in America poorer." See also (Nagle 2018).

global economic and political system that contribute to inequality. This also means that they should resist the urge to think about borders as a purely philosophical issue that can be treated in abstraction from political reality and isolation from other political questions. Put another way, the lesson to be learned from egalitarian critiques of open borders isn't that global egalitarians ought to reject open borders, but that opening borders is best justified as part of a broad and coherent global egalitarian program, both politically and philosophically. Having defended the viability of a pro-open borders egalitarianism, I then explore in section 5 the prospects for a stronger argument, one that holds that open borders are not just a possible, but a necessary part of the global egalitarian project. Section 6 concludes.

2. Inequality in destination states

Let us first consider concerns regarding the prospects for distributive justice in destination states. Large influxes of immigrants, it is argued, will have labor market effects that are bad for native workers, and especially the least advantaged (B. Barry 1992; Woodward 1992; Macedo 2011; 2007; 2018; for discussion, see Carens 1998). The basic idea is that without border restrictions, many poor and "unskilled" laborers will enter the workforce and compete for a limited number of jobs. This will result in lower wages, higher levels of unemployment, and less bargaining power for members of the native working class. The new arrivals will also put stress on the welfare state, thus limiting the availability of basic goods such as housing and education. The cumulative effect will be to widen the already troubling gap between the rich and the poor.

Some also contend that it is not just labor market effects and the carrying capacity of robust social programs that we should worry about, but that immigration can have deleterious effects on *support* for those programs as well. Without such support, those programs will deteriorate, and the

negative labor market effects will be exacerbated.[6] The main purported reason for this loss of support is that the social solidarity, cohesion, and trust that it necessitates is undermined by immigration, especially if the immigrants introduce more diversity into the populace, and especially if they come in large numbers (Macedo 2011, 307; Miller 2016, 10–11, 17–18, 64–65). If this is right, then egalitarians who are inclined towards open borders face another problem.

Before proceeding, it is worth considering a possible response from the global egalitarian perspective, which is that the problem outlined here is not really a problem at all. That is, if the project of building a world of equals undermines the fight against inequality within wealthy states, so much the worse for that fight; the point is to reduce *global* inequality, period. Given that this paper is addressed to global egalitarians, then, we might wonder what the relevance of the above concerns is. Indeed, many who raise such concerns supplement them with an argument about why distributive justice is more demanding within state borders than across them.[7] Since global egalitarians do not endorse such arguments, they have little reason to care about domestic projects of egalitarian justice in the face of massive global inequality.[8]

This seems to me an unattractive view that global egalitarians ought to reject. There are good reasons to hold on to a transitional global egalitarian vision—that is, an idea of how to get from here to there—that doesn't involve simply giving up on the project of making existing liberal democracies more egalitarian. For one, we want to avoid placing the burden in the wrong place, punishing the worst-off members of rich societies for global inequalities that they had little hand in shaping and from which they benefit only marginally compared to their more advantaged

[6] For a concise summary, but not an endorsement, of this argument, see (Pevnick 2009, 147; 2011, 154–55).
[7] Macedo (2011, 311–16), for example, has a membership-view inspired by Rawls. Miller comes to the table from the perspective of liberal nationalism.
[8] Ryan Pevnick (2009, 150–54; 2011, 158–61) makes this case, though not from a distinctively egalitarian position. His point is that in the absence of some other justification, the mere fact that immigration is a threat to the welfare state doesn't immediately provide a reason to restrict immigration. Further, what it could at best provide is a pragmatic or instrumental, rather than moral, reason.

compatriots.[9] Such an approach is also a political and strategic error: an effective egalitarian coalition should and would likely include, not alienate, members of the least advantaged in every country.[10] In other words, the right program is one that supports fights against inequalities in multiple different contexts, rather than having a crude top-down approach.[11] With that said, then, let us take the various concerns about the effects of open borders in turn.

Labor market effects

The first worry, to be clear, is not that immigration doesn't contribute to overall economic growth, but that it does so at the expense of the less advantaged members of society, and thus at the expense of equality. To raise such a worry, philosophers rely on basic economic principles buttressed by the empirical literature on the labor market effects of immigration. However, while this literature is vast and contested, there is a good amount of consensus that immigration has only modest labor market impacts on the receiving society, especially when considered at a relatively macro level in terms of time and space (Card 2009; 2005; Ottaviano and Peri 2012; Manacorda, Manning, and Wadsworth 2012; Zorlu and Hartog 2005).[12] To be sure, it is also acknowledged dynamics can vary in particular contexts and when examined with different research methods (Longhi, Nijkamp, and Poot 2010; Piyapromdee 2021; Parekh and Vargas-Silva 2018). Some studies, for example, show modest negative economic effects on previous immigrants (Ottaviano and Peri 2012; Manacorda,

[9] Doing so would violate, for example, Higgins's (2013) plausible *Priority of Disadvantage Principle* (PDP), which rules out any immigration policies that would avoidably harm a social group that is already unjustly disadvantaged.
[10] Those with a Marxist or otherwise anti-capitalist orientation emphasize this point, even if orthodox Marxists will resist the invocation of bourgeois values like equality. As Lea Ypi (2018, 175) puts it, "[h]owever much workers in one part of the world could achieve in their fight against capital, it would be worth very little if the price to pay were more capitalist exploitation and suffering by fellow-workers in other parts of the world." Or, more famously, "workers of the world, unite!" In my view, the point is both moral and strategic.
[11] This crude approach also lends credence to the idea that open borders is an anti-worker project for the benefit of a globalist, cosmopolitan elite.
[12] Notably, these results have been found across US, EU, and UK contexts.

Manning, and Wadsworth 2012), and, in certain cases, on subsets of lower-income workers (Dustmann, Frattini, and Preston 2013). Importantly, though, these magnitude of the effects are relatively small (Vargas-Silva and Sumption 2023).[13]

In other words, despite what may seem to intuitively follow from simple economic principles, it is not the case that immigration is a surefire threat to the economic well-being of the native working class. As a recent report from the University of Oxford's Migration Observatory puts it, "[t]heory does not predict exactly what the labour market effects of immigration will be" (Vargas-Silva and Sumption 2023). Fortunately, this point has not been lost on all philosophers of immigration; Peter Higgins (2013, 52), for example, though he does not endorse open borders, agrees that Macedo exaggerates the negative impacts of immigration on the least advantaged members of wealthy receiving countries.

A second point of interest is that the effects of immigration in any given case are conditioned by the existing social, economic, and political circumstances of receiving country (Jakubiak and Kaczmarczyk 2019, 379). To take one illustration, a recent study finds that immigration's impact on native workers in the US is more negative in states with a lower minimum wage (Edo and Rapoport 2019).[14] Even where migration does appear to conflict with equality, then, we must investigate the broader conditions that create such a conflict. Where increased immigration does seem to depress working class wages, for example, it is not clear that the situation is best summarized as "immigration is bad for the poor and working classes in wealthy countries." The lesson may rather be, "things are already bad for the poor and working classes in wealthy countries, and

[13] Suzy Lee (2019, 36) points out that even on the analysis of George Borjas, whose work is often used (by Macedo, for example, as well as Trump advisor Stephen Miller) to support the claim that immigration is bad for native workers, the effects on those at the lowest skill and income levels, where negative, are small.

[14] See also (Gould 2019). In the EU context, Andersson et al. (2019) conclude that "[t]he main drivers behind increasing labour market polarization and growth of the low-wage sector in particular seem to be more related to technological changes, institutions and globalization."

adding more immigration to the mix sometimes doesn't help." The latter is much less straightforwardly an argument against immigration. That argument would treat all of the existing conditions besides immigration as fixed. But they are not fixed, and they are precisely the ones that egalitarians are interested in changing: unregulated globalization, tax cuts for large corporations and the wealthy, declining labor union density, monopsony power of employers, and so on.

This is a reminder that we need to be careful when generating normative recommendations from empirical studies. There is a risk of naturalizing and thus obscuring factors that contribute to the conflict between the interests of immigrants and natives. We should ask of such conflicts, "under what conditions?" (Lee 2019, 36). One can get lost in the weeds, trying parse out whether or not the wages of workers are negatively affected by a few percentage points in some particular context, without stepping and back and considering the myriad factors that have contributed into the rising inequality of the past half century.

Another way to put the point is that when we move from empirical data to normative critique and proposal, we should be clear about what we conceive of as a fixed point and what we conceive of as lever to pull. When Stephen Macedo (2011, 317) says that "[i]f immigration laws and practices foster large scale movements of people that systematically worsen the conditions of the poorest among us, then we must consider whether there are sufficiently weighty reasons to justify or excuse this," one could instead say that if current economic arrangements make it such that large scale movements of people systematically worsen the conditions of the poorest among us, then we must consider whether there are sufficiently weighty reasons to justify or excuse those arrangements. Even if there are cases in which immigration does "systematically worsen the conditions of the poorest among us"—an assertion, that, by the lights of the empirical evidence as well as by Macedo's own admission, is controversial to say the least—it is plausible that when and where it

does, it does so largely because the existing economic conditions are already hostile to egalitarianism.

To be clear, I am not arguing that anyone should ignore empirical evidence. If it is indeed the case that certain groups are positioned in such a way as to be vulnerable to negative economic effects as a result of immigration, this is worth consideration. My point is that it is far from clear that it would be an argument for border restrictions, as some commentators seem to assume. I am arguing here for a reframing of how we think about these conflicts. From the egalitarian perspective, they are better seen as yet more reminders of how far we have to go in building an egalitarian society.

Support for egalitarian institutions

This brings us to the second issue. The general idea here goes something like this: egalitarian institutions need popular support, and that support requires a certain kind of social glue, be it solidarity, community, trust, a sense of shared purpose, culture, or something else, that would be undermined by large-scale immigration. So the real issue is not so much direct economic effects, but the social and political maintenance of the welfare state.

While this claim was once a matter of conventional wisdom, that consensus has eroded. Reviews of the literature find little reason to think that there is a necessary tradeoff between diversity and redistribution (Kymlicka and Banting 2006; Pevnick 2009, 148–50; 2011, 155–58).[15] Indeed,

[15] It should be noted that like Higgins, Pevnick is not a defender of open borders. He defends a version of the right to exclude (2011, chaps. 2–3). But he argues compellingly against this particular argument for the right to exclude, and in this we agree.

even philosophers who make use of this argument to argue against open borders note that the literature is conflicted (Miller 2016, 177n16).[16]

Still, the general idea at issue here holds sway in the popular imagination and has an impact on the politics of migration (Geddes and Scholten 2016; Vasilopoulou and Talving 2019). Perhaps this itself is a sign that egalitarians should be wary of immigration, and especially of calls for open borders. This would be prudent if conflicts over immigration tended to pull voters to the right, toward anti-immigrant candidates and parties that are also anti-redistributivist (Macedo 2011, 307).

However, there are good reasons to think that this way of framing the problem gets things backwards, and that social strife and identitarian politics are in fact the *result* of failures of distributive justice, rather than the *source*. That is to say, economic inequality fuels identity conflict, not the other way around. Summarizing the research on anti-immigrant attitudes among the working class, Suzy Lee (2019, 33) notes that such attitudes are rooted more in economic than identitarian concerns, and as such they tend to flare up in uncertain economic times: "[t]he correlation between the rise of such nativist movements and economic crises is so tight that most social science takes it for granted, with studies focusing on those rare occasions when they fail to appear during periods of economic crisis." Similarly, Neli Demireva (2019) points out that recent literature in the EU context increasingly suggests that income inequality and deprivation are stronger determinants than diversity of the estrangement of native citizens. And Thomas Piketty (2020, pt. Four) argues at length that the nativism on the rise today is consequence of the fact that egalitarian social programs have been largely taken off the menu by the major political parties in wealthy states. In other words, disadvantaged citizens are already alienated and mistrustful, and due to a lack of

[16] As Lorna Finlayson (2020) points out, Miller's reviewers have criticized him for this point, and for his use of empirical data more generally. See, e.g., (Ochoa Espejo 2017; Sager 2016a).

viable redistributive political programs to support, turn to issues such as immigration to vent their frustration.[17] Thus, we can accept that anti-immigrant attitudes exist without blaming them for the decline in egalitarian justice.[18] This undercuts the supposed egalitarian argument against immigration.[19]

Again, one lesson here is that we should be careful about how we are framing our inquiry. Lorna Finlayson (2020, 132–33) argues that pitting immigration against the welfare state "conveys a radically false impression of what that situation is: an impression of a benevolent liberal state faced with a difficult dilemma, between upholding its valuable institutions and traditions or extending hospitality to the needy but potentially troublesome hordes clamouring for a share of 'our' goodies." By worrying so much about the effects of immigration on the welfare state, we easily slip into a kind of idealization of those states. As with any idealizations, we need to ask not if they are strictly true (by definition, they are not), but if they are leading us astray by obscuring normatively relevant details. Given that the actual situation in these countries is that their egalitarian potential has long been buckling under the weight of policies that have served to transfer wealth to a very small slice of the population, it appears that the answer is yes. In other words, we can repeat the point from above, that the threats, insofar as they exist at all, are parasitic on certain contingent conditions. It is these conditions that should be the focus of egalitarians.[20]

[17] See also (McLaren 2012), as cited in (Geddes and Scholten 2016).
[18] Indeed, given the right institutional framework, conflicts can and do in fact become *productive* of solidarity. On this, see (Bloemraad 2017).
[19] My discussion here can be read as an extension of Pevnick's (2009, 150–54; 2011, 158–61) point that this argument assumes a certain fixity of institutional context and of native citizens' attitudes. I am adding the claim, of particular interest to egalitarians, that one major contextual factor here is an already inegalitarian set of political and economic circumstances.
[20] We can add that the framing sometimes has the effect of shifting blame onto the apparently hopelessly racist white working class, a move that is unsupported by data. Indeed, David Rueda (2018) contends that it is in fact the redistributive preferences of the rich that is most negatively affected by increased societal heterogeneity, and that this is far more influential. This is of course not to deny that many poor white people are racist.

Summary

With regard to both the labor market effects of immigration and its effects on trust and cohesion, two common themes emerge that are relevant to any egalitarian assessment of migration: (1) direct conflict between new arrivals and existing members is often exaggerated, and (2) where it occurs, it occurs less because of immigration itself, and more because of existing social and political conditions that are contributing to inequality. Thus, these criticisms themselves do not seem to constitute a genuine critique of the egalitarian case for open borders.[21] Again, the point is not to bury our heads in the sand and to pretend that immigration doesn't present practical and political challenges. Instead, the point is to get clearer on how egalitarians should think about those challenges and how they should respond to them. What I will argue in §4 is that they do need to attend to the concerns raised above, but that they can do so without abandoning their commitment to open borders, so long as they also offer a critique of the larger systems that create and exacerbate tensions between less advantaged citizens and potential immigrants. First, though, let us turn to another egalitarian consequentialist consideration.

3. Sending states and global inequality

Moving away from a focus on the receiving state, a second line of argument against open borders regards their potential effects on global inequality. The particular worry here is that the people in poorer countries who would be able to take advantage of the lack of restrictions are likely to be the wealthier and more educated. Their exit will harm their countries, thus worsening global

[21] One caveat is that we have only been dealing with the evidence regarding actual migration in our world, not a world in which borders were opened. While commentators such as Barry (1992) and Woodward (1992) suggest that flows in the latter case would be massive and catastrophic, I agree with Cole (2000, 167–75) that these claims are speculative at best and irresponsible at worst, and so it is not unreasonable to work with what we do know. Some cite polls where many people express a *desire* to move, but further evidence needs to be given to suggest that these desires would translate into actual movement, and also the kind of movement that would have the disastrous effects that are claimed.

inequality (Ypi 2008, 401–3; Tan 2004, 127–28; Brock 2009, 190–219; Miller 2013, 368; Higgins 2013, 63–68). As applied to "skilled" workers, especially those in healthcare, this phenomenon is often referred to as "brain drain," and has attracted much attention from philosophers of migration (e.g., Brock and Blake 2015). The supposed upshot is that even if Carens and other global egalitarians are right that borders in some sense protect unjust privilege, it doesn't follow that opening them will help dismantle that privilege.

As with the arguments considered above, empirical studies vindicate at most a rather attenuated version of this worry. In a thorough review of the literature, Kieran Oberman (2015, 242) points out that "the first thing that stands out is the sheer quantity of research affirming the effectiveness of migration in reducing poverty" (see also McKenzie 2018). While acknowledging that in certain cases, brain drain can be a "genuine concern" that poor states cannot solve on their own, Oberman (2015, 243) notes that it is not a problem everywhere, and where it is a problem, it has shown amenable to amelioration by policy. Similarly, Alex Sager (2016b, 222–25) doesn't claim that there is no evidence for the negative effects of brain drain, but does argue that philosophers' focus on the issue is ill-fitting giving the ambiguity of the empirical evidence and the high moral costs of restricting emigration.[22]

Further, it should also be noted that one major cause of brain drain is the fact that wealthy countries prioritize high-skilled over low-skilled labor in their immigration policies (Ball-Blakely 2021a). If brain drain is a problem, then, it is arguably a more immediate problem for the discretionary control over immigration, not for the open borders position.

I want to suggest that the same point from the previous section applies here: an egalitarian view of the situation should not neglect the other factors at play in affecting the ability of countries

[22] In other words, his argument is ultimately about burden-shifting. See also (Sager 2014).

to mitigate inequality. One such factor that looms especially large is the development of global economic system over the last fifty years. In this period, the liberalization of global markets without any genuine efforts at regulation or cooperation over fiscal policy has created competitive pressures that make it extremely difficult, especially for low- and middle-income countries, to build and maintain robust distributive institutions that could regulate inequalities (Piketty 2020, chaps. 11, 13; Higgins 2015, 157–60). This is not to deny that domestic political actors share some responsibility for the situation, but rather to emphasize that whatever effects emigration has, they need to be considered in a wider context. Again, the question of "in what circumstances" must be raised, and philosophers of migration justice should be cognizant of which factors they are holding fixed, if unwittingly, in their theorizing.

Still, there are lingering worries. For example, the problem might be less about whether or not the increased migration would help alleviate global poverty and inequality, and more that it might do so in a problematic way. Indeed, Oberman (2011) goes on to argue that there are normative reasons against opening borders to reduce poverty. In short, he argues that people have a human right to stay in their own state to receive whatever justice entitles them to. Put another way, opening borders still forces poor people to move, likely against their wishes and at great cost. As a solution to poverty or inequality, then, it seems to place the burden on exactly the wrong people, even if it does "work" in the end (Carens 2013, 233; Sidzińska 2021). Further, it is arguable that the strategy does not actually "work" once we broaden the egalitarian focus from purely distributive justice to concerns of status and relational equality. Higgins (2008, 530–31; 2013, 65–67), for example, draws on the work of feminist geographers Geraldine Pratt and Brenda Yeoh to contend that opening borders would potentially subject migrants to increased exploitation on the basis of race and gender. More generally, we might worry that a situation where open borders were not also paired

with robust rights protections for migrants would only make the already badly advantaged more vulnerable (Lee 2019).

These concerns do not defeat the egalitarian argument for open borders; what they suggest is that that argument cannot simply amount to dropping restrictions on movement and then letting people figure the rest out for themselves (Brock 2009, 211; Higgins 2013, 72). A key reason that borders are problematic from an egalitarian perspective is the role they play in a global system marked by extremely concentrated wealth and power. Focusing on borders alone without saying anything about the other features of this system is at best incomplete and at worst counterproductive. I turn to this point now.

4. Open borders and the global egalitarian project

So far, we have considered two sets of claims: one says that high levels of immigration are bad for egalitarian justice within receiving countries, and the other says that high levels of immigration will be bad for egalitarian justice within sending countries, and by extension globally. These considerations have the potential to provide global egalitarians with reasons to abandon their support of open borders, which previously appeared secure. In reply, my argument has been that they do not defeat the connection between open borders and global egalitarian commitments, because they take as fixed certain contingent features of domestic and global socioeconomic systems. But I have also alluded to the fact that these considerations are still important and informative, in that they give global egalitarians reasons to be cognizant of the way that they think about their support for open borders in relation to the egalitarian project more broadly.

Indeed, in my view, the idea of open borders has tended to get egalitarians in trouble when it has been talked about as if it were, purely on its own and in the abstract, a theoretical issue. To be

fair, doing so is understandable. For one, it's true that borders do represent a deep and interesting puzzle for liberal and democratic theory (e.g., Cole 2000; 2012; Abizadeh 2008). And, on the face of it, open borders do seem like a political nonstarter, as Carens (2013, 229) notes. This can encourage us to consider them from a purely philosophical perspective. But this has opened egalitarians up to a particular line of argument, considered in this paper, that denies that open borders would serve global egalitarianism. While that line of argument, as I have argued, has dubious empirical credentials, it nevertheless pushes global egalitarians to think of open borders as part of, and not detachable from, the broader egalitarian project. In this section, I elaborate on this point.

To begin with an illustrative example, take the case of the European Union. Central to the EU is a commitment to internal freedom of movement. But from an egalitarian perspective, this has not had successful results. Income inequality in most European countries has risen over the last forty years (Gethin and Blanchet 2019) and far right political parties espousing anti-immigrant positions have made serious and well-publicized inroads into European politics. These are not unconnected phenomena, especially considering that a large part of the politics of migration in Europe has to do with the welfare state and its maintenance (Geddes and Scholten 2016). To stem the growth of the far right, it is sometimes suggested that more mainstream parties should be prepared to exert more control over migration flows. I have claimed above, however, that egalitarians in particular should resist this response, and redirect attention to larger social and economic phenomena that far exceed migration in terms of their influence.

Consider, then, Piketty's (2020, 892–94) analysis of the EU, central to which is the fact that it creates a vast and unified market with circulation of goods, capital, and workers, while at the same time severely limiting the capacity for coordination on fiscal (e.g., taxation) and social (e.g., education and healthcare) policy. In this sense, it is "more of a commercial union or international

organization than a true federal government" (Piketty 2020, 894). An important result is widespread "fiscal dumping": a kind of race to the bottom of economic deregulation, especially in the form of lower tax rates on corporations, in order to compete for business (Piketty 2020, 550–51, 923–26). This has significantly contributed to the hyperconcentration of wealth at the top end of the distribution, largely due to capital income. In other words, the situation has largely benefitted the wealthy and powerful, thus alienating the disadvantaged and giving rise to a Euroscepticism that is also correlated with nativism and anti-immigrant sentiment (Piketty 2020, 860–61).

This is just a rough summary of the situation. My point is only this: if something like this picture is accurate, then the EU provides a lesson for the pro-open borders egalitarian. Free movement has been instituted, but against the backdrop of other policies and arrangements that have largely benefitted the well-off. This has created fertile ground for conflicts over migration not only internally, but notably at the borders of the EU itself as well. Thus we have a situation where the EU is committed to internal freedom of movement alongside extensive efforts to restrict immigration from abroad (Geddes and Scholten 2016, 145; Piketty 2020, 1025).

In line with my argument so far in this paper, what egalitarian philosophers and their activist counterparts should maintain here is that conflicts over migration are largely an effect, rather than a cause, of pervasive mistrust in the EU. In other words, instead of conceding that increased migration will exacerbate factors that will lead to inegalitarian outcomes, they should stress that there are pre-existing institutional factors that are creating a situation in which migration is perceived as threatening. This is to reject the false choice between freer movement and the strengthening of egalitarian institutions. To take Piketty's (2020, 1022–25) suggestion, more transnational coordination on just fiscal and social policy would plausibly create conditions in which free movement did not lead to such conflicts, or at least not conflicts of the current intensity. It is worth noting

that this idea need not be confined to the EU context—any countries could create such agreements. The point here is that insofar as egalitarians construe the border issue as an isolated and abstract problem of justice, they are susceptible to egalitarian consequentialist counterarguments. This need not be the case, however, if they embed pro-movement arguments within a broader critique.

We might wonder how this is meant to help. If anything, it seems to make the situation worse: now, egalitarians are not only calling for open borders, but for open borders *and* a broad swath of global reforms. This apparently all-or-nothing approach threatens to drive the open borders position further into the realm of utopian theory, bundled as it is with other political nonstarters.

In reply, I can clarify an important aspect of the view on offer here: it is indeed all-or-nothing in one respect, in that we should think about phenomena such as borders as part of a global system, but it is not all-or-nothing in another respect, in that we do not have to go all the way all at once. That is to say, we can think about ways to increase freedom of movement on smaller, perhaps regional scales, as a path to an eventual world of universal free movement. The crucial point is that when we do so, we also think in parallel terms about ways of reigning in inequality on the same scale. More concretely, an example of this sort of approach is Piketty's (2020, chap. 17, esp. 1022–30) social federalism, alluded to above. On this view, countries create democratically governed arrangements—"codevelopment treaties"—with one another to facilitate cooperation on issues such as free movement, reduction of carbon emissions, and perhaps most importantly, just fiscal policy (e.g., regulation and redistribution). While this is just one proposal, the general idea behind it is, I think, the right one. And, as Piketty (2020, 1032) writes, "while it is essential to propose a new framework for cooperation before abandoning the old one, it is impossible to wait for the entire world to agree before moving ahead." In this sense, social federalism is one way in which global egalitarians can use the open borders position not as only as a mode of critique, but

as a way to suggest alternative institutional arrangements that address the most pressing causes of inequality.[23] It is also an example of the sense in which we don't have to go all the way all at once; open borders can be worked for in particular places for now.[24]

5. What's left of open borders?

Still, it might be thought that too much has been conceded: if the real issues are about existing institutions and their failure to realize egalitarian distributive justice, then what is the force of the open borders position in the first place? Carens (2013, 234) points out that such arguments draw needed attention to the fact that wealthy states entrench their inequality through exclusion—the main point of the feudal privilege argument introduced at the outset of this paper. But can we say more than this? After all, the egalitarian criticisms I have been considering in this paper correctly point out that there are versions of open borders that would set back the cause of egalitarianism, especially in the absence of significant changes to background conditions in an egalitarian direction.[25] This also allows the alternative global egalitarian vision, which I alluded to in the introduction, to creep back into the picture. Recall that on this view, states retain the right to exclude, but have robust duties to mitigate global inequality through other means. Notably, these egalitarians do not advocate for the closing of borders in the short or even medium terms, nor do they think

[23] Here we can also see the difference between a global egalitarianism committed to open borders and a global egalitarianism that sees freer movement as a temporary measure on the road to a closed border utopia. The latter view is limited in the measures that it can recommend—while it will support large amounts of aid and global institutional reform, its commitment to the right to exclude entails a commitment to certain essential features of the state system that place constraints the range of possible institutional reforms. Crucially, this is a practical and not merely a theoretical difference. In other words, it does matter for the here-and-now whether or not global egalitarians think of themselves as being for or against open borders at the level of principle. I say more about this in the next section.

[24] As a smaller-scale companion example, consider the project of cross-border labor organizing. Here again the project is broader than mere free movement or mere redistribution. It is a project directly aimed at the particular ways that particular actors use borders to keep workers trapped and poor.

[25] The most salient example of this is the libertarian version of open borders, mentioned earlier, but recall that, as commentators such as Brock and Higgins have pointed out, even versions of open borders in our not-entirely-libertarian world could have such effects.

that the sorts of inequality-mitigating measures that they call for can produce results overnight. Theirs is a long-term vision, and it is compatible with—indeed, it demands—short and medium term increases in freedom of movement while we are going about the business of building a more equal world (Tan 2004, 128). So while we might criticize this position as being a "closed border utopia," to use Lea Ypi's (2008) phrase, it represents a challenge for those global egalitarians who support open borders.

At this point, there is a fork in the road.[26] One path involves resting at a weaker version of a pro-open borders global egalitarianism. On this view, the point is only to push back on global egalitarian skepticism of open borders. I have done so by arguing that such skepticism is largely empirically unfounded, and even where there is reason for worry, this has to do with existing conditions that egalitarians should also be interested in changing. The upshot is to preserve space for the compatibility of the global egalitarian and open borders projects by rebutting a certain kind of challenge to that compatibility.

Note that this weaker view does not force global egalitarians to embrace open borders. For example, anti-open borders egalitarians can agree that there may be some world where open borders are compatible with global egalitarianism but nevertheless argue that their non-open borders vision is preferable, whether on moral, strategic, some other kind of grounds. They would press the question of whether global egalitarianism really needs open borders. A stronger version of my argument, then, would go on the offensive, and would push to show that open borders are a necessary piece of the global egalitarian project.

Another way to think about the difference between the weaker and stronger positions is as different ways of responding to one of my central claims, that a political philosophical analysis of

[26] I thank an anonymous reviewer at this journal for pushing me to clarify the paper's argument in this regard.

immigration must consider broader social, political, and economic factors. Indeed, as we have seen, other philosophers (e.g., Brock 2009; Higgins 2013) have also pointed out that the egalitarian effects of greater freedom of movement largely depends on those contextual factors. Whereas these commentators interpret this point as a reason against open borders, I am framing it as a reason to rethink and elaborate the open borders position in terms of a broader egalitarian project that also targets those factors.[27] In the absence of the stronger version of the argument though, such commentators may reasonably wonder why we should favor my framing over theirs. While I have pointed out the possibility of such a framing and argued that it is more plausible than its critics suppose, I have not made the stronger claim of necessity.

It is true that to this point, I have focused on making the weaker argument. That is, I have been concerned with preserving the global egalitarian-open borders connection in the face of a certain kind of criticism of that connection. Note that this task is far from trivial: if it succeeds, then it significantly complicates egalitarian skepticism of open borders. It also, as I argued in the previous section, has implications for how pro-open borders egalitarians should think about their position.

With that said, however, one may wonder if the stronger argument is in the offing. In the remainder of the paper, I want to sketch two complementary paths forward for making that stronger argument. The first path involves responding to the particular way that borders are used to exacerbate inequality in our world. The second involves broadening our focus beyond distributive equality. While they will remain sketches for now, my claim is that these preliminary arguments build on the above foundations to point the way toward a successful egalitarian open borders position.

[27] I thank an anonymous reviewer at this journal for pushing me to clarify my view in relation to these other commentators.

The political economy of borders

One way to motivate the stronger egalitarian open borders case is to examine the particular roles that borders play in sustaining contemporary global inequality. Recall that the force of Carens's original feudal privilege argument was in the claim that borders entrench inegalitarian privilege. My suggestion is to push that basic thought forward by investigating the particular ways in which they do so in our world. While Carens focuses on the global system of citizenship, one must also pay attention the global economic system.

As a brief illustration, consider the case of the US-Mexico border. The dynamics of migration across this border are heavily shaped by the predominant economic system of the region, which is structured by the US-Mexico-Canada Agreement (USMCA; formerly the North American Free Trade Agreement, or NAFTA). In particular, capital has the right to traverse the border with little to no restriction, while the movement of workers across the border is subject to significant restriction. As Justin Akers Chacón (2021, chap. 1) puts it, it is a case of "free trade without free people." This has a number of important effects relevant to our discussion. For one, it allows firms to use differential labor conditions between countries to their financial advantage; they can not only rely on cheaper labor on the side of the border that provides it, but also benefit from the diminished bargaining power of workers on the other side. This arrangement also provides firms with a reserve army of labor, to use an old Marxist term, in the form of exploitable migrant workers, whether documented or not (Akers Chacón 2021, chap. 1; Ball-Blakely 2021a, 77; 2021b). In other words, in our world, capital uses border restrictions to advance its interests in ways that sustain inequality. Even if the US were to pursue a program of transnational wealth redistribution

in the region, it's not clear that it would have sustained success if it did not attend to these fundamental structural dynamics.

Still, the closed-borders egalitarian might argue, what if we did reform the economic system in such fundamental and structural ways? Wouldn't this then render the case for open borders unnecessary? One can perhaps imagine such a world, though two points are worth making in reply. The first is that there are good reasons to think that closed borders themselves prevent the constituency necessary for that change to emerge. That is, such a change will need to come from somewhere. On the plausible assumptions that this 'somewhere' must include a broad-based working-class constituency, and that freer movement across borders could facilitate the building of this constituency, the projects of freer movement and of the reform of transnational economic systems travel together (Akers Chacón 2021, pt. IV). Of course, more would need to be said to defend these assumptions; this is only meant to be a preliminary case.

Borders and relational equality

The second reply involves expanding our focus beyond only distributive equality, understood in terms of possession and access to material goods, to relational equality, which focuses on wrongs like oppression, subordination, and domination (Anderson 1999; 2010; Scheffler 2012, chaps. 7–8). From this latter perspective, the enforcement of immigration restrictions raises special concerns (Reed-Sandoval 2020; Sharp 2022).[28] Given that migration is not going away, placing physical and legal restrictions on movement promises to create classes of people that are subordinate in various ways to those around them. This manifests in terms of status inequalities as well as unequal

[28] Reed-Sandoval argues that once we properly understand what it is to be undocumented, (which comes apart from bring strictly legally undocumented) we see that undocumented people are subject to unjust conditions on relational egalitarian grounds. Sharp focuses on the objectionable power inequalities involved when states exercise discretionary control over migration.

rights; whereas some have warned of the inegalitarian consequences of open borders, we have just seen that border restrictions themselves often have this effect, especially where labor markets are attractive to non-nationals, creating a pool of exploitable workers with little formal protections. Migrants are also extremely vulnerable to violence throughout their journeys (Jones 2016), including, increasingly, in transit countries, as the EU and others "externalize" enforcement (Akkerman 2021). Even when not directly subject to violence, migrants often live precarious lives marked by uncertainty, uneasiness, and instability (Reed-Sandoval 2020).[29] In short, the illegalization of people and the criminalization of presence itself has disastrous outcomes, especially when circumstances are such that many people have weighty prudential reasons to cross borders.[30] Though it is only briefly sketched here, then, there appears to be an egalitarian case against borders that is distinct from distributive justice: in our world, to be a "migrant" is to be a member of a systematically subordinated class.

It could be replied that the terrible costs of border enforcement are a contingent fact about this world, and that borders in theory need not produce such violence and other harm. But experience makes it hard to be optimistic in this regard. As it stands, things appear to be moving in the wrong direction; walls are being erected rather than destroyed, and immigration enforcement is increasingly technologized, militarized, and monetized, and not for moral ends (Douglas and Sáenz 2013; R. Andersson 2014; García Hernández 2023). Arguably, these or similar developments are the logical outcome of a world based on the right to exclude, and especially one in which that right is

[29] As the acting director of U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE), said in a 2017 Congressional hearing, "[i]f you're in this country illegally, and you committed a crime by entering this country, you should be uncomfortable…You should look over your shoulder." Quoted in (Sacchetti 2017).
[30] This situation seems importantly different from other cases in which the criminalization of presence is ordinarily justified, such as trespassing on private property.

tied up with the global socioeconomic system in the way that ours is. In such a world, borders do matter for egalitarians.

Again, these are not knock-down arguments, especially as briefly sketched here. But I believe that fuller versions of them could vindicate the stronger claim mentioned above, according to which open borders are not just a plausible but a necessary part of the global egalitarian project.

6. Conclusion

Immigration is, of course, a difficult political and philosophical issue. My goals here have been modest, and aimed mostly at a narrow audience: egalitarians who find the case for open borders compelling, but who face difficulties in the form of what I've called egalitarian consequentialist arguments.[31] I've tried to rebut such arguments while also learning something from them: most importantly, that the egalitarian argument for open borders makes most sense as part of a larger critique of the political and economic system in the context of interest. I've also pointed out that egalitarians would do well to engage the particular political economic factors that drive migration in our world, and to buttress their concerns of purely distributive justice with arguments emphasizing the negative effects of borders and immigration enforcement on social and relational equality. Given the increasing amount of conflict around borders and movement, it remains as important as ever for egalitarians to articulate a vision of migration justice that is both philosophically and politically coherent.

Acknowledgments

[31] In other words, I have not considered other, non-consequentialist, egalitarian arguments against open borders (e.g., those by Michael Blake). It is worth noting, however, that Blake's (2020, 138–39) view does make use of the idea that immigration threatens an important kind of social trust.

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