

# Book Review: Strangers in Our Midst: The Political Philosophy of Immigration by David Miller

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*In Strangers in Our Midst: The Political Philosophy of Immigration, David Miller defends the ability of states to control their borders and exercise the right to exclude immigrants on the basis of community goals and preferences. Alex Sager argues that the book's central argument regarding this 'weak cosmopolitan' position is largely founded on myth, omission and the misrepresentation of empirical evidence; thus, while it may support the convictions of many, it also serves to reinforce misapprehension about this timely yet controversial topic.*

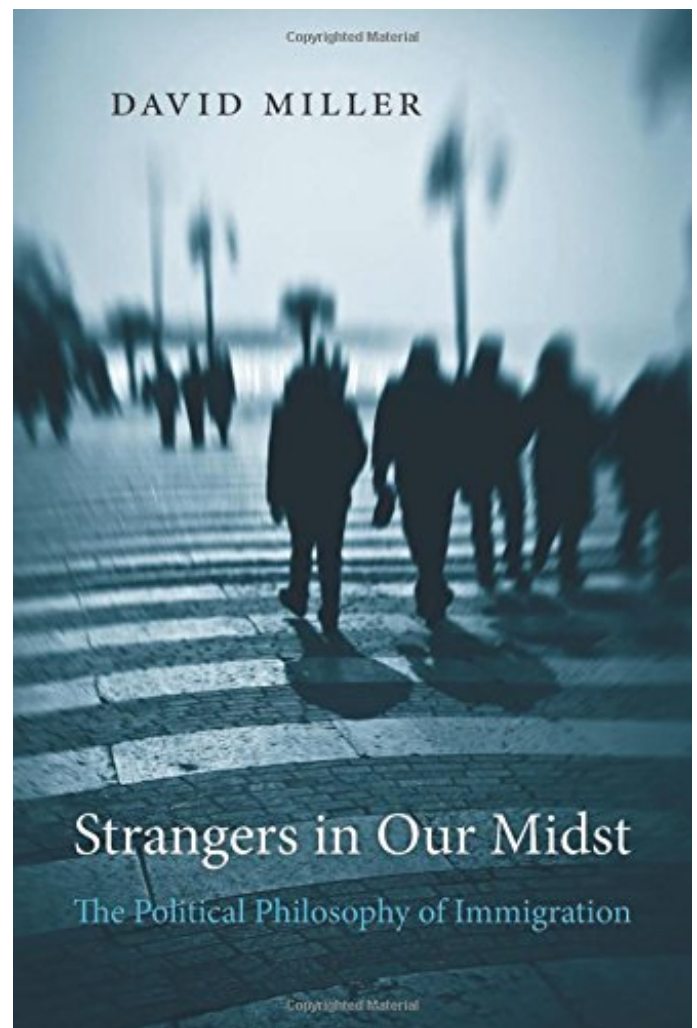
**Strangers in Our Midst: The Political Philosophy of Immigration. David Miller. Harvard University Press. 2016.**

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A central dogma of mainstream political rhetoric (though not [practice](#)) is that sovereign states have the right to welcome or exclude immigrants more or less at their discretion. Despite this, a majority of political philosophers, including major figures such as [Joseph Carens](#), [Phillip Cole](#) and [Chandran Kukathas](#), hold that current migration regimes are deeply unjust. It is surprisingly hard to provide a moral justification for militarised borders and detention centres erected to exclude peaceful people fleeing violence and seeking opportunities. Moreover, migration controls perpetuate [global inequalities](#). Not only are individuals' economic opportunities largely defined by their place of birth, but the [liberalisation of border controls](#) would also provide a major boost to the world economy.

David Miller is one of the most influential and articulate defenders of broad state rights to exclude immigrants according to community goals and preferences. *Strangers in Our Midst* is a continuation of his earlier work on [liberal nationalism](#), developing its implications for a political philosophy of immigration. He endorses 'weak cosmopolitanism' in which states' obligations are limited to respecting non-citizens' human rights (understood as opportunities to meet one's basic needs) (37). This entails an obligation to do one's fair share to protect refugees, a conviction [shared](#) by many publics. Miller qualifies this obligation so that if the number of refugees accepted 'would transform their own cultures and political institutions' (163), then the obligation to provide asylum becomes a humanitarian one that can be rejected.

Miller also insists that states take seriously non-citizens' interests (37) and provide them with reasons for their



exclusion that are tied to legitimate goals. Valid reasons for rejecting potential immigrants include the cost of integrating immigrants with different languages, religions or lifestyles (107); the desire to protect national cultures and avoid multicultural policies (108); the goal of curbing the size of the population and forcing other states to do the same; and limiting greenhouse gas emissions by preventing potential immigrants from adopting Western lifestyles (66). In most cases, states can reject would-be immigrants who are not suffering from human rights violations.

Miller considers his book to be a 'political approach to immigration' that focuses on institutions and policies rather than on individual behaviour, and which 'gives greater weight to the evidence about immigration, trust, and support for welfare' (18) than purely ethical approaches that refuse to consider barriers to a more generous immigration policy. This approach has much going for it. Unfortunately, *Strangers in Our Midst's* normative arguments are built on popular myths, error and the misrepresentation of evidence through omission and selective use of the empirical literature.



**Image Credit: (Dan Brickley CC BY 2.0)**

Some of Miller's misrepresentations are minor, such as his uncritical repetition of the *Daily Mail's* myth that Eastern European immigrants have been poaching the Queen's swans along the River Nene (152). (Miller cites a 2010 iteration of this story that more or less repeats a 2003 story in *The Sun* that has been widely [debunked](#).) More seriously, Miller insists in the body of the text that 'most irregular migrants will have arrived in contravention of its immigration laws' (117). This is false: most irregular migrants in the UK have entered legally and [overstayed](#) a visa. He also repeats the myth that irregular migrants have engaged in 'a form of queue-jumping with respect to all those who are attempting to enter through legal channels' (117). For most irregular migrants, there is no queue they are permitted to join. He also asserts that the *Daily Telegraph's* [irresponsible](#) attribution of a £120 billion cost from immigrants outside of Europe can be substantiated (207f3). In a discussion of what he dubs the 'pro-immigrant side, pro-open-borders side', Miller finds 'liberal idealists' but also 'business leaders, for whom immigrants are a welcome addition to the ranks of what Marxists used to call "the reserve army of the unemployed," helping to push down wages to the minimum' (153). Again, this assertion about depressed wages is not supported by the [evidence](#) on the economic effects of migration.

Many of Miller's errors are due to his uncritical acceptance of claims made in developmental economist Paul Collier's controversial book *Exodus*. (Migration scholars such as [Dilip Ratha](#) and [Michael Clemens and Justin](#)

[Sandefur](#) have sharply rejected the cogency of many of Collier's claims.) Miller inaccurately cites Collier's 'study' (in fact, a hypothetical example based on a simple economic model), which suggests that 'as the size of the (unassimilated) diaspora grows, its pulling power increases, and the rate of immigration will tend to increase indefinitely if there are no effective controls' (3). This claim resonates with populist fears of 'hoards' of migrants 'swamping' wealthy states. Against Collier's simple (arguably simplistic) model, [researchers](#) who incorporate data in their studies have observed a 'migration hump' in which migration accelerates in the early phases of economic development, but eventually declines.

Miller also follows Collier in exaggerating the evidence for 'brain drain' (the emigration of skilled workers), writing that 'an unrestricted right to immigrate would make things worse because it would no longer be permissible for rich states to close their borders to professionals exiting from poor countries where their services are badly needed' (53, c.f., 95, 102). In fact, there is [no evidence](#) that closing borders to professionals would actually improve the standard of living in poorer countries. Finally, Miller relies on Collier's discussion of Robert Putnam's article '[E Pluribus Unum: Diversity and Community in the Twenty-first Century](#)' to support the claim that higher levels of diversity in the United States correlate with lower levels of trust (64-65). Miller asserts that most social scientists accept Putnam's result even though Putnam himself carefully qualified his claims. In this case, some of Miller's own sources, buried in the footnotes, suggest otherwise (177f16).

The fear that immigrants undermine trust is tied to a larger perspective that informs Miller's book, since he 'places a great deal of weight on social cohesion and social justice and assesses immigration policy from that perspective' (161). Built into this is the conviction that the diversity offered by immigrants is different from the varied subgroups that inhabit every nation-state and urban area. Miller tells us that minorities 'may retreat into enclaves with rather little contact with those from outside of their own community' because of 'linguistic or religious differences' (68). He worries that immigrants may bring practices such as 'coerced marriage and punishment for apostasy' (137), and views them as a potential cultural threat and source of conflict (though he suggests they add 'spice') (64). He also begins the chapter on integration by citing riots in communities with large immigrant populations in Oldham, Paris, Sydney and Stockholm.

Miller's solution to segregation is immigrant integration through education and mandatory citizenship tests rather than structural change to give members of these communities more opportunities. It does not occur to him to discuss how [institutional](#) or structural [racism](#) prevent immigrants from integrating. Though he insists that immigration needs to be 'two-way', he does not consider measures such as combatting Islamophobia or dispelling myths propagated by the right-wing press and politicians

Miller's misrepresentations of the empirical literature and his own perspective support a view of immigrants as potentially deviant, law-breaking social burdens who undermine solidarity and hurt the economic prospects of natives. This is highly problematic, since he sees himself as committed to 'realism in thinking about immigration' (157). This 'realist' approach leads him to assert that the 'immigration regimes of most liberal democracies are under extreme stress', and that political philosophers need to acknowledge 'the anxieties, resentments, and prejudices felt by native citizens toward many (though not all) immigrants' (159). According to Miller, 'societies that feel crowded already or whose culture is threatened with erosion will be more restrictive' (160).

The conclusion that Miller draws is that a clear immigration policy 'accompanied by strong border controls' is necessary to alleviate 'a perception of cultural threat and a sense that their home is under invasion on the part of members of the receiving society' (160). Politicians (and presumably political philosophers) sympathetic to immigrants need to rein in their liberal instincts 'to avoid alienating their working and middle-class supporters' (160). This assumption treats anti-immigrant prejudice as an inevitable reaction to immigration, rather than seeing attitudes as shaped by state policies and by [anti-immigrant rhetoric](#) promoted by some politicians and journalists. It is hard to see why a realist approach cannot also insist that prejudice (which is not confined to the working and middle classes) should be vigorously resisted when it is based on false claims and xenophobic propaganda.

I have devoted much of this review to Miller's empirical and ideological claims and commitments because they are



fundamental to his philosophical arguments. Except in the case of refugees, an argument for or against exclusion comes down to how we weigh the interests of communities that wish to restrict migration against those of potential migrants. Miller gives great weight to communities' interests in avoiding real and perceived economic burdens from immigration and in promoting cultural and environmental goals. Notably, these economic, cultural and environmental burdens are all amenable to social scientific study – if these perceived burdens turn out to be largely illusory, the case for restriction is greatly weakened. Furthermore, his surprising decision in the book to ignore economic arguments for free movement deprives advocates of more open borders of some of their most compelling arguments (39).

Moreover, people who defend border controls are not simply distributing benefits and burdens by regulating immigration flows. They are advocating the use of force to prevent people from coming, a point eloquently developed by [Arash Abizadeh](#), among others. Miller argues that border controls are not coercive on the grounds that they merely *prevent* immigrants from doing something they would like (72-75). Even if one grants Miller's distinction between coercion and prevention, he admits that the means used to enforce immigration restrictions *are* coercive (73). From January to August 2016, more than **3000** migrants, many of them refugees, drowned in the Mediterranean on their way to Europe, resorting to using smugglers to make the often deadly journey. A major reason they take these extraordinary risks is that Europe has closed off legal routes for lodging claims to asylum. Increasingly, states are [detaining immigrants](#), often in abusive and squalid conditions. If we wish to make a normative argument about immigration admissions, the violence of border controls presents a strong counterweight to some citizens' desires to close their borders.

Despite Miller's insistence that taking his recommendations seriously 'would involve a significant shift in policy in the case of countries such as the United Kingdom' (164), he has succeeded in providing a lucid defence of the immigration status quo for wealthy, Western states. Those who believe that current migration regimes are basically just – in principle, if perhaps often not in practice – will welcome *Strangers in Our Midst* as a cogent defence of their convictions. Sadly, it will also confirm their prejudices.

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*Note: This review gives the views of the author, and not the position of the LSE Review of Books blog, or of the London School of Economics.*

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