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Borders of class: migration and citizenship in the capitalist state

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Borders of Class

In many recent debates on the political theory of immigration, conflicts between immigrants and citizens of host societies are explored along identity lines. In this paper, I defend the relevance of social class. I focus on two types of conflict, distributive and cultural, and show how class boundaries play a crucial role in each. In contrast to both defenders and critics of freedom of movement, I argue that borders have always been (and will continue to be) open for some and closed for others. The same applies to barriers on integration and civic participation. It is time to return to the connection between immigration and social class and to start carving political solutions that begin with the recognition of class injustice as a fundamental democratic concern.

Keywords: migration, justice, capitalism, citizenship, social class

1. Introduction

“It’s all about immigration. It’s not about trade or Europe or anything like that … The movement of people in Europe – fair enough. But not from Africa, Syria, Iraq, everywhere else, it’s all wrong”.¹ This is how one voter explained, on Channel Four news, why he voted for Britain to leave the European Union. He, like many of his fellow nationals, believed that immigration pressure had brought the country to reach a breaking point. “Breaking point” was also the slogan in one of the most controversial posters of the referendum campaign that Nigel Farage led on behalf of the UK Independence Party. The pictured showed Farage pointing the finger at a queue of refugees crossing the Slovenia-Croatia border in 2015 and read: “The EU has failed us all. Let’s break free of the EU and take our country back”.²

While much more critical of the exaggerations and simplifications voiced by such anti-immigration sentiment on mainstream media, the issue of how to come to a fair settlement of the claims of immigrants, those of citizens in sending societies and those
of citizens in receiving societies has been at the centre of many recent debates on justice in migration. "The immigration regimes of most contemporary liberal democracies", argues a prominent recent book, are under ‘extreme stress’. Such stress, so the account goes, is driven by a number of factors: firstly, the sheer number of migrants struggling to be admitted, secondly the premium that (because of a range of liberal democratic commitments to equality for all) is placed on “getting one foot inside a territory”, and thirdly by “the anxieties, resentments and prejudices of many native citizens toward many immigrants”.

Advocates of freedom of movement tend to respond to these arguments by questioning the very normative premises on which they are grounded. But they do so from a perspective that many have found lacking political bite. They suggest that, whatever we think about political reality, freedom of movement is a human right, border controls are arbitrary and coercive, and the distribution of privileges between rich and poor areas of the world is unfair given the basic moral equality between human beings.

Rather than siding with either critics or advocates of freedom of movement, here I want to focus on one dimension of migration debates that both parties seem to neglect. We might grant that immigration is a real concern for citizens of liberal states but we need to know which citizens are being affected, by what measures, and how they can be empowered again. We might agree that open borders are questionable but we need to see whether decisions on who to admit and who to exclude affect all migrants in the same way. My argument in what follows is that both defenders and critics of freedom of movement are wrong to assume that migration poses a problem of justice per se. My suggestion is that whether or not it does, and to what extent, depends on who you are. Borders have always been (and will continue to be) open for some and closed for others. The same applies to barriers on integration and civic participation. If we focus on the abstract value of freedom of movement, and its implications for border control, we are focusing on a secondary question that is unlikely to matter from the point of view of the politics of migration. It is time to return our focus to the connection between migration and social class. And it is time to start carving political solutions that begin with the recognition of class injustice as a fundamental democratic concern.
2. Distributive conflicts

In defending the centrality of social class to debates about migration, I will focus on two worries that are often emphasised when migration related conflicts are discussed, one distributive, and the other cultural. As far as the distributive worry is concerned, immigrants, it is often argued, compete with natives for jobs, housing, access to healthcare, schooling etc. Given the commitment of liberal states to guaranteeing access to a certain level of welfare to whoever resides in their territory, it is natural that the latter should exercise discretion on who they admit and who they exclude if they are to maintain those welfare standards.\(^6\) As far as the cultural worry is concerned, it is argued, we should be mindful of the fact that immigrants will make a significant impact on their hosts’ national culture by bringing new social conventions, new languages, new religions, and new ways of using public spaces and which will often present a conflict with existing ways of life and pose challenges that require to be addressed.\(^7\)

Let us start with the first question: the distributive worry. It seems to be particularly pressing when we turn to what average people think when assessing the impact of migration on host societies. David Miller’s influential contribution on the topic begins by citing British opinion polls that show how 85% of the British public believes that immigration is putting pressure on public services such as schools, hospitals and housing and 65% believes that immigration has been bad for British society as a whole.\(^8\) To be sure, Miller does not endorse these data himself, at least not at this point; he uses them as a platform to launch a moral enquiry on the fair terms of interaction between immigrants and natives given a range of plausible commitments of the liberal national state (including a commitment to self-determination and to guaranteeing human rights and a decent standard of living to whoever resides in its territory). More cautiously, Joseph Carens also claims that “in our highly inegalitarian world there is some evidence that welfare state differences play some role in motivating patterns of immigration” but concludes that the choice between the welfare state and open borders is in itself a morally objectionable one, similar to the perverse
offer of “your money or your life”.  

However, what both critics and defenders of freedom of movement fail to emphasise is the class-specific dimension of these concerns. The burdens of admission and integration are not shouldered equally by all immigrants and by all natives. As far as immigrants are concerned, and to take just one example, under the Tier One (Investor’s Visa Programme), those with the ability to invest one million pounds in the United Kingdom can apply for permanent leave to remain after only two years of residence and for permanent citizenship after only three years (significantly less than those who have reason to naturalise because of their family ties). Likewise, the inconveniences of assembling paperwork, waiting times, uncertainty of decision making and all the familiar troubles associated to immigration bureaucracy are unevenly spread among the immigrant population. Here again, to limit to just one example, if you are super-rich, under the super premium service for processing leaves to remain, for a ‘modest’ fee of around nine thousand pounds (as opposed to the just over eight hundred for the normal fee) application forms and biometric information are collected by a courier and visa officials to your home. There is no need to book an appointment and queue and the whole file is processed within twenty-four hours (as opposed to the over six months required for the normal service).

These practices are generalizable across the European Union and beyond. In the aftermath of the Eurocrisis, Cyprus offered citizenship to foreign investors as compensation for the loss of their savings deposited in Cypriot banks. In 2012, Portugal offered a “golden residence permit” with fast-tracked access to citizenship and accelerated family reunification procedures to real estate and financial investors promising to create jobs in the country. In 2013, Malta approved a law that allowed wealthy applicants to obtain a European Union passport in return for €650,000. Even on issues of selection, immigrants are unequally burdened. Under the point-based admission policy pioneered in Canada, and successfully spread around the world, including in Australia, Denmark, and the United Kingdom, prospective immigrants with higher skills, more money, a higher capacity to adapt in the host environment face significantly lower obstacles to admission and integration compared to their less wealthy, talented or well-trained counterparts. Indeed, in the case of highly
skilled immigrants, states find themselves competing for talent in a global race characterised by its own distinctive hierarchies whereby “the more desired the immigrant is, the faster she will be given an opportunity to lawfully enter the country and embark on a fast-tracked path to its membership rewards”.  

Given the selective practices of admission characteristic of the migration regimes of most liberal democracies, it is easy to see that the distributive concerns voiced by critics of freedom of movement only affect those migrants who are members of particular social classes and not others. The same considerations on the relevance of social class apply also when we assess the issue from the point of natives and examine their grievances about immigrant competition with regard to public healthcare, housing or schools. Again here, not all immigrants will attract mistrust and resentment in equal measure - only those with lower skills and on middle to lower incomes who are likely to make use of these services (Arab or Russian billionaires living in London typically have their health checks in private clinics, send their children to expensive private schools and make no claims to, say, council housing).  

The kind of competition that leads to resentment is typically between poor working class natives and poor immigrants because these are the subjects more likely to need state-subsidized assistance and access to a range of welfare services.

This is where both the diagnosis of why immigration is perceived to be a threat, and the variety of suggested remedies go astray. Reducing the conflict between immigrants and natives to an identity conflict between all migrants and all natives obscures the class-related dimension of such conflicts and the fact that those who are responsible for the emergence of such conflicts are as much part of an existing political community as coming from the outside. But the problem with such an interpretation of political reality is that the focus on distributive conflicts between migrants and natives obfuscates their own internal distributive conflicts and concerns. It also runs the risk of condoning the dominant narrative fuelled by populist media and xenophobic political forces, at the expense of a more progressive interpretation of what is actually going on in contemporary liberal democracies.

A rival interpretation of the empirical circumstances in which immigration injustices
arise would not begin with such an isolated analysis of the problem of justice in migration understood primarily as a conflict between agents who have different identities. It would rather examine the issue of migration in the context of wider social injustices appearing as a result of financial constraints on the funding of welfare states, the increase of sovereign debt, the impunity of domestic employers or property-owners who take advantage of the vulnerability of poor people (whether native or immigrants) and the fact that working class immigrants become scapegoats for the inability of liberal states to deliver the promise of equality in the distribution of social goods to all its members, in particular the most vulnerable ones. In short, it would be a discussion of how the crisis of the ideal of democratic solidarity to which many of our societies profess commitment is linked not to the consolidation of identity conflicts but to the pursuit of social and economic policies that leave poor working people with inadequate access to social goods like housing, healthcare, and a decent education for their children. Therefore, the real problem is not the perceived threat to jobs, schooling or access to health that migrants present for natives. And the most appropriate way forward is not to come up with admission and integration policies that will contain these effects by selecting migrants on the basis of particular, highly desirable, skill sets or potential for economic contribution and toughening up criteria for admission of all others.\textsuperscript{14} We ought to begin with a different diagnosis focusing on the obstacles that both poor migrants and poor white lower and middle-class natives encounter. Such threats are particularly pressing on the face of declining unions, the rise of populist political parties fuelling anti-immigration narratives, and in the absence of appropriate vehicles of political representation for immigrants and natives alike. On this rival analysis then, migration related distributive conflicts should be analysed as presenting not an injustice in their own right but as part of a larger account of social injustice, which focuses on a common source of oppression for both vulnerable native citizens and immigrants.\textsuperscript{15} And the solution will not come from responses that consolidate the divide between them. It is more likely to emerge from efforts to build political alliances across these two constituencies and from a firm commitment to strengthening networks of solidarity and institutions fostering joint bargaining.\textsuperscript{16} Taking up these challenges is the task of progressive political agents (movements, unions and parties) whose commitment to democratic representation and electoral success should not
sacrifice an appropriate interpretation of political reality.

So far I have discussed distributive problems by taking for granted two factual claims that critics of freedom of movement typically make in analysing the conflict between migrants and native citizens. The first is that there is a genuine trade-off between immigration and the preservation of the welfare state. This premise can be, and has often been, contested. Immigrants, it is often said, are more a resource than a burden for liberal democracies: they make a positive fiscal contribution even in periods of budget deficit, they fill shortages in labour supply, they compensate for a decline in fertility rates, and they contribute to the development of human capital in host societies. The second factual assumption is that the unit of analysis for the distribution of shared benefits and burdens is the state. It might be objected that the discussion on shared burdens would be different if we were to take as the relevant unit of analysis not the state but a more expanding community of transnational interest or even a cosmopolitan society. Both these objections are plausible and receive contrasting answers. I did not mention them only because I am more interested in assessing the mainstream political interpretation of migration-related conflicts, the kind of claims that the likes of Nigel Farage or Donald Trump are inclined to make, as indicated in my opening paragraphs. Open borders cosmopolitanism is unlikely to move their supporters, the largest proportion of whom are working class citizens who have somehow managed to convince themselves that immigrants pose a threat to their security and their jobs. Even if we deploy these arguments, they are unlikely to gain much political traction without supplementing with the different narrative I have suggested. The alternative question I have raised is therefore still crucial to challenge the political terms under which migration related conflicts are explored in liberal democracies, and to reshape citizens’ ascriptions of responsibility and political expectations.

3. Cultural concerns

The second issue that is often raised in connection to the impact of immigration on host societies relates to conflicts of a cultural nature. The emphasis here goes on the
costs of integration and the fear that immigrants’ cultural diversity might undermine the bonds of trust and solidarity required for a functioning welfare state. Many authors have spoken about the fair settlement of these conflicts in terms of a quasi-contract between natives and new members, a contract that requires both parties to take steps facilitating their mutual acceptance in the interest of the stable development of a shared political culture. In the case of immigrants, one such requirement has taken the form of making naturalisation conditional on the successful passing of linguistic, civic or other competence-based tests designed to prove the immigrants’ understanding and acceptance of important linguistic and social norms of their host society. David Miller, one of the most prominent advocates of these policies argues that ‘in order to function as a citizen, a person must also align herself with the political system of which she now forms a part’. His own account on the matter is quite demanding: not only is a sense of compliance with the basic authority and norms of the host state required, but immigrants ought to familiarize themselves with its cultural landmarks, ‘feasts and holidays, artistic and literary icons, places of natural beauty, historical artefacts, sporting achievements, popular entertainers, and so forth’. They ought to do this, he argues, even if their aim is ultimately to change the societal culture or to mix it with elements of their own heritage and background. Thus, as Miller explains, ‘a Muslim immigrant to Italy should expect that her female children will be allowed to dress modestly and to wear the headscarf to school but she should not object to the presence of a crucifix as a representation of Italy’s Catholic heritage’.

This argument raises two wider questions, both of which highlight the neglect of the issue of class in recent debates about immigration. Firstly, such expectations of cultural adaptation rest on a one-sided image of the political community, and a rather idealised one at that. They favour an overly positive narrative of the political community which conceals how much the construction of a political identity is a matter of ongoing political dispute, if it is to be more than a celebration of past achievements. To keep with the crucifix example, the problem with the argument about cultural integration is that the reification and sanitisation of political identity upon which it relies runs the risk of endorsing an exclusionary outlook which stifles rather than encouraging political activism. The issue of crucifix presences in Italian classrooms has been an object of vivid political contestation, with the main criticisms coming not from members of other
religions who object to it on cultural identity grounds but from secular Italian citizens who interpret it as a symbol of continuity with the country’s fascist tradition or as an attempt to undermine the separation of the Catholic church from the Italian state. The construction of common allegiances is often a matter of conflict not just between immigrants and natives but also among natives themselves. But the conflict is not cultural but of an ideological, often class-based, nature. To require that immigrants identify with the interpretation of the national culture that is at play in this case reifies consent around the conservative side of the political debate. It also discourages an alternative interpretation of the state as the political stage in which conflicts of ideology and social class are just as fundamental in shaping the development of political norms.

Secondly, and even more perniciously, by asking immigrants to refrain from questioning such national traditions while recognising their demands to expect certain cultural concessions on ‘their’ way of life, what we effectively end up doing is relegating the potential objections of the immigrant to cultural objections. This in turn both weakens the interpretation of her criticism as political in character and reduces the effectiveness of her civic participation. The result is that an intervention that is supposed to facilitate cultural integration and encourage political activism achieves precisely the opposite effect, it entrenches cultural identification and removes major issues of political contestation from the spectre of political disagreement. Cultural integration of this stripe stifles the political activism it is supposed to encourage. When political conflict is reduced to identity conflict, other major sources of political disagreement are either silenced or go unnoticed. This has pernicious effects for both the appropriate diagnosis of such conflicts and the identification of remedies required to respond to them.

One might argue here that the crucifix example is ill-chosen but that the general point would be valid if it were more charitably formulated. One might say that even if we agree that the construction of a particular political culture is a matter of ongoing dispute, and that we should not take any particular interpretation of it as the settled one, natives should remain in control of the process setting the terms of political debate. This is where civic competence tests become important. But again, here, we ought to ask which natives are in control, where exactly the bar for showing good
citizenship is set and by whom. If the degree of commitment required to participating in such civic debates is a minimal one, it is hard to see what exactly civic integration tests could measure and how they would show that they can measure what they purport to measure. If the standards of integration are demanding, it is hard to resist the objection that the entire project is an elitist one designed to conceal the class character of the state and to silence dissenting voices. Therefore, while demanding standards of adaptation neutralise political objections, minimalist ones end up shaking rather than consolidating the belief that the civic project to which migrants must commit is a worthy one.

A final option might be to weaken the demand so much as to require of immigrants no more than the ability to operate in a particular language and to function as a citizen of the host community. But then it is not clear why we take it as a default position that the kind of knowledge required to exercise political judgment of this kind is one all natives have and all immigrants lack. Surely here too, the problem is that in the preparation for competent exercise of political judgment levels of education, degrees of culture, and different social skills matter hugely whether one is a native or an immigrant. If we ask a highly educated immigrant to take the test, she might perform much better than a poorly educated native. If that is the case, either we should ensure that all citizens and all natives are tested to guarantee they can be competent participants in public debates, or we should acknowledge, more plausibly, that different people will display different levels of interest in these matters regardless of how the relation to a particular political community is established in the first place.

One final but important point is in order. The current, increasingly popular, practice of making citizenship conditional on the ability to demonstrate that migrants possess certain linguistic or civic skills is sometimes problematized in principle but seldom questioned as a matter of policy. Some authors see such policies as a necessary consequence of a state’s commitment to counter the influence of family structure on immigrants with certain cultural backgrounds and so as to facilitate their integration a new “stakeholders”. Thinking about the class discriminations that such an approach might entail helps us connect the principle to the practice and to criticise both. Civic competence tests are reminiscent of an age in which the same criteria were deployed
to restrict the franchise with regard to certain categories of people within a territory (e.g. those on lower incomes or with low levels of education and literacy). Then, as now, access to citizenship was a matter of class belonging. But while democrats around the world have successfully fought for the expansion of the franchise and against elitist citizenship, the danger to democratic inclusion now comes from the reification of national culture and the application of the same restrictions to resident immigrants. Then, as now, working class people, people with lower education, people who only spoke dialects and were barely literate in the standardised national language were excluded from the exercise of political rights (including the right to vote) on the same grounds that resident immigrants that fail to satisfy the criteria are now excluded.

The interpretation of problems of integration along identity lines and at the expense of social class poses a serious threat to the ideal of democratic citizenship: it turns the latter from a vehicle of social emancipation to one of elite domination. If this sounds plausible, it is imperative that democrats in Western liberal societies, including mainstream social democratic parties and policymakers, stand up to this trend, that they seek to abolish these requirements rather than merely highlighting the gap between the ideal of citizenship and the content of current public policy. If both those who seek to shape migration policy and those who run electoral campaigns on its basis endorse the practice while professing sympathy with a different principle, the moral schizophrenia from which the centre left currently seems to suffer is likely to increase. Such an attitude merely legitimises the current race with right-wing movements and populist parties on who is ‘tougher’ when it comes to standards of naturalisation and obstacles to admission and integration, a race that progressive political movements are in any case unlikely to win.25 Without a renewed emphasis on unconditional citizenship for long-term residents26 as both a matter of principle and a matter of policy, inclusive democratic ideals of integration will be sacrificed and eventually forgotten. There will be more Farages and more Trumps. And there might be even worse.

ENDNOTES
Miller also discusses the issue of such criteria “may be ungenerous but are not unjust” (Carens, example, stresses that within conventional assumptions about the right of states to control their borders, immigrants’ potential economic contribution in setting up criteria of admission, Joseph respond to the perceived conflicts that arise out of migration pressures. While discussing the focus on 14 (2010). Immigration: Evidence from a Survey Experiment,” see 13 Malta 12 Philosophy The Case of Immigrant Investor Programmes,” See Ayelet Shachar, “Dangerous Liasons: Money and Citizenship” in Ayelet Shachar and Rainer Baubock (eds.) Should Citizenship be for Sale, Robert Schuman Centre for Advanced Studies Research Paper No. 2014/01, p. 3. See also Owen Parker, “Commercializing Citizenship in Crisis Eu: The Case of Immigrant Investor Programmes,” JCMS: Journal of Common Market Studies 55, no. 2 (2017), and Ayelet Shachar and Ran Hirschel, “On Citizenship, States, and Markets,” Journal of Political Philosophy 22, no. 2 (2014). 12 See on this issue Ayelet Shachar, “Selecting by Merit: The Brave New World of Stratified Mobility” in Migration in Political Theory, cit. p. 183. 13 For empirical evidence that anti-immigrant hostility is much more pronounced when low-skilled immigrants are concerned, and that anti-immigrant sentiment declines when high-skilled migration is at stake, see Jens Hainmueller and Michael J. Hiscox, “Attitudes toward Highly Skilled and Low-Skilled Immigration: Evidence from a Survey Experiment,” American Political Science Review 104, no. 1 (2010). 14 Migration scholars often overlook the fact that the selection of skills might be an inappropriate way to respond to the perceived conflicts that arise out of migration pressures. While discussing the focus on immigrants’ potential economic contribution in setting up criteria of admission, Joseph Carens for example, stresses that within conventional assumptions about the right of states to control their borders, such criteria “may be ungenerous but are not unjust” (Carens, The Ethics of Immigration, p. 185). David Miller also discusses the issue of skill selection vis-à-vis selection based on gender or race in Miller, Strangers in Our Midst, p. 105-6.
For a discussion of this problem with regard to temporary worker programmes, see Lea Ypi, “Taking workers as a class: the moral dilemmas of guestworker programmes” in Fine and Ypi (eds.) *Migration in Political Theory*, pp. 151-174.


See for a discussion of many of these points https://www.oecd.org/migration/OECD%20Migration%20Policy%20Debates%20Numero%202.pdf

For a recent discussion of this literature see Rainer Bauböck and Peter Scholten, "Introduction to the Special Issue: “Solidarity in Diverse Societies: Beyond Neoliberal Multiculturalism and Welfare Chauvinism”," *Comparative Migration Studies* 4, no. 1 (2016).


Ibid, p. 149.

Joseph Carens objects to citizenship tests on the grounds that the knowledge they require is complex and multifaceted and cannot be captured by them, see Carens, *The Ethics of Immigration*, p. 59.

See for an example of this attitude Carens, *The Ethics of Immigration*, p. 60. See also the discussions in

See for arguments to this effect with regard to the immigration regimes of the European Union, Offe, "From Migration in Geographic Space to Migration in Biographic Time: Views from Europe", pp. 342-3 and for a more general discussion of immigrants as new stakeholders Rainer Baubock, “Global justice, freedom of movement, and democratic citizenship”, *Archives Européennes de Sociologie*, vol. 50, issue 1, pp. 1-31.
