European Review, Vol. 16, No. 4, 499–504 © 2008 Academia Europæa
doi:10.1017/S1062798708000343 Printed in the United Kingdom

Migration and Selection

PIETER EMMER

Department of History, Leiden University and AIAS, University of Amsterdam, The Netherlands. E-mail: p.c.emmer@let.leidenuniv.nl

Over the past forty years our ideas about migration have changed dramatically. In fact, I know of hardly any other aspect of our daily lives that has seen such a complete reversal of appreciation. Until the 1970s, immigration was something to be proud of. Over the past few decades though, we seem to have forgotten that it is far better to live in a country that people are queuing to enter rather than one that they are desperate to leave. In fact, the modern migrant and the present-day smoker have something in common: both have become outcasts almost overnight. In the Netherlands, we even have coined a new term in order to express our dislike of the modern migrant: 'fortune seeker'. That word seems somehow to make him or her different from, and less desirable than, the classic migrant of the past centuries.

In this contribution I would like to explore those factors that have brought about a sea change in European public opinion regarding migration. In the first part I plan to answer three questions. (a) Why in the past was immigration so popular in both the country of origin and the country of destination of migrants? (b) What has changed? And (c) can we do without immigration? The second part of this contribution looks to the future. When or if we consider that we cannot cope without immigrants, what should we do in order to avoid the pitfalls of the past?

Why was migration so popular in the past?

The answer to this question is simple: by migrating you could survive or improve your life expectancy considerably. Please note that the two did not always go together. Between 1500 and 1950, about 65 million Europeans migrated to another continent, in addition to even larger numbers migrating across European borders. Those migrating to North America, the non-tropical parts of South America, Australia, and South Africa lived longer, had more children and could consume more and better food than had been possible at home. Those Europeans migrating to the Tropics, however, although they too had more to eat, died younger. The same holds true for the 11 million Africans that were forced to move to the New World between 1500 and 1850.[1]

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1062798708000343 Published online by Cambridge University Press

In the previous centuries, migration was popular because it rested on three pillars. To begin with, emigration was evaluated positively by the country of departure because it helped improve the situation of those that remained behind. Second, immigration was positive for the countries of destination because it stimulated the economy and benefited a majority of the host population. Finally, migration was good because the migrants wanted it.

Why has immigration become so unpopular?

Migration became unpopular because one of the three pillars originally supporting migration no longer holds up: the host country. In the host country, immigration is now considered a financial burden. This is true even in the US, where traditionally anyone from anywhere who managed to get in – even if it was by climbing the fence along the Mexican border – in order to earn a living by hard work, has been warmly welcomed.

That immigration could become an expensive mistake caused a shock. Before the 1970s, immigrants were considered a gift to the host society. Immigration was almost like getting a railway system or a network of highway roads for free.[2] That has changed. Our social security systems are not equipped to cope with large numbers of virtually unskilled workers and their dependents. Mishaps such as unemployment, illness, and poor housing no longer constitute reasons to return to the country of origin. Third World immigrants compare the buying power of their social security benefits to that of the employed in their country of origin and not to the average income in their new country of residence.

Can we do without immigrants by increasing the existing supply of labour?

First, we could try to employ those Europeans that are now on social security benefits. Unfortunately, we cannot expect that the skills and work experience of the unemployed will tally exactly with the vacancies on the labour market. Of course, we can entreat a certain percentage of this group to enter the labour market by providing extra training and professional help in applying for job openings in combination with lower unemployment or disability benefits during a shorter time period. That would bring the Lisbon target of a 70% employment rate within reach. There is a paradox here though. The more we earn, the easier we can afford to push the worker with the slightest imperfection off the labour market and into the social security system.[3]

A second solution to satisfy the increased demand for labour would be to increase the rate of labour participation of those already on the labour market. The outcome will be the same. It is possible to increase labour participation by offering higher wages and more facilities to combine work and family care. But there is a limit to this, and the limit differs from country to country. Moreover,

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1062798708000343 Published online by Cambridge University Press

it is not solely the result of economic factors, but also of ingrained cultural traditions. In Italy, 45% of the women do paid labour against 71% in Denmark.[4]

Third, the elderly constitute a considerable dormant resident labour force. However, because salaries have risen, and because many more women have entered the job market, family incomes are higher than ever before and allow people to retire earlier than was usual.

These paradoxes in the Western labour markets seem to me to be a double-edged sword: higher wages and incomes will attract more people to work, but at the same time they will also allow more people to opt for more education and a later entry into the labour market, as well as for a shorter working week and early retirement.

The good news is that, in the past, labour has increased its productivity and that such an increase can partly compensate for a declining workforce. However, a declining and ageing workforce will limit economic growth and I do not know of one example where a declining and ageing population continued to achieve such growth.

The new migration

Rather than do nothing, it seems preferable to increase first of all mobility within the EU by lowering the barriers for crossing national and linguistic borders. At the moment, only 2% of the EU population works in a country other than that of its birth. This percentage may increase. Wage differentials within the EU will decrease in the future, however; and this in turn will reduce mobility. For most labour markets, obtaining additional labour from elsewhere within the EU will provide temporary relief at best, and will always remain limited in volume.[5]

Immigration and selection

That brings us to the last option to remedy the labour problem in Europe: admitting migrants from outside the EU provided that this time we can make sure that the advantages outweigh the drawbacks. That means placing immigration on a completely new footing.

Selection seems to be the new buzzword in the various scenarios for immigration. Countries such as Australia and Canada that have continually admitted labour migrants operate an intricate point system that favours people who are highly educated, have extensive professional experience, speak several languages and have partners with similar qualifications. The United States, on the other hand, has no selective point system for admitting immigrants, but operates a lottery system, while most immigrants enter the country illegally. Yet the unemployment rate among immigrants hardly differs. Obviously, the selection of immigrants is advantageous for the Australian and Canadian economies, while the US economy can accommodate large numbers of non-selected migrants.[6]

In Europe, selection seems imperative, as shown in a recent report from the Dutch Central Planning Agency regarding the position of Turks in Germany and the

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1062798708000343 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Netherlands. In Germany, the labour participation of Turkish men aged 16–64 is 23 percentage points higher than in the Netherlands, albeit that, in both countries, their participation is lower than that of the population as a whole. One of the factors used to explain the difference between the Netherlands and Germany is self-selection based on the different social security systems. Until very recently, it was far easier to obtain disability benefits in the Netherlands than in Germany and that may have induced those Turks that came from backward rural areas, and without much education, to migrate to the Netherlands, while the more educated Turks from urban areas preferred Germany. I hasten to add that there were also other factors at play. During the period of Turkish immigration, the industrial sector in the Netherlands went through a very difficult period, resulting in the closure of all the coal mines, and most of the textile mills, while developments in Germany were far less dramatic. Perhaps this allowed the Turkish immigrant workers to keep their jobs.[7]

Immigration and culture

I will conclude by mentioning yet another selection criterion: culture. I know that this is a contentious area and I hesitate to introduce the issue, as there may be ample reason not to include it in a new set of immigration rules. After all, what does it matter whether you are from Bangladesh, Argentina or South Africa, as long as you are healthy, young, well educated, speak several languages, have a partner who is also well educated, and so on?

Still, cultural differences do exist, and we need to know more about them. It may be that the higher educated and trained you are, the less your cultural background matters, but still it does matter. What to think of a nurse, born in Suriname, the West Indies, of Afro-Creole background, a single mother who works in an old-age home in Amsterdam and prefers to do night shifts because this pays better than regular hours? When she goes to work, she leaves her young children at home in the care of her eldest daughter, who is in her early teens. She likes her work in the nursing home and she needs a little nest egg in case she has to return to Suriname when her parents need her. She is appalled at the fact that the European Dutch send their old-aged relatives, even their own father and mother, to live away from them during the last years of their lives. That she would never do with her own parents, given half a chance. The question is: would the children of the nurse of Surinamese-Dutch origin stand less of a chance to improve their future position in life in the Netherlands than the children of a single mother who invests less time in her parents, but more in her children?

That we are not dealing here with just a simple individual example, and that the culture of the country of origin does matter, is reflected in the statistics regarding the highly skilled among the population of Great Britain of working age during the last years of the 20th century. Of the Indian men, 28% were highly

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1062798708000343 Published online by Cambridge University Press

skilled against 22% among native Britons, 17% among Pakistani men, 16% among Caribbean men and only 8% among immigrants from Bangladesh. In analysing these figures you could say that not culture, but economic background, may explain the differences. The high percentage of Indian high-skilled workers relates to the fact that the more wealthy Indians migrate to Britain, while the male immigrants from the Caribbean, Pakistan and Bangladesh are poorer. If that is the case, the same ranking should apply to the position of immigrant women in the labour market, but this time the order is different. The percentage of highly educated women among the Caribbean immigrants in Britain is 22%, followed by non-immigrant women (21%), and 18% for female immigrants from India, while the percentages for female immigrants from Pakistan and Bangladesh are far lower.[8]

These percentages clearly show that cultural factors do play a role in the success of immigrants in the receiving societies. Should we include cultural preferences in the new selection policy of future immigrants? I wish I knew the answer.

Conclusion

History has made us sadder, wiser, but also better prepared. In the short term, it seems attractive to remove future immigration from our thoughts as some of the populist parties in Europe now suggest, but in the long term this will only damage our economies. That is not a promising scenario.

However, when we do admit labour migrants, we must make sure that the host societies benefit. That should be the governing principle in selecting economic immigrants, with the exception of asylum seekers. The selection of the latter can only be based on humanitarian principles. That means that we have to discriminate between applicants, and a better word for 'discrimination', in this particular context, is selection. We need to select, and in order to do so we need new selection instruments. Let us hear what temping agencies can suggest, as they can play an innovative role in this field – in fact, many already do. We should not forget that the present-day problems among immigrants in the EU are rooted in the past when the recruitment of immigrant workers was the exclusive domain of government agencies and the employers themselves.

Should the culture of the home country play a role in selecting immigrants, in addition to health, language skills, etc? I once met a colleague from the US, who was convinced that culture should have been a prominent criterion in selecting immigrants all along. The US could have been the best country in the world, if only the selection of immigrants had favoured the British to become policemen, the French to become cooks, the Germans to become engineers, the Italians to become lovers, the Irish to become bartenders, and everybody to be supervised by immigrants of Swiss origin. However, no cultural selection criteria were applied, and thus the US suffers from the fact that most cooks seem to have come from Britain, the

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1062798708000343 Published online by Cambridge University Press

engineers from Ireland, the police from Germany, the lovers from Switzerland, and that the whole country is run by the Italian mafia.

Notes and References

1. For an overview of the history of human migration see L. Page Moch (1992) *Moving Europeans: Migration in Western Europe since 1650* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press). W. Gunwu (ed.) (1997) *Global History and Migrations* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press). K. J. Bade (2000) *Europa in Bewegung: Migrationen vom späten 18. Jahrhundert bis zur Gegenwart* (München: Beck).
2. J. L. Simon (1993) The economic effects of immigration. *European Review*, **1**(1), 109–116.
3. European Commission (2006) *Employment in Europe 2006* (Luxembourg: Office for Official Publications of the European Communities), pp. 28–39.
4. E. Berkhout, C. Dustmann and P. Emmer (2007) *'Mind the Gap'. International Database on Employment and Adaptable Labour* (Amsterdam: SEO and Randstad), pp. 6–8.
5. European Commission (2006) *Employment in Europe 2006* (Luxembourg: Office for Official Publications of the European Communities), pp. 210–246.
6. P. Stalker (2000) *Workers without Frontiers. The Impact of Globalization on International Migration* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Riener), p. 86 (Table 6.3), p. 108.
7. R. Euwals, J. Dagevos, M. Gijsberts and H. J. Roodenburg (2007) The labour market position of Turkish immigrants in Germany and the Netherlands; reason for migration, naturalisation and language proficiency. CPB Discussion paper no. 79. Also see: R. Koopmans (2002) Zachte heelmeesters….Een vergelijking van de resultaten van het Nederlands en Duitse integratiebeleid en wat de WRR daaruit niet concludeert. *Migrantenstudies*, **18**(2), 87–92. A. Böcker and D. Thränhardt (2003) Is het Duitse integratiebeleid succesvoller en zo ja, waarom? Reactie op Koopmans. *Migrantenstudies*, **19**(1), 33–44.
8. L. Lucassen (2005) *The Immigrant Threat. The Integration of Old and New Migrants in Western Europe since 1850* (Urbana/Chicago: University of Illinois Press), pp. 130–134.

About the Author

Pieter C. Emmer is professor of history of the European expansion at the University of Leiden, The Netherlands. He was a visiting fellow at Churchill College, Cambridge, UK, the *Wissenschaftskolleg*, Berlin, and at the *Netherlands Institute for Advanced Study*, The Netherlands. He served as visiting professor at the Universities of Texas and Hamburg. In English he published *The Dutch in the Atlantic Economy, 1580–1880* and *The Dutch Slave Trade, 1500–1850*. He is one of the editors of the *Enzyklopädie Migrationen in Europa* (an edition in English is to be published by Cambridge University Press). He heads the Archaeology and History section of the Academia Europaea.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1062798708000343 Published online by Cambridge University Press