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Strangers in Our Midst: The Political Philosophy of Immigration

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Strangers in Our Midst: The Political Philosophy of Immigration. **By David Miller. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2016. 218 pp. ISBN 978-0-67408-890-0.**

In this timely book, David Miller argues for the right of states to restrict immigration or to 'close borders': a controversial thesis among political philosophers. Of course, states already exercise the right to restrict immigration, but it is political philosophy's job to determine whether they ought to have it. In the last few decades, many political philosophers have argued that they ought not. States should be much more open to migrants than they currently are, these philosophers claim, or else they violate the universal principles of equality and avoiding unjustified coercion. Yet, in the very same period, the position Miller defends has become more and more popular among non-academics. As the victory

of the Leave campaign in the Brexit referendum and the election of Donald Trump remind us, a high percentage of voters in rich democracies want more border control. They believe that immigrants are neither an economic boon, nor a humanitarian duty; instead, they are an unjustified burden, which their countries have a right to avoid. Unlike many other liberal philosophers, Miller claims to take a 'realist' approach to these issues. He considers the effect that these popular beliefs have on politics. Yet, what exactly is this 'realism,' and what is its role in political morality? In the rest of this review, I will briefly summarize Miller's main arguments, and then I will return to this question.

Miller asks what to do about immigration from the perspective of the receiving state. He assumes that, for rich democracies, immigration is a burden, because it creates popular resentment. This is fueled by the perception whether 'accurate or not,' (p. 9) that immigrants do not contribute enough to the welfare state. The perception that migrants are costly thus undermines trust among nationals. This lack of trust, in turn, undermines the nationals' willingness to uphold the welfare state, which cannot function without their cooperation. So, overall, migration undermines the welfare state. For Miller, this effect must be factored in when weighting the costs and benefits of immigration.

But this cost–benefit analysis relies on controversial answers to difficult questions in political philosophy. One such question for Miller's theory is whether states are obliged to weigh the interests of all human beings equally when deciding upon their policies, or are instead legitimately allowed to give more weight to their own citizens' interests (p. 11). According to Miller, a state should favor its own citizens because compatriots have associative obligations. These obligations enable cooperation, and without them it is impossible to attain 'both distributive justice and collective freedom' (p. 27). Given these goals' importance, states can legitimately favor some persons' interests over others. For Miller, then, justice allows us to do more for compatriots than for aliens.

So, for Miller, associative obligations justify states in favoring citizens over strangers. But states must still justify this favoritism to those they deny entry. What justifies keeping people out? Miller derives the right to control borders from the principle of self-determination. A self-determining society has to make choices on public expenditure. But these choices are fundamentally altered by immigration, so a self-determining group has a right to control borders in order to make decisions and be fully self-governing. Moreover, if self-determination is valuable to a state, then so are immigration controls, because 'when immigrants are admitted, their presence will over time change the composition of the citizen body or, in other words, the 'self' in 'self-determination' (p. 62). Long-term planning requires the group's continuity and thus, for Miller, the nation's interest in continuity justifies border control.

This last inference, however, is not easy to grant: does Miller believe that the nation is internally homogenous and only the presence of migrants changes the nation's 'self'? Does not a nation change as younger generations grow up? Miller acknowledges that nations change internally, but he thinks that, unlike immigrants, young nationals do not make demands for religious and cultural accommodations. Immigrants, instead, are culturally divisive, and 'there is evidence that cultural divisions among members of a political community may reduce both interpersonal trust and trust in political institutions.' (p. 64) So, he concludes, if a self-determining society wants to preserve itself and its welfare state over the long term, it should foster solidarity and trust. This requires immigration controls.

With this core argument in hand, Miller discusses what the state should do in the cases of refugees, economic migrants, immigrants within states, and integration. He makes recommendations on the basis of four principles: first, a 'weak' moral cosmopolitanism, which sustains human rights; second, the value of national self-determination; third, the value of fairness; and finally, the idea of an integrated society (pp. 153–6). Miller argues that refugees have a strong case for admission, particularly when they establish a relation with a specific state. However, this right is not unqualified. The obligation to protect refugees is a collective obligation of all states and, like all collective obligations, it is hard to discharge. Miller argues that these obligations have to be fairly distributed among states, but there are situations when some have still not found refuge, but all states genuinely believe that they have done their fair share. Given that there are no international institutions to adjudicate whether this is indeed the case, 'we may acknowledge a gap between the rights of the vulnerable and the obligations of those who might protect them' (p. 93).

When it comes to economic migrants, Miller holds that admission depends on mutual advantage, and thus states can admit migrants based on criteria of their choosing. Justice does not come into play here, although migrants ought to be treated justly once they are in the country. So, those already inside (including those who came in illegally or overstayed their permits) have some rights, although there is no unconditional right to stay after a number of years of presence in a territory. For Miller, the criteria to reject or deport can vary, but they should always be guided by the values of human rights, full inclusion, and access to citizenship as the final goal, as well as reciprocity between immigrants and citizens. This implies 'obligations to contribute from the part of immigrants, and obligations to provide equal opportunities and welfare rights from the part of the state' (p. 129). Finally, Miller discusses integration. In his view, full integration requires that immigrants understand and embrace the public culture, while the mainstream culture accommodates the private cultures of immigrants.

I cannot discuss Miller's policy proposals in full, but in general they spring from two doctrines. First, that there are no general solutions applicable to all cases; specific policies should be based on democratic decision of current citizens. The second doctrine is his 'realism.' Miller thinks that we should stay clear of a philosophical perspective that imagines how the world would be in ideal circumstances, because this is a form of dodging hard choices. For Miller, the point of realist political philosophy is to specify the values that ought to guide us when making such choices, and then to make them head on. But this commitment to realism is not as straightforward as it seems. This is the point to which I promised to return because it raises serious concerns.

Take, for example, the main hard choice discussed: 'We may face a trade-off between higher levels of immigration and creating and maintaining a strong welfare state' (p. 10). This choice would indeed be tragic, if the options were in fact incompatible. Many people who are prejudiced against immigrants think they are, but why would *we* believe that? Miller does not support his claim with strong empirical evidence. Is there a strong link between immigration and the unraveling of the welfare state? Miller points to some general works on the connection between trust and democracy (p. 187, note 14) but his argument depends on a tight causal relation between immigration and the diminution of the provision of public goods, and this is not proven. Miller's book only refers to a minor (theoretical) article to support a negative correlation between ethnic diversity and public good

provision (p. 187, note 15), and the case for a positive correlation between immigration and erosion of trust is even dimmer. Miller says that 'most social scientists believe' (p. 64) that ethno-cultural diversity reduces interpersonal trust. However, his references lead us to a debate that is nowhere near settled (p. 177, note 16). Even if we conceded that the welfare state has declined because social trust has been undermined, could not we think that social trust has waned for reasons other than immigration? Say, the growing gap between the rich and the poor? Could the unraveling be due to class, race, or urban segregation, rather than national origin and migratory status?

Political realism is a matter of confronting hard choices, as Miller holds, but it should also be a matter of examining the options with a clear eye. Miller's 'tragic' choice does not arise from the *fact* that some citizens mistrust foreigners, but rather from the *assumption* that closed homogenous national communities are preferable to other forms of association. His stated reason for this preference is that such nations display more solidarity than other associations, and thus they are better able to sustain democracy and social justice. But why accept this view? It is neither obvious, nor empirically established. Miller concedes that 'this is hard to demonstrate with hard empirical evidence' (p. 28), and he cites one example instead. Yet there are also counter-examples. I can think of many examples of strong solidarity *across* borders, and also examples of diverse societies that have had strong welfare states, such as Canada.

Miller's insistence on the value of closed societies then, seems less a statement of fact than a matter of preference. He says as much in the conclusion: his preference for national communities with internal solidarity comes from the principles of self-determination and integration. Yet a closed, integrated, national community has never been a real fact: it is a counterfactual idealization that gives rise to some problems and obscures others (just like the ones he resists, p. 17). It is an ideal model for how to achieve a just society. But if this is true, then is the hard choice Miller describes a matter of 'realism' or just another type of idealism? If in fact there are no closed and integrated national communities, then what is so realistic about saying we ought to guide our choices by a desire to preserve them? Why think that we face a tragic choice between satisfying real-world constraints and pursuing moral aspirations? At bottom, the choices Miller describes seem to be between two idealizing models of how to get to a good society.

Miller claims, while discussing stranded refugees, that we are

> confronted with a tragic conflict of values: on the one side people who are liable to be severely harmed as a result of the persecution they are undergoing; on the other, bounded political communities that are able to sustain democracy and achieve a modicum of social justice but need closure to do this. (p. 93)

Yet, if the 'need' for closure is not a matter of fact, but a highly controversial assumption about how to get to an ideal goal, then the choice seems less tragic. On the one hand, there are real people in actual danger and dire need; on the other, there is a society that *might* require closure to fulfill some members' goals. Is there a tragic conflict of values here?

In sum, Miller's is an important book that occupies a central niche in the normative debate on immigration. Yet the 'realism' that grounds and motivates his argument is not in fact realistic. Without evidence, we cannot determine whether the other hard choices presented are in fact easy choices or false dichotomies. Must we, for example, think in terms of

'we' and 'the strangers'? Miller claims that this dichotomy 'captures how immigration is often experienced' (p. 18). But, I would say, it is also often *not* experienced like that. I, an immigrant, asked my father-in-law, a patriot with a strong sense of rootedness, about his opinion on the idea of 'strangers in our midst.' He responded: 'I think that when you get to know them, they are not strangers.'

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