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Ruling Out David Miller's Argument for Immigration Restrictions

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RULING OUT DAVID MILLER'S ARGUMENT FOR IMMIGRATION RESTRICTIONS

An Honors Thesis

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the

Requirements for Graduation with

Undergraduate Research Honors

Georgia State University

2011

by

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Date

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Under the Direction of Andrea Scarantino

ABSTRACT

The paper will describe one of David Miller's arguments for limiting immigration by concluding that immigration is a threat to a successful democratic welfare state. There is a threat to a democratic welfare state when there is lack of trust in a heterogeneous society. Immigration contributes to heterogeneity. The paper will present flaws in Miller's argument, which include the unacknowledged concepts of ignorance and fear that can lead to mistrust in cultural heterogeneous communities. I will then consider Miller's response to the critiques. Lastly, I will mention some proposals for increasing trust and addressing the real issues in a multicultural society.

INDEX WORDS: Immigration, Closed Borders, Trust, Welfare State, Ignorance, Fear

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An Honors Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

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1. Introduction

David Miller (2004, 2005, and 2008) has argued in a variety of articles and books that a nation-state should limit immigration. He presents one main argument for this conclusion. The core idea of the argument is that keeping borders open undermines the welfare state by undermining trust among citizens. Since Miller believes the welfare state should be preserved, he thinks it follows that immigration should be restricted. In this paper, I will criticize Miller's argument by arguing that it overlooks the real causes of the reduction of trust among citizens. I will conclude with a positive proposal.

2. Miller's Argument

One argument presented by Miller (2004, 2005, and 2008) refers to the effects that the immigrants have on a democratic welfare state. The argument goes roughly as follows:

P1 Open immigration leads to cultural heterogeneity

P2 Cultural heterogeneity within a society lowers trust among its members

P3 Lowered trust undermines the support for a democratic welfare state

P4 The democratic welfare state is a good thing

--

C We should limit open immigration to reduce the threat it constitutes to a democracy with an extensive welfare state

Premise 1 states that open immigration leads to cultural heterogeneity, understood as diversity in moral and intellectual culture. To support this premise Miller says, "[t]he governmental function of promoting moral and intellectual culture might be rendered hopelessly difficult by the continual inflowing streams of alien immigrants, with diverse moral habits and

religious traditions” (Miller 2008, 4). When alien immigrants enter, he suggests, their culture and characteristics are different to the native population’s culture and characteristics, thus making the host society more heterogeneous. On his view, this raises the problem of cultural integration, which the host country must deal with. As he puts it, “[s]ince new immigrants are likely to arrive as bearers of cultural values distinct from those of the receiving community, the question arises to what extent, and by what means, the state may attempt to integrate them into the existing national culture” (Miller 2008, 3).

Premise 2 states that cultural heterogeneity within a society lowers trust among its members. Miller writes that “[c]ultural heterogeneity does lead to lower degrees of trust between the culturally differentiated groups” (Miller 2008, 8). Miller’s view is that lines of cultural difference divide the population and provide grounds for distrust among the diverse population. He quotes individual data studies of US localities by Alesina (2002, 1). The studies are based on statistic and survey research. Their aimed at finding factors that influence trust. The study says, “Within the same community, individuals who express stronger feelings against racial integration trust relatively less the more heterogeneous the community is” (Alesina 2002, 1). The level of heterogeneity of a society is correlated with lower levels of trust, which in turn can cause less support for a system that will benefit the different groups (Miller 2008, 9).

This is precisely what premise 3 states, namely that lack of trust undermines the support for a democratic welfare state. He says that “studies of public policies have found negative correlations between ethnic diversity and the level of expenditure on forms of public provision that are potentially redistributive across ethnic lines” (Miller 2008, 9). As he mentions, “A comparative study aimed at explaining why public welfare provision is less generous in the US than in Europe found that about one half in the difference of the levels of expenditure can be

explained by the degree of racial fragmentation” (Miller 2008, 9). Since immigration contributes to increased ethnic diversity, it can have an effect on levels of expenditure mediated by the distrust of the natives against the immigrants. With more diversity there is more friction in the allocation of resources because of the emerging across-group distrust. As Miller concludes, “[t]he evidence is sufficient to justify the basic claim that a culturally divided society without a source of unity to hold its constituent together would be unlikely to support a democratic welfare state” (Miller 2008, 9).

The conclusion of Miller’s argument is that open immigration should be limited, because it is a threat to a democracy with an extensive welfare state. The conclusion would not follow from the first three premises unless a fourth, implicit premise was added, namely that “the welfare state is a good thing”. Miller assumes that the natives want to preserve the welfare state, which benefits all within that society by allowing for public institutions and services. He assumes that a successful democracy has a responsibility to preserve a welfare state which provides benefits for the constituents of that state (Miller 2008, 8). He adds that there have been no examples of successful democracies without a well-functioning and popularly supported welfare state.

3. The Problem with Miller’s Argument

As we have seen, Miller’s argument presupposes the existence of a causal interaction between cultural heterogeneity and lack of trust. On his view, cultural heterogeneity leads to lack of trust, which in turn leads to lack of support for the welfare state. I will not question the existence of such causal interaction, but I will argue that it is not an inevitable consequence of immigration. My counterargument will be that, even though Premise 2 is currently true – cultural

heterogeneity in the present circumstances does lower trust – it does not need to be true. In other words, it is in our power to change things so that cultural heterogeneity no longer leads to lack of trust.

My central point is that a racially or ethnically mixed community undermines trust because of external factors we can in principle remove. In particular, there are two factors that can lead to lack of trust within a cultural heterogeneous community. The first is ignorance. People can mistrust others because they have faulty assumptions about an ethnic or cultural group. For example, ignorance about immigrants can lead people to exclude them or to wrongly accuse them of a state's problems. In this case, anti-immigrant sentiments would be nurtured by false beliefs, which can be in principle removed by informing the natives of the reality of the immigrant experience.

Robert Pollin (2011, 1) describes the tendencies of Americans to blame immigrants for the country's problems, especially in times of economic recession. Natives conclude that immigrants are taking away from the available jobs, when in reality undocumented workers are not hurting wages or job opportunities for native workers (Pollin 2011, 2). As Pollin puts it, “[t]here are no significant differences from city to city in terms of either number of jobs available or wage levels for native workers, regardless of the proportion of immigrants living in the city” (Pollin 2011, 2). Consider the example of Georgia. Its' primary industry is agriculture, and it is currently suffering gravely. This is an industry that “brings in 12 percent (roughly 67 billion) of the state's gross domestic product” (Baxter 2011, 5). The farm laborers, who are mostly immigrants, are starting to leave the fields. They are leaving the fields because of the strict immigration laws that inhibit daily necessities, like working or being able to drive to work. If it

were true that immigrants are taking jobs away from Americans, there should now be a great offer of American farm laborers. This excerpt describes what actually happened:

“A 2010 “Take Our Jobs” Campaign by the United Farm Workers Union attempted to raise awareness about the migrant workers’ role in picking America’s crops by encouraging Americans to take up farm work and facilitating their entrance into it. The program received around 4,000 applicants but only a few dozen Americans ever made it into the fields, highlighting the extreme difficulties involved in farm work” (Baxter 2011, 14).

The current Governor of GA proposed substituting the farm workers with prison parolees, but they walked away from the job within hours and none lasted working in the fields for more than a week (Baxter 2011, 14). The point is that once the immigrant leaves, and many have already left, very few Americans are willing to take their place, due to the harsh conditions of work in the fields. This indicates that, rather than taking jobs away from Americans, immigrants often take up positions Americans simply do not want. There are projected millions of untold future losses. By some estimates, each job in the agricultural sector supports three more “upstream” jobs, including in professions involving transportation and processing (Baxter 2011, 6).

Another common belief about immigrants that underlies the lack of trust that their presence produces in native populations is that they commit a large number of crimes. In light of this belief, a Pennsylvania city council enacted a law in 2006 to revoke the business license of any local employer who was caught hiring illegal immigrants. The law also punished landlords for renting to illegal immigrants. The mayor’s reason for implementing the law was precisely the conviction that the immigrant population was responsible for a rise in local crime. But this

perception turned out not to be grounded in facts. In reality, out of the 8,575 felonies committed since 2000, only 20 were linked to illegal immigrants (Griswold 2009, 5). As the article puts it, “Comparable statistics of crime and population as it has been possible to obtain indicate that immigrants are less prone to commit crime than are Native Americans” (Griswold 2009, 2). Yet, there is a focus on the illegal aspects of immigration and immigrants are equated with criminality (Davies 2009, 2). An immigrant is a criminal insofar as she or he is “illegally” present in the United States. In addition, the legalization or naturalization process involves “high application costs, English proficiency levels and administrative delays” (Ramirez 2010, 15). The application costs exclude the immigration lawyer fees and can deprive people from applying due to lack of money. The delays can take as long as two decades (Fitz 2009, 16).

Another false belief about immigrants is that they free ride on public services. This particular belief has been an important driver of the recent anti-immigration legislation passed by southern states in the US. In Arizona, supporters of SB1070 claim that undocumented immigrants do not contribute to the state and that they do not pay taxes (Long-Garcia 2010). A 2007 study from the Arizona Udall’s Center in Public Studies attributed 2.4 billion dollars in tax revenue and an estimated 44 billion in economic output from immigrants (It’s Tax Time!, 2). What many anti-immigrant natives ignore is that immigrants pay taxes and receive few government benefits (Pollin 2009, 4). Myths also include that the undocumented can access same public benefits as citizens and that they come to the United States to get welfare (Navigating the Immigration Debate, 2009). In 2007 the US received a net benefit of between 120 to 240 billion dollars to the Social Security Trust Fund from unauthorized immigrants (Pollin 2009, 4). Illegal immigrants do not receive social services or retirement benefits (Fitz 2009, 11) and they also do

not want to “press their luck” and obtain benefits due to their precarious illegal circumstance (Pollin 2009, 4).

Georgia has also implemented HB87, an anti-immigrant law modeled on the Arizona’s legislation. This law allows police to proceed with an arrest if the officer has reason to believe the person is undocumented. Current state senator Rene Untermann expressed her support of HB87 as follows: “I want to take care of people. But I want to take care of our own people; I don’t want to take care of Mexico’s people”. What underlies her position is the conviction that immigrants are responsible for many crimes, including the crime of beating their spouses, and that they free ride on the state. This conviction is supported, as she pointed out, by what her angry constituents report to her. The problem is that angry constituents are not necessarily a reliable source of information about crimes and tax contributions. The constituents calling their senator to complain could easily have been biased by their emotions and lack of knowledge. (GA Sen. Renee Unterman's Speech in Support of HB87: "I don't want to take care of Mexico's people.")

In fact, illegal immigrants already pay taxes in Georgia and they may pay even more taxes if they were given a path to legalization. The types of taxes include sales, income, vehicle and property taxes. But they cannot since the federal immigration system of naturalization has remained unchanged since 1790 (Desipio 1998, 1). There is a sense in which the lack of action by the federal government has “opened a space” for the emergence of anti-immigrant local movements to take matters into their own hands (Pollin 2009, 4). These remarks point to the fact that when Miller argues that “immigrant groups are over-reliant on state welfare without having made the contribution to society that entitles them to it” he is making a factual assumption that is not necessarily supported by the data (Miller 2008, 14). The fact that people and people’s

representatives are convinced that immigrant groups free ride on the state is indeed a major source of anti-immigration sentiments. What I am suggesting is that this conviction is often based on ignorance. Due to ignorance, Americans can be supporting anti-immigrant movements that are harmful to their state socially and economically, and that use their state's tax revenue to deport or punish undocumented immigrants that can help the economy of their state (Baxter 2011, 8).

Another factor that plays into the causal relationship between cultural heterogeneity and lack of trust is fear. People in a society can mistrust because they fear immigrants and the implications of accepting them into their community. This fear is often irrational, in the sense that it is motivated by simple lack of familiarity. Many rural communities who are not accustomed to different ethnic backgrounds simply do not know how to react to the change. This fear is mingled with false beliefs, for instance the belief that immigrants take American jobs and that immigrants are criminals. The illegal immigrants are automatically criminals if they are undocumented, and the "illegal" label highlights their criminality and exclusion from the political system.

As Ian Davies has recognized, sentiments toward immigrants are highly polarized: "On one extreme lies a range of anti-immigrant platforms, xenophobia, and fear-mongering; the current conflation of immigration, criminality and terrorism; and an increased state apparatus of repression. On the other extreme is an array of pro-immigrant attitudes, based on the realization that immigrants are here to stay and that in some areas of the country, they are not just a part of the labor force, but they are the labor force" (Davies 2009, 1). Davies also explains the effects of immigration. He agrees with Miller that different and opposing beliefs, new traditional values, and language barriers are created with immigration. Despite the differences in culture, he

believes that there should not be fear or restraint in establishing a multiracial society because it can prove counter-productive and harmful (Davies 2008, 13).

Anti-immigration platforms are often politically supported by fostering fear. As Heathcott (2011, 6) puts it, certain groups “will use the issue of immigration to incite the body politic with apocalyptic visions of end times- at least at the end of “real America” imagined by anti-immigration forces”. These apocalyptic visions can promote irrational fear in the native population, and inhibit mutual interaction. Fearing a group can restrain one from reaching out to that group and collect actual information about it. Based on false presumptions about what could happen, a native can end up supporting anti-immigrant policies that destroy families and that are economically counterproductive.

If ignorance and fear are two of the main ways in which cultural heterogeneity leads to mistrust between natives and immigrants, the remedy should be clear: education and knowledge. With awareness of the facts, a native citizen will be much better able to understand an ethnically diverse group like that of illegal immigrants and their circumstance. With awareness of the facts, trust can be re-established and mutually satisfactory solutions can be found. If ignorance and fear were overcome, immigration would no longer lead to lack of trust, and the welfare state could be preserved despite the lack of restrictions on immigration.

4. My proposal:

Voters and legislators should make informed decisions. America is not just a country of majority rule. America is a republic which is supposed to protect minority groups. Listening to several disappointed constituents about the unrepresented does not justify in supporting legislation that affects that large group of politically unrepresented people. It is important to

research before agreeing to pass a law. It is important to consider the implications economic of laws. Legislators and constituents of local governments can reach out to non-profit organizations who can provide them with background knowledge and information. Individuals can attend panels, discussions and presentations about immigration before becoming biased or mistrustful of the group. There can be campaign ads, wrist bands, or symbolic expressions on clothing that promote awareness and understanding of immigration issues.

An individual can also personally interact with the diverse immigrant community. There is a need for English tutors. There are immigrants that are willing to learn English. Once one interacts with the other community or group, there can be less fear and judgment because there is communication. There can be an understanding of shared goals between groups, such as wanting to raise their families or wanting to be bilingual. Each community can contribute to the establishment of goals through their different talents, background knowledge and abilities.

Lastly, there needs to be immigration involvement from the national level of the U.S government. This paper is not endorsing the complete opening of borders. Immigration should be restricted, but fairly and practical. The new immigration system can identify and acknowledge the 12 million estimated undocumented people in this country (Fitz 2009, 11). The new system can unify families and correct wage and workplace violations (Fitz 2009, 8). The improvements can be created by the government, in the form of a new agency or immigration court to administer cases with branches throughout the states. It can also be self-funding and dependent upon immigrant fees. A humane solution to the immigration problem is possible, and it can be more productive than the measures that are currently being taken.

5. What Could Miller Reply?

David Miller could point out that whatever the causes may be, open immigration still leads to diminished trust. He may add that since fear and ignorance do exist, immigration as a matter of fact does increase mistrust, and so it is a burden on the democratic welfare state. To this I reply that we have a moral duty to control our irrational fears and our ignorance, when they result in the suffering of others. As pointed out by some estimates, there are 12 million of illegal immigrants in the US. We cannot just accept that their presence reduces mutual trust if the reduction of mutual trust is due largely to ignorance and fear. We have a moral duty to give knowledge to the ignorant and comfort to the fearful, if this is a way to avoid the trail of tears that would be produced by the massive exodus of 12 million undocumented immigrants (Fitz 2010, 11).

Miller seems to simply accept as a fact of nature what is instead merely a social fact that we can, and should, strive to change. The great majority of immigrants would be willing to become full and committed citizens if given the opportunity, and would contribute even more to the welfare of the host country. If the reason why they are not given such opportunity is based on ignorance and fear, it is not a good reason. This is not to say that the borders should be entirely open, or that everyone has a right to become a citizen once they have illegally entered the US. Careful discussion will need to take place on how to have a just immigration policy. My point has been that this discussion cannot be based on false beliefs and fear-mongering. It should be based on an informed and detached assessment of the implications of immigration policy decisions on our moral standing and on our economic prospects as a nation.

6. Conclusion:

I have argued that we can in principle block the causal relation between immigration and trust by working on what are the two real engines of mistrust: ignorance and fear. I have suggested that the American people are not so much worried about national identity as they are about immigrants paying their fair share. I have provided evidence that immigrants indeed pay their fair share and that this fact is both widely ignored and a cause of fear towards immigration. Just because there are diverse backgrounds and this currently leads to lower levels of trust, it does not mean that one cannot change that status quo and pro-actively make a difference to make it non-true. It is important to grasp the true reasons of the public's distrust and to address such reasons responsibly, without accepting as a fact of nature that increased cultural heterogeneity leads to increased mistrust.

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