



## The best of both worlds

# Two books debunk common fears about immigration

Migrants from badly run countries do not undermine the institutions of well-run ones

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**Them and Us.** By Philippe Legrain. *Oneworld*; 320 pages; \$30 and £20.

**Wretched Refuse?** By Alex Nowrasteh and Benjamin Powell. *Cambridge University Press*; 240 pages; \$29.99.

In 1885 a penniless, sickly German draft-dodger arrived in New York. Official records listed him as “Friedr. Trumpf”. Occupation: “none”. America had no immigration restrictions in those days, so he was allowed in. He made a fortune running restaurants and brothels in the gold-rush era. He then moved back to Germany, but since he had evaded military service, he was stripped of German citizenship and deported. He returned to the United States and founded a dynasty.

<https://www.economist.com/books-and-arts/2021/01/28/two-books-debunk-common-fears-about-immigration>

His grandson, Donald Trump, spent the past four years trying to lock immigrants like his grandfather out of America. One of his last trips as president, on January 12th, was to admire his wall on the southern border and denigrate the foreigners it is meant to exclude. “They may be murderers. They may be cartel heads. They may be some really vicious people,” he warned.

Joe Biden takes a different view. He had barely arrived in the Oval Office when he revoked several of Mr Trump’s curbs on immigration (such as a ban on arrivals from a list of mostly Muslim countries) and proposed legislation to let more people become citizens. Mr Biden understands that centuries of sucking in foreign talent have made America rich and dynamic. He would like to open up the country again, at least a bit. But two things make that tricky. One is the pandemic: until it abates, global mobility is on hold. The other is that in America and elsewhere many voters—including some who, like Mr Trump, are themselves descendants of immigrants—share his belief that letting in more of them would make their countries worse.

The evidence suggests otherwise, as two new books make clear. “Them and Us” by Philippe Legrain, a former *Economist* journalist, sets out the benefits of migration and asks how newcomers and locals can get along better. “Wretched Refuse?” by Alex Nowrasteh and Benjamin Powell, a think-tanker and an academic, asks a crucial question: might immigration from poor, corrupt countries undermine the institutions of rich, well-governed ones?

Mr Legrain’s book is the more accessible: though underpinned by scholarship it is chatty, entertaining and full of anecdotes, such as the one with which this review begins. He breezily rebuts popular arguments for closed borders, and turns populist slogans upside down.

Complaints that immigrants are not “like us” miss the point, he insists. If they were identical to natives, “they would bring nothing extra to the party except additional bodies”. In practice they bring skills and contacts that the host nation lacks, and new perspectives that enhance their interactions with locals. For instance, a percentage-point bump in the share of American graduates who were born abroad raises patent applications by a whopping 15%. One study found that immigrants with a background in science, technology, engineering or maths accounted for 30-50% of the improvement in American productivity between 1990 and 2010. A study by the imf found that by increasing the diversity of skills and ideas, migration has boosted living standards by 30% or so in both Britain and America.

## When in Rome

Unskilled immigrants, too, are different from unskilled locals in ways that benefit the host nation. They are more mobile, so they can revive decaying cities. They have different priorities. For example, natives typically shun fruit-picking because it is seasonal and they

want permanent jobs. For migrants, by contrast, seasonality is often appealing: many want to earn money quickly and then return to their families.

Mr Legrain's book fizzles with practical ideas. Though they generally pay their way, immigrants are often perceived as a burden, he observes. This is because public services respond too slowly to changes in population, so schools and doctors' waiting rooms become crowded. This suggests that governments should learn from the private sector, which adapts far more quickly. "Nobody blames migrants for shortages at local supermarkets—because there aren't normally any," he notes.

Facts matter, but so do words, he argues. People who oppose immigration in the abstract often change their tune when asked about specific types of immigrant, such as doctors, students or foreigners who marry locals. As for those who complain about a "brain drain" from poor countries—this is like labelling women's entry to the labour force the "family abandonment rate".

"Wretched Refuse?" is a denser book, full of charts and regression analysis. It is also highly original, and takes a chainsaw to the most intellectually respectable case against immigration. No serious economist denies that when people move from poor countries to rich ones, they become more productive and their wages soar. It seems likely, therefore, that more migration would make the world much richer. However, some scholars think that too large an influx from, say, Congo to Canada would make Canada more like Congo—ie, the immigrants would import Congolese habits, and gradually make Canadian institutions more like the corrupt and lawless ones that keep Congo poor. Yet remarkably little effort has been made to test this hypothesis. Messrs Nowrasteh and Powell do so as rigorously as they can.

Disentangling cause and effect is tricky. Simply pointing out that countries with lots of immigrants tend to be rich, peaceful and free is not enough. People move to places like Canada and Australia precisely because they are agreeable. To get round this, the authors examine all the countries for which they can find data, noting both the stock of immigrants (as a share of population) in the 1990s and the inflow over the next two decades.

Then they look at how those countries changed over that period on a variety of measures, such as economic freedom and corruption. They find no evidence that higher stocks or flows of immigrants made host countries less free, more corrupt, or less trusting. Indeed, they find modest improvements on a number of scores.

It is plausible, they argue, that a country that grows more free or less corrupt might attract bigger inflows of migrants, but that effect would not be retroactive; it would not change the stock of immigrants at the start of the period in question. They conclude that the doomsayers are wrong. Migrants do not undermine the institutions of the places they move to. Some move because they are fed up with corruption. Others soon assimilate to rich-country norms. This makes sense. Graft in Congo is seldom punished and often pays; in Canada, honesty delivers more reliable rewards.

The debate is far from over, the authors admit. No doubt, if a billion migrants were to arrive in a single year, rich countries' institutions might buckle. But they demolish a big argument against existing levels of immigration, and suggest that most rich countries would benefit from being more open. Mr Biden and his advisers should devour their book. ■