

# Mises and Open Borders

The Mises Institute has been the center of libertarian immigration skepticism for the last three decades. Ludwig von Mises himself, however, was a staunch open borders advocate for people of all races. Starting over a hundred years ago.

Yet in a classic case of “No good deed goes unpunished,” historian Quinn Slobodian recently interpreted Mises as a racist. In the latest issue of *Econ Journal Watch*, Phil Magness and Amelia Janaskie set the record straight, accusing Slobodian of not only misreading Mises but severe quote-doctoring. A few samples:

Slobodian, <i>CEH</i>	Mises, <i>Nation, State, and Economy</i>
When necessary, the opening of world markets had to be achieved through violence. Though ‘one can think only with shudders and anger of the fearful mass murders that prepared the basis for many of the colonial settlements flourishing today’, [Mises] wrote in a book published the year after the First World War, the net gain made it worthwhile; in the end, ‘ <u>all other pages of world history were also written in blood.</u> ’ Violence in the project of expanding the space of foreign investment, wage labour and commercial exchange was not only acceptable, it was necessary. (Slobodian 2019b, 148, underlining added)	It is true that those colonies were not taken with smooth talk, and one can think only with shudders and anger of the fearful mass murders that prepared the basis for many of the colonial settlements flourishing today. But <u>all other pages of world history were also written in blood, and nothing is more stupid than efforts to justify today’s imperialism, with all of its brutalities, by reference to atrocities of generations long since gone.</u> (Mises 2006/1919, 63, underlining added)

Slobodian, <i>CEH</i>	Mises, <i>Omnipotent Government</i>
<p>Yet Mises proved incapable of extending a similar cosmopolitan attitude to populations of colour. Even as he argued emphatically that <u>‘there are today no pure stocks within the class or race of white-skinned people,’</u> he did so by pointing out the difference with black populations. <u>‘Negroes and whites differ in racial—i.e., bodily—features’</u>, he wrote, <u>‘but it is impossible to tell a Jewish German from a non-Jewish one by any racial characteristic.’</u> Mises’s rejection of anti-Semitism was premised on an affirmation of white–black race difference. (Slobodian 2019b, 155, underlining added)</p>	<p>For more than a hundred years anthropologists have studied the bodily features of various races. The undisputed outcome of these scientific investigations is that the peoples of white skin, Europeans and non-European descendants of emigrated European ancestors, represent a mixture of various bodily characteristics. Men have tried to explain this fact as the result of intermarriage between the members of pure primitive stocks. Whatever the truth of this, it is certain that <u>there are today no pure stocks within the class or race of white-skinned people.</u></p> <p>Further efforts have been made to coordinate certain bodily features—racial characteristics—with certain mental and moral characteristics. All these endeavors have also failed.</p> <p>Finally people have tried, especially in Germany, to discover the physical characteristics of an alleged Jewish or Semitic race as distinguished from the characteristics of European non-Jews. These quests, too, have failed completely. (Mises 2011/1944, 192, underlining added)</p>
Slobodian, 2015 lecture	Mises, <i>Liberalism</i>
<p>For Mises, the demands of the world economy trumped all other political claims. In discussing colonialism, for example, he remarked that <u>“no chapter of history is steeped further in blood than the history of colonialism”</u> but still insisted that keeping the colonies was the first priority once Europe became dependent on the empire for raw materials. Self-determination might be thinkable but only under the control of a muscular super-state that could ensure the continuation of free trade. (Slobodian 2015, 9, underlining added)</p>	<p><u>No chapter of history is steeped further in blood than the history of colonialism.</u> Blood was shed uselessly and senselessly. Flourishing lands were laid waste; whole peoples destroyed and exterminated. All this can in no way be extenuated or justified. The dominion of Europeans in Africa and in important parts of Asia is absolute. It stands in the sharpest contrast to all the principles of liberalism and democracy, and there can be no doubt that we must strive for its abolition. The only question is how the elimination of this intolerable condition can be accomplished in the least harmful way possible. (Mises 2005/1927, 93–94, underlining added)</p>

Admittedly, Mises’ commitment to open borders was imperfect: He made one big exception for what modern economists would call “political externalities.” From his *Omnipotent Government*:

*These considerations are not a plea for opening America and the British Dominions to German, Italian, and Japanese immigrants. Under present conditions America and Australia would simply commit suicide by admitting Nazis, Fascists, and Japanese. They could as well directly surrender to the Führer and to the Mikado. Immigrants from the totalitarian countries are today the vanguard of their armies, a fifth column whose invasion would render all measures of defense useless. America and Australia can preserve their freedom, their civilizations, and their economic institutions only by rigidly barring access to the subjects of the dictators. But these conditions are the outcome of etatism. In the liberal past the immigrants came not as pacemakers of conquest but as loyal citizens of their new country.*

Yes, it's the same hyperbolic rhetoric of open borders as "suicide" for which I faulted Tyler Cowen. Contra Mises, I say that the vast majority of Germans, Italians, and Japanese migrating from Nazi Germany, Fascist Italian, and Imperial Japan would not only have been productive members of the Anglo-American world; their exit would have sapped the war-making powers of the sending countries.

As I explain in *Open Borders*, the citizens of totalitarian countries will likely be *relatively* authoritarian, but this hardly means they're willing to actually *act* to advance the cause of unfreedom. Instead, most will be too politically apathetic even to vote, much less risk their lives by joining any "fifth column."