

Reviewing Paranoia

We often hear about “movies that are better than the book,” but rarely of “book reviews that are better than the book.” Cato’s Alex Nowrasteh has just published one such book review. Here’s Nowrasteh on Reihan Salam’s *Melting Pot or Civil War? A Son of Immigrants Makes the Case Against Open Borders*:

The gap in quality between the book described by reviewers above and the actual book Melting Pot or Civil War? is wider than in any other book that I can remember reading. Descriptions of “calm” and “reasonable” are the most perplexing. True, he appeals to Americans “who are willing to meet others halfway” to solve the problems that he’s identified. On the other hand, he also argues that we need to follow his policy recommendations or face a racialized civil war. That is the very opposite of a “calm” or “reasonable” argument. A better description would be “hysterical” or “paranoid.”

Hysteria and paranoia aside, what’s wrong with the book? Salam engages in extreme reverse engineering, where even the most favorable facts about immigration somehow become extra reasons to oppose it:

For example, Salam disagrees with himself over whether the goal of immigration policy should be to increase wages and employment for low-skilled immigrants and their descendants, or per capita productivity growth in small sectors of the economy. He rightly claims that immigration barely affects wages in the United States, but then argues that a major benefit of stopping low-skilled immigration is higher wages for native-born and immigrant dropouts. Salam correctly points out that low-skilled immigrants today compete mostly against other low-skilled immigrants, so he wants to help low-skilled immigrants here by stopping more from immigrating in the first place.

Much of the book, moreover, is simply odd:

Forgetting everything that he wrote about labor markets, Salam praises a science fiction-esque scenario of “virtual immigration” where workers would work remotely by operating robots in the United States from their home countries — even though the labor market effects of that would at best be economically identical to allowing them to immigrate and work here. Salam argues that “virtual immigration will do more good than harm for U.S. workers, provided we have the right safeguards in place [emphasis added].” Salam does not explain what those safeguards are, how they would prevent competition in labor markets, and why the government couldn’t just apply those same safeguards to prevent labor market competition between low-skilled immigrants and low-skilled natives.

And:

Salam mentions the enormous economic cost to those foreigners who would be locked out of the United States under his preferred immigration policy. He proposes a package of U.S. foreign aid to bribe foreign governments to establish charter cities so that low-skilled immigrants can go there instead of the United States. Oddly, he predicts those charter cities will become “fonts of entrepreneurship and public policy solutions” and that excellent new ideas developed there will enrich America. If low-skilled immigrants are entrepreneurs who will create fantastic new ideas in these charter cities that will eventually make it to America, why not just let them come here in the first place? Why spill so much ink supporting a utopian scheme of charter cities as a solution to global poverty when immigration is a tried and true method?

You might think the “civil war” stuff is just hyperbole on the book cover, but no:

To his credit, Salam does admit that there is no private political

violence in American today that is comparable to the chaos before the Civil War, but that "it is hard to shake the feeling that our luck might soon run out." Civil war is a deadly serious topic and perhaps this reviewer is being too nitpicky, but I require more than Salam's difficulty in "shaking a feeling" to take his worry seriously. He should have done more to show that the choice is really between his "melting pot" or a "civil war."

Better yet, Salam should have proposed a bet. I say that America – indeed, the entire First World – is not only too rich, but too electronically sedated, to physically fight about much of anything. The risk of civil war in the First World is small enough to make even the trivial danger of terrorism look big by comparison.

If you think me naive, come take my money.