

Why is Immigration a “Contentious Issue in Classical Liberalism”?

“Contentious Issues in Classical Liberalism” was the theme of this year’s Mont Pelerin Society. This gave me a chance to explore a major puzzle: Sociologically, immigration clearly deserves to be on the agenda. After all, many people otherwise sympathetic to human freedom and free markets support even more immigration restrictions than we already have. Intellectually, however, it’s hard to see why.

The plot thickens when you notice that pro-freedom immigration skeptics routinely use arguments that almost never use in *any* other context, starting with:

1. Collective ownership. Yes, if countries are the collective property of their citizens, then they have a right to regulate immigration. But this also implies nations’ right to regulate *everything else*, too! You can’t live on my land without my consent, but neither can you open a store on my land without my consent, or even hire someone to work on my land for less than the minimum wage without my consent.
2. Collective guilt. Yes, if e.g. foreign Muslims are collectively guilty for whatever wrongs foreign Muslims have done in the past, then immigration restrictions against Muslims would be justified. But this also implies that other people can legitimately hold *us* collectively guilty for whatever wrongs “we’ve” done in the past. So affirmative action, reparations for slavery and colonialism, returning land to American Indians, and much more are suddenly on the agenda.
3. Shocking anecdotes. Yes, if we ought to take shocking anecdotes seriously, then any awful immigrant action on CNN justifies a major policy response. But this also implies that shocking anecdotes about poverty, health care, worker safety, and the environment on CNN also justify major policy responses.
4. Popular support. Yes, if “This is what citizens want, and they’re entitled to get their way,” then immigration restrictions easily pass muster. But so do virtually all the policies classical liberals traditionally oppose, starting with protectionism and a bunch of price controls.

Unless you’re going to abandon the whole classical liberal framework, basic intellectual hygiene requires you to excise any argument along these lines. What remains? Only arguments claiming that the consequences of immigration are awful enough to overcome the standard classical liberal presumption against government action.

How does that approach fare? See my full presentation to find out. Bonus: A bunch of

Zach Weinersmith cartoons!