

## Europe has nothing to fear from Polish plumbers

By Philippe Legrain

No government, except perhaps North Korea's, would dream of banning cross-border trade in goods and services, yet it is seen as perfectly reasonable for governments try to ban the movement across borders of most people who produce goods and services. Even within the European Union, for which the free movement of labour is meant to be a fundamental principle, restrictions still exist. Among the 15 countries that were members of the EU before its eastward enlargement in 2004, only two, Sweden and Finland, have opened their doors to workers from all 12 of the new accession states. Europe's labour market remains firmly closed to most people from developing countries.

This is perverse. Immigrants are not an invading army, they are mostly people seeking a better life who are drawn to Europe by the huge demand for workers to fill the low-end jobs that our ageing and increasingly wealthy societies rely on but which our increasingly well-educated and comfortable citizens are unwilling to take. Polish plumbers, Filipino care-workers, Congolese cleaners and Brazilian barstaff are simply service-providers who ply their trade abroad, just as European IT specialists do. And just as it is often cheaper and mutually beneficial to import computers from China, IT services from India and investment-banking services from Americans, it often makes sense to import menial services, such as cleaning, that have to be delivered on the spot.

Our efforts to keep poor people out while the rich and the educated circulate freely are economically stupid, politically unsustainable and morally wrong. Freedom of movement is one of the most basic human rights, as anyone who is denied it can confirm. We in rich countries take it for granted that we are free to move around the world more or less as we please. We go on holiday in Thailand and safari in Africa; many of us study and work abroad for periods of time; some of us end up settling elsewhere. Why, then, do we seek to deny this right to others?

Freeing up migration is also economically beneficial. One study suggests that abolishing all immigration controls could double the size of the world economy; even a small relaxation would yield huge gains. Migrants from poor countries can earn wages many times higher in rich ones, and the money they send home – some \$200 billion a year officially, perhaps another \$400 billion informally – dwarfs the \$100 billion that Western governments give in aid. Their remittances are not wasted on weapons or siphoned off into Swiss bank accounts; they go straight into the pockets of local people. They pay for food, clean water and medicines. They enable children to stay in school, they fund small businesses, and they benefit the local economy more broadly. And when migrants return home, they bring with them new skills, new ideas and the money to start new businesses that can provide a huge boost to the local economy. Africa's first internet cafés were started by migrants returning from Europe.

Europe too benefits from receiving immigrants, both high and low skilled. China already produces more university graduates than all of Europe, and as the number of graduates from emerging economies soars over the next 20 years, it will become increasingly important for European companies to be able to draw on the widest possible pool of talent – not just for foreigners' individual skills and drive, but for their collective diversity.

Instead of following the conventional wisdom, immigrants tend to see things differently, and as outsiders they are more determined to succeed. 21 of Britain's Nobel-prize winners arrived in the country as refugees. Most innovation nowadays comes from groups of talented people sparking off each other – and foreigners with different ideas, perspectives and experiences add something extra to the mix.

If there are ten people sitting around a table trying to come up with a solution to a problem and they all think alike, then their ten heads are no better than one. But if they all think differently, then by bouncing ideas off each other they can solve problems better and faster, as a growing volume of research shows.

Just look at Silicon Valley: Google, Yahoo! and eBay were all co-founded by immigrants who arrived not as university graduates, but as children. In fact, nearly half of America's venture-capital-backed start-ups have immigrant co-founders. As an ever-increasing share of our prosperity comes from companies that solve problems – be they developing new medicines, computer games or environmentally-friendly technologies, designing innovative products and policies, or providing original management advice – diversity is crucial. Indeed, since diversity boosts innovation, which is the source of most economic growth, critics who claim that immigration has few or no economic benefits are profoundly mistaken.

Europe also benefits from low-skilled migration. Many low-skilled services cannot readily be mechanised or imported: the elderly cannot be cared for by a robot or from abroad; cabdrivers have to operate locally; hotels, hospitals and streets have to be cleaned on the spot. And as people get richer, they increasingly pay others to do arduous tasks, such as home improvements, that they once did themselves, freeing up time for more productive work or more enjoyable leisure. Thus as advanced economies create high-skilled jobs, they inevitably create low-skilled ones too.

But while low-skilled jobs still account for over a quarter of the labour force in western Europe, the supply of low-skilled workers is shrinking fast. Whereas only half of western Europeans aged 55-64 have finished secondary school, four-fifths of 25-34 year olds have, and high-school graduates understandably aspire to better things, while even those with no qualifications don't want to do certain dirty, difficult and dangerous jobs.

But immigrants face a different set of alternatives: since wages in Brussels are much higher than in Manila, Filipinos are happy doing such work. This is not exploitation: it makes everyone better off. It does not undercut wages, since Europeans do not want to do these jobs in any case. And it does not undermine social standards: if there is abuse, legal migrants have recourse to unions and the law.

Low-skilled immigration does not entail creating a permanent underclass. If migrants are temporary, as most aspire to be, then their point of reference is their home country – and thanks to their work in Europe, they return home relatively well off. If they end up settling, their wages tend to rise over time as they gain skills, contacts and experience, while their European-born children ought to have the same opportunities as other European kids. If some children are left behind, whoever their parents may be, it is a reason to redouble efforts to ensure equality of opportunity, not to keep out immigrants.

If immigration is such a good thing, why do so many people oppose it? One reason is that people fear immigrants take local workers' jobs, as if there were only a fixed number of jobs to go round. But this is nonsense. We heard similar scare stories when women began to enter the labour force in large numbers: many men thought that if women started working, there would be fewer jobs for them. In fact, of course, most women now work, as do most men. Why? Because people don't just take jobs, they also create them. They create jobs as they spend their wages because they create extra demand for people to produce the goods and services they consume, and they create jobs as they work, because they stimulate demand for complementary workers: an influx of Polish builders, for instance, boosts demand for locals selling building supplies, as well as for interior designers. While Spain has received more immigrants in recent years than any other European country both in raw numbers and as a share of its population, its employment rate has shot up by 17 percentage points in a decade.

Far from competing with native workers, immigrants often complement their efforts: a foreign child-minder may allow a local doctor to return to work, where her productivity is enhanced by hard-working foreign nurses and cleaners. And because immigrants are more willing to move to where the jobs are, and to shift jobs as economic conditions change, they make the economy more flexible, reducing unemployment and allowing the economy to grow faster for longer without sparking inflation. France and Germany would have much to gain from allowing in the much-maligned Polish plumber.

Underlying the fears about jobs is a more basic fear of foreigners. Psychological studies confirm that opposition to immigration tends to stem from an emotional dislike of foreigners. Intelligent critics then construct an elaborate set of seemingly rational arguments to justify their prejudice. When immigrants are out of work, they are scrounging on the welfare state and when they are working, they are stealing our jobs. When they are poor, they are driving standards down, when they are rich, they are driving prices up. One British politician with whom I was debating claimed that Poles were earning misery wages and living in squalid conditions twelve to a room, and then blamed them for rising house prices. Immigrants can't win: they're damned if they do and damned if they don't. So while it's important to address people's fears and consider people's arguments, it is also important to see them for what they often are: a rationalisation of xenophobia.

Among the biggest benefits of immigration are cultural. Immigration broadens the range of cultural experiences available, and this mingling of cultures leads to distinctive innovations: fusion food, R&B music, new holistic therapies that blend Eastern and Western influences. It provides the opportunity to lead a richer life by meeting people from different backgrounds: friends, colleagues and even a life partner. As John Stuart Mill rightly said: "It is hardly possible to overrate the value, for the improvement of human beings, of things which bring them into contact with persons dissimilar to themselves, and with modes of thought and action unlike those with which they are familiar... there is no nation which does not need to borrow from others."

But while cultural diversity is generally beneficial, it can also cause problems. Learning to live together can be tough. This issue is not new: it has applied throughout history to each individual and group that must find a place for themselves in society. But if European societies are broad enough to include nuns and transsexuals, Marxists and libertarians, radical environmentalists and oil executives, surely they can embrace immigrants too?

After all, we don't all need to be alike to live together. We just need to respect the basic principles on which our societies are based: laws are made by people, not God; the people who make those laws are elected; and their ability to make laws is constrained by certain fundamental principles such as freedom within the law, equality before the law and tolerance of differences.

These are not "European values", they are liberal ones, shared by many non-Europeans, and rejected by European bigots. And while people cannot be forced to believe in liberal values, they can be required to respect the law: even those who believe that women are not equal to men must treat them as such.

Of course, all societies fall short of the lofty ideals of liberal democracy – discrimination is rife, tolerance limited – but they are still the standards we aspire to and the basis of our peaceful coexistence. But if immigrants must abide by the rules, they must also be made to feel welcome. Xenophobic rhetoric certainly doesn't help.

We have every interest to make the best of immigration, because governments cannot stop people moving across borders. Despite efforts to build a Fortress Europe, over a million foreigners bypass its defences each year: some enter covertly; most overstay their visas and then work illicitly. Draconian policies mostly drive migration underground.

Those who claim that tougher measures could stop immigration are peddling a false prospectus. Even if, at huge cost, the EU built a wall along its vast eastern border, deployed an armada to patrol its southern shores, searched every arriving vehicle and vessel, denied people from developing countries visas altogether, and enforced stringent internal checks on people's right to be there, migrants would get through: documents can be forged or stolen, people smuggled, officials bribed. Even if Europe became a police state, its borders would be permeable.

Instead of fighting a costly and unwinnable war against migration, we should treat it as an opportunity. The choice is between a closed, stagnant and reactionary society, and an open, dynamic and progressive one.

Allowing people to move freely may seem unrealistic, but so too, once, did abolishing slavery or giving women the vote. Campaigning for open borders is a noble cause for our time.

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