



Review of Phillippe Legrain's "Immigrants: Your Country Needs Them"

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Abstract:

The book discusses the positive effects of migration and its potential for economic, social and cultural contribution to development. By illustrating numerous migrants' life stories, Phillippe Legrain seeks to eliminate existing myths, prejudices and fears.

Migration is an increasingly global issue. However, while governments are intensively promoting international business and flow of goods and services, they are creating ever higher national barriers to the free movement of people. The fear that foreigners are stealing jobs, abusing the welfare system, ignoring the local way of life and threatening freedom and security of the host country is still present. In "Immigrants: Your Country Needs Them" Phillippe Legrain¹, a London-based economist and journalist, demonstrates the beneficial effects of migration and seeks to eliminate the existing myths, prejudices and fears.

Legrain's book is an important contribution to the migration debate, as it demonstrates a positive view of migration and concentrates on the benefits for the rich West. It examines the impact of migration on individual countries such as the United States, Canada, Australia, Britain and other Western European Countries, but also tries to find out what they can learn from each other's experiences.

Legrain has interviewed immigrants across the world and researched migration policies in rich countries. Throughout his book he is going through the detailed arguments that are commonly made against migration and is disproving them, one by one. The immigrants' personal life stories are used to strengthen his line of reasoning. Moreover, this approach can appeal to the conscience and self-interest of those who live in rich countries. Legrain uses case studies and other practical examples to support his ideas and to explode prejudices and fears.

Legrain rejects the opinion that migrants cost natives their jobs. They complement their efforts and allow them to pursue better careers. In advanced economies, there is a mismatch

¹ For more information about Phillippe Legrain visit www.philippelegrain.com

between skills and aspirations and the jobs offered. An increasing number of educated workers want to perform higher-qualified and higher-paid jobs. Yet someone has to do the low-skilled jobs, too. Migrants gratefully perform the necessary low-skilled jobs that natives do not want to do. For the local people, they provide care for the old, babysit children, prepare lunch, clean houses and drive around in a cab. Legrain claims: “We need them to do the jobs we won’t do. We need them to do the jobs we can’t do. We need them to square our lofty aspirations to opportunity. We need them to care for the old and to look after our young, to allow mothers back to work and free up time in our busy lives.” Consequently, “without immigrants not all of us will have the opportunity to realize our aspirations.”

Further, Legrain rejects the idea that migrants are abusing the welfare system. They take the risk and costs of moving to another country to build a better life for themselves and their children. It is improbable that they will just sit and claim comparatively low welfare benefits when they could earn much more by working instead. Legrain argues: “It simply does not pay to move to a rich country to claim comparatively low welfare benefits, especially if migration is costly and risky. Would an asylum seeker from Afghanistan really pay a smuggler £ 5.000 in order to come to Britain and claim £ 50 a week in unemployment benefits?” Also, most migrants are hard-working and enterprising. They have the courage to leave their home country and family and have a great incentive to make the most of the great opportunity. They have to provide for themselves and save for the family. Besides, migrants are typically denied most social benefits. In France, Britain, Germany and Canada asylum seekers and temporary workers are denied nearly all social benefits. In the US, immigrants are barred from all public benefits for five years after entering.

Legrain writes that “migration is both a consequence of development and a driver of it.” Demographic and labour market pressures force governments to think about migration as an important contribution to development. Highly-skilled migrants fill shortages in key occupations and bring new and diverse skills. Their abilities may complement those of native workers and boost innovation and economic growth. However, many developing countries are worried that their best-educated people may possibly leave. But, this “brain drain” effect can have positive aspects, too. Talented people contribute to a global diaspora providing their countries with remittances, know-how and contacts. They foster trade with their home countries, which is profitable for both, the sending and the receiving country. Moreover, remittances, money sent home by migrants, represent the second largest financial inflow to many developing countries, which also makes migration – so Legrain argues – “a weapon against poverty.”

Legrain clearly states a request for a more liberal policy of open borders throughout the world. The high cost of border controls and bureaucracy, the increase in people-smuggling industry and an expanding shadow economy are drawbacks of the current border policy. Furthermore by trying to cross borders, people put their lives at risk. Temporary-worker schemes could help reduce grey and black economies and prevent violence and death on borders. Moreover, temporary migration could give rich countries the flexibility to admit people depending on existing labour demand.

Furthermore, Legrain writes that migration brings different cultures together and enables them to learn from each other. Italian restaurants, German breweries, Russian ballets, Chinese markets and Indian tea houses are undeniable benefits of migration. However, he admits that migration can also cause friction between cultures. “Many people dislike or feel threatened by immigrants’ different ways – that they talk, look and pray differently – and many immigrants in turn feel excluded and discriminated against.” Legrain presents different integration models

in the European Countries, the USA and Canada showing the existing problems. He argues that successful integration requires immigrants willing to assimilate to local ways, but also natives willing to treat immigrants as locals. Moreover, there is a need for communication and for an open mind. In particular, making the most of diversity requires dynamic anti-discrimination laws and tolerance to difference. "Immigrants" is a book filled with interesting and inspiring life stories illustrating migrants' encouraging and disappointing experiences which Legrain uses to underline his arguments. There is George Borjas, the Cuban refugee who became a professor at Harvard; Inmer Omar, father and husband from Honduras who arrived illegally to the US-Mexican border; Lasso Kourouma, a refugee from Cote d'Ivoire who almost drowned trying to get to Spain, and many others. However, it is not clear if Legrain can convince the skeptical critics by offering personal stories lacking representative evidence. But, maybe sometimes a moving story makes you understand more than mere numbers can tell.

Legrain, Phillippe (2007). *Immigrants: Your Country Needs Them*. London: Little, Brown.

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