

Chapter 8

Xenophobia



8.1 There Has Always Been Migration

The first humans were hunters and gatherers who did not settle in one place. Can we conclude, accordingly, that migration is in our blood, that we always move on when a place has nothing left to offer? It was only later in history that developments such as agriculture would force humans to settle down so that they could harvest what had they had sown. The increase in population also led people to settle in villages and towns. As clans began to form tribes, relocation became more difficult. However, mass migrations during the first centuries demonstrate that entire populations continued to move. While these early migrations probably frightened the people who had already settled in an area, it would also have forced them out of their lethargy, quite likely leading to renewed momentum in the region.

Today there are also regions that are not used to dealing with immigrants. The locals fear a dilution of their own culture or they no longer feel safe and dare not go out at night; or they claim that they themselves are not well enough off to cope with immigration.

One problem with immigration is the value system immigrants bring with them. If too many of these values diverge from those of the host country (no sense of community, clan orientation, etc.), it can lead to a sense of alienation in the local population; this is especially true if immigrants are left among themselves to form “ethnic enclaves” such as Chinatowns, Turkish districts, etc. Immigrants have to be integrated, taught the local language, and included in work processes with the established residents. The second generation at the very latest should, through their attendance in local schools, be indistinguishable from the native population. Urban planning also has a role to play in laying the foundations for achieving this integration.

Immigration in social welfare systems endangers social stability and encourages populists to fight against it. However, the amount of money involved is not significant because the majority of young immigrants work hard and pay much more into

the welfare system than less honest individuals, who only take from it. Misuse of welfare by immigrants can be countered with the same instruments used to combat abuse by local citizens.

8.2 The Positive Outweighs the Negative

Immigration not only helps refugees secure a better life, it also promotes innovation and flexibility in the region concerned. Immigrants tend to have more entrepreneurial spirit than the compatriots they left behind. But you would not necessarily know this when you see these poor people as they are fleeing their native lands. People often only realize it after immigrants have been integrated and taught the new culture. And this often can be clearly seen in the second generation.

As a Swiss, I don't want to emphasize our own expertise and have therefore chosen to say little about the successes and failures of my country in this book. However, when it comes to problems concerning immigration, I will make an exception. Switzerland has a great many foreigners living within its borders, and this has been the case for hundreds of years. On average, about 25% of the people living within Switzerland are foreigners. Larger cities like Zurich have a foreign population of over 25% and Geneva holds the record with a foreign population of over 33%.¹ This is higher than in most other European countries. Every year, many of these people are naturalized. However, with the annual arrival of new refugees, the number of foreigners continues to increase slightly each year. In the seventeenth century a wave of Huguenots came to Switzerland. They were French protestants who fled to Calvin in Geneva after a massacre in their home country. They later moved on to protestant cantons in Switzerland. At that time, there were no borders and no passports. Suddenly one-third of the Swiss population was made up of Huguenots. Like most immigrants, they sought peace and work. And the majority were hard-working people that were a great asset to the country. By the end of the nineteenth century, Italians had integrated en masse (the first Gotthard tunnel was largely built by Italians). They were later joined by Spaniards, Portuguese, immigrants from former Yugoslavia, northern Africa, Turkey, and Iran. Today in our trams and busses, we hear a colorful mixture of languages. Everyone, especially the Swiss, has grown accustomed to this.

Immigrants in Switzerland are integrated into our labor market; they have to learn at least one of our four national languages and their children attend school here. Most immigrants are eager to work and want to earn their own livings. Today, Italian-speaking immigrants are members of cantonal and national councils and "Italianità"

¹Breakdown of the permanent resident population of Switzerland by Canton as of December 31, 2018 Office of Statistics: Switzerland 6,396,252 (74.857%); Foreigners 2,148,275 (25.142%). Geneva: Swiss 1,099,297 (66.925%), Foreigners 543,283 (33.075%); Zurich: Swiss 1,112,574 (73.149%), Foreigners 408,394 (26.850%).

has become a trend. Even immigrants from sub-Saharan Africa have become mayors of cities, and in an alpine city in Canton Vaud, a foreigner was elected president of the naturalization commission.² Some municipalities give foreigners voting rights at the local level based on the principle of “whoever pays taxes should have a say and bear responsibility”. In this respect, the French-speaking part of Switzerland is leading the way. Zurich is also discussing extending voting rights at the local level to foreigners who have lived in Switzerland for more than 5 years. They argue that it is not acceptable to exclude 25% of the tax paying public from this responsibility. The CEO of one of the largest chemical companies in Basel is an Indian-American and until February 2020 the CEO of the second largest international bank in Switzerland (Crédit Suisse) was from sub-Saharan Africa. One thing that was always important was that Swiss identity not get lost. In fact, quite the opposite happened. Often immigrants appreciate and defend local customs much more than their local counterparts. Most of them have become good Swiss and have learnt to accept and appreciate the advantages of the country.

Switzerland has benefited greatly from immigrants. They have brought new ideas and helped increase the level of prosperity enormously.

8.3 Immigration Limits

Swiss people have expressed their views on immigration in several referenda. They have never banned it, but have restricted immigration to a very high level and have, in particular, ensured that the potential for integration is not jeopardized by the sheer number of immigrants coming into the country. After all, immigration is not a human right.

Immigration must be objectively limited by a country's ability to integrate these new people.

If foreigners can no longer be integrated, then immigration must be limited accordingly. Freedom of movement is indeed something that countries should strive for. However, it only works if the economic standards within the free movement zone are equal (as for example, in the USA). In this case, freedom of movement is only a question of who prefers to live where. If, however, the standard of living varies greatly, then regions with higher wages and salaries will be overrun. The EU experienced this with immigrants from Eastern European EU countries. Why should we prevent the influx of such immigrants and yet still emphasize freedom of movement as the cornerstone of the EU? Are we applying two different standards for the same problem?³ If the EU had better understood the problem of

²The Commission makes recommendations at the municipal level concerning naturalization. Here the municipality has authorized the election of foreigners to its committees.

³Qualified immigrants weaken their country of origin (Brain Drain). For example, in countries such as Croatia, there are hardly any good craftsmen left.

immigration—especially from its own eastern countries—and had dealt with the issue earlier, it might have been able to defuse its subsequent problems with refugees as well. Perhaps the Brexit vote would have come out differently, especially as freedom of movement within the EU was a key issue (Brexit supporters argued that it had resulted in too many Polish immigrants in central England).

8.4 Politics with Immigration

Immigrants often arrive with new ideas; they are willing to work and want to build up a livelihood. Rarely are they motivated simply by profit. When they have learned the language and been integrated into the working world, the country benefits from them, at the latest with a second generation that has adapted completely to the new country.

Practicing politics at the expense of vulnerable foreigners—especially refugees who have often experienced terrible things—is dubious. It is easy for politicians to score points with xenophobia. Such politicians try to increase their influence by taking up this issue and providing simple solutions (“We don’t want a flood of immigrants”). They are elected even though they do not have any qualifications other than their opposition to immigration. More specifically, most of them lack the requisite economic or business knowledge to lead their country toward economic growth. They then blame their lack of economic success on foreigners, using immigration to hide the fact that they are not really concerned about the good of the country, but only about their own political power.

Such politicians would do better to strengthen their countries’ economic power. However, they usually lack the necessary skill to do this and use other issues to distract voters. Immigration is especially suited for this.

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