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## **Temporary Migrations and Restrictive Migratory Policies**

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# TEMPORARY MIGRATIONS AND RESTRICTIVE MIGRATORY POLICIES

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## Abstract

*Most of the literature on immigration sees it as a permanent phenomenon, which can best be contained by adopting strict policies of border closure. On the other hand, there is considerable historical documentation to show how often immigration is temporary. That is to say, immigrants stay for a certain period of time in the rich countries so as to accumulate wealth for later use in their countries of origin. However, full-scale border closure discourages these immigrants from returning to their own countries since they fear that, should they wish to once more migrate – compelled by those adverse circumstances that frequently afflict poor countries – it would prove difficult to do so. Thus full-scale border closure does not always bring about the desired reduction in the number of immigrants settled in the rich countries: on the contrary, it encourages family reunions, thereby further increasing the number of immigrants.*

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Mass immigration, and its attendant political, social and cultural problems, constitutes a phenomenon that has by now reached almost emergency proportions inside the industrialised countries. On the other hand, the recent enlargement of the European Union to include ten new countries, mainly situated in the east, immediately raises the problem of confronting migratory pressures on the borders of the Union. Such pressures come from countries like the Ukraine, for example, which suddenly find themselves constituting the new periphery of Europe. Faced with such an emergency, the richer nations are tending to stiffen the entry requirements for foreigners coming from developing countries, and to reinforce control over the borders that define the national territories. The development of legislation on the subject is accurately described in recent OECD reports on migrations and affords no doubt as to the significance of such a tendency. It is not by chance, for example, that in Italy the Bossi-Fini law passed by the previous Centre-Right government is drawn up in this vein, and it is unlikely that it will be substantially modified by the new government of the Centre-Left.

The policies of border closure so as to contain the flow of immigrants are based, however, on the idea that migrations are permanent: a smaller number of entries will thereby automatically entail a reduction in the immigrant stock. This hypothesis is rarely discussed, and yet to see migration as a permanent move is extremely limiting, since the flow is not simply one of entrance, but also of exit. Such a one-sided perception of the migratory phenomenon, in Italy for example, has probably been fostered by such sudden emergencies as

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recently arose as a result of the wars in ex-Yugoslavia and the Albanian collapse, and the having to deal with unexpected and substantial waves of migrants.

Nevertheless, considerable historical documentation shows the significance of temporary migrations. For instance an analysis, carried out by Barry Chiswick of the University of Illinois and Timothy Hatton of the University of Essex, estimates that already at the end of the C19th the emigrants that left the United States were 30% of those who immigrated there. Also a brief glance at the statistics for the last few years strengthens the impression that exit flows are a phenomenon not to be disregarded. According to the CSI/Istat data the average in Italy, for instance, of the registered cancellation/admission relation of foreigners for the period 1996-2000 was 44%. No doubt this figure underestimates the entry flow, since clearly the clandestine immigrants are not registered; it also overestimates the exit flow, in that a foreigner cancelled from the register has not always, in reality, left Italian soil. However, it certainly includes a quota of actual return migration. To evaluate how effective restrictive migratory policies are, then, it is important to ask oneself how they also influence the exit flow.

But how to give an account, within a coherent behavioural model, of migratory exit flows? To that end it should first be stressed how frequently immigration is a means of accumulating wealth abroad so as later to spend it at home. Furthermore, this is often not just a one-off operation, but involves several. One thinks of the seasonal workers: the most famous example is, probably, that of the “swallows”, the name given to the more than twenty thousand Italian farm labourers who before the Great War moved every year from Italy to Argentina.

Secondly, one can observe that however much border-control is increased the incentives to immigration do not change: its causes are in reality ascribable to wage differentials and the more wide-ranging phenomena of political and climatic instability, such as war and famine. The wage of an unskilled labourer in Europe can easily be 50 times higher than it is in a poor country, and the recent growth of regional conflicts has thrust waves of refugees outside their own States. Closing the borders does not affect these factors, but simply promotes clandestinity. It thereby defeats – at least in part – the attempt to reduce entries, to the advantage of those organisations that traffic in clandestines.

On the other hand the incentives change significantly for immigrants who succeed in entering. These will be reluctant, when the policies are significantly restrictive, to leave the host country for fear of not being able to return should new adverse circumstances at home make it desirable. It must once again be remembered, indeed, that the immigrants' own countries are exceptionally unstable economically and politically, and for the most part subject to natural disasters such as epidemics, famine, and climatic upheavals. For example, an immigrant – let us suppose him currently settled in England – will decide to return to his place of origin only if there is a reasonable guarantee that he will be able to re-enter England should the turn of events in his own country render it necessary. But if the migratory policies become gravely restrictive, re-entry proves difficult, and so from the very start our immigrant is reluctant to leave England. A “closed-door” policy, in other words, alters the composition of legal and illegal flows and increases the average length of the migration. Thus if on the one hand it is certain that the policies of border closure reduce the entries, then on the other hand they also discourage the exits, producing an overall balance which is, *a priori*, uncertain.

A further aspect, the importance of which is not to be underrated, concerns the phenomenon of family reunions. In the 70's, for instance, as a result of the unemployment due to the oil crisis, Germany decided to limit the entry of foreign workers. As a result, the immigrants brought over their families from their home country – an obvious sign of the transition from temporary to permanent migration. To get an idea of how important these effects are, one should bear in mind that family reunions nowadays amount to about 50% of

the legal entries into Europe. We need to dwell upon the consequences of such reunions: as we have seen, they require as a premise that admittance to the country is granted not to a single individual, but rather to the entire nuclear family. Multiplying the number of permits by the average size of the families will give us an estimate of the number of immigrants who are brought over by the head of the family.

It is true that the number of immigrants is not always a fair indication of the social tensions arising out of the settlement of large foreign communities. The macroeconomic, social and cultural context is fundamental in determining attitudes towards the foreigner, who may be seen either as an individual in search of a better life or as a threat to one's own wellbeing and safety, according to the prevailing economic conditions. In particular, the phenomena of xenophobia and racism depend first and foremost upon deep-rooted cultural differences, upon the scant reciprocal permeability of the traditions and respective customs of the locals and the immigrants. It is clear that the fundamental variable in these processes is cultural homogeneity between the country of destination and the country of origin. When adaptation to the new culture is more problematic, the formation of ethnic enclaves encourages the creation of ghettos and exclusion. The entry of entire nuclear families tends to exacerbate these problems, since it favours the creation of "islands" in which, given the scant interaction with the world outside, the native culture of the immigrants tends to propagate itself.

Thus it may even require several generations for the immigrants to be integrated and/or accepted. It is no accident that in Italy the children of foreign couples are considered foreign if they do not ask for Italian nationality on coming of age. In this regard, Graziella Bertocchi of the University of Modena and Andrea Prat of the London School of Economics report that the foreigners born in Italy currently number about 277,000. A less restrictive entry policy would probably lead to an increase in temporary immigration at the expense of permanent by reducing family reunions and foreign births. Despite the difficulty of quantifying such effects, the points discussed raise serious doubts as to the efficacy of restrictive migratory policies: they do not reduce the incentives to enter, but they do alter the incentives to exit, as well as increase family reunions and clandestinity. They are, moreover, extremely costly, because they entail the creation and financing of a repressive system, as vast as it is ramified, especially in countries such as Italy, with its particularly porous borders.

An effective policy of migratory flow control, then, must be compatible with individual incentives. A general, unconditional opening is without doubt impracticable, but a reliable guarantee of a possible re-think for emigrants wishing to return to their homeland, together with an economic policy directed at promoting the stability and growth of the poor countries, could modify the incentives in the direction desired. It is well-known, for example, that flows of migrants tend to replace flows of goods and services when the rich countries are protecting their own goods from international competition. It is no accident that, given how strongly European farm labourers are protected, our farms for the most part use extra-communitarian labour: if the poor countries cannot export agricultural products, they export workers. On the other hand, it is unlikely that the answer to the problem of migration control lies exclusively in a meticulous repression of attempts at entry.

But who benefits most, among the natives of a rich country, from a full-scale border closure? In this regard, let us begin by observing that in the democratic countries – which include the majority of high-income countries – the policies are the result of decisions taken by the majority, in conformity with the prevalent electoral system. Furthermore, among the various factors that determine the preferences of the resident citizens as regards immigration, it must be said that it is the economist (through understandable professional bias and methodological tradition) who recognises that immigration brings about a redistribution of income within the nation which is of fundamental importance.

Since the entry of barely-skilled labourers – as is the case with mass migrations – tends to reduce wages and increase capital returns (reproducing the neoclassic schema, on the basis of which the income of the factors of production is inversely proportional to the relative availability of those same factors), it seems natural that the entrepreneurs, owners of capital, are more “progressive” than the workers, whose main source of income is the wage. Claudia Goldin, a Harvard economist, has studied and reconstructed the events which, in 1920, led for the first time to limited entry to the United States. From her analysis it clearly emerges how the industrialists were almost always consistent in maintaining a “liberal” position, while in the cities where immigration reduced wages to a greater extent, the candidates elected were those most opposed to foreigners. These days it is well-known that associations of entrepreneurs are basically in favour of a less restrictive migratory policy while political groups whose electoral base is to be found among the middle and lower-middle classes are averse to it. On the other hand, such aversion is occasionally not without its origins in populism, if not xenophobia, indeed.

The effects described are certainly difficult to quantify: nevertheless the points discussed suggest strong doubts concerning the efficacy of closed border policies. It is a problem, therefore, that must be considered with a cool head, calmly calculating costs and benefits, tempering the irrepressible values and duties of solidarity with the disinherited by the concrete possibility of accepting them decently, without any obsessive, demagogic complex about the “barbarian invasion”, which could turn out to be not only humanly retrogressive but also counterproductive.

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