

Dandolo, Francesco

Article

Us and them: Reflections on Philippe Legrain's book on immigration

The Journal of European Economic History (JEEH)

Provided in Cooperation with:

Associazione Bancaria Italiana, Roma

Suggested Citation: Dandolo, Francesco (2022) : Us and them: Reflections on Philippe Legrain's book on immigration, The Journal of European Economic History (JEEH), ISSN 2499-8281, Associazione Bancaria Italiana, Roma, Vol. 51, Iss. 2, pp. 151-160

This Version is available at:

<https://hdl.handle.net/10419/311347>

Standard-Nutzungsbedingungen:

Die Dokumente auf EconStor dürfen zu eigenen wissenschaftlichen Zwecken und zum Privatgebrauch gespeichert und kopiert werden.

Sie dürfen die Dokumente nicht für öffentliche oder kommerzielle Zwecke vervielfältigen, öffentlich ausstellen, öffentlich zugänglich machen, vertreiben oder anderweitig nutzen.

Sofern die Verfasser die Dokumente unter Open-Content-Lizenzen (insbesondere CC-Lizenzen) zur Verfügung gestellt haben sollten, gelten abweichend von diesen Nutzungsbedingungen die in der dort genannten Lizenz gewährten Nutzungsrechte.

Terms of use:

Documents in EconStor may be saved and copied for your personal and scholarly purposes.

You are not to copy documents for public or commercial purposes, to exhibit the documents publicly, to make them publicly available on the internet, or to distribute or otherwise use the documents in public.

If the documents have been made available under an Open Content Licence (especially Creative Commons Licences), you may exercise further usage rights as specified in the indicated licence.

Us and Them. Reflections on Philippe Legrain's Book on Immigration¹

Francesco Dandolo
Federico II University of Naples

Immigration is the great topic of globalization, and has become even more relevant during the current pandemic. If on one hand it is true that history has always been marked by massive human movements from one continent to another and from one nation to another – “migration is natural” as the author suggests – on the other hand recent globalization processes have significantly boosted migratory flows, highlighting some aspects that appear disruptive to public opinion around the world. Most notably serious economic inequalities between different world regions, the conditions of those who move out of their country and the basic reasons that push them to do so, travel difficulties, problems associated with hospitality and integration, the restructuring of economic, social and cultural assets that arrival societies have to face. In short, in today's society as never before we could say that we have a large amount of data, information, images, opinions and positions taken on the migration issue. The real question, however, is how much the narrative on this very relevant topic is based on facts and how much it is exploited in order to outline a distorted picture aimed at feeding fears and conflicts. Overall, the fact that migrations are unstoppable is an incontrovertible element. And this is the

¹ P. Legrain, *Them and us. How immigrants and locals can thrive together*, Oneworld, London, 2020, 308 pp.

key interpretative line on which Philippe Legrain's book is based. A long-established scholar in the international debate on immigration, he shows particular sensitivity and competence on this topic as he himself, while being born in London, comes from a refugee family. Thus "I feel connected to many other places in the world while also feeling a very strong sense of belonging to my home city."²

His analysis focuses on host societies in order to clear the ground from superficial and alarmist reactions. Indeed, since the very first pages of the book he tackles the theme of the populist threat (*The Populist Peril*), which tries to drive fears by dividing societies between "Them (bad immigrants) and Us (good locals)." The question that arises is whether diversity is an enrichment or an overwhelming wave, a question that runs through the entire book. Of course, one aspect of the analysis is essential here: "While violence remains rare, the international debate about immigration is also increasingly inflamed."³ In this context, immigration becomes the main theme with which to attack liberalism-based Western societies: "In short, the ferred debate about immigration is no longer just about whether admitting newcomers is a good thing."⁴ And the current pandemic indisputably shows how Western societies need to resort to migrants. In recent days for example, Italy has decided to almost triple the annual quota of migrants allowed to enter the country compared to the pre-covid era. There can also be personal implications, as Legrain recalls, as in the case of Boris Johnson, one of the strongest supporters of the "Them and Us" theory, who once recovered from his severe coronavirus infection, publicly paid homage to the immigrant nurses who assisted him while he was in intensive care. At the same time, the very same people who deny others the opportunity to migrate from one country to another are among the staunchest supporters of the idea that "when migration is national, it is typically considered normal and beneficial."⁵ This is because in analyzing mi-

² Ibid, p. 14.

³ Ibid, p. 5.

⁴ Ibid, p. 7.

⁵ Ibid., p. 15.

grations in an international scenario narratives without foundation immediately take over, built to instill concern in the public opinion in order to gain electoral consent. This distortion of the debate, therefore, occurs because migrations are discussed abstractly, without considering that millions of people are involved with their choices, lifestyles and values that often integrate well into the target societies. So – according to Legrain – the main question to ask in this case is another: “How do immigrants benefit our societies today?”⁶

Indeed, the whole book is crossed by migrant men and women with their own names and stories, who make this reading very interesting because constantly in contact with reality. So, to describe briefly the architecture of the volume, in the first chapter Philippe Legrain highlights that negative perceptions of immigration are often not based on personal experience, while “ignorance, misinformation, misinterpretation or prejudice” are often very relevant.⁷ Therefore, it is not so much racism or even xenophobia that make immigrants unpopular but above all a mixture of ignorance and prejudice. In the second chapter – quite expectably – Legrain draws a brief history of immigration from which it emerges that Western societies are the result of a long-lasting hybridization. On the other hand, as Umberto Eco, a great twentieth-century Italian humanist, asserted Europe is the result of a successful crossbreeding. It was above all at the start of the twentieth century that the idea that “an open world seemed normal and enduring” became stronger in Western societies.⁸

The end of this season, however, came with the First World War, when severe restrictive measures were imposed against immigration while in Europe totalitarian regimes were emerging.

In the aftermath of the Second World War, migratory flows gained strength again even if with significant changes. Among these the most important was that Europe was no longer a continent of

⁶ Ibid, p. 11.

⁷ Ibid, p. 22.

⁸ Ibid.

emigration but rather it became a land of immigration, although in public opinion there was little awareness of these changes in migration flows. This transformation of the old continent was linked to the decolonization process which led to the birth of new states, often affected by severe underdevelopment. Migrants departures were then economically motivated, while their final destinations were in line with the history of imperialism that had marked the previous centuries: "Indians moved to Britain, Indonesians to the Netherlands, Algerians to France."⁹ In this scenario, international flows often intertwined with inter-European ones, with a growing role of the German Federal Republic, in particular in attracting many immigrants as "guest workers." This phase continued until 1973, when due to the first oil shock there was a new blocking, although while in this case migrants' returns to their places of origin were encouraged, the results were largely unsuccessful. As one Swiss writer commented, "We imported workers and got men (people actually) instead."¹⁰ A new acceleration of flows occurred with the collapse of the Berlin wall and the fall of the Soviet Union between the late 1980s and the first 90s: in this situation, destination countries grew in number in Europe, as in the case of Italy and Spain, and East-West flows intensified in the old continent. Finally, in recent years there has been the arrival, once again in Europe, of African and Middle Eastern refugees, also due to interminable wars such as the Syrian one. This process has often been described in alarming terms such as "invasion", a misnomer if only one thinks that "five in six refugees and asylum seekers are in developing countries."¹¹ We reach the fourth chapter where we have a photograph of our current reality: the overall picture that in any case, still today, on a global level migrants are just a small minority. They represent between 2.8% and 3.5% of the world population. Two thirds of them are in rich countries and about three quarters come from developing re-

⁹ Ibid, p. 39.

¹⁰ Ibidem.

¹¹ Ibid, pp. 42-43.

gions. There are areas where migrants are highly concentrate, such as in the Gulf region, and in general these flows are highly mobile, which also includes the opportunity of returning, after a certain number of years, to the home country: "Many people intend to move for only a while – to study, do a specific job, experience a different country or earn enough to buy a house or start a business back home."¹² This brings us to the fifth chapter dedicated to the future development of migratory flows. Legrain highlights the growing need for immigrants that immigration-dense societies show today: a belief based on demographic reasons but also on the impossibility that some humble but indispensable jobs could ever be performed by machines. At the same time, powerful economic inequalities, multiple war zones and climate changes will push an increasing number of people to leave their own country. Hence the need to enforce public policies aimed at defining legal entry channels in order to harmonize the two needs just outlined: the need for migrants in Western societies and an escape route for many men and women from the war and poverty-stricken zones of the world.

At the end of the part dedicated to the time frame of migration flows – past, present and future – from the sixth to the fourteenth chapter Legrain analyzes the economic effects caused by immigration. These account for nine chapters out of the twenty-one that make up the book and therefore this is the most consistent part, nor could it be otherwise if we think that the pro/anti immigration debate focuses on these very aspects. According to some researches, it is estimated that in 2015 migrants, who make up 3.4% of the world population, contributed to almost 10% of world economic production. This significant contribution is made possible by the fact that "newcomers have diverse attributes, skills, perspectives and experience that tend to complement ever-changing local resources, needs and circumstances."¹³ Indeed, according to some recent studies by the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the presence of immigrants

¹² Ibid, p. 52.

¹³ Ibid, p. 70.

raises living standards in advanced societies. This is made possible by the high dynamism that migrants often show, as they are often much more inclined than the local population to undertake entrepreneurial activities: a dynamism that characterizes migrants from their first arrival in their destination country and that motivates them to undertake all the possible ways to try to be successful. At the same time it is also true that students who specialize in institutions outside their home country have a beneficial effect and as Legrain points out “Everybody wins: the students, our universities, the towns and cities which benefit from investment and the firms who want to employ talented graduates.”¹⁴ This experience is now very common in Western societies: “Foreign brains can make a huge contribution.”¹⁵ More than half of the scientists working in Switzerland are immigrants, as well as more than a quarter of US residents with PhDs were born abroad. Thanks to immigrants’ contributions it is possible to create a virtuous circle, in which a clear complementarity with the activities promoted by local people can be seen. This cooperation does not only have economic effects, but also social and cultural repercussions. Nor should we always resort in our mind to the group of highly qualified foreign talent: “They are often the key workers who have provided essential services to societies in the coronavirus lockdown.”¹⁶ More generally, immigrants’ presence makes it clear how diversity is a wealth: quoting Alberto Alesina’s studies Legrain shows how immigration can have a very positive impact on host societies. “The diversity dividend” however can bring benefits, but it does not produce benefits automatically. In this regard, communication is fundamental because it enhances the diversity of perspectives in teamwork. Overall, it is above all in work contexts that immigrants stand out in taking on very physically demanding skills: “They are willing to do dull, dirty and difficult jobs that locals dislike.”¹⁷ This aspect is even more evident when immi-

¹⁴ Ibid, p. 76.

¹⁵ Ibid, p. 90.

¹⁶ Ibid, p. 102.

¹⁷ Ibid, p. 76.

grants take on “nursing care”, a profession that is highly required due to the rapid aging of Western societies. But help for the elderly is also necessary due to the increase in the employment rate caused by immigrants: without their presence, retirement age should be much further away in time: “In short – Legrain states – immigration is not an antidote to population aging, but it can alleviate the symptoms.”¹⁸ When we focus on a strictly financial dimension, it immediately emerges that immigrants pay more taxes than what they use in terms of public services. They are thus net contributors to public finances, helping to ease tax burdens for the populations with whom they cohabit. But it is above all in the “development dividend” that the author sees the positive contribution of immigrants. In this context, remittances – “the power of remittances” – play a key role as a privileged way to redistribute income globally: “Remittances were more than three times official government aid.”¹⁹ At the same time, emigration “is a key spur for people in poor countries to invest in acquiring skills in the first place.”²⁰ And furthermore, “returnees” and “diasporas” can enhance development: these two conditions produce great benefits in terms of trade, investments and business networks in the areas of origin.

However, immigration is not just an economic issue. The next part of the book – Cultural Challenges – consisting of five chapters is of great interest as well. The assumption is that “immigrants enrich our lives culturally as well as economically.”²¹ The result is that Western countries cultures are “an amalgam of immigrant contributions.” In short, once again we can recognize the physiognomy of a successful hybridization, which begins when immigrants without a residence permit come into contact with Western societies: “Even when they remain undocumented, immigrants still contribute to the economy and society and tend to be good people.”²² It is a process

¹⁸ Ibid, p. 137.

¹⁹ Ibid, p. 152.

²⁰ Ibid, p. 157.

²¹ Ibid, p. 165.

²² Ibid, p. 174.

of human relations that can be seen in everyday life but which is on the sidelines in the public debate on immigration. “Illegal” is instead the label with which migrants are often demonized in a generic sense. However, as Legrain states “Yet irregular migrants are a diverse group who don’t conform to the negative stereotypes about them.”²³ Indeed this category includes “visa overstayers”, “dreamers”, “border crossers”, or even people who are detained, deported or sentenced to death during “hope journeys”: in this last case what happens for example in the Mediterranean – “the most murderous barrier of all” – where between 2014 and 2019 an estimated 19,000 migrants died. If these are the reception conditions, there is no other possibility than “the undocumented continue to live in the shadow of fear.” This shameful condition is opposed to the civilization values of Western societies. For this reason, Legrain argues that it would be necessary to promote a general regularization in Western countries or “an amnesty if you like,”²⁴ the only realistic measure that would allow governments to manage the migration phenomenon at the moment. It could be argued that such a measure could lead to a loss of identity in Western societies: Brexit is indeed the consequence of this logic. What opposes this logic is an element that can be noticed as soon as one has personal relationships with immigrants: “typically they feel a strong attachment to the country that has welcomed them and of which they have chosen to become citizens.”²⁵ Moreover, all individuals often have “multiple identities”: no one belongs to a single place on the planet. Indeed, in many cases migrants help local people rediscover their true identity, because of the esteem and respect they show towards the host countries in a process of “learning to live together” based on “respect for liberal laws and institutions.”²⁶ This is a path to follow, in which integration is central, a term that as we all know “means different things to different peo-

²³ Ibid, p. 173.

²⁴ Ibid, p. 186.

²⁵ Ibid, p. 192.

²⁶ Ibid, p. 207.

ple."²⁷ Although it is a complex process, some elements can be easily spotted: to help this "growing together" it is essential for immigrants to learn the language, act as active subjects, adapt to new lifestyles, establish personal relationships with natives of the place.²⁸ In this way it is possible to strengthen social cohesion, a trend that is already taking place in many Western societies where "a sense of community does not need an ethnic homogeneity."

This leads us to the last part of the volume, whose significant title is "seeking solutions", a title that indicates that strategies in this area are still to be developed. The basic consideration is that in a scientific perspective "immigration is an overwhelmingly good thing."²⁹ And yet at the same time "many people remain unconvinced."³⁰ It is therefore essential to construct a narrative full of facts, presented in a simple way that can favourably impress public opinion. In this communication style it is important to "speak up for society as a whole."³¹ It is therefore crucial to emphasize connections rather than fractures: "We may come from different places, but we have a shared present and a common future."³² In this perspective it must also be emphasized that open societies are the prerequisite for making a country great, with a strong patriotic pride. In this scenario "immigration ought be presented as a sign of a society's success."³³ Communication is once again crucial for these issues: it can contribute significantly to changing public opinion. In the end, however, above all "personal contact tends to overcome fear, prejudice and conflict."³⁴ Only by creating a "mix" of relationships is it possible to understand how the benefits are in great number for everyone. And it is precisely in this field that a substantial change in public policies is required: "As the coronavirus crisis has highlighted, gov-

²⁷ Ibid, p. 215.

²⁸ Ibid, p. 225.

²⁹ Ibid, p. 231.

³⁰ Ibidem.

³¹ Ibid, p. 237.

³² Ibidem.

³³ Ibid, p. 238.

³⁴ Ibid, p. 240.

ernments can make decisive change quickly – for good or ill – when the need seems pressing enough.”³⁵ The problem that arises here is more general: how do Western societies imagine their future, “open or closed?” In his conclusions, Legrain tends towards a positive vision: “But looking to the future, there are grounds for cautious optimism.”³⁶ The challenge is to overcome the logic of the division between “them and us” and build societies in which the “all of us” perspective is dominant. From this point of view, the book is an important reference in the current immigration debate, with the merit of addressing complex issues in an accessible way for the general public, with an agile, incisive and engaging language. In short, it is a significant contribution to a new narrative on immigration, free from stereotypes or prejudices. Of this contribution there is today, and increasingly in the future, a great need in Western societies. The hope is that this kind of studies can grow in numbers in order to be able to reason on these issues in a calm and documented way. Indeed as Legrain points out at the end of his book, “The future is open. Let’s make the best of it, together.”³⁷

³⁵ Ibid, p. 241.

³⁶ Ibid, p. 248.

³⁷ Ibid, p. 251.