

# Open Borders as Ultra-Effective Altruism

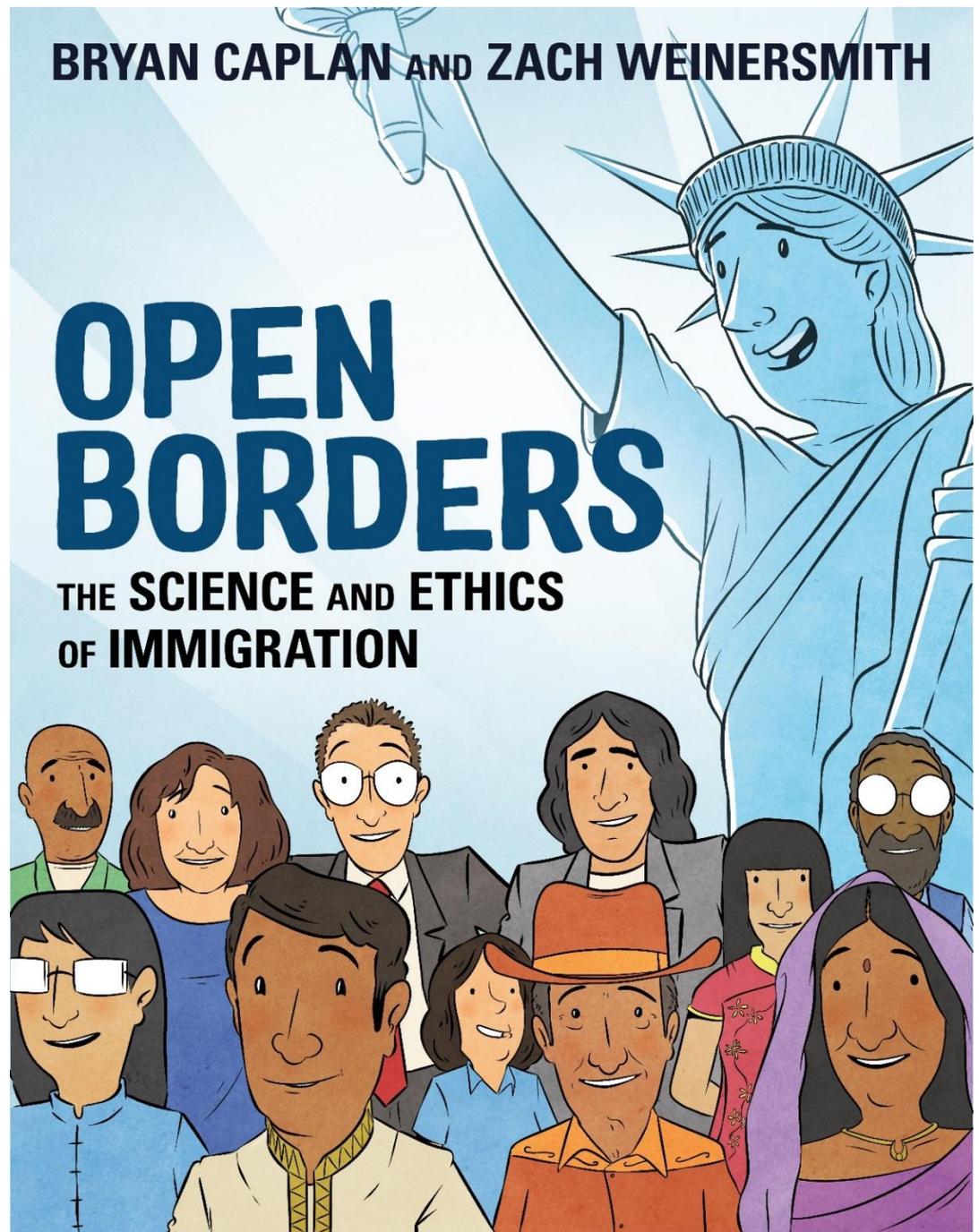
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# End Poverty the Easy Way

- Absolute poverty is terrible.
- Almost all absolute poverty exists outside the First World.
- When absolutely poor people move to the First World, they almost always escape absolute poverty *immediately*.
- How? Normally, by getting a “low-skilled” job.
  - A Haitian who earns \$5 a day in Haiti can easily earn \$75 a day in Miami.
- Immigrants from poor countries earn moderately less than natives, but *vastly* more than they did back home.

# So Why Does Poverty Persist?

- If migration lets almost any able-bodied adult escape absolute poverty, why is there still so much poverty?
- “They don’t want to move”?
  - Global surveys say over a billion want out.
- “Transportation costs”?
  - A rounding error – and don’t forget borrowing.
- So why not?
  - Because all First World countries strictly regulate immigration – especially of low-skilled workers!
- How can we be sure?
  - Black market prices
  - Immigration lottery

# The Great EA Opportunity?

- This points to an incredible EA opportunity: free immigration, a.k.a. *open borders*.
  - Huge demonstrable gain.
  - No donation required.
- Big worry: Fallacy of Composition
  - Migration works great for one migrant, but can it work for hundreds of millions? Billions?
- Good EA news: Yes it can.
  - How? Open borders solves poverty not by zero-sum redistribution, but by *drastically increasing global production*.

# The Logic of Open Borders

- People migrate to earn more, but why do such opportunities exist?
  - Because *productivity* is higher in some places than others.
- Can productivity really be so different in different countries? Definitely.
- Immigration restrictions' chief point is to stop labor from moving to higher-productivity places.
- Scrap the laws, and you stop missing this great opportunity.

# The Empirics of Open Borders

- How big is the missed opportunity?
- Standard estimate:  
Open borders would *double* GWP.
  - GWP = Gross WORLD Product!
- How is this possible?
  - Large gain per person
  - Large number of would-be migrants
  - Large \* Large = Massive
  - “Trillion-Dollar Bills on the Sidewalk”

*Table 1*

Efficiency Gain from Elimination of International Barriers  
(percent of world GDP)

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*All policy barriers to merchandise trade*

1.8	Goldin, Knudsen, and van der Mensbrugge (1993)
4.1	Dessus, Fukasaku, and Safadi (1999) <sup>a</sup>
0.9	Anderson, Francois, Hertel, Hoekman, and Martin (2000)
1.2	World Bank (2001)
2.8	World Bank (2001) <sup>a</sup>
0.7	Anderson and Martin (2005)
0.3	Hertel and Keeney (2006, table 2.9)

*All barriers to capital flows*

1.7	Gourinchas and Jeanne (2006) <sup>b</sup>
0.1	Caselli and Feyrer (2007)

*All barriers to labor mobility*

147.3	Hamilton and Whalley (1984, table 4, row 2) <sup>c</sup>
96.5	Moses and Letnes (2004, table 5, row 4) <sup>c</sup>
67	Iregui (2005, table 10.3) <sup>c,d</sup>
122	Klein and Ventura (2007, table 3) <sup>e</sup>

# Niagara Falls Economics

- Most people who analyze immigration policy ignore almost all of these foregone gains.
  - Even pro-immigration writers normally focus on high-skilled immigration.
- Rare analysts who acknowledge these gains, however, usually dismiss them by insisting that “almost all” the gains go to immigrants.
- This is strange, because big increases in production almost always end up being *broadly* beneficial.
  - Uber, internet, vaccines, tractors, etc.
- Since immigration restrictions drastically reduce global production, they’re almost surely impoverishing us, too.
  - Trickle-down? No, Niagara Falls.



**IT'S  
NIAGARA FALLS  
ECONOMICS!**



# Swamping?

- Borjas (2014, 2015) correctly points out that billions have to move to realize all these gains. He infers:
  - Either estimates are way too high because too few will come...
  - Or estimates are way too high because sudden movement on this scale will totally disrupt society.
- But Collier's (2013) work on "diaspora dynamics" implicitly answers this critique.
  - Actual migration begins slowly, then snowballs. So while billions will ultimately come, we have decades to adjust.
  - The case of open borders with Puerto Rico.

TABLE 1-1. Puerto Rico's Net Emigration, 1900–2000

Years	Net Number of Out-Migrants
1900–1910	2,000
1910–1920	11,000
1920–1930	42,000
1930–1940	18,000
1940–1950	151,000
1950–1960	470,000
1960–1970	214,000
1970–1980	65,817
1980–1990	116,571
1990–2000	130,185

*Note:* Net emigration is the difference between in-migrants and out-migrants.

*Source:* Francisco L. Rivera-Batiz and Carlos E. Santiago, *Island Paradox: Puerto Rico in the 1990s* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1996), 45; with data for 1990–2000 added from U.S. Bureau of the Census, *2000 Census of Population and Housing*, PHC-T-22.

# So Why Not?

- Estimates of massive economic gains rarely change people's minds about immigration. Why not?
- People who know the numbers rarely challenge the effect on global production. Instead, they point to offsetting concerns.
  - Protecting native taxpayers.
  - Protecting native culture.
  - Protecting native liberty.
  - Protecting the global environment.
- How weighty are these objections?
- For numerate EAs, not very.
  - \$1T - \$1B  $\approx$  \$1T
  - Keyhole solutions!

# A Match Made in Heaven

- *Ineffective* altruists like symbolism and sacrifice.
  - Look at Vandy’s inane Covid policies.
- Effective Altruists like substance and savings.
  - Open Borders delivers both on a massive scale.
- EAs like adjusting for probabilities.
  - Unlike speculation about “catastrophic risk” avoidance, the gains of open borders are *demonstrable*.
- EAs don’t accept evils because they’re familiar.
  - Such as: death.
- Challenge: Name *any* cause that deserves EA support more than open borders!

