Rethinking migration for a Good Society

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About Katherine Tonkiss

Katherine Tonkiss is a Lecturer in Sociology and Policy at the School of Languages and Social Sciences, Aston University, where she teaches courses in migration, globalisation and policy. Her first book, Migration and Identity in a Post-National World, explored the nexus between national and post-national forms of identity and belonging in contexts of high EU migration. She has also published widely on the subject of migration and citizenship rights, and currently holds a British Academy grant which she is using to study the work of migration rights organisations and activists in the UK and Australia

About Compass

Compass is a home for those who want to build and be a part of a Good Society; one where equality, sustainability and democracy are not mere aspirations, but a living reality. We are founded on the belief that no single issue, organisation or political party can make a Good Society a reality by themselves so we have to work together to make it happen. Compass is a place where people come together to create the visions, alliances and actions to be the change we wish to see in the world.

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Rethinking migration for a Good Society

The idea of a 'Good Society' is core to Compass' mission and values. But what do the principles underpinning this Good Society mean for how we think about immigration? This Think Piece provides an answer to this pressing and timely question, suggesting an alternative approach to migration policy that can better achieve fundamental equality for all.

Introduction

Immigration is one of the most hotly contested fields of policy both in the UK and in other similarly affluent and democratic countries around the world. In recent months, the mass movement of refugees out of Syria and pressures on western governments to increase the numbers of refugees permitted to settle in their countries has once again pushed migratory forces into the spotlight. In the UK, relatively widespread public support for refugees during this so-called 'crisis' has followed a period in which the British immigration debate has become particularly fraught, due mainly to the success of anti-immigrant voices such as UKIP in capturing the public imagination on migration in a climate of financial crisis and austerity. UKIP and similar groups have capitalised on a dominant narrative which constructs immigration as out of control and as placing unsustainable pressure on jobs, housing and the welfare state. According to this narrative, it is only through restricting immigration that we can stem this 'crisis'.

This approach has underpinned the increasingly restrictive immigration policies which have emerged in the UK in recent years, apparently in response to a growing tide of anti-immigrant public opinion. Policy responses have included a cap designed to drastically cut non-EU migration, introducing strict family migration rules based on stringent financial criteria, and creating a more hostile environment for those seeking asylum. Weaved into these policies is a definition of the deserving migrant as one who contributes through working hard and paying taxes while not demanding too much of the welfare state, while the undeserving migrant is imagined as a bogus asylum seeker or 'illegal' migrant who is only attempting to enter the UK for social welfare benefits.[1] Research[2] shows that these views are not supported by empirical evidence concerning the contributions that migrants make to life in the UK or their reasons for migrating, but still these myths persist and underpin anti-immigrant policies of border control.

Such dominant anti-immigration narratives and related policy responses are, however, out of step with global forces which are transforming membership in contemporary societies. This point is neatly illustrated by the fact that the UK government's attempts to reduce net migration to tens of thousands rather than hundreds of thousands a year between 2010 and 2015 failed to prevent net mi-gration from increasing during this period. 'People just move', a migration activist

commented to me recently, a phrase which captures the point that in an age of globalised labour markets and international diaspora, migration is an increasingly normal part of life and membership far more fluid and transient than is typically acknowledged.

This *Thinkpiece* considers how we can conceive of a fair and more just migration policy which is more in tune with a world in which 'people just move' than with anti-immigration sentiment and xenophobia, specifically by considering what a Good Society, central to the work of Compass, means for immigration control. The paper sets out some of the key principles which could inform an immigration policy in the fair and equal society that a Good Society concept represents, and considers the implications of this approach for issues of social justice, solidarity and community resilience. The core argument that I put forward is that, if a Good Society means tackling inequality across a range of factors which affect life chances, then a Good Society should mean embracing a more open and liberal approach to immigration.

A World of Migration

It is worth interrogating the notion that 'people just move', which I alluded to in the introduction, in a little more detail. Indeed, it may be noted that only 3% of the world's population hold a migration status. However, this 3% accounts for 232 million people, and in countries of relatively high immigration such as those in Europe and North America, migration accounts for over 10% of the population. Migration has also increased considerably over recent decades, particularly since the 1980s, prompting some to suggest that we are living in an 'age of migration',[3] where migration is a key factor in understanding and explaining contemporary social dynamics. Migration has also brought added complexity, not just in terms of this increasing volume but also due to an increasing diversity of migration routes and channels, as well as more types of migration status, such as undocumented migrant, economic migrant, student migrant, asylum seeker and so forth. In some contexts this has led to the emergence of 'superdiversity', a term used to describe the diversity of diversities found in many contexts of high immigration.[4]

Although economic justifications for migration are really just a starting point, and indeed can't in themselves help us to conceptualise immigration control in a Good Society, they can help to illustrate why migration is an increasingly normal part of life. As businesses have globalised, so too have labour markets. International and multi-national businesses rely on international labour markets, and as such national economies benefit from attracting international business by internationalising their labour markets. As a result, international migration has

increased, as has transience – or mobility between three or more places over a lifetime. In turn, this means that membership of different national communities is far more fluid and open to change than it was when labour markets were less internationalised and the travel options which have facilitated this mobility far less accessible. Increased migration can as such be seen as the symptom of an increasingly global economy and society which has transformed the borders of nation-states, making them far more permeable to people, goods and services.

Beyond the role of the economy in shaping global migratory flows, the internationalisation of fundamental human rights since the Second World War has also significantly shaped the migration that we see today. In particular, the core right to seek asylum from conditions of violence and persecution has led to the emergence of the 'asylum seeker' migration status. The clash that we can observe today between the right to asylum of, for example, Syrian refugees fleeing civil war, and national governments' gatekeeping of this right through various legal mechanisms, is symptomatic of a broader tension between the notion of a universal human right to asylum and the continued prevalence of restrictive national borders.[5]

This initial discussion, as well as introducing the concept of immigration, has illustrated some reasons as to why immigration control should matter to how we think about constructing a Good Society. Migration matters because it is not an anomaly; it is a critical factor which has shaped and continues to shape society as a result of the way in which national borders have been transformed by globalisation. Seen in this light, working for the rights of migrants is critically important to addressing contemporary sources of social inequality.

Migration and Social Justice

That migration is imbued with questions of social justice is not a radical notion. While international travel and the expansion of multi-national business have given rise to a cosmopolitan 'ex pat' elite, migration is most commonly associated with border crossing by people in search of better life opportunities for themselves and their families, often escaping conditions of harsh poverty or – in the case of refugees and asylum seekers in particular – violence and persecution. Migration is, as such, deeply related to structures of international inequality, but the lives of migrants are also affected by domestic sources of inequality once they have arrived and entered into the domestic labour market.[6]

The poverty and inequality experienced by migrants stems from the ways in which the statuses of citizen and worker have become separated under the

increasing dominance of the transnational neo-liberal economy. The architecture of rights is predominantly informed by national citizenship and the borders of the nation-state, while the growth of international labour markets means that vast numbers of workers fall outside of these regimes.[7] Migrant workers are far more likely to be exposed to precarious employment – sometimes described as 3D jobs (dirty, dangerous and demeaning) – as a result of the international sources of inequality that have driven their migration journeys. This combination of global and domestic inequality, mixed with the absence of robust worker rights for migrants, means that they are particularly vulnerable to exploitation.

As we've already noted, migration is good for national economies because it is good for international business. Indeed, an international labour market has been shown – through the government's own research[8] – to have positive effects on the national economy. Immigration brings added prosperity to national economies, and even during recession does not present the drain on finances that anti-immigration activists often claim it does. Yet the way in which immigration has been constructed as a purely economic good means that migrants are treated as dehumanised commodities of an international labour market and as a source of profit and productivity rather than as fellow humans with attendant rights. Even when people migrate through legal routes, their 'deservingness' stems from their perceived economic value to the nation. This, once again, is the result of national migration policy not having adapted effectively to the globalisation of economies. It is the result of the logic that the flow of people across borders should be subject to the same economic criteria as goods and services, rather than on the basis of the recognition of their personhood.

Migration and a Good Society

Having highlighted some of the reasons that immigration should be viewed as an increasingly normal part of life rather than as an anomaly within the nation-state system, and having described how migrants are affected by an interplay of international and domestic inequality, I'm now going to turn my attention to that key question of what all this means for how we should think about immigration control in a Good Society. But before we can work through the implications of a Good Society for immigration control, we need to properly define what is meant by this concept. A Good Society refers not to an ideal, imagined community, but rather to a framework of values which can inform how we think about key issues affecting society, to enable us to ask: 'does this help us build a Good Society'?[9] For Compass, a Good Society concept embraces three core values: equality, democracy and sustainability. For the purposes of this paper, it is the equality value which is the most relevant, and so for now I will focus in on this particular value and how it is defined by Compass. Specifically:

A Good Society endorses achieving fundamental equality by intervening to equal out as many life chances as possible, tackling inequalities based on a range of criteria like wealth, opportunity, gender, sexual orientation, class, race/ ethnicity, age and disability.[10]

A Good Society, therefore, articulates an approach to realising social justice by tackling inequalities which are produced by what might be called arbitrary characteristics – those differences between people that are completely beyond their control. Often, they are simply the result of the luck of birth into a more advantageous position, but they can have profound consequences for life chances.

So, then, we can ask – what does an immigration policy which is consistent with this approach to social justice which a Good Society framework envisages look like? I'm going to call this idea of achieving equality regardless of arbitrary characteristics the principle of individual moral equality. This principle is absolutely central to how we live as a liberal democratic society; we uphold the notion of individual moral equality whenever we argue that people should not be treated any differently on the basis of arbitrary characteristics. We would not, for example, find it acceptable for the law to apply differently to men and women, or for it to apply differently to a black person and a white person. Yet in the case of immigration, people are treated differently based on their place of birth, which is a characteristic completely beyond their control. They are prevented from moving from one place to another, across a national border, because of their place of birth – an arbitrary characteristic which undermines the recognition of individual moral equality. And there is an argument to say that, if we are guided by liberal democratic principles such as individual moral equality and equality of opportunity, then we should recognise a basic right to migration.

This argument has been most extensively and compellingly put forward by Joseph Carens[11], who follows John Rawls to argue that, in a hypothetical situation where 'accidents of natural endowment'[12] are disguised – in other words those morally arbitrary characteristics which should have no bearing on justice – place of birth and nationality would be considered as morally arbitrary. This is because, Carens argues, they are unchosen but have significant consequences for individuals' access to wealth and opportunities – the luck of birth in an affluent nation carries with it significant advantages over birth in a poorer country,[13] and not upholding the right to migrate would as such hinder liberty on morally arbitrary grounds and would perpetuate morally arbitrary inequalities by not allowing people to migrate for work and other opportunities. This would contravene Rawls' two core principles of justice, which are first that 'each person

is to have an equal right to the most extensive scheme of equal basic liberties compatible with a similar scheme of liberties for others', and second, that 'social and economic inequalities are to be arranged so that they are both (a) reasonably expected to be to everyone's advantage and (b) attached to positions open to all'.[14]

Moving from political theory back to this concept of a Good Society, what these ideas mean is that if we're serious about creating social justice for all and tackling inequalities based on arbitrary criteria which deeply affect life chances, then we must approach immigration policy from the perspective of a right to migrate. This assertion rests on the fact that controlling migration both hinders the basic liberties of everybody and perpetuates inequalities based on the luck of birth, which goes against this principle of individual moral equality which is at the heart of a Good Society concept.

It is not beyond comprehension to imagine a migration policy based on a core right to migrate. We already recognise movement as a human right in the international right to asylum (notwithstanding attempts to undermine the basic dignity and humanity of those claiming asylum through detention, a subject beyond the scope of this paper). This right is extended to everybody in the world, in virtue of their humanity. It does not apply differently to people based on their place of birth or nationality, because this right to asylum is seen as owed to everybody simply because they are human. We also recognise emigration as a basic migratory right (other than in totalitarian regimes), once again owed to each person simply because they are human and not defined by their place of birth, meaning that the right to exit a territory is thought of as a basic freedom that all human beings should have.[15] My relatively simple argument here is that, in a Good Society, we should use these same kinds of principles to underpin far more liberal immigration policies which do not perpetuate inequalities based on place of birth and which can support a more expansive approach to achieving social justice.

Migration, Solidarity and Resilience

One of the key criticisms of the position I've set out above in relation to migration in a Good Society is likely to be that it undermines the realisation of the other two principles central to the concept – democracy and sustainability. According to these arguments, a right to immigration is simply not sustainable if we also want to build a robust social democratic society. In this final section, I want to tackle some of the issues raised by this critique to demonstrate some reasons as to why my argument concerning migration rights might still be viewed as the most defensible from the perspective of a Good Society.

The argument that immigration undermines democracy and the welfare state is well-established in academic debates about migration rights. According to those who support this perspective, national citizenship is a crucial source of solidarity for building a robust democratic state and addressing issues of social justice. If we were to open our borders and recognise a right to migrate, they suggest, we risk undermining the foundations of the solidarity needed to achieve the kind of equality that a Good Society stands for. This is because, without the binding sentiment of nationalism, we would tend to pursue more individualistic interests rather than collective goods, and would lack the levels of trust needed to build a rich and robust welfare state. The best society that can imagine, therefore, is argued to be one where immigration is carefully controlled.[16]

Yet there are many reasons to argue against this position. We can look to multi-national countries such as Canada, which have robust liberal democracies and welfare states, to see that these structures are supported in contexts which do not necessarily rely on a singular shared nationalism as a source of binding sentiment. We can also look to rich multicultural countries of immigration – the UK included – which have extensive traditions of social welfare and liberal democracy. The way in which these goods have been eroded in recent times is not the result of immigration; the politics of austerity stem not from immigration but from the ideology of the right, and voter apathy far more to a lack of real alternatives in an electoral system converging on neo-liberal principles.

Indeed, there are alternative kinds of solidarity which could help us to understand how people live together in contexts of migration. In the academic literature these are often described as 'post-national', but really the key point is that they describe communities brought together over common struggles for rights and social justice. We can begin to move towards this basis of solidarity by providing local democratic spaces for communities – of migrants and non-migrants – to address the challenges they face together,[17] as well as providing informal meeting spaces for meaningful interactions at the local level.[18] These are the spaces within which a Good Society, based on an appropriate recognition of membership in the community rather than just the national group, can be built. While in the UK the response of many has been to turn to the anti-immigration sentiment of UKIP, perhaps unsurprisingly given the insecurity wrought by neo-liberal globalisation, creating divisions within diverse communities is unsustainable in this age of migration. Rather, research[19] has shown that investing in local spaces of meaningful interaction is the most sustainable approach to building resilient communities.

All very well, the argument might go, but this doesn't tackle the fact that immigration carries with it sustainability implications for the welfare state, and that uncontrolled immigration would simply be 'opening the floodgates' to people migrating from conditions of poverty into the UK with its more generous system of welfare and better life chances. Yet the sustainability issues raised by immigration are often exaggerated by anti-immigration commentators. Research shows that migrants make significant contributions to the welfare state,[20] and that migrant workers within public services such as the NHS are making critical contributions to its sustainability at a time when the UK-born population is ageing and therefore making higher demands on health and social services.[21] Furthermore, I'm not convinced that we can use global poverty as a reason to restrict migration rights. This is because, in themselves, migration rights aren't solutions to global poverty. From the perspective of a Good Society, they should be recognised because of equality of opportunity, but equality of opportunity is a matter of liberal freedom as much as it is about reducing inequalities in wealth. It is sensible to suggest that more liberal migration rights should be accompanied by more serious attempts at addressing the global inequalities which are currently perpetuated by the transnational neo-liberal economy, rather than suggesting a solution in further restricting rights to migration.

My suggestion that migrants contribute to the high quality public services that are available in the UK is not intended to suggest that population changes don't put pressure on services. As with any kind of demographic change, local service providers in areas which experience high levels of immigration – particularly where this is a relatively new phenomenon – face challenges in delivering the most appropriate kinds of services needed by this population and in managing the transitions involved in these transformations. Investing money to help such communities and local authorities to adapt to the changes that migration brings is a more valuable approach to take in a context where migration is a normal part of life, rather than investing in restrictive border control and making the UK less hospitable. Until relatively recently, the Migration Impacts Fund[22] was designed to do just this, but this fund was scrapped in 2010 in favour of more restrictive border control. If we want to achieve a Good Society, then I would argue that in addition to implementing far less restrictive immigration policies, we also need to invest once again in supporting communities as they adapt to change.

Conclusion

It has been my intention in this Thinkpiece to consider what a migration policy for a Good Society might look like. I hope to have shown that migration policy doesn't have to play into myths about the impact of migrant workers or the cost

of asylum seekers. Rather, a migration policy for a Good Society is one based on the right to immigration, which is critical for achieving equality of opportunity for everyone regardless of the luck of birth in an affluent nation. I've also considered how recognising this right to migrate might impact on achieving the democracy and sustainability principles of a Good Society, and have argued against some critics that rather than controlling immigration and as such accepting deep-rooted social inequality, recognising rights to immigration while also rethinking the basic binding principles of how we live together as a society and investing in resilience at a local community level is the most effective way of achieving all of the principles that a Good Society represents. My argument is not that we have to open our borders overnight, but rather to suggest that, if we strive for a more equal and just world, we should take open borders seriously and work towards its realisation, rather than responding to increasing migration with ever more restrictive immigration policies which will only deepen inequalities and reduce our ability to tackle social struggles which span borders.

Migration tells us something critical about the nature of struggles for social justice in the 21st century, based on the impacts of economic and social globalisation, and part of this involves thinking again about the kind of society that 'we' want to be. If the answer to this question lies in a Good Society, then working for social justice has to also include better recognising and responding to the rights of migrants, and better understanding and challenging the injustices which stem from restrictive border control.

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