

COMMENT

MICHAEL J. PIORE*

This comment presents a brief response to Fogel's criticism of the author's position on immigration policy. Piore summarizes his recent study, *Birds of Passage*, as arguing in part that most undocumented migration to this country in recent years has been initiated by employers with jobs to fill that native workers shun; that most migrants originally intended their stay to be temporary; and that severe problems resulted when this migration, like many others, failed to remain temporary in nature. The author recommends that public policy should focus less on controlling the supply of foreign labor than on controlling the demand for such labor, through improving the terms and enforcement of minimum wage and similar laws.

THE debate about immigration policy in the United States has been stylized into an argument between two camps: those who maintain that undocumented migrants have an extremely detrimental effect upon U.S. labor conditions and favor a closed border (or, rather, implementation of the letter and spirit of the law) and those who argue that the effects are generally benign and favor an open border (or the *de facto* policy of weak enforcement). Walter Fogel is basically in the first camp. He has used my position as a straw man through which to attack the opposing view. What I tried to do in *Birds of Passage*,¹ however, was to recast the whole debate, to reject the terms of the current argument, and to point instead to different social consequences of immigration and to different policy measures. The particular use to which Fogel has put my work thus leads to a rather distorted view of my

position and I would like to take the space offered here for a reply to describe more accurately, if briefly, the argument presented in detail in my book.

First, most undocumented migration to the United States at this time is circular. It consists of people who plan to work temporarily in the United States to accumulate a fund with which they can return to their home country and invest in some project that will provide them social advancement *there*. They are not among the poorest workers in the country from which they come, but rather occupy a middle strata, in which social advancement is possible but difficult without outside resources. This also characterizes the migrants who hold low-wage jobs in Western Europe, and, popular beliefs notwithstanding, it was true of most European migrant streams to the United States in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century.

Second—and most important in terms of the policy debate—migrations of this type are demand initiated and, in the early stages, demand controlled. The workers are recruited by employers in the industrial coun-

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¹Michael J. Piore, *Birds of Passage: Migrant Labor and Industrial Societies* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1979).

try to fill a particular set of jobs—jobs that national workers have rejected. Certain conditions abroad—population pressure and low incomes—are required for workers to respond to these recruitment efforts, but neither of these is the *cause* of the migration. It is here that the most fundamental point of disagreement arises between Fogel's view and mine. Fogel dismisses this point out of hand, without even summarizing the evidence, let alone evaluating it. The strongest evidence for my view is that in every case of economically (as opposed to politically) motivated migration that has been investigated historically, the timing of that migration is explained by the recruitment pattern. Without the recruitment pattern, it is impossible to explain why two countries or regions exist for long periods of time with no population interchange and then suddenly develop strong migratory flows.*

In the initial stages, migration seems to be an almost perfect solution to the demand problem. The migrants want the jobs; national workers do not. What makes such migration a perfect solution, however, is its temporary character, and migrations of this kind virtually never remain temporary. Many migrants stay longer than originally intended, develop permanent attachments, have children, or bring their families. Once permanent communities develop, the migrants are no longer satisfied with the jobs for which they were originally recruited. They instead aspire to the same kinds of em-

*Fogel comments: "I do not disagree with these views. I also contend, however, that once the demand for cheap labor in industrial societies, usually expressed through employer recruitment in countries of emigration, has initiated migration, demand factors do not completely control subsequent migration flows. A supply of migrants from nations with excess population, responding to generalized opportunities in receiving countries, can increase the demand for their labor services in the receiving countries through aggregate impacts (demand shifts) and by their wage effects (movements along demand schedules). Where host country wages are sticky, migrant workers may also be able to obtain employment by displacing indigenous workers. I do not know if Piore accepts these conclusions, but nearly all of the emphasis in *Birds of Passage* is on the propulsion of migration by demand factors operating in industrialized nations. It is this emphasis, it seems to me, which brings about Piore's neglect of external population growth as an important force behind current and future migration to the U.S."

ployment opportunities as nationals, but there is nothing in the process that assures that there will be enough of these other employment opportunities to go around. In fact, history suggests that second-generation migrant communities have difficulty meeting their aspirations, either because the jobs to which they aspire are limited or because the workers are not trained to move into them.

While I believe that is the most detrimental side effect of migration, there are others. I personally do not think it is healthy for American society to have work that nationals despise and scorn performed by people of identifiably different ethnic and racial backgrounds. The migration also has extremely disruptive effects on the established social patterns in the communities of origin: the people left behind do not always reap the economic benefits intended for them and they also face substantial social and psychological problems. On the other hand, I seem to be a lot less enamored of open spaces than is Professor Fogel.

On balance, however, I think I agree with Fogel that we ought to do what we can to limit this migration. To do so, however, we will either have to give up the work they perform or find substitute sources of labor. We would be best able to do this if we understood the U.S. labor market and the role of the jobs migrants are recruited to perform within it.

The key to understanding the role of those jobs must be the temporary character of the migration: apparently, there is something about the jobs that makes them acceptable to temporary workers but not to nationals looking for permanent employment opportunities. It is possible to identify such job characteristics—chiefly economic insecurity, lack of advancement opportunity, and menial social status—but it is not easy to identify the role that jobs with those characteristics play in the operation of the U.S. economy. Fogel attributes to me the view that migrant jobs are the bottom rungs of a social hierarchy, the existence of which is critical to worker motivation in a capitalist society. Actually, in *Birds of Passage* I attempted to explain this problem through a number of different hypotheses, of which

that attacked by Fogel was one; but I doubt, essentially for the same reason that Fogel does, that the role of social hierarchy in worker motivation is an important part of the explanation. I do believe that many of the jobs held by migrants are critical to the functioning of a capitalist economy as we know it today and could not be eliminated without major structural changes. Even this, however, is not critical to my views about public policy in this area. I believe we could make better policy if we knew what these structural relationships were, but the direction in which policy ought to move is clear without such an understanding.

Problems of Restriction

Any attempt to eliminate migrant jobs by cutting off the migrant streams can be a disaster in terms of the values that lead us to attempt to do so in the first place. The major difficulty with such a policy is that it evaluates the problem it is attacking in terms of the size and character of the foreign population in this country and not in light of the work that population performs. When restrictive policies are implemented, therefore, people are surprised by the economic consequences and very often turn out to be unwilling or unable to do without foreign labor. As a result, they actively connive to circumvent the law. The market for foreign workers goes underground, thereby aggravating the side effects of migration: the migrant communities become isolated from the rest of society; their children find it extremely difficult to obtain access to institutions that would permit them the upward mobility to which they aspire; they are open to exploitation at wages and working conditions below minimal legal standards; and with no effective legal restraints upon the size of the labor force in this underground market, the demand for migrants expands beyond whatever minimum is necessary to the functioning of the economic system. There is accumulating evidence that all this has begun to happen in the larger cities of the United States and, given the apparently insatiable demand of Americans for

goods and services, it is indeed unclear where the process will end.

In addition, an underground labor market increases the inducements for temporary migrants to become permanent residents. At the low wages prevailing in the markets in which they work, the migrants have to stay longer than they anticipated to accumulate their initial target income; and the longer they stay, the greater the chances of their developing attachments that lead to permanent settlement and to competition with U.S. nationals. Severe restrictions on entry or reentry also force people into longer stays without the intermittent visits home that characterize free migratory movements and serve to preserve prior attachments.

Rather than attempting to control the *supply* of foreign labor, therefore, I think we ought to attempt to control the *demand* for such labor. A number of our policies already do this, such as the laws establishing a minimum wage, health and safety standards, and protections for union organization. Those laws could be much better enforced, however, and the standards they set could be raised. I believe that there are three primary advantages to this approach. First, these policies focus attention directly upon the work at stake. People will understand when they consider an increase in the legal minimum wage, for example, that certain kinds of work will no longer be viable if the new minimum is rigorously enforced, and the potential elimination of that work will thus be taken into account in the policy decision. Our society may not be willing or able to give up that work, of course. But if it is unwilling to do so when faced with this decision explicitly, there is no reason to think it can be induced into doing so as an unintended consequence of legislation motivated by racism and xenophobia. Second, stronger enforcement of job standards will limit the development of an underground labor market without isolating or penalizing the workers themselves. Finally, if it is possible to attract U.S. nationals back into the jobs that are at stake through higher wages or better working conditions, such policies will work toward this end.

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