

Book Reviews

Exceptional People: How Migration Shaped our World and Will Define our Future

Ian Goldin, Geoffrey Cameron and Meera Balarajan, 2011

Princeton University Press, Princeton, NJ and Oxford, 371 pp., ISBN 978-0-691-14572-3 (hardback)

This book provides a comprehensive sweep of migration from the earliest times of human origins in Africa through to the present, ultimately to reflect on likely future trends. The book is a welcome counterpoint to the too often accepted view that migration is a problem that needs to be controlled or even stopped, and one of the major themes of the book is that the long-term impacts of migration throughout history have been largely positive for development. In its three parts, Past, Present and Future, the authors amass considerable descriptive material to justify their position and deal with the major theoretical approaches in the section on the Present, particularly in the chapters on 'Leaving Home: Migration Decisions and Processes' and 'The Impacts of Migration'. The authors write in an easily accessible manner and the text is refreshingly free of unnecessary jargon. It is a book written mainly for the non-specialist and there will be few surprises for those already familiar with the current debates. While the authors review an impressive range of sources, many of these are either review papers themselves or standard texts in the field. Hence, this book essentially provides an overview of much of our existing knowledge on migration supported by considerable secondary data in text, tables and graphs.

Even if the authors are generally balanced in their assessments, examining short-term costs as well as longer-term gains, they are perhaps a little too breathless about the benefits of continued globalization. In an ideal world the economic benefits that will accrue from increased mobility are indeed substantial but very real political and social pressures act to resist the ideal, and the authors often gloss over the contradictions and tensions in the global system. They argue that the 'global migration agenda should be centred on a clear long-term objective of progressive movement towards open borders' (p. 271). Perhaps, but that is not what we see at present and a general introduction to the topic such as this book might have been better served with a greater dose of political realism. Policy solutions that might initially be applied at local and regional levels rather than the global are not developed, for example. The case for a global policy approach to migration has yet to be satisfactorily made and

still too many countries actively seek to control or limit migrations within their own borders, let alone contemplate opening their borders to international migrants.

In this celebration of migration, the authors are in danger of reifying migration into 'a driving force of global history' (p. 259), whereas population flows essentially respond to economic and political development; they do not drive them. Perhaps curiously, the implications of the title are not fully examined in the book. All migrants, particularly international migrants, are 'exceptional' in that they form a small proportion of the world's population. The majority of people do not cross international borders and the authors often lose sight of this fact. Given the undoubted benefits that migration can bring and which are rightly emphasized in this book, why more people do not move surely deserves greater attention. However, are all migrants 'exceptional' in other ways or, perhaps more to the point, have most exceptional people been migrants? Some discussion of these questions might have been expected.

The book could have benefited from tighter editing, particularly to eliminate duplication. The lengthy international definition of a refugee is repeated verbatim in the text in Chapter 3 (p. 84) and again as endnote 94 in Chapter 5 (p. 308); and the return migration from the UK to Poland following the 2008 economic crisis is dealt with in two places (pp. 137-138 and p. 265), but using different sources and different estimates, for example. The reader is also not best served by the system of referencing using notes placed at the end of the book in contrast to the convenient and widely-used Harvard system that would have avoided constant backward searches, which often involved a further search in the bibliography. For the non-specialist, who will be the main target of this book, the chapters will appear footnoted to death.

Nevertheless, this book deserves to be widely read. Its principal messages that migration has been an integral part of human history and that migration brings real benefits to origin and destination countries, as well as to the migrants themselves, are well taken. Attempts to limit such movements are unlikely to be successful over the longer term, as well as being counterproductive. If these messages can be conveyed to greater numbers of policy-makers, as well as to the public at large, then misperceived attitudes might be changed and knee-jerk reactions to perceived short-term problems attributed to migration avoided. If this book can go some way towards achieving these objectives, it will have well served its purpose.

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