

Rationally Speaking #243: Bryan Caplan on “The Case for Open Borders”

Julia Galef: Welcome to Rationally Speaking, the podcast where we explore the borderlands between reason and nonsense. I'm your host, Julia Galef. And my guest today is Bryan Caplan.

Bryan is an economist at George Mason University and a repeat guest on Rationally Speaking. We're going to be discussing today Bryan's latest book, which has been climbing the New York Times bestseller list. It's titled *Open Borders: The Science and Ethics of Immigration*, and it's coauthored with Zach Weinersmith, who is also a regular on Rationally Speaking. It's a very dynamically illustrated case for open borders.

So that's what we're going to be talking about today. Bryan, welcome back to Rationally Speaking.

Bryan Caplan: It's fantastic to be back, Julia.

Julia Galef: I really enjoyed the book, as I've mentioned to you. And Zach's not here with us today, but his illustration of you as this kind of jaunty guide to open borders leading the reader -- graphically, literally leading the reader -- through the arguments for open borders was... I thought he captured your essence really perfectly.

Bryan Caplan: Yeah. I thought he did a great job. He was my number one choice of artist in the world, and I didn't even know him when I was starting the project. But I somehow talked him into it.

Julia Galef: Yeah. He was just the perfect ... When I heard about this project a year or two ago – it's the sort of thing that you hear about and you're like, "I can't believe that doesn't exist already. That's just the perfect thing to exist." He captured your, sort of, animated confident nerdiness. I don't know how to describe it. But your spirit really shines through these simple line drawings.

So yeah, this is a graphic novel, or graphic nonfiction, guide to open borders with a bunch of illustrations and some charts and graphs. But it's a very quick and fun read that at the same time packs in a lot of very dense argumentation and insight. So, highly recommended.

And just for the record, I'm pretty sympathetic to this argument. If not open borders, then significantly increasing the rate of immigration to the US. But I'm going to focus in our conversation predominantly on my hesitations or objections, just because that's where the meat is. But that's all, for the record, against a background of large agreement.

So Bryan, why don't you start off just by defining what you mean by open borders, and maybe clear up any common misconceptions that you find people have about the concept?

Bryan Caplan: Right. So open borders is a legal regime where in slogan form, where anyone can take a job anywhere. The more complicated way that I like to describe it is unless you belong in jail, you're allowed to live and work wherever you want.

Julia Galef: In the world.

Bryan Caplan: So murderers are still stuck in prison, but that's not what open borders is about. But if you are someone where you haven't done anything where you belong in jail, then you are free to live and work in any country that you wish.

Julia Galef: And so one thing that people often assume this means is literally no walls, no checkpoints. There's just nothing separating, geographically separating countries from each other. Is that what you mean?

Bryan Caplan: Right, so no. So again, to say open borders still means there is a border. In the book, I don't talk at all about whether or not to get rid of checkpoints, or places where you get your papers checked, or what have you. I think

there's a lot to be said for that too. So a lot of the pleasure of driving around the European Union is that you don't get checked at all. You can go through borders at 70 miles per hour, right?

And of course, that is an inconvenience; so a lot of the reason why more people don't travel between the US and Canada now is probably that you have to actually get checked. So if you're at Niagara Falls, it's a bit of a pain.

But those are fairly minor issues compared to the enormous losses of just saying a person can't move to another country at all.

Julia Galef: And I notice that you referred to “get a job” wherever you want. You didn't talk about citizenship. Is that not part of the definition?

Bryan Caplan: Right. No, it's not part of the definition. And again, that's just a much more complicated issue. I've got no strong views against letting people be citizens. A lot of what I ultimately think is, not letting foreigners vote is what got us here in the first place. Right? The very fact that they are treated this way, probably a lot of it is that they're not able to vote.

But there are the concerns that I talk about in the book, about if a lot come very soon, they might go and change policies and so on.

So I do have a chapter on the possible political dangers of immigration, where in the end, I say it doesn't seem like a very big deal. But at the same point, if it's just ... If this is the sticking issue, if someone says, "Well, I don't mind them living here, working here, but I'm worried about them voting," then I would say: This would be a very foolish hill to die on.

Julia Galef: Your support for open borders is both moral and economic, or empirical. Right? Want to lay out both of those threads?

Bryan Caplan: Yeah. So again, actually what I do in that book is try to show how almost any moral view you've ever heard of is very supportive of open borders.

But yes, in terms of the actual effects of open borders, the main thing that economists have done on this is try to figure out, well, if anyone could take a job anywhere, what would be the overall economic effects?

And the background here is we have this whole theory of international trade, that says that the gains to trade come from moving things from where they have low value to where they have high value. Right? And of course, this is what's going on with, say, trading oil. You move it from a place where people have way more oil than they would ever use, to a place where they really need it, and then both sides wind up gaining.

Or in earlier times, you actually would go to Antarctica, get a big pile of ice, and then sail it to the equator before it melted -- because the ice is worthless in Antarctica, but highly valuable in Jamaica.

So anyway, then when researchers try to figure out what are the economic gains of immigration, they basically apply the same standard method from trade models, but they get a much more dramatic answer. Because whereas for goods, the actual level of trade barriers in the world is now quite low overall, for labor, it's still astronomical. This is why just moving from one country to another can greatly raise or lower your earnings.

And then these regulations affect so many people. So when you multiply a large loss of keeping talent trapped in low productivity countries, times a large number of such people, then you get these enormous gains.

And that's why there is a slogan that I talk about a lot: that open borders would ultimately double the production of mankind. Of course, this is a very rough estimate. But

this is for economists the central effect of open borders, would be to have a very large increase in production.

And then most of the rest of the book, I talk about, all right, well, are there some other downsides that are not only real, but are so big that they would be actually be more important than doubling the production of mankind?

Now in terms of the ethics, I just go over a lot of different perspectives. There's a section on utilitarianism...

Julia Galef: I was most interested in *your* ethical case. What you actually believe.

Bryan Caplan: Yeah. So I'm really influenced by philosopher Michael Huemer, who's probably best known for his book *The Problem of Political Authority*. But you could describe his general moral view as just "pluralism." In saying that there are a lot of different moral principles that all have some merit. And a lot of sound moral reasoning comes down to finding moral presumptions, or prima facie moral principles, which however could be outweighed by other considerations.

So for example, prima facie, the right to move from one country to another -- that seems like a pretty basic thing, right? And yet, it's not absolute. So if your moving from one country to another would go and spread a terrible disease, that would seem like a pretty good reason to say, "I'm sorry. It may not seem fair, but there are many lives at stake here." Or if your moving were going to lead to some kind of political disaster, or something along those lines.

So then the way that I structured the book is I first talk about this moral presumption about why, at least on the surface, it seems like a pretty bad thing to do to another person, to say that they're not allowed to leave Haiti. And then talk about all of the reasons why this prima facie

judgment could actually be wrong -- so in other words, overcoming that presumption.

Just like there's a presumption against stealing from another person, but it's not absolute. If you have to steal in order to save your life, then that seems like it's okay to do. You probably want to pay it back afterwards and apologize to the person. But still, it's not something where you should say you should never do it.

Or there's the famous example of Immanuel Kant saying, "You shouldn't lie to save someone's life," which seems crazy to almost everyone. Seems crazy to me. And yet, I also say there is still a presumption against lying. And it's one that I would tell my kids, "Look, even if there doesn't seem to be any harm caused by the lie, still it's the kind of thing where there need to be a really good argument to lie before you would do it," rather than something where unless you can see the harm, then it's okay to do it.

Julia Galef: Got it. Yeah, so you're kind of approaching this question in an inverse from most people, I assume. Where you're saying, "Look, this should be our default. We should need a really good reason to not have open borders." Whereas other people have the status quo as the default, maybe, and are looking for some really good reason to justify open borders. Is that right?

Bryan Caplan: Yeah. I think that in politics, people are more likely to have a status quo presumption, or just a presumption that their ideology has all the answers. And then you have to really work to get them to say, "Maybe the status quo is bad, or maybe your ideology is wrong."

Julia Galef: Or maybe the status quo is an unfair assumption for me to make. The default assumption for many people might just be kind of a notion of the "sovereign right" of a country, the same way they feel that they have the right to decide who comes into their home or something. I didn't want to

assume that everyone's just kind of this unreflective status quo thinker.

Bryan Caplan: A lot of the way that I try to put this is that the idea that if you're saying that someone is not allowed to leave Haiti, that there's a presumption...

On the one hand, I know that this is not part of people's political world view. But on the other hand, if you just say, "Forget about your Republican, or Democrat, or whatever," and you're just in a situation where someone is making a decision to let someone in or not... Doesn't it seem like saying no for no reason is a very cruel thing to do to another person? And just strange? Why do you want to say no?

It seems like you would want to say yes. And then you would be willing to entertain reasons to not say yes. But still, why wouldn't yes be the default?

Julia Galef: I feel like there are two things you did in the framing there that are kind of sneaky, from most people's perspective. Unintentionally.

One is telling people they're "not allowed to leave" Haiti. The way most people think about open borders is deciding who's allowed to come *to* our country. And of course, if you extrapolate that, if every country has closed borders, then that ends up resulting in someone being unable to leave their country. But it feels different than telling someone they can't leave their country.

And then the other framing choice was focusing on one person, imagining one person at the border being told he can't come in. When in practice, when you're talking about a policy, the question is: Should we allow in however many millions, or tens of millions of people? And that would start to feel different.

Does that sound right?

Bryan Caplan: Right. And I would say, well, the difference could be that the negative consequences get bigger and bigger the more people we let in. And that's where I'd say, "All right. Let's go and talk about the negative consequences."

Julia Galef: Okay. Yeah. Let's talk about that.

I'm in San Francisco. And a big topic here, a big quality of life issue, is the homeless problem. We have several thousand people who are chronically homeless. I think it's several thousand. And there are encampments of homeless people living downtown -- which is true in other cities too that have decent weather, like LA. But they're less centrally located than they are in San Francisco.

Bryan Caplan: I don't know about LA.

Julia Galef: Oh, really? I thought that Skid Row in LA was not ... Maybe it's just that people don't walk everywhere in LA, and that's why.

Bryan Caplan: If you walk 10 minutes from the Music Center in LA, you will be in Little Calcutta.

Julia Galef: Got it. Maybe that's just people don't do that. I don't see many complaints.

Bryan Caplan: [I walked there] as a tourist, and I'm like, "Oh, my God."

Julia Galef: That was your mistake, walking somewhere in LA.

Yeah. So there's several thousand people. I think San Francisco has either the highest or second highest per capita homelessness rate out of any city in the country. And the mayor's trying to build shelters, or temporary navigation centers. But of course, no neighborhood wants a big homeless shelter in their backyard. And it'd be great to give everyone housing, but it's San Francisco -- the housing's super expensive. So that's kind of not going to happen.

And that's like 4,000 people. It's hard to imagine if we had 40,000 people living on the streets of San Francisco. And I think that's the kind of thing that people are picturing when they imagine just opening up our borders and letting anyone from around the world come to the US.

Is that not a fair thing to imagine? And if it is, then how would you answer it?

Bryan Caplan: Yeah, interesting question. So lately, I've been reading a lot of books about the homeless. The American homeless are so different from almost everyone in the US or out, that it's just not a reasonable comparison.

Again, the normal problems in living that the homeless have are severe alcoholism, severe drug problems, just being extremely difficult to get along with. So it's very common for the homeless to have a lot of family members that have helped them out in the past, but they have just burned all their bridges, and then they're homeless after that point.

Whereas, of course, most people who want to migrate don't have anything like these problems, and so they're ready to hit the ground running. It's quite striking that out of all of the illegal immigrants that you see, you see almost none of them begging. Right?

So thinking 30 years ago, Thomas Sowell was talking about how you almost never see a Mexican beggar in the Bay Area. I haven't been there for a while, but I'm guessing you still don't see very many. But you do see them working really hard in the fields.

So yeah, in terms of people actually living on the streets, again, this is primarily a behavioral issue of, even in the very short run, it'll be very unusual for a person to be homeless just because of bad luck. It's something where you need to have a combination of bad luck, but also have really bad behavior, and also have exhausted almost all of your other options, and then you end up homeless.

Yeah, so that's little to do with immigration.

Julia Galef: I assume that people in other countries have roughly similar predispositions to bad behavior, or alcoholism, or whatever you're pointing at that's causing American homeless people to be homeless? Is the presumption that those people just wouldn't immigrate to the US, or what?

Bryan Caplan: Or just there's such a tiny fraction. But yeah, I think it's also very reasonable that they wouldn't migrate, because a lot of their problem is not being willing to change their behavior in order to improve their lives.

Julia Galef: So you're sort of assuming there will still be a strong filtering effect, even with open borders.

Bryan Caplan: Yeah, at least for something like that. The most obvious thing that we've seen in previous open borders periods is that young people are a lot more interested in moving. So, young adults, much more willing to totally change their lives, to try to learn a new language, take their kids with them. But older people are a lot less interested in doing it.

Of course, right now we have a lot of filters because it's so much easier to get in if you're high skilled than if you're low skilled. I do actually want to get rid of that filter. But it's still a choice about whether you want to do it or not. And there's big differences between people that are willing to go and risk it all on a new life, and those that would rather play it safe and stay where they are.

Julia Galef: What about the broader impact on the welfare system?

Bryan Caplan: Right. So this is, first, it's one of the most common questions that I get. Because Milton Friedman famously gave an interview where he said, "You cannot have unrestricted immigration in a welfare state." And many people, especially free market oriented people, have quoted him ever since, saying, "Look, until we get rid of the welfare state, we can't even begin to talk about

allowing certainly low skill immigration in any greater numbers."

But it's a lot more complicated it seems. Because on the one hand, it's true that you've got a progressive tax system. So, all else equal, the higher earning you are, the more skilled you are, the better deal you are for US taxpayers.

But then there are a bunch of other complications in the numbers. In particular, there are a lot of government services that are what we call "non rival." So these are basically things the government does where the cost does not depend on population, or doesn't depend very much on population.

So for example, if the US had a big baby boom, would anyone say, "All right. Well, now we've got 30 million new babies. We need to get 10% more nuclear weapons in order to take care of the babies"? Almost no one would say that.

And [you could] say the same thing about a national debt -- whenever people talk about secession, they talk about: How do we divide up the debt? Because if you can secede without having to take in any of the debt of your country of origin with you, you're doing great.

So anyway, these non rival goods, these tip the financials in favor of people that are lower skilled and lower earning. A good way of thinking about this is movie theaters. Do they lose money by having cheap tickets at the matinee? The answer's no -- because the seats are already there, and you make some extra money, even though it's below average. And even though a movie theater couldn't stay in business if they charged the matinee prices all the time, still, it is good business to go and let in people who pay less than the average, as long as they pay more than their cost.

Julia Galef: To make sure I'm understanding -- you're saying large amounts of low skilled immigrants would be a drain on the welfare system, but that would be compensated for by the taxes they pay going towards covering the non rival goods.

Bryan Caplan: At least partly. And then of course, when you're thinking about the welfare system, it's also important to remember that that US, like every other country I've heard of, actually puts a lot more money into the elderly than the poor. And since immigrants tend to be young, what you say is, "All right, so low skilled immigrants, they're going to be poor, and that makes them more eligible for benefits. But on the other hand, they're also going to be young, which makes them less eligible for the other benefits."

And if you're saying, "Well, eventually they'll get them," the key insight of finance is that paying somebody something in 50 years is way cheaper than paying them now. And it's not just a pyramid scheme. It's actually a way of turning unfavorable financials into good financials.

And then I also just talk about education costs, which -- of course, immigrants have kids too. And that costs a lot of money. But they're still a really good deal here, because adult immigrants will normally have had their education paid for by their home country. And so basically, if you just do the thought experiment, a family of two American natives and their child, how many people did American taxpayers pay for? It's all three. Whereas two immigrant parents and a child, that is only one, so you get a lot of savings that way.

Julia Galef: Presumably, whether this ends up costing us or benefiting us overall depends on the mix of how poor, versus middle class, versus, I guess, wealthy, the immigrant population is that ends up coming under open borders. I mean, if everyone was desperately poor, we couldn't possible expect that to be a benefit for the country.

Bryan Caplan: Right.

Julia Galef: Why are we confident that the ratios will be such that it will be a benefit?

Bryan Caplan: All right. So as you might guess, there's a lot of empirical work on this, people trying to estimate it. And what I say is that... right now, the average immigrant we're getting seems to be a net fiscal positive, once you take into account the issues I've been telling you about.

But more importantly, when you go and break it down by subcategory, and then try to project, "Well, under open borders, we get a lot more of lower skilled workers than we're currently getting," basically the only categories that seem to be net fiscal negatives are older, low skilled people. So as long as you are young but low skilled, you're still a net fiscal positive. And that's actually the main demographic we should expect.

So of course, we're talking about something that is far out of sample, but it's not just that we can look at current numbers and say, "They're looking good," but we can actually subdivide them and say, "Even if we were to go and change the composition a lot, it still looks like it is of the positive."

Julia Galef: Are you talking long-term or short-term?

Bryan Caplan: These standard estimates are ultra long-term. Because of course, if you let in an immigrant, and he's going to have a kid in five years, and you don't count that fact, it's going to make it look like he's much better than he really is, because that kid is going to start being a big drain on taxpayers.

So whenever people do this, then they always say, "Okay. Well, we want to figure not just your effects, we want to look at effects of your kids." And so you'll have estimates that usually go out to 75 years or even longer. And those

are the National Academy of Science numbers, that I'm talking about. So these are not just short run numbers.

But again, of course, whenever you're talking about fiscal effects, you do want to be thinking long-term. You want to be thinking about long-term costs and benefits.

Julia Galef: Sorry, were you saying that the fiscal effect of an immigrant is worse in the short-term and better as you get longer run, or the reverse?

Bryan Caplan: Actually, it very much depends on what's going on. So if it's someone who is going to have a kid in five years, then focusing on today, he looks better than he really is. On the other hand-

Julia Galef: But you said the kid is a drain?

Bryan Caplan: Yes, because the kid doesn't exist yet, but he is-

Julia Galef: Oh, *very* short-term -- before the kid. Got it.

Bryan Caplan: Yes. Yeah. So basically, you have to look at it like:

A working adult, right now with no kids, he looks like he's great. But then, wait a second, in five years he's going to have a kid. We've got to count that in when we're doing these long run estimates.

But then you say, "Okay. But wait a second. That kid's going to grow up and he's going to work," and also, he's probably going to be much more financially successful than his parents, because one of the main things we see with immigration is the first generation doesn't do nearly as well as their kids.

In particular, if you look at poor immigrants, they're much more likely to have successful kids than poor natives. Because it seems like a lot of the reason why first generation immigrants are poor is because they just start off with so many disadvantages of not being fluent in the

language. Or they just didn't have the advantages that a native would have, of being able to arrange their career nicely and neatly.

But then their kids wind up growing up in this country, and they do as well as their parents would have, if their parents had not had these disadvantages. Because they don't have them.

Julia Galef: We're sort of getting at a recurring concern I had about this whole issue, which is... when I follow the discussion of immigration and wages, or immigration and employment, or crime, or whatever effects of immigration, it has always seemed to me that there's so much debate and disagreement over one narrow ... Like, take the Mariel boatlift. The 10,000 Cubans who immigrated to Florida in the 1980s. So it has seemed to me there's a lot of disagreement among economists, about: What were the effects of that one instance of immigration?

And if there's so much disagreement about that, then how could we be remotely confident about the long run effects of a hypothetical open borders policy, where we don't know who's going to come from where?

Does that make sense?

Bryan Caplan: It's just not true that these issues are very controversial, among people who work on them. Rather, you hear about the controversies, but that Mariel boatlift paper was of no great actual importance. It's one of hundreds of papers estimating the effects of immigration on non native wages. And it's a very typical paper.

So I'd say there's large literature reviews going over all the research, and a very typical estimate would be something like: If immigration raises the population of the workforce by 10%, then native wages fall by something between 0% and 1%. So talking about basically an elasticity somewhere between zero and .1.

And again, for the fiscal effects of immigration, I didn't just cherry pick the one study that seemed like it would be supportive of me. Instead, I tried to do a full literature search, and that found, "All right, so the National Academy of Science's estimates, these are deliberately consensus estimates, where they're getting a wide range of economists to go and say [what] we who have studied the facts can agree on."

So yeah, this Mariel boatlift paper, there was a recent wave of controversy about it. But I would say in the end, mostly it was just George Borjas, sort of is the main voice of dissent in this area. I've met him, and he's a very smart guy, and I've debated him... I mean, I would just say, to my mind, he's just someone who is very energetically searching for dark linings in silver clouds, which is what we've really got.

Julia Galef: So you think, excepting him, economists all roughly agree about the effects of immigration in that case? And that it matches the consensus on the effects of immigration in the other cases the economists have looked at?

Bryan Caplan: Yeah. So of course, you can go and find Peter Navarro too, for example.

You can go and read, for example, Paul Collier -- he's another person who sort of passes for being skeptical of immigration in the economics profession. If you read his book, it mostly comes down to, "Well, it's all been great so far. But I'm worried that it would start to be bad at some later point."

And again, compared to what a normal person says about immigration, that is an extremely favorable statement of all the complaints have been wrong up to now. And then Collier is someone who says, "Yeah, but I think we're going to *start* to see these effects," and I'm more someone saying, "Given that we haven't seen them, they're

probably just not there. Or they're just not very important compared to the gains."

Julia Galef: You don't think that there's going to be a huge difference between the effects of the sort of low level, controlled immigration that we've had so far, and what we would see under open borders?

Bryan Caplan: Well, what I say is that we do have a number of other cases that we can look at to see what happened.

So of course, there was an open borders era in human history, which was not that long ago. It basically ended about a century ago. But it's not that this world is unrecognizable today.

Also, there have been countries that have allowed very large waves of immigration in, in a short time. Like Israel after the opening up of the Soviet Union, or collapse of the Soviet Union, right? And it doesn't seem like these cases -- where you have much higher levels [of immigration] -- really do see the problems that people are so worried about.

So again, the main thing in my mind is always to put things in perspective. One thing I always like to say is: Approximately speaking, what is one trillion minus one billion?

Julia Galef: One trillion.

Bryan Caplan: Yes, one trillion. Yes. And yet people will often go and say, "Okay. Yes. There are these gains, which are in the trillions. And then I've got a bunch of problems that are in the millions or billions. And then who's to say?"

And I'll say, "Let's actually go and add them up, and just see. Are the things that you're worried about even in the same ballpark as the gains we're talking about?"

And that's a lot of the way I structure the case in the book.

Julia Galef: So, I feel pretty confident that the gains to poor people in other countries, who aren't currently allowed to immigrate to the US or other wealthy countries -- that those would be significant and positive.

The part that seems much more up in the air to me is the impact on the preexisting populations in the US and Europe. Which... If you're just going to be a pure utilitarian about it, then it seems like, yeah, it's a trillion minus a billion. Or maybe it's a trillion minus 10 billion. Whatever, it's still basically a trillion.

But if you wanted to make a confident case that the impact on the preexisting populations in the US and Europe will be positive -- or at least not negative -- that seems harder to do based on the data we have from the past. No?

Bryan Caplan: Right. Well, here's what I'd say. So we've got a lot of other examples of very large increases in production. And I will say there are zero examples that I know of, of a large increase in production that was not broadly beneficial to society overall.

So like, the industrial revolution -- this is not primarily a benefit to people who make factories or work in factories. There's a large increase in production, and the extra stuff that gets made gets sold to the world, and living standards in general rise.

Or vaccines -- not primarily a benefit to the manufacturers of vaccines. Instead, most of the gains go to mankind, that gets to live longer. Or again, the internet.

So I'd say that it's true if there's a small change, then it might be that the gains primarily go to one narrow group of actors, and the other people don't gain, or even lose. That does sometimes happen. But on the other hand, anytime that we've seen any kind of large increase in the production of mankind, we just can't find cases where the

gains all go to the group that's directly involved, and do not wind up getting spread widely.

Julia Galef: Let's talk about the cultural impacts of immigration, because I think that's probably a common objection that you hear as well, in addition to the impact on wages or employment.

Before I comment, why don't you just give your case for why you're not worried about the cultural impact?

Bryan Caplan: Right. So what I'd say is "culture" is a fairly vague term. So you want to go and say, "Exactly what are you talking about?" And the more specific you get, the easier it is to see the complaints don't really make much sense. And then of course, if the complaint never gets specific, then it's hard to really answer it.

But starting with things like language acquisition, there is this perception that immigrants aren't learning English. And we've got data on this saying that the pattern is very similar to what it was in the past, namely the first generation doesn't get fluent generally, especially if they come later in life. But their kids have almost total fluency.

And in the data, that seems to be true for the Ellis Island generation and true for today as well. Then I talk about there's this whole social science literature of trust. And there's this concern, "Well, in rich countries, people have high trust. In poor countries, they have low trust. Maybe this is causing the problems." Or maybe it's trustworthiness rather than actual trust.

Now, this in itself wouldn't be a problem if there were assimilation of immigrants, so that's the main issue that I focus on. It is true that in poor countries, you do have low measured levels of trust. But what I say is, also, if you look at the second generation especially, then you see they wind up being very similar in trust to the people in the country where they've gone.

Then, let's see, some of the other things that you could talk about... There's sort of an idea of, in your cultural DNA there's success, or failure, or freedom, or authoritarianism. So there's this literature that people sometimes call the “deep roots” literature, on ancestry. And sort of the idea of this is that the countries that are rich today are inhabited by the descendants of people that were relatively successful centuries ago.

And in the book, I go over the evidence and the research. So I mean, a couple things going on: One is just that there are three huge outliers in this research, namely China, India, and the US. Because China and India are still poor, and the US is rich. And these models say, really, it should be quite different.

And you could just say it's three outliers. But I say when the three outliers are the three biggest countries in the world, you should be worried. So I talk about how the results are very sensitive to whether or not you treat those countries as informative [outliers], or whether you treat them as weighted on their population.

Then also, this research winds up saying that just geography is very important too. And so when you go and just look at the original papers and say, "What do they say, what happened under open borders?" They wind up again giving you very optimistic results of letting people move to more favorable geographical areas.

Was there some more specific [question you had in mind]?

Julia Galef:

Yeah, as you talked, I realize how many different things could be meant by “the cultural issue.”

I guess I want to focus on two. One is the -- you were starting to touch on it -- the things that have made America great and successful seem like... sure, there's geography. We had this kind of isolated, safe location in the world, with lots of natural resources. And that surely

helped. But there's got to be cultural factors as well that have made America great. And probably a lot of those factors are captured in the, call them "hard institutions," like the laws in the US. Let's just assume those don't change if we have open borders.

But then there's probably also a large component of the culture that's just like memes, just shared culture. And that I think is one thing people worry will change, if you have huge swaths of people from other countries without this preexisting culture of innovation, or free speech, or love of democracy, or whatever it is you think is making America great. So that's a concern.

And then the other cultural issue I was thinking of is just Americans in small towns being like, "Hey... We're 10,000 people. If we let in another 10,000 people from another country, then our town's just completely different from what we've always known. Setting aside economic issues, that's a huge negative change to our happiness, our quality of life."

Bryan Caplan: Right. So of course, a lot of different things to talk about. But just to back up... so when you realize that the US had open borders or something very close to it for hundreds of years -- and all these complaints seem like they would've made a similar amount of sense back then -- and then say, "Well, how did the US do it?"

And the answer is you took people from a lot of very backwards and authoritarian countries. And the first generation kind of got some of it, and then their kids got assimilated.

Julia Galef: What was the scale of [that wave of immigration], was it 10% of total population?

Bryan Caplan: It peaked higher, actually. I think it peaked at more like 16% for the US, I believe. I think it was also actually more concentrated in those days, so much higher shares in New York and other port areas, things like that.

So it was totally possible in the past. And in fact, it happened that the US just absorbed enormous numbers of people that seemed very culturally distant. And it didn't seem that hard back then.

Now people say, "That was then, this is now." And especially, you could say, "Well, now we've got transportation and communication make it easier to stay in touch with the home country, and so assimilate less."

That's true, but that's only half the story. See, a lot of the story is that now thanks to modern communication and transportation, much of the world is what I call "pre-assimilated." They're already, in their minds, a part of the culture of the United States and the West, even if they don't live in those places.

So in 1900, a Sicilian peasant who comes to the US, he's probably never heard English, never seen electricity. And then he shows up in New York, and it's a totally new world for him. Whereas now, there are well over a billion people who are fluent English speakers. Most of them are not actually in English speaking countries, but they've just learned it. They know this culture through the internet, through TV.

So really, they're really hit the ground running in a way that was very rare in earlier periods. I think on balance, actually, it is easier to go and assimilate people today, because the world is just so much more culturally unified.

In terms of the town where you have 10,000 people, and 10,000 more people show up... that is a thought experiment where I can totally understand being concerned. But what if it's not 10,000 people showing right away, but rather 1000 people arriving a year for 10 years? In that case, it's spread out. There's a lot more time to adjust.

And it's worth remembering that in a town of 10,000 people, there's some nice cultural things; there's also a lot

that you're missing. And a lot of what those immigrants bring is food and new ideas and so on.

Julia Galef: I personally am very sympathetic to that. But I'm kind of trying to imagine the mindset of someone who didn't leave their small town for the big city *because* they preferred the life in a small town -- even though it's lacking good Thai restaurants or whatever -- to what they would have in a large city.

I recently read a blog post of yours. I think the title was "You Don't Have a Right to Your Culture." It was something like that.

Bryan Caplan: You Have No Right to Your Culture.

Julia Galef: And your point was basically that "culture" is what other people do. It's how other people behave. So no individual really has a right to try to control that.

And I feel sympathetic to that. But I feel like there's kind of an implied contract that people have with their community, or their city, or their country. Where they're kind of willing to make sacrifices for their community, or city, or country. They're willing to invest in the future. But only on the implicit assumption that it's not going to be completely different in 20 years.

To take my thought experiment and make it even more extreme: If you had this town that people had lived in for generations, and they knew that in 20 years, it was going to be completely Chinese immigrants or something, they were basically going to import their culture from wherever they were from in China... Would the people who had lived there before, would they still be as enthusiastic about investing in the future of the town? Or would they just feel like, "No, it's just a different town now. It just happens to be on the same location as our town was"?

Bryan Caplan: Of course, they'd probably want to be buying land to get ready for all those new customers, even if they themselves don't want to live there.

Julia Galef: That's a very economic ... Oh, I see. So you're suggesting that even for people who put a much higher value than you do on this kind of "continued culture," and less value on good Thai restaurants -- even for them, the economic benefits would be large enough that it would probably still be worth it to them?

Bryan Caplan: Not for every person, of course, but yeah, overall.

Even more than most economists, I'm very fond of the slogan that actions speak louder than words. Just the fact that people hardly ever make an effort to move out of an area with immigrants, even though there's plenty of affordable areas with very low levels of immigrants, says to me that their complaints just aren't really that serious.

This is in contrast to when crime in your area goes up. People do move for that.

So I mean, actually, since I live in DC, I've had a chance to go and talk to a bunch of people who are against immigration, for a living. And I have had to say, "Well, why are you here, when you could be living in Idaho?" Right?

You could be living in someplace where there's hardly any immigrants. And I'm always kind of expecting them to say, "The answer is I'm taking one for the team here. It's terrible to be here with all these immigrants. But I'm suffering so that the rest of America won't have to." But they never actually said that. Instead, they just sort of dodge the question and say, "Well, it's complicated."

It is complicated. But then why are you complaining if it's so complicated?

Julia Galef: Is their official position that they personally don't like immigration? I would've assumed that anyone living in DC, working at a think tank or whatever, probably enjoys life in a big city with immigrants, but thinks that it's bad for the country as a whole, long-term, or something.

Bryan Caplan: They haven't said that either.

Julia Galef: Okay. Well, I guess I don't really know how to model them...

Bryan Caplan: I've debated Mark Krikorian, head of the Center for Immigration Studies, many times. He's in this area, of course. And the most he's said is, "Well, immigrants just go to where the jobs are, so that doesn't really show anything."

And I say, "I think it actually shows quite a bit." In particular because one thing immigrants do is go to where the jobs are. But another thing they do is just go to where other immigrants from their country are. So there is a pattern of immigrants just going to border areas...

And yet, it doesn't seem like natives want to leave those areas either. So it's not that the immigrants were there because it was such a great area, except for the fact there's other people from their country.

So it is true they'll say, "Okay. I'm just worried about the effects on the country." But a lot of their complaints, you would think you would be able to see on a more local level. Especially, again, especially the cultural one. If you think it is just really bad to be losing your culture, well, you can just go to Idaho, and then you can keep living in the way people did in the 1950s. But it doesn't seem like many people actually care enough to do it.

To me, that really does say something. It just says, you don't really mind that much. You like complaining.

Julia Galef: Okay. How do you feel about the empirical evidence from Europe? Again, I'm not following this closely, but it has seemed to me that there's a lot of tension in places like Sweden, with large waves of immigrants that aren't assimilating as fast as people would like.

Bryan Caplan: Right. So what I say is, there's probably more research that's been done on the US than has been done for Europe. And the usual result is that immigration to Europe isn't as good as in the US. But it's still not bad.

So they definitely have lower rates of labor force participation in most European countries, which I would say is a sign European countries really need to rethink their labor laws and their welfare policies, rather than saying, "There's a problem with the immigrants themselves."

And then on fiscal effects... so, that's actually less clear, because Europe has so many value added taxes, which are paid by even people that are completely out of the normal legal labor force. So you do have more redistribution, but a lot of it's not targeted. So then again, that makes it less clear that immigrants are a burden.

In terms of crime, I think it's actually pretty clear that immigrants, or the foreign-born, have higher crime rates in Europe -- whereas in the US, it's the other way around.

If you're wondering what in the world's going on, I think it's actually a pretty simple story. Which is that native born Americans have high crime rates, and native born Europeans have low crime rates. And immigrants are in the middle.

Julia Galef: Huh. Oh. That's a nice, simple way to resolve that.

Bryan Caplan: Yes. So immigrants are better than us, but they're worse than Europeans. But again, you have to put this in the context of, in Europe, their crime rates are just so low,

especially for serious crime. You could be five times as bad as Europeans and still be fine.

Julia Galef: Something I still don't understand is why there's opposition to high-skilled immigrants.

We've been talking mostly about low skilled immigrants, because it seems more ambiguous what the overall effects would be, there are more downsides to point to. But what is the constituency opposing high skilled immigrants in the US?

Bryan Caplan: Right. Like I said, I have gotten the chance to debate people who are concerned about this. And as for what they say... well, of course, some of these concerns are not as serious. But for example, I've heard the argument of, "Even among native born engineers, most of them don't work in engineering. So the idea that we need more engineers actually turns out to be wrong."

Julia Galef: But why don't we just let them come? What's the downside?

Bryan Caplan: Well, I guess the idea is when you let in foreign born engineers, then they'll dis-employ native born engineers. And that's terrible.

Since I have a whole book on education, I have to say, "Look, you don't get it. What's really going on is that most people with STEM degrees get high paid jobs outside of STEM. That's the real story."

So when you let in more immigrants, it's not that you can't be an engineer when you're native born. It's just that people want to hire engineers for a wide range of jobs, even many that have nothing to do with engineering, because they just want someone who's a [high skilled worker] and can hack it.

So there's that. There are these dis-employment effects. I have heard people worrying about them.

Julia Galef: I guess I just assumed that highly educated, high skilled Americans tend to be pretty pro immigration, and they're not worried about losing their job to ... I never hear people with PhDs worry about losing their jobs to immigrants. Is that actually a thing, and I'm just missing that?

Bryan Caplan: Well, as I say in the book, if it weren't for all these immigrant econ professors, I'd probably have been at Harvard, right?

Julia Galef: But you like your Thai food, and you like your cosmopolitanism. That's what I'm saying.

Bryan Caplan: Yeah. Right.

Julia Galef: So surely that is not the reason why the US limits high skilled immigration. Is it?

Bryan Caplan: Yeah, so again, a lot of what's going on is not that the high skilled are advancing their own interests, but rather other people are upset on their behalf.

Julia Galef: Really? People are worried for the econ professors?

Bryan Caplan: Which is the way that so much of politics goes. There are lots of problems where the people affected barely complain. But there's some other group that says, "Look at how terrible this is. We've got to go and help these folks."

So that's pretty common. And then again, these cultural concerns.

And actually, if you think about the connection between the Harvard admissions discrimination case against Asians... I think there is sort of an idea of, "We don't want the American elite to become 80% Asian. And as long as we keep letting Asians in, that seems like it's going to happen. So we don't want that." I think that's in the background as well.

I think if Harvard were honest, they would say something like, "Well, Harvard brings the new elite. And we think that the elite should remain at least half white."

Julia Galef: Yeah. Instead, they just say that Asians have a worse personality than other people.

Bryan Caplan: Their personality's awful. Have you never noticed? [*EDIT: In case it's not obvious, Bryan's mocking Harvard, here.*]

Julia Galef: It was shocking to me that that was their fig leaf, that they think Asians' personalities are worse.

Bryan Caplan: Of course, they're all great personalities. But there's great and there's really great. [We want] really great personalities. Off the charts personality, baby!

Julia Galef: Bryan, before I let you go, you've been on the show before, twice actually. So I'm not going to ask you the standard question about a book that's influenced you. But what would you recommend people read to get a different perspective on the open borders question?

Bryan Caplan: Yeah. I'd say my colleague, Garrett Jones, has a book called *Hive Mind*. And I spent about 10 pages in my book arguing with an alien who is advancing his arguments.

So Garrett is very concerned about the effect of immigration on national IQ. And a lot of people get very touchy about that complaint. But I said, "All right. Let's just go and look at the evidence and see what it really means, and the extent to which the concern holds water."

If you go and read the book, you'll get something that's very different from what almost anyone else is going to tell you. So I thought he did a really good job in it. Of course, I also think I did a really good job in answering it, and also synthesizing the good parts in the book, while putting a proper cap on the complaints.

Julia Galef: Great. Garrett Jones, *Hive Mind*. We'll link to that as well as to *Open Borders: The Science and Ethics of Immigration* by Bryan, and Zach Weinersmith. It was really a pleasure to read. I highly recommend it to my listeners, even though I've been poking at the arguments.

Bryan, thank you so much for coming back on Rationally Speaking. It's always a pleasure to have you.

Bryan Caplan: Always fantastic to talk to you, Julia.

Julia Galef: This concludes another episode of Rationally Speaking. Join us next time for more explorations on the borderlands between reason and nonsense.