Book Reviews

The Immigrant War
Vittorio Longhi
Bristol, UK: The Policy Press (University of Bristol), 2013, 156 pp.

Some journalists possess a deep knowledge of political and policy debates. Their job is to follow the political developments of a certain policy, report on its effects, and write about it over the course of decades. It's only natural, after so much experience, that they would want to transform their observations and reactions into books that illuminate opaque topics. Vittorio Longhi's *The Immigrant War* fails at this.

In *The Immigrant War*, Longhi analyzes immigration through a Marxist political framework specifically influenced by the theories of Italian communist Antonio Gramsci, who wrote about how the collective social will defines social problems and finds solutions. As a result, he tells the story of immigrant troubles and travails through the struggles of labor unions and mass protests.

He takes the reader on an international journey through different immigration policies. The first stop is the Middle East, where hundreds of thousands of migrant laborers from Nepal, India, Bangladesh, and elsewhere work in filthy conditions for what Longhi considers are awful wages.

Longhi assaults the reader with brutal tales of migrant workers like Nepalese worker Bimala Bishworkarma, who committed suicide while working in Saudi Arabia. Yet the Nepalese continued to emigrate for work. Filipinos also had their share of abuses, with more than a few returning home in body bags. But Filipinos also continued

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to emigrate until their government stopped them from doing so. Not surprisingly, Persian Gulf employers shifted toward hiring Bangladeshi workers, who were cheaper. Bangladeshis faced hardships abroad, but they too continued to emigrate for work.

Longhi is genuinely distressed by this but fails to understand the economic logic behind it. As brutal, dangerous, and downright monstrous the working conditions in Saudi Arabia are, many Bangladeshi workers prefer the higher incomes to working in Bangladesh. The same goes for Nepalese and Filipino workers.

Longhi places a tremendous amount of his hope in labor unions and mass protest movements. He recounts a short tale of migrant workers striking for better conditions in the Persian Gulf, leaving out whether that union survived long enough to organize the next batch of migrant workers. He recounts similar tales in France and Italy.

But when Longhi turns to the United States he reveals his one-sided view of history. He praises labor unions as the real defenders of immigrant rights, repeatedly refers to "deunionziation" as a leading cause in human rights abuses committed against immigrants, and specifically praises American labor unions like SEIU for their valiant defense of immigrants, implying that their Marxist origins prepared them such a commitment to justice.

Yet he completely ignores the long Marxist anti-immigrant tradition. As Marxist historians Seymour Lipset and Gary Marks argue in their great book *It Didn't Happen Here*, one of the main reasons a labor or socialist political party did not arise in the United States is because the increasing ethnic and racial diversity produced by immigration dissipated worker solidarity and raised the transactions costs of organizing before unions could coalesce into a political party.

But Longhi believes that unions are at the forefront of defending immigrant rights rather than the longest-running opponents of legal immigration in the United States. The history of union anti-immigrant agitation, even from Marxist labor organizations, runs long and deep.

As recently as 2007, union opposition to guest worker visas played a major role in stopping immigration reform. Unions in 2013 are more openly supporting increased immigration through guest workers, but they have also consistently worked behind the scenes to make the programs unusable.

The Immigrant War unintentionally makes two important points. The first is that Marxism precludes the rational analysis of

immigration, as it does for almost all other topics. The second is that a systematic pro–labor union bias can degenerate otherwise excellent points about the costs of immigration restrictions into tiring partisan prattle. Longhi's book is confused by his Marxism, political partisanship, and full of so many half-truths that the author comes off as either ignorant about immigration or as an intentional obfuscator.

In the last chapter, he concludes that dependency theory and Immanuel Wallerstein's world systems theory, which divides the world into three levels of development based on Marxian economic theories, provides justifications for why the world needs immigration rules to be created and enforced by an international organization like the United Nations.

World systems theory was a response to the correct observation, first noted by John Stuart Mill, that both workers and capital owners get wealthier in capitalist economies. This was in direct contradiction to Marx's theory where, supposedly, the owners of capital would increase their wealth only at the expense of workers, thus impoverishing workers for the benefit of capitalists.

Based on some economic papers in the 1940s that reported that poor countries' terms of trade had worsened over time, Wallerstein shifted Marx's analysis from economic classes inside of countries toward explaining nations with different levels of economic development.

In world systems analysis, the chief exploiters of the poor are no longer intranational capitalists but a wealthy *core* where capital, financial assets, and wealthy workers reside. Outside is a *semi-periphery* that is partly industrialized but poorer than the core. The *periphery* is the poorest part of the world and is used as a reserve of labor and natural resources for exploitation by the core. Traditional Marxist economic classes are thus mapped onto the international world.

World systems analysis cannot explain how "semi-periphery" and "periphery" nations like India, China, Taiwan, South Korea, Turkey, Mexico, and a litany of others have clawed their way out of poverty or are on track to do so. Few non-Marxists take it seriously.

Longhi uses a simplified version of the theory, arguing that periphery nations send migrants to core or semi-periphery nations to be exploited by capitalists. In return, the periphery nations get remittances but no real development because of the supposed

phenomenon of the "brain drain" sucks all talented workers out of the periphery and exploits them in the core.

Interestingly, Longhi's own nation of Italy used to provide a "vast reserve army of labor," as the Marxists say, to the entire world. Italian temporary migrants and immigrants went to the United States and Argentina in droves, as many as half of them returning to Italy with money in their pockets, skills they learned working abroad, new ideas of how to run businesses, and new trade connections that helped their communities develop. Marxist ideology obscures the economic gains of migration by focusing on exploitation. Migrants helped Italy develop and are helping numerous nations today like Mexico and India grow out of poverty.

Longhi's arguments for a "brain drain" (more accurately called a skills flow) also rest on zero evidence. As economist Michael Clemens at the Center for Global Development has pointed out, the possibility of immigration for skilled workers incentivizes human capital acquisition in the first place by increasing the return on human capital investment. Workers in poor countries are much more likely to invest in acquiring human capital if there is the possibility that they can immigrate. Skilled people are paid more in wealthy countries just as they are in poor countries. Far from immigration being a drain, the number of skilled workers in poor countries increases *because* some of them can immigrate to wealthier countries.

But because of his Marxist obsession with societies divided by the antiquated notion of classes, Longhi fails to grasp how immigration can be beneficial for both sending and receiving countries. Furthermore, Longhi fails to understand how immigration can undermine the Marxist changes he wants to see. Immigration-driven trends—such as ethnic, racial, religious, and linguistic diversity—undermine successful labor movements, unionization, and the formation of radical left-wing political parties.

On the positive side, Longhi points out real and troubling problems with certain guest worker visas, especially those used by Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and other Arab countries in the Persian Gulf. He describes, in a brutal style responsible for his success as a journalist, a long litany of abuses against migrant workers.

Nevertheless, his analysis here fails on two points. First, he blames those worker abuses on a lack of unionization instead of government mandated limitations on visa portability. The best protection against the violation of a worker's rights is not a union, government

bureaucracy, or international human rights tribunal—it is his freedom to quit and find another job. The threat of leaving incentivizes employers to respect the wishes of their employees. A free international labor market with the fewest regulations possible would realize Longhi's human rights goals far more cheaply and effectively than unionization.

Longhi's second failure is his inability to explain why workers from Nepal, the Philippines, and Bangladesh continually sign up for work in Arab countries despite the horrible (by Western standards) conditions. He does not mention some possible costs of *not* migrating for labor, such as prostitution for the female children of poor male migrants, subsistence agriculture, or even poorer-paying and more oppressive jobs in their home countries. Migration under the deplorably bad circumstances described by Longhi can often be the best in a range of regrettable choices.

Like many Marxists, Longhi's analysis chooses simplicity and an exciting narrative over nuance. But explaining the complex phenomenon of immigration through the radical political prism of Marxist world systems theory leaves many gaping holes and unanswered questions, and leads to conclusions that fail to explain history or why people immigrate in the first place.

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