

Is Immigration a Threat to Security?

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JULIA TALLMEISTER, AUG 24 2013

Introduction

In recent years, international migration has made its way to the forefront of the security agendas of several states, particularly in Europe and North America. The perception of immigration as a threat to security has developed alongside the rapid increase in the number of immigrants worldwide: while there were approximately 191 million persons living outside their countries of origin in 2005, by 2010 this number had increased to an estimated 214 million (IOM 2010). In the most general sense of the term, security refers to the absence of threats. The traditional approach to international security has focused primarily on military concerns. From this perspective, the state is the referent object needing protection from threatening forces, particularly that of war (Krause and Williams 1996:230; Peoples and Vaughan-Williams 2010:23). However, security studies in the post-Cold War era has moved away from the state-centric approach, broadening the definition of security to include a number of potential threats (Krause and Williams 1996:230; Lohrmann 2000:5). Barry Buzan, founder of the Copenhagen School of security studies, argues that security studies should not only focus on the military sector, but should be further developed to encompass societal, environmental, economic, and political security (Peoples and Vaughan-Williams 2010:22-23). Due to the expansion of the concept of security, a multitude of issues such as those relating to the environment, poverty, and international migration have been labeled as security risks or threats (Krause and Williams 1996:230, Lohrmann 2000:5). Instead of the state as the referent object being threatened, non-state objects such as humanity, cultural identity, and the individual self are considered to be in danger (Huysmans 2006:20). This essay will focus on one particular aspect of the security debate: is immigration a threat to security? The following pages will investigate the claim that immigration is a threat to security by focusing on societal, economic, internal, and public security, arguing that immigration is a constructed and perceived threat rather than a real, objective danger.

Immigration and Societal Security

The concept of societal security primarily deals with the issue of collective identity. As explained by Ole Waever (1993), societal security “concerns the ability of a society to persist in its essential character under changing conditions and possible or actual threats” (23). In relation to international migration, it refers to the ways in which members of a state perceive their cultural, linguistic, religious, or national identity to be threatened by immigrants. From this perspective, the national values of the receiving country is the referent object under threat (Weiner 1992-1993:103). It is immigration in general, whether voluntary or involuntary, legal or illegal, that constitutes this threat, as long as the immigrants pose a challenge to the identity of the receiving state through their different language, culture, or religion.

The supposed danger of immigration to the societal security of a state is not an objective and universal threat, but rather a subjective threat, dependent on the ways in which the receiving state defines itself (Weiner 1992-1993:110). For instance, while some states may view multiculturalism as undesirable, other states may pride themselves on their cultural diversity. As explained by Heisler and Layton-Henry (1993), in the post-war era, most European states have undergone a transformation from fairly homogeneous states, whose members have been generally bound by a common sense of cultural and ethnic identity, to heterogeneous states made up of several national groups (158). In these cases, immigration may be seen as a societal security threat as it challenges a state’s traditional national identity and core values (Heisler and Layton-Henry 1993:158). Furthermore, the inability of immigrants to integrate or

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assimilate is argued to have a negative effect on the society and government's stability (Heisler and Layton-Henry 1993:162).

On the other hand, a traditional immigrant-receiving state such as Canada may hold a different notion of national identity and thus may be more tolerant and accepting of different languages, cultures, and religions, supporting its policy of multiculturalism. In a study of immigration and national identity in Germany and Canada, Esses et al. (2006) write that while Canada has embraced immigration as essential to its development, Germany's growing immigrant population is an unintended consequence of its history of guest worker immigration as well as a large inflow of asylum seekers and refugees (655). Each state's unique history affects their immigration policies as well as whether or not immigration is perceived to be a threat to society. For instance, while Canada has supported a multiculturalism policy since 1971, aimed at preserving the identities of its multi-national groups, in Germany there has been a trend to support the assimilation of its immigrant population (Esses et al. 2006:655).

Furthermore, ethnic and cultural affinity is socially constructed; notions of which cultural and ethnic groups are threatening and which are not change over time (Weiner 1992-1993:105). What may be deemed as a societal threat to one state may be embraced in another, demonstrating that immigration is a subjective rather than objective threat to societal security that differs between states and can transform over time. The securitization of immigration as a threat to the survival of the national community is problematic, as it labels the foreign migrant as the "other," ultimately excluding them from society (Huysmans 2000:758). As argued by Huysmans (2000), discourse that frames immigration as a threat to societal security "reproduces the political myth that a homogeneous national community or western civilization existed in the past and can be re-established today through the exclusion of those migrants who are identified as cultural aliens" (758). The act of securitizing immigration is more threatening than immigration itself, as it often results in racism and xenophobia, ultimately leading to social disintegration.

Immigration and Economic Security

Another way in which immigration has been argued to pose a threat to a state's national interest is through its impact on the state's economy. Immigration has, and will continue to have, a significant economic impact on both the receiving country and the country of origin. While immigration has economic advantages and disadvantages, the expansion of the definition of security to encompass the economic sector has brought increased attention to the economic challenges caused by immigration, and immigration has, as a result, been labeled as a security issue. It is economic migrants as well as refugees and asylum seekers that are perceived to threaten the economic security of a state.

Labour migration can be argued to pose a threat to the economic security of both the sending and the receiving state. According to this argument, the emigration of highly skilled and qualified workers from developing countries in the global South to developed states in the global North results in a "brain drain" in the sending country, as well as undesirable economic consequences in the receiving country (Guild 2009:134; Weiner 1992-1993:95). However, as argued by Carr et al. (2005), emphasizing the notion of "brain drain" on its own ignores the notion of "brain gain" (387). While developing countries may lose highly skilled workers through emigration, they often gain large numbers of people with greater skills back through the process of reverse migration (Carr et al. 2005:387-388).

Furthermore, remittances transferred to migrants' countries of origin play a significant role in the economic growth and development of sending countries (De Haas 2005:1274). According to the World Bank, in 2012 remittances surpassed \$406 billion; it is estimated that this number will continue to grow, increasing 8% by 2013 (World Bank 2012). Several studies show that remittances have a positive impact on poverty alleviation and financial development. In many developing countries, remittances have reduced the percentage of the population living below the poverty line: by 11 percentage points in Uganda, 6 in Bangladesh, and 5 in Ghana (Sharma 2009:8; Ratha 2007:p.5). In this sense, economic security overlaps with human security; this aspect of immigration has a positive impact not only on the sending country's economy, but also on the physical and financial conditions of the sending country's population. Labeling immigration as a security issue overlooks these advantages.

Immigration can be argued to pose a threat to a receiving country's economic security through its impact on the

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labour market. Guild (2009) addresses this concern by highlighting some key issues: do migrant workers decrease wages in strong economies? And, in a strong economy, do immigrants take away jobs from native-born workers (135)? Public opinion often supports the notion that immigrants depress wages and take away jobs, contributing to economic problems (Somerville and Sumption 2009:3). This argument is often used to justify restrictive and exclusionary immigration policies. However, this perception is based on perception rather than empirical facts. According to Chomsky (2007), the theory that the number of people determines the number of jobs is a fallacy (7-8). Rather, population growth facilitated by immigration creates jobs while simultaneously providing people to take these jobs (Chomsky 2007:8).

While the economic impact of immigration differs in every state and depends on the economic conditions of the time, it can be seen that immigration often has a positive impact on the employment levels of the host state (Islam 2007:53). For instance, a study on the relationship between immigration and unemployment in Canada by Islam (2007) concludes that migration does not result in higher unemployment levels (63). While it may, in some cases, contribute to temporary unemployment, this effect dissipates over time, as the state's economy begins to adjust to the increase in labour supply (Islam 2007:63; Somerville and Sumption 2009:9). Islam (2007) finds that "in the long run, demand side effect takes place, wages adjust, labour demand is restored and thereby Canadian born workers are benefited" (64). Complementary to this study, a paper by Somerville and Sumption (2009) demonstrates that although the effects of immigration vary from state to state, immigration has a minimal impact on wages; in the United Kingdom, most workers remain unaffected or even gain from immigration (13-14). Evidently, economic immigration does not pose a threat to the host state's economic security. Other factors, such as education and demographic change, have a much greater impact on labour market opportunities in immigrant receiving countries (Somerville and Sumption 2009:3). Contrary to the common public perception that immigrants threaten job security, depress wages and lead to an increase in unemployment levels, immigration, in reality, can increase job opportunities and enhance the economy of the receiving state.

It has also been argued that immigrants, particularly refugees and asylum seekers, are threats to the receiving state's social security and welfare system. From this perspective, immigration is seen as a problem rather than an opportunity. Refugees and asylum seekers are presented as profiteers and free-loaders who illegitimately exploit the host state's welfare system, and the welfare system is presented as unable to sustain an influx of immigrants (Huysmans 2006:78-79). Immigrants are portrayed to be so numerous and poor that they pose a strong economic threat to the state, creating housing shortages and straining education, transportation, sanitation and communication services (Weiner 1992-1993:95, 114; Stivachtis 2008:17). As explained by Weiner (1992-1993), the provision of welfare state services to migrant workers and refugees often spawns resentment from within the local community (114). There is a widespread belief that immigrants not only take jobs away from native citizens, but that they also take away social benefits (Huysmans 2006:78).

The presentation of immigrants as a strain to a state's social services is produced and reproduced through discourse. As argued by Huysmans (2000), the use of metaphors referring to "floods" or "invasions" of refugees and asylum seekers create the perception that immigrants are threat to the host community's economic security, dramatizing the challenges posed by flows of refugees and asylum seekers so that the issue appears more threatening (769). A study on the media's portrayal of refugees and asylum seekers in London concludes that inaccurate and unbalanced reporting on this aspect of immigration, which often refer to "overwhelming" influxes of asylum seekers and refugees, has resulted in a sense of fear and insecurity from the local native community and negative perceptions of immigrants (ICAR 2004). Furthermore, it is the visibility and noticeability of immigrants that cause them to be used as scapegoats for bitterness about wider socio-economic challenges and changes (Suhrke 2003:97; Heisler and Layton-Henry 1993:157). As written by Heisler and Layton-Henry (1993),

Economic stringency caused by recession, social changes perceived to be uncomfortable, institutional overload and other sources of difficulty occurred or were widely remarked after the advent of large-scale immigration; therefore these problems, which can be seen as threats to social security, are readily attributed to the immigrant presence and thereby elevated into problems of societal security (157).

Societal and economic security are closely connected, as the view of immigrants as an economic burden is often

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caused by the perception of immigrants as “others” due to their visible differences.

Evidently, the argument that immigrants are a threat to a state’s economic security is heavily influenced by misconceptions prominent in discourse as well as widely held stereotypes about the foreigner. While an increased flow of immigrants, specifically refugees and asylum seekers, inevitably poses a fiscal challenge which the host state must manage, the effects of migration on social spending vary between states and can change over time. Moreover, the long-term economic benefits of refugee flows should not be overshadowed by the possible short-term costs (Stevenson 2005). For instance, studies on the impact of refugees in Australia show that the initial costs of accommodating refugees through social security benefits are compensated in ten years (Stevenson 2005). Securitizing immigration and presenting immigrants as a danger to the survival of the welfare system consequently leads to the exclusion of immigrants by deeming them undeserving of social services.

Immigration and Internal Security

In addition to societal and economic security, internal security has also emerged as an aspect of security which is threatened by immigration. The notion of immigration as a threat to internal security has been present since the 1980s (Huysmans 2000:756). As highlighted by Huysmans, the Schengen Agreement and Convention of Dublin connected immigration to terrorism, international crime, and border control (Huysmans 2000:756; Huysmans 1995:53). Since the terrorist attacks of September 11, immigration has featured prominently on the counter-terrorism agenda; governments have tightened immigration policies, linking immigration with terrorist activities (Spencer 2008:1).

In the United States, immigration immediately became a matter of national security. President Bush quickly put forth a strategy to combat terrorism through immigration policy, and the United States Immigration and Naturalization Service was included in the newly established Department of Homeland Security (Spencer 2008:2-3), institutionalizing immigration as a threat to internal security. Six weeks after 9/11, the USA PATRIOT Act was signed into law, strengthening border controls, heightening surveillance of foreign nationals in the United States, and permitting the government to detain, prosecute, and remove foreigners suspected of terrorist behaviour (Lebowitz and Podheiser 2001-2002:876). Immigration policies and border control became instruments in the “War on Terror” (Adamson 2006:196). Several scholars support the notion that immigration policy must be restricted in order to protect the receiving state’s internal security. For instance, Stoffman (2008) argues that due to Canada’s high rate of immigration per capita, every newcomer cannot be screened thoroughly; consequently, dangerous people will enter the country (4). Thus, the most effective way of keeping out unwanted immigrants would be through a reduction in the annual immigration intake (Stoffman 2008:4). While terrorism is undoubtedly a real threat to the internal security of states throughout the world, its connection to immigration must be questioned.

Mueller (2006) persuasively refutes the argument that an absence of terrorist attacks in the United States since September 11 is a result of increased border control and stricter immigration policies (3). While terrorists may have a more difficult time entering the country, hundreds of millions of immigrants legally enter the United States each year, and 1000 to 4000 illegal immigrants each day (Mueller 2006:3). Mueller (2006) argues that the threat of terrorism by either national or immigrant terrorists has been highly exaggerated (4). Likewise, a study on immigration and terrorism in Spain by Saux (2007) maintains that the connection between illegal immigration and terrorism is a constructed rather than objective reality (p.63). Saux (2007) draws upon Moral-Panics Theory, arguing that the perceived danger of terrorism caused people to blame a certain group of people, designating them as the enemy and creating a division between “us” and “them” (63). After the September 11 attacks, the 2004 Madrid train bombings, and the 2005 London bombings, immigrants and asylum seekers became labeled as the enemy (Saux 2007:63).

Just as political discourse and the media have portrayed immigrants as a threat to societal and economic security, hostile attitudes toward immigrants and the apparent connection between immigration and terrorism are prevalent in politics and the media. In the periods after September 11 and the Madrid bombings, Spanish newspapers emphasized a connection between immigration and criminal behaviour, influencing political action and public opinion (Saux 2007:62). In the days following the September 11 attacks, the urgent need to crack down on immigration laws was prevalent in the media and political discourse. As shown by Huysmans and Buonfino (2008), in parliamentary

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debates in the United Kingdom after September 11, asylum and immigration in general “featured significantly in the political framing of the problem of terrorism” (768). Evidently, the connection between immigration and terrorism has been reinforced and entrenched in public opinion through the practice of discourse.

As argued by Daniel Griswold of the Cato Institute (2001), immigration and border control are two separate issues: terrorist attacks by foreigners are not a result of open and liberal immigration policies, but are caused by the failure of keeping out the small number of foreigners that do pose a threat to internal security. Similarly, Spencer (2008) points out the problems that arise from giving “immigration” the wrong meaning (9). Much scholarly writing fails to distinguish between “immigrant” and “foreigner” (Spencer 2008:9). In the case of 9/11, the terrorists were not immigrants; rather, they entered the United States on temporary visas (Spencer 2008:9). The concern of immigration, in general, as a threat to internal security disregards the fact that immigrants – those who enter a state to permanently settle – make up a small fraction of the entire number of foreigners in a state (Spencer 2008:9). Forming a correlation between terrorism and immigration is problematic as it has led to the alienation, exclusion, and racial profiling of immigrants, particularly those who identify as Muslim or Arab, which has a much more tangible effect on society (Adamson 2006:196).

Immigration and Public Security

Similar to how immigration has been connected with terrorism, immigration has also been related to increased criminality, resulting in the perception that immigration is a threat to public security. The issue of whether or not immigration actually results in increased crime rates is, again, an issue of perception versus reality. While the public has become increasingly concerned about high crime rates intensified by immigration and the threat that immigrants pose to public order, these concerns are empirically unsound (Wang 2012:743). Contrary to popular opinion, several studies on a number of states have found no strong correlation between immigration and criminality.

It cannot be denied that in some states, there has been a connection between increased immigration flows and increased crime rates. There is, indeed, a trend showing that cities and countries that have high crime rates tend to have a higher immigrant population. For instance, a study found that in 2001, “the proportion of the prison population born abroad in Spain was twenty five times higher than the proportion of immigrants in the population” (Westbrook 2010:101). However, as Westbrook (2010) insightfully argues, this has much more to do with demographic factors than it does with simply having an immigrant status (101). In the case of Spain, the majority of immigrants are those who have the highest incidence of criminal behaviour: single men aged 18 to 35 (Westbrook 2010:101). Thus, in examining the relationship between immigration and criminality, demographic variables must be taken into account.

There is an abundance of evidence which demonstrates that the correlation between immigration and criminality is very weak or non-existent. A study of three American neighbourhoods concludes that in general, immigration does not lead to increased levels of homicide among Latinos and African Americans (Lee et al. 2001:559). Similarly, in another study, Butcher and Piehl (1998) conclude that the flow of migration has no effect on a city’s crime rate (457). Bell et al. (2010) investigate the relationship between immigration and crime during two particular periods of large migration flows in the United Kingdom: during the wave of asylum seekers in the 1990s and early 2000s, and the inflow of economic migrants from EU accession countries beginning in 2004 (1). The study reports that neither wave impacted rates of violent crime, and that immigrant arrest rates were no higher than native arrest rates (Bell et al. 2010:17). Evidently, while widespread public opinion holds that immigration is a threat to public security, it is a constructed threat, not founded upon empirical facts.

Conclusion

Undeniably, immigration poses a number of challenges to receiving states. Given the expansion of the definition of security to include societal, economic, internal, and public security, it is inevitable that immigration would be viewed as a threat to society and the economy, as well as to internal security and public order. However, as demonstrated in this essay, immigration is a perceived threat rather than an objective one. While immigration is argued to threaten the national identity of a state, the notion of identity is constructed; ideas of national identity and notions of which cultural and ethnic groups can be accepted into a community inevitably change over time (Weiner 1992-1993:105). In terms

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of economic security, labeling immigration as a security threat overlooks the advantages that immigration may have on the development of the sending country. Furthermore, immigration can increase employment opportunities and immigrants can have a significantly positive impact on the host state's economy. While immigration has been increasingly connected to terrorism, particularly since September 11, immigration and border control have been wrongly placed in the same category, and the notion of immigration as a threat to internal security has been greatly exaggerated. Lastly, contrary to the widespread public opinion that immigration is a threat to public security, there is little to no correlation between immigration and criminality. The act of labeling immigration as a security threat does more to harm society than it does to protect it. It often results in xenophobic and racist attitudes, the exclusion of immigrant groups, and the perception of the immigrant as the undeserving "other" or enemy.

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