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Book Review by Adam Candeub

CULTURAL BAGGAGE

The Culture Transplant: How Migrants Make the Economies They Move To a Lot Like the Ones They Left, by Garrett Jones.
Stanford University Press, 228 pages, \$25



GARETT JONES HAS WRITTEN A SCANDALOUS book. *The Culture Transplant: How Migrants Make the Economies They Move To a Lot Like the Ones They Left* reviews a generation of social science research on why some countries prosper economically and enjoy good governance while others do not. Jones shows that countries that have a long history of advanced governmental structures and have adopted agriculture early tend to do better. But even more powerful predictions include the number of individuals whose ancestors lived in technologically advanced societies in the year 1500—and these societies tend to be European and East Asian. As a consequence, the more individuals with ancestors from these societies within a country, the more likely that country will be richer and better governed. Moreover, cultural diversity likely inhibits economic growth, or at least provides no tangible benefit. Diversity of *skills* is beneficial; cultural diversity, it appears, is not.

An economist at George Mason University, Jones recognizes how politically incorrect this is. He frets on his first page that his “book tells a true story that this economist sincerely, truly does not want to believe.” He knows that his conclusions should be catnip for the immigration restrictionist Right.

But Jones himself is no immigration skeptic. He argues for migration of the poor to

rich countries because the benefit to the poor immigrants outweighs any disutility rich countries experience in the form of interracial violence, slowing economies, degraded civil societies, or less responsive government institutions. He makes an exception for seven countries that lead the world in innovation: China, France, Germany, Japan, South Korea, the United Kingdom, and the United States. Immigration to these countries might weaken their institutions and depress the economic innovation on which the world depends.

THE LOGIC THAT TAKES JONES TO THESE policy conclusions illustrates the strange moral intuitions of libertarians, technocratic economists, and, more broadly, left-liberal elites. For them, as for Jones, value is only measurable economic output. They ignore the utility people gain from existing in countries with active civil societies that reflect unifying cultural norms. Jones’s book unintentionally provides insight into why Western elites support mass immigration even when it has hurtful, even self-destructive, effects.

Economists interested in discovering the causes of successful economic development initially looked to factors such as free trade, exchange rate manipulation, distance from a coastline, or education levels. These and similar factors have obvious effects on the ability

to exchange goods and adopt new technologies—making them good candidates for the drivers of economic growth.

But these approaches never panned out, so Jones relies on newer research that points to culture as determinative of economic growth—and culture is unmalleable. Immigrants and their descendants do not absorb the cultures into which they migrate. They instead retain the tendencies—at least those related to economic growth—of their homelands. As Jones concludes, “[I]f the only thing you knew about each nation on the planet was the fraction of that nation with ancestors of European descent, and you did the best job you could trying to predict average modern income per person using just that fact, you’d be able to predict two thirds of all global income differences.”

Similarly, predicting a nation’s wealth based on its past technological levels is most predictive if adjusted for immigration. Jones examines a multitude of variables used to predict current national wealth: state history (how long a country has had established government), agricultural history (how long a state has been agricultural as opposed to pastoralist), technological history, past urbanization, genetic distance from countries with advanced economies, and genetic diversity within a nation. He finds that migration-adjusted scores

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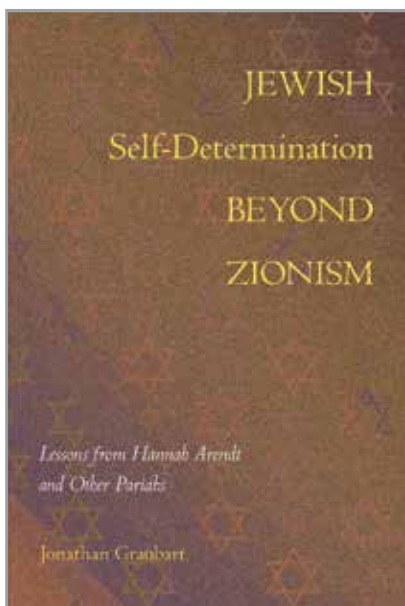
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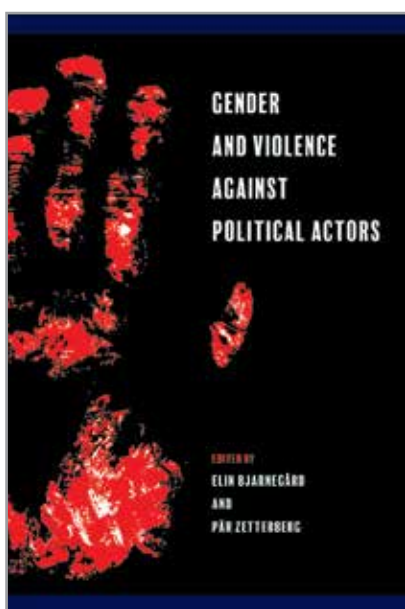


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are more predictive than unadjusted. Relying on these results, Jones advocates the “cultural transplant” theory of economic success—a nation’s wealth depends upon how many of its citizens descend from the wealthiest and most advanced societies in the distant historical past.

What about good government? The World Bank’s World Governance Indicators (WGI) provide six widely accepted measurements of good government: government effectiveness, regulatory quality, rule of law, control of corruption, political stability and absence of violence, and voice and accountability. The factors that predict wealth also predict high WGI to some degree—but migration-adjusted scores do much better. “The cultural transplant theory of government institutions,” Jones concludes, “does a good job, on average, of explaining difference in government quality.”

NATIONAL WEALTH AND GOVERNMENT quality depend upon descent from individuals who were part of wealthy countries with developed governmental structures in the deep historical past. Peoples matter more than governments or institutions—or, as Jones claims, deep cultural determinants transmitted by families are the most powerful predictors of current national wealth and sound government. This finding disrupts the typical liberal economist assumptions, i.e., wealth is generated by rational, wealth-maximizing responses to incentives. Jones concludes, to the contrary, that people of certain cultural lineages just make better societies.

He is not content with this blasphemy. Next, he asks whether cultural diversity promotes economic growth and good governance. Business management literature shows that culturally diverse work forces are less effective, though skill diversity aids economic growth. As Jones relates, the relevant sociological literature, particularly the work of Robert Putnam, shows that cultural diversity degrades social trust, leading to weaker civil society, lonelier people, and possibly less effective government. Finally, Jones examines the endemic nature of racial and ethnic conflict. Cultural diversity is *not* necessarily our strength.

What does this mean for immigration policy? Using Jones’s own empirical predicates, immigration skeptics might argue that immigration to wealthy countries does not improve the economic well-being of those already living there. Further, increased cultural diversity could weaken countries economically, degrade social trust and civil society, and raise the always prevalent threat of civil strife. Therefore, the skeptic might well conclude, we should end immigration.

JONES DOES NOT GO THAT ROUTE. INSTEAD, he advocates increased immigration to wealthy countries on the grounds that the lives of immigrants would be dramatically improved. As mentioned above, his policy suggestions come with a caveat: no mass immigration to the world’s most innovative countries. Threatening their institutions might endanger world economic growth. He also flirts with the idea of mass immigration of people with ancestries from historically economically and technologically advanced countries to poor countries. Thus, despite the threat of racial and ethnic violence, he thinks mass immigration of Chinese to Africa makes sense.

Why does Jones arrive at his conclusions? He would say, I suspect, that as an economist he looks to maximize welfare, calculating the greatest good for the greatest number. His selective immigration plan optimizes the relevant variables.

It’s not clear that he’s correct. As Jones himself shows, immigration creates less cohesive, lonelier societies, which are also poorer, at least on a per capita basis. In arguing for mass immigration to rich countries, he asserts without evidence that any harm will be outweighed by the improved lives of immigrants. How does he know that? Degrading civil society is an enormous tax on individuals. People who are less connected—who are not active in church groups, local sports clubs, or simply have fewer friends—live diminished lives. This tax is hard to measure but it exists.

Furthermore, immigration can degrade institutions central to human happiness by playing on collective action problems. Consider marriage, which is central to most peoples’ lives—as well as the social fabric of all Western nations. Monogamous marriage is an institution which is rare from a historical or global perspective: approximately 85% of societies in the anthropological record allow polygamy. Monogamy is largely a Greek and Roman invention, adopted and promoted by the Christian church.

Monogamy as a social norm decreases the spousal age gap, fertility, and gender inequality. It shifts men’s efforts from seeking wives to paternal investment, increasing savings, child investment, and economic productivity. By increasing the relatedness within households, monogamy reduces intra-household conflict, leading to lower rates of child neglect, abuse, accidental death, and homicide.

Monogamy provides many societal goods—yet it is fragile because it requires high-status men to forgo the multiple wives they would have in polygamous societies. Anthropologists and evolutionary biologists point to group competition sustained by social and religious



norms to explain the institution's migration from Europe to the rest of the world. Successful societies are monogamous—and, therefore, have spread across the globe. But evolutionary theory aside, monogamy encourages a unique type of relationship that gives meaning and purpose to people's lives. Societies are better with monogamy. Unsurprisingly, most Americans, if asked, have no desire to abandon monogamy as an institution.

But many Muslim immigrants to Western nations wish to retain polygamy. Already, enough Muslim immigrants exist in Europe that they could overturn monogamy's fragile basis. Author Michel Houellebecq describes this phenomenon in *Submission* (2015), a novel about the Islamification of France. High-status men come to accept Islamification with the temptation of 17-year-old second wives. Lacking a deep connection to Christianity or Western values, French men easily succumb. Norms shift, making society poorer and most individuals less happy—save perhaps high-status men who can have several wives, and low-status women whom no man would marry under monogamous norms. And as the institution of monogamous marriage degrades, the possibility of spousal addition erodes the trust that a monogamous husband and wife feel for each other.

BYOND HIS CULTURAL AND HISTORICAL shallowness, Jones abandons an economist's value-neutral attitude toward human choices. Following classical liberalism, economists typically look only to maximize utility—and do not judge its

source. If eating Tostitos gives the same amount of pleasure to people as watching the operas of Wagner, then Tostitos are as good as *Tannhäuser*. Preferences are equal; they differ only in magnitude.

But Jones doesn't acknowledge one fundamental human preference: the desire to live in a society with a shared history and moral outlook. People appear to want this. Polls stretching over decades continually show skepticism, if not outright hostility, toward immigration. But elites who profit from more immigration, aided by the fanatically anti-nationalist, anti-Western Left, make sure it continues unchecked. And Jones, by essentially arguing that not only are Tostitos as good as Wagner, but they are *better* than the desire to live in a society of shared values and history, demonstrates himself more of an apologist for these elites and ideologues than an economist.

Ignoring the preference to live in a society with a shared outlook imposes a distorted vision of human beings and their desires. Jones, who advocates immigration to un-innovative but wealthy countries, selects Iceland as an example of such a country. Iceland is an extraordinarily close-knit society descended from a small group of Viking settlers, with a shared language and a unique literature. Would most Icelanders want to live in a society that did not share their bonds of history, relation, and language? The answer's not clear, but Jones doesn't seem to care one way or the other. He simply ignores the possibility of such a preference.

I suspect Jones, in an unacknowledged way, may believe that people have a desire, even a right, to live in the nation of their birth and

in the society in which they grew up. Consider this thought experiment. Let's say that it could be shown that global economic growth and innovation would increase if wealthy Western countries persuaded certain people to emigrate. Let's assume that this emigration would create more innovative countries, thereby resulting in net global benefit. I don't think Jones would support policies to forcibly remove such people or even pay for them to emigrate. But if he wouldn't agree to such policies, then his whole approach of simply looking at economics to determine citizenship decisions is suspect.

Jones's inconsistency points to a fundamental political split in the West today. The Left and their libertarian allies resent the idea of national identity and community. Today's elites want to hire programmers, gardeners, and nannies of whatever nationality for the cheapest possible price while ostentatiously displaying their openness to other cultures, eating at trendy ethnic food restaurants, and skiing Jackson Hole. If an externality of their lifestyle is a country devoid of civil society, diminished in happiness as most people look for meaning without a shared social script—and with weaker institutions that may no longer be capable of supporting the whole show—well, they'd better enjoy the great powder days at Jackson Hole before the deluge.

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