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**Symposium on David Miller's *Strangers in Our Midst*
*Critical Review of International Social and Political Philosophy***

Migration, Political Philosophy, and the Real World¹

Abstract: In *Strangers in Our Midst*, David Miller develops a 'realist' political philosophy of immigration, which takes as its point of departure 'the world as it is' and considers what legitimate immigration policies would look like 'under these circumstances'. Here I focus on Miller's self-described realist methodology. First, I ask whether Miller actually does start from the 'world as it is'. I note that he orients his argument around a particular vision of national communities and that, in so doing, he deviates from a description of 'the real world'. In shifting between the descriptive and prescriptive without clearly acknowledging it, Miller undermines his claim to be outlining legitimate policies 'under these circumstances'. I also question whether Miller's picture of 'the real world' takes sufficient account of past injustice and its ongoing relationship to migration regimes. I maintain that there is a fundamental tension between Miller's commitments to his brand of nationalism on the one hand, and his version of realism on the other hand.

Keywords: David Miller, immigration, realism, nationalism.

Strangers in Our Midst contains all the high quality ingredients readers have come to expect of a David Miller classic.² It has the style: clear and readable. It has the substance: a 'communitarian' and 'social democratic' (qualified) defence of the state's right to 'close its borders' (161, 57). This is framed by Miller's commitment to the values of national self-determination, fairness, and social integration, and all constrained by his distinctive version of 'weak cosmopolitanism' (chapter 9). It has the methodology: a kind of self-described 'realism', which 'starts by looking at the world as it is, with its manifold inequalities and injustices, and asks what range of immigration policies it is legitimate for democratic states to pursue under these circumstances' (208n.8). As Miller writes, 'to think clearly and coherently about immigration requires drawing on all of the resources that political philosophy has to offer' (164). His latest book provides an impressive model of just that sort of project.

All readers will welcome Miller's most comprehensive examination to date of the complex questions raised by migration, including his chapters on the rights of and responsibilities towards refugees; his discussion of appropriate responses to irregular migrants; and his proposed principles for selecting between candidates for admission, settlement, and naturalization.

¹ First presented at the Roundtable on Migration, the Association for Political Thought Conference 2016, St Catherine's College, Oxford. With many thanks to the referees at *CRISPP* for the helpful comments and to Phil Parvin for his excellent work on this symposium. Submitted April 2016.

² David Miller, *Strangers in Our Midst: The Political Philosophy of Immigration* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2016).

Beyond the headline case in defence of the state's right to exclude and against a human right to immigrate, Miller's critics will find plenty to sink their teeth into, including Miller's suggestion that irregular migrants, having broken the rules and jumped the queue, 'should be made to do something to redeem themselves' as a condition of being granted amnesty—which may include asking them to 'undertake part-time military or civilian service' (126). Or they may take issue with his 'brain drain' related argument that receiving states should refuse to admit those who have 'skills that would otherwise be employed in [their] home country to do work that helps to meet the basic needs of [their] compatriots' (111). Or they may balk at his move to connect questions about responsibilities towards Syrian refugees with concerns about brain drain, in his endorsement of Paul Collier's proposal that, rather than focusing on *admitting* refugees, European states ought to help fund the establishment of 'industrial areas near to the [refugee] camps', to keep people and resources in region, ready for relocation to Syria when the conflict is over (170).³

At the same time, Miller's supporters will celebrate his clear articulation of the potential costs of large scale movements of people: the valuable aspects of our collective lives that could be lost or damaged or endangered, and the duties which might be violated, as a result of any move towards more open territorial and civic borders. Wherever we stand on these issues, we must all agree that Miller's arguments provide his critics and fans alike with a great deal of food for thought.

Here, rather than take issue directly with some of Miller's more controversial substantive arguments, I want to focus on Miller's general approach to these questions. He claims to take as his starting point 'the world as it is' and to ask which policies are acceptable 'under these circumstances' (208n.8). Not for him, he explains, the kind of theorising which begins with an idealised vision of a just world, and abstracts away from many of the most controversial questions about migration. Not for him the kind of otherworldliness of a strong cosmopolitan point of departure. Not for him a kind of naïve if well-intentioned humanitarianism, which ignores the fact of deep, principled dilemmas and fools itself that the most humane policy, on the face of it, will come without moral and political costs. When engaging with migration in political philosophy, he maintains, we do well to realise the importance of swallowing a 'considerable dose of realism' (16).

As the wide-ranging, recent methodological debates in our discipline have illustrated, we are struggling with the question of the appropriate relationship between political philosophy and 'the real world'.⁴ We struggle with the balance

³ For the original piece, see Paul Collier, 'If you really want to help refugees, look beyond the Mediterranean', *The Spectator*, 8 August 2015.

⁴ Interesting interventions in these diverse debates include, for example, David Runciman, 'What is Realistic Political Philosophy?', *Metaphilosophy* (2012), vol. 43, no. 1-2, pp. 58-70; Andrea Sangiovanni, 'Normative Political Theory: A Flight from Reality?', in Duncan Bell (ed.) *Political Thought and International Relations: Variations on a Realist Theme* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), pp. 219 - 239; Laura Valentini, 'Ideal vs. Non-Ideal Theory: A Conceptual Map', *Philosophy Compass* (2012), vol. 7, no. 9, pp. 654-664; and see David Miller's own 'Political

between real and ideal, and we struggle along many dimensions. What should we be reading? What are we supposed to be writing about? Who is our audience? Which parts of the 'real world' are relevant to our analysis, at which stages of the process, and in which ways? As feasibility constraints? As somehow constitutive of our theories? And so on.

So what are we to make of Miller's attempt at a realist political philosophy of immigration? In my view, Miller's book serves to illustrate the difficulties—even dangers—involved in the quest to deliver a realist political philosophy of this particular sort.

The first question is whether Miller does stick to his own brief and start from 'the world as it is'. Well, yes, he is theorizing about a world of sovereign states, and one that is full of injustice, with human rights abuses, refugees, poverty, people smuggling, and irregular migration. And yes, he explicitly draws on evidence from research in the social sciences and from opinion polls, for example—about public hostility towards large scale immigration and about the role of trust in democratic politics, for instance—and seeks to take this evidence seriously in developing his arguments. He also engages with real examples, from Syria to the Netherlands, from Canada to the Philippines.

But, significantly, he also allows himself to orient the whole argument around one of politics' greatest fictions: the idea of the national community, which 'conceives of itself as extended in time, indeed often as reaching back into antiquity' (27). As we know, Miller favours a kind of benign version of nationalism, which intends to capture the ways in which people value their membership in national communities and capitalizes on the supposed instrumental benefits of a shared national identity.⁵ Yet it is not clear exactly how this animating idea of discrete national communities and solidaristic national identities fits into Miller's proposal to start from the world as it is and to deliver arguments about legitimate policies for liberal democracies 'under these circumstances' (208n.8).

It seems obvious to me at least that this is not a description of the world as it actually is, or even self-proclaimed liberal democracies as they actually are. Indeed, Miller himself preempts this response, with his note that 'some readers' will detect a tension between his supposed commitment to delivering a realist political philosophy of immigration, and 'this too-rosy picture of the modern democratic state' (180n.10). Tellingly, he concedes that his vision of the 'goods' that accompany national membership are ones that 'actual states only realize partially, at most', but he believes that the obstacles towards achieving them are not so great as to make 'the quest to overcome them a hopeless one' (180n.10). In this short footnote, then, we have moved quickly and quietly away from 'the world as it is', towards something more like 'a picture of the world as it might be'.

Philosophy for Earthlings' in David Leopold and Marc Stears (eds.) *Political Theory: Methods and Approaches* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), pp. 29-48.

⁵ See his *On Nationality* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995).

That is not a problem in itself. The picture Miller paints can be interpreted as a normative vision of, say, the best or most fitting, realizable form of community and identity for modern mass democracies—something to strive towards, and the attainment of which is not altogether impossible but will be made more or less difficult by the pursuit of different migration policies. We can shift register, between the descriptive and prescriptive, between the actual and the desirable, for example. The ‘real world’ is meant to be the starting point, but we can (indeed, ought to) move on from there. All the same, though, we need to be clear about *when* we are shifting register, from the descriptive to the prescriptive, from the here and now, to the ‘aspirations for the future’. Because we cannot draw direct conclusions about what actual states are permitted to do here and now, ‘under these circumstances’, from a framework that relies on, say, an idealized vision of them as housing discrete, benign, ‘liberal’ national communities, protecting the goods that already accompany membership in solidaristic national communities.

However, in the course of the book, Miller often writes as though we *are* discussing a world in which we can already take these kinds of communities and identities as given, as entities which really exist here and now. In effect, he shifts register without always noting it. We get that impression, for example, from the ways in which Miller discusses the immigration-related decisions states are entitled to make in support of their national culture, such as when he writes about reasonable aspirations towards the cultural integration of immigrants in chapter 8. Yet, if this vision of national states doesn’t fit with the world as it actually is, then Miller’s prescriptions which take these as given offer no more of a direct guide for this *real* world, here and now, than do those of his opponents.

The deeper problem, though, is that Miller—unlike many of the opponents he explicitly positions himself against⁶—is actually claiming to speak to and about the world *as it is*, and about policies acceptable under current circumstances. While he maintains that different policies will suit different contexts, he is absolutely clear about the general principles that should guide policies about admissions, naturalization, deportation, and so forth. Indeed, at times, it sounds as though his intended audience is today’s politicians and policymakers:

Essentially what is needed is a clear policy on immigration that can be set out and defended publicly, with all the relevant data about how the policy is working also in the public domain. It should cover the overall numbers being accepted, the different categories of immigrants, the criteria of selection being used, and what is expected of immigrants by way of integration. This needs to be accompanied by strong border controls, and rapid assessment of the status of those who are admitted provisionally, for example as asylum seekers. No-one can pretend that border walls and fences are pleasant things to witness, but if citizens are going to embrace the state’s immigration policy, they need to be reassured that the policy is going to be effectively enforced, and that the people who are allowed to enter are the people who meet the criteria that it lays down (160).

And this may be a real problem, because if Miller’s arguments in the book are not directly applicable to actual states here and now, then politicians and policy makers are not entitled to draw from this that their states may pursue the kinds of activities that Miller outlines. I do not think Miller makes that clear, or clear

⁶ Such as the kinds of academics who write about the ‘ethics’ rather than the ‘political philosophy’ of immigration (17).

enough. We would need to hear a lot more about whether the relevant states (i.e. those developing and defending restrictive immigration policies) satisfy the conditions he has in mind, and about the implications for the argument where states do *not* meet those conditions.

A further, related issue for Miller's approach is not so much about what he includes in his picture of the real world, but what he leaves out of it. If we are starting from the world as it is, then we are starting from a world in which existing territorial borders and population distributions have come about in a variety of complex ways, many of which have included extensive injustices, such as those involved in colonialism, slave trading, wars of aggression, ethnic cleansing, and land seizures. The list is long. But Miller's animating idea of benign, discrete national communities stretching into the past and future allows him to brush over those kinds of facts about the world, at least in this book. There is almost no mention of these particular past injustices, and how they might affect our thinking about a realist political philosophy of migration.⁷ That seems to me a very important omission, for an argument which claims to engage with the real world.

In a sense, then, I think that Miller's background vision of national communities impedes his claim to adopt a realist methodology. The national community has various explicit and implicit functions in his theory, and colours his whole vision of the political philosophy of immigration. Consider the book's title, *Strangers in Our Midst*, which Miller takes from that of a 1965 article by his own supervisor, John Plamenatz.⁸ 'Some readers', Miller notes, 'have found it a little provocative'. He goes on, in the voice of his critic: 'why call immigrants "strangers", and why assume a homogeneous "we" in whose midst they are being set down?' (18). Miller replies: 'I believe, though, that this is very often how immigration is experienced, at least on first encounter, in settled societies most of whose members have a sense that they and their ancestors are deeply rooted in a place' (18). The title fits the book because Miller frames the entire argument around a central set of nationalist-inflected binaries: strangers and citizens; 'immigrants' and 'natives' (2); 'newcomers' and the 'indigenous majority' (64); 'members' and 'those who belong elsewhere' (21). In the process, I think he fails to notice or disregards significant shades of grey: those of us who are citizens, but who, for whatever reasons, do not feel that we belong within the dominant national culture and narratives; those of us who think of *our fellow citizens* as strangers in many respects; those of us who were born in one country, but have very close

⁷ I say 'almost no mention' because there is a brief, two-page discussion of 'particularity claimants', i.e. 'those who by virtue of past events already stand in some relationship to the state, but without having an agreement that guarantees them a right of entry'. And he concludes that short discussion with the line that these claims 'often carry considerable weight, but do not always translate into rights to immigrate' (113-115). He also returns to this theme at the end of his Postscript, exploring how European states should respond to the refugee crisis, and he cautions that 'the path of blame and guilt should be avoided wherever possible' (173).

⁸ John Plamenatz, 'Strangers in Our Midst', *Race and Class* (1965) vol. 7, no. 1. pp. 1-16

connections to other countries (including, perhaps, holding citizenship elsewhere); those of us whose near ancestors were migrants and who do not fit comfortably within a national 'us' and immigrant 'them' distinction; those of us who desperately want non-national family members to be allowed to immigrate; and those of us who vote or would vote for pro-immigration political parties. So on the one hand, there are many ways in which I think Miller's nationalism steers him *away* from a close relationship to 'the real world'—or at least from the real worlds which exist beyond his own partial perspective.

On the other hand, though, in his quest to engage with the real world as he sees it, I think Miller is too quick to accept unreflective, conventional ways of framing the debate, adopting well worn tropes and binaries from popular discourse about migration. For instance, he endorses the image of unauthorized migrants as queue jumpers: 'their behaviour may be regarded as in certain respects unfair, since by entering without permission they are at the very least engaging in a form of queue-jumping with respect to all those who are attempting to enter through legal channels...' (117). He does not pause to consider whether there are actually any legal channels through which many of these irregular migrants could have entered, if only they had waited patiently in line. He also frames his argument around a distinction between 'refugees' and 'economic migrants', where refugees for him are 'people whose human rights would be unavoidably be threatened if they remain in the place they inhabit, regardless of whether the threat arises from state persecution, state collapse, or natural disaster' (167), and economic migrants are... everyone else. Why try to divide all people on the move or outside their country of citizenship/ordinary residence into just these two, rigid categories, as though we can always distinguish clearly and constructively between them? Why adopt the politically loaded language of 'economic migrant', which has become a term of abuse? And in fact, this way of drawing the distinction leads him to describe 'those who have decided to quit refugee camps where they were protected but opportunities to work were inadequate' as economic migrants (169-70).⁹

Ultimately, I agree with Miller that any political philosophy about immigration needs to engage seriously, at some level, with the world in which we find ourselves. But I think we have quite different visions of the relationship between political philosophy and the 'real world', and, perhaps more fundamentally, different visions and experiences of that world.

⁹ It is worth noting, too, that Miller's adoption of the conventional 'refugee'-'economic migrant' distinction alongside his attempt to adopt a revisionist definition of refugees leads him into some difficulties when it comes to drawing on existing empirical data to substantiate his arguments. For example, he contends that 'the overwhelming majority' of migrants into and between liberal democratic countries 'count as economic migrants rather than as refugees' on his definition, as they are 'drawn in by the advantages that their new society has to offer'. Indeed, he adds that 'very often the incentive to move is strictly economic' (94). In the accompanying footnote he points out that 'in the year ending March 2014, around 560,000 people migrated to Britain, of whom only less than 24,000 were admitted as asylum seekers...' (194n.1). But we need to be clear that those admitted as asylum seekers are likely to be a far smaller proportion of that 560,000 people than those who meet Miller's own preferred definition of refugees, i.e. 'people whose human rights would unavoidably be threatened by remaining in the places they now inhabit, regardless of whether the threat arose from state persecution, state collapse, or natural disasters'.