BOOK REVIEW

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Joakim Ruist
Global migration – orsaker och konsekvenser

A few years ago, I reviewed Paul Collier's 2013 book Exodus: How Migration is Changing Our World. I found the book valuable because serious literature on international migration is so scarce. However, Collier's analyses were often too simplistic and his interpretations tendentious. Therefore, in the end of my review, I expressed a wish that a more balanced evaluation of global mobility and its repercussions would be underway.

In fact, such a book was already being prepared, and by a Nordic scholar. Joakim Ruist, a Swedish long-term migration researcher, recently published his book Global Migration: orsaker och konsekvenser. His aim is to increase our understanding about the causes and consequences of international migration, against the backdrop that despite of the salience of the topic in public debate many people do not know much about it. Many people actually also admit that their knowledge about the subject is limited.

In his book, Collier delivered a strong message, supported by more or less credible research data. He predicted that without better regulations and more control movement from poor to rich countries would significantly increase. In the course of time, large-scale migration would jeopardize the social models based on trust and mutual regard in the West. This development, he argued, would have serious consequences. In Collier's vision, the foundation of welfare in rich countries is based on a functioning social system. This system, in turn, requires the above-mentioned social model.

Joakim Ruist's position is more neutral. Instead of building a strong argument pro or contra, his purpose is to convey information corroborated by scientific research. For him, migration is neither good or bad as such. Rather, some of its consequences are positive and strengthen the receiving society, whereas other effects are more problematic, if not unambiguously negative. What makes the evaluation difficult is that in many cases it is rather both/and than either/or, depending on perspective.
One would imagine Ruist’s endeavour would produce a book of several hundreds of pages. However, the result is not much more than two hundred pages long. True, Ruist writes concisely, but the real reason for the brevity of his study unfortunately is that there is not much to tell – when the author wants to stick to scientifically proven facts and avoid speculation. In his introduction, he puts it bluntly: “Mycket av den publicerade forskningen har resultat som få forskare faktiskt tror på.”

Nevertheless, there is a lot of information in Ruist’s book, and reading it is definitely worth the effort. The author is a professional economist, but luckily he has reduced jargon to a minimum. There is no chain of reasoning that the reader could not follow.

Ruist firstly analyses the history of international migration over the past 180 years. As with Collier, Ruist also restricts his perspective to the movement from poor to rich countries. The fact that Ruist is Swedish plays a role here. More than any other European country, in terms of the share of population, Sweden has received refugee migrants from conflict-ridden countries.

The immigration history of Finland, Denmark, Norway and Iceland is somewhat different. However, Ruist’s book is also relevant to readers in the other Nordic countries. Although the relative share of refugees is lower, many migrants have come to seek better living conditions. Denmark and Norway, in particular, have received work-related migrants from many parts of the world, in addition to refugee migrants.

In the first period of large-scale global mobility in 1840–1880, Ruist reminds us, the Nordic countries were initially among the countries from which many people immigrated to the United States in search of a better life. In the late nineteenth century, Sweden and the other Nordic countries underwent rapid modernisation, and the remaining ones had enough work and livelihood at home. The New World attracted increasingly people from the eastern and southern parts of Europe where more people could afford the transatlantic journey and where previously tight emigration policies were relaxed.

After the World War II, Europe underwent a transformation from a continent of emigration to a region of immigration. Even though the oil crisis ended labour migration programs, immigration never stopped. Instead, the European integration process increased intra-continental migration, especially after the implementation of the Schengen Agreement and the eastern enlargement of the EU. Furthermore, crises and conflicts have augmented the number of refugees worldwide. Although a small proportion of the world’s refugees have ever reached Europe, asylum seeking has strongly shaped our perceptions of what migration is about.

In his book, Ruist also deliberates on who moves and why. There are many international migrants in the world, but only a small proportion of the world’s
populations decide to move to another country. Therefore, the decision to emigrate is an exceptional one that requires justification. According to Ruist, international migrants strive for making a rational decision, but often there simply is not enough reliable information. He quotes historian John Gould, who has stated that, in the 1860s, the conditions on the transatlantic ships were so miserable that only the most powerful, desperate and ignorant departed.

The idea also applies to the so-called refugee crisis of 2015–2016, the causes and effects of which have clearly inspired Ruist to write his book. Objectively speaking, there was no reason for such a big number of asylum seekers to head specifically towards Sweden. Rather, Sweden became the place of arrival because of small signals that made people think they would be more welcome in Sweden than elsewhere. In Finland, the wealthy Prime Minister Juha Sipilä’s compassionate offer to give his voluminous home to asylum seekers probably had a similar effect. Compared with Denmark and Norway, much more asylum seekers came to Finland in the autumn of 2015.

Mobility is also generated by chain migration. The decision to move is influenced by messages received from relatives, acquaintances or people from the same country, directly or through the media, about what life is like in another country. These messages may be realistic, but often they display a rosy picture of life abroad. Ruist also rightly points out that we often misunderstand the movement from poor to rich countries. In reality, the poorest people in the poorest countries seldom migrate because they lack the human and material capital to do so. Those who leave are usually more educated people in the country of departure. Countries of significant emigration, in turn, often rather are middle-income countries than very poor.

His way of rationalizing migrants’ decision-making reveals Ruits’s economist background, but so do also his three chapters on the economic consequences of migration. He presents research findings on the effects of migration on migrants, on host countries and on the countries of origin. To start with, there is a widespread consensus that migration enhances the economic well-being of those who move. On average.

However, Ruist aptly also points out that immigrants form a very heterogeneous group and that the concept of an “average immigrant” has little information value. Immigrants as a group need to be broken down into smaller subgroups. Unfortunately, it is by no means obvious how this division should be carried out. In terms of employment, for example, people coming from different countries of origin often differ. However, there can also be great varieties within a group of a certain nationality, and this group can be very similar to some other groups. Therefore, generalizations have to be treated with caution.

It is also difficult to measure the economic impact of immigration. Ruist nevertheless concludes that the consequences of migration on the labour market in the host society usually are relatively small. However, this does not mean that
they may not be large under some circumstances. Those most at risk of increasing competition are the ones that can be replaced by immigrants without potential to improve one’s assets through education. Often the most endangered ones are actually previous immigrants.

With regard to the impact of immigration on public purse, Ruist notes that some migrant groups have a positive impact, while others are a burden. Even in this case the effects generally are limited. It is difficult to achieve truly big positive economic effects through immigration. However, even at their widest, an otherwise healthy society and economy can cope with the negative effects. If Sweden survives the immigration and integration challenges of the recent years, the other Nordic countries have nothing to worry.

One chapter is devoted to the social consequences of immigration. Apparently, he would have liked to discuss this subject more than he does. He gives a sigh: ”Många, inklusive jag själv, tror att de kulturella faktorerna i allmänhet har större betydelse än de ekonomiska, men det är svårt att bevisa.” The economic consequences of migration are often overemphasized, while its social and cultural implications are not widely talked about. In this, Ruist is actually following the same tracks with Paul Collier.

As mentioned, Collier was worried about the effect of large-scale migration to mutual trust and respect. In his book, Joakim Ruist concentrates on shared identity and perceived justice. Immigration generates ethnic and cultural diversity. As a result, people do not know and understand each other as well as before. This, in turn, complicates solidarity and undermines the sense of belonging needed for the smooth functioning of society.

Unwelcome social developments can be reinforced by the polarizing effect of immigration. Some people are strongly in favour of newcomers and immigration, while others believe that both immigration and the rights of immigrants should be restricted. Survey results, however, indicate that people in the Nordic countries still welcome immigration from poor countries. Sweden, Iceland and Norway, in particular, stand out; Denmark and Finland are somewhat more hesitant.

Migration can also challenge the unwritten social contract that designates the rights and obligations in the society and defines the limits of generally accepted inequality. Some see immigrants as intruders who get too much rights and assistance in proportion to their contribution to society. Immigrants, for their part, may have difficulties in adopting the unfamiliar rules of the society that they themselves have not decided.

According to Ruist, immigration seems to have some negative social and cultural effects. Empirical research has shown that economic inequality and crime figures tend to increase. The latter often also occurs as an outcome of the former: the socio-economic hardship many immigrants face, or their insecure
position, drive some people to criminality. However, many of the alleged negative consequences of immigration are not confirmed by hard data. Ruist also considers problems caused by migration as relatively unimportant. The countries that have received large amounts of international migrants still are among the world's strongest countries and best-performing societies.

Ruist devotes the last chapter of the book to some reflections about future development. What can be expected with regard to international migration, especially from poor to rich countries? Rather than making predictions, Ruist tries to provide decision-makers with information that might help them think about different policy options. Future policies, in turn, can have a major impact on future patterns of migration.

It seems like migration around the world is constantly increasing. However, Ruist points out that although the number of international migrants has increased in absolute terms, it is more a consequence of global population growth than of increased willingness to migrate. In fact, the share of migrants in the population has usually rather decreased than increased. In particular, emigration has abated in countries where after a demographic transition there now are less young adults such as in many countries of Asia and Latin America. In many countries, the standard of living has also risen and future prospects have improved.

Nevertheless, in some parts of the globe, in Africa in particular, current demographic trends increase the likelihood of migration growth. Much depends on how African states and societies evolve, and how crises, conflicts and wars occur in the world at large. Taken together, Ruist concludes that a strong growth in migration towards Europe now seems unlikely.

Joakim Ruist does not have much belief in the possibilities of radically restricting immigration. In particular, he despises walls and other physical constraints as ineffective: "När det finns tillräckligt starka incitament att migrera verkar det nästan inte finnas någon mur som är tillräckligt hög för att kunna stoppa migrationen."

This does not mean that migration cannot be controlled. In the case of Europe, the most important incentive for refugees to come here is their right to seek asylum, anchored in international law. In his view, refugee policy should be profoundly reformed. Instead of encouraging uncontrollable asylum movement, Europe should receive people directly from refugee camps in an orderly manner.

Ruist frequently mentions that the widespread dissatisfaction regarding immigration policy is not caused by the volume of migration or its factual consequences. Rather, the reason behind this anxiety is the feeling of losing control over immigration and the diminished belief in political decision-makers. Ruist thinks that these political reactions are understandable even though, to repeat,
people tend to see the consequences of migration as more negative than what they actually are.

Migration therefore needs to be better controlled and citizens' confidence in decision-makers restored. It is equally important to increase research-based knowledge on migration and its effects. Therefore, let us hope that the author of the next book on international migration can provide us with more information and that there would be less reasons to complain about the state of affairs in migration research.

Finally, I would specifically like to urge cultural policy researchers to pay more attention to the causes and consequences of international migration. So far, few empirical studies have been carried out in the Nordic countries even though we know that cultural issues play a multifaceted role in these processes. Cultural aspects affect the decision to emigrate and influence integration in the host society. Because of migration, new cultural minorities emerge. Oppressive cultural policy in the country of origin may be one reason to emigrate, cultural policy in the country of arrival may support integration, or make it more cumbersome. When an economist says that social and cultural are more important that economic ones, we should respond to that statement with research that proves him right or wrong.