

Thermodynamics of Globalization

Blithering Genius

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It can be useful to think about society and culture in terms that are normally reserved for physics. Flows of money, people, resources and manufactured goods are analogous to flows of air or water along pressure gradients. People tend to flow from regions with a lower quality of life to regions with a higher quality of life, in the same way that air flows from a region of higher pressure to a region of lower pressure. Resources tend to flow from areas of resource abundance to areas of resource scarcity. Manufactured goods tend to flow from places where they can be produced efficiently to places where they can be sold at the greatest profit. Financial capital tends to flow to where it can get the highest return on investment.

These flows have two important things in common with thermodynamic flows. One is that they increase entropy overall. They erase differences between places. The wind moves air from high pressure to low pressure areas. By doing so, it tends to equalize pressure between those areas. Flows of people, money, resources and manufactured goods tend to equalize conditions around the world. Also, energy can be extracted from these flows, just as energy can be extracted from a flow of air or water. Flows are sources of *power*. A flow of people, resources, money or goods can be a source of financial or political power.

For example, consider immigration into Canada. I believe that immigration has been mostly harmful to Canadians over the past 25 years. There has been no real per capita economic growth, and there have been many negative consequences, such as the fragmentation of culture, the crowding of cities, and high house prices. Despite the negative consequences of immigration, a high level of immigration has been government policy for the past 25 years. Why? Because the flow of people into Canada can be used to make a profit.

Power and energy are related. Energy is required to do work. Power is the rate at which work can be done. A flow of people can be a power source. Work can be extracted from it, in the same way that a windmill extracts work from a flow of air. In most cases, that work is extracted in the form of money. Money is a type of stored energy, which can be converted into work. A scheme that extracts money from moving people is analogous to a windmill that extracts mechanical work from moving air.

There are various ways that people make money from immigration. The most direct way is to sell immigration-related services, such as immigration counseling and immigration law. Another is by employing immigrants at low wages. Large corporations can set up “immigration pipelines” that bring in cheap labor. Their workers receive the benefit of citizenship, which comes at the cost of native-born Canadians, not the corporation. Even if a company doesn’t employ immigrants, it

benefits from lower labor costs. Immigration increases the supply of labor, and thus keeps labor costs down. It also increases the local demand for most goods and services. Immigration is thus a subsidy to many businesses. It especially benefits the real estate sector, by increasing the demand for housing. It creates a demand for new housing, and it increases the price of housing in general. Many people profit from mass immigration. It makes life worse for most native-born Canadians, but it makes some people very rich.

What is true for flows of people is also true for flows of resources, money and manufactured goods. Each flow can be used as a power source. That power can then be used to keep the flows going as long as possible. Financial power can be transformed into political power.

Globalization is hard to stop, because the flows of people, resources, money and manufactured goods are concentrated sources of power. Once a person or entity has tapped into that power source, they can use the power to maintain their position and expand the flow. Stopping the flow requires an alternative source of power. Even if the flow is harmful to the majority of people in a society, the will of the people is diffuse and thus not a very useful source of power. Concentrated power tends to rule, and concentrated power tends to be corrupt. Power serves the interests of those who wield it.

Why do global elites support an essentially communist ideology that demands the global redistribution of wealth? Because the flows associated with that redistribution are power sources that global elites use to maintain their political power, at least for a while. They do not demand the personal redistribution of wealth (beyond a point), because that would make them poorer. Instead, they demand the redistribution of wealth between regions, races, etc, because those flows give them more power.

Once a flow through a barrier starts, it is hard to stop and even harder to reverse. A flow of people has a direction for a reason. It is much easier to let people in than to kick them out. It's very difficult to export people from a wealthy, safe country, because they don't want to go. They have to be "pumped" up a pressure gradient, and that requires work. There is strong opposition to immigration in many Western countries, but it is diffuse and not easy to translate into political power. The political will to oppose immigration would have to be very strong to override both elite interests and the will of the immigrants. Financial elites and immigrants are natural allies in this situation.

What could bring this process to an end? The flows are guaranteed to stop when conditions are equalized, or (more precisely) when the differences are too low to justify the cost of moving things around. The wind only blows if there is a pressure gradient. People will move around the world only if things are better in one place than another. If China had the same quality of life as Canada, then the flow of Chinese people to Canada would stop. A few would still move for various reasons, but the big flow would stop.

What else could stop the process of globalization? Barriers, of course. Barriers to flows could maintain differences between places. In the past, moving people and things around the world was very difficult. There were physical, biological and cultural barriers to cross, such as vast distances, deserts, oceans, diseases, language, religion, customs and hostility toward foreigners. In recent history, most of those barriers have either been removed or have become much easier to cross. Now, it requires explicit social policies to limit flows that were once limited by other means. The political will to stop immigration isn't strong enough to override elite interests and the interests of immigrants. Thus, the barriers to immigration into the West are full of metaphorical holes with metaphorical turbines attached to them.

For the flows of people to be stopped without barriers, conditions around the world would have to become roughly equal. That could happen by raising the global standard of living, or by lowering the Western standard of living. Unfortunately, there is a catch that makes the first option impossible without walls. A rise in global living standards makes it easier for people to migrate into the West, because they can afford the cost of a plane ticket. Before their standard of living could rise to match that of the modern West, they would migrate into the West, bringing down the standard of living in the West.

As the West is flooded with foreigners, it will cease to be the West. People are not interchangeable cogs. Civilizations depend on biology and culture. Change the people, and you change the civilization. The West is the goose that laid the golden egg of modern civilization. Mass immigration will kill that goose.

Without barriers to immigration, the Western quality of life will decline and the West will cease to be the engine of global progress.

The recent political shift toward populism in the West shows that there is growing opposition to mass immigration, but that is a diffuse source of power and difficult to tap into. Immigration itself, on the other hand, is a concentrated source of power and easy to tap into. For that reason, the political establishment in the West tends to support immigration, even if the public generally opposes it.

Given that flows of people are a source of power, why don't all rich countries allow foreigners to flow in? Why doesn't Japan have mass immigration?

The power structure in Japan is maintained by exporting manufactured goods, rather than importing people. Japanese elites extract energy from outflows of goods rather than inflows of people. Japan also has better physical and cultural barriers to immigration than any Western country. (Britain has equivalent physical barriers.) I'm sure that some rich people in Japan are salivating at the thought of opening up immigration, but for now Japan has good social barriers in addition to the physical and cultural ones. Japan is not immune to the problem, however. It is possible that Japanese elites will eventually start using immigration as a source of power.

So, that's why we have mass immigration, even though it causes so many problems. The same is true for other flows created by unequal conditions around the world. They will probably continue until conditions are equally bad, not equally good.