

Climate Change & Green Borders: Why Closure Won't Save the Planet

Abstract

There is a growing movement advocating for using closed border policies as a tool for solving the climate crisis. On this view, which I call the *green border argument*, fighting climate change requires drastic reductions in the global population and/or per capita greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions. However, immigration into high-income countries—particularly from low-income countries—increases per capita emissions while leaving the population untouched. Therefore, the green border theorist argues, we should limit entry into high-income countries. I explain why this is a mistake and why the political left should embrace a pro climate and pro migrant politic.

First, the argument significantly overstates the impact of immigration on global GHG emissions. Second, the progressive green border argument is normatively incoherent. It advocates for closing borders *and* eliminating poverty and other rights violations in sending countries. However, given the relationship between emissions and income, this argument would require rejecting all poverty reduction strategies—a conclusion the progressive theorist wants to avoid. Third, the argument is counterproductive. An open border politic better promotes climate justice. A key reason is that high-income countries perceive immigration to be one of the most serious short- and medium-term costs of climate change. Whereas closure allows them to avoid this “cost,” open borders would force them to eliminate push factors, incentivizing global adaptation and mitigation strategies. Moreover, a closed border politic creates divisions between those affected, undermining cross-border solidarity and contributing to the perception that environmentalism is a white, middle-class movement.

1. Introduction

Climate change and migration have, in recent history, jointly occupied relatively settled political positions. Political progressives have traditionally exhibited sympathy for the claims of would-be migrants while recognizing and seeking to mitigate the problem of climate change. The political right, on the other hand, had largely coalesced around climate denialism and anti-migrant attitudes. However, there are signs that these poles are breaking apart.

There is a growing phenomenon of right-wing arguments for protecting the environment and fighting climate change by closing the borders of high-income countries to would-be immigrants.¹ Climate change is being wielded as a weapon against immigrants by those who had, until recently, denied the problem. At the same time, egalitarian-minded philosophers have argued for restricting immigration to protect the environment.²

On this view, which I call the *green border argument*, there is a conflict between the claims of immigrants and the rest of the global population. Fighting climate change requires drastic reductions in the global population and/or per capita greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions. However, immigration into high-income countries—particularly from low-income countries—increases per capita emissions while leaving the population untouched. Therefore, the green border theorist argues that we should limit entry into high-income countries.

In this paper I offer three reasons why the green border argument is misguided and why progressives should embrace a pro-migrant *and* a pro-climate politic. First, it is on shaky empirical grounds. While there will be a short-term, and potentially long-term, increase in emissions, the

¹ Malm and the Zetkin Collective, 2021.

² Cafaro and Winthrop Staples, 2009; Hedberg, 2020.

difference is overstated. Given the scope of the climate crisis, closure is an insufficient tool for mitigating the risks of climate change.

Second, the progressive green border argument is normatively incoherent. Progressive green border advocates argue that high-income countries must *either* admit those fleeing poverty, violence, and climate change *or* work towards eliminating these migration-inducing injustices.³ However, if in pursuit of GHG reductions we reject the immigration, then we have equally strong reason to reject aid—they have similar effects on emissions. But this is an untenable conclusion, and one its proponents are loath to accept.

Third, the green border argument is counterproductive. Insofar as our goal is to fight climate change, an open border politic—from low- into high-income countries—is more effective. A key reason is that high-income countries perceive climate-induced immigration as a serious threat and a primary reason to be concerned with climate change. Insofar as (more) open borders force them to deal with this cost, it can provide a powerful incentive to eliminate the relevant push factors. In this case, that means working to reduce GHG emissions and seeking to prevent the worst effects of climate change from being felt in low-income sending countries.

Moreover, the green border strategy undermines cooperative efforts aimed at fighting the climate crisis. It does so by i) deflecting attention away from the true causes of climate change; ii) preventing cross-border solidarity; and iii) making environmentalism less popular by alienating those in, and with sympathies for, migrant communities. When fighting a global crisis like climate change—particularly one that is felt most intensely by the poor and those in the Global South—we must embrace strategies that bring those affected together, building connections between people fighting

³ Miller 2005, 198; Cafaro & Winthrop Staples III 2009, 24.

for climate justice. The climate crisis demands bridges connecting those affected, not walls segregating them and the costs and benefits of GHG emissions.

2. The Green Border Argument(s)

Philosophers and politicians have often sought to justify borders by pointing to their ability to protect important goods. These justifications include safeguarding the social welfare state, protecting the wages and employment opportunities of low-income citizens, preventing terrorism and crime, and defending a perceived national culture. In each case, the interests of would-be immigrants allegedly threaten the ability of states to promote the interests of citizens.

A pair of related justifications for exclusion have been gaining traction: protecting the local environment and preventing climate change. According to the former, countries have a maximum carrying capacity. Natural limitations on water, soil, and resources provide an upper limit on the size of each state's population, particularly with current per capita usage. This concern is only contingently related to the second. Here, the problem is the atmospheric stock of GHGs and the effect this has on the global climate. Insofar as this is a product of global population and per capita GHG emissions, and as we lack the institutions needed to regulate these on a global scale, each state has a duty to manage its own population and emissions.

In both cases, immigration is perceived as a threat. With the local environment, immigration increases the national population while leaving in place per capita consumption. With climate change, immigration leaves untouched the global population while increasing global per capita GHG emissions. Therefore, out of concern for the environment, wildlife, current residents, and future generations, they argue that immigration must be restricted.

In this section I focus on climate change-based defenses of closed borders. First, I briefly look at the growing movement of right-wing politicians who are leveraging concern over climate change to

promote immigration control. Second, I present the philosophical arguments that begin with concern for the climate and end with a defense of immigration restrictions. The goal is to identify the main arguments made in defense of green borders before critically evaluating them in §3 and §4, and then providing a positive defense of more open borders in §5.

2.1. From Borders to the Climate

Right-wing politicians and parties have recently made an about-face on climate change. Despite historically engaging in climate denial, they are publicly acknowledging the dangers of climate change while tethering them to the traditional boogeyman of the right: immigration. Finding outright denial increasingly untenable, the potential to weaponize climate change offered a strategy that could leverage a growing acceptance of climate science to their political advantage.

European Parliament member and spokesperson for France’s National Rally (RN) Jordan Bardella recently claimed that “It is by returning to the borders that we will save the planet” and that “The best ally of ecology is the border.”⁴ Rather than being local to RN, this trend is spreading throughout European right-wing parties. According to a recent analysis of twenty-two such parties, nine explicitly engaged in strong green border messaging, with six others deploying lighter forms of this rhetoric.⁵

Such views are also finding a home in the US. Arizona Attorney General Mark Brnovich recently filed suit against the Biden administration for immigration policies that are allegedly destroying the environment in Arizona and increasing GHG emissions.⁶ And “[i]n March 2013,

⁴ Malm and the Zetkin Collective, 136-7.

⁵ Turner and Bailey, 116-118.

⁶ Arvin, Vox.

Admiral Samuel J. Lochlear III, the commander of the United States Pacific Command, said that global warming was the greatest threat the United States faces. Mass destabilization, he said, ‘is probably the most likely thing that is going to happen [t]o cripple the security environment.’⁷

The right-wing green border argument begins with hostility towards (particularly nonwhite and poor) migrants. The image of the migrant is a ready-made vessel for a host of domestic concerns. The terrorist. The criminal. The welfare abuser. And now the GHG emitter. As with the other cases, the assumption seems to be that emissions are the birthright of (largely white) citizens of high-income countries. The climate crisis is not due to the exorbitant emissions of wealthy westerners, but “a problem of ‘the other’ seeking to enjoy the same carbon-intensive lifestyles of those in the Global North.”⁸ These domestic emissions are never critically assessed.

2.2. From Climate to the Border

Unlike their right-wing counterparts, progressive green border advocates argue that high-income countries must drastically reduce GHG emissions. However, immigration threatens to undermine this goal by increasing the domestic population while leaving domestic per capita emissions relatively untouched. Using expected income to estimate how immigration affects emissions, Leon Kolankiewicz and Steven Camarota have calculated that, as of 2005, the 37 million immigrants in the US produce “637 metric tons of CO₂,” which is “482 million tons more than they would have produced had they remained in their home countries.”⁹ To put this number in context, by moving into the US these 37 million immigrants, on average, increased their emissions four-fold. Finally, to

⁷ Todd Miller, 2021, 14.

⁸ Turner and Bailey, 120.

⁹ Kolankiewicz and Camarota, 8.

show the significance of this increase, they note that this “represents about 5 percent of the increase in annual world-wide CO2 emissions since 1980.”¹⁰

Phillip Cafaro and Winthrop Staples III claim that meeting the Kyoto protocol requires that the US “cut per capita emissions by 20.4%. If we double our population, it’ll have to be 58.5%.”¹¹ Immigration, therefore, makes it more difficult to meet domestic environmental goals. Accordingly, they argue that the US should reduce annual legal immigration from one million to two hundred thousand while sanctioning employers who hire the undocumented.¹²

One might respond by noting that immigration does not increase the global population but merely moves the existing population around. Rather than focusing on the mobility of the existing population, we should instead work to reduce the global population directly. They deride this criticism, noting that “[n]o one argues that ‘deforestation is a global problem; therefore, we shouldn’t worry about deforestation in our own country.’”¹³ Instead, global solutions are simply the result of domestic strategies.¹⁴ According to David Miller, “[w]hile immigration doesn’t change the global population, the only way to promote global population reduction is national policies. We can’t do this with open borders.”¹⁵ Unfettered immigration prevents the only actors with the power and authority to regulate population from being able to effectively do so.

¹⁰ Ibid, 8.

¹¹ Cafaro & Staples III, 11.

¹² Ibid, 16.

¹³ Ibid, 24.

¹⁴ Ibid, 24.

¹⁵ David Miller 2016, 65.

In addition to undermining the ability of high-income countries to regulate their populations, they claim that immigration increases global per capita GHG emissions. Immigrants in high-income countries enjoy higher incomes. Moreover, increases in income lead to corresponding increases in emissions.¹⁶ Therefore, immigration into high-income countries increases global per capita emissions.

The progressive green border argument does not require prioritizing citizens over non-citizens and is *prima facie* compatible with global egalitarianism. On this view, one reason for fighting environmental degradation in the US is that these costs are not contained by borders.¹⁷ The unsustainable consumption and emissions of US residents has unjust global effects on both current and future people and must be curtailed. This requires *both* population management *and* a change in lifestyles. Thus, reducing immigration is necessary for the US to reduce its own environmental impacts.

This universalist ethic is expressed by Trevor Hedberg, who advocates for the green border argument based on the moral equality of all current *and future* humans. According to Hedberg's *Intergenerational Moral Cosmopolitanism*, the value of a human life is not affected by their distance from us in space or time.¹⁸ And while permitting the movement of spatially distant people can improve their lives, the just state must look beyond these immediate effects and consider the effects on temporally distant people.¹⁹ Insofar as immigration increases emissions, it harms future people—people who will already be harmed the most by climate change.²⁰

¹⁶ Kolankiewicz and Camarota, 3.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 1.

¹⁸ Hedberg, 144.

¹⁹ Immigration also does nothing to mitigate the harms suffered by those who either could not or would not move.

²⁰ Hedberg, 147.

Finally, the progressive green border theorist does not advocate for closing our doors to the globally least advantaged while doing nothing to mitigate their suffering. Instead, they often argue for a conditional duty: *if* we prevent immigration from low-income countries, *then* we must work to address the conditions that cause their suffering and lead to migration pressure. For example, David Miller argues that the US should restrict immigration while also maintaining that we must either use targeted aid to promote human rights in low-income sending countries or not only allow them entry, but actively help them move.²¹ Similarly, Cafaro and Staples III argue that while we can exclude, we must use trade agreements and aid to help people live decent lives in their home countries.²²

3. De-Greening Borders

Any moral force the green border argument has depends upon immigration significantly worsening climate change.²³ In this section I argue that the green border theorist overstates the environmental benefits of restricting immigration. Even granting their assumptions, immigration to the US has significantly less robust effects on global GHG emissions than the green border argument suggests.

This is for two related reasons. First, even assuming that the only environmental effect of immigration is an increase in income and a corresponding increase in emissions, the green border argument exaggerates the counterfactual increase in emissions relative to a world with lower rates of immigration. Second, not only are there reasons to doubt that immigrant communities have emissions

²¹ David Miller 2005, 198.

²² Cafaro & Staples III, 12.

²³ It will be hard to justify coercive restrictions on the movement of people in low-income countries unless this leads to considerable harms for others, especially the globally least advantaged.

that are as high as their incomes suggest, but, as has been noted, immigration into high-income countries reduces the global population.

3.1. The Counterfactual Increase in Emissions

The green border argument begins with a simple empirical point: since immigration from low- to high-income countries substantially increases the income of immigrants, so too does it increase their emissions. In this section I focus on Kolankiewicz and Camarota's claim that immigration to the US constituted 5 percent of the increase in global GHG emissions from 1980 to 2005. I will present several empirical criticisms, illustrating that they have significantly overstated the effects of immigration on GHG emissions.

It is worth noting, before considering objections, that Kolankiewicz and Camarota are not claiming that immigrants to the US are responsible for 5 percent of global emissions, but 5 percent of the emissions *increase* from 1980 to 2005. In fact, according to their data, these 37 million people immigrating only made up 1.7% of global emissions in 2005. While this is should be taken seriously, ending immigration to the US would only be a drop in the bucket when it comes to meeting global climate goals.²⁴ Moreover, each of the seven empirical criticisms that I raise in this section suggest that their claim of a 1.7% increase radically overstates the impact of immigration.

First, even Cafaro and Staples III do not propose *ending* immigration, let alone deporting all existing immigrants. Rather, their proposal is to reduce documented immigration to the US from one

²⁴ And if, as I will argue later, curtailing immigration to the US negatively impacts the fight against climate change, then this benefit will be further reduced if not eliminated.

million to two hundred thousand per year and to eliminate undocumented migration by sanctioning employers.²⁵ The green border strategy does not even intend to cut 1.7% of global emissions.

Second, the green border argument relies upon GHG intensive immigration enforcement. While Cafaro and Staples III emphasize employer sanctions as a tool for reducing undocumented immigration, efforts in the US involve—and likely entail—traditional border enforcement.²⁶ The US has, after all, attempted a failed employer sanction program. When it was enacted in 1986, the US “had an estimated four million undocumented persons present” and within 20 years this population had grown to twelve million.²⁷ And though it is *possible* that employer sanctions slowed the growth of undocumented immigration, it was woefully inadequate for ending, let alone reversing this growth.

Rather than seriously stunting the flow of undocumented workers, employer sanction programs primarily serve to weaken workplace protections and to strengthen the ability of businesses to exploit undocumented workers.²⁸ While employer sanctions facially involve coercing businesses into excluding the undocumented, a practical effect has been to give businesses additional leverage—and incentive—to threaten and control an already prone and precarious population.

These policies have also led to discrimination against those that Amy Reed-Sandoval calls “the socially undocumented.”²⁹ These are residents who due to their appearance, including race, accent, socioeconomic class, etc., have their status and treatment negatively impacted by policies aimed at the

²⁵ Cafaro & Staples III, 16.

²⁶ This is particularly true if voters: i) perceive immigration to be a problem and ii) perceive strong immigration policies to involve border policing.

²⁷ Wishnie, 206.

²⁸ Wishnie, 207; Brownell, 86.

²⁹ Reed-Sandoval.

legally undocumented. According to Michael Wishnie, a 1990 “Government Accountability Office (“GAO”) study concluded that employer sanctions had prompted significant discrimination in employment...in a national survey of 4.6 million employers, GAO determined that a startling *19 percent* had engaged in discriminatory behavior.”³⁰ This included making hiring decisions based on name, accent, or appearance to avoid hiring the undocumented. Such discriminatory practices have led to weakened support for such programs, including among the labor unions that initially supported them.³¹ Therefore, not only are they largely ineffective at securing a reduction in undocumented immigration, but they are also unlikely to generate the kinds of popular support needed to make them politically feasible.

This suggests that more traditional forms of border control will be necessary.³² However, physical border enforcement is an energy intensive phenomenon. According to the American Immigration Council the US federal government spent \$333 billion on immigration enforcement between 2003 and January 2021.³³ This involves fencing, using aircraft and vehicles to patrol the border, and maintaining and monitoring surveillance technology. If the purpose of immigration control is to reduce GHG emissions, then these reductions will have to be weighed against emissions from enforcement.

Third, the assumption that we can dramatically cut immigration glosses over the need for immigrant workers. Dependence on the labor of immigrant workers, the reality that US citizens avoid

³⁰ Wishnie, 207.

³¹ Ibid, 208.

³² It is also worth noting that traditional forms of border enforcement have themselves proven to be largely ineffective at slowing, let alone eliminating, undocumented immigration into the US.

³³ American Immigration Council 2021b.

'brown collar' work at the bottom of the job queue,³⁴ and the overall economic benefits of immigration suggest that the likely result of ending pathways to permanent residency and citizenship will be, instead, an increased reliance on temporary labor migration.³⁵ If so, then temporary labor migration—and the increased travel emissions it involves—will have to be weighed against any purported reductions.

Fourth, the green border argument assumes that immigrants would have emitted at the mean level in their sending countries. This is somewhat troubled by the fact that immigrants—especially those admitted through skill-selection or work-related visas—are often relatively educated and affluent. Accordingly, they are likely to have greater than average emissions. To address this Kolankiewicz and Camarota suggest that a more accurate accounting would have immigrants emitting 3.7 rather than 4.1 times more in the US. While this is still considerable, it further diminishes the impact of immigration. This alone decreases the contribution of immigration to the US from 1.7% to 1.48% of global emissions in 2005.

Fifth, calculating the emissions of immigrants depends upon dubious assumptions about the emissions of the average US resident. Kolankiewicz and Camarota determine the emissions of immigrants in the US by identifying the average annual US income of immigrants from each sending country and stipulating that if, for example, the income of immigrants from Mexico is 53.4% of the

³⁴ Milkman, 20-31.

³⁵ While we should not tether ourselves unduly to practical political constraints, any plausible work in non-ideal theory must take seriously the likely outcome of policy changes. Existing incentive structures, power dynamics, and biases cannot be ignored. And in this case, this will almost inevitably lead to an increase in temporary labor migration—an emission intensive process that also further weakens the rights of immigrant workers.

US average, then their emissions will similarly be 53.4% of the US average. However, by using mean rather than median income, their data overstates the significance of the average resident's emissions.

In the US, the top 10% in income produce 50 tons of emissions per capita.³⁶ By contrast, the bottom 50% generates only 8.57 tons per capita. In terms of total emissions, the entire bottom 50% is only responsible for 86% of the emissions from the top 10%. Put differently, “if the wealthiest 10 percent of people worldwide consumed at the level of the average European, global emissions would drop by roughly a third.”³⁷ The “average” immigrant will, therefore, be emitting at a level considerably lower than the mean in high-income receiving countries. Accounting for this will further decrease the carbon footprint of immigration.

Sixth, the claim that immigration to the US constitutes 5% of the increase and 1.7% of total emissions in 2005 assumes that global emissions were 28,193 million metric tons. However, the World Resources Institute puts 2005 global emissions at 44,153 million metric tons.³⁸ Using this number, even the baseline argument presented by Kolankiewicz and Camarota leaves immigration to the US as contributing 1.09% of global emissions in 2005.

Seventh, the argument overstates the extent to which emissions are responsive to changes in population size. Some emissions, like those resulting from military activities, are largely independent of individual consumer actions or population-sensitive state planning. According to CJ Cuomo, although “[n]ations are not required to disclose the environmental impacts of their military operations” the cost is considerable, with the war in Iraq involving an estimated “141 million metric tons of carbon dioxide equivalent, an amount similar to the effects of putting 25 million additional

³⁶ Gore 2015, 10.

³⁷ The Salvage Collective, 25.

³⁸ Herzog 2009.

cars on the road in one year.”³⁹ Similarly, Phyllis Bennis, while remarking on the astronomical emissions *reported* by the US Department of Defense, noted that “the military’s *overseas* emissions are exempted for the US government’s carbon accounting—despite representing a majority of the DoD’s emissions.”⁴⁰

Importantly, overseas military emissions are not obviously responsive to marginal changes in the domestic population. A slightly larger immigrant population will neither necessitate more military conflicts nor demand a larger military force. Therefore, even after we include military emissions in a more accurate carbon accounting, we will have to ensure that these emissions are kept separate from those that more directly increase or decrease with population changes.

This is part of a broader problem with allocating responsibility for emissions that are not sensitive to changes in the size of the population. The emissions generated by space exploration, for example, are not clearly responsive to changes in the size of the population. Moreover, consider recent news from Texas, where cryptocurrency miners are expected to use as much energy as 1.2 million homes over the next year and a half. Not only is Texas doing nothing to stop this, but “Texas has been aggressively courting crypto miners, who are drawn to the state’s cheap power and laissez-faire regulation.”⁴¹ If the emissions generated by the military, cryptocurrency mining, and space exploration are included in national carbon emissions, and we evaluate the impact of immigration by dividing total emissions by the population, then we will be overstating the responsibility of the average person. We will be holding them responsible for emissions that would exist even if they did not.

³⁹ Cuomo, 705.

⁴⁰ Bennis, Jacobin Magazine 2019.

⁴¹ Malik, Bloomberg.

3.2. Lifestyles of Recent & Would-Be Immigrants

In §3.1 I assumed, following Kolankiewicz and Camarota, that an increase in immigrant income is the only effect that immigration has on GHG emissions. This presupposes that: i) immigrants would emit at the same level as others in their income bracket, and ii) immigration leaves the global population untouched. In this section, I provide three reasons to be skeptical of these assumptions. First, recent immigrants emit at a lower level than their incomes suggest. Second, when cultures of migration predominate, would-be immigrants who remain in sending countries likely emit at higher levels than their incomes indicate. And third, rather than leaving the global population unaffected, immigration to high-income countries reduces the global population.

Immigrant populations do not enter as blank slates, ready to immediately take on the cultural values and economic practices of the receiving community. Nor do they occupy the same socioeconomic positions as non-immigrants. Instead, elements of their background culture and lifestyle persist. And their unique situation in receiving societies can similarly affect their behavior. Accordingly, analyses that assume that the relationship between their income and GHG emissions track the current population risk painting with too broad of a brush.

While the environmental behavior of immigrants and native populations are not significantly dissimilar, “immigrants are often more likely than natives to engage in conservation behavior, like saving water.”⁴² Moreover, immigrants “also drive less, live in more densely populated households, and eat fewer processed foods.”⁴³ Insofar as these differences lead to a lower emissions-to-income ratio, immigrants generate a less significant climate burden than their incomes suggest.

⁴² Bohon and Conley, p. 77.

⁴³ Ibid.

The green border argument also presupposes that would-be immigrants would have had the same emissions-to-income ratio as others in their home countries. This is similarly predicated upon immigrant populations being perfect substitutes for the surrounding community. It again paints with too broad of a brush, ignoring the causes of immigration. Migration does not occur within a vacuum. The very conditions and desires that lead people to move across national borders are also likely to change behavior if pathways are closed.

According to the *cumulative causation of migration* theory, “migration affects individual motivations and social structures in ways that encourage additional migration...[it] tends to be a self-reinforcing process that acquires an internal momentum all its own.”⁴⁴ One reason for this is found in the increased social capital wielded by people in immigration-heavy communities. Knowing people who have immigrated provides information that makes it easier to navigate the difficult process of moving to another country.⁴⁵ However, this knowledge and experience also changes values and desires. It “induces changes in tastes and motivations” leading people to “alter their consumption patterns” and to turn away from traditional lifestyles and economic pursuits.⁴⁶ This can lead to increased consumption as they see and emulate the lifestyles of those who emigrated from (and not infrequently return to) the community.⁴⁷

The broader social context changes in part in response to the changes in consumer-based preferences among current residents. However, it also changes the economy in more tangible ways. For example, “farming and other traditional activities [can] lose importance” and “[m]igrants spend

⁴⁴ Massey et al. 1994, 1496.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 1495.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 1498.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 1500.

money collectively on infrastructure and other community projects aimed at transforming the landscape into a place of leisure, a place where migrants and their families can display their status.”⁴⁸ This can even lead to “an increase in the relative sense of deprivation” as would-be immigrants compare themselves to those who have successfully completed the journey.⁴⁹

These changes impact people who have not yet immigrated and therefore maintain effects even if border control prevents immigration. This means that when engaging in a counterfactual comparison of GHG emissions with current levels and with decreased rates of immigration, we must be attentive to the ways in which would-be migrants and their communities have developed habits and values that blend those of sending and receiving societies. Turning immigration into mere migration pressure through the increased use of border control is likely to leave many would-be immigrants in communities where emissions exceed the level expected by their income.

Finally, in §3.1 I assumed that immigration increases per capita income (and, hence, emissions) while leaving the global population untouched. This assumption does not hold. Immigration serves to reduce the global population *relative to a world in which they did not immigrate*. Bohon and Conley find that “immigrants have fewer children in their country of origin than if they had stayed in their country of origin” and so “immigration may actually reduce global economic pressures resulting from overpopulation.”⁵⁰ Thus, while the immediate effect of immigration is the movement of existing people from low- to higher-income countries, the overall effect is a decrease in the future global population.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 1501.

⁴⁹ Fussell and Massey, 153.

⁵⁰ Bohon and Conley, p. 75.

3.3. *Endogenous & Exogenous Population Growth*

Before ending this section, I want to return to the claim that global population management depends on state control over immigration. This argument proceeds as follows.

- (1) In order to combat climate change, we need to *both* reduce per capita emissions *and* reduce the global population.
- (2) The only way to meaningfully address the global population is through domestic population management.
- (3) States cannot manage their domestic population without border control—otherwise all domestic progress can be undermined by population flows.
- (4) Therefore, to combat climate change, states must control their borders.

The problem is that this argument conflates *exogenous* and *endogenous* sources of population growth.⁵¹ *If* states have a duty to reduce their populations, the duty must primarily involve limiting the domestic birth rate rather than reducing the domestic population full stop.⁵²

To see this conflation, consider again Cafaro and Staples III's claim that doubling the US population will require that we cut total emissions by 58.5% to reach 1990 levels.⁵³ This is predicated upon the US having the same emissions target regardless how it came to have its current population. If the US doubled in population due to an increase in the domestic birth rate, then it is plausible to

⁵¹ I am using them colloquially, referring only to whether the source of population growth is from within the country (decreased mortality or an increased birthrate) or from outside of the country (immigration).

⁵² I only assume that this duty exists for the sake of the argument. I suspect that most strategies for promoting reductions in the birth rate will violate other demands of justice—they will exacerbate racist stereotypes, will run counter to principles of reproductive justice, and will orient our focus in the wrong direction.

⁵³ Cafaro & Staples III, 11.

argue that they must make a corresponding decrease in emissions. However, this is less clear if the US doubled in population due solely to immigration. This would, after all, lead to a similar reduction in emissions for the sending country. Emissions targets must be sensitive to exogenous changes in population.

Consider, for example, a hypothetical future where two groups of humans live on the moon. Each group is comprised of one thousand people and both groups come to an agreement: to survive with the resources at their disposal, each must cut their populations to eight hundred within the next two generations. Both take the necessary internal steps to change the per capita growth rate, and both are on pace to hit eight hundred within two generations. However, two hundred people decide to move from community A to community B. The result is that B is on pace for one thousand and A is on pace for six hundred residents at the end of the two-generation timeline.

Despite B being on pace to exceed their limit, both communities met their obligations. They took the appropriate steps and reached the target reductions in their per capita growth rate. That migration—an exogenous source of population growth—led community B to have two hundred more, and community A two hundred fewer, residents is not relevant. Their duty is *not* to meet a specific population, independent from changes in other communities. Their duty is, instead, to meet a population target that is sensitive to available resources and the global population. If their population increases due to decreases elsewhere (immigration), an increase in global resources (or an increase in efficiency), or if the global population decreases, then their targets would change.

Now there might be a wrinkle here. Revisiting the analogy, perhaps community B is more profligate in its use of resources. Because of this, moving two hundred people from A to B leads to an unsustainable population. While this makes the problem more complicated—and shows that state-level GHG emission targets must be responsive to population changes that result from immigration—it does not mean that states cannot meet their obligations to reduce per capita population growth or

to reduce their overall GHG emissions without controlling immigration. At most it means that high-emitting states that see their populations rise because of immigration have a duty to *either* further decrease per capita emissions *or* to make further reductions to per capita population growth. Whether this is required, and the extent to which they need to make changes, would depend upon the overall relative increase in emissions generated by immigration.⁵⁴

Returning to our world, we can imagine a hypothetical future where the US has used domestic policy measures to decrease its per capita endogenous growth rate—as well as its level of consumption and emissions—to an “acceptable” level. It then receives a large influx of immigrants, many of whom come from countries with a higher birth rate. Accordingly, the birth rate in the US increases slightly. However, the population of the sending society decreases, *and* the global per capita growth rate will drop as well (given that the birth rate of immigrant populations drops in high-income countries).

This hypothetical US has, on any plausible metric, made considerable progress in meeting (if it has not in fact met) any population goals that the green border theorist could demand. Given the increase in global GHG emissions, the US might still have duties to reduce per capita GHG emissions, but this is not the same claim as the one made by green border theorists—that the US cannot address domestic population growth without the ability to control and significantly curtail immigration. And their duty to do so will depend upon a more complicated calculation whereby population and emission targets are reallocated in response to exogenous population changes.

The goal is to reduce global GHG emissions. National emissions are only relevant insofar as they contribute to this and insofar as they can be more feasibly addressed through policy decisions. If the entire global population immigrated to the US, the government would not have a duty to reduce its population down to, say, 200 or 300 million. Nor would it have the same emissions targets that it

⁵⁴ As I argued above, this increase is less considerable than the green border theorists suggest.

had when its population was 4% of the global total. It makes a significant difference, from the perspective of climate change, *how* the population increased. Endogenous and exogenous sources are importantly distinct, and the duty to modify the former is not undermined by an inability to control the latter.

In this section I have raised three general problems for the green border argument. First, even if the incomes and the emissions-to-income ratio of immigrant populations are as significant as is assumed, immigration leads to a smaller *increase* in global GHG emissions than is suggested. Second, there is evidence that immigrants in high-income countries have lower than expected emissions-to-income ratios, that would-be immigrants in sending societies have higher emissions-to-income ratios, and that immigration leads to a decrease in the global population. Finally, the claim that states cannot meet their population reduction requirements without resorting to immigration control conflates exogenous and endogenous sources of population growth. In the remainder of the paper, I will explain why the green border argument is both normatively incoherent and that it would, if acted on, undermine the fight against climate change.

4. Green Borders, Poverty, & the Progressive's Dilemma

Insofar as the green border position requires restricting immigration—and since many would-be immigrants are fleeing violence, poverty, or climate change—we might think it fails to show sufficient concern for the suffering of current humans, focusing unduly on the interests of future generations. To address this, the progressive green border theorist argues that we have a duty to those suffering from these harms but that it can be discharged *either* by admission *or* by working to mitigate the

injustices that they suffer. They suggest tightening immigration control while, for example, increasing efforts to address global poverty.⁵⁵

In this section I draw attention to the dilemma this poses for the green border theorist. If they endorse using other measures to end global poverty, then they undermine the green border argument. If they maintain a coherent green border argument, then they must argue that we should at least ignore global poverty and that we might even have a duty to ensure that it persists.

The green border argument begins with the claim that climate change results from the global population multiplied by per capita GHG emissions. And since income has a strong positive correlation with emissions, we can see climate change as resulting from the global population multiplied by per capita income. The obvious problem is that poverty reduction increases incomes and, hence, increases per capita emissions. The strong positive correlation between income and emissions does not depend upon *how* emissions increases come about, whether through immigration, aid, or other development strategies.⁵⁶ Accordingly, immigration and other poverty reduction strategies will stand or fall together. If a concern over climate change and future generations demands that we end the former, then they will similarly undermine the justification for the latter.

The green border theorist assumes that we have a duty to mitigate global poverty and suffering. In this they are correct. The hypocrisy of refusing to work towards ending—let alone taking steps to maintain—global poverty and suffering would be unbearable. High-income countries are largely responsible for climate change. Low-income countries experience the worst effects of climate change. And high-income countries are at least partially responsible for—and have benefitted from—the

⁵⁵ Cafaro and Staples III; David Miller 2005, 198.

⁵⁶ Peter Higgins raised a similar objection against Robert Chapman, noting that “[w]hat Chapman’s concern requires he oppose is improving the standard of living of the poor, regardless of the location of their residence” (96).

poverty and instability of low-income countries.⁵⁷ To then cite climate change as a justification for perpetuating their poverty while maintaining our immense affluence and emissions is a clear rejection of their moral equality and ignores our responsibility for past, present, and future injustices.

However, the hypocrisy of the US closing its borders based on a “concern for the environment” is no more bearable. As argued by Eileen Crist, “affluent countries cannot export environmental destruction...and, at the same time, refuse entry to foreigners on the ground of protecting their own environments.”⁵⁸ And their claim to do so is no more plausible when focused on the environments of other countries. High-income countries are not merely exporting destruction and refusing to allow those affected to leave. They are also preventing poor people from increasing their income (and emissions) *so that* they can maintain high-income, high-emissions lifestyles. According to Alex Sager, this “is morally obtuse. It amounts to privileged people using force to preserve their privilege by excluding others so that they can continue their unsustainable lifestyle.”⁵⁹ In a world where emissions are at a premium, the privileges of high-income countries increasingly depend upon the poverty of others.

Moreover, if our focus is on how human movement constructs the problem of climate change, then we would be better suited looking towards the mobility of the affluent.⁶⁰ For example, global

⁵⁷ As Turner and Bailey note, “the ‘winners’ and ‘losers’ of the global economy are structural legacies of European colonialism and industrialization, made possible by resource extraction, dispossession, slavery, exploitation, and dispossession of colonised people” (124).

⁵⁸ Crist, 209.

⁵⁹ Sager, 72.

⁶⁰ This is, as Adrian Favell notes (see Brettell and Hollifield, 262-271), a problem that results from methodological nationalism. We fetishize the nation-state, defining immigration by virtue of whether (and for how long) you crossed a national border. This focuses on attention on “immigrants” who move a hundred miles from Northern Mexico into Texas,

tourism constitutes an estimated 8% of global GHG emissions and has a growth rate of 4% per year.⁶¹ Global tourism, therefore, contributes 4.7 times more to the global carbon total than does immigration to the US—even using the inflated number provided by Kolankiewicz and Camarota. And unlike immigration to the US, these are *mere* luxury emissions, unnecessary for human flourishing or even a life decently lived.

Similarly, Monica Aufrecht notes that the average US resident of the lower forty-eight states emits a per capita average of two tons of CO₂ per year. At the same time, those who live in Alaska emit 6.9 tons per capita.⁶² Moving from the average US state to Alaska more than triples an already high rate of emissions. Therefore, if high-income countries are concerned about the emissions generated by mobility, it would make more sense to regulate the voluntary movement of US residents to Alaska and the unnecessary global tourism of the affluent.

The green border theorist has three choices. First, they could reject aid *and* immigration. However, this is not a morally viable path, particularly when high-income countries are emitting at their current levels. High-income countries bear responsibility for climate change and global poverty; they are perpetuating poverty, precarity, and early death in the short- and medium-term; and they would be doing so *while maintaining their own privilege*.

Second, they could seek to justify poverty reduction strategies while tightening border control. This is empirically untenable. The effects of poverty reduction on global per capita emissions undermine any ostensible gains made by immigration restrictions. Moreover, there is reason to think

rather than the jetsetter who travels from Seattle to Europe multiple times per month, or the Floridian who moves to Alaska for a slightly better paying job.

⁶¹ Lenzen et al, 522.

⁶² Aufrecht, 60.

that immigration is more compatible with fighting climate change than other forms of poverty mitigation. High-income countries can seek to break the current emissions-to-income ratio through green technology.

For example, while green energy sources (e.g., solar, wind, and hydropower) do not necessarily decrease per capita income levels, they can decrease the GHG emissions associated with energy production and use. High-income receiving countries can exert greater control over energy production and other forms of green tech domestically than in other countries. Accordingly, they have greater power to diminish the environmental effects of poverty reduction if it occurs through immigration than if it results from aid or trade.

Third, they could acknowledge that neither immigration control nor a refusal to engage in poverty reduction are morally justifiable strategies for addressing climate change, especially when high-income countries are consuming and emitting at anything near current levels. This is, I suggest, the appropriate position. It both respects the claims of would-be immigrants and better fits with the empirical realities surrounding climate change and mobility. However, as should be clear, accepting it requires that we abandon the green border argument.

5. On the Logic of Bridges & Walls

In previous sections I explained why the green border argument is mistaken about the empirical benefits of immigration control as well as why global poverty poses a significant challenge to the coherence of the green border strategy. In this section I explain how the green border strategy suffers from deep practical problems. It helps construct undesirable and misguided attitudes about climate change, the responsibility of would-be immigrants, and the nature of solutions.

Borders are not a fine-grained instrument with narrowly tailored effects. Instead, they are blunt tools that can have cascading consequences. Most obviously, they undermine the autonomy of would-

be immigrants, ensuring that they remain trapped in undesirable circumstances. They also turn circular patterns of migration into long-term undocumented residency.⁶³ When physical, they can damage the natural environment and undermine the migratory patterns of animals. However, they also help change attitudes, relationships, power dynamics, and incentive structures.

Drawing on this last point, I conclude the section by arguing that closed borders help high-income countries avoid one of the (ostensible) costs of climate change, thereby changing their incentive structures. While borders do nothing to stop the flow of GHGs, and little to stop the movement of high-emitting corporations and global tourists, they *do* regulate the movement of those fleeing these effects. And insofar as high-income countries believe high rates of immigration to be a threat to many domestic values, the ability to regulate climate migration serves as a tool for mitigating the costs of the climate crisis.

In this section I offer support for a recent claim made by Todd Miller. According to Miller, “Angela Y. Davis said that ‘the refugee movement is *the* movement of the 21st century. It’s the movement that is challenging the effects of global capitalism, and it’s the movement that is calling for civil rights for all human beings.’ And it is, dare I add, the movement that will challenge fossil fuel consumption.”⁶⁴ I explain how borders perpetuate the climate crisis as well as how fighting for an open border politic can push high-income countries to confront the climate crisis more directly, pursuing the kinds of mitigation and global adaptation strategies that we desperately need.

⁶³ Massey et al. 2014, 1030-1031.

⁶⁴ Miller, *Storming the Wall*, 122-123.

5.1. Mobilizing Anti-Migrant Attitudes

According to Wendy Brown, border performances, including building walls, emphasizing the threat of immigration, and publicly patrolling the border, “do not simply respond to existing nationalism or racism. Rather, they activate them and mobilize them.”⁶⁵ These practices focus on an alleged external threat, allowing the *immigrant other* to replace domestic sources as the cause of injustice, need, and anxiety. Closed border and anti-migrant politics can, over time, construct borders and immigration as central concerns in the public consciousness.⁶⁶

The decision of parties, candidates, and news organizations to center an issue can affect the perception of its importance. For example, in the early 1990s, “public opinion on government-supplied health insurance changed dramatically over a relatively short period of time...in accordance with the prominence of arguments advanced by political elites.”⁶⁷ And according to a recent study, “[a]nti-immigration rhetoric increases negative emotional reactions related to immigrants,” including “outgroup-related health risk; intergroup anxiety; outgroup threat; and aggressive physiological reactions.”⁶⁸

Border politics are particularly effective at changing attitudes. The *other* is clearly delineated, the “needed” protection is immediately present, and the alleged threat is almost infinitely malleable—including welfare, COVID-19, creating unemployment, and destroying the environment. And using

⁶⁵ Brown, 105.

⁶⁶ According to Alex Sager, “anti-immigrant attitudes may come explicitly from government policies that frame immigration as a threat, rather [than] from pre-existing public opposition” (87).

⁶⁷ Koch, 209.

⁶⁸ Conzo et al, 6.

walls and guards to protect against immigration crystallizes the difference between would-be immigrants and the (artificially constructed) population of homogenous citizens.⁶⁹

This, as with any security threat, is fertile and potentially deadly soil for politicians to till. For example, New Zealand's Christchurch shooter justified mass murder by saying that immigration, the birth rate, and climate change are one single problem. He claimed that while "the environment is being destroyed by over population, we Europeans are one of the groups that are not over populating the world. The invaders are the ones over populating the world."⁷⁰ He then claimed that saving the world requires killing "the invaders."

In addition to reinforcing a growing tendency to retreat within the fortresses of bordered states—seeing the *immigrant other* as a threat to our most deeply held values—closed-border politics also aim our attention in the wrong direction. Rather than focusing on transnational corporations, the fossil fuel industry, animal agriculture, global tourism, or luxury yachts, this strategy focuses political energy on the relatively minor contribution made by those who are much worse off and who have contributed far less to the problem.

5.2. Borders as Barriers to Solidarity

The green border strategy also undermines solidarity and cooperation with immigrant populations domestically. Environmentalism has often been a white, middle-class movement. According to Andreas Malm, "[i]n American environmentalism, pristine nature has long been held up as a crucifix against the advancing and seething nonwhite masses, whose proclivity to pollute brings doom upon

⁶⁹ Walia, 80.

⁷⁰ Malm, 151.

the planet.”⁷¹ The green border strategy reinforces this tendency, further alienating a growing population and reinforcing the extent to which environmentalism is becoming a fringe movement. According to recent polling, only 41% of US adults identified as environmentalists in March 2021, down from a high of 78% in 1991.⁷² In a country that is increasingly nonwhite, and that has a significant low-income population, white bourgeois movements will not suffice to achieve the mass support needed to fight the climate crisis.

The green border strategy also increases the precarity and proneness of the undocumented and their communities. According to Philip Radford, even “[t]he United States’ current immigration policy forces vulnerable communities to keep silent about corporate pollution for fear of having their lives and families torn apart.”⁷³ The fear of deportation keeps people from alerting authorities about environmental degradation. Increasing their precarity makes it even less likely that those workers and residents most often exposed to corporate pollution will speak out.⁷⁴

This is of particular concern when the green border strategy does not *merely* advocate for restricting legal pathways to entry and citizenship, but when it also involves efforts at eliminating undocumented residency. Despite draconian enforcement measures and massive levels of deportation, the US has maintained a considerable population of undocumented immigrants. To satisfy the green border demand that the US end undocumented immigration will require much more aggressive policies, both at and within the border.

⁷¹ Ibid., 142.

⁷² Jones, Gallup Politics.

⁷³ Radford.

⁷⁴ Ibid.

As noted above, internal enforcement harms the socially as well as the legally undocumented. Recent polling shows that 58% of citizens, 65% of lawful permanent residents, and 78% of non-lawful permanent residents are afraid that they or someone they care about will be deported.⁷⁵ 287(g) programs—wherein local law enforcement officers are deputized to enforce federal immigration laws and to work with Immigration and Customs Enforcement—have led to rampant racial profiling, arrests for petty offenses, and have undermined support for and trust in law enforcement within immigrant communities.⁷⁶ And employer sanction programs weaken workplace protections, push down wages, and increases employment discrimination against both documented and undocumented immigrants.⁷⁷ Such policies will not help rebuild broad support for environmental movements.

This troubling schism also extends beyond state borders. Closed-border politics affect the relationship between states that enact immigration restrictions and their neighbors. In a recent survey, “the presence of border infrastructure lowered evaluations of the countries [who enacted such policies] and eroded perceptions of the quality of their international relationships.”⁷⁸ One effect was to signal “unfriendliness and a motive to create distance.”⁷⁹ This furthers a division between the relatively privileged residents of high-income countries and the globally least advantaged—many of whom are first experiencing the most severe consequences of the climate crisis.

Climate change, however, is a uniquely difficult problem that demands robust global cooperation. The spatially and geographically diffuse effects, compounded with a lack of institutional

⁷⁵ Lopez et al.

⁷⁶ American Immigration Council, 2021a.

⁷⁷ Wishnie, 207.

⁷⁸ Mutz and Simmons, 4-5.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 5.

mechanisms for solving the crisis and an incentive to continue emitting, make most strategies ineffective.⁸⁰ We cannot fight against the wanton emissions of TNCs—especially the fossil fuel industry—from within the divided fortresses of bordered nation-states. This struggle requires a coalition of all affected. Rather than divisions and bordered thinking, we need to emphasize strategies that facilitate global sympathy and cooperation.

5.3. Canaries in the Climate Coal Mine

Borders do not *just* change relationships and attitudes. They also help states segregate costs and benefits, ensuring that the effects of their policies are not felt (or not felt as strongly) domestically.⁸¹ They promote the free movement of capital, permit selective and controlled movement of labor, and do little to constrain the influence of high-income countries. They contain distinct legal and regulatory systems, letting transnational corporations “shop around” for more lucrative locations.

But borders also help contain the costs of war, production, trade, and climate change. Political destabilization, lowered tax revenue, and unemployment primarily have domestic effects, even if these sometimes filter across state lines. And while climate change is not contained by borders, its effects are disproportionately felt based on geographical location. Borders also help contain the movement of people, ensuring that those who would otherwise flee these effects are (largely) trapped in place.

Borders help externalize costs and internalize benefits. For example, consider a country engaging in a war of regime change to secure reliable access to strategic oil reserves. With open borders, one effect would be the largescale exodus of people from the affected region, including many seeking refuge in the responsible country. However, borders help turn increased rates of immigration

⁸⁰ Stephen Gardiner, *A Perfect Moral Storm*.

⁸¹ This argument draws heavily on material from [redacted for anonymous review].

into mere immigration pressure; they let them contain this perceived cost, ensuring that the profit of their military operation is not drowned out by the perceived costs of immigration.

While climate change is a global phenomenon, its effects are disproportionately felt in low-income countries in the Global South. Not only does the geographic location of many high-income countries affect the severity of climate change, but their wealth allows them to better weather these costs. The geographical segregation of costs and benefits is one reason for the delay in responding to climate change: “if the gains were coterminous with the losses, they would not justify keeping the fires alive. Only because the multitudes first sentenced to die are nonwhite and out of the way can combustion be allowed to continue.”⁸² Segregation, with borders dividing those who matter from those who do not, and with costs being borne most heavily by those beneath the notice of high-income countries, does much to justify the status quo.

Borders and spatial segregation also help construct the climate crisis more directly. While they serve as barriers to the movement of people—largely poor people of color—they do little to constrain the movement of capital, corporation, and GHGs. Instead, according to Reece Jones, they create “pools of exploitable resources, with rules on extraction and access that differ across territories.”⁸³ Borders play a key role in the construction of sacrifice zones within which hyper-exploitation, high rates of pollution, and the extraction of fossil fuels can occur outside of the regulatory space—and

⁸² Malm, 319-20.

⁸³ Jones, 143.

away from the protected citizen—of high-income countries.⁸⁴ This allows high-income countries to formally embrace more sustainable environmental standards while still benefitting from their flouting.

Borders and free trade agreements also help incentivize high-polluting activities by transnational corporations. As low-income countries compete for TNCs with resources that exceed their national GDP, they often are compelled to lower, or at least refrain from raising, environmental standards. And the mobility of TNCs combines with free trade agreements to empower corporate pollution in low-income countries. This is seen in the example of METALCLAD suing for lost profits because authorities in San Luis Potosi would not issue a permit for a hazardous waste dump.⁸⁵ A NAFTA tribunal awarded them millions for their lost profits.

The geographical segregation of costs and benefits is also why immigration is one effect of climate change. As countries in the Global South first experience the most life-altering effects of climate change—and lack the material resources to adapt to them—the response is often to move towards more inhabitable climates. This response would be less rational if the effects were felt everywhere equally. And although much climate migration is internal, “three regions (Latin America, sub-Saharan Africa, and Southeast Asia) will generate 143 million more climate migrants by 2050.”⁸⁶ And according to a UN report, “there may be as many as 200 million climate-displaced people

⁸⁴ Naomi Klein describes how “[e]xtractivism is...directly connected to the notion of sacrifice zones—places that, to their extractors, somehow don’t count and therefore can be poisoned, drained, or otherwise destroyed, for the supposed greater good of economic progress” (169).

⁸⁵ Todd Miller 2019, 171-172.

⁸⁶ Podesta.

worldwide by 2050.”⁸⁷ Climate change will increase the serious weather events, food insecurity, political instability, and poverty that lead to international migration.

Government officials and security experts in high-income countries have long identified immigration as one of the major threats posed by climate change. In 2012 a report from academics and experts in Israel suggested that increased border protection will be necessary as the effects of climate change heighten immigration pressure.⁸⁸ A 2003 Pentagon report on climate migration held that “[b]orders will be strengthened around the country to hold back unwanted starving immigrants from the Caribbean islands..., Mexico, and South America.”⁸⁹ And in 2015 at a Defense, National Security, and Climate Change Symposium, Brigadier General Stephen Cheney discussed at length the security threats posed by climate change. A main way it does so is by “driving internal and cross-border migration.”⁹⁰ A consistent theme in the political and security industry responses to climate change has been hand wringing over the inevitable increase in migration pressure.

This anxiety occurs, however, in a world riven with physical and technological borders. In this world, the US government can begin security checks several countries before would-be immigrants ever meet the US border.⁹¹ Though these are far from infallible tools, they offer some ability to control migration flows. They let them stave off what they perceive to be one of the more imminent risks associated with climate change.

⁸⁷ Watson.

⁸⁸ Todd Miller 2017, 144.

⁸⁹ Walia, 208.

⁹⁰ Todd Miller 2017, p. 48.

⁹¹ See generally, Todd Miller 2019.

The green border strategy helps high-income countries continue avoiding the “costs” of climate change, offering progressive support for brutal regimes of border control. As discussed above, this strategy breaks two political poles that had long existed in western democracies. Progressive opposition has helped maintain pressure on politicians to at least nominally fight for protections for immigrants and would-be immigrants. Giving closed-border politics a progressive veneer changes the electoral calculations of politicians and significantly strengthens the right-wing anti-immigrant agenda.

While this matters for the protection of immigrant rights, I am focused here on how it affects climate policy. I suggest that a closed-border politic makes high-income countries like the US *less likely* to pursue the needed mitigation and global adaptation strategies. It does so by removing the (or one of the) clearest short- and medium-term perceived threats—one that must, from their perspective, be mitigated and regarding which adaptation is not possible.

Officials in high-income countries display at best an ambivalent attitude towards the climate crisis. Progressive politicians promote unbridled military spending, subsidies for animal agriculture, offshore drilling, and domestic fracking while formally agreeing to measures that are woefully inadequate to solve the problem. Right-wing politicians, on the other hand, have oscillated between denial and exuberance. For an example of the latter, Trump’s Secretary of State Mike Pompeo called “the melting sea ice a source of ‘opportunity and abundance.’”⁹² The widely known reality of the climate crisis has done little to motivate the radical changes needed—let alone verbal support for such policies.

However, high-income countries have shown marked concern about the alleged threat posed by immigration and a stunning ability to enact substantive changes to immigration policy. This suggests something important about climate migration; namely, that it appears to weigh more heavily than the

⁹² The Salvage Collective, 53.

direct effects of climate change in the deliberations of political and military elites.⁹³ Unlike the invisible movement of GHGs, the intermittent increase in storms, the creeping rise of sea levels, and heat that can be shut out by insulated walls and soothed by air conditioning, immigration is seen as a direct and immediate threat to security and national interests. And there are only two clear strategies for preventing immigration: 1) the use of coercive borders or 2) working to remove the conditions that predictably lead to large rates of immigration.

The green border argument empowers states to deploy, and increase the strength and scope of, the first strategy. By removing progressive opposition to a closed-border politic, it risks giving high-income countries almost unchecked power to regulate migration flows. And while this creates its own problems of justice—the effects on would-be immigrant communities, the undocumented in the US, and the socially undocumented—it also undermines the need for states to pursue mitigation and global adaptation strategies. Border walls might not stop the flow of GHGs, heat, or severe weather events, but they can stop the flow of humans, preventing high-income countries from experiencing what they see as one of the most significant costs of climate change. At least in the short- and medium-term, border control removes one of the major incentives for high-income countries in the Global North to directly and aggressively confront the climate crisis.

If progressives fought instead for the rights of immigrants, undermining the ability of politicians to pursue more tightly regulated borders, high-income countries would have a clearer incentive to pursue the second strategy for preventing climate migration. Rather than trying to regulate the flow of people desperately trying to flee the immediate effects of climate change, they would be pushed to respond to the causes of migration. Here, this means working towards climate change mitigation and global adaptation.

⁹³ Or, at least, it is a relatively costless policy measure that mobilizes residents and is broadly politically popular.

5.4. On Generational Lag & the Timescale of Immigration

There is, of course, generational lag in the effects of climate change. Even if we achieved net-zero emissions tomorrow, the effects would continue compounding.⁹⁴ This is a key reason why high-income countries have failed to take action to confront the climate crisis. However, it also means that climate migration will, no matter what we do, continue for the near future. Therefore, we might think that attempting to prevent climate migration by addressing its environmental antecedents will be no more successful in motivating a response from short-term political actors than is the climate crisis itself.⁹⁵ While this is true, there are still reasons why concerns over migration would lead to more rapid and significant responses to the climate crisis in high-income countries.

First, the Global South experiences the worst effects of climate change. However, another way of looking at this is to note that the Global South experiences the worst effects of climate change *first*. As temperatures continue increasing, severe weather continues worsening, and sea levels continue rising, the Global South will continue experiencing more deadly costs of climate change. However, the Global North will also suffer increasingly severe costs. Their geographical location and wealth just mean that a greater temperature increase is required to reach comparably harmful effects. Climate migration will impact high-income countries sooner than will the other serious effects of climate change, incentivizing mitigation strategies on a shorter timescale.

Second, a focus on preventing the causes of climate migration incentivizes global rather than local adaptation strategies. There has been a tendency to focus on local adaptation, or “adaptation *in situ*” where the goal is “assisting communities to continue...to live their lives and earn their livelihoods

⁹⁴ Gardiner, 402.

⁹⁵ I would like to thank [Name redacted] for prodding me to think more carefully about this problem.

without having to move.”⁹⁶ The growing recognition that many communities will have to be relocated has forced scholars to reckon with the global, and interconnected, nature of viable adaptation strategies. However, increasing the power of high-income countries to exercise discretionary control over immigration allows them to ignore this change in perspective. The inevitable need for relocation need not shape the incentive structures of high-income states far removed from these local tragedies *if* they can shut their doors and refuse their petitions.

The siloed perspective of high-income countries in the Global North has long shaped climate policy. In *Climate Leviathan*, Wainwright and Mann lament the refusal of global elites to take seriously mitigation strategies when they might have been most successful.⁹⁷ Not only was mitigation perceived to be too costly to pursue, but many of those also benefitting the most fell outside of the political calculations of high-income countries. With this incentive structure in mind, “[i]n 2010, Mike Davis imagined a ‘not improbable scenario’ in which mitigation ‘would be tacitly abandoned...in favour of accelerated investment in selective adaptation for the Earth’s first-class passengers.’⁹⁸ This “not improbable scenario” fits the current trajectory of the US and other high-income countries. Given its wealth and geographic location, the US can focus first on domestic adaptation, and second, on ensuring that prominent trading partners and allies are able to maintain a modicum of stability.

An open border politic, however, pushes back against this tendency. If high-income countries like the US cannot achieve the political support needed to coercively prevent climate migration—let alone achieve the reductions advocated for by Cafaro and Staples III—then mitigation and global adaptation strategies will become more rational. They will have little choice but to address the causes

⁹⁶ Huq, World Resources Institute.

⁹⁷ Wainwright and Mann, 28.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*

of migration—causes which will ultimately have similar effect on us all if the warning of the climate canaries is left unheeded.

6. Green Bridges: Climate Justice & Justice for Migrants

In this paper I have largely bracketed the justice claims of migrant communities and have sought to explain why the green border argument is, from a purely empirical and practical perspective, counterproductive. This is not because I am unconvinced of the moral claims of immigrants; far from it. Instead, my motivation is two-fold. First, I intend to engage with the green border argument on its own terms, showing that even if we begin from the perspective that immigration control is a neutral tool to be used to further policy ends, these ends are undermined by their strategy. Second, I want to show progressives and others on the left why they should not reject the green border argument, but how their fight for climate justice can coincide with their desire to fight for the rights of immigrant immigrants and would-be immigrants.

The primary goal is to change how we think about immigration and the climate. Rather than seeing immigration and environmental justice as discrete questions or seeing them as interwoven but where a concern for the environment requires that we tighten border control, I aim to show that those on the political left can and should fight for immigration justice and environmental justice at the same time. To illustrate this, I have tried to engage carefully with what a world looks like where we deploy the green border strategy. The counterfactual comparison, one involving all the messy details of immigration enforcement and questions of poverty amelioration, shows that the green border approach cannot succeed. Closing our borders will *not* help save the environment. In fact, doing so will undermine our ability to do so in the long term.

We desperately need green bridges, not green borders. With a crisis as deeply global, interconnected, and intergenerational as climate change we cannot retreat to the petty fortresses of

the nation-state. Doing so undermines efforts at building cross-border coalitions, grassroots movements, and international solidarity. It focuses our attention on external causes and internal effects. It increases the precarity and proneness of the undocumented inside the US. And, importantly, it reinforces the tendency to treat other countries as sites for extraction and exploitation—tendencies that exacerbate the problem of climate change. Bordered thinking has helped cause the climate crisis. It will not solve it.

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