

Book Review: FREEDOM- The Case for Open Borders¹

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I was pleased to have been invited to review this book. At the outset I must declare an interest as a trustee for a charity which supports migrants in the UK, I have long believed migration to be a positive benefit to local communities and host nations and have written previously for this journal about land, borders and sovereignty.² I was interested therefore to read this recently published book by Joss Sheldon, which makes the political, economic, social and philosophical case for a world where freedom of movement is celebrated as a right for all. As welcoming strangers is one of the tenets of Kenarchy, it is highly appropriate to review it here.

Sheldon opens with the 2015 US Presidential election race - Trump has denounced immigration and declared his intention to build a wall to stem to the influx of illegal immigrants. Countering this, the author invites us into a remarkable re-imagining of Hilary Clinton's speech in response, before an adulatory crowd she declares; "Immigrants Make America Great!", "Immigrants create jobs! They are the lifeblood of innovation!", "America was built by immigrants for immigrants", "the Founding Fathers were immigrants", "Immigrants create more jobs than they fill", "Immigrants save lives!", "Immigrants build the homes we live in!", "Open the borders!", "Let's make America the Land of the Free!".³ A very different perspective on how to Make America Great Again.

This opening salvo sets the tone for the rest of the book, where the statistics our re-imagined Clinton uses are unpacked and analysed. Using detailed research, Sheldon sets about providing evidence to justify each of the claims above and many more. Starting with the History of Movement he journeys through migration in the natural world, societies which nurture movement, the necessity of movement, whether migrants should integrate or contribute, their role in job creation, the economic benefits - offering detailed capitalist and anti-capitalist cases for free movement set against the immense costs of border control, why immigrants achieve so much compared to non-migrants, a defence of freedom of movement and a proposed roadmap for change.

In the history section, we learn that the oldest known peace treaty was based around a border, that borders are the cause of violence and even in allegorical tales such as Cain and Abel, we see the tensions between sedentary farmers and nomadic pastoralists.

¹ Joss Sheldon. Freedom: The case for open borders. (Self-published: Amazon, 2024).

² Mike D. Winter. Kenarchy as a counterpolitical resource: re-imagining our understanding of land and nature (2020, The Kenarchy Journal 1 (4): 46-61).

³ Sheldon, 2024, pp. 16-22.

Modern borders and nation states are incredibly recent and not the historical norm. We have been a nomadic species for the past 250,000 years, only settling with nation states and borders in the last few hundred. In Great Britain, we have only had a hard border and passports since just before the Great War – in 1872 a government minister stated, “By the existing law of Great Britain, all foreigners have the unrestricted right of entrance and residency in this country.”⁴ The situation we find ourselves in now is that, “every portion of land is wrapped inside a border, an imaginary line drawn by a powerful minority, but it wasn’t always like this. It’s a deviation from the norm..”⁵

There is a great deal of focus in the book on the economic benefits of migration with plenty of examples, including the benefit International Students bring to their host nation’s GDP, how remittances home from migrants working overseas can increase their home nation’s GDP by significant amounts.⁶ Indeed, remittances make up the largest source of foreign income for some countries. Sheldon claims (with evidence) that opening borders would eradicate poverty. Borders create a geographical inequality where, just by accident of birth, someone can end up being in the wealthiest 4% of people, not because their work is more special, but because by chance they were born in a place where the levels of pay allow for this. Opening borders would enable wages to equalise, where the cost of labour would be the same in any place – much the same as some goods have a single global price. He also offers a critique of micro-finance initiatives, citing an example where someone in Bangladesh would have to work for a lifetime to earn as much as they could in just 8 weeks working in the USA.⁷ Whilst I understand the need for the detailed economic arguments, for me the basic principle that all should have the right to freely move on this good Earth, a shared resource upon which we find ourselves living, could have been more robustly emphasised earlier on in the book and not left to the closing pages.

Despite the populist view, migration is not all one way from developing countries to the so-called developed world, nor is this book limited solely to academic and economic theory. Sheldon shares his lived experience as a migrant, having decided to go to India to help financially facilitate his career as a writer; he has since gone on to live in several countries and remains a migrant outside of the UK.

I understand why Sheldon has self-published this book. In the current hostile environment, migration is reported as and generally believed to be a universally bad thing, so there is probably little appetite for traditional publishers to take a risk on this work. Indeed, he ably demonstrates how

⁴ Ibid., p. 63

⁵ Ibid., p. 75.

⁶ Ibid., p. 130.

⁷ Ibid., pp. 148-9.

wrong the hostility to migration is, particularly the patent economic benefits to both host and home nations. However there were many times when, as I read, I really wished Sheldon had employed the services of a copy editor. He makes excellent, well-argued points using detailed evidence, but then follows up by making the same points again with additional but similar evidence. His intention is to reinforce, but I found the repetition frustrating. He is a powerful writer; for example, Clinton's re-imagined speech is immersive and full of energy, but some sections are much longer than needed.

Despite these misgivings, Sheldon has written a fully referenced work which attempts to confront most common objections to migration. It offers the reader numerous helpful examples of the benefits of free movement. If you are someone who finds positive conversation with others about migration difficult and would benefit from additional resources to help make the case for welcoming strangers, then this book is a must.