

# Race, Racism, and Immigration: A Critical Appraisal of Immigration Policies in the West

*Jeffry V. Ocaj*

*Eastern Visayas State University*

*Sheldon Ives Go Agaton*

*Eastern Visayas State University*

## Abstract

Human migration has never been as important a research topic as social scientists in today's rapidly globalizing society considered it to be. Ever since the dawn of civilization, humans moved from one place to the other in search for food and security. In fact, driven by food shortage, as well as issues about national security and freedom, many people today from less developed countries are immigrating illegally to rich and developed countries. As a result, these rich and developed countries, such as the United States, the United Kingdom, Canada, and Australia, tighten their immigration policies and border controls. As we can see, this recent political issue has triggered a lively debate among scholars and common citizens alike. For sure, central to this debate is the question of whether or not it is racist to limit immigration. In this paper, we will critically appraise the issues of racism and immigration in the West, particularly in Germany, United States, United Kingdom, and Canada. We will specifically address the question: Is it racist to limit immigration? Although local people in some countries in the West display racist attitude as can be seen in their reluctance to admit refugees and immigrants, this paper takes the position that in most cases the act of managing immigration through tighter policies is done primarily for socio-economic reasons. Hence, this paper argues that the attempt of any government to limit the admission of immigrants into its territory is not inherently racist.

**Keywords:** *Race, Racism, Migration, Immigration, Racial Self-Interest*

## Introduction

In recent years, several rich and developed countries have tightened their immigration policies and border controls in an attempt to limit the influx of immigrants, especially those from less developed countries. In New Zealand, for instance, the Green Party and Salvation Army have pushed for the reduction of the current level of immigration. In fact, the Green Party co-leader James Shaw had introduced in October 2016 a new immigration policy that put a cap of about one percent on immigration numbers, which even included New Zealanders who were returning from abroad (Patterson, 2016). More interestingly, in the United States, former President Donald Trump had issued the now infamous refugee and travel ban, which is commonly called as the ‘Muslim ban’. As is well-known, this ban has kept refugees from entering the US for the next 120 days since its signing. It also lowered the cap for refugee admissions from 110, 000 to 50, 000 (Bouie, 2017).

This recent move to tighten immigration policies and border controls on the part of the rich and developed countries has triggered a lively debate among scholars and common citizens alike. For sure, central to this debate is the question of whether or not it is racist to limit immigration. Although local people in some countries in the West display racist attitude as can be seen in their reluctance to admit refugees and immigrants, this paper takes the position that in most cases the act of managing immigration through tighter policies is done primarily for socio-economic reasons. Hence, this paper argues that the attempt of any government to limit the admission of immigrants into its territory is not inherently racist. In what follows, we will briefly develop and defend this position.

The paper begins with a discussion on the meaning of race and racism, as well as the nature and dynamics of immigration. This is important as it provides the context of the race-immigration nexus and the resulting argument that the attempt of several rich and developed countries to limit immigration is not premised on the

concept of racism but primarily on socio-economic reasons. The paper then proceeds with a discussion on the connection between race and immigration.

## **Race, Racism, and Immigration**

A discussion on the basic concepts of race and racism, and their relation to the topic of immigration is fundamental in supporting the argument that tighter government immigration policies nowadays are no longer constructed on the premise of racism but on the notion of national self-interest aimed at furthering the promotion of job security and well-being of the local people. In fact, Jenks (1993) argues that immigration is a complex issue so that limiting its context to 'race' would be utter reductionism. For Jenks, therefore, it is not fair to view the issue of immigration only from the vantage of race. Thus, one needs to have a critical approach towards immigration, that is, we need to view the issue of immigration from different vantage points, so that we, and policy makers alike, can attain an objective, holistic, and fair judgment about immigration issues.

But what is race and how does it acquire its negative connotations?

To begin with, Dobzhansky (as cited in Hale, 2004) defines race from a historical perspective. According to Dobzhansky, race has something to do with populations differing in the incidence of certain genes. Hence, race refers to groups of people that inherit certain biological traits that are unique in their group, and which made them different from others. This primal concept of race, according to Dobzhansky, is value-neutral from the very beginning. However, many historians believed that the European expansion in the 16th to the 19th century had given rise to issues in relation to the differences between and among races. As can be traced in history, when the European people traveled all over the world in search for valuable products, such as sugar, spices, and the like, they came in

contact with different races, especially the native people (see Pelz, 2016). As we already know, the European colonizers viewed these native peoples as inferior human beings due to the difference in their color and their seemingly backward cultural practices. This eventually paved the way for the emergence of racism which, according to Hale (2004), has something to do with the belief that a particular race is superior over the others.

Racism could also mean the practice of discriminating or prejudicing others based on the difference in race (Hale, 2004). The famous social theorist Frantz Fanon added a very striking statement on how certain races feel utterly superior over the others. Fanon (1963; see also Fanon, 2008) argued that being racially superior is directly linked to the notion of whiteness. Thus, as Fanon argued, the white people always feel to have some kind of social leverage upon seeing a black or brown man, while the black or brown man, upon internalizing the values imposed by the white system, experienced some kind of inferiority complex. As a result, people of color are normally labeled as inferior, dirty, uneducated, barbarian, troublemaker, and the like (Bobo & Fox, 2003).

Now, in relation to the field of immigration policy, it is undeniable that the issue of racism played a crucial role. As we can see, the immigration policies of several rich and developed countries had obviously discriminated against other races. For instance, in Canada, the Immigration Act of 1910 firmly established a policy that blatantly imposed a differential treatment on immigrants based on race. For example, Section 38(c) of such law stated that “It is the policy of the Department to do all in its power to keep out of the country. . . those belonging to nationalities unlikely to assimilate and who consequently prevent the building up of a united nation of people of similar customs and ideals” (Jakubowski, 1997).

It is noteworthy that in 1962, Canada had made changes to its immigration policy. The blatant race-discriminatory provisions were removed. The country also took on a point-system as the basis

in objectively assessing admissions of immigrants. However, it has been observed that in the existing immigration policies all over the world, although they follow a ‘color-blind ideology’, there are still subtle characteristics of racial discrimination in the system (Douglas, Sáenz, & Murga, 2015). As a matter of fact, a recent study in the United Kingdom acknowledged an existing linkage between the concepts of racism and migration from the post-colonial era to the newer trends in immigration (Erel, Murji, & Nahaboo, 2016). The study identified three overlapping race-migration connections that established the presence of racial discrimination of migrants (Erel, Murji, & Nahaboo, 2016). In addition to this, another study in the United States indicated that although a color-blind ideology is now applied in immigration, racial practices, such as profiling subject immigrants to arrest, detention, and deportation, remain visible (Arandanda & Vaquera, 2015). Nevertheless, while these studies were significant in the sense that they helped show that the individual and personal levels of racial behaviors and institutional or systemic racial practices have not been totally eradicated, the findings do not imply that the concepts of race and racism are directly related to the countries’ discretion to tighten immigration policies. In fact, other recent studies are starting to establish a separation of the concepts of race, racism, and immigration. This can be made possible through an understanding of the purpose and focus of the studies in these topics (Winant, 2000). For example, the studies on race and racism have always emphasized their historical and social focus. On the one hand, researchers now try to understand the social significance of the interaction between populations or races that differ in terms of physical attributes. On the other hand, discussions on immigration agenda and policies focus on comprehending the implication of the changing patterns of migration and refugee movements in reshaping the national and global order and economic situation (Winant, 2000).

It is precisely for this reason that the paper asserts that the recent attempts of several rich and developed countries to tighten their immigration policies and border controls are caused primarily by socio-economic reasons. In other words, when a certain country

limits immigration, it only does so for the sake of ‘racial self-interest’, that is, the act of protecting the job security and well-being of its constituents. As Kaufmann (2017) argued, the desire of the white population in recent years to limit the entry of immigrants in their countries is rooted mainly in the concept of racial self-interest, rather than racism.<sup>1</sup> As a matter of fact, the conservatives in the United States and the United Kingdom find it rational to think of the welfare of their own race rather than those that are coming from other countries (Kaufmann, 2017). Although the concept is still race-exclusive in nature, it is different from the ‘irrational hate, fear, or contempt for another group of peoples as symptomatic of the concept of racism (Goodhart, 2017).

## The Race-Immigration Nexus

What we have presented so far is the meaning of race and racism, as well as the nature and dynamics of the notion of immigration. In what follows, we will sketch very briefly the direct connection between the concepts of race and immigration through an engagement with the immigration policies of some rich and developed countries today, such as Canada, Germany, the United Kingdom, and the United States. The main purpose of this brief engagement is to show that indeed the limit on immigration imposed by these countries is not premised on the concept of racism, but on the concept of ‘racial self-interest’, that is, a country’s act of protecting the job security and well-being of its constituents.

---

<sup>1</sup> Of course, we are not discounting the fact that ‘racism’ can be a factor in immigration policies. As is well known, and as the famous political theorist Thomas Hobbes argues, humans always have the tendency to be wolf to the other. Thus, given the superiority complex of many white people, there remains a possibility that ‘race’ continues to influence immigration policies. However, what we aim to show in the above discussion is that immigration policies, as evidence shows, are becoming more and more hinged primarily on socio-economic reasons (see Hobbes, T 2011, *Leviathan*, Pacific Publishing Studio, United States of America).

In the past, Canada's immigration policies admitted only British people into its territory. In fact, until the Second World War, Cohen (1994) noted that 'Canada's immigration laws were exclusionary, restricting immigration from anywhere other than from Great Britain' (p. 83). As we can see, this policy was necessary in order for the Canadian government to save jobs for its constituents. However, after the War, the demand of the economy and the labor market forced Canada to allow immigration from countries other than Great Britain (Cohen, 1994), making the White Canada policy 'virtually dead' (Jakubowski, 1997). This means that even if Canada continues to limit immigration to date, it is not fair to assume that its immigration policy is racist. Canada simply has to protect the job security and well-being of its constituent, as other countries would normally do. While Canada today is friendly to immigrants, refugees, and asylum seekers, it is but proper for this country to limit the number of immigrants that are admitted to its territory for reasons that are already given above.

In similar manner, many people viewed Germany to be a racist country. As a matter of fact, the murder of more than six million Jews during the Holocaust had resulted from the anti-Semitism policy of the Nazi regime. Indeed, this policy is one of the most racist in the history of the civilized world. However, what we can observe lately is that Germany has apparently become friendly to refugees, asylum seekers, and immigrants, although it can be observed that there remains racist attitude among Germans, especially in the eastern part of the country (Clark & Legge, 1997). Indeed, Germany's immigration policy lately has shunned away from any racist undertones. As a matter of fact, Angela Merkel's inclusionary immigration policy has admitted thousands of people from less developed countries, most particularly those with Muslim ethnic origin. Interestingly, Merkel's inclusionary immigration policy aims to boost Germany's economy by inviting workers from abroad (Clark & Legge, 1997).<sup>2</sup> Again, this clearly shows that the

---

<sup>2</sup> The same inclusionary principle can also be applied in education in relation to race, class, and gender (see Ocay, Jeffry, Agaton, Sheldon Ives, & © 2022 Jeffry V. Ocay & Sheldon Ives G. Agaton

<https://journal.evsu.edu.ph/index.php/amri/article/view/296/122>

attempt to limit immigration in Germany is done primarily for socio-economic reasons. While remnants of racist attitude can be observed in many German people today, still it is not reasonable to argue that Germany's imposition of a quota on immigration is a racist move.

The case of the United Kingdom is quite peculiar. This is because for many years, in fact for over 2 centuries, the United Kingdom, according to Somerville, Sriskandarajah, and Latorre (2009), has been a net exporter of people. They noted that it was only in the mid-1980s when the rising demand for labor force was at its peak that the United Kingdom became an immigration country (Somerville, Sriskandarajah, & Latorre, 2009). In fact, since 2004, the United Kingdom experienced a massive influx of immigrants from all other the world, especially those coming from less developed countries. In 2007, for example, the United Kingdom has received a gross flow of 577, 000 people (Somerville, Sriskandarajah, & Latorre, 2009).

It is must be noted that for many years, the constant flow of immigrants did not appear to be a problem for the British government given that the country needed these immigrants, especially the skilled workers, in order to keep the economy moving and growing. However, in recent years the rising number of immigrants has fueled anxieties within the British society. The British people are now afraid that the immigrants will take away their jobs, thereby threatening their job security and well-being.<sup>3</sup> As a result, the UK policymakers have attempted to formulate policies

---

Villote, Asuncion 2021, 'Inclusion in education: Ensuring educational equity in relation gender, class, race, and ethnicity', *SABTON: Multidisciplinary Research Journal*, vol. 1, no. 1, pp. 49-59).

<sup>3</sup> The final decision of the United Kingdom to depart from the European Union, famously known as the 'Brexit', call also be viewed from this vantage point. As is well known, the Brexit is partly triggered by issues on job security and well-being among the British people (see Tannam, E 2016, 'Brexit and the future of United Kingdom', *Instituto Affari Internazionale Working Paper*, pp. 1-18).



that will manage immigration (Somerville, Sriskandarajah, & Latorre, 2009). This is done through the implementation of a points-based system for migration and new institutional requirements. Now, what is interesting is that even if many British people appear to be racist when dealing with immigrants who are perceived to be a threat to their society, the new British immigration policy which is based on limitation and integration is aimed primarily at protecting the well-being of the British people. It did not specifically limit immigrants based on race (Somerville, Sriskandarajah, & Latorre, 2009). This clearly shows that the attempt of the British government to limit immigration is not premised on racism, but on socio-economic principles.

In the case of the United State, we can observe that the history of immigration in this country has been replete with racist undertones. In fact, the United States in the past had promulgated a number of immigration policies that can be considered racist, such as the Immigration and Naturalization Act of 1965, which limited the number of Asian, Latin American, and African immigrants to be admitted into the country (Adams, Bell, & Griffin, 2007). However, migration in the United States has evolved recently toward a more non-discriminatory landscape as it imposed a color-blind ideology. This is aimed at putting an end to racial discrimination by treating individuals as equally as possible, regardless of race, belief, socio-economic standing, and cultural background (Douglas, Sáenz, & Murga, 2015).

Unfortunately, with the turn of events in the United States lately, former President Donald Trump imposed a travel ban that specifically targets immigrants from Mexico and several Muslim countries in the Middle East (Oppenheimer, Prakash, & Burns, 2016). As we can observe, this policy has drawn fierce criticisms not only from people abroad but also from the Americans themselves. They argued that Trump's policy is not only racist but xenophobic as well (Ozimek, 2016; Bouie, 2017). However, while it is undeniable that Trump's speeches are full of racist jargons, we cannot deny the fact that the recent immigration policy of the Donald

Trump administration that limits the number of immigrants is largely economic in nature. As Calabresi (2006) puts it, even when there are some anti-racist advocates that fuel the discussions on immigration policy, it doesn't mean that those who favor limiting migrants' entry into the nation are racists. For sure, this policy may be unjust, but it is a legal attempt to safeguard the socio-economic well-being of the Americans (Kuntzman, 2017; Cook-Martin & FitzGerald, 2014). As Skerry (2017) argues, while there is no doubt that Trump played racist sentiments, his policy to limit immigration may have great economic repercussions to the United States.

## Conclusion

The paper began with a discussion on the meaning of race and racism, as well as the nature and dynamics of immigration. It then proceeded with a discussion on the connection between race and immigration. As we can see, the paper found out that in the past, the immigration policies of some rich and developed countries, such as the United Kingdom, Canada, Germany, and the United States were replete with racist undertones. For instance, until the Second World War Canadian immigration policies did not admit people from other countries except Great Britain. The same holds true for the United States and the United Kingdom. In fact, the United States was very selective in admitting immigrants into its territory.

In recent years, however, these rich and developed countries have become friendly to immigrants, especially those who were coming from less developed countries. It can be observed that the racist aspect of the immigration policies of these countries has apparently disappeared. Indeed, in terms of the attempt of these countries to limit the number of immigrants to be admitted into their territories, the paper argued that it was done primarily for socio-economic reasons. For sure, these countries have to limit immigration in order to protect the job security and well-being of their constituents.

© 2022 Jeffrey V. Ocaj & Sheldon Ives G. Agaton

<https://journal.evsu.edu.ph/index.php/amri/article/view/296/122>



Finally, and in relation to the above, still we need not discount the fact that ‘race’ remains a big factor in immigration policies. As intimated above, given the superiority complex of many white people, there remains a possibility that ‘race’ continues to influence immigration policies. However, what we also aim to show in this paper is that immigration policies, as evidence shows, are becoming more and more hinged primarily on socio-economic reasons.

## References

- Adams, M, Bell, LA, & Griffin, P (eds.) 2007, *Teaching for diversity and social justice*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn, Routledge, London and New York.
- Arandanda, E & Vaquera, E 2015, ‘Racism, the immigration enforcement regime, and the implications for racial inequality in the lives of undocumented young adults’, *Sociology of Race and Ethnicity*, vol. 1, no. 1, pp. 88-104, DOI 10.1177/2332649214551097.
- Bobo, L & Fox, C 2003, ‘Race, racism, and discrimination: bridging problems, methods, and theory in social psychological research’, *Social Psychology Quarterly*, vol. 66, no. 4, pp. 319-332.
- Bouie, J 2017, ‘The real motivation for Trump’s immigration policies is racism. Never forget it’, *Politics*, viewed 12 July 2021, <[http://www.slate.com/articles/news\\_and\\_politics/politics/2017/03/the\\_real\\_motivation\\_for\\_trump\\_s\\_immigration\\_policies\\_is\\_racism\\_never\\_forget.html](http://www.slate.com/articles/news_and_politics/politics/2017/03/the_real_motivation_for_trump_s_immigration_policies_is_racism_never_forget.html)>.
- Calabresi, M 2006, ‘Is racism fueling the immigration debate?’, *TIME*, viewed 12 July 2021, <<http://content.time.com/time/nation/article/0,8599,1195250,00.html>>.

- Clark, J & Legge, J 1997, 'Economics, racism, and attitudes toward immigration in the New Germany', *Political Science Quarterly*, vol. 50, no. 4, pp. 901-917.
- Cohen, R 1994, 'A brief history of racism in immigration policies for recruiting domestics', *CANADIAN WOMAN STUDIES/LES CAHIERS DE LA FEMME*, vol. 14, no. 2, pp. 83-86.
- Cook-Martin, D & FitzGerald, DS 2014, 'How legacies of racism persist in U.S. immigration policy', *Scholars Strategy Network*, viewed 14 July 2021, <<http://www.scholarsstrategynetwork.org/brief/how-legacies-racism-persist-us-immigration-policy>>.
- Douglas, KM, Sáenz, R, & Murga, AL, 2015, 'Immigration in the era of color-blind racism', *American Behavioral Scientist*, vol. 59, no. 11, pp. 1429-1451, DOI 10.1177/0002764214566502.
- Erel, U, Murji K, & Nahaboo, Z 2016, 'Understanding the contemporary race—migration nexus', *Ethnic and Racial Studies Review*, vol. 39, no. 8, pp. 1339-1360, viewed 14 July 2021, DOI 10.1080/01419870.2016.1161808.
- Fanon, F 1963, *The wretched of the earth*, trans. Richard Philcox, Grove Press, New York.
- Fanon, F 2008, *Black skin, white masks*, trans. Richard Philcox, Grove Press, New York.
- Goodhart, D 2017, 'White self-interest is not the same thing as racism', *FIANCIAL TIMES*, viewed 14 July 2021, <<https://www.ft.com/content/220090e0-efc1-11e6-ba01-119a44939bb6>>.
- Grosfoguel, R, Oso, L, & Christou A 2015, "'Racism', intersectionality and migration studies: framing some theoretical reflections', *Identities: Global Studies in Culture and Power*, vol. 22, no. 6, pp. 635-652, viewed 14 July 2021, DOI 10.1080/1070289X.2014.950974.

- Hale, HE 2004, 'Explaining ethnicity', *Comparative Political Studies*, vol. 37, no. 4, pp. 458-485.
- Hobbes, T 2011, *Leviathan*, Pacific Publishing Studio, United States of America. Jakubowski, LM 1997, *Immigration and the legalization of racism*, Fernwood Publishing, Halifax, Nova Scotia.
- Jenks, R 1993, 'Special Feature: Immigration and nationality policies of leading migration nations', *Population and Environment*, vol. 16, no. 6, pp. 567-592.
- Kaufmann, E 2017, 'Racial self-interest is not racism: ethno-demographic interests and the immigration debate', *Policy Exchange*, viewed 14 July 2021, <<https://policyexchange.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2017/03/Racial-Self-Interest-is-not-Racism-FINAL.pdf>>.
- Kuntzman, G 2017, 'President Trump's immigration moves are as American as apple pie and racism', *NEW YORK DAILY NEWS*, viewed 16 July 2021, <<http://www.nydailynews.com/news/politics/trump-immigration-moves-american-apple-pie-racism-article-1.2959392>>.
- Ocay, Jeffrey, Agaton, Sheldon Ives, & Villote, Asuncion 2021, 'Inclusion in education: Ensuring educational equity in relation gender, class, race, and ethnicity', *SABTON: Multidisciplinary Research Journal*, vol. 1, no. 1, pp. 49-59.
- Oppenheimer, D, Prakash, S, & Burns, R 2016, 'Playing the Trump card: the enduring legacy of racism in immigration law', *Berkeley La Raza Law Journal*, vol. 26, no. 1, pp. 1-46, viewed 16 July 2021, DOI 10.15779/Z38TG3V.
- Ozimek, A 2016, 'Racism, xenophobia, and immigration', *FORBES*, viewed 16 July 2021, <<https://www.forbes.com/sites/modeledbehavior/2016/07/31/racism-xenophobia-and-immigration/#2cadefbc773a>>.

- Pelz, W 2016, *A people's history of modern Europe*, Pluto Press, London.
- Patterson, J, 2016, 'Greens would cap migration at 1% of population', *Radio New Zealand*, viewed 24 July 2021 <<https://www.rnz.co.nz/news/top/315879/greens-would-cap-migration-at-1-percent-of-population>>.
- Sarile, TC, Albuero, R, Albuero, H & Anesito L. Cutillas, 2018, 'Role of Women in the Implementation of the National Greening Program (NGP) in Cebu Province', *Journal of Agriculture and Technology Management*, vol. 18, no. 2, pp. 1-4.
- Skerry, P 2017, 'Opposing immigration wasn't always racist', *The Boston Globe*, viewed 16 July 2021, <<https://www.bostonglobe.com/ideas/2017/04/15/opposing-immigration-wasn-always-racist/ZToPxnulS41s95cP53PdHM/story.html>>.
- Somerville, W, Sriskandarajah, D, & Latorre, M 2009, 'United Kingdom: A reluctant country of immigration', *Migration Policy Institute*, viewed 24 July 2021, <<https://www.migrationpolicy.org/article/united-kingdom-reluctant-country-immigration>>.
- Tannam, E 2016, 'Brexit and the future of United Kingdom', *Instituto Affari Internazionale Working Paper*, pp. 1-18.
- Winant, H 2000, 'Race and race theory', *Annual Review of Sociology*, vol. 26, pp. 169-185.