

BECOMING AN IMMIGRANT COUNTRY: DOUBLE STANDARDS, EAST AND WEST

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What is an “immigrant country”? Places with a long history of large-scale settlement — America, Canada, Argentina, and Australia, for example — surely are. Others in Europe have also become so in recent decades, even though many of them, like Germany, begrudged admitting as much until not long ago.

When we look beyond the West and its offshoots, to Asia, the idea of not being an “immigrant country”, and not planning on becoming one, is deeply entrenched. As I noted in a recent article (“[Not an Immigrant Country?](#)”), countries in East Asia and the Persian Gulf insist that the standards of relative openness and multiculturalism that have gradually prevailed in the West — at least as an ideal — do not apply to them. Double standards abound. In Japan and China, business establishments matter-of-factly turn away foreigners (on Post-Mao China: [Sautman 1994](#); on Japan: Diène 2006). In the Emirates and Kuwait, generations of guest workers and their families are excluded from citizenship (on Gulf States’ illiberal policies: [Weiner 1990](#)). The chasm between the national and the foreign, and the cavalier comfort with which stereotypes are applied in policy and daily practice, are striking in much of Asia. One would have to go back to the early twentieth century in Europe to find anything comparable (on patterns of Asian racism in general: [Washington 1990](#)).

Asian societies get away with things that have become unacceptable in the late modern West. There are many reasons for this double standard. Asian countries’ recovery of confidence has often revolved around playing up their sovereignty and distinctness from the West. Nation-building has drawn bright lines between citizens and outsiders. Postcolonialism has also, in many cases, been not so much about universal equality as about securing the dominance of national élites and national majorities within their own space. Tribalism is taken for granted.

Many in the West typically either overlook non-Western racism or treat it with kid gloves. Well-meaning observers who favor cosmopolitanism, liberal equality, and open borders in the West tread lightly when they encounter problematic practices elsewhere. Either they suggest that the process of opening must run its course, however slowly, and that for outsiders prematurely to critique those who were once on the receiving end of European imperialism would be to pick on the underdog (on selective narratives about who commits racism and what duties are owed over its legacies: [Bhargava 2007](#)) or they hold the non-West to a permanently different standard (on supposed differences between e.g. Japanese exclusion of immigrants and Western racism: [Carens 1992](#)). Perhaps countries that do not pretend to be open are in a different league from those that do. Or perhaps the West’s colonial past imposes unique burdens: immigration might be the consequence of earlier empire-building. These fumbling distinctions unravel at the margins, of course. Sweden and Switzerland are expected to become immigrant countries even though they had no empires; and the majority of Asian countries that have ratified high-minded UN conventions against discrimination are forgiven for not really meaning it.

Perhaps it will be said that such double standards do not greatly matter. But with the rise of new Asian powers to more global influence, hard questions must be asked. Dismissive protestations that there is no racism in Asia can no longer be taken at face value. As economic and diplomatic influence shifts eastward, and more and more foreigners encounter Asian societies firsthand, practices on the ground gain attention. These societies already have immigrants — from Pakistani laborers in Dubai, to Nigerian traders in Guangzhou — who can no longer be treated as transient guests who should be grateful for short-term opportunities. The kind of scrutiny that the West has attracted in recent decades with regard to race and immigration inevitably must extend to Asia.

This scrutiny is also imperative because of the implications for global order. The ideas about national identity that Asian societies hold will spill over into the kind of world that they will

help shape in this century. When we scratch the surface, there are two competing images of world order taking shape.

One is a continued trend toward openness, a flattening of boundaries, and an emerging global citizenship. It would build on the best of experiments like the European Union and UN-ASUR. The hard boundaries of sovereignty, and migratory restrictions, would eventually look like an aberration in human history, as the world returns to the long-term pattern of diverse and fluid open space. It would look like the old cosmopolitan empires, but on a grander scale, flatter, and with rule of law.

The other vision would harden boundaries, and shore up the Westphalian state as the permanent organizing principle of the global landscape for generations to come. The West's shift to more inclusive ideas of citizenship lately would be a mere quirk in one area of the world. Human beings would be defined by their nationality. Our great-grandchildren would still live in a world of discrimination, visas, and deportations. And the shift of influence from some corners of the world to others would mean the rise and fall of collectivities, with all of the stereotyping and hierarchies that tend to follow. This is, among the more nationalistic currents of opinion in Asia, the meaning of the "Asian century". Dignity requires walls. Bide one's time and ride out openness, because those preaching it will not last.

In this contest of visions, how consciously the questions are asked matters a great deal. Ignoring non-Western racism does the world no favors in the long run. To indulge postcolonial

double standards for the sake of supposed gentleness would mean, as power shifts, sleepwalking into a much more hard-edged world quite at odds with what liberal idealists really prefer. Tougher and more consistent judgments – calling practices what they are, pressing for change, and binding these countries into an irreversible process of opening while they rise – would be a more genuine mark of respect. It is also a precondition for realizing any model of global citizenship.

Perhaps the most hopeful reality is demographic. The vast majority of the world's population were born after colonialism, so the instincts to tread lightly based on past guilt and past grievances may weaken. Moreover, non-Western racism is not a consistent problem throughout the Global South. Latin America and Africa are much more comfortable with messy diversity, and surveys show that their younger cohorts are quite cosmopolitan ([Furia 2005](#)). Much of the world's demographic and economic growth will be concentrated there in coming decades, and not in the likes of Japan, China, and the Emirates. There is good reason to hope, therefore, that world order can be shaped along lines of openness rather than closure.

By 2100, we are more likely than not to have an "immigrant world", with all the institutional structures to make it work. But getting there would be much surer, and quicker, if the debate about consistency started now in earnest.

Adam K. Webb has recently published an article titled "[Not an Immigrant Country? Non-Western Racism and the Duties of Global Citizenship](#)".