

Immigration—a biological perspective

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Should we be humane and let them in, or safe and keep them out? There are pretty clear cut arguments on both sides. So far there does not seem to be any middle ground. A biological perspective may provide that.

We, that is our bodies, get invaded all the time; mostly it is by biting insects, but sometimes our GI defenses let some larger than normally allowed protein into our body, and sometimes the visitors just stay in our GI tracts. There is a part of our immune system that has adapted over the centuries to deal with these unwanted immigrants. But sometimes they are not really unwanted.

Long ago, really long ago, in the days of single cell life, they had similar problems, but less ability to handle the immigrants, and some times the immigrants came with really helpful packages. All of the cells in our bodies, for example, have an energy producing section called mitochondria that resulted from this ancient immigration. Plants have a similar section that uses sunlight for energy. Life as we know it would not be here except for this immigration that happened more than a billion years ago. More recently parasites, those small animals that live in us and with us have been shown to help our immune systems develop in healthier ways; allergies are often less problematic if you have a tapeworm. We are also learning from newer technology that friendly bacteria do much the same and actually live in parts of our bodies that were considered germ free a few years ago, and most of them appear helpful. It is also easy to see this on a human scale in the benefit of the cross pollination of ideas that come with immigrants; Google, for one example, is the collaboration of an American geek and a Russian colleague.

What happens when microscopic immigrants visit our bodies is that our immune system has a way of recognizing them; it knows what is us and what isn't. That's why people who have organ transplants from someone else have to take drugs for the rest of their lives to turn off this part of their immune system, and why they have more cancer and other problems from turning off this defense. After recognizing them it puts a tag on them so that another part of our defenses can destroy the invader. Of course the invaders adapt by finding ways to confound these parts of our immune systems, that's why we have such a problem with malaria.

The bottom line here is that often, especially with the friendly bacteria—they're called commensals because they live with us in peace and actually help us— these are good immigrants. But we need time to make sure they are going to be nice to us.

So, we think it likely that immigrants would not refuse the implantation of a RFID chip, so that we could keep track of them. And give them a cell phone that they knew was monitored. The chip could be built to tell if they were using another cell phone—that's a warning—and to give a major warning if it was removed. Those would be unfriendly signals that could lead to deportation.

We also think it reasonable that nation states accepting immigrants take the lead in the inculturation of those people. Many are strange and foreign and have trouble mixing with and being accepted by the locals. This often leads to unemployment, poverty, and a fear that opens them to radicalization. The accepting government, representing its people, should insure education, inculturation, and employment in order to minimize this risk.