

BOOK REVIEW OF *ARRIVAL CITY: HOW THE LARGEST MIGRATION IN HISTORY IS
RESHAPING OUR WORLD*

World Religions Colloquium 88000
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November 17, 2015

Saunders, Doug. *Arrival City: How the Largest Migration in History Is Reshaping Our World*.
u.s. ed. New York: Pantheon Books, ©2010

Driving in a rented bus along the winding streets with our Ambassador's Fellowship group, I wondered how people could live in the shacks lining the road. Everything seemed dirty, children and animals were everywhere, and many in our group felt an urge to roll up the windows and take a different route to our destination. For a group of middle class Christian college kids from America on their first missions trip to Mexico, Tijuana was a disconcerting place. I had been there with my parents before, but we had stayed in the tourist areas with colorful shops, loud merchants and wide sombreros. This time we were going to a church in a nearby city to do construction projects, canvass the neighborhood with tracts and show films about Jesus.

Having traveled to more than 60 countries since then, I have experienced slums outside Nairobi, Istanbul, and dozens of other places. I have also lived in villages in Belize, Armenia, and elsewhere. To an outsider with the means and a schedule to leave, villages seem restful and quaint. Slums seem dirty, crowded, smelly, noisy, and altogether unwelcoming places. At first glance, it defies logic why someone would move from village to slum. From a public health standpoint, slums make you shudder. The easy assumption is that slum dwellers are those people who couldn't make it in the village and couldn't make it in the city either.

An equally easy assumption, given the tidal wave of international immigration from the failed Arab states, ISIS and the Syrian Civil War, is that movement from the developing world to the developed world is the greatest migration in modern times.

Biographical and Historical Information

Arrival City: How the Largest Migration in History is Reshaping Our World, by Doug Saunders, challenges both of those assumptions. Written by the Bureau Chief for the Toronto Globe and Mail, Saunders argues that the greatest migration is from villages to slums to cities. He posits that the village, for all its idyllic appearance, is the place of hunger and hopelessness. The slums, better called arrival cities, are the transition mechanism into the place of plenty, the established city. His is a provocative and well researched idea.

Summary of the Book

Saunders begins with a profile of Liu Gong Li, a small village in rural China, in 1995. The population began to shrink as many from the village traveled to nearby Chongqing, a major industrial center. Young adults, typically men seeking construction or factory jobs or women hoping to become factory workers or domestic servants, left first. Parents stayed behind in the village to work the farms and take care of the children. These young adults lived wherever they could, ate whatever they could, worked for anyone who would pay them, and sent everything extra back to the village.

As more rural migrants flowed to Chongqing, an informal economy developed on the outskirts of the city. Improvised housing was also used to start informal businesses, far enough from city authorities to escape the heavy hand of regulation, but close enough to get basic services such as water, sewage and roads. The businesses, from restaurants to retailers to service providers, made a pittance. Still it was enough to live, to save a little, and to send a little to

family in the village. Eventually as these migrants accumulated wealth, they moved to better housing and brought their families from Liu Gong Li to live with them. By 2010, Liu Gong Li no longer existed as a village. It had been overrun by the ever-expanding Chongqing and was now the outer edge of the city. Soon another village would be buried in concrete, and another, and another.

In Saunder's parlance, Chongqing is an arrival city, a place that transforms villagers into modern city dwellers. It has four functions:¹

1. Connect the village to the established city via a web of human relationships. Friends and family members who have gone before provide life support, education, opportunities and money for those who will follow.
2. Provide cash and credit to villagers to enable them to leave home and journey to the city. Early arrivals climb the social ladder through their success, eventually leaving the arrival city and making space for a family member from their village to follow. This process is known as chain migration
3. Act as urban establishment platforms. This allows migrants to buy a house, start a business, get education in the larger city, and build political support among others in the arrival city.
4. Act as social mobility paths. Those who succeed in accumulating wealth, education and contacts move from the arrival city into the middle class of the established city. Their exit allows others from villages to take their places in the arrival city. Thus each group in the human relationship web (ideally) pulls each other group from village to outskirts (often slums) to middle class life.

¹ Saunders, 20.

Much of the developing world remains agricultural, yet rural areas have the highest death rates from malnutrition, infectious disease, and other hazards. Rural incomes are typically less than urban ones. Rural to urban immigration is booming. In 1950, 309 million in the developing world lived in cities; by 2030, an estimated 3.9 billion will.² By 2050, the whole world will have the rural to urban distribution now experienced in wealthy nations, roughly 10-25% rural and 75-90% urban. But the city changes rural life too; remittances from urban dwellers raise standards of living among those who remain in the villages. Further, villages themselves develop. Chongqing is an example of a successful arrival city, and other examples include Toronto, Los Angeles, and Mumbai. The best arrival cities, such as Jardim Angela in Sao Paulo, Brazil, provide a real pathway from mud floor to middle class.

Part of the change has to do with technology. The economic norm in the developed world is moving from “employment” to “self-employment”, and this is even truer in the arrival city. Communication has become cheap and available to almost everyone; the cell phone is now as essential to commercial success in the arrival city as kerosene for light and heat.³ Improvements in transportation, making it possible to move hundreds of miles safely and at reasonable cost, also play a big role. Computers and improved manufacturing processes make businesses available to regular people, even the poor, which were inconceivable decades ago. Cable TV is another must-have in the arrival city, serving to constantly remind slum dwellers of what they hope to achieve.

Migration is not one way, however. People move to the cities first as experiments, with rural denizens testing the waters and then returning home. The stays get longer and parts of families remain in the city. Later whole families arrive. The more educated people become, the

² Saunders, 21.

³ Saunders, 42.

less likely they are to go back to the villages. During hard economic times however, such as the 2008 worldwide financial crisis, work became scarce and cash flows dried up. As a result, tens of thousands of migrants in arrival cities returned to villages. When economic conditions improved, many of these people returned to the cities to take up where they left off. By spreading social networks between arrival cities and villages, the rural poor can “build joint portfolios of farming, business, and migration remittances, hedging against economic risk between many platforms.”⁴

Saunders summarizes by saying that “the unimpeded arrival city was a more effective form of development than any known economic, social or population control policy.”⁵

Governments must provide basic infrastructure including roads, water, sewage, and power, and basic services such as transportation, education and health care. Then they must allow the city to develop on its own. Housing projects often fail because they are nicer than the poor can afford and attract lower middle class people with jobs. They also fail because they provide concentrated residential space (high rise buildings) without space for store fronts, shops, factories, and the ability to grow or shrink in accordance with economic needs.⁶ Neither bulldozing arrival cities as a blight nor implementing inflexible “slum improvement projects” works.

One argument against arrival cities, especially against immigrants coming to the developed world, is that they compete for jobs against natives. While this can be true, the author notes that birth rates in the developed world are so low that these nations need unskilled and semi-skilled laborers and will someday have to compete for them. By 2020, the shortage of semi-skilled manufacturing workers is expected to be 14 million worldwide.⁷ Further, people in cities

⁴ Saunders, 42.

⁵ Saunders, 58.

⁶ Saunders, 62.

⁷ Saunders, 91.

can be more productive than those on subsistence farms, increasing overall wealth and benefiting everyone. Increased wealth also leads to decreased disease and death.

If migrants to arrival cities own their property, they can build equity. If they can start businesses, they can accumulate wealth. If they have basic infrastructure, they won't have to pay oligarchs and criminals to provide basic services. If they have education, they will be able to expand their horizons. If governments let them immigrate and innovate, they will live wherever makes the most economic sense for them, thus maximizing productivity and economic contribution. However, if these things don't happen, arrival cities stagnate and trap people in poverty rather than raising them to prosperity.

In Herndon, VA, locals restricted immigrants from gathering at public places to find work as day laborers. In Tataria, Poland, villagers are loathe to give up their land, however unproductive, because of generous government support. In Shuilin, China, the lack of any social safety net except for subsistence crops makes migrants sensitive to any economic shock. In Dorli, India, suicide rates among rural farmers are astronomical, 57/100,000 per year, because of debt with no way out.⁸ In Emamzadeh, Iran, civil unrest percolates as new arrivals are trapped in poverty because foolish regulations limit their abilities to climb out. In Evry, France, Muslim migrants rioted in 2005, in part because they are stuck in housing with no prospects for jobs or businesses. In Germany, Turks struggle because they cannot get citizenship.⁹

Chapter 5 describes the first great rural to urban immigration; that of European villagers to Paris, London, and the New World in the 19th century. The basic motives, structures and functions of arrival cities today are the same as those then. Chapter 6 investigates Istanbul as an arrival city, in which the current president of Turkey, Recep Tayyip Erdogan, started as the child

⁸ Saunders, 116.

⁹ Saunders, 252.

of an arrival city immigrant.¹⁰ The rest of the text provides more examples of success, and failure, and a prescription for what governments must do to make arrival cities work.

Critical Analysis

Arrival City is a fascinating and provocative book. It is well written and well researched and turns many assumptions about immigration and social policy on their heads. Saunders does not seem to have any academic credentials or special training for writing a book like this, but as an international affairs correspondent, he does have applicable experience. He apparently had a team of researchers assist him with this book, and presumably some had the necessary skill sets in economics, finance and cultural anthropology to make the text reliable.

Arrival City can be very useful to Christians who are trying to help the poor and introduce them to Jesus. Earlier this week the Samaritan's Purse Christmas catalog arrived to the mail. It includes a wide variety of gifts that donors can provide to help the poor, ranging from \$6 for blankets to \$20,000 to build a rural school. Meeting needs is laudable, but the history of charity is littered with discarded blankets and empty school buildings. Though Samaritan's Purse seems to be a reliable organization, donors can't help but wonder how their gift can best make a difference. *Arrival City* points out where many of the needs actually are, and suggests real ways to help. Since arrival cities are on the outskirts of established cities, believers need not go far from home to aid immigrants.

Last Sunday I was talking with Jason, an older Hawaiian gentleman who now lives in northern Virginia and attends our church. He maintains close relations with family and friends on Oahu and was lamenting the rising rates of poverty and homelessness on the islands. As we discussed what the church could do, Jason wanted to lobby the government to build low cost

¹⁰ Saunders, 187.

apartments so that people living in tents on the beaches in the north and west of Oahu could have a solid roof over their heads.

Having read *Arrival City*, I asked a few details about the situation and his ideas. Some sounded a little like many of the failed United Nations and other projects from the past. While we middle class Americans might find living in tents on a beach, showering in a public bath house and taking the bus to work every day objectionable, those who actually do it may not. Further, housing without a way to make money is a dead end; a prescription for unending public support. Jason mentioned some derelict hotels in the area that could be made into the two to five story housing and workshop buildings that we so successful outside Istanbul. These areas already have water, power, sewage, security, transportation, education and health care. A lot more study needs to be done, but Jason may be able to pull some of his many political strings and make a real difference in the lives of the homeless in northwestern Oahu.

Saunders has a marked anti-religious and politically liberal bias, describing religion and social conservatism in uniformly negative terms. He opines that slums are places of “parasitic evangelical religions” and “this is certainly the fate of many arrival cities after they have been deprived of their fluid structure or abandoned by the state.”¹¹ Insofar as he is referring to Christianity, one wonders if he remembers that churches have been meeting the spiritual, social, educational, and physical needs of immigrants for millennia. Long before statist liberals began writing books, Christians from rural areas, the arrival cities, and the established cities have cooperated to plant churches, build clinics, and establish schools. Not only does Saunders’ view denigrate people of faith, it also denies him a great ally in the fight to help people in arrival cities, his purported goal.

¹¹ Saunders, 19.

Further, “when immigrants are brought over without their networks of relatives and village neighbors, they are more likely to become isolated and unsocialized, to fall into criminality or social conservatism.”¹² He never defines social conservatism, leaving the concept hanging over his readers’ minds like a black cloud. His bias in this area is so deeply held that he seems incapable of seeing it, or at least unwilling to see it.

The author’s social prescription is also decidedly liberal. While he applauds the industry of immigrants, he presents a long and expensive list of things that the United Nations and national governments must do to help them arrive. Nowhere did I find the suggestion that local or regional non-governmental organizations or even private companies and individuals could or should shoulder all, or even part, of this task. He mentioned a project by the United Nations outside Nairobi, but primarily to explain why it will not work.¹³ Saunders makes some convincing arguments. He describes arrival cities well, but he can conjure only one idea to make them work better – more government intervention. His is a one track mind.

Saunders is writing about economics, not religion, and so he downplays the real ways in which religion impacts the success of the immigrants in the arrival city. He blames the riots outside Paris in 2005 squarely on the French, as though the Muslim immigrants themselves bear no responsibility for their actions. The liberal mantra “if you give a man a house and a job he will never become a terrorist” is never stated but widely implied. Given the fact that Osama Bin Laden and Abu-Bakr-Al Baghdadi, the leaders of Al Qaeda and ISIS, respectively, were both accomplished if not wealthy does not seem to deflate this humanistic worldview.

¹² Saunders, 93.

¹³ Saunders, 68.

Conclusion

Doug Saunders seems to have a heart to help the poor. My friend Jason definitely does. Doug has done him a service in revealing some of the realities behind the arrival city, but as is often the case, Saunder's lasting impact may be limited to the realm of ideas. Jason has already blessed thousands of Hawaiians materially and spiritually and he will continue as long as he has breath. By building fences, Saunders limits himself. By building bridges, Jason unites people to a common and noble cause.

Though biased, *Arrival City* is worth reading. It sheds entirely new light on the crucial issues of immigration and how to help the poor. Christians can benefit from a new view of "the slums" and new insights on how to bless people there, both spiritually and materially. Donors can better understand how to use their scarce dollars. Governments can focus their work on what is most effective. Helping immigrants in arrival cities requires financial, political and spiritual action, and *Arrival City* can help direct such actions towards a noble end.