Episode Book

EPISODE #5559

Why Do People Move Countries? Migration Motives

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SYNOPSIS

Daniel grew up in Dublin and Cork, moved to Israel at twenty-five, and insists it was never about opportunity — it was about the belief that Israel is where Jewish people should live. Then he turned the question on himself: as a rational actor, wouldn't he have preferred not to migrate at all? That's the thread this episode pulls. We walk through what migration research actually says about why people move — push and pull, voluntary versus forced versus ideological migration, why the UN and OECD datasets classify migrants by legal category rather than motive, and why a clean global percentage breakdown of "economic versus ideological" simply doesn't exist. Along the way: Filipino nurses in Canada, Nigerian neurosurgeons, Spanish nurses headed for the UK, a hundred families in Uttarakhand, and the climate drivers that hide upstream of the stated reason. The empirical verdict backs Daniel's intuition — but the rational-actor frame turns out to be messier than it looks.

TRANSCRIPT



Corn

Daniel wrote in this week with something that started as a question about migration and turned into a question about himself.



Herman

Which is usually where the good ones start.



Corn

He grew up in Ireland. Born in Dublin, raised in Cork, moved to Israel at twenty-five. His grandfather ran a synagogue in Cork. And he says the move was never about opportunity. It was an expression of the belief that Israel is where Jewish people should live. His words. Not a better job, not a better option that happened to be available. Ideology, straight up.



Herman

And then he does something interesting with it.



Corn

He turns it on himself. He says he's a rational actor, and as a rational actor he'd have preferred not to migrate at all, because moving to a country that doesn't necessarily offer you a more prosperous future is stacking the odds against yourself. So his suspicion is that ideological immigrants are the exception, not the rule.



Herman

And he doesn't want to stay in his own lane with it either.



Corn

Right. He wants it out of the Jewish-to-Israel case specifically. So the questions are: why do people move countries generally? Has anyone actually quantified the most common reasons and what percentage each cohort makes up? What is ideological immigration and how does it differ from economic migration? Besides Jewish immigration to Israel, what other groups have moved for ideological reasons? And are ideological immigrants the exception?



Herman

That's five questions wearing one coat.



Corn

It is. So let's start with the biggest one. Why do people move at all?



Herman

The standard frame in migration studies is push and pull. Push factors are what's driving you out of where you are. Pull factors are what's drawing you toward somewhere specific. And the honest answer to why people move is that push and pull are not properties of countries. They're properties of the match between a person and a country at a particular moment. The same country can be a push for one person and a pull for another in the same year.



Corn

That's a clean way of putting it. Though I'd say the literature usually splits it into three broad buckets rather than two.



Herman

Go on.



Corn

Voluntary migration, which is mostly economic. Forced migration, which is war, persecution, that kind of thing. And then this third thing we're calling ideological or identity migration, which is movement toward a place because of what it represents rather than what it pays.



Herman

And that third bucket is where the measurement problem starts.



Corn

Explain.



Herman

Most of the big datasets, the UN, the OECD, Eurostat, they classify migrants by legal category. Labour, family reunification, study, asylum, other. Not by motive. So if you want a clean global breakdown of X percent economic, Y percent family, Z percent ideological, it doesn't exist in the way Daniel is hoping for.



Corn

So the percentage question has no clean answer.



Herman

Not at the global level. What you get instead is population-specific studies. Nurses, doctors, one region, one occupation. And even those tend to show motives are multiple and overlapping. People tick several boxes. So constructing clean cohorts is hard.



Corn

Give me an example of how messy it gets.



Herman

Take a Filipino nurse who moves to Canada. On the immigration form she's a economic migrant, a skilled worker. But ask her why she chose Canada over, say, Saudi Arabia, where the pay might be comparable, and you get a different answer. Family already there. A church community. A political system she trusts. A future for her kids that she can describe in a sentence. Which of those is the economic motive and which is the ideological one?



Corn

And the form only has one box.



Herman

The form only has one box. So the data says economic, and the reality says economic plus three other things that don't have a field.



Corn

So what does the research actually show about the most common drivers?



Herman

Economic and employment motives dominate. Every voluntary-migration study I've seen puts them at or near the top. There's a survey of Nigerian neurosurgeons from this year, about forty percent considering emigration. Financial pressure was cited by eighty-eight and a half percent as a push factor. Poor working conditions by sixty-three and a half. And when they asked what would keep them, higher salaries was the top answer at fifty-eight percent.



Corn

So the push is money and the retention lever is money.



Herman

Money and conditions, which are the same conversation. There's a scoping review of Africa-born health workers, sixty-five studies spanning twenty-ten to twenty twenty-four. Same pattern. Inadequate pay, limited professional growth, political instability as the push factors. Better remuneration and career opportunities as the pull.



Corn

Political instability is interesting there, because that's a different flavour than pure economics.



Herman

It is, and it sits closer to the forced-migration category than people admit. But it's still about material security rather than ideology in the sense Daniel means.



Corn

What about the European data?



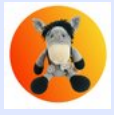
Herman

Spanish nurses. Study from twenty nineteen. Top drivers were unemployment and precarious employment, plus professional development. Half of them intended to leave within six months, mostly to the UK.



Corn

Half.



Herman

Half. And that's a population that isn't in a war zone, isn't being persecuted. They're just in a labour market that isn't giving them what they trained for.



Corn

So the pull is the UK, which is not an ideological destination in any meaningful sense. It's just a bigger labour market.



Herman

And that's the thing about the economic category. It doesn't require a story. It requires a gap between what you can get where you are and what you can get somewhere else.



Corn

What about family and education? Those keep showing up in the literature too.



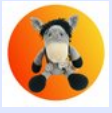
Herman

They do, and they're usually second-tier but significant. There's a rural-to-urban migration study in Uttarakhand, India, a hundred families. The major reasons were education, employment and income, and facilities. And here's the part that surprised me. Environmental factors ranked very low as a spontaneous personal motive. People weren't moving because the land was failing. They were moving because the school was better and the clinic was closer.



Corn

So even when you'd expect an environmental story, the actual stated reason is services.



Herman

Right. And there's a UK doctor migration review, forty studies. What's striking there is the same factors drive both inflow and outflow. Poor working conditions, training opportunities, quality of life, and this phrase that keeps appearing, a desire for a life change. The UK is both a destination and an origin for the same reasons.



Corn

That's a nice illustration of your point about push and pull being about the match, not the country.



Herman

It is. Same country, both directions, same drivers. Which is why you can't look at a country and say it's a push country or a pull country. It's a push for the people it's pushing and a pull for the people it's pulling, often in the same year, sometimes in the same profession.



Corn

And forced migration as its own category?



Herman

The European Psychiatric Association put out a policy paper last year that distinguishes voluntary, forced, and workforce migration. Push factors for the forced category are war, persecution, political instability. Pull factors are stability, economic opportunity, education, living conditions. And the paper's real point is that forced migration carries a disproportionate mental-health burden. That's a different conversation than the one Daniel is having, but it's important to mark the boundary.



Corn

Because forced migration isn't a choice at all, so it doesn't belong in the rational-actor frame.



Herman

It doesn't. You can't optimise when you don't have options.



Corn

What about climate?



Herman

Emerging, and smaller than the headlines suggest. There's a pilot study of Latin American and Caribbean immigrants in Atlanta that found direct climate drivers, floods, drought, reported by a subset, alongside economic drivers. So climate is increasingly studied as a contributing factor rather than a sole driver. People don't usually move because of climate alone. They move because climate made the economics worse.



Corn

Which folds it back into the economic category with a climate-shaped cause.



Herman

Mostly, yes. Though I'd add one thing. The reason climate migration looks small in the data might be the same measurement problem we've been circling. If someone's farm floods and they move to the city for work, they'll tell the survey they moved for work. The flood is the reason the work wasn't there anymore, but it doesn't get its own box.



Corn

So climate is upstream of the stated motive.



Herman

Climate is often upstream of the stated motive. Which means the stated motive is a summary, not a full account.



Corn

So the empirical takeaway is that in every voluntary-migration study, economic and employment and family and education motives dominate and are usually top-ranked.



Herman

That's the strongest backing for Daniel's intuition. Ideological migrants are the exception.



Corn

But I want to complicate the rational-actor framing before we move on.



Herman

Please.



Corn

Motives are almost always mixed. The pure ideological case, the person who moves for ideology and nothing else, may be rarer than ideological migration as a component. Most people who move for ideological reasons also have economic or family reasons in the mix.



Herman

That's true, and it cuts both ways. It makes Daniel's case rarer than he might think, but it also makes ideological migration harder to count. If ideology is one of four boxes someone ticks, does that person count as an ideological migrant?



Corn

Depends who's counting, and nobody's counting.



Herman

So if economic motives dominate, what do we actually mean by ideological migration, and who else has done it?



Corn

The literature doesn't use the term as standard. It maps onto what scholars call non-economic, identity-driven, or homeland-oriented migration. Movement toward a place because of what it represents. National belonging, religious belonging, political belonging, communal belonging. Often despite economic cost.



Herman

And the key feature is that the person knows they're accepting a worse material outcome. That's what makes it ideological rather than just sentimental.



Corn

Daniel's case is textbook. He moved not for opportunity but as an expression of the fact that Israel is where Jewish people should live. And his self-description as a rational actor who nonetheless stacked the odds against himself is precisely the tension the literature notes.



Herman

It's the interesting part of his prompt, honestly. He's not saying he was irrational. He's saying he made a decision that a pure material-optimisation model can't account for.



Corn

Which raises the question of whether the material-optimisation model is the right model.



Herman

It raises it. Let's hold it.



Corn

Other examples. Zionist aliyah itself, which is the case he's naming, is a national-ideological return movement. But there are parallels.



Herman

Palestinian return and diaspora nationalism. Migration framed around national belonging rather than economic gain.



Corn

Return-to-homeland movements generally. Armenian diaspora return. The Greek and Turkish population exchanges in the nineteen twenties, which were framed by national identity even though they were also coerced.



Herman

African-American Back to Africa movements. Liberia, Sierra Leone. People moving to a place they'd never seen because of what it represented.



Corn

Religious migration is a whole category. Pilgrims and Puritans to New England. Mormon migration to Utah. Amish and Mennonite migrations for religious freedom. Muslim hijra narratives.



Herman

Political-ideological migration is another. American Loyalists leaving the US after seventeen seventy-six. Russian émigrés after nineteen seventeen. Cuban exiles. Vietnamese boat people, though that one is mixed political and economic. Hong Kong emigration waves. Modern political exile flows.



Corn

And lifestyle or values migration. Back-to-the-land movements, intentional communities, some climate and eco-migration framed ideologically rather than as pure displacement.



Herman

Here's something telling. When I went looking for indexed clinical studies on ideological or religious migration, there were essentially none. The biomedical literature doesn't study this. It's studied in sociology, history, political science. Which itself tells you how the topic is framed academically.



Corn

It's not a health outcome, so it doesn't get a PMID.



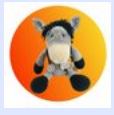
Herman

It's not a health outcome, so it doesn't get funded as one.



Corn

So back to the exception question. Is Daniel right?



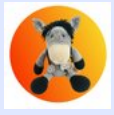
Herman

He's on solid empirical ground that ideological migration is a minority phenomenon and that economic and family motives dominate globally. But there are three caveats.



Corn

Give me the caveats.



Herman

Caveat one, mixed motives. Ideology and economics are often entangled. Many aliyah migrants also cite economic or family reasons. The pure ideological case may be rarer than ideological migration as a component.



Corn

Caveat two.



Herman

Measurement bias. Because most datasets classify by legal category, ideological motives can be invisible in official statistics even when they're present. Someone who moves on a family reunification visa might have moved for ideological reasons and the dataset will never know.



Corn

Caveat three.



Herman

Selection. Studies of specific ideological communities, religious Zionists, diaspora returnees, would show higher ideological weighting. But those are self-selected populations. You're asking people who already moved for ideology whether ideology mattered.



Corn

So the honest answer is yes, he's right, with the caveat that the measurement is worse than the phenomenon.



Herman

That's the honest answer.



Corn

But I want to push on the rational-actor framing, because I think it deserves pushback.



Herman

Go ahead.



Corn

The literature shows motives are usually plural. And ideological migrants may be better described as optimising for meaning and belonging rather than for material well-being. That's a different utility function, not an irrational one.



Herman

That's the right way to say it. It's not that they're not optimising. It's that they're optimising for something the standard model doesn't price.



Corn

Which means Daniel's framing of himself as a rational actor who stacked the odds against himself might be slightly wrong. He didn't stack the odds against himself. He changed what he was keeping score of.



Herman

That's a better description of what he did. And it's not a criticism. It's a correction to the model, not to him.



Corn

The model treats material well-being as the objective function. If you swap the objective function, the same decision becomes the rational one.



Herman

And that's why ideological migration is hard to study with the standard toolkit. The toolkit assumes a single utility function and tries to measure how well people are satisfying it. It has no vocabulary for someone who chose a lower-paying country because of what the flag means.



Corn

So the percentage question is unanswerable not just because the data is bad but because the categories are wrong.



Herman

Both. The data is bad and the categories are wrong. And the categories are wrong in a way that makes ideological migration look smaller than it is, because it only gets counted when it shows up as the sole motive, which is almost never.



Corn

There's a detail in the research I want to bring in, because it's relevant to how we think about this.



Herman

Which one?



Corn

There's a study of Nigerian doctors on non-migration and return migration. The question wasn't why do people leave. It was why do people stay, or why do they come back. And the answers were not the mirror image of the reasons people leave.



Herman

That's a real finding. The reasons to stay aren't just the absence of reasons to leave. They're their own thing. Family, community, a sense of obligation, a sense of place.



Corn

Which is the same insight from a different angle. If the reasons to stay are their own thing, then the reasons to move are probably their own thing too, and they're probably plural.



Herman

And probably weighted differently by different people in ways that don't collapse into one number.



Corn

So the honest answer to Daniel's percentage question is that the percentage doesn't exist, and it probably shouldn't.



Herman

I'd say it can't, and the reason it can't is instructive.



Hilbert

The piano was the thing that stuck.



Corn

Sorry?



Hilbert

I used to work as a shipping clerk for a small freight forwarder. Household goods, mostly. People emigrating, we'd handle the crates. And after a while you could tell from the manifest what kind of move it was.



Corn

Tell us.



Hilbert

The economic migrants shipped tools. Sewing machines, inventory, sometimes a whole small business in crates. The ideological ones shipped books. Photographs. One family moving to Israel shipped twelve crates of books and almost no furniture. I remember thinking, that's a lot of weight for paper.



Corn

Twelve crates.



Hilbert

Twelve. And then there was the piano. Heavy, impractical thing to put on a ship. The family insisted. I never learned why. I've thought about it for years.



Herman

What do you think it was?



Hilbert

I think it was the thing they couldn't leave behind. Not the most valuable thing. The thing that made the new place still theirs. I don't know. I was a shipping clerk. I just wrote it on the form.



Corn

So you'd say Daniel's intuition is right.



Hilbert

I'd say he's right that they're the exception. I wouldn't say they're irrational. The manifests told me they were optimising for something else. Memory, identity, continuity. That's not stacking the odds against yourself. That's betting on a different table.



Herman

That's a better way of putting it than I managed.



Hilbert

It's a shipping thing. Anyway, the levels are drifting on the second mic. I'll fix it in the edit.



Corn

Thank you, Hilbert.



Herman

That piano image is going to stay with me. Let's bring this back to Daniel's original questions.



Corn

The misconception I want to name is this. People assume there's a single authoritative global breakdown of migration by motive. X percent economic, Y percent family, Z percent ideological. It doesn't exist.



Herman

It doesn't exist because most datasets classify by legal category, not motive. And the surveys that do ask about motive are population-specific and show overlapping reasons. There's no clean cohort to point at.



Corn

And the second misconception, which is the one Daniel is half-holding himself.



Herman

That ideological migrants are irrational because they accept worse material outcomes. The better description is that they're optimising for meaning, belonging, identity. A different utility function, not an absence of one.



Corn

Which leaves us with a open question. If ideological migrants are optimising for meaning rather than material well-being, does that make them irrational, or does it reveal the limits of the rational-actor model itself?



Herman

And a second one. If official statistics can't see ideological motives because they classify by legal category, how many ideological migrants are we missing? The count is almost certainly an undercount.



Corn

As climate migration grows and political polarisation intensifies, ideological migration may become more common, or at least more visible. The question of why people move is never just about economics.



Herman

The piano on the manifest is the thing I keep coming back to. The data measures the crate. It doesn't measure what's in it.



Corn

If you enjoyed this episode, please leave a review. It helps other listeners find the show.



Herman

Thanks to our producer, Hilbert Flumingtop.



Corn

This has been My Weird Prompts.



Herman

We'll be back soon.