The prevailing doctrine of state sovereignty under international law is that it entails the right to exclude non-nationals, with only limited exceptions. These exceptions do not apply to so-called economic migrants. This presentation draws on the history and legacy of the European colonial project to challenge the right to exclude economic migrants. It argues that certain economic migrants have compelling claims to admission and inclusion. European colonialism entailed the emigration of tens of millions of Europeans and the flow of natural and human resources across the globe, for the benefit of Europe and Europeans. This presentation details how global interconnection and political subordination, initiated over the course of this history, generate a theory of sovereignty that obligates former colonial powers to open their borders to former colonial subjects. Insofar as certain forms of international migration today are responsive to political subordination rooted in colonial and neocolonial structures, a different conceptualization of such migration is necessary: one that treats economic migrants as political agents exercising equality rights when they engage in “decolonial” migration.

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