

**TO WELCOME THE STRANGER:
MYTHS AND REALITIES OF ILLEGAL IMMIGRATION**

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Then the King will say to those on his right, 'Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world. For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in.

—Mathew 25: 34-35

Introduction

For most of the last century, the study of immigration to the United States was an auspicious endeavor filled with surprises and inspirational lessons. Immigration comprises the saga of humble workers who arrive in this land searching for opportunity, laboring without respite on behalf of children, eager to fulfill dreams of prosperity and freedom denied in their own countries. Almost always, foreigners arrive hoping that through sacrifice they will ennoble their progeny and make real the vision of America, a country strengthened by the blood and sweat of immigrants.

Until recently, the story of immigration to the United States has been simple in its design and ponderous in its effects. Workers, whether having entered the country legally or not, perform menial tasks, earn low wages, try to overcome linguistic barriers, and confront prejudice from the descendants of earlier immigrants. Eventually, this Cinderella tale of hardship, faith, and

endurance blossoms into something larger—the strangers become citizens, their offspring barely distinguishable from other Americans. The secret behind that astounding transition has been to counterbalance the harsh realities of capitalist exploitation and market competition with an abundance of opportunity and a measure of tolerance. Two factors have overwhelmingly contributed to the advancement of working-class and immigrant populations: incentives to education and property rights (Koontz 2000). Over time, and not without pain, a combination of private demand for cheap labor and forward-looking government policies created a sturdy safety net. Through the accumulation of human and material capital, outsiders gained admission into the larger society; they prospered and developed a stake in the maintenance of laws and regulations. The German anarchists that bloodied the streets of Chicago in the late nineteenth century lived on to see their offspring become voters and home owners.

But there is another, less sanguine story related to immigration. When America has failed to provide material and educational incentives to recent arrivals, instead meeting their desire with hostility and their ambition with a lack of sympathy, she has seen their children grow up to become permanent outsiders, resentful, skeptical, and rebellious. The descendants of slaves who flowed from the rural south into Midwestern and Northeastern cities led by hopes of inclusion only to see those dreams dashed by bigotry and discrimination saw many of their children and grandchildren drop out of schools, join gangs and give up on mainstream values (Gans 1996; Massey and Denton 1998). The

counterpoint between the fate of African Americans and that of immigrants lies at the core of America's failures and successes. Until recently, the story of immigration has been infused with optimism; that of suppressed racial minorities with despair. As the new century advances, however, those two stories begin to converge. Below, I sketch the elements of that momentous shift.

Immigration in the Age of Globalization

Throughout the twentieth century, immigrants in the U.S.—many without proper documentation—were tolerated in obeisance to the demands of powerful economic interests, especially in agricultural production. Mexicans constituted the bulk of arrivals concentrating in the American Southwest to harvest the crops that filled domestic and international markets (Gamio 1971). Until the 1960s, most immigrants from Mexico were men with low levels of education who came from small rural villages in their home country. Between 1942 and 1965 many of those workers entered the U.S. as part of what has become known as the Bracero Program, a bilateral agreement that enabled agricultural workers from Mexico to enter the U.S. legally on a temporary basis. In 1965, under the Kennedy administration, that program was terminated in response to persistent complaints over the abuses and misuses of Mexican labor.

In 1965 as well, the Family Reunification Act opened new channels for immigrants already established in the U.S. to sponsor the legal arrival of relatives, especially wives and children. The same piece of legislation expanded immigration quotas for immigrants from Asia. As a result, the late 1900s

witnessed the growth of migration from Mexico, Guatemala, China, Viet Nam, and other countries in the two continents.

Between 1965 and 1986, the complementarity of American demand for cheap labor and a growing supply of Mexican workers created a well-oiled machine that benefited employers as well as immigrants (Alba and Nee 2005; Massey 2003). A measure of toleration for illegal entries led to an abundance of foreign-born recruits employed in services and agriculture. Many Mexicans—especially those without proper documentation—resorted to circular migration spending working periods in the U.S. and returning periodically to their home towns to mind small businesses or build homes. Remittances became the equivalent of a grassroots foreign aid program, enabling many communities in Mexico to thrive despite prevailing scarcity and ineffective government practices. The needs of American employers were met even as Mexican workers obtained benefits. The cost of this symbiotic relationship was moderate—a bending of the rules governing formal immigration policy.

Then, after the passage of the 1986 Immigration Reform and Control Act, the trend began to move towards more punitive and exclusionary measures. Immigration in general and illegal immigration in particular gained attention as a problem in search of a solution. New arrivals, mostly from Mexico and Central America were blamed for poverty increases in receiving areas. Media outlets portrayed newcomers as parasites taxing the welfare system, bearing children without restraint, crowding schools and packing the emergency rooms of local hospitals. The budget allocated to the U.S. Immigration and Naturalization

Service grew exponentially as did its personnel (Massey 2003). By the 1990s, the U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service had become the second largest military force in the nation trailing only after the U.S. armed forces.

Such policies had as a goal to curtail the uninterrupted flow of illegal migrants. Under Operation Gatekeeper and other similar endeavors, surveillance technology, including a fence several miles long along the Tijuana-San Diego border, was built to stop unauthorized entries. Although that campaign was hailed as a success by its designers, its major effect was to push potential immigrants to other more dangerous points of entry, including the Arizona desert. Before 1990 the number of deaths of individuals attempting to cross over into the United States was negligible. Since that date approximately 300 people have died on the average every year trying to make their way into the United States (Marosi 2005).

The incongruities surrounding illegal immigration are multiple and best illustrated by the process that led to the enactment of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) in 1993. That voluminous piece of legislation had as an objective to remove as many barriers as possible for the free movement of capital across international borders. One way to conceptualize NAFTA is as the logical culmination of economic currents that began three decades earlier. Starting in the late 1960s, an increasing number of manufacturing operations were relocated from advanced industrial nations, including the U.S., to less developed countries where wages were but a fraction of those paid to workers in rich nations (Fernández-Kelly 1983; Shaiken 1989). Neo-liberal economic

policies and a consensus built around the virtues of the free market eventually gave way to the North American Free Trade Agreement whose purpose was to facilitate competition and economic integration on a continental scale (Duina 2006).

Similar in purpose to NAFTA was the creation of the European Union. In that case, however, planners gave concerted attention to the effects of economic integration on labor flows. As a result, European nations supported investments in Portugal, a poor country and the weakest link in the European chain. The goal was to arrest an exodus of labor once the European Union had been formed. By contrast, the architects of NAFTA refused at every step of the way to consider labor in the arrangements that would lead to growing economic interdependence throughout the American hemisphere. Avid to find ways to demolish every obstruction for investments across international borders, they nonetheless expected workers to stay put (Duina 2006). Ironically, those advocates most vocal about the virtues of free markets now call for government intervention to prevent workers from crossing borders in search of the very same opportunities that have been created by neo-liberal policies.

That egregious breach of logic has had its costs. As the treatment of unauthorized immigrants became increasingly severe in the U.S., more of those already in this country settled down, returning less frequently to their home towns for fear that attempted reentry would be blocked (Massey 2003). Over a short period of time what had been a circular migration gave way to a permanent population of illegal immigrants now reaching an estimated 12 million. During the

same period, the demand for immigrant labor continued unabated but the legal quota for Mexicans is so small and in such discrepancy with the number of those interested in coming to the U.S. as to ensure that many will have to enter the country illegally. The estimated time frame for legal admission currently exceeds ten years. Increased discrimination and deaths of people trying to cross the border have not lessened migration—they have only resulted in wasted resources and steep suffering among vulnerable workers eager to find their way into America.

Conditions grow even worse in the aftermath of the 9/11 attack on New York and Washington. Over the last five years immigration has emerged as a new fulcrum galvanizing public concerns over national security. A decade and a half of escalating hostility against Mexican arrivals, especially those without proper documentation, exploded into new forms of repression starting in 2003 when the Immigration and Naturalization Service was dismembered and folded into the recently established Office of Homeland Security. That dependency was created with one goal in mind: to protect Americans from the threats of terrorism. By moving immigration services into Homeland Security immigrants were de facto redefined as security risks and potential terrorists. Of little significance in this madding process were the facts—it did not matter that those responsible for the 9/11 attack had entered the U.S. legally or that most illegal aliens seldom violate the laws of the land, or that not a single terrorist has ever entered the U.S. via the U.S.-Mexico border. In the face of all evidence, the drumbeat of unreason prevailed leading politicians to advocate extreme measures, including

the building of an electrified 2000-mile fence between Mexico and the United States, the imposition of severe penalties on employers who hire illegal immigrants, and the denial of citizenship to the children of illegal aliens. None of those measures has been implemented yet but the growing hostility they foster augurs badly for immigrants and their children who now face increasing discrimination and rancor. For the first time in recent history, Mexicans and Central Americans face a fate similar to that which stifled the capacity of African Americans to gain full membership in American Society.

Perhaps the most lamentable aspect in of this situation is its superfluity. Immigration, whether legal or illegal, has never constituted a major problem in the U.S. Latin Americans living in this country hardly present a security threat. When given an opportunity they have assimilated like many other groups. Only ignorance and fear among large segments of the American public in tandem with opportunism on the part of politicians can explain the present state of things. In the next section I give attention to ten points concerning the reality of immigration to the U.S.

Immigrants: Assets or Burdens?

The best way to understand immigration—both legal and illegal—is by enumerating the facts that surround it.

Fact One: Most immigrants to the United States come from a single country—Mexico. More than half of all legal entries to this country are Mexicans and almost all illegal aliens are from Mexico with smaller but fast rising groups

originating in Central America. About a third of immigrants since 1965 are Asians (Portes 2006). Typically, first-generation Asians and Mexicans do not become involved in criminal activities or terrorist acts.

Fact Two: Unemployment among first-generation immigrants is virtually nonexistent; most immigrants arrive in this country eager to work and easily find jobs. Although the overall effect of immigration on the U.S. economy is small, immigrant workers are vital to the stability and growth of sectors such as agriculture, the hospitality industry, construction, and other like services (Alba and Nee 2005). For the most part, working-class immigrants take jobs that are unlikely to be filled by native-born residents. There is some debate about the effect of immigrant workers on the employment opportunities of impoverished Americans. Nevertheless, most studies conclude that such an effect, when present, is minuscule. Moreover, to base concerns over immigration on its impact on racial minorities is disingenuous—the members of long established U.S. populations would not be competing for entry level jobs if adequate channels for their economic mobility were in place.

Fact Three: Most illegal immigrants pay taxes (Massey 2003). Even when using counterfeit documentation illegal immigrants make contributions to the national troth. In addition, their illegal status makes it difficult for many of them to obtain pensions and other benefits reserved to citizens. Their contributions represent a net gain for the nation. Immigrants also represent a burgeoning market and, when presented with the opportunity, they tend to participate constructively in political processes.

Fact Four: Most illegal immigrants do not use services or depend on public assistance for fear of deportation. It is true that in some localities immigrants crowd schools and emergency rooms. That problem would be largely resolved if immigrants were legalized. Citizens and permanent residents are less likely to cluster in low-income neighborhoods with overtaxed resources.

Fact Five: Whether legal or illegal, most immigrants to the U.S. endorse the norms and culture of the United States. Some authors, like Samuel Huntington (2005), argue that cultural differences among Hispanics threaten prevailing American values. That argument flies in the face of reality. Mexicans, for example, have a long tradition of European and American acculturation; they espouse Christian values and are conversant with mores and norms familiar in this country (Portes 2006). It is, in fact, their devotion to family and work—two central tenets of American culture—that first propels them in their journey to the U.S. The complaints regularly aired through talk show radio and, most notoriously, through TV series like “Broken Borders,” the unhappy creation of journalist Lou Dobbs, eerily echo the chauvinistic ranting against Irish, Polish, Jewish and Italian immigrants heard more than a hundred years ago, at the turn of the twentieth century

Fact Six: It is not true that immigrants from Latin America refuse to speak English or maintain a separatist attitude. English is far from being a beleaguered language in need of defense. More than 90 percent of immigrants in the U.S. speak English, at least to some extent. Almost universally, they try to speak the dominant tongue to better communicate with employers and service providers.

English as a Second Language courses are oversubscribed throughout the nation. It is unreasonable to think that people who first came to this country in search of opportunity would spurn a major skill necessary for their own economic and social advancement. Most second-generation immigrants speak only English (Portes and Rumbaut 2001). In fact, where immigrants are concerned, the problem is not that they refuse to learn English but that they lose the language of their ancestors so quickly.

Fact Seven: All attempts at curtailing illegal immigration to the U.S. have failed largely because the availability of legal resident visas is in great disparity with both employer demand and labor supply. Under present regulations, Mexico—a neighboring country with a population of 107 million people and a long trajectory of economic interdependence with the U.S.—is entitled to the same number of legal entries that tiny countries in Africa and Oceania (Massey 2003). Less costly and wasteful than current proposals for the construction of fences and the expansion of vigilante squads along the U.S.-Mexico border would be to close the quota disparity in ways that reflect true market conditions.

Fact Eight: Reputable studies show that, on the average, first-generation immigrants exhibit better health indicators than the U.S. public at large (Rumbaut 1996; 1999). That is partly because limited resources prevent them from partaking of the dangerous distractions that so often doom more established populations. Child mortality and morbidity rates are low among first-generation Mexicans as is the consumption of controlled substances. The evidence does not support the claim that illegal immigrants are carriers of disease.

Fact Nine: At least a third of illegal immigrants in the United States are youngsters who first entered the United States with their parents. Those children did not make an independent decision to cross the border illegally. They have grown up in this country, speak only English, and many have no memory of the ancestral nation. Yet those children have limited opportunity in education and employment given their irregular status. The fate of those children should be a central concern among policy makers.

Fact Ten: Mounting evidence, the result of painstaking research, clearly shows that, in the age of globalization and with growing points of contact between Mexico and the U.S., illegal immigration will continue unabated. The question is not whether people will continue to flow to points of opportunity but whether more will have to die or sink to the bottom of the social ladder in the process.

Conclusion: On Whose Side is God?

To reconcile American values and history with present attitudes towards immigration boggles the mind. A country known for its reliance on democratic ideals, market forces, and cultural tolerance is presently engaged in a denial of its own tradition. The America that overcame Nazism and Communism now sees a few million modest workers eager to find a second chance within its borders as enemies. The nation that emerged victorious from the Second World War to spread the advantages and perils of market capitalism throughout the world now wishes to see immigrants, the very embodiment of individualism and self

reliance, crushed and ousted. Those contradiction would be risible were they not tragic. To espouse exclusion over inclusion is not only immoral but also self defeating. The assault against illegal immigrants is not only an attack against persons and families but also an affront to knowledge.

It has become fashionable to argue that Americans are not plagued by a spirit of xenophobia; that they are not against immigration; that all they want is for foreigners to respect the law; that all they seek is to protect national sovereignty. Outsiders, so the argument goes, should wait for their turn to enter the U.S. in an orderly fashion and in accordance to established procedures. To do otherwise is to make a selfish choice in detriment of those who play by the rules. That kind of reasoning assumes that all people face the same options. Yet the workers who cross borders without papers are making the only reasonable choice available to them: to survive and endure despite the barriers created by outdated and ineffective laws. By accident of birth their alternatives are limited.

It is part of our Judeo-Christian tradition to recognize one fundamental truth—that the law cannot be above justice. America's strength has always derived from those willing to change or defy bad legislation in the interest of fair play. From the pilgrim settlers who yearned for religious freedom to those who made possible the American Civil Rights Movement, little social progress has been made in this country without breaking injurious rules. Those who sanctimoniously advocate respect for the law might have, in a different era, supported segregationist norms even as Harriet Tubman worked in the shadows to free slaves along the Underground Railroad.

Can God be on the side of those who uphold the law at the expense of humanity? No, is the resounding answer heard throughout the Old and New Testaments—God is always on the side of the suffering. Thus, the study of immigration presents more than an opportunity to fulfill academic objectives; it is also a platform to achieve what sociologist Marvin Bressler (1964) calls encoded decency. A systematic investigation of the facts surrounding immigration can lead to better understanding but also to the establishment of more sensible and humane approaches than those currently in existence.

Finally, a few more words are necessary about the unintended consequences of misguided immigration policies. Those laws are certain not to curtail the flow of people seeking alternatives in the U.S. but they may achieve a different and unexpected outcome—the creation of a hostile climate in which the children of once hopeful immigrants will scoff at the purported merits of democracy, opportunity, and fair treatment. Whether legal or not immigrants are here to stay. The only doubt is whether they will end up as citizens or whether they will enlarge the looming and desperate American underclass.

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