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# IMMIGRATION, GLOBALISM, AND THE NEW AMERICAN EMPIRE

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## Prologue

*In our day, everything seems pregnant with its contrary. Machinery gifted with the wonderful power of shortening and fructifying human labour, we behold starving and overworking it. The new-fangled sources of wealth, by some weird spell, are turned into sources of want. The victories of art seem bought by the loss of character. At the same pace that mankind masters nature, man seems to become enslaved to other men or to his own infamy. Even the pure light of science seems unable to shine but on the dark background of ignorance. All our invention and progress seem to result in endowing material forces with intellectual life, and in stultifying human life into a material force. This antagonism between modern industry and science on the one hand, modern misery and dissolution on the other hand...is a fact, palpable, overwhelming, and not to be controverted.*

--Karl Marx, speech at the anniversary of

*The People's Paper*, 1856

*The world in which we live is both remarkably comfortable and thoroughly miserable. There is unprecedented prosperity in the world, which is incomparably richer than ever before...But ours is also a world of extraordinary deprivation and of staggering inequality...The dual presence of opulence and agony...makes it hard to avoid fundamental questions about the ethical acceptability of the prevailing arrangements and about our own values and their relevance and reach.*

--Amartya K. Sen, "Globalization and Values," 2001

*Ever since George Washington warned his countrymen against foreign entanglements, empire abroad has been seen as the republic's permanent*

*temptation and its potential nemesis. Yet what word but “empire” describes the awesome thing America is becoming?...Being an imperial power, however, is more than being the most powerful nation or just the most hated one. It means enforcing such order as there may be in the world and doing so in the American interest. It means laying down the rules America wants...while exempting itself from other rules...that go against its interests.*

--Michael Ignatieff, from “*The Burden*,” *New York Times Magazine*, January 5, 2003

## INTRODUCTION

The excerpts quoted in the Prologue span more than 150 years of recent human history, right up to the present moment, and capture at least two old realities and one new one. To some, the first of the old realities seems almost biblical—“the poor you will always have with you”—and from that emanates the biblical desire to make them more secure in their poverty, rather than to eliminate it, as was Lyndon Baines Johnson’s bold intent when he signed the Economic Opportunity Act of 1964 (Levitan, 1969).

A second old reality follows on the heels of the first: while these thinkers can point us either toward pessimism or optimism, they beckon all of us to the need for an appraisal of our values and actions toward the great mass of socio-economically disenfranchised peoples throughout the world. What makes this call an old one, of course, is that it has been raised almost continually through the last two millennia by as diverse a cast as Jesus Christ, Mohammed, Adam Smith, Karl Marx, Dwight David Eisenhower, and, even sometimes, the editors and writers at the *New York Times* and the *Wall Street Journal*.

But it is the new reality reported by Ignatieff that makes this a historically unique context in which to make these observations, and summons us to reflection and action. This is, of course, the self-conscious emergence of the United States as the Western Hemisphere’s newest and imperial power. I will not go into the distinctions Ignatieff draws between the kind of imperial power the United States now wields and that commanded by its 20<sup>th</sup> Century predecessors, e.g., the English, the French, the Germans, the Ottomans, or the Soviets, leaving that to writers already embarked on that project (e.g., most provocatively, Hardt and Negri, 2001). For my purposes, it is sufficient to say that the strategic reach of the economic, political, and military power the United States now possesses presents

its people and government with a set of stark choices about how it can and should be used, because with empire comes a tremendous capability for doing great good or equally great ill toward the international problems of socioeconomic disenfranchisement that continue to plague us.

I outline some of those choices in this essay, with a focus on immigration as a problem that is an ineluctable symptom of global socioeconomic disenfranchisement and the widening rift in wealth, income, and economic opportunity between the First World and the Third. It is also well suited for American intervention toward a possible solution, in the context of America's new status. And since immigration is an issue encased within another economic fact of our age, the globalization of the capitalist system of economic relations, I shall deal with it in that connection as well.

## **IMMIGRATION AND ECONOMIC NATIONALISM: Contradictions And Conflict**

The free movement of people and workers between nation-states, and not just within national borders, is perhaps the last great desideratum of economists who are devoted to the idea that the purely conventional or irrational geo-political space of nations should be subordinated to the hyper-rational economic space of production, distribution, and consumption in an international regime of completely transparent and open ("free") trade. If workers were as inter-regionally or internationally mobile as capital is now, or even *slightly* more mobile, much if not most of the great disparities in income and wealth between the world's nations, places, and peoples could be ameliorated, with all workers enjoying a higher standard of living in the mid-to-long run.

But the problem of, and possible solutions to, both legal and illegal immigration into the United States (and in Europe, the UK, and elsewhere) has almost always been viewed from the perspective of economic nationalism. By economic nationalism I mean the view that what's good for one's country's economic well-being is good for one's country, period, and all others should sort themselves out as best they can.

What's good for one's country, however, is a very broad term. Economic nationalist policies thus take on varying identities, aims, and interpretations. This is particularly so because in a capitalist framework, what's good for one's country is also, by the defining mechanism of the invisible hand, good for one's personal economic well-being. And the reverse is often regarded as true—and often *perversely* regarded as true, just as in the former case—in the eyes of large numbers of self-interested beholders. Inevitably, then, certain sectors or classes

may see a given immigration policy as being in theirs *and* the national economic interest, while others see it as deeply injurious, from a perspective also framed in nationalist economic terms. And here is where economically nationalist policies toward immigration have generated predictably recurrent social and political conflict.

Most of the violent conflict has stemmed from economic nationalism's most virulently sociopathic corollary: the nativist, xenophobic, racist, or communal notion among native workers, be they the native-born children of first generation immigrants or first generation immigrants themselves, that "we" got here first, and "they" are not going to take it away from us. Although there may be earlier examples of which I am not aware, this was first seen in the US in the ante- *and* post-Bellum North. The migration of newly freed African-Americans from the South was met with hostility, and sometimes by rioters and lynch mobs, lest these previously no-wage workers be anything but terrorized at the prospect of taking jobs from white working class Americans who had fought hard to gain a toehold in urban labor markets.

And since the latter half of the nineteenth century, US citizens of Anglo- (Saxon, German, Polish, etc.) descent have manifested these same sentiments toward other immigrant groups. Railroad companies brought in Chinese immigrant laborers who were despised because of their race and feared as a threat to the hard-won economic gains of poor white workers. The Irish were equally threatening—and equally detested—because they flooded the ghettos of New York, Boston, and other great cities in as dispossessed an economic state as the Chinese. And because they were Catholics, they were considered non-white. There are countless other contemporary examples from around the world of ethnic clashes grounded in these kinds of sentiments.

In a bow to the civil unrest and economic dislocation that was the result of more or less open immigration schemes, US immigration policy at the beginning of the twentieth century and into its middle decades had taken a decidedly exclusionary turn. Vernon Briggs (1996) has pointed out that between 1910 and 1930 immigration was declining as a source of population growth in the US, and thus its economic significance was declining as well. And between 1930 and 1965, "the percentage of the foreign born population had fallen to 4.4 percent, the lowest percentage in all of US history, and the absolute number of immigrants had declined to levels not seen since the 1880s." (Briggs, 2002)

Moreover, in contrast with earlier periods, immigrants to the US between 1930 and 1965 were largely refugees from war and European fascism, and thus were overwhelmingly European (Caucasian), well educated (i.e., with professional and technical skills), and urban. Along with their urbanity, they brought large

endowments of what economists call human (and sometimes finance) capital, thereby raising by several orders of magnitude the probability of their chances for socioeconomic success in the New World. In short, if you were not hopelessly racist or xenophobic, these immigrants could prove to be pretty nice neighbors.

Briggs correctly avers that as of 1965, the issue of immigration was largely irrelevant to the wage earners of that day, and perhaps to economic policy makers as well. The passage of the Immigration Act of 1965, however, opened a broad avenue for a change in that situation, however unintended. The Act itself was at least partially an element in what (calling upon the contemporary lexicon of “Wars” on terror and drugs) we might call the War Against Old Jim Crow being fought by Martin Luther King, his cadres of insurgents, and the Democratic Administration of Lyndon Johnson. Johnson had just signed the Civil Rights Act of 1964, which banned all forms of *internal* or domestic discrimination based on race or ethnicity. His and the Congress’s intent in the 1965 Immigration Reform Act was to purge the nation’s immigration laws of the *external* racial and ethnic discrimination contained in provisions that had set strict and very low quotas on immigration from Southern and Eastern Europe, and had essentially banned outright all immigration from Asia. As such, it appeared not as a response to a national economic problem, but to a national civil concern.

If there was no overt economic intent in the legislation, however, its congressional sponsors felt compelled to deal with the bottom line of US economic nationalism. They stated in Congressional speeches that the Act would not raise immigration quotas or lower standards for the selection of immigrants, thereby flooding urban areas with the illiterate and indigent; and more importantly, that it would not cause any native-born Americans to lose their jobs. (Briggs, 2002)

This last assurance should have been anything but, however, to those whose economic positions could be threatened by an influx of foreign-born workers. The Act itself may have had no economic intent, but at the time of its passage, the “Braceros” program had been in force since the early 1950’s. This was an immigration program that provided cheap and pliable Mexican farm labor for agribusinesses in Texas and California. Against the backdrop of the 1965 immigration Act, the Braceros program is one of the most vivid recent examples of the contradictions of economic nationalism when played out in immigration policy. Economic *self-interest* in agribusiness claimed a “what’s good for us is good for the country” *national* interest in the program, citing—ingenuously or not, because of the supposed manpower exigencies of the Korean War—a shortage of native-born farm workers that required the legal importation of Mexican workers.

The process of importing farm labor became institutionalized in other processes: informal, mostly illegal, and certainly immoral and unjust borderland

labor contracting practices, and *in the minds* of appallingly poor rural Mexicans and rich Anglo farmers alike. For the former group, one-time access to the US soon became full-time access, as many legal Mexican workers simply forfeited that status by illegally and permanently settling in and around California's Lower Central Valley and the Rio Grande Valley of Texas. For the latter group, these *seasonal* farm workers—those living year-round in the US who did farm work in season—became as cheap and pliable a labor force as the *braceros* had been earlier (at least before the troublesome entrance on to the scene by farm labor union organizers in the early 1960s).

As that process unfolded, so did the shifting contradictions inherent in defining US immigration policy either overtly or inadvertently in terms of economic nationalism. One moment of that contradiction is that the precedent set for importing farm labor from Mexico, and the subsequent settling of increasing numbers of those workers—legally or illegally—in and around the Southwestern borderlands of the US, has now led to the current flood of undocumented workers from Central and South America.

Aided by actual and proposed amnesty schemes since that time, the flood has now given birth to the huge and growing “bi-illiterate” and permanent Mexican populations in Texas, California, Illinois, and other US states. While the “national” economic interest of hoteliers, restaurateurs, farmers, construction companies, small manufacturers, and various service industry operators are served quite well by the presence of this deep well of low-wage labor, US economic and civil nationalists decry the existence of virtual states within the states, and some mutter darkly about Mexican nationalist-revanchist dreams of “Aztlán,” i.e., the *reconquista* (re-conquest) of Texas and the trans-Rocky Mountain lands seized by the US during the Mexican War. In a less paranoid vein, the most recent and well-conducted economic studies point out that as long as this flood of low-wage, low- or no-skill immigrants is allowed to continue to surge, the national dream of eradicating or ameliorating poverty in the US, particularly among low-skilled native African-Americans and poor Anglos, will remain just that. (National Research Council, 1997)

A second moment of the contradiction lies in the intersection of Cold War exigencies and the 1965 Immigration Act's non-discrimination intent. Again, defined as in the national—although political (and not strictly economic)—interest, tens of thousands of refugees from communist nations also were allowed to immigrate to the US. This post-1960s immigration wave also raised or exacerbated clashes born of the contradiction between individual economic self-interest and various definitions of the national economic interest embedded within immigration policy.

For example, the enmity between native-born African-Americans toward the Cuban refugee population in South Florida is primarily a function of economic grievances, as the former have continued to be shut out of well-paying jobs and business opportunities, while “the economy within an economy” that is the Cuban immigrant community has expanded to become a major force in the Miami metropolitan area. More recently, Vietnamese political refugees re-settled in South Texas by the Immigration and Naturalization Service, and provided with livelihoods as shrimpers and fisherman, were shunned and then physically attacked by workers from the “native” fishing industry. Some of these antagonists were Mexican-American, in what is decidedly *not* an irony of the immigration process, given the “first mover” mentality of many recent immigrants.

Not surprisingly, the debate over immigration spawned by the contradiction between self-defined, individual economic self interest and the economic interests of the nation as a whole has led to widely diverging proposals about US immigration policy. Some have suggested that immigration again be limited to those who bring with them the skills, education, or financial capital required for prosperous prospects. In at least one sense, this proposal constitutes a permanent institutionalization of the “H-1B” program, an INS scheme that grants temporary visas to skilled software and computer specialists from foreign lands.

This proposal runs headlong into the contradiction between one groups’ definition of its economic self interest (in this case, the constellation of US “high-tech” industries that view these programs as being in the nation’s economic interest because they make up for alleged skill shortages among native-born Americans) and those who believe that importing skilled foreigners damages the future prospects of many low-wage native-born individuals who already have limited opportunities to fill these positions.

On the opposite end of the spectrum, the Bush Administration has contemplated a *widening* of immigration policy through another mass amnesty program for undocumented workers from Latin America, particularly Mexico. The Bush proposal faces much greater resistance from some economic and civil nationalists in the US, because it further legitimizes the flood tide of illegal immigration into the US that has been their main concern. Its critics have also characterized it as primarily a political ploy to bolster the standing of the Republican Party among Mexican-Americans and other Latinos in the US, and to improve the political prospects of Mexican President Vicente Fox’s rightist *Partido Accion Nacional* (PAN), with which US Republicans see an ideological affinity.

Nevertheless, the apparent “what, me worry?” attitude of the Bush Administration’s not-yet-proposed amnesty program is intriguing. Mass amnesties

would not only legalize the status of many hundreds of thousands of illegal Mexican immigrants in the US, but deliberately or not would make explicit a facet of globalism in the economic arrangements between rich lands and poor in the Western Hemisphere—i.e., between the US, Canada, and everybody else—that only now comes into clear perspective: the economists’ desideratum of free and open movement of workers across borders that I mentioned at the outset.

Of course, this is only *one half* of an immigration regime that would subordinate the putative irrationality of political-geographic space to the rationality of economic space. For Mexico, a new mass amnesty (with the implicit promise of more to come) for undocumented nationals working in the US would convey huge benefits. It would help relieve the severe demographic pressure on its still immature neo-liberal capitalist economy, which must generate millions of new wage-paying jobs annually just to maintain current levels of poverty-level employment and underemployment. And it would assure a continual flow of hard currency “remittances” back to Mexico from family members in the US, thereby bolstering the peso and the position of Mexico’s fragile banking and financial sector. Overall, the wage and income differential between Mexico and the US would be lessened over time.

For many in the US, however, to suggest that workers employed at prevailing wages here would likewise be free to cross the border to work in Mexico would be ludicrous, never mind the equalizing effects on wages in the long run. Nonetheless, legitimizing the free cross-border movement of low-wage Mexican workers is consistent with the globalist economic perspective embodied in free trade agreements like NAFTA, and such a regime is viewed by some in the US as consistent with the national economic interest. Confronted with the possibility of a scheme that would in effect establish a permanent channel to an inexhaustible reservoir of low-wage labor for US service industries, thereby keeping downward wage pressure on all but the most specialized or protected of US labor markets, others favor measures that would effectively prohibit illegal entry from Mexico and elsewhere in Latin America.

## **GLOBALISM OR INTERNATIONALISM?**

None of the immigration policy alternatives outlined so far for the United States addresses the underlying and long-standing contradiction between definitions of national versus group or individual economic self-interest. As a result, they do not honestly take into account the crying need to close the increasingly wide gap between rich lands and poor, nor to ameliorate the growing socio-economic disenfranchisement and inequality within countries. As I said earlier, taken together, these are old realities that contribute to newly urgent needs.



In the US, given its new standing as the world's only power with imperial strategic reach, the failure to adequately comprehend the nature of the contradiction in its stance toward immigration is part of a larger failure to make a distinction between globalism and internationalism. This failure makes it doubly difficult to arrive at immigration policies that are not only good for its national interest and the economically self-interested individuals and groups that actually comprise the national interest, but for the world at large toward which it must now focus its policy intent.

To put it plainly, globalism and internationalism are not synonymous, but are two distinct—if related—categories. Globalism *describes a condition* in which the world's economies now find themselves, one in which the economic well-being of any one nation is more than ever dependent on the welfare of all. Internationalism describes the policy regime toward that condition.

An internationalist position toward the global (and therefore national) problems posed by immigration must above all encompass what appears to be the irreconcilable contradiction outlined here between individual and national economic self-interest, and in addition, between the economic welfare of individual nations, many of which—because of the great contemporary disparities in wealth and productive capacities—appear to have competing and mutually irreconcilable needs. But the irreconcilability of their needs is only apparent.

This is not a new argument, but one that stems, as I have said, from sources as old as Jesus. Its contemporary strain in neo-liberal or neoclassical economics traces its roots back to David Ricardo and his justification for free and open international trade. That justification, of course, is that such a regime produces more growth and wealth for all, no matter where or what. True as that may be, the uncritical application of Ricardo's theories in a world where practical economic hegemony and growing international inequality is generated by and comes from multiple regional sources—e.g., the US, China, and the EU—is a fundamental mistake. It conflates a description (globalism) with a solution (internationalism). Looking back at my earlier example, this can lead to what can only be described as the absurd conclusion that the free movement of workers across borders not only provides the opportunity for low-wage workers to toil for higher pay, but for American (or European) workers to work in low-income countries for poverty-level wages.

The conceptual and practical advantage of recognizing the distinction between globalism and internationalism is that it avoids dead-ends like these. It allows real international differences to emerge from the fog that envelops reality when it is cloaked in inappropriate levels of theorizing. The first of these differences is that despite the globalization of economic relations of production,

consumption, and exchange, borders and boundaries still exist, and will continue to exist. These are not impediments to trade-induced wealth-creation, but rather the institutions that humans create to develop a sense of place.

As some regional economists have noted recently (e.g., Krugman, 1995), a sense of place is not merely a sociological or psychological construct, but has real economic value. It is the glue that makes human settlements function in the concrete—rather than the abstract—economic space of living and working. Seen from this angle, the free movement of workers across borders in a context of highly unequal (and therefore absurd!) exchanges like those reified in current US proposals for mass amnesty appears not as an economically efficient mechanism for equalizing global wealth, but as a deadweight on efficient production and exchange. Surely, persons and peoples should be allowed to live and work where they please, but economic exigencies must not be allowed to *force* or *require* their migration to foreign lands. In short, the desideratum of free movement of workers must be replaced by one in which economic conditions in *most* places—save the howling desert or the frozen canyons of Antarctica—must be made at least roughly equal, so that the large majority of those who adhere to a sense of place, and wish to stay in their home regions and localities, can afford to stay.

Crafting an internationalist stance toward immigration policy thus requires the initial recognition of the value of localities and regions. This is not a paradox, but an admission of a simple truth about the material conditions under which human societies flourish. What else would an internationalist stance look like? It must include the idea that global wealth creation is indeed the solution to the conflicts and contradictions generated by immigration policies defined by particularistic, i.e., narrowly nationalist or individualist, economic self-interest. Global wealth creation, however, must not be a zero-sum game. True wealth-creation cannot mean enriching some at the expense of impoverishing others. This merely re-creates the current conditions under which economic necessity determines international immigration patterns.

All of this pushes us inexorably to the conclusion that for immigration to occur on a scale and in a context where all nations, peoples, and persons benefit from the free movement of workers—a Pareto-optimal move, in the parlance of neoclassical welfare economics—international frameworks must be established to create the global commonwealth. This idea encompasses ones that are as pedestrian as large increases in foreign aid, as practically redistributive as the “structural adjustment programs” carried out by rich members of the EU for the benefit of new entrants, and as visionary as an Economic United Nations. The latter would be a regime in which global trade and exchange would be carried out along the lines of what might be termed an international Keynesian incomes policy that would provide price floors for internationally traded raw commodities,

currency protections and capital controls, and perhaps even internationally subsidized wages for poor workers in even poorer lands.

These are not mere blandishments, because such measures would require a radical rethinking of the way we view the process of wealth-creation, one that would be synonymous with the creation of social and therefore human well-being. But it would be one in which free choice and equal exchange—in fact, the real objective function under which both theoretical and practical capitalism would flourish globally and nationally—would dominate the calculus of migration decisions by peoples and persons, not the poverty of economic necessity.

What of the role of the new American empire in all this? As the richest and most productive nation on earth, is the most capable of sharing its riches in the schemes I have all-too-briefly outlined, along with its affluent European and Japanese allies and those countries that will soon approach US levels of mass affluence (e.g., China). To quote Ignatieff again, “Being an imperial power...is more than being the most powerful nation or just the most hated one. It means enforcing such order as there may be in the world and doing so in the American interest.” Clearly, the new American empire must redefine what is in the American interest to avoid the path of the dinosaur that all previous empires have trod.

## **EPILOGUE**

I close with another visionary but quite feasible (if whimsical) solution vector to the problem of immigration under global conditions of highly unequal exchange. Such a program would be not only feasible but advantageous to US imperial interests, if those could be re-conceived along the lines I have described:

Here is my vision: Remember the Manhattan Project during World War II? It took less than four years for a group of scientists to develop the first weapon of mass destruction. My vision is, we can do even better for an even worthier goal. We could call it the Manhelin' Project, and its purpose would be to develop the first weapon of mass construction instead. Think about it. What if we used that \$200 billion set to detonate in Iraq, and put it toward becoming the worldwide leader in renewable, clean, sustainable energy sources? Now there's some real power. Create something so plentiful you don't have to pay an army to protect your share. A

healthy income, a healthy outcome ... what could possibly make more sense? Boy, talk about feeding two birds with one scone!

-- "Swami Beyondananda", from Swami's 2003 "State of the Universe Address"

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