Comprehensive Immigration Confusion

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One of the more challenging aspects of teaching undergraduates about immigration is getting them to consider that the biggest winners in the story are the immigrants themselves. Even when presented with the evidence, my students are extremely reluctant to view immigrants as risk-takers making rational choices. They prefer to see them as victims of global forces beyond their control.

Still more challenging is getting undergraduates from affluent backgrounds to consider that the other big winners are people like themselves—upper-middle class Americans for whom a huge influx of unskilled immigration has been a boon. Instead, immigrants become the focus of sincere sentiments of compassion and demands for "social justice." Yet for their fellow citizens who complain about or even denounce immigrants, my students have virtually no compassion. They readily dismiss them as racists and bigots.

To be sure, this admixture of limited information, self-interest, and moralism is hardly unique in politics. And in the context of immigration policy, it has a conservative variant. I have endured many frustrating discussions with undergraduates convinced that illegal immigrants are simply criminals who must be sternly punished, though they are untroubled by employers who routinely break the law by hiring workers they have good reason to believe are undocumented. But such views are clearly in the minority at selective institutions, as well as among political and intellectual elites more generally.

Republican elites have not been shy about wielding lo□y rhetoric

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about the national purposes served by immigration. Yet their policies have been firmly rooted in mundane clientelist politics, leaving party leaders in thrall to well-organized business interests addicted to low-skilled immigrant labor. Meanwhile, working- and lower-middle-class whites have grown increasingly restive. Slow to be aroused and now difficult to appease, such constituencies are long past the point of being soothed by rhetoric about the Statue of Liberty.

Instead, these Americans are drawn to bombast about "building a wall"—even though many undocumented immigrants arrive with valid papers, and then either overstay their visas or get tripped up by complex rules administered by a notoriously incompetent bureaucracy. Impatient with such policy details, fed-up Americans are drawn not only to simplistic rhetoric but also to the apparent clarity of legalistic bright lines and drastic remedies, including challenges to the constitutional basis of birthright citizenship.

Yet we must not gainsay the concerns expressed by so many Americans, who have long felt ignored and condescended to by the very elites who overwhelmingly benefit from mass immigration. The specific claims and complaints articulated by ordinary citizens typically miss their mark and may get expressed in off-putting and downright offensive ways. But this is because they have not had the benefit of tri-

immigrants—illegal as well as legal—and how these shape both immigration and assimilation in America. Second, we need to see how some of our most intensely held—and intensely debated—notions about immigration are a function of the politics of civil rights and race in our country, and how this distorts our immigration debates in some strange and poorly appreciated ways. And third, we need to understand that the policy nostrums to which we have been wedded—the bright line between legal and illegal immigrants, the obsession with border control, and the mirage of guest-worker programs—obscure more than they reveal about the challenges and the promise of immigration in America. Seeing these dynamics more clearly can help us dispel the

family, wrote these out of concern over the plight of her co-religionists fleeing pogroms in Tsarist Russia. These were the "huddled masses" to whom the "Mother of Exiles" lifted her "lamp beside the golden door!"

So, too, after World War II did Liberty greet—however belatedly and begrudgingly—Jews and other "displaced persons" fleeing a ravaged Europe. She was gradually more welcoming of those fleeing communist oppression after successive popular uprisings in Hungary, Czechoslovakia, and Poland. Then of course she reached out to Soviet Jews during the closing years of the Cold War. If she had been standing in the 1840s, Lady Libertthe 18 td-5(e)-.1d a-26.61o7(b)-7.d.5(□)]3had-(r)-19.11y14.1((e)d W)8v( )]TJe7(b

when the rewards are high and the costs relatively low.

Unlike refugees, immigrants do not face a stark binary choice: leave home or stay and face persecution—or worse. On the contrary, the decision to emigrate is o□en marked by hesitation, ambivalence, and profound misgivings. Indeed, historians report that many of those who arrived here from Europe in the late 19th and early 20th centuries did not stay. Particularly during the years before World War I, when steamship travel made the journey shorter, safer, and cheaper, many so-called "birds of passage," mostly men, came intending to work, save money, and then resume their lives back in the old country. It is estimated that half of the Italian migrants during that period returned home.

Today, the motivations of Irish, Mexican, and many Central-American migrants are not dissimilar. Focusing specifically on the undocumented from Mexico, anthropologist Leo Chavez refers to "target earners." As Chavez and others have shown, the intention to return home shapes the behavior of migrants, such that they could not unfairly be said to "exploit themselves." They put up with unpleasant, even dangerous working conditions. They skimp on expenses and crowd into substandard living quarters to maximize their savings. And while it is true that many end up remaining here, the process has o□en been difficult and drawn out, with frequent journeys back and forth across the border—at least until recently.

A frequent consequence of such motives is concentrations of unattached males living in urban settings, and the social consequences can be problematic, occasionally explosive. In *he e oe he eigh o hood*, a study of transitional Chicago neighborhoods during the 1990s, sociologists William Julius Wilson and Richard Taub comment on how "litter and gra□ti … mar the formerly pristine streets" of a neighborhood once dominated by "European Americans" but succeeded by Mexican immigrants whose "perceptions of the neighborhood as a temporary haven meant that many residents did not invest in their homes."

In East Los Angeles during the late 1980s, I heard similar complaints from Catholic priests and community organizers trying to build up parish life in the face of what they bemoaned as "transience," not just of single men but also of entire families. And demographers Ira Lowry and Peter Morrison make a similar point about the 1992 Los Angeles riot, which resulted in more than 60 deaths. Unlike the 1965 Watts riot, which involved only blacks, the 1992 disturbances resulted in the arrests

of about equal numbers of blacks and Hispanic immigrants, overwhelmingly young men.

During this same period, political scientists Wesley Skogan and Susan Hartnett report that Chicago police had a difficult time involving Hispanics in community-policing efforts. After all, as a police lieutenant in the predominantly Mexican-American city of Santa Ana, California, once put it to me, "How do you do community policing when there is no community?" This aspect of immigrant neighborhoods is well understood by social-service providers, but is rarely talked about, for fear of stigmatizing immigrants or being denounced as racist.

of economically marginal newcomers, regardless of their legal status.

Further, it should be noted that while the number of lawful permanent residents (so-called green-card holders) admitted annually now hovers around one million, the number of non-immigrants admitted on visas to live and work (as students, exchange visitors, intra-company transferees, diplomats, temporary workers, and their family members) has most recently been more than 7 million. And this does not include the 67.5 million tourist- and business-visa-holders admitted, for example, in 2014.

These numbers might seem to dilute or dwarf the impact of 11 million undocumented immigrants. Yet to disgruntled Americans feeling ignored and denigrated by elites, they might plausibly have the opposite effect: sensitizing them to the scale and dynamism of contemporary migration and casting it negatively. Perhaps this is why, when asked by pollsters, Americans greatly exaggerate the undocumented as a proportion of all immigrants.

In sum, the legal status of the undocumented has become a highly visible but imperfect surrogate for broader concerns that run very deep. Reviewing the spate of local ordinances prohibiting landlords from renting to illegals, and denying city contracts to companies that hire them, Cristina Rodriguez of Yale Law School points out that many such ordinances have included declarations affirming English to be America's "official language," which would also pertain of course to

dismissed, either as chumps or as bigots—or sometimes as both.

contemporary France, for example. In any event, as Nathan Glazer has written about assimilation, "The word may be dead, the concept may be disreputable, but the reality continues to flourish." American society is

demands on the rest of us). In this regard, the multiculturalists have a point: Today's popular understanding of assimilation relies on a stan-

unavoidable competition between African Americans and Hispanic immigrants for jobs, social services, and visibility. This is straightforwardly depicted by Wilson and Taub in their study of Latinos and blacks in Chicago: "The fl

compendious *lo al ig a ion and he o ld Econo y o Cen ie of Policy and Pe fo ance*. Building on findings by Harvard economist Claudia Goldin, Hatton and Williamson focus on the determinants of immigration restriction in the post-World War I era. Arguing that global economic forces were at work well before the onset of war, they emphasize the declining literacy and occupational status of immigrants arriving in increasing numbers from Southern and Eastern Europe.

In a strikingly balanced account reminiscent of Higham, Hatton and Williamson assert that "perhaps the Immigration Commission [the much criticized Dillingham Commission, chartered by Congress from 1907 to 1911] was right in suggesting that those who arrived most recently were in some respects 'inferior' to previous immigrants." While acknowledging the racial basis of the late 19th-century exclusion of Asians, the authors stipulate that in the prewar period, "there is no compelling evidence that xenophobia or racism was driving immigration policy." Instead, they emphasize labor-market fundamentals and conclude, "New World governments acted to defend the economic position of unskilled labor … by restricting immigration."

balancing" — making sure all voices are heard. But today, our civic and political life is out of balance, and these organizations are often part of the problem. Certainly, they have exacerbated the already challenging task of formulating immigration policy in the national interest.

Of major concern is the heavy reliance of these organizations on controversy and contention to generate the publicity they need to demonstrate to donors (individual as well as institutional) that their contributions are making a difference, particularly in public-policy domains where success is seldom easy to measure. A related challenge is what

to simplify a tricky issue. The public's anxieties and outrage should be taken seriously, but it must also be acknowledged that as Americans we

the border" will always mean on-going e□orts to man and monitor whatever physical barriers and electronic devices are in place. But for

various pilot programs and developed a reliable internet-based system

been notoriously underfunded and oversubscribed. And in recent years,

should make much greater efforts to help students expand their per-

taking immigration seriously

In a May 2001 op-ed piece in the *New Yorker*, the sociologist Orlando Patterson voiced a concern about the media hype surrounding the re-