



ISSUES IN INTERNATIONAL POLITICAL ECONOMY

July 2002, NUMBER 31

Migration: Making Policy in the Face of Profound Disagreement

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Migration is a perennial subject, one that deals with a basic aspect of human existence. The intensity of the debate, however, varies with the times. Migration is a hot issue when the economy of the receiving country is weak, or when the political situation in the sending country is in turmoil. It was an excruciatingly difficult problem when India and Pakistan, on religious grounds, became two countries, and in Rwanda, as the Hutus and Tutsis set about killing each other. Ireland and Italy, for much of their histories, produced too many people for the size of their economies, and emigration was the solution. Japan today is producing too few people, and the opposition to immigration is increasingly becoming the problem there.

Migration is primarily an economic phenomenon, but obviously has political, religious, ethnic, familial, and labor manifestations. These are dismal times in many parts of the world, and it is thus no accident that migration issues are proliferating. The European Union recently held a meeting in Seville whose purpose was to find ways to limit immigration. But for the strong opposition of France and Sweden, the EU might have adopted a dreadful resolution to impose economic sanctions against states that were the source of illegal immigration. The United Nations held a conference last week that was stimulated by a similar concern, namely, the large flow of illegal immigration. There has been much publicity in recent weeks highlighting both Western European and American fears of terrorist immigration. The United States and Canada recently reached agreement to make asylum seekers ask for refuge in the first country they come to with the purpose of limiting shopping around. A migration understanding with the United States that Mexico thought was in the works disappeared after the events of September 11, and reviving it may be difficult.

There are some elemental features that guide national and individual sentiments. The rich countries favor unfettered movement of goods, service, and capital-but not of people. The poor countries are not ardent advocates of free trade-but they are of free movement of people, especially if they are headed to rich countries. Those who live in crowded urban areas are all in favor of keeping people down on the farm. Those living in poverty in rural areas prefer to take their chances in the cities. The governments of migrant-sending countries argue passionately for the humane treatment of their nationals living illegally elsewhere, even as they mistreat their nationals at home. The migrant-receiving countries are vociferous in insisting that undocumented immigrants are "illegal," but they show less concern about those who live legally in poverty before they emigrate. These complexities are enough to make migration bargaining harrowing, but these difficulties are compounded in specific situations.

This essay is being written in the United States and will focus on the American situation. Similar, perhaps even more difficult, problems exist elsewhere. The United States, for many years, has consciously been a migrant-welcoming country, an attitude that is not common around the world. What this means is that the U.S. government and Congress, when they decide each year how many legal immigrants should be admitted, have been more generous than most other countries.

Other than this most basic decision of how many people to admit, the most complex immigration issue with which the United States must now deal is how to handle the reality of undocumented immigrants already here, and how to prevent or discourage others from coming without the proper papers. There are now an estimated 9 million undocumented immigrants living in the United States. Many of them live in families that are a mixture of illegals and citizens. The sheer numbers, as well as specific family situations, means that the illegals cannot all be

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deported. Even if we could find them, which is problematic, such mass deportation is not something that a civilized nation, "under God," can do. The reality, therefore, is that the undocumented immigrants will remain in the United States, either legalized (or regularized, as some prefer to call it) or underground. How does one choose between these two options? If legalized, they can live normal lives; if not, they remain subject to exploitation in the country where most of them will live for the rest of their lives.

The problem with legalization (regularization) is that this gives an incentive for more people to enter the United States without documents, which they do by crossing land borders or overstaying visas. When President Vicente Fox discussed regularization with President George W. Bush before 9/11, the conversation dealt with Mexicans in the United States. U.S. foreign policy would not permit legalization just of Mexicans because there are millions of illegals from other countries. If I had to hazard a guess what action U.S. leaders will take, it would be "nothing" (i.e., live with an unsatisfactory-really, a horrible-situation for at least a generation).

The land borders with Mexico and Canada present another problem, namely, the conflict between security against terrorist entries and the efficient movement of goods. The United States wants to facilitate entry for those with proper papers-close to 2 million a day for the two countries combined-and to prevent the entry of terrorists, with or without documents. We want to speed the movement of goods-close to \$2 billion a day in and out of the United States with our two land neighbors-entering into legitimate commerce. These are unavoidable problems that must be solved; we do not have the choice of doing nothing.

President Fox has put migration issues at the top of his agenda with the United States. The negotiation was effectively halted by the events of 9/11, but the issue has not gone away forever. In addition to the two aspects noted above-legalization and concern about terrorism-there are proposals, both from Mexican authorities and U.S. employers, for a substantial temporary or guest program for low-skilled workers, especially in agriculture. There are now an estimated 2.5 million farm workers in the United States, of which 1.2 million are undocumented, mostly from Mexico. Under normal conditions, one would expect 10 to 20 percent of farm workers to exit each year to other occupations. If this holds true in the future, this would call for about 250,000 new agricultural workers each year, practically all of whom would have to be imported. In other words, the guest worker program would be temporary only for the individuals, but would have to continue year after year-be permanent, in other words-for the United States. The question this raises is whether the ideal immigration policy for the United States is one that gives special attention, year in and year out, to meeting the desire of particular employers for low-wage workers.

All immigrant-receiving countries are grappling with a related set of issues. Accepting the reality that richer countries will not open their borders to the free entry of people-as they might for the free entry of goods, services, and capital-what procedures will they use to obtain the kinds of immigrants they want? Countries make these choices now: Canada has a point system designed to choose skilled immigrants; the United States gives preference to family reunion, although there is also a program for skilled persons; other countries have variants of these. Receiving countries want to choose; that is why there is a general antipathy to illegal entries.

Decisions must be made on the number of immigrants wanted. This, in essence, was what led to the brouhaha at the Seville meeting of the EU. Denmark and the Netherlands, formerly seen as immigrant-friendly countries, at least relatively, have become more restrictive. As one looks objectively at the demographic trends in many developed countries, especially in Europe and Japan, one would conclude they would want to attract immigrants. This, so far, turns out not to be the case. Emotion, not pure reasoning, dominates the decisionmaking.

Looked at in reverse, rational and adventurous people in many developing countries, where birth rates are high and educational and economic opportunities are wanting, jump at the chance to emigrate. They will do so without documentation if the documents are not forthcoming legally. This sets up deep tension that will not go away. The argument often made in the rich countries that the better option for poor countries is development is fatuous for countries where poverty is intense and the development option really asks several generations to forego better opportunities.

There are some problems that have no ideal answers. Immigration is one of these, and most countries are settling for second best-or maybe the correct description is first worst.