

Immigration In the 1990s*

Michael Harrington notes that most have forgotten--or are ignorant of--the context of Woody Guthrie's text, 'This land is Your Land,' that it was a bitter expression of the period so beautifully captured by Steinbeck and then by the film, 'The Grapes of Wrath.' The Okies who left the Dustbowl for California, walking 'the ribbon of highway' were greeted at the California border by police 'guarding Paradise against the encroachment of of the Depression migrants' (p. 151). The plight of the Okies was tragic, but we need also to notice that they displaced Chicanos (American citizens of Mexican descent) and Mexicanos (Mexican citizens working in the US) and that until 1911, Oklahoma was to held for Native Americans.

Today I want to more or less bring Harrington's account up-to-date. Accordingly, much of what I will say is merely a sketch of his line of argument in his still remarkably useful book, *The New American Poverty* (1984).

The First Immigration

I begin in a different place than he did. I begin with the fact that the first immigrants to what became the United States were colonizers who were mainly WASPs. Whether one chooses to call what happened to the Native Americas genocide (following David Stannard) or something else, the fact would remain that there was a massive dis-enfranchisement and depopulation which quickly left power in the hands of the WASP immigrants. Africans were also brought to new world. Indeed, they comprised some 20% of the population at the Founding, the substitute for a then lacking American proletariat. They were not, strictly speaking, 'immigrants,' a fact of considerable importance in the history that followed. One consequence of the early part of the story was the idea that 'an American' was an enterprising WASP who could succeed if he choose to work hard and save his pennies.

This part of the story also helps explain the three elements of America's attitudes towards immigration as identified by Harrington: There is, first, the need to get certain jobs, often dirty jobs, done and there is, second, racism. Harrington's suggests as his third element, 'a genuine democratic idealism,' a certain 'decency of the national spirit.' Perhaps: but I would hasten to add that not only has this functioned in the context of the first two elements, but that its has mainly taken the form of individualism: treat me as a individual, belief in (formal) equality of opportunity, and in a deep commitment to 'freedom' construed as the right to be left alone. None of this is particularly democratic. Indeed, they are likely inconsistent with any sufficiently strong form of democracy.

The Second Immigration

The second part of the story runs from the end of the Civil War to the decade or so preceding World War I, the period of 'old immigration' to the US. During this period, a period of phenomenal economic growth in the US, the need to get jobs done, dominated. African-Americans were already doing dirty jobs and the end of slavery had not ended apartheid. As late as 1940, 80% of African-Americans lived in the South, a good many in tenant farming and sharecropping. As late as 1930, 90% of African-American females and 54% of males worked in either agriculture or domestic service. So some 24 million came from Europe to build roads, bridges, canals, subways and to work in mines and factories. Both my Greek and my Italian grandparents were in this group. All of my grandparents were illiterate but the men all got 'good jobs.' That is to say, they had jobs which put food on the table, and gave them warm rooms and weekend outings at Niagara Falls. Their wives supplemented the family income with work that kept them close to home. Their children got to go to public schools. One, my father, even got to go Syracuse University--until the Depression ended that. Credentials are positional goods. In those days, a high school education was a ticket to the middle-class; a BA degree guaranteed success.

Chinese, of course, had been excluded after 1884. This manifestly racist exclusion was motivated also by a fear that 'coolie' laborers would compete unfairly with native born white workers. By the end of the century, rapid unionization had exacerbated the problem. Immigration policy was a relevant weapon. Harrington notes that Morris Hilquit defined what was probably the position of most leftists since: "The Socialist Party favors all legislative

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measures tending to prevent the immigration of strikebreakers and contract laborers, and the mass immigration of workers from foreign countries, brought by the employing classes for the purposes of weakening the organization of American labor, and of lowering the standard of life of American workers." But he insisted also that "the Party is opposed to the exclusion of any immigrants on account of their race or nationality" (p. 158f.).

Of course, the 1921 immigration policy violated both of Hilquit's principles. Migrant flows from Mexico were manipulated to keep wages down in the newly developing West. And of course, Southern Europeans as well as Asians were thenceforth to be excluded. By 1910, of the nearly 92 million US citizens, nearly 10 million were African-Americans, some 32.4 million were foreign born or had a foreign-born parent. One in eight of these had either been born in German or Austro-Hungary or had a parent who had.

Woodrow Wilson defined 'assimilation' for Americans. In a widely quoted 1914 speech, he remarked, "Some Americans need hypens in their names because only part of them had come over. But when the whole man (sic) has come over, heart and thought and all, the hyphen drops of its own weight out of his name." Moreover, "we have the immemorial practice of the English race itself, to which we belong. Nowhere else has the pure strain of the nation which planted the colonies and made the independent government under which we live been kept so long without taint or mixture as it has been in Virginia and hitherto in all the South." To be an American is to be as WASPish as possible.

The New Immigration and the New Ethno-racial Pentagon

The National Immigration Act of 1965 was a significant liberalization. It ended the national origin system (which had been made even more outrageous by the 1952 McCarran Act) and offered a seven-fold principle of preference. Between 1981 and 1990, some 7.3 immigrants legally entered the US. In 1992, there were some 810,000 new legal immigrants. Estimates vary widely on the numbers of illegal immigrants, perhaps another 3.5 million. Most immigrants, legal and illegal, were 'Hispanic' from Mexico and Central America. This is, of course, a very small rate of immigration.

If we look broadly at the demographic map of America c. 1995, there are (from the point of view of understanding the dynamics and politics of race/ethnicity in America) five significant ethno-racial groups. The largest group by far are 'Euro-Americans' who (in 1990 census count) numbered 199,686,070, some 80.3% of the total. Two points are here critical. First is the fact that this group is very large relatively and is constructed as a 'racial' group--they are all 'white'-- despite the absence of any biological sense to the idea. Second, and part of this, (excepting very recent immigrants), they have undergone successful assimilation in that the boundaries between the populations which comprise this group have become largely symbolic. The hyphen has, as Woodrow would have had it, dropped off. As symbolic ethnics, if they have a connection to ancestry, it is both nostalgic and superficial. (In terms of self-identify, for some of these folks, it is important.) It may be easy for this group to be a constituency, imagined or real, for a hostile, even racist immigration policy. One thinks here of the 1921 policy. Official mythology has it that this country is a nation of immigrants. But even if so, it may be that we no longer are.

African-Americans are identified, by themselves and others, strictly in terms of appearance. They number 29,986,060, 12.1 %. Since in their history in the US, they were violently deculturated, they are today at least as 'American' as the Euro-Americans and more American than many. One might argue, indeed, that some of the most worthy features of American culture, e.g., jazz, are uniquely indebted to African-Americans. This history is absolutely critical as regards their response to recent immigrants and I think, also, to the constitution of the young entrepreneurs who dream of making it in the drug business. What indeed could be more American!

From the point of view of Euro-Americans, 'Hispanics,' who total some 22,354,059, 9.0%, are pretty much alike; they, of course, think otherwise. The largest group are the Mexican-Americans, at 13,495,938, followed by Puerto Ricans at 2,727,754. 'Hispanics' constitute the fastest growing immigrant group. One must be most careful about making generalizations not only as regards 'Hispanics,' but even as regards the ethnicities which comprise this category. Thus, there are Mexican-Americans who are trying to assimilate, others who are struggling to be bi-

cultural. There are many middle-class Cubans and South Americans, but most Central American immigrants and Puerto Ricans are poor and are often in the underground economy. At present, except in local politics in some cities, 'Hispanics' do not comprise a politically important group and I am doubtful that they ever will. Unlike African-Americans and to a lesser extent Native Americans, appearance will *not* be an obstacle to assimilation for many 'Hispanics.' (Jamaicans, Haitians and many Cubans, of course, are 'black' from the point of view of the Euro-Americans and decidedly 'other' from the point of view of African-Americans). This is also likely to be critical. Indeed, Peter Skerry has recently argued that it is a mistake to consider Mexican-Americans a 'racial minority,' since they experience less discrimination and have high outmarriage rates with Euro-Americans. 'Hispanics' are already a decided economic threat to African-Americans, especially where, as in LA and Miami, they are significant majorities. In Dade County, for example, the Hispanic population went, in a little more than 30 years, from 5% of the total to a majority of the two million. LA county is 37.8% 'Hispanic.' As a group, 'Hispanics' outnumber African-Americans in 26 cities.

The fourth group, 'Asian Americans' (including here, with the US census, Pacific Islanders!) numbers 7,273,662 or but 2.9%, a small grouping relatively. Moreover, like the Hispanics they are by no means a homogeneous group. While there are efforts to create an 'Asian-American' identity, this seems unlikely unless 'appearance' will be sufficient. *Unlike* most Hispanics, appearance, as defined by Euro-Americans, for most at least, will be an obstacle to assimilation. It is accordingly, not easy to predict the future, whether the boundaries will dissolve as with Euro-Americans and if they do, what the outcome will be. Adding to the complexity, like the Hispanic population, the Asian-American group is bi-polar but there is considerable variation between each of the groups. Some, but perhaps especially among Japanese and Asian Indians have done very well, largely. The poorest immigrant group in the US today are Laotians with a poverty rate of 40.3.

Native Americans, who number some 1,959,234 (or .8%), are by no means constitute a homogeneous group and, as is well known, they have been profoundly marginalized. Recent efforts to exploit sovereignty--by building casinos on sovereign land--has been a stunning boon. Hawaiians, who number totally approximately less than one million, are counted with Asians and Pacific Islanders. But, plainly, they are not immigrants and recognize, rightly, some critical shared history--and problems with Native Americans. Hawaii will remain, I think, a very special place in terms of ethnic self-understanding. I would not compare it usefully with the picture on the mainland.

The New Poverty

This relatively new ethno-racial social construction is potentially explosive given what seems to me to be the absolutely most critical aspect to the new situation as regards immigration. It is the consequences of the globalization of poverty: Put simply, there are not anywhere near enough good jobs anywhere for all the people who want to work. I am not saying, of course, that there wasn't poverty prior to this. I am saying that capitalist globalization has, in the 'third world,' destroyed the even the meager livelihoods of workers who formerly sustained themselves in pre-modern economies and that everywhere technologies have replaced workers without providing alternatives for the dispossessed. I am saying that 'Fordism' has been replaced by the part-time, temporary work typical of 'flexible accumulation,' and by 'casino capitalism,' the shift feared by Keynes that big money would prefer to bet on the psychology of the market than invest in productive enterprises. This would be bad enough apart from explosion of population, complexly interlinked with colonization and efforts at modernization.

The result is that the 'third world,' having experienced catastrophic political and social dislocation in the struggle to de-colonize, now faces a new kind of poverty along with a debt crisis which cannot be overcome. Indeed, in their effort to do this, third world nations may utterly destroy their natural resources and leave for their future a veritable wasteland. Viewed from the point of view of immigration, this new poverty would have been a serious enough problem for the relatively rich nations of the North without the collapse of 'actually existing socialism' in Europe and the former Soviet Union.

But plainly, even without these new immense pressures for immigration, and by virtue of the same global

processes, first world economies are looking at the prospects of continuing immiseration of a growing class both of workers and of those seeking work. The strains on government to maintain a safety net at a time when their capacities to generate necessary funds have been shrinking is plainly evident. Not only are some 90 million more humans every year but the international Labour Organization, a UN body, has estimated that 820 million people, or 30% of the labor force world-wide were without a job or underemployed at the end of 1994. Dividing the globe in to 'north' and 'south', they argue:

What we have is a globalization of the labour markets, a new division that is emerging. It means that the south will get more involved in labour intensive production and the north will have to find niches related to high-tech production. *No single country can tackle this on its own anymore* (*The European*, 24 Feb-2 March, 1995).

Scarcity breeds xenophobia. It is hardly surprising that in 1993, a Times/CBS news poll showed that 61% wanted a decrease in immigration, up from 49% in 1986 and 33% in 1965, or that proposition 187 passed last year in California.

As regards policy, there are at least three prior questions which need to be considered.

First, there remains the hotly debated issue of whether immigrants are overall a cost or a benefit to the nation-state. I put the point in this way because it is, I think, unwise to think of this wholly in terms of their effects on the economy. Immigrants make a nation cosmopolitan, potentially pluralist and culturally richer. Surely they have revitalized neighborhoods. It is not clear how one measures this.

But do they hurt the economy? Do they take jobs from 'natives' and do they pay their fair share. Even a cursory look at the arguments and data will show, I think, that the answer depends on how one formulates the question. A 1992 Los Angeles County study (which provided the ammunition for Governor Pete Wilson's punitive campaign which led, eventually, to proposition 187) argued that the county had incurred costs of \$947 million for social services for immigrants, but had collected revenues of but \$139 million. But 'immigrant' included recent and long-term residents, and legal *and* illegal immigrants. We know that the longer immigrants are here, the more they contribute and we know also that illegal immigrants are more likely to be highly exploited by employers who avoid payment of social security, income and business taxes. Moreover, the same study showed that immigrants paid \$4.3 billion in taxes and had used but \$2.5 billion in public services.

Indeed, the real problem, as a moment's thought will confirm, is both getting the taxes that would come if the underground economy did not exist, coupled with the fact that most of the taxes actually paid go to the Federal government. Immigration flows are extremely uneven: more than three-fourths of all legal immigrants live in six states: California, Florida, Illinois, New Jersey, New York and Texas. If one adds illegal immigration, the three-fourths may go to 90% (*New York Times*, 19 September, 1993). A hugely disproportionate amount is returned to those states which must deal with the problems of immigrants.

There is no way to measure the size of the underground economy and thus to judge its multiplier effects on the economy as a whole or, similarly, to determine how much is lost in unpaid taxes in this economy. The New York city controller estimated that in 1993, perhaps 20% of the total was underground, perhaps \$54 billion. We might compare today's underground economy, which ranges from drugs to the 10,000 or so illegal vendors in New York to cash businesses in car repair, hair styling and asbestos removal, to the pushcarts of the second immigration. But this would be an error: not only could one raise a family on a pushcart income, but there were neither social services then nor personal income or wage taxes.

Similar problems arise as regards jobs. There is no clear evidence that immigrants take jobs that others want, partly because so many of them are poverty-level jobs, because some fill niches vacated by previous immigrants and partly because immigrants sometimes create jobs. And as Hilquit insisted, employers continue to be more than happy to replace union workers with undocumented workers. Apparel manufacture was always heavily unionized. But apparel sweatshops in New York City went from 200 in the early 1970s to from 3,500 to 5,000 recently. The

stories of the plights of these workers are horrific. Jane Lii, a *New York Times* reporter, found out for herself. After 84 hours of work which gave her aching shoulders and a stiff back, her employer promised her that in three weeks she would get paid \$54.24--65 cents an hour (NYT, March 12, 1995).

One should note also that this process has been especially disastrous for African-Americans. They usually lack the capital and network support to duplicate the experience of Korean groceries and Sikh gas stations in the Bronx; they rightly refuse to be exploited in the ways that undocumented workers are; they see even minimum wage jobs disappearing as a consequence of the new capacities of employers to exploit the ever-increasing reserve army of labor.

The second question is this: Could we stop illegal immigration, and if so, at what cost? Clinton's draft budget calls for an increase of 41% over the 1600 now employed by INS. A 25% increase as of October 1994, which will also pay for an increase of 600-700 in the Border Patrol, brings its current budget is \$2 billion. Clinton wants also 131 million to double the capacity to detain and deport aliens, 15 million more to build detention centers in Buffalo and San Francisco, and an increase of 54% in the number of immigration judges. Senator Gram has proposed adding 1000 new agents annually for five years, so that by the year 2000, there would be 10,000 agents. The 'logic' is here the logic of the \$30 billion crime bill. Forget the causes, respond to the effects. But we might at least reduce illegal immigration. The price would be a Fortressed US: barbed wire and an army patrolling our borders.

The third question is more intractable: Could get control of the underground economy? There are a host of complications here, including to be sure not only our attitudes towards immigration, but our decidedly class-biased set of policies on crime and drugs more generally.

These considerations lead to my conclusion and recommendations, already articulated by Harrington.

First, as Jay Masur told President Carter in 1980, we must adopt a policy of total amnesty for undocumented aliens already here and we resist any effort to restrict legal immigration further or worse, to threaten entitlements of immigrants. This last idea, it must be emphasized, is part of the 'contract [on] America'. Mr. Clinton is in poor position to reject the idea since his own plan would require citizens to take greater responsibility for immigrants they sponsor. Putting aside the immorality of eliminating entitlements as regards legal non-citizens already here, it is a policy which likely will discourage some: exactly those who are relatively well-off, but it will not discourage those who will come illegally. And of course, it is just these poor folks who comprise the fodder for the non-drug-related underground economy.

Second, and as critical to this, we must go after the illegal employer, not the 'illegal' employee. The Labor Department had over 1000 investigators in the 1980's; at the end of 1994, there were 791. Predictably, Reagan, Bush and the current defenders of the Contract find the whole idea of employer sanctions a 'burden on employers.' This is, of course, entirely coincident with our profound reluctance to get tough with White Collar crime, and with our idea that the structure of opportunity has nothing to do with the choices made by people. The white-collar criminal knows that he will not be caught, that if he is caught, he will not be punished, that if he is punished, he can easily pay the price and do as he did before. The illegal immigrant, like the ghetto-bound adolescent has made a rational assessment of his opportunities. But it is easy to punish him for his choice to support and reproduce an underground economy in sweat shops or in dealing drugs. In 'get ahead America,' one does what one can. On the other hand, as Harrington said:

If we were to adopt the exact opposite of the Reagan philosophy and insist that all inhabitants of the United States...have basic economic and social rights, we would simultaneously strike a blow at the foundations of the American system of sweatshop labor..., low wages and frightened workers' (p. 178).

While I am not sanguine as regards the future of policy in Europe, such a policy would, not incidentally, put us

closer to the currently much more enlightened policies of the European Union.

Third, a commitment to a new economic order is essential. Until such time that global poverty is addressed and ameliorated, as the *Economist* put it, 'the laws of economic gravity' will make immigration a fact to be dealt with. The United States has a special burden here. After decades of efforts to enforce a punitive version of the Monroe doctrine and to shore up all the worst aspects of Mexican and Central and South American regimes, we are faced with the consequences. Until the poor of these countries can see hope in their own countries, we will continue to be forced to deal with these consequences.