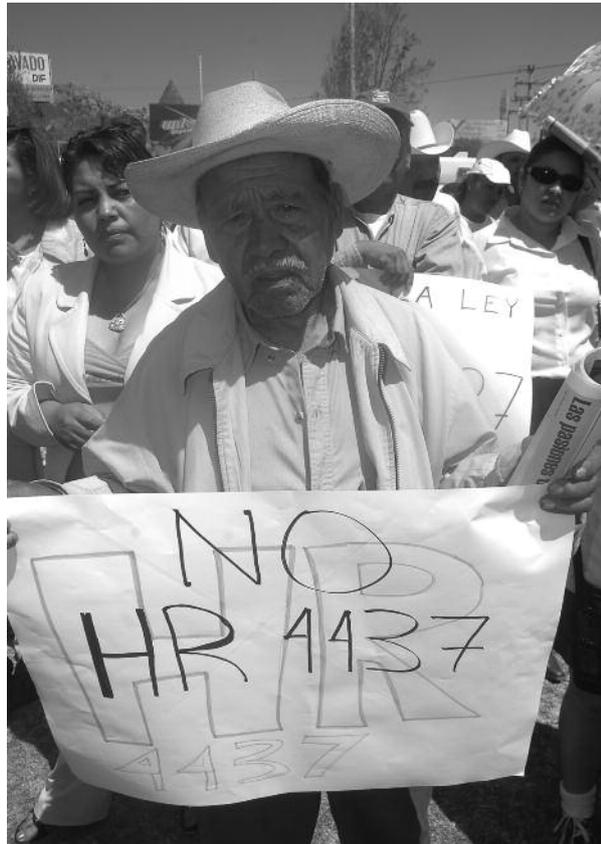


Immigration to Migration

John Burstein*



Iván Stephens/Cuartoscuro

A nation of immigrants—but for the Americans—the United States thinks a lot about the issue of immigration, and normally in terms of the assimilation of ethnic groups from distant lands into a national culture of complex identities under the ideal of individual citizenship. In the crisis mode produced by 9/11, the country's security systems have been reordered, even threatening to refashion much of the country around security issues. Yet it was not until 2006 that immigration—always a security issue—came to be the first order of

political debate. The hard-nosed aspects (sedition and terrorism) had been tackled in terms of intelligence and defence policies. With that, it was possible to launch the great immigration debate, framing it around nationality and citizenry. The executive placed a huge bet, in the coin of political capital, to re-settle the national consciousness in terms of “who we are” (referring to the United States community) and how others can become part of that “we.” The president expected the debate to close triumphantly with the signing of a new immigration law; but the conditions were wrong and the two versions—a close-the-door version from the House and a guard-the-door version from the Senate—could not be reconciled.

* President of Forum for Sustainable Development, a rights-based development organization in Chiapas, Mexico.

The reason is simple: the debate was not framed properly. While certainly considering economic aspects, the debate neither got to the bottom of immigration's role in defining the new U.S. economy, nor did it squarely face that the issue today is defined by immigrants' Latino and primarily Mexican origin, and as such is inextricably part of the Mexico-U.S. bi-national relationship in the context of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA).

This truism is part of a paradigm shift still just beginning. The U.S. political discourse is profoundly based on a "we-them" grammar concerning the United States and "the rest of the world." The subject of migration, by its nature, mediates. But that issue has to be re-described and reviewed, acknowledging the traditional and still powerful terms based on immigration-toward-assimilation, and now focused through a second perspective. That one we are calling "North American" (until its real name is found), even though "North American Free Trade Agreement" ill-fits the thing it names for various reasons. It feels too northerly to be "home" to most Mexicans. How firm is it? It is termed a "treaty" in Mexico. And while in effect an "area" (among other things), it is not uniquely defined by trade, and every day is less so defined. This tells us, minimally, that NAFTA is a temporary *economic*-political expression of something—if there is to be anything—more *socio*-politically grounded. In the meantime, the migration flow of Mexicans to, and back from, the U.S. will continue, as a reality quite regardless of treaties, laws, borders and political discourse, which is affecting each country at its core, forming a population escaping—and freed from—the rigorous identities of the respective nation-states, and requir-

ing the critical review of NAFTA-cum-immigration in the near future.

OLD STORIES

The best way to review a policy is to find its solid ground in history. Immigration is about shifting residence/ shifting identities, and those shifts have gone on between Mexico and the U.S. for a very long time. But the defining events for all practical purposes occurred in the middle of the nineteenth century. Depending on the political culture, Mexicans and people from the U.S. remember differently the transi-

**The president expected
the debate to close triumphantly
with the signing of a new
immigration law; but
the two versions
—from the House and from
the Senate— could
not be reconciled.**

tion of Texas and the contemporary U.S. Southwest from Mexico to United States territory. First, general history itself is experienced differently; Mexico living it vividly and the U.S. palely. Then, of course each remembers this fundamental war and peace through very different "stories." For example, the defence of the Alamo (1836) has enormously greater importance in the U.S. story than in the Mexican one. In fact, the Mexican version includes a vital chapter, reduced to a footnote in the U.S. version, on the way to Texas' statehood (1846).

Mexicans remember the terms of the failed negotiation and ensuing war

far better than their Pyrrhic victory at the Alamo. In 1845, U.S. President James Polk commissioned John Slidell to negotiate terms with Mexican President José Joaquin Herrera, arriving with the offer of U.S.\$25 million for the "rest" of Mexico, that "rest" based on an already outlandish claim that the south-western border of the soon-to-be-annexed Texas territory should run along the Rio Bravo/Grande, rather than the Nueces River, as had previously been the case. Though a secret aspect of Slidell's mission, it came out in the Mexican press of the day, creating an understandable uproar, and was cause for sending Slidell packing. (I suppose that the day China offers the U.S. some vast sum for California, the U.S. public will feel the same profound insult regarding the same territory.) The Mexican position was "rather war," which, of course, the Mexicans lost.

Another aspect of the story bears retelling. Alert to the looming over-reach of the Samuel Austin-led settlers, and having witnessed the ineffectuality of the Catholics-only restriction on immigrants, President Vicente Guerrero—a mulatto—outlawed slavery. No more cause was needed for Texan immigrants to declare their independence, as the slavery-enforcing Lone Star Republic.

A lot of water has flowed down the Rios Grande/Bravo and Nueces since then. Later slavery was outlawed in the U.S., too. The far north of Mexico had been frontier territory. U.S. troops occupied the capital for a relatively short time. Wounds heal. (One imagines China keeping Hawaii, after having occupied Washington, and the U.S., while humbled, would keep its national project alive.) The scar is worn a bit defiantly and the matter is rarely mentioned. But the lesson of Mexican national-

ism is lost on no one. When public policy was, is, or should be configured as threatening the absorption of Mexico into North America, the Mexican nation did and will no more buy it than it did Slidell's hostile take-over bid. Old and new Mexicans inhabiting lands in shifting patterns based on the economic projects of the moment is an old story.

PERSONAL STORIES

I had a conversation with a Zinacantec Amerindian friend in his home in the Chiapas Highlands, which gave me the eerie sensation of talking with my now-deceased grandfather (Ellis Island, 1907). Xun—a middle-aged man, and still strong—had bumped up against the low ceiling of economic development in his community. In May 2006, he was desperate, feeling pressures about his family's survival. He considered going to work in the United States. At first I thought it was a pipe-dream which I (from the States) considered far-fetched. As he talked about it, I understood that the Underground Railroad had reached Tzotzil Chiapas (only recently fully incorporated into the migration phenomenon). The limiting factors for boarding this "train," in order of importance were clearly: 1) the cost of the "ticket"—some U.S.\$2,000, with services included; 2) the physical risk; and 3) the disinclination to abandon all known references to reality. But the stories were rife of well-paid hard work. And then Indians in these parts have always been enormously adventurous in seeking work.

Of course Xun's situation differs from my grandfather's in various ways. One is the difference between an ocean passage and a land trek, of unclear sig-

nificance. I imagine that the Jewish and other migrations of the early twentieth century were *rites of passage*, more clearly marked, principally for emerging into a new identity, a rebirth, *legal* residence and citizenship. More cause to the same effect, the cutting of ties of allegiance to the old country must have been less ambiguous, and almost delicious, when the prospect of staying meant one's risking state-supported, physical catastrophe. Xun faces state-sponsored political manipulation, but not a razed-earth pogrom. (His Mayan relatives in Guatemala did.)

Then, legality aside, the economic and social reception or rejection of im-

**Latinos butt up against
a political culture which
is not predisposed,
either officially
or predominantly,
to embrace new identity
and interest groups.**

migrants is enormously important for creating a situation of international normalcy. Emma Lazarus's welcoming evocation to "the huddled masses" on the Statue of Liberty is better remembered than the slightly less generous immigration law of the time (1903) because it echoed a dominant strain within the U.S. political culture. That strain is no longer dominant today—though it is hardly absent. That is to say, as it was then, so it is today, that the United States sees the outside world as more or less treacherous; but whereas in the early twentieth century the U.S. saw itself as capable, and wanting to relieve those in danger for its own collective

benefit, today its attitude is defensive, rather needing to protect itself from the menaces of the outside world.

In other words, *migration* occurs in the context formed by the way each of two given countries view the other and view themselves, since there must be an *immigration* and an *emigration* policy, stated or implied, in every case. Using the same example of the past century, Czarist Russia did not value shtetl Jews economically or politically, while the industrializing U.S. did: this made for a *de facto* treaty in the sense that immigration/emigration policies, as reflections of their respective cultures, were complementary, making the migration flows "work."

There is no similar complementarity in U.S.-Mexican policies. On the one hand, Mexico produces many emigrants, though not normally by political violence and expulsion of Indians and the rural poor. And on the other hand, the United States' position on immigrants is profoundly contradictory; the U.S. makes enticing/rejecting gestures at the same time. It appears to coo economically, while barking politically and culturally. But at bottom, this contradiction has an economic basis.

Why, if the U.S. demand for labor in its economy is virtually as strong as it was a century ago, is it unable to "convince" the political decision-makers, as manifestly failed to happen in the recent initiative to reform U.S. immigration law? The reason is that the economy itself is not "convincing." In short, in great contrast to the case 100 years ago, the U.S. economy today is *post-industrial*. The message it sends to migrant workers is: "We need you for a hundred tasks, from agriculture to domestic care, but since this work is not linked to the growth we expect

from industrial investment, we do not commit to seeing you through economic cycles, nor do we commit, therefore, to incorporating you into the national community.” It is a basic rule of nation-building: newcomers do not qualify for membership (that is, citizenship) if they do not fit *productively* into the national economy (some humanitarian considerations notwithstanding).

Since in the economy, the short-term opportunity always carries more weight than the long-term menace, immigration is nevertheless the rule: it is happening. And a fraying national community, losing its borders and definition, is an effect, to be arrested by war-nationalism for the moment, and taken up as a longer-term political consideration sooner or later. By that time, the economy may permit a fuller rejection of autarchic notions of the nation-state. In the meantime, the Latinos, being the largest minority in the U.S., and well over half of whom are Mexican nationals (including, prominently, Amerindians) regroup on “the other side” in natural communities based on language, provenance, religion and family. They butt up against a political culture which is not predisposed, either officially or predominantly, to embrace new identity and interest groups; today the system even fosters divisions by way of rival social-political categories: some of the Latino wave of immigrants are new and increasingly prosperous citizens, others tolerated guests, and ever increasing numbers are shadow figures shockingly akin to stateless refugees.

THE STORY THAT DEFIES THE SCRIPT

Though the business sector was more than consulted, the U.S. economy did

not operate in the manner foreseen and described during the NAFTA negotiations. The political-economic forces in the U.S. hoped NAFTA would help expand the *productive* basis of the economy, and even be a counterweight to the growing reliance on consumption-based growth, with borrowed foreign money. NAFTA was always going to be a small part of that new productivity, but it was reduced to irrelevance once the U.S. landed in the present war economy.

In Mexico, the political-economic elite hoped that domestic industry, necessarily decimated by the lifting of protective barriers, would rebound as

**Some of the Latino wave
of immigrants are new
and increasingly prosperous
citizens, others tolerated guests,
and ever increasing numbers
are shadow figures
shockingly akin
to stateless refugees.**

a secondary effect of NAFTA, increasingly feeding inputs into the *maquiladora* machine. Indeed—even though diminished in comparison to the beginning of the century—the *maquiladora* platform certainly did expand the Mexican wage economy. But even before 2001, it had become clear that the relocation of industrial infrastructure to Mexico was neither sufficiently great, nor sufficiently long-lasting, to absorb the unwanted supply of labor in Mexico. On the contrary, the demand for *in situ* labor within U.S. territory was such—a sort of inhalation sucking-sound—that it provoked the unpredicted, enormous migration phenomenon. Far more

than the expected effects announced by the NAFTA experts, the (far more modest) growth in Mexico has also been consumption-based, and funded by remittances.

It is easy to see today that NAFTA’s designers were heady, their political will fed on the prospects served up by those dreaming of liberated North American capital markets; it became a conservative scenario that even a temporary special partnership would leave each nation richer and able to pursue its goals whether independently or together. That depended on free-trade borderlessness and human borders, the hypothesis that formed the basis of the rather fragile political consensus in the U.S. and Mexico.

Whose fault is it that the NAFTA-encoded political project was founded on false, or falsely-stated, premises regarding capital and labor markets? The story has some of the audacity, treachery and political-economic interplay of the border revisions of the mid-nineteenth century; and may even be read as installments on the same story. This new chapter has sub-plots that include the attack on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, the war in Iraq, the demise of the continental extension of the American trade bloc, the rise of the Latin socialisms, and—a twist for readers—the incorporation of Hispanic civilization into the U.S. nation, eventually to be reflected in migration policy, whether the bi-national relationship develops into an alliance or not.

When NAFTA was, is felt to be, or is configured as, threatening to absorb Mexico *into* North America, the Mexican nation no more buys it than it did the Slidell hostile take-over bid. Mexico for the Mexicans. **NM**