

Immigration and Beyond

Daniel Mathews

April 23, 2006

Being such a critical juncture for immigration issues, it seems to me that the present is a good time to think about immigration from different perspectives from the beginning, into the future; from the gutter, to the stars; from the present, to a better world and beyond.

1 “Breaking the law”

We look to the US-Mexico border, as the obvious place to consider. We hear there are illegal immigrants continually crossing the border: the border is very porous. Border patrols fail to catch most of these illegals. Law enforcement agencies don't have the funding to patrol the entire border. There is no fence; they can walk right on in.

Well then it is all very clear - and it is outrageous! So many can so easily break the law. They must be stopped! The government must give more resources to law enforcement. Upholding the law is fundamental to a civilized society. They should build a fence. They are breaking the law - it may not be murder, but it's a crime. Assisting one of them is assisting a criminal. They should be caught and sent home. This is our country and if they come legally, that's fine; but they cannot break the law. This is a great country, and we can't just let anyone in. In an age of terrorism it is more important than ever to have secure borders. There have to be proper procedures and legal channels for immigration. The issue is very simple.

2 The immigrant story

The issue is very simple, at least, until we notice that the "illegal" people are - whatever adjective we choose to describe them - still, nevertheless, people. By branding them as "illegal" we linguistically render them illegitimate, subhuman: their interests do not matter. It sounds bizarre to ask about the feelings of an illegal; it does not sound bizarre to ask about the feelings of a person.

Again, turning to the US-Mexico border, the circumstances of immigrants are, in broad outline, quite uniform. Each individual story has important details

- individual family members, and their situations, are all important - which must not be forgotten in each particular case. But the overall gist of the situation is clear.

So, if we ask why they attempt to cross the border, we find that the answer is not that they are depraved criminals breaking the law. The migrants in question are overwhelmingly not serious criminals - indeed, overwhelmingly, honest, decent and hard-working. They are coming to the country to get work! Rather, if we ask migrants why they attempt to cross the border, we find that the answer is usually economic necessity. Perhaps the family is poor and can't get enough food. Perhaps someone in the family is sick and needs money for treatment. Perhaps the father lost his job. In any case, some economic hardship or crisis creates a pressing need - it is not a question of wealth or luxury or desire for a better life, but a question of survival. There are higher-paying jobs in the US, if they can get there. It is the obvious solution, the only practicable solution. Otherwise there will be no food on the table, or no medical treatment, or they may be overtaken by whatever other calamity has befallen them.

Indeed, on slightly closer inspection of what migration entails, we grasp just how desperate a person must be to attempt crossing the border. Those who want to cross undetected into the United States become embroiled in a network of human trafficking, an underground world of organised crime. They sell themselves into the care of people smugglers, who may manipulate them, abandon them, or defraud them. They have no rights in dealing with criminal associations, and no rights when they arrive in the US either. The border crossing is dangerous, not only because of the risk of detection by the authorities - the authorities, at least, will give them food and water. If they make it across undetected, they must make it on foot to a major city, many days' walk away. The walk is across unforgiving territory: desert, with few sources of water, and very remote, with very few people nearby - and quite possibly migrants will be hiding from any people they see, for fear of deportation by the authorities. Many die in the process.

As for those who survive - anyone who lives in the US knows what their role will be. They will work unskilled jobs, whether as gardeners, labourers, cleaners, babysitters, or whatever else. Their pay will be pitiful compared to those of whites in the US, but luxurious and plentiful by standards back home: there will be enough to send home. The hours will quite likely be extremely long; perhaps they will work several jobs. The conditions will likely be arduous; legal protection without documentation will be virtually non-existent. But they will take such jobs; and speaking in a statistical way, these are jobs that whites tend not to want anyway.

So, with a little more information - broadening our understanding a little to examine the motivations and needs of migrants themselves, clearly one major set of actors in immigration issues! - the situation reveals itself as not so simple. It's not just as simple as enforcing the law. Those 'lawbreakers' have enough troubles on their plate, for the most part, usually extremely dire. To punish them does not seem to be a complete solution, or even a fair solution. Despite their critical economic circumstances, obtaining a visa through the 'proper channels' is high

impossible.

We may regard both these points of view - the perspective of law enforcement, and of immigrants themselves - as reasonable, or at least, both possessing some legitimacy. In which case, conflicts of legitimate interests arise; complexities arise. Immigrants are acting out of necessity; but we may believe it is reasonable to regulate the flow of immigration into a country. Some natural questions follow, beckoning us to consider the matter further, to broaden our perspective further. Why does this flow of people arise? Why do many people in Mexico find themselves in such dire economic difficulties? Why is there so much work for them in the United States, and at higher wages? On the other hand, if there is so much work for them, why doesn't the United States let more of them in? Isn't there something else the big, rich, powerful United States can do?

3 The economics of tragedy

So we step back a little further; we are now looking for truth, not easy answers, and we are looking for knowledge, rather than satisfying our own conscience or ego. For surely enough, beyond the personal level - and the story at the personal level is very important, capturing our attention with suffering - there is an impersonal system at work, an economic mechanism, which compels this migration to occur, documented or not.

These facts are very simple and well known. Mexico is a poor country, especially in certain regions. In many places, wages are low and unemployment is high; it is difficult to feed oneself and one's family, let alone prosper. Conversely, in the richest nation, the US, there is great demand for low-paid and unskilled labour. To ask why some countries are rich and some are poor is to ask why history happened - a long, long story, too long to tell here. But it is well worth asking - there is no reason, at first sight, to expect such enormous inequality to exist, and certainly no reason to accept it.

In any case, we see there is a supply of willing workers - willing, that is, to accept employment under pay and conditions very low by US standards - and a great demand for these jobs to be fulfilled. The US economy is, to a substantial degree, dependent on cheap migrant labour of this type. It has absorbed so much migrant labour that to do away with this part of society would cause immense strain. Without them, the economy would collapse.

This set of social and economic facts is not overseen by any authority, public or private. It is not a conspiracy to delude and defraud innocent migrants. It is not a plot to flood the US with aliens. It is just the product of economic circumstances; it is the result of people acting according to their own interests - often, acting out of the very basic need to survive. And taken as a whole, over all the millions of people who are affected, it constitutes a major social phenomenon. It is seen as the only way out for desperately poor Mexicans; often there is really nothing else they feel they can do. The fact of migration creates its own dynamics.

In the face of these facts, the law becomes mere words on paper; it has no power to stop the massive social and economic forces driving immigrants into the US. The facts on the ground are too powerful. The police and border guards and various authorities attempt to enforce the law - and they do, as much as they can - but considering the scale of the situation, enforcement occurs rather rarely. When it does, it consists of sending immigrants back to Mexico. That does not help their economic difficulties. It encourages migrants to avoid detection in the desert, through even more difficult desert terrain. The law, in short, does not help the situation.

4 Looking for state policies

But we do not simply throw up our hands there, viewing these tragic economic circumstances as the product of dismal fate. When we see social problems, we try to remedy them. When we cannot solve them individually, but require the organisational and financial and political power of collective action, we look to the state to execute policies and employ its resources to alleviate the situation. For problems on the national or regional scale, such as this, we look to the US and Mexican governments to deal with the problem - particularly the richer of the two.

And, have the respective governments done much to address the crisis of unemployment and poverty in Mexico? In fact, both governments remain committed to free trade policies through NAFTA which, however they may increase the GDP of Mexico, have done nothing to alleviate inequality and poverty there, and in fact have worsened them - a dismal and outrageous set of policies that is, shamefully for the world, all too common in the present time. Both governments, of course, understand the consequences of free trade policies. To put them in the best possible light, they have made the decision to continue - and worsen - inequality and poverty, in the hope that as total economic output rises, primarily benefiting the well-off and the middle class, somewhere in the midst of this process, as employment opportunities arise through expanding production, some of the poor will obtain employment and reasonable jobs. As far as it seeks to decrease poverty and inequality, however, all history is against this theory. The governments, if we are to view them with a benevolence which they do not possess or deserve, have sacrificed the most vulnerable people for the sake of some abstract economic goals that promise much for the rich, and which for the poor are mostly illusory.

But that is the best gloss, and a highly ignorant gloss, on free trade policies. Free trade in this context means free trade by large multinational corporations - free trade means free trade between the different national branches of corporations. It means shifting production to the location with the cheapest cost of labour, the least legal protection for workers, minimal benefit to employees, and maximum benefit to shareholders. In as much as it is an opening of markets - which mostly it is not, for the large corporations who dominate the relevant markets insulate themselves from competition anyway - it is a very spe-

cific opening of markets. For not only are many agricultural and other markets expressly excluded or subsidised by various governments. One of the most important "markets" is the "labour market". And in the same way as a shipment of bananas is sent in an open market to the place where they will get the best price, so workers in an open market would go to the place where they will get the best wages. This precisely means expanding opportunities for immigrant workers. Of course, it is dehumanising to compare humans to bananas. But the supposed "free trade" system of NAFTA (and indeed much of the world) is far worse - it treats the humans worse than the bananas.

So much for the trade policies of the two states. If we recognise that this terrible economic mismatch - or rather, a far too good match between a desperate supply of cheap labour and a burgeoning demand for it - is an underlying cause, then free trade does little to help. But what about other policies, more directly related to immigration?

For those who advocate "border protection", what state action is proposed? Militarizing the border; building a fence; both at immense cost. More guards, more patrols, thousands of miles of wall, checkpoints and guns. If the US is concerned to stop the flow of undocumented workers, directly, this is the obvious way to do it. It is clear, however, that this would leave many Mexican families desperate: it does not remove the economic hardship that drives immigrants in the first place, it just removes their ability to do anything about it. It would lead to massive economic strain and possibly collapse in the US, because of the US' dependence on cheap migrant labour. And the costs involved in security would be ongoing and massive, despite there being no security threat: immigrants looking for jobs are not terrorists. Despite the efforts of flag-waving American patriots, the border has not been sealed, and it is now clear why: the idea is totally impractical and totally counterproductive; it is insane.

So what about actual immigration policies then? The US, of course, offers legal means for immigration, through visas and green cards and so on. It could expand its visa schemes. At present, so few are available that it is impossible for those currently arriving over the border to obtain them. It could simply legalise existing immigration, or generally legalise a much larger number of immigrants each year.

Although those wanting to stem the flood of Mexicans might take fright at the suggestion, and although some may argue that this would open the floodgates for immigration from everywhere, it is worth thinking about. Is there anything so wrong about accepting more immigrants? After all, if we really believe in globalization, we ought to accept the free movement of workers and people around the globe.

There may well be unconscious racism in the dismissal of the idea of allowing more immigrants from Mexico: the country changes colour; is that what we are afraid of? But there are economic issues too. A large (larger than at present) influx of poor but diligent workers, willing to accept low wages and long hours, undercuts the position of wealthier US citizens. The immigrants may take their jobs, and for lower wages; wages may be bid down generally as a result. The country may be flooded with poor people; the standard of living will decrease.

So one might argue, in any case. But it is also possible that the hard work of Mexicans, taking up employment and earning money and spending it, adds to economic growth, adds to development and general wealth - after all, the US was built by poor immigrants trying to make a living for themselves.

There are different ways the state could enlarge the scope of legal immigration; each would have different consequences. It could retrospectively legalise undocumented workers living in the US; it could have a more generous scheme for attaining US citizenship through immigration; it could grant a substantial number more visas to Mexicans; it could open the border with Mexico. There are issues with all of these proposals. Increasing intake from Mexico only may encourage other countries to press for increases in their intake. To increase Mexican intake substantially may well encourage many others to immigrate, perhaps those who are not so desperate; on the other hand, why shouldn't Mexican families be free to seek a better life wherever they choose? Of course, immigration law can be technical and complicated, allowing for infinitely subtle variations.

Any of the above would certainly be a shock to the system, but small moves in this direction are certainly possible in the near future. A minimal proposal, simply allowing undocumented immigrants a path to citizenship, changes American demographics substantially, and brings a whole class of society out of the shadows. The more thoroughgoing proposals certainly would be more of a shock; a shock to the economy, probably, and a shock to ourselves, also. But to avoid shocking ideas locks us in to the present situation, or moving towards militarisation and worse. We need shocking ideas; against present tragedies, easy thinking is not enough.

5 Beyond the state

Indeed, the very idea of opening a border is shocking to us; it subverts the whole idea of a country, as a self-governing entity. A country, so it seems at first sight, has its borders and regulates who crosses them. That's what a country is, so one might think: it is a geographical region, with boundaries; without control over boundaries, it ceases properly to exist. Countries control borders and immigration because that's what countries do.

But in a sense that is not a sufficient answer: that's what countries do, sure, but why do they do it? We have assumed that countries exist, and they do; but we have also assumed that countries *should* exist. To question this is quite subversive, indeed rather treasonous; but it is an important question, which we should consider, if we are to examine the issue of immigration thoroughly.

For if we consider the issue in the large, immigration is the movement of people across borders. But what are these borders? Who put them there? Why are they there? They are not part of natural geography; there is no law of nature putting the boundary between the US and Mexico at whatever line of latitude.

Indeed, if we see it this way - globally, as a planet - we see that countries and states are entirely artificial entities. They have been created by people,

and borders have usually been established with great violence, through the subjugation of local inhabitants, through wars, through colonisation and many forms of oppression. There is no difference, usually, between the people living on one or the other side of a border. They are no more or less human beings because they come from this or that country. Our planet is a planet inhabited by humans, not by states. Viewed this way, indeed it is bizarre that peoples' lives should be determined, their opportunities circumscribed, their ability to survive and prosper permitted or denied, by the random fact of the geographical location where they were born; and that some artificial line drawn in the desert - a line that does not really exist - should actually in reality be a major determinant of their lives. While we may accept that the political administration of the world may require subdivision into various administrative units, we see no reason why the boundaries of those subdivisions should exert such force - such economic violence, through the inequality of nations and the poverty of the third world! - on the lives of so many people. It does not make sense; it is insane. And people are dying as a result of these random arbitrary lines all over the world; they are dying on the US-Mexico border right now.

Of course, we are a long way from this sort of openness and integration at the moment. But we feel it more and more through the globalization of the world economy; what happens in one part of the world more and more affects the rest of the world. The Mexican situation affects the US particularly intensely. We are hopefully moving in this direction: one may point to the complete absence of restrictions in movement between countries of the EU. The sooner we get there, the better; we hope that the US and other countries move in this direction in the near future.

6 Beyond blame

We quickly found that there were no easy answers; we also find that there are no total villains or totally illegitimate actors. There is nobody to blame, and this makes affairs less psychologically easy. Blame is rather diffuse: who can we blame that Mexico is underdeveloped? Who can we blame that nobody provides first aid to migrants attempting to cross the desert? Who can we blame for the dire economic situation in Mexico? With a target for blame, we can direct our efforts at them; without a target, things are more difficult. Sitting on the border with a gun is revealed as a shallow, indeed mindless and unnecessarily violent response to the problem.

Instead, what we see is a human tragedy, an ongoing tragedy affecting the lives of millions of people in this region, and we see it as part of a larger social, economic, political and demographic system. We see a systematic flow of people with causes and effects. We see economic mechanisms at work. We see states defending interests that we may or may not find legitimate - but their function is to defend them. We see it all as part of a larger global pattern. We see systems and institutions operating in society. Inflamed by pain on the personal level, we are driven upwards to see these as terrible effects of broader social dynamics.

We see systems that may or may not make sense; we see systems that we would like to change.

In our dreams, we see a world where national differences have become petty and the common humanity of all people is realised. We see a world in which borders are regarded as no more than administrative lines on a map, and where the border protection part of the state has withered away out of irrelevance. We see a world in which nations are seen not as holding clashing sovereign, final interests, but administrative units within a planetary community, and operating in cooperation with other nations. We see a world in which the free movement of people is guaranteed as a fundamental human right. We see a world in which cooperation between nations has moved beyond destructive superexploitation and economic colonialism, and has ended the outrageous inequalities between different regions of the world. We see a world in which all human beings are legal, and free, having opportunities and free to develop themselves to the fullest.

We see that change is certainly possible - and especially at present - and it consists not particularly in blaming people, not particularly in punishing certain actors, but in changing the operation of these systems, and the social structures that support them, in order to produce a better outcome, with less suffering, less poverty and less inequality. We seek to understand the situation, and to change it. This, after all, is the process of all progressive social change through history.

When we look in the long view, over the broad scale - without, however, forgetting the details of everyday lives and crises and trauma everywhere - we can see solutions and possibilities in a way that otherwise we might not. If we can see further, we can see more hope, more possibilities; therefore we are more likely to act to achieve them; and therefore those hopes are (self-referentially) more likely to be realised. The clearer we can see a better future, the closer and sooner it comes to reality.