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Land of Perpetual Immigration?

A Commentary on Douglas Massey's `The New Immigration and Ethnicity in the United States'[1]

By David Simcox

Is reducing immigration a simple matter of getting Congress to set lower limits and tighter controls and then getting the President to implement them?

Those so convinced, according to sociologist Douglas Massey, head of the Center for Population Studies at the University of Pennsylvania, are latter-day "King Canutes," futilely brandishing decrees against the tides. Immigration laws, he argues, have had only modest effects on the ebb and flow of immigration into the United States. Massey scorns equally the beliefs that the 1921 and 1924 restrictive legislation shut off the massive influx of the previous four decades or that the 1965 Act triggered today's snowballing mass migration.

The 1921 and 1924 Acts and Reduced Immigration

Massey's reasoning goes like this: the national origins quotas set in the 1920s applied only to immigrants from the Eastern Hemisphere, leaving the door open to massive migration from Latin America, particularly Mexico. But such flows did not materialize for more than 40 years. It was World War I which drastically slowed immigration from Europe during much of the 1910s. While European migration revived in the early 1920s, the absence of inflows from Russia, a major sending country before the war because of Czarist pogroms, kept overall European numbers low. The Bolshevik revolution and the emergence of a communist state had disconnected Russia from the world economy and discouraged emigration from a nation that had provided 1.6 million immigrants between 1900 and 1910.

In like fashion it was the Great Depression and World War II that kept immigration low from 1930 to well into the post-war period, not the Acts of 1921 and 1924. By the late 1940s and early 1950s demand for labor in the United States normally would have stimulated renewed immigration from Europe, but Western Europe in the 1950s was labor-short and had itself become a receiver of immigrants. Meanwhile Eastern Europe was sealed off by the Iron Curtain.

"[Massey contends] it was the Great Depression and World War II that kept immigration low from 1930 to well into the post-war period…"

The decline of European immigration set the stage for rising immigration from the Third World, which, however, was well underway before the 1965 Act passed and was in no way a result of it. Important to Massey's argument is that Latin American immigration has grown in spite of the 1965 Act's cap of 120,000 yearly on Western Hemisphere immigration, and subsequent restrictions.

The 1965 Law and Surging Immigration

Massey acknowledges that the 1965 Act un-leashed "an unprecedented and entirely unexpected flow of immigrants" from Asia. Rather than easing immigration from less-favored European countries such as Italy and Poland, as ethnic Congressmen had intended, the 1965 Act's boost to family reunification along with its termination of national origins quotas combined to detonate our era's burst of self-accele-rating immigration, particularly from Asia. But according to the author, at least one third of the remarkable surge in Asian immigration since 1970 was due, not to the 1965 Act, but to humanitarian arrange-ments stemming from the U.S. failure in Vietnam.

Nor can the 1965 Act be held responsible for the growth of illegal immigration since 1970, Massey claims. For that, one must look to a series of U.S. policy decisions in the post-war period such as the 1942-1964 migrant labor agreement with Mexico and the refusal to act on repeated legislative proposals since the early 1950s to ban the hiring of illegal aliens.

"Mushrooming immigrant enclaves here have become magnets to additional newcomers."

The prevailing estimates of 3.3 million resident illegal aliens in 1990 understate their effect, as they disregard illegal settlers who subsequently died or emigrated. Massey concludes that a new immigration regime began about 1970. The dramatic change reflects other formidable international and domestic forces, and only secondarily the effects of the 1965 changes.

Momentum: The Social Forces Driving Immigration Transcend Laws

The cumulative effect of these forces has been to further immunize immigration against government regulation. Migratory momentum is powered by spreading social, kinship and employment networks that increasingly tie intending immigrants to friends and relatives in the sending countries. Mushrooming immigrant enclaves here have become magnets to additional newcomers. The push of rapid population growth in the Third World, the pull of higher U.S. wages, the preference of U.S. employers for foreign workers, and the spread of the informal economy have joined forces to steadily swell both the supply of, and demand for, immigrants. Much of this is beyond the reach of U.S. law and policy, according to Massey.

The United States is becoming, in Massey's view, a land of "perpetual immigration," and sterner laws are unlikely to change this prospect.

Massey finds that the potential for Chinese immigration alone (now seven percent of all immigration) is enormous, with "chinatowns" already arising and expanding in many U.S. cities:

> *China's movement towards markets and rapid economic growth may contain the seeds of an enormous migration. …Even a small rate of emigration, when applied to a country with more than a billion people, would produce a flow of immigrants that would dwarf (Mexico's) levels of migration. …Social networks linking China and the United States are now being formed and in the future will serve as the basis for mass entry* (p. 649).

One notes in passing that there are reputedly more people studying English in China than *live* in the United States — easy to believe as China's population of 1.2 billion is nearly five times larger than ours (250 million).

Fatal and Flawed Analogies Between the Old and the New Immigration

Massey is not a restrictionist. He has researched Mexican migration to the United States extensively and sympathetically and written a highly regarded book on the growth of the U.S. underclass.[2] Massey's credentials insulate him from charges of racism when he concludes that the volume and relentlessness of today's immigration portend troubling consequences for future U.S. society. He validates and echoes the warnings that immigration reformers have issued for years about the profound differences between today's immigrants and those of the turn of the century, and between the United States as a receiving society today and what it was a century ago.

Massey is hardly the first social scientist to discover that these fundamental differences are making today's assimilation slower and spottier and changing the very nature of ethnicity. Absent now is the prospect for repeating the nearly 60-year hiatus in immigration that gave the United States the needed "breathing space" to assimilate four decades of turn-of-the-century mass immigration. Today, 38.4 percent of all immigrants are from one language group, Spanish; between 1901 and 1930 the largest linguistic concentration was about half that size. Massey notes that current immigrants are also more concentrated geographically within the U.S., increasing the chances for ghettoization.

Also absent today is the extensive economic growth from 1940 to 1973 that greatly eased the assimilation of European immigrants. Now, "the new immigrants are likely to enter a highly stratified society characterized by wide income inequality and growing labor market segmentation that will provide fewer opportunities for upward mobility" (p. 648).

More Immigration, Less Assimilation, Fragmented Ethnicity

Unlike turn-of-the-century European immigrants, today's Latin American and Asian newcomers will, in Massey's view, see their numbers continuously expanded by the perpetual addition of arrivals from abroad:

> *The rate at which ethnic culture is augmented by new arrivals from abroad will tend to exceed the rate at which new ethnic culture is created through generational succession, social mobility and intermarriage. …The character of ethnicity will be determined relatively more by immigrants and relatively less by later generations, shifting the balance of ethnic identity toward the language, culture and ways of life of the sending society* (p. 645).

"Linguistic segmentation" is already changing the process of assimilation and lowering the economic and social costs of not speaking English. The spread of immigrant enclaves reduces the incentives and opportunities for immigrants to acquire the cultural and behavioral attitudes of Euro-American society.

For Massey, other likely outcomes of these trends are: a drift of the United States toward bilingualism and bi-culturalism, with assimilation becoming more of a two-way street; growing antagonisms along class and ethnic lines, both within and between groups; and a particularly conflict-ridden relationship between native blacks and new immigrants, including black immigrants.

Shall We Concur With Massey that Legislation is Ineffective?

I would contend that this "inevitableism" sustains a national passivity toward immigration reform.

Massey paints a grim picture of where unselective mass immigration is taking the United States, and then rejects the efficacy of legislative action, the principal avenue of rapid change open to us as a national community. He couches his sobering vision of a "Bladerunner-like" America within a larger argument that is essentially "inevitableist" — defining the wrenching transformations of immigration as basically beyond the remedy of concerted political action. Timid legislators and executive branch leaders awed by the political symbolism of immigration find comfort in such a message — and much of academe is willing to give them such solace.

Is Massey's pessimism about the efficacy of immigration law and regulation well supported in his own arguments? Few would argue that the 1920s laws were airtight or that the 1965 legislation, riddled as it was with ambiguities, did not have unintended effects. He argues correctly that European immigration demand waned largely of its own accord, and appears to assume without evidence that if it had not, U.S. restrictive legislation would not have turned it back. For example, in citing the end of massive Russian immigration after 1917, Massey seems to argue that had Russia been able to send another 1.6 million immigrants in the 1920s, as it did in the 1910s, the United States would have ignored its then newly legislated national origins quotas and admitted them.

"…this `inevitableism' sustains a national passivity toward immigration reform."

Massey himself recognizes that the 1965 law unleashed at least two-thirds of the rising flow of Asian immigration, hardly a negligible effect. While he attributes the other one-third to U.S. refugee policy toward Vietnam, is that not a case of U.S. immigration choices expressed through specific laws and policies that had their intended effect?

Similarly, illegal immigration grew through an accumulation of unsound U.S. laws and policies, beginning with the 1942 Bracero agreement, through the rejection of employer sanctions in the 1952 Act, and the weak sanctions legislated on employers in 1986. These missteps and omissions, however, were not accidents, but deliberated official decisions to acquiesce in more illegal immigration.

The United States, through its choices of laws and regulations or the enforcement thereof, has erected the new immigration regime Massey sees as having emerged in 1970 and along with it has nourished the habits that Massey more ominously describes as "domestic and international forces."

The problem then is not that laws and regulations are ineffectual but that they often fail to embody a clear national will. True immigration reform is unlikely to be effectively legislated by "logrolling" — the vote-trading that results in the loopholes and calculated ambiguities that have crippled past efforts.

Laws that express an authentic and clear national consensus for urgent change have worked in the past, and can work again. ■

NOTES

[1] "The New Immigration and Ethnicity in the United States" by Douglas Massey appeared in *Population and Development Review*, Vol. 21, No. 3, September 1995, a quarterly publication of the Population Council, One Dag Hammarskjold Plaza, New York, NY 10017. Paul Demeny, Editor.

[2] See Massey, Douglas, *Return to Aztlan: The Social Process of International Migration from Western Mexico*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987); also Massey, *American Apartheid: Segregation and the Making of the Underclass*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993).