

Do the benefits to American society of immigration outweigh its costs?<sup>1</sup>

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The United States of America has really two options in terms of defining its origins, lineage, and legacy. The first is to define itself as a nation of genocide, the clearing of Native Americans from their lands to establish white, European supremacy. The second is to define the United States as a nation of immigrants. Scholars who discuss settler colonialism (Smith 2010, Wolfe 2006) are often writing from this first historical formation. The second, more conventionally though problematically accepted, story is to identify the United States as a nation of immigrants. Assuming that for many Americans the first scenario is difficult to reconcile with the mythos of Founding Fathers, Puritans and Quakers escaping religious persecution, and the Statue of Liberty and Emma Lazarus' "huddled masses" poem, then the latter question requires us to more deeply interrogate: why does the United States, as a "nation of immigrants," periodically, yet consistently, choose to forget that fact by perennially constructing immigrants as pariahs? All too often, the complex issue of immigration is reduced to a cost-benefit debate with mass media coverage and political grandstanding disproportionately focused on the costs. To counter this misguided bias, I will answer the question of why immigration matters by juxtaposing competing explanations of assimilation and acculturation to nativism and racialization as those are the major scholarly divides in the sociology of immigration.

## THE PAUCITY OF COST-BENEFIT DEBATES

Too often, in the immigration debate, the question becomes a cost benefit analysis of the role immigrants play in US economy and society. Harvard economist George Borjas is the most recognized scholarly opponent of immigration. Mark Krikorian and his Center for Immigration Studies fund the majority of studies that find the costs far outweigh the benefits.<sup>2</sup> In politics, 2016

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<sup>2</sup> A prime example is a recent CIS-supported study by widely discredited Jason Richwine who claims immigrants, by definition barred from most forms of welfare and federal health programs, purportedly use more in social welfare than natives. There are no direct measures to

Republican presidential candidate Donald Trump is the most vocal to claim that immigrants are pariahs, an unwelcome economic draw who bring down native worker wages, but his position has resonated with all Republican presidential candidates.

Harvard economist George Borjas cites human capital deficits (specifically, not learning English) as the culprit for immigrants' lack of economic assimilation (low wages). He states, "the more recent immigrant cohorts have fewer incentives to invest in US-specific human capital because the growth of the immigrant population makes those investments less profitable than they once were, and those reduced incentives have slowed the rate of economic assimilation [as measured by the change in the English proficiency rate]" (Borjas 2015: 485, 506). The very way Borjas frames his analysis puts the focus squarely on immigrants themselves and how poorly they supposedly assimilate to the U.S. economy.

The recent presidential debates also place immigrants as squarely to blame for not only their own lot but the U.S. nation's lot as a whole. Republican presidential candidate Donald Trump stated most vociferously in 2015: "The Mexican Government is forcing their most unwanted people into the United States. They are, in many cases, criminals, drug dealers, rapists, etc. ... They're sending us not the right people. It's coming from more than Mexico. It's coming from all over South and Latin America, and it's coming probably from the Middle East."<sup>3</sup> Doubling down on his anti-Muslim, anti-immigrant linkage following the workplace shooting in San Bernardino, California, he went one step further to call for "a total and complete shutdown of Muslims entering the United States."<sup>4</sup> In addition, he has justified and promised more torture, a database to register all Muslims residing in the United States, the surveillance and potential closure of mosques, all the while praising the illegal internment of Japanese Americans during World War II. There is simply no better example of the fear-mongering xenophobia than Donald Trump's campaign rhetoric.

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support this claim but instead Richwine builds an imputation model that presupposes immigrants draw off public coffers. See <http://cis.org/Cost-Welfare-Immigrant-Native-Households>

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.businessinsider.com/donald-trumps-epic-statement-on-mexico-2015-7>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/post-politics/wp/2016/01/02/donald-trump-featured-in-new-jihadist-recruitment-video/>

On the other hand, economists from UC Davis Giovanni Peri and UC Berkeley David Card offer the pluses to the benefit side of immigration, or at least challenge the idea that immigration has such a profound impact, either positive or negative, on the overall economy. This benefit or minimal impact school is replicated by voluminous research findings by the Manhattan Institute, Pew Hispanic Center, OECD, Brookings Institute, and in scholarly journals such as *International Migration Review* and *International Migration*. Best summed up by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, “The economic impact of migration has been intensively studied but is still often driven by ill-informed perceptions, which, in turn, can lead to public antagonism towards migration. These negative views risk jeopardizing efforts to adapt migration policies to the new economic and demographic challenges facing many countries” (OECD 2014). They go on to definitively state: “Migrants contribute more in taxes and social contributions than they receive in benefits.”

Economists like Professors Peri and Card are less definitive in the benefits of immigration but they certainly concur that the impact is either negligible or positive. In summarizing his previous research, Peri (2013) notes: “My recent studies on U.S. employment and wages... found very small — a few fractions of a percentage point — positive effects of immigration on the wages of less-educated natives.” Card (2012: 215) notes, “But the state of the evidence suggests that the overall impacts [of immigrants] on native wages are small—far smaller than the effects of other factors like new technology, institutional changes, and recessionary macro conditions that have cumulatively led to several decades of slow wage growth for most US workers.”

The cost-benefit debate is about much more than variable selection and technical statistical disagreements. One would question this debate if one weighed the preponderance of evidence for the benefits or minimal impacts. Yet, the accolades and constant media presence of Borjas, Krikorian, and those affiliated with the Center for Immigration Studies means the costs school has a ready and eager audience with political pundits, talk shows, and news media – regardless of the facts.

Immigration politics do not easily divide into liberal or conservative, Democrat or Republican, though the vitriolic hatred and fear mongering market is pretty well cornered by the far Right. There is basically a new Washington consensus on

immigration – both parties highlight the negative costs, in spite of the evidence to the contrary, and all agree to comprehensive immigration reform in the abstract.

The reality is that in a nation of 323 million people, 11 million undocumented immigrants or 3 percent of the population could not possibly be responsible for ruining an entire economy or draining government services. Nor could they be responsible for saving the economy or spurring all economic growth.

#### THE MELTING POT: CREAMY SOUP OR CHUNKY STEW

For sociologists of immigration, the cost-benefit debate is a better left to pundits and economists. Yet, the larger questions about cultural pluralism and assimilation versus nativism, xenophobia, and racism pervade any discussion of immigration, then or now. Sociologist Steven Steinberg makes a clear distinction between ethnic and racial relations in his “The Melting Pot and the Color Line” chapter. He basically concedes that the melting pot was created to account for European immigration at the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> to 20<sup>th</sup> centuries but the color line that African Americans face accounts for why white ethnic groups are allowed into the melting pot, yet African Americans find themselves constantly facing an apartheid context. The main point is that racial divisions are different than immigrant incorporation and as post-1965 generations of immigrants are increasingly and overwhelmingly from Latin America, Asia, Middle East, and Africa; old analogies of melting pots simply do not apply to how today’s immigrants experience a perennially racialized US society.

Most are familiar with the melting pot myth – that the United States, as a nation of immigrants, is defined by the melting of immigrants into ‘American’ culture. Many assume that the melting pot is both a normative ideal and an empirical inevitability. The assimilation and cultural pluralist positions both view American culture as a melting pot. In the first position, the melting pot produces a homogenous product much like a creamy soup. In other words, the differences are smoothed out to guarantee that each spoonful will taste the same. American culture is defined as a homogenous product and thus all Americans are essentially the same. The assimilation position often posits that all immigrants will conform to the established (white, Anglo-Saxon, Protestant) or the “American middle class” way of living.

A cultural pluralist position would characterize the melting pot as the container of chunky stews. Differences are allowed to coexist in the same stew because the different tastes tend to complement one another in the formation of one big stew. This is often described as life in the hyphen as American culture represents an amalgamation of ethnic traits defined as Irish-American, German-American, Mexican-American, etc. The two melting pot metaphors, regardless of whether they contain a homogenous identity that immigrants must assimilate into *a la* the creamy soup analogy, or posit that American identity is an amalgamation of different national identities coming together to form a unity in diversity *a la* the chunky stew analogy -- are quite specific to the 1880s-1920s European immigrant experience. Today's Latino, African, Middle Eastern, and Asian immigrants experience their incorporation into US culture much differently (as a direct result of racialization, neoliberal nativism, and transnationalism).

## RACIALIZATION AND NEOLIBERAL NATIVISM

The focus on migrant adaptation and what immigrants had to do to acculturate prefigured the possible range of explanations to either one of assimilation (immigrants viewed as the uprooted) or cultural pluralism (old world traits transplanted). Unfortunately, the focus on how immigrants were received by the host society became increasingly a non-question (John Higham's [2002] seminal history on nativism, *Strangers in the Land*, points to this oversight). Rather than studying the insidious effects of nativism and racism, the assimilationists/cultural pluralists are content to view social problems as one of cultural maladjustment. The "cultural pluralism" of non-European immigrants is much more complicated than existing cultural analyses of European migrant adaptation precisely because of the factors of racial exclusion, which have not figured prominently in the sociological study of migration.

Legislation at the state level are the main expressions of today's nativism. At the national level, the impasse over comprehensive immigration reform has not stemmed the tide of border militarization and mass deportations under the guise of fear of foreigners or xenophobia. The political rhetoric of Donald Trump and his campaign promise to "build a wall" is the logical policy outcome of this racist language of immigrant bashing.

Anti-immigrant legislation found its state-level expression in California's Proposition 187, the so-called "Save our State" initiative, that denied access to public benefits for undocumented immigrants residing in the state. It began a groundswell of anti-immigrant rhetoric in the mid-1990s that grew to 164 anti-immigrant state laws passed between 2010 and 2012.<sup>5</sup> Arizona's 2010 racial profiling SB1070 law emboldens law enforcement to verify the citizenship documents of anybody detained who with "reasonable suspicion" may be in the state without proper documents. The clear mandate for racial profiling of those deemed 'illegal aliens' is in determining reasonable suspicion as it constitutes an explicit penalty for driving while brown or speaking to an officer with an accent. SB1070 is steeped in trumped up fears of a re-conquest or multicultural invasion characterized as threats to national security (a concern only heightened in a post-9/11 era), and racially define the contours of the battle over who is or should be an 'American'.

Neoliberal nativism stands at the crossroads where free trade ideology meets up against the criminalization and racialization of immigrants as "illegals" or "illegal aliens." It is a lesson in how the free flow of commodities is eased in the era of NAFTA and DR-CAFTA while the flow of people is increasingly restricted. The current era of neoliberalism increasingly relies upon national and supra-national agreements to facilitate capital accumulation by driving down wages, displacing non-capitalist social relations with market and wage labor relations, eviscerating the nation-state in terms of public infrastructure and social services, and creating tariff-free zones to maximize transnational corporate profits. Seemingly, nation-states become more irrelevant as global capital writes the rules of the game in terms of labor relations and environmental safeguards. Yet, as neoliberalism signals the end of nation-state borders, the resurgence in nativist sentiment has created a new Washington Consensus on the issue of border security and the supposed need for further fortification and militarization, in a very thinly veiled adherence to nativism.

The biggest farce of neoliberalism is that of the laissez-faire state, when in reality the state becomes the preferred labor contractor in the service of global capital. Andreas (2000) argues that boundary enforcement along the U.S.-Mexico border during the 1990's stems from political factors and pressures to gain control of the border. Additionally, he asserts that enforcing the boundaries of the United

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<sup>5</sup> <http://www.motherjones.com/politics/2012/03/anti-immigration-law-database>

States is less about curtailing the flow of drugs and undocumented migration as it is about setting the symbolic territorial boundaries of the nation-state as the state has in the past failed to implement immigration policies that would deter the movement of undocumented immigrants along the boundary.

The symbolic representation of the border as a wall or fence in need of further fortification only serves to place the problems associated with illegal immigration as a burden on those deemed illegal. Lost in the equation are the employers who are illegally employing workers without papers, consumers who benefit from cheap products and services, and politicians on both sides of the aisle who criminalize immigrants for their own political gain. And it is clear that the rising tide of nativism coincides with economic downturns (see Mize and Swords 2010: Ch. 5 and Mize and Delgado 2012: Ch. 6). "Expressions of intolerance in American society, including indifference and a widespread lack of sympathy for the problems of immigrants, continue to characterize contemporary American society, but early-twenty-first-century American society is a far cry from what it was before the 1960s, when bigotry was explicitly built into immigration law" (Massey 2008: 16). At the federal level, Massey's assessment has some merit but it is clear that Massey severely underestimated the return of nativism at the local and state level where in fact bigotry is being written back into immigration law (most notably in Arizona's SB1070 and Alabama's HB56 but also in hundreds of bills introduced in Colorado, Wyoming and at least 30 other states). Nativism, xenophobia, and racism are the main impediments to immigrant incorporation as we move from the 20<sup>th</sup> to the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

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