

# The Conundrum of the Mexican-American Border: Anti-immigrant attitudes and free trade

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## **Introduction**

In this essay we shed light on the common contradictions and paradoxes that abound in the discourses (i.e. language and practices) regarding immigration from poor to rich countries. Within the context of the Mexican-American border, we explain the historical and material sources of American anti-immigrant attitudes—which could be extrapolated to other developed countries. We also talk about how the North American Trade Agreement (NAFTA) illustrates the inconsistency between the anxiety to stop immigration and the eagerness to enjoy its economic benefits. We believe that this border case in particular exemplifies why borders still matter. Sometimes maps may depict arbitrary lines that make very clear-cut divisions between one country and another, even though those artificial lines do not represent real divisions of culture, institutions, economy, social norms, law enforcement, wealth or policymaking. However, we believe that the Mexico-U.S. border does in fact reflect an accurate reality because the differences from one side of the border to the other are striking. More generally, we aim at provoking a reflection regarding how foreign policy of immigration should not be separated from its political roots, which grow out from perceptions about social realities.

## **Humanizing the dehumanizers: American anti-immigrant attitudes and foreign policy**

Anxiety towards migrants has led to immigration restrictions that have exacerbated suffering along and across the borderlands separating wealthy regions from poor peripheries. Some have argued that this has its roots in the rich countries' "fear of losing the comfort zone" (Van Houtum & Pijpers, 2007). Immigration controls and policies that degrade and endanger migrants have been denounced as barbaric, irrational, counterproductive and ultimately unsustainable measures that represent inherent contradictions not only to the lofty liberal-democratic values that the perpetrators say to uphold but also to their very economic interests (Bauder, 2003; Carens, 1987; Dummet, 2001; Düvell, 2003; Harris, 2002; Hayter T. , 2000; Hayter T. , 2001; Kymlicka W. , 1996; Kymlicka W. , 2001; Van Houtum & Boudeltje, 2009). Although from a moral, ideological and economic perspective this outrage is undoubtedly justified, it downplays the political foundations that give rise to these phenomena and, in doing so, runs the risk of making us believe that the solutions to these problems are too obvious. They are not.

Foreign policy is always about domestic politics, especially in democratic countries where politicians have high incentives to please their constituencies. As *The Economist* puts it:

Those setting migration policy in rich countries face an almost impossible task. The demands of demography and economics—shrinking and ageing workforces, a growing shortage of people to fill jobs requiring both high and low skills, and increasingly flexible and open economies—all point to more migration. [...] On the other hand, voters in many rich countries seem increasingly hostile to immigration, which suggests that politicians may find it more and more difficult to allow immigration to continue at its current high level (2008).

Therefore, although it is important to understand that protecting the comfort zone is the main force pushing towards ever-stricter immigration policies, it is also crucial to define this comfort zone. This implies a complementary effort to grasp the perceived threats that immigrants pose to people in rich countries. In this paper, we address this problem in the context of the United States and Mexico.

The consternation towards immigration in the United States has a time-proven pedigree. Already in 1912, “politicians, scholars and the public were alarmed over shifts in immigrants’ national origins” (Jaret, 1999). During the wave of immigration that took place in the U.S. between 1880 and 1924, migrants from Northern Europe were idealized in opposition to those arriving from Asia or Southern and Eastern Europe. At that time, Chinese, Russians, Polish, Irish, Greeks, Italians, Serbians, Spaniards, Rumanians, Portuguese, Catholics and especially Jews—among others—were racially discriminated, many times beaten or physically abused and even killed (Jaret, pp. 11-15). However, these groups eventually integrated or assimilated—some very successfully—and, since the 1970s, Mexicans have gradually become the new threat.



As the historian Roy Garis said, “The amazing thing about the immigration problem is the likeness of the arguments of one generation to the contentions of another” (Williamson, 1996, p. 8). Following the path of “scientific racists” and social

Darwinists from the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries (Menand, 2002), nativists and white supremacists are currently among the main advocates of more immigration restrictions (Jaret, 1999, pp. 12-33). The American public thinks that almost all illegal immigrants are Mexican and those Americans who want more controls over immigration usually attribute to Mexicans undesirable characteristics such as being: (1) Disloyal agents; (2) Unfit citizens; (3) Aliens with antagonistic values; (4) Economic threats and burdens; (5) Social and cultural threats to the “American way of life”; and even (6) Environmental threats (Jaret, 1999). These lines of argumentation are many times culturally deterministic or plainly racist, but by no means represent the opinions of a marginalized group or of a radical minority. Even authoritative academics like Samuel Huntington resorted to passionate accusations against Mexicans:

Unlike past immigrant groups, Mexicans and other Latinos have not assimilated into U.S. culture, forming instead their own political and linguistic enclaves—from Los Angeles to Miami—and rejecting the Anglo-Protestant values that built the American dream. The United States ignores this challenge at its peril (2004).

This kind of argumentation worryingly resonates with that of the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, when politicians, academics and intellectuals could still claim with a straight face the superiority of the Anglo-Saxon-Protestant race and culture because the horrors of racial extremism had not yet occurred. Some turn-of-the-century academics were thinking along the same lines as Huntington when they wrote that immigrants from South and Eastern Europe diverged “much more radically in type from the earlier American residents than did the old immigration, and that in consequence the problem of assimilation [had] become much more difficult” (Jenks & Lauck, 1911, p. 25).

Although these contentions’ moral, economic, political, social, and scientific foundations are dubious at best and therefore cannot be taken seriously, the fact that these ideas are arising once again is a clear sign that an important number of Americans are becoming increasingly concerned about Mexican immigration. The arguments put forward to curtail immigration from the southern U.S. border might tend to stoke vitriolically racist feelings, but are the roots of this sentiment of discomfort really irrational? They are not. The economic crisis makes Americans fear for their jobs and it is true that immigration hurts “the least skilled workers by depressing their wages” (The Economist, 2008). In addition, sharp disparities of income across the U.S. and Mexico threaten America with floods of immigrants—around 1000 immigrants enter the U.S. illegally through the Mexican border each day (Martin & Midgley, 2010). This wage inequality is aggravated by Mexico’s high levels of corruption, monopoly-constrained economy and high transaction costs to enter the formal economy—around 60% of the Mexican workforce labours in the informal economy (IMF, 2010).

Moreover, “outsiders who look and sound notably different from their hosts may find it hard to integrate” (The Economist, 2008). This is especially true for Mexican migrants, for whom “barriers such as phenotype (physical appearance), language and surnames makes assimilation extremely difficult” (Johnson, 1997, p. 1261). The United States Supreme Court even ruled that race was a legal motivating factor in questioning

someone's immigration status along the border (United States v. Brignoni-Ponce, 422 U.S. 873 [1975]). It is not the Mexican immigrants' fault to stand out, but still they do. There is evidence that greater diversity in America means short-term decline in social capital—i.e. trust, cooperation, shared values—and that this intensifies perceptions of more fear of crime and other social problems (The Economist). A policy analysis on illegal immigration of The American Legion—an influential and well-connected war-veterans organization—succeeds to summarize commonplace nativist fears towards the social degradation fuelled by Mexican immigration. Illegal immigrations, they argue, threatens to “Divide America into ethnic conclaves”. Moreover, they claim that:

Illegal immigration is not a victimless crime. The poor, minorities, children and individuals with little education are particularly vulnerable. It causes an enormous drain on public services, depresses wages of American workers, and contributes to population growth that, in turn, contributes to school overcrowding and housing shortages. Directly and indirectly, U.S. taxpayers are paying for illegal immigration. [...] Lax enforcement of immigration laws has invited the criminal element to our society. Alien gangs operate in most, if not all, major U.S. cities. Human and drug smuggling operations are numerous along our southern border. (National Americanism Commission, 2008)

This American Legion's analysis is an accurate representation of nativist anxieties and anti-immigration concerns in the U.S. They speak of depersonalized “aliens”, generalize their actions, give them a collective responsibility and do not take into account that the benefits of immigration outnumber its harmful collateral repercussions. However, our point is that it does not matter whether these nativist perceptions are right or wrong. They are highly subjective and miss the big picture, hold biased or cartoonish arguments and even use statistically insignificant examples in an effort to invest their claims with the halo of science. Yet, that is the way many Americans think and those preferences are the ones that count when their political representatives make decisions regarding immigration.

### **Migration might be economically efficient, but not politically savvy**

*The Economist* pointed out that “Politicians are not stupid. They know that walls do not stop people. [...] But tough borders are popular with voters, so they are here to stay” (2008). This can be seen in the loaded language politicians use to gain favour with their audience (read: constituents). Department of Homeland Security (DHS) Secretary Chertoff said in 2005: “Let me be clear – we will not build a giant wall across our borders. But in areas where it makes sense to do so, we will look at physical infrastructure and technology improvements to deter illegal border crossings” (DHS, 2005). However, the “giant walls” were signed into law under the Secure Fence Act of 2006 the next year. The walls themselves are signs of a “war on illegal immigration”, with names inspiring battlefield representations and harking back to the Mexican-American War: Operation Hold-the-Line in Texas, Operation Safeguard in Arizona, and Operation Gatekeeper in California. Despite these formidable obstacles, illegal immigration has not decreased but has been relocated to the borderlands that the DHS

perceived as too hard to cross and too expensive to monitor. A “virtual fence” was also funded to complement the physical barrier by putting into a place a network of cameras, motion sensors and communications equipment meant to speed the dispatch of DHS personnel. Including a US\$6.7 billion contract awarded to Boeing in 2006, the technological attempts of border monitoring resulted in only 1% of alarms leading to arrests (Hsu, 2010). The Boeing project’s funding was “suspended” in 2010 rather than being scrapped altogether, and the quiet press release consisted of only four sentences (Hsu), suggesting that politicians were motivated more by saving face than by admitting failure.

While politicians aim to please their constituents, they are also keen to receive contributions in return for policy shifts. Unskilled labour reveals a significantly strong connection between policy and demand-side economics. For instance, Hanson and Spilimbergo (2001, p. 612) found that “border enforcement is negatively correlated with lagged relative price changes in the apparel, fruits and vegetables, and livestock industries and with housing starts in western United States, suggesting that authorities relax border enforcement when demand for undocumented labour is high.” On the other hand, unions have been considerably influential concerning immigration policy, for example:

the AFL-CIO supported measures to reduce illegal immigration that culminated in the 1986 Immigration Reform and Control Act. Similarly, during the recent debate on the nurse shortage, the American Nurses Association has strongly opposed a measure to increase the number of H1-C visas, pointing out that ‘the provision would lead to a flood of nurse immigrants and would damage . . . the domestic work force’ [*New York Times*, 24 May 2006] (Facchini & Mayda, 2008, p. 656).

Obviously, politicians keep in mind the potential effects of immigration policy shifts not only on the national economy and attitudes but also—and perhaps more in the forefront—on their prospects of re-election or reappointment. To summarize, American politicians often find themselves between a very real wall and their voters’ sword.



The perception that Mexicans pose a threat to the United States has been further intensified by two recent events. First, after the 9/11 terrorist attacks in New York the Mexican border started receiving more attention because though the terrorists did not enter the U.S. through it, the possibility of al Qaeda cells working with Mexican smugglers to sneak into the US led the American government to consider its border with Mexico as a “Terrorist Alley” (Coleman, 2007). Politicians have been quick to bring up the temporal border (e.g. “since 9/11” was said three times in Secretary Chertoff’s short 2005 speech). The emotional attachment to this specific date in history can score major points with constituents, with the mere mention of the date as powerful as the phrase consistently used within advertising and public speeches after September 11, 2001, “Now, more than ever”. Stuart Elden has put the finger on this issue by explaining how the “loaded” shorthand for the attacks on that date

mask the spatial context of the events in favor of a temporal indication—one that is reduced to a number in calendar time and seeks a privileging of this date for American pain, occluding other events on that day in this and other years. Indeed, this date has been seen as a caesura, dividing world history into a “before” and “after.” Unlike the December 7, 1941, attack on Pearl Harbor, which is conveniently referred to only by a place, the lack of a single geographical site has turned the “new Pearl Harbor” into a simple date (2009, pp. xiii-xvi).

Second, the crackdown on drug bands that the Mexican government launched in 2006 has spurred increasing waves of violence along the Mexico-U.S. border that from time to time has spilled into American territory. This has fired the alarm in Washington and led Hillary Clinton, the US Secretary of State, to consider the violence in Mexico as a threat to American security (Richter & Dilanian, 2010). Similarly, the violence spillover from Mexico to Arizona was recently used to advance a controversial racial profiling law (SB-1070) in that American state (Archibold, 2010).

This does not mean that Mexican immigrants are in fact the source of the most pressing economic, security and social woes in the United States. Migrants are not the cause for unemployment, low wages or rising welfare burdens—even though they might be correlated. On the contrary, migration has always given America a distinctive advantage on innovation and a dynamic labour market. What is important to keep in mind is that anxiety towards immigrants in America, particularly Mexicans, “is often, but not always, a matter of unfamiliarity..., mean spirited ethnocentrism or racism....Its ‘irrational’ elements are not necessarily the main source of anti-immigrant phenomena; real intergroup competition over status and other resources plays an important role” (Jaret, 1999, p. 35).

### **The transcendence of the Mexican-American border**

Borders are international boundaries between different nation-states, lines that were drawn during a certain era, by a certain person, or according to a certain occurrence (Alvarez Jr., 1995, p. 449). Some borders were established only decades ago while others existed for centuries. As stated by P. Fernandez-Kelly & D. S. Massey, “Borders are neither natural nor fixed phenomena: they come and go in response to political and

economic transformations” (2007, p. 98). According to many scholars the Mexican-U.S. border is a very important model for border studies and borderlands genre throughout the world. This border is considered to be a zone of conflict and paradox, a border between the world’s “dominant economic-political nation-state” and a “third world country”; a border which exhibits the inequality of power, economics and the human condition (Alvarez Jr., p. 451). Before World War II, not many scholars had an interest in the Mexican-American border; it was seen as a real and natural boundary separating two different cultures and communities (Alvarez Jr., p. 453). Over time, as border towns and cities grew and population became more concentrated and cultures intertwined, the interest changed and so did the focus on the border, which became a perfect field to research the clash and interface between different cultures (Alvarez Jr., p. 454). It was not only the clash and interface of different cultures that shifted the focus on the Mexican-U.S. border. The phenomenon of immigration and undocumented migration and its growing importance in politics and every-day life also influenced the sudden focus shift. Suddenly, the Mexican-American border changed from being an irrelevant subject to becoming one of the most important political topics for both countries (Alvarez Jr., p. 457).

### **The year was 1993**

1993 was the year when immigration became an important public issue. It all started with a debacle concerning the employment of undocumented persons by the U.S. Attorney General. This was later exacerbated by incidents concerning the Haitian interdiction and repatriation; the plight of smuggled Chinese (who were living under inhuman conditions); and the indictment of an asylum-seeker who allegedly was involved in the World Trade Centre bombings in New York City (Johnson, 1993-1994, p. 937). The stressed American economy of 1993 allowed for a growing concern about undocumented immigrants from Mexico “filling the welfare rolls” and “taking American jobs” (Johnson, p. 938). A depressed economy facilitated the growth of anti-immigrant sentiment, especially in areas with large non-citizen populations. This perception led to a demand of tighter control along the Mexican-U.S. border in the hope of decreasing immigration from Mexico, which resulted in human rights violations—ranging from tackling the freedom of movement to the abusive use of force (Johnson, p. 938).

At the same time, as Congress was called upon by American public opinion to tighten the border, NAFTA appeared: the North American Free Trade Agreement among Canada, Mexico and the U.S. stirred up the already existing controversy. The heated political discourse on these subjects started to link immigration to NAFTA—though this treaty deals with trade and investments and leaves out immigration. The opponents of NAFTA stated that America should not ratify the agreement as long as it did not include an agreement whereby the Mexican government compromised to take steps to halt the flow of illegal immigrants. The left-wing in American politics, including labour and environmental organizations, feared for the loss of jobs to “cheap” Mexicans and expressed worries regarding lax environmental standards in Mexico (Johnson, p. 951). On the other hand, the proponents of NAFTA argued that the agreement would solve the

illegal immigration problem in the U.S. by fostering economic growth in Mexico and thus discontinuing the stream of Mexican illegal immigrants. With time, it became increasingly difficult to ignore the contradictory debate over immigration and NAFTA. On one side the U.S. Congress was pondering over NAFTA's elimination of trade barriers among the three North American countries; on the other side it was fortifying its borders with Mexico to stop the flow of illegal aliens to the U.S.

### **NAFTA: free trade vs. immigration and fortification of the border**

NAFTA, unlike the treaties of the EU, is solely concerned with the market and economic aspects. Its objective is to eliminate barriers to trade and investment between Canada, Mexico and the United States. This agreement is part of the latest trend of globalization, a "project" designed to tear down barriers, to facilitate trade and open markets, and to expand opportunities for capital investment (Fernández-Kelly & Massey, 2007). NAFTA encompass the free flow of goods as well as agricultural, trade and investment measures. However, this treaty only scantily addresses regulations on immigration by merely easing immigration restrictions for narrowly defined business and trade related purposes (Johnson, 1993-1994, p. 956). NAFTA aims to open the market and eliminate borders concerning trade and investment; it nevertheless recognizes each country's sovereign right to protect its domestic labour force and to pursue its own immigration policy, allowing each government to take measures to ensure their border security. While it is not precisely clear why NAFTA did not include the general immigration issues, some have stated that any far-reaching treatment of immigration issues in this agreement would have decreased the probability of Congressional approval or would have delayed it (Johnson, p. 957). NAFTA was eventually ratified in 1994 by the US government.

In the U.S., domestic pressure to do something about the influx of illegal immigration intensified in 1993 and the nearly two-thousand-mile Mexico-U.S. border became a very important point of political attention (Andreas, 1998-1999). New measures were taken to try to decrease the "illegal aliens flow". Pressed by Republican initiatives in Congress, Bill Clinton took aggressive steps against illegal immigration, such as the hiring of 600 Border Patrol Agents and the build-up of policing along the southwest border (Andreas, p. 594). The 1996 immigration control legislation reinforced the border enforcement through fencing, surveillance equipment, penalties and law enforcement personnel directed at inhibiting illegal entry of immigrants from Mexico. In addition, strategies such as "Operation Blockade" and "Operation Gatekeeper" were launched between 1993 and 1994 to curb illegal flows—not to mention the military support in expanding the border control campaign. After the attacks of 9/11, the Border Patrol was expanded and new "harsh" measures were introduced by the U.S. government. For example, on December 16<sup>th</sup>, 2005, the U.S. House of Representatives passed the Sensenbrenner Bill that labelled unauthorized crossings of the border and the hiring of and the provision of services and humanitarian aid to undocumented immigrants as felonies. Later on, the dismantling of Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) and the transfer of its powers to the Office of

Homeland Security was a reaffirmation of the belief that immigrants are a risk to the integrity of the U.S. The Office of Homeland Security was established with a clear mandate to protect the nation from terrorist attacks and was used to terrorize the immigrants, many of whom were displaced by NAFTA's economic aftermath on the most vulnerable social sectors of the Mexico (Fernández-Kelly & Massey, 2007, p. 108).

### **Conclusion**

By explaining the concerns of Americans toward Mexican immigrants and alluding to NAFTA as a tangible example of the contradictions that plague the debate over immigration between Mexico and America, we do not mean that the outcry provoked by the unnecessary suffering of migrants is not of moral, academic and political importance. Dehumanizing human beings is wrong; turning a blind eye on the brutal treatments that migrants receive is inexcusable, and trying to make this issue a priority in the political and academic agendas is a praiseworthy goal. However, denunciation is only half of the way. In order for migration policies to change and become more humane, first it is important to understand their roots. It is true that Americans or Europeans are afraid of losing their comfort because of migrants. However, by forgetting that politicians and their constituencies are also motivated and by dismissing the grievances that give way to such terrible migration policies we incur the risk of dehumanizing them and stereotype them as irrational, evil, stupid and brutal just for the sake of it. Dehumanizing decision makers and their constituencies is as dangerous as dehumanizing immigrants, for it allows us to rest in the comfort of our prejudices and to be content with our moral self-righteousness without actually engaging in an effort to explore how this might be overcome. We should not so easily conclude that legal and physical barriers are erected out of sheer fear and anxiety, for although to some extent this is true, we should not dismiss legitimate grievances related to migration like social tensions, crime, poverty, clashes associated to different values and religions, as well as burdens on health, schooling and housing that translate into higher taxes.

The rapidly expanding U.S. policing campaign along the Mexican-US border contrasts sharply with the rhetoric and practice of Mexican-U.S. economic integration. It seems like America is increasingly trying to control its borders over unauthorized immigrant labour flows in the context of a general loosening of controls over cross-border economic activities. Thus, although NAFTA promotes a de-territorialisation of economic activity between Mexico and U.S., the American border control reinforces the state's claim over its territorial authority. The paradox herein is evident: a barricaded border that coexists with a borderless economy at the same time. Though intuitively one would think that the worldwide trend of globalization would discourage the strengthening of protection alongside boundaries, thus permitting economic and social interaction, the Mexican-US border shows a more complex dynamic. This dynamic between a developed and an underdeveloped country is a paradox between economic cross-border freedom and a barrier to confront the invasion of the "unwanted".

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