

Talk to UCSC alumni in Orange County. 4/27/94.

Mexicans in California: Problem or Opportunity?

President Clinton, Governor Wilson and Senators Feinstein and Boxer have been unanimous in recent months in expressing strident concern about the flood of undocumented immigrants, and among them especially Mexican immigrants, into the United States. In so doing, they have both appealed to and helped to drum up a climate of public opinion in which, according to most polls, some 75% of Americans (whether White, Black, Asian or Latino) believe that there are already too many "foreigners" in this country, and that further immigration is a threat to the standard of living, the culture, the economy, and many would go so far as to say the political viability of the United States.

The terms of our public discourse on this subject are astonishingly similar to those that were current in the late 1920's and early 30's when the subject was pushed to the top of the national agenda by the great depression, and again in the late 1970's during the troubled presidency of Jimmy Carter. The rapidly increasing numbers of Mexican immigrants are represented as a problem rather than as an opportunity -- as a threat to the values and culture of North American society, as a cause of unemployment among the American-born poor, as a drain on the nation's budgets for health, education and welfare, as a contribution to the "criminal element" of the population. Accordingly, extraordinary efforts have been made to round up and repatriate large numbers of Mexicans, often by methods which were incompatible with the general standard of human rights which is believed to be operative in our country.

So "immigrant-bashing" is an old American custom, one to which we have frequently recurred in times of crisis, despite the unquestionable facts that the country has itself been built on the contributions of immigrants from all over the globe, and that immigrants continue to come here, as they always have, because there are jobs for them at pay levels which Americans are reluctant to accept.

Anti-immigration forces: the cultural conservatives, especially active since the majority of immigrants became non-white. They argue "why do you want to change the racial and cultural makeup of this country, and who gave you the right to do that?" Allied with them are many liberals (including the President and what is left of the labor movement) and many Chicanos and Blacks, arguing that immigrants compete with the native-born for "entry-level" and low-paying jobs and also that cheap labor is bad for the distribution of national income. The solution is for labor to become scarce in relation to demand, so that wages will tend to rise. These forces dominant in Carter presidency and today.

Pro-immigration (or anti-crackdown) forces led by the large-scale employers of immigrant labor, sweat-shop operators and especially growers with their powerful lobbies at the state and national level. (Evident when the 1986 IRCA law was passed offering amnesty for people who had been here illegally for

four years, and threatening sanctions against the employers of undocumented workers: growers got exemptions of 90 days for agricultural workers, and protection against unconstitutional search by the INS in the workplace). Mouthpiece of these forces is the Wall St. Journal, arguing consistently for a return to the 19th-century idea of free immigration, no INS and cheap labor as a condition for economic development. These forces dominant in the Reagan and Bush presidencies.

Current debate centers on measures 1) once again to try and control the flow of immigrants; and 2) to deny U.S. citizenship to persons born in the United States to undocumented parents; and 3) on the much-publicized lawsuits of the governors of Florida, California and perhaps Texas aimed at obliging the federal government to reimburse state and local governments for the enormous costs which it is argued are occasioned by the provision of education, health services, welfare payments and incarceration to persons who should have been denied admission to the country by the federal authorities in the first place. Pete Wilson hopes to recuperate some \$3 billion by these means; and it is said that President Clinton is inclined to go along with that plan at least to some degree.

The economics of this discussion are beyond my competence; but an interview with an economist colleague at Santa Cruz who is presently at work on a book about this subject suggests that the arguments that have been presented to the public are largely baloney. The scare campaign is based among other things on disinformation, on a carefully managed confusion in the public mind between undocumented immigrants and immigrants in general. In practice the campaign makes no clear distinction between legal and illegal, recent or long-standing, Mexican, other Latino and Chicano residents of California; and its real purpose appears to be the reconsolidation of an age-old attitude of suspicion and hostility toward the Latino population of California as a whole -- perceived now (as the Chinese once were) increasingly as a threat to an imaginary "American way of life."

Among the facts that help to undermine this carefully managed image of invasion are these:

- 1) undocumented immigrants are not entitled to receive welfare payments, and rarely do;
- 2) their access to health care facilities is, like that of other uninsured poor citizens and residents, extremely limited (though delivered in the most expensive way possible, for the most part in emergency rooms);
- 3) the considerable numbers of undocumented immigrants who do in fact clog our jails, have for the most part been arrested for the crime of being undocumented itself, or for crimes associated with the street drug trade (that is, for providing illegal but much-in-demand services to the enormous population of citizens and legal residents who are addicted to drugs for reasons beyond the control of the undocumented immigrant);
- 4) since most undocumented immigrants are single men and women and persons of unstable residence who are unlikely to establish families before they have found employment, the immigrant families whose numerous children do attend our schools (and challenge them in ways to which the underfunded schools have still not responded to in a satisfactory fashion) are for the most part legal

residents, or people well along the road to the steady employment which should and will lead to the legalization of their immigrant status.

5) generally speaking, Mexican immigrants in particular arrive here with great difficulty, "short on cash and long on hope" as the great Mexican-American social scientist Ernesto Galarza argued seventy years ago. They come because there is work for them here; and if they don't find work, as a rule they go home in disappointment.

The argument that these immigrants are a drain on the public sector is certainly not sustainable with the facts on a national scale. Undocumented immigrants contribute as much as other low-income workers to the tax base by paying state and federal income taxes, sales taxes, and property taxes indirectly through the payment of (often wildly inflated) rents. They contribute to the economy by spending most of their earnings in this country, and especially by subsidizing large sectors of it with hard work at low wages. Generally speaking, their undocumented status itself militates against their making substantial drains on the public services. Once established in the U.S., of course, their families participate in the society and economy on pretty much the same basis as other poor people, until such time as the fortunate among them manage to drag themselves out of poverty into the middle class.

On a local scale, in a place such as Los Angeles where there is a disproportionately large population of undocumented migrants attempting to lose themselves in an established population of Latino legal residents, it may be that the Governor has something of a point, and that the drain on services tips the balance somewhat against the contributions of this population to the economy -- though most calculations that lead to this conclusion have not factored in the subsidy in the form of low-wage labor. In these cases, it seems not unreasonable to argue that the federal government should take a portion of the revenues it derives from the undocumented immigrant population and reassign it to the localities where this disbalance may exist.

But the bigger question of "problem or opportunity" needs to be discussed in very different terms than those advanced so far by our political leaders. At the back of this reheating of the Mexican immigrant scare is an attitude of fear on the part of "Anglo" California that it will soon constitute a minority, albeit for a time still an economically powerful minority, in this state. David Hayes Bautista at UCLA startled people a few years back by making a demographic projection in which in the year 2020 a small minority of elderly white people were being supported by the taxes of a great majority of working brown people who would have little reason to want to treat us with generosity! Others' fears are more cultural: that the WASP culture that once dominated this society unquestionably is no more, and that it is being replaced by something impossible to predict, feel pride or loyalty in or control. A startling antidote to this way of thinking has recently been put forth by Harvard historical demographer Stephen Thernstrom, who writes that the present populations of the U.S. are likely to be in a zero population growth phase for the next century or so, and that any population increase will probably come from immigrants and their children -- but that in cultural terms this should not alarm anybody, because given

the communications technology already in place in this country, the cultures themselves of these immigrants will tend to amalgamate.

My view of this question is that California is a wonderful microcosm of the human race, and one in which thanks to a comparatively civil climate for human relations it is still possible to work out the differences between us without genocide or apartheid. As such, it is an invaluable laboratory for experimentation on the future of humanity. Immigrants to this country bring energy, intelligence, creativity, diversity of perspectives; for the most part, if they can find steady employment, they become very loyal to the country. All of these characteristics can be as they always have been in practice, valuable contributions to the process of our ongoing social experimentation.

So we should welcome these changes and support them, and concentrate our energies on making California a healthy and welcoming, desirable place for all those who make it here to live in.

There is precedent for this. There were no numerical restrictions at all on immigration from the Western hemisphere to the U.S. until 1965 (despite the racially discriminatory quotas levelled against Asians in the 1920's). The immigration act of 1965, paradoxically, opened up immigration from the whole Third World for the first time, but imposed a numerical limitation on Mexico which obliged most Mexicans following the historic trails in response to the continuing U.S. demand for Mexican labor to enter the country illegally. The numerical restriction, therefore, created the problem of undocumented immigration from Mexico.