

Reframing the Immigration Discourse for a New American Century*

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Twenty years ago this month, I presented my credentials, in a sealed brown envelope, to the immigration officer on duty at Kennedy International Airport. And after a brief interview, I was formally admitted into the United States as a lawful permanent resident. That sealed brown envelope contained a portfolio of documents, declarations and affidavits, including medical records, a chest X-ray and two complete sets of fingerprints, authenticated by the American Consulate in Georgetown, and attesting to the following facts:

1. that I did not have tuberculosis or any other respiratory disease or condition;
2. that I was not HIV positive;
3. that I had been screened, and tested negative, for an assortment of sexually transmitted diseases, including but not limited to syphilis, gonorrhea and Chlamydia;
4. that I was not then, nor had I ever been a member of the Communist Party;
5. that I had never advocated the violent overthrow of the government by force;
6. that I had never been convicted of a crime;
7. that I was not the target of any investigation by the FBI;
8. that I had had a valid and written offer of employment; and
9. that my sponsor was currently employed and earning income sufficient to ensure that I would not become a public charge at any time during the next five years.

As anyone who has endured the deeply invasive and often undignified probings and inquisitions of the immigration process will tell you, it is not an experience for the faint hearted. But we submit ourselves and our families to that process of our own free will, believing it to be a legitimate exercise of necessary caution by the American government,

and a price well worth the benefits of eventual admission to the United States. And for the most part, we do not complain.

So why am I talking about it now?

I do so now because -- 20 years later -- I have had it up to here, with all these right-wing xenophobes who have built an entire career for themselves by sounding off on the matter of immigrants and immigration, without the slightest idea of what it takes to get here, what it requires to survive here, and the degree to which *our* presence here enriches *their* quality of life. I have grown sick and tired of being constantly expected to justify my presence in this country. And as an American by choice, I will no longer accept the burden or the blame for everything that goes awry in America.

Many native-born Americans are blissfully unaware that those of us who choose to become Americans are required, as a precondition for the naturalization process, to take an Oath of Allegiance which declares, in part:

“that I will absolutely and entirely renounce and abjure all allegiance and fidelity to any foreign prince, potentate, state, or sovereignty, of whom or which I have heretofore been a subject or citizen; that I will support and defend the Constitution and the laws of the United States of America against all enemies, foreign and domestic; that I will bear true faith and allegiance to the same; [and] that I take this obligation freely, without any mental reservation or purpose of evasion, so help me God.”

So America is my country too. And I want it to thrive and be secure and prosperous, bringing forth good fruit in abundance for my children and their children's children. I am not the enemy, and I refuse to be tarnished or stigmatized, or to have my good name bandied about or abused as a political football by inept politicians looking for a convenient scapegoat to excuse their own individual and collective incompetence.

As we New Yorkers say: Enough already!

I have grown weary of being placed on the defensive. It is time now to go on offense. And the first order of business must be to reframe the entire discourse on immigration.

Our most immediate challenge in that effort is to reclaim the vocabulary that shapes the conversation. The nativists have perfected the art of using language to prejudice the discussion – specifically by their insidious use of the adjective “illegal” whenever they talk about immigration. In doing so, they have successfully fused the two words together in the public consciousness, so that any mention of immigration is tainted by the suspicion of illegality, even when the word is not explicitly spoken, nor any overt allegation made.

What we need to point out from the inception is that they have a choice of two possibilities in addressing this question: First, that this so-called “illegal” or “undocumented” immigration accounts for a relatively small proportion of the foreign-born population. Moreover, any estimate of the undocumented population must be – by definition – nothing more than a wild guess. The very nature of undocumented status means that those who fall into this category are not in the business of reporting their presence to the authorities.

On the other hand, if we assume that the authorities know who and where these people are, then we must necessarily infer that they are here with the connivance and implicit blessing of the government, and the corporate and business interests that benefit from that presence.

And for those who would ask how the government benefits from illegal immigration, or consider it either too far-fetched or conspiratorial to conceive of government complicity, we should direct them to an April 5, 2005 news report by Eduardo Porter of *The New York Times*, titled, “Illegal Immigrants Are Bolstering Social Security With Billions.”¹

¹ Illegal Immigrants Are Bolstering Social Security With Billions – The New York Times, April 5, 2005

As Porter reports:

“While it has been evident that illegal immigrants pay a variety of taxes, the extent of their contributions to Social Security is striking ...the money [paid by illegal immigrants in social security taxes] added up to about 10 percent of last year’s surplus. Moreover, the money paid by illegal workers and their employers is factored into all the Social Security Administration’s projections.”

According to the *Times*, starting in the late 1980s, the Social Security Administration began receiving a flood of W-2 earnings reports with incorrect, often fictitious Social Security numbers. Remember this would have been soon after the 1986 Immigration Reform and Control Act was signed into law by then-President Ronald Reagan. The Social Security Administration stashed the extra funds into something called the “earnings suspense file,” which has been mushrooming ever since: to the tune of some \$189 billion worth of wages recorded over the decade of the 90s alone. In the current decade, the file is growing, on average, by more than \$50 billion a year in recorded wages, generating as much as \$7 billion in social security tax revenue and another \$1.5 billion in Medicare taxes. And of course, the government gets to keep all that money, since undocumented immigrants will never be able to collect those benefits because of their undocumented status. Stephen C. Goss, the chief actuary at the Social Security Administration, is quoted in Porter’s piece as saying that without the flow of payroll taxes from these so-called “illegal” immigrants, the system’s long-term funding hole would be 10-percent deeper.

It’s about time somebody told that story.

But we should be careful also not to get mired in a circular conversation, in which immigration is defined first and foremost by the “undocumented”. That’s tantamount to having the tail wag the dog. There are other stories to tell – like the one about a recent research study from the National Foundation for American Policy which found that over

the next 75 years, new **legal** immigrants entering the United States will provide a **net benefit of \$611 billion in present value to America's Social Security system.**²

Citing data from the Office of the Chief Actuary at the Social Security Administration, the study found that a moratorium on legal immigrants entering the country would devastate the social security system, by ballooning the size of the actuarial deficit by almost one-third over a 50-year period. As Stuart Anderson, executive director of the Foundation and author of the report explained to me on *Talkback!*, our social security system benefits from immigration because newcomers typically arrive near the start of their working years, and contribute to the system for up to four decades before becoming eligible to receive any benefits. Senator Sam Brownback, in a statement released to coincide with the report, said the study reminds us that “while we must keep our borders safe and secure against those who would do us harm, we must also keep our nation open to the legal immigrants that play a crucial role in our country’s growth and prosperity.”

An earlier study, released in the summer of 2004 -- and also conducted by the National Foundation for American Policy, pointed to yet another benefit that immigrants bring to these shores: it’s called “the multiplier effect,” and involves the children of immigrants. Researchers found that an astounding 60 percent of the top science students in the United States and 65 percent of the top math students in 2004 were children of immigrants.³ And their parents are not slouchers either. As of 2004, “more than 50 percent of the engineers with Ph.D.s working in the United States were foreign-born, according to the National Science Foundation. In addition, 45 percent of math and computer scientists with Ph.D.s, as well as life scientists and physicists, were foreign-born. Among master’s degree recipients in the U.S. workforce, 29.4 percent of engineers, 37 percent of math and computer scientists and 25 percent of physicists were foreign born.”⁴

² New Study Finds Immigration Major Boon to Social Security System – National Foundation for American Policy, February 16, 2005; from the study, *The Contribution of Legal Immigration to Social Security*.

³ Report: *The Multiplier Effect* – National Foundation for American Policy, Summer 2004

⁴ *Ibid*

Bear in mind that the foreign-born currently account for approximately 12 percent of our total population. So it's about time somebody told that story too.

But immigrants – or as I like to refer to ourselves, New Americans – are not only holding their own and making their mark in the academy, or in the fields of science, technology and the professions. Just over a year ago, the National Venture Capital Association examined the impact of immigrant entrepreneurship in our country's business sector, and its corresponding benefits for the economy as a whole, including the native-born population. Here's what they found: that since 1990, immigrants have founded one out of every four public, venture-capital-backed companies. The figure is even higher in high-tech, where immigrants founded 40 percent of such businesses. And in the private sector, nearly half of all venture-capital startups surveyed were founded by New Americans.⁵

In January 2007, researchers at Duke University and the University of California at Berkley reported that nationwide, engineering and technology companies founded by immigrants produced \$52 billion in sales and employed 450,000 workers in 2005 alone.⁶ Foreign-born nationals from Cuba, Columbia, Brazil, Venezuela and Guatemala accounted for 35 percent of immigrant-founded companies in Florida alone; Israelis constituted the largest founding group in Massachusetts; Indians dominated in New Jersey. And based on an analysis of the World Intellectual Property Organization patent databases, the researchers estimated that foreign nationals residing in the United States were named as inventors or co-inventors in nearly 24 percent of all international patent applications filed from this country in 2006.⁷

Immigrant entrepreneurship is also reflected in the numerous small businesses -- from restaurants and gas stations to small, medium and large-scale manufacturing and production companies -- that provide employment for native- and foreign-born workers alike, expand the tax base, and even revitalize entire communities. We need to put an end

⁵ Immigrants Behind Startups, by Andrea James and John Cook – Seattle Post Intelligencer, Wednesday, November 15, 2006

⁶ America's New Immigrant Entrepreneurs – Master of Engineering Management Program, Duke University; School of Information, U.C. Berkley – January 4, 2007

⁷ Ibid

– once and for all – to the vicious slander that immigrants are a drain or a burden on our economy, that we consume more than we contribute, and that we are here to spend our time feeding at the public trough. All of the empirical evidence points to the reverse as being true.

And we need not go too far afield to find that evidence.

Last November, I had occasion to talk with David Dyssegaard Kallick, senior fellow at the Fiscal Policy Institute – a non-partisan research organization that focuses on tax, budget and economic issues in New York State. The subject of our conversation was the latest study released by the Institute, quantifying the immigrant contributions to our state economy. Kallick was its chief author.

Here are a few of the findings in that report:

that immigrants in New York State are responsible for \$229 billion in economic output, accounting for 22.4 percent of the state’s total Gross Domestic Product – a share slightly larger than their 21 percent of the population. And they are represented in every facet of economic activity and at every wage level.⁸

In the downstate suburbs of Nassau, Putnam, Rockland, Suffolk and Westchester counties, immigrants comprise 18 percent of the population. And while day laborers have attracted a great deal of attention, they are actually a tiny fraction of overall immigrants – probably less than half of one percent. The occupation with the largest number of immigrants in the downstate suburbs is registered nurses. And 41 percent of all physicians and surgeons in the downstate suburbs are foreign-born, as are 28 percent of college and university

⁸ Report: Working for a Better Life: A Profile of Immigrants in the New York Economy – Fiscal Policy Institute, Monday, November 26, 2007

professors, 22 percent of accountants and auditors, and 19 percent of financial managers.⁹

In upstate New York – above Rockland and Putnam Counties, five percent of the population is foreign-born but here again, they play a disproportionate role in the economy. Twenty-percent of university professors upstate are New Americans, and immigrants make up 35 percent of all physicians and surgeons there. In the scientific fields, which factor heavily in the upstate research and development industries, immigrants make up 20 percent of computer software engineers. And an estimated 80 percent of seasonal workers who pick the crops and keep the upstate farms going are foreign-born.¹⁰

And here's another tidbit worth noting: remember those pictures of Mexican day laborers we keep seeing portrayed in the media as the scourge of upstate communities? Well, it turns out that most upstate immigrants aren't Mexican at all; 52 percent are white, another 23 percent are Asian or Pacific Islanders, and only about one in seven are Hispanic. The three most common countries of origin for immigrants in upstate New York are Canada, India and Germany; Mexico comes fourth.¹¹

And let's not forget all those foreign students who also get lumped together on the "immigrant" side of the ledger whenever the xenophobes find it convenient. Apart from the fact that they provide us with a rich reservoir of intellectual capital from which American corporations routinely siphon off the best and brightest, there is also a measurable economic benefit to their presence here. Last fall, the Institute for International Education reported that international students' net contribution to the United States economy was nearly \$14.5 billion. In New York City alone, international students contribute about \$1.5 billion a year: that's more than the Yankees, the Mets, the Rangers,

⁹ Ibid

¹⁰ Ibid

¹¹ Ibid

the Knicks and the Giants combined.¹² What's more, the lion's share of those resources come from the students' home countries, mostly from personal and family resources; fewer than a third get their financing from American sources.

Now I'd like to address two other myths that need to be dispelled as part of this reframing process in the immigration debate. The first concerns immigrants and crime, and the second concerns the issue of English proficiency.

This latest news on immigrants and crime comes from California, which, as you know, has one of the highest foreign-born populations of any state in the country. It confirms what many New Americans already know, but it is always helpful to have the empirical evidence on our side. Here's how Time Magazine reported the story just over two weeks ago:

“Despite our melting-pot roots, Americans have often been quick to blame the influx of immigrants for rising crime rates. But new research shows that immigrants are, in fact, less likely than U.S.-born Californians to commit crime. While people born abroad make up 35 percent of California's adult population, they account for only about 17 percent of the adult prison population, the report by the Public Policy Institute of California showed. Indeed, among men ages 18 to 40 – the demographic most likely to be imprisoned – those born in the U.S. were 10 times more likely than foreign-born men to be incarcerated.”¹³

The story then goes on to say (and I am quoting here directly from the text):

“The new report even bolsters claims by some academics that increased immigration makes the United States safer. A second study, released earlier this month by the Washington-based non-profit Immigration Policy Center, found that on the

¹² Study: Foreign Students Added to Economy, by Tamar Lewin – The New York Times, November 12, 2007

¹³ Immigration: No Correlation With Crime, by Kathleen Kingsbury – Time Magazine, Wednesday February 27, 2008

national level, U.S.-born men ages 18 to 39 are five times more likely to be incarcerated than their foreign-born peers...Driving these statistics, researchers believe, are the same factors that drive immigration in the first place. 'People who make the decision to come here from another country want to get ahead, establish a better life,' says Harvard sociology professor Robert Sampson. 'That dream is not something they're likely to risk by getting arrested.'"

I couldn't have said it better myself. So now to this question of English proficiency:

The nativists are particularly fond of targeting newcomers for whom English is not a first language because, they say, an inability to speak English undermines the cohesiveness of our American culture, and may even endanger the public safety. They say the children of immigrants for whom English is not the first language spoken at home, are a drain on the public treasury, because we have to provide them with bilingual teachers and textbooks, and other support services. The Hispanic community is especially targeted for this line of criticism; never mind that nearly 60 percent of all Hispanics in the United States are native-born.¹⁴

Yet, a closer examination of the facts reveals an altogether different story. As reported earlier this year by the Pew Hispanic Center, nearly all Hispanic adults born in the United States of immigrant parents report that they are fluent in English. While only a small minority of their parents describe themselves as skilled English speakers, Center surveys conducted this decade showed that fully 88 percent of the U.S.-born adult children of Hispanic immigrants report that they speak English very well, and among later generations of Hispanic adults, the figure rises to 94 percent. Reading ability in English shows a similar trend.¹⁵

In this regard, Hispanics are no different from earlier immigrant cohorts originating in non-English-speaking countries. The first generation may flounder about for a time, but

¹⁴ <http://pewresearch.org/pubs/251/419-million-and-counting>

¹⁵ English Usage Among Hispanics in the United States by Shirin Hakimzadeh and D'Vera Cohn, Pre Hispanic Center

the children are quick to develop a level of English proficiency equal to that of their native-born peers. And if we're lucky in the process, they are also able to retain some capability in the language of their parents, thereby enriching our country's linguistic and cultural diversity.

Interestingly, this targeting of newcomers as undesirable aliens for lack of English-language proficiency has a long and sordid history in these United States. Benjamin Franklin famously denounced the German immigrants of the mid-18th century as “the most stupid of their nation,” remarking that “few of their children learn English ... the signs on their streets have inscriptions in both languages [and] unless the stream of their importation could be turned, they will soon so outnumber us that all the advantages we have will not be able to preserve our language, and even our government will become precarious.”¹⁶

Similar denunciations of other immigrant groups would ensue in the decades to follow, and by the mid-to-late 19th century, other targets of anti-immigrant contempt would expand to include the Irish, the Italians, the Jews and various southern and eastern European newcomers. Consider this front-page editorial from the New York Times of August 29, 1892:

“The New Yorker who goes to the Barge Office [at Ellis Island] these days gets a good idea of the class of people now seeking homes in the United States. It needs only a glimpse to assure him that it is a most undesirable class. Ignorance and dirt are the chief characteristics of the average immigrants of today.

“...it is plain that the United States would be better off if ignorant Russian Jews and Hungarians were denied a refuge here. What can be expected in this line of citizenship from men and women who cannot even read or write the language of their native country?”¹⁷

¹⁶ Cited by Kenneth C. Davis in *The Founding Immigrants*, The New York Times, July 3, 2007

¹⁷ No Way To Stop Immigration – The New York Times, August 29, 1892

One ironic feature of the crusade against immigrants today is that its foot soldiers often include the descendants of many who themselves were considered undesirable at the time of their own arrival. But as Aviva Chomsky, professor of history at Salem State College, explains, race has played a critical role in that attitudinal transformation. In her latest book exploring some of the more misleading myths about American immigration, Chomsky writes:

“Italian, Polish and Jewish immigrants may not have identified with, or been accepted into white society when they first arrived in the United States. But they, or more often their children, assimilated by becoming ‘white’ ... and part of that assimilation into whiteness meant the adoption of white racial attitudes.”¹⁸

And as she further explains:

“When European immigrants assimilated, they joined white society in social and cultural terms. Obviously, the color of their skin did not change but the category of ‘white’ expanded from its former association with Anglo-Saxons to include these newcomers. Anglo-Saxonism was fundamentally based on the domination of Africans, Native Americans and Asians, and the institutions and ideologies of the United States reflected this reality. Assimilating into it meant accepting it and identifying with the racial inequality it entailed – ¹⁹insisting, successfully, on their place among whites.”

Increasingly, today’s immigrants are so far outside the umbrella of possible assimilation into ‘whiteness’ that our society will have no choice but to make room for a more inclusive, more mature and more expansive vision of what it means to be American. According to the latest projections of the nonpartisan Pew Research Center, sometime in the next two decades, the foreign-born population will reach 15 percent, surpassing the

¹⁸*They Take Our Jobs! And 20 Other Myths About Immigration*, by Aviva Chomsky (Beacon Press 2007)
<http://alternet.org/story/55015>

¹⁹ Ibid

peak created by the European immigration wave a century ago. By 2050, 19 percent of Americans will be foreign-born, about the same share as in Australia and Canada today.²⁰

These are the New Americans who, together with their native-born children and compatriots, will chart the course of our nation this century. We need to welcome them, not with suspicion and prejudice, but with pride and confidence in their ability to lead us into a New American Century of ever greater prosperity, security and hope.

*An edited transcript of this talk is available at:

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²⁰ *Study Foresees the Fall of an Immigration Record That Has Lasted a Century*, by Sam Roberts The New York Times, Tuesday, February 12, 2008