

Notes to Latino Voices in the U.S.: Spanish Was Always Spoken Here

Slide 4

Puerto Ricans were given US citizenship in 1917 and therefore did not face any immigration restrictions in coming to the US. The larger number of Puerto Ricans migrated to the urban centers of the Northeast between 1945 and 1960. Surplus labor conditions in the island's agricultural economy, and the rapid industrialization of the island under the US program Operation Bootstrap pushed people to migrate. Puerto Ricans were pulled to the US where they became concentrated in unskilled blue-collar manufacturing jobs. By the 1970s, light manufacturing jobs were disappearing due to the deindustrialization of the Northeast regional economy. As jobs began to move off shore, Puerto Ricans living on the mainland were disproportionately affected and many workers developed a pattern of circular migration. This meant that people were forced to move between the island and the Northeastern part of the US in order to find work or to continue to receive government provided financial assistance.

Slide 6

The incorporation of Hispanic groups into American society has been very different from the experience of earlier European immigrants. Mexicans were first incorporated into the US through the military conquest and annexation of the Southwest territories (California, Arizona, New Mexico, Colorado, and Texas) in the 1840s. However, it was the economic expansion in the US at the turn of the 20th century coupled with social instability in Mexico that induced the first significant wave of Mexican immigrants across the border and provided the cheap laborers needed for agricultural production. This migratory flow was interrupted during the economic decline of the 1930s but continued after World War II. The composition of Mexican immigration, however, was significantly changed by the post World War II period. Legal restrictions caused many Mexican workers to enter the US illegally. In contrast to the vast opportunities available to the early European immigrants who came to the US, the employment options available to Mexicans and Puerto Ricans were overwhelmingly low skilled agriculture or manufacturing jobs. The Cuban migratory flows had a strong political refugee component arising out of the Cuban Revolution in 1959 and the US government offered significant financial support to people who left Cuba. In 1966, Cubans who had lived in the US for a year were allowed to become permanent residents--a privilege never before offered to any other immigrant group. The relative wealth of the first wave of Cuban immigrants, in combination with assistance they received from the US government allowed them to quickly assume the socioeconomic characteristics of non-Hispanic white Americans rather than those of other Hispanic groups. Many Cubans seek to distinguish themselves from other Latino groups living within the US by disproportionately declaring themselves to be white on Census forms for example.

Overall, by 1970, the economic and social marginality of many Latinos residing in the US was heightened by the "new immigration" composed largely of Central Americans who began migrating as civil war and US geopolitical expansionism in areas such as Nicaragua, Guatemala and El Salvador escalated. 1980 also saw the arrival of the Marielitos, low-income Cubans who landed off the shores of Florida. In addition, there were increased border crossings by undocumented Mexicans.

Slide 7

Social historians debate this question, but there is no simple answer. However, against this backdrop of historical erasure, I will consider what may be behind the anti-Latino rhetoric heard within the US today.

Slide 8

The benefit from the tendency for Latinos to work for a very low wage of course goes to those who employ them, while the cost (in social services) is spread out over the population as a whole. That is true of many other things too. What makes the fiscal issue more difficult is the distribution of the burden. The federal government reaps much of the revenue from immigrants who work and pay employment taxes. State and local governments realize less of that benefit and have to pay more of the costs associated with low-skilled immigration—usually health care and educational expenses. The economic benefits of low-skilled immigrants are not typically going to depend on how they entered the U.S. Illegal immigrants may pay less in taxes, but they are also eligible for fewer benefits. So being illegal does not mean these immigrants have a worse fiscal impact. In fact, a low-skilled illegal immigrant can create less fiscal burden than a low-skilled legal immigrant can because the undocumented do not qualify for most benefits. The point is that, at the local level in many states, working people who compete with Latino immigrants have seen wages lowered, hours of work increased and working conditions fall below the minimum standards in the US. Some Americans see their deteriorating standard of living as a result of the increased numbers of Hispanic immigrants living in the country. Again, the problem is that the benefits of illegal immigration are enjoyed by one group the employers who hire them (and the consumers of their services) while the costs are incurred by low skilled workers and taxpayers in states where illegal immigrants reside.

Slide 10

The largely low-skilled, illegal immigrant workforce from Mexico make the border crossing because employers in the US rely on the cheap labor the undocumented represent. Undocumented workers are both afraid and unable to press for the basic protections of wage, hour and working conditions standards that are available to native US workers. There is a real economic issue here for American and undocumented immigrant labor alike, but instead of discussing the wage effects of increased competition in the low-skilled labor market and methods to set a minimum standard of pay and protection, politicians are busy stirring up nativist fears among the US population, with restrictions on immigration that no one really intends to enforce. Business interests have too much invested in keeping borders open and labor available. The wall will probably never be built because it is both impractical and expensive.

Slide 11

On talk radio and the internet, Hispanics are typecast as a burden on the American taxpayer, prone to criminality and not having “our” values. The vilification is many times baldly racist. These concerns, echoed during the great waves of migration from Europe at the turn of the 20th century, have resurfaced. This time, however, immigrants

from Latin America, Africa, the Caribbean, and Asia are the new faces of the immigration debate. Moreover, missing from the calls to make English the official language and to deport so-called “illegal aliens” is a full awareness of the history of the 500-year Spanish presence in the Americas. But Hispanics, are very much aware that “they were here before us,” and do not see themselves as foreigners. While there may be pragmatic adaptations to American laws and customs, the border with Mexico is seen as a bureaucratic line, and a porous one at that, given how many families have members on both sides. As Carlos Fuentes observed “The Hispanic world did not come to the US, the US came to the Hispanic world. It is perhaps an act of poetic justice that now the Hispanic world should return.”

Slide 12

Realistically there is a need to reduce and control the inflow of low-skilled, unauthorized workers. The number of workers involved is very large indeed (about 7.2 m out of 11 million illegal immigrants). The right to control a country’s border is recognized in international law and the US in cooperation with Mexico could develop workable solutions. Of course, there are correspondingly sizable legal and organizational hurdles regardless of whether proactive steps are taken to transform the clandestine flow of labor into a legally regulated one, or stepped up enforcement is used to confront the labor flows. The guest worker program, proposed by the current administration would produce a low-waged work force that could not vote. This is a highly undemocratic proposal and one that would do nothing to reduce the adverse effect of immigration on wages. Some argue that making the hiring of unauthorized workers a serious offense, as it is in northern Europe and Germany would be a significant step in changing the behavior of migrants and employers. Others argue that only young, healthy, well-educated English speakers should be legally allowed to migrate.

Slide 13

Undocumented immigrants are strongly committed to working in the United States and they make significant contributions to the economy. The majority of the undocumented workers work in agriculture, construction, restaurants, building maintenance, garments and private household work. Juxtaposed against the harsh realities of their lives is the fact that the undocumented workforce supports thousands of other workers in the local economy through their purchases, paying taxes which many are fearful to claim because of the INS. In general, unauthorized workers demonstrate little reliance on government benefits. However, this information has not made its way to the average American worker who is vulnerable to “divide and conquer” tactics which keep workers from seeing their common interests across ethnic/racial and language differences.

The literature suggests that the wage effects of illegal workers are largely felt by low-skilled workers without a high school education. When averaged over the whole economy the effect of undocumented workers is a small net positive (wealth of average American is increased by less than 1%). Immigration policies must acknowledge the costs arising from economic restructuring, trade liberalization and globalization and the impact these forces have had on migrant labor flows. There must be a commitment to a minimum standard of social protection in keeping with the goals of economic as well as political democracy. In particular, work-related measures such as labor protections and

standards will not be effective unless they are approached globally so as to avoid the current race to the bottom that results from countries competing through poor environmental and labor standards.

Slide 14

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