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## Immigrant Labor Demand in Comparative Perspective: The United States Past and Present

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*A resource rich but population poor nation, the US has relied on immigration to meet labor demands throughout its history, while also confronting anti-immigrant hostility. This paper reviews three eras: colonial conquest and nation building, industrialization and urbanization, and the post-industrial, neo-liberal era.*

The oft-repeated description of the US as a nation of immigrants reflects a socio-historical reality insofar as aside from the small minority of Native American people, everyone in the country is either an immigrant or the offspring of immigrants. Americans positively embraced this reality only after the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century—3 decades after the end of mass migration and prior to the beginning of a new migratory wave.

While a majority of Americans continues to view immigrants as contributing beneficially to the nation, the Trump administration revised the mission statement of US Citizenship and Immigration Services—which issues green cards and visas—by deleting the phrase describing the US as a “nation of immigrants.” Trump wears his nativism on his sleeve. This current moment reflects the tension that has always existed in US history about the presence of newcomers. On the one

hand, there are economic reasons for desiring newcomers and certain economic actors who actively work to insure their presence. On the other hand, those hostile to newcomers raise the specter of cultural erosion, complaints invariably shaped by racism. This tension between those calling for the nation to be a relatively open versus those seeking a closed society was and is evident in three distinct historical eras: (1) The Era of Colonial Conquest and Nation-Building; (2) the Era of Rapid Industrialization; and (3) the Post-Industrial, Neo-Liberal Era.

During the first era, the US was a frontier nation, a land of conquest. This entailed the systematic subjugation of Native Americans, leading to a demographic disaster for the continent’s indigenous population. Colonizers saw Native Americans as a doomed people, not as a potential element in an expanding labor force. The geopolitical dynamic involved British colonizers acquiring land held by other European colonizers, evident for example in the incorporation of Mexicans after the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo (1848). This era also set in motion new streams of migration, witnessed during the Gold Rush as the adventurers seeking their fortunes included the Chinese. The westward movement of peo-

ple was justified by the ideology of Manifest Destiny. In this movement, the offspring of the first settlers were joined by recently arrived Western European immigrants. These included land hungry farmers who were instrumental in peopling the Midwest and beyond with Europeans. Such immigrants were also there at the beginning of the birth and dramatic growth of new cities and the emergence of extractive industries such as mining.

Aristide Zolberg's (2006) argument about "a nation by design" and David Fitzgerald and David Cook-Martín's (2014) "culling the masses" illustrate the role of policy makers in shaping who among voluntary migrants got in and were capable of becoming citizens—with explicit racism determining who gets in and who does not.

Exclusion was framed in terms of race, but that being said, the policy was more open than closed, reflecting the need for labor in a resource rich but population poor nation.

The labor picture would not be complete without considering the role played in the national economy by the only involuntary migrants in the US: Africans pressed into slavery. While slavery was found throughout the original colonies, it increasing became a Southern phenomenon, based on the plantation system. Slave labor was crucial for the region's agricultural economy, based on tobacco, sugar, indigo, and especially cotton. "King Cotton" was the US's major export commodity.

The quest for labor intensified during the rapid post-Civil War industrialization of the nation, met by mass immigration over a half century period beginning around 1880.

It constituted the largest movement of people across borders in history. By 1920, immigrants constituted 15% of the total population. How did these newcomers fit into changing labor demands? Against the grain, Timothy Hatton and Jeffrey Williamson (1998) contend that immigrants did not contribute to economic development and rapid industrialization based on the claim that they did not enter into high-wage high growth occupations. Their case has been rebutted by the preponderance of other scholarship, summarized by Charles Hirschman and Elizabeth Mofgord's (2009: 5) claim that the real issue is not skill level, but what role they played in fulfilling the "demand for labor in manufacturing and other key sectors of an industrial economy." During this time period, employment in manufacturing rose from 14 to nearly 25% of the workforce.

Given that industrialization and urbanization were linked, cities grew exponentially. Old stock white Americans remained in rural areas, perhaps in part due to cultural antipa-

thies to city life. Immigrants, by contrast, accelerated the growth of cities, and by the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, it was clear that the manufacturing sector was "almost completely dependent on immigrant workers" (Hirschman and Mogford 2009: 6). There were particular niches associated with different immigrant groups. Thus, of the three largest groups, Poles were associated with steel, mining, and meatpacking, and Jews with the textile industry. Italians, by contrast were both spread more widely across manufacturing industries, but also had a significant presence in construction and "pick-and-shovel" jobs that were instrumental to the growth of cities. By the time native-born rural whites began migrating to cities, the immigrant second generation was coming of age. Migration was low in the South, which remained agrarian and which, with the institutionalization of Jim Crow succeeded in exploiting cheap black labor—slavery having been replaced by the debt peonage of the sharecropper system, aided by the role of state governments in creating penal systems that amounted to de facto slavery.

Nativist hostility intensified during the era of mass migration, resulting in the passage of the National Origins Act in 1924 that effectively put an end to it. Labor demand declined precipitously during the Great Depression, but grew again during World War II. Shortages during the 1940s were met by the migration of rural blacks to the industrial North and by the Bracero Program, a contract labor program that employed workers from Mexico and countries in the Caribbean.

A new migratory wave began after the passage of the Hart-Cellar Act in 1965. The Act dismantled the racist national origins quotas, and set up seven categories of migrants, with preference for family reunification. The assumption of lawmakers was that this would not—nor was it intended—to produce mass migration. However, immigrants came in large numbers—indeed, the last decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century witnessed the largest numerical influx of newcomers in the nation's history. This occurred during a major transformation of the economy, the dawn of neoliberalism and the hegemony of finance capital. Deindustrialization characterized the 1970s, resulting in the emergence of what became known as the "Rust Belt." Soon thereafter, the high-tech sector took off and the health-care sector grew. In short, workers were needed at the high-skilled end of the economy and at the lowest end, but gaps developed in the middle.

By the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the Baby-Boomer Generation began its exit from the labor force. There are not enough young native-born Americans to meet new demands

for workers. As with the past, part of the debate between those hostile to immigration and those supportive of it has much to do with whether immigrants are substitutes for native-born workers (“they are taking our jobs”) or are complements meeting labor shortages. The evidence points to most being complementary. A recent Brookings Institution/Partnership for a New American Economy report concluded, “Our economy is dependent on immigrant labor now and for the future” (Singer 2012). This is true at both the high-skilled and low-skilled ends of the economy. At the high-skilled end, they now represent 23% of all workers in information technology and high-tech manufacturing. At the low-skilled end—construction, food service, and agriculture—they constitute 20% of the workforce. In the accommodation and hospitality sector (hotels, restaurants), immigrants represent 31% of the workforce. In private households, they account for 49% of the workforce.

A deep recession in 2008, the worst since the Great Depression, was followed by a slow and uneven recovery. Despite the dislocations caused by the recession, the trends in the high-skilled sector indicate that demand is being met, in part due to H1-B visa overstayers. However, with a current tight labor market and with declines in undocumented immigrants and the return home of some low-skilled workers, the situation is different at that end of the economy. As the *New York Times* economics columnist Eduardo Porter (2017: B1) put it recently, the danger from low-skilled immigrants is “not having them.”

This is a reflection of a policy problem. The 1965 Act and subsequent legislation

have not done a good job of finding ways to be responsive in a nimble way to labor shortages. During the first two decades of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, legislative reform has been stymied by right-wing Republicans. Hostility rivets on the undocumented, who are perceived to be located in the low-skilled sectors of the economy. Thus, ICE targets workplaces such as meat processing plants and 7-11 stores. However, anti-immigrant animus extends to legal migrants. The result is that the symbolic politics of xenophobes—reflected in the current White House—have made rational policy making difficult if not impossible.

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Suomen Siirtolaisuusmuseon päätapahtuma kesällä on Siirtolaisjuhla, joka pidetään sunnuntaina 14.7. klo 15 alkaen Maaailman Raitilla Peräseinäjoen Kalajärvellä. Ulkosuomalaisten tervehdyksiä toivotaan perinteiseen tapaan eri puolilta maailmaa. Tilaisuus on kaikille avoin ja maksuton.

**Tervetuloa!**

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