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Working Class Immigration and the Impact on the U.S. Economy

The debate over working class immigration in the United States tends to focus on the impact these new arrivals have on the American economy. Nativists who argue that unskilled immigrants are a burden on the U.S. economy compose one side of the debate. On the other side stand supporters of immigration who claim that these immigrants are an asset. In this grand discussion, the arguments of the two opposing camps ultimately filter into one of four main issues. The first two issues are the following. First, restrictionists and supporters of immigration differ in their interpretations of the impact these unskilled immigrants have on native workers' wages and unemployment rates. In his essay, "Legal Immigration Harms American Workers," Michael Lind, a senior editor for the *New Republic*, claims that immigrants are responsible for displacing unskilled American workers. Contrary to this, in his book, *Still an Open Door?: U.S. Immigration Policy and the American Economy*, Professor Stephen Moore argues that immigrants through their purchasing power actually raise the demand for U.S. goods. In addition, he states that because immigrants create additional jobs and expand the work force, unemployment rates are the lowest in areas with high immigration rates. The second critical issue that propels the debate is whether these immigrants "pay their way." Economist George Borjas believes that immigrant tax payments do not compensate for their use of welfare and other noncash social programs. Conversely, Moore contends that in the long run immigrants and their children earn higher wages and contribute significantly to the tax base.

The next two issues in dispute are the impact unskilled immigrants have on labor-intensive industries such as agriculture and textile and their effect on natives' standard of living. Professor Leon Bouvier in *Peaceful Invasions: Immigration and Changing America* maintains that the presence of immigrants impedes the U.S. economy from being more technologically based and that the U.S. should leave low-tech industries to developing countries. However, Moore shows that immigrants provide cheap, efficient labor and save these domestic industries as well as other American jobs in related industries such as trucking, packing, and storage. The final issue in the great debate over immigration is effect that unskilled immigrants have on the standard of living of all Americans. Economist Roy Beck suggests in his essay, "The High Cost of Cheap Labor," that immigration lowers the quality of life for Americans. In contrast, Richard Rothstein, an associate at the Economic Policy Institute, argues that the large American middle class benefits from the work ethic prevalent in many unskilled immigrants.

In this essay, for each of the four main issues I intend to explain why the arguments of the pro-immigration camp discredit those made by opponents of immigration. In response to the anti-immigration camp, I will show that the immigration of unskilled workers is an asset to the U.S. economy because these immigrants fill low-paying jobs as producers, create jobs as consumers, revitalize important domestic industries, and improve the quality of life for native citizens. Thus, taking into consideration both sides of the economic arguments on unskilled immigration, I contend that immigration remains an asset to the American economy.

Impact on Native Workers' Wages and Unemployment

The first issue in this debate is the effect unskilled immigrants have on native workers and unemployment rates. The restrictionist camp believes that immigrants vigorously compete

with unskilled American workers whereas supporters contend that these immigrants create additional jobs. Let us begin with an analysis of the anti-immigration camp.

Opponents of immigration focus their argument on the perceived negative effect that immigrants have on American workers. Lind says, “According to a 1995 Bureau of Labor Statistics study, competition with immigrants has accounted for roughly half the recent decline in wages among unskilled American workers” (Lind 80). Since the recently arriving immigrants are desperate for work, they are willing to work for much lower wages than those of the established American. Furthermore, this argument goes that if American workers want to keep their job, they must accept lesser wages. This camp acknowledges that immigration raises the production of manufacturing industries, but they believe that the overall effect of an increase in production due to the lowering of wages is not the best way to achieve economic growth. Beck says, “Economic growth based on low-wage immigrant labor has the effect of reducing relative income levels” (Beck 147). As a result of immigrant cheap labor, increased unemployment rates are the unfortunate by-product. Beck comments, “On average for every hundred immigrants, approximately sixty-five [American] workers are displaced” (Beck 156). From these claims, it seems immigration hurts native wages and jobs, but supporters of immigration beg to differ.

The pro-immigration response argues that immigrants do not displace American workers; rather, as consumers they create jobs and as producers they fill jobs. First, immigrants expand the demand for goods and services through their own consumption. Moore says, “When immigrants come to the United States, they immediately raise the demand for US goods and services. They shop for food in US grocery stores; they move into apartments or homes, stimulating more demand for housing construction. All of these activities lead to more jobs for US workers” (Moore 106). This demand for goods and services has a sliding effect. That is, not

only are working class jobs such as a cashier or cook immediately created, but also there is a demand for engineers and middle class managerial jobs because of the demand in housing. These skilled jobs are filled most by American workers. Therefore, unskilled immigrants not only create blue-collar jobs, but their presence creates a demand for college-educated American workers.

Similarly, Professor John Isbister argues that immigrants benefit American workers by filling unwanted jobs in the American economy. In *The Immigration Debate: Remaking America*, Isbister says, “Immigrants often take jobs that are low-skilled, low-paid and unpleasant, jobs that would otherwise have to be filled by Americans, and this releases those Americans to rise to more attractive jobs, effectively reducing the gap in incomes among natives.” (Isbister 14) In areas of concentrated immigration, immigrants do hold the vast majority of “unpleasant” jobs such as restaurant dishwashers and agricultural field hands. However, the second part of Isbister’s comment is intriguing. How is it that Americans benefit from being “liberated” of having to take these unpleasant, low-paying jobs? The answer lies in analyzing the relationship between American high school dropout and immigrants.

Unskilled immigrants take jobs formerly filled by American high school dropouts, and as a result these Americans are forced to look elsewhere for employment. For example, from 1991-1996, 27 percent of all legal immigrants came from Mexico, the most from any single country. On average their wages were 39 percent less than wages of natives.¹ A great percentage of these unskilled workers lack sufficient knowledge of English, and consequently are limited to taking low-paying jobs which tend to be filled by unskilled Americans, namely high school dropouts. In *Immigration in a Changing Economy*, McCarthy and Vernez argue that immigrants fill jobs that were once primarily filled by native-born high school dropouts. They contend, “Whereas in

1970, immigrants filled 15 percent of the 2.6 million jobs held by high school dropouts, they filled more than 60 percent of the (lesser) 2.4 million such jobs in 1990” (McCarthy, Vernez 143). In this context, one can see how immigrants allow natives to rise to more attractive jobs. If Americans know that if they dropout out of high school, it will be more difficult to get a job; then they are provided with an incentive to not only finish high school but also pursue a college education. Therefore, the competition from immigrants motivates Americans to finish high school and to some degree seek a college education. In the long run, this tends to lessen the wage gap between Americans. However, what happens to those that cannot attend college?

The pro-immigration camp argues that the job market stretches to create additional job opportunities for those American workers who are displaced. In response to the nativists claim that higher unemployment rates are a result of cheap immigrant labor, supporters argue that the extent of displacement is greatly exaggerated. Moore says, “And so the evidence suggests that, on a nationwide basis, higher levels of immigration are associated with subsequent lower rates of unemployment—precisely the opposite of what immigrant opponents argue” (Moore 102). At face value, this argument alone seems rather unconvincing; essentially, it just contradicts the position of nativists. However, states with very high immigration rates such as California, Florida, Massachusetts, and Texas have lower than average unemployment rates.² Also, Moore says, “States such as Iowa, West Virginia, and Wyoming “had virtually no immigration, but high and rising unemployment” (Moore 102). One sees the relevance of this argument when it is placed in the context of a study from Moore and his colleagues. Moore states:

We find that an upper-bound estimate of the amount of unemployment created by an immigrant’s arrival in a local labor market is the one-time loss of 0.85 person-years of employment for a US worker over the immigrant’s working life. This is

roughly the equivalent of saying that every thirty immigrant arrivals leads to one US worker becoming permanently unemployed. (102)

The vast majority of American workers who are displaced have little difficulty finding jobs. This data suggests that those displaced are absorbed elsewhere in the economy. This is consistent with the aforementioned pro-immigration arguments that American workers have an incentive to use their advantage over many unskilled immigrants, namely their natural knowledge of English to advance to better paying jobs. The bottom line is that the displacement of native workers is minimal and the economy absorbs those few that are affected.

Thus far I have shown why unskilled immigrants are an asset to the national economy in the sense that they create job through their purchasing power and fill jobs at low-wages that would otherwise go unoccupied. Those that argue against unskilled immigration wrongly believe that immigrants cause higher unemployment rates. In fact, as studies have shown, immigration rates and unemployment rates are inversely proportional.

Do Unskilled Immigrants Pay Their Way?

Having shown that the pro-immigration camp presents a stronger case for the first issue, I will now move onto the second disputed issue. The second main issue in the profound immigration debate is whether these unskilled immigrants provide enough resources to compensate for their use of the welfare system.

The anti-immigration camp led by George Borjas, an economist from Harvard and Peter Brimelow, a senior editor for *Forbes* magazine contends that unskilled immigrants are a stress on the national economy because they use more from welfare programs than they pay in taxes. In

his essay, "Tired, Poor, on Welfare," Borjas estimates that in 1990, immigrant use of noncash programs accounts for 13 percent (\$24 billion) of the total expenditure. Borjas states that immigrants do pay a significant amount in income taxes (\$85 billion), but obviously, not all of it goes directly to cover the \$24 billion that is received from welfare programs. Rather, since 9 percent of all taxes fund welfare programs, in reality the contribution from immigrants towards welfare programs is only \$8 billion. As a result, "immigrants impose a \$16 billion annual burden on native taxpayers" (Borjas 77). To this set of numbers and assumptions, the pro-immigration camp responds with the result of another study. Michael Fix, Jeffrey Passel, and Wendy Zimmerman in their essay, "Immigrants Do Not Abuse the Welfare System," argue that the figures from Borjas are distorted because of a smaller survey size. The Current Population Survey, from which Fix, Passel, and Zimmerman draw their conclusion interviewed families and took polls over the course of 32 months. They say, "Most immigrants (94 percent in 1993 according to the Current Population Survey) do not use 'welfare' as conventionally defined" (Fix 104). Clearly a larger survey sample leads to more accurate results, therefore, a 94 percent non-welfare rate makes the pro-immigration stance quite convincing. However, Borjas believes that the main issue of whether or not immigrants pay their way does not lie in these objective figures. The anti-immigration stance stresses the physiological impact that welfare has on its recipients.

Borjas and Brimelow contend that unskilled immigrants are a stress on the national economy because welfare provides unskilled immigrants with an incentive to not work and use the government as a source of income. Borjas acknowledges that the annual amount immigrants seemingly impose on native taxpayers is trivial. Instead, he feels that it is of utmost importance to analyze the long-term effect welfare has on immigrants' morals. Borjas comments:

The raging debate over welfare in the past thirty years is not over \$22 billion. Rather, it is over the possibility that welfare slowly saps a recipient's work incentives, encourages the breakdown of the family unit, and transmits welfare dependency across generations. These are the disturbing consequences that should worry observers of the immigrant experience. (78)

This fear that immigrants come to America to abuse the welfare system is echoed in Brimelow's book, *Alien Nation: Common Sense About America's Immigration Disaster*. Brimelow says, "The conclusion is unavoidable, immigrants are assimilating into the welfare system" (Brimelow 149). However, what the anti-immigration camp fails to address is the reason why unskilled immigrants come to the United States.

While many immigrants do receive assistance from welfare programs, workers do not immigrate to America to abuse the system that is helping them. In reality unskilled immigrants bring with them an insatiable thirst for work and a genuine desire for a better life. Immigrants that are eager to work any job will not sit back and live off welfare checks. Instead, it is more likely that one will see them on street corners of large cities early in the morning looking for work. In fact, many of the children of these immigrants inherit their parents work ethic and go on to become the first in their families to attend college. They will become future professionals who will contribute significantly to the U.S. tax base. Moore cements the pro-immigration stance in saying, "But immigrants earn higher incomes, contribute more in taxes, and use less of many services the longer they have been in the United States. Immigrants' short-term costs must be balanced against increasing payoffs, though higher tax payments and earnings, in the future" (Moore 92). The crux of the pro-immigration argument is that the investment welfare makes on poor immigrants and their children pays dividends in the long-term. By only looking at the

short-run impact, the opponents of immigration fail to fairly assess the issue of whether immigrants pay their way. However, in theory this pro-immigration argument sounds great, but do poor immigrants and their U.S.-born descendants actually earn more the longer they live in America?

In order to strengthen the pro-immigration stance, I turn to Linda Chavez to show that immigrants and their children do earn more over time. In her essay, “Civic Education in a Changing Society,” Linda Chavez argues that the gap between incomes of Hispanics and natives lessens with time. Thus, immigrants and especially future generations of Hispanic-Americans do not assimilate into the welfare system but instead are integrated into the mainstream middle-class work force. Chavez justifiably believes that U.S. born Hispanics are progressing into the large middle class. She says, “The earnings of Mexican American men are now roughly 80 percent of those of non-Hispanic white men. Mexican American men earn about 93 percent of the earnings of non-Hispanic white males with comparable education” (Chavez 165). Immigrants from Mexico compose the single greatest group of immigrants from any country. Since these first-generation immigrants earn 39 percent less than natives³, this means that the children of poor immigrants are adjusting rather well in the changing economy and finding economic prosperity. If Mexican immigrants, who have the largest wage difference between immigrant group and natives, can progress economically; then it is not a big assumption that most if not all other unskilled immigrants can achieve similar results. Furthermore, the time between the wide gap in earnings and relative economic equality is roughly only one generation. This critical analysis shows that immigrants that are on welfare do *not* remain dependent on the system for long. Instead, in the long-run their earnings increase and consequently so do their income tax payments. This is precisely when immigrants start having a high economic return. For this

reason, unskilled immigrants are not a burden on native taxpayers; conversely, they are beneficial to the national economy.

Impact on Labor-intensive Industries

Opponents of unskilled immigration argue that immigrants keep the economy stuck in labor-intensive industries whereas it should be focusing on high-technologically based industries. They claim that in order to accomplish this, blue-collar industries like agriculture and textile should be moved to developing nations. Professor Leon Bouvier argues, “The entry of so many unskilled immigrations in the 1980s contradicted government research and development and tax policies to promote and sustain a high-tech economy that is competitive in the global marketplace” (Bouvier 87). According to this viewpoint, immigrants hinder the United States’ ability to compete internationally in the high-tech arena because they provide cheap labor which makes it profitable to maintain these domestic low-tech industries in the national economy. Bouvier believes that it is better to have fewer jobs at higher wages than high employment in low-tech industries. Contrary to this, Briggs contends that the United States needs these industries, and immigrants are crucial to their economic survival.

Pro-immigration Moore argues that cheap and efficient immigrant labor not only directly saves important domestic industries namely agriculture and textile, but also indirectly saves related jobs in other industries. For example, in California immigrants make up 75 percent of the work force in textile mills and apparel warehouses. Also, in agriculture unskilled immigrants compose 61 percent of the total workers.⁴ Clearly, immigrants are a valuable asset in agriculture and garment manufacturing, but they also help related industries. Losing these industries to

overseas competitors would cause severe unemployment in packaging, trucking, and middle-level managing. Moore says:

They [Muller and Espenshade study] estimate that if it were not for Mexican immigration, 53,000 production jobs and 12,000 management jobs would have disappeared in the manufacturing sector. This loss of jobs would have had a further contractionary effect on the overall Los Angeles economy, causing 25,000 more incidental jobs to be lost. (107)

A significant amount of these jobs, especially in management are held by non-immigrant workers. These laid-off American workers would then either go on welfare or crowd other jobs. As a result, the national economy is weakened by increased unemployment. Contrary to what the anti-immigration camp says, immigrants benefit the economy by retaining these “low-tech industries” and saving thousand of jobs for native workers.

Impact on Natives’ Standard of Living

The fourth and last main topic for discussion in the debate over immigration is whether unskilled immigrants have a positive or negative effect on the American standard of living. Opponent of immigration Beck believes that immigrants adversely affect the American quality of life in intangibles ways. In contrast, Richard Rothstein argues that the large American middle class benefits from immigrant labor.

Economist Beck says, “My journalistic research in local communities finds that high immigration tends to lengthen the time it takes people to travel to work; it tends to increase air pollution, and to change the ambiance and lifestyle of a community” (Beck 146). How does

Beck make such a leap as to blame immigrants for the longer commute to work? A great number of poor immigrants especially in large cities rely on public transportation to get to work, thus they do not add to the congested freeways that Beck seems to be referring to. Concerning the ambiance and lifestyle of a community, most of the immigrants from Latin America which constitute 49 percent of all immigrants from 1991-1996⁵ are very family-oriented and do not erode the lifestyle of a community. Most poor immigrants come to the United States with the sole focus of improving their economic status and having a chance at a better life. For the most part, these immigrants do not directly or indirectly discomfort natives. In response to this anti-immigration stance, a fairer analysis is one Richard Rothstein offers in which he argues that immigrants improve the quality of life for America's middle class.

In his essay, "Immigration Dilemmas," Richard Rothstein believes that the necessity of unskilled immigrants forces them to take low-paying jobs, and in the process all Americans benefit. Rothstein says, "Immigrant wages for housecleaning, lawn mowing, child care, and even car washing make work outside the home feasible for people who could otherwise not afford it" (Rothstein 58). Not only do immigrants provide these services for relatively low wages, they generally do an excellent job since customers would not continue their services if they did not. Any middle class homeowner enjoys a great landscaping job, and any parent can appreciate a caring, affordable child caretaker. By providing quality service at low wages, these immigrants are improving the quality of life of their American employers.

Immigrants also benefit American consumers indirectly by keeping the prices of necessary goods stable. One of the intangibles that unskilled immigrants bring with them is their work ethic. They are willing to work long hours at arduous manual jobs for low incomes. Having this source of cheap labor, companies can compete with imports. An example of a

relationship between migrant worker and consumer is seen in agriculture. Since companies keep their production cost stable because of cheap labor, they can afford to sell their products at prices consumers are willing to pay. This is one of the main keys to preventing inflation. Stable prices increase the average output per capita which quite simply expands the national economy. In this sense, immigrants serve a dual beneficial purpose. They help expand the economy on the macroeconomic level at the same time their cheap services benefit their American recipients. This economic relationship between immigrant workers and American consumers improves the quality of life for Americans.

Overall, Rothstein makes a more practical and realistic argument whereas it appears that Beck is scapegoating immigrants for local problems. Beck makes unfounded connections between poor immigrants and environmental problems. One cannot single out immigrants when addressing the problem of air pollution or increased road traffic. Rothstein addresses the mutualistic relationship between immigrants and the American consumer in which Americans benefit. Additionally, by critically applying his arguments to economic principles, it is evident that immigrants help expand the national economy.

Opportunity towards Economic Prosperity—Acción

Thus far I have shown why working class immigration is an asset to the national economy. However, in order for these immigrants to fully integrate into the American society, more inclusive measures need to be taken to ensure that they can continue to climb the economic ladder to prosperity. Throughout most of the restaurants in areas where there is a significant percentage of Latino workers such as the Southwest, large urban centers in the Midwest, and in

big cities in the Eastern seaboard, Latinos dominate the workforce. Other Latino-dominated industries are agriculture, construction, and textiles; and as I have shown in this paper, working class immigrants (predominantly Latino) composed the majority of the workforce in these industries. The main problem is that while the great majority of the workforce in these industries is Latino, mostly first or second generation immigrants, the ownership remains non-Latino (mostly white). One of the best programs that provides these working class immigrants with the means to work their way out of poverty is Acción.

Acción is an international microlending program that provides poor women and men with capital to start their own business. Their borrowing rates are fair and give the borrowers an opportunity to profit from their skills. Most if not all of the Acción recipients would not qualify for a commercial business loan because of their little, if any credit, lack of collateral or little business assets. In addition, since Acción loans in the U.S. are as low as \$500, these loans provide much needed assistance whereas commercial banks do not. The commercial banks' opportunity cost of administering these loans is high enough to deter them from attempting to help out this marginalized group of aspiring poor. In the United States, Acción borrowers are 86 percent minority and 75 percent Spanish-speaking. Also, they often have business assets of less than \$5,000 and their "microbusinesses" often provide more than 50 percent of their family income. Another option of Acción lending is step-loans. The first loan can range from \$500-\$1500 and are usually paid back in 9 to 24 months. After the complete payback of the first loan, the applicant can apply for larger loans at a lower interest rate.

Another distinctive feature of Acción is that the loan approval board is composed of local community members. Those making the decision whether to grant a loan have a direct interest in seeing a revitalized community. Often times, Acción loan administrators rely on "gut

instincts”. That is, they grant the loan even if the credit rating or lack there of is poor and would disqualify that applicant from getting a commercial bank loan. The administrators rely on the person’s reputation of character to make the decision. Since these administrators are community members, often times they know the person or know others who can vouch for the applicant. The intangibles—that is, commitment to making the business a success, desire, and reputation from friends or customers—are taken into consideration when review a loan application. The applicant’s credit rating can be overlooked if there is sufficient faith that the administrator will pay back the loan.

Having a source of capital to start a business is a great way to help poor Latinos, either direct immigrants or descendents of immigrants, and in doing so, help revitalize poor communities. Programs like Acción also serve as an alternative to welfare; it helps poor immigrants who have the willingness to work hard with an opportunity to take advantage of a good business idea. While it is unrealistic to expect all poor, working class immigrants to achieve economic prosperity via microloans, Acción nonetheless is a great way to close the gap between the American middle class and the working class immigrants. As the first part of this paper has shown, immigrants are an asset to the U.S. economy and as a result, improve the well-being of all Americans. However, in keeping with the “American Dream”, these immigrants should have the opportunity to improve their economic status and programs like Acción are a great way to go about this.

Conclusion

For each separate issue in the debate over unskilled immigration, I have shown that the pro-immigration camp provides the stronger argument. For the first issue, while opponents of immigration claim that immigrants cause high unemployment by displacing native workers, in actuality, immigrants create additional jobs, and the job market stretches to accommodate those that did get temporarily laid-off. As for the second issue of whether immigrants “pay their way,” I affirmed the pro-immigration stance by providing a cost-benefit analysis of welfare with respect to time. This *long-run* earning potential model which shows that immigrants tend to earn higher incomes the longer they have been in the U.S. discredits any analysis that immigrants impose a burden on native taxpayers. The third issue focused on labor-intensive industries. These “low-tech” industries cannot be regarded without mention of their dependent industries. That is, immigrants not only save these labor-intensive industries such as agriculture and textile, but they also indirectly save thousands of jobs in related industries. For the fourth main topic of discourse, the pro-immigration arguments endure the accusations of opponents which claim that immigrants adversely affect Americans’ quality of life. It does not matter from what economic angle the pro-immigration camp is attacked; it withstands any threats and shows why unskilled immigration is an asset to the U.S. economy. Lastly, programs like Acción by providing microloans to poor, mostly minority Spanish-speaking men and women help bridge the economic gap between first and second generation immigrants and middle class America.

Notes

1. Borjas, George J., Heaven's Door: Immigration Policy and the American Economy. (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1999), 42.
2. Briggs, Vernon M., and Moore, Stephen, Still an Open Door?: U.S. Immigration Policy and the American Economy. (Washington D.C., American UP, 1994), 102.
3. [same as note 1.]
4. McCarthy, Kevin F. and Vernez, Georges, Immigration in a Changing Economy: California's Experience. (Santa Monica: RAND, 1997), 155
5. [same as note 1.]

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