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### Radicalizing the Immigrant Debate in the United States: A Call for Open Borders and Global Human Rights

Antonia Darder<sup>a</sup>

<sup>a</sup> University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

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## COMMENTARY

# Radicalizing the Immigrant Debate in the United States: A Call for Open Borders and Global Human Rights

Antonia Darder  
*University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign*

For what was once hailed as a human right is now opposed as an economic liability. Our governments are trapped in a morally warped and ideologically unsustainable paradigm. They applaud the free movement of capital; while they abhor the free movement of labor.

*Human Rights Watch*<sup>1</sup>

When you say "America" you refer to the territory stretching between the icecaps of the two poles. So to hell with your barriers and frontier guards!

*Diego Rivera*<sup>2</sup>

The US border with Mexico constitutes one of the most bloody and contentious geopolitical arenas in the world. Since its inception in 1948, increasing violence and conflict, varying in nature according to political and economic pressures, has plagued the border.<sup>3</sup> In the last decade, active campaigns for the militarization of the border by both official border patrol agents and border vigilantes have prevailed. Many of the names of some these campaigns—*Operation Rio Grande* at the Brownsville-Matamoros border, *Operation Hold the Line* at the El Paso-Juarez border, and *Operation Gatekeepers* and the *Minuteman Project* at the San Diego-Tijuana border—attest to the war-like mentality.<sup>4</sup>

In the midst of this intensification of border security, there are now an estimated 12 million undocumented immigrants in the United States. Of those unable to enter successfully, 3,000 have died in the last five years. The unsolved murders of almost 400 young *maquiladora* workers in the border cities of Juarez and Chihuahua are considered by some to be directly linked to the ongoing contested border politics of the region.<sup>5</sup> Over a thousand would-be immigrants

<sup>1</sup> Human Rights Watch, <<http://www.hrw.org>>.

<sup>2</sup> Cited in Mike Davis, *Magical Urbanism: Latinos Reinvent the U.S. City* (New York: Verso, 2001).

<sup>3</sup> Roberto Delgado Hernández, "Violence, Subalternity, and El Corrido Along the U.S.-Mexico Border", *The Berkeley McNair Research Journal* 8 (Winter 2000).

<sup>4</sup> Lee Siu Hin, "Violence, Killing, Life and Rape on the U.S.-Mexico Border: Can a Conscience Human Being Ignore the Facts?" Human Rights Watch, June 1998, <<http://www.change-links.org/Violence.html>> .

<sup>5</sup> Jessica Livingstone, "Murder in Juarez: Gender, Sexual Violence, and the Global Assembly Line", *Frontiers: A Journal of Womens Studies*, 25:1 (2004), pp. 59–76.

are deported or detained each month—a number that actually tripled in the last year, despite the raging national debate on immigration. The US Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS), under the auspices of the Department of Homeland Security, has in custody more than 15,000 detainees in detention centers and jails across the country.

The same anti-immigrant sentiments that have historically fueled US-Mexico border conflicts are also brewing in Washington today, where the contentious debate on US immigration reform threatens to become the most important national issue of the 2008 presidential campaign. Over the last year, Congress Democrats and Republicans have debated furiously over the best approach to address the issue of “illegal immigration.” In May 2007, the debate resulted in the introduction of numerous measures to intensify enforcement of anti-immigrant policies, including a “compromise bill” touted to ease the path toward legalization for many immigrants. However, immigrant rights groups vehemently protested proposed legislation, which is expected to turn as many as 12 million immigrants into “guest workers” and dissolve family reunification laws, creating greater hardship for undocumented immigrant families.

Such policies and practices surrounding immigration blatantly reflect an ideologically unsustainable paradigm. Thus, I wish to argue for the need to transform the US immigration debate from one that primarily demonizes and criminalizes Mexicans as violent smugglers of drugs and people to one that forthrightly focuses on the underlying forces of capital that thwart global sustainability. Hence, this essay seeks to link issues of local concern with the historical phenomenon of migration and capital. By doing so, local immigration debates can more effectively create the political space for discussing questions of education, youth unemployment, labor abuses, housing shortages, transportation needs, police abuses, and social tensions related to immigrant communities, beyond nativist notions that position immigrants as *the problem* to be solved.

This, of course, does not mean that we should be blind to the particular problems faced daily by immigrants or the difficulties experienced by those living in previously homogeneous communities who are unprepared to negotiate the local conditions that result from US economic folly abroad. So, yes, local communities must work together with new immigrant residents to address the class conflicts associated with immigrant life and labor in the United States. There is a need to jettison stereotypical attitudes and ignorance of immigrant populations. It requires negotiating differences in culture, aesthetics, uses of space, and tolerance for more intimate living arrangements. In addition, class issues, camouflaged behind a discourse of racialization, must be weeded out and transformed.

The realities of the changing economy in many cities and rural communities must be renegotiated. Downtown areas that once were abandoned have taken on new life in the presence of immigrant residents. New enclaves of immigrants have developed and new businesses inspired by immigrant consumer patterns have begun to be frequented by the larger community. Often these factors stimulate tremendous economic revitalization in blighted communities, but are generally ignored or even maligned in mainstream immigration debates.

But other factors are also ignored. For example, with almost 12 million undocumented people in the United States, how can we, by any stretch of the imagination, speak about immigration as an aberration? Instead what seems clear here is that immigration is a necessity of the system. It results from the policies and

practices tied to the current political economy—including the culture of business and government—and the economic imperatives of the nation state. We must speak to what exists in this country as an exploitive de facto guest worker system, integral to the US wage-labor system. And as de facto guest workers, undocumented immigrants labor without equal rights, labor without representation, subsist on meager wages, suffer medical neglect, are consistently subjected to oppressive institutional conditions, and are denied *carte blanche* the recognition of the important economic role they play in this society. Meanwhile, the differences in the conditions between men and women immigrants are generally overlooked, while the emotional needs of families living in exile do not even make it on the radar screen.

Yet immigrants from Mexico, Latin America, and the Caribbean continue to make the arduous journey northward seeking a better quality of life for themselves and their families. Their trek northward is the most logical response to the global structures of inequality. They move from geographical regions where wealth concentrations are low to the empire of capital—the USA—where concentrations of capital are high and density is still low by many world standards. They move to the region of the world that has the highest consumption rate of all industrialized nations. Hence, what cannot be denied is that the decision to emigrate is overwhelmingly one of economics.<sup>6</sup>

Nevertheless, the aspiration for survival and a better quality of life—oftentimes cited by immigration advocates and neoconservative alike—is not the root cause of immigration. For people have been on the move since the beginning of time and had it not been for this phenomenon, with its economic imperatives and the dispossession of lands from Native American nations, the United States would not exist today. Thus, the politics of immigration has always been tied to the prevailing politics of capital accumulation. For example, since 2001 the United States has effectively capitalized on the tragedy of September 11<sup>7</sup> to exacerbate hostilities against those perceived as outsiders and step up the regulation and monitoring of the movement of people on US territory. Moreover, conflicting and contradictory national efforts, which “on one hand, advocate for the open and unrestricted movement of commerce, trade, finance capital, technology and ideas; and on the other, [install] deeply isolationist policies to restrict the movement of people and workers across its borders,”<sup>8</sup> function to intensify the anti-immigrant debate. As the Iraq situation has become more and more volatile, the media’s anti-immigrant fervor has been heightened, obscuring more important reasons for the current economic instability.<sup>9</sup>

Yet, despite the intensification of anti-immigrant backlash, millions of immigrants and their supporters took to the streets during Spring 2006 to

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<sup>6</sup> See Stephen Castles, “International Migration at the Beginning of the Twenty-first Century: Global Trends and Issues,” *International Social Science Journal* 52:3 (2000), pp. 269–281, for a discussion of definitions and causes of migration.

<sup>7</sup> On September 11, 2001, the twin towers of the World Trade Center in New York City were destroyed when two passenger airliners were hijacked and diverted to crash into each tower. The September 11 attacks generated xenophobic and anti-immigrant violence in some US communities.

<sup>8</sup> See Saskia Sassen, “The De Facto Transnationalizing of Immigration Policy” in *Challenge to the Nation-State* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), pp. 49–86.

<sup>9</sup> A. Darder and R. Torres, *After Race: Racism After Multiculturalism* (New York: NYU Press, 2004).

effectively protest against the Sensenbrenner bill.<sup>10</sup> Key provisions of this

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<sup>10</sup>The Border Protection, Anti-terrorism, and Illegal Immigration Control Act of 2005 (H.R. 4437)—or the Sensenbrenner bill, after its sponsor, Wisconsin Republican, Jim Sensenbrenner—was passed by the House of Representatives and includes the following provisions (see < <http://thomas.loc.gov/cgi-bin/bdquery/z?d109:h.r.04437> >):

- Requires up to 700 miles (1,120 km) of fence along the US-Mexican border at points with the highest number of illegal border crossings (House Amendment 648, authored by Duncan Hunter (R-CA52)).
- Requires the federal government to take custody of undocumented aliens detained by local authorities. This would end the practice of “catch and release,” where federal officials sometimes instruct local law enforcement to release detained undocumented aliens because resources to prosecute them are not available. It also reimburses local agencies in the 29 counties along the border for costs related to detaining undocumented aliens (Section 607).
- Mandates employers to verify workers’ legal status through electronic means, phased in over several years. Also requires reports to be sent to Congress one and two years after implementation to ensure that it is being used (Title VII).
- Eliminates the Diversity Immigrant Visa (also known as *Green Card Lottery*) program (House Amendment 650, authored by Bob Goodlatte).
- Prohibits grants to federal, state, or local government agencies that enact or maintain a sanctuary policy (House Amendment 659, authored by Thomas Tancredo, withdrawn December 16, 2005, by unanimous consent).
- Incorporates satellite communications among immigration enforcement officials (House Amendment 638, authored by John Carter).
- Requires all US Border Patrol uniforms to be made in the United States to avoid forgeries (House Amendment 641, authored by Rick Renzi).
- Institutes a timeline for deployment of US-VISIT to all land-based checkpoints (House Amendment 642, authored by Michael N. Castle).
- Requires the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) to report to Congress on the number of Other Than Mexicans (OTMs) apprehended and deported and the number of those from states that sponsor terrorism (Section 401).
- Formalizes congressional condemnation of rapes by smugglers along the border and urges Mexico to take immediate action to prevent them (House Amendment 647, authored by Ginny Brown-Waite).
- Requires all undocumented aliens, before being deported, to pay a fine of \$3,000 if they agree to leave voluntarily but do not adhere to the terms of their agreement. The grace period for voluntary departure is shortened to 60 days.
- Requires DHS to conduct a study on the potential for border fencing on the US-Canada border.
- Sets the minimum sentence for fraudulent documents at 10 years, fines, or both, with tougher sentencing in cases of aiding drug trafficking and terrorism.
- Establishes a Fraudulent Documents Center within DHS.
- Increases penalties for aggravated felonies and various frauds, including marriage fraud and document fraud.
- Establishes an 18-month deadline for DHS to control the border, with a progress report due one year after enactment of the legislation.
- Requires criminal record, terrorist watch list clearance, and fraudulent document checks for any illegal immigrant before being granted legal immigration status.
- Reimburses states for aiding in immigration enforcement.

broad-reaching legislation call for the building of 700 miles of walls and fences along the US-Mexico border; call for the mandatory federal custody of illegal aliens detained by local authorities; and make mandatory employer verification of legal status of workers through electronic means. In addition, the bill criminalizes as a felony anyone remaining in the United States without proper documentation, as well as those who provide assistance to undocumented immigrants.

During summer 2006, the action of Elvira Arrellano became an important symbol of immigrant resistance against the inhumanity of both federal and local anti-immigrant policies and practices. Arrellano, seeking to resist her deportation, took refuge in a Chicago church so she could remain in the country with her seven-year-old son, Saul, who is a US citizen. Her action powerfully defied the powers of the Department of Homeland Security combined. Her courageous act of resistance helped to put a human face on national immigration debates. In fact, in November 2006, Saul addressed the Mexican Congress pleading for help in stopping the deportation of his mother. As a result, the Mexican government passed a resolution against deportations, appealing to humanitarian principles of family cohesion. Yet despite this action, the Mexican government is as much responsible for the reasons that Mexican citizens find little recourse for their lives than to an existence as undocumented immigrants.

### Challenging Nativism in the Face of Poverty

People hunger for modernity and they gamble. Knowing full well that the odds are stacked against them ... they move ... if they sense there is even a small chance of advancement and a new life.

*Mike Davis*<sup>11</sup>

A long history of impoverished people on the move calls into question nativist condemnations of neoconservatives like Samuel P. Huntington who bemoan the *cultural wars* and the *clash of civilization*. He argues:

The persistent inflow of Hispanic immigrants threatens to divide United States into two peoples, two cultures, and two languages. Unlike past immigrants groups, Mexican and other Latinos have not assimilated into mainstream U.S. culture,

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*Footnote 10 continued*

- Causes housing of a removed alien to become a felony and sets the minimum prison sentence to three years.
- Allows deportation of any undocumented alien convicted of driving under the influence (DUI).
- Adds human trafficking and human smuggling to the money-laundering statute.
- Increases penalties for employing undocumented workers to \$7,500 for first-time offenses, \$15,000 for second offenses, and \$40,000 for all subsequent offenses.
- Prohibits accepting immigrants from any country which delays or refuses to accept its citizens who are deported from the United States (Section 404).

<sup>11</sup> "Mike Davis on a Planet of Slums," *Socialist Worker*, June 24, 2006, <[http://www.socialistworker.co.uk/article.php?article\\_id=9073](http://www.socialistworker.co.uk/article.php?article_id=9073)> .

forming instead their own political and linguistic enclaves—from Los Angeles to Miami—and rejecting the Anglo protestant values that built the American dream. The United States ignores this challenge at its peril.<sup>12</sup>

In this alarmist attack of Latino immigration, Huntington invokes racialized images of despicably deficient Latino immigrants who defy democratic values, are responsible for lowering US wages, harbor contempt for US culture, and stubbornly insist on retaining their culture and language. The danger of such ruthless anti-immigrant rhetoric is that it functions to not only distort the relevance of necessary debates, but unfortunately also makes its way into the arena of public policy, where restrictive immigration policies in the name of sustainability camouflage a deeply entrenched egoistic defense of privilege.<sup>13</sup>

This was most recently apparent when the city council of Farmers Branch, a town located just north of Dallas, Texas, unanimously approved some of the most daunting anti-immigrant measures in the nation, first in November 2006, requiring all property owners and employers to report illegal immigrants, then again in May 2007, passing the first ordinance in the nation barring undocumented immigrants from renting apartments.<sup>14</sup> The Farmers Branch proposal followed similar legislation passed in Escondido, California, and Hazleton, Pennsylvania, to fine property owners who rent to illegal immigrants, deny business permits to companies that employ or do business with undocumented workers, and require tenants to register and pay for rental permits.<sup>15</sup>

Almost as problematic are the rhetorical responses of some Latino officials and national publications—responses that lacked the depth of analysis to counter the obstructive vitriolic of anti-immigrant backlash. Typical responses of such publications as *Hispanic Business*, for example, assert that “The majority of immigrants arrive in the United States in search of the *American Dream*.”<sup>16</sup> In concert, the publication has gone to great lengths to showcase the entrepreneurial qualities of Latino immigrants, along with their contribution to the economy.<sup>17</sup> Unfortunately, these responses to the anti-immigrant backlash degenerate into superficial and defensive posturing, which fails to interrogate the political economy of migration and its roots in imperialism.

<sup>12</sup> Samuel P. Huntington, “The Hispanic Challenge,” *Foreign Policy*, March/April 2004.

<sup>13</sup> I. Røpke, “Migration and Sustainability—Compatibility or Contradictory,” *Ecological Economics* 59:2 (2006), pp. 191–194.

<sup>14</sup> See Jim Lane, “Unbridled Anti-immigrant Racism in Texas,” *People’s Weekly World*, 2006, <<http://www.pww.org/article/view/10161>> and Stephanie Sandoval, “FB Immigration Law Wins Easily,” *Dallas News*, May 13, 2007, <<http://www.dallasnews.com/sharedcontent/dws/news/politics/local/stories/051307dnmetfarmersbranch.621241fe.html>> .

<sup>15</sup> In several cases where challenges have been brought against local ordinances, the courts have found that the cities had over-reached when trying to pass a law that is preempted by federal immigration laws, and agreed to temporarily block their implementation. Nearly 20 of the laws that have passed have been tabled or defeated. In December 2006, the city of Escondido, California, agreed to a permanent injunction against enforcement of its anti-immigrant ordinance. <<http://www.aclu.org/immigrants/discrim/29164prs20070322.html>> .

<sup>16</sup> See “Immigrants Gain Power,” *Hispanic Business*, May 30, 2006.

<sup>17</sup> See “Immigrants are Behind One Quarter of Startups,” *Hispanic Business*, November 15, 2006.

Hence, Mexican migration must be traced historically to imperial rule in the last century, a dynamic that predates the “globalization” debate. Implicit here is a critique of contemporary notions of globalization, such as Thomas Friedman’s celebration of globalization in *The World is Flat* or Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri’s argument in *Empire*, that classical imperialism has disappeared and along with it both powers of the nation state and the working class.<sup>18</sup> Both these views fail to prove out in today’s world and steer observers away from the salient question that must be asked: What is the underlying structural root of increasing immigration?

Both Friedman’s and Hardt and Negri’s arguments seem to dismiss or ignore the implications of the movement of people and their relationship to the accumulation of wealth, on one hand, and the global dispossession of large populations, on the other. For example, the conditions of northward migration are intimately linked to the participation of ruling elites of countries such as Mexico, which has a long historical connection to US imperial policies and practices. For over a century, the Mexican government and capitalists have partnered with the United States in pursuit of their own self-interests, while neglecting the needs of the majority of the Mexican people. For example,

in 1991, the Salinas government passed a reform law that both permitted and encouraged privatization of the *ejido* lands. Since the *ejido* provided the basis for collective security among indigenous groups, the government was, in effect, divesting itself of its responsibilities to maintain the basis for that security. This was moreover, one item within a general package of privatization moves under Salinas which dismantled social security protections in general and which had predictable and dramatic impacts upon income and wealth distribution.<sup>19</sup>

Hence it should be no surprise that many indigenous communities in opposition to these reforms joined the Zapatista rebellion in January 1994 against the Mexican government, on the very day that the NAFTA agreement went into enforcement.

However, it must be repeated that even these contributing factors predate the contemporary globalization debate and entail a long history of US capital relations with members of the Mexican ruling class, via the nation-state apparatus, irrespective of which party has been in office. Hence, immigration reforms must take into account the trends of migration tied to US economic and political interests in the southern hemisphere and the need for cheap labor to carry out dispossessing strategies of accumulation.

Another distortion in the current debate is that immigrants live at the margins of our nation’s economy. Nothing is further from the truth. In fact, immigrants are strategically integrated into the US class-wage system and exploited as cheap labor. To ignore the implications of this reality is to be duped by the ruse that somehow immigrants are extraneous to the class-wage system when they are undeniably integral to sustaining its vitality.

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<sup>18</sup> Thomas L. Friedman, *The World is Flat: A Brief History of the Twenty-first Century* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2005); Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Empire* (Boston, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001).

<sup>19</sup> David Harvey, *The New Imperialism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), p. 160.



Moreover, it is seldom noted that Huntington's lamentations—including Latino immigrant concentration in particular areas, their cultural and linguistic influence on social formations, and their impact on the economy—are the result of the very neoliberal policies he has advanced. Global neoliberal policies have led to a widening gap worldwide between rich and poor, resulting in unbridled migration to this country, not only from Latin America.

Also often ignored are the actual hardships of migration and the fact that most people would much prefer to remain in their own countries, on their own land, in familiar surroundings, providing their children and families a decent quality of life. When this possibility becomes more and more difficult, in the wake of neoliberal accumulation by dispossession, people are left little choice than to endure the hardships of staying or risk the hardships of leaving for a potentially better life. Immigrants repeatedly mourn leaving their families behind and living a life of exile in order to ensure economic subsistence. Yet US ethnocentrism, with its smug arrogance, is often at work in the criminalization of immigrants, preventing the empire's pampered citizens understanding life beyond material comforts.

Meanwhile, the increasingly unfettered movement of capital helps create the poverty that prompts economic migration from the so-called "developing" countries. Structural adjustment programs, imposed on countries by the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank in return for loans, generally lead to cuts in health, education, and welfare spending and to mass privatization, with people pushed out of their exploitable lands to serve the interests of capital. To illustrate the enormous impact of these policies on the world's disenfranchised population, consider the following facts and statistics on poverty:<sup>20</sup>

- half the world—nearly 3 billion people—live on less than \$2 a day
- the GNP (Gross National Product) of the poorest 48 nations (25% of the world's countries) is less than the wealth of the world's three richest people combined
- less than 1% of what the world spent every year on weapons was needed to put every child into school by the year 2000, but it did not happen
- the wealthiest nation on earth (the United States) has the widest gap between rich and poor of any industrialized nation
- 20% of the population in the wealthiest countries consume 86% of the world's goods
- a few hundred millionaires now own as much wealth as the world's 2.5 billion people
- approximately 790 million people in the developing world are still chronically undernourished
- a mere 12% of the world's population uses 85% of water resources
- 1.7 million children will die this year alone due to poverty.

Hence, anti-immigration reform policies must be challenged in ways that both expose and disrupt institutional practices anchored in neoliberal orthodoxy—draconian reforms that result in great metropolises of capital, expanding an economics of poverty that give rise to *global slums*.<sup>21</sup> And the building of a 700-

<sup>20</sup> See Anup Shah, "Causes of Poverty," <<http://www.globalissues.org/TradeRelated/Facts.asp>> .

<sup>21</sup> See Mike Davis, *Planet of Slums* (London: Verso, 2006).

mile border wall between the United States and Mexico<sup>22</sup> will certainly not ameliorate these conditions. For a border wall cannot contain the political mendacity, exploitive labor practices, and shameful poverty tied to the unchecked excesses of capital and efforts to safeguard capitalism from impending crisis. On another note, we cannot ignore that these are the same interests that proclaim the virtues of accountability, yet wash their hands of responsibility for the forced migration created by unrelenting policies of accumulation.

Global immigration today is inextricably tied to a historical context in which the internationalization of capital does not work to dismantle the nation state, but rather is legitimated through its apparatus. Instead of the demise of the working class, this mechanism has solidified class divisions by placing greater power in the hands of the state to regulate (or deregulate) the affairs of capital. While, simultaneously, utilizing the media and other cultural and technological means of ideological control to undermine the powers of mass protest along with the movement of people—whether that is by control of migration patterns or the mass incarceration of impoverished populations.

### Immigration and the New Imperialism

A never-ending accumulation of property must be based on a never-ending accumulation of power.

Hannah Arendt<sup>23</sup>

The difficulty in addressing the question of immigration in the United States is sifting through all the sources of misinformation and constantly shifting rhetoric. Moreover, there is a need to counter the *othering* of immigrants as “evil,” criminals, or demons who are wickedly threatening the well-being and stability—or sustainability—of the *American Dream*. To do this requires understanding that increasing immigration is not rooted in the wayward individual aspirations of *illegal immigrants*. Instead, as David Harvey argues in *The New Imperialism*, it is rooted in the:

uneven geographical conditions that arise out of the uneven patterning of natural resource endowments and locational advantages, but, more importantly, are produced by the uneven ways in which wealth and power themselves become highly concentrated in certain places by virtue of asymmetrical exchange relations.<sup>24</sup>

Moreover, for the United States to maintain its political dominance and its relentless strategies of capital accumulation, it has extended its military, political, and economic power (most notably in Iraq) to the point that the dangers of overreach are undeniable. Today’s so-called “immigration problems” constitute

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<sup>22</sup> A House bill, passed on a 239-182 vote, includes a proposal to build 700 miles of additional fence through parts of California, Arizona, New Mexico, and Texas, at a potential cost of \$7 billion. The government will also enlist military and local law enforcement to help stop illegal entrants. See Jamie Reno, “Is U.S.-Mexico Border Wall a Good Idea? Border Expert David Shirk Discusses Controversial Border Fence Legislation,” *Newsweek*, October 12, 2006.

<sup>23</sup> Hannah Arendt, *Imperialism* (New York: Harcourt Brace Janovich, 1968), p. 23.

<sup>24</sup> Harvey, *op. cit.*, p. 32.

only the tip of the iceberg of the enormous global chaos being created by ruthless forces of capital excess. Current efforts to control or “liquidate” immigrants, then, must be tied to the overreaching of US power worldwide. Hence, the threat to this nation is not increasing immigration, but the destructive impact of “accumulation by dispossession.”<sup>25</sup> This refers to the wide range of processes by which the United States has made major economic gains through:

the commodification and privatization of land and the forceful expulsion of peasant populations; the conversion of various forms of property rights (common, collective, state, etc.) into exclusive private property rights; the suppression of rights to the commons; the commodification of labour power and the suppression of alternative (indigenous) forms of production and consumption; colonial, neo-colonial, and imperial processes of appropriation of assets (including natural resources [such as water and air]); the monetization of exchange and taxation, particularly of land; the slave trade; and usury, the national debt, and ultimately the credit system as radical means of accumulation.<sup>26</sup>

Such forms of accumulation worldwide have been carried out with little regard to the destructive outcome of neoliberal policies and practices on impoverished populations. Moreover, the elimination of regulatory statutes designed to protect labor and the environment from degradation must also be seen as a loss of human rights. And the reversion of hard-won common property (i.e. state pensions, health insurance, etc.) to the private domain constitutes one of the most flagrant policies of dispossession to come out of neoliberal orthodoxy.

Unfortunately, the rogue nature of such economic imperialism is not new to the United States, despite the culture of denial that has prevailed among a large portion of the US population. In fact, Harvey argues that the United States “has a history of ruthlessness that belies its attachment to its constitution and the rule of law.” More specifically, he cites:

McCarthyism, the murder or incarceration of Black Panther leaders, the internment of Japanese in the Second World War, surveillance and infiltration of opposition groups of all kinds, and now a certain preparedness to overthrow the Bill of Rights by passing the Patriot and Homeland Security Acts. It has been even more significantly ruthless abroad in sponsoring coups in Iran, Iraq, Guatemala, Chile, and Vietnam (to name a few) in which untold thousands died. It has supported state terrorism throughout the world wherever it has been convenient. CIA and Special Forces units operate in innumerable countries. Study of this record has led to paint a portrait of the US as the greatest “rogue state” on earth.<sup>27</sup>

Xenophobic neoconservative rhetoric blatantly accuses immigrants of (1) being a drain to the economy, (2) being the cause of mass unemployment, and (3) threatening the course of “sustainable development.” Yet the real culprit is the internationalization of capital with its neoliberal solutions. For example, capitalists use technological changes and speculative investment to induce unemployment, thus creating an industrial reserve army of unemployed workers. Rather than immigrants, it is this

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<sup>25</sup> See discussion of *accumulation by dispossession* and the issues of *chronic insecurity* in Harvey, *op. cit.*, pp. 137–182.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 145.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 28, 38.

deliberate creation of unemployment that has exerted a downward pressure on wage rates, thereby creating new opportunities for profitable deployment of capital. This exploitive process of capital accumulation at the expense of workers has been responsible for stagnant and declining real wages over the last 15 years. In fact, it must be noted that this form of *othering* of both immigrants and unemployed workers has been necessary to the stabilization of capitalism.

Meanwhile, the liberalization of the market has served to produce greater levels of social and economic inequality. Within this dynamic, the “predatory” rhetoric of immigration serves to effectively camouflage capitalism’s predatory practices, which have created the impetus for increasing immigration to the centers of concentrated wealth in the United States—whether that be their movement to global cities or promising rural communities. Moreover, it cannot be left unsaid that “the State, with its monopoly of violence and definitions of legality plays a crucial role in both backing and promoting”<sup>28</sup> the predatory rhetoric of immigration.

So, the so-called “problems of immigrants” must be linked to the over-extension of political economic power abroad, which results in “chronic insecurity at home.” In response, Harvey argues, the middle classes took to the defense of territory, nation, and tradition, mobilizing the territorial logic of power to shield themselves against the alienating forces of neoliberal capitalism. The racism and nationalism that had once bound nation state and empire together re-emerged among the working class, and blaming the problems on immigrants became a convenient diversion for elite interests. As a consequence, exclusionary identity politics based on race, ethnicity, and religion again flourished.<sup>29</sup>

Moreover, the inflammatory rhetoric toward immigrants, with its focus on building a border wall, works to effectively camouflage the current vulnerability of the US economy, by deflecting attention from burgeoning corporate debt, US dependence on foreign investment inflow to cover foreign debts, and the increasing devaluation of the US dollar. Furthermore, blaming immigrants for social and economic ills puts window-dressing on the vast drain created by the turn to a permanent war economy—a desperate attempt by US interests to conserve political and economic dominance worldwide.

### The Rhetoric of Population Control

From Nazi-era eugenics to forced sterilizations, the population [control] framework is indelibly linked to colonial paternalism.

Adam Werbach<sup>30</sup>

Many anti-immigration debates are firmly anchored in a discourse of human overpopulation.<sup>31</sup> Leading anti-immigrant policy institutes, including *NumbersUSA* and *Center for Immigration Studies*, wield arguments about the negative impact of immigrants on community sustainability and resource

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 145.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 188.

<sup>30</sup> Adam Werbach, “The End of the Population Movement,” *The American Prospect*, October 2005, <[http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi\\_hb3463/is\\_200510/ai\\_n18248157](http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_hb3463/is_200510/ai_n18248157)> .

<sup>31</sup> See Christopher Hayes, “Round Population Numbers Fuel the Immigration Scare,” *The Nation*, October 24, 2006.

depletion. The environmental wing of anti-immigrant forces, which emerged from the zero-population movement of the 1960s and 1970s, includes members of such organizations as *Environment-Population Balance*, *Carrying Capacity Network*, and *Negative Population Growth*. These organizations point to immigration as the most incorrigible factor in US population growth.<sup>32</sup>

Public figures such as former governor of Colorado, Richard Lamm, co-author of *Immigration Time Bomb: The Fragmenting of America*,<sup>33</sup> suggest that “uncontrolled immigration” will be the peril of the United States if strict measures to curb immigration are not enforced. Meanwhile, anti-immigrant zero-population advocates contend that the current population of the Earth, now over six billion, is simply too many people for our planet to sustain at current consumption levels. However, this challenge for sustainability is distributed unevenly, given the fact that the so-called first world consumes over 86% of the world’s resources. But rather than move toward changing consumption and redistribution patterns, a campaign to stop population growth is their major concern. Hence, it is not surprising that aggressive population control efforts in disenfranchised communities have led to human rights violations—violations directly linked to the involuntary sterilization of Puerto Rican, African American, and Mexican immigrant women in the United States.

Xenophobic attitudes linked to population growth are also used as a rationale for the establishment and enforcement of anti-immigrant public policies. Here, the principle cause for poverty in the world is attributed to the reproductive function of poor and immigrant woman; a phenomenon I refer to as “the politics of colonized wombs.”<sup>34</sup> That is, the cause of social and economic ills among immigrants becomes defined as a question of reproductive control. The racialization and sexism inherent in this biologically determinist view of the problem also precludes, unfortunately, an examination of the predatory nature of capitalism as enumerated earlier.

More recently, for example, the reactionary reproductive rhetoric of immigration took a new spin. On November 14, 2006, a Missouri Republican-led panel on immigration asserted that abortion is partly to blame for increasing immigration, because it has caused a shortage of American workers. According to David Lieb:

The report from the House Special Committee on Immigration Reform says that liberal social welfare policies have discouraged Americans from working and have encouraged immigrants to cross the border illegally.

The statements about abortion and welfare policies, along with a recommendation to abolish income taxes in favor of sales taxes, were inserted into the immigration report by Rep. Edgar G.H. Emery (R), the panel’s chairman . . . who equates abortion to murder.

[Emery asserted that] “We hear a lot of arguments today that the reason that we can’t get serious about our borders is that we are desperate for all these workers,” he said. “You don’t have to think too long. If you kill 44 million of your potential workers, it’s not too surprising we would be desperate for workers.”

<sup>32</sup> See Tom Barry, “Immigration Debate: Politics, Ideologies of Anti-Immigration Forces,” IRC Americas Program Special Report, June 17, 2005, <<http://www.americas.irc-online.org/am/652>> .

<sup>33</sup> Richard Lamm and Gary Imhoff, *The Immigration Time Bomb: The Fragmenting of America* (New York: EP Dutton, 1985).

<sup>34</sup> A. Darder, *Forging a Puerto Rican Feminism: The Poetics of Consciousness and Embodied History* (New York: Routledge, forthcoming).

Suggestions for how to stop illegal hiring varied without any simple solution, the report states. "The lack of traditional work ethic, combined with the effects of 30 years of abortion and expanding liberal social welfare policies have produced a shortage of workers and a lack of incentive for those who can work."<sup>35</sup>

What is clear here is (1) pro-life neoconservatives are primarily concerned with life that looks like them, while calling for population control of immigrants; and (2) the long historical tradition to blame women's reproduction for the ills of the world is still alive and kicking. The misogyny of the latter view seems to trump the plethora of research and United Nations reports<sup>36</sup> that repeatedly argue that the most important factor in reducing population increase around the world is the improvement to quality of life and economic well-being of impoverished communities. Incidentally, it is also considered the quickest road to full citizenship and democratic participation in the political affairs of any society.

### Open Borders: A Radical Possibility

In all, the irrepressibility of movement seems a powerful argument against state efforts to suppress it.

Alan Dowty<sup>37</sup>

The radical possibility of open borders is in concert with a United Nations proclamation that "the right to leave or stay [is] nothing less than a right of personal self-determination."<sup>38</sup> Moreover, given the current struggles of millions of people on the move having to contend with the hostility of border enforcement and anti-immigrant views, the right to remain or return constitutes one of the major problems faced by immigrant populations. Coercive migration policies, as we are currently witnessing in the United States, place immigrant population often in harm's way.

Yet what cannot be denied is that whether in indigenous contexts around the world or the ancient civilizations of Greece and Egypt, the freedom of movement has always been seen as a natural right and a universal aspiration. In Greece, for example, the Delphi priests regarded the right of unrestricted movement as one of the four freedoms that distinguished liberty from slavery.<sup>39</sup> Moreover, the insuppressible nature of human movement alone seems to fly in the face of current coercive efforts to control immigration.

In the current hostile climate of border policy debates, the issue of immigration (entering the country) also becomes an issue of emigration (leaving the country). Often temporary undocumented immigrant workers are prevented from leaving

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<sup>35</sup> See report by David A. Lieb, *Associated Press*, November 14, 2006.

<sup>36</sup> See Röpke, *op. cit.*; United Nations, *Population, Gender and Development: A Concise Report*, ST/ESA/SER.A/193, 2001; and P. Pinstrip-Andersen and R. Pandya-Lorch (eds), *The Unfinished Agenda. Perspectives on Overcoming Hunger, Poverty, and Environmental Degradation* (Washington DC: International Food Policy Research Institute, 2001).

<sup>37</sup> Alan Dowty, *Closed Borders: The Contemporary Assault on Freedom of Movement* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987), p. 13.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 4.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 11.

given the hostile border conditions, which would require them to make another dangerous and costly journey back into the United States. Or, should they be detained at the border, this can mean the revocation for ten years of all legal rights to visit, with the threat of incarceration should one be caught attempting to cross the border during the time period. As a consequence, many workers become stuck in the United States and are forced to remain permanently, rather than solely during periods of seasonal work.

Increased surveillance and the building of a 700-mile wall at the border will only exacerbate the problems that it portends to solve. Along these lines, an *Albuquerque Tribune* editorial argued that "History has shown that border fences and walls, from the Berlin Wall to the Great Wall of China, have done little to improve relations or security between nations. That is best done not by building walls but by building trust and respect through diplomacy, economic development and common labor, environmental and social agreements."<sup>40</sup>

Stephen Castles contends that "barriers to mobility contradict the powerful forces which are leading toward greater economic and cultural interchange."<sup>41</sup> Rather than shut people out, the United States should adopt the same policy for the movement of people that it adopts for the movement of capital. Instead of archaic policing methods at the border that intensify animosities and violence, the United States should open up the borders and move toward greater economic integration with Mexico and Latin America. Such a move could potentially open opportunities to pursue investment policies that support the democratization of the economy by way of cooperative economic ventures rooted in the material and social needs of all people, rather than the narrow accumulative pursuits of transnational corporations.

Instead of blaming immigrants for the difficulties communities encounter in creating sustainable development, let's point the finger where it belongs: the ruthless neoliberal policies of privatization that have pillaged and plundered the world's resources. The historical record speaks volumes and we don't have to look very far for examples. The devastating impact of NAFTA in Mexico and the Caribbean alone (and more recently CAFTA in Central America<sup>42</sup>), where wages have fallen and people have less access than ever to the goods they produce, is a stark example. On the agricultural front, the subsequent lowering of import barriers allowed the entrance of extremely cheap imports from the highly subsidized agribusiness in the United States, driving down the prices of produce to a level that small, local agricultural producers could not rival. People who found themselves close to starvation, as a result, were forced to leave their lands and join the ranks of unemployed workers in large urban cities. This pattern of dispossession has been repeated among rural populations worldwide. And although some neoliberal analysts might point to a few exceptions of job creation or the increase flow of certain goods to support the legitimacy of their claims, the historical record belies their hypocrisy.

<sup>40</sup> "The Border Wall: Who Will Build It?", *People's Weekly World Newspaper*, November 2, 2006, <<http://www.pww.org/article/articleprint/10093>> .

<sup>41</sup> Castles, *op. cit.*, p. 279.

<sup>42</sup> See "Coalition Mourns One Year of CAFTA; Calls for Trade with Justice" and other articles on the negative impact of the Central American Free Trade Agreement at <<http://www.stopcafta.org>> .

Hence, despite neoconservative alarmist rhetoric to the contrary, some of the potential benefits of open borders might include:

- the democratization of border culture
- the increasing possibility of economic justice through mutual efforts to meet the material needs of all people
- the growth of opportunities for a more equitable distribution of wealth and increasing reciprocity of natural resources
- a more tension-free atmosphere for cultural exchange
- an expanding interaction and flow of ideas across the border
- a decrease in the social tensions and animosities reinforced by rigid “closed border” beliefs and practices
- increasing responsiveness to the welfare of both US and Mexican citizens
- stopping all punitive actions sanctioned against immigrants and their families
- ending the border abuse of immigrants and would-be immigrants
- dismantling the exploitive underground economy of border-crossing
- releasing all those who are currently incarcerated for crossing the border without documents
- and finally, creating a global citizenship that both respects cultural sovereignty and yet functions in concert with global human rights.

### **Globalizing Human Rights**

Of all human rights failures today, those in economic and social areas are by far the larger numbers and are the most widespread across the world.

*Human Rights Watch*<sup>43</sup>

Given widespread human rights failures in both economic and social arenas, what we need at this historical juncture are coherent counter-hegemonic strategies to interrupt international imperialist practices that have precipitated forced immigration to the centers of concentrated wealth. We need an ethics of sustainable development that functions at the local level, in concert with the global struggle for emancipation from the devastating impacts of the new imperialism, with its dispossession of three-quarters of the world’s population. Such a politics must be firmly grounded in both a critical analysis of the political economy of migration and the aggressive efforts toward globalizing human rights. If we were to begin with an understanding that the freedom of movement constitutes a fundamental human right, then the integration of a globalizing human rights agenda, within debates on immigration policy and reform, can be understood as a most reasonable and logical conclusion.

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<sup>43</sup> Shah, *op. cit.*



In 2003, the *Immigrant Workers Freedom Rides* campaign made four central demands that must be integrated into any globalizing human rights agenda: (1) legalization and a “road to citizenship”; (2) family reunification; (3) immigrants’ rights in the workplace; and (4) civil rights and civil liberties for all.<sup>44</sup> Thus if we were to take these four demands, we can begin to craft a preliminary global agenda of human rights for immigrants around the world. The sense that all human beings should be acknowledged as legitimate and legal subjects, irrespective of where they reside, goes without saying. Moreover, citizenship must be redefined within a global context, opening the road to the creation of societies that function in the interest of the collective global good, rather than in the interests of a few.

The issue of family reunification dramatically exposes the manner in which current neoconservative immigration policies betray the so-called *family values* of their architects. It seems that family values in this context are only legitimate if they are about white Christian US citizens. However, globalizing the right of family reunification can serve to shift the dynamics of political and economic abuses suffered by immigrants worldwide.

Globalizing worker rights for all workers, irrespective of national documentation, is a central concern that cannot be overlooked. Policies and practices that stop labor abuses of immigrant workers, as with all workers, must be forthrightly addressed within a human rights agenda. The failure to address labor issues in connection to immigrant populations is an egregious offense that places state officials in complicity with the injustice of unfair and dangerous labor practices, which dehumanize and strip workers of their dignity.

Lastly, the struggle for civil rights and civil liberties must be a central tenet of a globalizing human rights agenda. In a time when we are witnessing our civil liberties quickly eroding, political debates on immigration must be inextricably linked to the unveiling of neoliberal policies and practices and their subsequent impact on civil liberties of undocumented populations in the United States.

Closing the border cannot solve the problems attributed to immigration. The flow of immigrants is the expression of a long set of political economic arrangements that have created huge economic needs and conditions that provoke movement to the empire. To transform these conditions requires a major disruption of neoliberal policies and practices that reproduce savage inequalities along with despicable forms of human rights violations that guarantee their preservation. To counter this dehumanizing trend also calls for a bold and aggressive move toward a fundamental political commitment and solidarity with those who are weary and dispossessed by the ravages of capital. It embodies nothing less than an uncompromising commitment to become citizens of the world and join in the dismantling of neoliberal abuses that not only threaten all our lives, but the very sustainability of the planet.

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<sup>44</sup> See “The Immigrant Workers Freedom Ride,” *The Free Press Journal* 33:5 (September–October 2003), <<http://www.freepress.org/departments.php/display/20/2003/182/1/23>> ; also see report on Voices of The Immigrant Workers Freedom Ride in *New York Amsterdam News*, October 9–15, 2003. For more organizational information on The Immigrant Workers Freedom Ride, see <<http://www.iwfr.org/>>.