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# Alien Migration from Mexico: the Search for an Appropriate Theory and Policy

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Alien Migration from Mexico: The Search for an  
Appropriate Theory and Policy

by Vernon M. Briggs, Jr.\*

I. Introduction

One of the most significant developments in the labor market of the United States in the 1970's is the increasing participation of workers from foreign nations. Although the issue embraces workers from every continent, it is those from Mexico who overwhelmingly dominate the flow.

The issue of the participation of Mexican workers in the labor force of the United States is not new. The proximity of the two nations with their long common border offers accessibility. Moreover, there has historically been movement across the political boundary area. Aside from the fact that almost all of the region of the American Southwest once belonged to Mexico, the border was completely open from the time of its establishment in 1848 until 1924. Since then, entry and exit have never been especially difficult.

The importance of the current flow of Mexican workers, therefore, stems not from the newness of the issue but rather the rate of increase and the numerical magnitude of the level

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of entry that has occurred since the mid-1960's. All signs indicate that the future will witness even greater Mexican<sup>1</sup> participation.

The entry of workers from foreign nations into the American labor market occurs through three different means. These are border commuters, legal immigrants, and illegal entrants. Workers from Mexico are the most numerous users of each method. In terms of numerical importance, however, the one that dwarfs the others is the illegal entrant group. Because of the numbers of persons involved and the fact the process has become institutionalized over the years, the term alien migration will be used in this paper to describe the movement of the illegal entrants from Mexico. It will be this group alone that will be the subject of this paper.

The objective of this particular paper is not to describe or to assess the impact of this movement. Rather it is to review some of the theoretical explanations that are being offered by economists to explain the increasing participation of alien workers in the United States labor force and to evaluate critically the policy recommendations that flow from each such explanation.

## II. The Issue

Illegal aliens are entering the United States in the 1970's from almost every nation on earth. But those from Mexico are the most numerous. Of the 766,600 deportable

aliens located by the Immigration and the Naturalization Service (INS) of the U. S. Department of Justice in 1975, 680,392 persons (or 89 percent) were of Mexican origin. There is great difficulty in ascertaining the number of individuals involved since many of those apprehended were repeaters. Hence, there is an element of double (or more) counting in the official apprehension figures. On the other hand, it is acknowledged by the INS that the vast majority of illegal aliens are not caught. Hence, the total flow of illegal aliens greatly exceeds the number of aliens who were deported. Estimates by the INS are that for every 1 apprehension, 4 or 5 aliens are undetected. Also Mexican aliens frequently return home at various intervals so it is difficult to determine the exact number of individual involved. Estimates of the accumulated number of illegal aliens are, of course, open to all sorts of speculative judgements.<sup>2</sup> In 1974, for instance, the Commissioner of INS stated in his annual report to the President: "it is estimated that the number illegally in the United States totals 6 to 8 million persons and is possibly as great as 10 or 12 million."<sup>3</sup> Obviously, all of these are not Mexican aliens but the vast majority are.

More importantly, a comparative research study by David S. North and Marion Houstoun of the characteristics of illegal aliens from differing nations found that aliens from Mexico differ significantly from those from other

<sup>4</sup>  
nations. Of particular importance was the finding that the aliens from Mexico cited employment opportunities as the primary motivation for entry in 89 percent of interviews. In contrast, aliens from the Eastern Hemisphere cited employment is only 23 percent of the cases and those from other western hemispheric nations (excluding Mexico) cited it in 60 percent of the cases.<sup>5</sup> Hence, it appears that the illegal aliens from Mexico are more active in the labor market of the United States than those from other nations.

The explanation for the greater economic motivation from those aliens from Mexico rests most probably in the distinctively different characteristics of Mexican aliens from those from all other nations. In comparison, Mexican aliens were considerably younger; they are less likely to have a spouse or child with them in the United States; they had much less education; they were the least likely to speak English; they more frequently came from rural backgrounds with agricultural work histories; and they generally entered the United States by foot and without any legal documents.<sup>6</sup> The non-Mexican aliens tended to be visa abusers (i.e., they entered with legal documents as tourists, students, or on business but did not leave when their visas expired). This means that the non-Mexican aliens, by virtual definition, are from a different economic class as they had the money to cover their roundtrip transportation costs. Moreover, the North and Houston

study found that half of the illegal aliens from the Eastern Hemisphere entered the United States with student visas which usually require a secondary education and the ability to support one's self while being a student.<sup>7</sup>

The published data on illegal Mexican aliens is based entirely upon information garnered from apprehended Mexican aliens. Research efforts by scholars have not been successful in its attempts to interview scientifically non-apprehended illegal aliens despite frequent contact with them.<sup>8</sup> The research problem is that most of the apprehended Mexican aliens are caught before they have time to find employment. In 1974, for example, 62 percent of all apprehended aliens were caught within 72 hours of entry and 68 percent were not employed at the time they were apprehended.<sup>9</sup> Yet, one must recall, that those who are apprehended are only the tip of the iceberg. Most are not caught but the available research is based on those who are. The assumption must be made that the descriptive data on apprehended Mexican aliens is similar to that of those who are not. Indeed, there is no obvious reason to challenge the assumption since apprehension of Mexican aliens in the southwestern region appears to be largely random.

In the comprehensive North and Houston study, the ~~study~~ Mexican aliens who were interviewed had been in the United States for an average 2.4 years.<sup>10</sup> The data from their study which indicates the degree of occupational participation

is presented in Table 1. The largest single category was agriculture (27 percent) but all unskilled occupations (nonfarm laborers, farm laborers, service workers, and private household workers) accounted for 61.8 percent of all of Mexican alien workers.<sup>11</sup> These findings are roughly consistent with general estimates made in unpublished form by the INS that one-third of the illegal immigrants from Mexico are employed in agriculture; another third in other goods-producing industries (especially meatpacking, automobile manufacturing and construction); and one-third in service jobs.<sup>12</sup> The findings are also consistent to those of Julian Samora.<sup>13</sup>

It is a highlight of the North and Houston study that an effort was made to compare the employment patterns of the apprehended illegal aliens in the United States with their previous occupation in Mexico (see Table 1). Although there were fewer Mexican aliens employed in agriculture than had been the case when they were in Mexico, the percentage employed in unskilled occupations was approximately the same. The major shift was from being a farm laborer to being a nonfarm laborer. Table 1 also contains a column that distributes the prevailing employment patterns for all employed persons in the United States. Clearly, the pattern for Mexican aliens bears little resemblance to that of all employed persons in the U.S. economy.



TABLE 1

<u>Occupational Category</u>	<u>Previous Occupation of Illegal Aliens in Mexico</u>	<u>Occupation of Illegal in Most Recent Job in U.S.</u>	<u>Occupation of All Employed Persons in U.S., 1974</u>
Professional	1.7	0.5	14.4
Managers	.2	--	10.4
Sales Workers	3.2	0.7	6.3
Clerical Workers	1.7	--	17.5
Craft Workers	15.0	14.3	13.4
Operatives (except Transport)	8.4	21.9	12.4
Transport Operatives	4.4	0.7	3.8
Non-Farm Laborers	11.8	17.9	5.1
Farmers	0.2	--	1.9
Farm Laborers	49.1	27.0	1.6
Service Workers (except household)	2.2	13.5	11.8
Private Household Workers	<u>2.0</u>	<u>3.4</u>	<u>1.4</u>
	100.0	100.0	100.0

Source: Columns 1 and 2, David S. North and Marion Houstoun, The Characteristic and Role of Illegal Aliens in the U.S. Labor Market: An Exploratory Study (Washington, D.C.: Linton & Co., 1976), Table V-5, p. 108.

Column 3, U.S. Department of Labor, Manpower Report of the President: 1975, (Washington, D.C., U.S. Government Printing Office, 1975), Table A-15, p. 226.

### III. Theoretical Explanations for Mexican Participation in the U.S. Economy

A survey of prevailing migration theories by Robert Sayers and Thomas Weaver in search of an explanation for the migration of Mexican workers into the United States labor market concluded that it is the economic rather than the sociological theories that are the most relevant.<sup>14</sup> In particular, the "push-pull theories" were found to be the most explanative. These theories place reliance upon (1) the economic characteristics of the origin and of the destination; (2) social and demographic characteristics of the origin and destination and (3) the personal characteristics of the migrants themselves.

It is not the purpose of this section to elaborate upon the specific push-pull forces that apply to the Mexican migration case. They have been set forth elsewhere.<sup>15</sup> Rather it is to examine the evolving labor market theories that relate to the necessity and merit of continued participation of Mexican workers in the economy of the United States. The usefulness of a review of the various explanations rests with the public policy proposals that flow from each.

#### A. The Free Trade Case.

One view is that political borders are barriers that artificially allow wage differentials and employment shortages to occur and to be perpetuated by interfering with the free flow of labor.<sup>16</sup> This position accepts the fact that economic differences exist and that, in a competitive world situation,

only those differences based on efficiency should survive. The position has strong humanistic overtones which emphasize that this is one world and that public policy should promote interdependence among nations and to minimize distinctions. The position is consistent with most of the precepts of standard economic theory of free trade. Namely, the unimpeded movement of the world's economic resources ensures that economic resources will find their most rewarding and productive use and, thereby, world output will be maximized. The policy conclusions of this viewpoint accept the current mass violations of U. S. immigration laws and, in fact, argue for repeal of the laws which make the current process illegal for the participants. It is premised on the assumption that unemployment in the United States is due to money wage levels being too high relative to productivity and, if labor markets could become more competitive, unemployment would disappear as would international wage differentials based upon any factor other than efficiency.

#### B. The "Dual Labor Market" Case

A second approach is associated with the "dual labor market theory" which in recent years has attracted significant intellectual interest by labor economists in the United States.<sup>17</sup> Originally, the theory made no mention of the role of foreign workers. Rather, it spoke of the division of the American labor market into primary and secondary jobs. The former usually

containing good wages, unions job security measures, and promotion ladders whereas the latter does not. The theory sought to explain the existence and perpetuation of low wage labor markets in a generally prosperous economy.

More recently, however, efforts have been made by one of the theory's strongest advocates, Michael Piore, to extend the analysis to include illegal aliens.<sup>18</sup> In essence, the theory argues that modern industrial societies generate a need for low wage labor markets. In the past immigrant workers and then domestic workers moving from rural to urban areas were seen as filling these exploitive needs. By the late 1960's and early 1970's, it is argued, a combination of events--such as the civil rights movement, the war on poverty, the beginning of federal aid to education, and the liberalization of welfare and food stamp programs--contributed to a decline in the availability of domestic workers in the low wage labor market. As Piore writes: "Now that these domestic labor reserves have been exhausted, they are being drawn from foreign nations again, but this time not from Europe, but from Latin America and the Carribbean".<sup>19</sup> Piore's work to date has focused upon the East coast and especially upon immigrants from Puerto Rico who, of course, are not illegal aliens but are American citizens. Nonetheless, he has noted increasing numbers of illegal aliens from various Spanish speaking backgrounds who have blended themselves into the Puerto Rican communities of these eastern cities. There is only peripheral mention of Mexican immigration in his analysis.

With respect to policy, Piore does not favor a more restrictive border policy per se. Rather, he sees the process of illegal entry as inevitable and he fears greater sanctions will only drive the employment process of aliens underground. He supports greater enforcement of social legislation--minimum wage laws and payment of social security taxes--against employers but opposes sanctions against employers who hire illegal aliens. Piore does not address the policy matters that seek to stem the flow of illegal aliens into the secondary labor market. The entire analysis to date by Piore explains the alien migration solely in terms of "pull" forces--i.e., the need by some American employers for unskilled workers for low wage jobs. No recognition of "push" factors is contained in the analysis.

### C. The Pragmatic Case

The third approach denies the necessity of dependence of the American economy on illegal aliens. It does recognize and stress that aliens are used because they are available, they are exploitable, and that they work scared. Because of the potential for abuse of the aliens by unscrupulous persons and because of the adverse effects they have on wages, working conditions, and unionization efforts of citizen workers, the position advocates adoption of a more restrictive border policy.<sup>20</sup> It does recognize that there are aliens from countries other than Mexico but that Mexicans still overwhelmingly dominate the flow even if allowances are made for disproportionately heavy enforcement in the Southwest. It is

also acknowledged that there are considerable differences in the personal and economic characteristics of the aliens from Mexico as compared with those from other nations. Moreover, while Mexican aliens are moving out of their historic concentration in the Southwest labor market, the fact remains, that most Mexican aliens are still in the Southwest. The position argues that while it is true that Mexican aliens do work disproportionately in the secondary labor market, they are also a factor in making and keeping wage rates low, in keeping these jobs non-unionized, and in keeping these jobs without fringe benefits. The Mexican aliens did not create the secondary labor market but they are rapidly becoming a major factor in its perpetuation and its growth in the Southwest. By their economically depressing influence in these labor markets, they make it in self-fulfilling prophecy that domestic workers become unavailable for such jobs. The aliens will frequently work harder, be more grateful for what they receive, and be more docile in their acceptance of arbitrary treatment than will citizen workers. They make unionization almost impossible. As Samora has observed, when illegal aliens move into a labor market, the citizen worker must either work and live at the low economic level of the illegal alien worker or become unemployed or live on public welfare.<sup>21</sup> Accordingly, as the American economy is currently organized, the only hope for improving the economic situation of the citizen workers in the secondary labor market is to reduce the supply of workers

entering it. Although illegal immigrants are not the only source of workers for secondary jobs, their significance is increasing rapidly--especially in the Southwest. This position, therefore, stresses the necessity of more restrictive border policies to combat the alien migration.

But the pragmatic position is not based exclusively upon "pull forces" as an explanation for the illegal phenomena. Rather, it stresses equally the need for empirical research of both "push" and "pull" factors. In fact, a review of the "push" factors suggest that the population pressures, the extremely unequal distribution of income, and the accelerating structural changes (i.e., technological displacement of unskilled workers and the internal rural to urban migration) of the Mexican economy could be as important as the obvious "pull" factors as explanations for the quantum increases in illegal entry from Mexico since the 1960's. The importance, of course, of examining both "pull" and "push" factors rests with the relevant policy proposals. Emphasis exclusively on "pull" factors leads to recommendations for greater legal deterrence or special assimilation efforts. The addition of "push" factors lends to recognition of the importance of tariff reductions, technical assistance and development loans to help stimulate employment in Mexico in order to reduce the Hobson's Choice of illegal immigration that currently exists.

#### IV. Critique

The free trade argument supports the free movement of economic resources and discourages artificial impediments such as political borders and immigration restrictions. To begin with, it must be recognized that standard economic theory is essentially a form of social engineering in which individual differences of people and nations are minimized in the pursuit of aggregate social goals. In the real world, political boundaries shape the conditions of life within the various nation states of the world community. These borders have social, cultural, political, and economic consequences. It is largely within the confines of these boundaries that most of the crucial governmental policies that affect the quality of life for the citizens of each nation are made. Nominally there may be a world community, but the welfare of most people is dependent upon the decisions of their own government. They expect their government to safeguard and to further their interest as well as it can. Consequently, the study of political economy--as has always been the case--begins with the existence of political borders. To argue for unrestricted movement of workers in a world in which nation states exist is to argue for the abandonment of the responsibility of existing governments to protect the people they govern. If one wishes to argue for the abolishment of all nation states, one should do so and not hide under the pretext of advocacy of free trade and free movement of people. It is certainly unrealistic to assume that any one nation could adopt such a policy without



the concurrence of other nations. The prospect of such a trend is so small at this juncture of world history that the proposal hardly deserves to be discussed as it leads to no policy proposals that any responsible government could conceivably adopt.

Moreover, in conventional welfare economies, the gains of those who benefit (i.e., producers who can obtain a labor supply at lower wages than possible in the absence of illegal alien workers and consumers who are able to purchase goods and services at lower prices due to the lower wages, paid illegal aliens) would be compared to the losses of those who are adversely affected (i.e., the citizen workers who must compete with the alien workers for jobs, housing, public health services, welfare funds and private charitable funds). Theoretically, those who benefit could be taxed to compensate those who lose and society would have no problem to worry about. But this methodological approach is based upon the premise that the transfers between the gainers and losers are actually made. If the compensating payments are not forthcoming (and I know of no public policy proposal to promote such transfers), then illegal aliens are clearly harmful in their influence upon the American labor market.

As for the dual labor market position that accepts the entire development as inevitable. Rather than try to stop or to control the flow of illegal aliens into the secondary labor markets, the proponents conclude that the nation should accept the inflow and to try to minimize the assimilation problems.

The fear is expressed that greater deterrence will only drive the low wage labor market underground. The theoretical inconsistency of this position should be obvious. The way to rid the labor market of secondary jobs is not accomplished by increasing the available numbers of persons willing to take these jobs. By continuing the inflow of alien workers from Mexico to the labor market of the Southwest, it is inevitable that citizen workers can no longer be attracted to those occupations and industries. In the Southwest it is already possible to see what happens when substantial numbers of illegal aliens (and border commuters) are allowed free access to the labor market. Much of the labor market has already gone underground. There are numerous violations of the minimum wage laws and the requirements for payment of Social Security Taxes. The North and Houston study, for instance, found that 24 percent of all the illegal aliens interviewed were receiving wages below the Federal minimum wage with workers from Mexico being especially exploited.<sup>22</sup> In addition, there are even worse facets of the process than wage violations. Illegal aliens are often transported across the nation in the most unhuman manner; there is a burgeoning business in the sale of forged identification papers; and there is financial exploitation of many of these individuals by "loan sharks" who loan the money to cover the costs of transportation and of forged documents at exorbitant interest rates. In the East, the issue of illegal aliens in the labor market has only surfaced in the past few years as a

recognizable phenomenon. In the Southwest, the issue is old but its level of incidence has dramatically increased. Studies of the impact of illegal aliens in the Southwest should convince anyone that any attitude of benign neglect to such an issue as this one is hardly appropriate.

Thus, one is left with the pragmatic proposition that holds that the process of foreign workers in the United States is a result of strong "push" in their native lands; of strong "pull" factors in the form of higher wages and incomes; of available employers who are willing to tap this new source of cheap labor; and of an extraordinarily tolerant immigration policy by the United States that places no penalties on employers of illegal aliens, that grants "voluntary departures with no punishment to 95 percent of all apprehended persons; and which has an enforcement agency, whose size and budget is minute relative to its assigned duties.

There may be some short run benefits that accrue to some private employers by the exploitation of the alien workers. But in the long-run, the presence of a growing number of workers who are denied political rights as well as minimum legal and job protections; who often live at a survival level and under the constant fear of being detected; who work in the most competitive and least unionized sectors of the economy; and who are often victimized by criminal elements is a prescription for eventual trouble. Over the nearly two centuries of its existence, the

United States has developed numerous laws, programs, and institutions that have sought to reduce the magnitude of human cruelty and the incidence of economic uncertainty for most of its citizens. For illegal alien workers, however, these benefits are virtually nonexistent. It would be self-deception to believe that this situation can continue to mount at the current growth rate without eventual dire consequence to all parties concerned.

## FOOTNOTES

1. For a more detailed discussion of the causitive factors of the migration see Vernon M. Briggs, Jr., Mexican Migration and the U. S. Labor Market. Studies in Human Resource Development Series, Monograph No. 3, (Austin, Texas: Center for Study of Human Resources and Bureau of Business Research, 1975), Chapter 4.
2. For a discussion of the data problems see Vernon M. Briggs, Jr., "Illegal Immigration and the American Labor Force: The Use of 'Soft' Data for Analysis", American Behavioral Scientist (January 1976), pp. 351-363.
3. U. S. Department of Justice 1974 Annual Report: Immigration and Naturalization Service (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1974), p. iii.
4. David S. North and Marion F. Houstoun, The Characteristics and Role of Illegal Aliens in the U.S. Labor Market: An Exploratory Study (Washington: Linton & Company Inc., 1976).
5. Ibid., pp. S-4.
6. Ibid., pp. S-4 to S-8.
7. Ibid., p. S-15.
8. E.g., see Julian Samora, Los Mojados: The Wetback Story (Notre Dame, Indiana: Notre Dame Press, 1971) pp. 60-69.
9. North and Houstoun, op. cit., p. 34 [they cite as their source both published and unpublished data supplied by the Immigration and Naturalization Service.].
10. Ibid., p. 96.
11. Ibid., p. 108.
12. Robert F. Mathieson, "Influx of Illegal Aliens and the Unemployment Rate", in Houston Chronicle, 3 Jan. 1975, Section 1, p. 13.
13. Samora, op. cit., Chapter VI.
14. Robert Sayers and Thomas Weaver, "Explanations and Theories of Migration" in Mexican Migration (edited by Thomas Weaver and Theodore E. Downing), (Tuscon, Arizona: Bureau of Ethnic Research of the University of Arizona, 1976), Chapter II.

15. Briggs, op. cit.; also see Vernon M. Briggs, Jr., The Migration of Mexican Nationals into the United States: A Mounting Issue for the 1970's", in International Conference on Migrant Workers (edited by Ayse Kudat and Yilmaz Ozkan), (Berlin: International Institute for Comparative Social Studies, 1975), pp. 142-176.
16. Wendell Gordon, "A Case for a Less Restrictive Border Policy", Social Science Quarterly, (December 1975), pp. 485-491.
17. Peter B. Doeringer and Michael Piore, Internal Labor Markets & Manpower Analysis (Lexington, Mass.: D.C. Heath Company, 1971), Chapter 8.
18. Michael J. Piore, "Perspective on Planning and Policy for the 'New Immigration' in the United States" in International Conference on Migrant Workers, op. cit., pp. 177-194; and Michael J. Piore, "The New Immigration and the Presumption of Social Policy", Proceedings of the 27th Annual Winter Meetings of the Industrial Relations Research Association, (Madison, Wisconsin: Industrial Relations Research Association, 1975), pp. 350-358.
19. Piore, "Perspectives on Planning ...", ibid., p. 179.
20. Briggs, op. cit., Mexican Migration and the U.S. Labor Market, Ch. 6.
21. Samora, op. cit., p. 56.
22. North and Houstoun, op. cit., p. 128-129.