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In Praise of Newcomers

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New U.S. citizens at a naturalization ceremony hosted by Boston College Graduate School of Social Work. (Photo by Justin Knight)

A major criticism leveled against recent newcomers to the United States is that they are “takers” creating an economic drain on the nation. Not only are they takers, critics lament, but also categorically “illegal,” echoing past racist associations of criminality with African-Americans and many other people of color.

These criticisms of newcomers are old in U.S. history. Various strains of economic utilitarianism and racism have reared their ugly heads throughout U.S. history to render the latest newcomer less than human and unworthy of citizenship.

Recognizing these historical pitfalls in the current immigration debate is critical for two reasons: so we do not repeat the conflicts that have pitted Americans against one another in the past and so we achieve a truly common good today.

In the 2013 debate over immigration reform, critics have focused on the economic burden of new immigrants to the near exclusion of the benefits they provide to society. The Heritage Foundation released a report on May 6, 2013, “The Fiscal Cost of Unlawful Immigrants and

Amnesty to the U.S. Taxpayer,”¹ that epitomizes this specious argument.

The Heritage Foundation report contends that immigrants always will be dependant on government supports. The “bottom line” of the Heritage Foundation’s study: “Even if all the children of unlawful immigrants graduated from college, they would be hard-pressed to pay back \$6.3 trillion in costs over their lifetime.”² In other words, so-called “unlawful immigrants” over the next fifty years will only be an economic burden on the nation with no hope for becoming an economic benefit.

The American Conservative Union, the libertarian Cato Institute, and the progressive Applied Research Center immediately criticized the method and content of the Heritage Foundation study.

A major flaw of the Heritage Foundation study is that the economic benefit immigrants bring go well beyond how much any household receives in benefits minus how much it pays in taxes. Numerous longitudinal studies examining the 1986 Immigration Reform and Control Act (IRCA) demonstrate that not only does

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As Noel Ignatiev explains in *How the Irish Became White*, when the newly arrived Irish were considered a threat to American (meaning white) jobs, they were told that they and blacks “need not apply.” The Irish learned that by joining in anti-black racism they could become white and gain economic ascendancy.

We devalue human life when we reduce human persons

to units of economic production and categorize an entire group of people as “unlawful.” The danger is not only in how we treat newcomers in our midst. A greater danger is how racism and economic utilitarianism tear apart human community and human, moral, practical, and spiritual commitments that bind us together as sacred and social beings.

In their now classic examination of American individualism, *Habits of the Heart*, Robert Bellah and colleagues warned us of the threat economic utilitarianism poses to a good society. *Habits of the Heart* invited Americans to reflect on two contradictory senses of individualism. First, they celebrate the inherent dignity and sacredness of the human person.

Second, they criticize the ways that American individualism makes the individual primary to reality and society an abstraction or derivative of the individual. This view of the individual as primary to reality opposes the biblical and republican traditions, which view both individuals and society as equally real and valuable. Indeed, like the biblical tradition, Catholic social teaching celebrates the inherent dignity, sacredness, and social nature of the human person. The sacredness and sociality of the human person and the reality of interdependence means that we are all responsible for one another.

When we deny this theological, moral, and practical reality, we deny our humanity and that of our brothers and sisters before God.

No group of newcomers has ever created any kind of loss for American society. Every group has contributed to the growth and development of society in many ways that go well beyond cost-benefit analysis.

Every group has contributed to the defense of the nation, helped build their local communities, and cared for their children so that future generations would enjoy levels of education, health care, and a quality of life that previous generations could only imagine.

We ought to praise newcomers and welcome their wisdom, cultures, and ways of life.

More important, perhaps, every group has taught us about our common vulnerability, our common need for one another, and the interdependence of the human family. When we recognize our common humanity in newcomers, there is possibility. Recognizing our common humanity, we may envision new possibilities of who we may become in hope and solidarity as the people of God.

legalization lead to increases in wages, higher levels of education, and better jobs but also ultimately to economic expansion.³

It is important to evaluate the potential economic costs and benefits of any immigration reform legislation. However, there is danger on the political left and right if the economic utility of immigrants becomes the exclusive or primary focus of debate.

The contemporary question of the economic utility of immigrants is not a new concern in U.S. history. Fearing that Germans would overrun the English colony of Pennsylvania, Benjamin Franklin infamously derided them as “swarthy”⁴ and as “the most ignorant stupid sort of their own nation.”⁵

Germans, however, became one of the largest immigrant groups in the nation, disproving Franklin’s view. That they became “white” in the U.S. racial hierarchy is no insignificant reason for their social and economic ascendancy.

So, for example, when the U.S. re-codified racial hierarchy into national immigration law in 1924, Europeans, including Germans, were assigned the highest quotas to increase their numbers and national homogeneity. The question of who would gain the rights and dignity of citizenship has always been tied up with the internal border of whiteness.⁶

In contrast, the immigration law of 1924 conceived “colored races” as having “no country of origin. They were outside the concept of nationality and, therefore, citizenship. They were not even bona fide immigrants.”⁷

ENDNOTES

- 1 Robert Rector and Jason Richwine, Ph.D., “The Fiscal Cost of Unlawful Immigrants and Amnesty to the U.S. Taxpayer,” (May 6, 2013). Available online at www.heritage.org/research/reports/2013/05/the-fiscal-cost-of-unlawful-immigrants-and-amnesty-to-the-us-taxpayer.
- 2 Ibid., “Fiscal Cost of Unlawful Immigrants,” p. vii.
- 3 See the inclusive list of studies at the Immigration Policy Center website available online at www.immigrationpolicy.org/just-facts/immigration-stimulus-economic-benefits-legalization-program.
- 4 Full quote cited by Matthew Yglesias in *The Atlantic* (February 4, 2008) available online at <http://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2008/02/swarthy-germans/48324/>
- 5 Letter to Peter Collinson, May 9, 1753, Benjamin Franklin Papers at Yale University available online at franklinpapers.org/franklin/framedVolumes.jsp
- 6 Alex Mikulich, “The Hidden Border of Whiteness and Immigration,” *JustSouth E-newsletter* (Number 17, October 2011) available online at www.loyno.edu/jsri/hidden-border-whiteness-and-immigration.
- 7 Mae Ngai, *Impossible Subjects: Illegal Aliens and the Making of Modern America* (Princeton University Press), 2004, p. 27.