



enlacesAmérica

Injecting Rationality and Humanity into the Immigration Debate

By María Elena Letona

Over the summer, several bills aiming to effect sweeping changes in immigration policy were filed, adding to the many proposals that have languished over the years, unable to garner the necessary political support to work their way through the legislative process. And as we enter the fall congressional session, it appears that these bills—even the most punitive of them all—are doomed for a similar fate.

Why? Because the political environment surrounding immigration policy and immigrants is so charged that even the slightest attempts to redress an injustice are met with potent rhetoric that clouds the truth. Anti-immigrant forces consistently head off any rational debate regarding immigration reform with: “How can we reward people who broke the law?”

Calling immigrants “illegals,” “criminals,” and “lawbreakers” makes it easier to approve laws that hurt immigrants and to stop laws that would redress injustices. Moreover, such name calling masks the real truth behind migration patterns in a global economy and the truth behind a woefully obsolete and immoral policy.

Yes, the truth is that immigrants are not the problem. Immigration policy itself is the problem.

First, immigration policy is obsolete because it is out of sync with our current global economic reality. Our world economy has become more integrated, as seen most recently with the passage of CAFTA. Yet while capital has had the freedom to cross borders as it pleases, workers face militarized borders and the criminalization of undocumented migration.

So how do we explain the fact that, despite this reality, at least 8 million undocumented immigrants are living and working in the United States?

Immigration advocates have been using a powerful metaphor: Imagine that the speed limit on our highways had remained at 40 miles per hour, yet traffic levels were those of today. How many lawbreakers do you think there would be? Who would be at fault? Drivers or the law itself? It is the same with immigration policy. The millions of undocumented workers in the U.S. are not the problem. The law is the problem because it is obsolete and out of sync with a global economic reality.

Second, immigration policy is immoral because it dehumanizes and criminalizes people whose “crime” is to migrate in search of survival. Literally displaced from their homelands by war, persecution, poverty and hunger, today’s migrants are forced to make painful and difficult choices of leaving what they love most—family, friends, country—in order to survive.

Rather than risk their lives in a deadly journey and live in constant fear and insecurity, immigrants would like to come to the United States legally. However, they cannot because immigration policy does not allow them to do so. Once in the United States, they work in fields, factories, restaurants, and hotels to make our lives easier. This is their “crime”.

And not only do immigrants make our lives easier, but at the same time they sustain their families back home. For many Latin American countries, family remittances sent by immigrants working and living in the U.S. constitute the most significant source of revenue. These are the people anti-immigrant forces demonize, scapegoat, and criminalize.

Anti-immigrant forces scapegoat immigrants for a failing economy by claiming that immigrants take jobs away from “Americans”. The truth is that immigrants take the jobs nobody wants, not because they are “dirty” but because they pay so poorly and have no job security at all. Think about it. Working in our sewage system and garbage collection is pretty “dirty.” However, these jobs are unionized and relatively well-paid, so virtually no undocumented immigrants work in these fields. Instead, undocumented immigrants find jobs working in the janitorial services, in hotels and restaurants, and in factories and farms. If these industries were to pay and provide the wages and benefits demanded by Americans, consumer prices would go through the roof!

Third, whether someone is a “legal” immigrant or not is totally arbitrary. Significant numbers of legal immigrants today were once undocumented. But when windows of opportunity open up, immigrants who qualify for certain immigration programs are able to adjust their status or obtain work authorization. In the case of El Salvador, Temporary Protected Status grants work authorization to Salvadorans who arrived in the US on or before February 13, 2001. If you arrived a day later, too bad, you do not qualify. Just one day can make the difference between being “legal” and being “illegal.”

So, let us challenge the tired rhetoric of “rewarding illegal behavior.” This rhetoric masks the real injustice, immorality, and obsolescence of immigration policy. Let us not be confused, manipulated, or cajoled by the rhetoric of the few, rhetoric that is fueled by fear and hatred. Yes, laws are there to be obeyed and respected. But in a democracy based on the highest morals and values, we have a responsibility to challenge laws that are not congruent with these values. Let us never forget that slavery was once legal. In terms of immigrants and immigration policy, let us do the right and moral thing. Let us push and support the enactment of comprehensive immigration reform, for it is not about rewarding illegal behavior. It is about doing justice.

María Elena Letona is a Salvadoran immigrant who currently serves as Executive Director at Centro Presente, a community based organization in Boston, MA.