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Immigration Is Not a Domestic Issue

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As the builder of fences for the US-Mexico border, as well as immigration jails and a Border Patrol station, the Golden State Fence Company was well served by the politics of xenophobia. The popular desire to turn the United States into a huge gated community, fortified against poverty and aspiration, was good for business. The only problem was that undocumented workers—the very people the fences were designed to keep out—were also good for business. “They were more trustworthy and more apt to stay long term,” said one of the executives.

When prosecutors investigated the company in 2004, they discovered that a third of its employees were undocumented. Charges were filed. Many of the workers were deported. The managers were allowed to carry on working while under house arrest for six months. Pushed by economics, repelled by politics, the poor were repatriated while the wealthy reaped profits: the contradictions and paradoxes of America’s response to immigration laid bare.

Almost a decade later, with immigration reform facing its brightest prospects in a decade, precious little seems to have been learned. A new plan hatched by a bipartisan group of senators seeks to strengthen borders before providing a pathway to citizenship for the roughly 11 million undocumented people and making it easier for skilled workers to get visas. President Obama put forward a similar plan but argued that citizenship should not be contingent on tighter borders. Compared with the nothing that was being done on the federal level before and the heinous attacks on Latino communities in states like Arizona and Alabama, these are great steps forward.

Obama’s plan is better. Both are flawed. They seek to address the issue of immigration—legal and otherwise—as a domestic problem subject to bureaucratic remedy. But mass immigration is a global issue fueled primarily by economic inequality, war and environmental calamity. There is no meaningful immigration policy the United States can pursue that does not engage with foreign policy, international trade and climate change. Anything else is just a Band-Aid on a gaping wound. In short, there is no sensible conversation you can have about immigration in the West that doesn’t start with the fact that half the world lives on less than \$2.50 a day, mostly in the global South.

Take Mexico. The insistence on strengthening the border comes at a time when illegal border crossings are at their lowest level since Nixon. “We have reached the point where the balance between Mexicans moving to the United States and those returning to Mexico is essentially zero,” Jeffrey Passel, a senior demographer at the Pew Hispanic Center, told *The Washington Post*. The primary reason for this slowdown is not heightened security but the recession. Fewer jobs, lower wages, fewer hours—Mexicans didn’t come to America because they think it’s a better country; they came to work. The primary achievement of the extra border guards was a massive inflation in the price that the smugglers charged to avoid them.

They could not work at home in no small part because the laissez-faire policies of successive Mexican governments have compounded the inequalities in their country. But Mexico’s poverty is also intrinsically linked to US trade policies in general and NAFTA in particular.

Script n°16- langue anglaise

Thanks to government subsidies lavished on US agribusiness—as well as its large scale and its use of heavy machinery and irrigation—small Mexican farmers simply could not compete with the US exports that flooded their country after NAFTA was enacted.

Poverty is a powerful motivating force. Build a ten-foot fence with food on one side, and a hungry person will build an eleven-foot ladder to get to it. When the Eastern bloc prevented freedom of movement in the name of politics, it was rightly chastised for not letting people out. When, in the name of economics, the West stops letting people in, it is no less wrong. But movement should be voluntary, not forced by hardship.

For the West to cherry-pick those it lets in aggravates the problems in the global South.

Developing nations often invest in the education of their citizens only to see many of the best and brightest head-hunted by the wealthy. A 2010 World Bank report showed that almost three-quarters of the nurses trained in the English-speaking Caribbean head off to work in the United States, Britain and Canada, leaving the region with 3,300 unfilled nursing posts.

So long as these international inequalities exist, the West will have an immigration problem. So long as the West exacerbates those inequalities, it will bear much of the responsibility for it.