Borderlands and Immigrants

April 4, 2006 | 2257 GMT

By George Friedman

The United States has returned to its recurring debate over immigration. This edition of the debate, focused intensely on the question of illegal immigration from Mexico, is phrased in a very traditional way. One side argues that illegal migration from Mexico threatens both American economic interests and security. The other side argues that the United States historically has thrived on immigration, and that this wave of migration is no different.

As is frequently the case, the policy debate fails to take fundamental geopolitical realities into account.

To begin with, it is absolutely true that the United States has always been an immigrant society. Even the first settlers in the United States — the American Indian tribes — were migrants. Certainly, since the first settlements were established, successive waves of immigration have both driven the American economy and terrified those who were already living in the country. When the Scots-Irish began arriving in the late 1700s, the English settlers of all social classes thought that their arrival would place enormous pressure on existing economic processes, as well as bring crime and immorality to the United States.

The Scots-Irish were dramatically different culturally, and their arrival certainly generated stress. However, they proved crucial for populating the continent west of the Alleghenies. The Scots-Irish solved a demographic problem that was at the core of the United States: Given its population at that time, there simply were not enough Americans to expand settlements west of the mountains — and this posed a security threat. If the U.S. population remained clustered in a long, thin line along the Atlantic sea board, with poor lines of communication running north-south, the country would be vulnerable to European, and especially British, attack. The United States had to expand westward, and it lacked the population to do so. The Americans needed the Scots-Irish.

Successive waves of immigrants came to the United States over the next 200 years. In each case, they came looking for economic opportunity. In each case, there was massive anxiety that the arrival of these migrants would crowd the job market, driving down wages, and that the heterogeneous cultures would create massive social stress. The Irish immigration of the 1840s, the migrations from Eastern and Southern Europe in the 1880s — all triggered the same concerns. Nevertheless, without those waves of immigration, the United States would not have been able to populate the continent, to industrialize or to field the mass armies of the 20th century that established the nation as a global power.

Population Density and Economic Returns

Logic would have it that immigration should undermine the economic well-being of those who already live in the United States. But this logic assumes that there is a zero-sum game. That may be true in Europe or Asia. It has not been true in the United States. The key is population density: The density of the United States, excluding Alaska, is 34 people per square kilometer. By comparison, the population density in the United Kingdom is 247 per square kilometer, 231 in Germany and 337 in Japan. The European Union, taken as a whole, has a population density of 115. If the United States were to equal the United Kingdom in terms of density, it would have a population of about 2 billion people.

Even accepting the premise that some parts of the United States are uninhabitable and that the United Kingdom is over-inhabited, the point is that the United States' population is still small relative to available land. That means that it has not come even close to diminishing economic returns. To the extent to which the population-to-land ratio determines productivity — and this, in our view, is the critical variable — the United States still can utilize population increases. At a time when population growth from native births is quite low, this means that the United States still can metabolize immigrants. It is, therefore, no accident that over the past 40 years, the United States has absorbed a massive influx of Asian immigrants who have been net producers over time. It's a big country, and much of it is barely inhabited.

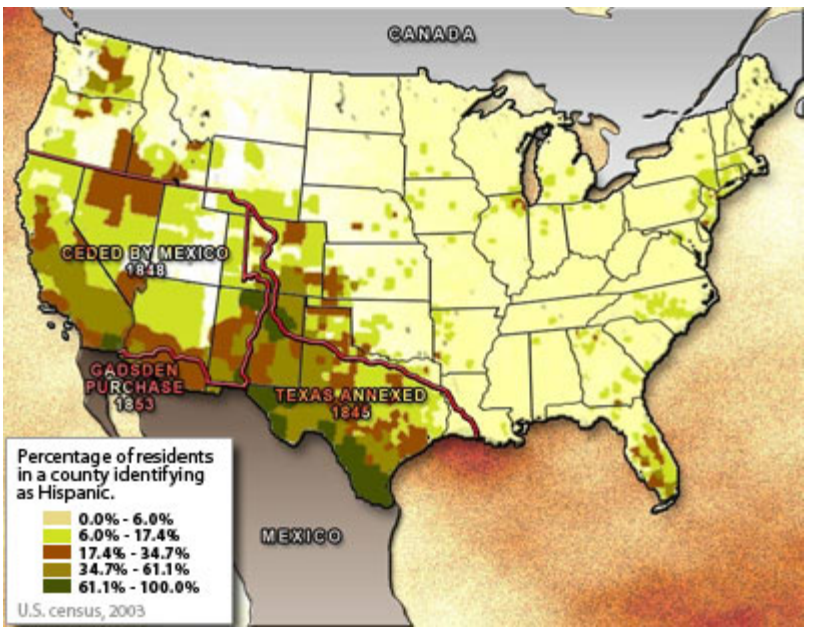
On this level, the immigration issue poses no significant questions. It is a replay of a debate that has been ongoing since the founding of the country. Those who have predicted social and economic disaster as a result of immigration have been consistently wrong. Those who have predicted growing prosperity have been right. Those who have said that the national character of the United States would change dramatically have been somewhat right; core values have remained in place, but the Anglo-Protestant ethnicity represented at the founding has certainly been transformed. How one feels about this transformation depends on ideology and taste. But the simple fact is this: The United States not only would not have become a transcontinental power without immigration; it would not have industrialized. Masses of immigrants formed the armies of workers that drove industrialism and made the United States into a significant world power. No immigration, no United States.

Geography: The Difference With Mexico

Now, it would seem at first glance that the current surge of Mexican migration should be understood in this context and, as such, simply welcomed. If immigration is good, then why wouldn't immigration from Mexico be good? Certainly, there is no cultural argument against it; if the United States could assimilate Ukrainian Jews, Sicilians and Pakistanis, there is no self-evident reason why it could not absorb Mexicans. The argument against the Mexican migration would seem on its face to be simply a repeat of old, failed arguments against past migrations.

But Mexican migration should not be viewed in the same way as other migrations. When a Ukrainian Jew or a Sicilian or an Indian came to the United States, their arrival represented a sharp geographical event; whatever memories they might have of their birthplace, whatever cultural values they might bring with them, the geographical milieu was being abandoned. And with that, so were the geopolitical consequences of their migration. Sicilians might remember Sicily, they might harbor a cultural commitment to its values and they might even have a sense

of residual loyalty to Sicily or to Italy — but Italy was thousands of miles away. The Italian government could neither control nor exploit the migrant's presence in the United States. Simply put, these immigrants did not represent a geopolitical threat; even if they did not assimilate to American culture — remaining huddled together in their "little Italys" — they did not threaten the United States in any way. Their strength was in the country they had left, and that country was far away. That is why, in the end, these immigrants assimilated, or their children did. Without assimilation, they were adrift.



The Mexican situation is different. When a Mexican comes to the United States, there is frequently no geographical split. There is geographical continuity. His roots are just across the land border. Therefore, the entire immigration dynamic shifts. An Italian, a Jew, an Indian can return to his home country, but only with great effort and disruption. A Mexican can and does return with considerable ease. He can, if he chooses, live his life in a perpetual ambiguity.

The Borderland Battleground

This has nothing to do with Mexicans as a people, but rather with a geographical concept called "borderlands." Traveling through Europe, one will find many borderlands. Alsace-Lorraine is a borderland between Germany and France; the inhabitants are both French and German, and in some ways neither. It also is possible to find Hungarians — living Hungarian lives — deep inside Slovakia and Romania.

Borderlands can be found throughout the world. They are the places where the borders have shifted, leaving members of one nation stranded on the other side of the frontier. In many cases, these people now hold the citizenship of the countries in which they reside (according to recognized borders), but they think and speak in the language on the other side of the border. The border moved, but their homes didn't. There has been no decisive geographical event; they have not left their homeland. Only the legal abstraction of a border, and the non-abstract presence of a conquering army, has changed their reality.

Borderlands sometimes are political flashpoints, when the relative power of the two countries is shifting and one is reclaiming its old territory, as Germany did in 1940, or France in 1918. Sometimes the regions are quiet; the borders that have been imposed remain inviolable, due to the continued power of the conqueror. Sometimes, populations move back and forth in the borderland, as politics and economics shift. Borderlands are everywhere. They are the archaeological remains of history, except that these remains have a tendency to come back to life.

The U.S.-Mexican frontier is a borderland. The United States, to all intents and purposes, conquered the region in the period between the Texan Revolution (1835-36) and the Mexican-American War (1846-48). As a result of the war, the border moved and areas that had been Mexican territory became part of the United States. There was little ethnic cleansing. American citizens settled into the territory in increasing numbers over time, but the extant Mexican culture remained in place. The border was a political dividing line but was never a physical division; the area north of the border retained a certain Mexican presence, while the area south of the border became heavily influenced by American culture. The economic patterns that tied the area north of the Rio Grande to the area south of it did not disappear. At times they atrophied; at times they intensified; but the links were always there, and neither Washington nor Mexico City objected. It was the natural characteristic of the borderland.

It was not inevitable that the borderland would be held by the United States. Anyone looking at North America in 1800 might have bet that Mexico, not the United States, would be the dominant power of the continent. Why that didn't turn out to be the case is a long story, but by 1846, the Mexicans had lost direct control of the borderland. They have not regained it since. But that does not mean that the borderland is unambiguously American — and it does not mean that, over the next couple of hundred years, should Washington's power weaken and Mexico City's increase, the borders might not shift once again. How many times, after all, have the Franco-German borders shifted? For the moment, however, Washington is enormously more powerful than Mexico City, so the borders will stay where they are.

The Heart of the Matter

We are in a period, as happens with borderlands, when major population shifts are under way. This should not be understood as immigration. Or more precisely, these shifts should not be understood as immigration in the same sense that we talk about immigration from, say, Brazil, where the geographical relationship between migrant and home country is ruptured. The immigration from Mexico to the United States is a regional migration within a borderland between two powers — powers that have drawn a border based on military and political history, and in which two very different populations intermingle. Right now, the United States is economically dynamic relative to Mexico. Therefore, Mexicans tend to migrate northward, across the political border, within the geographical definition of the borderland. The map declares a border. Culture and history, however, take a different view.

The immigration debate in the U.S. Congress, which conflates Asian immigrations with Mexican immigrations, is mixing apples and oranges. Chinese immigration is part of the process of populating the United States — a process that has been occurring since the founding of the

Republic. Mexican immigration is, to borrow a term from physics, the Brownian motion of the borderland. This process is nearly as old as the Republic, but there is a crucial difference: It is not about populating the continent nearly as much as it is about the dynamics of the borderland.

One way to lose control of a borderland is by losing control of its population. In general, most Mexicans cross the border for strictly economic reasons. Some wish to settle in the United States, some wish to assimilate. Others intend to be here temporarily. Some intend to cross the border for economic reasons — to work — and remain Mexicans in the full sense of the word. Now, so long as this migration remains economic and cultural, there is little concern for the United States. But when this last class of migrants crosses the border with political aspirations, such as the recovery of lost Mexican territories from the United States, that is the danger point.

Americans went to Texas in the 1820s. They entered the borderland. They then decided to make a political claim against Mexico, demanding a redefinition of the formal borders between Mexico and the United States. In other words, they came to make money and stayed to make a revolution. There is little evidence — flag-waving notwithstanding — that there is any practical move afoot now to reverse the American conquest of Mexican territories. Nevertheless, that is the danger with all borderlands: that those on the "wrong" side of the border will take action to move the border back.

For the United States, this makes the question of Mexican immigration within the borderland different from that of Mexican immigration to places well removed from it. In fact, it makes the issue of Mexican migration different from all other immigrations to the United States. The current congressional debate is about "immigration" as a whole, but that makes little sense. It needs to be about three different questions:

1. Immigration from other parts of the world to the United States

2. Immigration from Mexico to areas well removed from the southern border region

3. Immigration from Mexico to areas within the borderlands that were created by the U.S. conquests

Treating these three issues as if they were the same thing confuses matters. The issue is not immigration in general, nor even Mexican immigration. It is about the borderland and its future. The question of legal and illegal immigration and various solutions to the problems must be addressed in this context.