

INTRODUCTION TO SPECIAL ISSUE ON IMMIGRATION

Guest editors: Grant J. Silva and José Jorge Mendoza

In popular discourses throughout the world, what often passes for “the immigration debate” consists of several hotly contested issues. These issues include the problem of irregular, clandestine, or “unlawful” migration; the existence of persons who, even if they initially entered through proper channels, currently reside in political communities “without papers” (i.e., out-of-status) and have no legal means of regularizing their presence within the polity; the moral standing and militarization of borders, especially when those borders are used to separate the developed from the developing world; the internal enforcement of immigration law and practices of indefinite detainment and deportation; the use of immigration policy as a mechanism to attract the best and brightest from around the world and the effect this recruitment has on the sending countries.¹ Debate surrounding these topics often elicits strong reactions and emotions from which there is little middle ground upon which to stand. It is almost as if the borders in question not only divide *nation-states* but also *states-of-mind*. The one thing everyone can agree on, however, is that as long as human migration, national boundaries, and global inequalities are facts of the world, “the immigration debate” is not going away.

Regardless of one’s location on the political spectrum, in developed countries like the United States, the exigent need for comprehensive immigration reform is glaringly apparent. Recent anti-immigrant actions taken by individual states, such as Arizona, Alabama, and Georgia, as well as executive actions ordered by President Obama—such as his Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) and the “prioritization” of criminals over the separation of families in terms of deportation—are not reform. These actions keep existing laws intact, but meanwhile 12 million undocumented immigrants continue to function as a source for cheap, expendable labor when at the same time, they are denied membership into the political community. Undocumented immigrants affect the national economy in both positive and negative ways, and their existence inside countries like the United States reveals the interdependency of present-day countries via a global market and an international division of labor. Nonetheless, undocumented people live precarious lives without many of the rights (and duties) that typical citizens

of First World democracies enjoy. While most experts agree that immigration reform needs to take place, it remains to be determined what this reform will look like and how inclusive (or exclusive) it will be toward certain groups of people.

At this point, some might be surprised to see philosophers entering “the immigration debate,” and might even be skeptical as to what philosophy has to offer in terms of public policy. After all, the social sciences, unlike philosophy, produce and base their conclusions on solid empirical evidence, and it is out of these sorts of findings that public policy is often generated and then implemented. If immigration reform is simply a matter of getting the correct empirical facts, then it is indeed difficult to see what meaningful contribution philosophers have to make toward developing immigration reform.

Contrary to this view, the various essays offered in this issue of *Public Affairs Quarterly* aim to show that at its core, “the immigration debate” is a debate over conflicting philosophical principles. One of the most important aspects of political philosophy is its ability to identify and explicate the key concepts and concerns that are at the heart of public policy proposals and reforms. In other words, we believe that the more significant disputes within “the immigration debate” are taking place not so much over conflicting facts, but over how those facts are given meaning. This is not to say that empirical research is inconsequential to “the immigration debate,” but it is to say that research requires interpretation and that these interpretations already presuppose certain moral and political commitments. What are these commitments and what role do they play in hindering or expediting immigration reform? While it is true that resolving disagreements over evidence (i.e., over matters of fact) might best be left to social scientists, understanding and addressing disagreements over norms, values, and even the role of justice in “the immigration debate” are areas where philosophers can make important contributions toward a framework for future immigration reform. How *should* empirical facts be interpreted, and what *ought* to be done (and perhaps even what *can* be done) in light of pre-existing normative commitments?

It is quite amazing to think that human beings, oftentimes children (which raises a whole host of other issues), are willing to risk dehydration, hypothermia, and violent death, in addition to kidnapping, enslavement, deportation, and imprisonment, in order to enter a developed country like the United States by crossing an unforgiving desert, hiding in a hollowed-out car door, or boarding an overcrowded boat. Upon arrival, these individuals will be treated as second-class “citizens” or disease-ridden nuisances. For many, their labor and bodies will be exploited, and most likely, they will be subjected to overt and institutional racism—and yet they *still come*. Given the gravity of this situation, one would think that individuals concerned with theories of justice, civil rights, ethics, the unfair distribution of wealth, security, and living standards would have something substantial to say about *migration of this kind*. Along these lines, the essays in this issue aim to explore and clarify some of the key concepts and concerns surrounding immigration

policy, thereby helping to ameliorate the tone of the current debate. At the very least, and true to the goals of *Public Affairs Quarterly*, we hope to provide rational insight where one often finds little more than self-serving rhetoric, fear-mongering, and misinformed perspectives.

Marquette University
Worcester State University

NOTES

1. The above list is simply meant to prefigure the essays in this issue and to demonstrate that there is more to “the immigration debate” than simply “illegal” immigration. We understand that this is not an exhaustive list, as there are many other issues associated with global human migration. For instance, questions connected to asylum seekers and people of refugee status are also part of the general discussion pertaining to human migration across the globe. Both of these topics, unfortunately, tend to move discussions away from that of *immigration*.

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