

Mobility Socialism: How Anti-Immigration Politics Advances Socialism and Impedes Capitalism

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Party polarization around immigration is a key development in contemporary politics. Democrats are increasingly supportive and Republicans are the most skeptical of migration and migrants¹, but not long ago, GOP presidents and presidential candidates were in the vanguard of welcoming newcomers to America. Ronald Reagan, George H. W. Bush, George W. Bush, and John McCain were well known for their pro-immigrant views and openness to sensible reform ideas. They saw immigrants as future workers, taxpayers, churchgoers, and citizens who were attracted to our political and economic values and would help build the nation. This approach was intertwined with a broader articulation of an “opportunity society” that emphasized free markets, entrepreneurship, individual liberty, and limited government.

Today, the immigration debate has taken a problematic turn. In particular, principled conservatives in the GOP find themselves increasingly challenged by nativist, populist, and nationalist movements that seek to undermine our “nation of immigrants” heritage. These new activists may call themselves “conservative,” but as this essay will discuss, they advocate immigration policies that are contrary to free-market capitalism, individual liberty, religious values, and small government. They do not reflect the principled conservatism—best represented by Ronald Reagan—that built the world’s strongest economy, spread democratic ideals across the globe, won the Cold War, promoted the autonomy of individuals, and sought to limit the scale and reach of government.

This new anti-immigration activism is distinct from good-faith debates about immigration policies. While nativist-populists use immigration as a political football, traditional principled conservatives can have cogent and pragmatic discussions about the ways and means of migrant flows. It is understandable to be concerned about recurring border crises and worry that something has gone wrong with our immigration policies. Reasonable people can disagree on who should be admitted, how many should be admitted, when they should be admitted, and their status after admission. To support some immigration limitations, conditions, and enforcement is not the same as a broad attack on immigration that undermines our core values and traditions. While principled conservatives should pay more attention to libertarian arguments about how less restrictive migration policies would benefit everyone, we need to distinguish between the principled conservative and the nativist-populist.

Unfortunately, this renewed nativist-populism is making inroads into the policy opinions, electoral campaigns, and fundraising appeals of too many politicians, pundits, candidates, advocacy groups, and think tanks in the “conservative” universe. But there is no reason for principled conservatives who appreciate the Reagan legacy to accept that such anti-immigration politics is conservative in either theory or practice. In an era when many ideas are competing for the label of “conservative,” we need to distinguish between those that support capitalism, the individual, and smaller government from those that promote collectivism, larger government, and exclusionary identities.²

Furthermore, this essay argues that the nativist-populist-nationalist approach to immigration is not only unconservative but can and should be understood as a form of socialism.³ In contemporary anti-immigration politics, we see a distrust of individuals and free markets and a faith in the power of Big Government that is reminiscent of socialistic thinking and policies.

I call this “mobility socialism” because it brings the socialist mindset to human movement in a way that parallels how socialists want to restructure the economy and society. The implications for our liberties and freedoms are the same, as nativists and socialists alike have little problem with advancing their utopian agendas by empowering a large and centralized government, reducing our rights, and making us poorer. This essay is not the first to note that anti-immigration policies serve to advance socialism, as libertarians have made such arguments, but conservatives across the continuum should better understand the problematic implications of governmental restrictions on human mobility.

While the new crop of anti-immigration activists may claim that migrants are socialists who want to change America, this is a form of projection, which Merriam-Webster defines as “the attribution of one’s own ideas, feelings, or attitudes to other people or to objects.” As this essay argues, it is these critics—whether they know it or not—who are advancing socialism and it is the immigrants themselves who are supporting and reinforcing American core values.

We should not be surprised by such gaps between rhetoric and reality. As Iain Murray observes in *The Socialist Temptation*, “even some avowed conservatives espouse socialist policies. This is particularly true of conservatives who identify conservatism with populism or nationalism.”⁴

Principled conservatives who care about prosperity, liberty, and limited government should oppose mobility socialism and support the desocialization of our immigration policies. Instead of arbitrary restrictions, counterproductive regulations, and expensive enforcement, we should focus on reforms that grow the economy, reduce intrusive government power, and enhance individual freedoms. As I argue in a previous Hoover publication, “we should bring the ‘deregulation’ mindset—so strongly associated with Ronald Reagan—to immigration reform.”⁵

Mobility Socialism

In American history, we see the occasional sprouting of political movements that seek to drastically reduce migrant numbers, especially those from “minority” ethnicities, races, and religions. Rather than allow individuals, the free market, families, and civil society to shape where people can move, work, and live, nativists want Big Government to interfere in labor markets and socially engineer society.

Today’s anti-immigration activists combine old-fashioned nativism with contemporary populism and nationalism. They seek to undermine our “nation of immigrants” heritage through an endless cycle of restriction, regulation, and enforcement, regardless of the harmful effects on our pocketbook and liberties. This is not a rational attempt to solve real problems but a radical utopian project to artificially reshape America’s demography. They also push conspiracy theories, such as the Great Replacement, that falsely claim immigrants are somehow replacing “real Americans” or displacing our core values.

This desire for top-down interference in the economy and everyday American life is best understood as mobility socialism. As with all socialistic ideas, it is contrary to capitalism, works against human nature, and ignores the lessons of history. Furthermore, nativist-populist movements often lead to increased support for the welfare state, as this essay will discuss, and seek to impose un-American policies such as Soviet-style “papers please” internal checks. The result of anti-immigrant politics is the socialistic outcomes of bigger government, reduced prosperity, and declining freedom.

The nativist-populist movements of the past and present also share the ignominy of maligning the religious and racial-ethnic minority groups of the day. The nativist impulse goes back centuries but has been wrong about every immigrant group it sought to restrict.⁶ Nativists were wrong about the Germans, wrong about the Irish, wrong about the Polish, wrong about Italians, wrong about Catholics, wrong about Asians, and wrong about Jews. Today, they are wrong about Mexicans, Central and South Americans, and others. Nativists are like baseball players who bat .000 but think they are Ted Williams—whose maternal grandparents, by the way, were Mexican immigrants.⁷

The key insight is that the nativist-populist mindset privileges a group—whether a race, religion, or an imagined “the people”—over the individual. Nativist-populist movements are fundamentally collectivist and distrust individual liberty. They join socialists in demanding we sacrifice our freedoms and finances in the name of an amorphous common good, but we all know the script: freedom and prosperity will decline, but the promised results will never materialize. They will claim that this failure is because “the elites” have betrayed “the people,” which can only be countered by more regulations and restrictions.

We do not always see the socialism-nativism connection because we are distracted by media stereotypes. The average socialist is often portrayed as a young millennial who loves Bernie Sanders and avocado toast. Others falsely claim that immigrants bring socialist values to the United States and are somehow opposed to democracy and capitalism. We do not see where

the socialist mentality is most influential: the nativist-populist movements that want to empower Big Government to enact social-engineering policies that reduce our freedoms and make us poorer.

Mobility Socialism and Our Recurring Border Crises

As the above discussion indicates, much is at stake in the immigration debate. Keeping the big picture in mind can be difficult, however, in light of the many border controversies and crises. At the time of this essay's writing, the most recent was the large increase in immigrants attempting to cross the US-Mexico border, many from Cuba, Venezuela, and the Northern Triangle region (Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador).⁸ While such border crossings subsequently declined by early 2023, the question remains—what is the right policy approach to large numbers of would-be migrants?⁹ We should not allow the immediate challenges of migration policy management to distract us from core values.

Many Americans are concerned about migration, and this is entirely understandable, as immigration policy is often described by journalists, politicians, and pundits as “broken.” In addition to distressing headlines about border crises, we regularly see alarmist and sensationalistic stories about immigrant “caravans” and “invasions.” There is little consensus in Washington or state governments about reform options, and party polarization further impedes workable solutions. The result is a policy stalemate at the federal level, and the fundamental architecture of immigration law has not been revised in many decades.¹⁰

Responsible policymaking requires us to identify real problems and propose principled but realistic reforms. Today, that includes both acknowledging the serious humanitarian and law enforcement problems that recur along the US-Mexico border as well as understanding that no meaningful change can happen without (1) enacting migration laws that work with, and not against, capitalism and human nature, and (2) addressing the root causes of migration.

Finding solutions in the midst of continual border crises is difficult. Alex Nowrasteh of the Cato Institute called this the “Catch-22” problem.¹¹ As he observed:

Chaos and illegal immigration are caused by government restrictions on legal immigration, but it is extraordinarily difficult for policymakers to support liberalization in the face of so much immigration-related chaos. Thus, U.S. immigration restrictions produce chaos and the liberalizations required to reduce that chaos are politically difficult or impossible so long as the chaos remains.

Those who appreciate the Reagan legacy will understand that any reform must promote free market economics, enhance the opportunity society, and respect our “nation of immigrants” heritage. However, as noted above, we increasingly encounter pundits and politicians who jettison conservative principles in favor of populist and nationalist “solutions” that will only lead to the socialistic outcomes of bigger government, economic decline, and reduced liberties.

While space considerations preclude a full discussion of immigration policy and politics, my recent Hoover Institution interview on this topic provides more information and perspectives, and I highlight some ideas in the following two paragraphs.¹²

First, we have to understand that border crises do not occur randomly—they reflect our problematic immigration policies. Bad policies create bad outcomes, and until we change our policies, we will continue to see alarming headlines. In particular, we need rational reforms that meet economic needs and allow us to grow the economy. Millions of Americans have left the labor force, and many economic sectors need migrants across skill levels.¹³ Contrary to rumor, migration does not harm American workers but rather contributes to the rising tide that lifts all boats. If we want less illegal immigration and fewer border crises, we need to expand legal immigration.¹⁴

Second, we must address the root causes of migration. Immigrants are not only “pulled” to America by its opportunity but also “pushed” out of their home nations by violence, poverty, and a lack of opportunity. It is in our best interests to help those nations grow their economies, enhance the rule of law, and promote public safety. For instance, we might look to Plan Colombia for lessons that apply to Central America.¹⁵ Such efforts will require long-term attention and investment, which

is easier said than done, but until we work more cooperatively with Latin American and other nations to address root causes, we will regularly see “border crisis” headlines.¹⁶

Immigration and Freedom

Can a nation be both nativist and prosperous? Can it be both nativist and free?

Nativist movements are fundamentally opposed to American-style freedom. Frank S. Meyer wrote that an important component of American conservatism is a distrust of central planning and “attempts to design society and the lives of human beings.”¹⁷ Such planning and designing is central to the nativist agenda, which features laws and policies that would restrict (whether explicitly or implicitly) immigration based on race, religion, and national origin.

Another name for this is “social engineering,” and we have seen it before in US history. If your ancestors were Italian or Polish, for example, the nativists of a century ago pushed to keep them out. They enacted laws in the 1920s that provided tiny immigration quotas for these countries and large quotas for Western and Northern Europe. Not coincidentally, these excluded immigrants were also predominantly Catholics, which nativist movements portrayed as disloyal fifth columnists who would only answer politically to the Pope. The explicit nativist goal was to racially and religiously redesign American society to better resemble that of the nineteenth century. This effort was also intertwined with a pseudoscientific eugenics movement that saw Eastern and Southern Europeans as racially inferior. The concept of “Anglos,” which encompassed all European Americans, was decades away.

These same impulses continue today, except that the targets are different. Today, nativists focus their ire on Latino immigrants, which they attempt to justify through claims that are either contradictory (Mexicans want “welfare” but are somehow “stealing our jobs”) or easily falsifiable (“Latinos don’t assimilate”). The arguments against Mexicans and other migrants are routinely debunked by economists, political scientists, and sociologists, but such facts hardly slow down the nativist-populist parade.

It is distressing to anyone who loves America to read about the anti-Catholic, anti-Irish, anti-Italian, and anti-Polish politics of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries; it is equally objectionable to see anti-Mexican attitudes today. One of the most intriguing titles in the migration literature is Joel Perlmann’s *Italians Then, Mexicans Now*.¹⁸ He finds that the children of Mexican immigrants are making progress in ways that parallel that of Italian immigrants a century ago. Other research shows that the forces of acculturation and assimilation remain strong in America, and the Latino experience is consistent with our “nation of immigrants” tradition.¹⁹ The anti-Italian prejudice of the last century is just as wrong (factually and morally) as the anti-Mexican sentiment of today—and equally as harmful to our core values.

The nativist and the socialist are united in a desire to create ideal societies through government laws. However, Meyer noted how “the cast of American conservative thought is profoundly antiutopian. . . . Rather, the conservative puts his confidence in the free functioning of the energies of free persons, individually and in voluntary cooperation.”²⁰ The utopian prioritization of the abstract over the real, and the theoretical over the practical, was a temptation that the philosopher and politician Edmund Burke, often called “the father of conservatism,” opposed with such vigor.²¹

Standing against nativist, populist, nationalist, and socialist utopianism are capitalism and democracy, with all their untidy freedoms, liberties, and entrepreneurship. Capitalism can be disruptive, but it is the economic system that best works with, and not against, human nature. Democracy can also be messy and contentious, but as Winston Churchill observed, it is “the worst form of Government except for all those other forms that have been tried.” Nativist-populist movements want a government, leader, or party telling people what to do. Capitalism and democracy place their faith in the individual.

Nativism and the Welfare State

The nativist impulse is problematic for all who are concerned about the size and power of the national government. Principled conservatives know that you cannot advocate Big Government as the solution to your problems without setting the precedent

that Big Government can be the solution to every problem. When government reduces freedom in one policy realm, it sets a precedent that applies to other areas. You cannot compartmentalize a principle, and if Big Government is the solution to your Problem A, then it can be the solution to other people's Problems B, C, D, etc.

Scholars have also found that anti-immigration movements are associated with the growth of the welfare state. The concept is called "welfare chauvinism," and it means that more restrictive immigration policies lead to greater support for welfare programs, while more open immigration policies lead to lower support. We see it in European "radical right" political parties, whereby immigration restriction often goes hand in hand with support for expanded welfare—as long as this welfare is restricted to the native-born population that populists see as the "true" citizens.

The idea began when scholars asked how European welfare states could continue their generous policies in the face of growing immigration.²² As Europe transformed from nations of emigration to nations of immigration, how to incorporate the newcomers became increasingly controversial. In particular, the native born might resent their tax dollars going to new immigrant groups. This could undercut support for taxing and spending among the electorate. From the principled conservative perspective, of course, such diminished support would not be a bad thing.

Milton Friedman argued that the right approach was not to limit immigration but to limit the welfare state. Illegal immigrants were not a problem as long as they could not access social programs.²³ As Friedman wrote, "There is no doubt that free and open immigration is the right policy in a libertarian state, but in a welfare state it is a different story. . . . The real hitch is in denying social benefits to immigrants who are here."²⁴

Friedman also discussed a specific example: "Look, for example, at the obvious, immediate, practical example of illegal Mexican immigration. Now, that Mexican immigration, over the border, is a good thing. It's a good thing for the illegal immigrants. It's a good thing for the United States. It's a good thing for the citizens of the country. But, it's only good so long as it's illegal."²⁵ As William Niskanen put it, the solution is to "build a wall around the welfare state, not around the country."²⁶

"Welfare chauvinism" goes in the opposite direction, keeping immigrants out but providing welfare for the native born. It provides the worst of all worlds—chimerical benefits in exchange for a weakened economy, a larger state, and higher taxes.

The connection between nativism and a growing welfare state is not new but can be traced for over a century. Alex Nowrasteh and Andrew Forrester from the Cato Institute reviewed two economics papers that studied how American immigration restriction policies in the 1920s shaped voting behavior and public opinion about social welfare programs. They noted:

Closing the border removed the politically-effective counter-argument that more welfare would attract immigrants who will take advantage of new government programs. Closing the border thus freed both natives and immigrants to vote for more welfare without the fear that immigrants would come from Europe to consume the new benefits. A relatively open immigration system reduced support for redistribution and big government, but the removal of that political check resulted in increased public support for those programs.²⁷

Nowrasteh also noted that immigration was historically opposed by labor unions, and the restrictive laws of the 1920s set the stage for the growth of the labor movement during the New Deal era.²⁸ He further argued that immigration served to generally slow down the growth of socialism and reduce government expansion in the United States:

All in all, immigration did more to slow the growth of government in the 19th and early 20th centuries and to frustrate the goals of left-wing reformers than it did to overturn the fundamental economic and political institutions of the American founding. With few exceptions, immigrants helped preserve, protect, defend, and expand American free markets.²⁹

Bryan Caplan examined arguments about immigration and the welfare state from a libertarian perspective. He noted that "The core of libertarianism is that a country belongs not to 'the people' collectively, but to property owners individually. If

and when the welfare state makes an immigrant a net negative, labeling the immigrant a ‘trespasser’ may be convenient. But you have to be a socialist to really believe it.”³⁰

In an essay titled “Immigration Controls are Socialist,” Jake Desyllas looked to European history to argue that the classical liberalism of the nineteenth century had no immigration controls, whereas the twentieth-century growth of state power was associated with greater restriction: “Immigration controls were just one aspect of this wider regression—from economic freedom into socialist protectionism. . . . It was the rise of the democratic welfare states, with all their controls and permits, that created immigration controls in the first place.”³¹

Immigration and Capitalism

In this Hoover series of essays on “Socialism and Free-Market Capitalism,” Peter Berkowitz observes that “the hallmark of socialism” is the “top-down management of economic life.”³² Lee Ohanian writes that “The labor market is the centerpiece of every economy. . . . The difference between a poorly functioning labor market and a well-functioning labor market can mean millions of lost jobs and billions of dollars in lost incomes.”³³

Who should make the most important decisions about who is allowed to work, where they will be allowed to work, and what type of work they will be allowed to do? Should the federal government make these decisions? Or should we trust the market to decide what is best for business? The history of government economic intervention is not encouraging, and the free market does a much better job of making economic choices than does any bureaucrat.

A great deal of research has investigated the economic implications of immigrants and immigration, far too much to be summarized by this essay. Nevertheless, several notable points can be highlighted, and they illustrate the larger conclusion that immigration is essential to a growing and dynamic economy and provides many tangible benefits for the native born.

The first point is that economic growth requires a growing population.³⁴ Unless a shrinking population is accompanied by an increase in productivity (which has been stagnant in America for decades), current demographic trends among the native born predict long-term trouble. Not only have birth rates declined, but as noted above, millions of Americans have left the labor force.³⁵ The 2020 Census generated headlines about the declining non-Hispanic White population. Without immigrants and minorities, the American population would be declining for the first time in history.³⁶

Second, many prominent companies could not exist—at least not in America—without migrants. Many of the services and products that allowed economic sectors to survive during the COVID-19 pandemic were invented and staffed by immigrants. A prominent example is Zoom, which proved crucial to many businesses, families, educational institutions, and voluntary organizations. It was invented by Eric Yuan, who was born in China but moved to Silicon Valley.³⁷

This story is repeated across American business, particularly in the technology sector. The founder of Dropbox, the son of Iranian immigrants who grew up in Kansas, wrote an op-ed titled “Kansas welcomed my immigrant parents. Then I built Dropbox, an \$8 billion company.”³⁸ Google was cofounded by a Russian immigrant, Sergey Brin, and DoorDash was cofounded by Tony Xu, who migrated as a child with his parents from China. Apple was cofounded by Steve Jobs, whose biological father was born in Syria. More generally, immigrants and their children started almost half of Fortune 500 companies.³⁹

Such businesses are integral to our lives, and it is easy to take them for granted, but the world (and our lives) would likely be very different if these companies had been invented in Russia, Iran, China, or Syria. However, they would likely not have been invented at all in such nations, and the world (including America) would have lost out.

Ilya Somin of the Cato Institute and the Scalia Law School at George Mason University also notes that two of the key COVID-19 vaccines—Moderna and Pfizer—were invented in America and Europe by immigrants or children of immigrants. He points out that such an invention “is an example of the enormous benefits of international freedom of movement.”⁴⁰ More generally, he says, “Migration restrictions make the world much poorer than it would be otherwise, and thereby also slow the pace of improvement in health.”⁴¹

Third, the economic future of many native-born Americans is intertwined with the newest generations of immigrants. Dowell Myers discusses these issues in his prescient book, *Immigrants and Boomers: Forging a New Social Contract for the Future of America*.⁴² He argues that it is in the best interest of boomers to invest in education and other social programs for immigrants so that they can contribute to the economy as workers, taxpayers, and homeowners.

Consider two issues: home ownership and Social Security. As the baby boomers retire, many will want to sell their homes or leave them to their children. A home seller needs a home buyer, however, and that buyer will increasingly be an immigrant or someone closely related to the immigration experience. An Urban Institute report “projects that between 2020 and 2040, no net new homeowners will be White, and 70 percent of new homeowners will be Hispanic.”⁴³ When you add other immigrant and minority groups to the equation, the overwhelmingly White baby boomer generation (and their heirs) will rely on immigrants and minorities to realize what for many is their most important financial asset.

Social Security and Medicare are “social insurance” programs, which means that individuals contribute throughout their working life through paycheck deductions and then receive benefits when they retire. Such programs are more popular than “welfare” (entitlement) programs because of the perception that individuals are receiving what they contributed (although some will realize a net gain). The system is encountering the existential threat of more retirees, who live longer than ever, and fewer workers. The Social Security trust fund may run out of money by 2034, which would require a tax increase, benefit reductions, or both to maintain promised payouts.⁴⁴ In 1955, the worker-retiree ratio was 8.6, but by 2021 it had declined to 2.7 workers for each retiree.⁴⁵

With a non-Hispanic White population that will decline throughout the twenty-first century, the continuation of Social Security and Medicare at levels consistent with expectations will depend on immigrant and minority workers. By increasing immigration, the middle-aged will have a greater likelihood of receiving the benefits that many counted on, and will depend on, in retirement. While immigration alone cannot solve all of these challenges, nativist-populist calls to reduce immigration in the name of “the people” will only end up harming most of those same people.

Researchers have found many other economic benefits to migration, sometimes in ways that are counterintuitive. For example, research by economists shows the perverse effects of reducing H1-B visas. According to a review of research by Liya Palagashvili at the Mercatus Center, when company requests for such visas are denied, instead of hiring American workers, companies offshore the work.⁴⁶ In addition, cities with more H1-B visas saw greater employment and wage growth for Americans with and without college degrees, whereas areas with more denied H1-B requests saw employment declines and reduced wage growth.

But the ultimate goal of nativist-populist movements is not to enact rational economic policies that concretely help American workers. Their goal is typically to have fewer immigrants—temporary or permanent, legal or illegal—and especially “minority” immigrants. The average American pays the price for this anti-immigrant fixation without gaining any benefits.

In addition to being a “nation of immigrants,” America is also a nation of entrepreneurship, and the two are deeply connected. The late Hoover Institution economist Edward Lazear and his colleagues found that younger nations had higher levels of new business creation, while an older workforce blocks younger people from gaining skills and slows down entrepreneurship.⁴⁷ In statistical terms, they found, “A one standard deviation decrease in a country’s median age increases new business formation by 2.5 percentage points, which is about 40 percent of the mean rate.” As immigrant communities are a key source of America’s young people, restricting their numbers will have negative economic implications for all.

Nativist politics also hurt entrepreneurship in earlier periods. Petra Moser and Shmuel San found that the 1920s immigration laws, which were designed to sharply reduce the number of Catholic immigrants from Eastern and Southern Europe, led to a decline in the number of scientists working in some fields as well as the number of patents and the number of patents per scientist. In addition, such effects “persisted into the 1960s.”⁴⁸

One thought experiment is to imagine a world with many fewer obstacles to migration. In an article intriguingly titled “Economics and Emigration: Trillion-Dollar Bills on the Sidewalk?” Michael Clemens argued that such barriers are the

single largest economic distortion imposed by governments. Reducing them could double per capita income globally and be more beneficial than ending all remaining trade and capital barriers.⁴⁹

In the graphic book *Open Borders: The Science and Ethics of Immigration*, Bryan Caplan and Zach Weinersmith make the case for unrestricted migration. They argue that mass migration would “enrich virtually everyone on earth by massively increasing humanity’s productivity.” The book responds to all the usual and predictable counterarguments.⁵⁰

One might try to imagine a nativist graphic book, but instead of picturing prosperous people, it would be a gloomy atmosphere of walls, barbed wire, document checks, higher prices, unemployment lines, depopulating regions, and collapsing infrastructure. When buying their ink, the illustrators would need extra quantities of gray, the official color of socialist, populist, nationalist, and authoritarian regimes.

The debate about how reducing migration obstacles would lower global poverty highlights the contradiction of an economic system that promotes the free movement of goods but not of workers. To enhance American and global prosperity, we should work to desocialize immigration policies and empower individuals and the free market rather than governments to make decisions about human mobility.

Protectionism vs. Immigration

A longstanding claim is that immigrants compete with the native born for jobs, even if migrants are contradictorily stereotyped as welfare seekers.

According to John Cochrane of the Hoover Institution, “If immigrants steal jobs, ask yourself how 159 million Americans have jobs now. We are immigrants or descendants of immigrants. The answer is, we created new businesses and new demand just as much as we created new workers. So will the new immigrants.”⁵¹

He also discusses the related “lump of labor” fallacy, which posits that the economy has only so much work to do. Every immigrant therefore (allegedly) takes a slice of that work away from the native born. As Cochrane says, “This vision has nothing to do with reality.” Most of the evidence shows that immigrants do not take jobs away from the native born or lower their wages. At most, some newer immigrants may compete with those immigrants who arrived immediately before them, as they often look for the same jobs (those that native-born Americans do not want).

Furthermore, according to David Bier and Nowrasteh, “New workers don’t just take jobs—they create them.”⁵² As George Borjas notes, migrants can function as either substitutes or complements to current workers.⁵³ A report from the St. Louis Federal Reserve Bank noted that immigrant workers “are overrepresented at the extremes of the skills spectrum” and discussed the example of immigrants in the construction industry. They often fill in-demand but low-skilled and lower-paying jobs, which makes possible the employment of native-born workers in higher-skilled and higher-paying trades. This is “labor complementarity” in action and creates jobs that would not exist in a world of immigration restriction and enforcement. The report also noted that H1-B hires lead to the hiring of additional workers; that highly educated immigrants receive more patents than do highly educated native-born workers; and that immigrants are generally more entrepreneurial than native-born residents.⁵⁴

Even if the nativist economic myths were true, which they are not, competition is what capitalism—and life in America more generally—is all about. Whether you are a small business owner trying to make a better widget, an employee looking for a better job, or an athlete trying to make the team, the reality of competition is unavoidable. Many would argue that the competitive spirit makes us stronger as a nation.

Cochrane also notes that we need to bring the American consumer into this discussion. While old companies (A&P) are displaced by new companies (Walmart), which may then be disrupted by newer companies (Amazon), the result is “cheaper and better goods and services.” In addition, “Lots of people are doing well working for the new businesses.”

In addition, immigration does not harm business—to the contrary, it helps keep some companies, economic sectors, and even regions of the country alive. Just ask businesses in the agricultural, construction, hospitality, healthcare, and service sectors. Ask small towns and rural areas that have been revitalized by immigration after decades of population loss.

Even if economic competition from immigration were real, would it be a problem? In answer to a question, Ayn Rand made the following statement:

No one has the right to pursue his self-interest by law or by force, which is what you're suggesting. You want to forbid immigration on the grounds that it lowers your standard of living—which isn't true, though if it were true, you'd still have no right to close the borders. You're not entitled to any "self-interest" that injures others, especially when you can't prove that open immigration affects your self-interest. You can't claim that anything others may do—for example, simply through competition—is against your self-interest.⁵⁵

Capitalism and Human Mobility

Even the most cursory review of economic history shows that capitalism is the best friend of immigration, and vice versa. A dynamic, growing economy needs not only more workers but also new ideas and energy. As Dan Tichenor points out in *Dividing Lines: The Politics of Immigration Control in America*, while business interests are not enthusiastic about giving immigrants many political-economic rights, they do want them to cross borders as freely as possible.⁵⁶

For example, when American port cities tried to regulate passenger ships in the 1800s in order to reduce transatlantic migration, shipping companies responded with lawsuits that became known as the Passenger Cases.⁵⁷ Texas growers were able to insert the Texas Proviso in the 1952 McCarran-Walter Act, specifying that hiring unauthorized immigrants was not the equivalent of "harboring" them. The efforts of nativists to slow or stop immigration in the twentieth century were often thwarted by both laws and administrative rules at the behest of businesses and the politicians they supported who saw the benefits of a growing economy. These businesses were not softhearted idealists but hardheaded realists acting in their own self-interest, which is what capitalism is all about.

We might also note that actual socialist countries have a dreadful and tragic record on free movement. The Soviet Union, East Germany, and others were best known for internal and external controls on human mobility. Walls, barbed wire, and "papers please" checks are all part of the ugly legacy of these regimes, which created economies and societies that people risked their lives to leave, not enter. Freedom of movement was a threat to the state, and people were not trusted to make basic life decisions, including where to live. Many of the regimes behind the Iron Curtain claimed to be democracies that represented the people, and some even had names to this effect (German Democratic Republic, Polish People's Republic), but the reality was different.

Nativist-populists share this ethos, as they claim to fight on behalf of an amorphous "people" against nebulous "enemies." This fight inevitably reduces the rights and freedoms of the actual people, but the nativist-populist war is never ending, and lost rights are never reinstated. Immigrants and the native born alike lose in nativist, populist, and socialist utopias.

Immigrants and National Security

Despite what Timothy Garton Ash called "inflammatory wording" about immigrant "invasions," as well as the laughable idea that Hispanics are somehow engaged in a *reconquista* of the American Southwest on behalf of Mexico, the reality is that migrants have long contributed to America's national security.⁵⁸ In doing so, they helped defend America's political and economic values and shaped a world that better reflected them.⁵⁹

Today, a larger population means more potential recruits for the armed forces. Because of our all-volunteer force, the nation needs thousands of young people to sign on the dotted line every year.⁶⁰ With a declining non-Hispanic White population, the growing number of immigrants and children of immigrants is an essential national defense resource.

Diversity is a longstanding hallmark of the American military, going back to the American Revolution. During times of war, large numbers of immigrants and minorities have joined the ranks. Watch any World War II movie and the typical platoon has soldiers with names that represent many nationalities—Smith, Rossi, Murphy, Wisniewski, Garcia, LaFleur, and Schultz.⁶¹ These movies both reflected GI reality and made a general point about diversity in America and why we were fighting.⁶²

A more diverse population also means more cultural skills, talents, and knowledge available to the military and intelligence communities. Consider the immigrants and children of immigrants who have served in every war and spoke many languages, useful for all sorts of communication, interrogation, translation, and espionage purposes.

About five thousand noncitizens with legal permanent resident status join the military every year. These “green card soldiers” have fought alongside native-born citizens during the last two decades of conflict in Iraq and Afghanistan. Looked at with suspicion by some in the United States, they rallied ’round the flag during times of crisis and shared the sacrifices of American citizens.

From a broader security perspective, immigrant workers were crucial to the industries sustaining America during the COVID-19 pandemic, ranging from IT to delivery. They are particularly important to healthcare fields. According to the Migration Policy Institute, while “immigrants represent 17 percent of the overall US civilian workforce, they are 28 percent of physicians and 24 percent of dentists, for example, as well as 38 percent of home health aides.”⁶³

Conclusion: Desocialize Human Mobility

If you want to see socialism in action, you can find no better place than the nativist-populist-nationalist movements working to reverse our “nation of immigrants” heritage.

As history shows, anti-immigration activism advances the classic socialist agenda of expanding big government, hamstringing capitalism, promoting collectivism over individualism, and growing the welfare state. Rather than using top-down government power to create more immigration restrictions and barriers, policymakers should work to desocialize our immigration policies.

Such nativist-populism is distinct, however, from the principled conservatism most closely associated with Ronald Reagan. The traditional conservative can approach the immigration issue in good faith, and to advocate some migration conditions and limitations is not the same thing as the nativism that seeks to pull up the drawbridge in a way that harms our prosperity and liberty.

This is crucial to remember when we read sensationalistic media stories and alarmist pundit commentary about immigration and the border. Nativists will claim they want to “control” the border, enhance the “rule of law,” or “protect” the nation from “invasion.” While principled conservatives may see nothing wrong with such goals in theory, a different story emerges when you listen carefully to nativist rhetoric and read nativist proposals.⁶⁴ You learn quickly that many want to drastically restrict or even end migration and enact a Soviet-style “papers please” enforcement regime—in other words, to socially engineer society in a way that imposes collateral damage on our freedom and prosperity.

More generally, many of today’s nativists, populists, and nationalists are not only willing to accept Big Government to achieve their policy goals but may actually want to enhance it. In a discussion of the “sanctuary cities” debate, Ilya Somin makes the following points:

Of course, what counts as “conservative” is very much in flux. Much of the American political right today has more in common with European “big-government conservative” ethnonationalist movements than with the ideology espoused by Ronald Reagan. If your main priority is restricting immigration ... You may be willing to pay the price ... Many “national conservatives” might even view the resulting increase in federal power as a feature, not a bug.⁶⁵

Nativist movements are also indicted by their own problematic history. Contemporary anti-immigration activism is just the latest version of the impulse that previously tried to limit German, Irish, Italian, Polish, Asian, Catholic, and Jewish migration. Nativists were wrong then, and they are wrong now. Principled conservatives who want policy to be based on classic American values should shun these efforts to bring socialism to the world of human mobility.

Nativism and socialism are therefore close contenders for the title of Most Failed Idea in Modern Human History. Both movements are fundamentally skeptical of the individual, contrary to capitalism, and enamored of state power. They never accomplish their chimerical goals, but they do harm individuals, families, economies, and societies. Ronald Reagan famously said that “freedom and democracy will leave Marxism and Leninism on the ash heap of history,” and nativism and socialism equally belong in the dumpster.

Standing opposed to mobility socialism are core American values, like free enterprise and individual liberty. Contrary to the order-and-obedience mantra of nativist-populist movements, freedom can be messy and contentious. The creative destruction of capitalism means that Woolworth and Pan American World Airways no longer exist, but would we bring them back at the expense of Walmart and Southwest Airlines?

While new immigrant groups can alarm the native born, who often have little familiarity with them, the work ethic, religious faith, family values, patriotism, and entrepreneurial spirit of migrants strengthen our nation. Immigrants also promote prosperity and stability by allowing industries to remain profitable, creating jobs for the native born, and helping small towns and rural areas stem population loss.

Nativists and populists fail to appreciate that in America it is values that matter, not the color, language, or religion of the people who cherish them. The core of America is universalist ideas like freedom, documents like the Constitution, and processes like elections. They have attracted people from across the globe for more than two centuries, people who faced nativist suspicion but moved into the mainstream.

Today, the newest immigrants are disproving the “nattering nabobs of nativist negativism” (to update the famous phrase of Spiro Agnew, whose father was a Greek immigrant) and making vital contributions to our economy and national security.⁶⁶ Far from undermining our values, immigrants are adopting them as their own.

How should we desocialize our immigration policies? If we imagine a sliding scale with capitalism and individual liberty at one end and socialism at the other, our goal should be to move immigration law and policy as close as possible to the former and as far as possible from the latter. The more we rely on arbitrary restrictions, counterproductive regulations, and intrusive and expensive enforcement—in other words, Big Government—the closer we are to socialism. The more our policies emphasize individual choice and the free market, the closer to freedom.⁶⁷ In addition, as Milton Friedman and William Niskanen argued, the right approach is not to limit immigration but to limit the welfare state.

Principled conservatives who encounter what John Cochrane called “xenophobic political bloviation”⁶⁸ should remember the Reagan legacy. Our fortieth president believed that immigrants were at the heart of America’s unique spirit and mission, and he strongly supported the free movement of people. He not only rhetorically praised immigrants but also signed into law the largest legalization in American history, the Immigration Reform and Control Act of 1986. The law brought almost three million people out of “the shadows” and “into the sunlight,” and Reagan never regretted it.⁶⁹

In his Ellis Island speech celebrating the centenary of the Statue of Liberty, Reagan said:

Call it mysticism if you will, I have always believed there was some divine providence that placed this great land here between the two great oceans, to be found by a special kind of people from every corner of the world, who had a special love for freedom and a special courage that enabled them to leave their own land, leave their friends and their countrymen, and come to this new and strange land to build a New World of peace and freedom and hope.⁷⁰

In his Farewell Address to the Nation, he elaborated:

I've spoken of the shining city all my political life, but I don't know if I ever quite communicated what I saw when I said it. But in my mind it was a tall, proud city built on rocks stronger than oceans, windswept, God-blessed, and teeming with people of all kinds living in harmony and peace; a city with free ports that hummed with commerce and creativity. And if there had to be city walls, the walls had doors and the doors were open to anyone with the will and the heart to get here. That's how I saw it, and see it still.⁷¹

I choose Reagan's shining city over socialist nativism, and I hope you will also.



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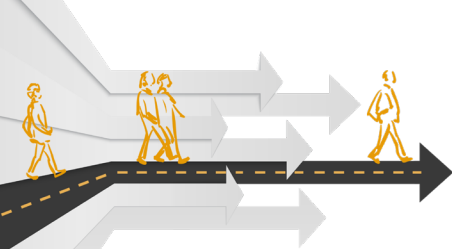
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⁶⁹ Ronald W. Reagan, “Statement on Signing the Immigration Reform and Control Act of 1986,” November 6, 1986, <https://www.reaganlibrary.gov/archives/speech/statement-signing-immigration-reform-and-control-act-1986>; David Bier, “Internet Myth: Ronald Reagan Regretted Legalization,” *Daily Caller*, July 16, 2013, <https://dailycaller.com/2013/07/16/internet-myth-ronald-reagan-regretted-legalization>.

⁷⁰ Ronald W. Reagan, “Remarks at the Opening Ceremonies of the Statue of Liberty Centennial Celebration in New York, New York,” July 3, 1986, <https://www.reaganlibrary.gov/archives/speech/remarks-opening-ceremonies-statue-liberty-centennial-celebration-new-york-new-york>.

⁷¹ Ronald W. Reagan, “Farewell Address to the Nation” (speech, Washington, DC, January 11, 1989), <https://www.reaganlibrary.gov/archives/speech/farewell-address-nation>.



SOCIALISM AND FREE-MARKET CAPITALISM: THE HUMAN PROSPERITY PROJECT

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