

IMMIGRANTS AS REFUGEES OF THE GLOBAL ECONOMY

Immigration

Colonial
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Migration

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Immigration and the Global Economy

The phenomenon of migration as we know it today must be understood in the larger context of the globalized economy and the “race to the bottom” that characterizes the multinational corporate relationship with the global South. A deeper understanding of the ways in which migration today is rooted in the machinations of the globalized economy can help engender compassion and solidarity.

Media portrayal of recent immigrants in general and undocumented immigrants in particular infects not just educational policy but the attitudes of the public toward massive numbers of rudely dislocated human beings—“Immigrants are taking our jobs!” “They are wanton lawbreakers!” As teachers, we are in a position to combat such perceptions through our curricula and to foster an inclusive community that recognizes the desperate needs of refugees from the globalized economy.

Without understanding the forces compelling immigration into the U.S. today, teachers are at risk of falling prey to the dominant narrative advanced by media and corporate interests, to the detriment of

children from immigrant families. Teachers need compassion for the struggles faced by these students and their parents in their communities and elsewhere. Further, teachers who are committed to advancing equity and social justice through their teaching must stand prepared with both courage and knowledge to counter the dominant narrative in their teaching.

This article investigates a curriculum unit for pre-service teachers that rests upon a study of the globalized economy and the international “race to the bottom.” Students are asked to consider whether the effects on human lives brought about by free trade agreements and third world debt in fact amounts to a kind of violence. Is the loss of a livelihood through these means really much different from losses brought about by other destructive conditions such as war or drought? When people are forced to migrate in order to escape intolerable and life-threatening conditions, should it matter whether this was caused by acts of nature or by institutions and policies created to protect the interests of transnational capital? And ultimately, how should we teach children and youth about immigration today?

A “Diversity” Course for Pre-Service Teachers

I teach the “diversity” course for undergraduate elementary and early

childhood majors at a public liberal arts college in New England. Typically taken in the sophomore year, the course is required prior to methods coursework with its accompanying practicum. In its former iteration, this course was the typical survey of the various ways in which humans can be “different.” It was, and still is, an attempt to foster culturally responsive educators, but two of my colleagues and I redesigned it to emphasize the role played by historical-political-economic forces over the last 500 years.

The aim is to equip students better to interrogate the dominant narrative and ultimately to prepare them to expose its shortcomings and omissions to their future students. The course in its entirety includes the following:

- ◆ Economic inequity in the U.S. today, and why capitalism produces wealth inequality.
- ◆ The role of public education in re-producing class-based inequity (including NCLB and the move to privatize public education).
- ◆ The still-ongoing history of Native American conquest and subjugation.
- ◆ The ongoing history of African American inequality in the U.S.
- ◆ Current forces affecting and surrounding immigration into the U.S.
- ◆ Organizing for change.

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Our students are predominantly female and White. They have to take this course quite early in their studies, with little if any prior practical experience. They are eager to learn how to be good teachers (in their view of “good teaching”). Perhaps understandably, many are a bit impatient (some more than a bit) with a course requirement that on the surface doesn’t appear to be teaching them how to do that.

Colonial Roots

The topic of modern migration and immigration, which is addressed in three weeks of class near the end of the semester, is the subject of this article. Early on in the course, we have revisited the Columbus myth, and now we return to the theme of colonialism. By way of introduction, I ask my students to speculate on why some countries in the world have huge concentrations of wealth, while others are deeply impoverished. Their conjectures predictably reflect the dominant thinking: corrupt governments, natural disasters and war, lack of natural resources, and so on.

I then ask them to list as many countries as possible that are relatively poor, and to make a second list of the wealthy nations in the world. We compile the two lists on the board, and I ask them to identify the continents where most of the wealthy countries are located, and then where most of the poor countries are found. Also, what relationships have existed

historically between those on the wealthy list and those that are impoverished? Sometimes students are totally stumped, but usually someone eventually mentions colonization. In any case, I then send them off to read the chapter on colonialism in Bill Bigelow’s and Bob Peterson’s (2002) *Rethinking Globalization*.

Thus begins the realization that today’s wealthy countries gained their wealth (in short) by taking it from today’s poor countries—most of whom, by the way, were anything but destitute before the plunder began. This sets the stage for an explanation of how such a large proportion of the world’s population have come to live in conditions of extreme poverty, when 500 years ago their ancestors enjoyed conditions of sufficiency, even plenty, and often in civilizations that were arguably more advanced than European society at the time.

Here we have a crack at debunking American exceptionalism and Eurocentrism, and also take a poke at White supremacy. (In this regard, it is important to underscore the role played in the Americas by the spread of disease, which literally decimated the population of the hemisphere well in advance of the conquest by supposedly “superior” armaments.)

The Globalized Economy

“Colonialism without colonies” (Bigelow and Peterson, 2002) well describes the

methodology for continuing the exploitation of the Global South by the North in modern times. I introduce this topic with a short but powerful film called *The Hidden Face of Globalization* (Darpon, 2003), featuring women in Bangladeshi sweatshops who are paid 17 cents an hour, working 20-hour days to manufacture clothing for companies like Disney and Walmart. Students investigate the labels on the clothing they happen to be wearing to see where in the world other people may have labored to produce it, much like the women in the video.

Next we engage in a simulation role play to illustrate the corporate “race to the bottom” that results in the conditions under which those young women in Bangladesh labor to fashion our clothing and most of the other items we depend on and can readily acquire. Developed by Bill Bigelow (2002, 2006), the “Transnational Capital Auction” allows students to play the role of leaders in anonymous third world countries. They compete to attract transnational corporate investment by adjusting labor, taxation, and environmental laws and policies so as to be maximally “friendly to capital.”

Through class discussions and mini-lectures along with further readings from *Rethinking Globalization* (Bigelow & Peterson, 2002), students learn about the role of the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund (IMF), and the World Trade Organization (WTO) in constructing the

globalized economy and supporting the interests of transnational corporations. They learn about free trade agreements and the meaning of “free trade” as opposed to “fair trade.” They are introduced to neoliberal and “trickle-down” economic theory. They read about child labor, sweatshops, and migrant labor. They learn about the devastation of local agriculture in the Global South wreaked by industrial agriculture hand in hand with the World Bank, the IMF, and the WTO.

Forced Migration

While in itself this material is arguably important to any educated citizen living in today’s world, it is crucial foundational knowledge for understanding the forces impelling most of today’s migration from Global South to North. In order to build solidarity with the immigrant population that is crossing our southern border, students like mine will need to see clearly how these migrants are virtually forced to leave behind all that they know and love, facing untold dangers to enter an unknown land where prospects are uncertain at best.

We begin this last phase of the unit with another chance to speculate. “Imagine yourself,” I say, “in the place of someone who has decided to leave the home where you were born and where you have friends and family, and go away to find work in another country where you have never been before, where you don’t speak the language, and where you don’t know anyone. The journey to get there is very expensive and very dangerous, and you might not get there alive. What do you imagine might be the reasons for doing such a thing?”

On the board we list all the reasons students can come up with: war, famine, wanting a better opportunity, needing a job, and so on. We then watch a half-hour video called *Uprooted: Refugees of the Global Economy* (Nilsen, 2001), which features the stories of a young woman from the Philippines, a couple from Bolivia, and a man from Haiti. Some students are asked to focus on noting the systemic reasons for large numbers of people like these to leave their homes and families and friends for other countries. Others are asked to focus on the personal reasons why the individual people featured in the film left home and family and friends to come to the U.S.

Afterwards, we list these two types of reasons. The video includes systemic factors such as the crushing national debt imposed by the IMF and World Bank, a lack of hard currency to pay back the debt, crippling inflation, the loss of domestic industry due

to underselling by cheap imports from the North, and loss of jobs as corporations pull out of one impoverished country to relocate in another. Personal factors help put a human face on the systemic. One family loses their life savings in a scam that falsely promises to take the father safely to the U.S., leaving the eldest daughter to forego college in favor of life as a domestic drudge in thrall to a wealthy U.S. family, sending half her meagre earnings home each month to help her own family.

We discuss these reasons and the three stories. How do they compare to the reasons students imagined? How much choice did the people in the video have in leaving home? In entering the U.S. without the required documents? Why did they not have those documents?

In another of Bill Bigelow’s (2006) well-crafted activities, students create short improvisational skits to explore some of the real-life dilemmas that such migrants have faced, and still do. They also search alternative news sources such as *truthout.org* and *Democracy Now!* to bring in articles on migrant labor in the U.S. and on the education of unauthorized immigrant children.

In a final bid to build solidarity with (or at least to engender compassion for) the refugees of the global economy, I show a video by Jenny Alexander (2007) documenting a recent immigration raid on a factory in New Bedford, Massachusetts, not that far from our campus. Women who were working in a factory manufacturing backpacks for the U.S. military were swept up summarily, shackled and handcuffed, and treated like criminals. Many were subjected to deportation, including mothers separated from their nursing babies and small children.

Ultimately, students are invited to consider the meaning of the term “refugee.” To what extent might it appropriately be applied to people whose livelihoods are endangered by economic forces, the effects of which they cannot mitigate, and which they can only minimally avoid by migrating elsewhere? Is it appropriate that people fleeing war or political imprisonment may be granted refugee status, while others, also imperiled in their homelands but by different factors, are denied that status?

Teaching about Immigration

At the end of each unit of study in the course, students have an opportunity to consider how they might teach about that topic to their future students. This is an important feature in the course, as it helps students to find the connections between the course material and their future work

with young children. It helps allay their impatience with an education course that tasks them to learn about economics, history and other topics that may seem superfluous to their career goals. It also helps them see that controversial topics, even tragic ones, are not only possible to bring into early childhood and elementary classrooms, but necessary, if we are to avoid repeating the disinformation that passed for schooling in our own upbringing.

For this unit, I bring to class a variety of children’s literature on the topic of modern day immigration and migrant labor. (A bibliography is provided in the Appendix that follows this article.) In teams, students select a book around which to base a lesson or mini-unit, rough out their plans, and then present the results to the rest of the class.

All of these children’s books can open up discussion of hardships endured by migrant children and their families. Some touch on language learning, and additionally on the relative difficulty that adults may experience in acquiring a new language compared with their children, who then may be forced into an intermediary role between parent and other adults (Elya, 2002). Some are written in both Spanish and English (Anzaldúa, 1993; Dorros, 1993; Perez, 2002). A few unabashedly take on the issue of unauthorized entry into the United States (Anzaldúa, 1993). The many migrant workers who are native born U.S. citizens are represented (Krull, 2003; Smothers, 2003). The winning of rights for migrant farmworkers in the U.S. is included (Krull, 2003). Many reflect the deep and abiding love that these displaced families hold for the homeland they are forced to flee (Bunting, 1996; Perez, 2002; Thomas, 1994). All of these topics, and others, can be discussed in the context of the students’ presentations in class.

Impact on Students

Students write responses to a set of essay questions at the end of each unit of study in the course. For this final unit, the culminating essay question is posed as follows:

Free trade policies have created conditions where capital (i.e., corporate investment) is free to cross national boundaries at will, seeking the most profitable regions in which to operate (e.g., where wages are lowest, worker safety laws and environmental laws are non-existent or not enforced, child labor is allowed, etc.).

As long as that is the case, do you believe that labor (i.e., human beings) should be equally free to cross national boundaries in order to escape conditions of poverty

and exploitation created by these free trade policies?

I tell the students that this question is an opinion piece, and there are no right or wrong answers, as long as their opinions are well-reasoned and supported.

A majority of students are in favor of allowing labor the same freedom of movement that capital enjoys: One student wrote:

I believe that as long as developed countries and companies are allowed to go over to the third world countries and take advantage of the desperate need of income to survive and to abuse and treat the workers inhumanely, the people from these countries should have the equal right to cross the boundaries to escape these conditions that are forcing them into extreme poverty. It's only right that if companies and free trade are creating even more impoverished countries, then the people have a choice to escape the exploitation and poverty.

Poor people are prevented from coming to the U.S. because the rights of corporations are favored over people's needs to survive and escape their poverty ridden countries. If they were allowed to cross national boundaries freely, just as capital can, there wouldn't be such trouble climbing out of poverty and it may even help poverty throughout the world because there would be no people to force into it.

A second student agreed, but hopes fair trade might somehow (magically?) replace free trade, obviating the need for migration:

We have been responsible for the failing economy of several countries due to globalization. Free trade policies have created conditions of poverty and exploitation in third world countries. There is no work or economic opportunity for the people of these countries because the global economy has depleted all the resources these countries once had. The people that the United States and other developed nations have taken advantage of for centuries should be able to try and dig themselves, their families and their countries out of debt by working under fair conditions in these first world nations. If the global economy can come in [to a third world country] and make structural changes to the entire economic system, then the people of [those] countries should be equally free to reap the benefits of another country's economy and resources. However, contrary to this belief I think that the real solution is in fair trade and similar practices. It would be most beneficial if these third world countries were able to restore their economies and trading markets so that they are equally benefited by the globalized economy and trade. This is almost unimaginable, but steering away from free trade policies and toward fair

trade would keep migrant workers from needing to leave their own homes for work and allow them to support their own nations' economy rather than the one that crippled them to begin with.

Some students believe that immigration wreaks havoc in the U.S. This student sees this as an irritant that might motivate change for the better:

If the people from these third world countries started crossing borders as they please and coming to the northern more civic [sic] countries, taking jobs from their people and causing upheaval, then maybe something would begin to change in the way the WTO operates.

Some students would like to have it both ways:

I believe that if these people are just going out of their country to escape these living conditions, then they should be equally free to do so. I do not feel that they should be able to freely come to the United States, though, unless authorized ... because we already have enough people here. With the amount of people here, there already is not enough work for them, let alone these individuals. Not only that, but we have not even made schooling good enough in some areas for our kids. So, to add more unauthorized people would not be fair to the people here.

Others are firm in their opinion that, even given current conditions, free migration from impoverished countries to wealthy ones is not acceptable:

I do not see how a person could not be against free trade and want to continue to enable corporations to continue to treat workers in such an inhuman fashion.... However, I do not believe that the solution would be allowing people to be free to cross national boundaries in order to escape conditions of poverty.... Unfortunately, most of the time immigrants have a difficult time escaping poverty even after coming to the U.S.... If everyone was free to cross the borders there would be a large amount of individuals flooding in the U.S. All of these individuals would have a difficult time finding work.... [Also,] opening up the borders would cause the home countries' economies... [to] crash.

As much as it is nice to think we can let people cross the border to work and escape problems in their country, that is just not realistic. This country has protected borders for a reason and although it seems ideal to help everyone, we can't have everyone escaping to the United States. Obviously what happens in other countries isn't ok and is really unfortunate, but we can't take everyone into this country. [We] can't afford to have them and they really can't afford to be here. Sooner or later the amount of work would run out, Americans would lose their jobs

to the people who immigrated and would work for cheaper. These protected workers keep the United States as successful as it is.... The United States needs to continue having protected borders because before we can think of others we have to think of our own problems first, which we seem to have many of.

Some students reject the premise of the question. (Fair enough!) However, this student then goes on to blame the victim:

I do not believe that either party should be able to cross borders.... The world should focus more on improving the life and economy of every country, not just instilling efforts into first world countries in the hope that those few countries on top of the world economy will be able to and responsible for taking care of every human on earth in need of a stable economy and safe living and working environment. This expectation is unreasonable. Countries such as India, Bolivia, the Philippines and Haiti need to stop letting United States forces come in and take over. Allowing richer countries to enslave native peoples somewhere else will certainly not bring wealth to those countries they enslave. I do not know what those third world country leaders are thinking. Perhaps they are desperate for resources and money [so] that they think that letting the U.S. take over for a while will be a quick fix. This is false. The U.S. has a way of taking over and staying where they want to keep power.... The World Bank and World Trade Organization need to be stood up to. They bully countries into thinking that they need to be part of the club to be successful. 'Let America take over and build factories in your country and enslave your already impoverished people and then you will be magically lifted out of poverty.' Why do countries believe this? The third world countries need to be educated in what is going on in the world and team up to fight against greater first world forces. Find the flaw in their system and end the 'free' trade that restricts most of the world.

Nonetheless, within this last student's diatribe lies the germ of an interesting idea. "The third world countries," she suggests, "need to ... *team up* to fight against greater first world forces" (emphasis added).

Analysis and Summary

What do these comments reveal about the results of this three-week investigation into the workings of the globalized economy, and in particular its effects on workers and migration? Clearly, most students still have not fully grasped the fact that transnational capital has become a hegemonic force. Many don't see that solutions like "steering away" from free trade and toward fair trade is a fantasy,

as long as the current economic system persists, with transnational capital at the helm, doing all the steering. Others berate the third world countries for not standing up to bullies like the U.S., and (echoing the myth of the welfare queen) simultaneously for expecting the wealthy countries to “take care of every human on earth.” Some continue to fear that looser immigration restrictions may “flood the U.S.” and “Americans [sic] would lose their jobs.”

On the other hand, most of these students have learned a great deal. They are clear about the devastating effects on the third world of European colonialism, to the vast benefit of Europeans and their descendants in the western hemisphere. They are conversant with the terms of the globalized economy and understand that it has continued the ruinous work of colonization, but now without the need for actual colonies. They are disabused of the illusion that impoverished migrants are thrilled to leave their own homelands, or that the United States is a land of golden opportunity for all.

They understand that the immigration story of today is not the old Ellis Island

story, and there is hope that if and when they teach about immigration it will not be that story that they tell. There is ample evidence of their increased compassion for (and maybe even solidarity with) the refugees of the global economy who fill the meanest positions in our workforce and whose children they will no doubt encounter in their future classrooms.

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APPENDIX

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