

# A Reformist Program On Immigration (Or What Harris Might Have Said)



*Richard D. Wolff*

11-26-2024 ~ The immigration issue has split and/or weakened both center and left parties and movements across many nations in recent years. Serious economic and social problems afflicting national working classes have been “managed”—at least temporarily—by scapegoating immigrants as if they were responsible for those problems. Leaders on the left fear that many among their supporters are vulnerable to that scapegoating. In contrast, leaders on the right often see that scapegoating as a means to achieve electoral gains. Trump reflected and strengthened the view that such scapegoating can get votes. The widespread perception that Kamala Harris too would be “tough on immigrants” showed that she offered no real alternative program on immigration. Thus, the classically reactionary posing of the issue as “protecting the nation against an immigrant ‘invasion’” widely prevailed.

Appeals to morality, multiculturalism, and compassion for the plight of most immigrants failed to dissuade many on the left from disengaging and moving politically rightward. The center or moderate left needs but lacks clear, strong support for immigrants that does not alienate portions of their traditional electoral base. “Me-too” opposition to immigration, even if less harsh and hostile than that of the professional demagogues, will fail, as Kamala Harris’s campaign discovered. Moreover, classic left reformism suggests a radically different program on immigration. It is derived from the reformist program (the “Green New Deal”) to address climate change when it faced a parallel problem with job-

holders in polluting industries. A parallel reformist program to deal with immigration might be called an “Inclusive New Deal.”

In contrast, conservative, right-wing, and fascistic political forces have used extreme opposition to immigration to grow their ranks. Those forces boldly accuse immigrants of bringing crime, disease, downward pressure on wages, competition for jobs, and burdensome, costly demands on schools, hospitals, and other public services. Even in the United States, a country mostly composed of successive immigrant waves (who obliterated and replaced the indigenous people), many of those immigrants’ descendants now hold anti-immigrant views. Despite massive evidence to the contrary, they rationalize those views by insisting that, unlike former immigrants, today’s differ in being “unwilling to work.”

Rightists advance their radical “solutions” such as sharply tightening immigration rules, refusing all further immigration, and deporting millions. Even where moral, ethical, and religious traditions call us to welcome immigrants, right-wingers have found that anti-immigration politics can work well. They attack center-leftists for seeking future votes by being pro-immigration or only weakly anti-immigration. In the United States, they attack the Democratic Party for not putting their American-born constituents first. Patriotism, as defined by such rightists, now entails a strict anti-immigrant position that displaces traditional religions’ endorsement of the opposite.

Immigrants forced to arrive as slaves, Black people in the United States, for example, fared differently: their integration was mostly slower and much more partial. Brown immigrants who arrived as other than slaves also suffered slower and partial integration. Anti-Black-and-Brown racism added further discrimination and life difficulties to the experience of those immigrants. Institutionalized racism denied opportunities for such immigrant communities to develop their members’ levels of education, job skills, businesses, personal wealth, and social confidence. All immigrants suffer delays in their access to those qualities and capabilities, but the addition of racism worsens and lengthens those delays, including in U.S. society today. The difficulties usually endured by immigrants slow and skew the development of the economy they have entered. The occasional explosions of immigrants’ resentments and bitterness at their treatment—and the usually very violent subsequent repressions—then add further damage to their host economies.

Repeated efforts by those opposed to immigration have rarely succeeded in stopping it. The broad range of social forces—including the persistent effects of colonial and neo-colonial subjugation, uneven capitalist development, and climate change—that propel people to emigrate usually outweigh their concerns for their own economic, personal safety, and family interests. For employers, immigration can cheapen labor costs by expanding the supply of labor power (especially when the opposite is threatened by falling birthrates or when capital accumulation risks bidding up wages). Undocumented immigrants offer employers notoriously outrageous opportunities for super-exploitation. Hence, they often support it.

An important social cost of immigration is the opportunity it has regularly presented to demagogic politicians. They have repeatedly scapegoated immigrants to deflect genuine mass discontent where it might otherwise threaten the domestic employer class. Is there unemployment? The demagogue suggests that jobs are being preferentially reserved for immigrants. Are public services inadequate? The demagogue suggests that immigrants are placing excessive demands on them and corrupt officials are directing them to immigrants to secure cheap labor or votes. Demagogues often insist—again despite evidence to the contrary—that immigrants commit more crimes and bring and spread more disease than the native-born.

The campaigns of Donald Trump and many Republicans scapegoated immigrants. Many Democrats' campaigns likewise featured the scapegoating of immigrants. In contrast, the real, basic economic problems of the United States were not seriously addressed in the latest presidential election campaigns. One of those is the immense gap between haves and have-nots that has widened over the last 40 years. Another is the economic instability that has the economy oscillating between inflation and recessions. Still another is the obvious decline of the American empire (the relatively declining roles of U.S. exports, imports, investments, and the dollar) within the global economy. These issues were marginalized or, more often, ignored. Instead, candidates relentlessly scapegoated 12 million undocumented immigrants (among the poorest of the poor) as if they were the cause of and thus to blame for the deep problems of U.S. capitalism, an economy of 330 million people. Likewise, they excoriated China for the economic competition its economic growth has brought to the United States. Doing that conveniently deflects blame from the corporate employers who made the decision to move production from the United States to China. As usual, all

social blame or criticism must be kept from touching the U.S. capitalist system that accounts for those profit-driven decisions.

Deep, costly, and lasting consequences have followed the demagoguery and divisions in societies that split over immigration. Much energy, time, and money is diverted from dealing with the nation's real economic problems to obsessive "coping with" immigration (homeland security budgets, border patrol budgets, and wall construction and maintenance). Still more is devoted to housing, policing, feeding, and otherwise "processing" undocumented immigrants. If high-priority policy instead created good jobs with good incomes for immigrants, huge portions of these social costs would be unnecessary. Moreover, worthwhile alternatives to failed existing immigration policies are available if sufficient political power places them on the social and political agendas of societies confronting immigration. A remarkable flaw of today's global capitalism lies in its provocation of massive migration of people alongside its massive, costly failure to plan or manage that migration.

One such alternative policy could solve *together* the recurring problems of unemployment, inadequate housing and social services, *and immigration*. In the U.S. case, another Marshall Plan or "Inclusive" New Deal, green or otherwise, is needed. It could create jobs performing public services (paid at or above the current median for such jobs) that would be provided, as a right, to every unemployed citizen as priority #1. As priority #2, equivalent jobs would be provided, as a right, to all immigrants. As priority #3, the jobs thus created would include expanding the housing and all other social services needed to adequately accommodate the entire population, native plus immigrant. The tragic social divisiveness of immigrant-vs-native competition for jobs might thereby be sharply reduced.

Such an Inclusive New Deal could be funded by (1) billions of dollars no longer needed for unemployment insurance, (2) increased income and other taxes paid by newly employed native and immigrant workers, (3) increased taxes paid by businesses profiting from increased spending by those workers, and (4) an annual wealth tax of 2 percent on all personal wealth above \$20 million. Immigration could be reduced for the first five years of this Inclusive New Deal to get it fully established and running.

A major side benefit of this Inclusive New Deal would be the huge boost in

receipts for Social Security. Another such benefit would be the reduced demands placed on social services by the better physical and mental health of all newly employed workers. Finally, as a social dividend from such an Inclusive New Deal, the official work week in the United States for all workers could be reduced from 40 to 36 hours (with no pay reduction).

Imagine the enormous social benefits that would accrue to the entire U.S. population, native and immigrant, from this different reformist approach to the immigration issue. In the United States and beyond, such an approach would reduce the social divisions over jobs, incomes, housing, homelessness, social services, and immigration. A strong, growing economy attracts immigrants, integrates them productively, and thereby impresses the world. A weak, declining economy not only fails to employ all its people productively but by deporting immigrants advertises its failure to the world. A radical program would embrace the freedom to migrate as universal and therefore reorient the global location of investment to serve that freedom both domestically and internationally.

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