History and destiny: immigrants’ vital role in the pandemic

By Marcelo Suárez-Orozco for the Rational Middle

Every day, we see news stories about COVID-19 wreaking terrible loss of life, untold suffering and economic mayhem, but there is another, less noticed casualty of this pandemic: rationality about immigration. As much as the response to the virus, immigration will be a defining issue of our times.

Last week’s presidential order barring immigrants from receiving green cards for the next 60 days, putatively “to protect American workers” (file:///Users/Loren/OneDrive%20-%2030%20Point%20Strategies/Marek/Rational%20Middle/Oped%20submissions/"to%20protect%20A the latest in a series of decisions designed to restrict both legal and unauthorized immigration and also asylum seeking. But how we deal with immigrants in this crisis could define our economic recovery and even the future of our nation.

Migration is the human face of globalization — the sounds, colors and aromas of a miniaturized, interconnected and in the age of pandemics and unchecked climate change, ever-fragile world. As of 2019 — the most recent year for which we have solid data, “half of the estimated 272 million international migrants were living in just ten countries.” With about 51 million, our country leads the way. (https://bit.ly/2xYkm7T) Germany, Saudi Arabia and the Russian Federation hosted the second-, third- and fourth-largest numbers of migrants.

During the past four decades, the rate of international migration has remained stable, with between 3 and 3.5 percent of the world’s population on the move. In our country, the rate of immigration, 14 percent (https://bit.ly/2xYAMx2), is slightly below its peak, 14.8 percent in 1890 (https://bit.ly/3eP80zu). The pandemic has brought global migration to a screeching halt.
In the U.S., immigration is history and destiny. Except for Native Americans, we are all immigrants—voluntary and involuntary, newly arrived or more distantly arrived. Immigration is the foundational narrative for the birth nation. It is a dynamic shaping the here and now. And above all, it is a social force that will define our shared destiny: the fastest growing section of the child population is the U.S.-born children of immigrants. Immigration as history-and-destiny is a rare feature — an exceptionalism that the U.S. shares with only a handful of other nations (such as Canada, Australia, New Zealand, and Argentina).

Immigration’s role in our history and destiny, raises some critical questions about the president’s order:

- Will it mark a brusque turning point in the nature of immigration to our country?
- Is it a mere cautionary pause during the pandemic’s great uncertainty?
- Or is it the trial balloon in a calculated effort to engineer a systematic immigration reversal (https://nyti.ms/3aCXsQL) in the name of protecting American workers from competition?
- How, above all, how will halting immigration affect our economy and society?

Evidence suggests that immigrants have a positive effect on the American economy and society. A National Academies of Sciences study (https://bit.ly/2VWx9j3) found that immigrants’ lives improve markedly in terms of educational attainment, occupation, income and language ability the longer they are here. Indeed with time, immigrants become like the rest of us in the many of the most significant measures of integration. The report also cites several factors impeding their integration: legal status, race, socio-economic status and low naturalization rates.

Immigrants complement the skills of native born-workers — they are over represented at both ends of educational attainment: more likely to be doctors, engineers and scientists (including Nobel Prize winners) but also more likely to have less than a high school education (https://bit.ly/3ayq7WZ) Thus, over the last two generations, immigrants have enabled native workers to pursue their fortunes in areas of the economy better suited to their skills. The average American worker is just as unlikely to be picking fruit and vegetables in the fields as they are to be working on the next Nobel-Prize worthy breakthrough in coronavirus research in American laboratories.
Our existential battle against COVID-19 reveals just how immigrants matter in sectors of the U.S. labor market with significant labor shortages including health care. Six million immigrants are COVID-19 freedom fighters — the doctors, nurses and first responders at the frontlines of battle. Twenty-nine percent of all physicians and 38 percent of home health aides (https://bit.ly/356dAsI) are immigrants. Among first responders almost 30,000 (https://www.americanprogress.org/issues/immigration/news/2020/04/06/482708/demographic-profile-daca-recipients-frontlines-coronavirus-response/) are immigrants protected by Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals, or DACA (https://www.nilc.org/issues/daca/). They have been joined by tens of thousands of other DACA-eligible residents who, during the crisis, have put their shoulders to the wheel in our warehouses, staffed our grocery stores and provided other essential services so the rest of us could hunker down to limit the virus’ spread.

Far from threatening American jobs, immigrants are working hard to protect them. Using the pandemic as an excuse to further anti-immigrant policies ignores both our history and our destiny.

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