

Immigration and Nativism in America

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Critics of Japan's dead-end policies on immigration often cite the US as a good model to follow. However, America's welcome mat has been muddied considerably in 2010, largely due to prejudice in Arizona that is emblematic of a wider nativism engulfing America. The economic recession and the election of an Afro-American president have stirred up latent racism in the US, helping explain the rise of the Tea Party, a conservative political movement that draws its support mostly from upper middleclass, middle-aged white men anxious about retaining their privileges.

I was visiting the US this past spring when the Arizona governor signed legislation that expands police powers aimed at curbing illegal immigration from neighboring Mexico. This made it possible for officers to spot-check anyone who they believe might be an illegal alien. What this means in reality is that any non-white person faces a higher risk of being stopped by police officers and asked for identification with the color of one's skin serving as probable cause. This racial profiling is justified as an unfortunate but necessary infringement on civil liberties, one that is unconstitutional, discriminatory and hypocritical.

On the late night comedy shows I was briefly encouraged as everyone took turns lampooning the new law, depicting supporters of the legislation as buffoons and bigots. Bill Mayer, a caustic progressive comedian, joshed, "Well you can be sure they got their lawns cut and pools cleaned before passing the law. Now in Arizona if you are brown and breathing you are a criminal suspect." Funny except the next day the NY Times poll showed more than 2/3 of Americans support the law! This shocked me, but I should have known better. The melting pot has long been a myth and as in Japan, negative stereotypes of immigrants are widespread.

The logic of the new law is to create such a hostile environment so that illegal immigrants will want to leave. Demonization of illegal aliens has become a blood sport in the US and not only in Arizona. Reports from NYC indicate there has been an escalation from words to baseball bats targeting

Latinos while Virginia seems to be hopping on board the alien bashing express by also sanctioning profiling. This is a phenomenon that seems likely to spread as people seek scapegoats to vent their frustrations upon.

Don't the Mexicans deserve better? After all, they do the dirty, poorly paid, insecure jobs that Americans eschew. They are the foot soldiers of California's vast agro-industry and the poorly paid peons who help keep many restaurants and other service firms solvent. Oddly, these industrious Mexicans are exploited if they work, sent packing if they are caught and depicted as invading aliens who are a menace to society. The protests in Arizona against the new law are a sign that many Americans still respect American values, but they have met with smoldering racist rage and arbitrary arrests actions befitting a police state. Last week a federal judge struck down most of the legislation, arguing that states cannot usurp federal powers and cannot have their own immigration policy, but this does not end the matter.

Operation Endgame unveiled by the Department of Homeland Security in 2004 aims to remove all the removable aliens in the US by 2014. A key weapon in this program is detention for immigrants who have committed crimes or misdemeanors, regardless if they are documented or undocumented. Currently, Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) is detaining more than 380,000 individuals in 270 detention centers pending trial, bail hearings or deportation. Since 1994, more than 3.7 million immigrants have been deported from the US and detention rates have soared fourfold from 95,000 in 2001. ICE has been embracing market solutions, contracting out incarceration of 17% of detainees to private contractors. More importantly, the surge in detention benefits local governments because the federal government pays them to house detainees in local detention facilities, creating an incentive for stricter enforcement. For detainees the mantra of cost cutting translates into crowding and understaffing.

It turns out that the new Arizona immigration law is modeled on one proposed by the conservative lobbying group, American Legislative Exchange Council (ALEC). ALEC has ties to private detention facility operators who stand to benefit financially from more detentions.

Clearly, 9/11 has created a window of opportunity for ICE to realize its longstanding agenda of stricter enforcement and boost its budget. Anyone who watches Fox News knows that the bizarre conflation of aliens and terrorists is not surprising. In a nation that prides itself on its diversity and respect for human rights, however, there is a surprising tolerance for racial profiling, Latino bashing and an epidemic of incarceration. END