

On Life and Meaning

MARK PERES

Episode 88 – Federico Rios – Welcoming Newcomers

Out of Many, One

And now a personal word,

Immigration is a defining political and cultural issue of our day. It is drawing lines and boundaries. It is determining the future of children and families. It is shaping nations and history. Immigration is also the most personal of conversations. Each of us is an immigrant or the descendent of one. Each of us has a story about how we came to this land. And we protect that story.

Federico Rios has his own story. His father is from Puerto Rico. His mother is from Colombia. His parents worked hard to provide for him. He grew up in Queens, New York, a place with immigrants from around the world. Think of a language, a religion, an ethnicity, and you will find it in Queens. Everyone is tossed together. The streets define diversity.

Later in life, Federico emigrated to Charlotte. He left his home for someplace new: a city far more homogenous and segregated, a city with different challenges and its own codes, a place large and small enough where social capital can make all the difference. When Federico arrived, he didn't like Charlotte much. The city was foreign to him. Until he found good work. Until he made friends. Until his colleagues opened doors for him.

Federico is a perfect advocate for the international community in Charlotte. He has struggled and persevered. He is culturally sensitive and adept. He understands hope and aspiration.

Federico noted that over the last thirty years there has been a dramatic increase in the number of immigrant families in Charlotte. Most of these immigrant newcomers have come from Latin America. He asserts that the United States has historically welcomed white Europeans, but anti-immigrant sentiment has risen because of a racist response to poor and brown people. My guess is that there are other factors involved too in the complex response to immigration.

In the April 2019 issue of the *Atlantic*, in an article entitled "If Liberals Won't Enforce Borders, Fascists Will," staff writer David Frum explores what we are getting right and wrong in the debate. It's a long analysis, but here are just a few of his points:

- Immigration is accelerating rapidly. From 1990 to 2015, 44 million people left the global South to find new homes in the global North. About 11 to 12 million people live in the US without documentation.
- By 2027, the foreign-born proportion of the US population is projected to be at its all-time peak of nearly 15 percent of the US population, with that percentage rising to new records thereafter.
- Contrary to most narratives, immigration is increasing because life on our planet is *improving* for most people. Hundreds of millions of people have been lifted into a new global striver class who want even more economic opportunity. The vast number of people who are immigrating are strivers who want a better life for themselves. They want to leave their homes and become Americans.
- Our immigration policies are a patchwork of laws that are incoherent. Asylum in the United States was originally designed for refugees fleeing fascism and communism in the aftermath of World War II. Today many asylum-seekers are fleeing crime and terror in their home countries. Yet asylum-seeking has surged even as crime in Central America has decreased.
- The United States rose to its greatest heights between the years 1915 to 1965, when immigration was its slowest and most measured. As immigration has accelerated, so has economic dislocation of the working class in the US, and the country seems to have splintered apart.
- The number of future potential immigrants is large and fast-growing. In the years ahead, tens of millions of people will want to become Americans, organizing and pushing at our borders, overwhelming nearly every social system in our nation.
- Demagogues rise by talking about issues that more conventional leaders appear unwilling or unable to address. Throughout the developed world, right-wing populism is rising in response to left-wing passive accommodation of massive waves of immigration.

In his article, David Frum repeatedly points out the many benefits of immigration, from Nobel prize laureates to the launch of new businesses to enrichment of culture. He is clear that we are a better and richer nation because immigrants come here. His point is that there are false narratives on both sides of the debate. It is too simple to say that people who want to reform and reduce immigration are racist. It discounts other facts on the ground that well-intentioned people are seeing and seeking to discuss. Frum concludes that we are more likely to fulfill promises of equal opportunity and mutual respect if we thoughtfully consider how many people we embrace as new Americans and how they become new Americans. We are more likely to cohere as a nation.

David Frum is a conservative columnist. Conservatives are motivated to preserve social stability and order, even if there is some inequity. Progressives are motivated by concerns of justice and equity, even if there is some disorder. A nation in balance is one that is stable and just.

The genius of America is that it is founded on a tension of ideals and the energy of new Americans attracted to those ideals. Immigrants who are embraced renew and revitalize our country. We become one country.

My parents emigrated here from South America. I am a first-generation American. As a young child, I lived in Queens, New York. That is part of my story. Federico Rios and I have much in common. Our stories are part of a much larger story of out of many, one.

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