MIGRATION DURING ECONOMIC DOWNTURNS: FROM THE GREAT DEPRESSION TO THE GREAT RECESSION

Workshop at the GHI, April 4-5, 2014. Co-sponsored by the GHI and the Migration Policy Institute. Conveners: Elisa Minoff (GHI) and Marc Rosenblum (Migration Policy Institute). Participants: Brian Gratton (Arizona State University), Christoph Rass (University of Osnabrück), Uwe Spiekermann (GHI), Almuth Ebke (University of Mannheim), Jimmy Patiño (University of Minnesota), Perla Guerrero (University of Maryland), Demetrios Papademetriou (Migration Policy Institute), Cybelle Fox (University of California, Berkeley), Hidetaka Hirota (Columbia University), Thomas K. Wong (University of California, San Diego), Hiroshi Motomura (University of California, Los Angeles), Muzaffar Chishti (Migration Policy Institute), Jim Hollifield (Southern Methodist University), David T. Hsu (University of Pennsylvania), Madeleine Sumption (Migration Policy Institute), Alejandra Tijerina García (University of Hamburg), Jessica Sperling (Graduate Center-City University of New York), Jobb Dixon Arnold (Queens University).

During the Great Recession immigration has been hotly contested on both sides of the Atlantic. Politicians, advocacy groups, and members of the public have debated new immigration reforms and controls. The workshop placed the current debates over immigration in historical perspective. The papers, presented by an interdisciplinary group of historians, political scientists, legal scholars, and policy analysts, shed light on how migrants have fared during economic downturns, how discourse has shifted, and how policy has actually changed. The majority of the papers focused on the United States, but several offered a helpful comparative perspective on the experience, discourse, and policy in Europe. Together, the papers complicated the traditional narrative about the fate of immigrants and immigration policy during global recessions. The papers confirmed that recessions often strengthened anti-immigrant sentiment, but they also showed how migrants themselves found innovative ways to persevere in their host societies. Immigration restrictionists, meanwhile, often had difficulty enacting their preferred policies; and when they were able, the new regulations were not always enforced as they had envisioned.

The first panel considered migration during the Great Depression. Brian Gratton, presenting a paper he co-authored with Emily Merchant at the University of Michigan, considered what census
data can tell us about the immigration patterns of Mexicans between the 1920s and 1940s. As Gratton explained, by the time the United States entered the Depression, Mexicans had a well-established pattern of circular migration. He and Merchant suggest that this pattern continued through the 1930s. By far the majority of the repatriation through the 1930s was voluntary, they argue. The Mexican government contributed significant funds to facilitate the repatriation, but the role of the U.S. government was limited. The first bilateral agreements between the United States and Mexico in 1942 creating a temporary agricultural workers program continued this pattern of a strong Mexican state and a weak U.S. state captured by agricultural interests. Christoph Rass picked up this discussion of bilateral agreements, charting the forgotten history of bilateral agreements in the interwar period. As Rass showed, the first bilateral agreements creating temporary workers programs were established at the turn of the twentieth century, and the bilateral agreements of the years immediately following World War I became a model for what came later. The agreement between France and Poland in 1919 established the goal of balancing supply and demand and the principle of equal treatment of temporary alien and native workers that later agreements would follow. Americans like Henry Pratt Fairchild looked to these European agreements when contemplating a bilateral agreement with Mexico in the early years of World War II.

The second panel considered discursive shifts during economic downturns. Almuth Ebke presented the case of the Brixton riots of 1981. As Ebke demonstrated, the most widespread image following the riots of West Indian migrants in the West London neighborhood was that of a bloodied policeman. Though liberals tended to argue that economic conditions were the underlying cause of the riots, conservatives and the Thatcher government argued forcefully against this thesis, asserting that unemployment could not justify rioting. The discourse helped build support for the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1981. Jimmy Patiño showed how Mexican-American activists in 1971 began to argue for a new definition of Chicano that transcended citizenship and could include the many undocumented workers residing in the United States. These activists fought against established Mexican American politicians and their allies in labor unions who believed it was in their interest to crack down on undocumented immigration. These “Chicano Democrats” supported the country’s first law sanctioning employers of undocumented workers. The law, which California Governor Ronald Reagan signed in November 1971, made
it illegal to knowingly hire an undocumented immigrant in California if it would have an adverse effect on resident workers.

The keynote address, delivered by Demetrios Papademetriou, considered Migration and the Great Recession. Papademetriou emphasized that the Great Recession is not over. Unemployment remains high, and Papademetriou argued that this high unemployment is structural. Firms have invested in mechanization and not hired new workers even as their earnings have picked up. The long-term unemployed are the worst off, since many are not only having difficulty finding work, but they are having difficulty keeping the jobs they are offered because their skills have atrophied. Papademetriou argued that we need to find new ways to invest in people. The government needs to partner with business to create training programs that will actually prepare workers for the jobs of the future. Immigration needs to be part of the solution.

The third panel examined deportation policy and practices during downturns. Cybelle Fox discussed the increased collaboration between health and welfare and immigration officials in the 1970s. During the Nixon administration, the first legal status restrictions were inserted into federal public assistance law and Congress amended the Social Security Act to permit the disclosure of information on public assistance recipients to immigration officials. These legal changes opened the door for federal, state, and local welfare officials to cooperate with immigration authorities. In Texas, California, and New York, officials did cooperate, and many immigrants were forcibly repatriated as a result. Marc Rosenblum discussed the most recent surge in deportations in the years since the passage of the Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act of 1996. As he showed, the law streamlined removal practices and increased funding for enforcement. As a result, the number of removals in the United States has steadily climbed over the last two decades. Under the Obama administration, deportations have continued to increase. In fact, the workshop coincided with public protests over the administration’s removal policies. But as Rosenblum documented, removals over the last few years have been more targeted, focusing in particular on criminal aliens.

The fourth panel considered state-level immigration regulation in the United States. Hidetaka Hirota described the long history of state-level immigration regulation, focusing in particular on the crackdowns on immigration in Massachusetts and New York during
the Irish potato famine in the 1840s and the financial panic of 1873. At these moments, Hirota argued, working Americans supported the exclusion of “pauper labor” and state governments responded, excluding and even deporting poor migrants. Such state-level policies became the foundation of federal immigration law when the U.S. Congress passed the Immigration Act of 1882, prohibiting the landing of paupers as well as people with mental illness and criminals. Following Hirota’s paper we jumped forward to the present, as Tom Wong discussed the current Congressional politics of interior immigration enforcement. Wong modeled recent votes in the House of Representatives on legislation that supported state-level immigration enforcement, and showed that party membership was a strong predictor of whether a Congressperson supported such legislation. But Wong also found that the demographics of a Congressperson’s district had some effect. If there was a very high percentage of Latinos in a district, support for the most drastic state-level policies fell among Republican legislators. Finally, Hiroshi Motomura presented some thoughts on the significance of state-level migration policies. He observed that state level policies tended to be “indirect” regulation, affecting a migrants’ rights to benefits and services, while federal regulation was most often “direct,” controlling who has a right to enter and reside in the country. He further noted that state level policies sometimes, but did not always, influence federal immigration law. So why do we care about state-level policies? Motomura argued that they tell us something about whether we view immigrants as “Americans in waiting” and how we think about illegality.

The luncheon speaker, Jim Hollifield, provided a broad overview of the evolution of American and German citizenship law in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. He argued that although many in Germany once considered the nation “kein Einwanderungsland,” there has since been a convergence between German and American citizenship policy and practice. The distinction between countries of “jus soli” and “jus sanguinis” no longer holds, Hollifield argued.

The fifth panel considered how countries have actually changed their migration policies since the onset of the Great Recession. Madeleine Sumption observed that public opinion didn’t react as some expected to the crisis, and in fact immigration as an issue decreased in salience in many countries as concern about the economy rose. Perhaps as a result, there has not been as much restriction as many people predicted. In the UK, tough rhetoric about immigration was followed
by relatively limited policy changes. In Spain, where the recession was (and is) particularly severe, the government suspended its temporary work program, cut quotas, and even launched a paid return program. But many countries did not enact restrictive policies. As an idiosyncratic response to the recession, a number of countries actually attempted to attract “investor immigration” by reserving visas for people who start companies that will hire more people or even buy vacant housing. David Hsu specifically considered the trend toward liberalizing skill-based migration policies. Using a model based on an original dataset of policy changes in 25 countries, Hsu argued that the political strength of multi-national firms requiring skilled workers helped predict whether a country lifted skill-based barriers to migration during the crisis.

The sixth and final panel considered the experience of migrants during the Great Recession. Alejandra Tijerina García presented the early findings of an ethnographic study of the experiences of Spanish migrants living in Berlin Neukölln. She found that some of the migrants left for Germany because they were unemployed in Spain, while others left jobs in Spain because they feared future unemployment. Many of the Spanish migrants were highly educated, and those who were the most successfully integrated worked in tech and other sectors where they could speak English while taking classes to learn German. Jessica Sperling examined the experience of 1.5 and 2nd generation young adult Colombian and Dominican migrants to New York City and Madrid. She found that the migrants to the two cities held very different ideas about the value of education and their future prospects. Migrants in New York believed that a university education was even more crucial after the recession and saw their future in the city. Migrants to Madrid, meanwhile, believed that the recession decreased the value of a university education and held a bleak view of their future prospects; some saw hope in further migration to Germany or the UK. Jobb Dixon Arnold considered the experience of migrants to Fort McMurry, the oil boom-town in Alberta, Canada. Focusing on migrants from Ireland and from Canada’s eastern province of Newfoundland, Arnold found that these migrants, living as they were in a multicultural and “petro-cultural” city, often bound together in mutual support, aiding each other in search of jobs, congregating at Irish and Newfoundlander pubs, and attending sports matches together. But they also tended to occupy one of the lowest socio-economic rungs in the city, working as laborers and earning $20 an hour when the modal annual income in the city was over $250,000.
The workshop was only the beginning of a conversation about the insight history provides into contemporary immigration debates. Workshop participants hoped that historians and historically-minded social scientists will begin to play a much more active role in these debates in the years to come.

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