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A Modest Proposal: Drop Undocumented Immigrants Into Detroit

A new idea from free-market scholars says that, since the city is already beyond government and corporate redemption, maybe new arrivals can help rebuild it.

By: Fawn Johnson – August 1, 2013

A few creative thinkers are proffering an innovative way to save Detroit: Let the city issue visas, on the condition that the immigrants live there, and *only* there. Imagine: a city filled with people who might have come from the United States' shady black market or from an impoverished town in Mexico but are now where they are welcome and where they can work legally and apply for citizenship—in America's No. 1 dying city.

It sounds like a radical social experiment, but it's not so crazy. An influx of newcomers is precisely what Detroit needs. Meanwhile, 11 million undocumented immigrants are here already, washing dishes or harvesting crops, and a lot more want to come. It's not hard to imagine that hundreds of thousands would jump at the chance to become legal residents, even if the price would be repopulating a discarded urban shell. Since 1960, the city's population has fallen 67 percent.

Would they be able to work? The city could decree that employment is a requirement. If the jobs exist in the city, the immigrants will find them; they'll figure it out. They already do that now, off the books. If the jobs are terrible, that's OK, too. Remember, immigrants take jobs Americans won't. Housing, obviously, would be no problem, with almost 100,000 vacant units in Detroit. Safety? In theory, that's something the city could improve on if its tax base grows, although it's not a guarantee.

The suggestion invites eye-rolling: It would never work. It would never pass. It wouldn't be fair. It conjures up images of the 1981 film *Escape From New York*, in which the island of Manhattan has been converted to a convict colony surrounded by a 50-foot-high containment wall.

"The place restriction—that's the thing that makes a lot of people shut down," said Brandon Fuller, one of the perpetrators of this thought experiment. Fuller, deputy director of the New York University Stern Urbanization Project, coauthored an op-ed in the magazine *City Journal* this spring proposing "regional visas" for immigrants. These visas would be distributed by the states for the express purpose of fostering their own economic needs, including "reserving the right to require visa holders to live in specific cities or regions."

Fuller and his coconspirator, Temple University legal scholar Sean Rust, would make the visas temporary, like three-year renewable H-1B visas, and allow the holders to apply for green cards. Once they attain legal permanent residency, they could move wherever they want. It's a safe bet that a lot of them would stay put—but, again, not a guarantee.

Regional immigration is a nonstarter in Congress, but it is making headway in political circles outside the Beltway. Michigan Republican Gov. Rick Snyder recently called for a pool of visas to

be made available to communities that have lost a certain percentage of their populations. Snyder has repeatedly said immigration is the best answer, really the only answer, to Detroit's woes. "Get them a green card so they can really homestead," he told the Michigan Public Radio Network.

Fuller, who states unequivocally he is not an immigration expert, is among a fledgling group of free-market economists who want to push traditional immigration policy in a new direction by asking a fundamental question: What purpose does immigration serve? Answer that question first, and then build a policy around it. "The U.S. immigration policy is its most powerful development policy. We don't think of it that way," he says.

There is a basic tenet in immigration circles that such policies should be set and carried out exclusively by the federal government. Ceding even a little visa-granting authority to states would make it unclear who gets in, how they get in, and how many there are. The rules might vary from state to state. Fuller is even agnostic about whether visas should be given out, amnesty-style, to unauthorized immigrants. He says the states are better attuned to their needs in making that call.

The concept can't pass the laugh test if equal treatment for all immigrants is a nonnegotiable goal. And it fails on its basic premise if immigration is considered to be solely the purview of the federal government. In fact, the idea begins to sound plausible only after a couple of other realities creep in. First, Detroit is unrecoverable. Its bankruptcy is reminiscent of a fox chewing off a limb to get out of a trap. Free from its pension obligations, the city now risks bleeding to death. Second, the U.S. immigration system is equally doomed. The unauthorized population festers, with no options. Deportations continue. Immigration-reform attempts in Congress are slowly dying. What's the harm in trying something truly radical to eke out progress on both fronts?

Alex Nowrasteh, an immigration analyst at the libertarian Cato Institute, says special exemptions and waivers—say, for certain industries—are a good way to get around annual caps on visas. He loves the regional visa idea. "I was thinking about other waivers, but this is even better," he says, "because it's geographic. It's better than relying on [opaque] central-government occupation categories."

The mental chasm between free-market economists and traditional immigration wonks may be unbridgeable, at least for now. Hard-liners and unions can't envision letting an undefined, demand-based number of foreigners into the country. Liberals can't abide weakening the current family-based immigration system to make room for a market-oriented approach. Conservatives can't countenance giving violators of the law a break, even if all those lawbreakers did was fail to renew a tourist visa. Policymakers just can't let go. But if more calamities in America's industrial base are on the horizon, maybe everyone should swallow a Xanax, take a breath, and give it some consideration.