

The Washington Post

The zero sum rightwing

By: Jennifer Rubin - June 30, 2013

What is remarkable is how little the immigration debate has changed.

Consider Clint Bolick of the Goldwater Institute:

Building a wall on our southern border will not halt the flow of illegal immigrants. Immigrants want the something we have: freedom and opportunity. People who would risk their lives to come to our nation—like our forefathers and mothers—are not easily deterred. Conservatives usually understand the laws of supply and demand. Our immigration laws have not been overhauled in more than 20 years. Millions of people want to come here, and employers hunger for them. Why don't opponents of comprehensive reform—who love to say they are not anti-immigration but only anti-illegal immigration—ever propose approaches that lift the number of immigrants who can lawfully enter from Latin American countries. . . .

[M]uch of the rhetoric evinces hostility toward the particular immigrants who are coming; the vast majority of whom do not view America as an “ATM machine” but as a land of opportunity for themselves and their families, and who are willing to work extremely hard to make their dreams come true. To me they extol American values more than many who were lucky enough to have been born here. . . . [If] by contrast our sole focus is walling off those who aspire to the American Dream, I suppose we can build it with scrap metal from the Statute of Liberty.

That was in 2007. It is odd that anti-immigration forces still can't decide if the immigrants are all going on welfare or will steal our jobs. It can't be both, right?

In some sense the argument goes back centuries to Adam Smith and the mercantilists. It is ironic that the voices on the right who claim to be pure conservatives evince views that the father of capitalism denounced.

Mercantilism is what we threw off by the American Revolution and what The Wealth of Nations replaced:

Mercantilism is the ideology that nations must protect their wealth from infringement by other countries using techniques such as tariffs. The idea reached its zenith in the 1600s as European countries battled each other for economic superiority using tariffs and colonial trade restrictions. Underneath these techniques is the idea that our country has more of a right to wealth than other countries, and we should restrict our trade with those other countries to come out on the winning side. This same tendency has come up in the immigration reform debate: every immigrant that crosses the border is taking one of “our” jobs.

Alex Nowrasteh, a Cato Institute scholar who has been arguing for immigration reform, tells me the analogy is correct. “Many opponents of immigration are making the same mercantilist arguments that Smith’s predecessors did based on non-comprehension of the benefits of specialization and the division of labor.” He explains: “They saw a fixed pie of wealth that could only be divided amongst so many people. Ironically, old mercantilist governments often understood the benefits of at least skilled workers and usually offered large rewards for technicians to immigrate and bring their knowledge with them. Modern anti-immigration folks rarely even acknowledge the economic benefits of skilled workers (just look at [the Economic Policy Institute] complaining about ‘genius glut’).”

Moreover, anti-immigration voices who decry Big Labor and minimum wage (not to mention “living wage”) proposals for setting labor rates too high (and thereby contributing to unemployment) don’t seem to understand that immigration restriction does the same thing. Nowrasteh once again spells it out: “Raising wages by government fiat, like minimum wages or protectionist economic policies, have similar impoverishing effects.” He cracks, “The difference is that immigration restrictions have the added political benefit of ‘protecting us’ from those dreaded foreigners who want to work for us and buy our products.”

Many right-wing anti-immigrant voices complain about remittances to the immigrants’ native countries. This is also poppycock, for precisely the same reason. “We’re not poorer if an immigrant sends money home any more than we are poorer if an American buys a good from abroad. The dollar the immigrant sends abroad would not have existed in the first place if the immigrant was not here working for Americans. The dollar that immigrant sends home is part of the extra production the immigrant added to our GDP in the first place.” It also assumes incorrectly we get no benefit from that immigrant. “Even if the immigrant was somehow able to send 100 percent of his earnings home, Americans would still have the value of the goods and services he produced for us, and we would be richer for it.” Moreover, the dollars sent to folks in his home country “will eventually return in the form of American exports or investment in our economy.”

You either believe in government rigging the results and preventing markets from operation or you don’t. Modern conservatives have rejected the former, building their entire agenda around free markets and limited government.

As one trio of economic conservatives wrote about the argument for immigration:

The argument is an easy extension of David Ricardo’s argument for free trade; blocking immigration hampers the free operation of an economy in much the same way that blocking trade does. It prevents resources, including labor, from being reallocated to those industries and locations where consumers most urgently want them. . . . The number of jobs in an economy is unlimited because our wants are unlimited. The more people working, the further down our list of wants we can get. Moreover, the more people working, the more potential customers—and hence business opportunities—we have. Immigrants buy or rent houses, purchase food and goods, and dine at restaurants. This is why the United States did not suffer mass unemployment as our population drastically increased over the last few decades, and why there wasn’t a jump in unemployment when women joined the labor force.

Restriction on employers' ability to hire workers willing to work for them is the opposite of free-market capitalism. (Deciding what legal and political rights to extend them is another matter.) Conservatives who rail at increases in the minimum wage don't seem to understand that restrictions on immigration (artificially bidding up the price of labor by limiting supply) amount to the same thing.

There is a reason for the nasty association of anti-immigrant groups with zero-population fanatics: Both believe in a Malthusian world in which every person is a threat to them and a competitor for scarce resources. They suspect if a dollar leaves the United States (whether in remittances or for purchasing goods) we "lose." This is economic illiteracy of the worst type.

Anti-immigrant voices on the right should make up their minds: Do they believe in free markets — in freedom itself — or not? If not, they might as well align themselves with Big Labor, extreme environmentalists and nativists. Oh, that's right. They have.