Immigrants in a Global Economy

Saskia Sassen argues that we need to think differently about immigration in this era of rapid economic internationalization.

Current immigration policy in developed countries is increasingly at odds with other major policy frameworks in the international system and with the growth of global economic integration. All highly developed countries have received rapidly growing numbers of legal and undocumented immigrants over the last decade; none has found its immigration policy effective. These countries are opening up their economies to foreign investment and trade while deregulating their financial markets. In developed countries, the emergence of a new economic regime sharply reduces the role of national governments and borders in controlling international transactions. Yet the framework of immigration policy in these countries remains centered on older conceptions of the nation-state and of national borders.

How can immigration policy account for the facts of rapid economic internationalization and the corresponding transformation of national governments? This is the subject I briefly discuss here.

SHIFT IN GLOBAL ECONOMY

The 1980s saw a major shift in the global economy. In that decade, the developed countries opened their economies to foreign investment, international financial markets, and imports of goods and services; deregulation and internationalization of a growing range of economic activities became hallmarks of economic policy. As economic doors have opened to others, many developing countries have implemented export-oriented growth strategies. Export-manufacturing zones and the sale of once-public sector firms on world markets became key venues for this internationalization.

Global economic trends engendered a new framework for national economic policy-making. This new framework is evident in the formation of regional trading blocs: the U.S.-Canada Free Trade Agreement, the European Community (EC), the new trading blocks being formed in Southeast Asia as well as the proposed NAFTA agreement. At the heart of this framework is a new conception of the role of national borders. Borders no longer are sites for imposing levies. Rather, they are transmitting membranes guaranteeing the free flow of goods, capital and information. Eighteenth-century concepts of free trade assumed freedom of movement between distinct national economies; 21st-century concepts of free trade are about an economy which is itself global, and about governments that coordinate rather than control economic activities.

To be sure, neither the old border-wall nor the nation-state has disappeared. The difficulties and complexities involved in this transformation are evident in the many obstacles to the ratification of the Uruguay Round of the GATT talks, which aims at further opening economies to the circulation of services. But the relentless effort to overcome these difficulties also signals the pressure to depart from an old conception of national economic policy and the emergence of a new conception of how economic activity is to be maximized and governed.

The framework for immigration policy in the highly developed countries, on the other hand, is still rooted in the past. Immigration policy has yet to address global economic integration in the 21st century and its implications. Border-control remains the basic mechanism for regulating immigration – an increasingly troubled effort given new policies aimed at opening up national economies, such as the lifting of restrictions on foreign investment, the deregulation of financial markets, and the
formation of financial free zones in major cities. Those policies amount to a partial denationalizing of national territory for the flow of capital, and they in turn globalize certain sectors of the workforce, notably the high-level transnational professional and managerial class.

Moreover, the policy framework for immigration treats the flow of labor as the result of individual actions, particularly the decision to migrate in search of better opportunities. Such a policy puts responsibility for immigration on the shoulders of immigrants. Policy commentary which speaks of an immigrant "influx" or "invasion" treats the receiving country as a passive agent. The causes for immigration appear to be outside the control or domain of receiving countries; immigration policy becomes a decision to be more or less benevolent in admitting immigrants. Absent from this understanding is the notion that the international activities of the governments or firms of receiving countries may have contributed to the formation of economic linkages with emigration countries, linkages that may function as bridges not only for capital but also for migration flows. That older view emphasizes individual "push" factors and neglects systemic linkages.

The worldwide evidence shows rather clearly that there is considerable patterning in the geography of migrations, and that the major receiving countries tend to get immigrants from their zones of influence. This holds for countries as diverse as the U.S., France or Japan. A transnational analysis of immigration contributes to its redefinition and allows us to see migrations as happening within global systems. The periods known as Pax Britannica and Pax Americana are but two representations of such transnational systems. The formation of systems for the internationalization of manufacturing production, or the formation of regional trading blocks, are other instances. These systems can be characterized in a multiplicity of ways: economic (the Atlantic economy of the 1800s, the EC, NAFTA); politico-military (the colonial systems of several European countries, U.S. involvement in Central America); transnational war zones (formation of massive refugee flows as a result of major European wars); cultural-ideological zones (impact in socialist countries of the image of Western democracies as offering the "good life").

Recent developments in Japan capture the intersection of economic internationalization and immigration. They also illuminate the intersection of immigration policy and reality. Japan’s closed door policy has not prevented a growing influx of immigrants. Nor has its 1990 immigration law, which opens up the country to high-level foreign workers but closes it to all low-wage workers, kept out the latter. Furthermore, despite a strong anti-immigration culture, immigrants have become incorporated into various labor markets and have begun to form immigrant communities in major cities in Japan. A detailed exploration of the dynamic at work provides useful insights into immigration processes.

What makes the disparity between the framework for immigration policy and the facts of the world economy particularly urgent is that all highly developed countries have experienced sharp increases in migration of both legal and undocumented immigrants. In some countries there is a resurgence of immigration after inflows had fallen sharply in the 1970s: this is the case for Germany and Austria. In other countries, notably the U.S., immigration policy opened up the country in 1965, yet in the 1980s, the number of entries doubled compared with the 1965-1980 period. Still other countries are becoming immigration countries for the first time in their contemporary histories: this is the case with Italy and Spain, long-time emigration countries, and with Japan, a nation of deep anti-immigration beliefs and policies.

DISCARD OLD NOTIONS

A detailed analysis of cross-country immigration patterns suggests that some key notions about immigration may be inadequate, particularly the notion that the developed countries may be facing a massive invasion of people from less developed countries. These cross-country regularities suggest that there is more room for effective and equitable policies than the imagery of "invasion" allows:

1. Emigration is a minority event in demographic terms. Except for terror-driven refugees, we now know that most people are reluctant to leave their home villages or towns: For example, most people in Mexico have not gone to the U.S. A minority is determined to come no matter what; while a gray area of potential emigrants may or may not leave, depending on pull factors; but the vast mass of people in a poor country are not likely to emigrate.

Crossing the U.S.-Mexican border where Avelardo Lopez Silverado was killed by the Border Patrol in 1949.
2. There is considerable return migration except when the military/political situation in countries of origin makes it unsafe. For example, we now know that about 60 percent of Italians who left for the U.S. around the turn of the century returned to Italy.

3. Rather than an uncontrolled "invasion," what we see over time is a tendency towards the formation of permanent settlements for a variable share of immigrants, but never all. This tendency is likely even when there are high return rates and even when a country's policies seek to prevent permanent settlement. We see this happening in all countries receiving immigrants, including such extremely closed countries as Japan and Saudi Arabia, as well as in the more liberal Western nations.

4. No matter what the political culture and the particular migration policies of a country, "illegal" immigration has emerged as a generalized fact in all Western economies in the post World War II era, including Japan. This has raised a whole set of questions about the need to rethink regulatory enforcement and the sites for such enforcement.

5. Immigration is a highly differentiated process: it includes people seeking permanent settlement and those seeking temporary employment who want to circulate back and forth. One important question is whether recognizing these differences might facilitate the formulation of policy today. There is a growing presence of immigrants who are not searching for a new home in a new country; they think of themselves as moving in a cross-country and even global labor market. We know that when illegal immigrants are regularized, they often establish permanent residence in their country of origin and work a few months in the immigration country, an option that becomes available when they can circulate freely.

TOWARD NEW POLICIES

How should the new reality shape our thinking about immigration? A more comprehensive approach can provide more analytic and empirical footholds towards a better understanding of migration and towards more effective policy. The various transnational economic, cultural, political systems now evident in the world all tend to have very specific geographies. They are not planet-wide events, but occur in the relation of cities to cities, or in production chains linking factories in rather remote areas of developing countries to manufacturing and distribution centers in developed countries. Considerable migration flows within these new geographies for economic transactions. By understanding the nature of these geographies we can understand where to intervene for regulatory purposes. Further, international migrations themselves are patterned in geographic, economic and temporal terms. These two types of patterning provide maps within which to search for new policies to regulate immigration.

If immigration is partly an outcome of the actions of the governments and major private economic actors in receiving countries, the latter could conceivably recognize the migration impact of such actions and make decisions accordingly. For instance, economic policies that facilitate overseas operations of firms, particularly in developing countries, should recognize the migration impact of such operations. Economic internationalization suggests that the responsibility for immigration may not be exclusively the immigrant's. Refugee policy in some countries does lift the burden of immigration from the immigrant's shoulders. U.S. refugee policy, particularly for Indochinese refugees, does acknowledge partial responsibility on the part of the government. Clearly, in the case of economic migrations, such responsibility is far more difficult to establish, and by its nature far more indirect. As governments increasingly coordinate rather than contain economic activity, their role in immigration policy, as in other aspects of political economy, becomes elusive. Despite this complexity, the responsibilities for the consequences of globalization do not disappear. If economic internationalization contributes to migration flows, recognition of this fact can only help in designing more effective immigration policy.