

# == Chapter 1 ==

## Ghost in the Machine: Interventions in the Mexico- U.S. Immigration System

**I**F ONE does not understand how a complicated piece of machinery works, one should not try to fix it. Without a clear picture of how a mechanical system functions, what its basic principles are, and how its various parts interconnect to influence one another, one is unlikely to be able to restore the machinery to health if it is not working well, or to modify it effectively if a different outcome is desired. Without a clear conception of how the various moving parts of the machine fit together to function as an integrated whole, one cannot readily predict how a change introduced into one part of the system will influence other parts to alter operations and affect outcomes. Blindly tinkering with a gear here or a cog there, or adding new levers and springs simply because they “look good,” is to invite a host of unintended consequences, and perhaps to cause a calamity that no one expected or desired.

### **Gumming up the Works**

In a very real way, the Mexico-U.S. migration system functioned as a complicated piece of machinery in the years from 1965 through 1986. It was composed of a set of delicately balanced social and economic processes that had emerged gradually over many years in response to specific changes in the political economies of Mexico and the United States. Cross-border population movements had a characteristic form, and over time they acquired a relatively stable structure and a well-defined geographic organization. Migration between Mexico and the United States followed predictable paths in accordance with well-established scientific principles.

Once one appreciates the workings of a complicated piece of socio-economic machinery, then it is theoretically possible to intervene at various points to influence outcomes and improve results. However, if one intervenes in arbitrary ways and for reasons that are largely disconnected from the system's actual operation, then one should not expect much of an improvement. Just as it is not advisable to take a wrench to a precision clock if one is not a qualified clockmaker, it is not wise to pull policy levers if one has no real conception of how the underlying system functions. Yet this is exactly what happened beginning in 1986, when the U.S. Congress and successive presidents presided over a series of legislative and bureaucratic changes that fundamentally changed the rules under which the Mexico-U.S. migration system operated.

These changes were enacted largely for symbolic political purposes in the United States, with little concern for the underlying realities of migration and North American economic integration. The 1986 Immigration Reform and Control Act (IRCA) ushered in a new era of restrictive immigration policies and repressive border controls that transformed what had been a well-functioning, predictable system into a noisy, clunking, dysfunctional machine that generated a host of unanticipated outcomes that were in neither country's interests. These errors were compounded by additional legislation passed in 1990 and 1996 that reduced Mexican access to legal visas, militarized key sectors of the Mexico-U.S. border, and penalized legal but noncitizen immigrants.

The arbitrary intervention of U.S. policymakers into one of North America's crucial socioeconomic systems would have been bad enough by itself, but at the same time, in another policy arena, U.S. officials were moving in a diametrically opposed direction. Even as they sought to restrict the movement of workers across the Mexico-U.S. border, U.S. authorities were constructing a framework to integrate North American markets to facilitate the cross-border movement of goods, capital, commodities, and information, a vision that became reality with the implementation of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) in 1994. The apparent contradiction of simultaneously promoting integration while insisting on separation does not seem to have troubled either Congress or Presidents George Bush and Bill Clinton.

These contradictory policies did not succeed in slowing down either documented or undocumented migration from Mexico; if anything, they encouraged more of both. They did, however, create a black labor market for Mexican labor, lower the wages of *legal* U.S. residents, increase U.S. income inequality, and worsen conditions in

U.S. labor markets. At the same time they pushed migrants decisively away from seasonal, circular migration toward permanent settlement and transformed Mexican immigration from a regional phenomenon affecting a handful of U.S. states into a broad social movement touching every region of the country. The hapless intervention of U.S. authorities into the complicated machinery of North American migration offers a textbook example of how ill-conceived policies cannot only fail to achieve their manifest goals but unleash a host of unintended consequences and amplify them to the fullest.

### Laying out the Blueprint

Politicians and the media are wont to frame immigration as a disorderly, chaotic process that somehow must be brought “under control.” Immigrants are portrayed as desperate people fleeing endemic violence and poverty in the Third World, where stagnant economies, growing populations, and decaying infrastructures leave inhabitants little choice but to seek refuge abroad. Two kinds of metaphors are customarily employed to dramatize the resulting population movements.

A series of hydraulic tropes depicts immigration as a “rising tide” that pounds against U.S. shores in endless “waves,” threatening to wash away a shaky “dike” as it sprouts numerous “leaks” that threaten the country with massive “flooding” by an immense “sea” of foreigners. A second set of metaphors is martial in nature. Immigration is visualized as a “war” in which outgunned Border Patrol officers heroically “hold the line,” “defending” America against “hordes” of alien “invaders” who “attack” the “fortress,” occasionally resorting to “banzai charges.” Foreigners already inside the United States are seen as a “fifth column” of potential spies and terrorists.

Rather than basing policies on metaphors that are, at best, dubiously connected to underlying social and economic realities, we seek to provide policymakers and citizens with a more accurate blueprint of the nuts and bolts of the Mexico-U.S. migration system. We offer a kind of “owner’s manual” to explain how the system works theoretically, how it was built historically, and how it functions substantively, or at least how it did function until the 1986 Immigration Reform and Control Act threw it out of synch. We then describe how IRCA and successive policies disrupted the system’s smooth operation to bring about a variety of negative, and largely unforeseen, consequences. We conclude by offering a blueprint for immigration reform to guide policymakers in fixing the now-broken machinery of Mexico-U.S. migration.

Mexico-U.S. migration is neither a flood nor a war, but a piece of well-ordered machinery that operates in a predictable fashion according to a patterned logic that has been intensively studied and well described by social scientists. Chapter 2, entitled “Principles of Operation,” draws on recent theory and research to describe the natural laws governing the evolution and behavior of modern international migration systems. We offer logical explanations for why immigration begins, why immigrant flows expand over time, and why they develop a stable structure across time and space.

Understanding a system in theory is all well and good, but if one really wants to know how a complicated piece of machinery works, there is no substitute for taking the device apart and putting it back together again. This is the project we undertake in chapter 3, “System Assembly,” where we describe in detail how the machinery of Mexico-U.S. migration was built historically and how it functioned for decades as an important system within the political economies of both Mexico and the United States. We demonstrate how, with the acceleration of binational economic integration after 1982 and its concrete realization under NAFTA, Mexico-U.S. migration became an integral part of the broader social and economic machinery operating within North America.

Having laid out the operating principles, design, and operation of the machinery of Mexico-U.S. migration, we then seek to calibrate its performance. In chapter 4, “System Specifications,” we draw upon high-quality empirical data from the Mexican Migration Project (see appendix A) to describe the moving parts of the system and document their efficient operation. Rather than being out of control, Mexico-U.S. migration functioned during the period 1965 to 1985 according to measurable parameters that were stable over time and produced regular, structured patterns of movement within the system. We divide the process of international migration into a series of discrete stages corresponding to key decision points in the migratory career and show how behavior at each point was not only patterned and predictable but broadly consistent with theoretical expectations.

In chapter 5, “A Wrench in the Works,” we describe the flawed understandings that underlay U.S. attempts to modify the machinery of Mexico-U.S. migration from 1986 onward. We highlight the fundamental contradictions of U.S. policy toward Mexico: on the one hand, that policy seeks to integrate North American markets for goods, commodities, capital, and information, but on the other hand, it somehow wishes to prevent the integration of labor markets. Immigration and border policies after 1986 were not grounded in any real understanding of Mexico-U.S. migration or its role in North American

integration, but in cold war ideology, anti-drug hysteria, and crude ethnic scapegoating, all of which were deliberately packaged and served up for domestic political consumption by cynical politicians. Although the symbolic politics of border enforcement may have produced short-term gains for a few enterprising politicians, it did serious, long-term damage to the social and economic fabric of Mexico and the United States. Over the course of the 1980s and 1990s the machinery of Mexico-U.S. migration increasingly grew out of synch with the larger engine of North American integration.

In chapter 6, "Breakdown," we catalog the damage done as a result of misguided U.S. immigration and border policies. Reliable data indicate that U.S. enforcement actions did not deter undocumented Mexican migrants from heading northward, crossing the border, or getting U.S. jobs. They did, however, discourage migrants from returning home, encourage their long-term settlement north of the border, and increase the prevalence of dependents over workers, all while wasting billions of dollars of taxpayers' money and destroying hundreds of lives. U.S. policies were also instrumental in transforming Mexican migration from a regional into a national phenomenon while pushing immigrants decisively toward naturalization to ensure the future immigration of millions more. In the end, U.S. policies transformed what had been a relatively open and benign labor process with few negative consequences into an exploitative underground system of labor coercion that put downward pressure on the wages and working conditions not only of undocumented migrants but of legal immigrants and citizens alike.

In chapter 7, we offer a "repair manual" based on our earlier understanding of the design, principles, and operation of international migration in the context of North American economic integration. We offer specific proposals to undo the damage caused over the past two decades and to restore the engine of North American integration to its maximum efficiency. Our approach requires policymakers to bring North American labor migration aboveboard and accept it as a normal part of the emerging transnational political economy. Rather than denying the reality of labor migration, we recommend regularizing it and working to manage it so as to promote economic development in Mexico, minimize costs and disruptions for the United States, and maximize its benefits for all concerned.

Some may argue that the United States should abandon its project of North American integration entirely and seek to harden the border and make it impervious not only to flows of immigrants but also to capital, goods, ideas, and information. Unfortunately, the creation of such a "Fortress America" is neither practical nor desirable, and some

observers have labeled the dream of a controlled border as an illusion of “smoke and mirrors” (Baum 1997). Politicians lack the skills of a good magician, however, and the trick has flopped. The issue is not *whether* North America will integrate, but *how* it will happen.

Like it or not, the United States is inextricably bound to Mexico by geography, history, demography, and economics. Given a sixty-year history of continuous movement back and forth across the border, the flowering of binational trade and investment, the continent-wide expansion of transportation and communication networks, and the blending of cultures and peoples in both directions, the two nations are already substantially integrated. What remains is for Mexican and American policymakers to face up to the reality of North American integration and bring labor migration into the broader structure and organization of the North American Free Trade Agreement, helping Mexico to grow economically and ultimately to assume its rightful place as an equal partner in the global system of investment and trade that will be the foundation of prosperity and stability in the twenty-first century.