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Who Are Today's Huddled Masses?

By Diane Chido

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Many are familiar with the poem celebrating the Statue of Liberty titled, “The New Colossus,” written by Emma Lazarus in 1883 as part of a fundraising effort for the statue still being erected. The last lines are the ones many can recite verbatim:

Give me your tired, your poor,
Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free,
The wretched refuse of your teeming shore.
Send these, the homeless, tempest-tost [sic] to me,
I lift my lamp beside the golden door!^[1]

[The first essay in this series on immigration](#) gave a broad overview of these “huddled masses” throughout American history and how they were treated in law. Long before there was an American nation, there were Spanish *conquistadores*, missionaries, and settlers. Then came the Dutch, English, and French. Then Germans, Scandinavians, and Scots-Irish came. By the time Lazarus was writing her poem, there were many more central and southern European, Irish, Scottish, Slavic, and Asian people, those last mainly settling on the West Coast. All the while, there were Mexican people who suddenly found themselves living in a new country by the 1850s, because their ancestral lands – mainly in today’s Arizona, New Mexico, and Texas – had changed hands. These people were not exactly immigrants, as they had not moved; rather, national borders had been moved around them.

Changes in law followed these immigration patterns, encouraging northern Europeans and eventually discouraging the rest, including any Mexicans who cared to venture north. By the 1960s, recognition of past discriminatory practices led to the current system under which students and people with specialized skills, as well as others joining family members were admitted with less difficulty but with some constraints on numbers.

But these changes of nearly 60 years ago have not kept up with new immigrant groups that wish to come and share in the American Dream. Throughout our history, the same fears prevented certain groups from assimilating, including fears of immigrants taking all the jobs and first changing our religion, then our culture. Extremist right-wing pundits today espouse *replacement theory*,^[ii] with roots in the 19th century, given new credence under the Nazi regime, and then resurrected by Serbian leaders to enact the genocide of Bosnians during the Balkan Wars of the 1990s. This use of economic and cultural fears as weapons produces a powerful resonance or it would have died out along with the “sciences” of eugenics and phrenology, which also attempted to marginalize or annihilate specific groups in the past.

More recently, we saw the shameful scenes of newly arrived people literally “huddled” on the streets and in border towns and then, due to political grandstanding, became part of an organized movement more recently to other major cities, where they overwhelm social services, such as homeless centers, schools, and gymnasiums. Who are these people who have crossed mainly our southern border while we have no apparent plan because of political polarization to manage their welfare and futures? This does not look much like the American Dream they ostensibly came here to pursue.

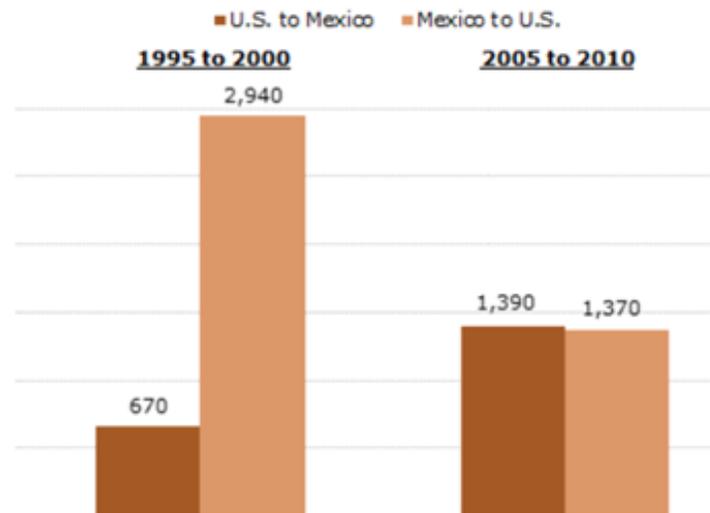
Many leaders have recognized the problem, including former President George W. Bush, who in his 2007 State of the Union address announced his intention to “fix our broken immigration system.”^[iii] Sixteen years later, no national leaders of either party have been able to solve the issue, so the immigrants keep coming and the system groans under the strain.

[i] “The New Colossus,” by Emma Lazarus, *Poetry Foundation*, available [here](#), accessed on September 27, 2023.

[ii] “Replacement theory,” *Britannica*, available [here](#), accessed on September 27, 2023.

[iii] “President Bush's Plan For Comprehensive Immigration Reform” *2007 State of the Union Address* available [here](#), accessed on September 27, 2023.

Five-Year Migration Flows Between the U.S. and Mexico, 1995-2000 and 2005-2010
(in thousands)



Net negative migration to U.S. from Mexico since 2010

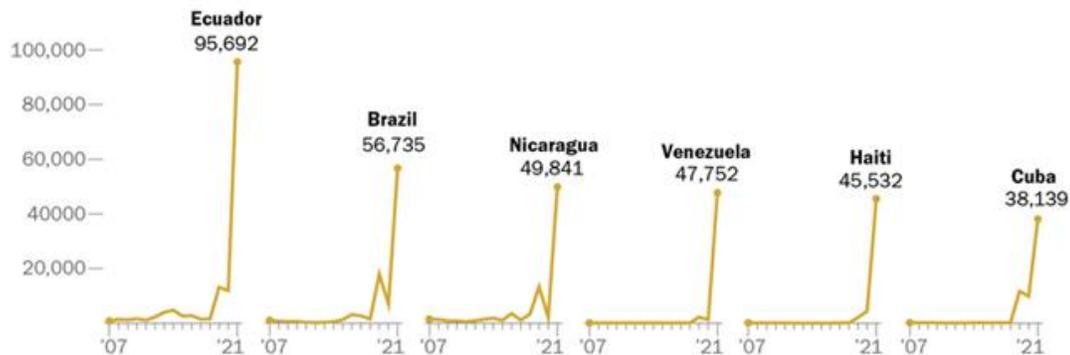
Former President Donald Trump frequently referred to any immigrants massing at our southern border as “Mexicans,” but this is a misnomer. People attempting to cross into the U.S. that way must by reason of geography pass through Mexico, but this is not their most likely point of origin. While Mexican immigrants have historically made up the largest single group, this trend reversed beginning in 2010, when Mexican net migration was – and still is – net negative, as illustrated by the first graphic.^[iv]

More people from the United States *emigrate to* Mexico than *immigrate from* there today. This is often said to be due to the positive economic effects in Mexico of the controversial 1994 North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), which led to an increase of U.S. companies relocating in Mexico, thus providing increasing numbers of jobs for Mexicans. Trump renegotiated this treaty in 2018, now called the United States-Mexico-Canada Agreement (USMCA), but there are other factors that have emerged, including lower birth rates that increase familial wealth, improved education, and enhanced border security.

[iv] “Net Migration from Mexico Falls to Zero—and Perhaps Less,” *Pew Research Service*, April 23, 2012, available [here](#), accessed on September 27, 2023.

Encounters with migrants from some countries rose dramatically in 2021

Migrant encounters at U.S.-Mexico border, by citizenship and fiscal year



CBP Southern border encounters by country 2007-2021

Customs and Border Protection (CBP) data showing Southern border encounters from 2007 to 2021 indicate that the greatest numbers of people were coming from Ecuador, Brazil, Nicaragua, Venezuela, Haiti, and Cuba, as noted in the second graphic.^[v]

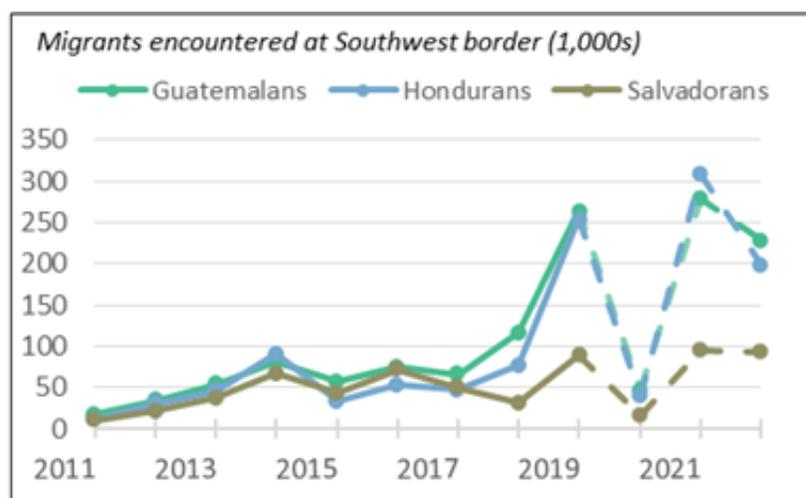
Brazil and Haiti suffered from national crises, as former Brazilian President Javier Bolsonaro tried to ignore the pandemic while 706,000 Brazilians died^[vi] and instituted autocratic policies restricting human and civil rights. Haiti has been plagued by criminal gang violence, a presidential assassination in July 2021, followed by a massive earthquake the following month, all while still trying to recover from a devastating 2016 hurricane and ongoing economic and ecological distress caused by decades of burning trees for charcoal.

Since the 2013 death of authoritarian socialist Hugo Chávez, who modeled himself after South American independence heroes like Simón Bolívar and satiated his population with subsidized food and energy prices from oil revenues, his less charismatic successor Nicolás Maduro has struggled to hold on to power. Drops in oil revenues led to difficulty maintaining subsidies and poor governance has led to a slow descent into crisis with increasing numbers of people fleeing the country in fear of chaos and total collapse.

Ecuador and Cuba have authoritarian self-described communist governments offering little economic opportunity and the same sort of poor governance that has led to recent violent crime surges, along with tolerating criminal organizations that essentially enslave local populations to exploit natural resources.

[v] "What's happening at the U.S.-Mexico border in 7 charts," *Pew Research Center*, November 9, 2021, available [here](#), accessed on September 27, 2023.

[vi] World Meter: Brazil,” available [here](#), accessed on September 27, 2023.



Northern Triangle migration at U.S. Southern border, 2011-2022

As illustrated by the third graphic,^[vii] the Northern Triangle, consisting of El Salvador, Guatemala, and Nicaragua, has produced mass migration as the region has descended into lawlessness and gang violence. These are crises of governance and economics as decades of civil war and kleptocracy (theft at a grand scale by government leaders) along with climate-related challenges of extreme weather and a coffee plant blight have impoverished citizens and generated dangerous conditions and food insecurity.

The current U.S. administration has made identifying and addressing the root causes of outmigration from Central America at their sources a priority; however, intentional approaches with civil society groups and appropriately targeted aid programs can take years to negotiate and bear fruit. In the meantime, seeing no apparent progress and little hope, often desperate people leave.

The values of ‘life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness’ are the bedrock upon which this nation was founded, despite the horrors and hardships of the journey for many. Through the increasing recognition of our complicated and complex – and at times abhorrent – past through stages of growth and assimilation, we honor those who paid the debt for our opportunity to live in a relatively free and prosperous nation today.

So, we should appreciate that people still want to come here to share in our birthright. What do they expect to find when they arrive? The time when immigrants imagined “streets paved with gold” are long past. I believe that they come from dire circumstances, summon the courage to leave, and expect to have

to work hard and prove themselves in a new and unfamiliar society. That is, they seek a better life than they currently have in the spirit of having an opportunity to experience liberty and pursue happiness.

In 2019, my husband and I took a trip to Arizona for me to participate in an Army conference. Mat had said that if that “dry heat” was good for his sinuses, we might consider moving there. Unfortunately, we went in August, which is monsoon season. No, really, monsoons in the desert. This means that it is no less hot than summer, but it is also nearly 100% humid with frequent rain showers that dry or flood the parched earth without nourishing it. A kind of hell on Earth, actually. One afternoon, we decided to go to the Phoenix Zoo. At the outdoor desert exhibit, I felt like I would drop dead from the oppressive heat and thought, “we have been here for 10 minutes, and I have had enough. People brave this for three weeks to come here. If they can make it, (screamed my inner liberal) let them come; these ‘huddled masses’ are obviously made of tougher stuff than I am.”

Next, we will examine the various aspects of our immigration system widely considered to be “broken” and look at how they might be “fixed.”

[vii] “Central American Migration: Root Causes and U.S. Policy,” *Congressional Research Service*, July 10, 2023, available [here](#), accessed on September 27, 2023.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Diane Chido is an Erie native who spent her early career in Washington, D.C, returning to found DC Analytics, a research and analysis firm. She has taught Intelligence Studies at Mercyhurst University, Political Science at Gannon University, and Cultural Analysis at the US Army War College and has conducted research for numerous US defense agencies. She holds an MS in Applied Intelligence Analysis, an MA in Russian Language, and a BA in International Relations and Soviet Studies.



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