

RESEARCH ARTICLES

Beyond Ellis Island: Unpacking the Negativity Around Contemporary Migration

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The year 2024 is the 100th anniversary of the end of Ellis Island as the welcoming gateway to and for millions of international migrants to the United States. It is also a presidential election year in the same country, where migrants and migration are lambasted, even as the economy cannot have enough of them. This behaviour pattern is not unique. By focusing mainly on the United States, this paper proposes a set of inter-related explanations as to why immigration can become – and persist in being seen – as a negative policy issue in the public eye. First, anti-immigration rhetoric is adopted as a rallying call by at least one mainstream political party. Second, the country's migration policies are enacted via executive order; and thus, they unwittingly become a proxy scorecard of alleged government inefficiency and incompetence, which, in turn, are projected as risks to national security. Third, in countries with either a relatively short history of independence, or with strong nativist cultures, nourished by a discourse of identity, patriotism, and a proto-ethnic sense of 'the nation', immigrants are seen to pose an existential threat; at best, any migrants have an obligation to 'fit in' via assimilation into their host community.

Introduction: Is Home a Place?

“Today, our cities are flooded by illegal aliens (...) Americans are being squeezed out of the labour force (...) Millions of people are pouring into our country.”

These were the words of Donald Trump during his speech accepting the Republican Party Nomination for the US Presidency on July 18, 2024, where he also promised the largest deportation in US history, if elected. He further claimed that immigrants were coming from mental institutions, thereby problematizing and denigrating any positive contributions migrants can make to modern America.¹

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1 For a full text of Donald Trump's speech see <https://www.nytimes.com/2024/07/19/us/politics/trump-rnc-speech-transcript.html> (accessed 23 July, 2024).

Notions of home are extraordinarily fickle. They cut across different realms and scales: from notions of home as a cosy and intimate, familiar and familial space; to an appreciation of Planet Earth as our home, in a deep, dark and dangerous universe. In spite of this mixture of meanings, we generally agree that ‘home’ is often a deeply romanced space in which significant emotional geographies are forged and nurtured. Such understandings can get complicated in a world characterized by migration, escape, expulsion, travel, transnationalism, and multiculturalism. In such a world of churn and movement, it has been argued that home, and associated cultural identity, transcends place: “Home (...) is “where one best knows oneself” (. ...) One is at home when one inhabits a cognitive environment in which one can undertake the routines of daily life and through which one finds one’s identity best mediated” (Rapport & Dawson, 1998, pp. 9–10).

But such explanations may sound ‘woke’, intellectual, abstract, and politically correct, skirting the connection between cultural identity and geographic location that others may instead find deep, natural, and visceral. Home is thus also a term swept up in discourses and policies that relate to nation building; its occupants an imagined community, with strong links to a common origin, history, language, and destiny (Anderson, 1991). This is particularly evident in sovereign states that feel vulnerable to attack, actual or imaginary, from outside or from within. Here, *home* can easily be extrapolated to *homeland*: a term akin to the German concept of *heimat*, burdened with ideological and political ramifications (Zoyirovna, 2024). *Homeland* is a reference to relational identities based on affiliations of friendship, family, achievement, and emotional self-attributions as well as other markers based on more physical terms – such as routines, rituals, dwelling, and prior experience with place – which come to bear on regions, such as Catalonia and Quebec, ‘stateless nations’ such as Scotland (Law & Mooney, 2012), or sovereign states, such as the United States. Nationalist discourse that invokes a country as homeland is also pivotal to the narratives of political leaders who must navigate a country with evident and official internal splits, peoples, nations, and minority groups, again, such as the United States.

An added complexity results when considering nations that have vast diasporas, such as Ireland, whose population of approximately five million is dwarfed by the 70 million citizens across the world who claim Irish ancestry (Irish Abroad Unit, 2017). For example, by 1900, New York was second only to Dublin in the number of Irish residents (Bartlett, 2010, p. 292).

For any diaspora, ‘home’ may be a complicated notion, referring to a place one had connection to through birth or the distant past, and yet which still holds an important place in official and personal understandings of identity. The U.S. has been an immigration site for most of the most recent two centuries, particularly since the great wave of European and imperial migration of the nineteenth century which saw approximately 44 million people emigrate globally, with the U.S. being a top choice for many migrants.

The benefits migrants bring to both home and host nations can often be forgotten or taken for granted, but they should not be underestimated. For example, “In the last half of the nineteenth century, Irish immigrants in North America sent an estimated US\$260 million in remittances and tickets home to Ireland; 90 per cent of that sum was from the United States” (Dunnigan, 2012, p. 64). This, in part, allowed for land purchases, the improvement of holdings, the funding of education for younger siblings left behind and the advancement of political independence for Ireland.

At the time of writing (spring-summer 2024), a new Pact on Migration and Asylum has been cobbled together by the European Union. Since various EU member states flatly refuse to process illegalised migrants who have landed in other EU countries, a ‘solidarity mechanism’ has been set up, allowing member states to forego taking in asylum seekers and instead pay into a fund meant to finance border management and to pay countries outside the EU to actively prevent migrants from making their way into the EU (Civil Rights Defenders, 2024; European Commission, 2024). At the same time, the U.S. presidential election campaign of Republican candidate Donald Trump is keen to remind voters of the alleged insecurity and administrative ineptitude surrounding their southern land border with Mexico (Crandall, 2023). Concerns about illegal immigration score highly amongst the U.S. electorate, particularly among Republican-leaning voters, as they do in many other countries across the world. Those migrants eagerly looking for a way into the U.S. are reported and represented in the tabloid press and media as invaders, terrorists, drug peddlers, criminals, and otherwise nameless and faceless hordes threatening the very fabric of America. Those who have somehow made it over the border can be caught and face deportation. Even legal, high-skilled migrants can be looked at with suspicion in times of high unemployment, a topic of fierce debate in courting Latino voters in particular in the 2012 U.S. presidential election, as read in Republican candidate Mitt Romney’s speeches on the topic (PBS, 2012). The current debate involves all kinds of migrants, from the undocumented and their children to the illegal migrants of earlier periods privileged to be referred to as ‘ex-pats’. Migration is simply a ‘problem’ despite the very different entry pathways and the fact that, despite the political rhetoric, the ultimate aim for many migrants is not necessarily to permanently settle in the U.S., but to learn skills, obtain training or seek savings from employment that they can then send or take back to their native countries.

Immigration gone wrong?

Even in countries with strong traditions of immigration, there are robust sentiments among politicians and their publics that the immigration file has somehow ‘gone wrong’. There seems to be, at least at a rhetorical level, a strong sense of urgency to better ‘manage’ and ‘control’ migration. This is particularly so with regard to immigrants seeking entry beyond the official route: for example, asylum seekers. Such migrants have been referred to as ‘illegalised’ because, while their cross-boundary nomadism and

mobility has been a feature of human civilisation for millennia, in recent decades the practice has ended up being illegal by virtue of the erection of state-driven hard borders and immigration protocols (Bleiker, 2012). In contrast, golden passport schemes and legislation meant to attract nomad entrepreneurs or high net worth individuals have proliferated (Surak, 2023), although not without significant critique. Indeed, while golden passport and visa programmes are illustrative of a state's creative governance that can lead to the raking in of substantial funds, illegalised migration can become an embarrassing scorecard of a state's ability, or inability, to 'control' migration. This 'litmus test' of a 'good' or 'bad' response to immigration is based purely on political rhetoric and not on the economic need for both highly educated and low skilled migrants (CNN, 2024).

Migration then, narrowly and negatively defined, has become synonymous with crisis, and a public trial for a government's capacity to govern and protect its citizenry. How and why has this happened? How is the U.S. story a harbinger of the resolute tack to right-wing ideologies in many parts of the world when issues surrounding migration are concerned? And why has such a paradigm shift occurred?

We try and address this ontological malaise in this paper by hoping to stay clear of the two epistemologies – more like two echo chambers – that are most strident in dealing with or talking about illegalised migration. On one hand, those who adopt macro-level perspectives, indulge in fearmongering and a discourse of invasion, and request stricter regulation and better securitisation. On the other hand, those who focus on the unfolding humanitarian drama at the micro level, and speak about human rights, social justice and states' obligations towards relevant international conventions, without recourse to national sensitivities or local resources. We are here more concerned with *why* immigration has 'gone wrong'.

But first, we focus on the story of Ellis Island, since it has been well documented over decades. The year 2024 also happens to be the 100th anniversary of the dramatic reversal of Ellis Island from 'gateway' to the US to a place where unwanted migrants were processed for deportation (Latson, 2014; Marinari, 2022). The shifting role of Ellis Island becomes like a microcosm for what has been changing in the U.S. as a whole.

Ellis Island: Island of Hope, but not any longer

Prior to 1890, the individual states (rather than the Federal government) regulated immigration into the United States. Castle Garden in the Battery (originally known as Castle Clinton), on lower Manhattan, served as the New York State immigration station from 1855 to 1890; some eight million immigrants, mostly from Northern and Western Europe, passed through its doors (Cannato, 2010). Then, from 1892 to 1954, Ellis Island took over: it was so busy that over 40% of U.S. citizens today can trace their ancestry back through its registry room. Some 12 million people, still mainly North and Western European immigrants, entered the United States from here,

the first being the 15-year-old Irish woman Annie Moore, travelling with her brothers to reunite with their parents who had migrated before them (Kelly & Morton, 2004). Cinematic footage and other records tell the moving (pun intended) stories of families with dreams of opportunity, sailing to the U.S. with what they could carry (e.g., History Channel, 2019). At its peak, the immigration station on Ellis Island processed people with assembly-line efficiency, sometimes doubling its maximum daily capacity of 5,000 (Latson, 2014).

But the political appetite for mass immigration was changing. With xenophobic sentiments ascendant during and after the First World War (1914-18), ‘new immigrants’ were deemed to be highly undesirable for American society, and assimilation began to be favoured over diversity (Lange, 2015). The Immigration Act of 1917 required immigrants over 16 years of age to demonstrate basic reading comprehension in any language via a literacy test; it increased the tax paid by new immigrants upon arrival; and permitted immigration officers to exercise more discretion in making decisions over whom to exclude from entry, for example, on health grounds (Lleras-Muney & Shertzer, 2015). Finally, the 1917 act excluded from entry anyone born in a geographically defined ‘Asiatic Barred Zone’, with a few exceptions (Sohi, 2022). Immigration restrictions based on the principle of numerical limitation were introduced in an emergency act in 1921 which limited the number of persons of any nationality annually entering the U.S. to 3 per cent of the number of foreign-born persons of that nationality recorded as resident in the U.S. at the 1910 Census (Marinari, 2022). Then, in 1924, the Johnson-Reed (Immigration) Act required potential immigrants to first register and be examined at overseas consulates rather than on Ellis Island; stopped migration from Asia (with a few exceptions); and imposed a new quota of immigration visas, limited to two percent of the total number of people of each nationality in the U.S. according to the 1890 Census (Office of the Historian, 2024). This was followed by Depression-era belt-tightening in 1930 in a context of high unemployment, and any immigrants had to have substantial funds with them in order to ensure they did not become a burden on the state. This led to a decline in the popularity of the U.S. as a destination for migrants. For example, from a high of 1,872,000 in 1891, the Irish population in the U.S. had declined to a low of 678,000 in 1941 (Carrier & Jeffery, 1953). By 1950, a post-WWII policy banned those who had ever been affiliated or associated with a totalitarian party, targeting mainly Germans and Italians (Time Magazine, 1950). Ellis Island had by then become the notorious holding area for those who tried to sneak through but were caught and were subsequently deported.

The changing migration narrative

Such legal measures followed in the wake of a change in the profile of immigrants into the U.S. Whereas North and Western European migrants (British, Irish, and Dutch) had flocked to the U.S. before, and had been easily absorbed into the fabric of the nation, they had now been replaced

at the immigration counters by Italians, Greeks, Poles, and Ukrainians. The latter's alleged poor work ethic, lax morals and inability to integrate into U.S. culture and society – also because few spoke English – were questioned. Such stereotyping was only swayed by a gathering sentiment in favour of “contributionism:” that this diversity was (also) a contributing strength to the U.S. economy and its resilient culture (Fleegler, 2013).

Other waves of immigrants would follow. Typically, those immigrants that had settled down in the U.S., and their second and subsequent generations, took kindly to family reunification measures; but developed notions of nativist populism and nationalism, which looked disapprovingly at fresh(er) waves of migration, from other sending countries. In the post-war period, the U.S. benefited from the influx of scientists from Europe and up to recently was the major receiving country for migrants with tertiary education, bringing high-level skills to both academia and industry. Indeed, one pathway to a permanent visa to remain in the U.S. is through demonstrable scholarly achievement. The EB-1A, the so called “Einstein visa,” can be secured even without an employer to sponsor an individual, for scientists who have developed and maintained professional recognition at a national or international level (Kumaran, 2024). The clear benefit to the U.S. economy and international intellectual profile means such visa holders are not the main cohort under discussion when migration is being critiqued.

Different but similar stories unfolded in relation to the U.S.-Mexican border, except that here, Mexicans have been, are, and remain the most likely migrants to the U.S. With a 3,140km land border - and unlike Ellis Island at the end of an arduous Atlantic passage - there is no serious stretch of water to help ‘manage’ the human flow, and porosity across the border is inevitable. Trade agreements have facilitated U.S. investment in Mexico (where labour costs are lower), although ‘sweat shop’ working conditions in *maquadoras*, particularly for women, have been condemned (G. Young, 2020). The border has been demonised as a haven and conduit for vice, gambling, prostitution, and illicit drug and arms trafficking, and associated violence (Shirk, 2014). Nevertheless, “there is no specific evidence to support the theory that the southern border is a security threat [to the U.S.]” (Ganster & Collins, 2021, p. xxviii). And there are over 30 million Mexicans living and working in the U.S., according to the 2020 Census. And according to the Department of Homeland Security, an estimated 11.4 million undocumented migrants live in the U.S. Moreover, far too many individuals live in U.S. in a state of limbo, under temporary relief from removal (Business Roundtable, 2022). Immigrants in the U.S. now account for some 13.7% of the U.S. population, nearly triple the share (4.8%) in 1970. However, today's immigrant share remains below the record 14.8% share in 1890, when 9.2 million immigrants lived in the U.S. (Budiman, 2020).

The economic scoresheet suggests that migrants have been positive contributors to entrepreneurship, competitiveness and economic growth, and they serve more as ‘job creators’ than ‘job takers’ (Azoulay et al., 2022);

yet, the glaringly negative attitudes towards immigration in the U.S. persist. The reasons for these changes in public opinion can be summarized under *four* themes: insufficiently effective migration policies, the perceived fears among the public, the role of the media in presenting questions related to immigration, and the populist rhetoric applied by politicians in addressing immigration issues (Dionne, 2012). These are reviewed in turn below.

‘Inefficient’ migration policies

The immigration issue in the United States has been plagued by longstanding inadequacies in public policy, stemming from prolonged disagreements between the major political factions (Republicans and Democrats). Disputes over immigration quotas and regulatory methods have persisted over the years, compounded by the pressing need to address border security and illegalized immigration concurrently. The policies crafted in response have been costly, but more importantly they often lack(ed) transparency (Kretsedemas & Brotherton, 2018). Despite the attempts of the Biden administration (2021-24) to find a proper policy response, the failures are obvious, stemming from the challenge to find a balance between the complex dichotomy of the application of more liberal policies, and the necessity for the setting up and implementation of effective control measures (Hollifield, 2016; Nowrasteh, 2018). The response should have addressed the problems of the inevitable need for migrant labour as well as the existing options for deportation of illegal migrants (Hanson, 2004). The latter mechanism has been in place for some time; but the statistics reveal fluctuating trends in deportation rates, with significant numbers under both Democratic and Republican administrations (Budiman, 2020). For instance, measures in response to the COVID-19 pandemic were applied by the Trump administration (2017-20) and led to the immediate expulsion of migrants (Title 42) (Long, 2023; Nowrasteh, 2018) and, to a lesser extent, continued to be implemented by the subsequent Biden administration (Gramlich & Scheller, 2021). Although the latter tried to broaden legal pathways for immigration, and at the same time reduce illegal border crossings, the number of migrants at the Mexico border has continued to grow (VoA, 2023). That poses a major challenge, especially to U.S. border cities (most of which are in ‘red’, Republican states). No wonder the system has been described as “broken” (Business Roundtable, 2022) and Republican-leaning states and cities have bussed newly-arrived migrants north to Democratic cities to get them to “feel the pressure” (T. Henderson, 2022). Additionally, the policies and subsequent laws are seen as being arbitrarily enforced and enacted less transparently. That is because most of the decision-making power related to immigration is vested in the executive branch, rather than in Congress, a practice that raises concerns over the legitimacy and permanency of immigration policies. Brought forward by the executive, only a few of those measures were crafted through the standard legislative process, therefore lacking substantial public debate, scrutiny, and legitimacy (Counihan, 2007; Cox & Rodríguez, 2009). Failing to agree on how to address immigration

challenges, the U.S. Congress has remained passive, allowing the executive branch to occupy the resulting power vacuum and shape the policy-making process (Counihan, 2007).

To summarize, a shift in the attitude of public opinion can be related to the widespread dissatisfaction about *how* immigration was/is handled, and a lack of political leadership related to this issue. The missing comprehensive congressional reform, an incoherent immigration framework, and ineffective immigration policies have added up to impact on quite unfavourable perceptions of immigration in the U.S. (Nowrasteh, 2018).

Divisive political rhetoric

From Slovakia to Germany and New Zealand, political rhetoric surrounding immigration has long been a cornerstone of election campaigns, and not just in the U.S., thus serving as a powerful tool to mobilize increasingly apolitical and lethargic voters and shape public opinion (Bedford et al., 2003; Dostal, 2017; Práznovská, 2019, respectively). The tone and messaging set by political leaders can significantly influence the public perception of immigration, often framing it either as a threat or as an opportunity (Counihan, 2007). In recent years, immigration in the U.S. has been a contentious issue with President Biden's administration seeking to shift the narrative by focusing on border enforcement and holding Republicans accountable for obstructing immigration reforms (Ward, 2024). Conversely, the Trump campaign has focused on border enforcement and deportation (Sanchez, 2024). Despite historical shifts towards more positive political discourse related to immigration (particularly between World War II and the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965), recent decades have seen an increasing political polarization over the issue. Today, Republican speeches reflect negative attitudes reminiscent of the strict immigration quota era of a hundred years ago. A content analysis of political speeches over the past 140 years reveals enduring themes in anti-immigration rhetoric, focusing on threats, control, legality, and crime. Conversely, pro-immigration discourse emphasizes desirable characteristics, humanitarian concerns, and community belonging. In that setting, the U.S. Congress serves as the arena for a clash of principles and beliefs, as well as for a growing polarization between the political parties (Card et al., 2022). Moreover, a dehumanization rhetoric is prevalent in discourse surrounding immigrants, stripping them of empathy, sympathy and even humanity, and instead portraying them as "diseased organisms," "cargo," "objects," or "invaders" (Markowitz & Slovic, 2020, p. 9260). Economic and cultural anxieties about immigration are closely intertwined, with both being part of the political discourse (Bloemraad et al., 2023). Since it is a divisive issue, immigration presents different sources of anxiety. For instance, the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks marked a pivotal shift in how U.S. citizens and policymakers perceived immigration, leading to the securitization of immigration policy, and particularly targeting Muslim migrants. This event intensified the negative rhetoric surrounding immigration, framing it largely through the lens of security concerns. The

tone and wording employed by political leaders (as a top-down approach), played a pivotal role in shaping public attitudes towards immigration. The role of populist rhetoric, especially during election campaigns, is to maximise support by exploiting immigration as a security issue, portraying it as an external and existential threat. That approach serves as a tool that helps deflect attention from more pressing economic and societal challenges, such as inflation, the erosion of democracy, and climate change.

The role of the media

The media play a significant role in shaping public perception of immigration, presenting it either as a benefit or a threat (Connor & Lopez, 2016). Debates on immigration in the U.S. have become increasingly polarized across various platforms, including legislative discussions, electoral rhetoric, media coverage, public sentiment, and activism (Bloemraad et al., 2023). Recent attention on immigration, fuelled by an alleged surge in immigrants at the border, makes this a critical topic in the upcoming 2024 U.S. general elections. And so, strong media coverage serves as a channel for shifting the blame for ineffective policies among opposing political parties (Dionne, 2012). The media's portrayal of the various groups of immigrants can add to or diminish their dehumanization, strongly impacting the attitudes of viewers and/or readers (Markowitz & Slovic, 2020). The caravans of immigrants and human suffering affect both the attitudes of emphatic viewers, as well as those especially sensitive to perceived threats. Clearly, editorial choices are directly shaping and impacting on public perceptions about immigration (Madrigal & Soroka, 2023).

Immigration as a perceived threat to national security

Public perception of immigration as a threat to U.S. security is influenced by views related to the immigrants committing serious crimes, carrying communicable diseases, general concerns about border security, and the palpable presence of a large number of undocumented immigrants. Policies regarding family reunification and fears of radicalization, particularly after 9/11, have added to these perceptions. While immigration has been predominantly viewed through economic and cultural lenses, the tragic events of 9/11 drastically shifted the narrative toward national security. The securitization of immigration policy, particularly concerning immigrants from Muslim-majority countries, has led to increased concerns related to potential threats from immigrants (Counihan, 2007).

Except for the relationship with eventual terrorism, security questions tend to deal with crimes and their purported association with immigrants. According to official U.S. statistics, from 2001 to 2018, 40% of immigrants deported have been convicted of a crime (Office of Homeland Security, 2017; Pew Research Center, 2018).

Another aspect is perceived security at the borders and consequent measures to increase it. For instance, after taking office, President Trump's administration enacted several measures aimed at tightening border security

and deterring unauthorized immigration, including executive orders restricting entry from predominantly Muslim countries, as well as efforts to build or extend a border wall. Those actions faced legal challenges and criticism, particularly regarding the separation of families at the border (The American Society of International Law, 2017). President Biden's administration has sought to reverse some of these policies, facing obstacles such as legal challenges to programs like *Remain in Mexico* and *Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals* (DACA) (Bartnik, 2022). However, the intertwined nature of border security and immigration policy complicates reform efforts, as attempts to liberalize immigration face resistance amidst popular concerns over border chaos (Nowrasteh, 2022). Republicans argue that the influx of migrants, especially across the southern border, strains resources and poses security risks, emphasizing the need for more stringent immigration controls. Conversely, many immigration advocates, including some Democrats, argue against proposed changes that they believe would compromise protections for vulnerable populations without effectively addressing border issues. An enduring perception of immigration as a threat to US security has reshaped policy debates, obliging a focus on border security, while proving unable to find a balance between security and humanitarian considerations (Nowrasteh, 2018).

Immigration as a threat to US values

The willingness to adopt and accept the American way of life has been a complex and evolving issue in the U.S.; one that is deeply intertwined with historical, cultural, and political dynamics. Immigrants have long played a significant role in shaping U.S. society, contributing not just economic value added but also distinct cultural backgrounds and perspectives. Historically, resistance to newcomers has been a minor but recurring theme in U.S. public discourse, from anti-Chinese sentiment in the 19th century to concerns about Southern and Eastern European immigrants in the early 20th century. Even in recent years, the anti-immigrant rhetoric has persisted, exemplified by the policies of President Trump's administration (Card et al., 2022). Therefore, and apart from the blatant security issues, public attitudes toward immigrants have been shifted and shaped by both economic and cultural factors. Economic fears, such as worries about job displacement, wage undercutting or added strains on social welfare systems, often accompany concerns about cultural differences and social integration. The perception of cultural distance between immigrants and the host population fuels anxieties about integration and the need to protect the national identity, although it is extremely challenging to objectively assess the perceived cultural distance (Bloemraad et al., 2023). However, the perception of immigrants as being culturally distinct persists, both from their co-nationals, in their country of origin, and as well as from the host country's citizens, arguably because of their distinct lifestyles (Benson & O'Reilly, 2009). From that point of view, national identity and national pride influence attitudes toward immigrants, whereas the ones that strongly identify with 'their nation' are often more

distrustful of newcomers (Bloemraad et al., 2023). The lack of a holistic approach that goes beyond economic considerations, that can foster a more in-depth positive integration towards a more cohesive society, is significantly lacking in the U.S.; and this is strongly reflected in public perception about immigration. Yet, despite its prominence in political rhetoric, immigration has consistently not been ranked as a top priority for and by U.S. voters. This was manifest in the 2020 election, when it was overshadowed by other issues (Baxter & Nowrasteh, 2021).

Migration and offshoring

Meanwhile, migration has been the subject of dystopic offshoring policies and practices. A technology of excision produces “spaces of exception” – spaces that manifest legalized lawlessness – via the very same exercise of sovereignty (Agamben, 2003/2005). There is a creeping normalisation of extreme (including extraterritorial) measures taken to ‘punish’ irregularized migrants and ‘protect’ the border.

The US probably has had the most media-scrutinised offshoring detention facility at Guantánamo Bay, Cuba, where some of the alleged perpetrators of the 9/11 attacks of 2001 still await trial (PBS, 2022). Australia made history by declaring parts of its territories and territorial waters to be “non-Australia” for specific purposes. Following the *Tampa* incident of late August 2001, the Australian legislature amended the Migration Act to exclude portions of its sovereign territory for the purposes of claiming asylum. Under the law, persons who enter these offshore places – mainly islands and reefs - are defined as “offshore entry persons” and are unable to make visa applications, including requests for asylum (Ghezelbash, 2016). These spaces were thus effectively “de-territorialized” for the purposes of asylum seekers (Perera, 2009, p. 203); while the latter are now punishable at law (Kumar Rajaram, 2006).

Australia has also excised migration detention services to Nauru and Papua New Guinea. While Italy has proceeded with a controversial plan to offshore asylum seekers in Albania, in which the new Labour Government in the UK has expressed an interest, having ditched a similarly contentious plan involving Rwanda, Africa. In spite of international conventions relating to the status of refugees, refoulement is an increasingly mainstream act of ‘punishment’ exacted by states on those seeking migration by other than state preferred pathways.

Beyond the US: Glaring exceptions

‘Migrant bashing’ is now a political party tactic to win votes and secure parliamentary representation, even forming part of governing coalitions. There is however, at least one contemporary glaring exception. Canada is possibly the only post-industrial democracy in the world today where mainstream political parties and the general public remain largely

accommodative, even sympathetic, to mass migration (Gordon et al., 2020). How has Canada's mustered what appears to be an immunity to nativist populism (Taub, 2017)?

Part of the answer is the absence of nationalism in the Canadian psyche. Remember that the country was formed by default, out of those provinces that remained loyal to the British Crown, rather than opting for the republicanism of the US, and thus *refusing to become its own country* at the time. The Canadian constitution was only repatriated from Britain in 1982.

The culture is decidedly mosaic rather than melting pot, at ease with diversity and not emphatic on assimilation (Peach, 2005). Ethnic identity is not a significant social marker. Multiculturalism is official, a way of defusing a tense Anglo-French binarism that had been at the root of power-sharing in the country, and which had led the francophone-majority province of Quebec to almost secede, twice, via referendum (R. A. Young, 1994). Indeed, one could say that the country has shared core values; but no 'core' ethnic or proto-ethnic identity. Instead, it is the *absence* of state-based nationalism and the consistent embrace of multiculturalism over time that facilitate immigration because they have been deeply assimilated and adopted as official policy (A. Henderson & McEwen, 2005).

The size of the country helps. Canada still processes hundreds of thousands of immigrants yearly. A 'points system' is largely lauded as a fair way to choose suitable immigrants. In spite of this, Canada still has a population of around 38 million (similar to Morocco) while having the second largest land area in the world (after Russia). The mean population density is less than 5 persons per km².

Geography also makes things easier. There is lots of room. The country practically only shares a land border with the U.S. (To be exact, there is a maritime boundary with France because of St Pierre et Miquelon, as well as one with Denmark via Greenland). Barring exceptional circumstances – Vietnam War Draft evaders in the 1960s; Trump refugees in 2016-7 – no hordes of undocumented migrants are likely to appear along any of these borders.

The political system also has advantages. Unlike other western democracies, where a historic post-World War 2 bi-party system has collapsed – such as in Austria, France, Germany, Ireland, Italy, the Netherlands, and Spain – Canada still maintains two, catch-all political parties which take turns at governing at federal level; and with a smaller Left-wing or Quebec-based federal party sometimes playing kingmakers. Both these country-wide parties – the Liberals and the Conservatives – court and depend on migrant voters; they cannot afford to alienate migrants, most of whom secure voting rights after a rather brief time period: typically, three years in the country.

It is important to mention that Canada has experienced its own brand of nativism. The Chinese Immigration Act of 1923 – almost in step with U.S. legislation – stopped most immigrants hailing from China (Holland, 2007). And the federal government sought to preserve Canada's status as a 'white

man's country' well into the late 1960s (Triadafilopoulos, 2012). However, by and large, Canada has been able to manage its migration policy and to assure its public that such a policy, and its script, remains firmly under government (federal and provincial) control.

Canada also has its own 'Ellis Island': *Pier 21* is a former ocean liner terminal and immigration shed located in Halifax, Nova Scotia, which saw over one million immigrants arrive from 1928 to 1971. It reopened as the Canadian Museum of Immigration in 1999 (<https://pier21.ca/>).

There are other exceptions to the populist trend; and not all, like Canada, have the luxury of wide swathes of empty space. For instance, Malta stands in sharp contrast to Canada. It is the European Union's smallest member (and archipelago) state with a staggering population density for a sovereign country: a population of around 525,000 on a land area of just 316 km². Malta has been accused of violating the non-refoulement rule in the management of its international maritime borders (e.g., Baldacchino, 2021). It has however witnessed over 100,000 immigrants settle there during just the last 15 years, reversing decades of a culture of emigration (Debono & Baldacchino, 2021). Many immigrants chose to stay even during the Covid-19 Pandemic. The local economy (including tourism, transportation and construction) and the public health service depend crucially on foreign labour to function. Unemployment is at record lows. There is a racist streak (especially with dark-skinned, sub-Saharan, and presumably non-Christian immigrants), and discourse about how the country is bursting at its seams with immigrants is rife, but not politically worrying. The only enduring politician with neo-fascist credentials in Malta is Norman Lowell, leader and founder of Imperium Europa opposed to Islam, multiculturalism, and immigration, but remains electorally irrelevant. He peaked at 0.3% of votes cast in the 2019 elections to the European Parliament (Diacono, 2024; Leusch, 2019; Taggart & Pirro, 2021). Malta, like Canada, is not obsessed with its national identity: it has *five* 'national days' and has been provocatively described as a 'nationless state' (Baldacchino, 2002).

Other small jurisdictions, like Singapore and Gibraltar, both 'islands' in their own way, survive as multicultural societies. Having thrived as port cities, they maintain an openness and tolerance to diversity that goes hand in hand with an entrepôt vocation (Darwin, 2020; Martínez et al., 2018).

Conclusion

The 100th anniversary of the end of Ellis Island as 'gateway' to America as 'land of opportunity' affords a sober assessment of the meaning of home and the significance of place and identity in the 21st century. Decades of neoliberalism have ushered in waves of international migrants and raised the proportion of residents not born in their place of residence to historically, unprecedented levels. Economies and industries seek talent but also brawn

and muscle in order to operate, from information technology wizards hailing from Southern India and Colombian hotel receptionists to Filipino care workers and Polish waitresses.

That a political rhetoric operates in direct opposition to these economic realities deserves unpacking. Many countries have experienced difficulties integrating immigrants into their society of late, in words as much as in deeds. Admittedly, immigrants have become necessary to address acute labour shortages and prevent population decline, but public attitudes toward immigrants can no longer be assumed to be largely positive. Instead, there is evident resistance and backlash to the sustained reception of large numbers of immigrants – whether state sponsored or otherwise – including concerns about an erosion and dilution of ‘national identity’ that can fuel nativist concerns (Esses et al., 2001; Feagin, 1997; Jaret, 1999; Münz, 2007).

With its focus on the U.S., and by resorting to a selective scan of secondary material, this paper suggests that immigration can become, and persist, as a negative policy issue in the public eye, when: (1) it is continuously lambasted as such by particular and mainstream political parties, and egged on by opportunist and drama-seeking media outlets; (2) its policies are enacted via executive order, cheating them from a broader legitimacy, and frankly short-circuiting the parliamentary debate that could boost their legitimacy and which may refine and smoothen their implementation, and perhaps even secure cross-party approval; (3) migrants, and/or the policies governing their movement, are tightly associated with issues of national security and ‘keeping our country safe’, and so become a proxy scorecard of government ineptitude and incompetence; and (4) countries have strong nativist cultures that are nourished by a discourse of identity, patriotism and ‘the nation’, whereby old migrant stock is quick to denounce newer migrants as non-belonging and subject them categorically to dehumanization. While these conclusions are not unique to the U.S., the prominence of migration in political rhetoric around its 2024 presidential election brings these issues to the fore.

It may be that the exaggerated political rhetoric about migration will need to be addressed on grounds other than narrow domestic agendas. According to Khanna (2022), “American immigration has plummeted to an all-time low of only 0.1% between mid-2020 and mid-2021, which amounts to barely 200,000 new migrants,” and the country is losing the war on attracting talented college students to countries with less harsh rhetoric around migrants, such as its neighbour Canada. The land of opportunity may carry on, but those who traditionally sought to find theirs may simply make other choices if the negativity surrounding migrant populations persists.

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