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“Immigration Dictatorship”? Logical Flaws and Etymological Faux Pas by Scott McPherson

In “Socialism and Immigration” (www.fff.org/comment/com0303d.asp), I compared the anti-immigrant forces of today with the anti-free-trade forces of 19th-century France, as related by the great libertarian Frédéric Bastiat in his essay, “Metaphors.” Their motive is to get people to associate certain scary terms with a target group and let the tide of public opinion do the rest, however ill-informed that tide may be.

At the forefront of anti-immigration sentiment in America is conservative columnist Paul Craig Roberts, whose misuse of language to further his agenda is as marked as any protectionist rhetoric from the 1900s. His latest attempt to turn the freedom of movement into a scare tactic for the political right was a column entitled “An Immigration Dictatorship?” which appeared in the February 24 issue of the *Washington Times*. “Are democracies democratic?” he asks in the opening line, “Or do elites determine political outcomes regardless of majority opinion?”

What Roberts is talking about is the fact that opinion polls routinely return high numbers in favor of greater immigration restrictions, a trend that has existed for the last 25 years. According to a poll by the Chicago Council on Foreign Relations, 60 percent of the American people view current immigration levels as a “critical threat to the vital interests of the United States.”

Despite this, both President Bush and members of Congress aren’t acting hostile enough towards immigrants, Roberts believes. Noting the large numbers who are turning out in Britain to oppose war with Iraq, Roberts says that protesters “also oppose [Prime Minister] Blair cramming massive Third World immigration down their throats.” By tolerating “mass immigration,” Blair is “no longer perceived as ‘New Labor,’” but instead “is now perceived as an anti-democrat.” Thus, Roberts concludes, Western leaders — in defiance of majority opinion — are creating an “immigration dictatorship.”

Oh, please.

As Bastiat noted in the 1840s, the choice of words by the opponents of freedom is very important. When an act of self-improvement, such as free trade or relocation to a different country, can be associated in the minds of the people with an act of aggression — using such words as “invade” and “flood,” and now, laughably, “dictatorship” — then an automatic, almost subconscious negative attachment can be created that requires only reference to the pejorative term to conjure up the necessary hysteria. Individuals’ freedom can then be curtailed to serve the agenda of the demagogue.

But Roberts, apparently growing tired of the clichés already worn out in the post-September 11 frenzy to rid Western lands of the hated foreigner, has moved on to a level of immigrant-bashing that borders on irresponsible even by contemporary standards. For example, he claims that the influx of immigrants into Great Britain has “unleashed germ warfare on the British people” because of the sharp rise in HIV, TB, and hepatitis B infections. A rise in such infections could logically be the result of allowing more people into the country who carry these diseases but to equate this to “germ warfare” is inexcusable, hateful — and somewhat reminiscent of Nazi oratory.

It stands to reason that if you allow people of generally poorer health into a given country, the general level of health will, in the short run, be lowered. Yet the long-term positive consequences will be an overall increase in general living standards — including health — as a direct result of immigration. Consider this: From the end of the Mexican War in 1848 up until the 1920s, there existed a truly open-border policy between the United States and Mexico. During the same period, millions of Europeans and Asians came to our shores. “By 1914,” writes Bernard Siegan in his *Economic Liberties and the Constitution*, “the [U.S.] national income exceeded that of the United Kingdom, Germany, France, Austria-Hungary, and Italy combined, and per capita income was well above that of any other great nation.... It is estimated that the purchasing power of wages ... trebled between 1840 and 1914-15. Working hours declined substantially.”

If immigrants deserve blame for bringing diseases, will Roberts and his allies give them any credit for helping to make such tremendous prosperity possible?
Don’t count on it.

It is worth noting here that throughout the 19th century the only restriction on immigration was a requirement that immigrants undergo a medical evaluation. Still, Roberts doesn’t even suggest a similar path, such as proposing mandatory inoculation against major infections for 21st-century immigrants (at their own expense, of course). He doesn’t appear to want them at all, and he will stoop to equating the basic human desire to live under freer and

better conditions to “germ warfare” if that’s the magic phrase that will inflame people against their alleged “attackers.”

Unfortunately, such flawed thinking isn’t confined to the editorial page. A February 18 report, also in the *Washington Times*, blamed lax enforcement of immigration laws for allowing five men to stay in the country who subsequently gang-raped a 42-year-old woman in New York City. “It could have been just another horrible crime, except that the five men charged should never have been in that neighborhood,” the *Times* lamented. “All were illegal immigrants who under federal law were subject to being deported.”

Which means that rather than being “just another horrible crime,” a gang-rape by illegals is somehow *even more* horrible because they were violating immigration laws at the same time. And we know that *legal* residents of this country never commit such acts.

Cannot this same anti-immigrant logic be applied to a group of men who cross a state border and commit a crime? If only there were immigration officers on the George Washington Bridge, crazed and disease-ridden New Jersey interlopers could be kept from raping good, honest, New York women (and taking their jobs, as well!). Perhaps the term “wetback” could connote those who swim the Hudson River.

The truth is, these attempts to contort both language and logic to serve anti-immigrant ends are built on a foundation of cracking ice. Take Roberts’s use of the word “democratic” in his column. If he is to be understood, anything the government does, or doesn’t do, against the will of the majority is symbolic of “dictatorship” and “elitism.”

Really? Then the entire Bill of Rights — which stands as a bulwark against majority opinion — rests on that very “elitist,” “dictatorial,” and “undemocratic” principle. Leftists who hate guns may wish to begin referring to America as an “armed dictatorship” — pointing to the high level of gun ownership that so alarms the majority of the American public. Activists for universal health care may call our land a “private health-care dictatorship” — referring to the popular majority who voted for Al Gore, an outspoken advocate of socialized medicine. And while we’re on the subject, should we abandon federalism altogether, lest we be called a “states’ rights dictatorship” by those who advocate pure democracy over representative democracy?

The idea of a free society — and a government created to ensure that freedom — rests on the notion that all human beings, as individuals, have rights that must be respected by their fellows. The concept of individual rights implies the freedom of each citizen to act in any way he wishes in pursuit of his happiness — short of imposing his will on another by force; government is likewise barred from initiating force.

Does this mean, as Herbert Spencer asked, “If men use their liberty in such a way as to surrender their liberty, are they thereafter any the less slaves?” Of course they would still be slaves, *if they had indeed voted themselves into tyranny* — which would require that government was to act coercively. But open immigration does not, by definition, require a forceful imposition on anyone; government is not *doing* anything. Actually, it is the use of government to intercept those crossing borders — that is, the closed-border mentality — that would have government acting aggressively against those who have not first done so. Thus, a legal system that tolerates immigration cannot, in and of itself, be logically associated with dictatorship.

The United States is a nation of immigrants. It always has been. It always will be. For more than 200 years those who came first from other lands — or whose parents or grandparents came from other lands — have been inclined to warn of the dangers of those who come later. It’s a ritual as old as our country. The justifications change over time — language, religion, race, ethnicity, economics, hygiene — but it always comes down to fear: fear of the unknown, fear of change, fear of competition, fear of the alien.

Though the contorting of language to inspire fear can be counted on, freedom-loving Americans should not allow it to go unchecked in the marketplace of language and culture. For in warping the true meaning of something so hideous as dictatorship, those who would misuse the word for their own statist ends weaken our understanding of government’s proper role and make us all that much more vulnerable to true absolutism.

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