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ACCOMMODATING THE FLOW OF PEOPLE

by Stephen Aguilar-Millan



One of the more salient aspects of the process of Globalisation has been the increased flows of people around the world. According to the UN, in 1965, the number of people living outside of their country of birth for more than a year was 75 million. By 2005, this had jumped to 195 million and the UN forecasts that, by 2050, this number will jump again to 294 million. The majority of the flows of people have been from what one might stylise as the ‘poorer South’ to the ‘richer North’. Typically the flows are from South and Central America into the US and from the former European colonies and the former Soviet states into Western Europe.

This is quite a large flow of people that represents about 3% of humanity. The flow of people on this scale has exposed some of the internal tensions within the process of Globalisation. On the one hand, within the countries of destination, immigrants are accused of adding to over-crowded living spaces; placing additional burdens upon the existing infrastructure (e.g. schools, housing, transport, and so on); and crowding out the indigenous population from employment opportunities. There is also the aspect of newcomers being seen as a potential security threat that is diluting the national identity of the host country.

Equally, other evidence suggests that the newcomers actually boost the local economy by holding down the latent inflationary pressures whilst stimulating demand; that they tend to gravitate towards jobs that the indigenous population – for whatever reason – are unwilling to undertake; and that they act as a mechanism to counter the ageing populations of the economies in Europe and North America. The arguments are fairly even between the benefits and the adverse impacts of the flow of people.

As one might expect, the issue of immigration has been rising up the political agenda in recent years in both Europe and North America. Whilst it has to be admitted that a proportion of newcomers are only temporary visitors – they arrive in the host country, work there for two to three years, and then return permanently to their country of origin – it is the

permanently settled newcomers that commands the attention of the public in the host nations. Indeed, it often distils into a single question: how can a nation accommodate the numbers of newcomers?

MONO-CULTURAL AND MULTI-CULTURAL MODELS

Traditionally, there have been two models of accommodation – the mono-cultural and the multi-cultural approach. It would be incorrect to characterise the two approaches too dogmatically, but those readers in the US are likely to be more familiar with the mono-cultural model and those readers in Europe are likely to be more familiar with the multi-cultural model. It is worth briefly examining the two models in a little detail.

The key presumption of the mono-cultural model is that all newcomers are expected to adopt that cultural habits and *mores* of the country of destination. This obviously means that they will be expected to lessen their links with their countries of origin, possibly to the point where, over a number of generations, the newcomers will be thoroughly assimilated into the host culture. For example, in the US, despite many languages being spoken, there is only one official language – English – in which nearly all official business is conducted.

This process works on the newcomers through naturalisation and on their children through the education system. The model in the US works on the basis that the third generation of newcomers will have shed most vestiges of their cultural origins. It is successful where the host nation has a strong sense of identity and the confidence to project that identity onto those coming to live in the nation. Throughout its history, the US has been very successful in welcoming waves of immigration and assimilating those newcomers as American Citizens. However, as discussed below, this success has not been total.

The multi-cultural model works on a different premise to the mono-cultural model. The key presumption of the model is that newcomers are welcome to retain the cultural habits and *mores* of the country of origin, as long as they respect that right in everyone else. The model works through the toleration of everything except intolerance. It allows the newcomers to retain strong ties with their countries of origin and gives everyone the right not to assimilate into the host population.

This is a model that has worked well in Europe for some time until recently. It does present a linguistic challenge. For example, the EU has three official alphabets and 22 *communautaire* languages! It also runs the risk of the mis-interpretation of some acts that are important to one cultural tradition which are abhorrent to another cultural tradition. For example, in the UK the issue of 'arranged marriage' is viewed very differently by those British Subjects who retain close ties to the Indian Sub-Continent than by those British Subjects who have a European background. The issue has not caused a great cultural divide – as long as the 'arranged marriage' is consensual – but it does provide a piece of grit in the smooth running of the system.

PROSPECTS

In recent years, the multi-cultural model has not been working too well. The right not to assimilate – widely seen across Europe – has led to what some observers see as the 'ghettoisation of minorities', where relatively small communities of newcomers co-exist with the host population, but who fail to integrate with the host population and manage to retain their original cultural identity and *mores* over a number of generations. In itself, this would not constitute a problem, but the 'War on Terror', which many young Muslims in Europe see as a 'War on Islam', has brought the divisiveness of this policy into sharp focus.

Perhaps this is seen most clearly in the *Banlieu* of France or the northern mill towns of England. The combination of the separation that the multi-cultural model allows, along with the strong identity of young Muslims, and the feeling of alienation from the mainstream of the host community has all added up to a very volatile social cocktail. One needs to remember that the July Bombers in London were relatively well educated, but disaffected, young British Muslims. It was after these bombings that the multi-cultural model was seriously called into question.

That the multi-cultural model has started to break down does not necessarily imply that the mono-cultural model will provide a useful alternative. One could argue that, although the mono-cultural model of the US has successfully integrated waves of immigrants from Europe, it has less successfully done so for newcomers from Asia and Africa. Indeed, one could argue that the internment of Japanese-Americans during World War Two stands as testimony to the failure of the mono-cultural model in the US. Alternatively, one might ask why there is such a disproportion of African-Americans in the US prison system. If the mono-cultural model were working effectively, then surely such disproportions would not occur?

The mono-cultural model, however, has yet to face its largest challenge – the influx of newcomers to the US from Central and South America. When such flows were relatively modest, the host nation could readily absorb the newcomers into its existing structures. As the flows have grown, the newcomers are starting to become as numerous as the indigenous population. At some point in the future, the newcomers will dominate the indigenous population numerically. It is at this point that the weakness of the mono-cultural model shows through.

For example, according to the US Census Bureau, by 2020, the majority of residents in California will have Spanish as their first language. What would happen if, after that point, the residents of California decided that the official language of California would be Spanish? In a mono-cultural model, the English speaking residents of California would either have to be absorbed into the Spanish diaspora, or move to another 'English' part of the US. Hopefully, common sense would prevail before this extreme possibility materialises, but the possibility illustrates the point.

If it is the case that the flows of people will continue into the future, that they are going to include a significant proportion of humanity, and if furthermore the traditional models of dealing with the flow of people are breaking down, then what hope is there for the future?

Before despairing, one needs to note that the world just described is disappearing also. The discussion about the flow of people is all about where lines are drawn on maps. For example, in Britain of the Dark Ages, someone from Manchester would be seen as a 'foreigner' in London. In the Sixteenth Century, someone from Scotland would be seen as a 'foreigner' in London. In the twentieth century, someone from Poland would be seen as a 'foreigner' in London. Today, none of these are 'foreigners' in London because all of them have the right to live in London, and none of them are classed as 'immigrants'. As Globalisation collapses geography, the sense of who and what are 'foreign' is collapsing as well.

One aspect of this is the diminution of the nation-state in importance. The lines drawn on maps today are far less important than they were a generation ago. This process is likely to continue into the future, particularly as global companies see their human resources as an asset that can be hired or deployed at will where it is needed in the world. In doing so, a new form of accommodating differences is likely to emerge, thus rendering both the mono-cultural and the multi-cultural models obsolete. Perhaps the ultimate point is for everyone to be a 'Citizen of the World'. That point, however, does seem a bit remote in terms of today's prevailing perspectives!

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POINTS FOR THE CLASSROOM (send comments to forum@futuretakes.org):

- *How might the exchange of ideas and resources, which accompany “people flows,” impact future patterns of global alignment?*
- *In the US today, work-related geographic mobility and re-location between states has become a standard feature of American life. How might these types of “internal people flows” differ from the “external people” flows that the author cites? In what ways may the presence of “internal flows” serve to invite or dis-invite “external people” flows?*
- *The common characterization of the US as a “melting pot” is consistent with the mono-cultural model as discussed by Aguilar-Millan. An alternative description, “salad bowl,” emphasizes the coexistence of diverse cultural and ethnic enclaves and traditions. Yet the US has evolved its own distinct business culture and has already “exported” it to other parts of the world. The US business culture contrasts profoundly with that of Western Europe – for example, in regard to work-leisure balance and executive compensation. Which business culture will prevail in 2015 – the European, the US, or another one – or can the business cultures continue to coexist as they do today?*
- *To what extent will long-term economic factors (e.g., energy, resources, lifestyles, climate changes, or relative values of currencies) impact – and be impacted by – the flows of people?*
- *Aguilar-Millan discusses the decreasing role of the nation-state, the evolution of the concept of “foreigners” through the ages, and the collapse of geography with globalization. In 2018, will people tend to identify more with large groups (i.e., occupations, geopolitical entities, trans-national ethnic groups, or socio-political groups) or with smaller ones – in other words, will identity be characterized more by “fission” or by “fusion”?*
- *Considering the present flow of people and possible future migration patterns, which cultures, values, and lifestyles will characterize your region in 2020? Which present ways of live will be less prevalent?*
- *Other authors have also supported the possibility that working newcomers can offset the economic impacts of aging populations in Europe and North America. In conjunction with other factors, how will living and working patterns change during the next decade?*
- *To what extent will newcomers, “virtual immigrants” (enabled by IT), and outsourcing continue to hold down inflationary pressures during the next decade – and in which regions and economic sectors?*
- *As Aguilar-Millan states, global companies “see their human resources as an asset that can be hired or deployed at will where it is needed in the world.” What “wild cards” can change the nature of global companies?*
- *Between the multi-cultural model and the mono-cultural model, which will prevail in your part of the world in 2018? In other regions of the world?*

Also see discussion of environmental refugees in Mack article, this issue.