

## **Immigrant Integration In The United States And Europe: A Briefing To The Staff At The Open Society Institute On The European Learning Exchange, January 4, 2007**

*by Donald Kerwin*

Before I left for Europe, I asked the Chairman of CLINIC's board of directors, Bishop Nicholas DiMarzio, about the difference between immigration integration in the United States and in Europe. Bishop DiMarzio has extensively studied this issue as a member of the Vatican's Pontifical Council for the Pastoral Care of Migrants and Itinerant People and as the sole U.S. member on the Global Commission on International Migration. He told me that while the United States has no formal integration policies, U.S. immigrants believe that they can become Americans. By contrast, the European Union has developed integration principles, goals, and even benchmarks, but many immigrants in Europe do not feel that they fully belong to their countries. This simplifies a very complex issue, but it is consistent with what I found on the European learning exchange.

The European countries we visited – Belgium, Germany, and England – extend their social safety nets to immigrants. Many European states also fund immigrant networks that provide a formal vehicle for bringing forward the concerns of immigrant communities. By contrast, the United States does not offer generous benefits to immigrants, or even recognize social or economic rights as such. The U.S. treatment of immigrants can be harsh and even cruel. U.S. immigrants endure exploitation in the work place, social marginalization, separation from their families, criminal prosecution, deportation, and mandatory detention. At the same time, the U.S. system demands participation. Immigrants need to work to survive and most can and do, even the undocumented. If U.S. immigrants want to resolve problems in their communities, they need to organize, advocate for themselves, and participate in the political process. At the U.S. immigrant rallies last year, many held banners that read: "We are America!" They did not say: "We need protection against discrimination." This is not to minimize the need for antidiscrimination laws, but to illustrate the difference between how many immigrants view their situations in the United States and Europe. The peaceful U.S. rallies contrasted sharply with the riots in France.

If this sounds triumphalist or jingoistic, let me clarify that the United States cannot assume that immigrant integration will automatically occur. Why not? The first reason, as in Europe, is the historically unprecedented size and diversity of the immigrant population, 37 million foreignborn, 12 million undocumented, with increasing numbers in communities that have not seen immigrants in 100 years. The numbers underscore the challenge and argue against complacency.

Second, the United States has experienced a 20-year span of restrictive immigration laws, both federal and now state and local measures. These laws harshly distinguish between U.S. citizens and non-citizens; make it more difficult for the undocumented to become legal and for lawful permanent residents to become citizens; and attempt to make life so difficult for some immigrants – by denying them housing, work, health care, and public benefits – that they will simply leave. Without comprehensive reform of this system, many U.S. immigrants will not be able to integrate.

Parenthetically, the United States and Europe have also established significant barriers to refugee and asylum protection. In Europe, anti-refugee/asylum developments include diminished refugee resettlement numbers, migrant interdiction, safe-third country programs, low asylum approval rates, and the "externalization" of the asylum process (something of a contradiction of terms). The deaths by drowning of thousands of African migrants – an estimated 6,000 in 2006 alone – trying to reach the Canary Islands highlight the tragic consequence of these policies.

Third, well-organized groups in the United States and Europe passionately oppose immigration. The United States has traditionally viewed itself as the "creedal" nation; that is, a nation comprised of immigrants united by core values like rights, equality, freedom, and equal opportunity. The competing vision rejects this view, maintaining that the United States is a distinct group of people. It views birthright citizenship – which is guaranteed under the U.S. Constitution – as "loop hole." And, of course, these groups try to associate immigrants with terrorism, criminality, and socio-economic problems of every variety. In the U.K., the antiimmigrant rallying cry, "they're taking our homes," has replaced "they're taking our jobs."

Integration can difficult to define. The Commission on European Communities characterized integration in a 2003 document titled *Communication on Immigration, Integration, and Employment* as "a two-way process based on mutual rights and corresponding obligations of legally resident third-country nationals and the host society which provides for the full participation of the immigrant." This definition appropriately emphasizes rights, duties, and participation. In the United States, we argue less over definitions than about metaphors, which reveals both the fledgling quality of our formal discussions on integration and our long experience of this phenomenon. We argue about whether the United States is a melting pot, or a salad bowl, or a mosaic, or (my own favorite) a mulligatawny stew. We search for a metaphor that captures unity based on shared values and commitments, but that does not deny cultural identity and diversity. I am not sure what metaphor captures the EU's vision for integration, and this seems a problem.

Tariq Ramadan, a Muslim academic, spoke of integration as "a sense of belonging and feeling that we are constructing a society with our fellow citizens." The absence of a "sense of belonging" explains the alienation of even the second- and third-generation members of immigrant families in Europe. This problem has no parallel in the United States.

Beyond metaphors and "belonging," what principles should define our "integration" model? As stated, we want to promote core U.S. political and civic values, but also to respect culture and diversity. We want to foster socio-economic and political participation, and to provide all U.S. residents with a level of safety and security. We do not want to pit native-born minorities against immigrants, but to improve society for all U.S. residents. We want to embrace the values that immigrants bring to the United States, particularly their commitment to community, family, religion and hard work. We want to extend to immigrants the rights and responsibilities of citizenship, with a view of "rights" as consistent with the common good. We want to treat immigrants as "citizens to be," rather than as permanent non-citizens. We want a model that challenges the United States to live up to its core values.

Let me close with a reflection on the integration of Muslim immigrants, an issue that drives much of the debate in Europe. On our trip, we learned that some European Muslims believe that after the fall of the Berlin Wall, Europe has turned back to its historic enemy, Islam. Needless to say, this is cause for concern. The integration challenge for Muslims was consistently raised in terms of multiple or hyphenated identities and, in particular, the notion of the "European- Muslim." The director of a self-help group for Muslim youth in London said that "the real problem comes when demands are made that Muslims need to belong to one over another identity." One of the activists on the trip was Bernadette Devlin, a Catholic from Northern Ireland, who served as the youngest member ever of Parliament. In recent years, she has been engaged in community organizing work around the peace initiative in Northern Ireland. I asked for her reaction to the response of the United States and England to the terrorist attacks on their soil. She said: "If you start treating your former friends as if they're suspect and if you demand that they chose one of their identities, human nature is such that they'll always chose the one you don't want them to."

Security and terrorism hung over the trip like a dark cloud. More terrorist attacks are predicted, and the government response needs to distinguish carefully between terrorists and immigrants, and between terrorists and persons of the Muslim faith. The integration of these communities and the good of their societies depend on it.

### **About The Author**

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