

Article

THE COSTS OF CONTRADICTION: US BORDER POLICY 1986–2000

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Abstract

Since 1986 the United States has employed a politics of contradiction in its relations with Mexico. With US encouragement, Mexico joined GATT in that year and embarked on a neoliberal economic project that opened its economy to trade, investment, and exchange, a project that was institutionalized by NAFTA, ratified by the US, and fully enacted in 1994. Over the same period, however, the US has poured increasing resources into maintaining the illusion of a controlled border that is impervious to the flow of Mexican workers, even as it becomes more permeable with respect to capital, information, goods, commodities, and services. In this article, we document the contradictory policy of growing integration and increasing separation and then trace out the costs of this self-deception for the inhabitants of both countries and the people who move between them.

Keywords

immigration; border policy; Mexico; undocumented migration; NAFTA

The year 1986 was pivotal for the political economy of North America. In that year, two things happened that signaled the end of one era and the beginning of another. In Mexico, a new political elite succeeded in overcoming historical opposition within the ruling party and orchestrated the country's entry into the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade. Then they boldly approached the US to forge a new alliance that would ultimately

create a free trade zone stretching from Central America to the North Pole. Even as US officials worked with Mexican authorities to integrate North America, however, they simultaneously acted to prevent the integration of its labor markets. Rather than incorporating the movement of workers into the new free trade agreement, the US insisted on the right to control its borders unilaterally. To underscore its resolve, Congress passed the Immigration Reform and Control Act in 1986.

Thereafter the US pursued an escalating politics of contradiction, working its way toward integration while simultaneously insisting on separation. In a time-honored fashion, the US sought to have its cake and eat it too – to move headlong toward a consolidation of markets for capital, goods, commodities, services, and information, while pretending that North American labor markets would remain separate and distinct. In the ensuing years, the US government would spend increasing financial and human resources to demonstrate to the American public that the border was “under control” and *not* porous with respect to migrants, even as it was becoming more permeable with respect to other flows. The impulse to “control” American borders has only increased in the wake of the events of September 11.

Admitting Mexican workers while pretending not to do so is nothing new, of course; but whereas this sort of hypocrisy could be maintained at a relatively low cost before 1986, afterward the illusion became increasingly expensive to uphold, not only for the migrants themselves, but also for citizens on both sides of the border.

Moving toward integration

The economic regime imposed on Mexico by its ruling elites naturally met with great favor in Washington – indeed, US officials had long recommended it. Still, there was the troubling problem of institutionalizing the reforms and making them permanent. To solve this problem, President Carlos Salinas de Gortari turned toward the US, proposing to join the free trade agreement that had recently been negotiated between Canada and the US. This move would tie his neoliberal reforms to a treaty with Mexico’s powerful northern neighbor. It would be extremely difficult, if not impossible, for a future Mexican president to abrogate a treaty with the US.

The Bush administration warmly embraced Salinas’ overture and immediately began talks to expand the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA). The treaty was successfully negotiated and ratified by the US Senate in 1993, with strong support from Bush’s successor, Bill Clinton. NAFTA took effect on January 1, 1994, and from that date forward, the US was officially committed to a policy of economic integration between itself and its neighbor to the south.