



Socrates and illegal immigration

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Colaboraciones n° 1072

July 6, 2006

After Socrates was convicted by a court of questionable charges, his friends planned to break him out of his jail in Athens. But the philosopher refused to flee. Instead, he insisted a citizen who lived in a consensual society should not pick and choose which laws he finds convenient to obey.

Selective compliance, Socrates warned, would undermine the moral integrity of the entire legal system, ensuring anarchy. And so, as Plato tells us, the philosopher accepted the court's death sentence and drank the deadly hemlock.

Socrates' final lesson about the sanctity of the law is instructive now in our current debate over illegal immigration.

There are, of course, many objections to illegal immigration besides that it is against the law: Unlawful

workers undermine the wages of our own citizen entry-level workers. Employers who depend on imported labor find common ground with ethnic chauvinists; they both exploit a large, vulnerable and unassimilated constituency. And security analysts warn us it is insane to allow a 2,000-mile open border while terrorist infiltrators are planning to kill us.

Yet few have criticized illegal immigration solely because millions have, with impunity, flouted the law -- aliens, their employers and the officials who look the other way. But Socrates would do just that, and also point to our hypocrisy.

The alien from Mexico chooses which American laws he finds convenient. He wants our border police to leave him alone -- until he becomes lost in the desert or is attacked by robbers. The employer

expects trespassing laws to be enforced to keep vagrants off his premises, but then assumes the same vigilant police will ignore the illegal status of his cheap labor force.

And does the city council that orders its policemen not to turn over arrested illegal aliens to the border patrol similarly allow townspeople to ignore their municipal tax bills? When thousands operate cars without state-mandated licenses and car insurance, why should other drivers bother to purchase them? If police pull over motorists and do not verify the legal status of aliens, why do they check for outstanding arrest warrants of citizens?

Ignoring the law is not only hypocritical and anarchical; it also creates cynicism. Recently, I listened to friends relate that the government had indicted some Indian immigrants on charges of arranging bogus marriages to gain citizenship. My friends half-jokingly wondered why the culprits hadn't simply flown to Mexico and tried to sneak across the border.

So, besides the money to be made on both sides of the border, why do we disregard the immigration laws? Are the laws wrong and cruel, and even if they are, would it be moral to ignore them? The answers are no and no.

Employing illegal workers drives down the wages of the legal poor. Cutting ahead in the immigration line is unfair to immigrants who wait years to enter America legally.

Mexico wants money from aliens to prop up its failures at home but cares little how such remittances burden poorer Mexican wage earners abroad. In other words, breaking the immigration law is not really civil disobedience but, typically, an expression of jaded self-interest by workers, employers and government officials.

Nevertheless, what distinguishes the U.S. from nations in the Middle East, Africa and, yes, Mexico is the sanctity of our legal system. The terrain of Mexico may be indistinguishable from the landscape across the border in the U.S. But when it comes to the law, there is a grand canyon between us.

Only on one side of the border is title to private property sacrosanct, are police held accountable and is banking conducted transparently. Public hiring in America is based on civil service law and judges are autonomous. And the American public has a legal right to investigate and even sue its government. That maze of legality helps to explain everything from why the water is safer to drink in San Diego than in Tijuana to why a worker makes \$12 an hour in Fresno but less than \$1 in Oaxaca.

Yet once we as a nation choose to ignore our keystone laws of sovereignty and citizenship, the entire edifice of a once unimpeachable legal system will collapse. Ironically, we would then become no different from those nations whose citizens are now fleeing to our own shores to escape the wages of lawlessness.

That worry is why Socrates, 2,400 years ago, taught us that the deliberate violation of the rule of law

would have been worse for ancient Athens even than losing its greatest philosopher.

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