INTRODUCTION: THE STRANGENESS OF IMMIGRATION

Although demographers view migration as one of the three determinants of any human population, alongside birth and death, they envision it merely as relocation in physical space, as represented by a shift from one unit of statistical aggregation to another. From this perspective, international migration does not differ in kind from internal movement. However, this misses a large part of the point. The specificity of the process arises in the first instance from the organization of the modern world into sovereign states with clearly indicated territorial boundaries delineating mutually exclusive jurisdiction; it thus involves, in addition to relocation, a change from one state to another. Moreover, most of the states in question claim to be national states (or sometimes multi-national ones), and this claim constitutes a major foundation of their legitimacy. Nations are historical constructions centring on the delineation of a cultural boundary, denoting simultaneously inclusion and exclusion.1 As the result of increased contact among populations within the confines of each state, and because of the efforts of each of them to make populations more alike within while emphasizing differences without, they are perceived by most of their members as family-like bodies, with a common ancestry and a common destiny. Consequently, whereas co-nationals take on the air of extended kin, even if they encompass several hundred million highly diverse individuals dispersed over continental spaces, as in the United States or Russia, non-nationals are considered “others”, as forcefully evoked by the latinate English legal term “aliens”.2

Population transfers between national states thus differ in kind from other forms of human migration, notably the wanderings of communities across space before the earth was carved out into mutually exclusive territories, and the movement of individuals within the confines of the state of
which they are subjects or citizens. Whatever the reasons for the movement, and whether it is relatively voluntary or forced, it involves an irreducible political dimension. Concomitantly, immigration is an odd phenomenon in that it brings about an encounter between groups hitherto separated by the very boundaries that define their distinctive identities; and the settlement of aliens deviates from what most members of the receiving community take as the "natural" mode of reproduction of their nation. This is emphasized by the term "naturalization" used for admitting them into formal membership, a process that parallels adoption, whereby the law provides a fictional substitute for biological filiation.

Consequently, it is not surprising that immigration and the prospect of incorporating a significant body of aliens tends to provoke contentious confrontations: once the debate gets under way, it inexorably broadens to encompass a wide range of disparate issues, including law enforcement and the organization of economic life, the conduct of foreign affairs, the question of what obligations the members of an affluent national community have toward strangers who come knocking at their door, and ultimately the identity and cohesion of the receiving community. By the same token, it is a politically confusing subject because it provokes alignments that often cut across the usual line-up of interests and established political parties, and the relevant policy choices cannot be easily fitted in within the usual "Left-Right" framework. This is particularly visible in current American debates, where the right-wing National Review opposes immigration as undermining the integrity of the American nation, whereas the Wall Street Journal advocates an open door on free-market grounds, and Latino advocacy groups oppose punishing firms that employ unauthorized foreign workers because enforcement might lead to discrimination.

**DIALECTICS OF THE TWO AXES**

The confusion arises because immigration involves two very different dimensions of concern and interest, the one pertaining to its putative effects on material conditions, the other regarding its putative consequences for national identity. These can be represented by two cross-cutting axes, each with positive and negative poles, providing for a continuum of positions "for" or "against". Hence it is possible to adopt a positive position on immigration with respect to one dimension and a negative one in relation to the other.

To simplify somewhat, with regard to the first axis, immigrants – including refugees – are viewed primarily as "workers", so that alignments are closely related to the configuration of economic interests more generally. Immigrants are characteristically welcomed by employers as an ad-