

As the recent riots in France show, Europe faces a conundrum when it comes to integrating its immigrant populations into their host societies. Some acknowledged and indisputably real factors need to be addressed, including discrimination and lack of education. However, a new notion is garnering attention from some European politicians – the idea that the US has had more success integrating immigrants than Europe because of its emphasis on the value of hard work for every segment of its population. The theory: Immigrants come to the US prepared to work with the underlying assumption in US society that hard work will be rewarded and a place of belonging must be earned, whereas the easy availability of welfare in Europe decreases incentives to find work. This model regards dependence on social services as an essential cause for the lack of immigrant integration into European society. Whether or not work is as readily available to immigrants in Europe as it is in the US is an issue that deserves consideration, but statistics suggest that European immigrants work less and this may indeed contribute to the difficulties in achieving valued roles in society. Perhaps Europe can learn from the US work ethic - provided, that is, it does not appear too "American."

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Politicus: U.S. Model for Europe: Immigrant Work Ethic

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PARIS If the United States has historically had more success in integrating its immigrants than Europe does nowadays, it's because the American work ethic makes greater demands on the newcomers than Europe's welfare societies - at the same time that America offers a job-related payback in dignity and the prospect of success.

Simplistic theorizing? But maybe not so far from the truth. Marx and Gramsci pointed, variously, to the system in the United States as convincing in its claims that it provided a chance to rise in a society where all classes emphasize the virtues of hard work.

These days, following France's three weeks of rioting, largely by Arab and African Muslim immigrants (mere "social disturbances," Prime Minister Dominique de Villepin explained to the world last week), there are a few European politicians taking a new look at the work ethic as a missing link in their countries' similar problems with integration.

This means a not so politically correct leap over the very real but incomplete explanation that discrimination and a lack of education are the essential causes of the high unemployment and the often angry alienation of Europe's immigrants.

Instead, the new thinking brings a focus to what has been called the failure of welfare-colonialism: Europe's allowing immigrants to become dependent on social handouts while letting a mutual commitment to work slide as a necessary bond in their integration.

The developing idea boils down to this: Because of the nature of the American ethos and the United States' less embracing social protections, immigrants coming to the country are prepared to seek work. In Europe, there are welfare-only alternatives to finding a job that create neither dignity for the immigrants nor, among the home folks, a sense of immigrants' contribution to society.

The Netherlands' leading left-wing opposition politician, Wouter Bos, who heads the Labor Party, has gone to the heart of the problem in the direct Dutch manner. He says: "Minorities integrate American society quickly. Here, social scientists argue it's easier to become dependent on social security than to seek a job."

Bos talked to me about creating a system in which immigrants in the Netherlands would build up credits toward full social-service benefits through work. He compared it to an air-miles program where the free ride, if it comes, is awarded on the basis of performance. There's no question of eliminating basic Dutch welfare protections for noncitizens, and Bos acknowledged that his idea would have to be checked out in relation to international law.

The concern about the place of the work ethic as a hobbled element in Europe's integration of immigrants is reinforced by statistical reality.

A study made in Oslo, quoted by Unni Wikan of the University of Oslo in her 2002 book "Generous Betrayal," said Pakistanis, Turks and Moroccans living in the city were three to five times more likely to be living from disability payments than Norwegians. In Denmark, current figures show that 43 percent of immigrants and their descendants have jobs, compared to 83 percent of native Danes.

In the past, Bertel Haarder the Danish education minister and former integration minister, had approached similar figures by saying: "It's not Turkish but Danish culture that's flawed. It's in Denmark where Turks have learned not to do anything for themselves."

Now, the center-right government in Denmark has proposed a directive that would make extending Danish citizenship to immigrants contingent on their working four of the previous five years before it's granted. Reinforcing the work ethic is also described as central in plans to cut allowances to immigrant parents whose children under 18 are not working or attending school; or, on becoming 18, making acceptance of a job a condition for receiving benefits.

Haarder explained on the phone last week: "I don't think you can preach work. You have to send concrete signals, and we've been too unclear. We want to underline that in this country you have an obligation to work and educate yourself. Otherwise, there's the probability that immigrants settle in on welfare and that this goes from generation to generation. We're sending the message, to get something you've got to give something."

In Europe, I'd note that this message to immigrants can get tangled in the comforters and warm bedding of early retirement plans (Paris Métro drivers can hang it up at age 50 with full pay) and 35-hour work weeks. It's certainly not just another number when a poll shows Americans, in comparison with the French and British (and even the Swedes), are doubly convinced that hard work means far more than "luck and connections" in getting ahead.

This statistic is part of the argument made by Seymour Martin Lipset in his now classic book, "American Exceptionalism," how the central elements of a national creed distinguishing and sustaining American society include the fact that "Americans choose to work."

But it's more than that. After lecturing in Europe this fall, Francis Fukuyama, the American political scientist, has come around to the idea that if work equals dignity and belonging in both the United States and Europe, there were other distinctions in play about how work functions (or doesn't

function) as an integrator on the two sides of the Atlantic.

The fact is, Fukuyama said in a conversation in Washington three weeks ago, America creates more jobs. Europe is stuck in many places with the idea that there is a fixed amount of work for distribution while America believes it is eternally expandable. And, according to Fukuyama, America makes a value judgment that Europe does not: differentiating between the deserving poor who want to work, and those whose inclinations are elsewhere.

The sum was, he said, "In the U.S. model an immigrant gets dignity by contributing to the whole and by the dignity of his work. I think the Dutch are beginning to see this."

Other Europeans have before them. If Lipset's analysis of their thinking is correct, two monuments of Socialist theory, Karl Marx and Antonio Gramsci, the Italian revolutionary, went as far as identifying something admirable and even equalitarian in American society that could be linked to the place in which it holds work.

Recommending American models as social, political or economic examples gets distinctly little traction in the European mind-set of December 2005. But remove the Made in USA label, and the reference points are still incontrovertible: about 4 percent yearly growth, 5.5 percent unemployment, and immigrants who work - on the job, and through it, at becoming compatible Americans.

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