

Sermon
Delivered at the First Baptist Church of Worcester, Massachusetts
January 15, 2012
Richard Ford

Opening Doors: An American Tradition

Between 1820 and 1900, nearly 20 million immigrants entered the US and began a new life as Americans. They came largely from Europe as well as China. These were the impoverished peasants of the 19th century and came to fight their way out of poverty. Those figures average out to about 250,000 a year and were hailed as one of the greatest voluntary migrations in recent human history.

From 2000 to 2005, an estimated 8,000,000 (about half illegal) immigrants arrived in the US. They came largely from Eastern Europe; East, Southeast, and South Asia; the Caribbean, Mexico, Central America, and Africa. Many were the result of wars in Viet Nam, Sudan, Congo, Liberia, Sierra Leone, Iraq, Afghanistan, Albania, Kosovo, and Somalia. Whereas the immigrants of the 19th century were largely the poor and illiterate, the new immigrants are a broad mix of displaced professionals, religious and political refugees, victims of local violence such as in Mexico, and some poor who have no options for employment or obtaining land in their home country. The new immigrants average a bit less than 2 million a year.

I will try to set the stage in the broadest sense as to why we celebrate Martin Luther King Jr.'s birthday, why Bhutanese refugees have come to Worcester from far-off south Asia, and why the US finds itself in the role of world policeman and world benefactor, all wrapped up into one amazingly complex bundle of politics and actions.

Each of these recent immigrant communities has a different story to tell, but each group is here because of a global revolution that began in the late 18th century and has been continuing with increasing intensity to the present day. To say the least, social change is accelerating at a rate far in excess of what the globe has ever known.

In the last 12 months, the people of the Arab Spring have mounted major assaults on, and in several cases, overthrown their central governments. The changes have come largely through civil action, stimulated in many cases by Facebook, Twitter, and other social networks. What the eventual changes will be remains to be seen – but the point is that the people of the Arab Spring are less interested in demanding new homes abroad but, instead, in creating a better life and a new governance model in their home culture.

A brief review of one interpretation of how it all evolved may set the stage for a more detailed discussion later this morning on the specific topic of the Bhutanese refugees whom Worcester has been fortunate to host for the last two or even three years. My focus will be on the nature of the nation state.

First, the explanation. The well-known futurist, Alvin Toffler, suggests that there have been three global revolutions in the course of human history that have influenced the present – your lives and mine. To start, the first thirty to forty thousand years of human history began among hunters and gathers in East Africa. These were the ancestors of every person in this sanctuary – all of you and me. Recent DNA research confirms that these small bands gradually trekked from East Africa into the Nile Valley. These hunter/gatherers introduced the first of Toffler’s major revolutions: agriculture. It occurred, probably simultaneously in several places, between 10,000 and 5,000 BCE. Agriculture enabled the migrants to settle down in one place – such as the Nile valley or later in the Tigris Euphrates valley. They began to devise large-scale tools – irrigation systems, animal drawn plows – as they no longer were moving from place to place. They came to value fertile land and water access; they began to domesticate animals. The concept of kingdoms and empires emerged, though very slowly. But the migrations did not stop in the Middle East. If there is interest we can discuss these and subsequent treks later this morning.

Surprisingly, agriculture remained the predominant form of global economic livelihood until the mid-18th century – roughly the time of the American Revolution.

What precipitated Toffler’s second revolution? It was far more than simply the industrial revolution with the advent of new machinery and sources of water and later electrical power. But make no mistake, the machines were important. But the industrial revolution itself had much deeper origins. Let me reminisce for just a few minutes on these origins.

The core cause was publication of two documents in 1776. One was a two volume book written in England; the second was a document penned in Philadelphia that fit onto a single piece of parchment, albeit a large one. The first was *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*, written by Adam Smith. His thinking and writing were as revolutionary as Copernicus and Galileo on heliocentric theories; or as the ideas expressed in the New Testament; or as radical as Marx’ *Das Kapital* or his *Communist Manifesto*. The second publication was called the *Declaration of Independence* containing a synthesis of lessons and commentary of hundreds of scholars, philosophers, and practicing politicians who sensed there were changes in the air and they could do something about it.

What did Adam Smith have to say? There were two basic messages, two very simple ideas. The first was that **self-interest was a more effective motivating force than coercion to influence human behavior and to increase production of goods and services.**

What can be more simple than that? Self-interest; the market.

The *Declaration of Independence*, written largely by Thomas Jefferson, the Virginian patrician who was inventor, architect, theologian, politician, statesman, slave owner, sexist, the third president of the United States, philanderer – and much more. He was a man of his times! He pulled together on one page a document that synthesized the philosophy of Jean Jacques Rousseau and John Locke and the politics of the feisty American colonists resisting the rule of the self-indulgent and eventually insane King of England, George III. Jefferson wrote:

We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights that among these are **Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness.** That to secure these rights, Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed.

The world would never be the same after publication of these two documents. The American Revolution brought the likes of French savants such as General Marquis de LaFayette to learn more about the new political vision of Jefferson and to help free the American colonies from the British. Lafayette would later play a significant role in launching the French Revolution.

Breaking the bonds with King George opened a gateway for expansion from the Atlantic coast into the US interior. Suddenly there was an unprecedented availability of free land that enabled the poor and exploited to acquire land and implement the theories of Adam Smith to let self-interest be their motivating force and the market to guide what they would grow, manufacture, or create. The free land also attracted the European immigrants to the new nation. The only losers in this grand design were the Native Americans whose land, herds, and homes were permanently wrenched from them.

The French Revolution, inspired in part by the revolution of the 13 colonies, left a power vacuum in France that enabled Napoleon to become the Emperor of most of Europe, at least for a few years. The 19th century also brought the formal industrial revolution – Toffler's second turning point event. Railroads, steamships, water-powered textile factories, steel mills, urban water systems, elevators that would usher in the era of high-rise office and apartment buildings. Here was Adam Smith's vision in full bloom, not just in the US but Europe as well. These political, social, and economic changes emerged, in part, because of the writings of Smith and Jefferson -- incentives, markets, and the goal of an equalitarian society – and would shape the polity and economy of Europe and the US for much of the 19th and 20th centuries. They would also bring millions of immigrants to America during the 19th century.

The industrial revolution gave rise to still another innovation, called the **nation state**. In many ways, Napoleonic France had set a precedent that became the first of the modern nation states. The British would dispute that, mostly because it involved the French, and you all know how the British feel about the French! But I think Napoleon was the innovator in terms of national polity. No longer was France a kingdom, ruled by capricious monarchs. Instead, France, and later England, the US, Sweden, The Netherlands, Belgium, and even later Germany, Italy, and Russia would become political entities producing goods and services for all rather than to enrich and pander to the monarchy. Here again is Adam Smith's doctrine of self-interest and the market holding sway over the previous power of the kings. The nation state as an industrial power required labor, raw materials, and markets for their newly manufactured goods. While Europe had dabbled with colonies before 1800, the 19th century became an avalanche of exploration and exploitation. The nation state was new and by the 20th century had become omnipotent. Perhaps in the 21st century the nation state will become obsolete and in its place the international corporations will eclipse nation states as the cornerstone for economic and political responsibility. That trend is already well underway.

Let me give some examples of how the nation state influenced global affairs. While my immediate focus for the adult forum will be on Bhutan and Asia, my own personal work has been in Africa. So let me become school teacher for a few minutes and take an example from Africa. Two maps of Africa were included with your program.

Look first at Map One, the blank outline map. This is the map of present Africa. The boundaries you see on Map One, with only two exceptions (and those are both disputed), were created in 1884/85. They were drawn at a meeting in Berlin – not in Africa. The boundaries were set by Europeans, not Africans. Which Europeans? The recently formed nation states, the ones that had emerged on top in the industrial revolution, the ones seeking new markets for their newly manufactured goods, the ones in need of raw materials to keep their factories humming. That is how the national boundaries of Africa were created. These are the boundaries of Africa's nations today – European drawn, not African.

Now look at Murdock's culture map. It portrays the boundaries of the cultures of the peoples of Africa – all 1,000 of them. These cultures have different languages, religions, belief systems, land tenure practices, livelihood traditions, and even different child-rearing practices and funeral rituals. It seemingly made no impression on the Berlin boundary makers that they were mixing age-old competitors into single governance systems. Why? Because the colonial practice was to pacify the colonies with an army and police force consisting of European officers and local soldiers/police, making certain that the rank and file would always be based in one of the districts or provinces where their traditional rival people lived – never based in their home districts. Clever? It worked for the Europeans. But the more important question: What was

the impact on the Africans during the colonial period and what is the current effect on peace and stability in independent Africa? Boundary making and peace keeping were much the same in colonial Asia.

The outline map locates the present national boundaries. Look at the region of Kenya on the culture map – there are 37 different cultural communities in Kenya; Uganda with 42; Nigeria with 50; and Congo with an astounding 250 languages. How can the nation state of Congo contain 250 nations? Europe drew these lines on the basis of Europe’s interests as part of their “civilizing mission.” Why are there refugees in the US today? -- Somalis, Congolese, Sudanese, Rwandans, Burundians, Liberians, Sierra Leoneans -- to name the larger groups? They come because all of these “nations” include multiple language and cultural differences that have led to violence, revolutions, civil wars, or related disputes. How ironic that two documents that led to creation of nation states that “derive their just powers from the consent of the governed,” in totally unexpected ways have also given rise to the imposition of nation state boundaries in Asia and Africa that serve no purpose other than to create conflict.

To be sure there are other factors causing these present conflicts. But at the core of these issues lie ethnic/religious conflicts created by lumping ethnic communities into nations.

But what of the future? What is Alvin Toffler’s third revolution? If you had not guessed, he calls it the **information revolution**. This was 30 years ago. It is a time when control of information – via computers, Facebook, Linked In, news media, television, blogs, political campaigns, advertising – becomes more important than agricultural or industrial production in controlling wealth and power. It is a time when globalization becomes the goal and control of global resources the means to attain power and place. Will these recent trends toward economic globalization make nation states obsolete and will the refugee problem be solved by creation of economic production zones controlled by global corporations? As corporate influence and power transcend national borders, as three global language spheres emerge of Arabic, Chinese, and English to dominate global politics and commerce, and as national sovereignty slides into corporate hegemony, the movement of peoples within these zones may very well become the future that our children and grandchildren will encounter.

In the meantime, in terms of the displaced refugees that have come from the industrial revolution and the more recent information revolution, do what you are already doing. Ease the transition for the refugees becoming American. They did not choose to be refugees. They had no voice in or influence on those who created the conflicts. They had no role in destroying villages, killing fellow countrymen, or bringing down governments. Instead they were the victims of movements that began many generations ago – long before any of us were alive.

But these are long term objectives. What can we do in the short run? We can help to quiet the voices of those who seek to bar political refugees from our borders and work to incorporate the new cultures and new peoples into the perpetually changing mosaic that is America. You of the First Baptist Church are already doing that. Perhaps these comments will suggest that integrating these refugees into American life is as important an action as the integration of African Americans that Martin Luther King Jr. initiated in his lifetime. I think Thomas Jefferson and Adam Smith would approve.