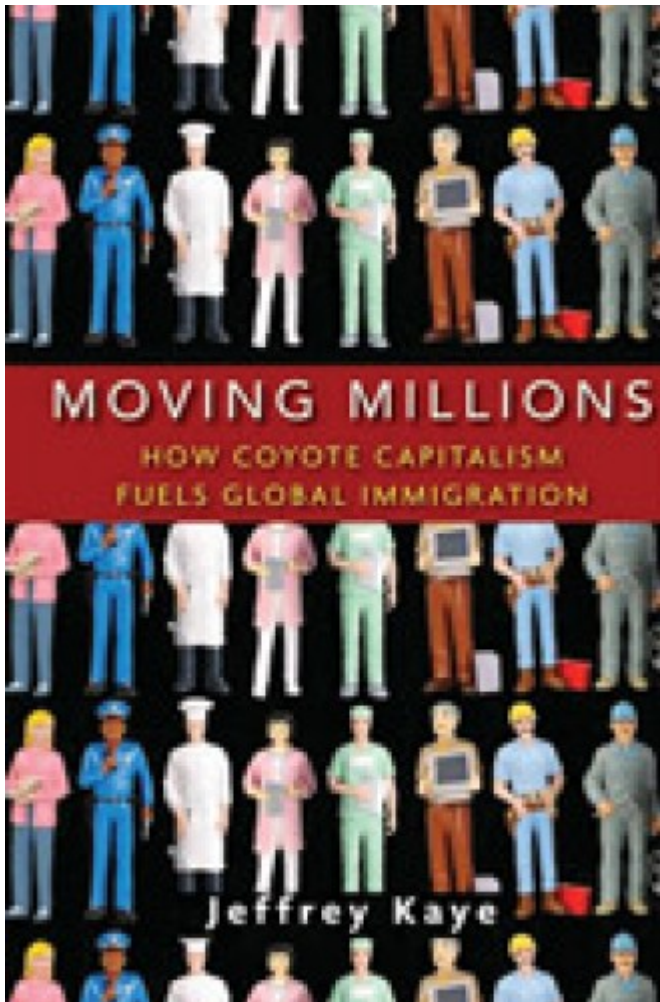


# On the move

by [LaVonne Neff](#) in the [January 11, 2011](#) issue

## In Review



## Moving Millions

By Jeffrey Kaye  
Wiley

When I hear the word *immigration*, I immediately think of friends, refugees from a war-torn country, who have spent more than 20 years and \$30,000 trying to become

legal U.S. residents—to no avail.

I then think of Arizona relatives, who—convinced that illegal immigration increases crime, taxes and unemployment—strongly support their state's recent efforts to ferret out undocumented immigrants and send them back home.

My refugee friends and Arizona relatives agree about one thing: America's immigration system is broken. President Obama, whose path-to-citizenship plan would help my friends, has said so. And so has Senate minority leader Mitch McConnell, who wants to secure the borders Arizona-style, even if it would mean sending people back into danger.

Everyone knows that the United States needs to fix immigration. But nobody knows how to do it.

Jeffrey Kaye doesn't know how to do it either, but his fascinating study of the economic and political forces affecting immigration should be required reading for anyone likely to express an opinion on the topic.

A freelance journalist who reports for the *PBS NewsHour*, Kaye looks at immigration through stories about immigrants and those who hire them, interviews with political and business figures, interesting (and often ironic) historical parallels, and mountains of data. Though he clearly disagrees with many current attempts to regulate immigration, he never minimizes the complexity of the problem. Rather than advocating for a particular solution, he provides the context that is usually missing from news accounts, op-ed pieces and political oratory.

Migration is not new, Kaye points out: "From the epic Exodus tale in the Bible to the story of Odysseus, our myths and legends attest to mobility as a central theme in the human saga." Kaye's own ancestors moved from Poland to England in the late 1800s, and in 1963 he moved with his family from London to Los Angeles.

Panic over immigration is not new either. A century ago, as boats full of Italians, Germans, Irish and Eastern Europeans were docking at Ellis Island, newspapers accused the newly arrived of causing "wasteful administration of public funds," increasing violence and crime, taking Americans' jobs and refusing to learn English—exactly what some of those immigrants' descendants are saying about Mexican immigrants today.

It's easy to empathize with desperately poor people who cross seas and borders in order to provide for their families. According to Kaye, however, the poverty of individual families is only one factor in today's immigration patterns. Business practices also play a major role in enticing people to leave their homelands. "The globally interconnected business engines that promote and support" migration affect not just the U.S., which has more immigrants than any other nation, but also the more than 60 nations whose percentage of immigrants surpasses our own, and the even greater number of nations whose citizens are heading out to greener pastures.

In the global economy, businesses need a cheap, movable, disposable workforce, and immigrants fill the bill. Despite low pay and often miserable working conditions, they grow, harvest, process and serve most of the world's food. They also build, repair and maintain many of the world's buildings. At the other end of the socioeconomic scale, they provide a significant percentage of highly educated workers in the health-care and technology industries. Thanks to immigrants, consumers enjoy low prices and businesses grow. What would developed nations do without them?

For that matter, what would developing nations do without the money that immigrants send to their families back home—in 2008, \$45 billion to India, \$34.5 billion to China, \$26.2 billion to Mexico and \$18.3 billion to the Philippines? It is not surprising that "a business infrastructure trains, recruits, and markets Filipino workers the way that banana republics used to cultivate crops," or that global recruitment enterprises ranging from publicly traded companies to illegal smuggling operations "comprise a multibillion-dollar-a-year industry."

If business decisions entice immigrants to cross borders, government policies often drive them to leave their homes. Trade policies that look good for a developed country may devastate its poorer neighbors. The NAFTA agreement, for example, jointly signed by the U.S., Canada and Mexico, drove down the price of corn and financially ruined hundreds of thousands of Mexican farmers. And even efforts to help may have unintended consequences: a U.S. loan intended to stabilize the Mexican peso led to the "bankruptcy of hundreds of thousands of companies, . . . the disappearance of several million jobs" and the migration of approximately 6 million additional immigrants to the United States.

What are poverty-stricken families supposed to do when government agreements remove their source of income, an industry in another country offers wages several

times higher than they could earn at home, and a business in their own country offers to ferry them to the promised land—legally in some cases, illegally in many others?

Obviously, they migrate. "Build walls, and people will go over, around, or under them," Kaye writes. "Hire border guards, and smugglers will bribe them. Step up patrols, and migrants will find alternate routes. Provide better-paying jobs, and workers will get to them. Migration will not be stopped."

And yet migration has a dark side. As Kaye notes, businesses that hire immigrants benefit from cheap labor, but native-born workers may then fear for their jobs. Countries that send immigrants benefit from huge cash inflows, but they may lose their best, brightest and hardest-working citizens. Many immigrants—if they make it alive across the seas, mountains and deserts separating them from their destinations—find better-paying jobs abroad, but they may spend years separated from their loved ones and are often ruthlessly exploited by their employers.

Wouldn't it be better if everybody just stayed home?

Maybe, Kaye says, but only if massive income disparities between the world's haves and have-nots were eliminated or reduced, and that's not going to happen anytime soon. So long as businesses and governments think of immigrants as mobile resources, current migration patterns will continue. After all, immigration helps businesses prosper and lets governments ignore their thorniest problems:

Where sending nations should be addressing such urgent needs as developing their economies and finding ways to keep families and communities together, instead, outflows of migrants let them off the hook. By the same token, in destination countries, migration reduces the incentive to create sustainable economies that are able and willing to tap their own resources.

Given the global context of migration, can America fix—or at least improve—its broken system? Kaye is not optimistic. Our current approach is dysfunctional: though our economic health depends on our more than 12 million undocumented immigrants, we pay them poorly, deny them benefits and force them to live in fear of deportation. Yet change is impeded by "a messed-up political standoff."

If Kaye were a prophet, he might say that "the alien who resides with you shall be to you as the citizen among you; you shall love the alien as yourself" (Lev. 19:34). Instead, he simply observes that "in the final analysis, how we respond to migration

and how we treat the strangers among us are reflections of our connections to humanity."