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Voting With Your Feet

When people think of voting they think of the ballot box and the voting booth, choosing there among candidates and issues. But there are a good many other ways of voting: the economist, for instance, frequently speaks of people voting with their dollars as to what will be produced. If we choose to buy beer and beer cans, for example, rather than a college education or cleaning up the cans, that is an economic choice, a sort of voting as to how our limited resources will be used. The economy is full of this sort of choosing, and every time we push a dollar across a counter we have cast a vote.

Besides voting at the polling place and voting with our dollars, there are other ways of choosing, or in effect voting. A man and a woman together have been known to vote admiration for each other with their eyes, or their hands, or otherwise.

One of the most powerful and convincing ways of voting, over many and many an age, has been choosing to come here rather than go there -- voting with one's feet. To a considerable extent, the reason for where you are and what you are doing today is that your ancestors, a tremendous stream of them spreading back and back into dim far time, chose this country or that region instead of another. For some of course the move was involuntary, as of children going with parents, or of victims carried into slavery. Thus

it was with Britons taken as slaves to Rome, and Africans to the Americas. But the bulk of the moving was voluntary, voting with the feet.

In this way our country was populated, and the American people created, beginning with the coming of Indians and Eskimos. (Perhaps they saw big game ahead, and the meat stimulated the march.) For you to be here today took the multiple decisions of many grandparents in your varying ancestral lands. Here you are, an unplanned result of all that deciding to move, some of it centuries ago. And if but one ancestor had failed to make the decision he or she did (resulting in his meeting and marrying that other one), you would not be.

We all know something of the saga of the leaving: longing for freedom, desire for opportunity; religious oppression, unwanted government, the military, escape from poverty. Free land and much else beckoned. Many, it is true, were disappointed, or half so, and a good many went back. But here we are, and we are here because our ancestors so voted with their feet.

Where would the world's people move today if this voting were easier? One wonders. I have sometimes wished we could have an International Migration Year, with all moving expenses paid and border barriers, both of egress and ingress, tossed away for the experimental year. Would you move? And if so, to where?

How many of the world's people would seek greener pastures? Would half of China want to go -- and where? I might not be willing to take the consequences of this experiment, but it would be interesting to see the people's choices.

There are any number of social, political, economic, and other experiments one would love to see tried, if, as in a test tube trial, he could sit back and watch safely, and call off the experiment if the results were going to be too painful. There are so many things one is curious about, and would at least half like to see tried. The International Migration Year is one of them, for me.

Of course there are reasons why a person, even though oppressed, may not choose to leave. The Russian writer, Nobel laureate Solzhenitzyn, and his predecessor Pasternak, illustrate this. Solzhenitzyn didn't go to Sweden to get his prize in 1970, reportedly because he was fearful of not being readmitted to Russia. Nor did Pasternak go, in 1958, and for similar reasons. But why would an after-exile matter too much, as shown by the permanent and successful leaving of dancers Nureyev and Makarova, and Stalin's daughter Svetlana? For some people, however, and this seems particularly true of certain poets and novelists, the homeland roots are peculiarly all. There is no leaving; to leave is to leave life, or at least creativeness. And this can be true even if the country is a sort of prison.

There are family ties, and all sorts of other reasons, that would hold many, and did hold many in the past. So by no means everybody who could see advantages in moving would leave in the great International Migration Year, even with the free transportation.

How many Jews would leave Russia? As far as that goes, how many Russians? Time magazine, in two articles this year, estimates that perhaps 300,000 of Russia's 3,500,000 Jews would leave at once if allowed to go

(and this without the free transportation that I assumed to cancel a cost barrier). How many Cubans would go to the United States, and how many of us to Cuba? Two of the most interesting places to watch would be India and China, those large countries immensely filled. How many feet would move, and which way would they point?

It is a compliment to a country that many come its way, as to the United States in the last three or four hundred years. This doesn't mean that anyone thinks the country ahead is perfect, or that there isn't pain in leaving. But it does mean that all in all things look better ahead. Of all the ways of voting, deciding where to go, and particularly where to remain and what to call home, is one of the most convincing evidences as to what people really think and feel. It tells much about how they appraise the rival economies, varying governments, social systems, state of science, and even the climate and scenery. If many people flow, until the wires go up and the guns are pointed, from East Germany to West Germany but few the reverse, it is hard to see how the choosing could be more vivid. Whatever it is that makes an Einstein come our way is significant. And whatever it is that makes some good people leave us should make us think (as the departure of some literary people, youthful rebels against the draft, some intellectuals, some blacks).

On the historic European flow to the United States a book like Marcus Lee Hansen's The Atlantic Migration tells effectively of the reasons, problems, pains of the coming, and something of its size and mode. You see some of your ancestors fleeing from famine, as in Ireland. Very very poor, some from the British Isles could come only when ships' steerage fare fell

from about \$50 in 1816 to \$25 in 1832, but at brief times was lower still. If the price of cheapest ship passage had been, say, \$70 then, would you never have become?

From all lands, east and west and Canada and Latin America too, perhaps 40 million people came to this country to stay (not including the many visitors). Any such figure is approximate, of course, and the farther back the more so. It must start with the stone-age migration from Asia, and the census takers weren't very well trained then. It must include the fraction of a million Africans brought as slaves. The remainder, the great bulk of the figure, is the immigrants, from Colonial times on up, mainly from Europe but also from Asia and elsewhere.

These people were our beginning, our genes, our blood. Were those who begat us wrong in where they went, and should their feet have been less restless? Your own ancestors had to have their particular meetings and matings, down through time, for you to result. For you never would have been if only one of your forebears, maybe very remote, had made another choice. And their choices included which way they pointed their feet.