Go East, Young American

By SUKETU MEHTA  
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ABU DHABI, United Arab Emirates — One of the fiercest debates in the nation these days centers on immigration to America, and whether it takes jobs away from people already here. But maybe the solution is emigration from America. Today, there are nine million American civilians living abroad — up from four million in 1999. In the 21st century, America’s greatest export could just be ... Americans.

Just as India’s greatest export has long been Indians. In 1936, when my grandfather was 16, he had to help support his five younger siblings in a village in Gujarat. His father sent him to Nairobi, Kenya, where he began his career sweeping floors in his uncle’s accounting office. In turn, his children moved, to America, to England, to Australia. In the 1970s my father stood for nine hours a day at the Diamond Dealers Club on West 47th Street in Manhattan because he couldn’t afford an office. My grandfather’s descendants are doctors, lawyers, public servants, corporate executives all over the world. Mobility is survival.

Many Americans recoil at the idea that they should have to go abroad for anything more taxing than sightseeing. The number of Americans working abroad is very low compared with other developed countries. Only a third of Americans have a working passport; three-quarters of Britons do, and 60 percent of Canadians.

If you were to believe President Trump, and even some supporters of Senator Bernie Sanders, you would think that this is because every American has a divine right to a well-paid job in his own country.
The 20th century was the American century; the 21st, not so much. A young person in Denmark or New Zealand has a better quality of life than a young person in the United States. There you can go to college free, not have to worry about money when you’re sick, and enjoy two months’ vacation even if you’re only an intern. Partly this is due to the significant underinvestment by the government in education, health care and the arts, which has left sections of the United States looking like postwar Europe.

Americans who work abroad do quite well; American pilots for Chinese airlines, for example, make $300,000 a year. All around the world, there are legions of Americans making a good living as engineers, corporate executives, English teachers.

Critics say this kind of globalization is only for the elite, those lucky and wealthy enough to have been educated at the best schools. But it’s not just jobs requiring a college degree that Americans should consider doing overseas. A 150-peso-an-hour job in an automobile plant in Aguascalientes, Mexico, isn’t the same as a $40-an-hour union job in Detroit; but you will live much better than if you made $8 an hour slinging burgers in Scranton, Pa. Maybe, instead of building a wall, President Trump should be demanding that Mexico open up its labor market to Americans.

I certainly understand why Americans might be attached to their house, their friends and family, their home country. I’ve made New York my home, the last home for those who have no other. The United States is a beautiful country, a safe country and, for most people, a comfortable country. It’s true that we should fight for better-paying jobs at home; companies move jobs abroad so they can pay workers less, in countries with looser environmental and labor laws.

But American jobs are disappearing not because they’re moving to Mexico or China; it’s because they are increasingly being done by robots. What we need is not tariffs, but training. We also need to gently teach our children: You might prefer to stay in the house you were born in all your life, but it’s not a constitutional right.

My family had to move because there was no future in rural Gujarat; 200 years of British colonialism had left the Indian economy in ruins. When we moved, we missed our vegetarian food, our family, the trees, the rivers and our language. Some
of it we could take with us; some of it we couldn’t. We returned to Gujarat when we could.

Americans are more fortunate; the whole world looks like America now. Americans who emigrate don’t have to go without cheeseburgers, “Seinfeld” or the English language.

So go forth into the world with confidence, young American! Don’t believe Mr. Trump’s defeatist talk of “American carnage.” Americans have a spirit of enterprise, efficiency and honesty that is unparalleled in the world. If you don’t believe me, try visiting a Chinese or Indian or Russian government office — and see how an American government office compares.

Some of my former New York University students were able to land lucrative jobs in the booming Indian news industry because they have writing and editing skills honed at a top American university. In India, their salaries can buy them an apartment, nice dinners, domestic help. Most of their peers in New York are still struggling in unpaid internships and have to be supported by loans or parents.

For my college-going sons, there is no guarantee that there will be a job waiting after graduation in America. But they have already worked, with confidence, in Brazil and Indonesia. Growing up in New York has made them comfortable with the idea of living anywhere in the world. The other day, my older son, who wants to be a journalist, told me he was thinking about looking for a job in ... India.

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Are you an American who lives abroad? Tell us why, and what you’d share with other Americans wondering about doing the same thing on Instagram using the hashtag #AmericanExpatLife.

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