Immigration Past & Present

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Abstract: Immigration has remade and changed American society since the nation’s founding, and an understanding of the past can help illuminate the immigrant experience in the present. This essay focuses on three central questions: What is new about the most recent immigrant wave? What represents continuity or parallels with the past? And how have migrant inflows in earlier historical periods changed the social, economic, political, and cultural contexts that now greet – and shape the experiences of – the latest arrivals? In examining these questions, the focus is on the last great wave of immigration at the turn of the twentieth century, in which the newcomers were mainly from Eastern, Southern, and Central Europe, and the contemporary inflow, from the late 1960s to the present, which is made up overwhelmingly of people from Latin America, Asia, and the Caribbean.

To know the past, it is often said, is to better understand the present. Nowhere is this more true than when it comes to immigration. Since the founding of the United States, immigration has been a fundamental feature of the nation’s population, institutions, and identity. Today, as in earlier eras, immigration is transforming the country in profound ways and also changing the lives of the newcomers who have moved here. What is new about the most recent immigrant wave? What represents continuity or parallels with the past? And how have migrant inflows in earlier historical periods changed the social, economic, political, and cultural contexts that now greet – and shape the experiences of – the latest arrivals?

In examining these questions, I focus on the two massive immigrations in the period that stretches from the end of the nineteenth century to the beginning of the twenty-first. The last great wave at the turn of the twentieth century, from about 1880 to the early 1920s, brought more than 23 million immigrants to America’s shores, mainly from Eastern, Southern, and Central Europe; the contemporary inflow, from the late 1960s to the present, is made up overwhelmingly of people from Latin America.

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Asia, and the Caribbean. By 1910, the nation’s population was almost 15 percent foreign born, a height unreachable since then, though it is coming close (13 percent in 2010). The numbers are much larger now, of course, rising from 13.5 million foreign born in 1910 to an all-time high of 40 million in 2010.

In some ways, history is repeating itself. This is not surprising given the many similar characteristics between immigrants now and those from a century ago; the comparable racial and ethnic barriers facing newcomers in both eras; and the very nature of immigration and the assimilation process. Because many contemporary immigrants arrive in the United States with low skill levels, do not know English, and are new to the country, they, like their predecessors in the last great wave, often enter the economy on the bottom, taking low-paid jobs with long hours and unpleasant working conditions that native-born Americans generally do not want. Even some of the jobs are the same. Russian Jewish immigrants in the past worked in garment sweatshops, just as many Chinese and Latino immigrants do today; Italians in the past dug tunnels and built bridges and roads, while today many Mexicans work in construction.

The underlying processes of niche development still operate to create ethnic job concentrations. As before, immigrants tend to flock to fields where coethnics have established a solid foothold. Lacking information about the broader labor market and dependent on the support of their own kind, new arrivals typically learn about and get help finding jobs through personal networks in the immigrant community. For their part, employers often prefer applicants recommended by existing employees. Ethnic businesses are another perennial feature of the American immigrant scene, if only because they emerge to serve the special tastes and needs of the ethnic market. In what also seems like a timeless feature, many newcomers today, as in the past, cluster in ethnic neighborhoods with their compatriots, partly owing to economic constraints and prejudice from established Americans but also because they seek comfort and security among kinfolk and friends in an environment of familiar languages and institutions.

It is often said that a major distinction between today’s immigrants and those of a hundred years ago is that then they were, in the main, white Europeans and today they are, in significant numbers, people of color. However, prejudice against immigrants on the basis of race and ethnicity has a long history. Jewish and Italian immigrants a century ago were not viewed as white in the same way that people with origins in Northern and Western Europe were: they were seen as belonging to inferior “mongrel” races that would alter the essential character of the United States and pollute the nation’s Anglo-Saxon or Nordic stock. Jewish and Italian immigrants were thought to have distinct biological features, mental abilities, and innate character traits, and many Americans believed that they were physically identifiable: facial features often noted in the case of Jews, “swarthy” skin in the case of Italians. Echoing racial views not uncommon in political discourse and the media, soon-to-be President Calvin Coolidge wrote in a popular magazine in 1921 that “Americans must be kept American. Biological laws show… that Nordics deteriorate when mixed with other races.”

The racial attack on Southern and Eastern European immigrants was a powerful ideological weapon of the movement to reduce immigration, helping mobilize public sentiment in favor of restrictive federal legislation, which was enacted in the early 1920s.

Not only was it acceptable to speak about the inferiority of Jews and Italians
in newspapers, magazines, and public forums, but discrimination against them was also open and, by and large, legal well into the twentieth century. Elite summer resorts and private clubs made no bones about shutting out Jews; deed restrictions, that is, clauses in real estate titles limiting the transfer of property to members of certain groups, kept them out of desirable neighborhoods; and informal quotas at Ivy League colleges set limits on the admission of Jews, who were a particular target given their early educational achievements.

Transnationalism, or maintaining ties to the home country, is also not new. Many immigrants in the last great wave maintained extensive transnational ties, sending money and letters to relatives left behind and putting away money to buy land and houses in the home country. Russian Jews, fleeing political repression and virulent anti-Semitism, were unusual for their time in the degree to which they were permanent settlers in the United States; but many Italians were “birds of passage,” going back to their home villages seasonally or every few years. In general, immigrants in a variety of groups at that time, like immigrants today, often followed news about, and sometimes remained actively involved in, home-country politics.

A common fear is that today’s immigrants and their children are not learning English, and that this is different from the past. But when it comes to language, the similarities with the past stand out. Research indicates that the standard three-generation model of linguistic assimilation still holds: the immigrant generation (arriving as adults) makes some progress but is usually more comfortable and fluent in the mother tongue; the majority of the second generation is proficient in English but also speaks an immigrant language; and the third generation is to a large extent monolingual in English. According to a recent study, 88 percent of adult second-generation Latinos reported speaking English very well (versus about a quarter of first-generation Latino immigrants). In 2000, among school-age children in newcomer families, about seven in ten of the Mexican third generation spoke only English at home; for Asians, it was 92 percent.4

If there are parallels with the past, that does not mean we are witnessing a timeless immigrant saga. In many ways, the experiences of today’s immigrants differ profoundly from those at the turn of the twentieth century given the broad range of new contextual features in the United States, from government laws and policies to widely accepted norms and values. In addition, immigrant flows have changed, with newcomers arriving from different places. A hundred years ago, the overwhelming majority of immigrants were from Europe: a remarkable 87 percent in 1910. Italians were the largest immigrant group arriving in the first two decades of the twentieth century, followed by Eastern European Jews. In 2010, only 12 percent of the immigrants in the United States were from Europe. More than four out of five were from Asia, Latin America, and the Caribbean. Mexicans are by far the largest group, making up about 30 percent of the nation’s immigrant population.

Another new development is the large number of undocumented now living in the United States. A hundred years ago, there were so few restrictions on European immigration that hardly any European immigrants were “illegal.” To be sure, specific exclusion laws barred the entry of Asians—in the case of the Chinese, as early as 1882. But until the 1920s, there were no numerical limits on European immigration—no immigrant visas or special papers that had to be secured from the United States. European immigrants arrived by boat, and most got through the
ports of entry easily because they already had been screened, mainly for disease, by steamship companies before embarking. Of the more than 12 million immigrants who landed at Ellis Island, only 2 percent were excluded from entry.

Today, if you do not have proper documentation from American authorities, you cannot legally live and work in the United States. There are numerical limits on the number of immigrant visas, and in many countries where the demand to come to the United States is especially strong, there is a long wait to get a visa, even if you have a family member to sponsor you. (The majority of lawful permanent immigrants — two-thirds in 2010 — enter under family reunification provisions of U.S. immigration law.) As a result, many have arrived or remained without proper documents. In 2011, there were an estimated 11.5 million unauthorized immigrants in the United States, or more than a quarter of the total foreign-born population; nearly 60 percent were from Mexico, and another 14 percent from Guatemala, El Salvador, and Honduras.

Undocumented immigrants have faced a host of difficulties. They are especially vulnerable in the labor market, commonly working in low-paid jobs with unpleasant, sometimes dangerous, conditions. Having legal status is not a recipe for success, but without it an immigrant has trouble getting a good job and making a living wage in the formal economy. The undocumented have been ineligible for most government social and welfare benefits. (Emergency Medicaid is one exception.) In recent years, they have been subject to great hostility and, in many places, punitive actions and legislation by local and state governments. The record number of deportations in the United States in recent years — about 400,000 in fiscal year 2011 — has heightened fears among undocumented immigrants. Although children of the undocumented born in this country are U.S. citizens, with all the rights that this entails, their parents often do not participate in public programs for which their U.S.-citizen children are eligible because of fear of authorities.

A more positive difference from the past is that today’s immigrants are more diverse in socioeconomic background than European immigrants at the turn of the twentieth century. Yesterday’s newcomers did include a sizable number who had worked in skilled trades in the old country, but the bulk were low-skilled workers; professionals and the highly educated were scarce. Today, many are still poorly educated and low skilled; in 2010, 32 percent of immigrants twenty-five years and older lacked a high school diploma. However, 27 percent had a bachelor’s degree or higher. Never in the history of U.S. immigration has such a large proportion of new arrivals been so highly skilled and educated.

Given their educational background, many immigrants today arrive ready and able to find decent, sometimes high-level jobs in the mainstream economy. This is another change from the past. So is the fact that a significant minority are proficient in English on arrival. This is obviously the case for the more than one million English-speaking Caribbean immigrants, but also for others — most notably, many from India and the Philippines, the third and fourth largest immigrant-source countries to the United States. Even those who did not know English before they emigrated seem to learn it faster than in the past. A much higher proportion of late-twentieth-century immigrants from the Spanish-speaking nations of Mexico, the Caribbean, and Central and South America spoke English in their first five years in the United States than was the case with early-twentieth-century European immigrants.

Transnationalism is not a new phenomenon, but much is new about it today.
Given modern technology and communications, immigrants can now operate more or less simultaneously in the United States and their country of origin—and maintain more frequent, immediate, and closer contact with home societies than before. At the beginning of the twentieth century, more than a month elapsed between sending a letter home and receiving a reply. It took about two weeks to get back to Italy. Today, immigrants can hop on a plane to visit their home communities or pick up the phone, or in some cases use the Internet, to hear news from relatives and be involved with those left behind. With a flick of the radio or television dial, immigrants usually can hear about news from the homeland.

The ubiquity of cell phones and low-cost phone calls—as well as the growing use of email, text messages, and Skype—has enabled migrants to stay in close contact and maintain a level of intimacy with relatives in the country of origin in ways that were not possible twenty years ago, never mind at the beginning of the twentieth century. Modern technology even can bring the tastes of home to the United States. Through courier services—paquete- rias—in Queens, New York, Mexican immigrants can get freshly baked bread or mole sauce that has been flown in, made by relatives in the homeland only forty-eight hours earlier. With the growing number of sending countries allowing some form of dual nationality or citizenship, many immigrants no longer have to give up home-country citizenship after naturalizing in the United States; and depending on the rules in each case, some have the right to vote in home-country elections from abroad.

Nativism, hostility toward immigrants on the basis of their foreignness, is alive and well, although today it is heavily focused on the undocumented and especially Mexicans. Racial prejudice and discrimination also continue to create barriers for black, Latino, and Asian immigrants. Yet there have been some positive developments in the last one hundred years. Gone are the days when mainstream institutions, most notably public schools, sponsored hard-edged Americanization programs and activities that told immigrants to shed completely their old customs and ethnic identities. “There is no such thing as a hyphenated American who is a good American,” Theodore Roosevelt proclaimed in a 1915 speech. “The only man who is a good American is the man who is American and nothing else.”

The notion that Old World traditions would diminish immigrants’ devotion to America, according to historian Gary Gerstle, “maintained its potency through the 1930s.”

Today, there is an official commitment to cultural pluralism and cultural diversity in the United States, and Americans are comfortable with hyphenated identities, which are embraced (at least some of the time) by long-established Americans as well as many immigrants and especially their second-generation children. Whereas the children of European immigrants of the last great wave were often embarrassed by their parents’ old country ways, today’s second generation is more at ease with having both American and ethnic identities. A study of the young adult children of immigrants in the New York area found that they rarely felt ashamed of their parents’ language and were proud of their culture of origin, or features of it. Generally, they had positive feelings about their ethnic roots and admired their parents’ struggle to make a better life for their families in this country. Nearly all said that they would try to teach their own children about their parents’ culture and help them learn the language.

Today’s immigrants and their children, moreover, are making their way at a time when many legal protections are in place.
that did not exist a hundred years ago. New York State, to mention one example, did not pass an anti-discrimination statute until 1945, and a few years later the U.S. Supreme Court banned restrictive covenants that had allowed property owners to exclude racial and ethnic minorities from purchasing homes in desirable neighborhoods. Perhaps even more important, many children of non-white immigrants are positioned to take advantage of and profit from civil rights-era institutions and laws of the 1960s, including policies promoting diversity in educational institutions and places of employment—policies that, ironically, were designed to redress injustices suffered by native minority groups. While most members of the second generation, as in the past, are making relatively modest moves up the socioeconomic ladder when compared to their parents, a greater proportion are now catapulting into high-level positions. Contemporary immigrants' class composition is far more heavily weighted toward the middle class than was true a hundred years ago. Also, American society “is more receptive to immigrants’ incorporation—in large measure, due to the efforts by earlier groups of outsiders, including native-born blacks, to widen access to opportunity.”

A final contrast should be mentioned. Contemporary immigrant communities are being constantly replenished with new arrivals in a way that did not happen in the last great wave from Europe. After the mid-1920s, there was a halt in mass immigration from Southern and Eastern Europe owing to legislative restrictions followed by the Great Depression and World War II, and mass inflows did not begin again until after the passage of the 1965 Hart-Celler immigration reforms. Despite the recent economic downturn in the United States and reduced levels of undocumented immigration from Mexico in the past few years, legal immigration has continued at high rates for nearly five decades, and a halt like the one seen in the past is unlikely—at least in the near future. In 2010, more than a third of all immigrants in the United States had entered the country since 2000. Between 2005 and 2010 alone, more than a million legal permanent residents were admitted each year. Ongoing immigration contributes to strengthening vibrant ethnic communities and cultures and the salience of ethnic identity. Whereas the earlier second generation of European origin growing up in the 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s did so in a context in which there were hardly any newly arrived immigrants in their neighborhoods, many children of today’s immigrants live in places where newcomers of all ages—who have strong ties to the home country, its customs, and its languages—are arriving every day.

The relationship between past and present concerns not only what is new about immigration but also the way changes introduced by newcomers in previous eras influence contemporary immigrants. To put it somewhat differently: how do migrant inflows in one period, in a dialectical process, change the context of reception that subsequently shapes the experiences and incorporation of the next wave? One legacy of the last great wave is the impact on popular culture, from television programs that feature the descendants of Italian and Jewish immigrants (think Seinfeld, Everybody Loves Raymond, and The Sopranos) to food (pizza and bagels, to name two items introduced a century ago that have become American mainstays). In addition, some institutions and cultural patterns that were developed or transformed by earlier European immigrants and their children continue to serve or provide a model for current newcomers. This is especially the case in long-established gateways like New York, Boston,
and Chicago, which have been major immigrant destinations for well over a century.

Today’s immigrants profit from the legitimacy (and practice) of ethnic politics dating back to the nineteenth century, when the Irish were able to infiltrate and take over the helm of big-city Democratic Party politics by mobilizing the ethnic vote.15 Later-arriving Southern and Eastern Europeans followed suit, using ethnicity to mobilize their base, attain political representation, and contend to be part of governing coalitions. Political machines are no longer what they used to be, and much has changed about the structure of urban politics; yet ethnic politics is central to newer immigrants’ political incorporation. That long-established European-origin groups used “ethnic arithmetic” to pursue their goals and entry into the political system in urban America gives legitimacy to similar efforts by politicians of recent immigrant origin as they seek to rally voters, build support, and gain influence in cities today. Successful attempts by African Americans to win office and mobilize support in the wake of the civil rights movement and civil rights legislation have also provided a model for immigrant-origin politicians.

Contemporary immigrants also benefit from an acceptance of religious pluralism resulting from the integration of Catholicism and Judaism into mainstream America.16 At the turn of the twentieth century, Protestant denominations prevailed in the public square, crowding out Catholicism and Judaism, both associated with disparaged Southern and Eastern Europeans and seen by nativist observers as incompatible with American institutions and culture. Earlier in the nineteenth century, Irish Catholic immigrants, who when they arrived in the 1830s and 1840s constituted the first mass immigration of Catholics to America, were the target of deep-seated and virulent anti-Catholic nativism.

For most of American history, as Gary Gerstle has written, Catholicism was depicted as the enemy of republicanism, standing for monarchy, aristocracy, and other reactionary forces that America hoped to escape.17 By the mid-twentieth century, however, Catholics and Jews had been incorporated into the system of American pluralism. The transformation of America into a “Judeo-Christian” nation — and Protestantism, Catholicism, and Judaism into the three main denominations in American religious life — has meant that post-1965 immigrants enter a more religiously open society than their predecessors did a hundred or a hundred and fifty years ago. Of course, the contemporary United States is hardly a paradise of religious tolerance. Anti-Muslim prejudice, for one, is all too prevalent. Nevertheless, Islam and other non-Western religions have a presence that is widely accepted as legitimate within a pluralistic society.

Many present-day immigrants attend churches founded by European immigrants of earlier eras and send their children to Catholic parochial schools that have their origins in the mid-nineteenth century, when Catholics established their own school system to protect their children from the overtly Protestant teaching in the state-supported or public school system. Since the 1960s, enrollment at Catholic schools has been in steep decline. Catholic schools, it has been argued, also underserve Mexican American youth in the Southwest and California — never regions for heavy investment in the Catholic educational system, which was most developed in the Northeast and Midwest, regions where Catholic immigrants from Europe primarily settled in the past.18 Still, in the 2011–2012 academic year, about 2 million children nationwide attended some 6,800 Catholic elementary and second-
ary schools; more than a quarter of these students were racial and ethnic minorities – no doubt many immigrants or children of immigrants.

Only a small minority of immigrant workers are members of labor unions – about 10 percent nationwide in 2010 – but those who are may belong to one established by European immigrants in the early twentieth century or that incorporated earlier unions, among them the International Ladies Garment Workers' Union and Amalgamated Clothing Workers of America, both of which, after several mergers in recent decades, became part of a broader union (Workers United). A growing number of unionized health care workers in the United States belong to a union affiliated with the national Service Employees International Union; the health care workers union has its origins in a small New York City pharmacists' local, founded by a Russian-born Jewish immigrant, that began to organize hospital workers in the late 1950s. New York City, the nation's quintessential immigrant city then and now, is home to a range of organizations and institutions – not only unions, churches, and synagogues but also settlement houses and social welfare associations – established by Eastern and Southern European immigrants in the Ellis Island era. These institutions provide services and opportunities for many new arrivals and, in some cases, give legitimacy to contemporary immigrants' organizational efforts and serve as models to emulate. In general, long-established immigrant gateways offer newer arrivals the benefit of institutions that were set up to aid immigrants in earlier waves; similar institutions are absent in places that until recently have had no need for such arrangements.

A final example concerns a different heritage from the past. Immigrants and their children today reap the benefits of the struggles of earlier first- and second-generation Europeans who worked to combat discriminatory barriers that blocked progress and integration into the American mainstream. The story of how these barriers fell is complicated, involving many factors, yet one element was the organized campaigns in the immediate post–World War II years, particularly by many Jewish organizations, for the passage of anti-discriminatory legislation and the elimination of quotas directed at Jews. In this sense, these earlier struggles against discrimination helped “change the rules of the game.” Even more significant was the civil rights movement and civil rights legislation, which have made it harder for dominant groups to engage in some of the exclusionary strategies that were adopted earlier in the twentieth century, and which have given more scope and leverage to contemporary outsider immigrant groups to mobilize and make their way in mainstream institutions.

It has become a commonplace to say that immigration, over time, has remade and changed American society; but this is the beginning of an inquiry, not the end of it. An important element in understanding these processes of change is appreciating how immigrants in each era transform the social, economic, political, and cultural contexts that then provide the setting for newcomers in the next wave – who, in turn, leave their own mark. If the massive inflow of a hundred years ago has helped shape the context of reception for contemporary newcomers, the immigration of the last five decades is sure to do the same for future immigrant cohorts. Already, those currently arriving come to a country that has been transformed by the heavy recent influx. Hispanics have surpassed blacks as the largest minority group in the United States, and to mention another example, programs have been established
in many gateway cities, from English-language learning in schools to translating services in hospitals, that were unavailable or less available to immigrants who entered just thirty or forty years ago. If, as is likely, high levels of immigration continue in the near future, newcomers arriving then will make their own imprint.

An examination of past and present through a comparative approach provides additional insights, allowing us to test what are often too easy and unproven assumptions about immigrants in earlier eras—assumptions that affect how we view and understand the present. We can also better appreciate what is really new about immigration today. As the historian David Kennedy reminds us, “The only way we can know with certainty as we move along time’s path that we have come to a genuinely new place is to know something of where we have been.”

While much is—and will continue to be—unique to the present, comparisons with the past make clear that what seems novel is not always new, from racial prejudice against newcomers to immigrants’ involvement with their homelands.

Past/present comparisons are more than an academic endeavor. They dispel commonly held popular myths about immigrant giants of an earlier golden age of immigration, against whom present-day arrivals seem like a pale imitation. And they remind present-day immigrants of what they have in common with their predecessors. This historical awareness can give them a greater sense of being part of America as a “nation of immigrants,” and perhaps also can inspire hope for the future. As a leader of an immigrant federation in New York City put it a few years ago: “We look at the Italian community, the Jewish community. They started out like us or even worse off. . . . Eventually the day will come for us.”

ENDNOTES


3 John Hightam, Send These to Me: Immigrants in Urban America (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1984), 45.


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14 As Tomás Jiménez reminds us, the Mexican-origin population in the Southwest was continually replenished throughout the twentieth century, with consequences for incorporation and ethnic identity formation. See Tomás R. Jiménez, *Replenished Ethnicity: Mexican Americans, Immigration, and Identity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010).


22 David Kennedy, “Can We Still Afford to be a Nation of Immigrants?” *Atlantic Monthly*, November 1996, 68.