

## Other Immigrants: The Global Origins of the American People

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Eric Homburger

The post-1965 immigration to the United States is larger and far more diverse than the 'New Immigration,' which had such profound an impact upon virtually every aspect of American life in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. David M. Reimers has written a comprehensive account of this new immigration, supplementing and in some respects transforming a story which a generation ago had been largely focused upon European immigration. (1) Reimers builds upon what is by now a mountain of recent scholarship bringing hitherto marginal groups (Chinese, Filipino, black Caribbean and Hispanic) to the centre of the story. The statistics Reimers presents are large and imposing. While declining most of the many temptations to speculate upon the future directions of this immigration, or its likely consequence for American society, Reimers has brought together in one comprehensive account the fullest, and most accurate, picture we have today of the evolving story of America and its immigrants.

The leading players – politicians, especially – in the debate on asylum and immigration in the U.K., and across Europe generally, could do much worse than to take a look at Reimers's *Other Immigrants*. What this book tells us about America will in some ways confirm a host of post-Katrina perceptions, currently rampant in Europe and elsewhere, that the national story is a dreary narrative of loneliness, hardship and disappointment on the part of the immigrants, and one of racism and occasional violence on the part of the 'host' population. Nonetheless, the deeper aspirations – let's call it hope – which brought so many individuals and families to America, and largely sustained them in an encounter with an alien and disorienting society, seems somehow to have been taken for granted in recent thinking about America and its place in the world. It is hard to capture the precise sense of how strange America and its ways has seemed to immigrants, and how uneasily Americans felt about these strangers. Hope, in sustaining quantities, was needed.

Americans have sometimes extended an open hand of welcome and generosity to immigrants, but hostility has left a deeper impact on the recollected experience of immigration. Beyond the charitable endeavours of fellow countrymen, co-religionists, and the efforts of American charities and benevolent organisations, the immigrants have had friends, of a kind, in America. Paradoxically, it was the hardfaced American capitalists, in agriculture and manufacturing, who waged campaigns and pulled strings to open the doors to immigrant workers. This was self-interested advocacy, but advocacy nonetheless. Immigrants were in demand as agricultural labourers and factory workers, at wages which failed to attract native American workers. Immigrant workers became strikebreakers, and were a powerful management resource against local workers, their unions, and their intermittent resistance to wage-cuts and speed-ups. When immigrants sought to unionise, other immigrants could be brought in to displace them. The record of immigrant-led social protest and radicalism is mixed. The much-admired César Chávez notwithstanding, agricultural workers in California today remain unorganised and on low wages. Race has powerfully divided workers against each other. In American conditions the poor have struggled to sustain social solidarity, and have seldom been sufficiently radical or class-conscious to meet the expectations of radical scholars. The increasingly conservative politics of the immigrants, as they adjust to American values, is an important facet of the story Reimers tells.

Reimers's book has the merit of not leaving anyone out. Every nationality, religion, race, and ethnicity under the sun, or at least every group, community and set of beliefs which have become a presence in the great bouillabaisse of American life, gets a chapter, or a couple of pages, or a brief paragraph here.

For students of American Studies, diversity itself carries with it a vast superstructure of possibilities, as well as the usual patterns of conflict. Diversity holds the promise of remaking America along different lines, of escaping from the national narrative of racism and gun-toting imperialism. Trying to assess the larger consequences for America as a society of the immigration described by Reimers is something like a parlour game: how can we remake a nation? How many new foods can find a place in the great national food court?

Drawing conclusions about the social meaning behind Reimers's large numbers is frustrating; the numbers rapidly lose explanatory power. Reimers austere declines to speculate on larger meanings. Individuals whose experience illustrates his argument appear, briefly, and are presented without much context or detail. The appearance of Senegalese vendors on the streets of Manhattan ('Swiss Navy Watches! Only ten dollahs!'), noted in the 1980s, drew the grand-standing hostility of Mayor Koch. Mayor Giuliani ordered sweeping arrests, which were thrown out by the courts. But what of the rich complexity of the system which brought the Senegalese to New York, housed them, supplied them with pirated or stolen goods to sell (umbrellas, Yankees baseball hats), and attended diligently to their exploitation? Working at New York University, Reimers must have passed such immigrants around the Washington Square campus, perhaps buying an umbrella on a rainy day. One would like to see such figures in the round, they way they suddenly appeared, fully stocked with goods, and then vanished when the heat was turned on by the police. We need to learn a lot more about the criminals who prey upon the Senegalese, and helped them at the same time. Reimers mentions the notorious Chinese snakehead people smugglers, and the Mexican coyotes. The middleman behind the young Senegalese selling umbrellas on lower Broadway or mid-town is a similar type whom immigrants have often encountered in America, and elsewhere. It is an aspect of the 'immigrant experience' which deserves more attention in a book as wide-ranging as this one.

We hear in *Other Immigrants* that the immigrants struggled and faced discrimination. A few achieved success and great wealth; a few were elected to office. For immigrant women, many from traditional and deeply conservative societies, entering employment disrupted gender roles. Mostly, the labourers and seamstresses and factory hands were invisible to the larger society, and the recovery of their stories has done much to enrich historical scholarship, if not quite transform suburban, white American attitudes towards the poor, blacks and foreigners.<sup>(2)</sup> How these things were understood, how described, has been left to other scholars. Reimers mentions a handful of writers who have achieved some degree of renown, but does not cite their books, or assess what they have seen and understood about immigrant life in America. But we should also be attending to the way immigrants have sought to shape their experience of America. The

narratives fashioned in a broad range of plays, novels, autobiographies written by the first and second generation of immigrants between 1890 and 1940 have drawn upon much the same body of experience, and shaped it into a coherent story of struggle and survival. Whether gleaming with the patriotic optimism of a Mary Antin, or the poignant ironies of an Abraham Cahan (3), theirs was a story which showed at least one of the ways immigrants encountered American values, and adapted to them. The self-representations of Reimers's 'other immigrants' are mentioned in a sentence here, a paragraph there, but he is not listening to their voices, their narratives. What a rich body of material he has ignored.

There are some almost fascinating details in Reimers's pages: the largest community of Chaldeans is to be found in Detroit. Passaic County, New Jersey, and especially the city of Paterson, is the home to 20,000 Turks. The lawns and swimming pools of Long Island are tended by a substantial, if undocumented, population of Salvadorans. A poultry plant in Morgantown, North Carolina, relies upon Maya immigrants from Mexico.(4) Ten per cent of the worldwide population of Zoroastrians now live in the United States.

As a story which involves the counting of large numbers of otherwise nameless and faceless immigrants, *Other Immigrants* is in effect an account of the attempts by the United States government to restrict immigration, and to staunch its seemingly irresistible flow. The immigration story is defined at every turn by the government. Legislation has created precise but constantly changing frameworks for who may be admitted, and who excluded. There are here repeated invocations of the consequences of the McCarran-Walter Act of 1952, the Refugee Relief Act of 1953, the Hart-Celler Act of 1964, the Cuban Adjustment Act of 1966, and so on. The consequences of each of these are repeatedly cited, but Reimers does not discuss the legislative passage of these measures, or the political forces and sociological thinking which lies behind them. Given the extraordinary impact of this body of legislation, and its implementation by successive federal agencies, it would be nice to know if the consequences, such as the vast expansion of Asian and Caribbean immigration, were intended or even envisaged.

Government policy veered wildly between stern measures to block immigration at the borders, and one temporary measure after another, in response to manpower shortages of agriculture and manufacturing, allowing the 'undocumented' to acquire legal status through a procession of amnesties, and retrospective legalisation through legislative means. The struggle to gain some handle on the ebbs and flows of mass immigration, triggered off by economic need, civil war, natural disaster and political change, produced some revealing differences in policy. Anti-Castro Cubans and some Asians (South Vietnamese, from the 1970s) found Washington far friendlier than did impoverished, French-speaking boat people from Haiti. However the control of the White House and Congress changes, the dilemmas, and the background mood-music of hostility towards immigrants, remains much the same.

The terminology of ethnicity and immigration remains a quagmire of complexity and entrapment. The term 'Hispanic,' it turns out, was chosen by the Ad Hoc Committee on Racial and Ethnic Difference within the Department of Health, Education and Welfare, in 1975. Other terms, such as 'people of color,' a shorthand for blacks, Asians, and Latinos and Hispanics, has a usefully inclusive vagueness, though it is a term which is invariably used about others, not about oneself. A poll in 2000 revealed that 'Latinos' and 'Latinas' use neither term to describe themselves. And the existence of significant minorities within the 'Latino' community who do not speak Spanish, and who as 'Indians' reject any such label, makes the term progressively less useful. There are good reasons to resist the application of contemporary terminology to groups in the past, and even better reasons not to attribute to those about whom we know so little the ethnic consciousness which such terms as 'Hispanics' imply. Reimers suggests that there were 'Hispanics' living in Tucson in the 1730s (p. 24), but, more plausibly, that the 'Spanish' population of Texas and California in the eighteenth century probably did not possess a Spanish identity, but one shaped by a mestizo mixture of cultural and racial identities (p. 26). The question of identity is unavoidable, but the terminology is confusing, and without consideration at a much closer level, is of doubtful usefulness, Reimers quotes without further comment one scholar's suggestion that Mexicans in Los Angeles have developed 'an emerging ethnic consciousness' (p. 32). Elsewhere he finds repeated examples of immigrants (such as Haitians and West Indians) who have not found it easy to build relations with native-born blacks. In other words, the terminology is no friend to understanding difference.

Reimers suggests a political model, a strategy, through which immigrant populations can pursue their own interests. The stages are precisely the same for each group: the building of group-consciousness through the establishment of (foreign-language) newspapers, self-help organisations, the establishment of churches when the existing churches prove unwelcoming, and then the staging of festivals, the reaching out to local politicians and elites, and the courting of the local media. Beyond that is the promised land of political alliances with other ethnic communities and the active pursuit of influence and power.

Virtually every immigrant community has gone through some or most of this model, but we do not know if the path to assimilation is much affected by some or all of the constituent steps. Communities with high levels of group consciousness, and others with deep class and cultural divisions and low levels of co-operative life, provide only a modest guide to the successful pursuit of self-interest in America. The wild diversity which Reimers records, the differences between immigrant groups, their languages, different social structures, patterns of immigration, as well as their own racisms, make the growing number of immigrants only intermittently significant in terms of politics. Anti-Castro Cubans are, due to their concentration in Florida, an important exception. Individuals from immigrant communities have been elected to office, but that has seldom signaled a substantial shift in the bases of political power. And the awkward class divisions between highly-educated, suburban-dwelling, entrepreneurial immigrants, and their fellow countrymen without the advantages of higher education, who are consigned mainly to low level employment or manual labor, have increasingly dispelled the mythical solidarity which is meant to unite immigrants.

The Indian immigration of the 1950s and 1960s, marked by high levels of education and professional aspiration, was followed in the succeeding decades by poorer and less well educated immigrants from the sub-continent. There is a similar absence of political unity in the large Filipino immigration (p. 173). The result, as Reimers notes (p. 192), is a more multilayered community, and one with increasing divisions between rich and poor. The wealthy, suburban Indian entrepreneur can insulate his family from the 'Dotbuster' gangs who assaulted Indians in Jersey City, complaining that 'The Hindus own everything' (p. 193) but individual success and prosperity did little, except vicariously, for those left behind in the struggle for respect and dignity in America.

Reimers's suggests that 'If the Indian community is to be effective, Indians will have to close ranks, become American citizens, and acquire the skills needed for political success' (p. 195). The notable condescension in this piece of advice is half-undercut by a further reflection on the political dilemmas faced by African-born immigrants and native-born blacks. It was not clear 'just how an effective alliance could be built' between such diverse communities, but, 'given the growing immigration from Africa (and the Caribbean as well),

these communities may work together at least on certain occasions' (p. 247).

But then again they may not, as Reimers several times points out. As a measure of political prospects in America today, it seems to me unpersuasive. There may be no ready formula or strategy which would hold the promise of group-emancipation from discrimination and marginality. Ethnic communities, essentially unstable and internally divided, may be precisely the wrong kind of building blocks for effecting social change. The protean capacity of working-class and lower-middle-class white neighborhoods to come into conflict with blacks is familiar stuff. Ever vulnerable to the corrosive power of racism to divide (p. 87), the idea that there may be other strategies, other possibilities (environmental, educational, economic) needs fresher and more hard-headed consideration. Reimers implies that the old Democratic Party model of alliances among 'minorities' can work once again. There may not be too much mileage in this. The fourth consecutive victory by Republicans in the New York mayoral election earlier this month, raises some interesting questions about ethnicity and politics. In an ostensibly 'Democratic' city, Ferrer should have walked the election. As it turned out, important strata from the city's Hispanic, Asian and black electorates, supported a billionaire Republican. All sorts of false consciousness running rampant in the five boroughs! 'Minorities' don't seem to behave like minorities any more. This should, but it does not, pose tricky interpretive questions for Professor Reimers.

'The large-scale immigration of non-Europeans since the 1960s,' writes Reimers, 'has changed America and is continuing to do so' (p. 290). In other respects, he is anxious to reassure his fellow-countrymen things will not change very much. He argues that 'American core values' are not threatened, and that the economic burden of mass immigration is sustainable. (British politicians: please note.) In the 2000 census, the foreign-born constituted more than 11 per cent of the population (versus 7 per cent in the U.K.), making the country 'a more pluralistic and interesting society' (p. 290). If current demographic trends prove correct, by 2050 the 'white' population in America will only be in a slight majority. Trends of inter-marriage have continued to rise, across almost every ethnic and racial group.<sup>(5)</sup> Reimers does not consider here the nightmares which such figures and trends evoke, and not just in extreme white supremacist groups. By implication, Reimers suggests that America will be a less divided society. A revised edition, post-Hurricane Katrina, might worth thinking about.

## Notes

1. John Higham's *Strangers in the Land: Patterns of American Immigration, 1860–1925* (New Brunswick, NJ, 1955) and Maldwyn Jones, *American Immigration* (Chicago, 1960; revised ed. 1992) embody the considerable strengths of the scholarship on European immigration. The absence of Asian and Hispanic immigrants in the scholarship of that era was not addressed in any sustained way until the 1960s.[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. Zeese Papanikolas, *Buried Unsung: Louis Tikas and the Ludlow Massacre, with a Foreword by Wallace Stegner* (Salt Lake City, 1982) is an exceptional example of the genre. Simon Newman's *Embodied History: The Lives of the Poor in Early Philadelphia* (Early American Studies Monograph Series, Philadelphia, Pa., 2003) brings impressive historiographical and theoretical sophistication to this material.[Back to \(2\)](#)
3. Mary Antin, *The Promised Land* (Boston, Mass., 1912); Abraham Cahan, *The Rise of David Levinsky* (New York, 1917).[Back to \(3\)](#)
4. Leon Fink, *The Maya of Morgantown: Work and Community in the Nuevo New South* (Chapel Hill, NC, 2003).[Back to \(4\)](#)
5. The use of intermarriage ratio as an index of assimilation was central to Julius Drachsler's 1921 Columbia University doctoral dissertation, 'Intermarriage in New York City: A Statistical Study of the Amalgamation of European Peoples'. Reimers suggests that the process has extended far beyond the ethnic limits of Drachsler's work.[Back to \(5\)](#)

The author is happy to accept this review and does not wish to comment further.

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