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Immigration in the Gilded Age: Change or Continuity?

The United States Immigration Commission, at the beginning of its well-known 1911 report, stigmatized the so-called “new immigrants”—persons who came from southern and eastern Europe, largely Italians, Jews, and Poles—as follows:

The old immigration movement was essentially one of permanence. The new immigration is very largely one of individuals, a considerable proportion of whom apparently have no intention of permanently changing their residence, their only purpose in coming to America being to temporarily take advantage of the greater wages paid for industrial labor in this country (1).

The distinction had long been made by nativists and others. As early as 1888 Lord Bryce in *The American Commonwealth* could sneer that “new immigrants, politically incompetent” were easily corruptible (2). To be sure, the nature of American immigration changed during the Gilded Age—as it has changed during our entire history and as it is changing today. Was Gilded-Age immigration strikingly different from that which preceded it, or was it another variation in a continuously changing pattern? To answer that question, it is necessary to look at the numbers of persons involved and their origins, and to examine the sociocultural matrix in which immigrants moved.

During the Gilded Age—defined here as the period from 1871 to 1901—11.7 million persons are recorded as immigrating to the United States (3). That is considerably more than the number that immigrated to the British North American colonies and the United States in the seventeenth, eighteenth, and the first seven decades of

the nineteenth century combined, but fewer than the 12.9 million who came in the first fourteen years of the new century. The national and ethnic composition of the immigrant population did change in the Gilded Age, as it has changed throughout our history. Britons dominated seventeenth-century migration; during the eighteenth century large numbers of Africans (4) and Germans came; in the period between the 1820s and the Civil War, Germans and Catholic Irish predominated, along with a smaller but still substantial number of Scandinavians. All of the groups named above, except for Africans, continued to come in the Gilded-Age decades and were joined by immigrants from eastern and southern Europe whose previous presence had been statistically insignificant. Table 1 shows European immigration by nation/region for the three Gilded-Age decades (5).

Those 10.6 million European immigrants represented 90 percent of all immigrants. Canadians, mostly from Quebec, made up 6.7 percent, and Chinese accounted for 1.7 percent of the total. Only in the 1890s did “new” European immigrants outnumber the “old,” but even then they were just barely a majority. What is rarely noticed is that the incidence of immigrants—the percentage of foreign-born in the population—was remarkably constant throughout the Gilded Age and the decades that frame it. The percentage of foreigners in the country did not vary significantly in any of the censuses between 1860 and 1920, a period justly characterized as one of rapid change in almost every other aspect of American life. Both the first and last of those censuses recorded the foreign-born as 13.2 percent of the population, while the censuses in between report percentages of 14.0, 13.3, 14.7, 13.6, and 14.7, respectively. Yet contemporaries perceived that the amount of immigration was overwhelming. These

Table 1
European Immigration:
Major Sources, 1871-1900

Nation/region	1870s	1880s	1890s	Total
Germany	718,182	1,452,970	505,152	2,676,304
Ireland	436,871	655,482	388,416	1,480,769
Britain	548,043	807,357	271,538	1,626,938
Scandinavia	243,016	656,494	371,512	1,271,022
Western Europe	1,946,112	3,572,303	1,536,618	7,055,033
Austria-Hungary	72,969	353,719	592,707	1,019,395
Italy	55,759	307,309	651,893	1,014,961
Russia	39,284	213,282	505,290	757,856
Poland	12,970	51,806	96,720	161,496
Southern/eastern Europe	180,982	926,116	1,846,610	2,953,708
Europe, 8 countries				10,008,741
Europe, all countries				10,562,761
All countries				11,746,190

Source: U.S. Department of Commerce, *Historical Statistics of the United States* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1975), 1:106-07.

perceptions have been repeated by historians who have persisted in using what I call hydraulic metaphors to describe the immigration process. Immigrants are described as coming to the United States in "waves," "floods," "torrents," and "streams." One does not have to be a specialist in semiotics to understand that the habitual use of such language tends to stigmatize immigrants as the "other," rather than as the ancestors of us all (6).

But numbers, important as they are, can tell only a fragment of the immigrant story. In my American immigration history course, in which one emphasis is group comparison, I suggest that students use what I call the "immigrant paradigm" as a way to organize information. The paradigm consists of a set of questions for discussion. These questions, with some possible answers, are reproduced below.

1. Where did immigrants come from?

Gilded-Age immigrants came overwhelmingly from Europe, with a steady shift toward eastern and southern Europe. Germans, British, Irish, Scandinavians, Italians, and subjects of the Austro-Hungarian and Russian Empires predominated.

2. Why did they leave?

As with most migrants in American history, perceived economic/social advantage was the major propulsive force, although persecution at home (including compulsory military service) was an important factor for many, especially those who were a minority group where they lived. Students of immigration often use a "push-pull"

dichotomy to describe the factors impelling persons to emigrate. The first term applies to conditions at home while the second is shorthand for the attractive factors about the destination. Push may be general (economic dislocation, war, persecution) or personal (familial division of land or other family crises, trouble with the authorities, or other dissatisfaction with life). Pull connotes the attractions of the destination. While push factors were part of immigrants' experiences, pull factors were part of their hopes, hopes that were not always realistic (7). To be sure, the factors were not mutually exclusive. Many if not most immigrants were propelled by both factors, and it is not possible to make a neat calculation of comparative forces.

3. How did they get here?

The development of transportation networks greatly influenced Gilded-Age immigration. As railroads—and cheaper and cheaper fares—spread through Europe, places with secure transportation to seaports multiplied. Oceanic transport changed dramatically in the years just before the Gilded Age. As late as 1856 more than 95 percent of European immigrants came to America by sail. Less than twenty years later (1873) more than 95 percent came on steamships. The chief transport innovation in the Gilded Age was the development of networks of part-time ticket agents in the United States employed by the European lines that dominated the trade. A Polish immigrant living in Detroit who wanted to bring over a relative or friend could go to a store or a saloon in the ethnic community and purchase a combination ticket from a Hamburg-Amerika Line agent that would be delivered to the relative/friend in Krakow. Such a ticket would provide rail transportation to Hamburg, accommodations in Hamburg while waiting for a ship, trans-Atlantic passage, and rail travel from New York to Detroit. While the technology was new, the end result was similar to what had been going on at least since the Great Migration of Puritans to New England in the seventeenth century.

4. Where did they settle?

While settlement patterns of Gilded-Age immigrant groups varied, an increasing percentage settled in urban centers. Ever since the census began listing the foreign-born separately in 1850, they have been more likely to live in cities—and especially in large cities—than the population at large. Regionally, immigrants favored the

northeastern and north central states—and by 1890, the western states—while shunning the South (8). Ethnic groups had their own patterns: Irish and Canadians favored New England, Italians and Russians the middle Atlantic states, Germans the east north central states, and Scandinavians the west north central states (9).

5. *What did they do?*

Because the Gilded Age was an era of expanding industrialism, most immigrants worked at industrial jobs, usually at the unskilled level, although workers with mechanical skills and training could start higher up the employment ladder. Most immigrants had to take the hardest, lowest paying, and most hazardous industrial employment. These unsung workers were, in historian Carl Wittke's phrase, "we who built America," and those who extol the achievements of industrial moguls like Andrew Carnegie ought to spend at least a little time considering the role of workers, immigrant and native-born, who created the wealth that entrepreneurs amassed. It was not just immigrant men who worked. Immigrant women and children were much more likely to be in the labor force than those who were native-born.

The agricultural sector, which had once included a majority of immigrants, still attracted a minority, most often those who came with significant resources. Even with free arable western land, which was rapidly disappearing, the costs of establishing a farm were far beyond the means of all but a few Gilded-Age immigrants. Even immigrants from groups that had been predominantly agricultural in the decades around mid-century, such as the Swedes, found mostly industrial employment toward the close of the century.

6. *How did they live?*

Most Gilded-Age immigrants, like their predecessors, lived in ethnic enclaves in both town and country whenever they could. There they could speak their own languages, worship with familiar rituals, and generally recreate a version of the world they had left. The Chinese were confined in parts of cities that came to be called Chinatowns as early as 1857 (10). In the Gilded Age, as the Chinese moved East, Chinatowns sprang up in places such as Butte, Montana, as well as in New York, Boston, and other cities. But, even without the rigidity of Chinese segregation, enclaves for Europeans developed with names like Kleindeutschland and Little Italy.

7. *In what ways did their culture change or stay the same?*

Attempts to create familiar surroundings and to maintain old cultures were largely doomed to failure. As the poet Stephen Vincent Benet remarked of seventeenth-century English immigrants:

They planted England with a stubborn trust.
But the cleft dust was never English dust (11).

Language rarely persisted more than a generation or a generation and a half. Some food preferences continued for as long or longer, but most immigrant culture succumbed to the omnipotent American environment and the desire of children to "be American."

The great exception was religion, although that, too, underwent changes. The Roman Catholic Church became very much a workers' church in nineteenth-century America, what Jay Dolan calls an "immigrant fortress." While most Jewish synagogues still held their main services on Saturdays, Sunday and Sabbath schools developed among Reform and Conservative Jews. Similarly, Japanese Buddhists adapted Protestant hymns into songs like "Buddha Loves Me, This I Know." One of the great clashes of cultures concerned the use of Sunday leisure in which the "continental Sunday" of play collided with the "English Sunday" of prayer, often enforced by blue laws. Similar struggles concerned the use of Protestant bibles in public schools. To be sure, many Protestant immigrants supported the "English Sunday" and bible reading, but the struggle was generally seen as one of "foreigners" versus "Americans."

Each of the foregoing "answers" describe processes that were at work long before the Gilded Age began and that have continued, with somewhat different protagonists, to the present. Thus, continuity rather than change seems to predominate. But an examination of immigration policy shows an entirely different pattern. While some Americans wanted to regulate and lessen immigration even in the grossly underpopulated colonial era—so much so that a serious nativist or anti-immigrant political movement had developed before the Civil War—only in the Gilded Age did the American government begin to restrict free immigration (12).

Restriction began with an ineffective 1875 statute aimed at Chinese women (13). The first effective statute was the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, which did not bar all Chinese immigrants but only Chinese laborers (14). At the time there were only about 125,000 Chinese of all kinds in the United States, the majority of them in California.

The Chinese Exclusion Act was the hinge on which immigration policy turned. Within a few years America's once free and unrestricted immigration policy had been modified in a number of ways. Immigrants had to pay a small fee to enter, contract labor was forbidden, and the barred category was widened to include persons with certain physical and mental disabilities, those with criminal records, and polygamists. (The latter target comprised Mormons, not Muslims.) None of these provisions kept many persons other than Chinese out. The general purpose of government policy was still to bring more people in, not keep them out. This was symbolized by the creation of the immigration station on Ellis Island, which opened in 1892. In the previous year Congress had created the first immigration bureaucracy headed by a superintendent of immigration who supervised twenty-seven subordinates. By 1906 his successor had a staff of 1,600 (15).

This bureaucracy, often headed by former trade-union officials such as Terrence V. Powderly, was imbued from the beginning with a strong animus against immigrants. Apart from the barring of most Chinese, nativists did not win other major victories in the Gilded Age. Their most effective organization, the elite Immigration Restriction League, founded by Harvard graduates in 1894, managed

“They told us that in America the streets were paved with gold. When we got here we saw that they weren’t paved at all. Then they told us that we had to pave them!”

to get its pet bill, a literacy test for immigrants, through Congress in 1897. But President Grover Cleveland vetoed the bill. A congressional blockage apparently stage-managed by William McKinley’s administration killed similar legislation. The literacy test was vetoed by William Howard Taft in 1913, by Woodrow Wilson in 1915, and enacted over a second Wilson veto in 1917 (16).

What conclusions are to be drawn from this brief summary? It seems to me that both continuity and change have prevailed and that it is time to discard the “old-new” dichotomy which suggests otherwise. Its continued use today can only cause confusion. If Italians, Eastern European Jews, Poles, and others who first came to America in significant numbers in the late nineteenth century are “new immigrants,” what are we to call the Asians and Latin Americans who dominate contemporary immigration? Should we emulate our colleagues in the Modern Language Association and call them “post-new immigrants”? I hope not. I would argue that, from our earliest history, most free immigrants have been persons who wanted to come to America to better themselves, and that a minority of them have been persons who were fleeing some kind of persecution. As transportation and political conditions changed, so did the sources of immigration. What has changed has not been the immigrant but the nature of both America and the rest of the world.

A more appropriate system of nomenclature would place immigrants in the appropriate era and speak of immigrants as those of the colonial era, of the agricultural era, of the industrial era, and those who have come in what some call “post-industrial America.” Another schema, for the era of restriction that began in 1882, would be to speak of an era of increasing restriction, 1882-1924; an era of severe restriction, 1924-1952; an era of relaxing restriction, 1952-

1980; and the present era, as yet nameless, which David Reimers describes as a “turn against immigration” (17). □

Endnotes

1. United States Immigration Commission, *Reports of the Immigration Commission* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1991), 1:24.
2. James Bryce, *The American Commonwealth*, 2 vols. (New York: MacMillan, 1889), 2:473.
3. U.S. Department of Commerce, *Historical Statistics of the United States* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1975), 1:106. This volume is the source for all subsequent statistics not otherwise ascribed. Except for the Chinese after 1882, illegal immigration was statistically insignificant in the Gilded Age, but many immigrants crossing the land borders were simply not recorded. The Canadian border was more significant.
4. Some object to considering Africans, who were almost all enslaved persons, being counted as immigrants, but no one objects to using the term for the large number of Europeans who came as semi-free indentured servants.
5. For this period the immigration statistics are based on a fiscal year ending 30 June, so the table really covers 1 July 1870 to 30 June 1901. For Gilded-Age data this makes little difference, but in 1914, for example (really 1 July 1913 to 30 June 1914), it masks the effects of World War I on immigration.
6. The stigmatization of strangers is all but universal. For example, the Organizer-General of Jamaica’s Afro-West Indian League insisted that Asian Indians, even those born on the island, should not be called Jamaicans “in the same way that a chicken hatched in an oven cannot be called a bread.” *Jamaica Times*, 3 February 1950, as cited in Howard Johnson, ed., *After the Crossing: Immigrants and Minorities in Caribbean Creole Society* (Totowa, NJ: F. Cass, 1988).
7. An Italian-American folk saying goes something like this: “They told us that in America the streets were paved with gold. When we got here we saw that they weren’t paved at all. Then they told us that we had to pave them!”
8. The regional index of immigrants (that is, percentage of foreign-born population/percentage of population) was as follows:

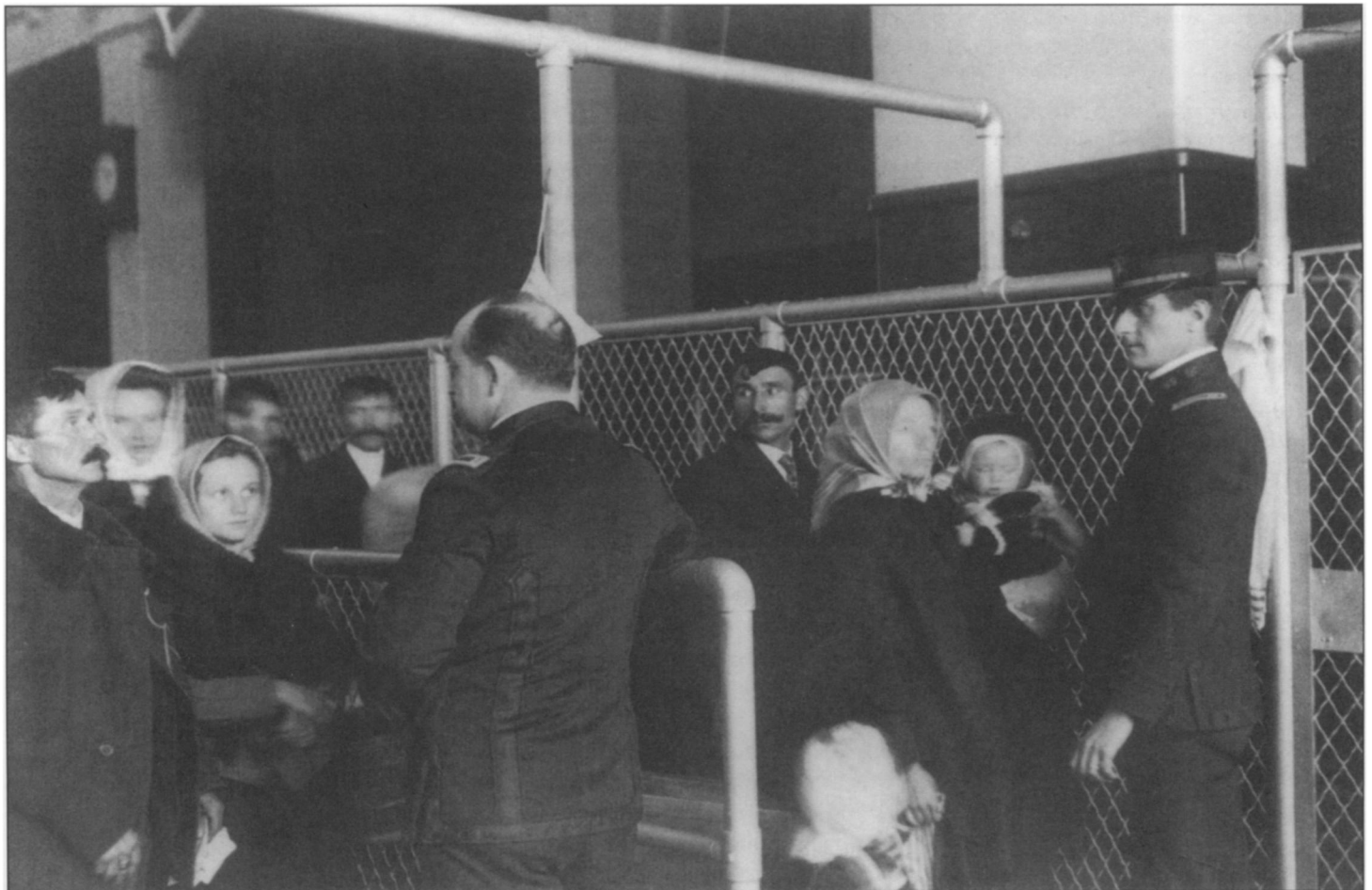
	1870	1890
Northeastern	1.5	1.5
North Central	1.3	1.3
Southern	0.2	0.2
Western	0.7	1.5

Source: David Ward, *Cities and Immigrants: A Geography of Change in Modern America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1971), Table 2-3, 60.

9. *Ibid.*, Tables 2-5 and 2-6, 67, 72.
10. The first use recorded in the *Oxford English Dictionary* comes from the *Butte Record* of Oroville in California’s “mother lode” country for 31 January 1857, which told its readers in a story about a New Year’s celebration that “Chinatown was wild with joy.”

11. Stephen Vincent Benet, *John Brown's Body* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, Doran, 1928), "Invocation."
12. For antebellum nativism, see Tyler Gregory Anbinder, *Nativism and Slavery: The Northern Know Nothings and the Politics of the 1850s* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992). The prohibition against the importation of slaves in 1809 is the first federal restriction of immigration, but it did not bar the immigration of either free Africans or Afro-Caribbeans.
13. One important new account is George Anthony Pfeffer, *If They Don't Bring Their Women Here: Chinese Female Immigration Before Exclusion* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1999). The 1875 law, called the Page Act, also barred "criminals whose sentence has been remitted on condition of emigration."
14. The ban on Chinese laborers, initially for ten years, was renewed for another ten years in 1892, made "permanent" in 1902, and extended to all alien Chinese in 1924. In 1943, as a gesture to a wartime ally, the fifteen statutes or parts of statutes dealing with Chinese exclusion were repealed.
15. It is not possible to pinpoint the growth in the 1890s. Many of the records either burned in the disastrous fire that destroyed the first Ellis Island immigration facility on 14 June 1897, or were deliberately discarded during the Eisenhower administration.
16. For information on the Immigration Restriction League, see Barbara Miller Solomon, *Ancestors and Immigrants* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1956). The classic work on nativism is John Higham, *Strangers in the Land: Patterns of American Nativism, 1860-1925*, 2nd ed. (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1988). For information on the largest nativist mass organization, see Donald L. Kinzer, *An Episode in Anti-Catholicism: The American Protective Association* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1964).
17. David M. Reimers, *Unwelcome Strangers: American Identity and the Turn Against Immigration* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998).

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Entry gate at Ellis Island. (*An Immigrant Nation: U.S. Regulation of Immigration, 1798-1991* [Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Justice, 1991].)