



# Immigration Monthly

**December 2006**

- ❑ ***Today's Immigration Policy Debates: Do We Need a Little History?* By Donna R. Gabaccia**
- ❑ **Various Books**

In their everyday life, most Americans seem to agree with Henry Ford who once said, "History is more or less bunk... We want to live in the present and the only history that is worth a tinker's damn is the history we make today." Certainly a great — but now also deadlocked — debate on immigration figures prominently in the history being made today in the United States and around the world.

What is surprising is how often the debaters evoke the past through references to "history." Some insist that the United States has always been a nation of immigrants. Others respond by insisting that today's immigration problems — illegal entry, globalization of labor, and threats to national security — are unprecedented.

Assertions of continuity, of change, or of deep rupture between past and present are all temporal claims, familiar to specialists in my home discipline — commonly called "history." As an historian, I'm fascinated by Americans' sudden interest in the past. What do debaters seek from the past when they argue policy alternatives? Does history, as a discipline, have special authority in interpreting the past

or is "every man his own historian," as Carl Becker, himself an historian, once insisted?

## **What is History?**

Historians do study the past, of course. Their concern with the past often makes them generalists who write about politics, society, culture, economy, and law, or about how some or all of these dimensions of human life entwine to define each moment in time as distinctive.

What scholarship on the present typically divides into separate disciplines (giving the analysis of politics to political science and of society to sociology) historians contentedly unite. Historians are concerned with causation, but their methods differ from those of the natural sciences.

Like social scientists, historians may use comparative methodologies in an effort to control variables, but only very rarely do historians claim the ability to predict. For many historians, the most effective way to convey causal relations or the complex connections among society, politics, and economy is through narratives and stories. Eschewing the specialized technical vocabularies that theorizing requires, many historians write for general audiences in accessible prose.

With such diverse concerns, historians use a wide variety of sources. Many historians especially respect work done in archives (often of unpublished materials); all depend on sources that have survived the passage of time. Historians regard these surviving sources as "primary," contrasting them to secondary sources that interpret past moments of time but are not themselves products of that time.

Historians cannot create their own data to answer their research questions. They can only pose questions about which surviving newspapers, books, government records, autobiographies, letters, diaries, statistics, graphic images, and material culture (to name just a few possibilities) provide information or about which they can interview living persons. As a result, historians employ a grab-bag of methods; no single, shared methodology unites them.

In a very real sense, time is to the discipline of history what space is to the discipline of geography. Historians care about chronology and sequence. They devote much

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labor to contextualizing events by entwining them in the politics, society, and culture of particular moments in time.

Chronology, sequence, and context allow historians to attribute causation. Historians are also deeply concerned with periodization — that is, with the organization of the past into temporal units; these units of time help to make the past sensible to those living in the present. In addition, historians capture essential qualities of particular periods in the past.

These units of time may be short (years, decades, or centuries) or quite long (the "common era" or the "axial age"; the era of classical civilizations or of capitalism). Single events and phenomena are interpreted quite differently depending on their location within or at the beginnings or ends of differing units of time.

### **Great Debates and the Origins of Immigration History:**

Concerned with time, historians find it interesting to ask when scholars began to study immigration. The timing of scholarly interest in migration tells us much about how policy debates have shaped our understanding of immigration as an influence on American life.

Sociologists typically cite Harvard's Oscar Handlin (author of the 1951 book *The Uprooted*), as the first immigration historian, but contemporary immigration historians like Jon Gjerde more often trace their field to Midwesterners George Stephenson, Theodore Blegen, and Marcus Hansen. These men began writing in the 1920s and 1930s; they were contemporaries of the sociologists studying immigration, who formed the influential "Chicago School" at the University of Chicago.

In both history and sociology, scholarly work on immigration was sparked by the great debates of the 1920s, as Americans argued over which immigrants to include and which to exclude from the American nation. The result of that particular great debate was the exclusion of Asians as racially undesirable and the restriction of immigration from southern and eastern Europe through discriminatory national origins quotas. In both cases, scholars responded to political decisions to exclude and to restrict with positive interpretations of immigration and of immigrants.

Reacting to the debates of their time, sociologists and historians nevertheless developed different central themes. While Chicago School sociologists focused on immigrant adaptation to the American mainstream, historians were more likely to describe immigrants engaged in building the American nation or its regional sub-cultures.

Historians studied the immigrants of the past, (which in the 1920s meant the 18th and 19th centuries), usually in the context of nation-building and settlement of the western United States, while sociologists focused on the immigrant urban workers of their own times — that is, the early decades of the 20th century.

Sociologists' description of assimilation as an almost natural sequence of interactions resulting in the absorption, modernization, and Americanization of foreigners reassured Americans that their country would survive the

recent arrival of immigrants whom longtime Americans perceived as radically different.

Historians insisted instead that the immigrants of the past had actually been the "makers of America;" they had forged the mainstream to which new immigrants adapted.

Both groups of scholars posited change over time. For sociologists, however, it was immigrants who changed and assimilated over the course of three generations. For historians, it was the American nation that changed and evolved.

In the 1920s and 1930s, neither historians nor sociologists of immigration used the term "nation of immigrants." First used by a former missionary in 1882, picked up occasionally in the 1910s and 1920s by a mixed group of businessmen, critics of immigration restriction, and the occasional scholar, the idea of the United States as a "nation of immigrants" did not really capture the American imagination until the early 1950s, when immigration had waned to its nadir and when the scholarly study of immigration by historians and sociologists had practically ceased.

The popularity of this phrase — still heard in contemporary debates — was the product of another great debate about immigration. In his efforts to prevent Congress from including in the 1952 McCarran-Walter Act the discriminatory national origins quotas introduced in the 1920s, Harry S. Truman began asserting that the United States was and always had been a nation of immigrants.

Immigration reformer John F. Kennedy then published a book of that title prior to his 1960 presidential campaign. Kennedy did not live to see the passage of the 1965 Hart-Cellar Act that eliminated the discriminatory national origins quotas for southern and eastern Europeans. The same act increased slightly the number of visas available to enter the United States but, significantly, it also imposed numerical limits on visas available to Mexico, establishing the conditions for today's debates about illegality.

The political battles of the 1960s quickly affected scholars' subject choices. A second wave of historians was soon reinterpreting the impact of immigration on American life. The Immigration and Ethnic History Society was founded in 1965; today, with more than 450 individual members, it still constitutes the largest scholarly organization devoted to the study of immigration in the United States.

This second wave of immigration history focused on the immigrants of the early-20th century. Immigration historians' descriptions of the working-class immigrant communities of that era were almost universally critical of the Chicago School of Sociology's theories of assimilation. They pointed not to the disappearance of immigrants into the mainstream but rather to the persistence, resurgence, and constant reinvention of ethnicity as a continuing element of American life.

Once again, immigration historians portrayed immigrants as building America. But the America they were building was now understood to be a multiethnic or multicultural nation — a mosaic rather than a melting pot. Diversity, and

not uniformity, was the main outcome of the country's long history of immigration.

#### **Time, History, and Today's Immigration Debates**

In current debates, the celebratory tone of references to the United States as a welcoming nation of immigrants too easily suggests that the challenges —whether illegal entry, globalization of labor, or threats to national security — are terrifying in their newness.

Studying the past reminds us that each restriction of immigration produced its own patterns of illegal entry. These immigration restrictions targeted Chinese laborers after 1882, anarchists after 1902, and Italians after 1924. The illegal immigrants of the past included all three groups—and others, too.

Scholars who actually count the numbers of mobile people over time note also that rates of international migration worldwide today are not higher — and may even be lower —than they were a century ago. Fears of immigrants as threats to national security have also sparked numerous policy changes: the passage of the Alien and Sedition Act in 1798 (which sought to prevent foreign influences on American elections by forcing foreigners to wait longer periods prior to naturalization); the transfer of immigration regulation from the Department of Labor to the Department of Justice in the early-20th century; and continuation of the national origins quotas as part of the McCarran-Walter Act in 1952.

Since the 1960s, celebrations of the United States as a nation of immigrants have encouraged Americans to forget the ferocity of these earlier debates about immigration.

Evoking this image does little to help Americans understand the long legislative deadlocks that have accompanied such debates. These are perhaps best symbolized by the Immigration Restriction League's 1894-1917 campaign to require literacy of immigrants, or by East-Coast liberals' lengthy campaign — from the 1920s into the 1960s — to eliminate the national origins quotas.

Given debaters' focus on immigration as a contemporary problem, social scientists have become the preferred experts in today's debates. What, then, can historians' perspective offer that others might not?

Overall, what seems to be missing from contemporary debates is not knowledge of significant elements of the American past or respect for the lessons to be drawn from that past, but rather debaters' ability to see how time shapes understanding of the present.

Like many historians, I view with considerable interest the efforts of many social scientists to compare today's immigrants to those of the past. Still, the temporal frame for those comparisons is often quite constricted.

For some economists and political scientists, the past begins in the mid-20th century while the present begins variously in 1965, 1990, or 2005. Comparing the immigrants of the 1990s to those who arrived in the 1950s suggests declines in the average levels of education among

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newcomers. But comparing today's immigrants to those of the early-20th century instead points to higher levels of cultural capital among today's newest arrivals.

Theories of migration that offer firm predictions for the short term often falter over the long term. In the 1870s and 1880s, geographer E.J. Ravenstein developed one of the first gendered theories or "laws" of migration. Based on census material collected in the UK, he posited that women were more likely to move about than men, but only over short distances, while men predominated among long-distance migrants. Ravenstein's laws have not proved helpful in explaining the marked feminization of global migrations that began in the 1920s and continues today.

Assessments of change or continuity over time are also typically quite different when made within shorter or longer time frames. Even as social scientists have expanded their analytical scope into the recent past, many innovative historians of migrations have chosen to tackle the longer term.

We now have brilliant and deeply troubling analyses of global migrations over the past millennium (see Dirk Hoerder's *Cultures in Contact: World Migrations in the Second Millennium*) and of the entire, long sweep of human life on earth (see Patrick Manning's *Migration in World History*). We know from such studies that human beings have been persistently on the move since they originated in Africa almost two million years ago.

While most humans at any one period of time have remained sedentary, long-distance, culture-crossing movements have occurred during every era of human history. Thus, Patrick Manning portrays migration as a primary motor of both fierce conflict and astonishing human creativity. Manning suggests that humans are a migratory species.

World histories like Manning's reveal how much company the United States has in facing the challenge of building a nation out of culturally diverse residents. In history, one finds many "nations of immigrants." Over the past 500 years, the constant reorganization of capitalist production has persistently mobilized populations; increasingly in the past century, however, national states have come to understand that same mobility as a threat to their sovereignty and unity.

But if humans are indeed a migratory species, migration is not the exception but the rule; it is not necessarily a problem to be explained or to be solved but merely a fact of life. Whether or not humans are biologically pushed toward mobility is another question. Yet, those on both sides of today's debates agree that being sedentary is normal and that *immigration* is indeed a problem requiring a solution. And both sides agree that the best solution to the problem is some form of restriction.

Viewed from this longer term perspective, the debates of 2006 appear as an important but probably also relatively minor skirmish in nations' periodic reactions to the equally periodic episodes of the globalization of production. World histories point to the relatively recent rise of the nation-state and to the relatively recent drawing of now-

passionately defended national boundaries.

In the first moments of American nation-building, the so-called Founding Fathers celebrated migration as an expression of human liberty. Here is a reminder that today's debates — whether temporarily deadlocked or not — take place among those who agree rather fundamentally that national self-interest requires the restriction of immigration.

Debaters disagree with each other mainly over how best to accomplish restriction, not whether restriction is the right course. The United States, along with many other nations around the world, is neither at the onset, nor necessarily anywhere near the end, of a long era of restriction.

#### **About the Author**

*Donna Gabaccia is a professor of history and director of the Immigration History Research Center at the University of Minnesota. She is author of many books and articles on immigrant life in the United States and Italian migration around the world. She is an editor of the recent special issue, "Gender and Migration," of the International Migration Review and (together with co-editor Vicki Ruiz) American Dreaming, Global Realities: Re-thinking US Immigration History.*

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