A Brief Historiography of Immigration: From Romance to Tragedy

by Melissa S. Wright

When the Congress of the United States enacted the Immigration Law of 1924, a momentous chapter in American history was closed. Unlimited immigration had come to an end, yet the study of American immigration had just begun. Over the past 67 years, countless historians have studied American immigration from many different viewpoints. Within these studies, however, distinct historiographical schools have emerged, making it possible for one to see an overall theme in immigration studies. During the last century, historians' interpretations have evolved from viewing immigration as a romance, in which the immigrant imposes his will upon the society he finds in the United States, to viewing immigration as a tragedy, in which immigrants, a separate group within American society, become society's victims.

One of the first great studies of immigration was undertaken in 1926 by George M. Stephenson in *A History of American Immigration 1820-1924* which examines the role of immigrants in the political history of the United States.[1] A main assumption upon which Stephenson bases his work is that immigrants should be grouped together as a whole. In discussing this assumption, he addresses the contemporary view of the distinct differences between the old and new immigrants. Many historians in the 1920s separated immigrants into two distinct groups: old immigrants, or those who arrived in America before the Civil War; and new immigrants, those who arrived in America after the Civil War. This distinction was made as a result of the political trends of the time. The establishment of communism in Russia in 1917 precipitated the Red Scare in 1920, as America feared communism and anarchy would overtake the United States. This fear, combined with the rise of the second Ku Klux Klan, produced a strong anti-foreign feeling which swept across the United States. The KKK, in an attempt to justify many of its members' older generation immigrant backgrounds, began to distinguish between old and new immigration. They claimed the old immigrants, whose Nordic background enabled them to adapt to American society and accept its values, were acceptable.

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[1]George M. Stephenson, *A History of American Immigration 1820-1924* (Boston: Ginn and Company, 1926), 111.

The new anarchist immigrants who spoke unfamiliar languages and did not physically resemble "Americans," however, were a threat to freedom, democracy, and the American way of life. This reasoning, according to Stephenson, was cold-blooded and unfair, as the evidence required to make a fair judgement would not be available for many years to come.[2]

Using this assumption that both old and new immigrants were similar, Stephenson uses the first half of his study to provide basic background history of each of the immigrant groups that arrived in America: British, Irish, Scandinavians, Germans, Dutch, Italians, Jews, and Slavs, establishing a set of reasons for emigration into which all immigrants fell. The immigrants from the United Kingdom escaped from their countries to find material betterment in America. In Britain, the beginning of emigration coincided with the changes brought on by the Industrial Revolution. As relations with employers became more openly hostile and fluctuations in trade caused business depressions and widespread unemployment, emigrants looked to America to relieve their discontent.[3] The Irish suffering centered on their small holdings, which necessitated a one-crop economy. When their potato harvests of the 1840s failed, the Irish were faced with famine. America was their only escape.[4]

Like the Irish and British, the Scandinavians' main reason for emigration was material betterment. They, however, were a step above the average immigrant, as they had adventurous instinct and the desire to improve their material conditions. The Dutch, too possessed that same spirit, according to Stephenson, as they were shrewd, hard-headed, calculating, and industrious.[5]

The Germans also came to America to find a better life, one without German religious and political persecution. As liberalism emerged in Germany, many university professors and students embraced it strongly. The governments, however, did not. Thus, the emigration of individuals was a self-imposed exile of educated and aggressive men and women looking for a better life.[6]

Based on these background summaries, Stephenson concludes that all immigrants' reasons for emigrating fell under one of five categories: pressure from increasing populations, religious zeal and

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[2]Ibid., 61-3.

[3]Ibid., 11-2.

[4]Ibid., 19.

[5]Ibid., 29.

[6]Ibid., 50-3.

persecution, economic motives, love of adventure, and political ambition.[7]

In addition to sharing the same motives for emigration, all emigrants shared the same characteristics "at the time of departure as well as in later years." The emigrant was incapable of analyzing complex forces operating over a long period of time, and thus to his environment. In addition, he was essentially a non-conformist in the economic, political, social and religious realms before and after immigration. To survive, the emigrant learned the English language and American ways, but never truly rejected the influences of his earlier life. There were some, however, who could not adapt sufficiently to American life, and consequently chose to return home. Without the emigrant's knowledge, America had worked "marvelous transformation," making the emigrant "a living advertisement of American prosperity" and an outcast in his own homeland.[8] To understand fully the emigrant, one had to return to the "cottages of the peasants and to the humble dwellings of the laborers in the factory and on the farm."[9]

Thus, according to Stephenson's metonomy trope, the experiences of the American immigrants, old and new, were similar. In addition to similar backgrounds and personal characteristics, Stephenson also claims that immigrants shared similar experiences in politics in the second half of his book in the sections titled "The Immigrant in Politics 1840-1860," and "The Immigrants in Politics 1860-1914." Using contextualism, a focus on background and trends, Stephenson paints the picture of an immigrant population as it attempted to establish itself in politics.

In the political arena, immigrants were termed special interest blocs as they could, as ethnic groups, swing the vote one way or the other. This was illustrated in 1840-1860 as political parties battled for immigrant groups' support on the issue of slavery. In order to gain the support of the ethnic groups, the Republicans added a campaign plank to attract the Dutch, a Dutch plank, to their party platform and engaged Germans, Scandinavians, and Dutch to speak to their communities in their native tongues. According to Stephenson, the political role of the immigrant was marked and culminated in the momentous election of Abraham Lincoln.[10]

In addition to their power of support, immigrants possessed the power to challenge political parties. The Irish and Germans were the most dangerous, claims Stephenson, as they came from

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[7]Ibid., 10.

[8]Ibid., 4-5.

[9]Ibid., 9.

[10]Ibid., 118-33.

countries whose government played leading roles in world affairs and had frequently been in disputes with the government of their adopted country. The immigrant's base loyalty would always lie with his homeland. Thus, in Stephenson's romance, immigrants, as a group and not individuals, triumphed over America's obstacles to establish their own place in the world of American politics.[11]

As Congress passed restrictive immigration laws, the masses of immigrants who had come into the United States during the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries began to settle permanently and assimilate. As this occurred, historians' views of immigrants and immigration changed accordingly. The materialistic culture of the 1920s was suddenly and forcefully replaced by the Great Depression. Anti-immigrant feelings hardened as native Americans accused immigrants of holding jobs that should have been filled by natives. Immigrant women were special targets of hostility as they had not only taken jobs from natives, but from male heads of households who had families to support. Immigrants were feeding off society, yet giving nothing in return.

In an effort to dispute this common feeling, Carl Wittke, in 1939, wrote *We Who Built America: The Saga of the Immigrant*, which still gains accolades from contemporary historians, including John Bodnar, associate professor of history and director of the Oral History Research Center at Indiana University, and John Higham, a widely-published immigration historian.[12] According to Wittke, immigrants were not simply sycophants, but major contributors to the development of "a new composite American civilization." Thus, the immigrants' story was a romance, as they were able to overcome the obstacles of immigration and contribute positively to the ever-evolving American society. As such, signs of immigrants' contributions to American society were widespread.[13]

One major area of immigrant contribution was art. Emmanuel Leutze, a German, painted "Washington Crossing the Delaware" and "Westward Ho," both of which decorate the walls of the nation's capitol. An Austrian, Karl Butler, sculpted the statue of Thomas Jefferson at the University of Virginia and served as the sculpture director of the pan-American Exposition, the St. Louis World's fair, and the Panama-Pacific Exposition.[14]

In addition, immigrants provided America with fiddles, flutes, ballads, folk dances, symphonies,

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[11]Ibid., 193-203.

[12]John Bodnar, *The Transplanted: A History of Immigrants in Urban America: The Saga of the Immigrant* (Bloomington: University of Indiana, 1985), 223; John Higham, *Strangers in the Land* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1955), 420.

[13]Carl Wittke, *We Who Built America* (New York: Prentice Hall, 1946), xviii.

[14]Ibid., 363-5.

and choral singing. The father of orchestral music, Gottleib Graupner, emigrated from Germany, as did the founder of the Boston Conservatory of Music. In 1930, the New York Philharmonic Orchestra boasted 114 members, 72 of whom were naturalized citizens. Immigrants also provided Americans with the Steinway piano, Gemunder violin, and the Schwab organ.[15]

Immigrant talents were not restricted to fine arts. German immigrants pioneered infant feeding, hydrotherapy, appendicitis surgery, x-ray work, and pharmaceuticals. In addition, immigrants were responsible for the development of cantilever bridges, suspension bridges, and the New York subway tunnels. In the area of manufacturing and business, immigrants contributions were innumerable and included cable cars, player pianos, grain elevators, outboard motors, zippers, oil refining, and linotype. Some of the most famous businesses developed by immigrants which still exist today include Bulova Watches, Bausch and Lomb, Schlitz, Pabst, Blatz, Anheuser-Busch, and H.J. Heinz.[16]

Thus Wittke, like Stephenson, discourages the use of new and old immigration divisions. In his introduction, Wittke informs the reader that his writing is based on the assumption that we, as human beings, know nothing about a "pure race," as there is no satisfactory scientific method of accurately testing inherent racial qualities. Thus, America is not a set, constructed nation as such, but is rather a constantly evolving and forming nation. Using an organicist approach, Wittke describes the process that each immigrant group experienced as it attempted to contribute to the formation of America. As the immigrant groups assimilated, they also contributed their own talents, transcending the obstacles in America, and, while still retaining some of their homeland values, contributing significantly to the formation of the American civilization.[17]

One of the unique contributions by the immigrants to the formation of America is illustrated in Wittke's chapter on immigrant utopias. He claims that utopian societies could be divided along communist/socialist and religious lines. Reflecting the anti-communist/socialist political views that dominated his times, Wittke contends that religious utopian societies were the better-organized and longer lasting. In addition, the majority of the utopian societies, alleges Wittke, were comprised of immigrants. Thus, American utopian societies constituted "an important chapter in the story of the

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[15]Ibid., 365-78.

[16]Ibid., 392-401.

[17]Ibid., xviii.

immigrants' hopes for a promised land."[18]

While Wittke presents a romance much like Stephenson's, he concentrates mainly on settlement of the frontier, and thus, old immigration. Although Wittke's work has been critically acclaimed by many historians, herein lies his main fault. A difference existed between old and new immigration, as old immigration mainly settled the frontier lands while new immigration was contained in urban areas. His failure to address urban immigration dates his work.

Stephenson's and Wittke's works were representative of the first four decades of the 1900s, as they examined the impact of the immigrant upon the society which received him. The 1950s marked a turn in immigration research as historians began to study the effects of the immigration process and American society upon the newcomer. This shift is quite remarkable when one considers the political context underlying it. Nineteen fifty marked the beginning of McCarthyism, as anti-communism reached hysteric proportions. McCarthy's witch hunts and Hollywood show trials, along with Truman's loyalty oath, pushed anti-immigrant feelings to their highest point since the Red Scare. How does one reconcile historians' approaches to immigration and the political context in which they wrote? Historians of the 1950s sought to defend the immigrants' contributions to American society. They, however, defended the immigrants by establishing them as the victims of American society and the immigration process.

One of the first historians to meet this challenge was Oscar Handlin in his popular *The Uprooted: The Epic Story of the Great Migrations That Made the American People* published in 1951. Using a blend of psychology, history, and immigrants' personal experiences, Handlin claims that he hopes to "seize upon a single stand woven into the fabric of our past, to understand that strand in its numerous ties and linkages with the rest; and perhaps, be revealing the nature of this part, to throw light upon the essence of the whole."[19] Thus, Handlin's goal is to illustrate emigration as the central experience suffered by a great many human beings, as "emigration took these people out of tradition, accustomed environments, and replanted them in strange ground, among strangers, where strange manners prevailed."[20]

Handlin's tragedy of the immigrants' struggle to survive in a new land begins with a short study

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[18]Ibid., 361.

[19]Oscar Handlin, *The Uprooted: The Epic Story of the Great Migrations that Made the American People* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1951), 3.

[20]Ibid., 5.

of the peasant origins of the immigrants, including communal traditions, transformation of agricultural organizations, and epidemics. After tracing the similarities in the immigrants' crossings of the Atlantic, Handlin presents, in great detail, the plight of the immigrant as he arrived in the cities empty-handed. Aching of spirit went hand in hand with aching muscles, as the burdens of his economic role became intolerable. Appealing to the reader's emotions, Handlin dramatically writes about the immigrant: "He was not a man at all...Driven in a helpless alternation of fortunes by the power of remote forces, these were no longer men, not any more men than the cogs spinning in their great machines."[21] Accompanying this economic desperation were loneliness, separation from the community of the village, and despair at the insignificance of their own abilities. These were the elements that victimized American immigrants.[22]

Although Handlin's work signalled a new era in immigrant history, he presented a liberal view of immigration, much like the historians who preceded him. The role of immigrants was tragic rather than heroic, as they "lived in crisis because they were uprooted...while the old roots were sundered, before the new were established, the immigrant existed in an extreme situation...the effects of the shock persisted for many years; and their influence reached down to generations which themselves never paid the cost of crossing."[23]

Four years later, an extremely controversial book appeared, which, while maintaining a theme of tragedy and a liberal ideology, addressed an obstacle faced by many immigrants but addressed directly by few historians: nativism. John Higham, author of *Strangers in the Land*, represents the school of intellectual history that emerged during the inter-war years. combining the internal approach, which states that creative thought is the most powerful force in history, and the external approach, which presents ideas as the instruments of socio-economic groups and forces, *Strangers in the Land* presents a dialectical structure of progressive history, proposing that deep social crises provide the pivot for change. This conflict is representative of a Marxist viewpoint, and Higham confirms this, stating: "I was drawn to the kind of progressive thought--distinctly socialist rather than communist--that looked forward to a fraternity of people rather than the solidarity of class." Thus, Higham's dialectic is based not on class distinctions, but on another belief that fraternally bonds

[21]Ibid., 80-1.

[22]Ibid., 4.

[23]Ibid., 6.

people together: nativism.[24]

Unlike the historians preceding him, Higham presents a dualism based on differing versions of the meaning of America. According to Higham, two opposing sides have always dominated history: nativists and their adversaries. Nativists historically embodied three traditions: anti-Catholicism, racism, and anti-radicalism. Within the definition of nativism lie the defining features of its adversaries. Social crises occurred as the components of this dualism were, in certain situations, placed directly at odds. Certain new ideas existed, however, which were powerful enough to transcend this dualism. These ideas spread across the whole of society, linking the opposing sides of the dualism together. The most prominent example of this is the concept of war. Historically, races and religion have joined willingly in war efforts. War transcends the dualism of nativism and its adversaries.[25]

Of all the books examined in this essay, *Strangers in the Land* has proven to be thus far the most resilient, as it was reprinted in 1985. In Higham's words,

> Most remarkably, it [*Strangers in the Land*] has never come under sustained criticism from any of the schools of historiography that have arisen since its publication, nor has it been superseded by wider syntheses or by a deeper penetration of its subject. *Strangers in the Land* to this day remains a hardy, solitary perennial--an academic phenomenon with a history of its own that begs for explanation.[26]

This quote, unfortunately, is representative of the attitude Higham exhibits throughout his writing. While Higham's argument is indeed strong and his credentials, including education and previous publications, impressive, the reader cannot help being put off by his obvious arrogance.

While Higham's writing may remain an academic phenomenon in his own mind, John Bodnar's *The Transplanted: A History of Immigrants in Urban America* (1985) presents a serious academic challenge to Higham's view of immigration. Previous treatments of immigration, states Bodnar, have been based on a similar assumption: the immigrant experience was a common experience shared by all. This is incorrect, states Bodnar, "as even the most cursory glance at an immigrant community or stream will suggest that not all newcomers behaved in a similar fashion." Instead, immigrants

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[24]Higham, *Strangers in the Land*, 333.

[25]Ibid., 218.

[26]Ibid., 331.

were fragmented into numerous enclaves arranged by internal status, levels, ideology, and orientation.[27]

The real explanation of immigrant adjustment lay at all the points where the immigrant met modernity and capitalism: the homeland, neighborhood, school, church, workplace, family, and fraternal hall. Thus, "the fragile link between the generations of the last century and the current one is not necessarily cultural or emotional as much as it is the shared need to respond to an evolving capitalism..." Using this metaphor, Bodnar uncovers the nature of immigrant involvement in capitalism to see that values and ideologies the immigrant abandoned and what he retained.[28]

In his first chapter, Bodnar concludes that the economic changes in the immigrants' homelands accounted for the cycle of migration. Manifestations of capitalism were apparent to immigrants in their homelands as cheap goods undercut the local artisan economic base and the rise of industrial cities created massive markets for agricultural products. As a result, immigrants came to America in two streams. The first stream, a minority of craftsmen, artisans, and small farmers, predicted what was about to happen to their economy and took their families to America to establish a new life. The majority of immigrants, who comprised the second stream, were searching for resources which could earn them a more respectable status in their homelands. Thus, the first stream came to America to establish new lives, while the second stream came to take advantage of its fabled gold-paved streets.[29]

The chapters which follow deal with the immigrants' involvement with an adjustment to capitalism. Rather than submit or acquiesce to capitalism, the immigrants simply accepted it, doing what had to be done in order to survive--nothing more. As such, immigrants, in Bodnar's work, did not intentionally attempt to change or better American society. Rather, they simply accepted the society, the victims of capitalism. Based on the immigrants' many responses to capitalism, however, separate classes emerged within the immigrant community, destroying the myth of the monolithic immigrant community. All responses, however, were based on what was best for the family. As a result, the immigrant community lived in a continual dynamic between economy and society, and between class and culture. Bodnar examines this swirl of interaction to uncover the nature of the

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[27]Bodnar, *The Transplanted*, xix.

[28]Ibid., xx.

[29]Ibid., 54-6.

immigrant's involvement with capitalism, determining which values they rejected and which they retained.[30]

Using a Marxist argument, Bodnar presents the assimilation of the immigrant into capitalism, proving that immigrants formed a new culture, "a product of both men and women, believers and non-believers, workers and entrepreneurs, leaders and followers...drawing both a past and a present and continually confronting the limits of what was possible." Thus, the mentality and culture of most immigrants in urban America was a blend of the past and present, centered on the immediate and the attainable.[31]

During the century of 1820-1920, over 35 million immigrants entered the United States. As the first immigrants came ashore, the American society experienced a transformation which would never cease. Historians have studied immigration for over a century, arriving at many different conclusions, ranging from the degree of similarity in immigrant backgrounds to the degree of similarity in immigrant response to capitalism. As new historiographical schools emerge, so will new conclusions, all of which will likely hold some grain of truth. The impact of immigration on American society is immeasurable, and as such, will be the object of historical study for decades to come.

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[30]Ibid., 206-8.

[31]Ibid., 209.