The Immigration Debate—from the 1920s

*Stanching the Flow*

By Martin Green

The emergence of immigration as a major issue worldwide and especially in the presidential campaign—thanks to Donald Trump’s vociferous attack on alleged rapists, drug dealers, and other criminals sneaking across the southern border, to say nothing of the threat posed by terrorists hiding among Moslem refugees—is not, of course, the first time Americans have debated the issue of access to American society by aliens. The early 1920s was the decade in which immigration was front and center in American political debate and the decisions made then shaped the course of American policy—for good and ill—for nearly the next half-century. Reading through the popular magazines of the period—as I have been doing for a major study of them as a reflection of popular thinking in the Jazz Age—offers a compelling counterpoint to the raucous debate today, with the opponents of illegal immigration—spurred by the outspoken Mr. Trump—falling over each other in proposing draconian solutions to stanch the flow of immigrants.

For the 1920s, the issue was imposing restrictions on legal immigration but the debate has many echoes of today’s arguments. Through most of the nineteenth century, immigration to the United States was largely unrestricted. Waves of immigrants flowed from Europe without many legal barriers. (Asian immigrants were another story—they were pretty much excluded late in the century.) Poor health was the major ground for exclusion from entry up to 1917. Although some groups, such as the Irish, met with anti-immigrant hostility, most immigrants found their way into burgeoning American industries with their insatiable demand for cheap labor or they fanned out onto the great American prairies to work on farms and perhaps own one. An effort to restrict immigration began in the 1890s as populations from Southern and Eastern Europe became the dominant arrivals on US shores. The anti-German propaganda campaigns of the World-War-I-era and the rise of the Bolshevik government in Russia fed fears of infiltration by enemy aliens, anarchists, and other subversives and led to further calls for restrictions on immigration. Nineteen Seventeen saw the passage of the first comprehensive immigration control law, which included, after many previous attempts at passage, a literacy test and many more grounds for excluding undesirable candidates for admission.

With the end of the war, with Europe reeling from the four years of unprecedented conflict, and the US facing severe economic dislocations and civil unrest, the outcry against
unrestricted immigration became louder. Congressman Albert Johnson (Republican, Washington) led the charge, deploring the kind of immigrants likely to come here: “We are being made a dumping ground,” he was quoted as saying in *Literary Digest*, the leading weekly newsmagazine of the period. “We are receiving the dependents, the human wreckage of the war; not the strength and virility that once came to hew our forests and till our soil. And worst of all they are coming in such numbers when we are unable adequately to take care of them.”

Many of the popular magazines of the day—from the widely read *Saturday Evening Post* to many of the more narrowly circulated public affairs journals—supported some form of restriction or at least thought some such was likely. The more fervent supporters of restriction, like the *Post*, presented readers with images of hordes of immigrants waiting to take ship to the US to join the tide of humanity already on its shores from pre-war days. Estimates of the potential number of immigrants given by Congressman Johnson and others ranged upward of 25 million. Some of the fear of these hordes was based in economic insecurity. In the immediate post-war period, American industry went through a wrenching readjustment and a recession; unemployment was high and labor unrest, especially in the steel, railroad, and coal-mining industries, was rife. Many labor leaders lobbied in favor of restrictions. Many employers, however, along with organizations representing various ethnic interests, were the biggest supporters of keeping immigration unrestricted or lightly restricted.

To many observers, the threat of subversion was paramount. In the period of the Red Scare, following a wave of bombings directed at government and business leaders attributed to “Bolsheviks” or anarchists, the idea that subversives could be arriving on our shores while federal and state governments were busily and publically rounding up and deporting dangerous radicals such as Emma Goldman was indeed a nightmare. The moderate public-affairs publication *The Outlook*, a weekly journal associated with liberal Christianity and Theodore Roosevelt’s policies, editorialized in 1920 on the threat posed to the US if it became “a hospital for victims of contagious diseases, . . . an insane asylum for cranks and crazy fanatics, [or] a Botany Bay for criminals”.

Underlying much of these warnings about the dangers of bringing in more immigrants was the notion that Europeans embodied distinctive racial groups, and those from Southern and Eastern Europe possessed essential inherited traits that were incompatible with the traits and traditions of the majority American stock—defined by many as Anglo-Saxon or British, or by many others as “Nordic.” Steeped in the racial “science” of popularizers such as Madison Grant, Henry Fairfield Osborn, and Lothrop Stoddard, these notions of racial distinctiveness and hierarchy (the Nordics at the top of a racial pyramid, dominating the so-called Alpines and Mediterraneans, with Asians and Africans at the bottom) were widely disseminated (although often debunked). *Saturday Evening Post* reporter Kenneth Roberts, later a popular novelist, filed a series of articles in 1920, later published as
a book, filled with colorful and critical detail contrasting the squalid and anarchic, and presumably genetically-based, lifestyles of the Eastern European hordes with the orderly and purposeful lives of Northern Europeans, likewise presumably based in their blood, as many experts on race maintained. (Although Roberts has scathing things to say about Czechs and Poles, his portrait of Eastern Europeans features negative stereotypes of Jews, especially their “ruthlessness and underhandedness in the pursuit of money” and “the sharp practices and the unreliability” of their business firms.)

The racial animus was put most bluntly by the editor of Current Opinion: “Keep America White,” he inveighed in a 1923 editorial supporting making permanent the restrictive immigration quotas passed a few years earlier.

Some experts argued for a link between racial traits and a tendency toward crime. The fact is “that certain classes of crime are associated particularly with certain races,” wrote biologist Edwin Grant Conklin in Scribner’s in 1921. “It seems probable that there is in these races an inherited tendency to peculiar forms of lawlessness and crime.” At the very least, another biologist told readers of The Independent, the “greatest permanent danger” in keeping immigration unrestricted “lies in the likelihood of receiving stocks of inferior inheritance. The American is beginning to suspect that some of our racial immigration is of low racial value. . . . Unquestionably we have been getting much of this kind of human material.”

Threats to the intelligence level of the American people posed by lower-value “racial” groups were underlined by the shocking statistics produced by the intelligence tests administered during the war to those drafted into the Armed Services. The statistics pointing to a low mental age of a majority of recruits suggested to many observers that the dregs of Europe were arriving here in force. And, as one critic opined in a 1922 Atlantic article, it was thought that these immigrants’ low mentality formed “the material of unrest, the stuff of which mobs are made, the tools of demagogues; for they are peculiarly liable to the emotional uncontrol which has been found to characterize so many of the criminals who come before our courts.” Social scientist Paul Popenoe’s analysis of the IQ statistics, summarized by Literary Digest, likewise indicated a deteriorating mental level in the population, especially among recent immigrants. “Should not the American policy be that of admitting all who are superior to the American average, and no others?” Popenoe asked.

Even feminist author Charlotte Perkins Gilman warned that the mixing of heterogeneous strains was dangerous to the unity and health of the nation: “If you put into a melting pot promiscuous shovelfuls of anything that comes handy you do not get out of it anything of value, and may break the pot”. If you “mix sugar and meat, butter and bones, eggs and onions, milk and tomatoes, fine herbs and flavoring extracts . . . you make neither soup nor cake but something we pay to have removed.”
upon the historic American majority,” warned a 1923 series in *World’s Work*, a glossy and prestigious magazine published by Doubleday and devoted to championing American industry and accomplishment. The series’ author, Gino Speranza, seemed to *World’s Work*’s editors a particularly compelling witness: a son of immigrants himself, albeit a professor of Italian and his wife of a prominent Italian family, Speranza had worked as a lawyer representing immigrants. These newer groups, with their “racial mindedness, their racial character, and their racial habits,” clustering in the major US cities “become more and more aggressive in their resistance to absorption,” Speranza argued. Speranza and Roberts considered the alien masses “unassimilable” by nature, an argument that dovetailed with the resurgent Ku Klux Klan’s campaign against various varieties of “unAmericanism.” While deploring the Klan’s strong-armed methods, Speranza, and many other mainstream writers, found merit in the Klan’s ideology. For Speranza, immigrants were “engaged in a movement far more subtle and far more dangerous” than petty plots against religion and government: “an elemental struggle to remain alien.” [Speranza’s emphasis.] Roberts called even the reduced numbers of immigrants under the temporary quotas passed in 1920 a “slow poison” in the American system.

Ironically, by the 1920s, when cries were loudest about lack of assimilation of immigrant groups, assimilation was well underway. The stories of many an immigrant youth becoming an American success were grist for the popular *American* magazine, once one of the outspoken vehicles of the muckrakers. The experience of my own family was not unusual. Arriving in 1911 from a *shtetl* in Ukraine, my maternal grandparents were figures of the Old World—a religious scholar and his shopkeeper wife—who until their deaths in the 1930s maintained their Old World appearance and presumably their Old World ways. Judging from family photographs, their surviving seven children, six of whom were born in Ukraine, displayed high degrees of social assimilation by the 1920s. When I was growing up in the 1940s, my older uncles retained only some tinges of Yiddish intonation to mark their “foreignness.” None of my aunts had a trace of an accent. In the next generation there was nary a trace of Old World ways. My older male cousins served in the military during World War II (one became a major); their sisters went to work or college and reared thoroughly Americanized families in the suburbs. My father arrived in the US as a young adult just as the quota laws were going into effect. To his dying day forty years later he never shed his Old World speech patterns, but he looked and dressed like any American-born man of his generation. He loved watching baseball and reading the newspaper (the old liberal, pre-Murdoch *New York Post*). While not all immigrant groups assimilated as readily or as willingly or uniformly as others, there are few places in the US today where descendants of the great wave of nineteenth- and early twentieth-century immigration have not integrated themselves into American society.

Franz Boas, the renowned anthropologist, spoke eloquently to readers of *The Forum* back in 1924 about the ability of any population to change and assimilate; mental and social traits weren’t inherent in any group, he maintained. Nonetheless, assimilation of foreign populations remains today a highly contentious issue in the US and Europe, partially because
many groups now value maintaining connections to their ancestral cultures, putting them at odds with the prevailing ethos of homogenization. In France, for example, the desire of many Moslems to maintain their religious traditions and home languages conflicts with the secularism of the larger culture, leading to conflicts over religious dress and symbols in public. In the US, Hispanic populations’ maintaining their native languages and dialects has led to a backlash embodied in the English-as-national-language movement.

The passage of the Johnson-Reed bill in 1924, with its strictly limited immigration totals and its rigid quotas favoring Northern Europeans, settled the argument for the balance of the decade and beyond. Still, some “experts,” such as an anonymous author writing about the biological future of America in a 1928 issue of Harper’s, continued to worry about the eugenic makeup of the United States as a result of its long years of allowing unrestricted immigration. Minor flurries of controversy continued to erupt from time to time over the basis for the quotas the bill imposed and over the “bootlegging” (i.e., smuggling) of immigrants. This period, of course, was the great age of bootlegging alcohol, a phenomenon not unrelated to the immigration controversy; immigrants with their Old World drinking habits were seen by prohibition advocates as major impediments to a dry America as Lisa McGirr points out in her recent book, The War on Alcohol. That many immigrants also were prominent in the illegal liquor trade did not help matters.

In contrast to the debate in the 1920s, today’s debate is largely framed in terms of legality, economic competition, resources, and security, and less in terms of racial and ethnic traits. However, xenophobia and racial tensions are not too far from the surface, especially as they relate to both Moslem and Latin American immigration. Moslems are seen by many as unassimilable “others” as well as a security threat, while the accusations of criminality against Latin-American immigrants seems to echo the racialist assumptions of the 1920s.

Ironically, Latin American immigrants were excluded from the restrictions of the 1920s quota law, partly for economic reasons; Western farmers needed their labor. There was a minor campaign for imposing quotas on them, however. Roy L. Garis, an economics professor and the intellectual architect of the quota law, and a prolific contributor to various opinion magazines on the immigration issue, for example, quoted approvingly the opinion of a California newspaper that to “shut down on Anglo-Saxons,” as the revised quota law scheduled to go into effect in 1929 was thought to do, while continuing “to admit peons from Mexico is ridiculous.” In addition, some worried about the phenomenon that has recently been termed “anchor babies”: children born in the US to a foreign national mother who has not been lawfully admitted for permanent residence. Congressman Johnson himself, outlining his law in The Outlook, anticipated recent criticism of citizenship being bestowed automatically on those born here to non-citizen parents. He suggested amending the Constitution “so as to deny citizenship to those born here whose parents were ineligible to citizenship.”
Nearly 100 years after the great debate of the 1920s, the American people find themselves groping to deal with the legacy of mass illegal immigration in ways that protect national interests and economic health and at the same time do not undermine the values that many Americans see as integral to national identity—openness to newcomers, equality of opportunity, the American Dream of raising oneself by one’s own efforts. We’re a “Nation of Immigrants,” it is frequently asserted, echoing the title of then Senator John F. Kennedy’s 1958 book. But, like any aspect of contemporary America, the idea is not uncontested. Back in the 1920s, Roy Garis argued that anti-immigrant sentiment was as American as apple pie, starting with Ben Franklin’s complaints about German immigrants to Pennsylvania. More recently, Charles C. W. Cooke, writing in the National Review, maintained that we’re all restrictionists in one way or another. The restrictionists in the 1920s may have considered their triumph as protecting what they saw as the national interest and national values—as perhaps does Mr. Trump—but the law’s strict quotas and their rigid application undermined major American values of opportunity, compassion, and openness, and kept the borders virtually closed even in the face of the unprecedented persecution of Jews in Nazi Germany. One hopes that history does not repeat itself and that a way can be found for the country both to protect its national interests without rigid quotas, draconian screening methods, or “beautiful walls,” and to remain an open and humane nation.

References


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