The Unwanted: Immigration and Nativism in America

By Peter Schrag [1]

It's hardly news that the complaints of our latter-day nativists and immigration restrictionists—from Sam Huntington to Rush Limbaugh, from FAIR to V-DARE—resonate with the nativist arguments of some three centuries of American history. Often, as most of us should know, the immigrants who were demeaned by one generation were the parents and grandparents of the successes of the next generation. Perhaps, not paradoxically, many of them, or their children and grandchildren, later joined those who attacked and disparaged the next arrivals, or would-be arrivals, with the same vehemence that had been leveled against them or their forebears.

Similarly, the sweeps and detentions of immigrants during the early decades of the last century were not terribly different from the heavy-handed federal, state, and local raids of recent years to round up, deport, and occasionally imprison illegal immigrants, and sometimes legal residents and U.S. citizens along with them. But it's also well to remember that nativism, xenophobia, and racism are hardly uniquely American phenomena. What makes them significant in America is that they run counter to the nation's founding ideals. At least since the enshrinement of Enlightenment ideas of equality and inclusiveness in the founding documents of the new nation, to be a nativist in this country was to be in conflict with its fundamental tenets.

And from the start, we've fought about the same questions. Who belongs here? What does the economy need? What, indeed, is an American or who is fit to be one? In 1751 Benjamin Franklin warned that Pennsylvania was becoming "a Colony of Aliens, who will shortly be so numerous as to Germanize us instead of our Anglifying them and will never adopt our Language or Customs any more than they can acquire our Complexion." Later Jefferson worried about immigrants from foreign monarchies who "will infuse into American legislation their spirit, warp and bias its direction, and render it a heterogeneous, incoherent, distracted mass." Sound familiar?

American nativism and our historic ambivalence about immigration—at times vigorously seeking newcomers from abroad, at other times shutting them out and/or deporting them—is deeply entangled both in economic cycles and in the uncertainties of our vision of ourselves as a nation. A self-proclaimed "city upon a hill," a shining model to the world, requires a certain kind of people. But what kind? Do they have to be pure Anglo-Saxons, whatever that was, which is what many reformers at the turn of the last century believed, or could it include "inferior" Southern Italians, Greeks, Slavs, Jews, or Chinese of the 1800s, the "dirty Japs" of 1942, or the Central Americans of today? Can America take the poor, the "tempest-tost," the "wretched refuse" "yearning to breathe free" and make them a vital part of that city? If we began in perfection, how could change ever be anything but for the worse?

Tom Tancredo, briefly a presidential candidate in 2008 who, until shortly before his retirement from the House, was the leader of the Congressional Caucus on Immigration Reform—meaning immigrant exclusion—liked to boast about his immigrant Sicilian grandfather, but conveniently forgot that his grandfather belonged to a generation widely regarded by the WASP establishment and many other Americans of the early 1900s, when he arrived, as belonging to a class that was genetically and culturally inassimilable—ill-educated, crime-prone, and diseased. Yet Tancredo, like many of today's immigration restrictionists, echoed the same animosities. "What we're doing here in this immigration battle," he said in one of the Republican presidential debates in 2007, "is testing our willingness to actually hold together as a nation or split apart into a lot of Balkanized pieces." Like other contemporary restrictionists, his portrayal of Mexican immigrants was almost identical to the characterization of the Italians, Jews, and Slavs of a century before, and of the Irish and Germans before them—people not fit for our society.

It's a long history: Know-Nothingism and the anti-Irish, anti-Catholic virulence that swept much of the nation in the 1850s, waned briefly during and after the Civil War and then flourished again in the half century after 1870: "No Irish Need Apply" (later, "No Wops Need Apply"), "Rum, Romanism and Rebellion," and then "The Chinese Must Go" and, as the ethnic Japanese on the West Coast were interned after Pearl Harbor, "Japs Keep Moving." The magazine cartoonists' pirates coming off the immigrant ships in the 1880s and 1890s were labeled "disease," "socialism," and "Mafia." And always there was the shadow of the Vatican, looming over American democracy and, more ominously, seducing the nation's schoolchildren.

New immigrants were not fit to become real Americans; they were too infected by Catholicism, monarchism, anarchism, Islam, criminal tendencies, defective genes, mongrel bloodlines, or some other alien virus to become free men and women in our democratic society. Again and again, the new immigrants or their children and grandchildren proved the nativists wrong. The list of great American scientists, engineers, writers, scholars, business and labor leaders, actors and artists who were immigrants or their children, men and women on whom the nation's greatness largely depended, is legion. Now add to that the story of Barack Obama, who is not just the nation's first African-American president, but also the first American president whose father was not a citizen, and the argument becomes even less persuasive. Yet through each new wave of nativism and immigration restriction, the opponents of immigration, legal and illegal, tend to forget that history.

Forbearers of Restrictionism

The list of contributory factors to the surge of anger, xenophobia, and imperial ambition in the two generations after 1880 is almost endless. It includes the official "closing" of the frontier and the western "safety-valve" in the 1890s and industrial expansion and depression-driven cycles of economic fear. It also includes urban corruption and the big city machines, most of them Democratic, that patronized new immigrants more interested in jobs, esteem and protection—and more comfortable with their values of personal and clan loyalty—than with the abstract WASP principles of good government and efficient management that fueled the Progressive movement and with which most of the nation's respectable small-town middle class grew up.

And along with those upheavals came the heightening fear, bordering on panic in some circles, of our own immigrant-driven racial degeneration. That, too, presaged a lot of our latter-day hysteria. It resounded through Madison Grant's influential *The Passing of the Great Race* (1916), through the writings of Alexander Graham Bell and countless others in the first decades of the Twentieth Century, and in the hearings and debates of Congress. In the face of the inferior, low-skill, low-wage but high-fecundity classes from Southern and Eastern Europe, demoralized Anglo-Saxons would bring fewer children into the world to face that new competition.

Probably the most representative, and perhaps the most influential, voice for immigration restriction in the 1890s and the following decade was that of Rep. (later Senator) Henry Cabot Lodge of Massachusetts, the paradigmatic Boston Brahmin. Lodge's articles and speeches warning of the perils of the rising tide of immigrants from Southern and Eastern Europe—many of them mere "birds of passage" who only came to make a little money and then return to the old country, many more bringing crime, disease, anarchism, and filth and competing with honest American workers—drove the debate and presaged many of the later arguments against immigration. The late Harvard political scientist Samuel Huntington's restrictionist book, *Who Are We?,* published in 2004, is shot through with Lodge-like fears.

There were reasons for the old patricians to be worried—and they weren't alone. The overcrowded tenements of the nation's big cities were incubators of disease and violence that put ever more burdens on schools, the police, charities, and social agencies, many of which they helped fund. And so, in words and tones not so different from today's, members of Congress heard increasingly loud warnings about the social strains and dangers the immigrants imposed. Checking the rising political participation of the new urban immigrants and the power of the big city machines that challenged the Anglo-Saxon establishment's authority—and in the view of a whole generation of muckraking reformers, corrupted democracy itself—was an obligation that couldn't be escaped.

What's striking is how many immigration restrictionists came, and still come, from a Progressive or conservationist background. Madison Grant was a trustee of New York's American Museum of Natural History, and active in the American Bison Society and the Save the Redwoods League. David Starr Jordan, the first president of Stanford, a respected ichthyologist and peace activist, along with a group of other leading scholars and clergymen, was deeply involved in the race betterment movement which aimed "To Create a New and Superior Race thru Euthenics, or Personal and Public Hygiene and Eugenics, or Race Hygiene…and create a race of HUMAN THOROUGHBREDS such as the world has never seen." In California many progressives were fierce battlers to forever exclude Asians from immigration and landownership. "Of all the races ineligible to citizenship under our law," said V.S. McClatchy, the publisher of the unabashedly Progressive *Sacramento Bee*, in Senate testimony in 1924, "the Japanese are the least assimilable and the most dangerous to this country."

Eugenics, Quotas and Immigration Policy

Beginning just after the turn of the twentieth century, theories about the inferiority of the new arrivals also began to be reinforced by the new eugenic "science" which seemed to prove that virtually all the "new" immigrants—Slavs, Jews, Italians, Asians, Turks, Greeks—who arrived in the two generations after 1880 were intellectually, physically, and morally inferior. Henry H. Goddard, one of the American pioneers of testing, found that 40 percent of Ellis Island immigrants before World War I were feebleminded and that 60 percent of Jews there "classify as morons." Meanwhile, the eminent psychologists who IQ-tested Army recruits during the War, convinced that intelligence was a fixed quantity, concluded that the average mental age of young American men was thirteen, that a great many were "morons," and that those from Nordic stocks—Brits, Dutch, Canadians, Scandinavians, Scots—showed far higher intelligence than Jews, Poles, Greeks, and the very inferior immigrants, like grandfather Tancredo, from Southern Italy. "The intellectual superiority of our Nordic group over the Alpine, Mediterranean and negro groups" wrote Princeton psychologist Carl C. Brigham, who popularized the Army data after the war (and later became a principal author of the SAT college admission tests) "has been demonstrated." Only "negroes" were less intelligent than southern and eastern Europeans.

But in the long chain connecting this country's historic nativism, the eugenic "science" of the 1920s and 1930s, and the shifting immigration restriction policies, past and present, it was Harry Laughlin, who was (and in some ways remains) far and away the most prominent single link both between eugenics and immigration policy and between the nativist ideology in the immigration policies of the 1920s and the present.

Laughlin, superintendent of the Eugenics Record Office (ERO) at Cold Spring Harbor, N.Y., from its founding in 1910 until 1939, was the author of such eugenic treatises as the "Report of the Committee to Study and to Report on the Best Practical Means to Cut Off the Defective Germ-Plasm in the American Population" (1914). He is the godfather of eugenic sterilization in this country and the legitimization it gave racist sterilization in Nazi Germany, whose eugenic policies he lavishly praised. In 1921, Laughlin also became the "Expert Eugenics Agent" and semi-official scientific advisor to Rep. Albert Johnson's House Immigration Committee, which wrote the race-based National Origins Immigration Laws of 1921 and 1924 that would be the basis of U.S. policy for the next forty years and, in some respects, well after.

Immigration from any particular country, excepting Asians, who were already excluded, and people from the Western Hemisphere, including Mexico, who were exempt from the formal quotas, was capped at two percent of its estimated share of the U.S. population, not in 1910 or 1920, the most recent Census, but in 1890, when the descendants of northern Europeans still dominated the population. Even when immigrants from favored nations didn't fill a given year's quota, the quotas for others would remain fixed. As late as 1965, John B. Trevor, Jr., the patrician New York lawyer who was the son of the man who devised the national origins quota formula, would testify against repeal of the quota, warning that "a conglomeration of racial and ethnic elements" would lead to "a serious culture decline."

In 1937, while still at the ERO, Laughlin also became the co-founder and first director of the Pioneer

Fund, whose prime research interest has been—and to this day continues to be—race and racial purity. Murray and Herrnstein's *The Bell Curve*, which argued that group differences in IQ between blacks and whites were primarily genetic, and which included a sympathetic discussion of "dysgenic pressures" in contemporary America, some coming from inferior immigrants, relied heavily on the work of researchers funded, according to one estimate, with $3.5 million in Pioneer Fund money.

Through Laughlin and Pioneer particularly, the institutional, personal, and ideological links and parallels run almost directly from the eugenics and nativism of the first decades of the last century to the present. Between the mid-1980s and the mid-1990s, the Pioneer Fund contributed roughly $1.5 million to the Federation for American Immigration Reform (FAIR)—the organization started by the Michigan ophthalmologist John Tanton in 1979. Tanton was also a founder of the Center for Immigration Studies and other influential anti-immigration groups. Tanton's earnest writings echo with the nativism of 1900: "Will the present majority peaceably hand over its political power to a group that is simply more fertile?" he wrote in 1986. FAIR and its sister organizations have been essential sources of information for the radio and TV talkers, the bloggers and the politicians leading the immigration restriction campaign.

Tanton's organizations were also the primary generators of the millions of faxes and e-mails that were major elements in the defeat of the comprehensive immigration reform bill in 2007. In Congress, both were accomplished with the threat of filibusters, and by putting the immigrants' face on the often inchoate economic and social anxieties—the flight of jobs overseas, the crisis in health care, the tightening housing market, the growing income gaps between the very rich and the middle class, and the shrinking return from rising productivity to labor—that might otherwise have been directed at their real causes.

Here also there was broad precedence in the economic and social turmoil arising in the new industrial, urban America at the turn of the twentieth century. The descriptions of Mexicans taking jobs away from American workers, renting houses meant for small families, crowding them with 12 or 14 people and jamming up their driveways with junk cars, echoed the rhetoric of 1900 about inferior people brought in as scabs, crowding tenements, bringing disease, crime and anarchy, now become terrorism, who would endanger the nation and lower living standards to what the progressive sociologist Edward A. Ross a century ago would have called their own "pigsty mode of life."

In the age of Obama, the overt, nearly ubiquitous racialism of the Victorian era, like eugenic science, is largely passé and certainly no longer respectable. Eugenic sterilization is gone. The race-based national origins immigration quotas of the 1924 Johnson-Reed immigration act have been formally repealed. But the restrictionists' arguments echo, often to an astonishing degree, the theories and warnings of their nativist forbears of the past century and a half.

Waves of Migration: Push-Pull Factors

Economics and events abroad—religious persecution in England, the Irish and German potato famine, the failed revolutions of 1848, the Russian pogroms, Stalin, Hitler and the two European wars, the strong post-World War II recovery of Western Europe and Japan, the creation of the state of Israel and, as ever, boom and bust—have always influenced immigration. But in the past half-century, spiking Third World birth rates, the rapidly growing economic gaps between the booming developed world and the underdeveloped world, have brought great waves of new faces—yellow, black, brown—to places that had never seen them before. People who once wanted to come to America by the millions, Western Europeans especially, weren't nearly as interested in emigrating while tens of millions of others—Poles, Chinese, Vietnamese, Indonesians, Indians, Iranians, Pakistanis, Algerians, Moroccans, Turks, Ethiopians, Kenyans, Sudanese moved north or toward the west.

For the United States, the new wave was overwhelmingly Latino, Caribbean, and Asian. In a process that segued smoothly and almost unnoticed from the World War II-era bracero program to a system of increasingly organized illegal immigration, the growing gap between the booming post-war U.S. economy and the lagging, pre-industrial Central American agricultural economy sucked ever more

Mexicans, Salvadorans, Guatemalans, and Hondurans into California and the Southwest. Those new immigrants and their children began to show up in growing numbers in schools, public clinics, and hospital emergency rooms and on the streets, and thus they were soon regarded increasingly as nuisances, and often a burden on established residents, despite the fact that many of those established residents were also their employers. What right did they have to be here?

One major policy change driving increased immigration was NAFTA, the North American Free Trade Agreement which, after it went into effect in 1994, opened the Mexican and Canadian borders to an increasingly free flow of goods and capital. But unlike the European Community, on which NAFTA was partly modeled, it made no provisions for the movement of labor, despite the fact that it was likely to have a major impact on workers. One of its original selling points against warnings from people like Ross Perot, who famously predicted it would produce a "giant sucking sound" as jobs fled to Mexico, was that by creating more economic opportunities south of the border, it would reduce the pressure to emigrate. But the result was almost precisely the opposite. By allowing the import of cheap agricultural products from the highly efficient U.S. farms, corn particularly, it drove tens of thousands of Mexicans off their less productive land to join the stream of migrants heading north. Some became part of the million-plus workforce at the *maquiladoras*, the multi-national manufacturing plants along the border, crowding the growing border cities and the hovels around them. Many more followed well-worn trails to join relatives and friends in the United States.

Anti-Immigrant Restrictionism and Political Alignment

More and more in the years beginning in 1990, the letters, and later the e-mails, to politicians and newspaper editors would be full of declarations from people saying they'd be damned if they'd ever pay one additional cent of taxes to educate a bunch of illegals; without them the schools wouldn't be crowded and the other kids wouldn't be held back while teachers focused on immigrants who came to school not even speaking English.

In 1994, the voters of California, at the time just coming out of a recession, enacted Proposition 187, an initiative that would have denied virtually all public services, including schooling and higher education, to illegal immigrants and their children. It would also have required every public employee, teacher, physician, and social worker to report all illegal aliens to the head of his or her agency, to the attorney general, and to immigration authorities. Because the initiative was drawn up by Harry Nelson, the former U.S. immigration commissioner, at the time a paid adviser to FAIR, it was quickly targeted as part of the racist agenda of the Pioneer Fund, which had given FAIR more than $1 million in the prior decade. In the days following, FAIR withdrew its funding and went out of its way to prove that it wasn't a cat's paw of Pioneer and that, in any case Pioneer wasn't racist.

Proposition 187 nonetheless passed with 59 percent of the vote. Although it was quickly blocked by a federal judge, the campaign to pass it had long-lasting consequences, particularly for Gov. Pete Wilson and the California Republican Party. In 1986 Wilson, who, as a U.S. senator with a big agricultural constituency, had been a major advocate of a generous guest worker program. But in 1994, running for a second gubernatorial term, he rested much of his campaign on his support of Proposition 187. His TV ads featured a clip taken from grainy Border Patrol infrared film footage showing shadowy figures running across the I-5 freeway in Southern California with the ominous line: "They keep coming."

Wilson easily won a second term. But both his campaign and that for Proposition 187 with which it was linked generated widespread fear even among legal aliens that they might lose public benefits if the measure passed. By the tens of thousands they took out naturalization papers and, as soon as they became citizens, marched into the welcoming arms of the Democrats, who just as quickly registered them as new voters. In 1990, in his first campaign for governor, Wilson, at the time a moderate Republican, won 40 percent of the Latino vote. In 1998, his would-be Republican successor got 22 percent of a now much larger Latino vote. In Texas, where Gov. George W. Bush had developed a much friendlier relationship with Latinos and with neighboring Mexico, he got nearly half the Hispanic vote. In California, the GOP has not yet recovered.

The Politics of Immigration: Ambivalence and Uncertainty

Even before the defeat of comprehensive immigration reform in 2007, state and local governments had been rushing to fill the vacuum, producing their own laws and regulations. Some sought to protect illegal aliens to secure their cooperation in reporting crimes and encourage local business. Others imposed fines or loss of licenses to businesses hiring undocumented workers and/ or forbade landlords from renting to them; still others created programs to train local cops to work with what by then had become ICE, the U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement agency.

If there was any sense in this crazy pattern, it was the geography of the immigrant dispersion itself. As hundreds of thousands of immigrants, Latino immigrants particularly, either moved from or by-passed the traditional immigrant states and moved into the Midwest and Southeast, the backlash spread with them. In many places, the new immigrants, stretched to pay for housing, occupied what someone called “backhouses” —sheds or garages—or lived three or four to a room, often a total of ten or twelve people or more, with junk cars crowding driveways, in houses or condos designed for families of four. That, too, mirrored both the patterns and the nativist backlash of a century before.

Arizona’s SB1070 and the other laws seeking to drive out illegal immigrants in the first decade of the twenty-first century indicate that even a long history of Latino immigration might not necessarily make it immune to virulent anti-immigrant politics in the future. But it reduces the likelihood. California had what may well be it last nativist fit with Proposition 187 in the early 1990s. Its population is now majority-minority, making it hard to imagine another similar recurrence. In another generation it will have an absolute Hispanic majority—assuming that the state’s high rate of ethnic intermarriage will make any such count still possible. Many parts of Iowa, South Carolina, Wisconsin, Oklahoma, Virginia, Georgia, and Missouri are just starting on that route.

More than anything else, however, the crazy quilt of contradictory local responses—like Washington’s failure to enact comprehensive immigration reform—seemed to reflect the nation’s own ambivalence and uncertainty about immigration. The same states that granted illegal aliens in-state tuition deny them driver’s licenses. In 2004, California Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger lauded the Minutemen, the self-appointed enforcers of a tight border, for doing “a terrific job” and he’s demanded still more militarization of the border. But in the fall of 2007, he signed a bill that prohibited cities from requiring landlords to check whether tenants are in the country legally.

The polls confirmed the ambivalence. In 2007, 69 percent of U.S. adults said that the illegal resident population should be reduced and (by 75 percent) should not be allowed to get drivers licenses. But 55 percent also said that when illegal aliens who’ve committed no crime encounter local cops they shouldn’t be arrested. By a margin of 58-35 they supported “a program giving illegal immigrants now living in the United States the right to live here legally if they pay a fine and meet other requirements.” By 66-33 they said they’re not bothered when they encounter Spanish speakers. Some 45 percent (in another poll) said immigration is a good thing, 19 percent a bad thing; some 33 percent have no opinion.

But as with issues like gun control, the intensity of an opposition fueled by economic insecurity and fanned by radio and TV talkers tended to overwhelm the immigrant rights groups. The anti-immigration activists drove the major Republican presidential candidates who tilted toward tolerance to abandon their position. John McCain had been among the original Senate sponsors of comprehensive reform; Rudy Giuliani, as New York’s mayor a decade before, had been a strong defender—for the sake of public safety and health—of the necessity of providing services for illegal immigrants; Mike Huckabee, as governor of Arkansas, sponsored tuition breaks for illegal immigrants. By the end of the 2008 presidential primary, they had all embraced Tancredo’s stance—to the point where he said he was no longer needed. Even Democrat Hillary Clinton, also running for president, flopped and waffled after her initial support for allowing illegal aliens to get driver’s licenses. (That, too, wasn’t new. In 1993, during the California recession when Wilson was preparing his anti-immigrant campaign, Sen. Barbara Boxer, among the most liberal members of the Senate, wondered whether California could afford to educate the children of illegal immigrants). In the 2008 general election itself the issue vanished almost entirely.

Conclusion

What's indisputable was that the failure of immigration reform—not just in regularizing the status of illegal aliens, developing less capricious and more predictable employer sanctions and, most of all, in creating economic conditions south of the border to ease the pressure to migrate north—left a thousand questions unanswered. If your name is Hernandez, and you have dark skin and speak little English, can you risk reporting a crime to the local police without being ICEd? If you have a contagious disease or you're a drug addict, how willing will you be to seek treatment, and how safe are your neighbors and families because of that fear? And what about those driver's licenses? What happens when a car driven by an American citizen collides with one driven by an undocumented—and therefore uninsured—immigrant? What will the nation do for skilled workers when the boomers are gone? As the anti-immigrant groups, the TV and radio talkers, and the bloggers fanned anti-immigrant anxieties, these unresolved questions, which reinforced legitimate fears, got little airtime.

In another few years the nation may look back on the first decade of the twenty-first century, and especially the years after 9/11, as another of those xenophobic eras, like the Red Scare of the twenties or the McCarthy years of the fifties, when the nation became unhinged, politicians panicked, and scattershot federal, state, and local assaults led to unfocused, albeit often cruel, harassment of non-Anglo foreigners. It may also be seen in retrospect as a desperate rearguard attempt to freeze Anglo-white places and power in a mythic past. Much of today's policy vacuum stems from our collective uncertainty. A new society with new kinds of people and new voters is rapidly growing under and around us—just as it grew under the old native Anglo-Saxons a century ago. By 2042, according to the Census, a majority of Americans will be something other than non-Hispanic white.

America, to come full circle, is famously a nation of immigrants. What's Anglo-European about it are the institutions and ideals of equal rights, constitutionally guaranteed due process, and democratic government. But now all of us are also immigrants to the new cosmopolitan multi-ethnic—perhaps post-ethnic—society that's grown around us, whether we're Mayflower descendants, Sons of the Golden West, or the most recent arrival from Kenya or El Salvador. The diverse nation that those immigrants and their children and grandchildren made, *contra* all the warnings from the Know Nothings, the eugenicists, the Klan, the Pioneer Fund, and our latter-day radio and TV talkers, refutes not only their dire predictions but the very premises on which they were based. The society whose immigration policy now begs to be reformed, and the history that made it, are not the society and history that most of us, much less our parents, imagined a generation or two ago. The more the nation and its policymakers excavate that history out of the myths of their imagination, the more rational, humane, and productive the debate will be, and the better the uniquely American future that grows from it.

Published On: **Mon, Sep 13, 2010** | Download File [2]

- Perspectives
- History of Immigration
- The Restrictionists
- Policy

Links:
[1] http://www.ucpress.edu/book.php?isbn=9780520259782
[2] http://www.immigrationpolicy.org/sites/default/files/docs/Immigration_and_Natvism_091310.pdf