

The As-Yet-Mostly-Unheard Side of the Debate about the National Origins Quota System: Immigrants Speak Out

A 1920 article by Carol Aronovici, a Romanian immigrant and scholar who went to college and received his Ph.D. in the United States, explains the arbitrary nature of Americanization. He wrote of Americanizing agencies that “their aims are still ill-defined, their methods still in their formative state, and their achievement hardly measurable in concrete terms,” though at the time of his writing, many groups had been making efforts to assimilate newly arrived immigrants for decades. Aronovici clearly resented the ideas of some other scholars and of American society in general when they called for more far-reaching assimilation of immigrants. He believed that all immigrants had something valuable to contribute and could help create a better America which would not come to be if immigration were restricted and immigrants forced to conform to subjective standards of Americanism. For Aronovici, immigrants were valuable simply because they were immigrants, and their unique perspectives were an asset that no other country had the opportunity to take advantage of like the United States did. The drive to restrict immigration and haphazardly assimilate remaining immigrants represented a total waste of and disregard for that opportunity.

Aronovici was in the minority as far as the immigration restriction debate is concerned. But he was also certainly not the only immigrant to speak out against it. This thesis will consider immigrants’ responses to the push for restriction in the era of the 1924 Johnson-Reed Act which established the national origins quota system. At this point in history, calls to restrict immigration by the native-born were common and came from all parts of society. That side of the issue is both well-documented and thoroughly analyzed in the existing secondary source base. By focusing on the response of immigrants themselves to the

drive to exclude them from the country, the paper will cover an underexplored yet significant piece of immigration history in the United States.

Many secondary sources about exclusion, nativism, the Johnson-Reed Act and other related topics discuss immigrant reactions to the legislation that had such profound effects on their lives only in passing, if at all. A project that concentrates on immigrant opinion would necessarily rely considerably more on primary sources, in order to closely examine the predicaments of typical immigrants, in their own words. An obvious challenge is that these sources can be hard to find, but a thesis that engages a wide variety of them would be all the more unique and would certainly contribute something new to the field of immigration history.

The historical context of the question cannot be ignored. When the Johnson-Reed act was passed in 1924, nationalist and anti-foreign sentiments were running high in the United States in the wake of World War I. Immigrants were often thought of as enemies within the country, far too close to home. There was a movement to keep them out, and immigrants who had already made their way to their new home were often forced to prove their loyalties by Americanizing in various ways. Of course, most had harbored no ill will toward the country, but the treatment they received upon arrival could certainly have been enough to anger them and inspire a negative reaction.

The topic was chosen because of its distinct applications to various facets of immigration history. It lends itself well to an investigation of the quota system itself, something widely viewed as an injustice to a part of American society, in order to find out to what extent it was resisted. It can also explore the concept of agency as it relates to resistance to restriction. The study of agency is important because it is inherently optimistic. Countless historians have portrayed immigrants as helpless victims who absolutely were not

active agents in their own lives. Others ignore the issue altogether and leave it to the reader to infer what degree of agency immigrants enjoyed. This paper would treat them as intelligent individuals who both understood and spoke out against the negative treatment they received from others. In a sense, immigrants were unsuccessful in whatever resistance they attempted, considering the fact that a modified quota system still exists today. However, relative success or failure is unimportant in a study of the motivations of marginalized peoples. Another reason for this choice is that the topic allows for an exploration of ideas about nativism and whiteness, two other fascinating elements of immigration history that merit further study. The topic occupies a fantastic place at the convergence of several important issues.

This sort of essay could be written in any of a number of ways. One particularly compelling way to present the evidence would be to situate primary sources in a sort of conversation with each other. An argument of a critic of immigration could be given, then countered with a response from an immigrant or someone defending immigration. For example, a quote from E.A. Ross concerning undesirability of immigrants or their supposed unwillingness to assimilate could be followed by a quote from Anzia Yezierska discussing immigrants' attempts to get an education after coming to the United States and finding most paths closed to them. This structure is suitable because the project undertakes an investigation of arguments and responses to them. A reaction makes no sense outside of the context of the contention that inspired it. The best setup is to recreate a debate between opponents and advocates of immigration. Furthermore, this sort of presentation could implicitly mirror current debates about immigration and immigrants in the United States, making the project even more relevant and consequential.

Any project that treats American immigration history between 1900 and 1930 necessarily draws from a variety of sources in several fields such as political science, anthropology, and sociology. Many works with much to offer have been written. This thesis, which discusses immigrants' responses to the movement for immigration restriction and the establishment of the national origins quota system with the 1924 passage of the Johnson-Reed Act, will be no exception, in that it will rely on multiple disciplines and address numerous aspects of the problem. Historians and other scholars have been working in this field for decades and have addressed a wide range of issues, though much still remains to be done.

Some of the most important foundational works of immigration history disagree about the proper treatment of immigrants as subjects of scholarship. Many studies can trace an idea back to Oscar Handlin's classic *The Uprooted*, which portrays immigrants as vulnerable victims of an unsympathetic host society that neither understood them nor welcomed them, and in fact rejected them after 1924. For Handlin, the immigrant experience in the United States was one of unrelenting suffering. On the other hand, John Bodnar's *The Transplanted*, a direct rebuttal to Handlin, views immigrants as active agents in their own lives who made the best of difficult situations in their adopted home and were often successful financially and socially regardless of any injustice directed at them. Another key work, John Higham's founding study of nativism titled *Strangers in the Land* largely eschews the immigrant perspective on anti-immigration sentiment and instead focuses on prejudices within the larger society that led to the passage of the restriction laws. Among these works there is no consensus about where agency lay in immigrants' lives.¹

¹ Oscar Handlin, *The Uprooted: The Epic Story of the Great Migrations That Made the American People*. 1st ed. Boston: Little, Brown, 1951; John E. Bodnar, *The Transplanted: A History of Immigrants in Urban America*. 1st ed. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987; John Higham, *Strangers in the Land: Patterns of American*

Works which directly discuss the effects of the 1924 laws or situate it within its historical context are also of particular value. Mae Ngai's excellent monograph *Impossible Subjects* is one such work. Ngai treats the restriction laws and their creation of the first "illegal aliens" within the United States and puts forth her argument that an overwhelming sense of "illegality" had profound effects on the American immigrant experience. However, she does not undertake a consideration of immigrants themselves and their reaction to the new law's implications for their daily lives. In a similar vein, several studies exist which examine immigrant workplaces in this period and their ability to shape workers' attitudes. These include articles about Americanization by Stephen Meyer and James Barrett and another book by John Bodnar. Higham's book is also an excellent source to use when discussing Americanization because of its examination of waves of anti-immigration sentiment and their culmination in the passage of the quota system. The historical context of the movement is crucial. But again, the historians disagree about agency. No consensus has been reached concerning Americanization – did it occur from the top down, as Meyer argues, or the bottom up, as Barrett maintains?²

Another pertinent group of works are case studies which examine a particular ethnic group in a given time period or city. They are useful for a variety of reasons. Sometimes they point to relevant primary sources. Others give insight to the time period in question. Most works of the genre are good examples of the proper methods for writing about immigrants. And they tend to focus on the day-to-day functioning of immigrant

Nativism 1860-1925. (New York: Atheneum, 1963). 1987; John Higham, *Strangers in the Land: Patterns of American Nativism 1860-1925*. (New York: Atheneum, 1963).

² Mae M. Ngai, *Impossible Subjects: Illegal Aliens and the Making of Modern America*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004; Stephen Meyer, "Efforts at Americanization in the Industrial Workplace, 1914-1921," *Journal of Social History*, 14.1, 1980; James R. Barrett, "Americanization from the Bottom Up: Immigration and the Remaking of the Working Class in the United States, 1880-1930." *Journal of American History* (December 1992): 996-1020; John Bodnar, *Worker's World: Kinship, Community, and Protest in Industrial Society, 1900-1940*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1983.

communities. Some examples of this kind of study, useful as patterns for studies from the immigrant perspective, include Laura Gómez's book *Manifest Destinies* and *At America's Gates* by Erika Lee. Some examinations of Italian Americans by Virginia Yans-McLaughlin and Donna Gabaccia are helpful because they encompass the time before and after the passage of Johnson-Reed. Another work in this vein is Ewa Morawska's *For Bread with Butter*. The problem with works like these is that they can lack analysis and synthesis of new ideas.³

One set of works crucial to an understanding of the drive for immigration restriction and its effects on lives of immigrants are those that deal with whiteness. There are several, and they debate whether or not certain immigrant groups were perceived as "white" when they arrived in the United States. Whether it was understood at the time or not, ideas about whiteness shaped native-born Americans' treatment of immigrants and immigrants' experiences in their new country. These works explain the inherent difficulty of immigrant life as coming from a lack of consensus about the proper place of immigrants in society. Founding works on the subject by David Roediger are *The Wages of Whiteness* and *Working Toward Whiteness*. An article by Roediger and James Barrett titled "Inbetween Peoples" and Matthew Frye Jacobson's book *Whiteness of a Different Color* both explain the essential nonwhiteness of immigrants, who existed somewhere in the middle of a spectrum between white and black. Noel Ignatiev's *How the Irish Became White* explores similar themes in dealing specifically with the Irish. And Thomas A. Guglielmo's *White on Arrival* presents

³ Laura E. Gómez, *Manifest Destinies: The Making of the Mexican American Race*. New York: New York University Press, 2007; Erika Lee, *At America's Gates: Chinese Immigration During the Exclusion Era, 1882–1943*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004; Virginia Yans-McLaughlin, *Family and Community: Italian Immigrants in Buffalo, 1880-1930*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1977; Donna R. Gabaccia, *From Sicily to Elizabeth Street: Housing and Social Change Among Italian Immigrants, 1880-1930*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1984; Ewa Morawska, *For Bread with Butter: The Life-Worlds of East Central Europeans in Johnstown, Pennsylvania, 1890-1940*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985.

the counterargument that European immigrants were always considered white and knew exactly where they fit in to American society. Either way, immigrants often challenged native-born Americans' ideas about religion, language, family life, work, and many other parts of life which were often identified with race or what it meant to be white. A discussion of immigrants' awareness of the place they inherited in society upon arrival would add another component to the field.⁴

Studies from other disciplines are often valuable to an analysis of attitudes of immigrants. One article from the field of anthropology that discusses much of the same material as Ngai is Nicholas P. DeGenova's "Migrant 'Illegality' and Deportability in Everyday Life." A sociological perspective on language persistence, Susan Olzak and Elizabeth West's "Ethnic Conflict and the Rise and Fall of Ethnic Newspapers," examines the efforts of immigrants to keep speaking their native languages after coming to America and the use of ethnic newspapers to bind the community together. A project like this one necessarily blends some disciplines together to an extent, but few works incorporate elements of history, anthropology, sociology, and law to study immigrants' reactions to their treatment under United States immigration policy.⁵

Something missing from the existing field of literature concerning immigration restriction is an assessment of immigrants' behavior and thought in the period surrounding

⁴ David R. Roediger, *The Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class*. London: Verso, 1991; David R. Roediger, *Working Toward Whiteness: How America's Immigrants Became White: The Strange Journey from Ellis Island to the Suburbs*. New York: Basic Books, 2005; James R. Barrett and David Roediger, "Inbetween Peoples: Race, Nationality, and the 'New Immigrant' Working Class." *Journal of American Ethnic History* vol.16, no. 3 (Spring 1997): 3-45; Matthew Frye Jacobson, *Whiteness of a Different Color: European Immigrants and the Alchemy of Race*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998; Noel Ignatiev, *How the Irish Became White*. New York: Routledge, 1995; Thomas A. Guglielmo, *White on Arrival: Italians, Race, Color, and Power in Chicago, 1890-1945*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2003.

⁵ Nicholas P. DeGenova, "Migrant 'Illegality' and Deportability in Everyday Life." *Annual Review of Anthropology* vol. 31 (2002): 419-447; Susan Olzak and Elizabeth West, "Ethnic Conflict and the Rise and Fall of Ethnic Newspapers." *American Sociological Review*, vol. 56 (August 1991): 458-474.

the Johnson-Reed Act establishing quotas based on national origins. This law passed through Congress because of prevailing anti-immigration feelings which must have been obvious and hurtful to immigrants who already lived in the United States. Their responses to a society that found them fundamentally undesirable should be discovered and analyzed. Such an analysis would be made all the more valuable and compelling by drawing from several academic fields of study.

This is an important project that needs to be written because of its potential to explore largely ignored historical territory. Immigrants as conscious dissenters have traditionally been overlooked. This is a shame. A continued denial of immigrant agency and protest in the era of Johnson-Reed lends legitimacy to the original arguments of restrictionists, first put forth so many years ago. Their opinions were predicated on the perceived inherent ignorance, indolence, and inability to assimilate of the American immigrant population. The marginalized deserve a voice at last.