



Making America 1920 Again? Nativism and US Immigration, Past and Present

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Executive Summary

This paper surveys the history of nativism in the United States from the late nineteenth century to the present. It compares a recent surge in nativism with earlier periods, particularly the decades leading up to the 1920s, when nativism directed against southern and eastern European, Asian, and Mexican migrants led to comprehensive legislative restrictions on immigration. It is based primarily on a review of historical literature, as well as contemporary immigration scholarship. Major findings include the following:

- There are many similarities between the nativism of the 1870-1930 period and today, particularly the focus on the purported inability of specific immigrant groups to assimilate, the misconception that they may therefore be dangerous to the native-born population, and fear that immigration threatens American workers.
- Mexican migrants in particular have been consistent targets of nativism, immigration restrictions, and deportations.
- There are also key differences between these two eras, most apparently in the targets of nativism, which today are undocumented and Muslim immigrants, and in President Trump's consistent, highly public, and widely disseminated appeals to nativist sentiment.
- Historical studies of nativism suggest that nativism does not disappear completely, but rather subsides. Furthermore, immigrants themselves can and do adopt nativist attitudes, as well as their descendants.
- Politicians, government officials, civic leaders, scholars and journalists must do more to reach sectors of society that feel most threatened by immigration.
- While eradicating nativism may be impossible, a focus on avoiding or overturning nativist immigration legislation may prove more successful.

Introduction

Scholars will spend decades debating the reasons for Donald Trump's stunning electoral victory in 2016, yet at least some of the credit must go to his campaign's famous slogan "Make America Great Again." Certainly, the phrase was one of the factors that inspired millions of people to elect Trump as 45th president of the United States. The first three words, after all, comprise a forward-looking call to action and a patriotic promise about the future, rolled into one.

Historians who wish to understand and analyze Trump's success, however, should perhaps focus on the last word of the slogan: "Again." This single word transforms the phrase into a commitment to revisit (if not recreate) a specific historical era — one when America was "great." Neither the candidate nor the campaign ever explicitly defined their concept of greatness (for whom was America great? when? and why?). Nevertheless, this was probably an effective technique: Voters were free to make their own assumptions, without too much information about a detailed policy agenda.

Throughout the campaign, however, Trump and his surrogates argued that one key problem has been preventing the America of today from being sufficiently "great." That problem is immigration.

Trump famously launched his campaign by calling Mexican immigrants rapists and criminals, and repeatedly promised a "big, beautiful" wall along the southern border. He also continuously linked immigration to terrorism, called for "a total and complete shutdown of Muslims entering the United States," and, after his inauguration, promising to give immigration preference to "persecuted" Christian refugees (Trump 2015; Brody 2017). Since the very first week of the new administration, when the president released three executive orders, two to crack down on undocumented immigration and one to restrict travel from Muslim-majority nations and to cut the US refugee admissions program, the Trump administration has made it very clear that its vision for American greatness is a nativist one.

In this nativist vision, the time period to which we return is one in which immigration is sharply restricted by national, ethnic, and religious criteria. Perhaps we have an answer, then, to the unanswered question within "Make America Great Again": Trump's America is looking more and more like the America of 1920.

In 1920, immigrants made up 13.2 percent of the population — making the demographic landscape analogous to today, when the foreign-born make up 13.5 percent of all Americans. Then, as now, both the masses and educated elites held deep suspicions, hostility, and fear of these immigrants. Many viewed them as being too different to assimilate into the majority culture. As a result, politicians and the press frequently portrayed immigration as a threat to the nation. By the early 1920s, these long-held nativist fears generated new restrictive legislation that would cause the number and percent of foreign-born in the United States to decline sharply for decades afterwards.

Once again, the United States finds itself in an era of nativism and exclusion, as our politicians contemplate immigration restrictions and deportation policies that are reminiscent of those enacted nearly a century ago. A detailed review of nativism and immigration policy in the

period of 1870-1940, then, can tell us much about where we are today, and may also help us answer questions about where we are going.

Nativism and Immigration Policy in the United States, 1870-1940

There were several reasons for the massive wave of immigration that so changed the United States during the late nineteenth century. Historian Jose Moya pinpoints five major “revolutions” that pushed people away from Europe and towards the United States. These were: 1) rising growth rates and declining mortality rates in Europe; 2) the dominance of liberalism in European political thought, which allowed for the unrestricted movement of peoples; 3) the transition from subsistence to commercial agriculture, which created a surplus rural population and released peasants’ ties to the land; 4) the industrial revolution, which further mobilized the labor force by creating a demand for labor in industrial centers; and 5) developments in transportation that made ocean and land travel easier and cheaper, effectively shortening the distances between the Old and New World (Moya 1999, 13-44).

Such large-scale changes help explain why so many Europeans immigrated to the United States after the 1840s, and why — as industrialization spread across the continent — European migrants came mostly from Southern and Eastern Europe by the last quarter of the nineteenth century. To a certain extent, these factors were also applicable in Japan, which had modernized quickly in the nineteenth century; as well as China, Korea, and the Philippines (Hsu 2000; Choy 2003; Azuma 2005). Thus, after the 1870s, the United States (as well as other countries in the Western hemisphere, particularly Argentina, Brazil, and Cuba) saw sharply increasing migrant populations from southern and eastern Europe and Asia. After 1900, this population included increasing numbers of Mexicans, as well.

Nativist movements had targeted immigrants well before this period, and indeed throughout US history. One of the more well-known of these was the Know-Nothing Party, which was formed by anti-Catholic and anti-Irish members of the working class during the 1840s and 1850s (Boissonneault 2017). Yet even the Know-Nothings were never able to create and pass national legislation on nativist grounds. Rather, before the 1880s, immigration to the United States was marked not by legislation, but rather by the lack of it. Beginning in the last two decades of the nineteenth century, however, heightened feelings of nativism among the public and policymakers alike prompted policymakers to move away from liberal immigration policies and towards a raft of new restrictions.

At the root of these nativist impulses were several intertwined phenomena. In the popular imagination, the “new immigrants” of the post-1870 period were unassimilable because of their race, ethnicity, and culture. Commonly held beliefs of the time, many of which originated in the so-called “science” of eugenics, defined specific national and ethnic groups as inherently better or worse than others.¹ Yet economics also played a role: Nativist restrictions were often accepted and promoted by working-class whites, who believed that

1 For a seminal work on nativism in the United States, see Higham (1995). More recent works include Schrag (2010). For a fascinating treatment of eugenics as it was expressed and reiterated in Latin America, see Stepan (1991).

they were losing job opportunities to immigrants. This was certainly true in California, where Chinese and other immigrants from Asia became the first targets of this new wave of nativism.

Asian Immigration to the American West

As with many other national groups, native resentment against Chinese and Asian immigrants increased proportionately in relation to contact and competition between these immigrants and the native-born. Chinese immigration began between 1850 and 1860, when almost 50,000 Chinese came across the Pacific for jobs in the mining industry and on the railroads (Howland 1929, 494). By the 1880s, the Chinese immigrant population had become much more widely dispersed through the coast and mountain states of the West.

Native resentment of the Chinese arose from the perception that they were an “unassimilable, even subversive group, [whose] vicious customs and habits were a social menace” (Jones 1960, 248). Their perceived inability to assimilate was blamed on their appearance — not only their physical characteristics, but also their traditional dress and the hairstyle of male migrants — as well as their tendency to preserve the cultural practices and language of their home country. Their culture was cast not only as primitive and backward, but also as an existential threat to US democratic institutions: a “Yellow Peril,” in the parlance of the times. Economic factors also played a role: The Chinese competed with whites for jobs in gold mining and the railroad industry, and they were often willing to work for lower pay. In addition, an economic downturn during the 1870s caused increased labor competition between Chinese immigrants and the native-born, especially as more native workers migrated from the East to take jobs in California (Kraut 1982, 156; Fuchs and Forbes 2003, 152).

Together, nativist resentment and economic competition fueled reprisals against the Chinese population in the West. Politicians used legislation to target and humiliate the Chinese, as when California legislators passed a “queue ordinance” that required people convicted of criminal offenses to have their hair cut to a one-inch length (Howland 1929, 494). Whites also committed acts of violence: Rioters killed 21 Chinese immigrants in San Francisco in 1871, and set 25 Chinese laundries on fire in 1877, to name just two examples (Kraut 1982, 156-57).

After the 1870s, nativists organized political movements against the Chinese as well. Most notable of these was the Workingmen’s party, lead by an Irish-born sailor in San Francisco named Dennis Kearney. The party demanded that the US government cut off Chinese immigration and limit the rights of the Chinese in the United States. Despite protests by Chinese diplomats, the Chinese-American community, and a few more enlightened politicians, the Workingmen’s Party formed a voting bloc “just large enough to hold the balance of power in California,” and so was an important impetus to legislation against Chinese immigrants in the 1880s (ibid., 160).

During this decade, legislators passed a series of successively more restrictive laws that limited the rights of Chinese in the United States and barred new Chinese immigrants from entry into the country. Most significantly, the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 suspended

immigration of Chinese laborers for 10 years, and was renewed periodically until 1943. The Exclusion Act also stipulated that all Chinese had to obtain certificates proving their eligibility to live and work in the United States. In 1887, the Scott Act prohibited the return of any Chinese who left the country, even those who were legal residents or citizens. The 1892 Geary Act denied bail to Chinese in habeas corpus cases and required all Chinese to obtain a certificate of eligibility to remain in the United States. If a Chinese immigrant was arrested without the certificate, the burden of proof fell upon him to prove his eligibility to live and remain in the United States. These and other legislative restrictions (especially the Immigration Acts of 1917 and 1924) ensured that Chinese immigration to the United States was effectively prohibited for nearly three-quarters of a century.

The success of the anti-Chinese movement helped to fuel very similar mobilizations against the Japanese, Koreans, and Filipinos in the West, who had arrived for similar reasons, albeit later and in smaller numbers than the Chinese. Like the Chinese, these immigrants were characterized by nativists as inherently different — “immoral, subversive, and servile” — and therefore impossible to assimilate (Jones 1960, 264). After the Japanese and Korean populations increased after the 1900s, white Californians led labor campaigns and other mobilizations against them in the state. In 1905, nativists formed the Japanese and Korean Exclusion League, and the following year the San Francisco school board ordered all “Oriental” students into segregated schools. The nativist movement against the Japanese eventually resulted in the Gentlemen’s Agreement of 1907, in which the US government persuaded the Japanese government to deny passports to emigrants (Howland 1929, 502-03). Restrictions and discrimination against the Japanese population continued until the Japanese were barred almost completely from immigration in 1924. Filipinos also faced resistance and hostility for all of the same reasons: They were cast by nativists as immoral, criminal, and unassimilable, and in 1934, the Philippine Independence Act installed a quota of only 50 Filipino immigrants per year (Jones 1960, 288). By the end of the 1930s, Asians were almost completely excluded from immigration to the United States, and they would remain so for decades.

The Rise of the Quota System

The nativist organizing that led to the eventual exclusion of Asian immigrants preceded and overlapped with similar movements against European immigrants in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. While Chinese, Japanese, Korean, and Filipino immigration had occurred primarily on the West Coast, the immigration of southern and eastern Europeans was a great concern to the native population in the East and Midwest. Before 1860, most immigrants had come from the British Isles, Germany, Scandinavia, Switzerland, and Holland. By 1900, close to 70 percent of all immigrants originated in regions and countries including Austria-Hungary, Italy, Russia, Greece, Romania, and Turkey (ibid., 179). This immigration mushroomed after the 1880s: Whereas only 2.5 million Europeans entered the country in each decade between 1860 and 1880, during a single decade in the 1880s, over five million Europeans arrived, and 16 million entered in the subsequent quarter century (Fuchs and Forbes 2003, 152).

Resentment by natives against the new waves of European immigrants stemmed from long-held racial and cultural prejudices among Americans of northern and western European

heritage about non-western Europeans, and particularly against Jews. These prejudices fueled the perception that the southern and eastern Europeans, like Asian immigrants, were simply too different from the native-born to assimilate. As with the Chinese and Asian immigrants, southern and eastern European immigrants' differences in language, religion, economic background, and traditions made them seem undesirable to the native population.

Many of the new immigrants from eastern Europe and Russia were Jews, who were regarded with particular hostility both by the working classes and by elites. Stereotypically portrayed as greedy and materialistic, resented as “competitors for work and housing in the urban slums,” or vilified for their religious beliefs, the rise in Jewish immigration prompted anti-Semitic protests by the Knights of Labor and the other populist groups in the 1890s and afterwards (Garis 1927, 213; Curran 1975, 112-13).

Slavic immigrants, too, were ill-regarded by many of the native-born. Poles, Czechs, Russians, and other eastern Europeans were portrayed as socialists and anarchists, and often blamed for crime and labor conflict (Howland 1929, 445). Frequent complaints were made about the perceived unruliness of eastern Europeans. One contemporary commentator noted that “in any Polish church congregation ... a free fight, or a riot with bludgeons and firearms, may be expected at any moment” (Curran 1975, 114).

Southern Europeans, like the Slavs, were often reviled because of the perception that they were criminally inclined. Nativists accused the Italians and Greeks of “a distinct tendency to abduction and kidnapping,” while the Russians were charged with “larceny and receiving stolen goods” (Kraut 1982, 158). According to one contemporary observer, Italians “drank to excess, they lived in filth, and at the slightest provocation, they went for the stiletto” (Curran 1975, 115). And one author, although writing a fairly tolerant sociological assessment of Greek immigrants, asserted nevertheless that “[Greeks] are probably a greater tax on the police courts of the country, in proportion to their total number, than any other class of our population” (Fairchild 1911, 239). All of these groups faced discrimination and hostility from the native-born population.

The American working classes resented these new waves of European immigrants not only for their perceived criminality and cultural differences, but also because of the labor competition that they represented. Natives, confronting economic downturns after the 1870s, saw the new immigrants as a threat to their personal welfare, and expressed this “in a fear-ridden and sometimes hysterical hatred of foreigners” (Jones 1960, 253).

Upper-class intellectuals, the press, and business elites were also opposed to the new immigration on the basis of racial and economic grounds, and their opinions — often published in the media — helped to fuel working class resentment and xenophobia. In the early twentieth century as the nativist furor reached its peak, books such as *The Passing of the Great Race*, by eugenicist Madison Grant, and editorialists such as Kenneth Roberts of the *Saturday Evening Post*, brought stereotypes about the supposed inferiority of new immigrants to a broad audience (Curran 1975, 136). Throughout the period, political cartoonists such as Thomas Nast produced endless racialized images that cast immigrants as “unsavory-looking figures” whose inherent attributes threatened the United States (Schrag 2010, 61-62). And, as historian Alan Kraut (1995) describes, Americans across the social and political spectrum frequently blamed immigrants for bringing disease into the

United States, creating a kind of medicalized nativism that led to humiliating immigration inspections, and helped drive the impetus for legal restrictions on immigration.

Prior to World War I, legislation did not explicitly restrict the selection or composition of immigrants based on race or nationality, with the exception of Asian immigrants. In general, it attempted to exclude people based on income level, education, and moral, biological, and physical qualities. The Immigration Act of 1875, for example, barred prostitutes and alien convicts, while the Immigration Act of 1882 prohibited the entry of the insane, the mentally disabled, convicts, and those liable to become a public charge. In 1891, immigration legislation excluded people “suffering from loathsome or contagious diseases and aliens convicted of crimes involving moral turpitude” (Fuchs and Forbes 2003, 154).²

After the turn of the century, the provisions in the Immigration Act grew increasingly strict. The rationale for this crackdown was a 40-volume report published by the Dillingham Commission, which was formed in 1909 by Congress in order to assess the effects of Asian and southern and eastern European immigration. The commission “began its work convinced that the pseudoscientific racist theories of superior and inferior peoples were correct and that the more recent immigrants from southern and eastern Europe were not capable of becoming successful Americans” (*ibid.*, 55). Despite the fact that the data they collected did not support their preconceived notions about these immigrant groups, members of the commission made policy recommendations based on their nativist assumptions. Published in 1911, their report endorsed the exclusion of undesirable classes, races, and ethnicities, but advocated a literacy test and a tax for all immigrants as an effective tool for achieving this exclusion. With the support of the Dillingham Commission findings and a refreshed xenophobia after the onset of the First World War, the 1917 Immigration Act established a literacy requirement and a head tax on all migrants entering the United States.

Even though the literacy tests were created in order to filter out the majority of the new immigrants, it became apparent in the late 1910s that these measures were not achieving their goals. Between 1918 and 1921, only about 1,500 people per year were kept out of the country based on illiteracy (Howland 1929, 444). In response, legislators began to take definitive steps towards the installation of a quota system that would limit immigration based on the national origins of immigrants.

Taking inspiration from the results of the Dillingham study, the Emergency Quota Act took effect on June 3, 1921. The act restricted all immigration from Europe and European colonies, excluding most countries in the Western Hemisphere. From each of the restricted European countries, immigration was limited to three percent of the number of foreign-born persons from that country resident in the United States at the time of the 1910 census. Even this unprecedented legislation did not satisfy the nativist agenda, as immigration rates did not fall quickly enough. To strengthen the restrictions, the Johnson-Reed Act of 1924 set even more explicit prohibitions against immigrants based on their nationality, establishing an annual limit of 150,000 on immigration from Europe, prohibiting Japanese immigration entirely, and installing even more specified quotas that restricted immigration from any specific country to two percent of the number of foreign-born persons from that country at the time of the 1890 census.

2 Also see description in Howland (1929, 431).

Once the law took effect in 1929, it effectively ended the great wave of “new” European immigration that had begun in the last quarter of the nineteenth century. While immigration from Great Britain, Ireland, Germany, and the Scandinavian countries was relatively unrestricted, southern and eastern European immigration was dramatically reduced, causing the overall numbers of immigrants to decline steeply. From a high of over 800,000 in 1921, European immigration dropped to 700,000 in 1924, to 300,000 per year from 1925 until 1928, and to less than 150,000 by the end of the decade (Jones 1960, 279). Throughout the 1920s, though, another immigrant group was coming to the United States in increasing numbers.

Nativism and Mexican Immigration

The restrictive legislation that was crafted in response to Asian and European immigration in the United States was also notable for a significant omission. Although Mexico had become one of the most important new sources of immigration to the United States after 1890, Mexican immigration went almost unrestricted until the late 1920s. This was not because American nativists were more tolerant of Mexicans than of other immigrants. On the contrary, Mexicans were often portrayed as even less desirable, from a racial standpoint, than Europeans. Despite this, economic factors prevented immigration legislation from affecting Mexicans for almost four decades.

Between 1890 and 1917, the expanding railroad system and the emergence of new industries in the Southwest and Midwest led to an increase in the demand for labor (Rosales 1978; Cardoso 1980, 18-20). As noted above, however, Asian immigration had begun to decline following the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1892. Further restriction of European and Asian immigration, both before and after World War I, created new openings for Mexican labor. As a result, patterns in Mexican employment changed greatly during this period. Whereas Mexicans had worked in agriculture, railroads, and mining prior to the war, afterwards they could be found in automobile factories, steel and meatpacking plants, stockyards, and the service and transportation industries. Settlement patterns at this time also became more urbanized and geographically dispersed. Migrants no longer remained in the agricultural Southwest, where competition had lowered wages, but instead began to settle in urban areas in California, Texas, and the Midwest as well. By the end of 1917, policymakers in the United States had become aware that “almost every sector of the economy . . . depended heavily on the *bracero*” (Cardoso 1980, 51). This pattern only intensified after the new immigration quotas were applied in 1921 and 1924.

The increased presence of Mexican migrants in the United States drew out the same xenophobia and nativism that had been directed towards Asians and Europeans. Nativist groups and labor organizations were vocal in their advocacy for legislative restrictions of Mexican immigration. Opponents to Mexican migration argued that “the Mexican’s Indian blood would pollute the nation’s genetic purity, and his biologically determined degenerate character traits would sap the country’s moral fiber and corrupt its institutions” (Reisler 1976, 38). As with other immigrant groups, nativists argued that the differences between Mexicans and the native population would prevent Mexican immigrants from ever assimilating in mainstream society.

Despite the forcefulness of the nativists' pleas to restrict Mexican immigration, the agricultural and industrial lobbies put significant pressure on lawmakers to waive Mexican nationals from the requirements of the immigration laws of the 1910s and 1920s. For example, although literacy tests required by the Immigration Act of 1917 could have severely limited Mexican immigration, they were not applied to immigrants from the Western Hemisphere. The Immigration Acts of 1921 and 1924, as well, did not apply to this group of immigrants and thus did not limit the entrance of Mexican workers. Mexican migration, therefore, continued in the patterns established during World War I and increased in volume and geographic distribution. By 1929, Mexican migration had spread even further throughout the country (Cardoso 1980, 82-92).

By the end of the 1920s, however, the nativist drumbeat grew impossible to ignore. Between 1926 and 1930, there were numerous discussions in government and the media about whether to apply the immigration quotas of the 1921 and 1924 laws to Mexicans — one proposed measure, the Box Bill of 1926 — would have included Mexicans in the quota system. Pressure from agricultural and economic interests kept such legislation from becoming enacted, but only as long as the economy remained strong.

In the end, while national origins quotas were never rewritten to include immigrants from the Western Hemisphere, immigration from Mexico declined steeply anyway. In 1929, as the stock markets crashed and unemployment began to rise, native-born US citizens targeted Mexican immigrants. Across the country, local and federal officials launched “repatriation drives” — raids and campaigns to deport Mexican immigrants back to Mexico.

In cities and towns across the United States, Mexican workers and their families were pressured (and in many cases, forced) to return to Mexico. Many of them had entered the United States legally, and many — especially their children — were American citizens. The repatriation campaigns expelled hundreds of thousands of Mexicans (some estimate as many as 1.8 million), and continued throughout the 1930s, in what historian Francisco Balderrama has labeled a “decade of betrayal” (Balderrama and Rodriguez 2006).³

Immigration and Nativism in the United States, 1930 to Present

The steep decline in Asian, European, and Mexican migration after 1929 — and the immigration legislation that precipitated it — marked a watershed moment in US immigration history. For the next four decades, throughout the Great Depression, the Second World War, and the Cold War, the number of immigrants would decline steadily, and by 1970, the proportion of immigrants as a percentage of the US population reached 4.7 percent, the lowest point since at least 1850.⁴

Once again, Mexican immigration proved an exception to this trend. As mentioned above, immigrants from the Western Hemisphere were excluded from the quotas, and labor was greatly needed in the immediate post-war period. To address this issue, the US and Mexican

³ For the statistic on 1.8 million, see Wagner (2017).

⁴ For US census data on migration, see Campbell and Lennon (1999). See also Migration Policy Institute (n.d.).

governments created the Bracero Program (1944-64), which brought Mexican migrants to the United States as legal temporary guest workers. At its peak, nearly 50,000 farms employed more than 400,000 Mexicans per year (Rosenblum et al. 2012). The program had many administrative problems, however, and undocumented migration from Mexico also increased concurrently. Millions of Mexican migrants without papers were then targeted for frequent deportation drives, such as during Operation Wetback in 1954. Mexican laborers have been the primary target for periodic deportation drives ever since.⁵

The end of the Bracero Program coincided with the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965, which marked a momentous change not only for Mexican migrants, but of the entire migration landscape in the United States. The new law put an end to the quota system, and replaced it with a preference based on family relationships and professional skills. Throughout the 1980s, 1990s, and 2000s, the number and percentage of immigrants rose continuously and steeply, and the ethnic makeup of the newest wave of immigrants changed significantly, with immigration from Asia and the Americas eclipsing immigration from Europe (Chishti, Hipsman, and Ball 2015). Additionally, the United States had begun welcoming refugees after the Displaced Persons Act of 1948 (although Congress only standardized the placement of refugees after 1980, with the Refugee Act of 1980).

For Mexicans and other migrants from the Western Hemisphere, the 1965 act also contributed to a steep rise in undocumented immigration, since it established a numeric cap on immigration from the Western Hemisphere. Other factors also played a role in the growth of the undocumented population, such as the termination of the Bracero program in 1964 and population growth in Mexico and many other Latin American states, combined with limited employment opportunities and stagnant wages. At the same time, the United States experienced growth in the agricultural and service sector. These factors pushed undocumented migration from Mexico and other countries in the Americas to new heights in the 1980s and 1990s (with Mexicans forming the largest single group of undocumented immigrants). Since the 1990s, the United States also saw an increase in the undocumented immigrant population from other regions of the globe (Passel and Cohn 2016).

US lawmakers passed a series of laws over these two decades in order to attempt to address the issue. The first of these was the Immigration Reform and Control Act of 1986 (IRCA), which created sanctions for employers of undocumented immigrants, while also providing paths to legalization for some immigrants. Subsequent legislation, such as the Immigration Act of 1990 and the Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act of 1996, authorized increased resources for border enforcement and expanded the criminal grounds of removal, among other measures (Rosenblum et al. 2012).

Despite these reforms, Mexican undocumented migration increased steadily until the mid-2000s, as did migrant deaths along the border. Beginning in late 1993, an intensified Border Patrol presence at traditionally heavy crossing routes prompted Mexicans and other migrants to cross in more remote and perilous areas (CLINIC 2001, 5-15). While Mexican migration has slowed in the past decade (due to largely changing demographic trends in Mexico), violence and poverty in Central America, as well as economic and political factors

⁵ For an anthropological study of the effects of drives on Mexican immigrants and their families, see Boehm (2016).

elsewhere, have continued to fuel undocumented immigration (*ibid.*). Thus, undocumented immigration to the United States remains a persistent political, social, and human rights challenge.

By 2015, immigrants made up 13.5 percent of the US population — a proportion not seen since 1920. Today, the United States finds itself at a historical moment that bears some resemblance to the 1920s: It is experiencing a “Second Great Wave” of immigration (Greico 2014). Unfortunately, it is also experiencing another great wave of nativism. Once again, the newest generation of immigrants — many of them from Latin America, Asia, the Middle East, and Africa — are subject to nativist suspicions that they are too different from previous waves of immigrants to assimilate, and that they therefore represent a threat to the native-born population (Schrag 2010, 163-93). Since September 11, 2001, politicians and the media have increasingly framed undocumented immigration and refugee resettlement as a national security threat, as well.⁶

It is up for debate whether today’s nativism is a new phenomenon, or whether it is simply a persistent current that has been present throughout the last century. Certainly, the earlier nativism persisted well after the restrictionist laws of the 1920s were enacted and implemented. One only has to review the racial history of the 1930s, when the United States provided “a fertile field for individual economic and social crackpots and rabble-rousers, left and right . . . who worked xenophobia, racism, nativism, and anti-Semitism with renewed vigor” (*ibid.*, 145). Among the most vocal opponents of immigrants were Gerald L. K. Smith, founder of the America First Party, and Irish Catholic priest Charles Coughlin, whose xenophobic weekly radio show railed against Jewish immigrants in particular. And certainly, nativism played a role in the refusal of the US public to accept Jewish refugees from the Second World War; in public acceptance of Japanese internment camps during the same period; in the continued deportations of Mexican migrants; and in resistance to the resettlement of Vietnamese refugees in the 1970s, to name just a few examples (Kraut 2016).

Yet, there are also differences between the two eras. Today’s nativism, for example, is less likely to be directed at Europeans, Asians, and Catholics, but rather at undocumented immigrants, the majority of whom are Mexican and Central American, and at Muslims. The current rhetoric against undocumented immigrants centers on the charges that they are an economic drain on society (because of the perception that they take the jobs of the native-born and disproportionately use government resources, without paying taxes) and that they are dangerous (because of the perception that they commit crimes at higher rates than the native-born). These charges certainly hearken back to the rhetoric against poor southern and eastern Europeans during the early twentieth century. They are also demonstrably false.⁷

The nativist case against Muslim immigrants also bears some resemblance to nativism a century ago. In general, those opposed to Muslim immigration claim that this group is

6 In the wake of 9/11, the US Customs Service and the Immigration and Naturalization Service were subsumed by the Department of Homeland Security (created in 2003) and reorganized as US Immigration and Customs Enforcement.

7 On jobs, see National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine (2016), on taxes, see Gee et al. (2017), and on crime, see Hickman and Suttorp (2008).

unassimilable: that Muslims come from a culture that is too different to that of the native-born; and that they cling to their culture, religious traditions, and language without adapting to American culture. By this rationale, the presence of Muslim immigrants poses a threat to the Christian identity of the United States. This echoes the similar claims about immigrants from China, Japan, Korea, and other Asian countries during the 1870-1940 period, as well as to the anti-Semitism of the same period, and even to nativist fears about Catholics during the nineteenth century.⁸ Additionally, Muslim immigrants are perceived by nativists to be inherently dangerous because of their purported links to religious extremists — a fear that echoes historical fears about the potentially dangerous political affiliations of specific immigrant groups during the early twentieth century. As historian Peter Schrag (2010, 196) puts it, “the anarchist rats and the Mafiosi swimming off the ships in New York harbor a century ago have become Arab terrorists wading across the Rio Grande.”

Certainly, anti-Muslim nativism has spiked in the years since September 11, when Muslims have become inextricably linked to the threat of terrorism in the American public sphere. With this focus on difference and danger, nativists group all Muslims together, failing to account for the wide degree of cultural difference among Muslims worldwide, or to distinguish between the tiny minority that participate in terrorist acts and the vast majority that do not, despite the fact that surveys of Muslim American attitudes show extremely low levels of acceptance for religious extremism (Pew Research Center 2007).⁹

Just as they were during the early twentieth century, today’s nativists are vocal and organized. Anti-immigrant organizations such as the Federation for American Immigration Reform (FAIR) and NumbersUSA have been instrumental in disseminating skewed statistics and misinformation about immigrants and lobbying for stricter immigration legislation. Many of today’s most vociferously anti-immigrant groups are also explicitly promoting a racialized vision of a “European” America in which nonwhites are excluded from entry. The founder of FAIR, John Tanton, has written and spoken admiringly of eugenics and eugenic policies.¹⁰ Academics such as Samuel Huntington have lent credence to these calls for a whitened society (much as Madison Grant and the Dillingham Commission did at the turn of the twentieth century) and controversial public figures such as Lou Dobbs and Ann Coulter broadcast these ideas far and wide in the media, just as Father Coughlin did in the 1930s.

Today’s nativists, however, have an outlet that earlier generations did not: a president who not only seems to agree with many of their arguments, but who also stokes the flames of this nativism so explicitly and aggressively. Trump’s nativist statements are too numerous to count, but they tend to target undocumented immigrants and Muslims. Most recently, he announced the foundation of Victims of Immigrant Crime Engagement Office (VOICE), a subgroup within the Department of Homeland Security that will “work with victims of crimes committed by undocumented immigrants” — thereby emphasizing nativist claims that criminalize undocumented immigrants and view them as an inherent threat to the majority population (Kopan 2017). He has also tweeted directly about the purported

8 For a useful overview of nativism as it relates to Christianity in the United States, see Payne (2017).

9 For the perspective of a secular Muslim woman who feels unable to define herself as such, see El Amine (2017).

10 See Campos (2014, 142-44) and People For the American Way (2015).

dangers of Muslim immigrants, and spoken publically about the possibility of establishing a database for Muslims in the United States, thus helping to reinforce nativist perceptions about this group, as well.¹¹

Counteracting Nativism: Some Final Reflections

What can proponents of a robust immigration system do to counteract this rising tide of nativism? One way to do so would be to analyze and discuss the costs associated with nativism. The nativism of the 1870-1940 period came at a social, cultural, financial, and moral cost to society. The case of Jewish refugees who were turned away during the Second World War is particularly compelling when one contemplates the historical and contemporary contributions of America's Jewish immigrants to American culture, scholarship, economy, and society. The same can be said for the innumerable other ethnic and national groups that were denied entry after 1924, or whose integration and prospects were stymied by other discriminatory policies. Repeated deportations of Mexican immigrants over the past century, for example, have not only traumatized deportees and their families, but have also produced no positive effects on wages for the native-born (Clemens, Lewis, and Postel 2017).

Studies of more contemporary immigration restrictions likewise indicate that nativist immigration policies, such as mass deportation, come at a steep cost to American society.¹² The Trump administration's recent executive orders have already begun to create measurable costs for US colleges and universities (in the loss of tuition from immigrant students) and for the tourism sector, as foreign visitors are discouraged from visiting (Nasiripour and Lambert 2017; Muther 2017).

Importantly, however, information about the costs of nativism must be disseminated to a broader audience, which is a difficult challenge in America's ideologically segmented media landscape. Indeed, there is no shortage of scholarship on the benefits of immigration, but the message is not resonating with large segments of American society.¹³ More work should be done to publicize the economic, social, and cultural contributions of Muslim immigrants, undocumented workers, and other groups targeted by today's nativist policies. For example, a recent *New York Times* article on the essential role of refugees in regenerating the economy of small towns in upstate New York illustrates how immigration could be reframed as something that has direct and tangible benefits for society (McKinley 2017). In addition, politicians, government officials, civic leaders, scholars, and journalists must do more to educate the public on the costs of nativism and to address the fears that underlie nativist beliefs. A growing effort to understand the concerns of the so-called "white working class" that were instrumental to the election of Donald Trump will hopefully produce more information on how to address and respond to nativism within that group (Molyneux 2016).

11 For two relevant Twitter posts by Trump, see Trump (2017a): "Interesting that certain Middle-Eastern countries agree with the ban. They know if certain people are allowed in it's death & destruction!"; and Trump (2017b): "Because the ban was lifted by a judge, many very bad and dangerous people may be pouring into our country. A terrible decision." For more on his statements about a Muslim registry, see Abramson (2016).

12 See, for example, Warren and Kerwin (2017).

13 On the benefits of immigration, see West (2011).

Nativism might also subside when a broader cross section of the US electorate experiences the costs of the new restrictionist measures and ceases experiencing the benefits of immigration. If immigration restrictions continue, such losses — whether in the form of higher cost goods and services, labor costs, cultural production, and innumerable other tangible and intangible benefits — will be felt more widely in the months and years to come. On the other hand, however, studies have shown that nativism increases during times of economic hardship, and so it is possible that the economic costs of immigration restrictions might actually fuel nativism, rather than mitigate it (Goldstein and Peters 2014).

Demographic developments may possibly help to divert or subdue the current nativist turn, particularly as they impact the electorate. Perhaps when those costs and benefits become more apparent, both immigrants and the native-born will begin to mobilize for political change, as was the case in California during the 1990s when the passage of Proposition 187 inspired the Mexican and Latino immigrants it targeted to become politically active and form coalitions with other immigrant groups, as well as white progressives (Hemmer 2017). Latinos were widely expected to form a definitive voting bloc in 2016, and although the number of Latino voters increased, it was ultimately not enough to elect the Democratic presidential candidate. Still, it seems safe to assume that as the number of Latino voters increases, so too will the possibilities for political mobilization against nativist legislation (Krogstad and Lopez 2016).

Nevertheless, it is also important not to assume that progress is inevitable, and that nativism will decline if only the right arguments are made to the right people. Unfortunately, nativism seems to spring anew with each new generation of Americans. Indeed, the very immigrants who were the targets of nativism in the early twentieth century held their own prejudices and biases about other groups. As Peter Schrag (2010, 140) points out, these immigrants “often invoked these [ethnic and racial] stereotypes proudly, sometimes affectionately, because it showed they were now also 100 percent American.”

Indeed, adopting racist and exclusionary attitudes may be one way of assimilating in a society that is still economically and culturally divided along racial lines. Historians of ethnicity and immigration have demonstrated that the concept of “whiteness” is flexible, and that as some immigrant groups during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries came to be considered (and to consider themselves) part of the white majority, they also adopted the attitudes of that majority towards groups still considered to be nonwhite.¹⁴ It stands to reason, then, that today’s immigrants — as well as their children and grandchildren — cannot be expected to automatically develop solidarity with other immigrant groups. Latinos, for example, are divided along political and national lines — and even immigrants from the same country are sometimes divided by political developments in their homeland, a factor I have discussed elsewhere.¹⁵

For all of the historical and contemporary reasons discussed in this article, the task of overcoming American nativism is a daunting one. Nativism has a long and pervasive history in the United States: In the words of Alan Kraut (2016), it is an “American perennial.” It appears that the United States is once again entering an era in which nativism drives

14 See, for example, Jacobson (1999).

15 See Young (2015).

national policy and legislation. Thus, it may be too much to hope for an end to nativism. It is perhaps more realistic to work towards preventing nativist immigration restrictions.

At the same time, opponents of nativism must continue to promote the principles of immigration reform — reform that would meet the needs of America’s labor market, provide a path to legal entry for immigrants with talent and promise, respond adequately to humanitarian needs and refugee flows, and work to legalize undocumented immigrants, while discouraging and preventing future undocumented immigration. Reforms such as these would do much to combat nativism in the long run. Achieving them, however, will require a complex and multipronged approach, and must involve long-term political mobilization and a more positive public discourse on immigrants and immigration. In this way, the United States might achieve a better future, instead of returning to its nativist past.

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