

# **“A Nation of Immigrants”: The Cold War and Civil Rights Origins of Illegal Immigration**

Mae M. Ngai

With an exchange between Eric S. Maskin and the Author



The Occasional Papers of the School of Social Science are versions of talks given at the School's weekly Thursday Seminar. At these seminars, Members present work-in-progress and then take questions. There is often lively conversation and debate, some of which will be included with the papers. We have chosen papers we thought would be of interest to a broad audience. Our aim is to capture some part of the cross-disciplinary conversations that are the mark of the School's programs. While Members are drawn from specific disciplines of the social sciences—anthropology, economics, sociology and political science—as well as history, philosophy, literature and law, the School encourages new approaches that arise from exposure to different forms of interpretation. The papers in this series differ widely in their topics, methods, and disciplines. Yet they concur in a broadly humanistic attempt to understand how, and under what conditions, the concepts that order experience in different cultures and societies are produced, and how they change.

Mae M. Ngai is Professor of History and Lung Family Professor of Asian American Studies at Columbia University, and a member in the School of Social Science at the Institute for Advanced Study, 2009-2010. She is interested in questions of immigration, citizenship, and nationalism in United States history. Ngai received her BA from Empire State College SUNY in 1992 and her Ph.D. from Columbia in 1998; and taught at the University of Chicago before returning to Columbia in 2006. She is author of *Impossible Subjects: Illegal Aliens and the Making of Modern America* (2004), which won six awards, including the Frederick Jackson Turner prize from the Organization of American Historians and the Littleton-Griswold Prize from the American Historical Association. Her second book, *The Lucky Ones: One Family and the Extraordinary Invention of Chinese America*, will be published by Houghton Mifflin Harcourt in September 2010. Ngai has written on immigration history and policy matters for the *Washington Post*, *New York Times*, *Los Angeles Times*, the *Nation*, and the *Boston Review*. Professor Ngai has received fellowships from the Social Science Research Council, NYU Law School, Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Study, and the John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation. She is now working on a comparative study of Chinese gold miners in the nineteenth-century North American West, Australia, and South Africa, which thinks about the role of diasporic labor in extractive economies in the making of settler-colonial societies and the place of gold in global capitalist development during the late-nineteenth century.

Eric S. Maskin is the Albert O. Hirschman Professor in the School of Social Science. The email exchange with Mae Ngai is an example of how conversations continue after the seminars.



## “A Nation of Immigrants”: The Cold War and Civil Rights Origins of Illegal Immigration

In 2008 Harper Collins reissued a book by John F. Kennedy, *A Nation of Immigrants*, on the occasion of the fiftieth anniversary of its publication in 1958. It was the third edition of the book, and it came with a new introduction by Senator Edward Kennedy, who was a champion of immigration reform in the US Congress for the last two decades, before his death last summer. The second edition, published in 1964 after the President’s assassination, carried an introduction by the other Kennedy brother, Senator Robert Kennedy.

A genealogy of this little book offers a way to examine the history of immigration policy in the United States in the decades since the Second World War. It helps us understand how immigration reform in the 1960s was tied to cold war and civil rights politics; and how those imperatives created a system of immigration regulation based on a core paradox, a system founded on principles of equality and fairness, yet which has generated an ever larger caste-population of illegal immigrants. If the United States is today a nation of immigrants, more so than at any time since the 1910s, it is a nation in which thirty percent of the foreign-born are without legal status. It also is a nation in which the general population is profoundly divided over this question.

When it was first published in 1958, *A Nation of Immigrants* articulated an ethos of cultural pluralism that was regarded as a truism of American historical experience; the concept was—and still is—believed to be as old as the nation itself. In fact “a nation of immigrants” is a twentieth century idea and one that became embraced by the mainstream only after World War II. But, its simplicity and putative timelessness give it a protean character, so it is easily invoked by diverse interests in contemporary immigration debates. I suggest that by historicizing “a nation of immigrants” as a concept produced by cold war and civil rights politics, as an archetype of twentieth century racial liberalism, we gain access to an understanding of how the modern regime of immigration policy was constructed.

The political force behind Kennedy’s publication *A Nation of Immigrants* was the Anti-Defamation League of B’nai B’rith, one of the leading Jewish civil rights organizations in the United States. During the 1950s, the ADL engaged in a vigorous campaign to eliminate all vestiges of anti-Semitism in American society. Although increasing numbers of American Jews after World War II enjoyed middle-class status, they continued to face discrimination in the housing market, in higher education, in the professions, and in other walks of life. The ADL considered immigration policy particularly repugnant, on account of the blatantly racist quotas that were imposed on immigration from Eastern and Southern Europe in the 1920s.

Although there was no significant demand for Jewish emigration to the United States after the Holocaust and the closing of the Soviet Union to emigration, American Jews were deeply committed to repealing the national-origin laws because they were so symbolically degrading.

If cultural pluralism was a new kind of politics in the post-war period, that is not to say it had no antecedents. In the early twentieth century, all immigrant-ethnic groups pondered the question of their identity. Many came to embrace the "hyphen" to signal their dual cultural commitments. But these were mostly particularistic, or group specific, answering the question, how do "we" fit in. Jews were the first group to generalize their ethnic experience as prototypically American. They conceptualized American identity as pluralistic. Pluralism, in this line of thinking, was the motor of democracy; it made democratic society vibrant and ever changing. Immigration was the solution to complacency, stagnation, and social decay.

The philosopher Horace Kallen, one of the first American Jews appointed to the Harvard faculty, expressed this concept as early as 1915. In an article called "Culture and Democracy" published in the *Nation* he famously compared America's diverse population to an orchestra. The separate and distinct musical instruments (or national groups) each made beautiful music, but together they made a symphony. That took work, and the work that made music out of cacophony, Kallen argued, was the work of democracy.

In the 1910s and 1920s this was a radical concept. It departed from mainstream thinking, whether nativist or assimilationist, among native-white Americans. Kallen's intervention was novel because it derived from the experience and vantage point of the immigrant. But Kallen and others who experimented with ideas and theory that we would recognize today as cultural pluralism—Franz Boas, Randolph Bourne, Louis Brandeis—were marginal voices at the time. They were all but drowned out by a tide of eugenics, social Darwinism, race-nativism, and anti-radicalism that impelled Congress to pass the National Origins Act of 1924.

That law signaled a seminal shift in American immigration policy. For the first time in history, a ceiling was placed on annual immigration and it was severe, 15 percent of the annual average in the decade before the Great War. Immigration had previously been numerically unrestricted, attesting to the needs of colonial settlement, national expansion, and industrialization. The exception, Chinese exclusion, indexed the colonial influences on American-national expansion in the nineteenth century. The advent of numerical limits on immigration was part of a global trend of hyper-nationalism after World War I, the consolidation of the modern inter-state system based on the idea that competition among nation states would be kept from degenerating into war by the principle of national sovereignty.

The quota act is best known for its discriminatory allocation of the immigration quotas. To Europe, which was the main target of the law, the law distributed the numerical quotas according to national origin, ostensibly to match

the composition of the United States. The intended result was to radically restrict immigration from Eastern and Southern Europe.

In addition, the 1924 law perfected Asiatic exclusion, extending it by statute to all persons deemed ineligible for naturalization, that is, to persons from all countries from Afghanistan to the Pacific. The Chicago sociologist Robert E. Park understood the significance of this move. Writing in 1926 about the new law, Park pointed out, “These laws have created on our Western Coast a barrier to immigration that is distinctly racial. Its purpose is not merely to limit [as with Europe] but to stop immigration from Asia. It is as if we had said: Europe, of which after all America is a mere western projection, ends here. The Pacific Coast is our racial frontier.”<sup>1</sup>

There were no numerical quotas imposed for the countries of the Western Hemisphere, owing to the interests of southwestern agriculture and foreign policy. Pan-Americanism, which advocated for good diplomatic, investment, and trade relations between the US and Mexico and Latin America, was a policy of open hemispheric borders. But, despite the lack of numerical quotas, the administrative regime of immigration restriction weighed heavily on Mexicans. The requirement that every migrant show a visa, pay a head tax, and submit to inspection at an official port of entry, was expensive and degrading (inspection for Mexican laborers required bathing and fumigation), and led many Mexicans to avoid the process and simply cross the border informally, as they had done for decades. But what had once been informal was now illegal.

Soon legal immigration from Mexico became virtually impossible. In 1929 the State Department adopted a policy to refuse visas to all Mexican laborers on grounds that they were liable to become a public charge. This put emigrants in a catch-22, for if they showed an offer of employment, they would be excluded by the ban on importing contract labor. Thus the US-Mexican border, itself a creation of conquest and annexation in the nineteenth century, became reproduced in the twentieth century as an ambiguous boundary line, one that was easy to cross, but, paradoxically, only without documents. Mexicans were welcome as agricultural workers but not as prospective citizens. The US-Mexico border became another kind of racial frontier.

Thus immigration restriction enacted a tripartite border policy—restriction for the Atlantic, exclusion for the Pacific, and formally open borders for the Americas.

After World War II, with its attention to the racism of Nazi fascism, the racism of the national-origin quotas embarrassed American liberals, much as they were embarrassed by racial segregation in the American South. Importantly, a constituency had emerged to seek immigration-policy reform. These were the Euro-American ethnics, the children of the Jewish, Slavic, Italian, and Greek immigrants of the early twentieth century. During the 1930s and 1940s, industrial unionism, mass consumer culture, and military service had accelerated their assimilation as

Americans. After the war they were an important voting block of the urban Democratic north. Groups like the Anti-Defamation League of B'nai B'rith and the American Order of Italian Americans (which formed its own anti-defamation league) were in the forefront of the reform effort.

In 1941 the Yugoslav-born writer Louis Adamic coined the phrase "a nation of nations" to describe America's diversity as a source of national strength for the war effort. Adamic represented a kind of popular filiopietism that dated to the early twentieth century; but a similar theme was central to the first academic histories of immigration, which emerged during the decades surrounding the Second World War. (In the early twentieth century, immigrants were treated as objects of study [that is, problems] by economists and sociologists; it wasn't until the 1940s that immigrants were the subjects of historical inquiry.) More than any other scholar, Oscar Handlin of Harvard University established immigration as a legitimate subfield of American history. Handlin's famous first lines in *The Uprooted* (1951)—"Once I thought to write a history of the immigrants in America. Then I discovered that the immigrants were American history"—carried a double meaning: first was the idea that immigrants made up the nation, expressing the pluralist ethos of the post-war years. The second was that the process of assimilation was the same as Americans' transition to modern urban and industrial society. This insight was indebted to the work of the interwar generation of sociologists at the University of Chicago who had first conceptualized immigrant adaptation as a process of modernization.

When Handlin published *The Uprooted* in 1951, he was also an active public intellectual, writing extensively about pluralism and group life, civil rights, assimilation, the problem of Jewish identity, and, notably, immigration reform. He was a consultant to President Truman's Commission on Immigration and Nationality and to Senator Herbert Lehman, the former governor of New York, and the leading advocate for immigration reform in the Senate in the early and mid-1950s. Handlin's thinking on immigration policy is instructive because it both reflected and shaped the course of reform in the post-war period. He provided a cogent articulation of the liberal nationalism that framed the reform legislation that was ultimately passed in 1965, as well as the law's historical legacy.

For Handlin and for the white ethnics interested in repealing the national origin quotas, actual immigration from Europe was only a minor part of their interest. Immigration from Europe after the war was modest, especially with post-war reconstruction and a declining birth rate. While there were Euro-Americans who wished to bring their relatives from abroad to the United States, more were interested in the political symbolism of the quota law.

The most important reason for reform, said Handlin, was that "the present system clashes with...democratic ideals." The quota system was "offensive to our allies and potential allies throughout the world and a slur on millions of our citizens." The latter received special emphasis: "[T]he quotas cast the slur of inferiority [upon]...the



grandfathers of millions of Poles and Italians and Jews, and of hundreds of thousands of others who, by their contributions to American life, have earned the right to be counted the equals of the descendants of the Pilgrims....The Italian American has the right to be heard on these matters precisely as an Italian American. The quotas implicitly pass a judgment upon his own place in the United States.”<sup>2</sup>

Here Handlin expressed the practical import of cultural pluralism—he saw ethnics as interests in interest-group politics. Furthermore, we can see how the cause was conceived as a battle against the “slur of inferiority.” Many Euro-American ethnics believed they were waging a parallel fight to the African American movement against segregation. Immigration reform was their civil rights movement. Throughout the 1950s and 1960s the Anti-Defamation League published scores of books, many commissioned from academics, which aimed to combat not just anti-Semitism but racism, nativism, and religious intolerance in general. One gets a sense of ADL’s project from the titles of their publications: *Civil Rights and Minorities* (1956), *Negro American Intelligence* (1964), *Privacy and Prejudice: Religious Discrimination in Social Clubs* (1962); *Prejudiced - How do People Get that Way?* (1959). Oscar Handlin wrote for the ADL, *Danger in Discord*, about anti-Semitism (1949), *American Jews: Their Story* (1958), and *Out of Many*, on cultural pluralism (1964), in addition to other books on immigration, ethnic history, and cultural and religious pluralism.<sup>3</sup>

These efforts were characteristic of the belief held by many post-war liberals and social scientists that prejudice was born of ignorance and could be resolved with education and persuasion. As sociologist Francis Brown explained, “the whole problem of minorities must be approached from the point of view of modifying basic attitudes. The first step,” he added, “is knowledge of and appreciation for the contribution of each group.”<sup>4</sup>

Towards this end, in 1958 the ADL proposed to John F. Kennedy, then Senator of Massachusetts, that he author a book on immigration history. It offered to the Senator’s staff an outline written by Arthur Mann, an assistant professor at Smith College who was one of Handlin’s first doctoral students at Harvard, and who would go on to a long career at the University of Chicago. Published over Kennedy’s name as a modest pamphlet of 40 pages, *A Nation of Immigrants* revised the original outline considerably, making it more of a celebratory narrative of immigrant contributions to American life and eliminating Handlin’s thesis of uprootedness and alienation as the stages prior to modernization and assimilation. Yet Handlin’s *Uprooted* and Kennedy’s *A Nation of Immigrants* were more similar than they were different. Both read the founding colonists as America’s first immigrants and American history as a succession of immigrations from Europe, with each wave assimilating to and revitalizing the nation’s core values of individualism and democracy. Both entrenched a nationalist framework, in which a *telos* of inclusion and assimilation provided evidence of America’s exceptional history and character; both situated

racism and discrimination as anomalous interruptions to what Gunnar Myrdal had famously called the American creed.

If the new immigration history expressed the political arrival of ethnic Euro-Americans in the post-war political order, a kind of proto-multiculturalism, there was as yet no parallel movement among non-European immigrant groups. Latinos and Asian Americans were almost completely absent from the immigration reform movement, reflecting their general lack of participation in politics, in policy, and in academia. They were scarcely visible in popular histories of immigration; the original *A Nation of Immigrants* did not discuss Latino or Asian immigration at all, save for a brief mention of Chinese exclusion, which it said was "shameful." The absence of Mexicans from the text signaled the extent to which they were seen not as immigrants but as seasonal migrants from a hemispheric neighbor, people with a different relationship to the United States than immigrants who crossed an ocean in order to settle permanently.

Although liberals framed European immigration in terms of its impact on Euro-American ethnic-group interests, they addressed Asian and Mexican immigration without considering the interests or viewpoints of Asian Americans and Mexican Americans. That is to say, they saw European immigration in terms of American citizens, but they saw non-European immigration in terms of foreigners.

Asian immigration was conceived almost entirely from the vantage point of US cold war foreign-policy interests. Here the symbolism of reform was not aimed at Asian American citizens but at United States' allies in East Asia. The "Asia Pacific Triangle," which was a global race quota limiting Asian immigration to some 2,000 per year, was a "needless source of difficulty and a gratuitous insult to [Asian countries] who should be our allies," wrote Handlin.<sup>5</sup>

Reformers also took a symbolic and abstract approach to immigration from Mexico, Latin America, and the Caribbean. In the early 1950s, Handlin advocated elimination of the quota exemptions historically enjoyed by countries of the Western Hemisphere in the name of consistency. Throughout the 1950s and early 1960s, however, the reform movement supported continuing the non-quota policy for Western Hemisphere immigration in deference to the State Department's commitment to Pan Americanism and agricultural interests.

In 1963, the Kennedy Administration crafted an immigration bill and arranged for Senator Philip Hart of Michigan and Congressman Emanuel Celler of New York to sponsor it. The Kennedy bill initially exempted countries of the Western Hemisphere from numerical quotas, continuing past practice, and replaced the national-origins quotas with two broad preference categories: first, professionals whose skills were deemed in short supply in the United States and, second, relatives of existing citizens. Country-based quotas were introduced indirectly, in the form of a provision that no single country could receive more than 20,000 visas a year. This

limit aimed to keep the immigration stream diverse, and, as Attorney General Robert Kennedy explained, to "prevent excessive benefit or harm to any country."<sup>6</sup>

After the President's assassination, the bill was re-introduced with the backing of the Johnson Administration. As hearings on the bill were held on Capitol Hill, the ADL reissued *A Nation of Immigrants*, its authorship by the slain President now worth inestimably more than when he was a Senator. *A Nation of Immigrants* came out not as a paper pamphlet but as a book issued by a major publisher, Harper and Row, enlarged in size, slightly revised (adding a few paragraphs on Chinese/Japanese and Mexican/Puerto Ricans), and with the addition of a 32-page pictorial essay. In the new introduction, Robert Kennedy emphasized equality and diversity, echoing themes from the African American civil rights movement. "Our attitude toward immigration reflects our faith in the American ideal," he wrote. "We have always believed it possible for men and women who start at the bottom to rise as far as their talent and energy allow. Neither race nor creed nor place of birth should affect their chances."<sup>7</sup>

But, if the principle of "equality" in the domestic civil rights movement was incontrovertibly about the equal rights of citizens, the concept of "equality" that informed the liberal appeal for immigration reform was murky and inconsistent: the subject of equal rights was at once the United States citizen, the individual migrant, and the sending nation. Each subject's claim to equality derived from a different epistemology of rights: the civil rights of the citizen in the liberal nation-state; the human rights of the individual without reference to state membership; and the right of nations to self-determination and to equal standing in the international community.

The discourse of formal equality in immigration reform elided these differences and, moreover, justified both liberalizing and restricting provisions of the law. It impelled repeal of the national-origins quota system, but it also made the Western Hemisphere exemption from quotas appear unfair. Thus liberals' support for Pan Americanism collapsed when moderates in Congress, worried about population increases in Latin America, moved to slam shut the back door.

In fact, an immigration policy that treats all nations equally is substantively unequal: in a world of unequal conditions and relations of power, such a policy means that a small country in the industrialized West, like Belgium, will never use up its quota whereas emigrants from poorer countries in the developing world, like Mexico and China, have to wait many years for a visa.

The principle of equality in immigration involves a crucial slippage, in which a symbolic gesture of equality to citizens obscures unequal treatment of non-citizens. The cost of this slippage has been an exaggerated notion of our immigration policy as generous and fair. In fact, the Hart-Celler Act of 1965 was numerically more restrictive than past policy; it impelled the illegal immigration of the unskilled,

especially from Mexico and Central America; it promoted brain drain from the developing world; and it continued to resist humanitarianism as a policy imperative.

The vaunted family unification principle, I might add, was in fact written to favor European immigration, as it gave nearly two-thirds of the family preference quotas to adult children and siblings of citizens, and about one-third to immediate family members, spouses and minor children of legal immigrants.

Liberals' singular focus on winning symbolic equality for Euro-American ethnic groups resulted, albeit unwittingly, in preventing serious consideration of two other policies that would prove to be critical for late-twentieth century immigration: internationalist responsibility for refugees and asylum-seekers and open immigration in the Western Hemisphere.

Moreover, I argue, liberalism's commitment to formal equality directly contributed to the rise of illegal immigration from Mexico and Latin America in the last quarter of the twentieth century.

When the country cap of 20,000 went into full effect in the Western Hemisphere in 1976, the US deported 781,000 Mexicans; by comparison, the total number of apprehensions for all other parts of the world combined remained below 100,000 a year. By the early 1980s there was talk of a crisis: the southern border was out of control and there were estimates of over one million undocumented persons living in the United States.

This problem was, and would continue to be through the turn of the twenty-first century, the result of a basic mismatch between the principle of formal equality and the dynamics of the labor market, in which low-waged immigrant labor has provided the backbone for the expanding service economy (the hospitality industry, janitorial and domestic services), industrial agriculture and food processing, and the construction industry fueled by the housing boom.

The country caps on visas channeled low-waged labor into illegal streams. Officially, the maximum number of visas from any country is 26,500 a year. Four countries persistently max out on their annual allotment: Mexico, China, India, and the Philippines. There is no wait if you are from Australia. But for people from these four countries, the wait for a visa easily can be five or ten years, even twenty, and in some categories as long as forty years.

The Anti-Defamation League reissued *A Nation of Immigrants* in 2008 as an intervention in an increasingly antagonistic public debate over immigration. The text is the same as it was in 1958 and 1964, with its overemphasis on European immigrations. In this new edition, the book begins with an introduction from Senator Edward Kennedy. Just as the publication of *A Nation of Immigrants* in 1958 and 1964 intended to spur the reform of the national-origin quota system, Kennedy made clear the latest edition aimed to win Americans to immigration reform today.

"Immigration is in our blood," he states, "it's part of our founding story" (eliding the difference between colonial settlement and immigration as did his

brother). He praises today’s immigrants, who “come from all corners of the world, representing every race and creed. They work hard. They practice their faith. They love their families. And they love this country. We would not be a great nation today without them.”<sup>8</sup>

Edward Kennedy goes on to explain the need for reform. His focus is on illegal immigration. He writes, “We know the high price of continuing inaction. Raids and other enforcement actions will escalate, terrorizing our communities and businesses. The twelve million undocumented immigrants now in our country will become millions more. Sweatshops will grow and undermine American workers and their wages...” Most important, Kennedy extended the inclusionary message of a “nation of immigrants,” to the undocumented, implying that they too work hard, practice their faith, love their families and love America.

Americans have generally been of two minds about the consequences of illegal immigration: we want to control the border but hesitate to pursue mass deportations. That’s why American immigration policy moves in a cycle of enforcement and legalization.

Today the logic of “comprehensive immigration reform” continues to call for legalization of the undocumented and prevention of future unauthorized migration through, first, border enforcement and, second, managing low-skilled migration with temporary worker visas, a highly exploitative process that doesn’t eliminate unauthorized migration. Few proponents of reform are willing to question the fundamental mismatch between the visa system based on formal equality and the dynamics of the labor market and the real needs of families.

A more radical reform is required, but one that also draws on historical precedent:

- A differentiated quota system that takes into account the different conditions and needs of sending countries. For example, before Hart-Celler, Philip Hart proposed a system of quotas which were allocated according to size of population, with size serving as a proxy for need.<sup>9</sup>
- A regionalist policy, like our old policy of pan Americanism. The North American Free Trade Agreement, which promotes the free movement of goods and capital but not persons, contributed to economic dislocations in Mexico and increased pressures on emigration
- A statute of limitation on unlawful presence, which we used to have in the early twentieth century. Statutes of limitation are normative in American jurisprudence and exist for all but the most serious of crimes, like murder. Applying this principle to undocumented immigrants after a period of time would save them from living in the shadows of society forever and prevent an accretion of an unauthorized population.<sup>10</sup>

I want to conclude by returning to *A Nation of Immigrants*. If Oscar Handlin and John F. Kennedy established a normative theory of American immigration based on a model of European assimilation and American exceptionalism, that theory should be understood as an expression of a specific historical moment in the post-war and cold war era, when American democracy contrasted to fascism and communism, and the United States enjoyed unprecedented global power and economic growth. The assimilation of Euro-American ethnics was made possible by a long post-war trend of declining economic inequality (1947-1974), by home ownership and college education funded by the GI bill, and by new political alignments in the urban-industrial north. The themes of progressive inclusion and universal citizenship could be read back onto the nineteenth century only by bracketing slavery, Jim Crow, Asiatic exclusion, annexation of half of Mexico, and the acquisition of insular territories from the history of American national development.

In fact, the experience of European immigrants at the turn of the twentieth century, as well as that generally of non-Europeans throughout American history, was marked by exploitation in a segmented labor market, social isolation, and nativist opposition. Even the Fourteenth Amendment's provision of birthright citizenship to all persons born in the United States, including the children of immigrants—the foundation of the second generation's access to the polity—has proved viable only when conditions are favorable, that are at once economic (expansion not contraction), demographic (concentration of voters) and political (foreign relations, allies in domestic social movements). Perhaps, as historian David Gutierrez suggests, immigration in the twenty-first century, with its high incidence of labor exploitation and political exclusion, is the "new normal." From this angle, the prospects for democratic inclusion—now, as in the past—are certainly not foreclosed, but must be understood not as organic or inevitable. Instead, they reside in conditions of possibility that are chiefly political, domestic and global.

The following is the email correspondence between Professor Eric S. Maskin and Mae M. Ngai, author of this Occasional Paper.

Dear Mae,

Many thanks for your talk.

Just a small comment on something you said in passing in the Q&A. You suggested, I believe, that the economic ramifications of immigration are "a wash," which I interpreted as "the negatives and positives cancel each other out." But, in fact, I think the evidence shows that immigration has always made (and continues to make) a strong positive contribution to the U.S. economy. Immigration has its biggest domestic effect on two groups of people: employers and existing workers. For employers, the matter is completely clear-cut----they have been helped enormously by access to this additional pool of workers. For workers, the exact answer is harder to pin down, but the best available data (see David Card's work in particular) suggest that that the effect--whatever it is---has been small. That is, even if the effect has been negative, it has been much smaller in magnitude than that for employers. So, when we add the two effects together, there is little question that the country gains a great deal economically from immigration (at least, at current levels), even after accounting for the additional costs--such as health, education, or welfare benefits-- that immigrants impose. This suggests that, as part of immigration reform, it should be possible to introduce mechanisms whereby the "winners" compensate the "losers."

Eric

Dear Eric:

Thanks for your comment. I am familiar with David Card's work and find it persuasive. I agree that immigrants in general add economic activity (including as consumers). How many middle, even lower class, American women got manicures every week, twenty years ago? So I would add to your two existing groups, a third group, or perhaps a third angle, consumption (which includes employers and existing workers and immigrants). I'm not sure how this fits into economic theory, not being an economist, so I may have twisted something here, but I think consumption has to be taken into account.

The problem in weighing "costs" and "benefits" is in determining what goes into each column. For example, the anti-immigrant argument often claims that immigrants use social services (schools, emergency rooms, etc) and put strain on local resources. But they don't consider that adult migrants, say, come after having been schooled in another country, ready to work, as it were, and so that

part of the cost of social reproduction is entirely born by the sending community or country.

The other argument that I often confront in talks is the one that I mentioned, that immigrants take jobs from native blacks. In general I don't think this is true--black unemployment is caused by many factors (decline in manufacturing; jobs leaving the cities, etc etc). But there are some areas where there appears to be displacement: for example, in building janitorial services, and in hotel housekeeping jobs. In the former, blacks seem to have been replaced by Latino immigrants in Los Angeles, but Ruth Milkman has an argument about a middle step, where employers switched to sub-contracting services. Interestingly, in New York City, where the building services workers are unionized, there seems to have been less displacement, less sub contracting. There are many Latinos in building services, but still many African Americans. My observations about the hotel industry is similar--where the union remains a force, there is less displacement in the workforce. I haven't seen any studies that actually show **\*\*how\*\*** the displacement operates. I think David Card (and Milkman) tend to play down this problem. Although I agree with them and I think you, too, that on aggregate it is not the main trend.

Thanks again for your comment. Perhaps we can talk more about how policy might be constructed to have winners compensate losers?

Yours, Mae

Dear Mae,

The way economists typically aggregate all the costs and benefits of a phenomenon such as immigration (so as to include, for example, the cost of social services) is by gauging its effect on GDP per capita (i.e., net income per person). This is an incomplete measure, but still a very useful one. When I said that immigration has benefitted the country economically I was thinking of the studies showing that it has produced a significant increase in the typical U.S. resident's net income. The problem, of course, is that this increase is not uniform over residents; many people gain, but some lose. Hence, the usefulness of redistributive mechanisms.

Here are a couple of examples: To protect a community from the temporary strain of a large influx of immigrants, an insurance system could award it compensatory transfers paid by other communities. To help agricultural workers who lose their jobs as a result of increased competition from immigration, unemployment benefits can be extended and job-retraining programs instituted. There are many other such possibilities.

Eric



## ENDNOTES

1. Robert E. Park, *Race and Culture* (Glencoe, IL: The Free Press, 1951).
2. Oscar Handlin, “The Immigration Fight has Just Begun,” *Commentary* 14 (July 1952): 1-7, at 2, 6-7. Emphasis in original.
3. Selected titles published by Anti-Defamation League of B’nai B’rith: Paul Hartman, *Civil Rights and Minorities* (1956); Thomas Pettigrew, *Negro American Intelligence* (1964); *Privacy and Prejudice: Religious Discrimination in Social Clubs* (1962); William Van Til, *Prejudiced—How do People get that Way?* (1959); Oscar Handlin, *Danger in Discord* (1949); Handlin, *Out of Many: A Study Guide to Cultural Pluralism* (1964). Handlin also published: *Adventure in Freedom* (New York: McGraw Hill, 1954); *Chance or Destiny* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1954); *Race and Nationality in American Life* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1957); *Immigration as a Factor in American History* (Englewood: Prentice Hall, 1959); *The Newcomers: Negroes and Puerto Ricans in a Changing Metropolis* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1959); *The American People in the Twentieth Century* (Boston: Beacon, 1963); *Children of the Uprooted* (New York: Braziller, 1966); *A Pictorial History of Immigration* (New York: Crown, 1972), and many other titles.
4. See Stuart Svonkin, *Jews Against Prejudice: American Jews and the Fight for Civil Liberties* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997). Quote by Francis J. Brown, Jr., in *One America: The History, Contributions, and Present Problems of our Racial and National Minorities*, ed. Brown and Roucek (rev. ed., New York: Prentice Hall, 1946), 622. On the evolution of ethno-racial group consciousness in the post-war period and implications for liberal democracy see David Hollinger, *Post-Ethnic America* (New York: Basic Books, 1994); Nikhil Pal Singh, *Black is a Country* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004).
5. Oscar Handlin, “Americanizing our Immigration Laws,” *Holiday*, Jan. 1966, p. 12.
6. Testimony of Robert F. Kennedy, Immigration, Hearings before the Subcommittee on Immigration, Senate Committee on the Judiciary, on S. 500, 89th Congress, 1st Session, 2 vols. (Washington: GPO, 1965), 223.
7. Robert F. Kennedy, introduction to John F. Kennedy, *A Nation of Immigrants* (New York: Harper and Row, 1964), x.

8. Edward M. Kennedy, introduction to John F. Kennedy, *A Nation of Immigrants*, third edition (New York: Harper Collins, 2008), x.
9. For more on Hart's early proposals, see Mae Ngai, "The Lost Immigration Debate," *Boston Review*, April 12, 2009, <http://bostonreview.net/BR31.5/ngai.php>
10. See Mae Ngai, "We Need a Deportation Deadline," *Washington Post*, June 14, 2005, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2005/06/13/AR2005061301460.html>

A Nation of Immigrants (. ISBN 978-0-06-144754-9) is a 1958 book on American immigration by then U.S. Senator John F. Kennedy of Massachusetts. The name of the book is a reference to a popular moniker for the United States, as a country whose population, the Americans, is predominantly made up of non-Native American peoples who settled the country following the European colonization of Americas and the establishment of the Thirteen Colonies. Immigration policy offers many telling insights into the political economy of illegal immigration and into how the government may cater to special interests. In the US, the historical emphasis on border "not interior" enforcement is best understood through a political economy lens. In addition, he stressed (much like Hollifield 1992) that liberal norms, which invest immigrants with rights, are a second constraint on state policy, next to interest-group pressure. Reference to liberal norms helps explain why European states, despite the absence of an ethnic lobby there, have remained open to certain kinds of immigrants, most notably the family members of labor migrants.