

Back to the Basics of Immigration

BY VIVIANA TRIANA

Though they offer no easy solutions, these two books shed considerable light on our current dilemmas of immigration policy. Together they tell a complex story— who lawful immigrants to America have been and how we have viewed them through history.

For those who mistakenly believe that the immigration controversies in America are just about the recent migration of Hispanics/Latinos, I suggest reading *Coming to America: A History of Immigration and Ethnicity in American Life*, second edition (New York: Harper Perennial, 2002, 576 pp., \$17.95), by University of Cincinnati history professor Roger Daniels. In this accessible and comprehensive guide to the history and diversity of American immigrants, Daniels covers a wide spectrum of people groups from Europe, Africa, Latin America, and the Caribbean, as well as from across the Pacific. Beginning with the colonial-era immigration from Europe, he thoroughly reviews the socio-economic, cultural, political, and religious motivations for migrations to the United States.

Coming to America dispels many commonly held myths regarding the motivations, identity, and origins of those early immigrants. One of the most common myths Daniels addresses is the concept that America was and is a melting pot. “While there has been a continuous genetic mixture of ethnic groups in the United States, most individuals are still aware of their ethnic background,” he notes. Indeed, “the melting pot simply did not happen” (pp. 17-18). Although many in American society hope for an integrated nation, the reality is that the country has become more diverse. The political wrangling of today demonstrates that for some people this diversity is a strength, while for others it is a sign of the need to “close the door” to newcomers.

To dispel some common myths regarding the immigrants' motivations, Daniels emphasizes the wide range of "push" and "pull" factors that have encouraged migration to America. "Push" factors are conditions in the country of origin that force people to emigrate; these may be catastrophes like the Irish potato famine in 1845, political events like the Edict of Nantes (1598) that granted rights of emigration to French Huguenots, or various economic pressures usually related to a growing population. "Pull" factors refer to those attractive forces that draw immigrants to leave their home countries, such as the draw that religious freedom had for some English Puritans and Quakers and Baptists during the colonial period. Normally, pull migrants leave their countries because they wish to and because their talents seem to fit the available educational or professional opportunities. Push immigrants, like the immigrant slaves who came from Africa or the recent refugees from Cambodia, are persons who ordinarily would not have left their countries.

A general reader will enjoy this book for the interesting and rarely discussed facts about many of the people groups that have migrated to the United States over the years—facts such as the statistical distribution of national or linguistic ancestries in the 1800s or that most of the first Arab immigrants to America were Christians of several Eastern Rite churches. But Daniels also addresses the current experiences of the different immigrant groups as they settle in the United States.

This combination of historical sweep and contemporary survey is valuable when Daniels turns to discuss the changing resistance to immigration. While much of the resistance today is based on economic concerns, in the early period of American history the basis of resistance was quite different. Citizens in the eighteenth century opposed immigration "largely on ideological rather than ethnic or religious grounds. Federalists opposed radical immigrants from England, France, or Ireland; Jeffersonians in Congress, concerned about the migration and settlement here of exiled nobility from France, got a provision put into the 1795 Naturalization Act requiring an applicant for citizenship to foreswear any hereditary titles of nobility" (p. 116). Eventually, the resistance shifted even more as immigrants who did not resemble Europeans began to appear. Laws like the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 and the "Operation Wetback" in the early 1950s were implemented to prohibit immigration from these "dissimilar" countries.

It may be impossible to write immigration history objectively, but I believe Daniels comes as close to this achievement as anyone could in this comprehensive guide to American immigration. Writing in a clear, concise, and impartial manner, he recounts the captivating but often neglected stories of "the immigrants themselves, their children, and sometimes their children's children, from the earliest European and African 'settlers' to today's jet-age migrants" (p. 29). This encyclopedia of immigrant history is a valuable resource for anyone interested in knowing the cultural contexts of immigrant life.



In *Americans in Waiting: The Lost Story of Immigration and Citizenship in the United States* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006, 254 pp., \$19.95), Hiroshi Motomura examines America's immigration policies from the perspective of his personal experience as well as historical investigations. "What does it mean to be American?" he asks. "What does this position in society require and imply?" Recommending that immigrants should be seen as "Americans in waiting," he starts unfolding this idea beginning with the 1920s when the concept of "permanent residency" first emerged.

In the formative years of the United States, the road to citizenship was a relatively simple matter. In the early 1800s the government encouraged immigration, but as waves of immigrants arrived from Eastern Europe and Asian countries speaking diverse languages and practicing foreign religions, Americans began to feel threatened. By the end of the nineteenth century, national laws – like the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 mentioned above – would discourage and even prohibit the immigration of certain nationalities. But years earlier, individual states had taken matters into their own hands through laws that "addressed migration by citizens and foreigners alike. Some state laws barred criminals, or restricted the movements of free blacks, or quarantined anyone with a contagious disease." To discourage the migration of the poor, some states "required shipmasters to post bonds to guarantee that their passengers would be financially self-sufficient after arrival" or "imposed a head tax on immigrants, paid into a welfare fund for those who became indigent," Motomura notes. "Restrictionists urged that states enforce and expand these laws to keep out various undesirables" (p. 21). This pattern is repeating itself today. In the absence of national immigration reform, some communities are taking matters into their own hands and implementing restrictive laws to deal with the increasing population of immigrants. For example, Farmers Branch, Texas, requires all renters to pay a five-dollar fee and demonstrate U.S. citizenship or legal immigration status to obtain an occupancy license from the city.

Immigration also has been restricted due to concerns over national security and dangerous ideologies. "Over time, the focus has shifted from anarchists to subversives, then to communists, and most recently to terrorists," Motomura writes. Current immigration laws make "noncitizens inadmissible and deportable based on terrorism, espionage, sabotage, or the potential for serious adverse foreign policy consequences" (pp. 38-39). Unfortunately, the border line between these legitimate concerns and the race, ethnicity, national origin, or religion of immigrants is easily blurred. The moral problem of racial profiling after 9/11 is another instance of history repeating itself.

How we "see" immigrants and the immigration process – as people fulfilling an implicit contract, creating a new affiliation with us, or beginning a transition to full citizenship – strongly influences how we treat immigrants.

Generally we have tended to view immigration, says Motomura, as something like an implicit contract that guarantees justice and fairness, but not equality, to immigrants. On this view, citizens and immigrants have expectations of one another: immigrants must agree to certain conditions for their entrance (e.g., not to become a public charge) and continued residence (e.g., not to leave the country for an extended period of time). Congress has the authority to establish such rules on behalf of citizens, and immigrants have little or no constitutional right to challenge them. This paradigm is unsatisfactory, Motomura argues, because it does not lead to true community. In reality the contract is not about fairness but about protection of American resources. "Immigration as contract is based on the sense that fairness and justice for lawful immigrants does not require us to treat them as the equals of citizens. Though immigration as a contract is a model of justice, it is a model of unequal justice that turns not on conferring equality itself, but on giving notice and protecting expectations" (p. 10).

On the immigration-as-affiliation view, immigrants can earn equality with citizens when they prove themselves to be productive members of the community by putting down roots, starting families, and paying taxes. However, some immigrants are not able to integrate fully into society because they do not have a certificate of citizenship. For many newcomers the process of getting their documentation is extremely long, complicated, and expensive. For immigrants from Mexico or China, for instance, the process leading to legal permanent residency and then to citizenship may take more than fifteen years.

The author defends a third perspective which says lawful immigrants should be treated as persons in transition to become citizens. They are "Americans in waiting," endowed with all the rights and responsibilities that position entails as they wait for documentation. He explains,

This is not a proposal to erase the line between

lawful immigrants and citizens. If a lawful immigrant does not apply for citizenship as soon as he is eligible, his status would be only the status that a lawful immigrant has today. He would no longer have the same ability as a citizen to sponsor a family member for immigration. He would have only the limited welfare eligibility for lawful immigrants under current law, and he could no longer vote.

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The essence of my proposal is to treat a new lawful immigrant more generously, but also to use that extra generosity to help him take full advantage of the opportunity to integrate into America. If he chooses not to naturalize, he would lose that better treatment. (p. 13)

This immigration-as-transition paradigm is not new. From 1795 through 1952, a declaration of intent was a prerequisite for naturalization in the United States. Noncitizens who filed the declaration benefited from several rights, including the right to vote and diplomatic protection like any other U.S. national. Motomura calls us back to the basics of earlier immigration history in America, when the nation integrated into its society lawful immigrants who were willing to be part of American life. This does not mean immigrants should be assimilated into American culture to the point that their identity is absorbed and destroyed. He envisions immigration as “a reciprocal process in which immigrants change America as much as America changes them, and yet a process that keeps this nation of immigrants one nation” (p. 164).

Many citizens rightly are concerned that lawful immigrants do not participate in the American way of life and do not support its governing principles. What would happen if they were treated like citizens, with all the rights and responsibilities that citizenship entails? Motomura believes they would fully participate in American community life. Finally, it would be dangerous not to fully include these lawful residents, for “democracy is impaired by having a permanent group of marginalized residents who are governed but cannot acquire a voice in governing” (p. 151). Indeed, the premise of the book rests on this paradox. On behalf of democratic inclusion, Motomura proposes to restore an immigration standard of seeing lawful immigrants as future citizens, a standard that had its birth in a period of American history when the democratic system was considerably less formal than today’s established system.

As a first generation immigrant from Colombia, I am the “American in waiting” Motomura describes. Perhaps this is why I believe he sheds some light on the immigration dilemmas that America confronts. Continuing to treat noncitizens as aliens will only increase economic and social disparity and fan prejudices against them. If we can begin to think of all lawful residents as equal, we may indeed become “one nation under God, indivisible, with liberty and justice for all.”



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