

Immigration and Migration

The United States emerged in the last third of the nineteenth century as an industrial powerhouse, producing goods that then circulated around the world. People in distant countries used American-made clothes, shoes, textiles, machines, steel, oil, rubber, and tools, among other finished products. They also ate foods grown in American soil and relied upon America's iron ore, coal, and lumber, all transported from the hinterlands to the great shipping ports by American-built railroads. This frenzy of production transformed the United States in the decades following the Civil War, making it the most dynamic economic engine in the world.

None of this could have happened without a work force that sewed the clothing, dug the coal, forged the steel, operated the railroads, and stoked the fires of the many thousands of factories, mills, mines, and workshops that spread over the United States. The industrialization of America stimulated the vast expansion of its own domestic business and agricultural sectors as well. Workers in factories and mines needed food, housing, and a range of consumer goods. As factory employment grew and the population expanded, businesses responded by selling their wares to the workers, enabling them to then go out and work and keep the economy on its course. Not limited to the Northeast, which had been the center of industry earlier in the nineteenth century, industrialization transformed America, in no small measure as a result of massive immigration.

Those newcomers came primarily from Europe and constituted the bulk of the laborers who made industrialization possible. Statistics tell part of the story. In the decade from 1871 until 1880 more than 2,800,000 arrived, while the following ten-year period brought in over 5,000,000. In the subsequent two decades well over thirteen million arrived, with the period from 1901 to 1910 being the single largest decade of immigration. Clearly with numbers like this immigration was a serious issue in American life and became the focus of much political debate and contention. These numbers have to be thought of in percentage terms as well. As a point of contrast, in 1850, the foreign born made up 9.7 percent of the American population; by 1890 that figure stood at 14.7 percent.

The story of immigration to the United States in the industrial era also should be thought of in terms of where the immigrants came from. In the 1870s migration tended to come primarily from central and northern Europe, the countries of Scandinavia, Germany, England, Ireland (which although part of Great Britain had a unique and separate immigration history), and the Austro-Hungarian Empire. By 1900 migration gradually shifted to the east and the south and most immigrants hailed from Italy, the Czarist empire, Roumania, and other places in southern and eastern Europe. Catholics predominated, with a significant influx of Eastern Orthodox also adding to America's religious diversity. Immigration of the industrial era also saw the size of America's Jewish population grow exponentially. In 1870 about 250,000 Jews lived in the United States, but the new migration that extended into the 1920s brought in an additional 3,000,000 Jews.

Not only Europeans made their way to the United States in these decades. Immigrants from Mexico, even from its more remote regions, began to arrive in the late nineteenth century, primarily to work on the railroads, and they created small enclaves as far north as Chicago before the beginning of the twentieth century. Women and men from Syria and Lebanon, mostly Christians, also arrived in the latter part of the nineteenth century. Few of them flocked to industrial work, but as peddlers and small shopkeepers they provided consumer goods to industrial workers and farmers, both native born and immigrant. Immigrants from the Punjab region, primarily Sikhs, arrived in the Pacific Northwest in the late 1800s as well, and they joined railroad crews and logging camps. Some became farmers. Small numbers of immigrants also came from the Philippines, Japan, and various islands of the Caribbean.

The two largest non-European immigrant groups in this period included French Canadians, streaming south into New England from Quebec and the Maritime Provinces, and the Chinese. The two groups resembled each other in some ways. They each gravitated to a specific geographic region in the United States, the former to New

England with its textile industry and the latter to California, and formed visible ethnic enclaves. But they had very different histories in the United States. French Canadian immigration was never restricted and even after the imposition of quotas in the 1920s, they could come and go as they chose across a largely porous border.

The Chinese story followed a very different course. The Chinese in fact were the only immigrants to ever be excluded specifically by nationality. When Congress enacted across-the-board immigration restriction in the 1920s, it did not exclude any one group. When Japanese immigration came to an end in 1908, it happened through a diplomatic agreement known as the Gentlemen's Agreement.

The history of the Chinese stands in a class of its own. Between the end of the Civil War and 1882, about 300,000 Chinese immigrants had entered the United States. Anti-Chinese sentiment had been running high in California since the 1850s, and in 1882 the United States Congress passed the first piece of immigration restriction, of any kind, in the history of the nation. The Chinese Exclusion Act barred Chinese immigrants from coming to the United States, although there were a few exempted categories, including students, merchants, and the children of naturalized citizens. The imposition of such a restriction ushered in a new era in American history, one in which the federal government moved, slowly, toward curtailing the uncapped flood of newcomers from abroad.

To many native-born Americans the influx of so many millions of foreigners, mostly Catholics and Jews, and most relatively poor and speakers of myriad languages, seemed threatening to the way of life they considered authentically American. A quick summary of the major developments of the years from the middle of the 1870s until 1900 shows how much the concern over immigration came to dominate national politics.

The trend toward government action vis-à-vis immigration may be said to have started with a US Supreme Court case in 1875, *Henderson v. the Mayor of New York*, as the opening salvo in a debate that raged in America over immigration. In that case the Court ruled that the various states could not regulate immigration individually from abroad as they chose, but that this power lay in the hands of Congress. Thus, the long-established practice of leaving immigration to the states it was overturned. Congress soon passed the first act of restriction, banning convicts and prostitutes from entering the United States. The first, and only, restriction of a specific group on the basis of national origin or race came in 1882 with the passage of a temporary Chinese Exclusion Act, which became permanent in 1900 by congressional act. In 1885 Congress passed the Foran Act, which prohibited the migration of contract labor, that is, women and men hired abroad and whose fare had been paid by an American employer. In order for these restrictions and regulations to work Congress had to create a bureaucracy and in 1891, under the aegis of the Treasury Department, it founded the Bureau of Immigration. So, too, in 1892 the immigrant-receiving station at Ellis Island opened its doors (with smaller stations in Boston, Philadelphia, Baltimore, New Orleans, Galveston, and San Francisco) making visible the regulatory process.

The 1890s saw not only the march toward regulation coordinated by the government, but also the emergence of organized citizen action against immigration. In 1895 a group of elite women and men in Boston founded the Immigration Restriction League with the goal of preserving the historic ethnic make-up of America—as defined by this group. They pushed for a literacy test, which passed in Congress in 1896, although President Grover Cleveland vetoed the measure. In the early twentieth century during the presidency of Theodore Roosevelt, a few more categories of potential immigrants got added to the list of the undesirables, including the “feeble-minded,” “imbeciles,” carriers of various diseases, and anarchists.

This last category, anarchists, had a very specific origin, and tells us much about the rise of industrial America. In 1901 Leon Czolgosz, the son of immigrants and an anarchist, assassinated President William McKinley. This shocking event stoked American fears about political turbulence and radicalism, which they saw as a threat to the basic stability of the nation, and one associated with foreigners. As more and more Americans worked for industrial employers who could force their employees to endure whatever conditions the boss wanted, at

whatever rate of pay the market could bear, more and more workers sought forms of action and organization to address their plight.

One event from each decade of this era can demonstrate the escalation of labor and radical action. In 1877—dubbed “the year of violence”—tens of thousands of workers in Pennsylvania, Ohio, Maryland, West Virginia, and elsewhere shut down the rail system for more than forty days in the Great Railway Strike. Local police across the strike regions used force to quell the strikes, and President Rutherford B. Hayes called in the Army to assist in this effort. A decade later, on May 4, 1886, a gathering in Haymarket Square in Chicago ended when a bomb was tossed into a group of police officers trying to break up the crowd. The police fired into the crowd and in the process created a group of martyrs to the cause of labor. In 1892 a strike at the Homestead, Pennsylvania, steel mills of Carnegie Steel pitted the police and armed Pinkerton detectives against workers who had taken over the plant.

While immigrants alone did not participate in these strikes and in the labor and radical movements, many Americans in fact equated the two, and growing numbers of them and their political representatives were convinced that continued immigration harmed the country, threatening the coherence and stability of the nation.

Not all Americans, however, put the blame on the immigrants; some saw unbridled capitalism as the source of the social unrest. While some in the Progressive movement harbored anti-immigrant sentiment, many in the movement believed that the fault lay with the system and not with the women and men who had come to the United States to make a living and who fueled the nation’s industrial output and made its wealth possible.

In 1890 a New York journalist, himself an immigrant from Denmark, Jacob Riis, castigated the greed of landlords and employers for immiserating the lives of the city’s cigar workers, garment shop employees, and other laborers. His expose *How the Other Half Lives*, on conditions among the poor in New York City, complete with photographs, was widely read and led to legislative action in New York. A year earlier two women in Chicago, Jane Addams and Ellen Gates Starr, had opened up a settlement house, Hull House, in the packinghouse district where large numbers of Polish, Italian, and eastern European Jews lived and labored. Starr and Addams experimented with various ways to both improve the lives of the immigrant poor and advocate for them. Settlement houses like Hull House sprang up in Boston, Baltimore, New York, Buffalo, Milwaukee, and in all the large cities to which immigrants had gone, drawn by the magnet of the jobs available in American industry. Those immigrant workers and the others across the country played a pivotal role in providing the labor necessary to create industrial America.

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