

RETURN TO THE MELTING POT: ETHNICITY IN THE UNITED STATES IN THE EIGHTIES^c



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In 1986, we, Americans, will be observing the centennial of the Statue of Liberty and beyond that, in 1992, the centennial of Ellis Island. Both of these national monuments are intimately associated with the story of immigration. To the immigrants arriving in New York harbor, "Liberty Enlightening the World" appeared to be welcoming them with her torch raised in greeting. If the Statue of Liberty seemed to symbolize the "Promise of America," Ellis Island represented a harsher reality. Its establishment as an immigrant receiving station signified the tightening of federal controls over immigration. For immigrants arriving in steerage (those in first and second class were processed on board ship), Ellis Island was a purgatory. Would they be admitted to the Promised Land? Fear, anxiety, bewilderment were their emotions as they made their way through the bureaucratic maze. Only a small percentage were

denied admission, but for them and their families it was a tragedy. Some 3,000 committed suicide on Ellis Island over the years. No wonder it was known in many tongues as the "Isle of Tears."¹

President Ronald Reagan appointed the Statue of Liberty-Ellis Island Centennial Commission in May 1982 to raise funds for the restoration of both monuments which had been allowed to deteriorate shamefully. The Commission is composed of business leaders and celebrities with Lee A. Iacocca, chairman of the Chrysler Corporation, as chairman. We can expect the centennial observances to have a celebratory, triumphal quality with little attention to the chiaroscuro of the immigrant experience. Undoubtedly the fanfare and media hype connected with these events will focus public attention on our immigrant roots as a nation. Ironically this comes at a time when immigration and its consequences have once again become issues of intense debate among Americans.

Since the enactment of the Immigration Law of 1965, the influx of newcomers has not only increased substantially, but has also changed dramatically in character. Whereas in the fifties the number of immigrants averaged about 250,000 per year, in the 1970s the arrivals sharply increased, culminating in 1980 with over 800,000. In addition to the regular immigration, the latter figure reflected a wave of refugees from Cuba and southeast Asia. It did not, however, include the "illegal" or undocumented immigrants whose numbers were estimated to be 600,000 or more each year. Alarm, particularly regarding the flow of illegal aliens, resulted in the creation by the Congress in 1978 of the Select Commission on Immigration and Refugee Policy. After detailed study, rivaling that of the Dillingham Commission of the early twentieth century, the Select Commission submitted its report and recommendations in March 1981. The particular reforms proposed by the commission tended to be on the whole reasonable and liberal. Efforts to translate these recommendations into legislation, however, have been frustrated by the political volatility of the immigration issue.²

Certainly immigration for the United States is an issue which must be addressed in public discussion and policy. However, if one listens closely to the debates in the Congress, the press, and on the streets, one hears disturbing overtones of the nativism of yesteryear. Immigrants are accused of taking jobs away from American workers; they are said to constitute a burden on the country's social services; they are charged with contributing to criminality and immorality. Less explicit is the aversion to the "new" immigrants because of their racial and cultural differences. Since the late sixties, the predominant sources of the newcomers have been Mexico, the Phillipines, Cuba, Korea, and China/Tai-

wan. Dark-skinned and black-haired, the Latinos and Asians have transformed the racial character of cities such as Los Angeles, New York, and Miami. Their visibility has triggered deep-seated prejudices.³

Once again American society is confronted with the need to incorporate immigrants who appear to be exotic and alien. In the 1960s the Melting Pot, judged to be an obsolete symbol of a coercive and unsuccessful Americanization policy, was relegated to the junkheap of history. Now in the eighties, it has been retrieved and refurbished. The need to assimilate the "new" immigrants as well as doubts about their capacity to be assimilated have become common themes in public discussions. The Hispanic population (comprised of such diverse ethnic groups as Mexicans, Puerto Ricans, and Cubans) because of its dense concentration and strong attachment to its language has been identified as a particular threat to the "cultural unity" of the United States. The issue of bilingualism in public education has become something of a lightning rod for highly charged rhetoric about the dangers of immigration from Latin America. Critics evoke fantasies of a Spanish-speaking "Quebec" or a Belgium-like linguistic conflict, culminating in separatist movements and even civil war. A movement is afoot led by former U.S. Senator S. I. Hayakawa to enact a constitutional amendment which would make English the official language of the United States. These reactions, verging at times on the hysterical, are, in my judgment, expressive of a neo-nativist mentality.⁴

As so often in the past, immigration is the touchstone of the climate of opinion in the United States. The neo-nativism of the eighties is indicative of a resurgence of nationalism and conservatism. This can best be understood within the framework of John Higham's brilliant analysis of the cycles of American nativism.⁵ Sentiment toward immigrants has fluctuated, according to Higham, depending on how Americans have felt about their country and the future. In times of confidence they tended to be optimistic about the capacity of the United States to absorb newcomers; in times of doubt, anti-immigrant feelings flourished. During the 1970s, the United States suffered several humiliating reversals which cast a shadow over its professed leadership of the "free world." Defeat in Vietnam, the Iranian hostage incident, the futile boycott of the 1980 Olympic games, all attested to limits on American power. Meanwhile, Japan's economic ascendancy shook American belief in the preeminence of our industry and technology. High unemployment rates, inflation, and economic uncertainty eroded the psychological and material bases of Americans' sense of well-being. A crisis of confidence in their institutions and values assailed Americans. Ronald Reagan's flagwaving patriotism, hardline anti-Communism, and moral conservatism represent a "counterreformation," a reassertion of

"traditional" values. Meanwhile, the "Moral Majority" has rallied behind such issues as opposition to abortion, gay rights, gun control, and the Equal Rights Amendment. The revival of a Cold War mentality abroad and a crusading moralism at home have combined to create pressures for conformity to prevailing ideas and mores. Only in this perspective can one understand the sudden *voltafaccia* from the ethnic revival of the seventies to the return to the melting pot of the eighties.

The balance of this essay will sketch major developments at both the intellectual and societal levels which embodied changing attitudes toward ethnic diversity during the past two decades. The "rediscovery of ethnicity" in the sixties followed hard upon a period of intense pressures for national unity engendered by World War II and the "Cold War." Pearl Harbor had blighted a budding movement for cultural democracy. Inspired by the populist ideology of the New Deal, writers, artists, educators, and scholars had discovered the country's essential diversity, regional, racial, and ethnic, as a source of beauty and strength. Louis Adamic, himself an immigrant from Slovenia, was the most eloquent advocate of this vision of America as a "nation of nations." During the thirties, Marcus Lee Hansen, Theodore Blegen, Carl Wittke, and George Stephenson produced the first substantial works in American immigrant history. Meanwhile, Caroline Ware and Oscar Handlin made groundbreaking contributions to the writing of the history of urban, industrial America from an ethnic perspective.⁶

The entry of the United States into the war in December 1941 radically altered the cultural politics of the nation. Differences were now to be subordinated to the common purpose of defeating the Axis powers and then to containing the threat of Soviet Communism. Cultural as well as political deviations from the American norm were suspect as possibly subversive and Communist-inspired. Unqualified loyalty to the United States was once again made the criterion of Americanism. The postwar economic boom and its flood of consumer goods appeared to insure the triumph of a homogeneous, middle-class society. The dominant interpretations of American history in the fifties emphasized consensus as the genius of the American political tradition. Americans, it was said, had generally agreed on basic values; differences of class, race, and ethnicity had not been the source of fundamental conflicts. In an expansion of Turner's frontier thesis, David Potter found the key to the American national character in the material abundance enjoyed by this "people of plenty." Will Herberg advanced a "triple melting pot" model, Protestant, Catholic, Jewish, but one within which all, regardless of religious persuasion, embraced a common belief in the American way of life. **The uprooted** by Oscar Handlin celebrated the terrible but ultimately benign power of the American environment to divest immi-

grants of their Old World cultures and to transform them into "new men". In the fifties, the melting pot went unchallenged.⁷

As a graduate student at the time I shared with my peers a claustrophobic sense of the conservative orthodoxy which dominated historical studies. It was with a sense of liberation that we greeted John Higham's essay, "Beyond Consensus: The Historian as Moral Critic," in which he called upon the historian to deal with questions of good and evil, and to participate sympathetically in the value conflicts of the past.⁸ None of us anticipated how quickly we would be swept up in the maelstrom of conflict and turmoil which was to characterize the sixties in the United States. Society suddenly seemed to fragment along fault lines of race, generation, class, ethnicity, and gender. Wars in Vietnam and the urban ghettos, student movements and youth culture, feminism and gay rights, pitted American against American in violent confrontations. How could belief in the homogeneity, goodness, and wisdom of the United States survive the traumas of that bloody decade? With loss of faith in the American Creed and loss of confidence in the Anglo-American establishment, the essential pluralism of the society manifested itself. The lid was off, and all those groups which felt oppressed, stifled, excluded from power and history asserted themselves. Liberation movements among blacks, Chicanos, Indians, women, gays, and white ethnic groups proclaimed their identities and demanded their distinctive histories.⁹

In the journalistic idiom of the day, "lower middle class ethnics" were the sons and daughters of the last great wave of immigrants, particularly those from southern and eastern Europe. Largely still blue-collar workers, they nourished historic resentments against a dominant culture which stigmatized their parents as "inferior breeds," and still largely relegated them to the status of "assistant Americans". In the sixties, these feelings were exacerbated by social policies which favored blacks and other racial minorities over the Euro-American ethnics. To the "white ethnics" it appeared that black demands were directed at "their" schools, "their" jobs, "their" neighborhoods, and that they were being forced to compensate blacks for a history of oppression in which they had had no part. Because of this "backlash", they were denounced as "fascist pigs" and racists. By the 1970s, "white ethnicity" had been rediscovered by foundations, government agencies, and universities as a problem to be addressed.¹⁰

Michael Novak's **The Rise of the Unmeltable Ethnics** became the manifesto of the white ethnic movement.¹¹ Novak, a third-generation Slovak American, viewed the persistence of ethnicity as a vital and creative force in American life. He juxtaposed the emotional, familycentered character of ethnic Catholics to the sterile individualism

and nationalism of the WASPS. The real antagonists of the white ethnics were the Anglo-Americans who dominated the cultural and economic life of the country. More polemic than history or sociology, Novak's book was highly controversial, but for many second and third generation ethnics reading it it was a liberating experience. Novak told them it was ok to be ethnic. Critics of the white ethnic movement who dismissed it as a pipedream concocted by "romantic intellectuals" misread one of the major social phenomena of the decade. It is true that white ethnicity never became in itself an autonomous political force. The liberal strategy put forward by the American Jewish Committee, among others, which envisioned a populist coalition of urban working-class blacks and white ethnics based on their common interests largely failed. The social issues of the seventies pertaining to family, sexual mores, drugs, and race proved more potent among the traditional-minded Euro-ethnics. In 1972 and again in 1980, such issues split large segments of white ethnic voters from their historic allegiance to the Democratic Party. The New Deal coalition crumbled under the impact of these highly emotional moral conflicts.¹²

Regardless of political outcomes, there was no doubt about the heightened ethnic consciousness among Americans in the 1970s. The "Black Pride" movement legitimated the affirmation of particular identities, and soon buttons and bumper stickers proclaimed "Kiss Me, I'm Finnish", "Ukrainian is Beautiful", and "Slovak Power". The new pluralism did not so much create a new consciousness as sanction the expression of group identities which had been long repressed. The "ethnic revival" manifested itself in manifold ways: the revival of traditional festivals; a resurgence of old organizations and the proliferation of new ones, an increased interest in ancestral history, culture, and language. Alex Haley's **Roots** gave a tremendous impetus to the family history movement which was already well underway. Genealogy which had been largely the domain of socialclimbers in search of coats-of-arms, became a quest for real forebears, whether noble or ignoble. The American tourist's itinerary now frequently included a pilgrimage to the native village in Ireland, Galicia, or Sicily. The bicentennial observances of American independence in 1976 more often than *not* took the form of celebrations of immigrant heritages.¹³

Beginning with Black Studies programs, the movement for ethnic studies in the schools made headway in the seventies. In 1972, the Congress established the Ethnic Heritage Studies Program declaring that its purpose was to "afford students opportunities to learn about the nature of their own cultural heritage, and to study the contributions of the cultural heritages of the other ethnic groups of the Nation." Although appropriations for the program during the seventies were

modest and ceased entirely under the Reagan administration, its symbolic importance ought not to be underestimated. For the first time, the federal government recognized that America was a multiethnic society and the positive value of understanding "about the differing and unique contributions to the national heritage made by each ethnic group." Despite the cutbacks in funding, teaching about American history and society from a multicultural perspective continues in many classrooms.¹⁴

Buoyed by this popular tide of interest, ethnic and immigration history flourished in the past decade. This academic scholarship, however, was not simply a reflection of the social movements. In fact, its origins anticipated the emergence of white ethnicity as a public phenomenon. In 1963, Nathan Glazer, who had been writing insightful pieces about American pluralism in the fifties, coauthored with Daniel Patrick Moynihan, a comparative study of ethnic groups in New York City entitled **Beyond the Melting Pot**.¹⁵ Citing the persistence of these collectivities, they declared: "The point about the melting pot is that it did not happen." Contrary to expectations, ethnicity continued to be a major force in the life of the metropolis. The following year, Milton Gordon's **Assimilation in American Life** sought to explain this persistence by offering a more complex theory of assimilation, making a basic distinction between cultural assimilation and structural assimilation. Also in 1964, my critique of **The Uprooted** maintained that immigrant cultures were more enduring and influential than had been supposed; hence the need to study the variety of patterns of accommodation particular to different immigrant groups. Joshua Fishman's **Language loyalty in the United States** was a major contribution to a new paradigm for American history.¹⁶ Rather than passively accepting assimilation, immigrant communities had struggled vigorously and with some success to maintain their mother tongues and cultures. By the mid-sixties, a reevaluation of the significance of immigration was clearly underway. Yet as late as 1969, it could be argued that ethnicity was a neglected dimension of American history and that "the study of immigration has been and remains an underdeveloped field of historical inquiry."¹⁷

A variety of influences contributed to the burgeoning of ethnic and immigration history in the seventies, including the "new social history." Inspired by ideologies of the New Left and liberation movements, a younger generation of historians set out to document the experiences of the inarticulate, the powerless, the subaltern elements in American history. To understand the consciousness of workers, immigrants, women, blacks; to perceive the world through their eyes; to interpret their behavior through their values. Such "history from the

bottom up" required new sources and research techniques; oral history and quantitative analysis were employed to create data for those who had left few records. But it was also discovered that the documentation for the non-elite populations was much richer than had been dreamed. The success of the Immigration History Research Center of the University of Minnesota in collecting published and archival materials for the southern and eastern European immigrant groups inspired other institutions to emulate its example. Meanwhile, the number of practitioners in the field increased dramatically; founded by a handful of scholars in 1965, the Immigration History Society grew to over five hundred members. In 1981, the Society founded the **Journal of American Ethnic History**. Old ethnic historical societies like the Polish American Italian Historical Association were created. One of the qualities of the "new ethnic history" was its engaged and empathic character. Many historians turned to the study of their own immigrant backgrounds, and while for the most part avoiding the pitfalls of filiopiety, approached their subjects with empathy and insight. The rapprochement between ethnic academics and ethnic publics has been not the least accomplishment of pluralist history.¹⁸

The internationalization of migration history has been one of the most significant developments in the field. While American scholars were turning with renewed passion to ethnic topics, their colleagues in countries of emigration were discovering the importance of mass exodus for their own histories. The latter phenomenon can be dated from Frank Thistlethwaite's seminal paper, "Migration From Europe Overseas in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries," presented at the International Congress of Historical Sciences in Stockholm in 1960. In the years which followed, projects in Uppsala, Turku, Cracow, Zagreb, Rome, and elsewhere produced an extensive literature on the causes and backgrounds of the trans-Atlantic migrations. The resulting interaction between American and European scholars has provided a strong stimulus to ethnic and immigration history. Finnish-American collaboration is a prime example of this fruitful relationship. The series of joint symposia on Finnish migration to North America, the exchange of publications and primary sources, the compilation of guides and bibliographies to materials, and the expanded research opportunities for scholars, have contributed to an enrichment of scholarship in both countries.¹⁹

In retrospect, two decades of work in ethnic and immigration history has resulted in an impressive record of solid achievement. Simply in terms of volume, more doctoral dissertations were written in this field during the seventies than in all preceding decades com-

bined. Literally hundreds of monographs have been published on a vast array of topics, while the articles number in the thousands. The latter have appeared in such leading journals as the **American Historical Review** as well as in specialized publications. Whereas fifteen years ago, one was fortunate to find even a few volumes on any particular ethnic group, say the Finnish Americans, now there are shelves and even libraries of writings. This recent scholarship has been summed up in two comprehensive works: **The Harvard Encyclopedia of American Ethnic Groups** and **They chose Minnesota**.²⁰ Regarding the quality of this scholarship, one is impressed by how much of it is free of pieties and orthodoxies, by its sophistication of theory and methodology, and by its sensitivity to the particularities of ethnic group experiences. Unfortunately not all scholars have had the requisite linguistic and cultural skills, but the best work is steeped in a deep understanding of pre-migration history in the Old World. Most fundamentally, the concept of ethnicity has become one of the basic categories for historical analysis. In short, pluralism is generally accepted as the paradigm for the American past.

Despite its indisputable accomplishments, pluralist history has of late received harsh criticism from unexpected quarters. Critics, sometimes confusing the scholarship of ethnicity with ethnicity as a social movement, have charged that the latter was largely the creation of the former. The attacks have come basically from two sources: one Marxist; the other nationalist. The former contend that the emphasis on ethnic identity is a smokescreen for racism and other reactionary politics and obscures the realities of social class, while the latter accuse the pluralists of exaggerating the importance of ethnicity, fomenting disunity and denying the existence of a common American nationality. Such critics agree in dismissing the "ethnic revival" of the seventies as largely factitious, a media event contrived by ethnic ideologues. From the late seventies on, a growing chorus of criticism has challenged the pluralist paradigm. Among these critics are some who were pioneers in the field of ethnic studies. Nathan Glazer, disenchanted by the politics of ethnicity, has speculated whether the assimilation model does not after all have much to recommend it. Alineated by the "excesses" of the new ethnicity, Arthur Mann argued that the common culture of Americans has been much more important than the ethnic differences among them.²¹ John Higham, one of the founders of the "new ethnic history," has become increasingly uncomfortable with the divisive tendencies of ethnicity. In 1982, he cheerfully proclaimed that "the ethnic revival is over, and an era in ethnic studies has come to an end." In a recent paper, he urged historians to go "beyond pluralism" and address the "grand theme" of the making of a people in America.²²

While not discounting the validity of certain criticisms of the new ethnic history, yet these attacks on pluralist scholarship appear to originate more in anxiety over the political consequences of ethnic diversity rather than objections regarding the validity of pluralism as a framework for interpreting American history. They are symptomatic of the growing fear of cultural and racial conflict posed by the "new" immigration and militant ethnicity. As one who has been involved both as a scholar and advocate in the ethnic movements of the past two decades, I must admit to a certain degree of disillusionment with the outcome. Our aspirations to create a pluralistic society with a greater degree of freedom and equality have not been fully realized. Ethnic communities have remained excessively self-centered, preoccupied with their own agendas, and unwilling to cooperate for the common good. Too often, their traditional values have been enlisted in the service of reactionary politics. In sum, the new ethnicity did not become the basis for a new progressive coalition which some of us had hoped for.

Notwithstanding such political disappointment, there is no question in my mind but that the ethnic movement has been on the whole a salutary influence in American society. The power of Anglo-American conformity has been broken, and will not, I think, be restored. We are all more comfortable with our varied origins today than was true in the 1950s. Certainly ethnic pride is healthier than ethnic shame. This is not to say that prejudice and bigotry have been wiped out in the United States. Still, while the growing mood of neo-nativism is distressing, one should still recognize that the "new" immigrants often receive a more hospitable welcome and ready acceptance than was true of immigrants at the turn of the century. In a country as large and complex as ours, it is not surprising that there are contradictory tendencies at work.

Regardless of how one might feel about the idea of a pluralistic society, I do not think it can be gainsaid that ethnicity is still a powerful force in the America of the eighties. In response to a question regarding their ancestry posed by the 1980 census, 83 percent of Americans reported at least one specific nationality or country of origin of their forebears. Only 6 percent replied simply "American."²³ While the significance of these responses is unclear, they do at a minimum indicate an awareness of Old World antecedents. The findings of social science research of the past decade also point to the continuing saliency of ethnic identities and affiliations for many Americans.²⁴

If politics in a democratic society are a barometer of popular feelings, then the current presidential campaign further attests to the potency of ethnic appeals. The candidacy of the Reverend Jesse Jackson is its most dramatic expression. However, the black-Jewish controversy swirling about the statements and positions of Jackson is a further

indication of powerful ethnic feelings. The manner in which the candidates have tried to outdo each other in their pro-Israel stands attests to the political clout of American Jews. In Texas, New York, California, and Florida, where they form important ethnic blocs, Hispanics have been courted by presidential aspirants. President Reagan's much-publicized journey to the village from which his greatgrandfather left for America is not unrelated to the fact that there are an estimated 40 million Irish Americans. Many of the social issues which will be debated in the presidential campaign such as abortion, prayer in the schools, and the equal rights amendment, touch on moral values which are embedded in ethnic cultures.

Beyond politics, the search for identity goes on in American society. There is an undiminished interest in family history, ethnic festivals, and heritage projects. Unlike Canada and Australia, the United States has not officially espoused a policy of multiculturalism. Rather, after a brief flirtation with pluralism, Washington appears to have returned to the melting pot. However, in the private sector ethnic diversity continues to flourish. The "return to the melting pot," another shift in the political and ideological climate of the United States, ought not to be mistaken with the underlying social reality. For good or for ill, ethnicity in its changing modes has proven itself not to be a transitory phenomenon, but a persisting dimension of American society. In the years ahead, I anticipate no waning of interest in the study of ethnic and immigration history. Rather, the saliency of immigration and ethnic diversity as pressing issues of public policy, against the backdrop of the centennial observances of the Statue of Liberty and Ellis Island, will sustain a high level of involvement and ferment in this field of historical study.

NOTES

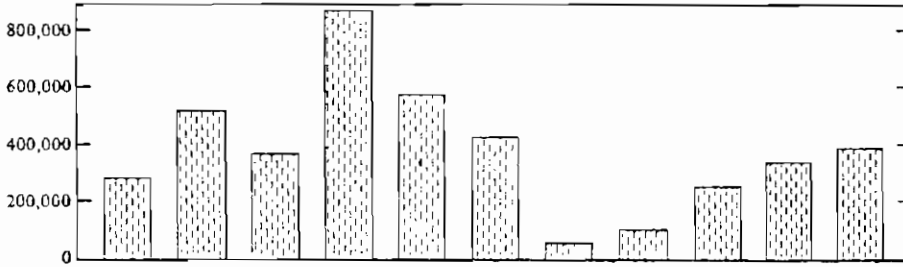
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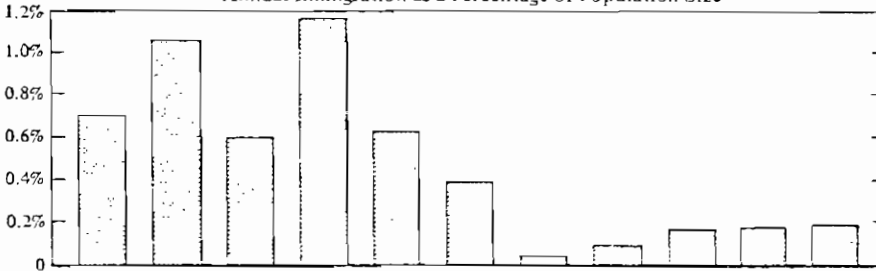
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LEVELS AND RATES OF U.S. IMMIGRATION, 1870-1979

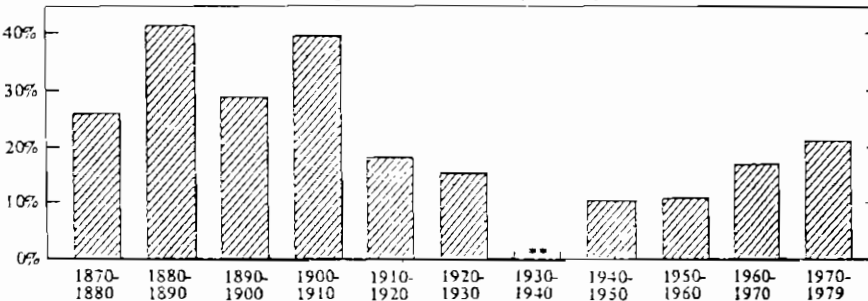
Average Annual Immigration



Annual Immigration as a Percentage of Population Size



Decennial Net Migration as a Percentage of Population Growth*



*Decennial net migration as a percentage of population growth equals total decennial population increase minus natural population increase (births and deaths) divided by total population increase.

**Emigration exceeded immigration by 85,000.

SOURCE: Select Commission on Immigration and Refugee Policy, *U.S. Immigration Policy and the National Interest* (Washington, D.C., 1981).

MAJOR ANCESTRY GROUPS OF THE UNITED STATES

Percent Distribution of European (Excluding Spaniard) Ancestry Groups With 1,000,000 or More Persons by Region: 1980

Ancestry group	Number 1,000	Percent distribution				
		Total	North- east	North Central	South	West
English.....	49 598	100	16	23	40	21
German.....	49 224	100	19	41	22	18
Irish.....	40 166	100	24	26	32	18
French ¹	12 892	100	26	27	27	19
Italian.....	12 184	100	57	16	13	14
Scottish.....	10 049	100	19	23	35	24
Polish.....	8 228	100	41	38	11	10
Dutch.....	6 304	100	18	35	26	20
Swedish.....	4 345	100	15	43	12	31
Norwegian.....	3 454	100	7	55	7	31
Russian a.s.c. ¹	1 781	100	48	17	16	19
Czech.....	1 892	100	18	49	18	15
Hungarian.....	1 777	100	39	33	13	14
Welsh.....	1 665	100	25	27	22	27
Danish.....	1 518	100	9	38	10	43
Portuguese.....	1 024	100	50	3	6	41

NOTE: Includes persons who reported single and multiple ancestry group(s). Persons who reported a multiple ancestry group may be included in more than one category.

¹Excludes French Basque.

²Includes persons who reported as "Russian," "Great Russian," "Georgian," and other related European or Asian groups; see "Definitions and Explanations" for more details.

SOURCE: U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1980 Census of Population: Supplementary Report, Ancestry of the Population by State: 1980 (Washington, D.C., 1983).

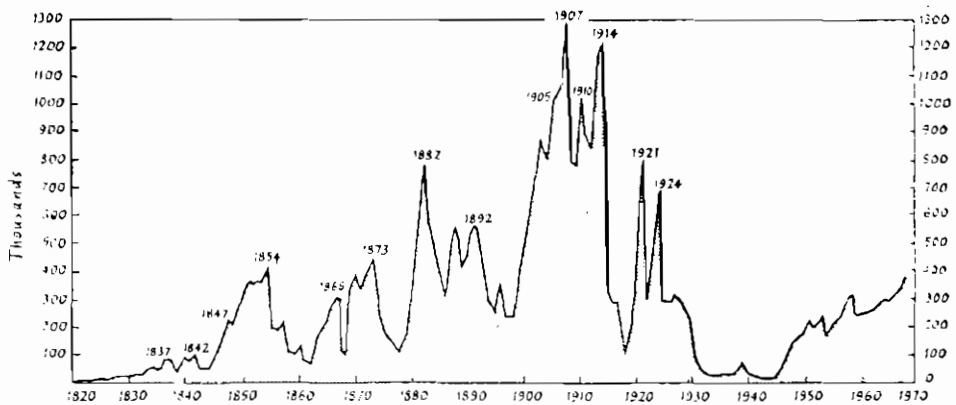


Diagram 2. American immigration: 1820-1970

SOURCE: Philip Taylor, *The Distant Magnet: European Immigration to the U.S.A.* (New York, 1971), 103.