

# THE IDEOLOGY OF UNRESTRICTED IMMIGRATION

Chilton Williamson Jr.

The late Julian Simon, who believed in the benefits of virtually unlimited immigration to America (and elsewhere), conceded in his book *The Ultimate Resource*, “I don’t claim that [immigration] is necessary; we can live quite nicely without it.” Similarly, the late Ben Wattenberg, author of *The First Universal Nation*, admitted that immigration has “never been popular” with Americans, from the early seventeenth century down to the present. In the early 1990s a CBS poll reported that two-thirds of the respondents who wanted immigration quotas reduced preferred they be abolished altogether, and that 20 percent of the American public favored summarily returning immigrants to their countries of origin. No polling done in the past twenty years that I know of suggests that Americans feel different today.

Whether the United States should allow any immigration at all is a question that has

never been considered by our national government, but rather how much immigration, what kind of immigrants, and from where. Yet only after that existential question had been framed and carefully considered should the immigration issue have been passed on to the stage of detailed policymaking. The American Founders believed immigration to have been quite as unnecessary, and indeed undesirable, as the American majority does today.

From the founding of the republic in 1789 to the middle of the nineteenth century, immigration was chiefly a matter for municipal and state governments to decide, which they did on an ad hoc basis, and from 1865 to the fourth quarter of the nineteenth century mass immigration seemed more a natural force than a considered national policy, though in fact it was demanded by the new postwar industrialists lobbying Washington for unlimited cheap labor from

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Europe. Nevertheless, the vast demographic and social transformation of America between the Civil War and World War I elicited responses that remain the basis for thinking about immigration today.

The various elements of the Progressive movement divided on the question of immigration, some of them advocating restriction, others emphasizing Americanization and assimilation. Meanwhile, mass immigration to America continued down to 1914, and resumed again after the war. In *Immigration Restriction* (1927), Roy L. Garis, a well-known historian of immigration active in the restrictionist cause in the early twentieth century, noted that, when the national quota system was being installed and refined by a series of congressional acts, “The amazing thing about the immigration problem is the likeness of the arguments of one generation to the contentions of another. The point of view and prejudices of many sons are like unto their fathers.”

Ninety years later Garis’s observation still holds, largely because Americans in our day, as in his, prefer to think about immigration piecemeal rather than as a whole, in terms of its specific and disconnected benefits and liabilities, no doubt because they are easier to formulate and discuss in ordinary democratic discourse than are broad historical and philosophical considerations. (Aristotle comments in the *Politics* on the justice of the Athenians’ refusal of immigrants from a less happy society, on the ground that there is nothing to prevent them from re-creating Athens for themselves, at home.)

America, like every other modern Western country, is a technocratic and positivist society confident that “technique,” in government and the social sciences as well as in industrial production and the management of economies, can effectively resolve every national problem. But why, if immigration

really is unnecessary to the welfare of the United States, and as it is demonstrably unpopular with a large majority of Americans, need we debate the matter further? In a democracy, *vox populi* should have been heeded long ago.

Since polls register near-unanimity about immigration to a degree that is rarely if ever achieved on matters of crucial national importance, the response of democratic politicians should be to acknowledge the popular consensus and respect it. Instead they prefer to treat that consensus as mere irrational, ignorant, and even sinister preference: insufficient basis for a national immigration policy, which, they insist, must be determined by a developed technocratic and moral construct of “experts.”

Their insistence on positivist considerations compels the restrictionist camp to formulate complex and sophisticated policy rationales of its own, as the sociologist Henry Pratt Fairchild observed its historical counterparts doing a century ago. Similarly, critics of liberal immigration policy have spent the past thirty years renovating and refining arguments developed by their predecessors early in the twentieth century, and discovering and inventing a number of new-sounding ones. This explains why the majority of recent books and serious essays in this period have been the work of anti-immigrationists, while the defenders of immigration have commonly restricted themselves to brief journalistic polemics and articles in the popular magazines.

Sophisticated people, no matter what they think about immigration, cannot overlook the simplemindedness of Donald Trump’s remarks on immigration, tossed off with his characteristic air of bravado and casual defiance, during the past primary season. Trump does not, indeed, appear to have studied the immigration issue in depth, or at all. That

is exactly why what he has to say about it resonates as strongly as it does with significant portions of the electorate. What Trump has really been saying is: “To hell with all these excuses for why illegal immigrants are still crossing our borders in droves. Why they can’t be deported once they’re here, or encouraged to self-deport. We the People don’t have to give You People in Washington reasons why we won’t tolerate illegal immigration any longer, and why we don’t want America to be transformed, by them or by legal immigration, or anything else for that matter. WE DON’T WANT ANY SUCH THING AND WE ARE THE VOTERS TO WHOM YOU ARE CONSTITUTIONALLY RESPONSIBLE.” That is not a calibrated “policy” argument, of course: it is a demand for comprehensive action. It is also, in a democracy, all the justification for restriction that is necessary—the more so because Americans do indeed have their practical and moral reasons to resist immigration, and eminently sensible ones at that.

The argument that the United States does not need immigration and indeed would be better off without it shocks many Americans today, yet it was commonplace, if not universal, in the early days of the Republic.

How, when, and why immigration became the superego of the American conscience, and how immigration advanced from grudging tolerance to national myth, and from myth to mystique, make for a long and complicated story. I believe the myth developed concurrently with American power and pride, from republican self-consciousness to imperial self-celebration. Its fortunes have tended to rise with America’s nationalist and imperialist ambitions and to decline as they lapsed. Broadly speaking, four main currents have nourished immigrationist (that is, ideological) enthusiasm over the past two cen-

turies: patriotic self-congratulation, French radicalism, imperialism, and now globalism and multiculturalism.

For purposes of convenience, the history of immigration to the North American colonies and the United States may be divided into eight periods. The first, beginning with the earliest European settlements, extends to 1783, by which time (as R. Mayo Smith, a professor of political economy and social science at Columbia University, wrote several generations ago) “the state was established, and any further additions to the population had little influence in changing its form or the language and customs of the people.”

In the second period (1783–1820), an average of ten thousand immigrants per year arrived in the United States.

The third (1820–60) was an era of considerable immigration, mostly Catholics from Ireland and Germany, and it was in this period that the American nativist movement was born with the Know-Nothing Party and the Native American Association of the United States. In the late 1820s the federal government began compiling statistics relative to immigration, and by the 1850s nativism had become a powerful political force in opposition to an idealistic and democratist one.

The sectional crisis that culminated in the War Between the States necessarily halted immigration, but between 1865 and World War I vast numbers of immigrants arrived from central, eastern, and southern Europe, among them many Jews and even more Catholics. On the West Coast, the arrival of Chinese, Japanese, and other Asian peoples helped provoke the powerful reaction after the First World War that led eventually to the national origins system as it was incorporated in the Quota Acts, which, aided by the Great Depression, virtually suspended immigration to America until shortly before

the outbreak of war on the Continent, when the United States admitted a substantial number of refugees from the Third Reich.

But in the two decades between the end of World War II and 1965, American immigration policy changed drastically, beginning with the refugee and “displaced persons” legislation and culminating in the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965, which replaced the national origins system that had favored immigration from Europe with an officially nondiscriminatory one that emphasized family reunification. As a result, between 1965 and the present day tens or scores of millions of immigrants, illegal and legal, poured into the United States from the Third World, while Congress and the executive branch of the federal government looked on as the country was transformed into a multicultural nation.

Supporters of continued mass immigration in the twenty-first century defend it by arguing its supposed economic benefits and the cultural blessings of “diversity.” Yet colonial Americans thought economic considerations unimportant or irrelevant, ethnic diversity undesirable, and religious orthodoxy essential, while the separate colonial authorities sought to bar immoral and mentally defective immigrants from their colonies. Owing to the efforts of colonial legislatures entrusted by Parliament with matters of immigration and naturalization, all thirteen American colonies succeeded in preserving their particular individuality while creating a collective demographic entity that by the time of the Revolution was recognizable as the American people.

Thomas Paine’s desire, expressed in his pamphlet *Common Sense*, that America should become “an amalgam of the people of the world,” was a minority opinion among Americans of the time, for whom the Declaration of Independence was precisely that—

and not a statement of universalist principles in the sense in which modern liberals choose to read that document.

“Providence,” John Jay wrote in *The Federalist* No. 2, “has been pleased to give us this one connected country to one united people—a people descended from the same ancestors, speaking the same language, professing the same religion, attached to the same principles of government, very similar in manners and customs.” In 1751 Benjamin Franklin spoke against the influence of “Palatine Boors” who were reshaping English culture in Pennsylvania. In *Notes on the State of Virginia* (1782), Thomas Jefferson wrote that arrivals from monarchical countries would “bring with them the principles of the governments they leave, or if able to throw them off, it will be in exchange for an unbounded licentiousness, passing, as usual, from one extreme to the other.”

George Washington wrote in 1794 to John Adams that “my opinion with respect to immigration is, that except for useful mechanics and some particular description of men and professions, there is no use of encouragement.” Adams himself told Christopher Gadsden that “Americans will find that their own experience will coincide with the experience of all other nations, and foreigners must be received with caution, or they will destroy all confidence in government.” And Alexander Hamilton argued—surprisingly perhaps, given his economic nationalism—that “the safety of a republic depends on the energy of a common national sentiment; on a uniformity of principles and habits, and on that love of country which will almost invariably be found to be closely connected with birth, education, and family. . . . The influx of foreigners must . . . tend to produce a heterogeneous compound.”

Even during the early nationalist period (1783–1820), the average annual arrival of

only ten thousand aliens created sufficient opposition that municipalities, states, and finally the federal government felt compelled to devise legislation to cope with the problems caused by the influx. In 1820 Washington began keeping statistics regarding immigration, and in the next decade Massachusetts passed a resolution calling on Congress to curtail the arrival of the foreign poor throughout the United States.

In those days when the national population was doubling itself every twenty-two years, there seemed no need of importing workers. In the 1820s, however, with the great construction projects of the era under way, some observers concluded that immigration might be necessary to complete them. Henry Fairchild suggested that it was around this time that the principle of the “open door” began to be adopted, and with it the notion of America as a welcoming country ready to accept “the oppressed and downtrodden of all nations.”

Then an ideological component started to infect the nascent immigration debate, with the Federalists sticking with the spirit of the Alien and Sedition Acts from a suspicion that the aliens were potential revolutionaries and conspirators who contributed to their party’s decline, and the Jeffersonians viewing immigration as a sign of national dynamism, a reflection of the Jacobin notion of universal citizenship, which they had embraced along with other principles of French republicanism, and a source of votes for the Democratic Party.

The nativist movement had little if anything to do with economic fears and grievances, although already the argument that immigrants depressed native wage scales by working harder and for less money than Americans did was beginning to be heard. It was an expression of resentment toward cultural dislocation, and especially the grow-

ing presence of the Catholic religion. In 1835 the *North American Review* printed a long article rehearsing many of the arguments against immigration that we hear today. Five years later, during the presidential election of 1840, William Cullen Bryant’s *New York Evening Post*, a Democratic paper, attacked Federalist-Whig nativism from a universalist position. Immigration restriction was a critical issue in the election of 1844, and in 1854 the American Know-Nothing Party entered the fray at the national level on a platform that called for barring Catholics from all public office; the defeat of General Winfield Scott in 1852 was widely attributed to German and Irish immigrants.

In the 1850s concerns about immigration were aggravated by coalfield strikes in Pennsylvania and the notable presence of what one publication called “European reformers...[with] a host of extravagant notions of freedom” and “heads full of division of property”—clearly a reaction to the recently arrived refugees from the revolutions of 1848 on the Continent. Like problems associated with the railways and the trusts, those caused by immigration were becoming too much for the state governments to manage, and by the late 1850s the issue was plainly coming to a head. The result might have been something on the order of the restrictive legislation of seventy years later had not the immigration crisis been overshadowed by the sectional crisis, and overwhelmed finally by the outbreak of war.

When immigration to the United States resumed after 1865, and the controversy with it, the debate assumed almost immediately the shape it has maintained down to the present day. The end of the War Between the States committed the newly reunited nation to a program of unrestrained industrial development and urbanization, both conducive to a large foreign-born workforce.

It also replaced the relatively casual and unself-conscious nationalism of the early republican era with a self-conscious, aggressive, and instrumental nationalism encouraged by many politicians, industrialists, and public intellectuals, well suited to an industrializing and modernizing nation with imperial ambitions, as well as to a universalist concept of citizenship more consonant with that of Jeffersonian democracy.

By the late 1870s anti-immigrant feeling was strong among the working classes and spread more broadly throughout society in the next decade as Americans became increasingly concerned about the high birth rate among immigrant families, the confusion of languages they created, and their alien customs and appearance. Nevertheless, the erection of the Statue of Liberty in New York Harbor in 1886 marked what the historian John Lukacs calls the “historical symbolization of the United States,” while the Columbia Exposition in Chicago in 1893 was widely celebrated as a global event.

Even so, opposition on the West Coast to immigration by Chinese immigrants caused Washington to pass a series of exclusionary acts in the 1880s and '90s and to impose a moratorium on skilled and unskilled labor from China. And in the early 1900s President Theodore Roosevelt, having resisted similar pressure from the Far West to exclude Japanese immigrants, grudgingly agreed to halt immigration from Japan. Nevertheless, the history of Japanese and Chinese exclusion shows the executive and legislative branches of the U.S. government actively opposing, in the name of world diplomacy and its own imperialist ambitions, restrictionist measures adopted under public pressure by the western state governments.

After the turn of the century, opposition to immigration passed from the level of popular sentiment to an intellectual and

professional one during the great Progressive debate on the issue that gave the restrictionist movement the effectiveness it had previously lacked. In 1907 immigration to the United States peaked at 1.3 million, a total unmatched by *legal* immigration until the present time. Before the First World War and after, the discussion was pretty much dominated by the argument between Josiah Royce, the “provincialist” philosopher; the anthropologist Franz Boas, who, believing that societies are more alike than not, wanted the “enlargement of political units” and welcomed immigration; and Randolph Bourne, the journalist, whose essay “Trans-National America” in 1915 anticipated Horace Kallen’s work in the 1920s on cultural pluralism that adumbrated multiculturalism at century’s end.

After World War I, fear of subversion by Bolshevik influence and European radicalism, and a heightened awareness of national identity, sapped the popular imperialist sentiment encouraged in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries by the American elites and led directly to a revival of restrictionist scholarship; the Quota Laws of 1921, 1924, and 1927; and the National Origins Quota System based on race and identity.

The subsequent history of American immigration policy is widely familiar in outline to people today. Immigration to the U.S. was virtually nonexistent—at times even negative, as many immigrants returned to their home countries—until the late 1930s, when refugees from Nazi Germany began arriving. Following World War II, when popular opinion might have opposed immigration from fear of communist subversion, universal revulsion against Hitler’s crimes and anti-Semitism had the opposite effect.

In the late 1950s and early '60s the civil rights movement made racism shameful, while offering white people a chance to atone

for historical sins. This, together with the fortuitous convergence of the State Department's determination to deprive Moscow of a propaganda tool in its attempt to draw the Third World into the communist orbit, and the determination of Congress to memorialize an assassinated Irish-American president, for whom immigration reform had been a personal cause, prepared the way for the passage of the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965, which favored immigration from the Third World over immigration from Europe.

The resulting immigrant waves, coming slowly at first and then more rapidly and unrelentingly, were supported by the anti-American radicals of the '60s, by American employers greedy for cheap labor, and by multiculturalism, whose ambition to deconstruct the United States and the West were obviously congruent with global immigration on a mass scale. In this way an American myth, born in the mid-nineteenth century, became a mystique after 1965 and finally an idol of the Democratic left and the Republican establishment. As Edward Abbey, the essayist and novelist, put it a quarter century ago, "Liberals love their cheap cause, conservatives love their cheap labor."

What I call immigrationism—the ideology of immigration that began as a component of statist nationalism in the late nineteenth century, promoted the concept of American exceptionalism, entwined itself with the humanitarianism of the 1950s and '60s, and is now an indispensable element of multicultural globalism—is not a policy at all but an ideological commitment pressed by people looking to create what the historian Clyde Wilson calls "a third forum of American nationalism." Now that the United States is (or was until very recently) the undisputed leader of the world, "for the first time the American leadership class, the politicians and intellectuals who were the inheritors of

the Progressive Era's belief in elite and expert rule, in technique, optimism, and progress, began to regard American success not as an end but a means."

The ideological nature of the immigration debate, and my belief that immigration never has been necessary to America's prosperity and success, and that since 1965 it has been positively harmful to our national well-being, explain my lack of interest in the current "policy" discussions that are a part of it. Advocacy of a particular policy implies that its supporters believe in its efficiency in addressing some aspect or another of a single broader policy, or disposition to action. Being convinced that American immigration policy overall in the past half century—which has been to tolerate virtually open borders and mass immigration, legal and illegal, from anywhere—has been profoundly ideological, I view every policy subordinate to the general one ("micro" versus "macro," I suppose) as irrelevant in the practical sense.

I agree with the founding generation that "there is no need of encouragement" with respect to immigration, and conclude that it should therefore be shut off entirely. This seems to me the more sensible when one considers how little the United States today resembles its former self as it was in 1907, at the height of the last great wave of immigrants, to say nothing of what it was in Washington's time, when the American economy was undeveloped relative to the postindustrial one we have today, the population comparatively tiny, and the North American continent not only unsettled but as yet unexplored.

Where most people involved in the immigration debate see matters of public policy I see public ideology, and one ideological policy cannot be expected to correct another.

George Bernanos said that the most corrupting lies are problems falsely stated, and such has been true in regard to the immigration question. The following are among what I consider the ideological pillars of the immigrationist position.

*America is the exceptional nation and therefore immune to the historical laws, demographic and otherwise, that have limited and constrained every nation in history.* For immigrationists, the historical fact that other nations have been destroyed by immigration amounting actually to invasion (which is what we are experiencing) gives us no good reason to suppose that America, too, is susceptible to similar destructive forces. The perennial slogan of the dedicated immigrationist is “Immigration Now, Immigration Forever!” Because immigration did not destroy the country in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, it won’t now and in the future. This is not rational thinking, or critical thinking, or historical thinking; it is ideological thinking—or no thinking at all.

*Exclusion on nearly any ground is unfair, unequal, and discriminatory in the case of individuals, as well as groups.* In the context of immigration, the liberal argument from rights and fairness emphasizes the ideological concern for individual immigrants, while overlooking the communitarian interest of the native population. But reasons drawn from considerations regarding the personal welfare of would-be immigrants and individual fairness are not the sole moral considerations at stake. The problem in its individual dimension is complicated by the valid moral claims of nations and communities to their own well-being and comfort, to their self-identity, their coherence, and their right to self-determination, and even self-preservation. The argument for exclusion speaks to what Michael Walzer calls the

maintenance of “communities of character” built on consensus rather than on some universal ideal of moral perfection.

*America is “the permanently unfinished country,” as Nathan Glazer once said.* About twenty years ago, a Chinese-Hawaiian student, encouraged by a reporter from the *Wall Street Journal*, confided to him that she would grade America “incomplete.” This sort of thinking, very prevalent in the United States today, reminds me of Nietzsche’s remark that the modern world is obsessed with becoming, while ignoring being. It was Toynbee who observed, “The same elements that build up an institution eventually lead to its downfall.” And Richard Lamm, a former governor of Colorado, argued thirty years ago that “immigration reform is not the death of the American Dream. . . . It is the necessary precondition for the preservation of the dream.”

*America is not a nation in the sense that all other nations are and have been nations, but a “proposition country,” having no history and no identity apart from certain eighteenth-century political notions embodied in its Constitution and common law.* Allan Bloom described the United States as a system founded by philosophers and their students, a great stage on which political theories are personified. But those eighteenth-century notions were mainly British ones, as of course the common law is, while the “philosophers” and “students” were of British descent. And since the colonies that created the United States were British ones, so too, in that sense, is their creation of 1787.

There is no space here to argue the proper definition of a “nation.” Suffice it to say that the propositionists’ arguments are even less remarkable for the thinness of their historical sense than they are for their determination to depersonalize the United States by reducing the country from a historical fact to an intel-



lectual abstraction, which in its concrete form is a vast machine designed to manufacture democracy—and democracies. The quickest and surest way to destroy the American nation is to treat it as something other than the historical nation it really is, as the fastest way to kill a horse is to feed it on stardust and moonbeams, as if it were a unicorn.

*Whoever claims to act from “conscience” in supporting immigration proves his moral bona fides.* But “conscience” is best thought of as a phrase fragment. There are bad consciences as well as good ones, and societies, like individuals, are bound in duty to distinguish between them. Many people in America have been working for many decades to “weaponize” immigration, as the U.S. military has recently declared that Russia and ISIS are using migration from the Third World to destroy the European Union, and ultimately Europe itself.

*Immigration promotes multiculturalism and diversity, and “diversity is our strength.”* Again, this is too broad and complex a subject to develop here. One need only recall John Lukacs’s wisdom in pointing out that people use “multicultural” when what they really mean is “multicivilizational,” and that the multicivilizational nation is a contradiction in terms. Multiculturalism is a supreme example in our time of ideological thinking: multiculturalism can only mean the established international system, while “multiculturalism in one country” is no culture, and no country, at all.

*Christian doctrine requires acquiescence in mass immigration. “You shall welcome the stranger as your own.”* Here John Henry Newman speaks far better than I can in his sermon “The Religion of the Day”: “What is the world’s religion now? It has taken the brighter side of the Gospel, its tidings of comfort, its precepts of love; all darker, deeper views of man’s condition and prospects

being comparatively forgotten. This is the religion *natural* to a civilized age, and well has Satan dressed it and completed it into an idol of Truth. As the reason is cultivated, the taste formed, the affections and sentiments refined, a general decency and grace will of course spread over the face of society, quite independent of Revelation. That beauty and delicacy of thought, which is so attractive in books, then extends to the conduct of life, to all we have, all we do, all we are.”

*America (like the other countries of the West) needs sustained and permanent immigration on a mass scale to maintain its economic standing and progress.* The economic argument on behalf of immigration has, indeed, always been the principal one made. It is also the most compelling—though not compelling enough when weighed against the many strong arguments that have been made from the standpoint of the many other considerations involved. Moreover, equally “conclusive” cases can and have been made on both sides of the argument.

In any case, it is a historically outmoded argument, inapplicable to economically mature Western nations suffering the effects of unprecedented international and internal strife, economic pain, physical crowding, and increasingly grave environmental stress. And it too is, finally, an ideological argument based on the capitalist equivalent of the Marxist myth, the latter holding that the Marxist paradise of communal ownership and noncompetitiveness, once attained, will endure forever, the former that a truly free economy will grow and prosper until the end of time.

Nevertheless, immigration, in at least two instances I can think of, has certainly delivered the economic benefits its enthusiasts promise. Illegal immigration—cheap labor—has greatly benefited certain businesses (e.g., agribusiness and meat

packing) while costing hundreds of thousands of Americans their jobs. And immigration, legal as well as illegal, has created a multibillion-dollar subeconomy of immigration lawyers, lobbyists, activists, and so forth. Clearly ideology is not *always* impractical in financial terms, and political ones as well. Think of the tens of millions of immigrants' votes garnered by the Democratic Party in elections over the past several decades.

Political policy based on ideological thinking can be argued only in ideological terms. When one considers the extent to which the issue of immigration has disturbed and divided this country for nearly two centuries, Julian Simon's suggestion that we could all get along fine without immigrants ought, it seems to me, to be the final word on the subject. The solution it points to is an obvious one. †



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