

Immigration in the Gilded Age and Progressive Era

Directions:

Read the essay and answer the questions that follow.

It is impossible to understand the American experience without understanding the impact of immigration. The millions of immigrants who came to the United States settled across the nation, named its cities, helped build its canals, roads, and railroads, mined its ore, and shaped its culture. To understand immigration in the United States is to understand the history of the country itself.

Between 1880 and 1920, over twenty million people immigrated to the United States. Men, women, and children from across the world, seeking the opportunity and freedom available in a society rooted in the principles of the Declaration of Independence. They traveled thousands of miles in the hope of providing a better life for themselves and their families in the economic opportunities available in a free-enterprise, industrial economy. They brought with them diverse languages and cultural traditions that enriched American society and culture. Their experience of immigration varied, but those who stayed became Americans and helped build modern America.

However, whenever different cultures meet, the differences can cause tensions. The absorption of these immigrants into the fabric of American society was not always a smooth process. Pressures stemming from the blending of cultures had profound effects on the politics and opinions of the era. The clash and unity of these worlds, the conflicts, successes, and failures, are the real story of immigration in the Gilded Age and Progressive Era.

Coming to America

Migration is the movement of a person from one geographic location to another. The immigrants of the late nineteenth century came primarily from southeastern and northwestern Europe, Asia, and from Mexico and Canada in North America. The migrants only became immigrants when they crossed the international border for the United States. It is this factor that makes immigration a matter of law between countries.

For immigrants of this era, and any era, the long journey to a new home began with a decision. Uprooting themselves from their homes, farms, and jobs was an arduous process. The immigrants came to the United States for different reasons. For many immigrants in the late nineteenth century, there was something that pushed them out, such as slow economic growth in Southern Italy, or religious persecution in Eastern Europe. Others were pulled from their homes by the job opportunities the rapidly expanding industrial economy and cheap, farmable land in the countryside.

These push and pull factors acted together to animate the millions of immigrants who found their way to the United States during this period. Finding their way was no easy task. Immigrants had to contend with treacherous roads and oceans, often in cramped and uncomfortable quarters. They also had to overcome language barriers and foreign social customs and traditions. Moreover, they had to navigate the legal process of coming to a new country.

Their experiences upon arriving in the United States changed throughout the period. Immigration to the United States in the early part of the eighteenth century was fairly informal, but this would change throughout the century. By the 1860s the Fourteenth Amendment, and the 1866 Civil Rights Act, helped to make clear a definition of who was and was not a citizen. This led to an increase in regulation of immigration at the federal level. By 1890, the federal government had assumed the responsibility of processing immigrants arriving in the United States. To cope with this responsibility, the government developed a formalized method for vetting immigrants as they arrived. By 1892, the famous port of entry at Ellis Island was opened and began welcoming immigrants ashore in New York City. In 1910, on the West Coast, Angel Island, in San Francisco Bay, also began examining newcomers as they came ashore.

Immigrants arrived at these ports of entry into the United States with high hopes for the future. From their steamships they were ferried ashore to the processing facility on the island. They would be subjected to a medical examination, have their documents inspected, and most were then released to gather their luggage and purchase or pickup train tickets. Most walked out the doors carrying all they owned in their arms.

Not all of the immigrants were granted permission to enter the country. The majority of those on Ellis Island who were denied entry were denied due to medical reasons. Those deemed medically unfit could be treated on the island, but if their condition was too dangerous, they would be sent back to their country of origin. Others were rejected for being (or suspected of being) radicals, anarchists, or criminals. On Angel Island the circumstances were different.

Beginning in 1882, laws restricting the immigration of Chinese and other Asian peoples were put in place by the federal government. Countless numbers of Asians immigrants were denied entry to the United States at Angel Island as a result of these laws.

The Challenge of Assimilation

From these processing centers, the immigrants spread out and settled across the nation. Throughout the 1870s and 80s many of these immigrants settled in the West, seeking the opportunities for land afforded by the frontier. They worked as farmers and laborers, tilling the land and building the infrastructure that facilitated the nation's growth. As the century progressed, the rise of the industrial economy opened up thousands of new low-skilled, labor-intensive jobs in cities across the country. These jobs opened opportunities for the newly-arrived immigrants. The impact of immigration was felt throughout the nation, from the Pittsburgh steel mills, to New York's garment district, to California's farms.

To find and take advantage of these opportunities, immigrants relied upon familial and cultural networks in the United States. They relied upon information and introductions received from family members to seek out and exploit economic opportunities. Being strangers in a foreign land, familial groups also provided support to the newcomers. Groups of immigrants from particular countries settled in cities and neighborhoods together and created distinctive cultural enclaves. In addition to providing support getting jobs and places to live, these neighborhoods allowed immigrants to keep their own customs and traditions alive. Common languages, familiar foods, cultural festivals,

native language newspapers, and religious observances all assisted immigrant groups as they adapted to life in the United States and assimilated into society.

The Rise of Nativism

The hatred and fear of immigrants and immigration during this period was known as nativism or xenophobia. Nativism arose out of the tensions between native-born Americans and newly-arrived immigrants. Competition over jobs and a general fear of the unknown, perpetuated by myths and propaganda, helped shape nativism into a strong political movement.

The ideas of Social Darwinism also helped to perpetuate nativist sentiment. Applying the concept of evolution as theorized in Charles Darwin's *The Origins of Species* (1859), many native-born Americans reasoned that different races or groups of people had reached higher levels of civilization depending on their race or ethnicity. People who applied Darwin's theory to society and the ranking of the races around the world, predominately believed that white, western European men had reached the pinnacle of civilization. They believed, therefore, that it was their duty to assist those they saw as "lesser races," mainly Eastern and Southern Europeans, Africans, and Asian peoples, to become more civilized. They feared that too great an influx of these groups into the country would pose a threat to the white, Anglo-Saxon race in America and the ordered and complex civil society into which they were entering. The progressives were firmly behind the movement to Americanize the immigrant population in America for a more united culture and social order.

The tide of nativism rose throughout the late 1890s and into the twentieth century. Increasing

nativist sentiment created political movements to restrict immigration. Nativist organizations like the Immigration Restriction League and the American Protective Association advocated strongly for limiting immigration into the United States. Many of the members were progressives who believed that restricting immigration of the "inferior races" would help bring about greater social order and harmony. Many unions whose members' jobs were threatened by competition with cheap immigrant labor supported immigration restriction. Many politicians who represented rural areas supported the measures.

Opponents of immigration restriction were the owners of factories, mines, and other industries that relied heavily on large pools of low-wage immigrant labor. Other opponents of immigration restriction included politicians who represented northern states and cities where millions of immigrants settled. Finally, the immigrants who already had settled in America were strong opponents of restricting immigration.

The two sides of the immigration debate demonstrate the tensions which arise from a society coping with change. Immigrants played a vital role in the country's economy, but they introduced foreign beliefs, customs, and opinions about American society and government. Therein lies a tension.

This tension has at its heart a difficult question for a democratic society. Fundamental principles like the rule of law, private property, and individual liberty may be undermined if they are not properly understood and jealously guarded by the people. In the Gilded Age and Progressive Era, however, this question became erroneously entangled with the racial prejudices of the time. The main tension still exists today, and the questions that still beg asking today. The

progressives grappled with the same questions related to the immigration debate today. The questions of adopting certain fundamental principles clashed with those of preserving one's culture and ideas in a pluralist society.

This struggle played out throughout the Gilded Age and Progressive Era. As the number of immigrants coming ashore increased, nativist concern and political pressure to address the issue mounted. This pressure led to the passing of several major pieces of legislation. The first, the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, virtually eliminated all immigration from China while banning Chinese from American citizenship. In 1907, President Theodore Roosevelt traded protection of Japanese immigrants in America for a promise that the Japanese government would not allow additional immigrants to go to the United States. Though popular in the legislature, the nativist push for immigration restrictions was met with opposition in executive

branch. During World War I, Congress overcame a series of presidential vetoes to pass a literacy test on immigration to keep poorly-educated immigrants out of the country. Increasing nativism culminated in the Immigration Act of 1924, which set limits based on a national origins formula for how many immigrants from different countries would be allowed in the country. The date for that formula was set before 1890 when large numbers of southeastern European immigrants began to arrive.

Though the number of immigrants coming into the country was being curtailed, their influence was not. Immigrants had a dramatic impact in shaping the future of the nation. As they became assimilated into American society, the United States also assimilated to them, shifting and changing to integrate the countless millions from around the world who came to the new world seeking a new life.

REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. What sorts of challenges did immigrants face when deciding to leave their homes and travel to a new country?
2. How do push and pull factors affect immigration?
3. What was the purpose of Ellis and Angel Island? Why do you think the government established these facilities?
4. Why did immigrants tend to group together in cultural and family groups?
5. What were the sources of tensions between immigrants and native-born Americans?
6. What benefits do you believe immigration brings to the United States?
7. What challenges might immigration pose to the United States? How has the United States responded to these challenges in the past and present?