

INTRODUCTION

It's not the immigrants—it's us.

What's different about immigration today as opposed to a century ago is not the characteristics of the newcomers but the characteristics of our society. Immigrants are what they've always been: not the poorest of the poor but one step up from the bottom, strivers looking for better lives for their children, coming from rural or small-town backgrounds in traditional—what we would call third-world—societies. But the changes that define modern America—in our society, economy, government, and technology, for example—are so fundamental that our past success in dealing with immigration is simply no longer relevant.

This is a new argument. It's not that previous critiques of immigration have been wrong—indeed, much of what follows in this book is based on the outstanding work of others over the years. Instead, the source of the problems created by immigration has usually been located in differences between *immigrants* past and present rather than in differences between *America* past and present. Immigrants in the past, it is said, were white, but now they're not; they used to want to assimilate, but now they don't; or they used to be self-sufficient, but now they seek out government assistance. We've all heard the laments: “My grandpa

from Sicily learned English, and my grandma from Minsk got by without welfare—what’s the problem with immigrants today?”

The problem is that the America your grandparents immigrated to a century ago no longer exists. This is neither a good nor bad thing—it just *is*. Of course, some of the changes brought by modernity are generally positive, others negative. We all welcome, for instance, the spread of easy and cheap communications and transportation but mourn the weakening of our communities. Other changes will be embraced by some but not by others; the growth in government, for instance, is seen by the Left as a recognition of our social responsibility to the poor and marginalized but feared by the Right as likely to erode liberty and personal responsibility.

But whatever steps we take to accentuate what we consider positive about modern life and ameliorate what we see as negative, the basic features of modern society are not subject to debate. The social and other changes briefly outlined below are inherent characteristics of a mature society; we cannot say that “immigration would be fine if only we got rid of (fill in the blank)” when what we fill in the blank with is an inextricable part of how we live today. Instead, immigration undermines many of the objectives that our modern, middle-class society sets for itself and exacerbates many of the problems brought on by modernization.

In short, mass immigration is incompatible with a modern society. As Hudson Institute scholar John Fonte has written, “It’s not 1900 any more.”¹

The subsequent chapters will spell out exactly how the changes that distinguish a modern, mature society are incompatible with continued immigration, but for now it will suffice to say that they paint a picture of a country fundamentally different from the past. Some examples:²

ECONOMY. A century ago, what economists call the primary sector of the economy (farming, fishing, hunting, and herding) still employed more Americans than any other, as it had since the dawn of humankind. Today only 2 percent of our workforce occupies itself in this way. Mean-

while, the tertiary sector (service industries) now employs 80 percent of working Americans, and the percentage is climbing.

EDUCATION. Along with the change in the economy, education has become more widespread. Nearly a quarter of American adults had less than five years of schooling in 1910; as of 2000, that figure is less than 2 percent. Likewise, the percentage who had completed high school increased sixfold, from about 13 percent of the total to 84 percent. And the percentage of college graduates increased tenfold, from 2.7 to 27 percent. Another way to look at it is that in 1900, only a little more than 10 percent of high-school-age children were actually enrolled in school; in 2001, nearly 95 percent were.

TECHNOLOGY. In 1915, a three-minute call from New York to San Francisco cost about \$20.70 (about \$343 in 2000 dollars); the same call in 2000 cost 36 cents. In 1908, a Model T cost more than two years' worth of the typical worker's wages; a Ford Taurus in 1997 (a much better car) cost eight months' work. A thousand-mile airline trip in 1920 would have cost the average American 220 work hours; by 2000, it cost perhaps 11 work hours.

DEMOGRAPHY. The birthrate fell by half during the past century, while infant mortality fell by 93 percent. In 1915, sixty-one out of ten thousand mothers died during childbirth; in 2001, only one out of one hundred thousand did. Life expectancy went from forty-seven years in 1900 to seventy-seven a century later, while people sixty-five and older have tripled as a share of the nation's total population, from about 4 percent to more than 12 percent.

GOVERNMENT. In 1900, total government spending at all levels equaled about 5.5 percent of the economy; by 2003, it was more than 36 percent. Total government employment (federal, state, and local) went from a little more than 1 million in 1900 (about 4 percent of the workforce) to more than 22 million in 2000 (more than 16 percent of the workforce).

LIFESTYLE. America's population was still 60 percent rural in 1900; in 2000, only 21 percent of Americans lived in rural areas (and only a tiny fraction were involved in farming). The average household

went from more than 4.5 people to a little more than 2.5, while the number of people per room in the average house fell from 1.1 in 1910 to 0.4 in 1997.

Other changes are harder to quantify but are just as real in marking modern society as a break with the past: a weakening sense of community and civic engagement, increased religious skepticism, a greater sense of responsibility for the less fortunate, rejection of racial and religious discrimination, and concern for our stewardship of the natural world.

These changes have brought both benefits and woe, but whatever we might do to deal with harmful side effects, modernization itself is irreversible, because people don't want it to be reversed; anyone who has spent time in a premodern village understands that Marx's observation about "the idiocy of rural life" has more than a little truth to it. Or in the words of the popular World War I song, "How Ya Gonna Keep 'Em Down on the Farm (After They've Seen Paree)?"

These social changes marking national adulthood don't mean that mass immigration was out of place during our country's adolescence. America ended up a stronger nation because of the mass-immigration phase of our development, a phase that extended for seventy-odd years, from the late 1840s until the early 1920s. Had we not experienced that period of mass immigration, our population, derived mainly from descendants of a relatively small number of preindependence settlers, would still have grown rapidly, but it would have been smaller; in 1990, about half of America's population was attributable to post-1790 immigrants and their descendants.³ The first part of the immigration phase, dominated by northern Europeans, helped settle much of the land; this happened both because some immigrants went directly to the Midwest and West to establish farms and ranches and because others moved to eastern cities, filling in behind old-stock Americans who had moved west. The latter part of our nation's adolescent immigration phase was dominated by immigrants from eastern and southern Europe who settled mainly in the cities and contributed mightily to industrialization.

Samuel Huntington pointed out in his book *Who Are We?* that describing America as a nation of immigrants is only a partial truth; we

are a nation of both settlers and immigrants, two very different ways of moving to the New World. Settlers arrived as a group to create a new community where there is none; immigrants came from one preexisting society to another one. As Huntington puts it, “Before immigrants could come to America, settlers had to found America.”

But as different as they are, these two methods of peopling America share one thing—they were phases in our national development that we have outgrown. In 1890, the superintendent of the census declared that the frontier could no longer be said to exist, ending nearly three centuries of westward settlement. As the historian Frederick Jackson Turner wrote in *The Frontier in American History*, “the frontier has gone, and with its going has closed the first period of American history.”

A generation later, Congress declared that the period of mass immigration was also closed by passing the immigration laws of 1921 and 1924. In the latter year, the number of immigrants was about 700,000, already down from 1.2 million in 1914, right before the outbreak of World War I; in 1925 it fell to less than 300,000. It was sixty-five years before immigration again reached the level of 1924. As one supporter wrote at the time, “The passage of the Immigration Act of 1924 marks the close of an epoch in the history of the United States.”⁴

President Franklin Roosevelt made the same point in his speech on the occasion of the fiftieth anniversary of the Statute of Liberty: “Within this generation that stream from abroad has largely stopped. We have within our shores today the materials out of which we shall continue to build an even better home for liberty.”

When the sweeping overhaul of the immigration law was debated in the 1960s, culminating in the 1965 Hart-Celler Immigration Act, supporters readily asserted that the changes, important as they were, would be mainly cosmetic. Though important for moral and foreign-policy reasons, the new law was not intended to return America to a bygone phase in its national life. Representative Sidney Yates (D-IL), for instance, supported the bill but said, “It is obvious in any event that the great days of immigration have long since run their course. World population trends have changed, and changing economic and

social conditions at home and abroad dictate a changing migratory pattern.”⁵

Likewise, immigration subcommittee member Representative Peter Rodino (D-NJ), another supporter of the changes, testified that “We will not be admitting substantially more immigrants, times and possibilities have changed, we can no longer admit everyone who wishes to come here and it is with sadness that we modify Miss Liberty’s invitation.”⁶ And President Johnson put it most succinctly in his remarks upon signing the new immigration law: “The days of unlimited immigration are past.”⁷

The closing of the frontier was irreversible—once it was gone, there was no way to get it back. But prospective immigrants continued to be available in abundance. And so, starting with the 1965 immigration law, America resumed its adolescent policy of immigration, leading to the largest wave of newcomers in its history. The total foreign-born population has ballooned, from fewer than 10 million in 1970 (less than 5 percent of the nation’s population) to nearly 38 million in 2007 (12.6 percent of the population). Annual legal immigration—the number of people awarded permanent residency, potentially leading to citizenship—has gone from fewer than 400,000 in 1970 to nearly 1.3 million in 2006. And illegal immigration has become a major phenomenon, with today’s illegal population totaling perhaps 12 million and growing by around half a million each year.

One last figure will suggest the magnitude of what was ignited in 1965: Fully one third of all the people ever to move to the United States, starting from the first Siberian to cross the Bering land bridge in search of game, have arrived since 1965.⁸

The objective of this book is to demonstrate how this new immigration wave clashes with modern America, how a policy that served us well in our adolescence is harmful in our maturity. This is not a strictly conservative argument, though I am a conservative. While there may be anti-Americans on the hard Left or post-Americans on the libertarian Right, whose ideologies lead them to welcome the effects of

mass immigration, this book is intended for Americans in the patriotic mainstream, liberal and conservative, who can agree on the broad contours of a desirable society, though obviously not on all the details nor on how best to achieve it. Nothing is this book assumes a particular set of views on other issues, like abortion or the minimum wage, but it does assume certain broadly shared goals for modern America:

- A strong sense of shared national identity
- Opportunities for upward mobility, especially for the poor, the less educated, and generally those at the margins of the society
- The availability of high-wage jobs in knowledge-intensive, capital-intensive industries
- A large middle class, with the gap between rich and poor not growing inordinately
- A functional, responsible, and affordable system of social provision for the poor
- Middle-class norms of behavior, such as orderliness and cleanliness of public places, residential occupancy limits and zoning rules, and obeying traffic laws
- Government spending on certain kinds of infrastructure, such as schools, roads, and public amenities like national parks
- Environmental stewardship, to provide clean air and water to our descendants, and historical stewardship, to preserve the treasures handed down to us by our ancestors

There are other characteristics common to all modern societies which, when combined with mass immigration, undermine these goals, such as:

- Easier and cheaper means of long-distance communication and transportation
- The trend toward smaller families

- The spread of cosmopolitanism or post-Americanism among our elites
- Social atomization, disengagement, and anonymity

In effect, this book offers a “unified field theory” of immigration restriction, explaining why the different impacts of immigration (on the economy, assimilation, security, and so on) are really all part of the same phenomenon. There is some legitimacy to the complaints of immigration boosters that immigration critics seem to have been offering a Chinese menu of objections: If you’re a conservative, pick a problem from column A (tax burden or national security); if you’re a liberal, choose from column B (effects on the poor or on sprawl).

It’s not that these objections are baseless—in fact, they’re spot-on. The problem is that they have never been integrated into a coherent whole. Immigration critics across the political spectrum have been like the proverbial blind men feeling different parts of an elephant and imagining they’re touching different things, not realizing that it’s all the same animal. Likewise, immigration critics concerned about security, for instance, may dismiss concerns about the harm done to low-skilled workers, while those worried about artificial population growth may frown on concerns related to assimilation. In fact, they’re all identifying different facets of the same problem.

It’s important to note that this critique is not focused on any particular kind of immigration or any particular means of immigration. Specifically, the problem we face is not confined to the arrival of illegal aliens. The stubborn refusal of America’s political class to enforce the immigration law is an enormous problem, and thus it is only appropriate that most political activity related to immigration has been directed toward controlling illegal immigration. After all, until we develop the will and the means to enforce current immigration law, changing that law will have little effect.

But as the rest of this book will argue, the central problem is the large-scale settlement of people from abroad, whoever they are and however they get here: legal or illegal, skilled or unskilled, immigrants

or guest workers, European or Latin or Asian or African. Obviously, different kinds of immigrants will have different impacts; an illegal alien, for instance, undermines the rule of law but places less of a burden on government services than an otherwise similar legal immigrant. Likewise, a skilled immigrant does not have trouble learning and speaking English, but he may be more susceptible than his low-skilled counterpart to a politics of ethnic grievance and be more able to pursue dual citizenship and a transnational lifestyle. Despite the different effects that different kinds of immigrants may have, the common thread remains—modern America has outgrown mass immigration.

This is not a pessimistic or declinist argument. The problem is not that America has become decadent and weak and is thus unable to take full advantage of the blessings of mass immigration as it once did. Rather, a policy that served America's interests during our national adolescence no longer serves those interests now, during our national maturity. President Reagan was right when he said America's best days lie ahead. But only if we heed the words of his greatest predecessor, Abraham Lincoln: "As our case is new, so we must think anew and act anew. We must disenthrall ourselves, and then we shall save our country."