

The Unwanted: Immigration and Nativism in America



[1]By [Peter Schrag](#) [2]

It's hardly news that the complaints of our latter-day nativists and immigration restrictionists—from Sam Huntington to Rush Limbaugh, from FAIR to V-DARE—resonate with the nativist arguments of some three centuries of American history. Often, as most of us should know, the immigrants who were demeaned by one generation were the parents and grandparents of the successes of the next generation. Perhaps, not paradoxically, many of them, or their children and grandchildren, later joined those who attacked and disparaged the next arrivals, or would-be arrivals, with the same vehemence that had been leveled against them or their forebears.

Similarly, the sweeps and detentions of immigrants during the early decades of the last century were not terribly different from the heavy-handed federal, state, and local raids of recent years to round up, deport, and occasionally imprison illegal immigrants, and sometimes legal residents and U.S. citizens along with them. But it's also well to remember that nativism, xenophobia, and racism are hardly uniquely American phenomena. What makes them significant in America is that they run counter to the nation's founding ideals. At least since the enshrinement of Enlightenment ideas of equality and inclusiveness in the founding documents of the new nation, to be a nativist in this country was to be in conflict with its fundamental tenets.

And from the start, we've fought about the same questions. Who belongs here? What does the economy need? What, indeed, is an American or who is fit to be one? In 1751 Benjamin Franklin warned that Pennsylvania was becoming "a Colony of Aliens, who will shortly be so numerous as to Germanize us instead of our Anglifying them and will never adopt our Language or Customs any more than they can acquire our Complexion." Later Jefferson worried about immigrants from foreign monarchies who "will infuse into American legislation their spirit, warp and bias its direction, and render it a heterogeneous, incoherent, distracted mass." Sound familiar?

American nativism and our historic ambivalence about immigration—at times vigorously seeking newcomers from abroad, at other times shutting them out and/or deporting them—is deeply entangled both in economic cycles and in the uncertainties of our vision of ourselves as a nation. A self-proclaimed "city upon a hill," a shining model to the world, requires a certain kind of people. But what kind? Do they have to be pure Anglo-Saxons, whatever that was, which is what many reformers at the turn of the last century believed, or could it include "inferior" Southern Italians, Greeks, Slavs, Jews, or Chinese of the 1800s, the "dirty Japs" of 1942, or the Central Americans of today? Can America take the poor, the "tempest-tost," the "wretched refuse" "yearning to breathe free" and make them a vital part of that city? If we began in perfection, how could change ever be anything but for the worse?

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Published on Immigration Policy Center (<http://www.immigrationpolicy.org>)

Published On: **Mon, Sep 13, 2010** | [Download File](#) [3]

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