



**Charles Hirschman**

## The impact of immigration on American society

*Looking backward to the future*

Charles Hirschman surveys the history of immigration in America in an attempt to understand current attitudes and the future. "While it is not possible to predict the role of immigration in America's future, it is instructive to study the past. The current debates and hostility to immigrants echo throughout American history. What is most surprising is that almost all popular fears about immigration and even the judgements of 'experts' about the negative impact of immigrants have been proven false by history."

### Introduction

Even as most Americans celebrate their heritage and identity as a "nation of immigrants", there is deep ambivalence about future immigration. There is a strong base of support for continued immigration as a necessary ingredient for economic growth and as an essential element of a cosmopolitan society among many Americans. Almost 60 million people — more than one-fifth of the total population of the United States — are immigrants or the children of immigrants. For most of this community, immigration policy is not an abstract ideology but a means of family reunification and an affirmation that they are part of the "American dream".

On the other side, there is a substantial share, perhaps a majority, of Americans who are opposed to a continuation of large-scale immigration. Many opponents of immigration are old-stock Americans who have all but forgotten their immigrant ancestors. They often live in small towns or in suburban areas, and many have relatively little contact with immigrant families in their neighborhoods, churches, and friendship networks. Beyond the debate over the economic consequences of immigration, there is also an emotional dimension that shapes sentiments toward immigration. Many Americans, like people everywhere, are more comfortable with the familiar than with change. They fear that newcomers with different languages, religions, and cultures are reluctant to assimilate into American society and to learn English.

Although many of the perceptions and fears of old-stock Americans about new immigrants are rooted in ignorance and prejudice, the fears of many Americans about the future are not entirely irrational. With globalization and massive industrial restructuring dominating many traditional sources of employment (both blue-collar and white-collar), many native-born citizens are fearful about their (and their children's) future. The news media often cite examples of industries that seek out low-cost immigrant workers to replace native-born workers. Some sectors, such as harvesting vegetables and fruits in agriculture, have very few native-born Americans seeking jobs in them, but immigrants are also disproportionately employed in many other sectors, including meatpacking, construction, hospitals, and even in many areas of

advanced study in research universities. These examples are fodder for unscrupulous political leaders who seek to exploit popular fears to their own ends.

While it is not possible to predict the role of immigration in America's future, it is instructive to study the past. The current debates and hostility to immigrants echo throughout American history. What is most surprising is that almost all popular fears about immigration and even the judgments of "experts" about the negative impact of immigrants have been proven false by history. Not only have almost all immigrants (or their descendents) assimilated over time, but they have broadened American society in many positive ways. In this review, I discuss the popular fears about immigrants by old-stock Americans and the historical record of immigrant contributions to the evolution of the industrial economy, political reform, and even to the development of American culture.

### **A short overview of immigration**

Immigration to North America began with Spanish settlers in the sixteenth century, and French and English settlers in the seventeenth century. In the century before the American Revolution, there was a major wave of free and indentured labor from England and other parts of Europe as well as large-scale importation of slaves from Africa and the Caribbean.

Although some level of immigration has been continuous throughout American history, there have been two epochal periods: the 1880 to 1924 age of mass migration, primarily from southern and eastern Europe, and the post-1965 wave of immigration, primarily from Latin America and Asia.<sup>1</sup> Each of these eras added more than 25 million immigrants, and the current wave is far from finished. During some of the peak years of immigration in the early 1900s, about one million immigrants arrived annually, which was more than one percent of the total US population at the time. In the early twenty-first century, there have been a few years with more than one million legal immigrants, but with a total US population of almost 300 million, the relative impact is much less than it was in the early part of the twentieth century.

The first impact of immigration is demographic. The 70 million immigrants who have arrived since the founding of the republic (formal records have only been kept since 1820) are responsible for the majority of the contemporary American population.<sup>2</sup> Most Americans have acquired a sense of historical continuity from America's founding, but this is primarily the result of socialization and education, not descent. The one segment of the American population with the longest record of historical settlement are African Americans. Almost all African Americans are the descendants of seventeenth- or eighteenth-century arrivals.<sup>3</sup>

Much of the historical debate over the consequences of immigration has focused on immigrant "origins" — where they came from. Early in the twentieth century, when immigration from southern and eastern Europe was at its peak, many old-stock Americans sought to preserve the traditional image of the country as primarily composed of descendants from northwest Europe, especially of English Protestant stock.<sup>4</sup> The immigration restrictions of the 1920s were calibrated to preserving the historic "national origins" of the American population.<sup>5</sup> The American population has, however, always been much more diverse than the "Anglo-centric" image of the eighteenth century.

The first American census in 1790, shortly after the formation of the United States, counted a bit less than 4 million people, of whom at least 20 per cent were of African descent.<sup>6</sup> There are no official figures on the numbers of American Indians prior to the late nineteenth century, but they were the dominant population of the eighteenth century in most of the territories that eventually became the United States. The estimates of the non-English-origin population in 1790 range from 20 to 40 per cent.<sup>7</sup>

Each new wave of immigration to the United States has met with some degree of hostility and popular fears that immigrants will harm American society or will not conform to the prevailing "American way of life". In 1751, Benjamin Franklin complained about the "Palatine Boors" who were trying to Germanize the province of Pennsylvania and refused to learn English.<sup>8</sup> Throughout the nineteenth century, Irish and German Americans, especially Catholics, were not considered to be fully American in terms of culture or status by old-stock Americans. In May 1844, there were three days of rioting in Kensington, an Irish suburb of Philadelphia, which culminated in the burning of two Catholic churches and other property.<sup>9</sup> This case was one incident of many during the 1840s and 1850s — the heyday of the "Know Nothing Movement" — when Catholic churches and convents were destroyed and priests were attacked by Protestant mobs.<sup>10</sup>

The hostility of old-line Americans to "foreigners" accelerated in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries as racial ideology and anti-Semitism also became part of American consciousness. The rising tide of nativism — the fear of foreigners — had deep roots in anti-Catholicism and a fear of foreign radicals. The new dominant element of this ideology in the late nineteenth century was the belief in the inherent superiority of the Anglo-Saxon "race".<sup>11</sup> These beliefs and the link to immigration restriction had widespread support among many well-educated elites. The Immigration Restriction League, founded by young Harvard-educated Boston Brahmins in 1894, advocated a literacy test to slow the tide of immigration.<sup>12</sup> It was thought that a literacy test would reduce immigration from southern and eastern Europe, which was sending an "alarming number of illiterates, paupers, criminals, and madmen who endangered American character and citizenship".<sup>13</sup>

Cities, where most immigrants settled, were derided and feared as places filled with dangerous people and radical ideas.<sup>14</sup> These sentiments were often formulated by intellectuals, but they resonated with many white Americans who were reared in rather parochial and homogenous rural and small-town environments. While some reformers, such as Jane Adams, went to work to alleviate the many problems of urban slums, others, such as Henry Adams, the descendent of two American presidents and a noted man of letters, expressed virulent nativism and anti-Semitism.<sup>15</sup>

The Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 was the first step toward a closed society. From the 1880s to the 1920s, a diverse set of groups, ranging from the old-line New England elites and the Progressive Movement in the Midwest to the Ku Klux Klan, led a campaign to halt undesirable immigrants from Europe.<sup>16</sup> In the early decades of the twentieth century, the nascent pseudo science of Eugenics was used to support claims of the inferiority of the new immigrants relative to old-stock Americans. Passing the national origins quotas in the early 1920s was intended to exclude everyone from Asia and Africa and to sharply lower the numbers of arrivals from southern and eastern Europe.

The period from 1924 to 1965, when a highly restrictive immigration policy was in place, was exceptional in American history. For those who were reared in this era, it might seem that the high levels of immigration experienced during the last three decades of the twentieth century are unusual. However, high levels of immigration characterized most of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries as well as the first two decades of the twentieth.

The impact of the 1965 Amendments to the Immigration and Nationality Act, also known as the Hart–Cellar Act, was a surprise to policy makers and many experts. The primary intent of the 1965 Act was to repeal the national origin quotas enacted in the 1920s, which were considered discriminatory by the children and grandchildren of southern and eastern European immigrants. The advocates of reform in the 1960s were not pushing for a major new wave of immigration. Their expectation was that there would be a small increase of arrivals from Italy, Greece, and a few other European countries as families that were divided by the immigration restrictions of the 1920s were allowed to be reunited, but that no long-term increase would result.<sup>17</sup>

The new criteria for admission under the 1965 Act were family reunification and scarce occupational skills.<sup>18</sup> The new preference system allowed highly skilled professionals, primarily doctors, nurses, and engineers from Asian countries, to immigrate and eventually to sponsor their families. About the same time, and largely independently of the 1965 Immigration Act, immigration from Latin America began to rise. Legal and undocumented migration from Mexico surged after a temporary farm-worker programme known as the Bracero Program was shut down in 1964.<sup>19</sup> Migration from Cuba arose from the tumult of Fidel Castro's revolution, as first elites and then professional and middle-class families fled persecution and the imposition of socialism in the 1960s and 1970s. Beginning in the 1970s, there were several waves of Vietnamese, Cambodian, and Hmong refugees following from the collapse of American-supported regimes in Southeast Asia. Then in the 1980s, there were new refugees from Central American nations such as Nicaragua, El Salvador, and Guatemala.<sup>20</sup>

Each of these streams of immigration as well as refugee inflows has spawned secondary waves of immigration as family members followed. By 2000, there were over 30 million foreign-born persons in the United States, of whom almost one-third arrived in the prior decade. Adding together immigrants and their children (the second generation), more than 60 million people — or one in five Americans — have recent roots from other countries.<sup>21</sup> Although the current levels of immigration are not equal — in relative terms — to the age of mass migration in the early twentieth century, the absolute numbers of contemporary immigrants far exceed that of any prior time in American history or the experience of any other country.

American history cannot be separated from the history of immigration. Or, as Handlin put it, "Immigrants were American history."<sup>22</sup> During the middle decades of the nineteenth century, immigrants from Germany and Scandinavia played a major role in settling the frontier. Irish immigrants worked as labourers in cities and were the major source of labour in the construction of transportation networks, including canals, railroads, and roads. Some have estimated that the manpower advantage of the Union forces during the Civil War was largely due to immigrants who had settled in the northern states.<sup>23</sup>

Immigrants have also played an important role in the transition to an urban industrial economy in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century.

Immigrant workers have always been over-represented in skilled trades, mining, and as peddlers, merchants, and labourers in urban areas. Immigrants and their children were the majority of workers in the garment sweatshops of New York, the coalfields of Pennsylvania, and the stockyards of Chicago. The cities of America during the age of industrialization were primarily immigrant cities (Gibson and Jung 2006).<sup>24</sup> The rapidly expanding industrial economy of the North and Midwest drew disproportionately on immigrant labour from 1880 to 1920 and then on African American workers from the South from 1920 to 1950. In 1900, about three-quarters of the populations of many large cities were composed of immigrants and their children, including New York, Chicago, Boston, Cleveland, San Francisco, Buffalo, Milwaukee, and Detroit.<sup>25</sup> Immigrants and their children remained the majority of the urban population, especially in the industrial cities of the Northeast and Midwest until the 1920s.<sup>26</sup>

Immigrants and their children have also played an important role in modern American politics, for example, in forming the Roosevelt coalition in the 1930s and again in the 1960s with the election of John F. Kennedy. The seeds of the 1932 Roosevelt coalition were established in 1928, when Al Smith, an Irish American (on his mother's side) Catholic from New York City, attracted the immigrant urban vote to the Democratic Party. Although Herbert Hoover defeated Al Smith in 1928, a number of scholars have attributed the shift from the Republican dominance of the government in the 1920s to the New Deal coalition of the 1930s to the increasing share, turnout, and partisanship of the urban ethnic vote following several decades of mass immigration (Andersen 1979: 67–69; Baltzell 1964: 230; Clubb and Allen 1969; Degler 1964; Lubell 1952: 28).<sup>27</sup>

Although the age of mass immigration had ended in the 1920s, the children of immigrants formed 20 percent of the potential electorate in 1960.<sup>28</sup> The political leanings of the second generation can be inferred from research on the relationship between religion and political preferences. In the decades following the World War II era, white Protestants, and especially middle class white Protestants outside the South, have been the base of the Republican Party, while Catholic and Jewish voters have been disproportionately Democratic.<sup>29</sup> The majority of early twentieth-century southern and eastern European immigrants were Catholic or Jewish.<sup>30</sup> The reform periods of the New Deal of the 1930s and the New Frontier (which led to the Great Society programmes of Lyndon Johnson) were made possible by the mass migration of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

Immigrants and their descendants were also important in the development of popular American culture and in creating the positive image of immigration in the American mind. Immigrants and the second generation have played a remarkable role in the American creative arts, including writing, directing, producing, and acting in American films and plays for most of the first half of the twentieth century (Buhle 2004; Gabler 1988; Most 2004; Phillips 1998; Winokur 1996).<sup>31</sup> The majority of Hollywood film directors who have won two or more Academy Awards (Oscars) were either immigrants or the children of immigrants.<sup>32</sup> Many of the most highly regarded composers and playwrights of Broadway were the children of immigrants, including George and Ira Gershwin, Richard Rodgers, Lorenz Hart, Jerome Kern, Harold Arlen, and Leonard Bernstein.<sup>33</sup> These composers and lyricists who wrote much of the standard American songbook were largely second- and third-generation Jewish immigrants who were reared in ethnic enclaves, but their music has defined the quintessential American musical culture of the twentieth century.

Although first- and second-generation immigrant artists have always been anxious to assimilate to American society and to adopt "Anglo-sounding" names,<sup>34</sup> they have also broadened American culture to make it more receptive and open to outsiders. The Hollywood theme "that anyone can make it in America" is an Americanized version of the rags-to-riches story — one that is appealing to people who are striving for upward mobility. Many Hollywood and Broadway productions have also given us poignant accounts of outsiders who struggle to be understood and accepted. Perhaps it is not so surprising that the Statue of Liberty has become the pre-eminent national symbol of the United States (Kasinitz 2004: 279).<sup>35</sup>

### Lessons from the twentieth century

From our current vantage point, it is clear that popular beliefs and fears about immigrants in the early twentieth century were completely mistaken. In the early twentieth century, most elites and many social scientists thought that immigrants were overrunning American society. Based on the prevailing theories of the time (social Darwinism and Eugenics), immigrants were thought to be culturally and "racially" inferior to old-stock Americans. The arguments used to restrict continued southern and eastern European immigration in the twentieth century paralleled those made earlier to end Chinese and Japanese immigration (in 1882 and 1907, respectively). For three decades, the battle over immigration restriction was waged in the court of public opinion and in Congress. In 1910, the Dillingham Commission (a congressionally appointed commission named after Senator William P. Dillingham of Vermont) issued a 42-volume report, which assumed the racial inferiority of the new immigrants from eastern and southern Europe relative to the old-stock immigrants from northwestern Europe.<sup>36</sup>

Social Darwinism and scientific racism were in full flower with many leading scholars warning against allowing further immigration of "beaten members of beaten breeds".<sup>37</sup> When the passage of a literacy test in 1917 did not have the intended impact of slowing immigration from southern and eastern Europe, Congress passed the Quota Act in 1921 to limit the number of annual immigrants from each country to three percent of the foreign-born of that nationality in the 1910 Census.<sup>38</sup> These provisions were not strong enough for some restrictionists, who passed another immigration law in 1924 that pushed the quotas back to two percent of each nationality counted in the 1890 census, a date before the bulk of the new immigrants had arrived.

Looking backward, we can see that the impacts of the age of mass migration from 1880 to 1924 were almost entirely opposite to those anticipated by contemporary observers. Based on standard measures of socioeconomic achievement, residential location, and intermarriage, the children and grandchildren of the "new immigrants" of the early twentieth century have almost completely assimilated into American society.<sup>39</sup> Even groups such as Italian Americans that were considered to be a "community in distress" as late as the 1930s, have blended into the American mosaic. A closer examination reveals that the "new immigrants" have remade American society in their image. The Anglo-centric core of the early twentieth century has been largely replaced with a more cosmopolitan America that places Catholicism and Judaism on a par with Protestant denominations, and the Statue of Liberty has become the national symbol of a nation of immigrants. Perhaps the most important legacy of the age of mass migration is that the children of eastern and southern immigrants helped to pave the way for the New Deal of the 1930s, the Great Society of the 1960s, and the 1965 Immigration Act that

allowed a new wave of immigration from Asia and Latin America to arrive.

In his recent novel, *The Plot Against America*, Philip Roth poses the possibility that Charles Lindbergh might have been elected president in 1940 and then established a cordial understanding with Nazi Germany. There was certainly a lot of virulent anti-Semitism in the United States at the time, and the hatred of Franklin Roosevelt by the WASP upper class could have led to elite support for a fascist alternative. However, as we look back to the 1930s, it appears that Jews and Catholics were "protected," at least to some degree, by their alliance with many other segments of American society as part of the New Deal coalition. Ironically, the closure of the door to immigration after 1924 and the Great Migration of African Americans from the rural South to cities in the North and Midwest may have helped the children of southern and eastern European immigrants to climb up the socioeconomic ladder in the middle decades of the twentieth century.<sup>40</sup> All of these groups remained in the Democratic Party well into the 1960s, and this unusually broad base discouraged political alliances based on race and nationality alone. The examples of the Dixiecrats of 1948, George Wallace in 1968, and the Southern Strategy of 1972 show that American politics are not immune to appeals to the "race card". However, recent immigrants and their descendents, when allied with other reform groups, have played a major role in broadening democracy in American society.

### Looking to the future

The demographic challenges of twenty-first century America are not unique. Immigration, like race, seems to be a continuing source of tension in many societies around the globe. Immigration, especially clandestine immigration, is higher in the United States than in most other industrial countries, but the underlying dynamics are common to almost all industrial societies (Hirschman 2001).<sup>41</sup>

Recent legal immigration to the United States has fluctuated from 700 000 to 1 000 000 new permanent residents in recent years, but with an upward drift that is evident from a decadal perspective.<sup>42</sup> Only about one half of legal immigrants are new arrivals to the country. The other half consists of adjustments of current residents who were able to obtain an immigrant visa because of change in employment or family status. Many refugees are eventually able to obtain permanent resident immigrant visas. There is also a large, but unknown number of undocumented (illegal) immigrants, perhaps upwards of 300 000 per year.

The major policy discussion in the United States (and elsewhere) is focused on immigration control. There is wide agreement that clandestine immigration should be stopped and legal immigration should be tightly controlled. There are arguments over the numbers and types of immigrants to be admitted, but the idea that sovereign states can and should control population movements across borders is virtually unchallenged. However, there is a considerable body of research which shows that the motivations for international migration are huge and that the rewards to migrants, employers, and societies (both sending and receiving) are enormous.<sup>43</sup> These forces suggest that public policies of immigration control are unlikely to be successful.

The mass media routinely report the extraordinary investments and ingenuity of Latin Americans, Chinese, and Africans who seek to migrate to North America and Europe. Many of these efforts lead to capture and humiliating

treatment as criminals. In other instances, many migrants die when they are locked into shipping containers or attempt to traverse the deserts without sufficient water and other provisions. Yet they continue to come. The simple reason is that the economies of the North and South are increasingly integrated through flows of goods, capital, and labour. International migration is a functional component of modern societies, rich and poor, that resolves the uneven distribution of people and opportunities.

Most migrants come, not to settle, but to support their families at home.<sup>44</sup> Indeed the remittances from international migrants to developing countries far exceed the funds going to poor countries from foreign aid, direct capital investment, and manufacturing exports (Massey et al. 1998).<sup>45</sup> The gains of international migration to the economies of advanced countries are also substantial. Most industrial economies do not have sufficient domestic supplies of low-cost labour. If this pattern were found in only one country or in only a few sectors, then it might be possible to consider a fairly narrow explanation in terms of political cultures or market rigidities. The demand for "cheaper immigrant labour", however, spans many sectors (agriculture, manufacturing, construction, repair services, restaurants, and child care) in most industrial countries, including a number of rapidly growing developing countries.

The demand for immigrant labour is not restricted to unskilled manual labour. The United States and other industrial countries have encountered a shortage of scientific and engineering workers, particularly in the high-tech sector. This demand has been met, in part, by allowing many talented foreign students in American universities to convert their student visas to immigrant status. In spite of political pressures to control immigration, almost all policy changes have broadened the scope of legal immigration to allow settlement by refugees, agricultural workers, "illegal" immigrants with long residences in the country, people in countries that have too few American citizen relatives to sponsor them, and workers in high demand by US employers.

Standard economic theory posits that domestic migration is a functional response to wage differentials between areas. Migration allows for workers to benefit from higher wages in growing areas and stimulates the economy to operate more efficiently by creating larger and more porous labour and consumer markets. Indeed the logic for lessening barriers to migration is similar to that of international free trade. Economic theory suggests that all countries benefit from the free flow of capital, goods, and technology across international borders. International migration is often excluded from discussions about expanding international trade (such as in the NAFTA debate), largely because of political considerations rather than economic theory.

My reading of current trends and history suggests that the major policy issue for international migration is not immigration control, but the creation of opportunities for the socioeconomic advancement and social integration of immigrants and their descendants. Immigrants will continue to come in large numbers for the foreseeable future. If the borders are closed, they are likely to find clandestine ways of entry — the economic incentives of both the sending and receiving societies are overwhelming. However, it is an open question whether the immigrants will be accepted as full members of the receiving society. American society, even with all of its failings, may offer a model of how immigrants and their children have prospered and also contributed to society. Even the idea of what it means to be an American has evolved as each immigrant wave has broadened the outlook of all Americans. An awareness of

this history can help to inform the contemporary debate over the significance of current and future immigration in other societies.

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