

usually see death as the end of something, Lesley A. Sharp's *Strange Harvest*, reviewed here by Laura Maudlin, examines the social organization of the postmortality experience—in this case, the market for body parts.

Finally Heather Johnson's *The American Dream and the Power of Wealth* looks at American society from a different angle: how that strangely American amalgam of the hopes, ambitions, and ideas about social mobility we call “the American Dream” shapes American reactions to the shifts in concentration of wealth we have seen in recent decades. Reviewed here by Aaron Pallas, this book takes a look at the relationship between *ideas* about economic prosperity that are so deeply imbedded in American culture and today's economic realities.

Review Essays

Immigrants and Boomers

Charles Hirschman²

Immigrants and Boomers: Forging a New Social Contract for the Future of America. *Dowell Myers, Russell Sage Foundation, 2007.*

In a book that is both an empirical analysis of demographic trends and a policy treatise, Dowell Myers examines the interaction between immigration and population aging. The popular press, as well as much scholarly writing, treats these as separate and independent issues. Both are considered major problems, if not impending crises. According to some pundits and scholars, immigration adds more people than the nation can afford, and the wrong sort of people—those with low skills who will overburden the limited resources and social services. The “graying” of America is another big crisis on the horizon, which will leave the country with a shortage of workers and too many elderly dependents.

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Using only straightforward demographic tools and clear-headed logic, Myers turns the conventional wisdom on its head. He explains that immigration is a potential solution to the challenges created by population aging. Population aging will create a shortage of workers and also add to the burden of dependency—more elderly who need income support and healthcare. Social Security and Medicare will be under increasing strain in the coming decades, with the declining number of native-born workers who “pay in” in the system of intergenerational transfers and an increasing number of native-born elderly who hope to “draw out” resources from the system. The modern welfare state was created at a time when the age structure was much more favorable to an intergenerational contract and a “pay as you go” system of financing. With only modest numbers of elderly relative to the working-age population, the nation could afford to be generous and keep payroll taxes low. Indeed, the Social Security account has been running a surplus for many years and these funds have been used to cover (hide) major budget deficits in the federal budget. Both political parties have been complicit in this masquerade.

With the aging of the Baby Boomers, and population aging more generally, the day of reckoning is soon approaching. Taxes will have to be raised (or the base of taxation broadened) or benefits will have to be lowered. The possibility that there might be a return to higher fertility, which could tip the age structure in a younger direction, is most unlikely. One partial solution is immigration. Immigrants are younger—almost all are of working age. Almost all immigrants, including illegal immigrants, pay taxes, including Social Security and Medicare taxes, but many do not remain in the United States after retirement to collect Social Security and Medicare. Immigrants also have higher fertility and slow population aging. Moreover, immigrants often work in the low-wage service sector, especially in nursing homes and home healthcare, which the older native-born population need.

In recent decades, however, immigration and immigrants have been demonized. Demagogues in the mass media, politics, and even a few in the academy have portrayed immigrants as a major threat to the U.S. economy and way of life. In spite of a lack of empirical evidence that immigrants have taken jobs or lowered incomes of native-born Americans, there is a steady drumbeat of claims that middle-class jobs are disappearing because of immigration. Much of the fear of immigrants is cultural. Immigrants, especially from Asia and Latin America, speak different languages, follow different religions, and are more likely than native-born Americans to share housing with relatives and friends. If these practices are assumed to be permanent features of ethnic immigrant communities,

then critics of immigration claim there is an incipient trend toward a “disuniting of America” because contemporary immigrants do not wish to assimilate to traditional U.S. society and culture. Similar to the economic controversy, most empirical evidence provides little support for the cultural fears about immigrants. The children of immigrants are invariably completely fluent in English and adopt U.S. culture much more rapidly than their parents would like. In general, the values of most immigrants about family, religion, and work are much closer to the traditional U.S. model of prior generations than those of younger native-born Americans.

Myers casts California as the model of America’s future. Many of the demographic forces, as well as economic and cultural, that are sweeping U.S. society happened first in California. Large-scale immigration began to transform California in the 1970s, a couple of decades before the immigration wave hit most of the United States. Fears about the impact of immigration were the primary political dynamic of California during the 1980s and 1990s. Although nearly 50% of California’s population is composed of immigrants and their children, almost none of the presumed fears have come to pass. Indeed, Myers notes that California may become the world’s major laboratory for the successful settlement and incorporation of immigrants. What has accounted for the “California turnaround?”

Good times returned to California in the second half of the 1990s and there was a slowdown in the rate of immigration. Immigrants have begun to settle in “new destination areas”—the South and Midwest. This led to a shift in the composition of California’s immigrant population with a decreasing share of newcomers and an increasing share of long-term immigrants who had experienced higher levels of social mobility. This has been accompanied with a much more positive reception (and perhaps acceptance) of immigrants in Californian civic and political life.

But much more is needed than acceptance—there needs to be a major investment in education to broaden the opportunities of the younger generation of Latino immigrants. This is not just in the interest of Latinos, but also of the broader society that will depend on the skills, as well as the taxes paid, by future generations that are increasingly comprised of minorities and immigrants. Myers makes a convincing case for a new social contact between older generations of native-born Americans and the younger generations of new immigrants and their children. I recommend Meyers’s book as both a demographic and political study of how immigration is inextricably tied to the future of the United States.