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Rethinking the Teaching of Immigration History: We've Been Here Before

By Carol Lynn McKibben

The impact of 9/11 and the economic challenges of the new millennium are reshaping debates over immigration policy in profound ways, and presenting new challenges to the way we understand and teach immigration history. Most importantly, the new millennium has been associated with the crisis and trauma of terrorism, and also with a mass immigration that appears overpowering to many Americans, just as large-scale immigration overwhelmed Americans at the end of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Americans today frequently react to both the terrorist threat and this contemporary demographic transition as one and the same. Thus, all kinds of immigrants (asylees and refugees, legal migrants and undocumented arrivals) are lumped together in the popular mind as aberrant and dangerous threats that require desperate and immediate action and new policy initiatives, rather than being seen as the normal part of American life.

We are barely into the new millennium, but are already confronted with a narrative of U.S. immigration that appears to be nothing like what we might have predicted in the last years of the twentieth century. In spite of anti-immigration initiatives such as California's Proposition 187 in 1994 (declared unconstitutional in 1999), the North American Free Trade Act (NAFTA) seemed to promise a 21st century opening of borders and a looser policy towards workers. In spite of the usual nativism that has always been part of American history, we also might have anticipated in the new millennium a rash of legislation protecting the rights of minorities, homosexuals, asylees and refugees, and victims of domestic violence and trafficking, for which the feminist, gay rights, and human rights movements fought so hard, and with much success, at the end of the 1990s.

At the beginning of the twentieth century, the trauma of an unstable economy as a result of rapid and mass industrialization, together with political turmoil internationally and nationally, and the crisis of World War I, led to vicious policies and practices, culminating in the 1924 Johnson-Reed Act that signified a wholesale acceptance of scientific racism, excluding people from the entire continent of Asia and most of Southern and Eastern Europe. In the decades after the Second World War, however, we retreated from the view that all immigrants were an alien horde, a menacing presence in the country, and one that needed to be controlled or excluded altogether based on perceptions of ethno-racial difference, even as we held fast to a quota system based on nation-states and racist ideologies. By the end of the decade of the 1970s, the national mood and official policies shifted, as Presidents Johnson, Carter, Reagan, George H.

W. Bush, Clinton, and George W. Bush (at least before 9/11) and Congress broadened definitions of refugees and asylum seekers and opened immigration to formerly excluded groups. Instead of overt exclusion based on national origin (read: race), the presidents and Congress generally responded to demands for civil and human rights, and to the efforts by feminists, gay rights activists and minority groups. These policy-makers expanded definitions of "refugee" to include victims of domestic violence, forced marriage and female genital mutilation. They moved beyond a notion of refugee and asylum that had been limited to anti-Communists only. Although quotas remained firmly in place, there were efforts to bring equity to migration, and to get rid of obviously biased policies such as refusing entry to homosexuals.

The situation we are faced with today feels more like the early twentieth century environment, with its violent racism, nativism, and harsh policy initiatives that denied human rights (and entry to the U.S.), to millions of people already in this country and throughout the world. Instead, we see a flurry of local and state legislation related to immigration, most of it nativist, brought on by perceptions that the federal government is not doing its job of controlling migration flows, especially in the context of recent economic downturns and worldwide terrorism. The challenge of making sense of it all is formidable. Students arrive in the U.S. immigration course that I teach both confused and troubled by a discourse on immigration that has grown ever more polarized and nativist in recent years.

The first step is to bring historical context into debates about citizenship rights, legislation regarding borders and security, and of course labor issues, among other topics that we explore in immigration courses.

It helps to begin in the beginning. Channeling my late and wonderful mentor, Jim Kettner, our class considered the meaning of citizenship in the earliest days of the American republic and the idea of integration of diverse peoples into the body politic that the founders conceptualized. Students are amazed to read anti-German rants from Benjamin Franklin (who looks like such a kind person otherwise), and Jefferson's worried writings on black people, both free and slave, as both a threatening population and impossible ever to integrate as American citizens. Students are often surprised that Native Americans were considered to be outside the pale of citizenship from the seventeenth century colonization until the 1930s, and that Chinese and all Asian immigrants were banned from citizenship from the 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act until well into the twentieth century.

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News from Libraries, Museums and Research Institutes...

The **Historical Society of Pennsylvania** in Philadelphia has received a bequest from the estate of the late John Haas to support the care and interpretation of ethnic and immigrant history. John Haas was a former chairman of the board of the **Balch Institute for Ethnic Studies**, which merged with the HSP in 2001. According to HSP president Kim Sajet, "The funds are to go towards the Balch mission which includes the Balch Fellowships, the programming related to ethnic and immigrant history including educational programs, and the care of the collection."

The **Immigration History Research Center** at the University of Minnesota will host a research talk by Florence Vychytil-Baudoux, l'Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales (Paris), Fulbright Researcher at the IHRC, "Citizenship and its Uses: Circulation of Ideas among Polonia in the Free World during the Cold War." The presentation is at 12:00 noon on December 1, 2011. Information at <http://ihrc.umn.edu/>

The **Immigration History Research Center** at the University of Minnesota (IHRC) offers Grants In Aid awards of up to \$500 to assist graduate students, independent and other scholars traveling to conduct research for at least one week (five research days) at the IHRC. The deadline for applications for 2012-2013 awards is June 1, 2012. Post-doctoral scholars are also eligible to apply for additional funding for a maximum award of \$1,000. The post-doctoral Grant In Aid supports a two-week residency (ten research days) while conducting research in the Center's collections. Those applying for the post-doctoral Grant In Aid must clearly indicate their qualifications for the award in a letter of application. The deadline for post-doctoral Grants in Aid also is June 1, 2012. Further information at www.ihrc.umn.edu/educators/grantsinaid.php

The **German Historical Institute** in Washington DC has launched the multi-year project *Immigrant Entrepreneurship: German-American Business Biographies, 1720 to the Present*. It will feature a pub-

lished collection—in print and online—of about 250 biographical essays of first- and second- generation German-American businesspeople. The online platform will be a repository for a wealth of additional information, including visual and media materials such as archival photos, business documents, and audio recordings as well as statistics and raw data on businesses and immigration. By synthesizing the diverse fields of business history, entrepreneurship research, migration history and German-American studies, the project will make a significant contribution to a wide array of academic disciplines and offer unique tools for teaching and research. Individuals who have source material that may be of interest, or scholars who have done research on German-American businesspeople, companies, industries or regions, and who would like to contribute to this project, please contact GHI at entrepreneurship@ghi-dc.org. For more information see the GHI temporary website:

ghi-dc.org/entrepreneurship

The **Japanese American National Museum** in Los Angeles has a current exhibition: "Drawing the Line: Japanese American Art, Design & Activism in Post-War Los Angeles." Through February 19, 2012. Information at <http://www.janm.org>

The **South Asian American Digital Archive (SAADA)** aims to document, preserve and make accessible the history of the South Asian American community. SAADA's digital collections reflect the vast range of experiences of the South Asian diaspora in the U.S., including those who trace their heritage to Bangladesh, India, Nepal, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, and the many South Asian diaspora communities across the globe. Digitized materials in SAADA's collections reflect the diversity of the community, including: the papers of the first Asian American Congressman, Dalip Singh Saund; historic articles about the early immigration of South Asians to the U.S. dating from 1910; pamphlets created by the Gadar Party in California in 1915; and photographs documenting the political

activism of the South Asian American Voting Youth (SAAVY) in 2004. The collections are readily accessible at <http://www.saadigitalarchive.org> SAADA is currently looking to expand its collections by digitizing additional materials. The organization is particularly interested in archival records that document a range of political engagement and cultural expression among diverse South Asian American communities. Those interested in contributing are encouraged to contact the organization; e-mail Samip Mallick, samip@saadigitalarchive.org

The **Texas Seaport Museum** in Galveston, Texas has compiled the nation's only computerized listing of immigrants to Galveston, Texas. The museum's immigration exhibit features text and historic photographs illustrating Galveston's role in immigration history and the major organized immigration movements of the 19th and 20th Centuries. Computer terminals in the exhibit area allow visitors to search for information taken from ships' passenger manifests pertaining to their ancestors' arrival in Texas. The database is also available online. Information at <http://www.galvestonhistory.org>

The **Chinese American Museum**, 425 N. Los Angeles Street in Los Angeles is planning a new exhibit: "Breaking Ground: Chinese American Architects in Los Angeles (1945-1980)." The exhibit opens January 19, 2012. Information at <http://www.camla.org/upcoming.html>

The **University of Washington Libraries** have placed online many oral-history interviews from the South Asian Oral History Project. The interviews are with many individuals who immigrated from South Asia to the Pacific Northwest since the 1950s. Many are available in audio and video versions and in transcripts. Say the librarians: "Taken together, these interviews make up a unique record of the lives of South Asians who have contributed greatly to the fabric and texture of the region. These

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From the IEHS President...

Greetings, IEHS members!

Time slips away quite quickly—and at other moments moves at a turtle's pace! As I write this, my sixth and final message to you as IEHS president, I am amazed at the speed with which my three years as president has passed, even though I can also recall moments when I thought the term would never end. All in all, my six years in a leadership role in IEHS, first as vice president/president-elect and then as president, have been happy and productive. During these years, I have worked with so many scholars for whom IEHS means so much. With their dogged devotion and expenditure of countless hours, Ron Bayor, Elliott Barkan, and John Bukowczyk enabled the Society to survive the challenge of moving the *Journal of American Ethnic History* from its previous publisher to the University of Illinois Press, a decision that has also allowed our organization to flourish financially—at least for the moment. During and since that trying episode, others have labored in the Society's offices and on its Board of Directors to accomplish the work of organizing our IEHS-sponsored conference sessions, keeping our records and financial statements, deciding policy questions, awarding prizes, finding candidates for office, locating possible sites for our annual dinner, and creating new initiatives. I wish that I could name all of you, but you know who you are. My sincere thanks to each of you!

And let us all prepare to welcome Hasia Diner into the IEHS presidency! The hand-off of the "gavel" will take place immediately after the Society's annual business meeting on Friday, April 20, 2012, during the OAH in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. At that meeting, the names of the Society's incoming vice president/president-elect and three new Executive Board members will be announced (see the "Call for Nominations" elsewhere in the *Newsletter*). In the evening, IEHS will hold its annual dinner at Brocach Irish Pub (www.brocach.com/milwaukee), at 1850 North Water Street, about two miles from the conference headquarters at the Hilton Milwaukee. Irish specialties will be served, and Guinness will be on tap!

Even earlier, in January 2012 at the AHA

in Chicago, IEHS will have two sponsored sessions on the program: "Rethinking the Model Migrant: New Perspectives on Jewish Migration," on Thursday, January 5, at 3:00 p.m. at the Marriott and "To Resist or Embrace? Immigrant Perspectives on Public Schooling, 1870-1940," on Sunday, January 8, at 11:00 a.m. at the Sheraton.

Let me also call your attention to the Society's enhanced electronic presence—our totally redesigned website, initiated and now supervised by Website Editor Rachel Kranson at www.iehs.org, and especially to the site's new "Syllabus Exchange" under "Resources." And my heartfelt thanks also go to Julio Capó, Jr., for creating our IEHS Facebook page. Check us out at "Immigration and Ethnic History Society" and "Like" us!

As I totter into the sunset of my presidency and my coming three years as Immediate Past President, and get ready to pull two huge file boxes out from under my worktable and ship them to Hasia, I bid you a preliminary good-bye, but do hope to see many of you in Chicago and Milwaukee.

Best wishes,

Barbara M. Posadas
IEHS President

Necrology...

OSCAR HANDLIN, 1915-2011

Oscar Handlin, Carl M. Loeb University Professor Emeritus of History at Harvard University, died Sept. 20, 2011 at his home in Cambridge, Massachusetts. He was 95 years of age.

Handlin was the best-known historian of American immigration in the twentieth century. Born in Brooklyn in 1915, the son of a Jewish immigrant grocer, he graduated from Brooklyn College at the age of 19, and received his doctorate from Harvard University in 1940. His doctoral mentor was Arthur Schlesinger, Sr., then the preeminent scholar of American social history. Handlin taught at Brooklyn College from 1936 to 1938, then began a teaching career at Harvard in 1939 before completing his doctorate. He retired from the Harvard faculty in 1984 and became professor emeritus, but remained active in research and writing until his death.

Handlin's doctoral dissertation was published in 1941 as *Boston's Immigrants,*

1790-1880: a Study in Acculturation. The book, which was awarded the Dunning Prize of the American Historical Association, provided a model for later immigration historians in its detailed examination of the ethnic societies of a particular locality, and in its sociological perspective and emphasis on the life of the ordinary immigrant. The book which made him known to many as an outstanding immigration scholar, however, was *The Uprooted: The Epic Story of the Great Migrations That Made the American People* (1951). It was awarded the Pulitzer Prize for history in 1952. It presented a somewhat gloomy picture of the immigrants' difficulties, caught as they were between the culture they left behind and the new unfamiliar culture of the American city. Other historians would in time criticize his interpretation as an over-generalization which did not recognize the differences among immigrant groups, and which did not recognize the durability of the immigrant traditional culture in the face of the dominant American society. Nevertheless, *The Uprooted* remained for many the first book to read on the subject of American immigration.

Handlin published many other books in social and economic history as well as ethnic history. He also had many other active roles: editing the *Harvard Guide to American History*; serving as head librarian at Harvard for five years; directing Harvard's Charles Warren Center for Studies in American History; and advocating actively in the 1960s for the repeal of the immigration quota acts of the 1920s, goals which were achieved in the Immigration Act of 1965.

Handlin saw his own influence in the well-known first sentence of *The Uprooted*: "Once I thought to write a history of the immigrants in America. Then, I discovered that the immigrants were American history."

From the newsletter editor...

The *Immigration and Ethnic History Newsletter* welcomes proposals for the feature articles in each issue. These front-page articles are generally historiographical or pedagogical in nature. Reviews of the literature on a specific subject or ethnic group may be considered. We do not publish detailed research articles. These essays are usually about 1500-1800 words in length. Do not send a completed work; tell us your ideas first. E-mail: james.bergquist@villanova.edu.

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Conferences and Meetings...

The **Boston Immigration and Urban History Seminar**, sponsored by the **Massachusetts Historical Association**, has scheduled a series of seven meetings for the academic year 2011-2012. Meetings are held at the Society, 1154 Boylston Street, Boston on Tuesday evenings. Meetings held so far this autumn included:

Sept. 27: Robert W. Snyder, (Rutgers University, Newark), "Arrivals and Departures, Retrenchments and Revival: Washington Heights and New York City from the Fiscal Crisis to the Onset of the Crack Epidemic."

Oct. 25: Mary Anne A. Trasciatti (Hofstra University), "Athens or Anarchy? Soapbox Oratory and the Early Twentieth-Century American City."

Nov. 15: Brian Gratton (Arizona State University), "Henry Cabot Lodge and the Rise of the Movement to Restrict Immigration."

Seminars scheduled for 2012 include:

Jan. 31: Arissa Oh (Boston College): "Orphan Evacuation or Big Business?: The Institutionalization of Korean Adoption."

Feb. 28: Anne Marie Reardon (Brandeis University): "The 'Coddling Controversy': Italian POWs on Boston's World War II Homefront"

March 13: Kornel S. Chang (Rutgers University, Newark): "Policing Migrants and Militants: In Defense of Nation and Empire in the U.S.-Canadian Borderlands."

April 24: Andrea Thabet (University of California, Santa Barbara): "'A Successful Integrated Development for the Central City': Constructing the Los Angeles Music Center, 1954-1967."

Seminar meetings start at 5:15 PM and are followed by a light buffet supper (make reservations for the supper). Full information is at <http://www.masshist.org/events/bsiuh.cfm>

The **American Historical Association** will hold its next meeting Jan. 5-8, 2012 in Chicago. Theme: "Frontiers of Capitalism and Democracy." Information on the web at <http://www.historians.org/>

The **Polish American Historical Association**

will hold its annual meeting in conjunction with the AHA meeting in Chicago, January 5-8, 2013. PAHA's program can be found in the AHA program; see <http://www.historians.org/annual/program.cfm>

The **American Conference for Irish Studies** will hold its annual conference in New Orleans, March 14-17, 2012. Theme: "Erin at Home, Erin Abroad: Capturing the Irish Experience." Paper submissions closed Sept. 30, 2011. Information at: <http://acisnola2012.org/index.html>

The **Association for Asian American Studies** will hold its 2012 meeting in Washington, D.C., April 11-14. Theme: "Expanding the Political: Power, Poetics, Practices." Information on the web at <http://www.aaastudies.org>

The **Organization of American Historians** will hold its 2012 meeting in Milwaukee, April 19-22. Theme: "Frontiers of Capitalism and Democracy." Information on the web at <http://www.oah.org/>

The **Immigration and Ethnic History Society** will hold its next annual meeting in connection with the Organization of American Historians, April 19-22, 2012, in Milwaukee.

The **Society for German American Studies** will hold its 36th annual conference at the University of Kansas in Lawrence, April 12-14, 2012. Theme: "Transforming the Americas: Immigrants, Explorers and Exiles." Proposals closed Nov. 15, 2011. Information on the web at: <http://sgas.org/meetings/2012-call.pdf>

The **Society for Historians of American Foreign Relations (SHAFR)** will hold its annual meeting in Hartford, Connecticut, June 28-30, 2012. Theme of the meeting: "Revolutionary Aftermaths." Aside from the general theme, the committee also welcomes proposals on other topics pertaining to U.S. relations with the wider world, including (but not limited to) state-to-state relations, global governance, transnational movements, and histories of mobility, borderlands, and empire. For information,

see "Call for Papers" at www.shafr.org

The **American Jewish Historical Society** will hold its 2012 Biennial Conference on American Jewish History June 12-13, 2012 at the Center for Jewish History in New York City. General theme: "Beyond Boundaries: Interdisciplinary Approaches to Studying American Jews. Proposals closed Nov. 1, 2011. Information at www.ajhs.org

The **German Studies Association (GSA)** will hold its Thirty-Sixth Annual Conference in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, October 4-7, 2012. The Program Committee invites proposals on any aspect of German, Austrian, or Swiss studies, including (but not limited to) history, Germanistik, film, art history, political science, anthropology, musicology, religious studies, sociology, and cultural studies. The deadline for proposals is February 15, 2012. Information on the web at www.thegsa.org

The **Oral History Association** plans its annual meeting in Cleveland, Ohio, October 10-14, 2012. Theme: "Sing It Out, Shout It Out, Say It Out Loud: Giving Voice through Oral History." The deadline for submission of proposals is January 20, 2012. Information at: www.oralhistory.org

The **American Conference for Irish Studies** will hold its international meeting in New Orleans, March 14-17, 2012. Theme: "Erin at Home, Erin Abroad: Capturing the Irish Experience." Further information at <http://acisnola2012.org/>

The **Social Science History Association** will hold its 2012 meeting in Vancouver, British Columbia, Nov. 1-4, 2012. Information on the web at <http://www.ssha.org>

The **American Studies Association** plans its 2012 annual meeting at the Caribe Hilton and Puerto Rico Convention Center, San Juan, November 15-18, 2012. For information, see the web at www.theasa.net

Future meetings of the **IEHS** and **OAH** will include: San Francisco, April 11-14, 2013; and Atlanta, April 10-13, 2014.