

Not Fit for Our Society: Immigration and Nativism in America, Peter Schrag, University of California Press, 2010.

Nativism Is Alive and Thriving in America

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In an era when cash-strapped publishers have cut back on marketing, Peter Schrag, author of this lively history of American nativism, has had a stroke of good luck. The state of Arizona has undertaken to do the marketing for him.

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Just as his book reached the store shelves, Arizona enacted Senate Bill 1070, a law requiring police to check the immigration status of anyone “where reasonable suspicion exists” that the person is an illegal alien—but not use race or ethnicity as grounds for that suspicion (good luck with that). Immigration is back—maybe on the national agenda but certainly on cable TV and the blogs, and perhaps even on reading lists.

For those who prefer light to heat on the immigration question, *Not Fit for Our Society* is the perfect place to start. Drawing on his decades of reporting and reading of primary sources and the latest scholarship, Schrag traces the strange career of American nativism and America’s enduring ambivalence about immigration from the Puritan saints to the Tea Partiers. He delivers a story rich in irony,

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detail, and nuance, often told with passion and frequently challenging orthodoxies of both the political right and left. It is the right book at the right time, a worthy successor to John Higham's classic history of U.S. nativism, *Strangers in the Land*.

The differences between Higham's book and Schrag's measure how much America has changed over the last half century and, paradoxically, how little some themes of national life have changed over four centuries.

Higham's study, even when it was new, read like the epitaph for a dead idea. Writing in 1955, Higham assumed that the tides of mass immigration, and the defensive nationalism that rose and fell with them, were over. "The vast folk movements that had formed one of the most fundamental social forces in American history had been brought to an end," he declared. The cycles of nativism that roiled the country between the age of confidence left by the Civil War, when "nationalism was complacent and cosmopolitan," and the nativist triumph of passing the restrictive immigration quota law of 1924, were a thing of the past. The intellectual threads of those nativist movements—anti-Catholicism, Anglo-Saxon triumphalism, antiradicalism—lived on mainly in the McCarthyite "equation between national loyalty and a large measure of political and social conformity."

By the time a generation of college students plowed through Higham in the 1960s and 1970s, even those rem-

nants were gone: a Catholic had been elected president and McCarthyism was a bad memory. The book they read mentioned California only briefly (for Denis Kearney's Workingmen and their anti-Chinese xenophobia, a phenomenon deplored by other Americans, according to Higham, as foreign-inspired radicalism). Its index did not contain the words "Mexico" or "Mexican."

Higham, it turns out, had called the game before it was over. In immigration as in so many other facets of American life, the mid-century era that stretched from the 1929 stock market crash to the mid-1960s has proven the great exception in the long patterns of our history. From Schrag's vantage point a half century later, immigration and nativism look more like permanent and living threads of America life, "a spiral of ambivalence and inconsistency, a double helix, with strands of welcome and rejection would tightly around each other." Nativism is alive and in full voice, performing twenty-first century covers of political anthems that were sung a hundred years ago from the pulpits of small-town Presbyterian churches, at Ku Klux Klan cross burnings, and in the faculty clubs of Ivy League universities.

As Schrag makes clear, the existence of nativism does not make the United States unusual; nativism and immigration naturally go together. What makes the American story different is that our nativists have to contend not just with immigrants but also with the ideas on which the nation was

built. On July 4 Americans read in the Declaration of Independence that “all men are created equal,” and if they are diligent enough to read it all the way through, can peruse its denunciation of King George for obstructing naturalization laws and blocking immigration to the colonies. Those words have regularly left nativists at something of a rhetorical and political disadvantage. Were the Know-Nothings, the antebellum nativist party, to gain power, Abraham Lincoln wrote, the Declaration would “read ‘all men are created equal, except Negroes, and foreigners and Catholics.’ When it comes to this I should prefer emigrating to some country where they make no pretense of loving liberty.” “To be a nativist in this country,” Schrag notes, “was to be in conflict with its fundamental tenets.”

Nativism has also been at odds with the need for labor and the realities of an increasingly globalized world. “Here is a half-worked country in need of a larger labor force; across the sea is a labor force in need of employment,” Kate Holladay Cleghorn wrote in 1900 (but could have written almost any time before or after). America needed immigrants to clear the forests and push back the native inhabitants; to lay rails across the prairies; to bust the sod along those rails so the railroads would have customers; to stoke the blast furnaces; and, in our own day, to write code in Silicon Valley and pick grapes in Visalia. The tidal force pulling idle hands toward undone work would prove irresistible, Cleghorn predicted. “It will be as impossible

to keep these apart, under modern conditions of intercommunication, as to shut out a rising tide with a board fence; the water will force its way in, either over, or under, or through the cracks.”

But as Philip Martin, the UC Davis economist, once said, we wanted labor but we got people. The laborers brought with them strange costumes and customs, different forms of worship, new political ideas. In America, mass immigration put a foreign face on all the great stressors and upsets of the nineteenth and early twentieth century: industrialization, urbanization, modernization, the struggle between capital and labor. So it is not surprising that, even with the handicap of often playing against the nation’s economic interests and its highest ideals, nativism has enjoyed a vigorous American career. If the United States was a nation created, in revolution, by choice—a choice reaffirmed each time an immigrant stepped off a ship—it was also a place of lingering doubts about whether everyone was up to the job of carrying the torch of self government.

The doubts go back to the beginning, Schrag shows. Benjamin Franklin worried in the 1730s that the influx of “Palantine boors” would “Germanize” colonial Pennsylvania beyond recognition. Less than a century later descendants of those German immigrants were in the crowds rioting in Philadelphia against the immigrant Irish and Catholic influence in the public schools. The pattern would repeat endlessly. Each new wave of immigration, set off

by economic changes or social turmoil abroad—“this visible act of ingurgitation on the part of our body politic and social, and constituting really an appeal to amazement beyond that of any sword-swallowing or fire-swallowing of the circus,” as Henry James put it—would give rise to a movement of defensive American nationalism judging the newcomers “not fit for our society.”

In the nativist indictment, the immigrants were not fit to be free citizens because, depending on the era, they were loyal to foreign monarchs; beholden to the pope; or agents of foreign and subversive ideologies. They brought crime and disease and vice. They came (take your pick) to leach off the taxpayers or to work so hard as to compete unfairly with American workers. The nativists’ verdicts varied from era to era. But their themes, as Schrag delights in demonstrating, have endured. With his fervid imaginings of an immigrant-driven leprosy epidemic, Lou Dobbs, business reporter turned cable ranter, is the direct descendant of early twentieth-century nativists with their images of diseased immigrants carrying their contagion to the New World. Today’s conservative fantasies of Mexican immigrants as the leading wedge of a “North American Union” conspiracy echo older fantasies of a papist takeover.

For the nation’s first 150 years, nativists found it difficult to turn fear into national immigration policy, except in case of the 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act. Their arguments

could not overcome Americans’ faith in their founding ideals, the need for labor, the political clout of immigrant voters (many states permitted noncitizens to vote), and the real and potential foreign policy issues created by singling out particular nationalities for exclusion. But in the twentieth century, the rise of eugenics and pseudoscientific racism in America’s leading universities, which Schrag sees as both a consequence and cause of nativism, “helped break the ice.”

Here *Not Fit for Our Society* shines. Through its pages parade a cavalcade of supposed scholars who decorated the Anglo-Saxon supremacist theories of Madison Grant, author of the infamous tract *Passing of the Great Race*, with the authority of “science.” In an era when Progressive historians were muckraking the Founding Fathers as political fixers who wrote the Constitution to shore up their economic interests, the eugenicists were debunking the Founders’ idea that “all men are created equal.” “The Fourth of July orator can convincingly raise the popular belief in the intellectual level of Poland by shouting the name of Kosciusko from a high platform, but he cannot alter the distribution of the intelligence of the Polish immigrant,” Carl C. Brigham, one of the early psychometricians, wrote.

The eugenicists’ “science” didn’t pass muster with more scrupulous writers and thinkers, from Franz Boas to Walter Lippmann. But it was good enough for nativist politicians

eager to close the immigration door after the turmoil of World War I and the 1919 Red Scare. Harry Laughlin, director of the Eugenics Record Office, part of the Carnegie-funded evolution research station at Cold Spring Harbor, would soon be sitting as “expert eugenics agent” beside Albert Johnson, chairman of the House Committee on Immigration and Naturalization. Together they crafted the 1924 immigration quota bill to keep America free from more Poles, Jews, Italians, and other carriers of what Margaret Sanger, birth control advocate and eugenicist, called “vicious protoplasm.”

Immigration restriction accomplished, Laughlin would soon turn to cheering the sterilization law passed by the Nazis, who rewarded him, in turn, with an honorary degree. One of the strengths of Schrag’s account is the way it connects the influence of the early eugenics movement both to the horrors inflicted on Europe and to today’s nativist groups. Many of those groups and individuals are today busy recycling the junk science and draw funding from some of the same organizations the eugenicists created. As Schrag puts it, “Intellectuals have well tended the roots of American anti-intellectualism for generations.”

It is a measure of Schrag’s skill and restraint that his portrait of nativism never descends into caricature. It could not have been easy. If anyone has earned the right to paint this story in broad strokes of anger, Schrag, himself an immigrant and refugee from Nazi Germany, is surely that

writer. But *Not Fit for Our Society* never loses sight of the complexity of its subject or runs short on understanding. Schrag recognizes the costs and uncertainties created, at every point in our history, by mass immigration. A committed liberal, he does not flinch from the conclusion that broad political support for the robust public services he favors may not be winnable in an ethnically diverse state and nation with large numbers of foreign-born residents. He recounts how, as a teenager fresh to New York City and America, he joined his friends in lampooning Japs and wops and guineas. He knows firsthand that being American has often required, for natives and immigrants alike, defining the Other.

What he doesn’t tell his readers is how hard he has wrestled with these issues. I witnessed the struggle up close, as Schrag’s colleague at the *Sacramento Bee*, in the rolling public policy seminar that was the McClatchy Newspapers editorial board in the glory years when he was its editor. Like many others, he doubted California’s economic and political capacity, and the nation’s, to absorb the immigrant influx in the last decades of the last century. He worried that Mexican immigrants, their homeland a quick ride away, might not assimilate as had generations of immigrants past or achieve the same success in schools. He feared the possibility of growing tribalism and identity politics, with ethnic and immigrant leaders promoting, in Arthur Schlesinger’s phrase, more *pluribus* than *unum*.

But unlike some others with similar questions, he did not let fear or ideology provide automatic answers. He did what a good and honest journalist does. He went to the border to see for himself. He visited sewing shops in Los Angeles. He talked to the leading researchers on the patterns and economics of immigration. He read everything he could get his hands on, as the 40 pages of endnotes in the book attest. And through all that reporting, he achieves the goal he set: to be the reader's trusted guide through one of America's most treacherous policy thickets.

By the time one reaches the moment in the book when history gives way to the debate Arizona has reignited, Schrag's insights and prescriptions seem like common sense: That the nation cannot afford to replay the nativist fantasies of its past. That no fence can change the reality of a globalized economy, where people are as mobile as capital and goods and ideas. That the border between the United States and Mexico is, as Schrag puts it, a region to be managed in a multinational way, not a line that can be fortified. That the billions now squandered on unworkable border defenses should be diverted to investments that strengthen both countries and reduce the need for immigration. That few people, immigrant or native, excepting *coyotes* and unscrupulous American bosses, benefit more from unrestricted and illicit immigration than they would from a system that humanely manages the economic push and pull across our borders. That ethnic-based prefer-

ences in education are incompatible with public support for immigration and that multiculturalist demands for ethnic "identity" are the nativists' best friends.

The Arizona law and the emotional debate it triggered show that, in the immigration debate, the United States still has a long way to go politically before it's ready for that kind of reasonable discussion. But the story Schrag tells in *Not Fit for Our Society* gives reason for hope. Just as high tides of mass immigration have given rise to nativist reactions, nativist moments have spurred immigrants and their children to use politics in self defense. Eight years after Albert Johnson drove his restrictive immigration quota bill through Congress, he lost his seat in the New Deal landslide powered by the immigrant voters he believed unequal to the task of becoming truly American. Emmanuel Celler, the Brooklyn congressman who as a freshman made his first major speech on the House floor in opposition to Johnson's bill, would go on, 41 years later, to write the Hart-Celler Act that repealed the 1924 act and opened the immigration door to people who weren't among the eugenicists' chosen few. Each time some older Americans have lost faith in Jefferson's words, a generation of new Americans has stepped forward to redeem them.

As Peter Schrag shows once again, it often takes an immigrant to remind us what it means to be American.