

Is Immigration Reform a Good Thing?

Book Review by Scip Garling

In *Not Like Us*, University of Cincinnati history professor Roger Daniels examines the conditions in America for three groups (Blacks, Amerindians and immigrants) and the “reactionary forces” hostile to them, exploring the “paradox” that “a period of supposed progress was instead filled with conflict and xenophobia” [back cover]. Despite a strong anti-immigration reform tone Daniels’ book contains a lot of historical information and context useful to modern reformers — including the story of the *original* moratorium bill and its whirlwind passage in the House!

Much of the book is devoted to the plight of American Blacks and Amerindians. While this material is central to Daniels’ analysis, it has little relevance to the interests of the average immigration reformer, and may be skimmed without much loss of context. In a small way, this is unfortunate, for it is the “Black” passages that contain the best of Daniels’ prose, including his nearly cinematic descriptions of the race riots of the “Red Summer” of 1919 in Chicago and Tulsa.

In a great service to the reader Daniels places the Americanization movement in the larger context of the Progressive movement of which it was an element. Elements that today seem politically disparate — education reform, election reform, immigration reform, Prohibition, women’s rights — were, during the first quarter of the century, considered facets of a broad agenda of the Progressive movement. (The Progressive movement left a number of legacies, including the

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initiative/referendum process and the direct election of Senators, who had previously been selected by state legislatures.)

For example, because the Progressive agenda included women’s suffrage, the 1924 Immigration Act was preceded by the Cable Act of 1922, which decoupled women’s citizenship status from that of their husbands. Before 1922, native-born American women who would marry foreigners would actually *lose* their U.S. citizenship (p.137).

Being part of a larger agenda helped the cause of immigration reform in the 1920s; today a firm connection between it and other reform movements has yet to develop. Inklings in that direction, however, can be seen in the infant Reform party and in the writings of Michael Lind, who has recently suggested in *The New Republic* that

immigration reform needs to be one of the central planks in a broader agenda for “neo-Progressives.”

Arguably the most important item in *Not Like Us* is news of a legislative “ancestor” to the idea of an immigration moratorium. In December 1920, Representative Albert Johnson, the then-champion of immigration reform, sponsored a moratorium bill which was “introduced, debated, and passed, without any of the customary hearings, in one week” (p.120). By a vote of 296 to 42 (an absolute majority of both parties) the House voted to halt all immigration for one year. (Johnson’s original bill was for a two-year halt, but it was modified by the House.) The Senate, however, shelved the bill and replaced it with a quota bill, which was pocket vetoed by Woodrow Wilson in his last week in office. But the Senate’s desire to avoid the extremity of a moratorium pushed Congress to enact the quota law of 1921 — later made permanent by the 1924 Act — that kept immigration at a low level until 1965 (p.132).

Daniels’ book includes other surprises.

**Not Like Us:
Immigrants
and Minorities
in America,
1890-1924**

by Roger Daniels
Chicago: Ivan R. Dee Publishing
192 pages, \$12.95



Restrictionists, it turns out, did intend to limit Western Hemisphere immigration in the 1924 Act but were blocked by Southwestern legislators “insisting that their regions needed Mexican agricultural labor” (p.136). Much of the reduction in immigration levels in the 1920s and 1930s followed *not* from well-known legislative numerical restrictions, but from the consular service’s heavy use of its new executive authority to deny visas to “LPCs” — those “likely to become a public charge” (p.141).

And who would guess the author of the following quote:

Our industrial plant is built. ...Our last frontier has long since been reached. ...There is no safety valve in the form of a Western prairie. ...We are not able to invite the immigration (sic) from Europe to share our endless plenty (p.149).

That was spoken by liberal Democratic presidential candidate Franklin Roosevelt in a 1932 address to the Commonwealth Club of San Francisco.

Unfortunately Daniels occasionally tosses off tantalizing assertions without giving any further evidence:

Even the leaders of many of the longer-

established immigrants groups supported the [1924 immigration reform] bill, as did many African-American leaders (p.139).

Also, Daniels is no friend of immigration reform for today, which he sees only as a manifestation of wicked “nativism.” Daniels’ stance against immigration reform often shows strongly in his writing:

Present-day nativists, such as members of FAIR (Federation for American Immigration Reform), who view the numbers of contemporary immigrants with alarm, fail to note that while the 8-million-plus immigrants of the first decade of this century came to a country of some 90 million persons, those in the 1990s come to one of more than 250 million (p.159).

If the reader can overlook such flaws, the book is overall an interesting read with information and perspectives that help modern reformers both to understand the success of the earlier movement and to gather clues about repeating it today.

