John Higham Revisited

Were immigration reform and nativism the same thing?

by Otis L. Graham, Jr.

What we think about immigration restriction, and the role of "nativism" in it, has been powerfully shaped by historian John Higham's *Strangers in the Land: Patterns of American Nativism: 1860-1925* (1954), one of the brilliant and enduring volumes in American historiography of the past half century. But Higham's continuing second thoughts on the role of nativism in America have not been sufficiently heeded or discussed.

Higham, who died in 2003, traced what he saw as a nativist tradition through three outbursts of especially intense and well-organized anti-alien political activity – the 1790s, the Know-Nothing era before the Civil War, and the period of his main focus, the four decades prior to immigration restriction in the 1920s.

Higham seemed to cast the entire forty-year history of the New Immigration debate as in part a story of nativism – which he defined as "intense opposition to an internal minority on the ground of its foreign connection."

But were immigration reform and nativism the same thing?

Henry Cabot Lodge, a reformer in a restrictionist direction but a critic of those he saw as nativists, emphatically thought not. But historians writing after Higham and journalists following their lead have ignored the distinction.

In the years after *Strangers in the Land* was published, historians and journalists have tended to treat the cause of reforming immigration policy simply as an outbreak of nativism, essentially bigotry and fear of foreigners.

The cross-references under "nativism" in the index to Leonard Dinnerstein and David Reimers' textbook *Ethnic Americans* (1988), for example, include "see also Bigotry, Discrimination, Prejudice."

Nativism, one way of reacting to mass immigration in the decades before the Civil War, thus came to be spread as a label over all subsequent criticisms of unlimited entry of foreigners into the United States, to the present day.

This is profoundly ahistorical. And the first dissenter was Higham.

Shortly after the publication of *Strangers in the Land* Higham published an article (1958) confessing:

> *that nativism now looks less adequate as a vehicle for studying the struggles of nationalities in America than my earlier report of it. …The nativist theme, as defined and developed to date, is imaginatively exhausted.*

As a concept, he went on, it directs our attention too much to "subjective, irrational motives," and neglects and even screens out "the objective realities of ethnic relations" and "the structure of society." The word "nativism" derives from a particular era in American history, the 1830s to the mid-1850s, when the first large waves of immigration came to the eastern seaboard, mostly from Ireland and Germany. Eastern cities were swamped by incoming migrants from the rural hinterland and overseas, and life was hard for all. But the immigrants seemed to intensify all existing problems and bring new ones. In this era and during the Great Wave of the period from the l880s to the l920s, there was indeed "intense opposition to an internal minority on the grounds of its foreign connection." But the opposition and demand for limits was also based

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Otis L. Graham, Jr. *is Professor Emeritus (History), University of California, Santa Barbara, Visiting Scholar, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, and author of the just-published book* Unguarded Gates: A History of America's Immigration Crisis. *This essay is reprinted by permission from www.VDare.com.*

on real social costs imposed by the unregulated flow of people. It was "a bad habit," Higham reflected, to label "as nativist any kind of unfriendliness toward immigrants."

In the second edition of *Strangers in the Land* (1963), he stated that if he were writing the book again he would take more account of aspects of the immigration restriction movement that cannot be sufficiently explained in terms of nativism."

One part of the story of the 1880-1920 Great Wave's impact on America, nativism is an inadequate framework for understanding immigration reform politics in that period.

It is entirely misleading after the 1940s when nativism had eroded and "was all but finished" and had moved to the far fringes of American life, in the account of historian David Bennett, who followed nativism to its mid-century disappearance, as Higham had not.

And the larger framework in which to set mass immigration in any era must include the very real socioeconomic strains that these invariably generate.

Thus, economic historian Robert Fogel writes that the flood of immigrants arriving in America from 1841 to 1851, more than had come in the previous two centuries, "put severe downward pressure on wages and job opportunities. American workers suffered one of the most severe and protracted economic and social catastrophes of American history."

In New York, the city's population grew tenfold from 1800 to 1850. By 1850 half its residents were foreign-born and their proportion was growing twice as fast as the native born. New York's Irish were 30 percent of the population but accounted for 50 percent of arrests and 70 percent of indigent relief cases, while being heavily hit by infectious diseases.

"Xenophobia did not matter" in generating the restrictionist pressures of the latter part of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Harvard economic historians Timothy Hatton and Jeffrey Williamson went so far as to state in their exhaustive 1998 study of immigration's impacts.

The term "nativism" should thus be returned to its historical roots from its current pejorative application to anyone in modern America who seeks lower immigration numbers. It was one source, a century or more ago, of restrictionist sentiments that rested more substantially on labor market competition and a range of social disruptions. It has disappeared as an organized element in modern American life, and we would do well to respect Higham's advice that contemporary debates over immigration policy be conducted without anachronistic terminology.•