

EDITORIAL: THE USES AND MISUSES OF HISTORY

"Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it." - George Santayana(1)

"History is more or less bunk." - Henry Ford(2)

Henry Ford notwithstanding, many of us incline towards Santayana's view. Without expecting events to repeat themselves, we call on history, as best we can understand it, to help orient ourselves in time, place and direction. The saying that there is "no need to reinvent the wheel" encourages us to examine what has gone before. In this issue of THE SOCIAL CONTRACT we take a look at the uses and misuses of history as it affects our cluster of issues.

Errors abound. The simple manufacturing of history is perhaps the most egregious. On other occasions, we are tempted to judge past events by today's standards -- and today's events by past standards. Either approach leads to distortion.

In the immigration debate, one of the most common errors is the false analogy: since some measure worked (or didn't work) in the past, it will (or won't) work today. A good example of this is the contention that since the large numbers of immigrants we received in the first two decades of this century assimilated more or less satisfactorily, today's high numbers will also do so. Not to worry.

But things are different now. Consider the matter of language. The last great wave of immigration between 1905 and 1915, when nearly one million people a year came, brought people from literally dozens of different language backgrounds. In 1910 people came from the Eastern Hemisphere by way of arduous trips and with little thought of going back (though many did so). It was imperative for them to learn English in order to leave their ethnic enclaves and succeed.

Today, through the accidents of history, we have large numbers of people coming from similar language backgrounds who therefore find less need to acquire a new language to survive. Many immigrants come from countries close at hand by way of convenient modes of transportation. They often think of keeping their ties with the home country and perhaps returning after acquiring better means of support.

Eighty years ago there was a vigorous immigrant press, but now, in addition, we have radio and television. It is far more possible to get information in the native tongue, and less necessary to make the transition to English. In those former years, the government worked toward assimilation (Teddy Roosevelt was outspoken on this point); Jane Addams at Hull House, and the settlement house movement in general, worked energetically to teach English to the newcomers along with the skills for social survival in urban America. Today the government is confused at best, providing ballots and services in languages other than English, and underwriting bilingual education programs which encourage maintenance of the native tongue as the primary vehicle for communication.

Perhaps most significantly, there was a hiatus in immigration between 1925 and 1950, attributable to the immigration ceiling finalized in 1924, to the Great Depression, and to the Second World War. This gave the engine of social assimilation a chance to work. Studying together in the public schools, thrust together by circumstance into the military and defense plants, large numbers of immigrants from diverse cultures were incorporated into the American body politic. Today, neither such a break in the stream of migration nor a comparable stimulus to assimilation is in sight.

Lincoln once remarked: "As our case is new, so we must think anew and act anew. We must disenthrall ourselves, and then we shall save our country."(3) In that spirit we invite you, by way of this issue of THE SOCIAL CONTRACT, to take a look at the uses and misuses of history, particularly as they pertain to the debates about immigration policy and assimilation.

(We will insert a paragraph here to lead into the various articles and explain very briefly why they were chosen.)

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January 1, 1991

(1) Santayana, George, The Life of Reason (1905-1906), vol. I, "Reason in Common Sense."

(2) Ford, Henry, interview with Charles N. Wheeler, Chicago Tribune, May 25, 1916.

(3) Lincoln, Abraham, Second Annual Message to Congress, Dec. 1, 1862.