

of native welfare recipients is 15.4% to 22.4% of immigrant recipients. Borjas documents with compelling data that economic prosperity is not undermined by reductions in immigration levels.

Advocates of unrestricted immigration passionately believe that American society can never be *too diverse*; hence, an ethnically Balkanized 'melting pot' isn't considered an oxymoron. Recently, Frank Sharry, Executive Director of the National Immigration Forum, argued in a letter to the *Washington Post* that "contemporary immigrant families" assimilate as well as other "newcomers" in "embracing the cultural norms that are part of life in the United States."¹ Using four standards to substantiate his claims, Sharry noted that: (1) 76.3 percent of immigrants speak English proficiently within 10 years of their arrival; (2) 76.4 percent of immigrants who resided 40 years in the U.S. were naturalized; (3) 60.9 percent of immigrants own their homes within 20 years of arrival; (4) Foreign born Asians and Hispanics have higher rates of intermarriage than the native-born black and white population. Such trends, according to Sharry, demonstrate that present immigration levels merely serve the national interest.

While these individual claims maybe factually correct, collectively they give a misleading impression of the socio-economic plight of *recent* immigrants. The selective nature of Sharry's argument omits critical truths about the *assimilation* process and *immigrant poverty rates*. A recent analysis by the Center for Immigration Studies points out that: (1) the gap between native and immigrant poverty levels tripled in less than two decades between 1979 and 1997; (2) one in five individuals living in poverty resided in an immigrant household; (3) 75 percent of the total increase in the size of the poor since 1989 stems directly from the growth of immigrant-related poverty; (4) levels of education, higher unemployment and larger family size contribute to relatively higher immigrant poverty rates.²

Sharry fails to substantiate his general point about cultural assimilation for the simple reason that *measurable gaps*, which involve a multitude of social, economic and cultural factors, distinguish the foreign from native-born population. As William Graham

Sumner pointed out in *Folkways*, "the only way in which, in the course of time, remnants of foreign groups are apparently absorbed and the group becomes homogeneous, is that the foreign element dies out."³ Yet when viewed through the lens of multiculturalism, assimilation simply means *accommodating* immigrant cultures at the expense of native-born Americans. As the nation's population becomes increasingly diverse, lacking the common bonds of a homogeneous national culture, the American 'melting pot' begins to resemble a 'Balkanized caldron'. For instance, English is now optional at ATM banking machines in major metropolitan areas with sizable immigrant populations.

Egalitarian politicians and political activists will never fail to exploit this differential gap for political gain, particularly when economic inequality lingers between immigrant and native. No matter how much assimilation occurs between ethnically diverse populations, further cultural, economic and social partitioning is likely to split along ethnic lines. As long as humanity remains divided ethnically, egalitarian politicians will exploit this division under the rubric of economic and social justice. Borjas takes up the question of national origins and makes a compelling argument for the right of a nation's citizenry to determine its own national fate.

One proposal that Borjas endorses for immigrant selection is a modified version of the Canadian point system. Citizenship requirements would be *meritoriously* conferred on applicants who *qualify* for legal residency in the U.S. Qualifications would be similar to the present Canadian model in that candidates for citizenship would be scrutinized in terms of national priorities. Hence, points are allocated collectively (from, say, arbitrarily 1-100) over several categories: skill level, educational background, age, no criminal record, national origin, language proficiency, family size, previous employment record, etc. Architects, engineers, chemists, and neurosurgeons seeking citizenship would receive more overall points than, for example, migrant farm workers, domestics, or gas station attendants. The allocation of points would be linked to workforce demand and the granting of citizenship would become a *privilege* not a patrimonial rite of passage.

To some extent the national criteria for screening and selecting recent newcomers reflects an earlier period in this century. The 1924 immigration act implemented new standards for citizenship which emphasized IQ level and mental hygiene. A major concern then was the *qualitative* traits of the foreign-born, primarily because successful assimilation into American society hinged on a settler's adaptability to societal challenges; overcoming barriers of language, tradition, habits and social mores of the national culture. During this earlier period, officials from the Public Health Service relied upon the input of pioneering psychologist Henry Herbert Goddard in the clinical use of recently developed IQ tests to screen out *more efficiently* the 'feeble-minded' from the new arrivals passing through Ellis Island. Complicating matters around the turn of the century was the unprecedented influx of European immigrants, many of whom left undesirable conditions in disease-ridden areas. Public health officials were concerned about the effectiveness of regulating and monitoring their health conditions since it was not uncommon for a staff of twelve doctors to handle a case load of nearly 5,000 immigrants per day. The use of IQ tests by Goddard and his staff assisted public health officials to screen the mentally impaired more effectively, alleviating the concern about time constraints in the screening process.⁴

Many of the contested aspects of the immigration debate ultimately boil down to the assimilation of ethnic cultures. On this question Borjas admits that there really is no objective criteria for excluding some while admitting others. By the same token, he argues forcefully that matters of fairness in regard to this selection process should be determined first and foremost by those most affected by it. It is fitting to recall what the eminent sociologist Henry Pratt Fairchild once described as the "indispensable nation:"

The true nation is one of the finest products of cultural evolution. In it, the distinctively human traits find their fullest and most unhampered development. In the perfection and diversity of particular nationalities lies much of the richness of human life and experience. Those who long for world fellowship and a common brotherhood of humanity may easily find

*themselves visualizing this goal in terms of an essential uniformity of habits, customs, standards, conventions, traditions, institutions, and mores in general for all the members of the human species, so that basic groups would practically disappear. This is in many ways an alluring vision, but it is also a misleading one if conceived of as a possibility in any immediate future. If world peace had to wait for the achievement of such an ideal, we should certainly be doomed to an infinitely extended period of inconceivable chaos while some unpredictable forces were working toward that end.*⁵

Like Fairchild, Goddard, and other scholars of an earlier generation, Borjas recognizes the importance of numerical limits and selection criteria in deciding which applicants the U.S. should admit as legal residents. He makes an important point of noting that a diverse pool of skilled immigrants is preferable to the prevailing influx of unskilled immigrants who share common ties of national origin. Numbers matter, and as Borjas reminds us, nothing is more important for national posterity than the civic responsibility of preserving a nation's cultural heritage. TSC

NOTES

¹ Sharry, Frank, "Letters to the Editor" *The Washington Post*, September 13, 1999, p.A26.

² Camarota, Steven A., *Importing Poverty*, Center For Immigration Studies, September 1999.

³ Sumner, William Graham, *Folkways: A study of the sociological importance of usages, manners, customs, mores & morals*, Ginn & Co. 1907.

⁴ Zenderland, Leila, *Measuring Minds: Henry Herbert Goddard and the Origins of American Intelligence Testing*, Cambridge University Press 1998, pp.263-281. Zenderland's detailed account of Goddard's role in testing immigrants during the early part of this century offers a more balanced and objective profile of Goddard's work than the more subjective and critical accounts typical of the popular literature. Zenderland shreds the more critical interpretations of Goddard's work which has received unwarranted scorn over a distinguished record of public service.

⁵ Fairchild, Henry Pratt, *Race and Nationality as Factors in American Life*, Ronald Press Co., NY, 1947 p.197.

A Voice From the Past

How has labor leadership felt about immigration?

[This is the text of a letter from Samuel Gompers, president of the Executive Council of the American Federation of Labor, dated April 28, 1921, and addressed to J. H. Reiter at Haverford College, about Congressional legislation to restrict immigration. A copy of portions of the letter appears below. The correspondence is from the archives of H. Keith Thompson for the Thompson Collection in the Hoover Institution.]

Dear Sir:


Your letter of April 25 received and contents noted.

You ask for information on the immigration question. The American Federation of Labor made an earnest effort to have immigration restricted for at least two years. It also urged that an immigration law be enacted containing the provision that after that period of two years an order can be issued absolutely prohibiting immigration during times of unemployment.

Congress, however, passed a bill providing that only three percent of any one nationality, based on the foreign population of 1910, could enter the United States. This was not signed by the President. At the next session of Congress the American Federation of Labor will continue to urge the passage of legislation restricting immigration for two years or more.

Every citizen of the United States should make protest against the influx of people from other countries. It is estimated that there are 5,000,000 unemployed in the country at the present

time with the number increasing rapidly. In October 101,000 immigrants arrived in this country; in November, 103,000. According to steamship men 10,000,000 people could be brought into this country in the next ten months if ships were available. This estimate is based on applications for passage already received. So many have moved from Belgium and Germany to Holland that tens of thousands of



AMERICAN FEDERATION OF LABOR

Executive Council
President: Samuel Gompers
Secretary: Frank Morrison
Treasurer: W. J. Scott
100 N. Washington St., Washington, D.C.

First Vice-President: Louis Brandeis
Second Vice-President: John P. Morgan
Third Vice-President: John R. Commons
Fourth Vice-President: Philip A. Murray
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Seventh Vice-President: J. H. Reiter
Eighth Vice-President: J. H. Reiter
Ninth Vice-President: J. H. Reiter
Tenth Vice-President: J. H. Reiter

LONG DISTANCE TELEPHONE: MAIN 3871-2-3-4-5
CABLE ADDRESS: AFL-USA

April 28, 1921.
Washington, D.C.

Mr. J. H. Reiter,
Haverford College,
Haverford, Pa.

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Very truly yours,
Samuel Gompers
President,
American Federation of Labor.