

From Ellis Island to JFK: New York's Two Great Waves of Immigration

Nancy Foner. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000. 334 pages.

reviewed by Sharryn Kasmir

New York City has been shaped by two great waves of immigration. During the first (1880-1920), one and a half million immigrants arrived in the city. By 1910, 41 percent of New Yorkers were foreign born, the vast majority Italians and Russian Jews. The second great wave of immigration began in the mid-1960s. Today, there are 2.8 million immigrants in New York, 37 percent of the City's population. The top twelve sending nations are: the Dominican Republic, the former Soviet Union, Mexico, China, Guyana, Trinidad, Jamaica, Ecuador, Haiti, Italy, and Korea, and India. These and other facts fill Nancy Foner's interesting and highly readable book.

Foner, who teaches anthropology at SUNY-Purchase, compares the two groups of immigrants because there is much mythologizing about the first: "[T]hey worked hard; they strove to become assimilated; they pulled themselves up by their own Herculean efforts... They were, in short, what made America great." These images are frequently used as a yardstick for today's immigrants. As Foner notes, "those who comment on and, in some cases, set policies about the newest New Yorkers -- politicians, scholars, and writers -- are often themselves descendants of the earlier wave... For many present-day New Yorkers, their Jewish and Italian immigrant forebears have become folk heroes of a sort - and represent a baseline against which current arrivals are compared and, unfortunately, often fail to measure up." Foner writes against this anti-newcomer and, as she shows, ultimately racist sentiment.

The book compares immigrant waves along 7 axes, with a chapter devoted to each. Chapter 1 gives a profile of where immigrants came from, why they came, and how they came. There are interesting brief accounts of the economic history of agricultural change in the southern regions of Italy, where most New York-bound émigrés originated, and of the anti-Semitic laws in Russia that pushed Jews out of a changing agricultural economy. We see how in the post-1965 period impoverishment of the Caribbean pushes out the poor, inflation in Brazil encourages middle-class people to emigrate, and the lack of professional and technical jobs in India, Korea and Taiwan motivates emigration among the highly skilled. Immigration policies in the U.S. and exit policies in sending countries also condition who comes and how they get here. While there are horror stories of illegal and sometimes lethal crossings from Central America and China, Foner reminds us that for most of today's immigrants, JFK Airport is the point of entry.

Chapter 2, outlines residential patterns and conditions. A major difference between immigrants then and now is that some of today's immigrants can support a middle-class suburban lifestyle. The first wave of immigrants were crowded below 14th Street in Manhattan and only after 1900 moved to Brooklyn, the Bronx and Harlem, to larger, more modern and healthful apartments. Today's immigrants are less likely to live in ethnic enclaves, though there are Chinatowns in lower Manhattan and Flushing, Queens, and Nostrand and Church Avenues in Brooklyn is a West Indian enclave. Immigrants now also inhabit a wider terrain, settling in New Jersey, Westchester and throughout Brooklyn and Queens. Another novelty is the polyethnic neighborhood, such as Elmhurst, Queens.

Chapters 3 and 4 focus on work. Again, the theme is the diversity of today's immigrants compared with the first wave, when Jewish immigrants worked for the most part in garment factories and Italians were factory workers and laborers. Today, the pattern of ethnic concentration in a particular field is replayed (e.g., Filipina women work as nurses, while Caribbean women find work as health aids and nannies), but post-1965 immigrants as a group have a broad range of occupational and educational experience. Some also have access to capital to start businesses. The city's racial and ethnic structure has also changed. African Americans and U.S.-born Hispanics, a small fraction of the city's population in 1900, now make up one quarter of the city's working age population. This

changes the terms of competition for jobs. While native-born minorities with higher educations do better than immigrants, those at the low end of the job market bear the brunt of the negative impact of competition.

Chapter 4 offers an especially interesting focus on immigrant women and work. Foner recalls how Italian and Russian Jewish daughters worked outside the home and turned their paychecks over to their parents. When they married, women typically left the factory and earned money in industrial homework and by taking in boarders. The retreat from work outside the home earned them respectability, but it came at the price of isolation. Most of today's immigrant married women remain in the workforce. Like their counterparts a century ago, their earning power brings them more authority and equality in the home. Perhaps the greatest difference is that today, women often have better employment prospects than men. Foner tells of Jamaican women sending for their husbands once they have established themselves. This pattern offers them a level of power that their first wave counterparts did not have.

In these chapters, race and racism is a consistent undercurrent, shaping housing and job opportunities. This crucial issue is taken up in Chapter 5, "The Sting of Prejudice." Foner reminds us that first wave Italians and Jews were not initially considered white, but an inferior racial "other." Today, racism continues to limit opportunities, and black-white cleavages are common in most immigrants' experiences. Foner raises the important question of how racial categories, always culturally made and historically contingent, will change in coming years. She suggests that anti-black racism will continue to be a determinant feature of immigrant life.

Chapters 6 covers the topic of transnational ties made and retained by immigrants and Chapter 7 deals with education. A myth structures the comparison of first-wave and current immigrants: that first-wave parents stressed education and their children excelled in school. Foner shows that to the contrary, before World War I most Jewish children received little education, and many of New York's teachers had contempt for Italian school children. Meanwhile, today's immigrant children are doing better in school than is commonly believed. Foner intends this debunking to shed historical and comparative light on, and to expose the anti-immigrant sentiment of, today's public discourse about educational standards and policy decisions to cut the budget of City University of New York. The concluding chapter asks provocative questions about the future: How will racial categories shift and what will the disparate impact be on different immigrant groups? Will today's second- and third-generation immigrants succeed in climbing occupational ladders? Will transnational ties be maintained in successive generations?

Nancy Foner masterfully corrects some of our images of 1880-1920 immigration and reshapes our view of today's immigrants. She also shows how racism is a critical barrier for many of today's immigrants. This is a very good and enjoyable book. It is ideal for college courses and for a general audience.

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