

CHARLES D. BROCKETT

SOME FACTS TO STAND ON, SOME AVENUES TO EXPLORE

The purpose of this essay is to provide the reader with context for this volume's personal accounts of immigration, acculturation, and naturalization. It will cover, admittedly in brief fashion, the following: historical overview, U.S. distinctiveness, current immigration demographics, the naturalization process, acculturation and identity, and the situation of immigrant women.

Overview

We often say in the United States that we are a nation of immigrants, taking pride in the Statue of Liberty's welcome to the "tired . . . poor . . . [the] huddled masses yearning to breathe free." Yet at other times it sounds instead like many of us wish to replace Emma Lazarus's poem with a 'no vacancy' sign. Immigration controversy is not new—it has ignited intermittently for more than a century and a half.

The Know Nothing movement opposed the growing Catholic population prior to the Civil War, Exclusion Acts later in the nineteenth century targeted first the Chinese and later all Asians, and historic laws in 1921 and 1924 greatly curbed all immigration, especially from outside of Europe. Conversely, an equally significant immigration reform in 1965 removed legal discrimination against non-Europeans and opened the door for greatly expanded immigration from all over the world, thereby setting the scene for the immigration debate of recent years.

Consensus and controversy: Although it is widely acknowledged across the political spectrum that the U.S. is greatly in need of another fundamental reform in immigration policy, we are so divided over the issue the Congress has been unable to legislate successfully. A major study was commissioned by

Congress in 1990 to examine the issue and suggest appropriate reforms. The Jordan Commission did just so in its outstanding report in 1997 (and prior preliminary reports) but Congress did not act.(1) A broad bipartisan coalition for reform did emerge in the second term of President George W. Bush and for a while it looked like it might succeed; however, the effort collapsed in 2007 under withering attack from the right.

Throughout these controversies, most U.S. citizens have been clear that as a country we have benefitted from the continuing flow of immigrants joining our society. We certainly agree, and the contributions to this anthology demonstrate why. However, contemporary survey data also show majority dissatisfaction not just with current policy but also with current levels of immigration. Although some scholars and activists argue for the free movement of labor across open borders paralleling that of capital, this is an infrequently held position.(2) Most U.S. citizens are unwilling to allow all hardworking people of good moral character who would like to immigrate to the United States to do so. Because there are so many who would like to come, we agree. There are limits to how many newcomers can be incorporated successfully into a community as part of a continuing flow. The harder questions are what is the desired level for the U.S. population of foreign compared to native born and what criteria should be given priority in determining who is permitted to immigrate.

Historically the United States has been among the most permissive countries in its immigration policy (except for 1924-1965) as well as in allowing for naturalization. An important way of understanding U.S. history is the expansion of who we allow to join us by becoming U.S. citizens, from only whites in the beginning to no restrictions for the last half century on who you are in terms of race, religion, gender, or nation of origin. Alongside all of the country's defects, this must be recognized for the extraordinary achievement that it is, creating a diverse population of citizens unmatched except perhaps by Canada.

Citizenship and Community: But what do we mean in the U.S. by the 'citizenship' that we offer to those who wish to join us? Some might be comfortable with a minimal expectation, perhaps not much more than an instrumental relationship in the marketplace. Others might have broader expectations of agreement on core values and the full acceptance of the responsibilities of membership in a *community*. When the immigration level reached its peak in the early twentieth century, a strong Americanization