



A Permanently Unfinished Country

by Reed Ueda



Many European immigrants settled in U.S. cities. Their legacy includes ethnic neighborhoods like Greektown in Detroit, Michigan. *Patricia Haller, Downtown Detroit Partnership*

The United States has been called “a permanently unfinished country,” because it has been continuously built and rebuilt by immigrants. Indeed, it has been the world’s leading destination country for immigrants from the 19th century to the present. Newcomers pose a recurrent challenge fundamental to American life: How can communities of immigrants — different from natives and from each other — learn to act

collaboratively under conditions of openness, change and choice?

U.S. legislators and policymakers have promulgated laws and institutional reforms to help meet this challenge by enlarging immigrants’ opportunities for education and social mobility. Leaders have also promoted a pluralistic form of democracy that includes newcomers in voluntary activity and civil association. Immigration has sparked social and cultural

change that has resulted in immigrants and native-born citizens partnering to create a shared collective and institutional life, both as a national community and as a constellation of local communities marked by differences in class, race, religion and culture.

Early Immigrants

In the 1840s, an average of 170,000 immigrants arrived each year on U.S. shores and, by 1850, 10

percent of the country's total population of 23,000,000 was foreign-born. From the 1840s to the Civil War, Irish Catholic immigrants fleeing from famine spurred the growth of cities and provided the labor for canal building and railroad construction. Germans, Dutch and Scandinavians moved into the upper Midwest where their family farms developed the region's agricultural economy. They often established rural communities that replicated the villages of Norway, Sweden, Germany and the Netherlands. Emigration from southeastern China also increased during this period. Farmers and laborers whose families had lived for generations in the vicinity of Hong Kong and its hinterland began to immigrate to the United States and Hawaii to seek improved living conditions and opportunities.

In the decades after the Civil War, the immigrant flow reached new peaks. By the 1880s, more than 500,000 immigrants entered the country each year. The majority of these newcomers continued to come from Ireland, Germany, the Netherlands and Scandinavia. Britain and Canada also supplied many newcomers.

In the 1890s, the patterns of European immigration began to shift from northern and western Europe to southern and eastern Europe, bringing Italians, Greeks, Slavs and Jews from eastern Europe and Russia, who were labeled as "new immigrants" by newspapers of the day. The number of immigrants arriving each year rose to just under a million. Fearing the recomposition of the American populace by immigration, some opinion makers and leaders called for the exclusion of immigrants from Asia and the introduction of a quota system based on national origin to reduce the number of immigrants from Europe, especially from countries in southern and eastern Europe. In 1921 and 1924, Congress followed suit and passed new legislation establishing restrictive quotas and exclusions.

From 1930 to 1960, immigration played a minor role in American life. The quota system greatly limited the flow of legally admissible foreign-born persons. In addition, the high unemployment levels of the Great Depression created an enormous economic disincentive for immigrating to the United States, and World War II hindered voluntary migration. After the war



Crowds still flock to the annual San Gennaro Festival, first celebrated in 1926 by Italian immigrants who had settled on New York's Lower East Side, a neighborhood that has welcomed immigrants since the 19th century. © AP Images

ended, the U.S. admitted some refugees, but the quota system limited immigration.

20th Century Turning Point

A turning point occurred in 1965 with the adoption of the Hart-Celler Immigration Act. This law abolished exclusions and restrictions on immigration based on race and national origins and established a new immigration framework prioritizing family reunification and occupational preferences. This opened the U.S. to people from all parts of the world and generated a large influx both of highly educated and less well-educated immigrants. The number arriving each year began to equal and exceed the annual immigration rates of the early 20th century. Most importantly, the national origins of immigrants shifted from Europe to Latin America and Asia. By 2000, more than half of all U.S. immigrants came from Latin America and

over a quarter came from Asia, in contrast to a century earlier when nearly nine out of 10 immigrants came from Europe.

From the 1970s to the start of the 21st century — an era of increasing globalization — immigrants continued to select the United States as their preferred destination. More than ever before, the U.S. populace was heterogeneous, and the United States' reputation as a land of opportunity and a society open to ethnic and cultural pluralism continued to attract newcomers. Just as the national foods, speech, music, dress and behaviors of Italians, Germans, Jews and Irish had transformed U.S. communities during the Industrial Revolution, the cultures brought by Mexican, Brazilian, Korean, Filipino, Arab and Caribbean immigrants reshaped cultural and consumer behavior in the post-industrial era.

New Immigrants Adapt

By the late 20th century, the descendants of the early 20th century “new immigrants” from southern and eastern Europe — and the first Asian, Hispanic and Caribbean immigrants from that era — were fully integrated into U.S. society. Slavic, Jewish and Mediterranean immigrants of the early 20th century had gained a central place in the regional culture of the industrial North, while Mexicans in the Southwest, and Chinese, Japanese, Koreans and Filipinos of the Pacific coast and Hawaii, profoundly influenced these regions. Moreover, as residential



Samiul Haque Noor, originally from Pakistan, was named New York City's best food vendor in 2006. The popularity of Noor's vendor cart, “Sammy's Halal,” illustrates how immigrants continue to enrich — and transform — American cuisine and culture. © AP Images

and social mobility increased among the descendants of these immigrants, ethnicity became less significant in occupational, educational, housing, and even marriage choices.

The United States successfully maintained national cohesion while absorbing the enormous influx of immigrants of the early 20th century. Recently, some scholars and commentators have wondered whether this pattern will continue as the nation integrates arrivals from Latin America, Asia, Africa, Europe and the Middle East. Some public leaders

and commentators indicate that continued popular support for immigration depends on the long-term progress and integration of all immigrant groups. History shows that successive waves of U.S. immigrants have displayed remarkable creativity and flexibility in adapting to the American pluralistic culture, even as they helped to transform it.

Reed Ueda is a professor in the Department of History at Tufts University. He is the author of Postwar Immigrant America and a co-editor of New Americans.



This article appeared in eJournal USA: Becoming American: Beyond the Melting Pot, Vol. 15, No. 9. Download the complete issue at <http://goo.gl/TSb5E>

The opinions expressed in this article do not necessarily reflect the views or policies of the U.S. government.

