



2004

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Recommended Citation

Molgaard, Leland E. (2004) "Immigration: Is it what it used to be?," *The Bridge*: Vol. 27 : No. 1 , Article 12. Available at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/thebridge/vol27/iss1/12>

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Immigration: Is it what it used to be?

by Leland E. Molgaard

I became interested in this topic as I traveled around the country teaching. My wife and I work with teachers and social workers, training them to conduct a "strengthening families program" for parents and young adolescents. Many of these teachers and social workers serve recent immigrant families and, as I heard them tell of their work, they often told me that these families were unique because they were new immigrants. Yet as I listened, I was struck by how similar these immigrant families were to the families in the community where I grew up in northwest Iowa. The scripts were similar, only with different people and names. In this paper I wish to note how we have always been an immigrant nation and probably will always be one, and how migration today is both similar to and different from what we celebrate at this conference.

The United States and Canada can proudly boast of being immigrant nations from their beginnings. While the earliest immigrants were Asians crossing the frozen straits to what is now Alaska and northwestern Canada, the European migration to North America made it unique in the modern world. Even though we are an immigrant nation, we have also had a history of anti-migrant feeling. The American Revolution had hardly ended when an anti-French spirit surfaced, manifesting itself in the Alien and Sedition Acts. Later the Irish, Italians, Chinese and Poles all took their turns being the focus of anti-immigrant moods of the time. In poor economic times, the hostility would increase; when the economy was booming we might even encourage immigration because of the need for labor—but that welcoming attitude usually did not last. I remember stories of my grandparents not always being welcomed and being taken advantage of because they were "greenhorns." Many of us trace our heritage to the 50 million who left Europe between 1815 and 1920. Is immigration different today? Yes and no.

From the very beginning, the words "immigration" and "problem" were used together in the same sentence. Those leaving were seen as a problem in the countries they left and also in the

countries that saw them coming. Why do people migrate? The primary reason has always been economic, or the quest for a better life. Marcus Lee Hansen in his book, *The Problem of the Third Generation Immigrant*, illustrates this well by stating that in the year 1936, the heart of the depression, only 36,329 immigrants were admitted into the United States. In the same year, 35,817 departed, making a net gain of only 512 persons. Interestingly, 1936 was the first year of a net gain since 1931! In the depths of the Great Depression more people were leaving the United States than coming, leading Hansen to state, "the great historic westward tide of Europeans has come to an end and there is no indication in American conditions or sentiment that it will ever be revived." Hansen thought the Great Depression had solved the immigrant problem. This article was written before Hansen's untimely death in 1938.

After the end of World War II, immigration began to rise again. Refugees came, with the aid of Lutheran World Relief and other organizations, from Germany and Eastern Europe and they still come today with Lutheran help from war torn areas such as the former Yugoslavia, Afghanistan, Sudan, and Somalia to name a few. Throughout the ages, migrants have been pushed out by war or famine or pulled toward their new country by the lure of a better life economically. Most of our ancestors were not refugees fleeing from war, so I will not focus on refugees but rather voluntary migration.

Today there are 130 million recent immigrants in countries around the world. Thirty million of these have come to the United States over the years and live here now. While opponents like to paint a picture of the thundering hordes washing upon our shores, new immigrants now comprise only 10% of our population compared to 15% in 1900 when our ancestors were part of the "thundering hordes." Of the immigrant population today, only 10% to 15% of them are here illegally. Most of the illegal immigrants are students or workers who have overstayed their visa or green card, not Mexicans wading across the Rio Grande as we see portrayed in the media.

Migrants from Mexico and countries to the south come in greater numbers than a generation ago because they are attracted by an economy that pays more than the one or two dollars a day common

in their economies. This is the age-old economic magnet that pulls migrants toward a more vibrant economy. The United States no longer has the lure of 160 acres of free or cheap land, courtesy of the Homestead Act, but rather the lure of \$10 dollar an hour work in meat and poultry packing plants in the Southeast and Midwest, for example, or even lesser paying jobs in the service industries of our cities. The pull continues, including temporary workers doing migrant farm labor who come legally, work during the season and return home. I am not, however, including temporary migrants in this discussion.

While we primarily notice Mexicans as the dominant immigrant population today, Danes have continued to come, but the historic tide from northern Scandinavia has not resumed. I interviewed a few individuals who have emigrated from Denmark since World War II. One person, coming from Copenhagen in 1949 with a "gymnasium" classical education and \$50 in legal cash, was able to quickly advance in a state government position. The ability to speak several languages made this person a valued employee in state government. Another person, who came on a university scholarship, returned to Denmark for a while, and then came back to the United States to have a successful professional career. Three others I interviewed were farm boys from West Jutland who came in the 1960's, each with only seven years of education and not a word of English. Yet they still became successful craftsmen and entrepreneurs. By the mid-1960's, the teaching of the English language was widely spread in the Danish schools, even in the more rural areas, so then it became increasingly easier for Danes coming to this country to integrate into the United States workforce and professions quickly.

Today, the few Danes who migrate to the United States are usually highly educated professionals transferred by Danish multinational corporations with offices in the United States. They may stay a few years or so and return, perhaps with an American spouse, or they may stay and eventually become a citizen of the United States. Immigration law prohibits non-professional tradesmen from coming to enter the workforce if the job they are coming to is deemed one a United States citizen can perform. Present-day Danes who are less educated or prosperous are not

attracted to the United States purely for economic reasons as in the past because Danish social services far surpass those of the United States. Today's Danes come well educated and multi-lingual, often speaking better English than the native born. These immigrants are able to afford an annual trip back home, making immigration seem more like relocation.

While migration today has many similarities to that of our ancestors, there are also some differences. Hansen wrote of the westward tide from Europe, but present tides from Mexico, southern Africa and Asia flow northward and eastward. The immigrants are likely to be poor, dark skinned, and less educated than our dominant population and they are coming at a rapid rate. It is now common in some Midwestern county seat towns of about 10,000 persons to have an immigrant population of 30% and rising, while ten years ago these towns were 100% families of European heritage. Vocal anti-immigrant sentiment is on the rise, with websites and letters to the editor bemoaning current migration phenomena. Yet, aside from skin color, these migrants are still very much like those we claim as forefathers and foremothers.

I also interviewed several of these recent immigrants who are now living in the towns of Worthington, Minnesota and Storm Lake, Iowa. My grandmother always said she came so her children could have a better life. As I talked with these mothers from Mexico, Guatemala and Nicaragua, I thought I was hearing her story. These immigrants have the same optimism about the future, the same ambition to create a better life for their children, the same desire for their children (and themselves) to learn English and the other skills necessary to become "Good Americans" as did my grandmother.

Researchers from Harvard University have studied several decades of immigrants to America, from all countries, not just Scandinavia. Contrary to the stereotypes spouted by opponents of the new immigration, the researchers have found that the majority of immigrant children today are less poor, somewhat better educated and more skilled than our parents and grandparents were when they came. Recent immigrants are over represented as high school class valedictorians and many are students at Ivy League colleges. Proportionally, they are the fastest growing segment of the U.S. population. Even more impressive, today's recent immigrants take

home one third of all the Nobel prizes going to the United States, they earn one third of the advanced degree in Physics and are one third of the scientists and engineers in Silicon Valley. And so we can see that they not only fry our hamburgers in McDonalds, but they also lead our research institutes and business communities. These recent immigrants are at the helm, leading our nation into the future.

It may, however, be more important to look not just at those who excel, but also at today's typical immigrant. Their children now comprise 20% of all the youth in the United States. Studies show they are healthier, work harder and participate in school with more pro-social attitudes than their native U.S-born peers.

Recent immigrants are shaping the future of America. If we want their influence to be positive, we need to support today's immigrant families by respecting their culture and by encouraging them to keep positive connections to their traditions. The Harvard study states, "We recognize how vitally important to a child's successful adaptation are the parents' ability to maintain respect for the family and the child's connection to the culture of origin." We are here today because we were allowed to respect our heritage while becoming good Americans. Tyler and Askov, Minnesota, and Dannevang, Texas, are some of our ethnic communities that were created to do just this. It was not seen as disrespectful to learn the old language as well as the new.

The authors continue, "Children whose parents maintain a voice of authority while encouraging them to achieve 'bicultural competency' will be best placed to take full advantages of the opportunities available." Bicultural competency was the basis for the folk schools in the United States, Danish Summer Schools, and confirmation in Danish. We should encourage those of other nations to stay connected with their dance, speak their language and eat their food. That is America; it has always been America.

Just as Denmark and Northern Europe have influenced our Midwestern towns in ways we no longer even notice, today's youth and migration will continue to bring new tastes and influences. Even drinking habits reveal the changes. Business pages print that Tequila is the fastest growing liquor of choice and it is not being drunk exclusively by Hispanic immigrants. Recently, I was walking Strøget in Copenhagen and the signs for ethnic foods of the Middle

East struck me. In Oslo I marveled at the signs advertising Fajitas even though there are few Mexican immigrants in Norway. As globalization continues, these new signs and tastes document the influence of migration worldwide. This migration to the United States does not mean we will be speaking Spanish or some other national language in 20 years, as some fear, because 99% of all immigrant children list learning English as their first goal. If we want to put on some pressure, let us encourage their children to speak both English and their native language just as many of us wish we could speak both English and Danish.

At the same time, we must also recognize that today's migrants often face circumstances quite different from those encountered by their predecessors. My grandparents first worked in America as hired men and hired girls as stepping-stones to becoming farmers. These stepping-stones have been removed. The one room country school and Danish summer school educated them well for their time. We all know more education is needed for native and immigrant youth alike. My ancestors were white and Protestant and this shielded them from some of the hostility faced by people such as the Chinese. A Polish family could have its foreign-sounding name changed to Muskie and have a son become a senator later. Jews could convert to Christianity and Catholics could become Episcopalians to avoid continued prejudice. Africans, Asians and Hispanics cannot hide in this way so tolerance must be a new tool in order for recent migrants to be accepted.

And so, immigration today is both similar and different from that of a century ago. Recent arrivals frequently tend to be darker skinned, but like my grandparents they come with few or no English language skills and very little money. But they also bring the same hard work ethic that has helped get us to where we are as third generation immigrants.

Hansen describes this process of coming to America beautifully in his last paragraph; the epic of migration "is a simple story of how troubled men and women by courage and action overcame their difficulties and how people of different tongues and varied cultures have managed to live together in peace."

In this most important way, immigration is still what it used to be.