

How did immigrants adapt to life and work in the United States in the period 1880-1921?

In 1911 the Dillingham Commission reported to Congress on the thorny subject of immigration and dogmatically stuck to two main assertions. Firstly that the previous twenty-five years had brought an entirely different set of immigrants both ethnically and culturally from the predominant groups which had made up the population of the country up until that point, and that this was in danger of upsetting the racial homogeneity of the country at the time of Abraham Lincoln. Secondly, that the new wave of immigrants was overrunning the unskilled labour market and that the subsequent displacement of traditional ethnic professions such as Irish longshoremen was creating a form of unfair competition. However the conclusions which the commission drew from its own data to a great extent tended to blur rather than clarify the picture of a multitude of different groups, totalling 23.5m people in the period 1880-1921¹, each with their own different experience of the America to where they had staked their future.

The first thing to note about the figures is that they did not in fact support the conclusion that the turn of the twentieth century had brought an invasion of the native cultures which America had enjoyed for fifty and more years. Instead, the percentage of foreign born persons in 1860 - 13.2% of total was remarkably similar to the 14.5% who were counted in the 1910 census.² It is also not true by any means to say that America as a whole saw the great changes which met Henry James on his return from England in 1907. Instead, the immigrant communities which the Dillingham Commission was documenting were exceptionally regionally based. The fact that, for example, five-sixths of Irish and Russian immigrants lived in towns and cities³ serves to show that the shock of James on arriving at the metropolitan port of New York. was not one that was shared across the country. Indeed, the division which the Dillingham Commission made between old and new immigrants meant remarkably little in rural parts of the country. The conquest of the West, for example, was predominantly carried out by the 'old' group of pioneers born in native in America or in England, Germany or Scandinavia. The exploitation of the vast virgin lands west of the Missouri from the 1870s onwards was carried out almost entirely by these groups. Indeed when the Irish Catholic Land Fund attempted to encourage Irish settlers out west they spent enormous amounts of money only to see that the pioneers subsequently went to work on the railroads in the booming city of St Paul. In the same fashion attempted Jewish farming settlements quickly folded with their inhabitants returning to the more profitable opportunities in the cities of the eastern seaboard.⁴ Geographically, therefore, the immigrant experience in America was very different from community to community. French-Canadian immigrants unsurprisingly preferred to search for their opportunities in New England, while Mexicans in Texas and the south-western states.

One of the more noticeable features which the Congressional report picked up upon was the fact that immigration after the 1880s was no longer the simple and permanent matter it had been some time previously, and instead there was much more a two-way process. Temporary work appeared much more common with the advent of a reliable and regular steam-ship network especially as the nineteenth century drew to a close. In the years 1908-14 for example although there were 6.7m arrivals, there were also 2.1m departures from the United States, suggesting that there was a substantial community of migrant workers.⁵ This is particularly noticeable among the

¹ Kraut: *The Huddled Masses*

² Jones: *American Immigration*

³ Jones: *American Immigration*

⁴ Jones: *American Immigration*

⁵ Kraut: *The Huddled Masses*

Italian community, who frequently worked as 'general laborers' in the construction industry during the summer months, and who returned to Italy in the winter. Certainly, a figure of around \$100m of American-earned money was filtered into the Italian economy in the period 1897-1902.⁶ In many ways this status altered the vision of an immigrant and the conditions he would accept. The Commission found that 'new' immigrants earned substantially less than native Americans because 'they were content to accept wages and conditions which the native American and immigrants of the older class had come to regard as unsatisfactory.'⁷ Yet although they may have seemed unsatisfactory to natives, the relative wealth of America was extraordinary compared to the poverty many immigrants had faced in their former countries. A Polish anthracite miner for example, moving from Galicia to Pittsburgh and doing the same job could expect to see his real wage increased a sevenfold. Is it any wonder then that he was quite content to work in drudgery and thrift for a time if it offered the opportunity to return home with a relative fortune? It also offered a far smaller incentive for such emigrant workers to properly integrate themselves with the American society who were their hosts. Certainly for one thing it made semi-skilled immigrants very unsusceptible to labour movements designed to campaign for better wages and working conditions. Immigrant strike-breakers were regularly used in the Pennsylvania coalfields throughout the 1870s and 1880s against the Knights of Labor. Miners, especially those of Slavic origin were very prepared to tolerate wretched working conditions since they earned more money that way and because they regarded themselves as temporary workers. The few years of back-breaking toil were worth it if they intended to return home with a large sum - it is noticeable that it was only when Slav miners regarded themselves as permanent settlers that they were happy to co-operate in labour movements such as the AFL. Yet even though temporary migration in this way worked against a concerted working class response to industrialisation, it also must be said that migratory workers from the English coalfields were also responsible for its formation.

The key factor then in how involved an immigrant community became in the workings of the business environment in which they worked. Certainly the two most crucial factors in this process were the ability of immigrants to master the English language, and their literacy-level. The immigrants from the north-west Europe, with their generally good command of English and higher educational attainment, generally received much better pay than new and unskilled arrivals. Higgs has formulated a mathematical hypothesis for the putative average pay-level of an ethnic group based on its percentage of literacy and command of English. Its results are that there is a remarkably accurate scale of pay across all the immigrant groups, and it is even applicable to native Americans - for a predicted wage of \$14.20 per week the actual figure is only slightly more at \$14.37 per week.⁸ It also confirms a statement made in 1912 by Isaac Hourwich, who said that 'The rapid pace of industrial expansion has increased the number of skilled and supervisory positions so fast that practically all the English-speaking employees have had the opportunity to rise on the scale of occupations.'⁹ It explains why immigrants from the 'old' countries in this period tended to be skilled industrial workers who knew precisely which jobs they were arriving to obtain - at higher than average wages. For those who could not speak English, and who did not have the educational skills to quickly adapt, conditions were more precarious. To overcome language, legal and labour difficulties they were often dependent on ethnic *padroni* who already had the connections necessary to act as a middleman. The boss structure did provide a great deal of support for ethnic groups especially those from southern Europe, but it rarely left the individual immigrants with everything they deserved. On the Erie Railroad for example it was quite common for corrupt construction managers to hand over the

⁶ Kraut: *The Huddled Masses* p.16

⁷ Higgs: *Race, Skills & Earnings*

⁸ Higgs: *Race, Skills & Earnings*

⁹ Higgs: *Race, Skills & Earnings*

workers' wages directly to the boss, who after taking a healthy cut gave onto his workers a mere pittance. Since the Dillingham Commission defined 32% of the entire Italian population as being 'general laborers', the amounts of money which could find its way into bosses' pockets could be enormous. Yet it had definite benefits for all parties involved since the workers found jobs, and the employers found a large and willing labour force, which they otherwise would not have been able to do.

Social mobility also demonstrates this contrast between the fortunes of those groups of immigrants who were well educated and those who were not, such as the contrast of experiences between the Italian and Jewish communities in New York. Jewish immigrants arriving in America dominated the textile trade by importing their tailoring skills from eastern Europe. Yet over the forty years of this period, the numbers of skilled workers and peddlers fell greatly since many set up in business by themselves and had premises. This entrepreneurship in business, especially in clothing & real estate, led to a 10% increase in the number of Jewish white-collar workers. In contrast to this, Italians entered the textile business as time went on, often by virtue of the fact that employers could in them find ways around union demands. A job which in 1880 required a skilled tailor could by 1905 be done by a semi-skilled sewing machine operator - and Italians aggressively under-cut their rivals in this market, as they also did in displacing Irish longshoremen on the wharves. One factory owner made the point that "The Italian and his wife together work for the same price which the Jew receives for his labour alone, and in this way the Italian is able to crowd the Jew out of the trade."¹⁰ Yet crucially the changing demographics of the garment trade did not necessarily imply that Italians were simply ousting their competitors, since entrepreneurship on the part of one group of immigrants - such as Jewish tailors - in fact created extra work for machine workers lower down the pay-scale. Entrepreneurship was a crucial factor in the Jewish experience of business, and it can be put down to any number of reasons - Old-World customs, community support or perhaps even the desire to become self-employed to avoid having to face discrimination in the workplace. Certainly it is very noticeable that 2nd generation Jews were exceptionally keen to train for professional qualifications which would allow their bearers the freedom to practice where and how they wished. However it must also be noted that these educational strivings were mostly based on the foundation of hard graft by the parents in business activities.

The concentration on material gain, whether it be by temporary work or by entrepreneurship produced a marked imbalance in the numbers of male and female immigrants arriving in the country, with in 1892 6 male Italians arriving at Ellis Island for every 1 female. Certainly the migratory ethic in no way encouraged the formation of family groups in the New World, but likewise it dissuaded even further migrants to attempt to form lasting ties in America. Instead it reinforced the importance of ethnic, regional or even local ties in the minds of emigrants. One out of every four Italians in San Francisco returned to his or her native village in Italy just for the purposes of a marriage.¹¹ It was only with definite commitment to a life in America that family groups flowed into the country. In much the same way that Irish immigrants had done earlier in the century, unaccompanied males set themselves up before sending the money and documents to allow their families to join them later. The nuclear family subsequently became the crucial social unit in many immigrant communities, and it is noticeable how frequently they reflected the cohesiveness of ethnic origins. Among the ethnic Germans of Wisconsin, 86% of first generation immigrants married other Germans. Perhaps surprisingly, this figure was only very slightly lower for the second generation at 80%.¹² As well as being the central social unit, it was also the only real economic unit, in that invariably all members of the family worked to

¹⁰ Kessner *The Golden Door*

¹¹ Bodner: *The Transplanted*

¹² Bodner: *The Transplanted*

supplement the family income. In Detroit among native unskilled families 43% boys & 16% girls worked; 66% of German boys & 43% German girls worked in contrast. Among Italian families this desire to have the children working left parents unconcerned by their childrens' schooling, perhaps seeing it as competition for control over their children - as one said 'the schools make of our children persons of leisure - little gentlemen. They lose the dignity of good children to think first of the parents, to help them...' ¹³ As for women, here social pressures counted against them producing income especially amongst Italian families. Frequently husbands forbade their wives from working outside the house, and certainly not in the factories where he worked. The factory boss who said that 'The Italian and his wife together work for the same price which the Jew receives for his labour alone' would have found that his experience was rare. In consequence the numbers of women who worked at home was disproportionately skewed towards immigrant communities - most frequently hand 'finishing' of garments with hand-stitching was done by immigrant women using imported skills, as was the making of millinery & artificial flowers.

The next most crucial social grouping was at the level of the community, especially in the inner cities. We must not confuse these necessarily with national groups, since almost invariably it divided rather along the regional lines of Europe. For example, Neapolitans and Genoese Italians rarely mixed, and neither did Jews from Lithuania and Galicia. We must also not assume that community ties were necessarily anything like as strong as family ones, since places such as the *Mezzogiorno* had never developed a community structure in the Old World to anything like the degree which Jews had. Nevertheless, communities, especially where they were based around a geographic concentration of immigrants such as the Little Italies or Chinatowns of most major American cities, very effectively insulated communities from native American influences and indeed the influences of other immigrant groups. Indeed the geographic concentration of self-imposed ghettos meant that for many immigrants they need never meet anyone of a different cultural origin in the course of their days. Communities were so effective at resisting assimilation into American culture that often the only time ethnic groups came together was at evening classes designed to teach them English. Parochial schools especially in the Greek and Jewish communities also attempted to continue traditions and pass them down to children. Invariably these were run by the community's religious organisation, be they Orthodox priests or synagogues.

Yet although communities formed a considerable barrier to the adoption of American values, they invariably made small concessions to the new country they had adopted. French-Canadians for example, shared Catholic churches with Irish and Polish immigrants despite their distaste for the liturgy in a foreign language. Orthodox Jewish men also often shaved their beards and changed their dress code as an outward nod to America. Among the second generations this process continued further with many Jews working on Saturday since it was a normal business day for their Gentile neighbours - and Cahen's Yiddish-language newspaper records incidents such as when young Jew took his father shopping in 5th Avenue and bitterly complaining when this father spoke in Yiddish to a shop-assistant he suspected of being Jewish.

Ranged against this denial of assimilation were the numbers of native Americans who viewed as did the Dillingham Commission the new immigrants as being dangerously foreign, and for whom the sooner that assimilation could take place the better. Yet WASP attempts to proselytise, through the Social Gospel movement for example invariably failed miserably. There were only a handful of converts to Protestant Christianity from their efforts, while even secular reformers such as the settlement movement of Jane Addams and others also frequently alienated immigrants by insensitivities over their local customs. Accepting charity was seen certainly among many Italian communities as being worse even than destitution - they would only accept

¹³ Kessner *The Golden Door*

it even from their own compatriots with reservations. Russian Jews, for example, did their utmost to avoid receiving assistance from established German Jewish families such as the Guggenheims. In many ways the movement in political life for Progressive reform also went directly against the interests of immigrant workers. State health legislation in New York in 1900 for example reduced the numbers of licensed homeworkers - predominantly immigrant women - from 21,000 in 1900 to only 5,700 in 1915.¹⁴ On a political level immigrant groups were often very well organised especially in conjunction with the bosses of the urban political machines. Italians composed 26% of one ward in Chicago but were 58% of the total registered voters. The forty year struggle of Progressive reformers to break the stranglehold of John Powers in Chicago foundered at the entirely self-interested nature of immigrant communities - Jane Addams admitted as much in 1889 when she said 'An Italian labourer wants a job more than anything else in the world, and quite simply votes for the man who promises him one.'¹⁵

Yet assimilation gradually occurred, mostly over time with the length of residency increasing command of English and familiarity with American customs, while public schooling raising the level of general education. Theodore Roosevelt said that 'The man who becomes completely Americanised - who celebrates our Constitutional centennial instead of the Queen's Jubilee, or the Fourth of July rather than St Patrick's Day and who talks 'United States' rather than the dialect of the country which he has of his own free will abandoned - is not only doing his plain duty by his adopted land, but is also rendering himself a service of immeasurable value.'¹⁶ It may be true that many did take advantage of the possibility to 'talk United States', but nevertheless attitudes to schooling did diverge sharply between immigrant groups. In 1910, New York's City College counted 73% of its students from the Jewish community, while 36% of Italian children in New York slipped back by at least one school year. Assimilation was a very gradual process which did not have the uniformity which native politicians such as Roosevelt and the members of the Dillingham Commission had wanted. That was unsurprising given the vast differences between the cultures of the agrarian east of Europe and the urban capitalism of the America they now new. Yet similar processes occurred with previous groups of settlers such as the Irish, who likewise entered the country predominantly as unaccompanied males doing unskilled labour. The hysteria in which Congress found itself in the 19teens over immigration was as much a reaction to changes inside the country as those which were coming in from abroad.

¹⁴ Kessner *The Golden Door*

¹⁵ Nelli *The Italians in Chicago 1880-1930*

¹⁶ Kraut: *The Huddled Masses*