

Book Review: Foreign Relations: American Immigration in Global Perspective

by blog admin

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*Histories investigating U.S. immigration have often portrayed America as a domestic melting pot, merging together those who arrive on its shores. Yet this is not a truly accurate depiction of the nation's complex connections to immigration. **Donna Gabaccia** examines America's relationship to immigration and its debates through the prism of the nation's changing foreign policy over the past two centuries. **Susan F. Martin** finds Gabaccia's book a welcome addition to the growing literature on the historical antecedents of the most pressing immigration issues of today.*

Foreign Relations: American Immigration in Global Perspective.
Donna R Gabaccia. Princeton University Press. March 2012.

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Donna Gabaccia's *Foreign Relations: American Immigration in Global Perspective* serves as an antidote to the tendency found in the study of American immigration to focus solely on domestic U.S. issues. The sweeping but succinct volume places the evolution of U.S. immigration squarely within the context of international relations. As such, it joins the literature on transnationalism that sees international migration as an essential element of globalisation.

Gabaccia's basic argument can be summarised simply: bottom-up immigrant foreign relations—what are often referred to as immigrants' transnational ties—and top-down foreign policies intersect in a globalised world. Understanding these linkages is important because they help explain the experiences of the immigrants themselves as well as the successes and (more frequently) the failures in immigration policy.

Gabaccia questions the exceptionalism of the U.S. experience, arguing that a global approach puts the study of American immigration into new perspective. The interconnections between immigration and foreign trade, the global economy, empire building, and geopolitical strategies take on new meaning in this context. Gabaccia further argues that American global leadership, rather than leading to expansive immigration policies, is as likely to draw on xenophobic tendencies about threats from outside that can lead to restrictions on immigration.

As befits an historian, Gabaccia presents her argument in chronological order. Her chapter on American immigration before 1850 covers the colonial period and early republic. Subsequent chapters focus on historical periods leading up to 1965 from the building of empire to the evolution of US immigration restrictions. The fourth and final chapter focuses on immigration and globalisation since 1965.

Some of the strongest analysis discusses the evolution of US immigration policies in relationship to trade patterns and concerns. The pattern is set in the context of trade between the colonies and Great Britain. Ships carrying American exports to Europe retrofit for a return trip with what is essentially a cargo of migrants. The slave trade is but the most extreme manifestation of this pattern. Gabaccia revisits these issues of trade and commercial diplomacy throughout the following chapters, presenting new perspectives

on U.S. policies as well as the involvement of immigrants themselves in setting trade linkages with their home countries.

A further strength of the book is the discussion of the role of immigrants in challenging and, in some cases, shaping U.S. foreign policy as well as the policies of their countries of origin. Discussed are both dramatic and sometimes violent cases, such as the American Fenian raids in Canada in support of Irish independence, and more peaceful examples, such as the advocacy of a Pacific wide boycott of American goods to protest treatment of Chinese merchants in the United States. Gabaccia also provides historical perspective on the role of migrant remittances in their relationships not only with their own families but also with their home countries.

If anything is disappointing in the volume it is the brief concluding chapter. Having persuasively argued that American immigration should be seen in global perspective, Gabaccia focuses primarily on domestic US policies. She argues that xenophobic concerns today are as overblown as they have been in the past and makes the case for taking the responsibility for immigration reform away from Congress and placing it in a neutral Immigration Council. Detailed discussion of the strengths and weaknesses in current policies and administrative mechanisms is lacking, however, and makes it difficult to weigh either the desirability or the likelihood that such a recommendation would be adopted.

More problematic, Gabaccia does not engage in discussing a range of other issues that flow directly from her analysis: Should immigration agreements be negotiated as part of bilateral, regional and multilateral trade treaties? Should the United States encourage and participate in bilateral, regional and multilateral consultations on international migration? To what extent should US policies reflect the concerns of emigration countries about remittance flows, brain drain and other matters of deep concern to them? Gabaccia brings the reader to the brink in discussing such issues but never crosses the line into a full discussion of these issues that are already on the foreign policy agenda.

Nevertheless, the volume is a pleasure to read. Gabaccia interweaves stories about individual migrants into the chapters, bringing many of her points to life with real world experiences. She also provides interesting perspective on well-known policymakers and commentators on immigration. Her discussion of Hector St Jean de Crèvecoeur provides new understanding of his famous reference to the American as a “new man,” “leaving behind him all his ancient prejudices and manners.” Similar treatment is given to other icons, such as Alfred Stieglitz’s 1907 photo, *Steerage*, which, in contrast to what is often assumed, captures immigrants returning to Europe rather than coming to America.

Foreign Relations provides a welcome addition to the growing literature on the historical antecedents of many of the most pressing immigration issues of today. Having read and appreciated this volume, I look forward to a second in the series.

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