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James R. Barrett

**IMMIGRANTS AND IMMIGRATION  
- BELOW THE SURFACE OF THE 2008 ELECTION**

National coverage of the 2008 presidential race offers enough drama to keep analysts busy. With the Democrats favored to win the national election as a result of the disastrous foreign and domestic policies of the Bush administration, many Americans have been looking forward to one or another historic first. The Democrats would nominate either a woman or an African American for president. Of course, third parties, including the Communist Party of the USA, have nominated women, African Americans, and other candidates of color in the past, but it seemed impossible just a year or two ago that a major party would make such a move. It is now clear that Barack Obama will receive the Democratic nomination. He faces a formidable opponent with all the resources American conservatives and reactionaries can muster to defeat him in the general election, but the fact is that a fairly liberal candidate who identifies and is identified as African American stands a good chance of winning the election and taking the United States in a different direction from the policies of the past decade. This is indeed a historic moment, and it is no wonder that this national story has grabbed all the headlines.

But a wise Congressman once said that all American politics are local. While most U.S. and international opinion and analysis focuses on the symbolic level of American politics and the personalities involved, most voters continue to live their lives and form their political opinions locally. In my short space here I would like to draw attention to one major political issue – immigration – as it is lived and experienced at the local level and as a historical issue in American politics.

Despite its reputation as a “Nation of Immigrants,” the United States has a somewhat checkered past on the issue. The society has absorbed millions of immigrants in several fairly distinct waves between the mid-nineteenth century and the present – mainly Irish, Germans, and Scandinavians between the middle and the end of the nineteenth century; increasingly Eastern and Southeastern Europeans from that point through the early 1920s; and a very diverse immigration with large numbers of Hispanics, especially Mexicans, and East and South Asians since the late 1960s.<sup>1</sup> The history of the modern United States is in some sense the history of the gradual integration of these immigrant peoples. Yet each of these waves brought with it a conservative reaction including nativism and calls for immigration restriction.<sup>2</sup> Vital to such reactions has been a tendency to racialize immigrants, to construct them as distinct and more or less problematic peoples who represented serious threats to the health and security of American society.<sup>3</sup>

The reaction to Irish Catholic and Chinese immigrants in the nineteenth century provided models for the notion of immigrants as a race apart, with the first explicitly racial law for restriction passed in 1882 against the Chinese. Starting in the World War One era and culminating with the Native Origins Act of 1924, Congress passed much more comprehensive restrictive legislation aimed primarily at Eastern and Southern Europeans. Like the Irish and the Chinese before them, these “New Immigrants” were deemed to come from inferior races. The 1924 law was “racist” in this literal sense: it set strict quotas for the various nationality groups based on their racial desirability. In the process the law virtually ended mass immigration to the United States for more than a generation.<sup>4</sup> While the language used is more careful these days, the racialized image of the Mexican immigrant as someone who threatens the economic and social health of the United States remains an important symbol in the current campaign for immigration restriction and the criminalization of undocumented immigrants.

From one perspective, the most striking aspect of contemporary immigration policy in the context of the national election is how seldom it has surfaced in the campaign. Construction of the fence continues along the border with Mexico (constructed in part at least by undocumented immigrant workers), but the issue seldom

<sup>1</sup> For useful historical overviews of immigration to the United States, see R. Daniels, *Coming to America: A History of Immigration and Ethnicity in American Life*, New York 2002; J. Bodnar, *The Transplanted: A History of Immigrants in Urban America*, Indiana University Press 1985.

<sup>2</sup> J. Higham, *Strangers in the Land: Patterns of American Nativism, 1860–1925*, New York 1969.

<sup>3</sup> J. R. Barrett, D. R. Roediger, *Inbetween Peoples: Race, Nationality and the ‘New Immigrant’ Working Class*, “Journal of American Ethnic History”, Vol. 16, No. 3, Spring 1997, p. 3–44; D. R. Roediger, *Working toward Whiteness: How America’s Immigrants Became White*, New York 2005.

<sup>4</sup> On the racialization of the “New Immigrants” and its impact on immigration restriction, see R. F. Zeidel, *Immigrants, Progressives, and Exclusion Politics: The Dillingham Commission, 1900–1927*, Northern Illinois University Press 2007, and on the racial component of American immigration legislation more generally, D. King, *Making Americans: Immigration, Race, and the Origins of the Diverse Democracy*, Harvard University Press 2000, and M. M. Ngai, *Impossible Subjects: Illegal Aliens and the Making of Modern America*, Princeton 2004. On immigration policy more generally, see R. Daniels, *Guarding the Golden Door: American Immigration Policy and Immigrants since 1882*, New York 2004.

surfaces in national campaign coverage. The war, the economy, and gas prices are all issues that hit close to home, that affect common Americans in their everyday lives, so perhaps it is not surprising that these have displaced a vital debate over immigration policy over the past year. But the fact that few commentators are following the issue, or that presidential candidates seldom mention it in their speeches, does not mean that immigration plays no role in the politics of the moment.

Immigrants themselves and their native-born children are affecting the outcome of the election in at least two ways. First, for the past two years, working through local labor movements and churches, they have created an important social movement around the issue of immigrant rights. The movement was most visible in the huge demonstrations across the nation in March and May of 2006 and the much smaller ones on May Day 2008.

Predictably, these were largest in immigrant centers like Los Angeles, Chicago, and New York, but they also took place in many other cities, including in the South, because the most recent immigration seems to have touched virtually every corner of the nation. Large numbers of immigrants work in harvesting throughout the rural South and West, in the food-processing industries in Iowa, North Carolina, and the Pacific Northwest, as well as in industrial and service jobs in the cities of the Northeast, Midwest, and California.<sup>5</sup>

It is the movement below the surface of these marches, however, that is perhaps most significant. Not only the Catholic parishes but also various evangelical congregations have been transformed by the recent immigration. While Mexican and other Spanish-speaking immigrants are perhaps the most visible elements in this transformation, East Asian, Eastern European (including many Poles), and other immigrant groups are also a part of this change. As a result, the Churches, particularly the Catholic Church, an institution historically created and now reinvigorated by immigrants, have taken strong stands in support of immigrant rights. Parishes and other local congregations have become focal points for organizing the movement.

The second institution being reinvented from below by immigrants themselves is the American labor movement. While this has been decimated over the past three decades by aggressive employer tactics, hostile government policy and legislation, global competition, and poor leadership, it remains a vehicle for immigrant workers to organize and voice their concerns. In some states like New York, Illinois, and California, it remains a potent political force.

Historically, the labor movement has exhibited all of its own nativism and supported immigration restriction. Throughout most of the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the American Federation of Labor, later in tandem with the Congress of Industrial Organizations, (AFL-CIO) defined immigrants not only as

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<sup>5</sup> On the immigrants' rights marches in various locations, see "Chicago Tribune", March 11, 2006, p. 1; March 26, 2006, p. 3; May 2, 2006, pp. 1, 6, 13; May 2, 2008, pp. 2, 3; May 2, 2008, pp. 2, 3; "Los Angeles Times", May 2, 2006, pp. A 1, A 18, B 1, B13; May 3, 2006, p. B 1; May 2, 2008, p. B 1.

outside of, but actually as a threat to “American Labor.”<sup>6</sup> In the past few years this position has changed dramatically, and the AFL-CIO now supports a system to gradually legalize the status of currently undocumented immigrants and to protect their rights in the meantime. This rather dramatic shift is in part a result of the ways in which immigration has transformed the membership base of the movement, but it has also been produced by the pressure immigrant workers themselves have placed on the movement to address the issue of immigration reform. Much of the growth in labor movement membership since the 1980s derives from service occupations overwhelmingly populated by immigrant and native-born people of color. It is not too much to say that the future of the labor movement lies in the hands of immigrant people.<sup>7</sup> Its policies and actions regarding immigration are changing accordingly, and it will be a player in any future Democratic Party administration.

What do the invigoration of religious and labor organizations and their increasing interest in issues of immigration mean for the 2008 election? Particularly in cities like Los Angeles, New York, and Chicago, where Spanish-speaking immigrants have emerged as an important political base and where the immigrant rights movement is at its height, the presidential candidates will be forced to talk about more than a wall between Mexico and the United States. Increasingly, these immigrants are voters and organizers, and they will want to know how the candidates will protect the rights of the undocumented and offer them a path to full citizenship.

Much has been made recently of the conservatism on this issue exhibited by second and third-generation immigrant voters, including many Mexican American voters in the Southwest. This minority phenomenon is real. But in areas of heaviest immigration, the undocumented are often not only the compatriots, but also the husbands and wives, brothers and sisters, cousins and friends of immigrant citizens and voters. There are indeed pockets of Republican support among Hispanic immigrants in Florida, Texas, and even California. One of the many challenges facing the political movement behind Obama will be to defuse tensions between Blacks and Hispanics in an era of diminished economic possibilities and resources. But Democratic ties to both groups are strong and growing, especially in large cities. A forthright stand for immigration reform and the rights of the undocumented will help the Democratic Party to mobilize naturalized and native-born voters from immigrant communities. Most would agree that Obama’s fate hinges first on such a massive registration and mobilization drive among immigrants and people of color.

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<sup>6</sup> On labor nativism and support for immigration restriction, see G. Mink, *Old Labor and New Immigrants in American Political Development: Union, Party, and State, 1875-1920*, Ithaca 1986; C. Collomp, *Les Organisations Ouvrieres et la restriction d’Immigration aux Etats-Unis a la fin du dix-neuvieme siecle*, [in:] *A l’Ombre de la Statue de la Liberte: Immigrants et ouvrieres dans la Republique Americaine, 1880-1920*, Saint-Denis 1988), pp. 231–246.

<sup>7</sup> D. R. Roediger, *What If Labor Were not White and Male? Recentering Working Class History and Reconstructing Debate on Unions and Race*, “International Labor and Working Class History”, Vol. 51, Spring 1997, pp. 72–95.

But even commentators who see Obama's vulnerability among white working-class voters would also do well not to underestimate the positive symbolic importance of immigration among second and third, even fourth-generation immigrant people in large cities and industrial towns. The immigrant rights movement includes not just Mexicans, Africans, Irish, Poles, Koreans, and Chinese, but also some who are not immigrants at all but may feel a bond of sympathy with the newcomers. Many Chicagoans, for example, feel that the city was built by immigrants, and remember the hardships and discrimination their parents and grandparents faced. Many are linked to the new immigrants through the Catholic Church, which has often and clearly spoken for the rights of its undocumented constituents and for a liberal immigration policy.

Race undeniably complicates the potential for sympathy with the Asian and Hispanic newcomers, but you will still find such sympathy in many "ethnic white" communities. Immigrant marches in Chicago, Los Angeles, and other cities have been overwhelmingly Hispanic, but they have included Irish pipes and Korean drummers as well Mariachi bands and African dancers. Conservatives have often noted that marchers carry the Mexican as well as the American flag, but Polish, Irish, and other flags may also be seen. It may not be as difficult as some seem to think for white ethnics to understand how an immigrant can feel strong ties both to his new home and to his country of origin. This was certainly true for Polish Americans, for example, for generations. As a symbolic issue, then, immigration cuts both ways, turning some native-born voters toward calls for restriction and penalization, and others toward sympathy with this latest generation in a "Nation of Immigrants."

Historians should stay out of the business of political prognostication, but I would observe that immigration has too often been viewed by politicians as a problem. It can also be viewed as an opportunity to continue expanding the notion of what it means to be an American, a notion that has never been fixed, but rather closely contested and evolving for more than two hundred years. Immigration has been a key site for the construction of this identity – and a key source for political mobilization and power in the United States over the generations. Barack Obama, the child of a native-born white mother and an African immigrant father, might still turn out to be the ideal candidate in a society increasingly populated by immigrants, their children, and mixed-race people representing a bewildering array of backgrounds. Immigration may yet play a significant role in the 2008 election, if only below the surface.