



Curriculum Units by Fellows of the Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute
1999 Volume III: Immigration and American Life

Introduction

Most Americans like to think of their country as a "nation of immigrants," and indeed no other country has received so many immigrants in the last two hundred years. Moreover, as a result of changing world conditions and more generous immigration laws after 1965, the U.S. has experienced its fourth "great wave" of immigration during the last third of the twentieth century. That wave is likely to continue well into the next few decades, affecting every phase of American life.

Yet even today, immigration does not form so large a share of the U.S. population as it does in other nations, including Canada, Argentina, and Australia. American history also displays important and often successful movements to exclude or discriminate against immigrants, as well as to welcome them. The most extensive and effective historical discriminations have been on the basis of race, followed by class and political ideology. Hence the relationship of the U.S. to immigrants, past and present, is more complex than the "nation of immigrants" slogan suggests. Currently, important controversies related to immigrants include calls for restrictions on entry and access to public health, education, welfare services, and jobs; disputes over bilingualism, multiculturalism, and affirmative action; and conflicts between various groups of new immigrants and native populations, especially blacks, as well as with each other.

The seminar on *Immigration and American Life* chiefly examined primary sources on political debates over immigration from the founding era to the present, along with secondary sources detailing the major legislative developments in U.S. immigration history. The first half examined historical immigration debates, including those between the Jeffersonians and the Federalists, the Know-Nothings and their opponents, champions of Chinese exclusion and the literacy test, the adoption of the National Origins Quota system in the 1920s, and its repeal in 1965. Later sessions explored current immigration policies and controversies, including the relationships of immigrants to the U.S. economy, disputes over bilingualism and multiculturalism, and the impact of immigrants on U.S. politics. Discussions centered on why Americans historically had favored or opposed various sorts of immigrants and what current policies should be. Those discussions revealed that, today as in the past, issues of appropriate immigration policies are genuinely challenging and complex. Though popular discussions of immigration issues are often beset by gross misconceptions, accurate information is hard to obtain. Even the best information available still leaves us with many hard choices that reveal much about our basic political values and commitments.

In their curriculum units the teachers who participated in the seminar have adapted these themes for students in a wide variety of courses at a wide range of levels, with originality and diversity appropriate to the subject matter. One unit comprehensively documents U.S. immigration history while deriving from it a range of mathematical exercises; another similarly uses immigration statistics to teach graphing techniques. Others

focus in revealing ways on more particular aspects of U.S. immigration history. Several feature particular groups of immigrants. These include the Italians, emblematic of the great immigration from southern and eastern Europe during the late 19th and early 20th century; Africans, involuntary immigrants to antebellum America who are only becoming a significant voluntary immigration stream today; and Puerto Ricans, not truly immigrants, yet not clearly fully equal U.S. citizens either. One uses representative figures from New Haven's past to tell the history of immigration in this city, a microcosm of immigration to America's northeast. Another focuses on the Irish in New Haven and how the St. Patrick's Day parade has always been a fascinating window on their experiences. Still another reverses perspectives, tracing how European immigrants affected the first migrants to this continent, the Native American tribes. One concentrates on one of the most controversial yet important issues related to current immigration, bilingual education. Another, recognizing that the great drama involved in immigration has long inspired great American novels, plays, and films, uses student research on immigration as preparation for training in acting and dramatic presentations.

It is a measure of how rich the topic of immigration and American life is that even these diverse and fascinating units only touch on a small number of the groups, themes and issues that could be pursued under this general heading. Yet the manner in which these units generate illuminating insights into politics, economics, and cultural and social life within and between so many groups seems quite significant. In terms of one enduring educational goal, achieving a deeper understanding of the human condition, we can give a profoundly affirmative answer to questions about the importance and value of immigration in America's past, present, and future.

Rogers M. Smith

Alfred Cowles Professor of Government

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