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Review: 'Ellis Island Nation: Immigration Policy and American Identity in the Twentieth Century'

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Fleeglar, Robert L. 2013. *Ellis Island Nation: Immigration Policy and American Identity in the Twentieth Century*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press. 270 pages.

Ellis Island Nation's focus on the period between 1924 and 1965 allows for new arguments to be made about belonging, citizenship, and the social construction of American identity. The book is a political and intellectual history in which Robert Fleeglar weaves discussions of policy debates, public discourse, and educational curriculum to analyze changes in immigration law, societal reactions to immigrants and ethnics, and notions of pluralism. The author's conceptualization of "contributionism" melds two positions that have been at the heart of immigration debates for 200 years. Contributionism, as Fleeglar defines it, "emphasized that the cultural and economic assets of immigrants enriched America by celebrating the unique benefits of immigrants' native cultures to American life" (p.12). As he makes clear, however, contributionists rarely included Asian, African or Latino immigrants in their definition. Fleeglar identifies a different angle by which to assess the divides between nativism and cosmopolitanism that are focal points of scholarly work in immigration history. Contributionism, the author argues, is also distinct from the midcentury's universalism (which peaked during the late 1940s) and later twentieth century ideas about multiculturalism. Tracing how and why advocates of contributionism waged and won the ideological and legal fights over the course of the twentieth century is the centerpiece of this noteworthy book.

The periodization of *A Nation of Immigrants* is one of the work's biggest strengths. Fleeglar's argument about the rise and fall of national origins ideology – based on racial prejudice and nationalism – is a good top down analysis which uses political and intellectual history methodologies to make the case. The book's greatest contributions are made in the chapters focusing on the 1940s and 1950s which make up the majority of the study. In addition, the power of the argument comes out in the structure of the book. The chapters are coherent, similar types of sources are used, and organizational patterns followed throughout.

Fleeglar's efforts to show that, during World War II, the struggle between universalism and contributionism was an indication of nativism is a critical part of his interpretation for the early part of the study. For example, he demonstrates that the universalism of the 1940s made Americans out of ethnics of European descent by emphasizing "melting" as well as underscoring the traditions of religious pluralism. Not only could Italians, Slovaks, and Russians become Americans but so too could Catholics, Protestants, and Jews – the latter playing heavily into the rhetoric produced by government wartime propaganda and other media at the time. Here, as elsewhere, the author shows that the possibility of Southern and Eastern Europeans (the "Ellis Island Immigrants" to which the title refers) to become Americans, albeit fraught and uneven, stands in stark distinction to Asian and Latino immigrants.

If universalism helped win the war, the nativists had not quite quit the fight. There is a good discussion here about the McCarran-Walter act and the way it reiterated national origins as mainstay of American immigration policy. Despite the victory, there was also a latent discourse of contributionism in the debates. Even though Congress overrode Truman's veto on McCarran-Walter, the law's opponents clearly used contributionist rhetoric in their efforts. Moreover, backers of the law used cultural rather than racial logic to frame their arguments.

The national origins framework, by the 1960s, was under attack. Definitions of displaced persons and the terminology of refugees moved people outside of the narrow interpretation of the law. And helped them immigrate. Immigration reform became tied to civil rights, economic demand, and

assimilation successes. When the Hart-Cellar Act passed in 1965, it also reflected notions of community and family life as central components of what it meant to be American in the US. Moreover, Fleeglar shows, contributionists had won. The law continued to uphold quotas – in terms of numbers – but removed the racial basis by removing the barred zones and defining entry in terms of nationality. *Ellis Island Nation* ends with an epilogue that takes the discussion to the 2012 presidential election and shows how the continued struggle that immigrants face is, in great part, a reality of lawmakers' fights about immigration reform

The richness of Fleeglar's work also, paradoxically, tends to mark its flaws. *Ellis Island Nation* includes some interesting interpretations about race. African-Americans debated immigrant contributions to the US and, therefore, though there were no Blacks in Congress leading up to the Johnson-Reed Act, the conditions of their lives were inseparable from immigrants. This is an important inclusion. Fleeglar also makes a dubious statement about this period as well as later periods. "Prominent nativists who had been concerned about the dangers of unfettered immigration turned their attention to the growing African American population in the major cities" (p.30). Racism and racists (whatever their stripe), as US history has borne out, have been well-equipped to attack more than one group at a time. Fleeglar repeats this type of argument in his discussion of the McCarran-Walter Act and states that because politicians like John F. Kennedy and Adam Clayton Powell resisted different parts of the bill (southern and eastern quotas in the former case, and West Indian restriction in the latter case), it "seems to suggest that the old ethnic divisions were fading and that the dichotomy between African Americans and whites was rapidly becoming the central racial/ethnic issue of American society" (p116). Such statements misrepresent, at the very best, and misunderstand at the very worst, the long history of racism and its multiple insidious patterns in the United States.

In the discussion of religion – like his remarks on race – Fleeglar reveals much but also misses an opportunity to fully engage in the historiographical literature as well as to forge new ground. The inclusion of religion in this study, is a welcome contribution to the field. The author shows quite convincingly that religious pluralism (limited to Judeo-Christianity) was a hallmark of deliberations on immigration reform. But the evidence on this topic requires that he go further in his analysis and unpack the way American identity was framed during this period. The notion of contributionism was limited in ways that shaped the definitions of who belonged in the United States. Faith based Americanism, so to speak, was really Judeo-Christian in content. Americans increasing tolerance for religious difference, as Fleeglar puts it, only encompassed Protestant, Catholic, and Jewish denominations. No one mentioned – or at least Fleeglar does not record that they did -- Hinduism, Confucianism, Islam or other world. In addition, the undercurrent of anti-atheist sentiment that tied 1950s debate about Communism and the Cold War, regardless of party, political ideas, or racial ideology, the author also neglects. To be a nonbeliever was to be un-American. For example, during the 1960 Presidential campaign, Nixon, Fleeglar notes, believed "that religion should be a political issue only if a particular candidate did not adhere to any faith." (p. 157). Indeed, that was the undercurrent of thought at mid-century. Given the literature on the 1924 bifurcation of race and ethnicity by Mae Ngai (and others), which is actually cited in *Ellis Island Nation*, there is much to be gained by looking deeper into other dividing lines between insiders and outsiders.

Overall, *Ellis Island Nation* is a good book which analyzes the key debates surrounding 20th century immigration reform. Its scope and content are wide ranging, and the sources Fleeglar uses (especially the incorporation of contemporary textbooks of the 1920s-1960s) are important. The analysis is straightforward, the prose well-crafted, and the analysis, in many cases, instructive. The book would be

an excellent choice for an upper level undergraduate course in US history and also in topical classes on immigration. Fleeglar's study makes its mark – and it is a significant one.

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