

Becoming American: Immigration and Assimilation in Late 19th Century America



**An Online Professional
Development Seminar**

Josef Barton

Professor emeritus of History and
of Spanish and Portuguese
Northwestern University



NATIONAL
HUMANITIES
CENTER

Florida
VirtualSchool

GOALS

- To deepen your understanding of late nineteenth century immigration to the United States, focusing on what it meant for the nation and what it meant for the immigrants themselves.
- To provide fresh insights and resources to strengthen teaching.

FROM THE FORUM

- How does late nineteenth century immigration compare with contemporary immigration? Students often cannot distinguish between legal and illegal immigration.
- What struggles and hardships, including forms of discrimination, confronted immigrants arriving between 1880 and 1920?
- How and to what degree did immigrant assimilate American culture and integrate themselves into American life during this period?
- What was the economic status of immigrants vis-à-vis that of native-born workers? Were immigrants exploited?
- How did lodges and fraternal organizations function in the lives of immigrants?
- How did the education received by immigrants compare with that received by native-born workers?
- How did the influx of immigrants affect the American labor market? How did it affect the labor union movement?
- How did the influx of immigrants affect different regions of the United States?
- How did the working condition of Northern factory workers at this time compare with those experienced by agricultural workers elsewhere in the nation, especially in the South?

FROM THE FORUM

- How were different immigrant groups “welcomed” in America?
- How were groups “sorted” upon arrival on Ellis Island?
- Why did the majority of immigrants shuttle through Ellis Island while many went to Boston?
- Did single young men find entry into our nation easier than single young women? How about families? What about families that arrived without parents?
- How did communications between immigrants and the folks back home affect perceptions of the US and influence the decision to leave the old home place for America?
- What was the trip to America like? Are there any personal narratives available, especially one that describe the experience of teenagers?

1. What cultural changes can be traced to immigration?
2. How and why did immigration make possible the transformation of the United States from a rural republic to an industrial nation?
3. How did immigrants create stable lives in the midst of this economic transformation?
4. How, in the midst of such uncertainty, did immigrants create a distinctive urban culture?
5. How did immigrants transform American politics?



Josef Barton

Professor emeritus of History and
of Spanish and Portuguese
Northwestern University

Research and teaching focus on immigration, labor, and environment, in the case of the United States, and in the themes of peasantries and rural communities, in connection with Latin America.

Peasants and Strangers: Italians, Romanians, and Slovaks in an American City, 1890-1950 (Harvard University Press, 1975)

Recipient of American Council of Learned Societies, NEH, and Fulbright fellowships, he has recently completed a book on capitalism and the persistence of community in Mexico and the Southwest, 1880-1930.

- The second great wave of immigration began in the 1820s, surged in the 1850s and 1880s, crested in the first decade of the twentieth century, and ended with the immigration restriction law of 1924.
- A transportation revolution made America accessible from more and more remote parts of Europe, even as a population crisis in rural Europe and the breakdown of traditional agriculture put millions of people to flight.
- Astonishingly varied in its sources, this immigration greatly extended the religious and ethnic variety of the United States. Most importantly, this massive in-pouring shaped an urban, industrial way of life. To a degree unequaled elsewhere in the modern world, the immigrants peopled greatly expanding cities and supplied an industrial labor force.

- In its search for secure incomes, steady jobs, stable neighborhoods, and good health, the immigrant working class built up a new ideal of stability that would be enshrined by the New Deal in the Social Security system, the cornerstone of the American welfare state.
- Immigrants invented new cultures that at once drew ethnic boundaries and bridged differences.
- Not only did immigrants create a work force, not only did they make possible a second industrial revolution, not only did they fashion a new urban culture, but they also mounted social movements that altered the distribution of power in the United States.

What cultural changes traced to immigration?

As an illustrative encounter, let's consider a clash in 1915 between Edward Ross, a renowned Midwestern sociologist, and Horace Kallen, a New York public intellectual. Their famous spat dramatically highlights the stark differences between two positions. One camp mourned the loss of Anglo-American dominance in the old republic; Ross's *Old World in the New* served as the manifesto for these nativists. The other side looked toward a new nation of side-by-side ethnic groups; Horace Kallen's famous response to Ross, "Democracy versus the Melting Pot," rallied the pluralists. Immigration gave rise to this cultural contest, the consequences of which are still unfolding in twenty-first century America.

What cultural changes traced to immigration?

Edward Ross
Midwestern Sociologist

vs.

Horace Kallen
New York Public Intellectual

The Old World in the New: The Significance of Past and Present Immigration to the American People

“Certainly never since the colonial era have the foreign-born and their children formed so large a proportion of the American people as at the present moment. I scanned 368 persons as they passed me in Union Square, New York, at a time when the garment-workers of the Fifth Avenue lofts were returning to their homes. Only thirty-eight of these passers-by had the type of face one would find at a county fair in the West or the South.”

Discussion Questions

What response did Ross want in his readers? What common expectations about faces – and, behind the faces, ethnic identities—did Ross and his readers share?

What values and practices, in Ross’s mind, did they threaten?

What cultural changes does Kaplan believe that the immigrants make possible?

How, if at all, are the consequences of the struggle between Ross and Kallen still unfolding in 21st century America?

“Democracy versus the Melting Pot”

“The older tradition has passed from a life into a memory, and the newer one, so far as it has an Anglo-Saxon base, is holding its own beside more and more formidable rivals, the expression in appropriate form of the national inheritances of the various populations concentrated in the various States of the Union, populations of whom their national self-consciousness is perhaps the chief spiritual asset. Think of the Creoles in the South and the French-Canadians in the North, clinging to French for so many generations and maintaining, however weakly, spiritual and social contacts with the mother-country; of the Germans with their *Deutschthum*, their *Männerchore*, *Turnvereine*, and *Schützenfeste*; of the universally separate Jews; of the intensely nationalistic Irish; of the Pennsylvania Germans; the indomitable Poles, and even more indomitable Bohemians; of the 30,000 Belgians in Wisconsin, with their ‘Belgian’ language, a mixture of Walloon and Flemish welded by reaction to a strange social environment.”

How and why did immigration make possible the transformation of the United States from a rural republic to an industrial nation?



The making of an immigrant working class was an always uneven, often violent, transition. No single witness, no solitary analyst, ever captured the remarkable speed and spread of the changes. Nonetheless, four early twentieth-century observers made penetrating analyses:

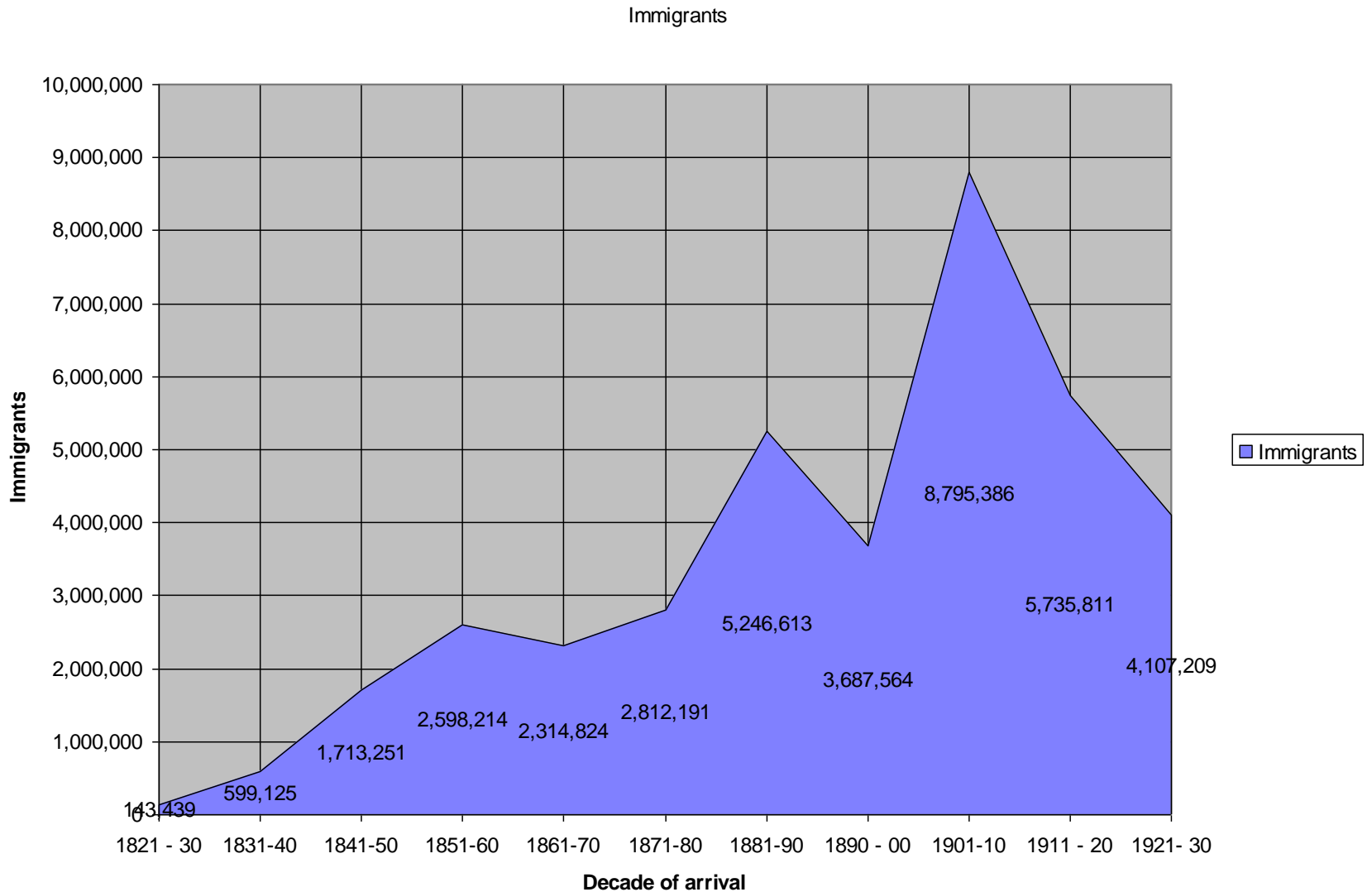
- Peter Roberts (*Anthracite Coal Communities*), a pioneer student of industrial labor, later an advocate of Americanization, spent many years in immigrant mining communities;
- Emily Greene Balch (*Our Slavic Fellow Citizens*), a sociologist trained in French and German universities, a peace activist in both world wars, and a winner of the Nobel Peace Prize in 1946, who spent ten years tracing the origins of immigrants and their entry into the American economy;
- Edith Abbott (*Women in Industry: A Study in American Economic History*), one of the first American women to earn a Ph. D. in economics, a founder of the School of Social Service Administration at the University of Chicago, and an adviser to Franklin Delano Roosevelt, who wrote a brilliant study of immigrant women at work; and the Interchurch World Movement, a delegation of Catholic, Jewish, Orthodox, and Protestant leaders that compiled an important investigation of the great steel strike of 1919.
- The Steel Strike of 1919 . . .

“As the years go on and he works on up, the right to his job, the fear of losing it or of being shifted become more important and he is the one to value most his security in promotion. He finds he is the one whose personal preference counts least and the bar that stands out strongest in his mind is not being an ‘American.’ ‘That job is not a hunky’s job; you can’t have it,’ is the answer that destroys his confidence in himself. He can’t change his race; he can’t change his foreman and he cannot get above the foreman. By this stage in the progress he has become sufficiently Americanized to want higher wages and shorter hours, he wants better living and more recognition as a human being and less as a hunky, but he finds himself in the grip of a system which regulates his hours by whistle, his wages by bulletin-board, his grievances by rebuff. In this stage the union organizer found tens of thousands in the steel industry to whom the strike was very considerably a revolt against arbitrary control, as it was principally for the Americans and hardly at all for the common laborer. Of the ‘foreigners,’ this class is the one left by the strike in the most rebellious frame of mind and most likely to answer another strike call.”

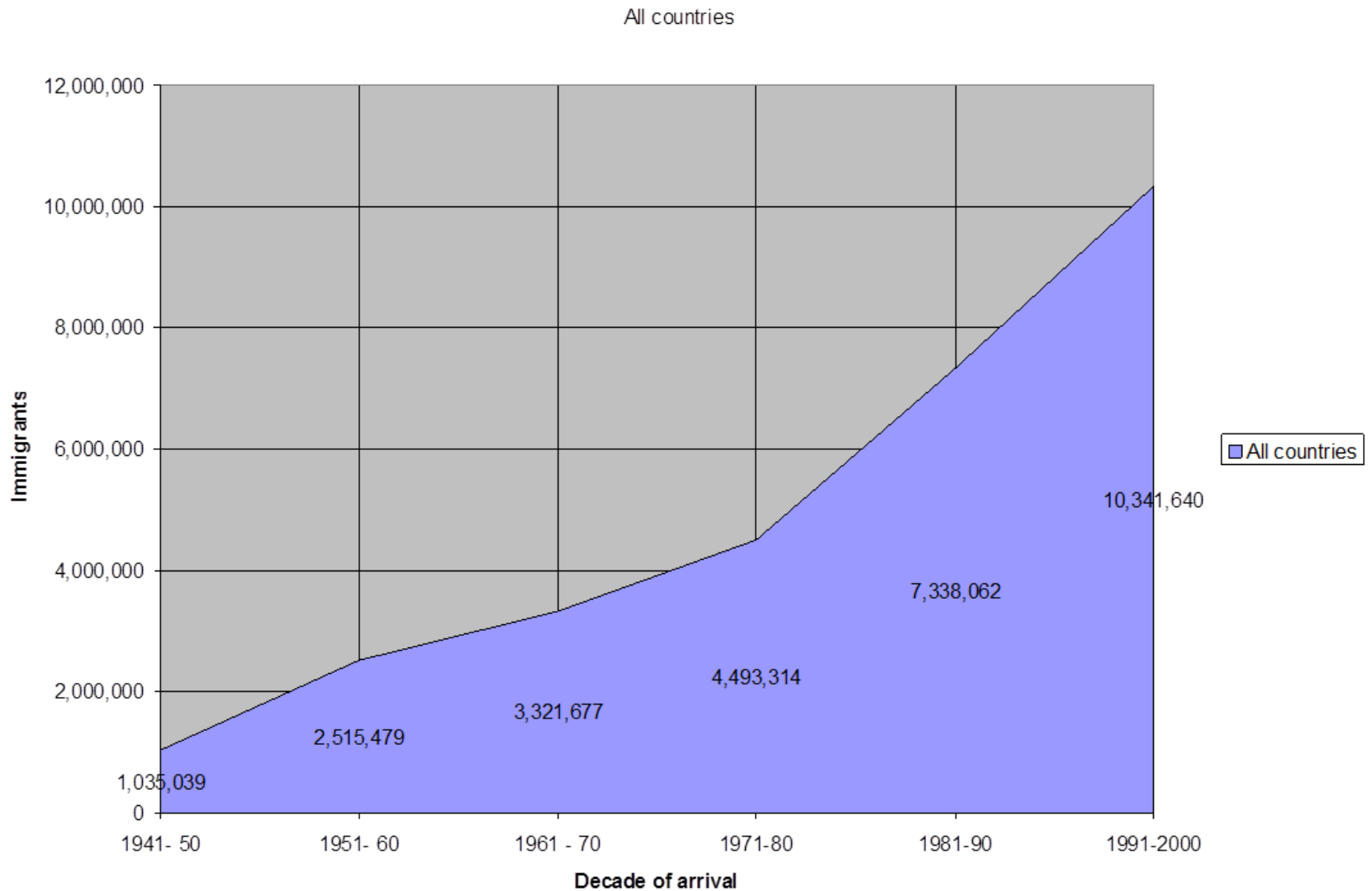
Discussion Questions

- What lay at the root of newcomers’ commitment to unions and collective action?
- How did newly-arrived workers acquire their knowledge of the realities of working-class life?
- How did the immigrants’ joining labor movements further their integration into American society?

Immigration to the United States by decades, 1820-1930

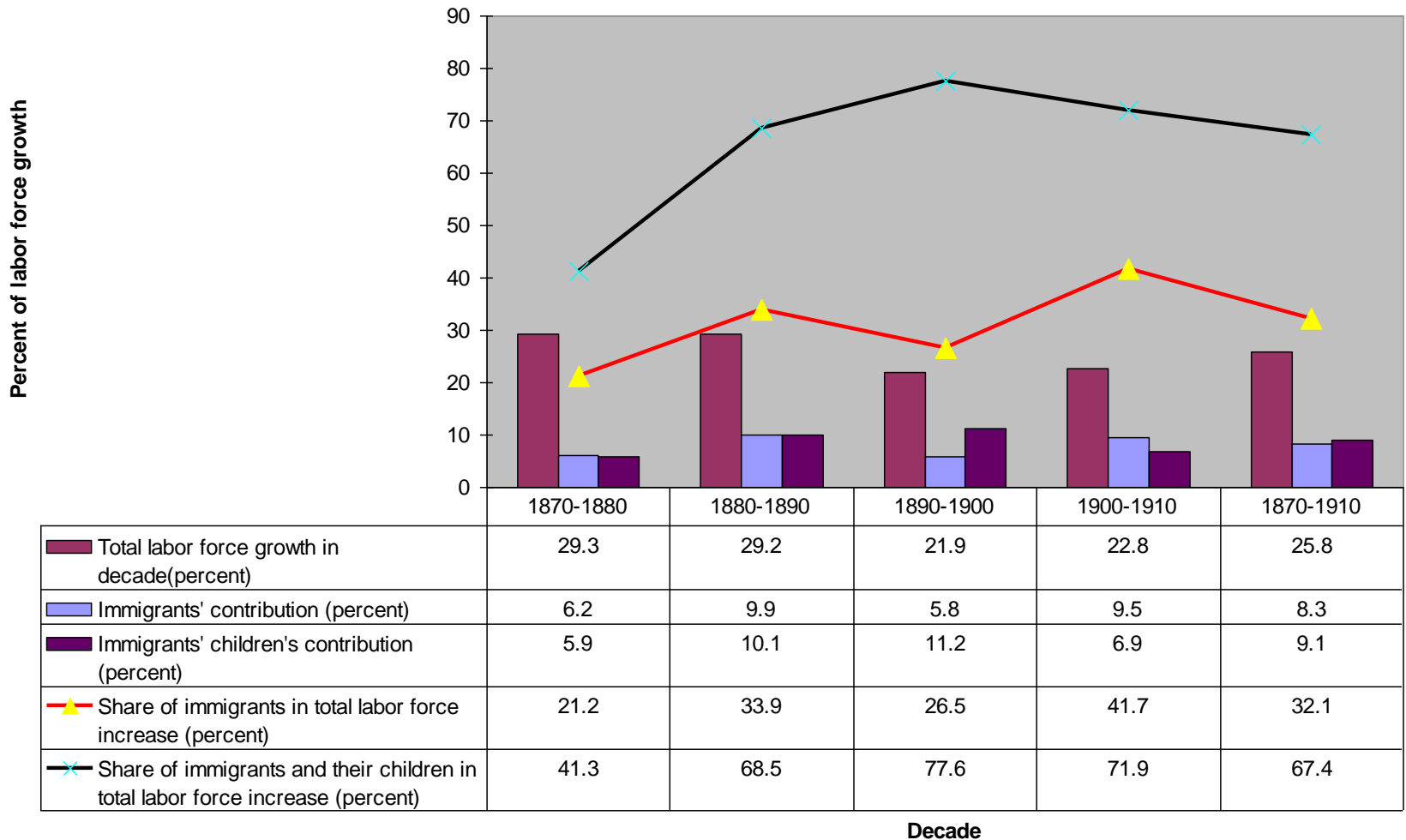


Immigration to the United States by decades, 1941-2000

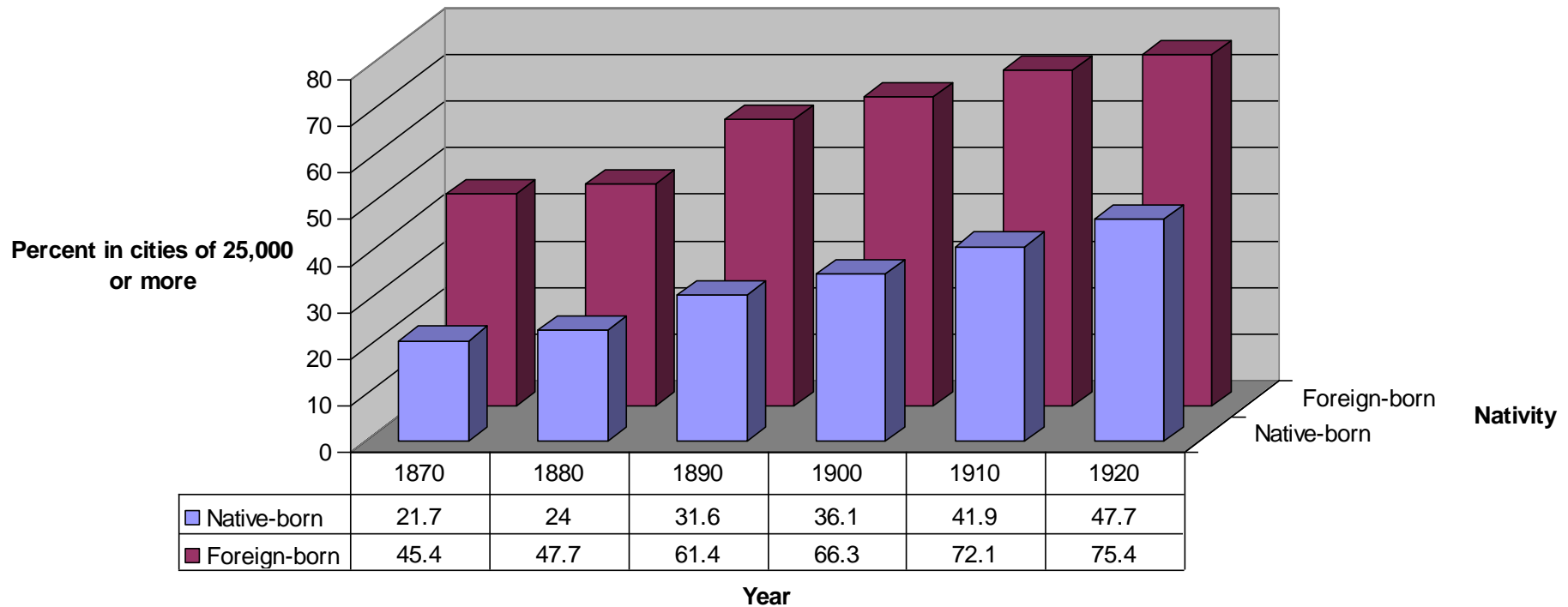


Average rate of labor force growth by component, 1870-1910

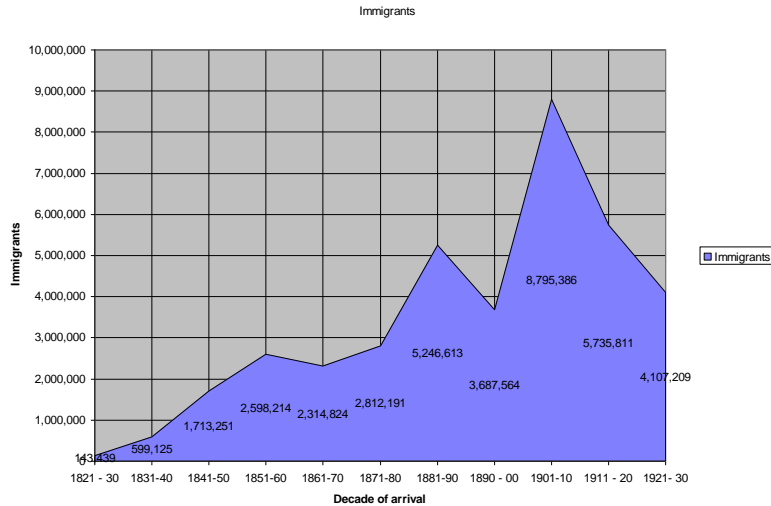
Average rate of labor force growth by component, 1870-1910



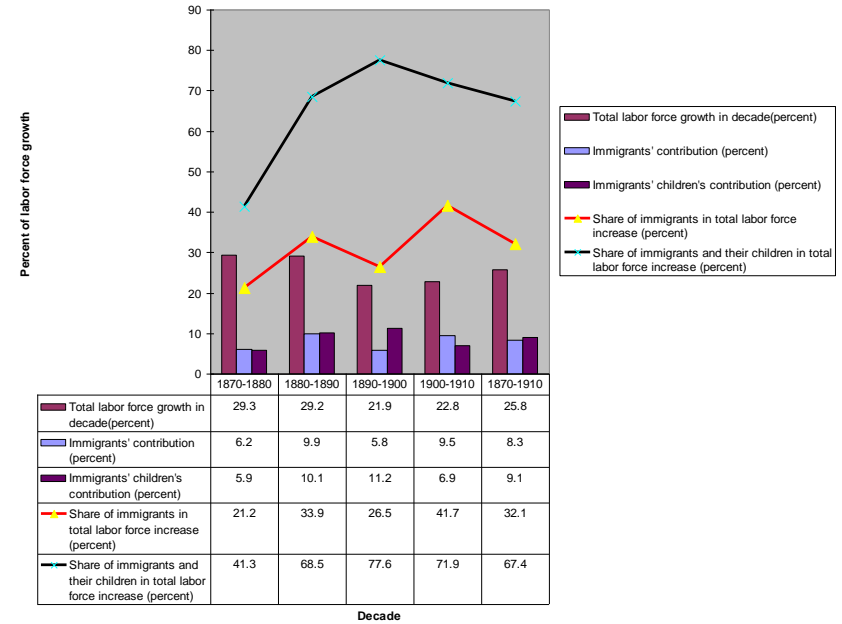
Immigrants and native-born of native parentage living in cities of 25,000 or more, 1870-1920



Immigrants and native-born of native parentage living in cities of 25,000 or more, 1870-1920



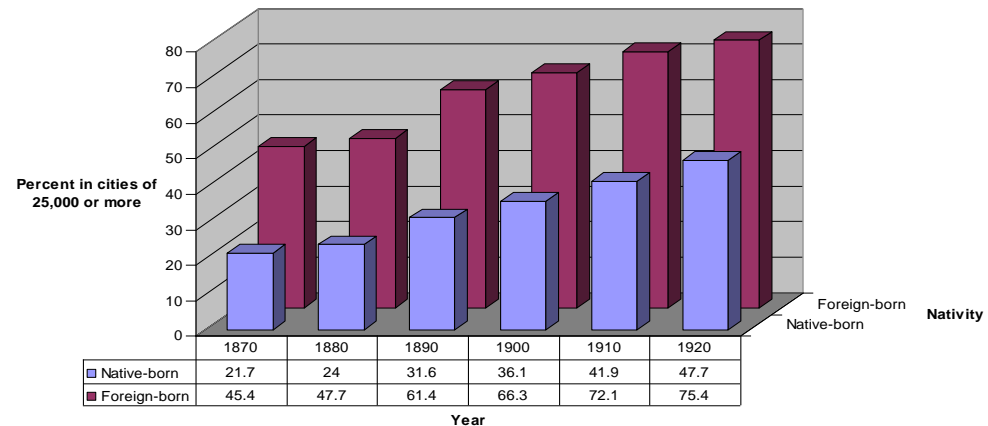
Average rate of labor force growth by component, 1870-1910



Discussion Questions

The historical record of immigration; the impact of newcomers on the labor force; and the concentration of immigrants in big cities. Two enormously high peaks of immigration; a huge expansion of the labor force; and a rush into the cities, all within a half century from 1870 to 1920.

- What strikes you about the conjunction of these changes?
- How might we best imagine the transformations in work, residence, and daily life that followed these big developments?



How might we best imagine the transformations in work, residence, and daily life that accompanied the surge in immigration, the immigrants' entry into the labor force, and their concentration in big cities?

One way to answer that question is to explore the photographic record of American immigration. The following photographs capture scenes from immigrant Pittsburgh, newcomers from rural eastern and southern Europe suddenly find themselves in an alien, incomprehensible world. Arriving at Ellis Island making steel in Pittsburgh, working with strangers, living among transient neighbors: this was the world they plunged into.

- How did they make sense of this new life?
- How did they learn to connect with their neighbors at work and at home?
- How did they learn to act meaningfully in this new nation?

Italian family on the way to Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania Station, 1902



Arthur Hewitt Collection, New York Public Library

Pittsburgh, The Point, 1900



Pittsburgh, The Strip, 1906



The Monongahela River at night, looking toward the Jones and Laughlin plant, Pittsburgh, 1906



Pittsburgh, Homestead, Jones and Laughlin plant and immigrant workers' housing, 1908



Iron ore mountain at Jones and Laughlin plant, Pittsburgh, 1907



Steel pourer's platform at Jones and Laughlin plant, Pittsburgh, 1907



Crews at furnace in Jones and Laughlin plant, Pittsburgh, 1907



Discussion Questions

What led newly-arrived immigrants to send photographs of steelworkers on break or a Homestead street back to their birthplaces?

How might prospective emigrants view these images?

What might they learn about their future lives in an American industrial city?



“Group of Mill Workers.”

Postcard in Archives of Industrial Society, University of Pittsburgh.

Steel laborers, Pittsburgh, 1909.

Discussion Questions

What led newly-arrived immigrants to send photographs of steel-workers on break or a Homestead street back to their birthplaces?

How might prospective emigrants view these images?

What might they learn about their future lives in an American industrial city?



“Immigrant Day Laborers on the Way Home from Work.”

Postcard in Archives of Industrial Society, University of Pittsburgh.

Pittsburgh, Homestead, Going home from work at the Jones and Laughlin rolling mill, 1908.

Discussion Questions

What led newly-arrived immigrants to send photographs of steel-workers on break or a Homestead street back to their birthplaces?

How might prospective emigrants view these images?

What might they learn about their future lives in an American industrial city?



“This picture sums up Homestead:- the mill at the left; the Carnegie Library on the hill in the center, and the mean houses of the Second Ward to the right.”

Postcard in Archives of Industrial Society, University of Pittsburgh.

Polish, Rusin, and Slovak immigrant steel workers' housing, Soho Hill District, Pittsburgh.

Discussion Questions

What led newly-arrived immigrants to send photographs of steel-workers on break or a Homestead street back to their birthplaces?

How might prospective emigrants view these images?

What might they learn about their future lives in an American industrial city?



“Cornet Street in the foreground; the Jones and Laughlin steel mills and the Twenty-second Street bridge in the distance; Forbes Street to the right.”

Postcard in Archives of Industrial Society, University of Pittsburgh.

How did immigrants create stable lives in the midst of this economic transformation?

Samplings of contemporary testimony on this theme follow:

- Robert Hunter (*Poverty*), a one-time settlement-house resident in Chicago and New York, a Socialist campaigner, and, in later life, a designer of the golf course at Pebble Beach, an introductory section to his relentless exposé of American poverty, published in 1904;
- Margaret Byington (*Homesteads: The Households of a Mill Town*), one of the pioneers of American philanthropy, a selection from her deeply informed account of Pittsburgh's immigrant households, which appeared in 1910;
- Crystal Eastman (*Work-Accidents and the Law*), an undeservedly forgotten legal reformer and peace crusader, a segment of her searing, sobering study of industrial work accidents, which she published in 1910; from
- Edith Abbott and Sophonisba Breckinridge (*Truancy and Non-attendance in the Chicago Schools*), Abbott we have met before; Breckinridge was one of Jane Addam's closest collaborators at Hull House, the first female graduate of the University of Chicago Law School, and the first woman to earn promotion and tenure at the University of Chicago. *Truancy* is an unblinking account of children's labor and education in immigrant Chicago, which they offered in 1916; and again from Sophonisba Breckinridge (*New Homes for Old*), a snapshot of immigrants' relentless drive toward property ownership, from her study of immigrant homes published in 1921.

“Let us turn from general facts and consider, in the first place, how the economic problem of life can be worked out on \$1.65 a day.

With the single men the problem is of course a simple one. Many care little how they live so long as they live cheaply. One of the lodging houses which I visited during the depression consisted of two rooms one above the other, each measuring perhaps 12 by 20 feet. In the kitchen was the wife of the boarding boss getting dinner,— some sort of hot apple cake and a stew of the cheapest cuts of meats. Along one side of the room was an oilcloth-covered table with a plank bench on each side; above it a rack holding a long row of handleless white cups and a shelf with tin knives and forks. Near the up-to-date range, the only piece of real furniture in the room, hung the ‘buckets’ in which all mill men carry their noon or midnight meals. A crowd of men were lounging cheerfully about, talking, smoking and enjoying life, making the most of the leisure enforced by the shut-down in the mill. In the room above, double iron bedsteads were set close together and on them comfortables were neatly laid. In these two rooms, besides the ‘boarding boss,’ a stalwart Bulgarian, his wife and two babies, lived 20 men.”

Discussion Questions

- How did these families manage to cobble together a living?
- Where were such families to find the money to buy gas stoves, or washing machines, or for that matter any consumer goods?
- What happened when the grinding necessity of child labor clashed with the lofty expectation of universal education?
- What long-run political consequences grew from the immigrants’ search for security?

How, in the midst of such uncertainty, did immigrants create a distinctive urban culture?

Much of the documentation of immigrant cultural creativity is elusive. But a few telling traces run through readily available sources.

- In connection with religious diversity, sample a few passages from *Hull House Maps and Papers*, a compilation of first-hand investigations that reveals the immigrant worlds around Chicago's famous settlement house.
- For a glimpse of the density of the immigrant press, read two short selections, the first from Peter Roberts's *Poverty*, a study of immigrant mining communities, the second from the great University of Chicago sociologist Robert's Park's analysis of foreign-language newspapers.
- For an astonishing insight into ethnic theater, consult Hutchins Hapgood's *The Spirit of the Ghetto: Studies of the Jewish Quarter in New York*, a classic account of the Jewish immigrant world of New York's Lower East Side, a product of this Massachusetts Brahmin-gone-Bohemian's long residence in Greenwich Village. And Peter Roberts in *The New immigrants* supplies, a snippet on immigrants' acquisition of English.

“The Bohemian People in Chicago,”

Hull House Maps and Papers, by Josefa Humpal Zeman



“The Bohemian order of Benedictines of St. Prokopius parish has founded a Bohemian College, which is equivalent to the common high school, offering the same curriculum; and it has also a business course, all in the Bohemian language. In each parish there are organizations of men and women, many being benevolent, others more purely social and religious. There are four Catholic Bohemian newspapers published in Chicago,—one daily, one children’s paper, the other two weeklies. The Catholics have their own halls, theatres, schools, and cemetery.

The Protestants have two Bohemian churches: one the Congregational ‘Bethlehem,’ and the other the ‘John Huss’ Methodist Episcopal church, and two Methodist Episcopal missions. They publish two papers: one the *Pravda*, Congregational; and the other the *Krestanski Posel*, published by the Bohemian Methodist pastors. These churches have about fifteen hundred members.”

Discussion Questions

- How did immigrants learn to straddle the cultural differences that were so distinctive a feature of 20th-century cities?
- How did immigrants manage both to cultivate the distinctive identities of ethnic groups and establish the common connections among urban masses?
- What advantages did their urban experience give to immigrants?
- How did immigrants acquire the capacities and resources to contribute to this characteristically urban, American culture? And why did newcomers so eagerly participate?

How did immigrants transform American politics?

Following is a series of six photographs that illustrate the astonishing flooding of immigrant labor and nationalist movements onto American streets in the early twentieth century. All record Chicago's great immigrant mobilizations, since that city's photojournalists left the best documentation.

Discussion Questions

How did immigrants find the assets to mount strong movements for change?

How did they learn to form alliances that overcame ethnic differences and blended different peoples into effective coalitions?

How did newcomers learn to blend their ethnic allegiances and their working-class aspirations in the mass movements that led to the New Deal?

How do the photographs reveal the mingling of two powerful impulses: workers demanding their American rights and nationalists redeeming their European homelands?



Garment workers strike, men and women parading on West Jackson Boulevard, Chicago, December 1910

Discussion Questions

How did immigrants find the assets to mount strong movements for change?

How did they learn to form alliances that overcame ethnic differences and blended different peoples into effective coalitions?

How did newcomers learn to blend their ethnic allegiances and their working-class aspirations in the mass movements that led to the New Deal?

How do the photographs reveal the mingling of two powerful impulses: workers demanding their American rights and nationalists redeeming their European homelands?



Garment workers strike, men and women parading on residential street, Chicago, December 1910

Discussion Questions

How did immigrants find the assets to mount strong movements for change?

How did they learn to form alliances that overcame ethnic differences and blended different peoples into effective coalitions?

How did newcomers learn to blend their ethnic allegiances and their working-class aspirations in the mass movements that led to the New Deal?

How do the photographs reveal the mingling of two powerful impulses: workers demanding their American rights and nationalists redeeming their European homelands?



Crowd awaiting Zionist parade, Chicago, 1914

Discussion Questions

How did immigrants find the assets to mount strong movements for change?

How did they learn to form alliances that overcame ethnic differences and blended different peoples into effective coalitions?

How did newcomers learn to blend their ethnic allegiances and their working-class aspirations in the mass movements that led to the New Deal?

How do the photographs reveal the mingling of two powerful impulses: workers demanding their American rights and nationalists redeeming their European homelands?



Polish National Alliance parade, Michigan Avenue, Chicago, 1918

Discussion Questions

How did immigrants find the assets to mount strong movements for change?

How did they learn to form alliances that overcame ethnic differences and blended different peoples into effective coalitions?

How did newcomers learn to blend their ethnic allegiances and their working-class aspirations in the mass movements that led to the New Deal?

How do the photographs reveal the mingling of two powerful impulses: workers demanding their American rights and nationalists redeeming their European homelands?



Third Liberty Loan parade, Art Institute visible in background, Chicago, July 1918

Discussion Questions

How did immigrants find the assets to mount strong movements for change?

How did they learn to form alliances that overcame ethnic differences and blended different peoples into effective coalitions?

How did newcomers learn to blend their ethnic allegiances and their working-class aspirations in the mass movements that led to the New Deal?

How do the photographs reveal the mingling of two powerful impulses: workers demanding their American rights and nationalists redeeming their European homelands?



Final slide.

Thank You