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Comments on Brian Gratton's "Race and Politics"

The issues of nativism, racism, and immigration restriction are again in the news. High rates of immigration are transforming the American population, much as in the late 1800s and early 1900s. The election of Donald Trump has breathed life into the politics of immigration restriction, while opponents complain about increasing levels of racism and nativism by native-born whites against nonwhite new immigrants.

The qualifications that this essay introduces into our discussion of immigration restriction are important and useful. An overreliance on dark and irrational forces has dominated much our talk of immigration history. This interpretation can be traced back to John Higham's seminal 1955 book, *Strangers in the Land*, which outlined various types of nativist thought as an organizing principle in thinking about the relationship between native-born American and immigrants. The book has long influenced the way historians think about immigration. As the author writes: "Scholarship dating from John Higham's *Strangers in the Land* has stressed an irrational, racialized nativism as the driving force" behind immigration restriction.

This essay stands athwart Higham's thesis—as well as the work of a few generations of scholars who built their own research on Higham's work. It argues that "working-class voters and their ethnic distinctions constituted the vital center for immigration restriction," racism, or nativism. It is a provocative argument, especially since it goes against so much that has been written about immigration in the last half century.

As novel as this argument is, it is interesting to note that no less a figure as John Higham began to pull back from his own thesis. Just two years after

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the publication of *Strangers in the Land*, Higham announced his second thoughts: "Shall I confess that nativism now looks less adequate as a vehicle for studying the struggles of nationalists in America than my earlier report of it, and other reports, might indicate?"

Writing in 1950s America, dealing with the ideologies of both Communism and McCarthyite anti-Communism, and still recovering from the threat of fascism, Higham overemphasized the role of rigid ideologies, especially ones that emerged from "the irrational depths of human nature." Higham went on to note that the "modern mind dwells on the unconscious savagery lurking in its own dark corners." Looking for base and vile motives, Higham argued, the historian would neglect "realistic motives of solidarity or calculated self-interest; nor is he likely to find high ideals. Instead, he discovers a fog of myths, prejudices, stereotypes, and power-hungry ideologies."

"Repelled as I was not only by the xenophobias of the past but also by the nationalist delusions of the Cold War that were all around me, I had highlighted the most inflammatory aspects of ethnic conflict," he explained. In words that sound very like the current article under discussion, Higham instead asked: "Should we not suspect that the nativist theme does little justice to objective realities of ethnic relations?"

His discussion of nativism, he had now believed, had focused too heavily on "ideologies, not to actual social processes or conditions." Thus, he declared most certainly prematurely that "the nativist theme, as defined and developed to date, is imaginatively exhausted."

Of course it was nowhere near exhausted and scholars continued to expand on the nativist theme. Post-1960s scholarship, fueled by the civil rights movement and other social protest movements, found itself increasingly attracted to explanations that focused on the "unconscious savagery" that many historians felt lurked not too far below the surface of American society. Higham's book from an earlier generation seemed ready made for the post-1960s analysis, one reason for the book's long shelf life. Hence, most scholars ignored Higham's "second thoughts" and avoided dealing with the qualifications he had subsequently put on the thesis of *Strangers in the Land*.

As welcome as this essay is in providing greater perspective on the reasons for immigration restriction historically and moving away from a monolithically dark view of human behavior, the author overplays his or her hand by downplaying the role of nativism and racial antipathy. It is without a doubt that increasing numbers of immigrants from southern and eastern Europe in

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the late 1800s helped fuel the drive for restriction. And modern scientific ideas such as evolution and genetics would often crop up in those discussions.

It is not hard to find in the writings and speeches of the 1880s and 1890s, arguments about the inherent undesirability of immigrants from southern and eastern Europe. Vermont senator Justin Morrill, the father of land-grant colleges, wrote in 1889 that these new immigrants were "more dangerous to the individuality and deep-seated stamina of the American people. . . . I refer to those whose inherent deficiencies and iniquities are thoroughbred, and who are as incapable of evolution, whether in this generation or the next." MIT president Francis A. Walker famously wrote in the *Atlantic Monthly* in 1896 that the new non-Anglo-Saxon immigrants "have none of the inherited instincts and tendencies which made it comparatively easy to deal with the immigration of olden times. They are beaten men from beaten races; representing the worst failures in the struggle for existence."

Contrary to what the author writes, by the mid-1890s Americans were able to demarcate "separate" European "races." In 1898, Terence Powderly cowrote a report of the Immigration Service that would henceforth change the way immigrants to the United States were classified. Up until this time, immigrants were recorded based on their "nationality." In an era of empires, this was an imprecise form of classification. Therefore, Powderly and his colleagues drew up a list of "races." Among the categories: "Hebrew," "North Italian," and "South Italian." The reasoning for this classification, as Powderly explained, was that "an Englishman does not lose his race characteristics by coming from South Africa, a German his by coming form France, or a Hebrew his, though he come from any country on the globe." He was using race, Powderly continued, in the "popular rather than in its strict ethnological sense."

What we have is not an either/or situation, but a both/and one. Irrational prejudice against foreigners mingled with real concerns about economics and culture. That is as true today as it was 125 years ago. Americans have always had a complex reaction to immigration—stemming greatly from the fact that so many Americans are descended from immigrants themselves. This essay provides a useful counterbalance to standard academic narratives of immigration by putting the actual politics back into our discussion. We see Henry Cabot Lodge not simply as an Anglo-Saxon chauvinist, but rather as a clever and calculating political figure trying to craft a Republican Party platform that would appeal to working-class voters.

This is the kind of scholarship that, in his later essays, Higham had hoped to create. But it is also important to remember that Higham never actually repudiated *Strangers in the Land*; he just modified it. The dark forces he

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described were not simply imaginary. It is therefore up to future historians to blend together the two Highams: the one who concentrated on the inflammatory examples of nativism in *Strangers in the Land* with the one who later placed a number of qualifications on that analysis. In that way, we can truly understand the complexities of how Americans have dealt with immigrants throughout their history.

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