PROGRAM 1: *THE CENTURY OF IMMIGRATION: 1820-1924*

Introductory Essay
*Hasia Diner, Professor of American Jewish History, New York University*

Parts of New York City in the late 19th and early 20th centuries were a boiling cauldron of new immigrants from Eastern and Southern Europe and the ethnic communities they built there: The Lower East Side, Little Germany, Little Italy, Hell’s Kitchen. Through literature, film, books, television, and public celebrations, the American popular imagination has focused on this New York City story as representative of the larger story of American immigration. It was a time when massive steam ships, operated by globally powerful companies, helped bring over 27 million Europeans to the United States, with New York City as a major port of entry and epicenter for an unprecedented influx of immigrants.

The history and drama of immigration to the United States, of course, extends further back in time than the 1880s and covers more of the United States than New York City. Most of the millions of immigrants from this century of mass migration – even if they landed at Ellis Island, which opened in 1892 – moved on to the Midwest to big and small industrial cities and mining regions. Yet immigration to New York City during this period forms a major part of America’s immigration story and provides an opportunity to both examine this extraordinary time, and also to explore our own notions of what it means to be an immigrant, and to place that understanding within the wider history of immigration.

America’s economic growth in the 19th century was fueled in large part by immigration from Europe, primarily from the British Isles and various German speaking regions of Central Europe. By the beginning of the period known as the “Century of Immigration” (1820 – 1924), voluntary migration transformed immigration into a major and defining aspect of American life. The opening of the Erie Canal in 1825 made it possible to tap the vast resources of the Middle West and beyond. Improvements in sail travel and such innovations as the laying of the transatlantic telegraph cable and the invention and development of steam transportation all enabled more and more immigrants to come to the United States to fill the constant need for labor, spurred by the territorial expansion of the nation and the handsome profits to be derived for businesses from the lumber, minerals, and agricultural bounty of the continent. Immigrants came to the United States from regions undergoing economic modernization, as they experienced soaring birth rates and new farming and manufacturing processes which made their labor at home redundant.

In the period from the 1820s through the 1860s most of the immigrants to the U.S. came from northern and central Europe, including: Ireland, both before, during, and after the Great Famine of the 1840s; German-speakers from the states that in 1871 would become Germany; Czech-speakers from the Austro-Hungarian Empire; and from Scandinavia. But by the 1860s the source of the migration shifted gradually eastward and southward. Increasingly by the 1880s, masses of immigrants came from southern Italy, the eastern parts of the Austro-Hungarian Empire (the area that would become Poland), and the Czarist Empire. They also came from parts of the Ottoman Empire, Greeks among them.
This new flood of immigrants came for a multitude of reasons. Local upheavals, wars, regime changes, and the rise of nationalism all played a part. But mostly, the same forces of social and economic change at work in the earlier part of the nineteenth century snowballed: the penetration of the railroad into the hinterlands, an increasing birth rate, the consolidation of agriculture and the decline of home manufacturing in the face of rising industrialization, all upended conventional ways of making a living for millions of Europeans. Essentially, too many people had to compete for increasingly limited work or land.

In this later migration, immigrants tended to be mostly Catholic and Jewish, differing as such from the earlier immigrants among whom (except for Irish Catholics) Protestants had predominated. Notably these immigrants were white and, as such, capable of naturalization and acquisition of citizenship as mandated by the 1790 Naturalization Act which limited this privilege to free white men.

At the beginning of the 19th century, no American state – and certainly not the federal government – had enacted laws to regulate or restrict immigration. If you could get to the U.S., you became an American. Over the course of the 19th century, however, states like New York and Massachusetts began to impose some kind of immigration control, as they worried that too many indigent women and men would swamp port cities like New York and Boston. By the 1870s the federal government took over supervision of the process. From the 1880s on, including the 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act and culminating in 1924 in the National Origins Act, restrictions began to creep in, complicating what had been a simple, non-bureaucratically regulated matter of migrating to America.

Throughout this period, Americans were divided over the benefits and liabilities of immigration. While they recognized the need for immigrant labor, many lamented the particular immigrants arriving. Whether Irish, Italian, Jewish, Polish, Greek, German, or other ethnicities, some Americans found fault with them. Until the end of the nineteenth century, however, American public opinion held that immigrants could improve themselves through education, exposure to American standards of behavior, and even conversion to Protestantism. By the end of the century though, increasing numbers of Americans came to think that the “new immigrants,” a phrase used at the time, took jobs away from Americans, committed criminal acts, drank too much, refused to learn English and had no interest in becoming American. Scientific opinion of the time, influenced by social Darwinism, emphasized race and asserted that various immigrant populations were innately criminal, violent, stupid, or unable to assimilate into American culture.

This century of immigration radically transformed American society, adding 40 million immigrants to the population. Immigrants made possible the development of the American economy, providing the muscle power for the industrial, transportation, and agricultural revolutions which changed the United States into the most dynamic economy in the world. Immigrants felled the trees, dug the mines, laid the railroad tracks, and churned out the factory goods which powered American productivity. They provided much of the agricultural labor as well, and their muscle-power reshaped urban and rural life across the country, in every region. Without immigrants there would have been no railroad system, no coal mining, no steel and auto-making industries. Immigrants excavated American cities to build subways
and erect skyscrapers and loaded and unloaded the cargo ships which took American-made goods to customers around the world. Beyond their labor, immigrants not only diversified the nation’s religious profile and forced America to live up to its First Amendment principles of separation of church and state, but they made being of foreign birth and foreign parentage the norm, particularly in American cities. The immigrants, each group in their own way, challenged the conventional understanding of America as the domain of a Protestant, English-stock founding class, setting the stage for the complicated process of defining citizenship in the 19th century that contributed to the eruption of the Civil War.

Some Americans fretted over the continuous immigration and sought to limit the influx of foreigners, particularly from the 1890s on. Nativists — opponents of immigration — began to distinguish between “old immigrants” who had come in the first part of the nineteenth century and “new immigrants,” the far greater number who arrived in the latter part of the century and the early twentieth. “Old immigrants,” nativists claimed, had come in search of freedom and tended to disperse into the countryside, going into farming and blending easily into American life. “New immigrants,” their critics declaimed, came for “base” economic reasons, clung to their back-home cultures, settled in cities, and had not, nor would ever, assimilate and become English-speaking loyal Americans. These claims belied any historic reality, since newer immigrants came for the same reasons as older ones, and the older ones had been just as alien and despised as the more recent. The call for restriction instead revealed the fear and prejudices of many Americans.

Despite these sentiments, the immigrants, by their actions and those of their descendants, proved that America derived strength from its diversity. The immigrants and their children, rather than harming American society as nativists feared, demonstrated a cultural flexibility, as over time they both embraced their new nation and its symbols and also remained committed to the traditions from which they had come. Their sons served in the American military when called upon, with World War I a particularly powerful example. Their daughters became teachers, nurses, social workers and librarians, offering services to all Americans. They learned English, entered American politics and served on the local, state and national levels. They helped create an American vernacular culture, producing music, art, literature, theater and movies, which both reflected their own immigrant experiences and highlighted American themes. Their foods became American foods and even if Americans did not realize the origins, every time they bit into a hotdog — originally a frankfurter named for the city of Frankfurt — or a slice of pizza, an egg roll or a bagel, they reaped the benefits of immigration.

The economic system of the time left new settlers exposed to exploitation by unscrupulous landlords and employers, and weak labor unions, which had no support from the government, did relatively little to aid them. Immigrants also had to go through the process of building communities in the United States, including creating their own religious, fraternal, political, and cultural institutions in order to meet their needs. They had to figure out how to navigate the economic system and provide cushions for themselves against hard times.

The communities immigrants created, regardless of where they had come from and independent of where they settled in America, resembled the villages, towns, and regions they
had left and yet also represented innovation based on American realities. Sometimes these places were called “Little Italy,” or “Pole Town” or “Little Sweden,” or “the Hebrew Quarter.” Wherever immigrants settled they clustered with others who came from the same places they had, who spoke the same language and subscribed to the same customs. Nearly all immigrant parents faced a cultural chasm between their experience and that of their American-born and raised children who functioned in a more diverse and complex society. Events like World Wars I and II and their mass conscription of young men, meant that the sons of immigrants who may have grown up in relatively insular ethnic communities found themselves thrown together with others of different backgrounds. Similarly, American popular culture, particularly the movies and radio, brought the larger society into the lives of the immigrants, further complicating their family and community coherence.

The Century of Immigration in many ways resembles immigration of the late twentieth century and the early twenty-first of today, and not simply in terms of numbers and proportion. As in the past, immigrants today represent a selective group from among their cohorts back home. Regardless of where they originate, they come to America eager to work. Their children, like those who immigrated a century earlier, learn English, master the intricacies of the culture, and articulate complicated identities as Americans from somewhere else, which they do not see as conflicting with each other. What separates this new wave of immigration from the massive one which came before, however, is that today’s immigrants must navigate a complicated system of immigration law which those who arrived earlier did not. They also confront a public conflicted about the influx of millions without documentation and legal right to be in the United States. But perhaps more importantly, they arrive more skilled and educated than the immigrants of the previous century, and they function in a world of high-speed transportation and communication technology which has revolutionized the lives of all Americans.

Film 1: *New York, A Documentary Film: Episode 4, The Power and the People*

Co-Produced and Directed by Ric Burns, 1999
NEH Sponsored
Emmy Award Winner, Outstanding Non-Fiction Programming
Alfred I. DuPont-Columbia Journalism Award, Silver Baton
Emmy Nomination, Editing Outstanding Nonfiction Series
Emmy Nomination, Cinematography Outstanding Nonfiction Programming

Running time for excerpt: 36 mins

Description:
Episode Four of this series, acclaimed by the New York Daily News as “a masterpiece,” studies the great wave of immigration that began in the late 19th century, tripled New York’s population and transformed the city and the nation demographically, culturally and politically.
Historians Kenneth Jackson, David McCullough and others, as well as well-known writers and cultural critics, describe and comment on the unprecedented tide of humanity that washed into America through the entrance port of New York City between 1880 and 1920. No longer primarily Northern Europeans, now Italians, Poles, Jews, Greeks, Armenians, Hungarians, Turks, Ukrainians and others streamed in in such numbers that, by 1920, there were more Italians in New York City than in Naples, more Irish than in Dublin, and more Greeks than in Athens.

The film movingly explores the immigrants’ first glimpse of America on arriving in New York Harbor, the harrowing experience of passing through Ellis Island, the growth of immigrant communities and enclaves in places like the Lower East Side, and the immigrants’ role in building the world’s first skyscrapers and in transforming America into an industrial nation.

Technical Notes:
DVD: This DVD was edited for the Becoming American series with special permission from the filmmakers. It can be used only for this Becoming American program.

Start at 00 and play through to the end.

Film 2: The Jewish Americans: Episode 2, A World of Their Own

Written, produced and directed by David Grubin, 2008
NEH sponsored
Writers’ Guild of America Nominee, Best Documentary
CINE Golden Eagle
Columbus International Film Festival Christopher Award

Running time for excerpt: 23.5 minutes

Description:
This segment from the multi-award winning series explores in greater depth the story of one of the groups that made up the great wave of immigration described in Program One. Over two millions Jews flooded into America in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, fleeing poverty and oppression in Eastern Europe. Drawn by the promise of religious freedom and economic opportunity, they migrated across the United States., but the majority gravitated to Manhattan’s poverty-stricken Lower East Side.

Struggling to adapt their traditions to their new life, they were aided by existing Jewish settlers and by new ethnic institutions such as the Yiddish newspaper, The Forward, which devoted columns to teaching the newcomers, in often unintentionally humorous ways, American mores and ways of behaving.
Many Jewish immigrants got jobs in the garment industry, the largest and one of the most important industries in New York at the time, and one with abysmal working conditions. Women, men and children did piece work in poorly lit tenement rooms, or labored long hours in crowded factory sweatshops. Conditions led them to the nascent labor movement and they spearheaded the drive to form unions, along with Italian and other immigrant workers. This trend gained momentum in the aftermath of the Triangle Shirt Waist Factory tragedy in 1911, when a fire broke out on the high floor of a lower Manhattan sweat shop. The workers were locked in, the fire escapes buckled in the flames, and 136 young immigrant girls, mostly Jewish and Italian, perished, many jumping to their deaths under the eyes of horrified onlookers.

Technical Notes:
DVD: Open Disc One. Go to Main Menu. Hit SCENE SELECTION. Click on A WORLD OF THEIR OWN. Run from the Opening (b&w photo of old man with a long white beard) to 1:23:50 (Triangle Shirt Waist fire).

Suggested Readings
Mary Antin, The Promised Land

Thomas Bell, Out of This Furnace: A Novel of Immigrant Labor in America

Vincent Cannato, American Passage: The History of Ellis Island

Hasia Diner, Lower East Side Memories: A Jewish Place in America


Erika Lee, Angel Island: Immigrant Gateway to America

Online Resources
Boisi Center, Boston College. This academic paper discusses the history of religious pluralism in the US: https://www.bc.edu/content/dam/files/centers/boisi/pdf/bc_papers/BCP-Pluralism.pdf

Harvard University Library Open Collections Program. This page contains a timeline of important events in the history of immigration to the US from the 1780s to 1930: http://ocp.hul.harvard.edu/immigration/timeline.html

Liberty and Ellis Island Foundation. This page contains a timeline by decade of important events in the history of immigration to the US: https://www.libertyellisfoundation.org/immigration-timeline;
Library of Congress. This page details some aspects of nineteenth century Irish immigration to the US: https://www.loc.gov/teachers/classroommaterials/presentationsandactivities/presentations/immigration/irish2.html

Migration Policy Institute. This page contains a number of resources that detail demographic trends in America immigration history: https://www.migrationpolicy.org/programs/data-hub/us-immigration-trends#history; This page contains graphics and data on immigration to the US from the mid nineteenth century to the present day: https://www.migrationpolicy.org/programs/data-hub/charts/immigrant-population-over-time?width=1000&height=850&iframe=true; This page contains a link to a timeline of important laws regulating immigration in American history from the 1790s to the present day: https://www.migrationpolicy.org/research/timeline-1790

National Park Service. This timeline contains both important immigration laws but also specific important events in immigration to the West Coast: https://www.nps.gov/subjects/pacificcoastimmigration/timeline.htm

The Newberry Library. This entry includes a history of American immigration up to 1924 and a number of relevant historical documents: http://dcc.newberry.org/collections/immigration-and-citizenship

Pew Research Center. This article details offers statistics on trends in the foreign-born population in US history: http://www.pewhispanic.org/2015/09/28/chapter-5-u-s-foreign-born-population-trends/; This page includes additional data on immigration statistics to the US; http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2017/05/03/key-findings-about-u-s-immigrants/; This page outlines the changes in US immigration rules into the present day: http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2015/09/30/how-u-s-immigration-laws-and-rules-have-changed-through-history/.

Population Reference Center. This article provides some key statistics and general information on the historical trends of migration to the US: http://www.prb.org/Publications/Articles/2014/us-migration-trends.aspx


Humanities Themes

The economic role of immigration. For many immigrants to America, economics played an important role in the decision to migrate. The lack of economic opportunity in their
homelands was often a push factor while economic opportunities in a rapidly industrializing America, as well as the chance for upward social mobility, were often major attractors. Once in America, immigrants played an important role in the development of America’s industrial economy, although their entry into the American economy was often at the lowest levels, regardless of experience.

**Immigration and freedom.** The issue of immigration is intensely tied to notions of personal, political, and religious freedoms, as immigrants believed that America would allow them and their children greater personal autonomy than had their birthplaces. American ideals of democracy, liberty, justice, and equality are themes that run through the national dialogue around immigration at this time.

**Urbanization.** Many immigrants who arrived during this period settled in American cities, setting up ethnic enclaves. These communities played a vibrant role in the political, social, and economic development of the 20th century city. It was during this period that America went from being a largely rural nation to an urban one. Immigrants played a large role in that transformation: building the cities’ infrastructures, creating small businesses and taking on jobs in city politics and civic society, as well as making significant contributions to the language, art, and cuisine of a new urban culture.

**Reactions of native-born Americans.** There has long been a tension in Americans’ view of immigration. On the one hand, Americans see themselves as a nation of immigrants welcoming the world’s “poor huddled masses.” Yet this has alternated with a concern that immigrants are too different from us and will not be able to assimilate into American society. Running throughout American history is also the push-pull between welcoming new settlers’ willingness to work for low pay, alternating with the concern that immigrant workers will take jobs from native-born Americans or lower overall wages.