



IDEAS

America Never Wanted the Tired, Poor, Huddled Masses

The U.S. is a diverse nation of immigrants—but it was not intended to be, and its historical biases continue to haunt the present.

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WHEN DAVID DORADO ROMO was a boy growing up in El Paso, Texas, his great-aunt Adela told him about the day the U.S. Border Patrol melted her favorite shoes. Romo's aunt was Mexican and had a visa that allowed her to commute into South Texas for her job as a maid. Every week she had to report to a Border Patrol station, in accordance with a program that ran from 1917 into the 1930s requiring most Mexican immigrants to bathe in government offices before entering the United States. She would dress up in her nicest clothing, because those who looked dirty or were thought to have lice were bathed in a mixture of kerosene and vinegar. Years later, when Romo visited the National Archives outside Washington, D.C., he found photos and records of gas chambers where the belongings of the Mexican workers had been disinfected with the chemical Zyklon B,

as well as a large steam dryer of the sort that had melted his aunt's shoes. He discovered that a German scientist had taken note of the procedures being carried out at the American border and advocated for them to be implemented in Nazi concentration camps. Eventually, the Nazis increased the potency of Zyklon B in their gas chambers, and began using it on human beings.

Romo also learned that just as the bathing and gas-dousing program was winding down, the American government began using a different dangerous chemical to delouse Mexican immigrants: From the 1930s through the 1960s, border agents sprayed DDT onto the faces of more than 3 million guest workers as they crossed the southern border.

Romo was shocked that he hadn't learned this earlier. He became a historian dedicated to exposing truths that have been buried along the borders. "We have deep amnesia in this country," he told me when I spoke with him recently. "There's a psychological process involved in forgetting that is shame from both sides—from both the perpetrator and the victim."

This forgetting has allowed the racism woven into America's immigration policies to stay submerged beneath the more idealistic vision of the country as "a nation of immigrants." That vision has a basis in truth: We are a multiethnic, multiracial nation where millions of people have found safety, economic opportunity, and freedoms they may not have otherwise had. Yet racial stereotypes, rooted in eugenics, that portray people with dark skin and foreign passports as being inclined toward crime, poverty, and disease have been part of our immigration policies for so long that we mostly fail to see them. "It's in our DNA," Romo says. "It's ingrained in the culture and in the laws that are produced by that culture."

The first American immigration laws were written in order to keep the country white, a goal that was explicit in their text for more than 150 years. (Over time, the understanding of "whiteness" changed and expanded. Well into the 20th century, only those of Northern and Western European descent were considered white; Italians and Jews, for instance, were not.) Even after the laws were finally changed, allowing large numbers of immigrants from Latin America, Asia, and Africa into the country

starting in the 1960s, the eugenic ideas that supported earlier versions of them remained embedded in our society, and still provide the basis of many modern restrictions.

“This idea that somehow immigration was based on the principles stated on the Statue of Liberty? That never happened.”

President Joe Biden’s immigration plan would make citizenship available to millions of unauthorized immigrants. Democratic members of Congress rallying behind it have said it would establish a more inherently American system, arguing implicitly that the Trump administration’s often overtly stated preference for white immigrants, or no immigrants at all, was an aberration from the past. “To fix our broken immigration system, we must pass reforms that reflect America’s values,” Senator Amy Klobuchar of Minnesota, a co-sponsor of the proposed legislation, said in a statement introducing the bill. “For too long, our immigration system has failed to live up to the ideals and principles our nation was founded on,” said Senator Alex Padilla of California, another co-sponsor. But Donald Trump’s immigration agenda was executed without a single change to laws already passed by Congress, and his rhetoric and policies were consistent with most of American history. “The Trump era magnified the problem, but the template was there,” Rose Cuison-Villazor, a scholar of immigration law at Rutgers University, told me.

[Caitlin Dickerson: America’s immigration amnesia](#)

As the country moves forward from the past four years of harsh immigration policies, it must reckon with a history that stretches back much further, and that conflicts with

one of the most frequently repeated American myths.

“This idea that somehow immigration was based on the principles stated on the Statue of Liberty? That never happened,” Romo said. “There has never been a color-blind immigration system. It’s always been about exclusion.”

MOST AMERICAN CHILDREN are taught in school that the United States’ immigration policies help make the country special and, yes, great. A haven for outcasts who faced persecution in their home countries, the nation was founded, the story goes, on the principle of welcoming others who were treated similarly in their own homelands, with the idea that granting them individual rights and freedoms would allow distinct cultures and traditions to thrive together. This tale resonated in my own Central California school district, where I sat alongside classmates whose parents had come from Mexico, India, Laos, Vietnam.

But the cracks in that story began to show as soon as we hit the schoolyard, where kids of different backgrounds played together, but also hurled insults that stung because they had the weight of centuries of American law and rhetoric behind them.

RECOMMENDED READING

How the Democrats Lost Their Way on Immigration

PETER BEINART

Can We Still Afford to Be a Nation of Immigrants?

DAVID M. KENNEDY

The Psychological Benefits of Commuting to Work

JERRY USEEM

When the Pilgrims crossed the ocean to settle in the New World, they brought with them ideas that would evolve into “manifest destiny,” which held that the United States was a land that had been bestowed by God on Anglo-Saxon white people. In 1790, the first American Congress made citizenship available only to any “free white person” who had been in the country for at least two years. In 1882, the Chinese Exclusion Act blocked Chinese immigrants—and in 1917, it was expanded to block most Asians living between Afghanistan and the Pacific. These laws were upheld numerous times by federal courts, including in a seminal Supreme Court case from 1922, in which the government prevailed by arguing that citizenship should be granted as the Founders intended: “only to those whom they knew and regarded as worthy to share it with them, men of their own type, white men.”

In the early 20th century, the term *progressive* became synonymous with preserving or improving the racial “stock” of the country—and that meant keeping it white. Harry Laughlin, whose work would provide a model for Nazi Germany’s sterilization laws, served as the House Committee on Immigration and Naturalization’s “expert eugenics agent.” In 1922, he presented evidence of the “hereditary feeble-mindedness” of nonwhite immigrants. Laughlin categorized the subjects of his research into overlapping subgroups that included “the criminalistic,” “the diseased,” and “the dependent.” Two years later, Congress passed the “progressive” Johnson-Reed Act, which established immigration quotas based on national origin. Adolf Hitler hailed the law as a model to emulate. “Compared to old Europe, which had lost an infinite amount of its best blood through war and emigration, the American nation appears as a young, racially select people,” he wrote.

Beginning during World War II, geopolitical and economic interests became important factors in the development of new immigration laws, but protecting the nation’s whiteness remained a priority.

The historic Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965 did away with the quotas based on national origin and instead allowed citizens of the United States to petition for

family members to join them. But the overtly race-blind language in the new system belied its intent. For his book *Dividing Lines*, Daniel Tichenor, a scholar at the University of Oregon, scrutinized the Congressional Record and found that legislators designed the system the way they did because they believed that people of European origin, who made up the majority of the population at the time, would also make up the majority of those petitioning to bring in new immigrants. In the 1980s, the so-called diversity-visa program was created to help the thousands of Irish immigrants who were coming into the country illegally each year enter instead as legal residents.

However, since 1965 the flow of immigrants from Latin America, Asia, and Africa has, as ever, outpaced expectations—to the point where America is on track to become a majority-minority nation sometime in the next few decades. Various attempts have been made to acknowledge the enduring presence of immigrants of color by granting them legal status: In 1986, President Ronald Reagan ushered in an amnesty policy that allowed nearly 3 million undocumented immigrants, most of them Mexican, to become citizens. And in 1990, President George H. W. Bush amplified the demographic effects of the 1965 law by increasing the visa caps it had established. But by the time these efforts were made, racial tropes that had once painted Irish, Italians, and Chinese as unassimilable and prone to crime, poverty, and disease were already embedded in the nation’s culture, as well as in its laws.

From the June 1896 issue: Restriction of immigration for “vast throngs of ignorant and brutalized peasantry”

AS A REPORTER covering these issues for the past several years, I have seen how discrimination against immigrants of color has been meted out not just in the ways the laws are written but in the ways they are enforced, sometimes as a consequence of policies not explicitly tied to race. For example, Immigration and Customs Enforcement agents, under pressure to carry out more deportations, have at times prioritized Mexicans over other groups of unauthorized immigrants, in part because Mexico doesn’t generally require American authorities to obtain travel documents for deportees before they can be returned. Mexicans are “easy to find, easy

to remove,” Jim Rielly, a retired officer from the agency’s Chicago field office, told me. Rielly and several of his colleagues told me that the direction they would get from their superiors was “No OTMs”—the ICE acronym for “other than Mexicans.” They told me they knew of Chicago workplaces where ICE could have easily picked up large numbers of undocumented Irish or Polish immigrants, but none of them could recall that ever happening.

Previous iterations of racialized enforcement practices were more explicit, putting the power of government behind stereotypes. At various points, immigrant groups were associated with specific illnesses, resulting in enhanced screenings by American authorities that were degrading and unnecessary. “Even germs were ethnicized,” David Dorado Romo told me. “Middle Easterners were said to have this terribly frightening disease that was trachoma, which made you blind. The Jews were seen as people that carried tuberculosis; the Chinese had cholera.”

Well into the mid-20th century, while Mexicans were being bathed in kerosene, sprayed with DDT, and subjected to Jim Crow laws in the American South, Northern and Western European immigrants were being given periodic opportunities to legalize their immigration status. One such program, called pre-examination, allowed tens of thousands of Europeans to gain residency. Their descendants could then claim that their families had entered the United States the “right way,” as a means to argue for the exclusion of others who could not make the same case.

Mexicans were ultimately not eligible for these programs. Instead, their communities were policed with increasing ferocity. Mae Ngai, a historian at Columbia University, notes that in the 1920s, the earliest Border Patrol agents were instructed to act with civility toward white immigrants only. Within a decade or so of the agency’s establishment, its officers were apprehending nearly five times more people along the Mexican border than along the Canadian border. By the 1980s, when Mexicans made up just over half of the undocumented population, they accounted for nine out of 10 immigration arrests.

Over the past century, the United States has deported more immigrants than it has allowed in. Since 1882, it has deported more than 57 million people.

This overpolicing of Latinos and other nonwhite immigrants by federal authorities continues to the present day as a result of policies implemented by prior administrations—both Republican and Democratic. Collaboration between police and immigration authorities, which began under Bill Clinton and was expanded under Barack Obama, compounded the racial biases of each. Sheriffs began to campaign on platforms arguing that keeping communities safe meant ridding them of immigrants. The supposed relationship between immigrant and crime has become implanted in the national psyche, even though evidence consistently shows that U.S. residents born outside the country commit fewer crimes than the native-born.

Several of Jim Rielly's colleagues told me that Latinos were more likely to be questioned and arrested for being in the wrong place at the wrong time, such as during a workplace raid or street enforcement operation, whereas European immigrants were typically picked up only if they came onto the agency's radar because of a serious criminal conviction. One former officer, Lorenzo Rivera, who was born in Mexico and worked in immigration for 30 years starting in 1986, told me he would often be asked to join in ICE's workplace raids to help identify who was undocumented and who was not; he could distinguish among different groups of Latinos in ways that his white colleagues could not. He chafed, sometimes publicly, at what he called the "unwritten rule" that Mexicans should be singled out while European immigrants were effectively ignored. "I used to tell my supervisor, 'You know, you're basically profiling here.' And he goes, 'These are orders from Washington.'" Rivera suspected that the disparities he witnessed at work were due to more than just a difference in policy: "Most of the special agents were of European descent, and of course to them, going after one of their own—it was unheard of."

THE USE OF the phrase *a nation of immigrants* to describe America first appeared in the late 1890s, in the Congressional Record, according to Donna Gabaccia, a scholar at the University of Toronto. It was used only sparingly until the 1950s, when it was popularized during the movement to broaden the label of *white* to include a more diverse group of Europeans. Mae Ngai notes that in 1958 John F. Kennedy, himself the descendant of Irish immigrants, published a book called *A Nation of Immigrants* that included only two paragraphs on Asian and Latino immigration.

To call America a nation of immigrants is not wrong, either as a factual statement or an evocation of American myth. But that fact coexists with this one: Over the past century, the United States has deported more immigrants than it has allowed in. Since 1882, it has deported more than 57 million people, most of them Latino, according to Adam Goodman, a historian at the University of Illinois at Chicago. No other country has carried out this many deportations. This “challenges that simplistic notion of a long tradition where the United States has welcomed immigrants,” Goodman told me.

Moreover, though the United States accepts more immigrants each year than any other country, the percentage of its population that is foreign-born is lower than in countries like Norway, Gabon, Sweden, Switzerland, and the United Arab Emirates—none of which considers itself “a nation of immigrants.”

There are legitimate debates to be had about how to balance economic, geopolitical, and humanitarian concerns in formulating immigration policy. But too often, such concerns have been invoked as euphemisms to disguise arguments that are really about race.

One of the most insidious consequences of stereotypes about immigrants is that they have been used to justify punishments that outweigh their transgressions. Undesirable immigrants were a “double debit” against society, Harry Laughlin, the eugenicist, told Congress in 1922. “Not only do the inadequates not pull their own weight in the boat but they require, for their care, the services of normal and socially valuable persons who could well be employed in more constructive work.” In the 1920s the

label LPC—“liable to become a public charge”—was “shaken on deportation cases as though with a large pepper shaker,” a political scientist wrote at the time, in order to rationalize deporting people who had committed only minor criminal offenses or perceived moral transgressions, such as having a baby out of wedlock. For years before President Trump came along, tens of thousands of people without criminal records were being deported every year—many of them leaving behind children who were U.S. citizens—after they were caught living in the country without legal status, which is a civil infraction. During Trump’s term, more than 5,000 children were taken from their parents, many of whom had committed only the misdemeanor offense of crossing the border without documentation a single time.

In describing its own immigration plan as a racial-equity initiative, the Biden administration is nodding at a more complex view of our history. But opposition to the proposal, predictably, has echoed the past. Senator Tom Cotton of Arkansas called it “a disaster” that “does nothing to secure our borders, yet grants mass amnesty, welfare benefits ... to over 11 million people.” On Fox News, Laura Ingraham said that Democrats pushing for the plan were “enticing illegals to bust through our borders, exploit our resources, and commit crimes.”

Once you begin to notice examples of how the past is still present, they become difficult to ignore. Trump enacted the most stringent border closure of his administration by citing the threat of disease, even though COVID-19 outbreaks were far worse inside the United States than just outside its borders (in fact, Americans were actively deporting the virus abroad). His persistent blaming of the Chinese for outbreaks in the U.S. helped incite violence against Asian Americans that continues today, mirroring similar attacks from centuries past.

In moving toward the more inclusive system that some elected officials now say they want, the country would be not returning to traditional American values, but establishing new ones.