



Forum: Future Directions in American Immigration and Ethnic History: Introduction

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## Introduction

JOHN J. BUKOWCZYK

SCHOLARLY INTEREST in the history of immigration, race, and ethnicity has never been higher than at present, and these subjects also have come to occupy a central place in both policy discourse and popular culture. Significantly, the field of American and ethnic history has expanded far beyond the dualistic assimilation/ethnicity paradigm to encompass a dizzying range of subjects and topics, including forced migrations, the relationship of colonialism and imperialism to migration, diasporas and transnationalism, the structural determinants of the migration and incorporation of immigrants, the development of migration systems, the social construction of race and nation, multiculturalism, and a host of other problems and topics. Arguably, the immigration and ethnic history field, as it has evolved, now ranks among the most overarching and encompassing of the various fields of historical inquiry. Indeed, it may provide a route toward the kind of historical synthesis widely bemoaned by scholars as lacking since the rise of the various revisionist scholarly sub-fields—like the “new social history,” radical history, women’s history, gay and lesbian history, ethnohistory, Latino/a Studies, Asian American Studies, cultural studies, Black history, and immigration and ethnic history itself—shattered the hegemonic master narrative that had dominated the historical discipline through the 1950s.

Essay collections and historical journals, like the *Journal of American Ethnic History*, have abounded in articles and essays reviewing the historiographical development of the field.<sup>1</sup> As part of the commemoration of this journal’s twenty-fifth anniversary, it is fitting not only to examine where we—as a publication, a professional organization, and a scholarly field—have been and how we have arrived at the intellectual place we now occupy, but also and especially to consider the future of the field. From

that impulse, this forum on “Future Directions in American Immigration and Ethnic History” took shape.

In assembling this forum, the intent was, first, to recruit essays representing a broad though by no means fully comprehensive range of approaches and perspectives and, second, to offer the authors wide latitude in how they would address the topic at hand. The former instruction arises from the commitment of this journal (and this editor) to interdisciplinary, inclusive, historiographically contextualized, and theoretically informed and problematized scholarship. The latter instruction bows to practicality: trying closely to direct the contents of the various contributors’ essays likely would have been like herding cats. Indeed, senior scholars, as the contributors to this forum, tend to write what they want to write, as well it should be, and the title of the “forum” intentionally has been left a bit vague, both to encourage participants to respond in ways that would express their own interests and excite their own imagination, as well, better to accommodate in the framework of a single “forum” what they actually would deliver.

The result, which follows, features a few essays that are, in the main, historiographical and subject-specific, some that reflect the continuing fissures in how we understand—and the conflicts in how we “do”—immigration and ethnic history, and some that are boldly prospective and prescriptive. Rather than summarizing their contents, this brief introduction will let the essays and their authors speak for themselves. Taken together, the following nine contributions can be read as part of an ongoing dialogue among the proponents of different intellectual approaches and political positions whose advice and conclusions sometimes conflict but frequently overlap in some profound (if not always immediately apparent) ways. Rather than the sightless men of the Indian proverb, alternately describing the elephant as like a wall, a spear, a snake, a tree, a fan, or a rope, more often than not scholars—and certainly those whose essays appear below—see the same elephant and even largely agree upon its gray areas.<sup>2</sup> More importantly, they share a fundamental agreement about the value in their scholarly enterprise. Even when implicitly (or explicitly) critical of work that has come before (perhaps including even each other’s), taken together the essays they offer here point outward and can help lead scholarly inquiry and teaching in the American immigration and ethnic history field forward.

At once, this forum is itself also a historical artifact. One might imagine, with an optimism uncharacteristic of the discipline, another such “forum”

at the fiftieth anniversary of this journal. In 2031, one might already have reached a very different “immigration and ethnic history” discipline in a brave new future world of genetic engineering, interstellar migrations, extra-terrestrial contacts, race wars in distant galaxies (or here on Earth, alas), and tomorrow’s historians may look to this forum to see what a generation of scholars at the dawn of the twenty-first century imagined to be the state of present and future practice in this humanistic academic field. Perhaps they shall smile, shrug, or shake their heads. More likely, they shall be impressed.

Despite his manifold flaws, now amply detailed by revisionist scholars, among the many useful observations of Thomas Jefferson was the comment that “the earth belongs to the living.” Each generation of scholars will reinvent practice in the field as it sees fit, and no doubt future forums on “future” directions in the field will see both their past, that is to say, our present, and their future very differently. One might venture a prediction, though, that however changed the world and its people (and peoples), however evolved historical scholarship in its methods and approaches, many of the topics, issues, and themes that have animated recent debate in American immigration and ethnic history will remain as salient in 2030 as they are today. This is not to reject the observation that “history is the study of change,” nor to embrace the shop-worn and deeply flawed observation (a favorite among undergraduates), that “history repeats itself,” but rather to aver that some historical change happens only at glacial pace, and some problems are extraordinarily tough nuts to crack.

This forum therefore helps to commemorate the anniversary of this journal and inadvertently but unavoidably also serves as an artifact of a particular moment in the evolution of this scholarly field. But forum and special issue both are embedded in and contribute to a broader train of events that have remade both society and scholarship in the past generation. In fact, if they “commemorate” anything, they commemorate the events—and, yes, accomplishments and successes—of a political, social, cultural, and intellectual era. Roughly forty years ago, the landmark Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the no less landmark Immigration and Nationality Act amendments of 1965 were passed. In the latter year, the precursors of the Immigration and Ethnic History Society and the University of Minnesota’s Immigration History Research Center (IHRC) both were organized, and Ellis Island was designated part of the Statue of Liberty National Monument. At roughly the same moment, in 1964, Rudolph J. Vecoli published “*Contadini in Chicago: A Critique of The Uprooted*”;<sup>3</sup> several important

popular works appeared, including Dee Brown's *Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee* (1970), Michael Novak's *The Rise of the Unmeltable Ethnics* (1971), and Alex Haley's *Roots* (1976);<sup>4</sup> and in 1981, the first issue of this journal was published.

In the intervening years since this fifteen-year period, America—and American immigration and ethnic history—have changed. The children of the first generation of immigrants admitted to the United States since the abolition, in 1965, of the national origins quota system and the children of the first generation of African Americans in the South newly enfranchised by the Civil Rights Act are now adults reaching the age of forty with children (and even grandchildren) of their own. The professional societies, which once eschewed papers and sessions on immigration and ethnic topics, now feature such work across the length and breadth of their conference and annual meeting programs. The iconoclastic young revisionist scholars, who came of intellectual age in the late 1960s and 1970s, are now respected senior members of their departments, centers, and institutes, in the high prime of their academic careers or even nearing retirement. Meanwhile, a new generation of young scholars is waiting in the wings. Having come of age in a very different United States, many of these young men and women perhaps take for granted the pioneering insights and accomplishments of their intellectual forbears. If they do, they should not.

Among the scholars whose work in recent years or decades has helped to make it so different a place, those who now so generously have given of their time to prepare an essay for this special issue are to be doubly thanked both for their various scholarly, cultural, and political contributions, as well, for their participation here. Meanwhile, as thanks are extended and acknowledgements duly conferred and as one muses on walls, spears, snakes, trees, fans, ropes, and grayness, one would be remiss not to take note, by name, of another elephant, the one in the room.

The work of Oscar Handlin has served as a strawman for many revisionist studies, often deservedly so, nonetheless Handlin's seminal works, among which number *Boston's Immigrants* and *The Uprooted*, more perhaps than the work of any other scholar, served to legitimize the study of immigrants in American society.<sup>5</sup> Itself strongly influenced by Thomas and Znaniecki's pathbreaking *The Polish Peasant in Europe and America* (1917–18),<sup>6</sup> a foundational work in of the "Chicago School" of urban sociology, *The Uprooted*, in particular, popularized the subject of immigration and ethnicity, even while it carried an assimilationist message. In this

sense, *The Uprooted* served as a springboard for the latter-day development of the field of immigration and ethnic history, with its various redefinitions and reincarnations that embraced newer methodologies, theory, subjects, and problems (including African Americans, slavery, race, etc., which Handlin's work either did not fully integrate or omitted entirely). As *Roots* was for a generation of African Americans, swept up in the great social revolution of the 1960s and 1970s that remade race relations in America, *The Uprooted* was for a generation of the children of the immigrants of the great late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century migrations "for bread," for work, and for freedom (whatever that meant to them). Despite their shortcomings of omission or commission, we all, contributors to and readers of the *JAEH* and other journals of its ilk, owe a great intellectual debt of gratitude to the pioneering works of Handlin and other scholars of his generation who helped make us what we are today, as well, what we are not. To our intellectual grandfathers and grandmothers, and to the many-hued women and men they—and we—have studied this forum is dedicated.

## NOTES

1. See, for example, John Higham, "Current Trends in the Study of Ethnicity in the United States," *Journal of American Ethnic History* (hereafter cited as *JAEH*) 2, no. 1 (Fall 1982): 5–15; Thomas Archdeacon, "Problems and Possibilities in the Study of American Immigration and Ethnic History," *International Migration Review* 19 (1985): 112–35; James P. Shenton, *Ethnicity and Immigration*, The New American History Series, ed. Eric Foner (1990; [Washington, DC], n.d.); Ewa Morawska, "The Sociology and Historiography of Immigration," in *Immigration Reconsidered: History, Sociology, and Politics*, ed. Virginia Yans-McLaughlin (New York, 1990), 187–238; Fred Matthews, "Paradigm Changes in Interpretations of Ethnicity, 1930–80: From Process to Structure," in *American Immigrants and Their Generations: Studies and Commentaries on the Hansen Thesis after Fifty Years*, ed. Peter Kivisto and Dag Blanck (Urbana, IL, 1990), 167–88; John Higham, "From Process to Structure: Formulations of American Immigration History," in *American Immigrants and Their Generations*, ed. Kivisto and Blanck, 11–41; John J. Bukowczyk and Nora Faires, "Immigration History in the United States, 1965–1990: A Selective Critical Appraisal," *Canadian Ethnic Studies/Études Ethniques au Canada* 33, no. 2 (1991): 1–23; Kathleen Neils Conzen, "Thomas and Znaniecki and the Historiography of American Immigration," *JAEH* 16, no. 1 (Fall 1996): 16–25; Jon Gjerde, "New Growth on Old Vines: The State of the Field: The Social History of Immigration to and Ethnicity in the United States," *JAEH* 18, no. 4 (Summer 1999): 40–65; George J. Sanchez, "Race, Nation, and Culture in Recent Immigration Studies," *JAEH* 18, no. 4 (Summer 1999): 66–84.

2. "The Blind Men and the Elephant: John Godfrey Saxe's (1816–1887) version of the famous Indian legend," [http://www.noogenesis.com/pineapple/blind\\_men\\_elephant.html](http://www.noogenesis.com/pineapple/blind_men_elephant.html), 19 May 2006.

3. Rudolph J. Vecoli, "Contadini in Chicago: A Critique of *The Uprooted*," *Journal of American History* 51 (December 1964): 404–17.
4. Dee Brown, *Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee: An Indian History of the American West* (New York, 1970); Michael Novak, *The Rise of the Unmeltable Ethnics: Politics and Culture in the Seventies* (New York, 1971); Alex Haley, *Roots* (New York, 1976).
5. Oscar Handlin, *Boston's Immigrants: A Study in Acculturation*, rev. and enlarged ed. (1941; New York 1968); *The Uprooted: The Epic Story of the Great Migrations that Made the American People* (New York, 1951).
6. William I. Thomas and Florian Znaniecki, *The Polish Peasant in Europe and America*, 5 vols. (Chicago, 1918–20).