Jonathan Lam

Prof. Abdelwahed

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Anti-Immigrant Sentiments: Failed Attempts at Remedying the Great Depression Crisis

The prevalence of nativist sentiment dramatically reinforced in the U.S. with the Immigration Act of 1924, which issued quotas on different ethnic groups' entries into the U.S. Its implementation in 1929 coincided with the onset of the Great Depression and introduced a massive stop onto the flow of immigrants; U.S. census data from the 1820 to 2018 show that the number of immigrants gaining resident status per year, a number which had not dropped below 100,000 since the Civil War and peaked to over 1.2 million in the early 20th century, dropped from almost 300,000 in 1929 to 23,000 in 1933 (U.S. Department of Homeland Security, 2016). In effect, we observe a race-targeted movement that favored certain "preferred" immigrant groups and spurned certain others. While the original rationale behind many of these acts was initially based on eugenics (by Americans trying to keep its racial makeup more homogeneous), the nature of the arguments became more economic as the Great Depression progressed (Hoffman, 1974). Despite justification by the U.S. government, most of these anti-immigrant events of the early 1930's, such as the Mexican Repatriation and the quotas of the Immigration Act of 1924, exacerbated the economic crisis of the Great Depression. These acts hurt a historically hardworking population while idolizing other populations without sound economic reason, wrongfully attacked American citizens solely on account of race (especially in the case of the Mexican Repatriation), and led to no improvements in the economy for non-immigrant U.S. citizens and perhaps even exacerbating the financial situation.

While the late 19th century and early 20th century involved several pieces of legislation against immigrants, the Immigration Act of 1924 was perhaps the most extensive. In 1882, the

Chinese Exclusion Act was passed after the immigration of hundreds of thousands of Chinese into the U.S. in the prior few decades (Ngai, 1999). The so-called “Gentlemen's agreement” restricted Japanese immigration to the U.S. in 1907. The Immigration Act of 1917 imposed English literacy tests for immigration, making it difficult for many non-Anglo immigrants (especially Eastern Europeans and Asians) to enter. The Emergency Quota Act was passed in 1921, setting quotas on immigrants based on their percentage of the U.S. population in 1910, aimed to increase ethnic homogeneity amongst Americans, and thus restricting minorities proportionally to their rarity in the U.S. population. This was followed by the Immigration Act of 1924, which lowered the quotas further and prevented any immigration from Asia. As we can see in Figure 1, the largest drops in immigrants occurred around 1930 when the Immigration act of 1924 was put in place.

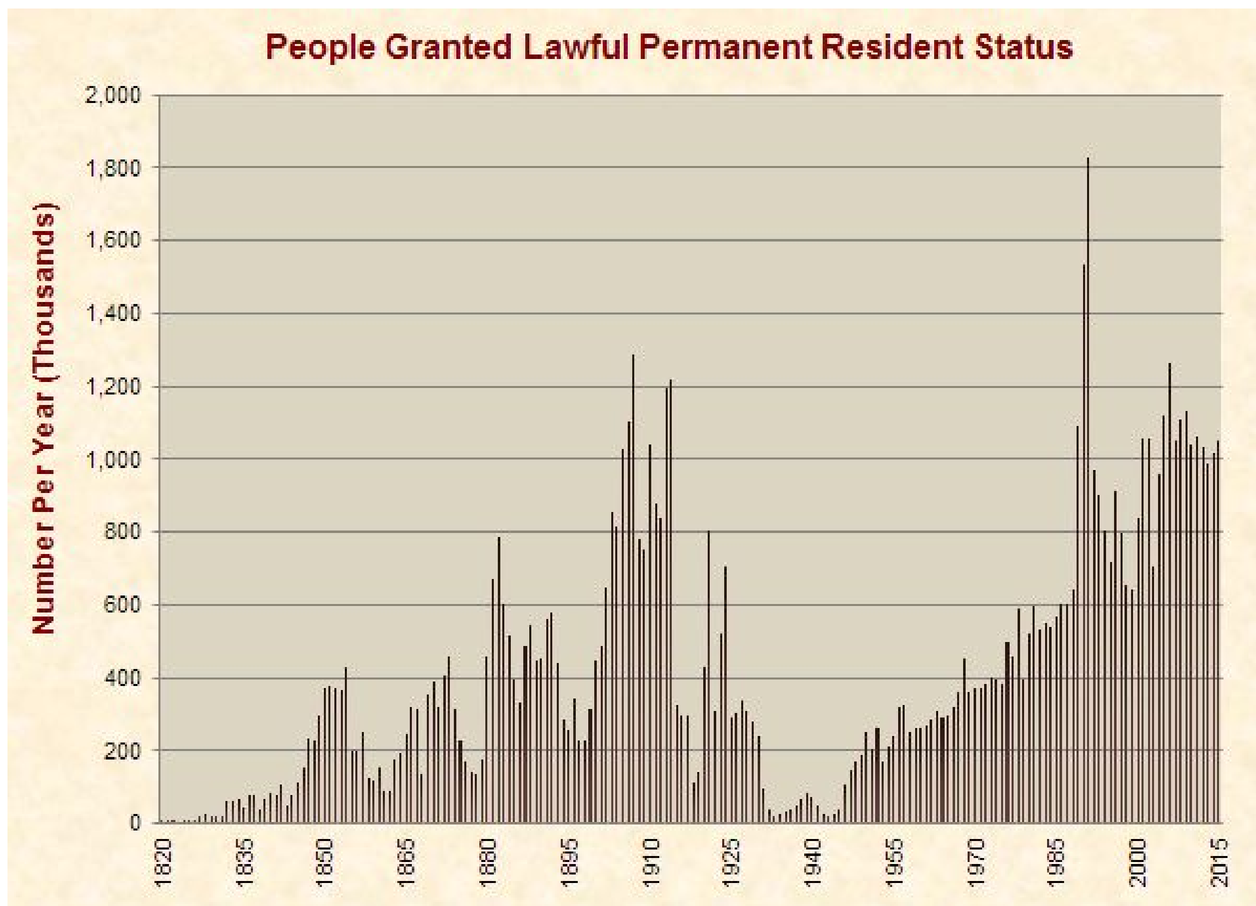

Figure 1. People Granted Lawful Permanent Resident Status, by Year.

Figure published at https://www.justfacts.com/immigration.asp, visualizing data from the "2015 Yearbook of Immigration Statistics," U.S. Department of Homeland Security.

While the Depression may have greatly compounded the drop in immigration, it doesn't discount the fact that this was the greatest change to the trend of immigration in the history of the U.S.. Even if economic factors were a greater contributor than sociopolitical factors, immigration reached all-time lows in the 1930s, at the same time that the Immigration Act of 1924, which limited immigration counts to 20% of their pre-WWI counts, was implemented (Murrin, 2015). As this act was passed before the Depression, the primary argument for limiting immigrant usage was for non-economic reasons: Senator Reed stated that "disregards entirely those of us who are interested in keeping American stock up to the highest standard—that is, the people who were born here" (Stephenson, 1926). In other words, eugenics was the initial main driving force for limiting immigration.

Firstly, we find that quality of life diminished for the average, non-English speaking immigrant. We turn to a study on what Inwood calls "reverse assimilation" for immigrant groups in Canada in the 1930s (Inwood et al., 2014). The term "reverse immigration" indicates that not only are new immigrants discouraged, but even the long-established non-Anglo immigrants were being financially uprooted, causing older immigrants to de-assimilate. Canada is relevant because it passed immigration acts roughly matching those of the U.S., including immigration quotas by national origin; Canada also implemented a better system of tracking citizens' earnings. Using earning reports from 1901-1931, Inwood found that there was a significant gap in earnings between "free" or "preferred" U.S. or British immigrants, and the non-preferred ones (Inwood et al., 2014). Inwood further finds that older immigrants appear to fare even worse than newer ones, as their decreased ability to invest in "language human capital" (i.e., to learn English) greatly impaired their employment opportunities. Thus this was a positive-feedback spiral that led to an increasingly large employment gap: the minority immigrant groups in Canada tended to have fewer individuals proficient in English, which limited their ability to immigrant, which limited their representation

out of their population, which decreased their quota numbers; and vice a versa for larger immigrant groups of Anglophone nations. In addition, this led to the widening social disdain of minority groups and the belief that they were often public charges (i.e., likely to become dependent on the government). In other words, the disadvantages of not knowing English were compounded by these new acts and made the life of immigrants dramatically more difficult; this in turn hurt their financial stability, which made them appear as second-class citizens to non-immigrants. To reiterate, due to the vast similarities between Canadian demographics and immigration policy to the U.S., the general principle can be applied to the U.S. as well.

As the economic situation of the Great Depression worsened, the arguments against immigrants shifted more toward claims that they were less financially reliable and more prone to be dependent on the government. However, this argument is caused by the non-immigrant majority leveraging a popular argument in order to continue driving their eugenic goal forward, and does not have much grounding in fact. More respectable immigrant classes with larger quotas, such as Irish Americans, were just as prone to becoming dependent on the government; indeed, this particular group was hit especially hard by the Stock Market Crash of 1929, and in the years following many had "carried the derogatory label of 'Returned Yank'" or "often cut off contact with family members back in Ireland because they were too embarrassed or guilty about their inability to meet their familial responsibilities" (O'Brien, 2002). Thus, even though this group was welcomed into America with open arms, they were no more able than other immigrant families (and perhaps more panicky and less prudent, as O'Brien's depiction may show). Except perhaps the related work by Inwood and the inability of immigrants to find work, there is no strong evidence that non-preferred immigrant groups were less capable or hardworking than non-immigrant or preferred-immigrant groups; rather, the Asians' efficiency and risk-tolerance in the dangerous and difficult jobs such as building the Transcontinental Railroad was a major reason it could be finished so quickly, and this helped foster jealousy and hatred amongst non-immigrants who didn't take those jobs. This discredits the common contemporary sentiment that "preferred" immigrant groups were more financially capable and recovered better than "non-preferred" groups.

While many immigrant populations were blocked from entering the U.S. and were hurt by a poor English ability, one ethnic group was hit especially hard during the Great Depression: Mexican Americans. Like Filipino Americans, Mexicans were exempt from the quotas of the Immigration Act of 1924, and large numbers emigrated to the U.S. in the early 1900's, bolstering the farm economy of the southwestern states; they played an important part of the labor force like Asian Americans of the late 1800's in the Gold Rush and the railroad industry. With stronger proponents of eugenics and the worsening economic situation came the Mexican Repatriation, a policy beginning in 1929 supported by both the American and Mexican governments that involved "repatriating" many Mexican migrant workers in the U.S. to Mexico. Historian Abraham Hoffman describes the American supporters of the Repatriation to belong to several groups: "small farmers, progressives, labor unions, eugenicists, and racists" (Hoffman, 1974). The former three camps claimed that their presence occupied American jobs, and many Americans were on relief or were public charges; eugenics and racists found the Mexican barrios and the difference in physical appearance of Mexicans easy to use as a scapegoat for economic troubles. In the next few paragraphs, I find that both of these arguments are unsubstantiated.

First of all, the legitimacy of many of the "repatriations" is questionable; the action involved the deportation of more American citizens than the repatriation of citizens of Mexico. Estimates for the repatriation are difficult to pin down — there was no mechanism in place to accurately measure this kind of trend, much of it was illegitimate (deporting U.S. citizens on basis of appearance), the efforts were decentralized, and contemporary authors were not always consistent with their claims. A report by Hoffman designated specifically to the statistics of the Mexican repatriation claims that commonly-cited contemporary author Carey McWilliams often was inconsistent with his estimates in different articles (Hoffman, 1972); his own estimate was that of approximately 400,000 (Hoffman, 1974), although other estimates have ranged to almost two million (Ray, 2005); these and other reviews also conclude that the majority of the people (60%) forcibly-moved were U.S. citizens. The simplest conclusion to draw from this lack of clarity is how hasty and otherwise poorly-implemented this policy was put in place. The only result that this creates is the

reinforcement of Mexican Americans (migrant workers or valid U.S. citizens), are second-class citizens who don't even have the basic right of protection from discrimination-based, unlawful deportation. The forced deportation of many American citizens also demonstrates the highly racialized aspect of the policy. Indeed, from a purely economic perspective, Mexicans migrant workers in the U.S. had been beneficial to the U.S. economy as mentioned above; however, the social (i.e., ethnic) aspects cause problems when it comes to the U.S. deciding on immigration policy. Aguila succinctly summarizes the ongoing dilemma for U.S. policymakers:

> "A significant cause of this quandary results from the obvious, but problematic, fact that each nation benefits from the existence of Mexicans (documented and undocumented) in the United States. The remittances from workers are an obvious subsidy for the Mexican economy, which today totals nearly ten billion dollars per year. However, the gains for U.S. society are highly controversial despite major sectors of the economy's dependence on this labor" (Aguila, 2007).

The fact that "the gains for U.S. society are highly controversial" emphasize the complexity of U.S.-Mexican relations past the facade of economic gain for Americans. Moreover, one of the major reasons the Mexican government supported the repatriation was that it would reintroduce many skilled workers from the U.S. back into their society — conversely, this implies that the U.S. was losing much skilled labor (that was willing to work at a lower pay rate), which would undoubtedly hurt the U.S. economy in the long term, even if there was a current economic downturn. Thus the Mexican American community was greatly economically maligned due to a largely social cause.

But did the Mexican Repatriation help with non-immigrant American employment as it was intended to do? Even if it did negatively affect the Mexican Americans, did it benefit non-immigrants? To assume that the repatriation of Mexicans would benefit Americans financially makes the assumption that there were enough Mexican migrants such that replacing their collective roles with a fewer number of American workers would be able to improve wages and fulfill their roles. In reality, since the pay rate of Mexican workers was much lower, this assumption was unrealistic. A statistical study with controls on the employment levels using available census

data found that, in addition to decreasing employment for migrants, the repatriation was associated with a nonpositive net effect for American native citizens, leading to a slight increase in American unemployment (Lee et al., 2017). Thus the Mexican Repatriation not only harmed many Mexican Americans, but it was a situation of Pareto worsening — i.e., nobody (except perhaps the eugenicists from a social viewpoint) benefitted economically from this emergency measure.

One other major non-preferred immigrant group was heavily targeted during the Great Depression: Filipino Americans. Since the Philippines were a U.S. territory at the time, Filipinos were legal American citizens and thus did not have quotas placed on them; like with Mexico, Filipino immigration boomed in the 1920's. Especially with Chinese immigration curtailed in the 1880's with the Chinese Exclusion Act and Japanese immigration slowed in the 1910's following the Gentleman's Agreement, Filipinos played an important role in filling the role of the Chinese and Japanese (Flores, 2004). Despite their important role in the economy, they were also subjected to harsh racism like the other Asian immigrant groups, as well as the growing economic concern of job availability. This led to numerous conflicts, the most notorious being the Watsonville Riots in California in 1930, a deadly attack of local farmers on a Filipino institution mainly caused by them worrying about Filipino workers taking the scarce jobs. This set a precedent for further attacks and anti-Asian sentiment amongst non-immigrants, which eventually became a primary cause for the U.S. to lessen their occupation of the Phillipines, which in turn allowed them to restrict quotas on Filipinos with the Tydings Mcduffie Act (Sobredo, 2018).

The question of immigration policy cannot be ever dismissed as trivial, and this case study of various immigration events related to the Great Depression era demonstrates the sort of racial scapegoating that can easily arise as a result of economic panic. The anti-immigrant sentiment was originally a matter of eugenics, but as the Depression worsened and the immigrants were increasingly maligned by the immigration law, native U.S. citizens turned their excuse into an economic claim, which is largely unjustified, as shown by Lee et al. Furthermore, we see the general financial stability of immigrants decline, and there was an increase in racism as a means of venting economic frustration, but none of it benefitted any party.

Despite this insight into the Great Depression, we still see parallels to nativist socioeconomic concerns even today; for instance, one year before the 2008 Great Recession, Arnold warns of the “growing anxiety about Mexican immigrants ‘stealing jobs’ and usurping welfare, education and healthcare benefits is being tied to sovereign concerns” (Arnold, 2007); in recent memory, this “stealing jobs” rhetoric has been beaten to death by U.S. political leaders, likely in the same way that it was employed eighty years prior. Hopefully, policymakers of the future will learn from the immigration laws of the 1930’s and use methods other than attempting to effect economic or racial changes by immigration restrictions.

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