

Immigration: A Moral Issue

How do we balance the rights of the individual against the claims of corporate society?

Book Review by Gregory Pavlik

In his new book, *The Immigration Mystique*, Chilton Williamson takes up the subject of mass immigrations to the United States on several levels. One of the most impressive features of the book is the author's refusal to treat the issues raised by the United States's immigration policy lightly. Mr. Williamson treats immigration as a moral issue, subject to competing moral claims. He avoids the trap of spitting economic statistics coupled with epithets at his opponents, a modus operandi all too common among advocates of immigration.

Significantly, Mr. Williamson's book is one of the first in recent years to draw prominently on the restrictionist literature of the early twentieth century. His work is heavily influenced by the earlier writings of Henry Pratt Fairchild and other critics of the "old immigration" of Eastern and Southern Europeans of non-Anglo-Saxon stock. (Williamson does avoid reference to restrictionists who based their objections to immigration on racial grounds. This seems to give short change to history — President Harding testified to the influence of Madison Grant's *Passing of the Great Race* in his views against immigration.)

Insofar as Williamson deals with immigration as a subject in and of itself, he goes a step beyond being a critic of current policy. The result is a bold and comprehensive essay, dealing with the topic of immigration as an agent of social and political transformation.

The first portion of Williamson's book deals with the

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history of American immigration. It is, as he shows, largely dominated by the myth, propagated in this century, that America was built on the foundation of open borders and immigrant cultures. It is the author's contention — which he amply supports — that America, far from being the result of widespread immigration from disparate nations, was the result of the colonial experience of Great Britain. The early British colonies assumed the right of restriction, through which they were essentially able to maintain their unique characters. Challenges to the colonies' restrictionist tendencies originated almost entirely with the mother country, which wished to use the colonial territories for purposes alien to the interests of the colonists.

In a related vein, the formative political and cultural institutions of the young United States were British; major regional variations still discernable today were, as David

Hackett Fisher points out, the result of a heritage directly traceable to separate migrations from the British Isles. And Mr. Williamson shows that many of the prominent figures among the founding generation, from Jefferson to Washington, were either ambivalent or hostile toward immigration, the result of which they imagined would be the destabilization of the common ethnic and cultural make-up with which John Adams believed Providence had blessed the new nation. Yet the early national period was relatively free from acrimony with regard to immigrants if only because they were so few. As Williamson points out, from 1783 to 1820, "an average of ten thousand aliens arrived annually in the United States." By the 1830s, the stirring of the nativist movement could be heard, objections mainly based on the culture shock produced by large numbers of immigrants arriving in America's cities. Americans, in short, never experienced a period in the republic prior to the Civil War in which the noticeable effects of immigration were unaccompanied by its opposition.

The Immigration Mystique: America's False Conscience
by Chilton Williamson, Jr.
New York: BasicBooks, 1996
202 pages, \$23.00



One of the after-effects of the Civil War noted by Williamson was the establishment of the “propositional” definition of American citizenship. President Lincoln justified the pursuit of his war against the Confederacy not only by a previously unrecognized appeal to “Union” but also by the notion that America is dedicated to the proposition that “all men are created equal” and are the recipients of certain metaphysically-defined “unalienable rights.” This undermined the special nature of American political rights, previously understood as an inheritance of British civilization. This transformation within American politics — which matched closely the definition of what the twentieth century classical liberal Garet Garret called a “revolution within the form” when analyzing the New Deal — would have a significant impact on later discussions of the morality of immigration. In a circular irony of history, immigration would also serve to buttress this new national myth. After all, the increasingly heterogeneous population of the United States could hardly be expected to identify with an exclusively British political inheritance. This new abstract and universalized conception of political citizenship and rights — essentially a throwback to the Jacobinism of the French Revolution — became the basis of the immigrationist belief in the oxymoronic “universal nation.”

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The fact that immigration significantly contributed to the transformation of the public understanding of what it meant to be an “American” was not lost on the critics of mass immigration earlier in this century. As mass immigration helped to buttress the political foundations of an increasingly imperialistic and industrialized United States, it also affected the culture, which increasingly reflected the proletarianization and commercialization produced largely by lower class

immigrants. Williamson echoes this in his work:

immigration produced levels of cultural, ethnic, and racial diversity that gradually, almost imperceptibly, have partially reconstructed the American nation. For most of this the Old — not the New — immigration is responsible.

By pointing out the transforming power of mass immigration involving those with relatively closely related civilizational backgrounds, the author provides the historical background against which we can expect to judge the effects of current immigration from the Third World.

Williamson’s historical discussion is a convincing revisionist indictment of current orthodoxy. One particular element stands out as a universal among those historically opposed to large-scale immigration. He makes clear that the advocates of restriction were careful to delineate between hatred of foreigners and the fundamental right of self-preservation. This is a powerful appeal, which illustrates the author’s contention that immigration is ultimately a moral problem, balancing the rights of the individual against the claims of corporate society. That those most closely opposed to the historically definable corporate society within the United States are also among the most vigorous proponents of the open borders doctrine is significant. Williamson quotes Lawrence Auster to the effect that in many respects contemporary multiculturalism is the child of mass immigration.

Of course, this essay is more than a historical sketch. The bulk of the presentation within *The Immigration Mystique* deals with today’s “immigration crisis” (Williamson’s words). In some ways the Civil War was a watershed event with ramifications for policies relating to the Old Immigration, the hegemonic dominance of Cold War liberalism was certainly the foundation on which policy relating to the New Immigration of the late twentieth century was built. The defining event of the New Immigration was the 1965 immigration act, which was the culmination of social trends promoted under the aegis of modern liberalism. Williamson points out, for example, that the 1965 act was rooted in the civil rights movement, which commanded a good deal of moral prestige in opposition to discriminatory policies. He also argues that whatever moral debt may have been owed to American blacks, that debt could not have been owed to foreign immigrants, who were, after all, external to the American historical experience.

Indeed, there were other considerations that impacted the immigration debate prior to passage of the 1965 act. Cold War liberals demanded reform of immigration policies to avoid offense of Third World countries that might be tempted to ally with the Soviet Union if the U.S. government appeared to be hostile toward non European peoples. While secretary of state, Dean Rusk argued that the discriminatory policies of the United States with regard to immigration were one of its most damaging weaknesses in the eyes of the Third World.

Whatever combination of factors led to the passage of the 1965 act, the result has been, as Auster and Peter Brimelow have recently emphasized, demographic madness. Immigration has increased in numbers and many of the immigrants are radically estranged from the main-stream of American culture, which itself has been redefined through immigration. The book deals with both aspects of these trends.

One of the most intriguing arguments that Williamson puts forth against mass immigration, and one that he holds to be "the most persuasive," is environmentally based. Here, I think also, is the most underdeveloped argument in the book. In two sections, the author deals with both the subject of population pressures and the environmental impact of immigration. With regard to population movements, he raises some important observations. For example, he quotes Virginia Abernethy to the effect that the "prospect *alone* of immigration has pronatalist effects on sending countries," hence increasing population pressure in already overpopulated countries.

But while rightly noting the hesitancy of environmentalists to criticize immigration, Mr. Williamson doesn't make much of a case with regard to the relationship between immigration and the destruction of natural resources. Much of the section on the environment contains Malthusian predictions with little in the way of supporting evidence. That is not to say that the environmentalist objection to immigration is necessarily wrong; the reader simply has no way to judge.

The converse position that resources are essentially unlimited is rightly held up for ridicule. The whole reason for the existence of the division of labor and a complex structure of production is the fact of the scarcity of resources. It is also the reason for the existence of economics as a discipline. Until recently, the denial of the fact of scarcity was limited to Utopian

socialists and the Biblical account of the Garden of Eden. To claim, as some immigrationists have, that human ingenuity effectively eliminates the scarcity of natural resources, broadly defined, is almost flabbergasting. In actuality, an effective economic system rationally coordinates the allocation of resources based on the most efficient satisfaction of consumer wants. Human ingenuity may be able to cope with scarcity; it does not eliminate it.

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Overall, the scope of Mr. Williamson's treatment is impressive. He tackles the ethical and religious claims made by immigrationists, the relationship between America's perception of itself and its immigration policies, New Class interest in immigrationism, and the development of multi-culturalism in America, among other topics. And although most of the discussion in *The Immigration Mystique* treats economics as superfluous to larger questions raised by immigration, the last section of the book engages the pro-immigration economists squarely. While Mr. Williamson concedes, following Fairchild, that economics provides the most appealing arguments in favor of immigration, he deals with the issue quite effectively. He cites studies that show that immigration can significantly retard the development of the sending countries, contributing to stagnant and impoverished conditions. Similarly, immigration can act as a "brain drain" within countries that desperately require their brightest citizens. While immigrationists argue that immigration is needed to provide workers (and consumers) in the economy, Mr. Williamson points out that there is an abundance of low-skilled workers available, though many are currently on the dole. In an important observation, the author comments,

“economists have noted that the United States really needs greater capital and more and better technology, which immigration does not supply.” Technological development and capital investment are, after all, the means by which marginal productivity is increased.

The book as a whole is a carefully constructed work in which topics related to immigration and its effects are treated with great care. When dealing with the

arguments in favor of immigration put forward by individuals and institutions (for example, mainline church denominations), Mr. Williamson provides some particularly erudite responses. Anyone who wants to grapple with the larger issues raised by current immigration policies will benefit tremendously from this presentation. His book has raised the terms of the debate. □

Mexico's Continuing Crises

The implications of this analysis are ominous

Book Review by David Simcox

Chaos may not be too strong a word for the social and political disarray that marks the crumbling of Mexico's 67-year-old authoritarian political system: unresolved political assassinations; massive currency crises and capital flight; paralyzing economic downturn; guerrilla uprisings in the south; graft of pharaonic scale in a once trusted former president's immediate family; and emergence of a Colombia-style narco-culture that pervades all institutions and co-opts all law enforcement.

Most of these afflictions are not new in Mexico's troubled 174-year history as an independent republic. But nowadays they seem far more menacing from this side of our common border. Mexico is no longer a sleepy banana republic isolated by harsh terrain and bad roads from the U.S. There will soon be 100 million Mexicans, most of them unfulfilled, impatient — and mobile — as never before. Nearly 20 million of them live within a half day's drive of the U.S. border.

The mushrooming of Mexican colonies in the U.S. southwest has increasingly mingled Mexico's politics with our own. The Mexican establishment has advanced

this process by allowing Mexican-born Americans dual citizenship and extending partisan political mobilization to U.S. territory. The U.S. encourages it by sweeping immigration amnesties followed by massive rubber-stamp naturalizations. Overlapping loyalties and an evanescent border are ingredients for the spread of violent conflict to U.S. soil if the Republic's political rot degenerates into general insurgency.

Journalist Andres Oppenheimer ratchets up our fears of apocalypse in Mexico with this chronicle of corruption, greed, murder and ineptitude in the ruling circles of the republic since the early 1990s. His

book is a series of journalistic sketches or case studies of recent debacles in Mexico that symptomize a political system above accountability, immobilized by deceit and denial, and now collapsing from within because of infighting among the once united dominant political tribes.

Corruption, he notes, is no longer working as the “oil” and “glue” of Mexico's political system — the oil that made government wheels turn and the glue which bound quarrelsome factions of elites together and to the president since the 1920s.

The uprising of Zapatista militants in Chiapas state on New Years day 1994, an expression of despair, also helped catalyze the loss of investor confidence that would within a few months blossom into massive capital flight. Oppenheimer disputes the romantic view of some media and international human rights interests of the Chiapas insurgency as an indigenous, non-ideological

Bordering on Chaos

By Andres Oppenheimer

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