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Reply to Kaufmann and Cannato

In this article, I sought first to demonstrate that late nineteenth-century restrictionism was a democratic movement. Eric Kaufmann is correct that nativism had long had purchase among old American populations. Their xenophobia did not suffice; its broad anti-immigrant sentiment and crude anti-Catholicism led to disaster for the Republican Party. Political success depended on the shift of first-wave immigrants and their descendants to a restrictionist position. In the 1880s, that turn became visible. Politicians in the Republican Party seized the opportunity to recruit working-class, ethnic voters. This strategy met their goal, which was to win elections.

My second intent was to expose the lack of evidence for racism as the source of this movement, the orthodox explanation among historians. In this scenario, racist politicians and intellectuals manipulated the political process to achieve exclusion. Where the voters are in the scene is not clear.

I thought the racial dogma so dominant among immigration historians was indefensible on two grounds. First, there was little to no evidence that racism, as a biological theory, had any meaning among intellectuals or politicians in this period. (And even less, as Kaufmann remarks, for working-class voters.) Second, even if ethnocentrism had a role to play, as it most certainly did, there was no proof that such prejudice was the reason restriction succeeded.

As an intellectual and a politician, Henry Cabot Lodge was a compelling character to have upon the stage. All the better that he was the chief villain in the conventional drama. The intellectual context of his time provided Lodge no foundation for an ideology based in biological racism. The remarks made by Senator Morrill that Vincent Cannato quotes offer no evidence for such an ideology. Speaking in 1887 on the Senate floor, Morrill argued for a Republican plan to curb undesirable immigrants by consular inspection.¹ His text did not

refer to new Southern and Eastern European immigrants but to any immigrant without “good moral character,” specifically criminals, alcoholics, and paupers. To all others, Morrill believed we should “leave our doors wide open.”

The mid-1880s did show heightened concern about new immigrants. The article details antagonism vividly expressed by the representatives of the working class in congressional hearings over contract labor; it appeared as well in the increasingly anxious Anglo-Saxonist rhetoric of Morrill and Lodge and others. As the article cites, and Cannato restates, by the mid-1890s men such as Francis Walker and Lodge were fumbling around at the edges of what might be called true, hereditary views of race. Yet this was well after the movement had gathered great momentum, drawing deeply from the discontent of immigrant-origin workers with cheap labor competition. Lodge’s political career demonstrates that he and other Republican politicians rejected the party’s early pro-immigration position on politically expedient grounds. They did so well before they experimented with ideological justifications.

In addition to its two intents, the article had two ambitions, these likely to be in vain. First, historians should not use the term racism where it does not apply. Ethnocentrism is endemic to homo sapiens, but it is an altogether different thing. Second, they should subject to scrutiny any claim that prejudicial attitudes constitute the chief engines of anti-immigrant sentiment. These scholarly rules might relieve immigration history of the tendentious reading of the past that has characterized it from its beginnings. Its affection for the immigrant has been of late still more aggravated by the hyperbole of whiteness studies, much to John Higham’s distress.

In venturing beyond the academy, only a fool would rush in to draw lessons for the present from the past. Still, what worth has a discipline with nothing to say to the living? Each of the commentators on this essay remarks on the shadow the nineteenth century casts over contemporary conditions. I hazard my own observation. Orthodoxy has confused us about the foundations of the success of restrictionism in the past, and it ought not do so in the present.

NOTE

1. U.S. Congress, Senate Immigration Committee, “Immigration Abuses: Remarks of Justin S. Morrill of Vermont in the Senate of the United States, December 14, 1887, on His Bill to Regulate Immigration and for Other Purposes” (Washington, D.C., 1887).