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## PRYING OPEN THE GOLDEN DOOR

Robert L. Fleegler: *Ellis Island Nation: Immigration Policy and American Identity in the Twentieth Century*. (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013. Pp. 280.)

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The idea that the United States is a nation of immigrants is heard from across the political spectrum. Robert L. Fleegler in *Ellis Island Nation* shows how this contemporary point of agreement was a product of prolonged political and cultural campaigns promoting the idea that immigrants brought unique contributions that strengthen the nation. This ideology Fleegler calls contributionism: “Contributionism emphasized that the cultural and economic assets of immigrants enrich America by celebrating the unique benefits of immigrants’ native cultures to American life. At the same time, however, contributionists frequently assumed that immigrants would lose some of the very distinctions that set them apart as their talents and skills were incorporated into the American nation” (12).

This exploration of contributionism is bookended by two major shifts in US immigration policy. We begin with late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century debates culminating in the passage of the restrictive 1924 National Origins quotas. We end with the 1965 immigration reform legislation that eliminates those quotas in favor of a system of preference categories. In between we see a variety of arguments for immigrant inclusion from a wide range of sources. We see the uneven and uncertain rise of contributionism, illuminating what national conditions make fertile soil for this ideology. We see how changing conceptions of race and ethnicity work with foreign-policy and economic imperatives to create openings or closings for contributionism.

Fleegler’s compelling argument about the development of contributionism, then, is an important addition to the work on immigration politics and history. This powerful book covers a time period often overlooked in immigration history and focuses on ideas often not at the center of our attention. We can point to many accounts of the history, the dynamics, and meaning of nativist efforts. From John Higham’s work forward we have dissected the efforts of anti-immigrant forces in many different ways. Efforts to include immigrants into American identity or liberalize immigration policies have received much less attention. Fleegler turns to those pushing for more inclusion of immigrants and the payoff is a deeper and more complete picture of US battles over immigration and the development of our national identity.

For example, we see in a new way how foreign-policy concerns guide the discussion of immigration identity. Contributionists make limited headway during World War II. While we know the war stalled restrictionist politics, Fleegler shows us that it also hindered a contributionist ideology that promoted valuing difference. People stressed the need for unity as well as the

dangers of racial thinking. This helps us understand why, while limiting the appeal of traditional nativist arguments, World War II did not lead to an immediate undoing of the National Origin Quotas or limitations on refugees.

We also see how race becomes intertwined with our national identity in new ways by new forces and new people. As Fleegler shows throughout, even as the Ellis Island immigrants (southern and eastern Europeans) become acknowledged as contributing to America, others—Mexicans, Chinese, and Japanese—remain outside of the boundary of American identity. This helps us understand the limitations of forces arguing for immigration liberalization and inclusion. Fleegler's introduction of contributionism, then, sheds light on our immigration history that complements the important work done on restrictionism.

The many variants of contributionism that are illuminated and the incomplete ways its proponents apply the idea throughout history present questions about the coherence of the idea of contributionism. For example, why or when does acknowledging the contribution of immigrants to American life come with an argument for inclusion in American society? In the debates over the 1924 National Origins Quotas, a newspaper noted Japanese farmers were turning unproductive lands into productive ones, a contribution to the economy and the building of America, but also stated that they would remain outside of American society in terms of culture and loyalty (25–26). Race might be a simple answer, although part of Fleegler's argument is that the decline of race thinking allowed various European immigrant groups to be included. Identifying race as a barrier, then, might hide more than it illuminates. It paints racial categories as static (the Japanese and Mexican immigrants would always be defined as a different race) and diminishes the power of revealing contributionist thinking (which is said to overcome the exclusion and prejudices against immigrants, even those perceived at one point to be fundamentally different). Geography and race alone cannot explain why at some moment acknowledgement of contribution demands inclusion and overcomes difference while at others one can argue for foreignness and contribution in the same breath. Charles Beard in a 1928 textbook suggests that southern and eastern European immigrants have provided "invaluable" labor but remain loyal to their home country (33). Both of these examples are moments when people recognize the contribution to US society by immigrants but do not connect this with inclusion in our national identity or a new argument about what assimilation might mean.

While trying to trace the development of contributionism, variations of arguments for the inclusion or acceptance of immigrants are revealed but not named. At points in *Ellis Island Nation* contributionism might simply mean the recognition of our immigrant heritage (122). Or contributionism could mean any belief that immigrants are a benefit to the nation, which may include the idea of assimilation. Franklin Delano Roosevelt stresses the "strength" and "moral fiber" that immigrants have contributed to the United States. He argues for the ability of immigrants to maintain affection

for their countries of origin but still be loyal and make sure their children learn English and adapt to American institutions (36). This is a combination of recognizing immigrant contribution while calming fears about assimilation, which he says will happen. At other points contributionism seems to refer to individuals who oppose an assimilationist tendency by stressing the ways in which immigrant culture informs and reconstructs American identity and culture in positive ways, a two-way street of cultural transformation. Cultures become “blended” (42). Louis Adamic, who plays a very interesting role in this history, argues that cultures should be “harmonize[d] and integrate[d] . . . without suppressing or destroying any good cultural qualities in any of them, but using and directing these qualities toward a possible enhancement of color and quality of our national life in America” (39). At still other moments, contributionists seem to abandon not just assimilation but also incorporation into a single culture and stress tolerance as the only unifying characteristic with preservation of separate cultures as key. Contributionism has many expressions of the relationship between American identity (or identities) and immigrants. This is demonstrated through the wide range of metaphors Fleegler assigns to contributionists. Some embraced the melting pot, others explicitly resisted a melting pot idea; some talked about an orchestra, others talked about an alloy, a tapestry, a salad bowl, or a composite.

A next step for future work would be to engage in more explicit categorization and discussion of these variants. Fleegler’s history and idea of contributionism could be used to powerfully explore the changing idea of assimilation. Distinguishing between the variants of contributionism may help provide a more complete genealogy of partisan positions and political rhetoric on immigration, and multiculturalism more directly. Is contributionism a precursor to later multiculturalism, to ideals about incorporation that come to the fore in sociology, or to the “America is a nation of immigrants” ideas today that can wipe out difference and power? Are these all legitimate legacies of the same set of ideas that have been used in different ways or have they always been separate strands really not unified in any sense except in opposition to a strong assimilationist/exclusionist stance? Explicit discussion of these variants and clear categorization might help explain why the idea of contributionism is a coherent and important way to think about some immigration politics. It would also help further our understanding of why certain forms of contributionism come to the fore at certain moments while others fall to the background or fail to gain traction. What form finds appeal during war time, during slow immigration, during high immigration, during economic turmoil? Does it matter what the basis of the contribution is: loyalty (armed services), economic, cultural, etc.? While Fleegler helps us see how these factors of race, economics, and war affect the rise and fall of contributionism, we may be able to also understand how these forces affect the form of contributionism more clearly.

In part, these questions can only be asked because Fleegler has done such an impressive job using a broad variety of sources. He draws from bureaucratic government programs, elected leaders, films, nonprofit organizations, religious organizations, literature, celebrations and holidays, radio programming, and textbooks to trace out the development of contributionism over time and to craft an argument about how the idea develops and when contributionism makes headway.

To make claims about the progress of contributionism, however, Fleegler stretches beyond what his evidence can tell him to ask about reception of ideas, not just their production. He claims that “politicians’ language” in the pre-World War II period “shaped and reflected popular attitudes towards immigration” (37) and that in that same period the contributionist ideal which “stressed tolerance and cooperation” was created by a “liberal elite” but did not gain a popular following (58). While including an occasional reference to polling data or other small evidence that is not compelling, he does not have a compelling way to judge acceptance or success of these ideas. Fleegler’s evidence does not really allow him to make a claim about reception but it does allow him to make a claim about production.

*Ellis Island Nation* is a story of the development of an idea through multiple sources. A strong exploration of arguments for immigrant inclusion, during a critical period in the middle of the twentieth century when no major immigration legislation is passed, helps us understand more fully the role economics, race, and foreign policy play not just in the anti-immigrant forces, but in the shape of the immigration discourse more broadly. In this rich and detailed history we can see why many politicians feel they must make a genuflection to the idea of America as a nation of immigrants; we also come to understand the limitations and the flexibility of that idea.

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