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Whose West? Whose History?

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EUROPEAN immigrants are the forgotten people of the American West. Their stories are not told in the many books, paintings, and movies that have created the mythic West. Immigrants have not easily fit into the image of the West as the bastion of unfettered individualism and self-reliance — a region peopled by the free, brave, and pure battling against the urbanized, industrialized, and economically dominant East.

Nor do European immigrants populate the pages of frontier history. Ever since Frederick Jackson Turner opened the field a hundred years ago, general histories of the American frontier have tended to ignore them. Grounded on the Turnerian notion that the frontier environment overpowered ethnocultural behaviors and attitudes, such histories assumed that common frontier experiences created the so-called American character. Presumably, the environment worked equally on all frontier people regardless of origin; people of all cultures had to adapt to physiographic realities if they were to survive. Failing to fit the established interpretive model, European immigrants again were overlooked.

They have fared no better in the general histories of the American West. For example, Robert V. Hine simply dismisses European immigrants as unimportant for his interpretation in The American West.2 Rodman Paul’s The Far West and the Great Plains in Transition, 1859-1900 devotes two chapters to racial and ethnic diversity, but he summarizes the role of European immigrants in about seven pages.3 One searches fruitlessly in these and other broad studies of the West for adequate descriptions of ethnic-group settlement or for recognition of the sometimes astounding proportions of European-born persons in certain communities. Equally scarce are analyses that illuminate internal social structures or the intricate economic and political relationships of ethnic groups with each other or with so-called dominant elements in Western society.

Curiously, even historians of immigration have also tended to overlook Europeans who settled in the West. In the 1920s, when syntheses of American immigration history first began to appear, scholars looked first to the cities, where immigrant populations were numerous and obvious, or to Eastern rural areas. Although there were notable exceptions, most immigration historians preferred to study places where immigrants, their leaders, and plentiful historical sources were concentrated. Moreover, many early historians of immigration tended to shoehorn their subject into Turnerian boots. Seeing America as a frontier of Europe, they concentrated not on the persistence of culture but on the many ways immigrants contributed to American civilization and on the speed with which they accommodated their behavior to American norms. They viewed America as a great “melting pot” in which ethnic distinctiveness disappeared.

Labor historians have traditionally viewed the West from a different mountain. Unlike frontier historians, they saw plenty of European immigrants in Western mines, forests, factories, and transportation systems. Appalled by the exploitation they observed, some surveyed the West through a Marxist lens. Such historians, preoccupied with the class struggle against capitalist oppressors, acknowledged the persistence of ethnic culture in America but lamented its perseverance as an obstacle to economic justice. Diversity of language, religion, and custom, when combined with lingering ethnic animosities, seemed to hinder the formation of class consciousness, which was the Marxist prerequisite for successful protest against capitalist exploitation.

Nor do European immigrant groups fare well in the works of the “new Western historians,” even though ethnic societies fit comfortably in the analytical paradigms they have developed. Arguably the best known of these works, all published within the past decade, is Patricia Nelson Limerick’s The Legacy of Conquest: The Unbroken Past of the American West. A vigorous attack on the Turnerian emphasis on process, Limerick’s study substitutes place — the West as the meeting ground where culturally diverse peoples competed and often clashed to survive in the often unyielding Western environment. Limerick tells a story of conquest — the conquest of a vast land by competing interests to exploit natural resources. In this version of Western history, racial minorities — Indians, Mexicans, Asians, and blacks — are repeatedly victimized. Curiously, however, she says nothing about European immigrant groups — Irish or southern Slav miners, Scandinavian loggers,
Italian truck farmers, Basque shepherds, Jewish peddlers, or German farmers — or about the discrimination they endured or how ethnic cultures conditioned the measures they took to combat or accommodate it.4

Similarly, the editors of the Oxford History of the American West, a brilliant epitome of the “new Western history,” chose not to include an essay that focuses on European immigrants.2 One can only speculate why. Did the editors presume that European-immigrant stories were indistinguishable from those of other white Americans, or perhaps that they, unlike blacks, Indians, Hispanics, or Chinese, had in fact realized the promise of American life?

And yet huge numbers of European immigrants were present in the 19th-century West. In 1900, when the federal census reported that the proportion of all foreign-born persons in the national population was 13.6 percent, the West (not including the Great Plains states) registered 20.7, a regional percentage second only to New England, which recorded 25.8. North Dakota, with 35.4 percent, had the highest proportion in the country.

When the data are expanded to include both the immigrants and their American-born children (the first- and second-generation immigrants), the proportions of European immigrants in the Western states in 1900 are even more startling. Again, North Dakota’s immigrant percentage, an astounding 71.3 percent, ranked the highest in the United States. South Dakota, Nebraska, Montana, Wyoming, Colorado, Utah, Nevada, Washington, and California all exceeded the national average of 32.1 percent.

Although these data provide a convenient slice across American history at the end of the frontier era — a useful point of reference in the march of time — they must be used with caution. Drawn from the decennial reports of the Census Bureau, they should never be regarded as precise or exact. In the 19th and early 20th centuries, immigrants were usually under-recorded; then, even more than now, census takers missed people. Moreover, the old census categories are not the ones most historians and social scientists identify today. These and other problems are too complicated to analyze here. Suffice it to say that census data nevertheless provide a foundation for inquiry into the history of European immigrants in the American West. They outline the large pattern: In 1900, immigrants and their children constituted an enormous slice of the population pie in virtually all of the Western states and territories, and in most cases they exceeded the national average.

The data also open a virtually unlimited range of questions, especially those based on quantitative analysis. Demographic numbers can be the bedrock for comparative analyses, and they often make possible studies that reveal the interplay of ethnic cultures and environments, both physical and social. Ideally, systematic comparisons should be made, first, within an appropriate time sequence (the essence of historical analysis), and second, between one cultural group or immigrant society in a given place and (1) other ethnocultural groups, native- or foreign-born, who lived in the same or comparable physical environments, or (2) members of the same ethnic studies usually offer the best potential for meeting these standards.

The opportunities for such research are limitless; the number of exemplary studies are few. Work based on the strategies proposed here may help to abate the fevers of filioptism that long afflicted immigration studies and to drain the swamps of superficiality that have enervated special interest studies.

NOTES

This essay has been adapted from the introduction by the author for European Immigrants in the American West: Community Histories, to be published by University of New Mexico Press in 1998.


2. Robert V. Hine, The American West: An Interpretive History, 2nd ed. (Boston, MA: Little, Brown, 1984). Hine merely asserts that European immigrants represented “only cultural differences” that “were not generally conceived as alien to the dominant society” (p. 237).


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