

Nations of Immigrants: Do Words Matter?¹

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Perhaps it's unfair but I often ask my undergraduate students a trick question. The question is: "what country in the world in the year 2000 had the highest proportion of foreigners living on its national territory?" It's probably no surprise that the largest number of them answer "the United States." When asked to explain, the least articulate students give the most revealing responses. They tend to report, accurately, that "everyone knows that the United States is a 'nation of immigrants.'"

Students are surprised to learn that the correct answer to the question is not the United States but the United Arab Emirates, where 85 percent of the resident population in 2000 was foreign-born and where most foreigners worked on short-term labor contracts with the expectation they would return home again. Is the U.A.E a nation of immigrants? My students don't think so and neither do most of the leaders or natives of the U.A.E.² Switzerland, a country that has a longer history of importing temporary labor, today has a resident population of about 23 percent foreigners—almost twice the

¹ This paper began as a lecture I have been giving for the past five years to two groups. The first group is the many public school teachers who participate in "Teaching American History" projects funded by the U.S. Department of Education. The second are scholarly and community groups around the country and the world. I offer thanks to audiences in Richmond, Va, Kansas City, Missouri, St. Paul and Minneapolis, Minn., Pittsburgh, Penn., Fall River, Mass., San German, Puerto Rico, Iowa City, Iowa, and at Ellis Island. Thanks also to faculty colleagues at the University of Western Australia, Dickinson College, the École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales, Texas A & M University, the University of Pittsburgh, and the University of Minnesota. Finally, I want to thank Adam Walaszek and Dirk Hoerder, my co-authors for a paper that significantly re-shaped my thinking about this project, "Émigration et construction nationale en Europe (1815-1939)," in Nancy Green and Francois Weil, eds., *Citoyenneté et émigration: Les politiques du départ* (Paris: Éditions de l'École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales, 2006), pp. 67-94--now available also in English as "Emigration and Nation-Building during the Mass Migrations from Europe," in Green and Weil, *The Politics of Emigration* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2007). Finally, extra special thanks to Lizabeth Zaroni for help in accessing my sources.

² Five years later, and again based on shares of population rather than numbers, the United States does not even make it into the "top ten" worldwide: "Migration Information Source" <http://www.migrationinformation.org/DataHub/charts/6.2.shtml>

comparable figure for the foreign-born of the U.S. in 2000 (12.5 percent). Most Swiss vigorously deny they are a “nation of immigrants,” while many Americans insist on it.³ Clearly, it’s not just a matter of numbers.

Although unfair, my trick question is a good way to open discussion. What difference does it make if we call someone a foreigner, an immigrant, an emigrant, a migrant, a refugee, an alien, an exile or an illegal or clandestine? To ponder this question is to explore the vastly differing ways that human population movements figure in nation-building and in the historical imagination of nations. Notice, for example, that when I posed a question about foreigners, American students responded with an answer about immigrants. To confuse matters further, the foreigners that Germany counts are not necessarily foreign-born, while the foreign-born counted in the U.S. are not necessarily foreigners (many are naturalized citizens). By calling attention to terminology, my question encourages students to begin to compare the U.S., and its proclamation of itself as a “nation of immigrants,” to other nations around the world and to problematize their own comfort with words. It’s an exercise I recommend for all who wish to engage in contemporary debates about immigrants, fences, and guest worker programs.

Even in today’s highly mobile world, the U.S. is almost--although not quite--alone among 193 nations in calling itself a nation of immigrants.⁴ (Canada and Australia also do so occasionally).⁵ Labeling the U.S. as a nation of immigrants is one of several important variations on what I have called the “immigrant paradigm” of American

³ Hans-Joachim Hoffman-Nowotny, "Switzerland: A Non-Immigration Immigration Country," in Robin Cohen, *The Cambridge Survey of World Migration* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

⁴ Or is it 204 nations? On this point, too, definitions matter, and differ, from nation to nation: thus, for example, Germany maintains consulates in over 200 countries; Russia in only 172. The U.N. counts 193 members. Does the Vatican City count as a national state? Does Taiwan?

⁵ Franca Iacovetta, with Paula Draper and Robert Ventresca, eds., *A Nation of Immigrants: Readings in Canadian History 1940s-1960s* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1997); Tim Dare, *Australia: A Nation of Immigrants* (French’s Forest, NSW: Child & Associates, 1988).

history.⁶ It is as much an assertion of national pride as a description or history of national demography. It also rests on a number of common assumptions about the past. The first is that foreigners have composed a more significant portion of the U.S. population or played a larger role in national life than in other nations. Related to this is the assumption that the U.S. is unique in amalgamating persons of diverse cultures or origins into a single nation. Americans also like to believe that migrants have found greater success and happiness in the U.S. than elsewhere.

All these assumptions can, should be, and have been successfully challenged. Recent scholarship on emigration and on immigration to countries other than the U.S.—much of it by non-U.S.-based historians—suggests that the U.S. was but one of many nations with histories that might have produced nations of immigrants.⁷ Most nations of the Americas, along with Australia, trace their modern histories to the defeat and then collapse of indigenous societies in the face of European colonization and the related trade in African slaves, prisoners or indentured servants. The Founding Fathers of the U.S.

⁶ This paradigm is a critique of and alternative to Frederick Jackson Turner's "frontier thesis," that proclaimed a different locus for the forging of a distinctive American character: Gabaccia, "Is Everywhere Nowhere? Italy's Transnational Migrations and the Immigrant Paradigm of American History," Special Issue on Transnational History," *Journal of American History* 86, 3 (December 1999): 1115-1134.

⁷ From a huge literature on the ubiquity of migration in the histories of the world and most of its specific regions and nations, see Jan Lucassen and Leo Lucassen, *Migration, Migration History, History: Old Paradigms and New Perspectives* (Bern: Peter Lang, 1997); Wang Gungwu, *Global History and Migration: Some Patterns Revisited* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1997); Dirk Hoerder, *Cultures in Contact: World Migrations in the Second Millennium* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002); Dirk Hoerder and Christiane Harzig, *What is Migration History?* (Polity Press, forthcoming); Adam McKeown, *Chinese Migration Networks and Cultural Change: Peru, Chicago, Hawaii, 1900-1936* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001); Gabaccia, *Italy's Many Diasporas* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2000); Samuel L. Baily and Eduardo J. Miguez, *Mass Migration to Modern Latin America* (Wilmington, DE: Scholarly Resources, 2003); Jose C. Moya, *Cousins and Strangers: Spanish Immigrants in Buenos Aires, 1850-1930* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1998); Leslie Page Moch, *Moving Europeans: Migration in Western Europe since 1650* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992); Leo Lucassen, *The Immigrant Threat: The Integration of Old and New Migrants in Western Europe since 1850* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2005).

were not unique in wanting population; they recognized, like Argentina's Juan Bautista Alberdi (who made the point most succinctly in 1852), that *gobernar es poblar*.⁸ Demographically, all American nations grew through transatlantic and transpacific migrations. Border-crossing migrations were also absolutely essential to Europe's industrialization as well as to empire-building in Asia and Africa. New research suggests that long-distance migrations within Asia and to frontier regions there were of equal demographic significance.⁹ Indeed, Patrick Manning now suggests that movements across linguistic boundaries have been a key motor of change and development in human history.¹⁰

Why then does the U.S. understand itself as a nation of immigrants, while Argentina, France, Germany, Switzerland, Brazil, China, South Africa or Russia does not? So completely have Americans naturalized the exceptionalism of their immigration history that few even pose the question. At most, Americanists such as Daniel Kanstroom, Aristide Zolberg, Moon-Ho Jung, and Mae Ngai have disagreed, in passing comments, about the timing and initiators of its invention. Kanstroom locates the myth of the nation of immigrants in the 1790 law limiting naturalization to white aliens. Zolberg and Jung instead point to the anti-Chinese debates of the 1860s and 1870s, while Mae Ngai suggests it may have been mid-20th century immigration reformers of recent immigrant origin who invented the U.S. as a nation of immigrants.¹¹

⁸ The phrase is used throughout his writings, Alberdi, *Bases y puntos de partida para la organización política de la República Argentina* (Santa Fe: Librería y Editorial Castellví, 1963), p. 164.

⁹ Adam McKeown, "Global Migration, 1846–1940," *Journal of World History*, 15, 4 (2004): 155–189.

¹⁰ Patrick Manning, *Migration in World History* (London: Routledge, 2004).

¹¹ Daniel Kanstroom, *Deportation Nation: Outsiders in American History* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2007). See Aristide R. Zolberg, *Nation by Design: Immigration Policy in the Fashioning of America* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2006), pp. 169; Moon-Ho Jung, *Coolies" and Cane: Race, Labor, and Sugar Production in the Age of Emancipation*, (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2006), p. 145; Mae Ngai, *Impossible Subjects: Illegal Aliens and the Making of Modern*

I tell a somewhat different story. The invention of the U.S. as a nation of immigrants begins in the decades of the Civil War as Americans gradually stopped calling newcomers *emigrants* and began labeling them instead as *immigrants*. (That Americans of the nineteenth century also felt ambivalence about discussing themselves as a *nation*—preferring to celebrate, instead, the American *people* is a part of this Civil War era story, but one I cannot explore here.) Labeling newcomers as immigrants spread with the desire of many Americans to restrict their entry: it was no complement to label newcomers as immigrants. Given the negative associations of the term “immigrants,” it is scarcely surprising that few Americans adopted the phrase “nation of immigrants” when it was first used. In fact, many who first used the phrase actually did so in order to justify the exclusion of immigrants. The popularity of the phrase as a celebration of American inclusiveness came much later, in the late 1960s. By acknowledging the complex history of how the United States came to understand itself as a nation of immigrants, I set the stage for a larger project that compares the U.S. to a wide range of other countries: what would they call the mobile people who appeared as “outsiders” not who belong to the nation but nevertheless entered its territories to live or work? It was a rare nation that did not confront this phenomenon and complex decisions about nation-building in the 19th and 20th centuries.

The History of Ideas meets the Digitized Text

Words and phrases such as immigrant, emigrant, and nation of immigrants can profitably be viewed as *keywords*—central and evocative terms that are widely used

America (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), p. 223-4, 245-6. A dating similar to Ngai’s is offered in Robert L. Fleegler, “A Nation of Immigrants: The Rise of ‘Contributionism’ in the United States, 1924-1965” Unpublished Ph.D. Dissertation, Brown University, 2005).

because they capture something essential about a society or culture. Despite a recent association with online search engines, keywords have been used and studied by humanities scholars since the mid-nineteenth century.¹² According to one student of his work, British Marxist scholar Raymond Williams, author of the influential book *Keywords*, reunited “some vague conceptual terms...and some clearly material facts...in a loose family of social and historical relationships that gave added meaning to both.”¹³ In the social sciences, sociologists in communication studies and political scientists interested in political rhetoric have treated keywords as constituent elements of their “content analyses.”¹⁴ Despite the fact that content analysis is a methodology understood sometimes to be quantitative (after all, counting is involved), sometimes to be qualitative (because the focus is on ideas), there seems to have been very limited cross-fertilization among the humanities and social science scholars interested in keywords. I seek to bridge that gap. What I hope to demonstrate in this paper is that analysis of large, web-based

¹² “Keywords” have been especially popular among Americanists interested in culture and in politics: Raymond Williams, *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1976); Daniel T. Rodgers, *Contested Truths: Keywords in American Politics since Independence* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1998); Tony Bennett et al, *New Keywords: A Revised Vocabulary of Culture and Society* (Malden: Blackwell, 2005); Bruce Burgett and Glenn Hendler, eds. *Keywords for American Cultural Studies* (New York: New York University Press, 2007).

¹³ Annabel Patterson, “Key Words: Raymond Williams and Others,” *English Studies in Canada* 30, 4 (Dec. 2005): 67;

¹⁴ Michael Bloor and Fiona Wood, eds, *Keywords in Qualitative Methods: A Vocabulary of Research Concepts* (Thousand Oaks, Cal.: SAGE, 2006); Martin W. Bauer and George Gaskell, *Qualitative Researching with Text, Image, and Sound: A Practical Handbook* (Thousand Oaks: SAGE, 2000); Wayne A. Danielson and Dominic L. Lasorsa, “Perceptions of Social Change: 100 Years of Front-Page Content in the New York Times and The Los Angeles Times,” in Carl W. Roberts, *Text Analysis for the Social Sciences: Method for Drawing Statistical Inferences from Texts and Transcripts* (Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associations, 1997), 103-115; Philip J. Stone, et al. *The General Inquirer: A Computer Approach to Content Analysis: Studies in Psychology, Sociology, Anthropology, and Political Science*. Cambridge, Mass.: The M.I.T. Press, 1966.

archives of digitized texts can raise new questions to be explored through careful readings of printed texts.¹⁵

First, and most obviously, archives of digitized texts allow scholars to render more systematic the methods traditionally used by etymologists.¹⁶ Think of the *Oxford English Dictionary*. Even its large teams of researchers traditionally used methods that might be characterized as “seeking needles in haystacks.” Prior to digitization of texts, the most ambitious proponents of content analysis had little choice but to work rather selectively, sampling and coding relatively small numbers of texts, and often focusing on relatively short periods of time; it was simply too much work to analyze the contents of an entire run of even a single newspaper. Today these same newspapers—along with other complete textual universes (for example, *The Congressional Record*)--are fully searchable in digitized formats, opening good possibilities for systematic analysis over longer time periods. See Figure 1 which easily puts to rest the common belief that the United States “has always considered itself a nation of immigrants.” Figure 1 documents the emergence of the keyword in the context of late nineteenth century politics-- it first appeared in the *Congressional Record* in 1896—and in six major American newspapers that began to use it later, in the twentieth century--notably in the *New York Times* (with

¹⁵ Many historians are experimenting in much the same ways I am. David Roediger reports having searched the University of Michigan/Cornell University digital archive “Making of America,” for early uses of keywords (such as “ethnicity”) that figure prominently in the history of whiteness: Personal Communication but see *Working Towards Whiteness: How America’s Immigrants Became White: The Strange Journey from Ellis Island to the Suburbs* (New York: Basic Books, 2006). In France, international historian Pierre-Yves Saunier has traced the origins and evolutions of the terms “transnational” and “transnationalism,” and I was happy to alert him to my identification of the term “transnational” in digitized texts. (The first was in an 1862 German-language lecture on comparative philology). Pierre-Yves Saunier, “Transnational/Transnationalism,” *Dictionary of Transnational History* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2007).

¹⁶ A popular introduction to etymology is Sol Steinmetz, *Semantic Antics: How and Why Words Change Meaning* (New York: Random House Reference, 2008).

its first use of the keyword in 1923), the *Washington Post* (1924); the *L.A. Times* (1925), the *Chicago Daily Tribune* (1952), the *Christian Science Monitor* (1954), and the *Wall Street Journal* (1968). Such long-term searches allow us to ask better questions about the timing and contextualization of linguistic change.

Second, large archives of digitized texts allow historians of ideas to explore more systematically how particular sub-populations of authors or readers recognized, used and even defined keywords over time. It is quite striking, for example, that east-coast newspapers such as the *New York Times* and *Washington Post* (but not the *Wall Street Journal*) used the phrase “nation of immigrants” intermittently after 1920, while the *L.A. Times* did not adopt it until 1963. Even thereafter, reporters in Los Angeles never used the phrase with the enthusiasm or ubiquity of New York journalists. At least for understanding the history of this particular keyword, regionalism seems a central theme.

Finally, Boolean searches allow even the technically naïve researcher to use simple forms of content analysis to explore over long periods of time the networks of meaning and associations that once required painstaking coding of printed texts--e.g. the oeuvre of a single author, a handful of key political treatises, or a single year of newspaper headlines, editorials, or articles. In thinking about the differing temporal patterns of the appearance of the keyword “nation of immigrants” in the *L.A. Times* and the *New York Times*, for example, I could ascertain within ten minutes that even over the course of the past 30 years, writers in Los Angeles and New York contextualized the term quite differently. Angelenos occasionally linked the term nation of immigrants to individual European immigrant groups (e.g. Irish, German, or Italian) but never to Mexicans or to Chinese. Three thousand miles to the east, their counterparts were just as

likely to refer to Chinese and Mexicans (but less often Germans to my surprise) as Irish and Italians when discussing the nation of immigrants.

As this suggests, I have not attempted sophisticated methods of content analysis. I have used simple keyword searches and counts, supplemented by Boolean searches, to identify and contextualize the use, spread, and changing meanings of keywords such as immigrant, emigrant, alien, foreigner, refugee, exile, nation, people, and “nation of immigrants.”¹⁷ I have also read samples of selected texts intensively, as would any historian of ideas. For this paper, archives of digitized newspapers and Congressional records have been used to trace word use and associations over long periods of time.¹⁸ Alas, digitized texts written by immigrants, and in languages other than English, are still very rare. (In neither “North American Immigrant Letters, Diaries and Oral Histories”¹⁹ nor in “American Life Histories”²⁰ does this keyword appear even a single time.) Research of this type is also facilitated by open-access online archives and hindered when scholars (and their home institutions) face sizeable subscription costs to commercially digitized archives. Finally, since the universe of digitized archives continues to expand almost daily, my findings can never be considered definitive. Scholars in the humanities

¹⁷ The method is not without its own problems; Google Books, for example, is notoriously sloppy in its scanning and editing; errors in dates are especially common and a real problem for using this ever-expanding and already massive archive of digitized texts for systematic counts of keywords. Cross-checking and physical examination of texts remain essential tasks of the careful historian of ideas.

¹⁸ Among the archives of digitized texts consulted for this project are Yale’s “Avalon Project” (<http://www.yale.edu/lawweb/avalon/avalon.htm>); “Making of America” (<http://quod.lib.umich.edu/m/moagrp/>); Project Gutenberg (http://www.gutenberg.org/wiki/Main_Page); “A Century of Lawmaking for a New Nation,” <http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/amlaw/lawhome.html>); Google Book (<http://books.google.com/>); Bartleby (<http://www.bartleby.com/>); HeinOnline’s Congressional Records after 1873 (http://heinonline.org/home/content/General_Overview.html); Proquest Historical Newspapers (http://www.proquest.com/products_pq/descriptions/pq-hist-news.shtml); and Harvard’s “Immigration to the United States,” (<http://ocp.hul.harvard.edu/immigration/>).

¹⁹ <http://www.alexanderstreet.com/products/imld.htm>

²⁰ <http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/wpaintro/wpahome.html>

and other interpretive disciplines may live more comfortably with that than do some social scientists.

Keywords: Aliens, Emigrants, Immigrants, Foreigners

Do words matter? At least some philosophers assert that they do, and I am inclined to agree with them. If words matter, what do we make of historians who regularly display images (such as the one reproduced in Figure 2) as they discuss the “immigrants” of the nineteenth century? The image of Castle Garden in Figure 2 reminds us forcefully that it was operated by the Commissioner of *Emigration* of the State of New York and was commonly understood to be the site of “*Emigrant Landing*” with an entrance clearly marked “for *emigrants* only.” Obviously, Castle Garden did not process persons who were leaving the U.S. (as current usage of the term emigration would suggest) but rather ones who were entering it—people we would today call immigrants. Like most historians, I have often projected the use of “immigrant” and of “immigration” backwards in time. Nineteenth-century labeling of people entering the U.S. as “emigrants” is so counter-intuitive that I might not communicate successfully with twenty-first century students if I insisted on calling new arrivals *emigrants*. In understanding the emergence of the keyword nation of immigrants, however, we ignore such differences in terminology at a cost.

In almost any language, people have access to a small cluster of related terms for any single phenomenon. (Those who do content analysis create a “concordance” of these related terms in order to study their linkages.) For this paper, I focus on what Americans called people entering their national territory from outside, with special attention to

emigr* and immigr* and some attention as well to foreigner/s and alien/s.²¹ Each term resonated in slightly different ways, and both the meanings and the resonances of these terms changed over time. Certainly the meaning of emigr* changed dramatically—from one who enters to one who leaves--as immigr* became a substitute for those entering the United States. As I have sought to unravel the origins of the term “nation of immigrants,” I have used digitized archives to weigh the popularity of, to map the use over time and social space, and to limn the meanings of “immigr*,” “emigr*,” and “nation of immigrants.”

Historically, “emigrants” and “immigrants” were categories invented by national states: the migrant herself experiences no immediate change in identity or sense of self as she moves, and is moved by state agents at any given border, from one category into the other. Unlike the terms foreigner and alien (which English-speakers in the British Isles used already in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries), the earliest uses of immigration and emigration date from the era of the 1648 Treaty Westphalia--said by some scholars to be the origin of today’s international system of national states. The *OED* gives 1658 for the first use of immigration--“a going to dwell, a passing *into*” (which modern speakers of English would more likely understand to be *emigration*)—while a 1650 reference to emigration seems more familiar in referring to a spiritual movement or “Emigration of humane Souls *from* the bodies” after death.²² While emigration and immigration today appear to have clearly different implications for national states (concerned as they inevitably are with the impacts of population movements resident populations), the

²¹ Throughout the paper I’ve used the common shorthand of web-based search engines and Boolean searches not to be playful but to call attention to the methods I’ve used.

²² My references are to the online edition of the *Oxford English Dictionary*, <http://www.oed.com/about/>.

distinction between immigration and emigration was somewhat fuzzy in the seventeenth century.

According to the *OED*, emigrant and immigrant appeared as terms for mobile persons about a century later, with references to emigrants (after 1754) preceding somewhat those to immigrants (after 1792), and with both of the earliest references that *OED* etymologists identified coming from North America. Although the *OED* cites the British traveler Edward Augustus Kendall as claiming already in 1809 that “immigrant is perhaps the only new word, of which the circumstances of the United States has in any degree demanded the addition to the English language,” in fact, surprisingly few Americans at that time referred to newcomers as immigrants.²³

For the first half of the nineteenth century, emigrant was the most popularly used term for a foreigner entering or living in the U.S. The term had no juridical or legal meaning. Occasionally Congressmen of the antebellum years referred to “emigrants” as we do today, as persons leaving the U.S. For example, they discussed emancipated slaves returning to Africa as emigrants.²⁴ Congressmen also called American Indian emigrants when the U.S. army forced them over the Trail of Tears to trans-Mississippi territories in the 1830s.²⁵ But emigr* also had a broader meaning for it was applied to any mobile person intending to settle frontier lands. Emigr* often appeared as a synonym for colonizer or settler; emigration suggested colonization not just of the American west but of other empires, too. Both in London and in the colonies, English-speaking settlers of

²³*Travels Through the Northern Parts of the United States, in...1807 & 1808* (New York: I. Riley, 1809), 1st ed. II, lv, 252.

²⁴ In Congress, representatives began discussing the emigration to Africa, encouraged by the American Colonization Society already in the 1820s, see the resolution of the General Assembly of the State of Kentucky, *Journal of the House of Representatives of the United States*, February 16, 1827, p. 303, “A Century of Lawmaking for a New Nation.”

²⁵ See, as just one example of many, the motion of Mr. Vinton, *Journal of the House of Representatives of the United States*, Dec. 18, 1826, p. 66, “A Century of Lawmaking for a New Nation.”

Australia, Canada, and South Africa also preferred emigrant as a term for colonizers from abroad. In the U.S. emigrants included those we would today call internal migrants (those natives moving west from the eastern seaboard states) and those we label immigrants (foreigners arriving from another country).²⁶

Discussions of emigr* appears with great frequency in texts from the nineteenth-century West, outnumbering references to immigr* four to one.²⁷ In an Illinois archive of texts, references to English-speaking citizens arriving from New England and those traveling to the prairies from Germany or Sweden were labeled emigr*. In all these contexts, emigr* seems to have called attention to pioneering settlement and to what pioneers carried with them—the civilization of Europe in general and of Protestantism in particular. No English-speaking American in the U.S. in the 1850s expected emigrants to adopt the culture or social mores of the earliest natives of the west—the American Indians—although they did expect that life on American soil made emigrants builders of an American empire, and not of a British, German or Swedish one. Emigrant seems to have been a positive label and one does find scattered references to the United States as a “nation of emigrants” in the first half of the century.²⁸ In the 1850s, the supporters of the

²⁶ Gabaccia, “Nations of Immigrants,” *Przeład Polonijny* XXXI, 1 (2005): 31-50.

²⁷ On this point, I analyzed nineteenth-century texts from Illinois:
<http://dig.lib.niu.edu/prairiefire/index.html>

²⁸ I have to date located several uses of this alternative keyword, between 1842 and 1875, mainly in sermons on seamen or drawing on the example of the early Hebrews as a wandering nation of emigrants: see *The Sailor's Magazine, and Naval Journal*, 15 (1842), reprinted in William R. Williams, *Miscellanies* (New York: E.H. Fletcher, 1851); “Mutual Influences of National Literatures,” *The Southern quarterly review* 12, 24 (Oct., 1847), p. 326; Samuel Gilman, *Contributions to Literature: Descriptive, Critical, Humorous, Biographical, Philosophical, and Poetical* (Crosby, Nichols, and company, 1856. See also Edward Lillie Pierce, “The two systems of government proposed for the rebel states : Speech of Edward L. Pierce, at the Town House, Milton, October 31, 1868,” in digitized archive, “Making of America;” and Edwin A. Curley, *Nebraska: Its Advantages, Resources, and Drawbacks* (London: Sampson Low, Marston, Low and Searle, 1875), p. 10.

nativist American Party--also known as the “Know-Nothings”— complained about foreigners and foreign influences, especially in the Catholic Church rather than about emigrants.²⁹

Americans’ transition from discussing emigration and emigrants to immigration and immigrants can best be traced in digitized sources with long, temporal runs. Here I compare three such sources—the digitized records of the Federal congresses of the U.S., 1789-1875 and the digitized newspapers of Los Angeles (1880-1830) and New York (1851-1930). Differences in the three sources contain important clues to Americans’ substitution of immigr* for emigr* as the main terminology for those entering the U.S., and thus for the invention of the keyword “nation of immigrants.”

As Figure 3 shows, legislators regularly discussed emigration and emigrants but before the 1850s they scarcely ever referred to immigration or immigrants. In interpreting Figure 3 it is useful to keep in mind several points. In the digitized records of Federal congresses between 1789 and 1875, alien was by far the most frequently discussed category for newcomers (1008 cases, compared to 790 of emigr* and 143 of immigr*). This is perhaps not surprising, since the U.S. as an independent nation had adopted from British tradition use of alien as the juridical term for an unnaturalized foreigner. Also, until the 1860s, it was individual states that regulated the entry of aliens into the United States. At the federal level, Congress deliberated on migration mainly as an element of foreign commerce; Congressional regulations of migration thus typically labeled mobile

²⁹ Of New York Time reportage on the American Party” (also called the “Know-Nothing” Party) in the 1850s, over sixty articles discussed *foreigners* as a problem, outnumbering discussions of immigr* by a factor of two and discussions of emigr* by a factor of eight; see, as an example, “Foreigners Not Entitled to Vote or Hold Office in Massachusetts,” *New York Daily Times*, May 22, 1855, p. 1.

people as “passengers”—the commodities of the “passenger” trade.³⁰ Among the nation’s political elite, immigr* became a focus of attention only in the 1860s, as Congress moved to assert federal control over both citizenship and entry into the nation, a transition not completed until the late 1906.³¹ In 1864, Congress temporarily empowered President Lincoln to appoint a Commissioner of Immigration to recruit contract laborers. In 1882, shortly after passing what is known today as the “Chinese Exclusion Act” Congress also passed its first legislation titled explicitly an “Immigration Act.” (Its purpose was to exclude undesirable categories of people.) As this suggests, it was in the Civil War debates over the citizenship and rights of emancipated slaves, the recruitment of labor for industry, and the rapidly emerging hostility toward Chinese contract laborers or “coolies” associated with the 1868 Burlingame Treaty, that the re-labeling of emigrants as immigrants began. The long, sectional struggles over both slavery and states rights hovered palpably over discussions of immigr*, restriction and also, I might add, the meaning of “nation” into the 1870s and 1880s.

The adoption of immigr* proceeded somewhat differently on the two coasts. Figures 4 and 5 track the use of immigr* and emigr* in the *New York Times* and the *L.A. Times*. In the *New York Times* in the 1850s, references to emigr* outnumbered those to immigr* by a factor of between five and ten in any given year. The ratio of immigr* to emigr* jumped permanently upwards beginning in 1869–71 (as was also true in the Congressional records in Figure 3) and again in 1882 as Congress again discussed the

³⁰ Gerald Neuman, “The Lost Century of American Immigration Law (1776-1875),” *Columbia Law Review* 8 (1993): 1833-1901.

³¹ With passage of a new law governing naturalization. Dorothee Schneider, “Naturalization and Citizenship in Two Periods of Mass Migration, (1880-1930 and 1965-2000)” in Pyong Gap Min, ed., *Mass Migration to the United States: Classical and Contemporary Periods* (Walnut Creek: Rowman Altamira, 2002), p. 167. The federalization of U.S. immigration policy between 1860 and 1906 is treated in Gabaccia, *Foreign Relations: An International History of U.S. Immigration* (forthcoming).

exclusion of Chinese laborers. After 1900, references to immigr* consistently outnumbered emigr* but only after 1920 did immigr* attain the very large majorities emigr* had enjoyed in the 1850s. In fact, by 1930, the relative frequency of the two terms had almost exactly reversed.

Unfortunately for my purposes, the publication of the *Los Angeles Times* began only in 1881 and I did not have access to digitized versions of earlier San Francisco newspapers that might have allowed for a more exact comparison to the *New York Times* between 1850 and 1880.³² Still, my analysis of the *L.A. Times* suggests that Californians were enthusiastically using immigr* already in the early 1880s—10-20 years before New Yorkers showed the same enthusiasm for it. Especially—some might say “fanatically”—focused as they were on migration from across the Pacific, Angelenos’ preference for immigr* over emigr* remained double that exhibited by New York journalists between 1880 and 1920. Only after 1920 did the ratio of usage of immigr* to emigr* converge in the two cities, making immigr* the term overwhelmingly preferred on both coasts. This transition occurred during nation-wide debates that resulted in the closing of U.S. doors to immigrants from Asia and the heavy restriction of immigrants from southern and eastern Europe (the migrations that more concerned New Yorkers).

Readers may plausibly see in these figures support for the arguments of Moon Ho-Jung, who, based on his reading of congressional debates, asserts it was the invention of the Chinese “coolie” and the concomitant racialization of immigrants as free, white

³² The website of Proquest Historical newspapers promises an early San Francisco newspaper, *The San Francisco Chronicle*, “soon.” A researcher’s note: colleagues and I lobbied two years before getting access to the *L.A. Times* from our University of Minnesota library administration. The type of research I pursue may very well in the future become the preserve of scholars at well-endowed private universities.

Europeans that transformed the U.S. “from a slaveholding nation to a ‘nation of immigrants.’” Like most historians before him, however, Ho-Jung has read sources that discuss emigrants and translated them for modern readers into discussions of immigrants. (He cites a puzzled U.S. consul in Hong Kong asking advice about “what is a ‘Coolie’ as here defined, and what is a free emigrant?”)³³ It was not the supposedly welcomed Europeans—a group that in California, and especially among the anti-Chinese activists, included the Irish --who were most often labeled as immigrants. On the contrary it was the hated Chinese and, in the east, the disparaged Italians. (While westerners described the importation of coolies, easterners worried over Italians traveling under contract as “padrone slaves.”)³⁴ The terms coolie (signifying unfree labor from Asia) and the term immigrant (used by Ho-Jung to mean free labor from Europe) had still not become linked as a binary of opposites as we think of them today. On the contrary, as Table 1, below,

Table 1: Ratio of “Immigrant*” to “Emigrant*” in Discussions of Specific Groups, 1881-1930

	<i>L.A. Times</i>	<i>N.Y. Times</i>
Chinese	4.4	3.9
Irish	1.1	.8
Italian	4.0	4.2

³³ Moon-Ho Jung, “Outlawing ‘Coolies’: Race, Nation, and Empire in the Age of Emancipation,” *American Quarterly* 56, 3 (September 2005), p. 699. On the binary opposition of immigrant and coolie, see Jung, *Coolies and Cane*, p. 4.

³⁴ Luciano J. Iorizzo and Francesco Cordasco, *Italian Immigration and the Impact of the Padrone System* (New York: Arno Press, 1980); Guenther Peck, *Reinventing Free Labor: Padrones and Immigrant Workers in the North American West, 1880-1930* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

suggests, they were often synonyms that both contrasted negatively to the more positive term *emigr**. On the negative associations of *immigr** with undesirable immigrants, New Yorkers and Angelenos agreed. They referred to the Irish in roughly equal proportions as *emigr** and as *immigr** (a ratio of *immigr*/emigr** of .8-1.1). But when contemplating migrants from China or from Italy, journalists on both coasts preferred the terminology of *immigr**, and they did so by a factor of about four. Boolean searches suggest further that New Yorkers especially associated *immigr**, and specific groups such as the Italians and Chinese, with industrial society and with what contemporaries termed “the social question”--a range of new economic problems, including labor, class conflict, wages, and strikes. Both New Yorkers and Angelenos also strongly preferred to use *immigr** over *emigr** when discussing coolies and *padroni*.

A Boolean search confirms further the strong association of *immigr** with movements to regulate, restrict and exclude. See Figure 6. During periods of particularly intensive political debate (e.g. the 1850s, early 1890s and 1920s), both *emigr** and *immigr** appeared in about equal numbers in articles about restriction. But over the entire period, *immigr** was almost twice as likely as *emigr** to be associated with exclusion, restriction and regulation and this was particularly true during the 1880 debates about Chinese exclusion and the exclusion of contract laborers of all backgrounds (passed as the Foran Act of 1885).³⁵ In contrast to earlier east coast nativist groups that had emphasized their Americanism, distinguishing themselves from aliens or foreigners (the “American Party” of the 1850s; the American Protective Association of the 1880s), the

³⁵ On the Foran Act, see Michael LeMay and Elliott Robert Barkan, *U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Laws and Issues: A Documentary History* (Westport, CT: Greenwood, 1999), p. 56.

Harvard nativists who organized themselves in 1894 chose the name Immigration Restriction League (IRL). For the next thirty years this group would “advocate and work for the further judicious restriction or stricter regulation of immigration,” mainly, although not exclusively, in the halls of Congress.³⁶ Their most important and early demand was imposition of a literacy test on all arrivals.³⁷ Their purpose was to diminish migration from the peripheries of Europe. Odd as it seems to contemporary ears, the term immigrant initially built a poor foundation on which to begin to build a celebratory portrait of the United States as a “nation of immigrants.” Immigr* was the preferred terminology of restrictionists; it was closely tied by context and chronology to efforts to exclude. Against this rock, the early inventors and users of the phrase “nation of immigrants” foundered for many, many years.

The Early, Unsuccessful History of the Nation of Immigrants

Historians now generally accept that the U.S. became what Erika Lee has called a gatekeeping nation in the years between 1870 and 1930; they recognized that immigrants, in Roger Daniels’s words “were “not like us.”³⁸ Rather than the classical era of welcome for the mass immigrations from Europe, the Gilded Age and Progressive Era, 1870-1930, is now viewed by scholars as the age of restriction’s spread and triumph. It is in this shifting context that the nation of immigrants was invented. Given the negative

³⁶ Harvard has digitized much of the IRL’s archive. See *Constitution of the Immigration Restriction League* (Boston: IRL, n.d.), <http://pds.lib.harvard.edu/pds/view/5233215>

³⁷ The most complete study of the campaign for the literacy test is Robert F. Zeidel, “The Literacy Test for Immigrants: A Question of Progress,” (January 1, 1986). *ETD Collection for Marquette e-Pubs*. Paper AAI8708749. <http://epublications.marquette.edu/dissertations/AAI8708749>

³⁸ Erika Lee, *At America’s Gates: Chinese Immigration During the Exclusion Era, 1882-1943* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004); Roger Daniels, *Not Like Us: Immigrants and Minorities in America, 1890-1924* (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 1997).

associations of immigr*, it is easy to understand the extremely slow and contested spread, documented in Figure 1, of what was to become a celebratory portrait of American nation-building and inclusiveness.

The first, extremely scattered, digital appearances of the keyword “nation of immigrants” date from the 1860s, 70s and 1880s.³⁹ Early uses of the keyword document how, in decidedly differing ways, racialized exclusions and debates about exclusion of first the Chinese and then the newer immigrants from southern and eastern Europe, along with concerns about the status of newly emancipated slaves, became midwives to its birth.

On Wednesday, February 19, 1879, the San Francisco German-American lawyer, judge, and former state and federal Senator, John Sharpsteen Hager (who had been born in New Jersey in 1818), proclaimed to the Constitutional Convention of the State of California that “We are a Nation of Immigrants and have been a nation of immigrants.” At the moment he spoke, Hager was engaged with his colleagues in a debate over limiting the use and teaching of languages other than English in California’s common schools. Hager opposed the use of languages other than English. He asserted that the U.S. was a nation of immigrants in order to establish that he felt no disrespect for the home of his own (German) ancestors or others, noting that “our people come from all parts of the world” (although the parts he subsequently named were all in Europe). Hager denied having any “prejudices of race but I am in favor, sir, of one flag, one language, and one

³⁹ I am currently seeking to confirm and to contextualize an early use of the term by a New York businessman in 1861; a Googlebook search suggests that he asserted “We are a nation of immigrants, and have no right to shut the door against the Chinese any more than we have against the people of Ireland.” *Annual Report of the Corporation of the Chamber of Commerce of the State of New York* (New York: Chamber of Commerce, 1861), p. 119.

country,” and he concluded by asking “If we must teach the German children in their language, must we not also teach the Chinese in their language?”⁴⁰

Hager thus quickly revealed himself to be what his contemporaries at the convention surely already knew-- an anti-Chinese zealot with close ties to the European working-men of San Francisco. Unlike those Irish workers (whom he and others at the time more typically called emigrants, as Table 1 suggested), the Chinese were not to be part of Hager’s nation of immigrants. In 1884, Hager became the collector of customs for the port of San Francisco, where he persistently refused to admit merchants arriving from China, even though the 1882 exclusion law permitted their entrance. (Many merchants then made habeus corpus appeals to the federal district courts and were admitted.) Hager raged throughout his term that he would not tolerate such “interference” by federal judges.⁴¹ For Hager, as Moon Ho-Jung might have predicted, building a nation of immigrants could be imagined only after the elimination of slavery and the exclusion of Chinese as coolie, unfree labor. Westerners, as we saw above, long remained reluctant to use the phrase “nation of immigrants” at all, in part because the term immigrant was so negative.

Thus, for many decades, it was easterners and Midwesterners who first battled among themselves over the meaning of the “nation of immigrants.” A second example of

⁴⁰ *Debates and Proceedings of the Constitutional Convention of the State of California, Convened at the City of Sacramento, Saturday, September 28, 1878* (Sacramento : State office, J. D. Young, Supt. State printing, 1880-1881), p. 1410. A key subtext in this debate was the meaning of “nation” to the debaters. Even with the end of Civil War and Reconstruction, notions of states right and state sovereignty died hard, and Californians clearly still disagreed passionately about the meaning of “E pluribus unum” which was mobilized in this particular debate by both the opponents and advocates of teaching in languages other than English.

⁴¹ Christian J. Fritz, “A Nineteenth Century ‘Habeas Corpus Mill’: The Chinese before the Federal Courts in California,” *The American Journal of Legal History* 32, 4 (October, 1988), p. 366. See also, Lucy Salyer, “Captives of Law: Judicial Enforcement of the Chinese Exclusion Laws, 1891-1905,” *The Journal of American History* 76, 1 (June 1989): 91-117.

an early use of this keyword in digitized texts comes from Michael Epaphras Strieby (1815-1899) who, while a member of the same generation as Hager, was instead an advocate of racial equality. Strieby was both an easterner and a man of the cloth, a graduate of Oberlin who worked with Booker T. Washington on the education of both Native Americans and emancipated slaves at the Hampton Institute; he remained an active missionary for the Presbyterian Church in the later years of his life. In the early 1880s, Strieby lectured on the Brotherhood of man (and included the African among “the three brothers who settled America”).⁴² Along with other missionaries, he protested to Congress that the “obnoxious features of the Geary bill” (allowing the exclusion of Chinese laborers from the U.S.) would not only result in retaliation by the Chinese government against American missions but sully “the reputation of American Christianity and its influence in the world to-day.” The missionaries insisted that the Geary bill contained “the most outrageous regulations ever imposed in a civilized community on a peaceable people within its borders.”⁴³

In 1888, Strieby addressed the Annual meeting of the American Missionary Association in Providence, R.I. Speaking as the group’s Associate Secretary, his topic was “American Freedmen and African ‘Evangelization.’” Strieby asserted that “America is a nation of immigrants, mostly from Europe and Africa.” He continued, noting that “The Europeans soon assimilate, and only the tradition of the individual family tells of the particular nation from which it came. But the African immigrants are still, after nearly 300 years’ residence in America, separated from the white race by visible marks of color

⁴² “American Missionaries: The Rev. Strieby on the Brotherhood of Man,” *New York Times*, Oct. 27, 1887, p. 2.

⁴³ “Chinese Exclusion Act—Retaliation Feared if it be Enforced—Repeal Called For,” *New York Times*, Jan. 27, 1893, p. 2.

and features, and are thus, at the same time, identified with the land of their fathers.”

Rather than dismiss that identification negatively or attribute it exclusively to the hostility of whites, Strieby saw the persisting connection to Africa as an opportunity for achievement among emancipated slaves. They were, he argued, excellent candidates for mission work in Africa.⁴⁴ For Strieby, Africans were part of the nation of immigrants.

Significantly, too, assimilation was not a requirement of belonging to that nation.

Connections to the distant homeland could, and did, persist, creating opportunities, as the missionary Strieby saw it, for the United States to expand its influence abroad.

Clearly, “nation of immigrants” carried a complex load of associations for its earliest users. Disagreements among them seemed particularly sharp in the late 1880s and 1890s, as use of the term spread modestly. Thus, for example, in 1889, reformers attending the Buffalo meeting of the Association of Charities and Corrections debated a committee report on immigration after listening to the Congregationalist minister Myron W. Reed of Denver (who described the Chinese and then Huns and Poles as the kind of light-shunning insects and reptiles that live under rotten logs) and to a defense of immigrants (including of the Chinese) by the Cornell social scientist, Franklin B. Sanborn. In her own intervention in the debate Josephine Shaw Lowell, the noted Boston female charity worker, invoked the nation of immigrants for the assembled crowd of reformers. But she did so negatively and in a manner that showed her close intellectual ties to the east coast elite professors who were popularizing a theory of racial science that traced American democracy to the forests of northern Europe. “We are indeed a nation of immigrants,” Shaw proclaimed, in syntax that would become formulaic, “but for a

⁴⁴*The American Missionary* 42, 12 (December, 1888), p. 52.

thousand years before those immigrants came here they had been trained in self-government.” By contrast, the immigrants arriving in the U.S in the 1880s, she concluded, “come under a sort of slavery.”⁴⁵

When, in 1894, Harvard professors organized the Immigration Restriction League, yet another one of their neighbors, William Lloyd Garrison, Jr., son of the deceased abolitionist, spoke out against restriction with another, more positive portrait of the nation of immigrants. In a speech to the Reform Club of Boston on April 10, 1896, Garrison worried over “what becomes of the rights of the excluded” in a “nation of immigrants and the children of immigrants” when those earlier immigrants, “having obtained possession of the continent,” now consider the “the feasibility of barring out other immigrants.”⁴⁶ Unlike Strieby’s earlier remarks to missionaries, Garrison’s speech was quickly picked up by legislators in Washington where the Immigration Restriction League had by 1896 introduced their demand for a literacy test.⁴⁷ Thus began the short, early career of the phrase in Congress (See Figure 1).

Of the Congressmen who introduced the keyword into debates over the literacy bill (with or without citing Garrison), all were foreign-born, midwestern Republicans who opposed the Immigration Restriction League’s proposals. All, furthermore, were

⁴⁵ *Proceedings of the National Conference of Charities and Correction* (Boston: Press of George H. Ellis, 1888), pp. 426, 435.

⁴⁶ Garrison’s speech is mentioned in James M. McPherson, *The Abolitionist Legacy: From Reconstruction to the NAACP* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995), p. 327.

⁴⁷ Garrison was directly quoted and cited by Representative Richard Bartholdt, a German-born Republican from Missouri, addressing the House on May 19, 1896, 54th Congress, *Congressional Record*, p. 5422. “HeinOnline Congressional Documents.” Knute Nelson, the Norwegian-born Senator from Minnesota had already introduced the phrase without citation in an earlier speech on May 14, 1896, *Congressional Record*, p. 5221; Andrew Kiefer, German-born and also from Minnesota, would use it again in a speech he introduced into the Appendix that same year. 54th Congress, 1st Session, *Congressional Record, Appendix*, p. 370.

representatives from states—Missouri and Minnesota—with large populations of Germans, Norwegians and Swedes. Congressmen with similar backgrounds or constituencies continued to in the years between 1870 and 1930 invoke the nation of immigrants in Congressional debates in 1897 and 1898 and again in the years prior to World War I, but they did not succeed in turning it into a useful slogan in their efforts to counter restrictionists and they soon abandoned it.⁴⁸ As late as 1916, Massachusetts Representative Frederick H. Gillett continued to echo Josephine Shaw Lowell in his own intervention in debates over the literacy requirement, first by acknowledging “we are a nation of immigrants” only to argue for restriction on the grounds that “those who first established our Government one hundred and twenty years ago had inbred in them from the struggle of a thousand years the self-reliant and self-restraining spirit essential to successful democracy.”⁴⁹

With the term immigrant still firmly associated with restriction, the nation of immigrants continued to be invented in order to write its obituary. Even in the ferocious battles over immigration restriction that raged in the Senate and House of Representatives between 1921 and 1924, the only voice that acclaimed the U.S. as a nation of immigrants was a restrictionist, Representative Clarence F. Lea, from California. Lea acknowledged the continuing negative associations of immigr* but lectured his fellow Congressmen, “To us, the word ‘immigrant’ should not be offensive. We are a ‘nation of immigrants

⁴⁸These were a somewhat more mixed group than the earliest Congressional enthusiasts. All were in the House of Representatives but more were Democrats and there were a few who probably considered themselves in the language of the times “old stock Americans.” In addition to Richard Bartholdt, cited above, invokers of the nation of immigrants included Horace Mann Towner, a Republican Representative from Iowa; Augustine Lonergan, Democratic Representative from Connecticut, Charles Otto Lobeck (the child of German immigrant parents), a Democratic Representative from Nebraska; Adolph J. Sabath, a Czech-born and Jewish Democratic Representative from Illinois; and George John Kindel, another son of German immigrants, who was a Democratic Representative from Colorado.

⁴⁹ 62nd Congress, 3rd Sssion, *Congressional Record*, Dec. 14, 1912, p. 653.

and the descendants of immigrants.” Lea then praised those who had subdued American Indians to “the white man’s civilization” but concluded that “true assimilation requires racial compatibility” and takes time. And so, with immigration continuing at 150,000, yearly and with the result, Lea claimed, of an “ever-accumulating number of unassimilated aliens,” he argued that “only by restriction” could assimilation be achieved.⁵⁰

Having failed to become a rallying cry in Congress, an odd and unacknowledged coalition that included intellectuals, social welfare activists, and spokesmen of east coast immigrant groups, along with the occasional businessman, nevertheless kept alive a more positive and celebratory version of the nation of immigrants even during the years of mounting demands for exclusion and restriction.⁵¹ Thus, on Thanksgiving Day in 1905, an assembly of Jewish New Yorkers celebrating the settlement of Jews in colonial America heard Philadelphia’s Rev. Dr. Joseph Krauskopf link what he called the Jewish Pilgrim Fathers to the American nation of immigrants.⁵² In 1906 L.J. Ellis, an agent for the Norfolk and Western railroad wrote in Franklin Sanborn’s *Journal of Social Science*, invoking the nation of immigrants in his defense of newer immigrants who were “only so slightly removed” racially from earlier Caucasian ones.⁵³ In 1907, an Irish American in

⁵⁰ 68th Congress, 2nd Session, *Congressional Record*, April 5, 1924, p. 5696. I am currently searching for a second reference made during Senate hearings on Emergency Immigration Legislation in 1921.

⁵¹ A very rough index is provided by my search of the—admittedly, notoriously unreliable—digitized archives of Google Books. With some preliminary elimination of “false positives” (almost all the product of incorrect dating), I am relatively confident of having found 1 use of the key word in 1860s; 2 or 3 in the 1870s, 2 in the 1880s, 2 or 3 in the 1890s, and then as many as 12 between 1900 and 1909, 20 in 1910-1919, and again in the 1920s, and then dropping off sharply after 1930.

⁵² *The Two Hundred and Fiftieth Anniversary of the Settlement of Jews in the United States* (New York: New York Cooperative Society, 1906), p. 128. In the same year Jewish New Yorker and teacher/principal Julia Richman, noted “Ours is a nation of immigrants. The citizen voter of today was the immigrant child of yesterday,” *American Education* (Sept. 1905), IX, 1 (1905), p. 17.

⁵³ L. J. Ellis, “Railroads and the Immigrant,” *Journal of Social Science* 44 (September, 1906), p.

Brockton, Mass., John S. Kent, chose much the same rhetorical strategy as Krauskopf had in New York, and emphasized the “comparatively speaking” few years that separated the arrival of the Mayflower at Plymouth and the Cunard line ships disgorging their crowds of Irish immigrants in East Boston.⁵⁴ The same year, *International Socialist Review* picked up the keyword, again associating it with the predominance of immigrant labor in the U.S.A.⁵⁵ But in 1909 Grace Abbott, of Chicago’s Hull House, told the National Conference for Good City Government that “In spite of the fact that we are nation of immigrants, Americans are inclined to resent the claims on their thought and attention which the last arrivals make....”⁵⁶

As World War I loomed and then began, advocates of restriction outside Congress also continued to proclaim the U.S. a nation of immigrants in order to announce its imminent death before hordes of undesirable newcomers.⁵⁷ While restrictionists dominated Congress, positive references to the U.S. as a “nation of immigrants” increasingly emerged from the pens of liberal historians (such as Max Ferrand, writing assertively and positively in the *New Republic* in 1916, and in his 1918 history of the U.S.⁵⁸ and Charles and Mary Beard, writing far more skeptically, and only about the colonial era, in their *History of the United States*).⁵⁹ Oddly (given their families’ recent immigrant routes), none of the midwestern historians who began writing the histories of

⁵⁴ Executive Committee, Old Bridgewater Historical Society, *Proceedings of the 250th Anniversary of Old Bridgewater, Mass.* (Bridgewater, Mass.: Arthur H. Willis, 1907), p. 122.

⁵⁵ “Immigration in the United States,” *International Socialist Review* 8,2 (August 1907), p. 65.

⁵⁶ “The Immigrant and Municipal Politics,” *Proceedings of the Cincinnati Conference on Good City Government and the Fifteenth Annual Meeting of the National Municipal League* (n.p: National Municipal League, 1909).

⁵⁷ See, e.g., Henry Stoddard Curtis, *Education through Play* (New York: Macmillan, 1915), p. 183.

⁵⁸ Max Ferrand, *The Development of the United States from Colonies to a World Power* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1918), p. 15.

⁵⁹ In their discussion of the Colonial Era, the Beards asked students to explain why “America has been called a nation of immigrants,” *A History of the United States* (New York: Macmillan, 1921), p. 18.

the Atlantic migrations in the aftermath of the war--neither George Stephenson nor Theodor Blegen at the University of Minnesota, nor Marcus Hansen at Harvard and Illinois, nor Carl Wittke at Case Western Reserve University—adopted this keyword of nation-building in their own work.⁶⁰ Only the Harvard Historian, Arthur Schlesinger (a second generation midwestern transplanted to Boston) described the United States as a nation of immigrants, in a 1927⁶¹ In the *New York Times*, the keyword instead first appeared in a statement from the National Association of Manufacturers in 1923, apparently in hopes of influencing the looming debates on immigration restriction; journalists, politicians and rabbis in New York also used it occasionally in the 1920s before use again dropped off as it had in Congress and as it did in the wider society.⁶²

A Belated Celebration

Only much later, during the Cold War, did the nation of immigrants again begin to re-enter policy discussions in Washington. Again, it was east coast immigration reformers, many of them now in the Democratic Party, who sought to purge immigration policy of the vestiges of scientific racism aimed at Europeans and Asians. In the 1950s, President Harry S. Truman found the keyword useful both in emphasizing the assimilatory successes of the U.S. (which understandably suffered from global Cold War attention to “Jim Crow” failures) and in his quarrels with Congressional leaders who insisted on continuing national origins quotas in the 1952 McCarran–Walter immigration

⁶⁰ A Googlebooks search of these authors’ writings confirmed my own research in the archived materials and publications of Blegen and Stephenson. On the writings of these “ethnic Turnerians,” see Jon Gjerde, “New Growth on Old Vines-The State of the Field: The Social History of Immigration to and Ethnicity in the United States,” *Journal of American Ethnic History* 18, 4 (1999): 40-65.

⁶¹ Arthur Meier Schlesinger, *Political and Social History of the United States: 1829-1925* (New York: Macmillan, 1927), p. 505.

⁶² *New York Times* May 16, 1923; March 2, 1924; July 6, 1926; June 25 1927.

Act.⁶³ Then, in 1958, presidential aspirant John F. Kennedy, likely with help from others, published his influential *A Nation of Immigrants* for the B'nai B'rith Anti-Defamation League's "One Nation Library."⁶⁴ By then Kennedy was already the best-known advocate of eliminating national origins quotas. "Nation of immigrants" suddenly became enormously popular, as Figure 1 demonstrated.

This growing popularity coincided oddly with the historical context in which it emerged. Invented and re-invented, and serving contradictory political goals, this keyword of U.S. nation-building did not become truly popular or widely used phrase until a century of restriction had done its work, and the proportion of the foreign-born had fallen from 15 to only 5 percent of the U.S. population. As Mae Ngai has suggested, celebrations of the U.S. as a nation of immigrants helped to convince Americans that immigration reform, by eliminating the racial and national origins discriminations of the 1920s, again made the United States a place that welcomed growing groups of new immigrants. In fact, the new immigration law of 1965 imposed the first ever numerical limits on visas available to residents of other American countries.⁶⁵ For potential migrants from Mexico (where the bracero guest worker program had only recently been eliminated) the result of this new restriction, in the form of increased entry without inspection and rising rates of illegality, would fuel yet another restriction movement in the last decades of the century.

⁶³ *New York Times*, March 25, 1952, p. 12; September 18, 1952, p. 20.

⁶⁴ Many have speculated there was a ghostwriter for *A Nation of Immigrants* (New York: Anti-Defamation League of B'nai B'rith, 1959). One recent study suggests it was an assistant of Kennedy, Meyer Feldman: see Daniel J. Tichenor, *Dividing Lines: The Politics of Immigration Control in America* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002), p. 205. Mae Ngai documents that Arthur Mann, a University of Chicago historian, had provided the outline, *Impossible Subjects*, p. 116.

⁶⁵ Ngai, *Impossible Subjects*, pp. 227-228.

Clearly a more detailed contextualization of Americans' new celebration of the nation of immigrants after 1965 must be undertaken. Among other things, we need to know why in recent decades, unlike in the early twentieth century, this keyword remained on the lips of so many Americans even during years when immigration was not the focus of major debates in Congress. One plausible explanation is that it became a re-assuring assertion of the ability of the United States to include in the face of the sharp racial and ethnic conflicts of the decade between 1965 and 1975, when African-Americans and Native Americans instead pointed to the country's long history of excluding them from power. Certainly, Figure 1 suggests that invocations of the nation of immigrants peaked in the decades after 1965 and not during debates of the immigration reforms of the early 1960s.

A Global Conclusion to a National Story: Rejecting the Immigrant; Insisting on the Foreigner

My analysis of digitized texts has, I hope, begun to make the ubiquitous keyword “nation of immigrants” appear, even to American readers, as strange and problematic, and thus as a product of human choices. The United States has not always celebrated itself as a nation of immigrants. The country's political elites were initially far more concerned to distinguish aliens from citizens than they were to identify the numbers or qualities of foreigners or foreign-born living on national territories. In the first half of the nineteenth century, Americans celebrated those foreigners who settled the land in the west as emigrants. Nativists instead disparaged the growing populations of wage-earning, urban, impoverished or Chinese arrivals whom they termed immigrants. Immigr* became

the terminology of restriction, and its use spread with demands to exclude first the Chinese, then all Asians and many southern and eastern European immigrants, too. Popular celebrations of the United States as a nation of immigrants are indeed very recent. Such celebrations may have gained ground among Cold War immigration reform but it seems they quickly became a defensive response to demands for social and political equality among formerly excluded groups who were never immigrants, notably African- and Native Americans.

I have emphasized the terminological choices made in the United States—first in the early years of the nineteenth century, then in the years between 1870 and 1920 and again during the Cold War—and I have called attention to the linkage of keywords and policy debates for a reason. Not all countries made the same terminological or policy choices as the United States in these years. Yet globalization and mass movements of people required choices in many lands, not just in the United States. In problematizing Americans' eventual adoption of "nation of immigrants" as a metaphor for American nation-building, it is important to ask also what those other choices were and what policy consequences might be associated with them.

In the early nineteenth century, *emigr** also became the most popular term for newly arrived foreigners throughout the British Empire. In Canada and Australia, too, emigrants were understood to be white pioneers who brought civilization to frontiers where small populations of savages still survived.⁶⁶ But *emigr** did not become equally popular in France or in Spanish-speaking Latin America. In the former, the commonly used term *émigré* instead carried with it an association with political exile and it applied equally to persons entering or departing France. In the latter, references to *inmigr**

⁶⁶ Gabaccia, "Nations of Immigrants," *Przegląd Polonijny* XXXI, 1 (2005): 31-50.

replaced discussions of foreigners already by the middle of the nineteenth century. As best as I have been able to ascertain, there were not emigrants in Argentina. Terminologically, then, different foundations for nation-building emerged quite early. While only a few English-speaking countries came to call themselves nations of immigrants, the national histories of France and Spanish-speaking countries in Central and South America generally acknowledge the importance of migration and population movements as demographic foundations for nation-building. They also note the successful transformation—through *mestizaje*, amalgamation, naturalization, republican citizenship or intermarriage—of outsiders into insiders.⁶⁷ They understand their nations as inclusive but not as nations of immigrants.

While the U.S. was gradually redefining emigrants as immigrants, countries such as Germany resisted viewing migratory laborers as immigrants. According to Dirk Hoerder “German discussions of ‘Auswanderung’ (the permanent movement of persons out of and away from the territory that became modern Germany in 1871) began in regional debates in a ‘Germany’ that did not yet exist.”⁶⁸ Germans in the 1820s and 1830s routinely referred to the *Auswanderer* (emigrants) traveling to North America, although they sometimes also called them *Ansiedler* (settlers) and referred to their settlements abroad as colonies rather than as *Siedlungen* (settlements).

Germany passed its first emigration law in 1897 but by then Germans who had once worried largely over the *Erhalt des Deutschtums* (retention of Germanness, often understood as a racial inheritance) among the *Auswanderer* (emigrants) were instead beginning to worry about the threat of over-foreignization (*Überfremdungsgefahr*) as

⁶⁷ Gabaccia, *Italy's Many Diasporas*, ch. 8.

⁶⁸ Gabaccia, Hoerder and Walaszek, “Emigration and Nation-Building during the Mass Migrations from Europe,” in Green and Weil, *The Politics of Emigration*, p. 65.

large numbers of foreigners entered Germany to work or merely to transit to its emigration ports. Despite a half century of debates over *Auswanderung*, writes Hoerder, “Germans did not view those arriving as an *Einwanderung* (Immigration) of *Einwanderer* (immigrants) but rather as an *Ausländerzufuhr* (import of foreigners) of *Fremdarbeiter* (alien workers).”⁶⁹ When they referred to *Einwanderer* (immigrants), Germans usually still meant Germans who had emigrated to North America. Germany’s subsequent losses of territory and population during World War I intensified fears of *Überfremdung*. Whether in the Weimar Republic, National Socialist Germany or in the post-world war II Federal Republic of Germany, there would be no immigrants, as there were in the nations of the Americas, in France, or in the former settler colonies of the British Empire. Instead the *Fremdarbeiter* would become *Gastarbeiter*. And they, along with their children, would remain foreigners. Dependent on foreign labor, Germany (and even more so Switzerland) long flatly denied being nations of immigrants. Indeed, Germans social scientists who studied the postwar *Gastarbeiter* often seemed not even to know there had been a history of migration into Germany a century earlier. Excluded from the nation, national histories ignored the very existence of foreign workers.

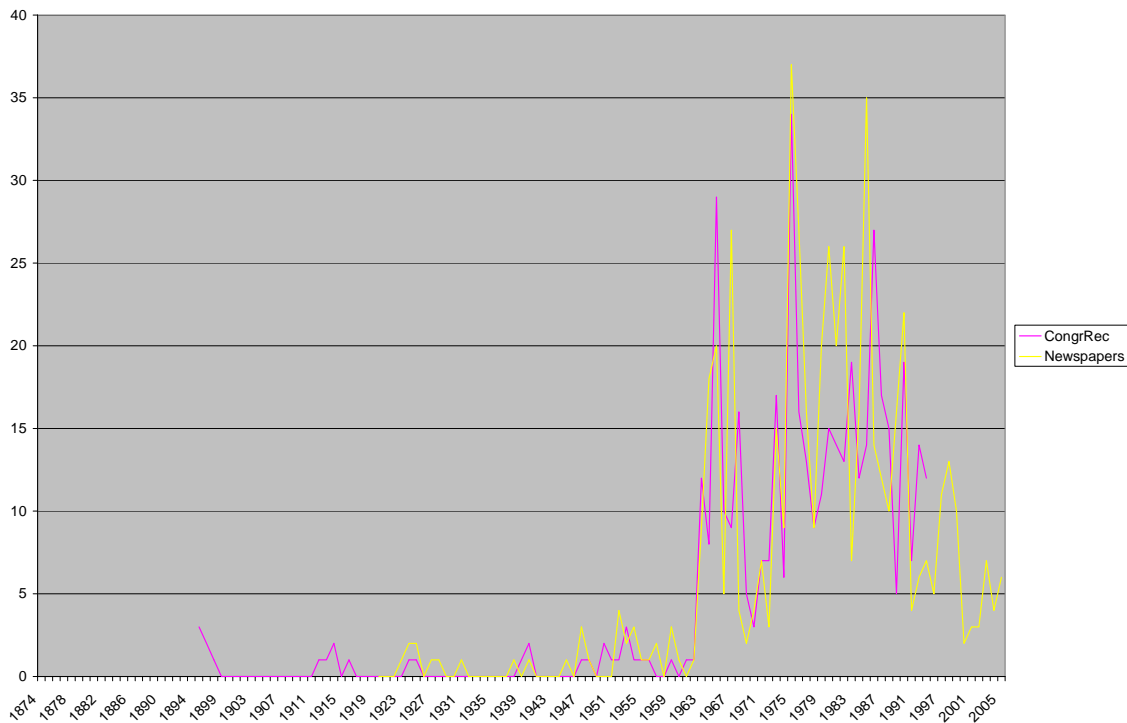
Here again, we see how words, as much as numbers, can matter in nation-building. Although *immigr** may have begun as a term of approbation associated with restriction, it nevertheless provided the building block for a new keyword—nation of immigrants—that celebrated inclusion, even during the American age of restriction. Germans would not have that ideological or linguistic option when they faced the German-born children and grandchildren of foreign workers in the 1970s and 1980s. Even if “nation of immigrants” serves to hide a long history of American restriction and

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 68.

exclusion (as I increasingly believe it does), it nevertheless asserts the importance of celebrating inclusion. Most of the modern nations that have the highest proportion of foreigners living on their national territories today resemble Germany or Switzerland more than they do the United States: they do not have their own, national, terminology for inclusion or for its celebration as a mode of nation-building.

ILLUSTRATIONS

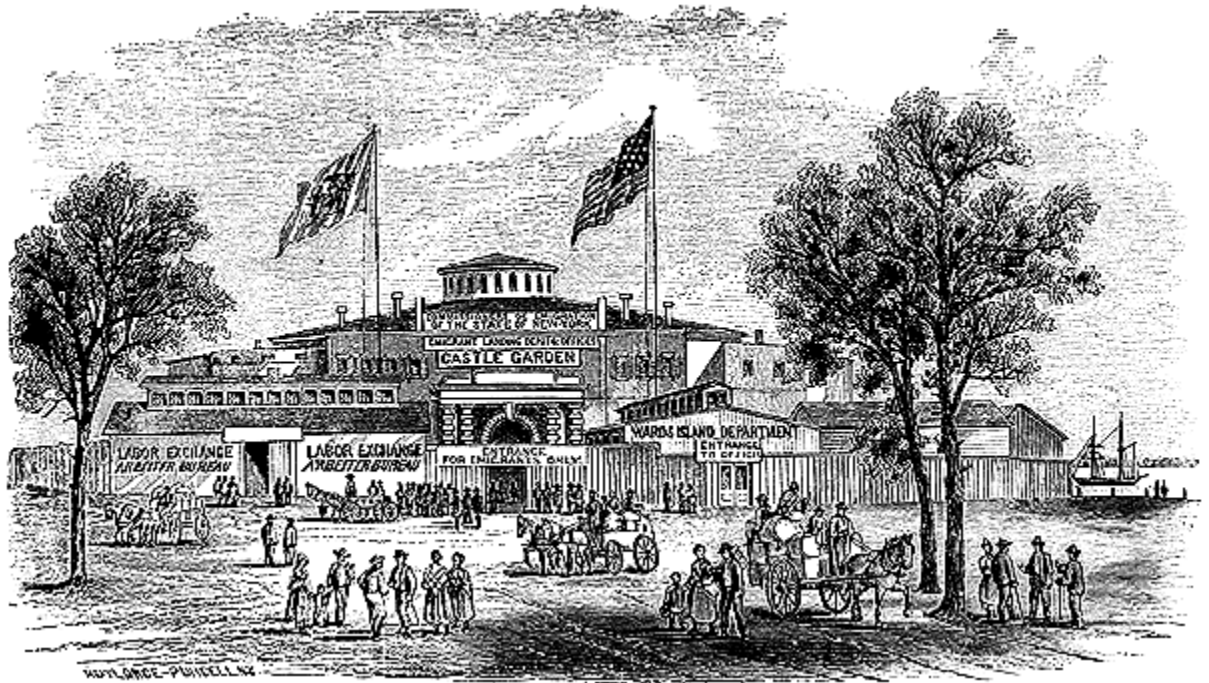
Figure 1 Use of “Nation of Immigrants” in Digitized Newspapers and Congressional Records, 1859-2003



SOURCES:

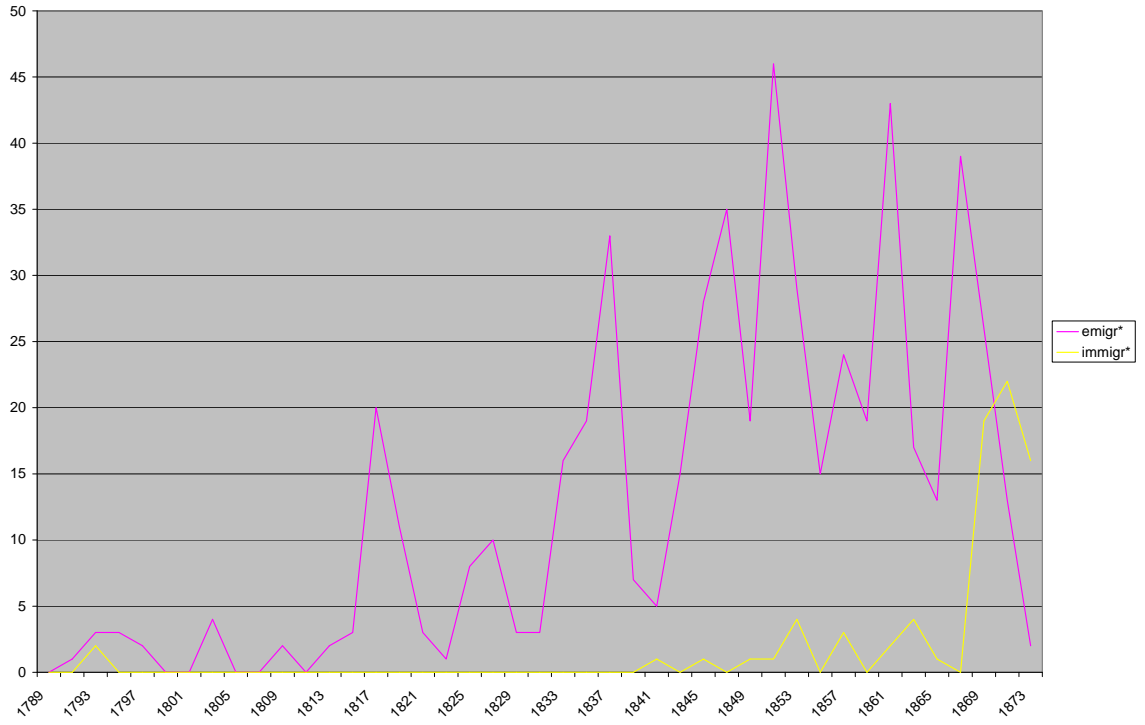
- “Proquest Historical Newspapers” for 1851-1986 (*The New York Times; The Wall Street Journal; Washington Post; The Christian Science Monitor; Los Angeles Times; Chicago Tribune*).
- “A Century of Lawmaking for a New Nation”, 1789-1875,” American Memory, Library of Congress.
- *Congressional Record*, 1873-2003, “U.S. Congressional Documents ,” HeinOnline.

Figure 2 Emigrant Landing Depot at New York's Castle Garden



URL: <http://www.theshipslist.com/pictures/castlegarden2.htm> (Accessed on April 22, 2007)

Figure 3 Emigr* and Immigr* in Digitized Congressional Documents, 1789-1875



SOURCE: “A Century of Lawmaking for a New Nation”), 1789-1875,”

American Memory, Library of Congress.

Figure 4 Emigr* and Immigr* in the Digitized *New York Times*, 1851-1930

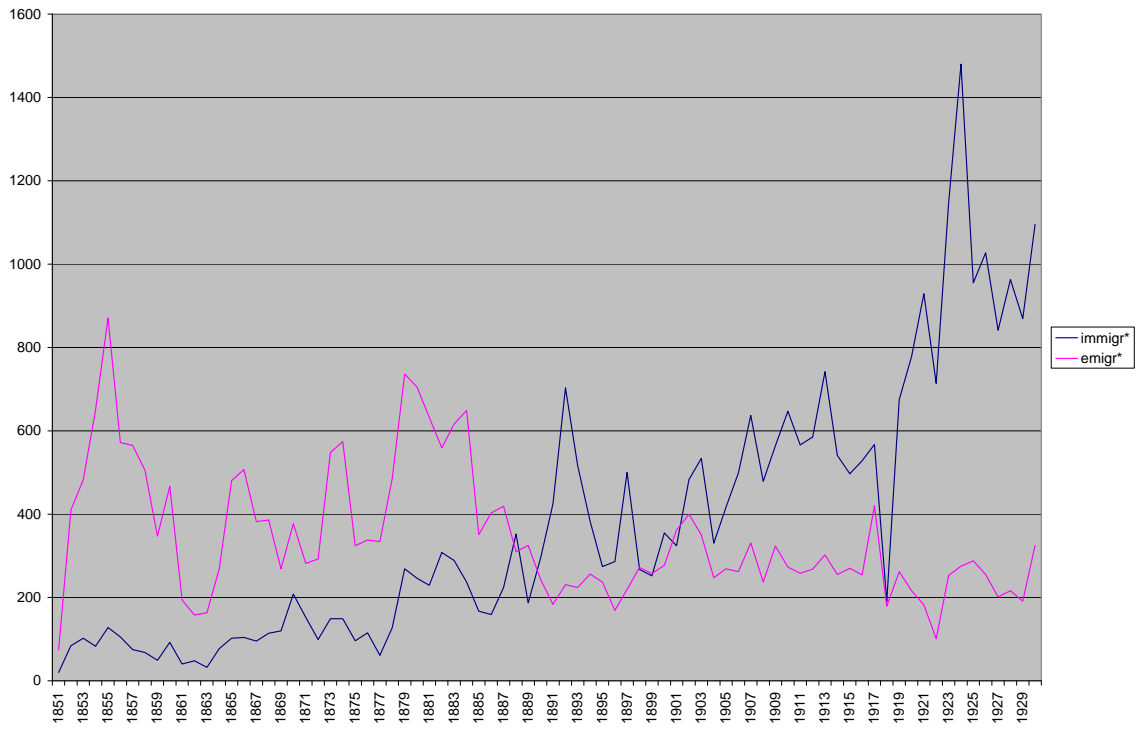


Figure 5 “Emigr*” and “Immigr” in the Digitized *L.A. Times*, 1881-1930

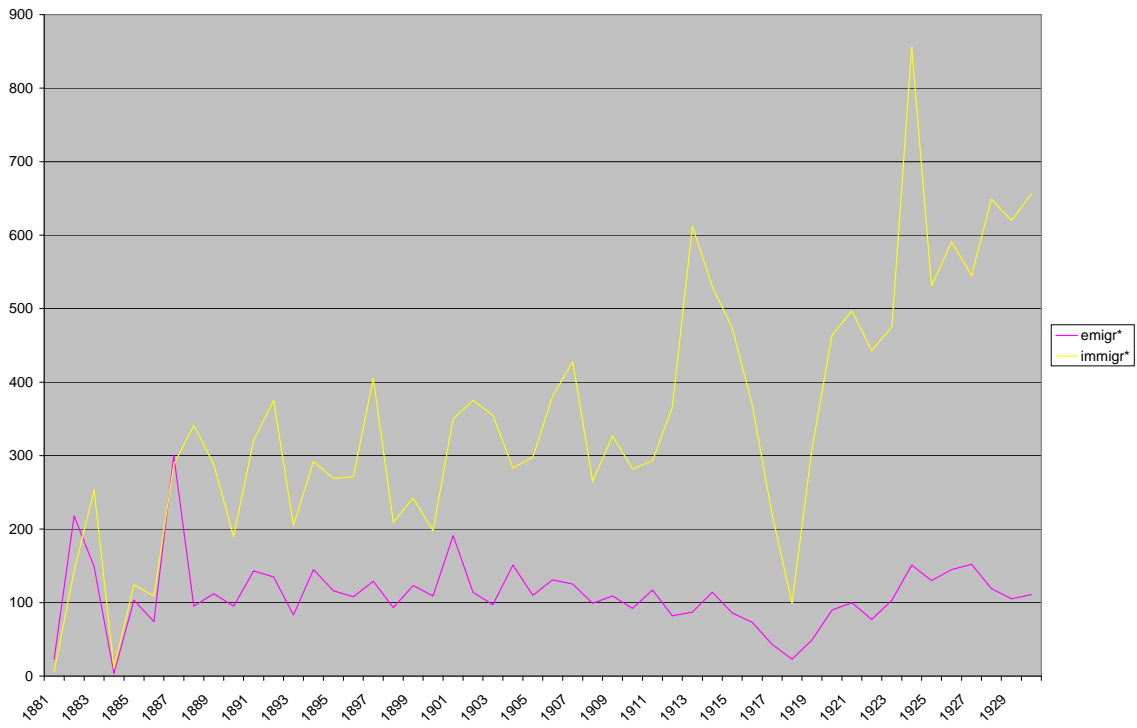


Figure 6 Percentage of Articles Associating Emigr* and Immigr* Negatively with Restrict*, Regulat*, and Exclusion* in the *New York Times*, 1851-1930

