

Confronting Immigration Exclusion, 1860s–1920s

The exclusion of immigrants by the U.S. Congress is usually seen by historians as a dreadful aberration from the nation's remarkable history of open borders. But for Asian immigrants, exclusion was the rule rather than the exception. From 1882 to 1934, every immigrant group from Asia faced immigration restrictions that were more severe than those faced by European groups. The Immigration Act of 1924 offers a notorious example of this anti-Asian discrimination. While setting up national quotas that dramatically decreased the numbers of European immigrants, Congress virtually stopped Asian immigration by refusing to grant even a token quota to Asian nations.

Scholars have long debated the causes of Asian immigration exclusion. Historically, the question has turned on the relative significance of three variables: class, race, and politics. The class argument portrays Asian immigrants as tools of big business used to undermine the rising power of labor unions. Asian exclusion, from this perspective, is seen as a victory for the white American working class. The race argument, on the other hand, underscores the common class position of Asian and white workers and as a result attributes Asian exclusion to the race consciousness, and not the class consciousness, of the American labor movement. Finally, the politics argument recognizes the importance of both class and race but casts exclusion as fundamentally rooted in negotiations among elected officials and the workings of the American political system during moments when the call for Asian exclusion was loudest.

In addition, historians have opened up an entirely new dimension of the exclusion question by focusing on the victims of exclusion. Recent studies have begun to reveal the creativity, and limited success, of Asians in seeking to enter the United States. But more than this, it has become apparent that in resisting exclusion, Asian immigrants created legal precedents, changed administrative policy, and in various other ways affected the larger process of American immigration. This was particularly true for Chinese immigrants, the first national group excluded from immigrating to the United States and the longest to be denied entry within its borders.

DOCUMENTS

The first six documents take up the issue of Chinese exclusion. Document 1 presents the views of Henry George, reformer, journalist and future author of *Poverty and Progress* (1879), a widely popular book that championed the notion of ending poverty by taxing rich land owners. A decade earlier, George supported Chinese exclusion because he believed that Chinese immigrants had a deleterious effect on white wages and a common American culture. Document 2 provides a counterpoint to the exclusionists in the form of an illustration depicting the imprisonment of the fiery anti-Chinese movement leader Dennis Kearney. In it Kearney is being taunted by Chinese workers holding the products of the industries in which they worked in San Francisco. Document 3, an excerpt from a speech delivered on the floor of the Senate by a senator who opposed Chinese exclusion, offers another counterpoint to anti-Chinese sentiment. The opposition failed and in 1882 Congress approved the Chinese Exclusion Act. The complete text of the Act is reprinted in Document 4 and reveals the mechanics of exclusion along with additional rationales for its necessity. Document 5 is a response by Chinese merchants, who as a class were free from immigration restrictions, to the renewal of the Chinese Exclusion Act in 1892. Document 6 is a photograph of Wong Kim Ark, whose successful Supreme Court case (*Wong Kim Ark v. U.S.*) in 1898 prevented the extension of immigration exclusion to American-born Chinese.

The next three documents focus on the exclusion of Japanese (and Korean) immigrants. Document 7 is taken from the proceedings of one of the most vociferous pressure groups for Japanese exclusion. It lays out the economic, racial, and sexual basis for opposing Japanese immigration and settlement. Document 8 is an editorial in a white workers' periodical opposing the anti-Japanese prejudice that was commonplace within the labor movement. Document 9 reveals the response by the editor of a Japanese newspaper to the 1924 exclusion of Japanese immigrants.

Document 10 is part of a published legal critique of the Supreme Court ruling that upheld the legality of East Indian immigration exclusion and various state laws discriminating against these immigrants.

1. Editor Henry George Supports Chinese Exclusion on Economic and Racial Grounds, 1869

The Wages Question

It is obvious that Chinese competition must reduce wages, and it would seem just as obvious that, to the extent which it does this, its introduction is to the interest of capital and opposed to the interests of labor. But the advocates, upon the Pacific Coast, of the free introduction of these people, hold that this is not so, and, insisting upon the literal acceptance of the half truth that "the interests of labor and capital are identical," argue that a reduction of wages by this means will be a real benefit to the community at large, by attracting capital and stimulating production,

From Henry George, "The Chinese in California," *New York Tribune*, May 1, 1869; reprinted in *Racism, Dissent, and Asian Americans from 1850 to the Present: A Documentary History*, ed. Philip S. Foner and Daniel Rosenberg (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1993), 84–87.

while it will do no harm to the working classes, as the lessening of the cost of production will so reduce prices that the laborer will be able to purchase with his lower wages as much as before. According to them, the saving effected by the use of low-priced Chinese labor is precisely the same as that effected by the use of machinery; and as the introduction of machinery has resulted in increased comfort and employment for all classes, so, they argue, will the introduction of Chinese labor result. For, say they, the occupation of the lower branches of industry by the Chinese will open opportunities for the displaced whites in the higher, giving them employment as foremen, superintendents, clerks, etc., when they lose it as journey-men mechanics.

This, I believe, is a fair statement of the opinions held by a large and powerful class, and inasmuch as they are put forward by the most influential portion of the press, and advocated by many who claim the position of public teachers, they are worth an examination in detail. And as in examining them we touch upon questions which are and would be of general interest, even if there was not a single Chinaman in America or any prospect of one coming here (and for the sake of greater clearness), let us eliminate at first the Chinese and local considerations, and treat the general problem. If a general reduction of wages would, as it claimed, work no hardship to the laborer, because prices would fall in the same proportion, then the converse is true that it would work no benefit to his employer—as his receipts would diminish in the same ratio as his expenses, while the power of his capital would not appreciate, and no increase of production could take place.

If this position is correct, then the knotty labor question is indeed solved; the interests of labor and capital are indeed identical. Provided the movement be general, to raise wages as high and as often as asked would be only an act of empty complaisance on the part of the employers; to submit willingly to any reduction, only cheap courtesy on the part of the employed.

This fallacy rests upon the assumption that all profits, rents, etc., would be reduced by and in the same proportion as the reduction in wages, which is manifestly absurd. Nor, when we speak of a "general reduction of wages" in the sense the term is used in this discussion, we do not mean all wages, but only the wages of manual labor. Wages of superintendence, the professions, etc., would be unchanged, and could only be affected indirectly and after some time, by a reduction in the wages of manual labor.

And, as consumers constitute a larger body than laborers, even if consumers get the whole benefit of the reduction in the cost of production consequent on the lowering of wages, it is evident that the laborer's gain as a consumer would be less than his loss as a laborer. It requires no argument to show that to take \$5 a day from five men, and to divide it again between them and two more, would be a losing operation to the five.

But consumers would not necessarily get the benefit of any part of the reduction in cost of production. The whole benefit would at first go to employers in increased profits. Whether any would subsequently come to consumers would depend upon the competition which increased profits caused. The more general the reduction of wages, the longer would it take for this competition to be felt; for if wages sank equally and profits rose equally, there would be no inducement for capital to leave

one occupation and seek another, and the fresh accessions of capital to produce competition could only come from abroad or from new savings.

Plainly, when we speak of a reduction of wages in any general and permanent sense, we mean this, if we mean anything—that in the division of the joint production of labor and capital, the share of labor is to be smaller, that of capital larger. This is precisely what the reduction of wages consequent upon the introduction of Chinese labor means. . . .

Character of the Chinese

The population of our country has been drawn from many different sources; but hitherto, with but one exception these accessions have been of the same race, and though widely differing in language, customs and national characteristics, have been capable of being welded into a homogeneous people. The Mongolians, who are now coming among us on the other side of the continent, differ from our own race by as strongly marked characteristics as do the negroes, while they will not as readily fall into our ways as the negroes. The difference between the two races in this respect is as the difference between an ignorant but docile child, and a grown man, sharp but narrow-minded, opinionated and set in character. The negro when brought to this country was a simple barbarian with nothing to unlearn: the Chinese have a civilization and history of their own; a vanity which causes them to look down on all other races, habits of thought rendered permanent by being stamped upon countless generations. From present appearances we shall have a permanent Chinese population; but a population whose individual components will be constantly changing, at least for a long time to come. A population born in China, expecting to return to China, living here in a little China of its own, and without the slightest attachment to the country—utter heathens, treacherous, sensual, cowardly and cruel. They will bring no women with them (and probably will not for a little while yet) except those for purposes of prostitution; and the children of these, of whom there are some hundreds in California, will exercise upon the whole mass but little perceptible influence, while they will be in all respects as essentially Chinese as though born and reared in China.

To a certain extent the Chinese become quickly Americanized; but this Americanization is only superficial. They learn to buy and sell, to labor according to American modes, just as they discard the umbrella shaped hat, wide drawers and thick paper shoes, for the felt hat, pantaloons and boots; but they retain all their essential habits and modes of thought just as they retain their cues. The Chinaman running a sewing machine, driving a sand cart, or firing up an engine in California, is just as essentially a Chinaman as his brother, who, on the other side of the Pacific, is working in the same way, and with the same implements, as his fathers worked a thousand years ago.