

H-Net Reviews

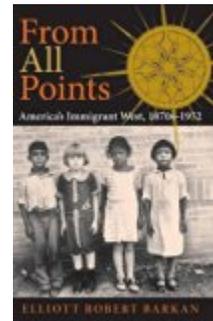
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Elliott Robert Barkan. *From All Points: America's Immigrant West, 1870s-1952*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2007. 598 pp. \$39.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-253-34851-7.

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Published on H-GAGCS (October, 2009)

Commissioned by Thomas Adam



Immigration to the American West: From All Four Points of the Compass

Elliott Robert Barkan comes ideally equipped for the task of this book, the first in a projected two-volume series. He spent a career teaching the history of immigration and race relations at California State University-San Bernardino and fifteen years as book review editor of the *Journal of American Ethnic History*, thus giving him a superb overview of the scholarship on immigration to this region. By his own description, the task he undertakes is “not only to move the immigrants’ role in the western economy to center stage but to move their broader experiences—their relations with the dominant society and with other groups—to center stage as well” (p. 21). By including vignettes of individual life stories, he manages to capture both the forest and the trees of the immigrant experience, and puts a human face on many of the general tendencies and developments he describes. The West in Barkan’s definition includes the Mountain and Pacific states as well as Alaska and Hawaii; it extends to Texas but not to the tier of Great Plains states from Oklahoma to the Dakotas.

This volume is clearly rooted in the historiographic issues of the twenty-first century. There is no trace of the western triumphalism of earlier generations of scholarship; one looks in vain in both index and bibliography for such names as Frederick Jackson Turner and Walter Prescott Webb, or even Ray Allen Billington. The West as a region saw a disproportionate impact of Asian and Mexican immigration, and as a result, Barkan devotes considerable attention to ways in which race interacted with ethnicity, for example, in the workplace and espe-

cially during labor conflicts. One of the main themes of the book is summed up thus: “The fate of many newcomers ... was tied so tightly to how they were ‘racially’ identified—and not just as white but how white, if white at all—that it frequently determined whether they were welcomed or excluded, well treated or mistreated, equitably rewarded or simply exploited, tolerated, or killed” (p. 7). Given this emphasis, it is rather surprising that there is only a brief reference to the anti-Chinese agitation of the Workingmen’s Party of California and no mention of its Irish immigrant leader Denis Kearney. Barkan does bring to light an obscure German immigrant, Jacob Weisbach, who as mayor of Tacoma in 1885 led a mob of five hundred in driving the Chinese out of the city (p. 64). But the brief mentions of the Asian Exclusion League omit the role of Norwegian immigrant Olaf Tveitmoe as its leader and chief publicist. More attention to these aspects would have reinforced a point made elsewhere in the book—for example, in relating the Cripple Creek, Colorado, labor conflicts—that European immigrants could be perpetrators as well as victims of ethno-racial discrimination and even violence.

Readers of this list are probably most concerned with the book’s coverage of Germans. Twenty-five pages of tables in the appendix make it easy to gauge the relative influx of various immigrant groups. Through 1910, when Germans peaked at nearly 210,000, they constituted the largest immigrant group in Barkan’s West, falling to second place in 1920, third by 1940, but only fifth and slipping in 1950. A book of this breadth necessarily leans

heavily on secondary works, and Barkan is handicapped by a dearth of studies on Germans anywhere in the West besides Texas. Thus judging by the index entries, Germans receive less coverage than, for example, Filipinos, a group they still outnumbered two to one in 1950.

Much of the available literature is thematic rather than ethnic specific. As a result, the two world wars receive considerable attention. With respect to World War I, Barkan concludes that “anti-German responses may have been less numerous and less concentrated in the West,” though he does relate a number of “hostile episodes,” focusing particularly on the situation in Montana where a recent posthumous pardon movement has provided documentation (pp. 206-207, 526). For the interwar period, Barkan provides a critical review of Franklin Delano Roosevelt’s policies toward refugees from Nazi Germany, and a good overview of the German émigré community in Hollywood and Los Angeles

in general. Another of his chapters, entitled “The Second World War’s Other Enemy Aliens: Italians and Germans,” comes to the unsurprising conclusion that German enemy aliens were treated better than Japanese-American aliens or citizens, but also to the surprising conclusion that “Germans, despite their large numbers in the West ... did not experience the ordeals of the Italians” (p. 403). “Professional ethnics” might remonstrate, but serious scholars would agree.

In summary, Barkan provides a view of immigration to the West that is both panoramic and analytical, above all highlighting the difference in reception that immigrants encountered depending on whether or not they were “visible minorities.” The relatively low profile of Germans, both in the book and in the society of the American West, can be taken as an index of their relatively easy acculturation.

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Citation: Walter D. Kamphoefner. Review of Barkan, Elliott Robert, *From All Points: America’s Immigrant West, 1870s-1952*. H-GAGCS, H-Net Reviews. October, 2009.

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