

Katherine Benton-Cohen. *Inventing the Immigration Problem: The Dillingham Commission and Its Legacy*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2018. 342 pp. \$29.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-674-97644-3.

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The belief that migration of people can or should be managed is deeply rooted in current political and popular discourse. Few argue today for a laissez-faire approach and instead speak of the “designing” of immigration policy or “selection” of immigrants. Critics often explain divergence from their ideal as policy failure either in its design or in its application or enforcement, and more important as a problem of governance. How did these ideas take shape? What do people expect of the government, which branch and level of the government, and in what aspects of immigration and immigrant lives? By definition, international migration transcends the nation-state, but why is it mostly considered in the context of domestic politics?

Katherine Benton-Cohen’s *Inventing the Immigration Problem: The Dillingham Commission and Its Legacy* looks into the crucial turning period at the early twentieth century when immigration regulation and restriction was about to become the norm in the United States. The book examines the role that the Dillingham Commission played in decisively pushing this dynamic by constructing immigration as a “problem” in several ways. First, the view that immigration was a problem that needed to be fixed was prevalent. The second related idea was that there were actual solutions to this problem. And most important was

the belief that the US government, above all, the federal government, was both responsible for and capable of providing solutions.

The Dillingham Commission should be familiar to scholars of US immigration history. The commission’s invention and distinction of “old immigration” from “new immigration” has shaped how historians talk about the histories of immigration. In terms of policy outcomes, the commission had enormous success, as many of its policy recommendations listed in its first volume, such as the literacy test, became law. Its forty-one-volume report has been a rich source for both contemporaries and later scholars of various disciplines. Scholars today still refer to the reports to study immigrant lives in the early twentieth century.

Yet Benton-Cohen’s book makes us realize how little we know about the commission. Surprisingly, with the exception of Robert Zeidel’s *Immigrants, Progressives, and Exclusion Politics: The Dillingham Commission, 1900-1927* (2004), this is only the second book on the commission. Scholars of immigration have written about how the commission’s conclusions led to a restrictive immigration policy and what became of the findings. Benton-Cohen’s examination of the internal workings of the commission is different and significant in that the book tells us about the little-

known aspect of how the commission produced its findings in the first place. The commission was a product of the Progressive Era, and it was novel for Congress to conduct social-science-based research rather than hold hearings. Thus, at one level, the book tells a story of the rise of immigration experts and their use of the federal government's power to pursue their research interests, to enhance the status of their discipline, to promote what they believed was a just social cause, and to build their own careers. At the same time, it is also about the failure of experts, the clash of allegedly scientific and objective knowledge, and the influence of political interests. The commissioners' final recommendations contradicted and simplified many of the published findings. Benton-Cohen illustrates how political pressure suppressed some of the important findings from even making it onto the pages. More important, immigrants themselves often resisted encroachment of the "experts" and the government into their daily lives and negotiated in their own ways to have their voices heard.

In addition to an introduction and a brief epilogue, the book consists of seven chapters. Adding color to the narrative, each chapter revolves around a few individuals, chosen from among the nine commissioners and over three hundred staff. Benton-Cohen's selection of the protagonists is balanced and provides a more wholesome picture of the commission while drawing our attention to its diversity and internal contradictions. Some members were powerful and prominent, such as the economist Jeremiah Jenks (chapter 1), Senator LeRoy Percy (chapter 7), or the famed anthropologist Franz Boas (chapter 6). Others exercised influence disproportionate to their academic standing, as in the case of W. Jett Lauck, the agent in charge of the industrial series (chapter 4). Others participated in an essential but less recognized role, such as Anna Herkner and Mary Mark (chapter 5), who investigated the "white slave" trade as undercover agents, or Yamato Ichihashi (chapter 2), an undergraduate assistant and a future Stanford

University professor. Finding information about these individuals demonstrates the depth of Benton-Cohen's research, which deserves recognition. The federal archives do not hold the organizational records of the commission. Benton-Cohen has created a database of all the staff, many of whom were previously unknown, and through exploring some thirty manuscript collections, she has reconstructed the stories of people surrounding the commission.

The book begins with two chapters on the Pacific and the Pacific coastal states and ends with a chapter on southern plantations along the Mississippi delta. This geographical framework offers historians a new view of the commission, which previous literature has most associated with restrictions placed on transatlantic immigration from southern and eastern Europe. In fact, aside from a volume on the Greek padrones system, the Japanese were the only people who were singled out as a "race" in the title of the reports (volumes 22 to 25). The commission was established in 1907, the same year as the United States and Japan reached the Gentlemen's Agreement to curtail Japanese immigration. The two opening chapters are significant not only because they point to another origin of the commission but also because they place the commission in a transitional period from a bilateral framework or diplomatic approach to a unilateral approach to immigration policy.

The first chapter centers on Jeremiah Jenks, a Cornell University economics professor, who entered the field of immigration through his early interests in colonialism in the Pacific. Jenks believed that "the federal government had a right—even an obligation"—to regulate and restrict immigration (p. 35). Chapter 2 proceeds to discuss in detail the commission's studies on Japanese immigrants and Ichihashi, a first-generation Japanese immigrant who served as a research assistant and interpreter. When US-Japan relations were rapidly deteriorating, with Japanese immigrants in-

creasingly being problematized, Ichihashi and the Japanese workers he interviewed offered an alternative view of Japanese immigrants as good citizens. By focusing on Jenks, a top commissioner, and Ichihashi, a student interpreter, the two chapters shed light on opposing visions of Asian immigration within the commission, with the former eventually suppressing the latter.

Throughout the book, Benton-Cohen makes the point that scholarship on the Dillingham Commission has overemphasized the influence of eugenics, and one of her purposes of focusing on Jenks in the first chapter is to point to the central role of economists. But this is not to say that the book discounts race. In fact, racial categorization was central to the commission's study. As Lauck wrote, the main purpose of the industry series he administered was to determine "the races which and the races which do not lower the standard of living" (p. 125). In addition, as Benton-Cohen points out, the commission measured its data primarily by race. What the book reveals is how extensively race permeated a wide range of academic disciplines, including economics, and Benton-Cohen seeks to carefully sort out biological determinism of eugenics from other forms of racial thinking that were so prevalent. While the commission borrowed its racial classification from the bureau of immigration, neither simply reflected racial thinking. Chapter 3 discusses the controversy over the classification of "Hebrew" as "race" that cut across nationalities, protests by Jewish organizations, such prominent Jewish leaders as Simon Wolfe and Max Kohler, and divisions among Jews. Research design determines the framework by which data gathered is interpreted, and the book shows the contested process of constructing race as a framework of understanding.

Organized lobbying was just one of the various responses to expanding power of the federal government, and Benton-Cohen describes daily resistance of ordinary immigrants. An example is chapter 6 on Boas's study of how immigrants' and

their children's bodies changed in the US. The author clarifies how Boas both differed from and resembled the eugenicists. Although he refuted the eugenicist argument that racial characteristics were immutable, Boas and the eugenicists shared the methodology of measuring bodies and more fundamentally the conviction that scientists and the government were entitled to intrude the most intimate sphere. But measuring bodies, especially those of children, was met with strong opposition from parents and immigrant communities. Benton-Cohen is attentive to how ordinary immigrants suspected and detested intrusion of experts and the federal government.

While most of the forty-one volumes credit such men as Boas, Benton-Cohen also calls attention to the neglected fact that more than half of the staff who undertook actual research were women. The commission provided one of the limited opportunities for college-educated and graduate school-trained women to bring their expertise to the service of the federal government. Benton-Cohen illustrates how these women combined their class and gender values with social science in their investigation and deployed the power of the federal government for their causes. Chapters 5 and 7 describe contrasting outcomes of women's involvement in the federal investigation of immigrant conditions. Chapter 5 sheds light on women who worked, sometimes anonymously, for the commission, such as Anna Herkner, Mary Mark, and Mary Philbrook, on a campaign against "white slavery," which successfully paved the way for the Mann Act. Chapter 7 tells a different story of Mary Grace Quackenbos, a lawyer at the Department of Justice, and her investigation of peonage conditions of Italian immigrants on a southern plantation. Peonage investigation largely faltered in the face of strong local and political opposition. In fact, commissioners from the South pressured the Dillingham Commission to produce a study that would discredit the Department of Justice's version. The two chapters show how federal

agencies offered competing versions of “objective fact.”

Ultimately, the Dillingham Commission’s study of immigrants boiled down to the question of Americanness. The most extensive and influential sixteen-volume industrial series called for the protection of the “American worker” defined as “old immigration.” The industrial series marked a sharp contrast with reports on the South advocating for more immigrants, which placed African Americans outside the sphere of “American workers.” Focusing on Lauck, now a little-known figure, Benton-Cohen explains the commission’s development of an economic argument for immigrant restriction in order to protect the “American standard of living.” At one level, as Benton-Cohen emphasizes, Lauck’s reasoning significantly differed from more essentialist grounds for restriction in the 1920s, with its emphasis on innate biological difference. At another level, the overarching emphasis on the American worker signaled transition to immigration policy that prioritized domestic interests over international relations, a unilateral over a multilateral framework of approaching immigration.

With thorough research and compelling evidence, Benton-Cohen’s book is not only an essential read for immigration historians but also an invaluable addition to a growing literature on the Progressive Era. As questions about the “immigration problem” are intensely debated in the US today, this book will help us reflect on its origins.

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Making of Modern America (2004) to be published by Hakusuisha Press in 2020 and a co-edited collection of essays *Introduction to History and Culture of the United States* (forthcoming in 2021).

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