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Mae M. Ngai. *Impossible Subjects: Illegal Aliens and the Making of Modern America.* Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003. 368 pp. $35.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-691-07471-9.

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The period between the immigration acts of 1924 and 1965 is somewhat neglected by immigration historians, perhaps because the period lacks heroic stories. Before 1924–or was that 1882 with Chinese exclusion–this nation of immigrants welcomed virtually all who wanted to come. Old immigrants or new, all were welcome to melt in the pot of America, and their stories were uplifting tales of hardship overcome, the American dream achieved. After 1965, the "New New Immigrants" flooded into America to a multicultural welcome, at least at first, and again some won the brass ring despite the odds, generating upbeat stories about the golden door and the land of opportunity–but there were few old-style heroic stories in the forty years when the United States tried to live without immigrants. As Mae M. Ngai documents, during this period, the heroes became villains.

Actually, the door never closed–immigration shrank greatly, but in only one year was there a negative total–but the criteria for admission changed. The transformation of the immigrant into an alien is one focus of this fine history. Another, and perhaps more important for its implications for the future, is the process of pushing the alien first under then outside the law. Ngai explores the creation of the idea of national origin as a racial category, an identifier, and eventually a basis for exclusion. First define alien. Next define illegal in the context of immigration. Put the two together into exclusion. Ngai argues that the process, which occurred in the Progressive Era, was undertaken with a foreordained conclusion and a great deal of deception. Racism underpinned the supposedly scientific justifications for exclusion. Having established that the policy was racist from conception, Ngai explores several early cases of exclusion. Asians and Asian Indians were excluded by law, unprotected by the Constitution, and under the power of the sovereign nation to accept or exclude as it chose. The status of Mexican-Americans in the southwest deteriorated despite their protection as citizens by treaty and the Constitutional criterion of whiteness. Enforcement was inconsistent on the Canadian and Mexican borders. Crossing the southern border was a violation of law, while crossing the northern border was an administrative error. Eventually, Mexicans and Mexican Americans came to be lumped together as illegal, and eventually citizens became aliens. Canadians, on the other hand, no matter how illegal, remain legal.

The section on the enforcement of the new laws is vital because it documents the shift from one characterization of the foreigner to the other. Before the 1920s there was no law enforcement because there was no law to violate. Ellis Island controls were administrative. The establishment of the Border Patrol as a law enforcement agency coincided with the shift of immigration violation from an administrative to a criminal matter. The immigrant now had potential criminal status.

To show how the redefinition of some classes of immigrants as illegal aliens worked, Ngai examines groups affected by the change: Filipinos repatriated when they tried to acculturate, Mexicans and Mexican Americans defined interchangeably as illegal, Chinese forced to confess a fraud the system forced on them, and Japanese Americans forced to choose between the Japanese and American sides of their hyphen. Although the stories are familiar, Ngai provides a fresh perspective by treating them in the context of the developing concept of illegality by class rather than as an individual.

For example, the Japanese-Americans were U.S. citizens–before, during, and after their internment. Without backing of law, the U.S. government chose to redefine them as Japanese, even while it chose to define Italian and German Americans as American. The War Relocation Authority, assuming that an assimilated ethnic was a loyal ethnic, attempted to ban Japanese language, religion, and culture in its crusade to Americanize the already American Japanese. The result was that the internees were conflicted between their two identities and forced into a defense of their Japanese side that they did not necessarily feel. They were Americans, after all.

For another example, the Chinese lived for genera-

tions with a fraud, a lie forced on them by the Chinese Exclusion Act. The original legal Chinese merely had to show a document or testify about his family background. Immigration officials rarely challenged the document or statement. Once immigration became illegal for other than family members, non-related Chinese entered by elaborating on the original family stories. With time, Chinese immigration was a process of using a false name that was certified by immigration on a fictitious genealogy. Fraudulent "families" proliferated. By the 1950s, when the paper families ended with the Chinese Confession program, there were 11,000 who confessed to having used false names to immigrate, 19,000 named by others, and 6,000 family tree slots still unused.

Having discussed selected cases through the 1950s, Ngai backtracks to show the demise of exclusion. She addresses the development of ethnic diversity/cultural pluralism as a replacement for the melting pot, Americanization and anti-alienism. In chapter 7, she traces pluralism from its progressive origins through the immigration reform of 1965. She notes the underlying nationalism in the liberal assertion that accepting pluralism was a thing that the superior societies did, another affirmation of the unique superiority of the United States in world history–the special, chosen, Anglo-Saxon United States. Magnanimity was an expression of exceptionalism.

There was a short window during and after the war when this nationalist largesse seemed about to open the world to the blessings of the United States in the American century (desegregation, eased immigration restrictions, and amnesty), then the Cold War slammed that door shut in a struggle between good and evil. Pluralism became a political rather than a cultural phenomenon as the society united as one nation, hegemon of all. The McCarran legislation was a Cold War tool against communism more than it was immigration reform. McCarran-Walter was a consolidation rather than a reform bill–and internal security was separate because the Senate was in a hurry and did not want to wait for the Immigration Act to pass. The one reform, elimination of Asian exclusion, still was within the context of racial quotas and favorable propaganda opposing our good Asians to their bad ones. The door remained unopened. Occupational preferences, included for the first time, meant that, "the country could select the alien instead of the alien selecting the country" (p. 238).

Truman vetoed the act because he disliked the racist aspects, but Congress overrode his veto. The Truman immigration reform commission that followed began the thirteen-year debate that culminated in the 1965 act. The reform coalition of liberal religious, ethnic, and labor groups mobilized to work the political system. Public intellectuals such as Oscar Handlin were important. John Higham's *Strangers in the Land* (1955) was an important work, as was John Kennedy's *A Nation of Immigrants* (1964). But the coalition was blind to the third-world and human rights perspectives. They worked from a position that was purely Cold War politics. What we used to call consensus, Ngai calls "hegemonic discourse" (p. 245). According to Ngai, the liberals' notion of equality was unfair because it was the same for every country (and by extension for every domestic ethnic group) even though not every country had the same needs. The underlying assumption was that the equal treatment would be in a white context. The people working to change the law had no expectation that it would alter the complexion of the post-1965 immigrant. As a matter of course, the Asian and Hispanic communities had no role in the debate.

An important point is that the act of 1965 retained the exclusionist character of the 1924 legislation. It just excluded different groups of people. And the establishment of quotas for the western hemisphere also made the likelihood of illegality greater for those newly excluded. Mexicans and Mexican Americans were broad-brushed as "wetbacks."

Ngai is an activist turned scholar, and she writes with passion rarely seen in a reworked dissertation. She rarely oversteps her sources, but it happens. She says, "Cold War politics and the sensationalized investigations against fraud reproduced racialized perceptions that all Chinese immigrants were illegal and dangerous" (p. 223). Ngai provides no polling data, news sources or anything to back up this statement; she footnotes only a direct quote from Dai-Ming Lee about how government should not smear the whole race with one single brush. That seems a thin document for a claim that "racialized perceptions" arose from politics and publicity.

Her big finish is probably unrealistic, and it brings the book in for a softer landing than her story might warrant. "In the globalized world of the early twenty-first century, when national borders have softened to encourage the movement of capital, information, manufactured goods, and cultural products, the persistence of hardened nationalist immigration policy would seem to demand our attention and critique" (p. 264). Attention and critique? How about storming the barricades to undo eighty years of racist injustice? On second thought, why not just back away and accept that opening the borders even more is not going to be U.S. immigration policy any time soon.

The story Ngai tells is complicated story, not par-

ticularly pretty, and its central characters too often find themselves defined as "wretched refuse" than as "huddled masses, yearning to breathe free." Ngai tells the story well and with enthusiasm. This book provides essential background for those who would understand how immigration policy came to be so hopelessly in disarray.

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