



Maddalena Marinari. *Unwanted: Italian and Jewish Mobilization against Restrictive Laws, 1882-1965.* Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2020. 280 pp. \$27.95, paper, ISBN 978-1-4696-5293-1.

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Green on Marinari, 'Unwanted: Italian and Jewish Mobilization against Restrictive Laws, 1882-1965' (2020)

As immigration continues to be a major focal point of political debate and social justice activism, contributions from historians and other scholars have sought to show that the same nativist oratory that governs recent attempts at restrictive legislation and the fight against it is nothing new. Maddalena Marinari's recent book, *Unwanted: Italian and Jewish Mobilization against Restrictive Laws, 1882-1965*, wades into this conversation by exploring the various ways ethnic groups have sought to alter and contend with restrictive legislation in the United States. Focusing on the Italian and Jewish immigrant communities through the use of manuscript collections, newspapers, and governmental documents, Marinari argues that the rise and codification of restrictive immigration legislation was not just a product of top-down directives but also a combination of actions from ethnic reform advocates as well as executive and congressional actors that helped shape immigration restriction throughout the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

Marinari's book is divided into two sections. The first, consisting of three chapters, focuses on the beginnings and consolidation of a restrictive immigration system from the late nineteenth cen-

tury until the close of World War II. During this time, early attempts at Chinese exclusion and European restriction began to merge, strengthening both congressional and public outcry for harsher immigration legislation. Early attempts by Italian and Jewish reform leaders to combat the rise of the Immigration Restriction League and the 1907 and 1917 Immigration Restriction Acts, as well as their relative inability to sway the opinions of the Dillingham Commission, provide an excellent backdrop through which Marinari explores the small victories of immigration reform advocates. These small victories, however, led only to piecemeal reforms, while at the same time calcifying and normalizing xenophobic thought processes that undergirded US immigration policy. As Marinari points out, these early rounds of negotiations between the legislative branch and reform advocates made abundantly clear that less liberal, more moderate changes would be the only path forward. As nativist sentiments hardened in the first decades of the twentieth century, Italian and Jewish leaders were forced to contend with an ever-changing landscape that ultimately led to extremely restrictive quotas under the 1924 National Origins Act. By this point, Italian and Jewish leaders were forced to negotiate measures that were at

once both self-serving and pragmatic. In this light, Marinari underscores the fragility of interethnic alliances, a reality that often fractured hopes of a unified national anti-restrictionist coalition.

The second half of *Unwanted* hinges on the post-World War II foreign policy landscape, which ethnic reform advocates used to their advantage to slowly reverse the status quo. Throughout the 1940s and 1950s, Italian and Jewish reform advocates used their participation in the war effort, the importance of family reunification, and the early Cold War geopolitical climate to secure gradual changes in such acts as the 1948 and 1953 Displaced Persons Acts, and even concessions to the restrictionist McCarran-Walter Act of 1952. *Unwanted* thus builds on recent work by Katherine Benton-Cohen (*Inventing the Immigration Problem: The Dillingham Commission and Its Legacy* [2018]) and Danielle Battisti (*Whom We Shall Become: Italian Americans and Immigration Reform, 1945-1965* [2019]), which have demonstrated the complexities through which immigrant groups contested restrictive legislation and xenophobic public perception emanating from early legislation and the Dillingham Commission.

Despite the success of the restrictionist coalition throughout the first half of the twentieth century, *Unwanted* shows that the actual processes of immigration were much more nuanced. To Marinari, the oft-repeated binary of open and closed gates, of inclusion and exclusion, is problematic in that it does not take into account the thousands of immigrants who still found their way into the US despite rigid quota systems, especially after 1924. As she notes, despite efforts by a restrictionist coalition in Congress and a widespread nativist fervor, nearly every piece of restrictive legislation passed "contained several provisions that favored immigration even when that was not the legislator's intent" (p. 53). This shows the moderate success of Italian and Jewish negotiators but also echoes an important point that guides Marinari's writing: the United States has been simultaneously

open and closed, due in large part to liberal reform advocates' use of several strategies to circumvent restriction. Among the most important of these approaches was an emphasis on family reunification, which became the linchpin of Italian and Jewish reform efforts. As restrictionist legislation hardened, liberal immigration advocates turned to reuniting families, ultimately settling on smaller conservative changes to the restrictionist status quo. This strategy, Marinari contends, continues to inform contemporary political stances on immigration, despite the passage of the 1965 Hart-Cellar Act. As she insists, this strategy was "the main tool to challenge immigration restriction over the course of the twentieth century" (p. 6). This strategy, however, came with unintentional consequences, which continue to plague attempts at immigration reform. To this day, permanent, skilled migrants with visible family connections are favored over temporary, unskilled, single migrants, harkening back to the efforts of Italian and Jewish anti-restrictionist advocates decades earlier.

Unwanted adds to the larger body of literature on immigration and, specifically, policy history, that has emerged in the last two decades. Since the publication of Erika Lee's journal article "Immigrants and Immigration Law: A State of the Field Assessment" in 1999, which called for the study of immigration law through legal, social, and cultural lenses, several historians and political scientists have looked not only at the laws themselves but also at the processes of lawmaking, litigation, compromise, resistance, and the cultures (both national and transnational) that emerged as part and parcel of this story.[1] This focus on how Italian and Jewish anti-restrictionist leaders interacted and contended with federal immigration policy helps show that ethnic minority groups were equally important at effecting legislative change, however small. Despite ethnic, geographical, cultural, and generational differences, ethnic coalitions were able to secure smaller changes to immigration policy that allowed for the reunification

of families, the settling of refugees, and an overall larger amount of immigration than might have been possible under unchallenged restrictive legislation.

Though she coherently directs our attention to war—specifically World War II and the postwar geopolitical climate—as a major driving force and turning point of US immigration law, the absence of the connections made between Italian and Jewish activists and other political movements, such as the emergent civil rights groups in the 1950s and 1960s, seems like a missed opportunity. For example, did the struggle for civil rights in the postwar era, which used the same postwar geopolitical space, reflect this same piecemeal approach used by Italian and Jewish leaders, or was this unique to the anti-restrictionist immigration cause? More important, did Jews and Italians borrow tactics from civil rights grassroots organizing (and vice versa), and if so, what did cross-dialogue between the two social justice camps look like? In a post-World War II geopolitical climate that brought race to the forefront, answering these questions could have perhaps shed more light on Marinari's arguments for pragmatic self-preservation and uneasy interethnic alliances that are underlying threads throughout. As it stands, this negotiated pragmatism is shown to be a product of the haunting difficulty of building and maintaining these alliances, a trend that unfortunately persists to the present day. It is also worth wondering whether or not the story of challenging legislation would look different if told through a different perspective, especially through a comparison of actions taken by groups considered nonwhite, such as Asian immigrants. Because Italian and Jewish immigrants were often considered (and actively fought to be recognized) as white, the story of success, albeit on a small level, might not have been possible considering the racial barriers erected by the dawn of the twentieth century.

Nevertheless, *Unwanted* deftly illustrates how nuanced and fickle the legislative process of im-

migration restriction could be, and how choices (unintentional or not) made by ethnic leaders, grassroots organizers, politicians, and presidents ultimately shaped past and present immigration policy. This addition to immigration and political historiography is both timely and subtle enough to engage scholars of these fields and general readers alike. Marinari concludes with a fitting (yet incredibly real and harrowing) memory about a recent student who tearily compared their class on the history of US immigration to current news of anti-immigrant rhetoric and restriction attempts. As her excellent work—and this concluding anecdotal example—shows, a discussion about the ways specific ethnic groups have resisted, altered, crafted, and collaborated on immigration legislation is needed now more than ever.

Note

[1]. Erika Lee, "Immigrants and Immigration Law: A State of the Field Assessment," *Journal of American Ethnic History* 18, no. 4 (Summer 1999): 85-114.

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