

IMMIGRANT COMMUNITIES IN THE CROSSFIRE: Challenges and Opportunities

WELCOME TO *PERSPECTIVES*!

Perspectives is an occasional electronic GCIR publication that highlights members' viewpoints, analyses, and reflections on a range of immigration- and immigrant-related issues. GCIR's goal in launching *Perspectives* is to share ideas, promote deeper understanding, and generate dialogue among our members and other grantmakers.

IN THIS INAUGURAL ISSUE

We are delighted that our inaugural issue features the remarks of Gara La Marche, Vice President and Director of U.S. Programs at the Open Society Institute. Mr. La Marche was the keynote speaker at *Immigrant Communities in the Crossfire: Challenges and Opportunities for Bay Area Philanthropy*, a February 15, 2005 briefing, which GCIR co-organized with Asian Americans/Pacific Islanders in Philanthropy and The San Francisco Foundation, with generous support from The California Endowment.

GCIR welcomes your comments and invites you to share ideas for future issues of *Perspectives*. Please contact Daranee Petsod at 707.824.4375 or daranee@gcir.org.



Grantmakers Concerned with
Immigrants and Refugees



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I appreciate the opportunity to talk with you this morning about the challenges we face in supporting the rights of immigrants and the needs of immigrant communities in the United States, and to reflect on the lessons the Open Society Institute has learned in nearly nine years of work on these critical human issues. Despite leading an organization that has played a leading role in this area among U.S. philanthropies, immigration is not an issue I have ever been heavily involved with on a personal level—well, except for being descended from French-Canadians who made the arduous journey from Montreal to Springfield, Massachusetts by the forerunner of Amtrak—and I don't claim even the modest level of expertise I could be said to have on, say, the death penalty or lesbian and gay rights. So I welcomed the opportunity of this talk to further educate myself and, in effect, to learn what I think.

I'm going to take literally the duality that has been built into the title of this meeting: challenges and opportunities, and list several of each in turn, starting with challenges.

The first challenge, for all of us, is to know our history. What we are going through now is not only not without precedent, but is chillingly familiar from events of the last century. Since we have so little shared knowledge of our past, we seem condemned to repeat it.

I spent the early years of my career with the American Civil Liberties Union, which has fought to redeem the guarantees of the Bill of Rights for eighty-five years. One of the things I most treasure from those days is a bound set of the ACLU's annual reports, starting with the first in 1920, written by the founding director, Roger Baldwin. Let's remember that the ACLU was founded in direct response to the Wilson Administration's crackdown on dissenters and alleged radicals, particularly the notorious raids and deportations carried out by Attorney General A. Mitchell Palmer, the John Ashcroft of his day, in 1920, resulting in thousands of forced deportations. In those days, we learn from the report, the deportees included John Yereb of Belleville, Illinois, Nicholai Mansevich of Detroit, Michigan, and Callo Costello of Texas. Why do I give you the names? Because the wheel that is turning today for those who are Arab, or Muslim, or South Asian, turned at that time for persons of European descent, as it turned again for Japanese-Americans in the 1940's.

David Cole, the Georgetown law professor and former Soros Justice Fellow who is one of the country's leading advocates for civil liberties and immigrant rights, reminds us in his recent book "Enemy Aliens," that the time I am speaking of was far more threatening to public order and security, in scope and number of incidents, than the present day. In 1919 alone, there were over 3,600 strikes involving four million workers. J. Edgar Hoover—yes, the famous persecutor of suspected Communists and civil rights activists got his start in the first American "red scare"—claimed that "civilization faces its most terrible menace since the barbarian hordes overran Western Europe and opened the dark ages." Package bombs were sent to the Mayor of Seattle, a former Georgia Senator, John D. Rockefeller and J.P. Morgan, and a suicide bomber died in an explosion at the home of A. Mitchell Palmer, meant to kill the Attorney General. Fragments of the bomber's clothing indicated he was an Italian alien from Philadelphia.

The Palmer Raids that followed were first directed at suspected members of the Union of Russian workers, a social organization of Russian immigrants. More than 1,000 people were arrested, mostly without warrants, and in two months a quarter of them were deported to Russia. Here's an excerpt from Cole's book that should sound familiar in our post-9/11 world: "One of those deported...was Joseph Polulech, a 27-year old Russian

who had been living in the United States since 1912. Polulech was arrested without a warrant as he was taking a math class at the People's House in New York City, the Union of Russian Workers headquarters. He was held incommunicado for six weeks. At his hearing, he denied membership in any organization other than his church. His pastor testified that he was an ambitious and well-behaved member of his congregation. The only evidence against him was a page from the Union of Russian workers membership book. But that was sufficient in the eyes of the immigration law."

Before Communist raids were conducted in January of 1920, Cole writes, J. Edgar Hoover persuaded the Labor Department to change the ground rules regarding detained aliens' right to consult lawyers. Responding to a pamphlet drafted by union lawyers advising detainees to remain silent and to consult a lawyer before answering questions—a precursor of the Miranda ruling that the Supreme Court would issue in 1966—Hoover got the immigration regulations amended to delay access to a lawyer until the case "had proceeded sufficiently in the development of the facts to protect the government's interests."

Perhaps I should mention that many of the alleged radicals treated so harshly and arbitrarily were Jewish, a religious minority as misunderstood, feared and persecuted then as adherents of Islam are today.

Allow me to fast-forward for a moment to the present day. As the ACLU and others have exhaustively documented, after the attacks of September 11, hundreds of Muslim men from South Asia and the Middle East were swept up in government dragnets and denied basic human rights. For virtually all, there was no credible evidence of their involvement in terrorism. They were held under a presumption of guilt, sometimes even after their innocence was conclusively proven. They were denied access to counsel, held incommunicado and denied even information about the charges against them. And they were held in degrading and inhumane conditions, which we learn more about to our horror each day. Many have been deported to countries where they haven't lived in years, places of human rights abuse and economic deprivation—places they left to come to a land which represented to them the loftiest human ideals of liberty and opportunity. Upsetting as they are, many of these stories, including abusive use of German Shepherd guard dogs, will be familiar to anyone who has dealt with the "ordinary" immigration detention system.

To this day, the “no-fly” list contains mostly Muslim names and is a constant hassle for many law-abiding Arab, Islamic and South Asian travelers. And how many of us raised our voices when Muslim charities were shut down or restricted into ineffectiveness?

Now, as in the 1920’s—a time when the legal protection of civil liberties, and the advocacy organizations charged with this work, were much less developed—the only way abuses like this could take place was if the immigrants involved were seen as “the other,” even subhuman. In testimony about the subjects of his raids, Attorney General Palmer said that “out of the sly and crafty eyes of many of them leap cupidity, cruelty, insanity and crime; from their lopsided faces, sloping brows, and misshapen features may be recognized the unmistakable criminal type.” An immigrant group which today has taken its place in the leadership of virtually every American institution, the Irish, was widely seen as criminal and degenerate—indeed, the term “paddy wagon” comes from such a racist stereotype. In his provocative book “How the Irish Became White,” Noel Ignatiev writes that the Irish “commonly found themselves thrown together with free Negroes. Irish and Afro-Americans fought each other and the police, socialized and occasionally intermarried, and developed a common culture of the lowly. They also both suffered the scorn of those better situated. Along with Jim Crow and Jim Dandy, the drunken, belligerent and foolish Pat and Bridget were stock characters on the early stage. In antebellum America it was speculated that if racial amalgamation was ever to take place it would begin between these two groups.”

Racist fears of the foreign are as American as apple pie. Before the American Revolution, Founding Father Benjamin Franklin wrote of the influx of German immigrants: “Those who come hither are generally the most stupid of their own nation.” Earlier he had warned that “Pennsylvania will in a few years become a German colony; instead of learning our language, we must learn theirs, or live in a foreign country.”

You don’t have to look so far back in history, or need the climate of mass fear engendered by September 11, to find evidence of such racist attitudes as fuel for the assault on immigrants. You don’t have to go far at all, if you live in California. Recall the language used to pass Proposition 187: “Save our state.” In Governor Wilson’s ads on behalf of the ballot initiative, the screen showed shadowy figures running, presumably across the border, as a narrator warned darkly that

“they” keep coming. One INS official complained that “people are tired of watching their state run wild and become a Third World country.”

I could go on and on, and cite examples that place today’s Muslim, Arab and South Asian immigrants in a long line of those once despised, feared and persecuted. After all, we tend to forget that even in the words of the poet Emma Lazarus that adorn the base of the Statue of Liberty and welcome newcomers to America, they’re called the “wretched refuse of your teeming shore.” But enough history. The second challenge is to listen to what immigrant communities have to say about what is happening to them, what their priorities are, and let that guide our own priorities and funding decisions. Here in the Bay Area you are extremely fortunate to have the report prepared by Grantmakers Concerned with Immigrants and Refugees and Asian Americans/Pacific Islanders in Philanthropy following the roundtable with leaders of Arab, Muslim and South Asian grassroots organizations, which tells us about the serious organizational development and capacity issues they face, the difficulties in finding common ground and working in coalition with other immigrant and ethnic communities, the pervasiveness of negative stereotypes and double standards in the media, the persistence of hate crimes, and the pervasiveness of civil rights violations. It’s a full and urgent agenda.

In general, we need to listen to the stories that emerge from immigrant communities on the front lines. Yesterday’s Los Angeles Times carried a cover article on how President Bush, after faith-based charities had provided him an opportunity to sit and listen to graphic stories of suffering directly from persecuted young people who fled to the United States, took personal action to increase the number of refugees admitted to the country, reversing sharp limits imposed after September 11. One wishes the President also had time to listen to the stories of Arabs, Muslims and South Asians caught up in the web of detention after September 11, the kind of stories told in the recent ACLU report, “Worlds Apart: How Deporting Immigrants After 9/11 Tore Families Apart and Shattered Communities.” He might have been moved by the plight—all too typical, we learn from the report—of Benamar Benatta, a 31-year old Algerian, formerly an Air Force lieutenant, now in his fourth year of detention in Buffalo, long cleared of any terrorism charges but awaiting deportation to a country from which he sought asylum, where he will surely be imprisoned and tortured.

Perhaps he would be moved by a visit to Brooklyn's Midwood neighborhood, not far from my own house. Once home to 100,000 Pakistanis, so many it is called Little Pakistan, between 20,000 and 45,000 have left the community since special registration ended in 2003, either through deportation or voluntarily.

The third challenge is to understand the changing pattern of immigration. One of the most striking developments of the last ten or twenty years in America is the growing presence of immigrants, particularly Asians and Latinos, in the Midwest, the south and all across rural America. In a recent Washington Monthly article, "My New Kentucky Home," Peter Laufer reports that Mexican communities are popping up in places Kennett Square, Pennsylvania and Dalton, Georgia. The Hispanic population of Alabama and Georgia more than tripled during the 1990s—and that's just officially. Catholic Charities in Kentucky estimates that the Latino population is seven times the number cited by the census. My first inkling of this trend came six or seven years ago when I realized that OSI had awarded fellowships to physicians working with the special health needs of Latinos in two far-flung and unexpected places—Arkansas and Maryland.

The fourth challenge is to recognize that immigration is not a special interest or a funding niche. As the Kentucky example makes clear, it is a core social, economic, political and human rights issue in every corner of the country, not just on the coasts. OSI was drawn into the fight for immigrants' rights nine years ago when George Soros was outraged by the cuts in safety net programs borne by legal, law-abiding, tax-paying immigrants in the Clinton welfare bill. But over the years we have recognized, as have many funders, that every issue is an immigration issue—education and health care and criminal justice and women's rights and youth development and many others.

Anyone can be an immigrants' rights funder—there is a need, for example, for culturally-sensitive mental health services and counseling of survivors of domestic violence. But it will not surprise you to hear that my particular advice is not to shirk from the edgier, more controversial issues. Polling that OSI supported, conducted for the National Immigration Forum showed, to be sure, a good deal of ignorance about what immigrants contribute to society, underscoring the need for public education and storytelling. But it also showed, somewhat surprisingly, strong support for fair and equal treatment—for the basic human rights of all people. Yet this work has few advocates in the funding community. It needs more.

I was not being fully honest when I said I would deal separately with challenges and opportunities, for as is so often the case, one is the flip side of the other. So the opportunity before us is to learn from our history and step forward to stand up for the rights of unpopular immigrants in a time of fear. We can support with our voices as well as with our funds.

The recent passage of the REAL ID Act in the House is a very troubling example of the scapegoating of immigrants in the name of the war on terror. There was an overwhelming vote on an amendment to provide for bounty hunters to find and turn in immigrants—a chilling echo of the fugitive slave act. The law passed despite opposition from local government officials who felt it was an unfunded mandate. There has to be an investment in strengthening the national advocacy groups and the capacity of local groups to engage with them.

The painting of immigrants and asylum seekers as terrorists until proven otherwise is aggressively being used to back harsh policies and will impede integration efforts of all immigrants, not just Arab American and Muslims. The driver's license issue, affecting mostly Latinos, is now framed in national security terms. There needs to be an even greater investment in changing public opinion.

The opportunity is to listen to what Arab, Muslim and South Asian communities are telling us, and broaden our funding accordingly. At OSI, in the wake of September 11, we realized that despite many years of funding for immigration issues, we barely knew some of the communities most affected. So we made a concerted effort to learn more, and today, in addition to Latino and Asian-American groups, we support organizations like the Arab-American Institute Foundation, the Arab Community Center for Economic and Social Services, the National Iranian-American Council, and the Arab-American Justice Project; the Desi Reel Newz Project to train South Asian youth in community video and documentation; the Azaadi Legal Defense Project, to create a legal representation center for South Asian immigrants; and a fellowship for a Northeastern University professor who is developing strategies to enhance understanding between law enforcement agencies and Arab, Muslim and Sikh communities.

The opportunity is to recognize that new immigrants are among us, often with different problems and needs than those who came before, and that more established immigrant groups are making their way to new places where they encounter ignorance, discrimination and even violence. We also need to recognize the enormous diversity within immigrant communities, and overcome stereotypes.

The opportunity is to look at all our funding program areas and ask ourselves—and the communities involved—how we can do a better job of reaching out to and serving immigrants in all aspects of civic life.

For funders who work on voting and civic engagement, in addition to support for getting people registered and going to the polls, there needs to be an investment in the system itself. In 2004, there was discriminatory application of identification requirements used against immigrants and minorities, who were asked for ID not required of others. There were also issues for people

who live in multi-family households in urban areas, who are less likely to have a driver's license and where the utilities bills go to one person. In some states, voting machines were unevenly distributed with more going to wealthier white areas: a multitude of issues here which either must be fixed nationally, locally, or both.

I want to close with one of my favorite quotes. When I ask people who they think said it, their guesses are always wildly off: "I believe that the weakness of the American character is that there are so few growlers and kickers among us. We have forgotten the very principle of our origin, if we have forgotten how to object, how to resist, how to pull down and build up, even to the extent of revolutionary practices, if it be necessary to readjust matters." Whose stirring words are these? Was it Frederick Douglass? Mother Jones? Eugene V. Debs? No, indeed, it was the man who put Debs in jail, Woodrow Wilson, President of the United States during a very dark time for civil liberties. We could treat this as just one more exhibit in the voluminous evidence that we have often been governed by hypocrites. I would prefer to see it, as Ellen Goodman recently wrote of President Bush's sweeping inaugural paeans to freedom and human rights, also much criticized coming from a man who brought us the Patriot Act, Guantanamo, and Abu Ghraib, as a standard to judge him—and indeed ourselves—by.

Foundations don't have to growl and kick themselves too much. But we need to look out for the growlers and kickers among us, those who alert us to the problems we would rather not see. Let's do it for Woodrow Wilson.



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