

IMMIGRATION FROM THE OTHER SIDE

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I wish I had read Michael Barone's fine book "The New Americans" (Regnery 2001) before participating recently in a conference in Sirmione, Italy, which was titled "Multiculturalism in the U.S. and Europe: Immigration, Integration and Identity." But I have read Barone's new book now, and it backs up, with gusto and detail, some rules I was trying to suggest to my European colleagues.

Europeans and Americans start from a different past: one colonial, one anti-colonial. But while many European intellectuals may harbor anti-American sentiments, they do think we know something about immigration -- a topic they are now forced to deal with seriously. America is a successful immigrant nation, so we must know how to do it, right?

What's the secret? There must be secrets.

Rule One is that there is no secret. Immigration ain't easy. Immigrants often look, talk, dress, worship and behave differently from old-stock natives, who are often repelled by the newcomers. It takes time, even in a place like America, which has been dedicated to democratic pluralism from George Washington forward and to all the pretty words and laws that go with it.

Barone presents three fascinating pairs in the American tale of immigration and its anguish. The current Latino immigration resembles the old Italian one --- slow and steady family-oriented progress. Today's Asians resemble yesterday's Jews --- meteoric educational achievement to overcome social rejection. And, says Barone, what's happened to blacks (who

migrated from the rural South to the urban North) is similar to the behavior of, and response to, the earlier Irish immigration.

When the Irish came to America in the mid-1800s they were regarded as primitive peasant "gorillas," with startlingly high rates of crime, alcoholism and illegitimacy. They were typically averse to entrepreneurial and educational enterprise. They didn't "look" normal, as Noel Ignatiev also notes in his book (with the title of the decade) "How the Irish Became White" (Routledge 1996). Citing census data, Barone reports that it took 100 years (until 1950) for Americans of Irish ancestry to reach income parity.

It ain't easy. But it works.

It won't be easy for Italy either, as they look toward decades of immigration, particularly from Moslem North Africa.

Why are the Europeans so very interested in immigration these days?

Their continent is depopulating.

Back in 1348 Europe suffered the Black Death, a combination of bubonic plague and likely a form of mad cow diseases. (See another splendid new book "In the Wake of the Plague," by Norman F. Cantor, Free Press 2001.) The plague reduced the estimated European population by about a third.

In the next 50 years Europe's population will relive -- in slow motion -- that plague demography, losing about a fifth of its population by 2050 and more as the decades roll on. (Don't invest there: no customers.)

That's what happens when fertility rates tumble. Italian women today bear an average of 1.2 children, about half that required to merely keep a population stable

over time. Current U.N. estimates indicate that the Italian population will fall from 60 million people to 40 million by 2050.

So the Italians are looking to immigrants to fill in some of the gaps that are sure to come. Who will take care of the old people? Who will clean the toilets? Who will wash the dishes in the restaurants?

Will it be easy? No.

Some on the European left argue that supersensitivity is called for, with bilingual education, with some multicultural dancing and singing tossed in, all taking place in cutesy-poo new, publicly funded neighborhoods.

Not going to happen. The newcomers are not generally welcome by the public, and faking it is fake, and known to be fake.

Rule Two in America and Europe: Enforce the laws. The flaw of supersensitivity is most harmful when it offers special dispensation for criminal behavior, which, alas, is high among recent immigrants to the European nations, just as it was among some American immigrant groups. As we've learned here, nothing can so engender fear of immigrants as crime.

Rule Three is the toughest, and the most fruitful. Let a democratic pluralist society grow. That means, over time, letting immigrants vote. This suggestion scares many Europeans, particularly those on the right of the political spectrum. Most immigration to Italy is now illegal. For legal immigrants (unless they have an Italian ancestor) it takes about 15 years to become a citizen, with hurdles all the way.

There is no democratic pluralism without voting. The 1964 Civil Rights Act was powerful medicine. But it was the 1965 Voting Rights Act that broke the back, forever, of legal racism in America.

Suddenly George Wallace and Strom Thurmond were courting black voters.

Europe with immigrants and without voting rights is a 21st-century scandal in the making. It is internal colonialism, and it won't work.

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