

Our Slavic Fellow Citizens

Emily Greene Balch, 1910

[p. 404] Doubtless the most important issue involved is the racial one. But here we are paralyzed by our comprehensive ignorance of the actual results of race crossings. Those who should be expert give the most contrary opinions. “Only pure races are strong.” “Only mixed races are strong.” “Mixture within certain degrees of unlikeness is desirable; beyond that line, disastrous.”

The investigations of the Immigration Commission under Professor [Franz] Boas, as just now reported in a preliminary way, appear to point to an unexpected and very rapid assimilation of physical type among the children of immigrants, quite apart from racial intermixture.

Whatever the truth as to national eugenics, in practice all other considerations are dwarfed by the economic interests involved. The question is and should be discussed in its physical, ethical, humanitarian, social and political aspects, but it is decided, in our present stage of moral development, by bread and butter considerations, from the point of view of American interests. But economic interests themselves diverge and conflict. So far as the nation desires to increase national production, commercial prosperity, dividends and rentals, so far it favors the inflow of labor to increase the product of our national “plant” – of our land capital, and directing energies. On the other hand, so far as the nation desires to raise the standard of living of the mass of the citizens, to extend democracy within the country on economic and social as well as on political lines, in a word, to raise wages and increase the influence of the workingman, so far it is opposed to the admission of new and cheaper competitors in the labor market.

Hitherto the first set of interests has prevailed, with one main exception. Where, as in the case of the Chinese, race prejudice has reinforced the economic interests of the employe[e], those interests have prevailed and the aliens have been excluded. Otherwise the employer’s policy has prevailed...

[p. 405] Some [people] see in the American republic the trustee for humanity of an experiment in democracy, the greatest in scale, the most favored in conditions, of which there is any hope. They believe the Anglo-Saxon to have peculiar ability and tact in self-government, and they see in the dilution of this stock by others, and in every new complication of the problem by

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extraneous difficulties, a threat of a world-tragedy – the shipwreck of the American enterprise in democracy.

On the other hand, with still wider horizon and still more daring faith stand those who see in this enormous migration a new advance in the slow process of the growth of humanity. They see the newcomers drawn from layers of population where pressure is greatest and progress least possible, into situations where for the first time they meet opportunity; where they not only “have their chance,” but where they, and still more their children, do actually gain, not in comfort only, but in freedom, thoughtfulness and self-respect; where with all that they lose, they on the whole profit as men. ... At the same time they hope that the newcomers in America will bring fresh, vigorous blood [p. 406] to a rather sterile and inbred stock, and that they will add valuable varieties of inheritance to a rather puritanical, one-sided culture rich in middle class commonplace, but poor in the power of creating beauty except in the one great field of literature.

Before such a vast world movement as the modern wage migrations it is impossible not to feel awestruck, not to realize how little it is possible for contemporaries to gauge the results and to compute advantages. In the face of this doubt, the burden of proof seems to be on those who would interfere, who would turn back to their crowded homelands the hordes who are moving in the direction of promised advantage to themselves, drawn by the demand of those who desire their services.

It is easy to talk lightly of more or less arbitrary exclusion rules, of illiteracy tests, and so forth, until one realizes the sort of social surgery that they involve. It is not possible to lower the portcullis without cutting into living flesh. A large proportion of those excluded will necessarily be people bound by the tenderest ties to those already in this country. The individual cases as they occur make this only too real to the spectator in an immigration inquiry courtroom. ... I have seen a mother fainting before the judges who excluded (as they were bound by law to do) her little feeble-minded boy. The father and elder children were irrevocably planted in America. A return to pogrom-smitten Russia with one child out of her brood would have been bad enough, but she was, as a matter of fact, too far advanced in pregnancy to be able to make the journey. The helpless, weak-minded child had to return without her, to heaven knows what fate, one of the older children being sent back with it. Such cases are inevitable under any hard and fast rule...

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[p. 407] As to the question of racial fusion, we are, as already said, as yet hopelessly ignorant. The biologists are not even ready to go beyond the very vague rule that too wide differences and too little variety are both probably bad. ...

In the first place, then, there is no physical barrier [p. 408] to intermarriage between Slavs and Americans, nor even so much physical unlikeness as in the case of Italians and Jews, with their more southern characteristics. A Slav of the second or third generation in America would be likely to look, for better for worse, much like “anybody else.” I should judge that on the basis of bodily appearance the much mixed Slavic peoples were at least as similar to the much mixed American stock as, say, the French or the Scandinavians.

The barrier is social and psychical, not physical.