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# *Nativism and the Civil War: The Impact of the Emancipation of Slaves on American Immigration*

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***Abstract:*** The emancipation of enslaved people after the Civil War dramatically altered the perception of immigrants in the United States. This paper explores legal and social changes that took place in America after the Reconstruction period and analyzes the effect of those changes by comparing the treatment of the Irish in the mid-19th century with that of immigrants who arrived later in the century. It focuses on three main topics: the evolution of immigration laws, the rising popularity of post-war pseudo-scientific theories on race in the late 19th century, and immigrant groups' assimilation rates. The study demonstrates how these concepts are interrelated to illustrate the impact of the Civil War on immigration trends. It concentrates on Irish and Italian families since they share many traits: both groups came from poor, rural backgrounds, both took jobs away from Americans and lowered wages, both immigrant groups practiced Catholicism, and both came in waves from Europe. Despite these similarities, Italians, like Asian and Jewish immigrants fleeing their homelands between the 1880s and early 1900s, faced more virulent forms of nativism and more restrictions than Irish newcomers a few decades earlier, in part because of the 14th Amendment's definition of birth-based citizenship and post-Reconstruction discrimination that was intended to subordinate newly freed African Americans.

***Keywords:*** American history, Civil War, Irish and Italian immigrants, ethnic studies, minority & ethnic groups, nativism

## 1. Introduction

During the 19th century, unstable European political, social, and economic conditions resulted in mass migration to the United States. Events such as Ireland's Great Famine of 1845 and British repression, for example, spurred great outmigration of Irish families. In southern Europe, political changes following Italy's unification in 1861, as well as high taxes and natural disasters like earthquakes and soil erosion, provoked a large emigration of rural southern Italians. Most poor, Catholic Irish and Italian families made their way to New York City between 1840 and 1920 to take advantage of job opportunities arising from rapid industrialization.

The great influx of immigrants threatened American laborers who were adversely affected by declining wages and increased competition for jobs. To lessen the impact, nativists attempted to demonize the immigrants to prevent employers from hiring them. Nativism took many forms, but after the emancipation of slaves in the 1860s, the status of newcomers in the eyes of Americans changed dramatically. Unlike pre-Civil War immigrants who were judged by their economic,

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educational, and cultural differences, Europeans who arrived after the 1870s faced more virulent discrimination based on pseudo-scientific racist theories. These changes took place on the heels of huge demographic shifts during the Reconstruction Period that triggered deep-seated xenophobia and nativist resistance to foreigners.

Some scholarly works about immigrants and the changing perceptions of nativism starting with the Civil War have been published in recent years. For example, "Irish-American Identity, Memory, and Americanism During the Eras of the Civil War and the First World War" (2012) by John French explores Irish American dissent during the Civil War and WWI, and nativist accusations that Irish disapproval of the wars stemmed from un-American attitudes and disloyalty to the nation. Using information gathered from contemporaneous news sources, archival material, and documents written by Irish American leaders, French discusses Irish efforts to counter nativist accusations by playing up their valuable participation in the American Revolution and underscoring their place in cosmopolitan America. In another recent dissertation, Peter Vellon examines the Italian perception of race and whiteness. In his essay, "A Darker Past: The Development of Italian American Racial Consciousness, 1886-1920," Vellon argues that southern Italian immigrants did not at first see themselves as "white" or "non-white" since the concept of racial hierarchies did not exist in Italy [1]. Only when they came to America, they were exposed to the concept of "blackness." Italians, like African Americans, were portrayed as an "inferior" race who could be lynched with impunity. Like French, Vellon explores the issue of nativism and racism from the perspective of the immigrants themselves and highlights the immigrants' desire to be accepted as both "white" and "American."

However, less scholarly attention has been paid to changing nativist perceptions on immigration in America, nor the forestalled assimilation of immigrants due to the emancipation of slaves. Hence, this paper gives new insights into how and why post-war immigrants like the Italians, Chinese, and Jews were disparaged by new forms of racialization stemming from pseudoscientific race theories that had not affected western European Irish immigrants in the antebellum period. This paper argues that the Civil War and the subsequent liberation of African American slaves effectively emboldened nativists, who exploited racial stereotypes to justify anti-immigrant prejudice. The finding explains the sudden rise of xenophobia in the late 19th century and the anti-immigration activities that resulted in discriminatory Naturalization Acts in the 1920s. Understanding the causes of race-based bigotry helps trace the roots of the upsurge in American exceptionalism and isolationism in the 20th and 21st centuries.

The paper primarily draws from information gathered from archives, immigrant memoirs, and government policies. Primary sources include essays and newspaper articles from the late 19th and early 20th centuries, as well as census records and cartoons that visually illustrate the nature of hostility toward immigrants in the mid-19th century The documents help support information from secondary sources that describe immigrant experiences. Structurally, the study begins with a description of the status of immigration before the Civil War. It then demonstrates the impact of the Civil War and new forms of racism on immigration. Finally, it discusses the status of immigrants in the post-Reconstruction period concluding with a comparison of Irish and Italian immigrants in the United States.

## 2. The Status of Immigrants before the Civil War

### 2.1. The Association between Irish Immigrants and African Americans

When Irish families arrived on the shores of the United States, American workers were threatened by the economic impact of the influx of masses of unskilled laborers into the job market. Consequently, they compared the Irish to the lowest members in the American social hierarchy, African Americans, who lived in the same slum neighborhoods such as Five Points and competed for the same working-

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class jobs. Like African Americans, the Irish were depicted as violent and subhuman creatures inferior to white American Anglo-Saxons [2]. The immigrants from the British Isles were characterized as "negroes turned inside out" and "Irish Niggers." To reinforce the parallels between the two low-caste groups, African Americans were called "smoke Irish" [2]. The Hibernian newcomers tried to disassociate themselves from African Americans by heavily embracing their whiteness and adamantly opposing the emancipation of African slaves [3].

Irish immigrants vigorously distanced themselves from African Americans by aggressively clashing with free Blacks who competed with them for jobs and openly opposing abolition. When South Carolina seceded from the United States after the election of Abraham Lincoln, the Irish supported Southern slave owners by resisting the Union's efforts to defeat Confederate states [3]. The immigrants especially objected to the Enrollment Act of 1863, which required all male citizens between the ages of twenty and forty-five to enlist in the army unless they paid $300 commutation fees. Most working-class Irish immigrants could not afford to pay the fee. To combat conscription laws and express hatred of freed blacks, Irish gangs rioted in New York City, attacking military and government buildings, and burning the homes of abolitionists and prominent African Americans as well as an orphanage for black children. The three days of civil unrest resulted in the deaths of more than a hundred men, women, and children and thousands of injuries.

However, the New York City Draft Riots did little to change the conscription policy. Despite their objections, twenty-thousand Irish Americans from New York were forced to enlist. Although they opposed the North's intentions to end slavery, Irish soldiers eventually realized that courageous participation in the Civil War could help establish their patriotism and loyalty to America [3]. In a 1903 article written by Dr. Isidor Singer in the New York Sun, a veteran expressed the Irish sentiment when he said that "the fight was for the union, not for the abolition of slavery" [4]. In the antebellum period, the Irish and African Americans were linked based on their shared class. The Irish were able to distinguish themselves from the dark-skinned servile group by emphasizing racial differences. However, they could not evade discrimination based on their religious adherence to Roman Catholicism.

### 2.2. The Impact of Anti-Catholic Nativism

Tensions between Scottish and English Protestants and Irish Catholics had a long history in Britain that carried over into the United States beginning with the establishment of the first colonies in the 17th century. Anglo-Americans were especially suspicious and fearful of Catholic loyalty to the Pope, believing that the spiritual leader could, at any moment, call on his faithful congregants to turn against their adopted nation. Anti-Catholic sentiments were so strong that they periodically turned violent. For example, in 1831, a group of Protestants burned down a Catholic Church in New York City. A few years later, thirteen Catholics were killed in anti-Catholic riots in Philadelphia [5]. The great influx of Irish immigrants after the 1845 potato famine seemed to validate the conspiracy theory that Catholics were being sent to America by the Pope to engage in a plot to overthrow Protestants and take control of the United States. To thwart any future collusions, therefore, white, anti-immigration, anti-Catholic Protestant Americans organized themselves politically into the Native American Party, more commonly referred to as the "Know-Nothing Party." They pledged to "resist the insidious policy of the Church of Rome and all other foreign influence against the republican institutions" [6]. Perceived Catholic disloyalty was dispelled temporarily, in part by the charitable acts of Catholic nuns and priests and Irish enrollment in the U.S. army [7].

After the Civil War ended, nativist sentiments resurged prompting anti-Catholic activists like caricaturist Thomas Nast to "educate" the public about the inherent threat of the Irish through stories and cartoons. In a cartoon published in the 1870s, Nast rekindled conspiratorial beliefs in an imminent Papal takeover. The cartoon depicts the Pope perched atop the Dome of the St. Peter's Basilica,

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wishfully gesturing toward the territory across the Atlantic Ocean that he is scheming to overrun. A year later, Nast published another poignant cartoon showing the plot in action. In Harper's Weekly magazine in 1871, the political cartoon "The American River Ganges" portrays a bask of bishops bedecked in jewel-encrusted mitres in the form of man-eating crocodiles slithering ashore to devour helpless, cowering Protestants. Along with dredging up negative stereotypes about the Irish, Nast's political cartoons were also instrumental in bringing down one of the most powerful men in New York City, William Magyar Tweed. Tweed, at the time, was the "boss" of the corrupt Tammany Hall political machine which had relied on the votes of Irish immigrants to stay in power. Despite the negative stereotypes portrayed in Nast's illustrations, Irish immigrants managed to protect themselves by gaining a degree of political power.

### 2.3. The Irish Gain Political Power

Before the Civil War, the Naturalization Act of 1802 dictated that European immigrants were automatically considered citizens of the United States after residing in the country for five years if they could argue that they were "free white persons." As voting members of society, the well-connected Irish soon became a sought-after electorate by the leaders of New York City's powerful political machine, the Society of St. Tammany. The latter exchanged Irish bloc votes for jobs and economic aid. The police and fire departments eagerly recruited Irish supporters of Tammany Hall as police officers, firefighters, construction workers, and builders for the city's various projects. At the same time, other minority groups such as African Americans were banned from taking on these jobs [8]. By the mid-19th century, Irish voters made up more than a third of the electorate in New York City.

Two decades later, anti-Irish nativism plummeted as the immigrants began to rise the economic ladder and act more like native-born Americans [9]. After the fall of Boss Tweed in 1871, for example, an Irish immigrant became Tammany Hall's first Irish Catholic boss. A decade later, William R. Grace became the first Irish American mayor of New York City. The Irish also became active in labor movements. One of the most significant contributors was Peter McGuire, an Irish-born immigrant resident of New York City's Lower East Side. McGuire traveled across America, urging Irish workers to organize themselves into unions. On September 5, 1882, he led a "parade" of over 30,000 marchers to promote 8-hour workdays and labor rights and encouraged similar movements in other cities. McGuire's influence was so great that the state of Oregon began annually commemorating the event in 1887. The U.S. Congress followed Oregon's example in 1894 and designated "Labor Day" as a national holiday to be celebrated on the first Monday in September.

Catholic Irish immigrants posed an economic threat to American laborers who tried to diminish the power of the Irish "menace" by comparing them to poor blacks and claiming that the immigrants were conspiring with foreign powers to demolish American democracy. The ploy at first worked resulting in the proliferation of "No Irish Need Apply" signs, which pushed the Irish into deeper poverty. However, with their white skin, English language skills, and lax immigration policies, the Irish were able to overcome economic barriers, assimilate into American society, and gain political power. Although nativists still targeted foreigners during Reconstruction, they were less active while America was working to reunite North and South. That leniency would change, however, in the later part of the 19th century when new immigrants began to face more challenging obstacles.

## 3. The Impact of the Civil War and Scientific Racism on Immigration

### 3.1. The Changing Legal Status of Immigrants before and after the Civil War

Between 1861 and 1865, the course of the Civil War and the status of slavery supplanted immigration in the American national political discussion. While the war was taking place, more than 800,000

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foreigners slipped into the country without much resistance [10]. After the war's conclusion, attention shifted to the freed blacks' new status and the nation's dramatic post-war demographic and political changes. Repercussions from the new racial status quo altered the perception of aliens in America. Three years after slavery was abolished with the passage of the 13th Amendment, American-born blacks were granted citizenship and, a year later, the right to vote. The inclusion of newly freed black men in the electorate prompted several changes to the American immigration policy.

Passed in 1868, the 14th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution gave former African American slaves the right to automatically become citizens based on their birth in America. While these legal changes benefited black people living in country, the new laws resulted in greater restrictions for immigrants. Between 1787 and 1875, immigrants could easily apply for and receive U.S. citizenship after only a few years of living in the country. The first naturalization act passed by Congress in 1790 allowed all "free white persons" to apply for citizenship after just a year of living in the U.S. and become fully naturalized Americans after just two years in the country. In 1795, Congress increased the required residency for citizenship from two to five years, and required immigrants born with "any hereditary title, or been of the order of nobility" to renounce their status. The latter condition was largely inconsequential in the 19th century since most immigrants came from commoner backgrounds and had sailed to the states to take advantage of the vast expanses of unsettled frontier land in the American Midwest and the western plains. In 1798, Federalists passed the ill-fated Alien and Sedition Act. The Act temporarily increased residency requirements from five years to fourteen years to prevent Republican-voting foreigners from tilting the political scale toward the opposition party. The long waiting period for citizenship was changed back to five years after Republican president Thomas Jefferson took the oath of office in 1801. In 1855, the naturalization act was further revised, and citizenship was automatically granted to foreign women if they married an American [11].

Immigration policies were relatively lax before the Civil War and during the Reconstruction era. After 1875, though, a series of restrictions were put in place. Criminals, people with diseases, anarchists, prostitutes (a restriction that particularly targeted women from China), beggars, and other "undesirables" were now forbidden from entering America. In 1882, immigrants from China were barred completely with the passage of the Chinese Exclusion Act. Only native-born Asian-Americans obtained citizenship since they were, under the 14th Amendment, entitled by birth to full citizenship. According to nativists, though, this loophole had to be closed, and they hoped to use the new phenomenon of scientific racism to accomplish this.

### 3.2. Scientific Racism and Its Impact on Immigration in America

The theories behind scientifically based racism were sparked by the 1759 publication of *System Naturae* by botanist Carl Linnaeus who described four races of men (these were expanded to five races in 1795). It was then refined by essays on physiognomy, phrenological studies, and the corruption of Charles Darwin's theories on the "survival of the fittest" by Herbert Spencer [12]. In the United States, Harvard University biology professor Louis Agassiz proposed the idea of "polygenism," arguing that human races came from different origins. He analyzed and measured human skulls to prove that white people were biologically superior to blacks [13]. By the early to mid-20th century, this kind of biology-based racism was widely disproven. However, even in the late 20th century, there were still studies that theorized that the high imprisonment rates among Black Americans were proof of innate criminal tendencies. Rather than investigating institutional and historical circumstances that might account for the disparity in prison rates, these researchers continuously attempted to prove that white people were mentally superior based on pseudoscientific intelligence testing.

In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, scientific racism was universally applied to explain the wide gap between rich and poor Americans and to justify the separation of the races by Jim Crow

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laws based on biological factors. The popularity of the racist theories also had a ripple effect on the status of new immigrants. The categorization of races based on pseudoscientific theories was used to bypass citizenship clauses in the 14th Amendment and to limit the influx of darker skinned, less desirable immigrants. This categorization was used to argue that Chinese women were more prone to engage in deviant sexual practices, for example, to reinforce the ban on the immigration of Asian women through the 1875 Page Act. Pseudoscientific beliefs in a racial hierarchy were also used to rationalize the prohibition of Chinese immigration altogether in 1882. Southern Italians who arrived from the Mediterranean region around the same time were also categorized as coming from the "Latin" race which was deemed inferior to "Anglo-Saxons" [14]. Italians were frequently accused of bringing diseases to America and were denigrated by Americans because of their cultural differences, "not only in dress, cookery, and customs but in character, thought, and speech" [15]. Moreover, their darker features made it easier to compare them to black Americans. One of the grimmest incidents of anti-Italian discrimination in the United States occurred on March 14, 1891, when a dozen southern Italians were lynched for allegedly killing New Orleans police chief David Hennessy. The identity of Hennessy's killer was never determined, but the lynching clearly showed the parallels between the treatment of black men and Italian immigrants. The latter were portrayed as violent and criminal members of the "Sicilian Mafia" [16]. The discrimination that Italians encountered in Post-Reconstruction America took the same pseudo-scientific basis as the intensified racism aimed at black Americans. The end of slavery and the introduction of the 14th Amendment caused nativists to turn to biology and pseudo-science to oppress other social groups that threatened them socially and economically.

## 4. Status of Immigrants in the Post-reconstruction Period

In the 1880s, waves of immigrants fleeing discrimination, violence, natural disasters, and poverty began to arrive in the United States. In the western part of the country, Chinese migrants fleeing a country carved up into foreign spheres of influence were joining earlier Asian immigrants seeking financial opportunities in California. On the east coast, hordes of immigrants arrived at the ports of New York City from the eastern and southern parts of Europe. Jewish families escaping large-scale anti-Jewish pogroms triggered by the assassination of Tsar Alexander II were looking for a haven, for instance, and landless Southern Italians were fleeing dire poverty, malnutrition, illiteracy, disease, and violence because of Italian unification and political turmoil. Like the Irish, the new European immigrants competed with locals for jobs and caused wages to fall. The Jews and Italians also practiced alien religions, Judaism and Catholicism. However, unlike the Irish, the later immigrants now confronted less surmountable political and ideological challenges because of the new social and political conditions in post-Civil War America. The immigrants arriving in America in the late 19th century had to contend with stricter immigration policies and widespread racially motivated nativism in their adopted land.

New Eastern European immigrants had a much harder time shaking off negative stereotypes and faced greater hurdles that prevented them from easily assimilating into American society, despite their efforts to fight discrimination. Poverty-stricken, unskilled Italian workers were badly exploited and were paid some of the lowest wages in the country. Like the Irish decades earlier, Italians fought for better working conditions. For example, the Lawrence Textile Strike of 1912 in Massachusetts erupted after Italian workers discovered that a 32-cent pay decrease had reduced their pay to an average of $8.76 a week [17]. Women workers led the immigrant laborers shouting, "we want bread, and roses, too," giving the demonstration its name, the "Bread and Roses Strike" [18]. By the end of January 1912, more than 10,000 workers were out on strike. However, while uprisings helped improve conditions for Italian Americans, the group never gained the same political power as the Irish.

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Italians coming to America in the 1880s and 1890s had more disadvantages than the Irish who came before them because of their circumstances and changing trends in America. Unlike the Irish, who already spoke English, Italians faced cultural barriers because they spoke a foreign language. Furthermore, since most Italian "Birds of Passage" expected to return home after earning money, they did not waste time learning the local language or forming strong community bonds that may have protected them [19]. Unlike the Irish, whose strong alliances won the support of political machines like Tammany Hall, isolated Italians were left to fend for themselves politically. Culturally, Italians were also victims of new racist trends based on pseudoscientific theories that classified dark-skinned immigrants as members of inferior racial categories. Adding to economic and racial discrimination, the Irish condemned the Italian version of Catholicism — even though just a few decades earlier, they had suffered from anti-Catholic discrimination. Italians, the Irish contended, improperly practiced the religion because they participated in ceremonies in a "Carnival-like atmosphere" [20]. Because of this prejudice, Italian Americans were often forced to practice their Catholic faith in the basements of the Catholic churches in New York.

## 5. Conclusion

Irish and Italian immigrants were both targets of nativism and discrimination because of their economic impact. Both were compared negatively to African Americans and faced discrimination because of their Catholic religion. However, Italians and other immigrants in the late 19th century experienced much deeper and enduring discrimination because of post-war pseudoscientific beliefs that validated theories about inferior races. The 1924 Immigration Act illustrates the wide disparity between the two groups. The act particularly targeted Italian, Slavic, and Japanese immigrants, proclaiming that it had become "necessary that the United States cease to become an asylum" [21]. No mention was made of the Irish who had long been established as "legitimate" American citizens, so much so that twenty-three U.S. presidents could claim Irish heritage. In contrast, there have been no American presidents of Italian descent in America [22]. The intensification of racism after Reconstruction deepened the oppression faced by immigrant groups in the United States and blocked the paths that earlier groups, such as the Irish, had used to obtain political power and social acceptance.

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