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A Unique Period for Immigration

On September 7, 1817, Edward Phillips of Shrewsbury in Shropshire, England, sailed from Liverpool on the *James Monroe*. He arrived safely in New York on October 17 and immediately headed for Philadelphia, where he found work. On March 18, 1854, Johann Bauer, born in Heidelsheim in Baden, Germany, left from Bremen for New York. He arrived safely on May 2, stayed with friends for two months, then left for Illinois, where he found work.[1] The voyages of these two individuals, which nearly bracket the period studied in this book, illustrate one important characteristic of immigration from Europe to the United States during the antebellum period. The immigrants arrived after a long voyage on a sailing ship. Phillips' trip was forty days and Bauer's took forty-five. Although Bauer left almost forty years after Phillips, they both experienced voyages of similar length. Given the long trip, an individual only made the voyage if he or she expected the move to be permanent. In fact, neither of these men ever returned to Europe. Until the 1840s, immigration was almost always a one-way trip because the sailing ship was the sole means of travel across the Atlantic Ocean. Only then did steamships begin crossing the ocean on a regular basis. Until steerage was widely introduced on steamships in the late 1850s, however, the only passengers carried by these vessels were those sufficiently wealthy to pay for a cabin. Thus, throughout the antebellum period, the voyage by sailing ship meant that immigration was usually a permanent move.

A second important characteristic of the antebellum period was that it was when mass migration began. In the colonial and early national

[1] Erickson, *Invisible Immigrants*, pp. 265–7; Kamphoefner, et al., *News*, pp. 149–53.

periods, the number of individuals coming to the United States was small, and the numbers remained small into the 1820s. During the late 1820s and early 1830s, however, well before the potato famine, the number of individuals migrating each year began to rise sharply. The potato famine then increased the volume of immigration even more, and the higher numbers of immigrants from Europe persisted until the United States imposed restrictions in the 1920s. As Phillips and Bauer illustrate, the migrants arrived from a number of different European countries.

Only during the antebellum years did both characteristics hold, that is, large numbers of permanent immigrants arrived in the United States from Europe on sailing ships. During earlier periods, all individuals who came to the United States from Europe traveled on sailing ships. The numbers, however, were usually small. After the Civil War, the annual volumes became even larger, but by 1870, most passengers arrived on steamships and many did not plan to stay in the United States.[2] It was the high volume of permanent immigrants arriving via the sailing ship that makes the antebellum period unique in the history of world immigration. Although these features suggest that immigration during the antebellum period deserves separate treatment, they do not imply that every aspect of the immigration occurring at this time was necessarily unique.

Besides possessing a combination of unique characteristics, antebellum immigration should be investigated for at least two other reasons. First, antebellum immigration provides a situation that is close to the classic theoretical migration model, where individuals are assumed to migrate to achieve economic improvement.[3] At least as a starting point, the classic model does not account for the possibility of return migration, and the antebellum period is unique in that little return migration occurred. The model also predicts specific consequences of the migration for the individuals and each country. Given the large volume of immigration during the antebellum period, the theoretical effects predicted by the classic immigration model should be readily apparent. The period examined in this book thus provides an excellent test of the predictions of the classic immigration model. Second, the United States experienced rapid economic growth during the nineteenth century. The century saw

[2] In 1870, 86% of the European immigrants arriving in New York City came on a steamship. The percentage in 1852 had been only 1%. See Cohn, "Transition," Table 1, p. 472.

[3] In this model, migration occurs because the economic return in the country of destination is larger than the economic return in the country of origin, after adjusting for the cost of migrating. See Chapter 3 for further discussion.

the United States move from being a fairly minor economic and political power on the world stage to being the country with the largest economy and one with a growing political clout.[4] Because of its rapid growth, the United States became the most important destination for immigrants as they sought to improve their standard of living. The large inflow of people, which increased over the entire century but first became sizeable during the antebellum period, in turn provided an important source of labor and other resources to the rapidly growing U.S. economy. A study of antebellum immigration thus sheds light on an important factor in nineteenth-century U.S. economic growth.

Structure of the Book

This book explores the economic causes and effects of European immigration to the United States during the period of mass migration under sail, or between about 1815 and 1860. The available data concerning immigration and an evaluation of those data are central features of the book. Essentially, the following chapters lay out what we currently know – and do not know – regarding the economic history of immigration during this important period. First, the book examines a number of aspects relating to the flows of antebellum immigration, including how many people came, where they came from, and why the volume increased at this time. Next, the immigrants are examined, including who they were, their trip from home to the arrival port in the United States, and their experience in the United States. Finally, the effects of European immigration on the antebellum United States are analyzed.

The entire period of mass European immigration to the United States occurred between 1815 and 1914, when 35 million people migrated. Somewhat more than 5 million of these individuals arrived before 1860. Although these 5 million individuals were the smaller part of the entire mass migration, the annual antebellum volume was much larger than in earlier years. Chapter 2 explores the volume and sources of immigration during the antebellum years. The available data are presented and critiqued, and the timing of the increase in volume is determined. In addition, the chapter explores where the immigrants came from within Europe and illustrates the changes in the European sources of immigration over the antebellum years. Chapter 3 then extends the analysis by explaining

[4] For a discussion of U.S. economic ascendancy during the nineteenth century, see Wright, "Origins," pp. 651–3.

the reasons that immigrant volume increased substantially around 1830. After discussing the economic theory of immigration, the chapter examines the factors that changed in Europe, the United States, and ocean travel that caused many more people to immigrate. Essentially, immigration became easier. Chapter 4 continues the discussion by analyzing the importance of push, pull, and other factors during the antebellum period. In particular, the chapter investigates both the potato famine and the relationship between downturns in the U.S. economy and downturns in the volume of European immigration.

Chapters 5 through 7 examine the European immigrants themselves. The higher volume of immigration during the antebellum period was associated with a fundamental change in immigrant composition, which is the subject of Chapter 5. Although most immigrants were positively selected before the early 1830s – they were more skilled than the underlying labor forces they left – the skill level of the immigrant stream declined during the antebellum period. Thus, the antebellum years not only saw more immigrants arrive, but also a substantial reduction in their "quality." Chapter 6 explores the trip undertaken by the European immigrants in moving to the United States. The routes and transportation modes the immigrants took within Europe to get to the embarkation ports are discussed. In addition, this chapter examines the conditions faced by the passengers in crossing the Atlantic by sailing ship, a trip that averaged more than six weeks, and provides an estimate of the mortality suffered during the ocean voyage. The outcomes achieved by the immigrants in the United States, both geographically and financially, are addressed in Chapter 7. After all, the fundamental economic goal for antebellum immigrants was to improve their economic well-being, and the United States was selected because of its rapid rate of economic growth. Essentially, the analysis shows that all the different immigrant groups achieved success in the growing U.S. economy, even given the discussion in Chapter 5 concerning the declining "quality" of the immigrant stream. The chapter also explores the attempts by various agencies in the United States to assist the arriving immigrants.

The economic and political consequences of immigration for the United States during the antebellum period are investigated in Chapter 8. A comparison of the skills of the immigrant stream and those of the native-born U.S. labor force is provided for 1850. The chapter investigates the broader economic and political consequences for the United States of the changes in the volume and composition of immigration. In particular, the connections between immigration and overall real wages, the relative wages

of skilled and unskilled workers, developments in manufacturing and transportation, and the outbreaks of nativism are examined. Some of the benefits obtained by the United States from the large volume of immigration are also briefly addressed. Chapter 9 discusses how immigration changed after the Civil War and recaps the findings of the book.

Argument of the Book

This section provides an overview of the line of reasoning presented in detail in the remainder of this book.

Although small in volume, the immigrant stream before the 1830s was generally more skilled than the native-born labor force in the Colonies and then the United States (Chapter 5).[5] The exceptions might have been immigrants arriving as part of a religious flow. The method of transatlantic passage, the sailing ship, meant the journey was long and that virtually all of the immigration was permanent. The high cost of crossing the Atlantic mostly restricted travel to those who could afford to pay the passage fare and indentured servants, who paid their fare by working at reduced wages in the Colonies for a period of years. However, skilled labor was especially scarce in the Colonies, so more skilled individuals gained the most from migrating. Immigrants who were able to pay their own way must have had relatively high incomes, which meant they were more likely to be wealthy farmers, skilled workers, or entrepreneurs. Even the indentured servants experienced a larger gain in the New World if they were more skilled. The overall immigrant stream before the 1830s, therefore, had a relatively high skill level.

During the eighteenth century, the average yearly volume of immigration increased slowly, with the annual total usually being less than ten thousand (Chapter 2). Most immigrants came from Great Britain. After 1750, consistent population growth began to occur throughout Western Europe, which put increased pressure on the standard of living and caused emigration to increase from other European areas, such as Ireland and Germany (Chapter 3). During the first fifteen years of the nineteenth century, immigrant volume fell to very low levels due to the

[5] The discussion in the remainder of this section is carried out without footnotes. The reader is referred to the other chapters for further details and references. The chapter to consult is indicated as follows: at the end of some sentences is a chapter number in parentheses. The reader will find further detail on the material in that sentence in that chapter. Following sentences refer to the same chapter until the next sentence in which another chapter is referred to in parentheses.

Napoleonic Wars. After the end of the wars in 1815, the shipping market was disorganized and transatlantic fares were high, causing the volume of immigration to remain small. Throughout the 1820s, fares slowly fell as the shipping market improved in various ways. In addition, remittances and prepaid tickets became more common and European governmental restrictions on emigration declined. These factors combined to make the transatlantic crossing cheaper by 1830 and thus more affordable to a larger segment of the European population.

Industrial production in the United States did not grow rapidly during the 1820s, and this factor contributed to the low rate of immigration during this decade (Chapter 4). A much more rapidly growing U.S. economy during the early 1830s, in conjunction with the smaller costs of getting to the United States, led to a large increase in immigrant volume in 1831 and 1832 (Chapters 2 and 3). Between 1815 and 1860, a total of 5.2 million Europeans immigrated to the United States, with most arriving after 1830 (Chapter 2). Based on the previous discussion, it is apparent that "push" factors, "pull" factors, and other factors were all important to explain why immigration occurred (Chapter 4). In the antebellum years before the 1840s, the largest proportion of the immigrant stream came from southwest Germany and Ulster in northern Ireland (Chapter 2). These areas had two factors in common. Population densities were very high, which made it difficult to earn a living from agriculture. In addition, the possibility of earning some income in nonfarm activities while remaining on the farm were limited. Emigration was thus an attractive solution for individuals living in these two areas.

The large increase in volume was not the only fundamental change in immigration during the 1830s (Chapter 5). The composition of the immigrant stream also became less skilled, as a greater share of the European labor force could now afford to immigrate. The decline in skills occurred for each of the major source countries: Ireland, Germany, and Great Britain. Yet the German stream remained more skilled than the British, who were more skilled than the Irish. The discrepancies were due to differences in trip length, volume of remittances, and languages. After the early 1830s, the overall skill level of the immigrant stream was similar to that of the native-born U.S. labor force, although the former was relatively abundant in nonfarm unskilled labor and relatively scarce in farmers (Chapter 8). Another factor that could have affected immigration – mortality on the voyage – remained fairly constant over the antebellum period (Chapter 6). About 1.5 percent of those leaving European ports died during the voyage or shortly after arrival, with most

deaths occurring on a small number of voyages where epidemics broke out.

Transatlantic passenger shipping routes were fairly specialized, with connections between specific European and U.S. ports (Chapter 6). Over time, however, an increasing percentage of the European immigrants landed in New York City (Chapter 7). This trend reflected advantages of the city as a port, the opening of the Erie Canal, the growing economic importance of the city, and the establishment of the Commissioners of Emigration of the State of New York in 1847. This agency provided some type of assistance to about one-third of the arriving immigrants. A key objective was to help the immigrants move elsewhere in the United States, with northern urban areas being an important destination. The Irish were more likely to remain in the Northeast, the Germans were more likely to move to the Midwest, and the British spread throughout the North. The locational pattern reflected differences in income and skill levels. The poorer and less-skilled Irish found it more difficult to move to the Midwest and were pulled toward the low-skilled factory and servant jobs that were most abundant in the Northeast. The more-skilled Germans were least likely to work in the factories and more likely to be merchants or farmers. The British had a sizeable presence in a wide variety of occupations, from farming to factories.

After the early 1830s, further improvements in shipping, increased remittances, continued population growth in Europe, and the spread of information caused an overall increase in annual volume and, especially, increased numbers from newer areas of Ireland and Germany (Chapters 2 and 4). Although the trend was upward, volume declined in certain years, sometimes because of downturns in the U.S. economy and sometimes because of other factors (Chapter 4). The outbreak of the potato famine in Ireland in 1846, along with other events in Europe, intensified the desire to emigrate. The U.S. economy grew substantially during these years, so the United States provided not only a refuge, but also a source of jobs for those fleeing Europe. Thus, the volume of immigration to the United States increased significantly beginning in 1846. During the peak volume years from 1850–1854, male immigration increased the U.S. male labor force by more than 4 percent per year (Chapter 8). The huge volume led to stagnation in real wages at this time and caused a huge increase in nativist sentiment. The 1854 off-year elections resulted in unprecedented electoral success for the nativists who, although always a presence during the antebellum years, had never achieved much success at the polls. The unexpected election results, in combination with improved conditions

in Europe, caused immigrant volume to fall by half in 1855. With the outbreak of a depression in 1857 in the United States, immigrant volume did not surpass its 1854 peak until 1873, when almost all immigrants arrived on steamships.

Antebellum immigration had a number of effects on the U.S. economy (Chapter 8). The unskilled immigrant labor was important in building the antebellum transportation network, and thus they contributed to the decline in internal transportation costs. In addition, the early part of the antebellum period saw manufacturing production begin to shift to larger firms using less-skilled production methods. Skilled European immigrants who arrived before 1830 contributed to this change. Originally, manufacturers used native-born females and children as workers. The larger volume of lower-skilled immigrants arriving by the 1840s, however, provided a ready labor force for manufacturers and thus reinforced the trends in production methods. As a result of these changes, individual artisans lost a good deal of independence, although the latter part of the antebellum period saw skilled wages increase relative to unskilled wages. Besides the distributional effects, immigration raised the rate of economic growth in the antebellum United States in a variety of ways, from adding to the stock of labor to increasing entrepreneurship to adding to the capital stock.

The Current Migration Paradigm

At one time, immigration to the United States was regarded as permanent, unique, and a consequence of the modernization of Europe. An undifferentiated mass of immigrants was viewed as being uprooted from their European homes. Since the 1970s, this view has undergone significant change, mainly in response to an article written by Thistlethwaite.[6] Migrants are now viewed as having been rational decision makers who considered the benefits and costs of moving, factors that were strongly influenced by information available from previous migrants. As a consequence, migration is viewed as a regional phenomenon, where migrants traveled from a specific place in Europe to a place overseas where previous migrants from their village or area had settled. In addition, some individuals returned to their European homes. Thus, migration to the United States is no longer seen as unique because numerous individuals migrated to other places, and many did so before the Industrial Revolution. In sum,

[6] Thistlethwaite, "Migration."

migration is viewed as a consequence of individuals seeking to improve their economic well-being by moving within regional networks. Sometimes this led to a temporary move and other times to a permanent move, sometimes a move to the United States and sometimes to somewhere else, sometimes it involved a return to one's origins and sometimes not, and so on.

In fact, the preferred term is no longer "immigration" or "emigration" but "migration." The change is meant to emphasize that the movement of people was seldom permanent. For example, Walter Nugent titled his book, *Crossings: The Great Transatlantic Migrations, 1870–1914*, because he places migration to the United States in a broader context of transatlantic migrations.[7] Quotes from two other historians emphasize the same point. In one of his articles, Charles Tilly concludes that "(i)t is not very useful to classify migrants by intentions to stay or return home, because intentions and possibilities are always more complex than that – and the migrants themselves often cannot see the possibilities that are shaped by their networks."[8] In his masterly book on intra-European labor movements during the early 1800s, Jan Lucassen wrote, "The ties which bound the migrants to their . . . area of origin . . . were still very strong. In most instances, it is impossible to speak of permanent migration."[9] Although primarily discussing migrant labor within Europe, Lucassen later writes, "The difference between migratory labour and permanent resettlement, so clear-cut in past centuries, has grown vague."[10]

A culminating work along these lines is the book by Dirk Hoerder, *Cultures in Contact: World Migrations in the Second Millennium*.[11] As the title suggests, the book is a compendium of migrations over the last millennium that occurred for a variety of reasons. For example, between 1000 and 1500 CE, Hoerder discusses the Jewish Diaspora, the Muslim movement into Spain, the Crusades, early slavery, the migrations of the Normans and the Wends, and the movement of people for marriage, because of droughts and religious persecution, and as farmers, soldiers, pilgrims, prostitutes, traders, and workers. In this 700-page book, only about 40 pages address the immigration of Europeans to the United States between 1800 and 1920. Similarly, Leslie Page Moch writes, " . . . migrants to every sort of destination – from the regional capital to the mines of

[7] Nugent, *Crossings*.
[8] Tilly, "Transplanted Networks," p. 87.
[9] Lucassen, *Migrant Labour*, p. 122.
[10] Lucassen, *Migrant Labour*, p. 215.
[11] Hoerder, *Cultures*.

Missouri – were pushed by the same set of forces." A few sentences later, she says, "... overseas migration systems were intimately linked with those on the continent." In another article, Moch writes, "If we consider international migration, ignoring the regional and national moves created by the same economic and social situation ... our understanding of migration will be impoverished."[12] Thus, the current view is that European immigration to the United States was not very different from a mass of other moves.

Given this body of recent work, how can a book that focuses on European immigration to the United States during the antebellum period, and generally ignores other migratory movements during the same period, be justified? I do not wish to argue that all aspects of the current migration paradigm are incorrect. Clearly, they are not. However, not all facets of the current migration paradigm accurately describe the unique case of European immigration to the antebellum United States. In a number of ways, the subject of this book is fundamentally different from intra-European migration or international migration after the Civil War.

A primary reason for the difference is that immigration to the United States was expected to be, and in virtually all cases was, permanent. Although a desire to increase one's income led to both seasonal migration within Europe and immigration to the United States, the first was temporary, whereas the latter was permanent. Immigration to the United States during the antebellum years required a six-week voyage across the Atlantic by sailing ship. The length of the trip made a return to Europe difficult. Thus, an individual did not view travel to the United States as a seasonal movement, but rather a one-time move. Although a few antebellum migrants eventually returned to Europe as visitors or to live permanently, the numbers were small. The best estimates of return migration during the period of sailing ship travel are by Kamphoefner for Germany. He concludes that return migration to Germany in the 1860s was about 2 percent, while for earlier periods, the rates were "consistently under 1 percent."[13] His calculations are based on records of return migration kept by a number of German states. In arriving at this figure, he notes that many previously higher estimates included individuals who returned

[12] Moch, "European Perspective," p. 133; Moch, "Dividing Time," p. 43.

[13] Kamphoefner, "Volume," pp. 297–301. In addition, see Harper, *Emigrant Homecomings*. Her book consists of twelve chapters, each by a different author who examines a particular case study of return emigration. Most of the authors use government documents or family letters to develop their arguments. All the case studies in Harper's book before the steamship, however, involve merchants or soldiers.