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Using History to Inform the Modern Immigration Debate in the United States

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Abstract:

The contentious modern immigration debate in the United States is often void of historical context and thus filled with fallacious narratives. To confront this trend, social studies educators should place the issues of modern immigration within their proper historical framework. This paper looks at three primary themes educators can explore: the increasingly restrictive immigration system, the similarities between the past and present in relation to xenophobic and nativist beliefs and movements, and the changes immigrants have continuously brought to American society. By exploring both the historical continuity and contrasts, students can begin to obtain a more nuanced and embracive view of immigration. History is a powerful tool that educators can employ to undermine increasingly popular xenophobic rhetoric and policies and help lead students towards a vision of social justice.

Key words: immigration; immigrant rights; nativism; social justice.

Introduction

The current discussion on immigration is often vitriolic and filled with misinformation. This is especially true in politics, where candidates and representatives often use anti-immigrant rhetoric for political gain (Ball, 2016). In the social studies classroom, it may be easier for teachers not to address immigration. However, for the sake of the immigrant student population and the direction of the national discourses on immigration, it is imperative for teachers to expose students to the issues surrounding this contentious debate. Unfortunately, the discussions on immigration often occur without proper historical context. This lack of understanding can lead "native-born" students to the conclusion that their ancestors immigrated the "correct" way, while the undocumented immigrant population today is simply refusing to come to the country legally. There is often not the recognition of how the immigration system has become more restrictive over time. By not understanding the history of immigration, students can also fail to

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see how modern stereotypes and contempt towards immigrants are often the recycled fears and hatred of past generations. Failing to understand the history of immigration also prohibits students from seeing how every generation of immigrants has significantly changed the fabric of society and how these societal and cultural changes often benefit the overall population.

The contribution of this article during the Trump era is to help students explore current similarities to historical fears and discrimination while simultaneously exploring our society, which is both increasingly diverse and has some of the most restrictive immigration policies in our national history. Although there is scholarship within social studies that explores the issue of the changes modern immigration is bringing to society (Banks, 2004; Rong, 1998) and similarities of past and present immigrant experiences (Keiper & Garcia, 2009; McBee, Bone, Mossop, & Owens, 1998), this article focuses on the nuance of how, despite our increasing diversity, we have become more restrictive. It seeks not only to understand education in a more multicultural United States but to use history to problematize the current restrictive system, which is often culturally accepted as normal and necessary.

Theoretical Framework

This article is based in the theoretical framework of social justice, which rejects the idea of "value-free" research and instead is willing to engage with "issues of power and how we treat each other, both in the sense of micro face-to-face interactions and in the sense of macro social and economic relations" (Gewirtz, 1998, p. 471). Banks (2004) ties the concept of social justice to the ideal of a more global view of citizenship, which is essential for students seeking to "make their communities, the nation, and the world more just and humane" (p. 304). Villegas (2007) argues that the ethical and moral aspects of education make the idea of social justice central and that it is a type of focus that teacher educators should seek to instill in their students.

The issue of immigration policy is deeply connected to the larger concept of social justice. Rutger Bregman (2016) argues that one's national status is the greatest form of discrimination today, even more than other factors such as race or gender. Carens (1987) compares the injustice of restrictive immigration policies to the feudalism of the Middle Ages, contending that "like feudal birthright privileges, restrictive citizenship is hard to justify when one thinks about it closely" (p. 254). Fortier (2006) and Schulze-Wessell (2015) highlight how modern immigration restrictions are mainly implemented to stop the movement of poorer populations, as many of the wealthy are less inhibited by restrictive border policies. In this sense, stances towards immigration are not just about economics or national interests, but about fairness, equality, and human dignity.

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History of Open Immigration

In the history classroom, teachers may frequently discuss past immigrants entering the country through Ellis Island and Angel Island and the process of becoming citizens. This is vital to understanding how immigration has always been a central aspect of the history of the United States. However, there should also be a greater recognition of how open the system was, at least when it came to legal entrance into the country. The U.S. government allowed the majority of immigrants to enter the country unless there was visible sickness or suspicion of illicit activity. For example, between 1880 and World War I, less than 1% of the 25 million individuals from Europe were denied entrance into the United States (Ngai, 2014). The Mexican-American border was also largely open, and the U.S. government put few restrictions on migrants crossing into the United States (Ettinger, 2009). This can be a vital point for educators to discuss, as the idea of policing the Mexican-American border is a relatively new phenomenon.

In the modern context, we are missing a large aspect of the story by simply focusing on immigrants coming in illegally without addressing the changing system that makes the act illegal. The United States had an almost de facto open immigration system for a large portion of its history (Lemay, 1987). Educators can discuss with students whether this was related to the ideals of liberty taken from the Enlightenment, which were crucial to the formation of the nation. Philosophers such as Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1754) seemed to undermine the notion of sovereign borders with his writings on property and inequality. As he stated, "You are undone if you once forget that the fruits of the earth belong to us all, and the earth itself to nobody" (Rousseau, 1754, p. 64). Thomas Jefferson (1774) also alluded to this right of migration in his arguments for self-rule, talking about "a right, which nature has given to all men, of departing from the country in which chance, not choice has placed them, of going in quest of new habitations" (p. 121). George Washington (1778) also had poignant words regarding immigration: "I had always hoped that this land might become a safe and agreeable asylum to the virtuous and persecuted part of mankind, to whatever nation they might belong." One could argue that a more open position towards immigration is central to the whole idea of the founding of the United States: leaving one's native country and starting anew. With all the inconsistencies and racism inherent in the founder's worldviews, was the idea of a more open immigration system seen as foundational to American values?

In modern society, nation-states have becoming increasingly stringent regarding immigration, and the debate has devolved to the point of arguing over how strict immigration policies should be. What policy makers do not often discuss is the idea of migration being a human right.

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Although the economic and social situations were different in the 19th century, there seemed to be an idea among many in the U.S. at the time that individuals had the right to migrate to another country without being unfairly barred by the nation-state. This is exemplified by Emma Lazarus' (1883) famous poem engraved on the Statue of Liberty portraying the United States as the "Mother of Exiles" and imploring the Old World to "give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free."

Movement towards Restrictive Policies

Educators can help lead students to understand the racial motivations of the earliest immigration restrictions. The first large-scale restrictions of immigrants came with the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 (Railton, 2013). Teachers can examine how this first overriding immigration restriction demonstrates the relationship between immigration policy and racial fears. In the 1920s, the U.S. passed a series of restrictions and immigration quotas largely based on race (Daniels, 2004). By examining the countries with greater quota restrictions, students can understand the immigration privileges given to Northern and Western European nations. However, it is also important to point out how Latin America was largely exempt from the immigration restrictions and quotas, largely due to the dependence on Mexican labor in the American Southwest (Ngai, 2014).

The immigration system became even more restrictive in the 1930s during the Great Depression. Students can look at the timeline of immigration restrictions to more fully understand the link between economic anxiety and immigration restrictions. This nexus also adds a greater nuance to the issue, as reasons for greater restrictions towards immigrants are often complex and multifaceted; for instance, while some anti-immigrant arguments are based on economic concerns (even if misguided) and others are based on cultural and racial fears, a mixture of conscious and unconscious fear is common.

During World War II, the U.S. once again opened immigration from Latin America to meet the need of greater labor. This is when the U.S. government implemented the Bracero Program. While the program allowed for a temporary legal status to stay and work, many of the workers stayed indefinitely (Drisicoll de Alvarado, 1998). After the war, the U.S. government systematically deported about one million Mexican migrants under President Eisenhower's "Operation Wetback" (Peralata, 2015). Due to the inhumane treatment, some immigrants died as a result of these deportations. According to Mae Ngai, "Some 88 braceros died of sun stroke as a result of a round-up that had taken place in 112-degree heat… a Mexican labor leader

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reported that 'wetbacks' were 'brought [into Mexico] like cows' on trucks and unloaded fifteen miles down the highway from the border, in the desert" (cited in Peralata, 2015). The U.S. government allowed immigrants to enter freely when the U.S. needed their labor, but these same immigrants were treated like criminals when society no longer needed their services. This created a strange phenomenon: Immigrants continued to enter the country even after the U.S. government implemented greater restrictions. Additionally, sectors of U.S. industry remained dependent on immigrant labor. According to Ettinger (2009),

Mexican families dependent on remittances from the north could hardly reinvent their economic strategies overnight. And American farmers addicted to cheap labor were happy to accommodate them. Through the 1960s, 1970s, and beyond, the tradition of undocumented entry persisted. Once primed, the pump could not so simply be turned off. (p. 171)

In 1965, President Johnson signed the Immigration Act, which did away with the racially based quota system and provided more equal opportunity to individuals of different national origins who wanted to come to the United States. However, a consequence of this was a greater restriction of Latin American immigration. This was problematic because of the historically large influx of immigrants from Latin America, particularly from Mexico. To overlook that historical reality in the name of greater equality in immigration led to detrimental consequences and a greater occurrence of illegal immigration (Waters & Ueda, 2007).

Possible Class Discussion on Increasingly Restrictive System

When students see immigration from this perspective, it may change some of the conceptions they have about undocumented or illegal immigration. From a historical perspective, immigrants, especially those from poorer and working class backgrounds, have always come to the United States. However, when the U.S. began creating more stringent immigrant standards, it forced these immigrants to enter in a clandestine fashion. Perhaps this can lead to discussions on whether the onus of illegal immigration should be placed more on the national government that has changed policy rather than on the immigrants seeking better economic opportunities and societal stability. This idea is so foreign to the modern framework of immigration that many students may never have considered it. Such a discussion might lead to deeper analysis of the overemphasis placed on national citizenship rather than global citizenship.

This could also be an opportunity for teachers to discuss *who* is allowed to immigrate to the United States. For example, when I brought an undocumented student to my teacher education class to tell her story, one of my students earnestly asked why she could not simply get her papers

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from Mexico and apply for legal status. There appears to be much misunderstanding about how the contemporary immigration system actually works.

Many early arrivals to the United States were from the poor and working classes employed in agriculture or factories (Kozak, 2000; Tsu, 2013), but this has changed in the modern era. Today, most visas are reserved for immediate family members of skilled workers in specific fields. Permanent legal status for "unskilled" workers is limited to 5,000 per year (American Immigration Center, 2014). This unskilled demographic made up the majority of immigrants coming into the country during the 19th and early 20th centuries (Sadowsk-Smith, 2008). Recognizing these changes can lead to a discussion about whether our current immigration system fails to meet the demand for immigrant labor that has been present throughout the national history. Students might discuss the role that working class immigrants play in keeping production costs lower and the possible economic outcomes of a sudden mass exodus of working class immigrants; however, economic arguments should always be discussed within the larger context of human rights and justice.

The History of Discrimination and Prejudice

When discussing this history with students, teachers can explain that even when the U.S. had a largely open immigration system, it did not mean that the U.S. population treated immigrants in a respectful or just manner. Malicious treatment was present both in the attitudes of the general public and government officials, particularly within the criminal justice system, and such treatment is a significant point for teachers to emphasize when analyzing the similarities between past and present immigrant experiences of scapegoating and injustice. Although there may have been easier legal access to the country, past immigrants did not always have equal rights. The United States has often failed to live up to its Enlightenment ideals in issues of race, ethnicity, and equality. Groups such as the Irish, Italians, and Chinese faced harsh treatment from many native-born Americans who loathed the new immigrants because of economic concerns, cultural differences, and racial fears (Higham, 1965). When students understand the exaggerated fears of past generations, it may allow them to look at modern anxieties in a more critical light. Students can examine the motivations behind the individuals, particularly politicians and media figures, who have pushed these fearful narratives. Giving students historical examples of discrimination or xenophobia can often create some emotional distance and a greater chance of understanding that may not be possible with a current contentious issue regarding immigration.

Corresponding author: wmccork@clemson.edu

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Stereotypes

Teachers can point out the derogatory stereotypes of past immigrants and relate them to stereotypes today. For example, 19th century immigrants were often labeled as dangerous and unruly, blamed for taking jobs away from Americans, and accused of undermining the cultural heritage of the United States. Though they were allowed to immigrate to the country, they were not always allowed a sense of true membership and belonging.

One way to introduce a discussion about these past stereotypes is examining cartoons of the past and comparing them to modern anti-immigrant cartoons. This can be a helpful strategy in continuing to identify the faulty narratives and stereotypes present in the immigration debate, such as the caricature of the drunken Irish rabble-rouser (Nash, 1867) or the conspiring, untrustworthy Chinese immigrant (Keller, 1878). Immigrants were portrayed as a threat to the American way of life, especially at the turn of the century as Eastern and Southern European immigrants were associated with revolution and anarchy (Bencivinni, 2014). In addition to cartoons, students might examine historic political statements and writings illustrative of anti-immigrant attitudes. Examples of such documents include the Know Nothing Party platform (1856) and the writings of nativist and anti-Catholic 19th century writers such as Maria Monk (1836), Samuel Morse (1835), and Lyman Beecher (1866).

Anti-Immigrant Organizations

There are also continuous historical examples of anti-immigrant organizations that have appealed to people's fears of immigrants. The Know-Nothing Party's political rise in the mid-19th century was directly tied to their xenophobic stance, particularly against Catholic immigrants (Abinder, 1992). The Ku Klux Klan's resurrection in the 1920s was associated with anti-immigrant fervor, especially towards religious minorities like Jews and Catholics (MacLean, 1994). Most students have probably heard of the rise of the KKK and the hatred and violence directed at African-Americans, but they may not be as aware of the anti-immigrant aspects of such groups. This antagonism is present today in the harsh anti-immigrant rhetoric that often defines modern hate groups (Campbell, 2015). Immigrants can be an easier target since prejudice towards them can be framed in legal terms. Teachers might discuss why antagonism based on nationalism is often seen as more justified than direct racism.

Teachers can introduce primary sources to help show the nationalistic and xenophobic elements of groups like the Klan. Some of the strongest sources are the publications produced by different Klan organizations. In an article in one of these publications, *The Watcher on the Tower,* the

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author states that he is a Klansman "because this is my country, my Native country, and its flag is my flag" and because he supports "restricted immigration" and "Americanism" (Bower, 1923, p. 2).

When discussing historical attitudes towards immigrants, students can explore the incidents in which fears and stereotypes led to mob violence and murder. One of the most heinous examples was the massacre of Chinese workers in Rock Springs, Wyoming, in 1885. Due to racial animosity and labor tensions, 150 white miners killed 28 Chinese coworkers ("Memorial of Chinese Laborers," 1885). Similar violence against the Chinese took place in Los Angeles (Zesch, 2012) and Seattle (Daniels, 1978). Teachers might also explore the violence carried out against the Japanese after Pearl Harbor. Studying these events may help students recognize that appealing to a population's basest instincts and fears can have far reaching consequences and that xenophobic rhetoric can result in actual violent acts.

Modern Parallels for Discussion

Teachers might use modern examples of targeted attacks on immigrants due to their nationality or religious background such as, for instance, the beating of a Hispanic man in Boston by two white men shouting the praises of Donald Trump (Rappeport, 2015). Students can also explore the "spike" in anti-Muslim violence after terrorist attacks, including cases of harassment of hijab-wearing students, shootings and death threats at Islamic owned businesses, and the burning of mosques (Lichtblau, 2015). Additionally, students might discuss the rise of extremism in the wake of the election of Donald Trump.

Exposing students to the extreme xenophobia of the past can help illuminate current xenophobic attitudes and their unsavory foundations. Indeed, the Ku Klux Klan's rhetoric of the 1920s aligns on many fronts with modern nationalist and xenophobic movements in the U.S., which have a strong focus on the flag, Americanism, endangered Constitutional rights, and fears of a changing country (Schrag, 2010).

Teachers might highlight the increased modern xenophobic rhetoric of politicians like Donald Trump and the scapegoating of immigrants for criminal activity. A strong example would be the 2018 State of the Union address in which Trump highlighted individuals killed by undocumented immigrants and marginalized those on family visas by pointing to a failed terrorist attack by an individual on a family visa (Trump, 2018). He stressed these anecdotal examples without noting that native-born Americans statistically commit more crimes than immigrants (Bersani, 2014). Xenophobic rhetoric is often present in modern day media, especially in certain right-leaning

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http://www.iajiss.org ISSN: 2327-3585

political outlets such as Fox News and Breitbart. Teachers might explore the emotions and fears that certain news stories or commentaries inflame and the possible link to past fears and misconceptions about immigrant communities.

Immigrants and the Criminal Justice System

Educators can also explore how, both historically and contemporarily, the justice system has tended to work against the interests of the immigrant population. Perhaps the most famous historical example is the case of Sacco and Vanzetti, two Italian men executed for murder; many suspected that their conviction was due to their radical political beliefs and ethnic background rather than actual proof of the crime (Temkin, 2011). This was not a solitary case: Violence and legal discrimination against Italian Americans and other immigrants were rampant. One of the worst cases occurred in 1891 when a mob of over 20,000 people lynched 11 Italian American prisoners in New Orleans, an attack secretly arranged by the Louisiana establishment (Rimanelli & Postman, 1992).

Revealing past injustices carried out against immigrants can help students examine discrimination towards minorities and poor communities in the current criminal justice system. Exploring historical cases like that of Sacco and Vanzetti is crucial because it is often easier to see and admit fault in hindsight. When similar injustices happen today, there are many who are quick to justify them for political, social, and racial reasons; indeed, as Provine (2013) points out, due to the increased focus on immigration enforcement, Mexicans and Central Americans often face "profiling, hyper-surveillance, abusive stops, problematic searches, and unwarranted detention." Modern cases of racial and ethnic discrimination in the justice system such as acts by individuals like former sheriff Joe Arpaio of Phoenix, Arizona (Santos, 2016), the war on drugs, police brutality, incarceration rates among minority groups, and the often inhumane treatment of immigrants at largely for-profit prisons across the nation are important topics for examination and critique in the classroom.

Immigrants and the Changing Fabric of the Nation

Another facet of immigration history that many students may fail to understand is how substantially past immigration impacted the "fabric" of the nation and the fear that this often wrought. Today, these fears center around groups with different cultures and religions, particularly those of the Islamic faith, and resistance to large-scale language changes like the increasing use of Spanish in the United States. There can be a tendency to exaggerate the differences between current immigrants and modern American society while downplaying the

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http://www.iajiss.org ISSN: 2327-3585

differences of past immigrants and American society, but past immigrants did not merely assimilate into the dominant culture—they helped change that culture.

Religious Concerns

It is critical to point out that the fear of religious differences is not a new phenomenon in the United States. In the 19th century, Protestants feared the Catholicism of groups such as the Italians and Irish, worrying that Catholics would blindly follow the Pope in Rome and thus undermine the ideals of a republic founded on freedom of religion (Oxx, 2013). Many Americans also felt extensive animosity towards the Jewish immigrants of the late 19th and early 20th centuries, discriminating against Jews in housing and education, stereotyping them in derogatory ways, and even accusing them of being responsible for the Great Depression (Gerber, 1986). An intriguing way to illustrate the fears of different religions is to point out that critics of sitting presidents often accused them of being part of religions with which they were not associated. Some of Abraham Lincoln's critics accused him of being a Catholic when Irish immigration and anti-Catholicism were at high levels, and Franklin D. Roosevelt was accused of being a Jew while anti-Semitism and hostility towards Jewish immigrants were on the rise. In the modern context, critics labeled President Obama as a Muslim during a time of rampant fear and hatred of Islam (Parlett, 2014).

In hindsight, fear of Papal rule and Judaism seems nonsensical. This may help students understand our current irrational, overblown fear of Muslims. Teachers can explore the multi-faceted elements of terrorist activity in the United States which does not merely or even primarily entail Islamic extremist groups (Scott, 2015).

Language Concerns

Both contemporarily and historically, there has been a resistance to change in language. In the 19th century, German was the second most spoken language in the United States (Baron, 2014) and an "official alternative language of instruction" in schools in Ohio and Pennsylvania (Zagofsky, 2011). However, in the 1880s, some states became fearful of the growing use of German, and the state of Wisconsin banned Catholic schools from continuing to use German as the primary language of instruction (Leibowitz, 1969). The fear and animosity towards the German language and culture reached their highest levels around World War I when several states banned immigrants from speaking German on the phone, in the streets, and in religious services (Crawford, 1990).

Corresponding author: wmccork@clemson.edu

http://www.iajiss.org ISSN: 2327-3585

Today, the second most spoken language is Spanish, and there is once again resistance to a multi-lingual society. Even in much of our education system, the choice of how we educate second language learners is often not so much about the top research, quality of education, or creating the best life prospects for students (Stritikus, 2002), but about keeping the United States a primarily English-speaking nation. Another example of resistance and fear regarding becoming a multi-lingual society is the move toward making English the "official language" in certain states (Liu & Sohkey, 2014). Teachers can discuss the current resistance to more diversity in language, both in society and the school setting, and the underlying cultural anxieties that may drive this resistance.

The "Melting Pot" Fallacy

The standard narrative that past immigrants abandoned their cultures, jumped into the "melting pot" of the United States, and quickly adopted American values is an oversimplification, as it often took generations for immigrants to "assimilate" into American society. In large cities, specific ethnic neighborhoods retained their cultures, foodways, languages, and traditions; these enclaves were often segregated by racist zoning policies (Roediger, 2005). The fallacy of complete assimilation also overlooks the fact that immigrants changed the fabric of society (Glazer & Moynihan, 1963). Not only did they change the culture in areas such as food, holidays, and cultural customs, they also helped both change and refine the ideals of American society. As immigrants from Catholic and Jewish faiths entered the public arena, they began to slowly alter the hegemony of Protestantism in areas such as education (Schultz, 2013). Although the nation was founded on the ideals of freedom of religion and a separation of church and state, many of these ideals did not become solidified until the large-scale immigration of individuals from different religious backgrounds forced the nation to address religious issues in the civic arena. The immigrant populations also changed American society politically and economically. Some immigrants embraced capitalism, but many sought to change the system and make it more just. Immigrants were vital to the strength and success of the Labor Movement and ultimately to progressive social reforms (Begston, 1999; Michels, 2014).

Classroom Application

While immigration does change the fabric of the nation, we can see from the past how these are often necessary changes. A country can become so ethnocentric in its outlook that it loses all recognition of its faults and discrepancies. With immigrants coming into the country, the ideals of the American society are refined and helped shaped into a more perfect union. When students

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http://www.iajiss.org ISSN: 2327-3585

understand that past immigration did lead to a changed society, but those changes were often beneficial, it can help frame the current immigrant debate in a different way. This can lead to a class discussion on how modern immigration is changing the country for the better. How are immigrants helping us to re-examine our values? What positive insights do immigrants bring to society? A rational and research-based discussion on the issue may lead students to see the often positive changes in American society that immigration can bring.

Some practical activities may help students understand this concept. For instance, students might investigate aspects of American culture that came from a specific ethnic group or several different ethnic groups, whether something as simple as food, sports, music, or technology, or something more nuanced like a specific philosophy, ideology, or element of our democratic system of government. Alternatively, students might choose a specific ethnic group and explore the positive changes it contributed to American society. On a more personal level, students might interview a local immigrant and report on specific ways that the individual is contributing to the American society, not merely on an economic level but on a social and cultural level, with a special emphasis on how they may be assisting the United States in becoming a more just society. Students can also explore the multi-faceted nature of what citizenship means to an immigrant in the context of the larger ideal of global identity (Karlberg, 2008).

Conclusion

As students begin to understand the history of immigration, the current immigration debate comes into clearer focus. The narrative that one's ancestors came in "legally" or the "right way" is problematized with the realization that unlike in the past, modern working and middle class families often have little chance to immigrate legally to the country (American Immigration Center, 2014). By understanding the increasingly restrictive immigration policies, students may able to see what has led to the rise of undocumented immigration. This historical framework can shift the blame away from those immigrating illegally to a government that has created few legal options for certain populations.

By understanding the discrimination and animosity that past immigrant groups faced, modern xenophobia can be exposed for what it is—a tool for demagogues to gain political power. As historian Alan Kraut (2016) puts it, "Nativism is old wine in new bottles that perennially quenches the thirst of America's fearful and suspicious." Perhaps students will begin to see the commonalities between "Irish need not apply" signs of the 19th century and modern hateful rhetoric towards undocumented immigrants, refugees, and Muslims. There can also be a greater

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http://www.iajiss.org ISSN: 2327-3585

recognition of how differences in religion, language, and culture can lead to unwarranted and exaggerated fears and how these fears can lead to violence. In line with the goal of teaching for social justice, educators can use the history of immigration to help students understand how they can reform the current society.

History helps reveal the great gaps and faulty reasoning in our modern immigration debate. It is difficult for students to deeply study the nation's history of immigration and come away with strong xenophobic attitudes. When one studies U.S. history, it becomes clear that we have always been a nation of immigrants. For a more rational and compassionate outlook on modern immigration, students must truly explore U.S. history.

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