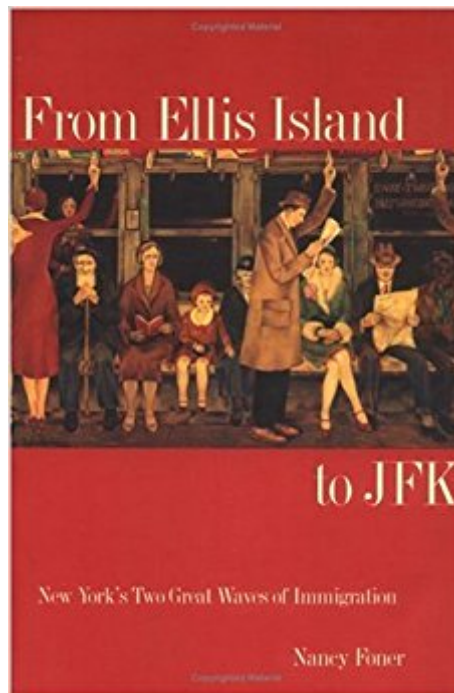




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From Ellis Island To JFK: New York's Two Great Waves Of Immigration



Synopsis

In the history, the very personality, of New York City, few events loom larger than the wave of immigration at the turn of the last century. Today a similar influx of new immigrants is transforming the city again. Better than one in three New Yorkers is now an immigrant. From Ellis Island to JFK is the first in-depth study that compares these two huge social changes. A key contribution of this book is Nancy Foner's reassessment of the myths that have grown up around the earlier Jewish and Italian immigration and that deeply color how today's Asian, Latin American, and Caribbean arrivals are seen. Topic by topic, she reveals the often surprising realities of both immigrations. For example: Education: Most Jews, despite the myth, were not exceptional students at first, while many immigrant children today do remarkably well. Jobs: Immigrants of both eras came with more skills than is popularly supposed. Some today come off the plane with advanced degrees and capital to start new businesses. Neighborhoods: Ethnic enclaves are still with us but they're no longer always slums today's new immigrants are reviving many neighborhoods and some are moving to middle-class suburbs. Gender: For married women a century ago, immigration often, surprisingly, meant less opportunity to work outside the home. Today, it's just the opposite. Race: We see Jews and Italians as whites today, but to turn-of-the-century scholars they were members of different, alien races. Immigrants today appear more racially diverse but some (particularly Asians) may be changing the boundaries of current racial categories. Drawing on a wealth of historical and contemporary research and written in a lively and entertaining style, the book opens a new chapter in the study of immigration and the story of the nation's gateway city.

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Customer Reviews

"By comparing the two big waves of immigration in New York City, Foner has found a distinctive and enlightening way of describing the country's recent racial and ethnic history. Her subject may be New York City, but Foner's book is really about America. It should thus become essential reading for scholars, students, public officials and everyone else concerned with immigration as well as race and ethnicity in American life." Herbert Gans, author of *Popular Culture and High Culture* "An important book which both clarifies and complicates our thinking about immigration in the United States." Rudolph Vecoli, *Journal of American History* "An exemplary book... a telling portrait of New York immigration in its two great waves... cleanses both movements of their mythic incrustations." Vincent Crapanzano, *Times Literary Supplement* "Move aside, Glazer and Moynihan! With *From Ellis Island to JFK*, we have a welcome replacement for *Beyond the Melting Pot*." Roger Sanjek, *City Limits*

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One of the best books and the most updated one I have read about America's immigration history. Its discussion of the present day immigrants should give many Americans a more optimistic view of our country's future. This book also shows that many of the previous views we held about the Ellis Island 1880-1924 immigration were not true. Italian and Jewish American immigrants, the major groups landing in NY then, did not "make it" in the second generation, but in the third and fourth, especially after WWII. This was the era when the GI Bill, the Civil Rights Bill, and revulsion to the Holocaust made these previously despised and often considered "non-white" groups fully "white." The new post-1965 Hart-Cellar (and Ted Kennedy pushed) anti-quota immigration act has given new "blood" to NY and the rest of this country. With the immigration reform law debate now heating up, we see too many xenophobes, especially in the South and even some of the sons and daughters of the Ellis Island group, espousing the same racist 1920 immigration restriction drive with regard to Hispanics. IMHO, this book is generally an antidote to these negative views.

This book is useful, though not brilliant. It provides a comparison between the great wave of Jewish and Italian immigrants to New York at the turn of the last century, and the present wave of immigrants from Asia, Latin America and the former Soviet Union. Foner's account look at where

immigrants live, how they work, immigrant women in particular, the sting of prejudice, the matter of ties to the old country and going to school. She seeks to refute the view which uses the success of the first wave and selected members of the second wave as a stick to beat everyone else. By and large she succeeds. She reminds us that one reason why many Asian-American have excellent education and social mobility records in the United States is because they were well educated members of the middle class back in Asia. She points out that it took a couple of generations before Jews experienced middle class status and high school graduation. She reminds us that despite fears of America becoming increasingly balkanized new immigrants are more "american" than previous waves because of the world of mass culture. There are nuanced discussions about the mixed blessings of wage labor and increased independence. There is an interesting chapter on how Jews and Italians were viewed in the past as non-white, and how Asians and Hispanics are becoming increasingly "white." There is much in here that counters the widespread moralistic underclass discourses that have made *The New Republic* the fashionable magazine of our day's *Vanity Fair*. There is a nuanced discussion of the effect immigrants have on black employment. Some pundits, shedding crocodile tears for African-Americans suggest they would be better off if immigrants were not taking their jobs. But in fact, as Foner points out, many immigrants are not directly displacing blacks because they work in niches where blacks either were rarely employed or actually excluded. On the other hand, working in sweatshop jobs often makes them less attractive to native workers and helps lower wage rates. Often employers use stereotypes to immigrants' benefits and blacks' detriment. On the other hand by increasing the New York population they encourage African American strength in public employment and stop the decline in business that comes from a falling population. So why does this book only get three stars? Well, many of its insights aren't particularly new, that they may be a revelation to readers does not mean they are to people who study the topic. There is little about politics of immigrants, either electorally or through such measures as unions. There could be more about class in the book, both within immigrant communities and within the problem of New York as a whole. It is not that the subject goes unmentioned but it is noteworthy that there is no entry under the index for "Gulliani." The result is nourishing, but bland; it could use a little more bite.

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