## Sammelrez: Race, Expertise, and State Power

Perlmann, Joel: *America Classifies the Immigrants. From Ellis Island to the 2020 Census*. Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press 2018. ISBN: 9780674425057; 464 S.

Benton-Cohen, Katherine: *Inventing the Immigration Problem. The Dillingham Commission and Its Legacy*. Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press 2018. ISBN: 9780674976443; 352 S.

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The history of immigration in the Progressive Era has received renewed attention by historians in recent years, particularly regarding control at the border.[1] Two new monographs contribute to the trend, focusing on the extension of state power, forms of knowledge, and immigration legislation.

Joel Perlmann covers the federal state's system of racial classification up to the 2020 census, but a progressive-era project lies at the heart of his book: the so-called list of races and peoples. The list is little known outside a small circle of historians working on the census and immigration legislation, but it formed the foundation for the federal classification of America's immigrants as well as inhabitants throughout the twentieth century and beyond. Created by employees of the Immigration Service in 1898, the list was regarded a crucial tool for attaining more detailed and accurate knowledge of immigrants arriving, particularly those coming from Europe's multi-ethnic empires. At a time when racial thought pervaded scientific as well as public debates about immigration, it was assumed that recording immigrants' racial identity was necessary to make statements about their potential impact on the country. However, the methods of racial classification and the interpretation of the data thus collected were and would remain contested, and these are the conflicts Perlmann explores.

In the Progressive Era, battles were fought about the proxies used to determine immigrants' race (nationality, place of birth, citizenship, mother tongue, or religion were but a few of the categories suggested), the stability of racial characteristics, and the number of existing races. Perlmann disentangles the complexities of the positions of those involved. For example, established Jewish organizations protested against being classified as „Hebrew". On the other hand, more recent Jewish immigrants as well as Eastern-European ethnic groups pushed for being included on the list as they wanted to become legible and visible to the state in order to strengthen group identity and their claims to political participation. The state, in turn, tried to expand and refine its system of racial classification in the Progressive Era. Here, instead of rehashing historians' debates about the Dillingham Commission's notorious Dictionary of Races or Peoples, Perlmann clarifies that the list of races and peoples actually formed the basis for its investigation. In his probably most original contribution, he demonstrates that the 1910 census came very close to adopting the list to introduce race-based classifications of white inhabitants of the United States for the first time.

While the book's first part focuses on the Progressive Era, the second revisits the role of race in the restrictive legislation passed in the 1920s. Perlmann argues that historians have overstated the relevance of eugenic thought. Without relying on racial science, he explains, Congressmen agreed that European immigration could be distinguished into desirable and undesirable races, that it needed to be reduced drastically through quotas, and that nationality could be used as a proxy for race. Revisiting Supreme Court decisions about Asian immigrants' eligibility to citizenship, he also claims that the court consistently prioritized popular conceptions of race over scientific theories, and explores how restrictionists unsuccessfully tried to extend exclusion to Latin American migrants.

The third part retraces the spread of the concept of ethnicity from the early twentieth century to 1965, the year the first major immigration act since the quota acts was passed. It shows that the shift from a biological under-

[1] See for example Douglas C. Baynton, Defectives in the Land. Disability and Immigration in the Age of Eugenics, Chicago 2016; Torrie Hester, Deportation. The Origins of U.S. Policy, Philadelphia 2017.

standing of race to ethnicity occurred gradually and was only completed in the Civil Rights Era, spurred by social scientists' new interest in the persistence of ethnic characteristics. Lastly, the book turns to the censuses of 1980, 2000, and 2020. New census practices prioritized self-identification, created and reconfigured pan-ethnicities, and allowed for recording multiple ethnic origins, thus reflecting a wider shift in the understanding of race.

Perlmann has written a fascinating account of the creation and evolution of the ways the American federal state classified race and ethnicity. He takes the reader through the complex and sometimes confusing multitude of racial theories, categories, and assumptions about the stability of group traits. A wealth of evidence undergirds every argument, and the author addresses archival silences and makes important contributions to historiographical debates.[2] While the first three decades of the twentieth century clearly form the period where Perlmann feels most comfortable, the book offers an insightful analysis for the entire twentieth century, and maybe one of the most compelling accounts of the evolution of ethnicity as analytical category. However, some may also regard the book's strengths as its weaknesses. Perlmann wants to present a complete rather than a concise account, and the reader is often taken through very detailed and sometimes repetitive presentations of evidence. Readers are also left to wonder how different the story could read if the more than four hundred pages also explored social, cultural, economic, or gendered contexts, the practices of identifying race at the border, the relevance of transnational connections, or – more broadly – why the overwhelming majority of the monograph lacks women as historical actors.[3] The book is, however, an insightful, detailed, and definite history of the complexities of racial categorization and its application by the modern American state.

Katherine Benton-Cohen follows a different approach: instead of zooming in on the details of a complex issue, she uses a well-known historical event to present smaller, almost self-contained stories. Her new perspective on the Dillingham Commission goes far beyond established interpretations, and her chapters, taken together, let the reader rethink the federal state, Progressivism, and American views of immigration. Named after its chair Senator William Dillingham, the Immigration Commission was the most ambitious federal project of its time. It produced forty-one volumes of reports between 1907 and 1911, more than 29,000 pages mostly consisting of quantitative data on the so-called new immigrants from Eastern and Southern Europe. The commission's scope and the fact that its papers were destroyed might be the cause why few historians have engaged with its work in detail. Most have instead relied on Oscar Handlin's evaluation, who argued in 1957 that the commission's members were convinced of the new immigrants' racial inferiority and bent results to fit their political agenda: to recommend restrictive legislation.[4] Instead, Benton-Cohen follows Robert Zeidel, the historian who produced the only recent monograph on the commission. Like him, she argues that the members of the commission had at least the ambition to produce impartial results, that it was formed too early to be influenced considerably by the eugenic movement, and that its recommendation to restrict immigration through a literacy test was based on economic rather than racial grounds.[5]

While Benton-Cohen has to position her work in relation to this key historiographic debate, she clarifies in the introduction that she does not intent to provide a full account of the commission but instead wants to tell a variety of stories about progressive-era perceptions of immigration. While some readers might wish for more context on the

[2] However, it is slightly surprising that he does not engage with the only other expert on the list of races or peoples, or scholarship on the application of these categories at the border. See Patrick Weil, Races at the Gate. Racial Distinctions in Immigration Policy. A Comparison between France and the United States (1865–1965), in: Georgetown Immigration Law Journal 15 (2001), pp. 625–648; Vincent Cannato, American Passage. The History of Ellis Island, New York 2009.

[3] For example, Perlmann discusses the Dillingham Commission's Dictionary of Races or Peoples as well as the role of its author, Daniel Folkmar, in detail, but fails to mention that it was co-authored by his wife, Dr. Elnora Folkmar (pp. 104–132).

[4] Oscar Handlin, Race and Nationality in American Life, Garden City 1957.

[5] Robert F. Zeidel, Immigrants, Progressives, and Exclusion Politics. The Dillingham Commission, 1900–1927, DeKalb 2004.

commission and its creation, the thematic chapters could almost be read independently. Nonetheless, they are connected through the skillfully crafted and engaging narrative that weaves in a number of recurring themes: the expansion of the state's knowledge of its population, the Progressive trust in expertise, regional variations in attitudes towards immigration, and the opposition of immigrant groups to racialized interpretations of their lived realities. Some of the topics discussed are relatively well-known, for example the story of Franz Boas, the anthropologist who used the commission's funding to disprove some of the key claims of scientific racism. Most chapters, however, bring out aspects other historians have mostly overlooked. The book is the first to analyze the reports on Asian immigrants in detail, and demonstrates that the commission owned its creation to the Gentlemen's Agreement. The chapter on the commission's female staff is most impressive: completely neglected by other historians, Benton-Cohen unveils that the Dillingham Commission employed more women than men, many of them at least in mid-level positions. Telling the stories of three women in more detail, the chapter demonstrates that female employees used the commission and contemporary ideas of maternalism to fashion themselves into social policy experts, shaping the commission's agenda and its results. Through one of the commissioners, Benton-Cohen also engages with an aspect few historians have investigated: the schemes to distribute new immigrants to the South. The examination of one of these programs reveals regional differences as well as competing racial conceptions. While some Southerners were convinced that European immigration would stimulate economic growth and skew population ratios in favor of whites, others regarded Italians and other immigrants from Southern Europe as undermining free white labor in the South.

These new aspects of the Dillingham Commission, the flow of the narrative, the ample evidence provided, and the attention to detail make this book a compelling read. Taken together, the chapters also present a convincing argument that historians miss important nuances if they reduce the commission to a mere vehicle of a eugenic or restrictionist agenda. As Benton-Cohen demonstrates, the commission did provide opportunities for women to claim political, administrative, and scientific authority, allowed individuals and interest groups to articulate competing interpretations of immigration's impact on the country, and embodied the federal state's expanding grasp over its population. If one wanted to criticize the book, this criticism needed to be directed at details, for example a tendency to slightly over-claim in the introduction. While it is promised here that the book integrates imperial and transnational contexts, such links are listed rather than analyzed. For example, the book mentions that that some among the commission's staff had previously worked in America's recently acquired imperial possessions, but does not explore whether racialized views of industry, economy, or labor were transferred from the colonized to immigrant groups. Nonetheless, such nit-picking should not detract from the fact that Benton-Cohen has produced an outstanding book, one that does not only tell new stories about immigration, but offers an innovative take on the social and cultural history of the Progressive Era.

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