Selecting by Origin: Ethnic Migration in the Liberal State by Christian Joppke (Book Review)

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Recommended Citation

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1943 he presented the CJDP’s Six Pillars of Peace document to President Roosevelt (reproduced by Nurser in the book’s appendix). As the secretary of state designate if the Republicans were to win the 1944 election, Dulles played a vital role in the success of the Protestant initiatives.

The reader will need some patience with this book, and a short review cannot do it justice. The main actors are often organizations; as a result, a bewildering array of abbreviations—CCAA, CEIP, CJDP, CSOP, FCC, FMC, IMC, JCRL, WCC, WSFC, YMCA, and these are just the Protestant ones—cross the pages. It helps to keep a finger on the index. It helps, too, to have a taste for Protestant theology, without which the underlying assumptions and aims of the actors cannot be understood. Nolde persuaded the powerful Protestant missionary organizations to accept his interpretation of religious freedom: that involved theology as well as pragmatism—the wording of article 18 makes no sense without that theology. If none of this is found to be distracting, the reader will be enthralled by the depth of research, the wit, the shrewd assessments of a benevolent English Anglican about American religion and society, and the nuanced treatment of issues that make this book an outstanding work of scholarship as well as a text for our times. This chapter of American religious history comes from a lost world. The “undomesticated Protestants” have driven the Noldes from the scene, and the consequences are round about us.

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Jonathan Steinberg


Christian Joppke’s volume is a timely intervention into the highly charged question of ethnicity and its proper role in citizenship and immigration regimes. If societies are about a common past as well as a common future, how should they choose future members from the outside? Liberal democratic states are committed to laws and preferences that are universalist and meritocratic. Yet considerations of community and commonality, solidarity and identity, inevitably lead to legal preferences for kinsmen—racial, linguistic, religious, and so on.

Immigration is an odd issue in contemporary political theory and politics. To begin with, liberal democracies can muster no philosophical principle to justify borders that keep well-intentioned people out. Likewise, immigration debates cut oddly across dominant political cleavages. In Europe and America alike, capitalist employers and poor people’s civil rights organizations unite to advance the free migration of people/labor—against the interests of working people subjected to income-reducing competition, most of whom are poor and ethnic minorities themselves. The two “dimensions” of citizenship also seem at odds with each other. The vertical dimension—social solidarity, welfarist redistribution, community—is arguably undermined by liberalization of the horizontal dimension—boundedness, recognition, and in/out borders. To work, bonds require boundaries. How then can an existing population decently defend itself against those wishing only to join it? The most common response has been to insist that “communities of character,” or nations, have a right to be “themselves” and to select both the nature and the quantity of any would-be newcomers.

Which newcomers make the best fit? Eagerness and opportunity may be the measure of illegal immigration, but official policies today tend to prefer achieved marketable
“skills” and “family ties” (which lead to a chain migration that reproduces those groups who have most recently immigrated). Although not unassailable, these values represent a victory of neutrality and equality principles over the national principle within liberal democracies. Less and less does immigration reproduce historical particularity. De-ethnicization of both immigrant stream and nation is the inevitable result, despite sometimes strong populist backlashes that cannot always be mollified. Nearly everywhere, liberal countries are becoming more diverse—multicultural—while the differences among these countries—nationalism—continue to shrink.

Joppke is a premier analyst of these and related developments. In this volume, he examines three paths taken by liberal democracies in addressing ethnically selective immigration. The first is the movement toward source country universalism that characterizes colonial “settler societies,” particularly the United States, Canada, and Australia—all of them with strong racialist as well as civic histories. The second is the arrival in Europe of the “postcolonial constellations” of the former European empires—receiving a cool welcome in Britain and France but a partially warm one in Spain and Portugal. The last is the “diasporic constellation” focused on the ingathering of ethnic exiles stranded precariously abroad, a “right of return” process virtually over now in Germany but resilient in Israel.

In each instance, Joppke unpacks the justifications, selection mechanisms, and oppositional pressures surrounding ethnic immigration in liberal states. Eschewing the ethnic/civic dichotomy that has dominated these debates, Joppke develops “nationhood” and “liberal stateness” as the variables that serve to explain how much preference for ethnic immigration a particular liberal democracy will show. It would be comforting to believe that liberal stateness is on the march and that de-ethnicization is the Geist of the times. Such a belief would fit well with today’s images of global capitalism.

The Allied victory in World War II signaled, in the words of Franklin Roosevelt, “the supremacy of human rights everywhere,” and Joppke accordingly stresses an international “epistemic shift,” a “rapid normative evolution” (52), that “outlawed [race] as a legitimate ordering principle” (49). In the two decades that followed, foreign policy interests, assisted by local mass movements, led the Western settler societies, beginning with Canada (in 1962) and ending with Australia (in 1973), to abandon race- and ethnicity-based immigration policies. Liberal internationalist elites associated with the executive branch led the way, followed by sometimes resistant legislatures and citizenries. Joppke shows how, by the time the U.S. national origins quota system was replaced and official nondiscriminatory universalism introduced in 1965, two-thirds of immigrants were already arriving outside the ethnic origins quota system. By 2000, only one-sixth of immigrants were Europeans, half the figure of the 1960s. Similarly, by 1973 Australia’s transformation was complete: positive discrimination on behalf of Britons was ended and “multiculturalism” became Australia’s new nation-building ideology. Still, what does such “neutrality” mean when Mexicans, Filipinos, and Chinese are clamoring at the gates while Europeans and Africans are either uninterested or unable even to apply?

For Europeans, the “aftermath of empire” has entailed the arrival of about 4 million repatriated colonists (often of mixed descent) and a smaller to equal number of colonial natives. Joppke identifies two constellations, Britain and France making up one and Spain and Portugal the other. Britain and France have absorbed former settlers (“patrials”) while viewing postcolonial immigration as ethnically/racially unwanted, though sometimes indulged in under labor market pressures. Spain and Portugal, old empires, themselves recently poor lands of emigration, have instead constructed a “panethnic ‘historical and cultural’ community” (95) that grants privileged status to all postcolonial
immigrants, both native and native. Why the French don’t treat Algerians the way the Portuguese treat Brazilians and Angolans may require addressing Islam. Unfortunately, neither “Islam” nor “Muslim” even appears in the book’s index, a clear shortcoming in an effort to make sense of recent developments.

The “diasporic constellation,” represented here by Jewish return to Israel and volks-German return to (West) Germany, marks the most persistent form of ethnic migration in liberal societies and provides the most interesting section of Joppke’s book. Here, homeland states actively pursue the “return” of fellow ethnics living anxiously among foreign majorities inclined to persecute them. Repatriation, or ingathering, is, in fact, not considered immigration, so liberal norms of nondiscrimination are not deemed to have been violated or even relevant. Such positive discrimination on behalf of returnees is even permitted by the United Nations Convention on Eliminating Racial Discrimination. In the German case, ethnic ingathering is effectively over, with both legal and cultural preferences for Germans from abroad winding down within a few years of reunification. In the Israeli case, only a small minority of Jewish Israelis, post-Zionists, believes that Israel should simply be a state of its own citizens with no further mandate to gather in and privilege Jews. Indeed, as long as the Law of Return is law number 1 and nation building unfinished, Israel cannot develop as a liberal or democratic country.

Despite their large numbers—12 million ethnic German expellees at the end of World War II—Joppke insists that German solidarity with the expellees had to be “conjured up” (171), a position at odds with most scholarship in the field. Joppke also insists that “ethnocultural tradition” was not much appreciated, even though it was acknowledged legally that expellees were “returning.” The cold war generated sociopolitical battles rather than national conflicts, and West Germany became Europe’s first “culturally postnational state” despite backdoor ethnic immigration (172). The Basic Law mandated achieving the “unity and liberty of Germany,” not of Germans, at the same time that early legislation provided displaced coethnics an open door to citizenship.

The end of the Soviet Union unleashed a wave of ethnic migrations. With 1 million “Jews” coming to Israel from the former Soviet Union and 2.5 million “Germans” migrating to Germany, both countries confronted liberal and restrictive challenges to their policies. Ethnic preference comes at the expense of Palestinians in Israel and Turks in Germany, and they and their supporters mounted liberal challenges. At the same time, underprivileged segments of the titular nation mounted restrictive challenges, intended to keep out coethnics as well as other would-be competitors (189).

The liberal challenge in Israel was of the first order: Zionism itself was called into question. But the outcome was slim, as Jewish ingathering was decisively reaffirmed, largely at the expense of the Palestinian homeland minority. In the German case, the liberal challenge was more modest, addressing only “immigration policy.” But it was also far more successful, with German diasporic immigration all but over and a liberalized citizenship and immigration laws attaining a consensus. After a postnational flirtation with multiculturalism and group rights, German liberals by the start of the new millennium had settled firmly on an inclusive, integrating civic nationalism.

The solidarity of homogenous collective individuals in the nation, the nation as the totality of society, is gone. What James Scott famously called the “high modernist state”—namely, “society as a military parade”—is (and was) a phantasm. The real “high modernist state,” one that qualifies for the European Union, has stable democratic institutions and a functioning market economy. It is not much interested in uniformity or nationalism; it is at most an integument for the individual’s exercise of liberty, equality, and property rights. Joppke may overstate this, but there is much to it. Effec-
tive human rights are now the measure of, rather than a constraint on, sovereignty. Citizenship is increasingly territorial rather than descent-based, and naturalization increasingly requires only language acquisition and a professed commitment to constitutional democracy. Ethnicity and citizenship are decoupled as never before, while dual citizenship is no longer avoided or disparaged.

Countertendencies are few and generally weak. Oddly though, the rise in emigrant diasporas may reenergize ethnicity as it de-territorializes politics. Diasporas and expatriate communities are now valuable assets for sending countries to prize, and from Mexico to Turkey to the Philippines, they do. Witness the Mexican state’s interest in keeping Mexicans in the United States “Mexican” unto the third generation, at the expense of their integration into their “new” country. Transnationalism of this sort reethnicizes liberal states, according to Joppke, and needs to be limited. If the Mexican or Turkish or Hungarian states view their emigrants as bearing the national torch abroad, there is a real risk of reethnicizing—and pushing rightward—both the sending and the receiving countries.

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Charles I was brought down by cascading rebellions in Scotland, in Ireland, and, finally, in England; when Scotland’s leaders rashly proclaimed his son king with a pan-archipelagic title, invasion and destruction swiftly followed; and, once the military juggernaut had brought Scotland and Ireland firmly under Oliver Cromwell’s rule, the costs of occupation proved too much for that regime’s survival. The mutual and often brutally consequential attractions and repulsions of the island nations cry out for systematic analysis. Such are the complexities—even of naming, let alone of history—that scholars have been wary of venturing from essays into monographs.

Allan Macinnes’s solution to the taxonomic problem is brisk. He is confident that whatever Ireland’s role, and whatever its suffering, the revolution was a strictly British one: he has no truck with the Anglocentrist’s masquerade of speaking British and meaning English. Some may suspect a certain Scottish pride here, but many more will relish his felicitous term for the new archipelagic realities: “the Scottish moment,” the years from 1638 to 1645, when Scottish Covenanters set the British agenda and when Scottish soldiers kept the Protestant cause alive in Ireland.

There can be no doubt of the value of Macinnes’s northern perspective. With a facility in Baltic and Gaelic languages and archives unimaginable among English scholars, Macinnes brings off the unlikely feat of unfolding the multiplying crises within and among the multiple communities of the three kingdoms even as he locates them firmly in a European context. For as the Scots and Irish, inveterate foot soldiers in the Thirty Years’ War, well knew, information and resources traveled readily, and little was as straightforward as English policy makers sometimes dreamed. The interest of French diplomats in events across the English Channel in the 1640s has long been known, but Macinnes stresses the inclination of several of Europe’s belligerent powers to see in the Hiberno-British theater an extension of their own struggle; eager for support, Irish, Scots, and English of various stripes encouraged such identifications.