

THE *Current*

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Coming to America

For the United States, the demographic terminator — the line that separates night from day — is the Immigration Act of 1965. Signed by President Lyndon B. Johnson on Oct. 3 of that year, it eliminated quotas that effectively kept Asians, Africans and other ethnic groups out of the U.S.

Johnson downplayed the potential reach of the law, but it would prove to be the catalyst for a new, more diverse country, said [John S.W. Park](#), a UC Santa Barbara professor of [Asian American studies](#). Now, in “[Immigration Law and Society](#)” (Polity Press, 2018), Park examines the landmark legislation and its role in reshaping the racial and political landscape in the U.S.

“That’s the centerpiece,” Park said. “Initially, when President Johnson signed the Immigration Act of 1965, he promised that it wouldn’t change America, that it wouldn’t be revolutionary.” Johnson would prove to be strikingly wrong.

Park, a scholar of U.S. legal history by training, has been teaching an American migration course at UCSB since 2002. His book, and a companion [website](#), were born of that experience and a desire to provide an accessible overview of immigration to students and anyone interested in the subject.

“The whole point is to make it such that 18-, 19-year-old students can grasp it relatively easily,” he said.

The World Opened Up

Not that it's a simple subject. Politicians from the right and the left have complained for decades that the immigration system is "broken." But Park noted that migration into the U.S. over the past 50 years has been transformed and driven by two technological revolutions: one in communications and the other in transportation, a pair of genies that won't go back in the bottle.

The internet and mass media have opened up the world, and air travel has made it accessible. Our technology, he asserted, has surpassed the ability of our modern nation-states to remain stable. With millions of people crossing international boundaries every year, seeing how the other half lives has never been easier.

"If you're living in a remote area of Mexico, you can still see what Santa Barbara looks like through television, through popular media," Park said. "You can see how another life is possible."

The Role of Asians

And while he said that Mexicans and Central Americans are central to the current debate about immigration in this country, Park noted that other ethnic groups — especially Asians — figure prominently in the migration narrative after 1965.

A little background: American history was not kind to Asians. The Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 was the first law that banned a specific ethnic group from immigrating to the U.S. The law was "justified" because of the widespread belief that Chinese were incapable of assimilating, and that Americans would never accept them. Although it was repealed in 1943, quotas kept Chinese immigration to roughly 100 persons per year, and migration by other Asians was practically nonexistent. In contrast, 90 percent of the people who came to America between 1876 and 1920 were from Europe.

"Between 1880 and 1965 there really is no huge or significant migration of Asians," Park said. "Asians [at the time] were less than 1 percent of the U.S. population."

Enter the Immigration Act of 1965. In addition to abolishing quotas, the law was designed to reunite families and attract skilled labor. As Park said, Johnson's thinking went like this: Most colleges and universities were in Europe, so if we're going to privilege skilled migrants, they'll probably be Europeans. In a similar way, most Americans had close relatives in Europe, so family reunification would likely also benefit Europeans.

According to U.S. Census Bureau data, there were more than 17 million Asians in this country in 2016. When Johnson signed the Immigration Act there were less than 1.5 million, Park said. Even when immigration rules became more restrictive after 1980, Asian migrants continued to arrive in large numbers.

Money Matters

What accounts for this explosive growth? Park argues that immigration rules prioritized migrants by class and by level of education, not race. He explained that “reforms” in immigration law have made it relatively easy for the well-to-do to gain legal residency here. Many Asian immigrants live in large, established communities in Northern and Southern California — and many of their sons and daughters are students at UCSB.

“If you have over a million dollars or if you have means — for folks like that, we already live in a world that is essentially like an open-border system,” he said. “We’re not blocking people who are wealthy from coming here. We’re in fact stimulating it.

“At the height of the Chinese exclusion period there were probably fewer than 150,000 Chinese people in the entire United States,” Park continued. “We are migrating twice that number every year from Asia, and yet there has been no significant backlash. Nowadays we see at least a quarter-million Asians. Sometimes it’s nearly half a million Asians coming to the United States every year in skill categories and investor categories. And most of them are coming legally to work and to settle.”

Trouble at the Border

For poorer migrants at the border, circumstances are quite different. The vast majority are poor and coming from violent, unstable countries. The U.S. has pulled the welcome mat, Park said, after decades of looking the other way while enjoying the economic benefits of low-skilled migrant labor.

During World War II, the U.S. brought in Mexican workers — *braceros* — to work in a number of industries. Many agricultural producers, for example, became somewhat dependent on these foreign workers.

“Once the Americans stimulated that pattern, it was hard to undo,” Park noted. “In the case of Mexico, it’s largely the Americans who went to Mexico first, rearranged migration patterns in Mexico, and that’s in part why we see so many Mexican migrants to this day in the United States.”

Even though Central Americans and other migrants travel through Mexico to arrive at the southern border, he said, they’ve taken pathways established and often built by the Americans decades ago.

An Ugly Echo

Today, amid new policies of exclusion and mass deportations, hundreds of migrant children remain locked in detention centers after federal immigration officials separated them from their parents at the border. Park said he sees troubling parallels with the past.

“Before I became an immigration scholar, I was an Americanist, a legal historian,” he said. “My expertise and background is in American history. The last time Americans did similar kinds of things was in response to fugitive slaves. When slave masters recovered their slave property, and if the family ran away together, the very common punishment was to sell the children away. This was something that slave owners did to their slaves, to let the other slaves know that if you run away, you will never see your child again.

“This is what this current episode reminds me of,” Park continued. “It’s a way of frightening people by threatening their families. In the case of fugitive slaves, it was designed specifically to stop them from running away. In the circumstances that we have now, the policy terrorizes anyone who might attempt to cross the southern border with their child, and it leaves open the very real possibility that if we catch you, you’re never going to see your kids again.”

The Future

In his class at UCSB, and in his recent book, Park provides a history of laws and policies governing immigration, but he also hopes that such a history can help us understand our present, especially our contemporary political and legal controversies over immigration. Many are quite jarring — he says they test who we are as Americans, as well as the shape of our own values. This nation of immigrants was forever changed by the Immigration Act of 1965, and on-going migrations will

continue to challenge future generations of Americans.

Park's book ends on a sober note, influenced in large part by the work of his colleagues on the other side of the campus. If our climate continues to change, for example, if the ice caps melt and many more nations suffer droughts and floods, he states, and if weak states fail amid that chaos, our migration problems going forward might make the ones we have now seem quaint.

Overall, his course appeals to the value of an excellent college education: in order to cope with our formidable problems now and in the future, we will need smart, educated and informed leaders Park said, adding that many of his own students give him hope every term, every year.

About UC Santa Barbara

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