

Nancy Foner, *In a New Land. A Comparative View of Immigration,*

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New York City has arguably remained one of the most important gateway cities for immigrants throughout the twentieth century and beyond. In Nancy Foner's *In A New Land*, New York City is used as the constant for comparisons across time, cities, regions and nations. Foner contrasts the racialisation of contemporary migrants to their predecessors at the turn of the twentieth century, focusing on the experiences of women as well as different ethnic groups during the two great waves of immigration, from 1880 to 1920, and from 1965 to the present. Foner also examines the divergent experiences of West Indian migrants in New York and London, in addition to analyzing the regional variations of immigration within the United States, culminating in a discussion of the uniqueness of New York. The breadth of these comparisons is an ambitious undertaking for a single monograph, as the author admits in the final chapter. However, Foner deftly synthesizes a mass of research and literature in this broad field, resulting in an interdisciplinary text that is both insightful and innovative.

Most scholars in immigration studies often focus on a particular nation, city, ethnic group or time period. Foner argues that immigration scholars need to move beyond this narrow focus on individual case studies. Foner writes that a comparative angle can offer the researcher fresh perspectives and new insights into old problems, as well as raising new questions and research problems over theoretical and empirical issues that may not have arisen from a single case study alone. In this sense, Foner demonstrates the benefits of an explicitly comparative study, revealing the shared experience of immigration across time periods and national borders, but she also recognizes the key distinctive feature of US immigration history, namely, the

impact of the American racial structure and the legacy of slavery and segregation.

The first section of *In A New Land* compares the experiences of Jewish and Italian migrants in New York at the turn of the twentieth century with contemporary migrants from Asia, Latin America and Europe. The analysis illustrates the extent to which understandings of race have changed in the past hundred years. Foner argues that in 1900, race was not about skin colour as Jews and Italians were stigmatized on the basis of their religion and culture, and that the term 'white' was narrowly defined as those with western European ancestry and of the Protestant faith. Now, Foner writes, the term white is much more inclusionary, as European Jews and Catholics 'vanished into whiteness' (p.37), and race is synonymous with skin colour. Foner explains that one of the most profound adjustments West Indian immigrants make upon settlement in New York is dealing with the fact that their skin colour can have such a negative effect on their daily lives and ambitions. Foner concludes that since racial categories are highly changeable, she speculates that the term white will broaden to include successful and skilled Asians, and some Hispanics, but warns that blackness will remain stigmatised.

In her comparison of being black in New York and London, Foner highlights the significance of the racial context on the incorporation of immigrants. In this section, Foner uses research that she conducted in London in the 1960s on West Indian immigrants entering under Britain's open-door policy for Commonwealth citizens in the 1950s and early 1960s, and compares this with research on West Indians in New York in the 1980s. Foner argues that even though West Indians were automatically granted British citizenship upon arrival (including the provision of state-funded benefits), these immigrants were shocked at the informal racism they encountered in London, facing difficulties in finding employment and housing. Conversely, in New York, West Indians were allowed a degree of upward social mobility as employers

preferred to employ foreigners over African-Americans and Puerto Ricans, who were considered to be lazy and highly sensitised to exploitation. In the case of West Indian women in New York, these migrants – who were often the migratory pioneers of their family, leaving behind spouses and children – were able to carve out an occupational niche in the area of care-giver services. This in turn provided West Indian women with a degree of financial control and independence that they lacked in their home country. Foner also notes the ambiguous relationship between West Indians and African-Americans, with the former employing tactics of distancing to avoid discrimination, as well as accommodation and identification with the latter.

It is evident that Foner's strength lies in the study of immigration to New York City. The section on comparisons across space, and in particular, her discussion on West Indians in London, arguably relies on out-dated research from the mid 1960s. In addition, Foner uses this research of West Indians in the mid 1960s to compare with the experiences of West Indians in New York from the 1980s. It is questionable whether comparing the migration experiences of West Indians in 1960s London with (post-Civil Rights Movement) 1980s New York is reasonable. Foner justifies the use of old research on the grounds that since the British Government imposed immigration restrictions in the mid-1960s, there have been few new West Indian immigrants; most blacks in London today are second or third generation migrants. However, the author does admit that since she conducted her research, the conditions and experiences of migration may have changed (p.177), but fails to acknowledge if and how this limited research may undermine her comparative study across national borders.

It is Nancy Foner's aim that *In A New Land* is a first step in the comparative project into studies of immigration. Foner has done much to advance this endeavour, identifying new lines of inquiry into American immigration history and drawing out astute observations. Foner displays an impressive command

of the existing, and vast, literature in this area, yet manages to convey the depth of her knowledge in a lucid and engaging manner.

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