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“In the interests of all of us...”: Theodore Roosevelt and the Launch of Immigration Restriction as an Executive Concern

Hans Krabbendam

1. My Girl Tisa: Roosevelt’s Post World War II Reputation as the Friend of the Immigrant

¹ Theodore Roosevelt was the first president to regularly appear on film during his life. Even after his death his personage has appeared in more than thirty movies. The portrayal of Roosevelt changed after World War II from a cowboy representing the strenuous life to that of a reformist politician. The first post-World War II film to depict him as a reformer was a 1948 release, *My Girl Tisa*. The end of the film shows Roosevelt in 1905, rescuing a Hungarian girl, Tisa Kepes, from deportation from Ellis Island, after her boyfriend, Mark Denek, appeals directly to him.¹ Even though the release of this film in early 1948 put the film in the midst of the debate about persons displaced by World War II and revisions to the immigration policy in the Truman administration, it is, nevertheless, a romantic comedy rather than a political statement.

²
The cast had a number of first and second generation immigrant actors, among them German immigrant Lili Palmer, who played the protagonist, Tisa Kepes. The story is set in New York City, where Tisa has recently arrived to work in a sweatshop. She diligently saves her wages to bring her father over from Europe. Each week travel agent Tesco collects payments from poor immigrant girls in the factory for passage tickets. Tisa's new friend Mark, played by the second-generation Ukrainian Jew Sam Wanamaker, dreams of a career in politics, but cannot hold a job because he argues with employers who criticize Teddy Roosevelt. When Tisa lends Mark \$100 to sign up for a correspondence course in law, she realizes that her generosity will delay her father's arrival. Tesco presents a solution and persuades her to sign a document which turns out to be a forced labor contract for her father. Tesco pays the passage on the next ship, the Queen Victoria, in exchange for years of work by Tisa's father in a lumber camp. When Mark discovers the scheme he confronts Tesco, who turns the tables by accusing Tisa of prostitution and reporting her to the immigration authorities for deportation. Mark tries to save her by offering to marry her, but when he suggests this during the deportation hearing, he is arrested for illegal action, and she is brought to Ellis Island to be deported.

³
When Tisa sees her father's ship enter the port from her cell, she calls on Miss Liberty, the famous statue on Ellis Island, to take care of Mark. Meanwhile, Mark makes bail and comes to visit her. When he leaves the prison, he finds himself in the midst of a parade featuring President Roosevelt who has come to meet the same ship to welcome a European Crown Prince to America. Mark disrupts the parade to catch the president's attention. The president listens to Mark, visits the detention center, orders Tisa's release, and takes the couple in his carriage to the arrival of the ship and a happy ending: Mark's ambition to advise presidents is satisfied and good immigrants are welcomed to America.

⁴
Unquestionably, the film puts both Roosevelt and European immigrants in a positive light, although a *New York Times* review found the film with its "sentimental reminiscences about first-generation Americans"

intolerable.² Other newspapers were equally critical of the script, though more generous about the actors, and they raised the issue whether or not Theodore Roosevelt's intervention was in or out of character. The *Los Angeles Times* concluded that the rescue scene was "about as unlike an incident as one might witness."³ Today the film is all but forgotten, but 75 years later it takes us to the heart of the theme of this paper: immigration, urban poverty, and the role of Theodore Roosevelt. This paper answers two questions. The first is whether Theodore Roosevelt's deserves to be remembered as the immigrant's friend and second, whether his policies were a preview of the long debate on immigration that followed. The answers to both questions are positive.

2. Historiographical Framework

⁵
Before zooming in on Roosevelt's direct involvement in immigration policy, widening the horizon of the debate so as to understand the importance of the immigration issue itself will help prevent ascribing too much or too little value to Roosevelt's ideas and actions. There are three major insights that help create this broader perspective.

⁶
The first contribution comes from historian Matthew Frye Jacobson. He puts Roosevelt's dealings with immigrants into the broader scope of America's rapid incorporation into the global economy. America's eagerness for new markets made encounters with other cultures inevitable both at home and abroad. Jacobson outlines America's search for global markets and the relationship between the state and the immigrant with these words: "World labor migration was a natural twin to the phenomenon of the world market; and since their own superiority to most of the world's peoples was a powerful current in American thought and illimitable foreign markets, Americans were decidedly uneasy about the growing presence of these inferior foreigners, either within the gates of the American factory or within the bounds of the domestic policy."⁴ Only fragments of this perspective were visible during Roosevelt's lifetime, as privileged middle and upper class Americans saw immigrants as the source of the country's wealth and simultaneously as the

cause of its social ills, including those problems arising from the non-immigrant labor class.

⁷
The argument that unfit immigrants on the labor market depressed wages can be found in Roosevelt's speeches. He echoed the voices of others, who had expressed these concerns in the late 1870s.⁵ By the time of Roosevelt's political awakening in the early 1880s, labor violence had become a serious issue and was associated with the immigrant. In 1884, for instance, Roosevelt's future Secretary of State, John Hay, wrote a novel about labor unrest in his home town, Cleveland, Ohio. The impulse to blame the immigrant was not restricted to the upper-class. Similarly the same verdict could be heard among labor leaders and in the Socialist Party.⁶

⁸
A second notion relevant to the immigration issue is a consequence of Roosevelt's nationalist agenda for his domestic policies. Roosevelt's biographer Kathleen Dalton has drawn attention to the apparent contradiction between Roosevelt the realist champion of imperialism and Roosevelt the idealist at home who had the aim of increasing the power of the citizen.⁷ She finds a parallel tension between the liberal and conservative acts of Roosevelt's social policy agenda. This is no surprise, as progressivism was a mixed bag of proposals. Roosevelt stood to the left of most market capitalists but to the right of social democrats. Dalton harmonizes the apparent discrepancy between foreign and domestic policies by bringing them together as two tactics for strengthening the American nation-state. As corruption and inefficiency harmed the growth of the nation, Roosevelt used Federal institutions to attack both. He made strides towards a welfare state after 1906.⁸ His main goal stood in service to his nation-building when he realized that America's social protections lagged far behind those in other Western nations. He wanted to increase equality by breaking down structures of privilege and he voiced these domestic concerns strongly in the 1912 campaign. They eventually came to overshadow his imperialist agenda. Most historians have acknowledged Roosevelt's domestic policy turn to the left after 1906.

⁹
Some scholars, such as labor historian Gary Gerstle, have qualified Roosevelt's shift as civic rather than racial.

Roosevelt's famous Osawatimie speech on his New Nationalism delivered in Kansas on August 31, 1910, contained a shopping list for a liberal nation, including securing membership in unions and collective bargaining, maximum hours of work, a minimum wage, and workmen's compensation. Yet, this left turn had its limits, kept a safe distance from socialism and did not include any improvement in race relations. It was exactly the immigration issue, standing as it did at the cross-roads of foreign and domestic policy, and connecting economic and racial concerns, that allowed federal power to protect and become coercive. The Bureau of Immigration was founded to advance the naturalization process, encourage immigrants to adapt to WASP values, and to suppress other loyalties.⁹

¹⁰

European historian Axel Schäfer of Keele University added a third element to the larger perspective, namely the internal tension caused by immigration in a time of modernization. In a recent collection of essays on transatlantic views on U.S. history, he analyzed immigration as an issue in the recurrent general debate about the universal and unique features of historical phenomena.¹⁰ This discussion on the proper historical balance between the unique and the general, surfaces again in the debate about transnationalism. On the universalist side, economists emphasize immigrants' economic contributions or burden on society. On the particularist side, historians emphasize essentialist features of immigrants and often applaud their cultural contributions or inversely, the threat that they pose. Schäfer argues that transnationalism does not really add new elements to our body of knowledge, but rather reveals how the perspective on immigrants as assets or liabilities are crossed by opposite perspectives on general or unique features.

¹¹

When high levels of immigration coincide with high expectations of social security, the tension easily erupts. This is a helpful insight to explain the timing of Roosevelt's immigration policy. He had to curb access first before he could expand the quality and coverage of the welfare state. Furthermore the legislation of the 1920s and 1930s that restricted immigration resulted from a host of professionals dealing with the problem, an intensification of transnational interests, and a growing attention on the cultural aspects of

immigration.¹¹ However, in the decades preceding the 1920s Progressive politicians had laid the foundation for these trends. During Theodore Roosevelt's presidency new forms of state supervision in interstate commerce, the Pure Food and Drug Act, regulation of labor conditions, and the first comprehensive immigration investigation marked the intersection of migration dynamics and the debate on social welfare policies.

¹²

The question of economic and cultural approaches to immigration was recognized by Roosevelt and seen in a transnational light. Roosevelt investigated the European labor movement as well as its insurance and state institutions. Meanwhile concrete European-American connections between immigration and social welfare programs developed in the settlement houses. In order to protect immigrants from exploitation, these social laboratories bolstered pluralist cultural self-awareness, as well as cooperative immigrant institutions in politics, in the market place, in housing, and in social insurance. These social workers and intellectuals recognized the important place of immigrants in society and opened up distribution of social means to them, even though non-white immigrants from Asia and Latin America never received a share of the benefits equal to those given to European immigrants.

¹³

To sum up, to understand the importance of Roosevelt's ideas about immigration and social conditions, one should embed these in the context of expanding markets which brought foreign cultures closer. This growing tension erupted during Theodore Roosevelt's formative years and connected labor unrest with immigration. As president he pursued nation building, he recognized the need for cohesion, efficiency, and fair competition. He looked towards Europe to compare its social conditions and welfare arrangements with those in the United States. He had to sort out the tension of facing the immigrant issue from a particular cultural perspective and a universalist's economic one. These factors should be kept in mind when analyzing Roosevelt's reflection on his encounters with immigrants in his autobiography and the formation and application of his political agenda.

3. The Immigration Issue in Roosevelt's Autobiography

¹⁴Roosevelt began writing his autobiography immediately after the Bull Moose electoral defeat in late 1912, because he needed funds to replenish his finances. Facing rising costs and declining income, he needed quick cash in order to pay legal and medical bills, to finance his travels, and to keep up a level of public entertaining, including hosting a reception for five hundred guests at his daughter Ethel's wedding. The easiest and most dignified way for a gentleman to earn money was to sell books. This was a tested device, but his royalties slipped from \$ 28,620 per month in 1911, to barely a thousand a month a year later. Macmillan offered him an advance of \$ 20,000 and a 50-50 split of the royalties if Roosevelt produced his autobiography in the summer of 1913, after serialization in *The Outlook*.¹²

¹⁵Roosevelt did not mean his reflections to be final. He was not done yet with his active life and called the series, "A Possible Autobiography." The title was correct, as it was meant to contain "certain chapters of my past experiences." His wife Edith protected the privacy of the Roosevelt family by vetoing revelations of intimate matters. Roosevelt listened to her and was even worried that his childhood stories were too personal. This made him concentrate on his experiences in nature and his political highlights. Far from complete, the autobiography was not meant to expose his inner life and private affairs, nor stir up the recent upheaval in the Republican and the Progressive Parties. Despite its fragmented and mostly dispassionate character, the book contained enough information for the reader to follow Roosevelt's development.¹³ He found a proper tone for his narration, which he dictated to a secretary, thanks to his preparations for a major address as chairman of the American Historical Association. This assignment framed his own history as an object lesson for political victory. It softened the pain of his recent defeat as it was put in the context of (rare) earlier defeats, which had called for and caused reform.

¹⁶Just before he committed his recollections to paper the immigrant problem had literary jumped out at him. In October 1912, a paranoid German immigrant, John

Schrank, shot him in Milwaukee and Roosevelt was saved by a thick pad of papers and other obstacles that prevented the bullet from entering his heart. Still, this event did not turn him against the immigrant in general. To the contrary, the opening paragraphs of his autobiography celebrated his own forefather, Claes Maertenszoon, the inhabitant of the Dutch Republic who moved to New Amsterdam in the 1640s, as an immigrant. Roosevelt emphasized that his ancestor had gone through the same experience on a sailing ship as the millions now traveling in steerage by steamer, though in reality these experiences were very different. He quickly turned to highlight the mixed origins of his more respectable roots including a Pilgrim father, Welsh and English Quakers, Scotch-Irish, Germans, and Huguenots. The qualities of these men and women shone in the sterling character of his celebrated father and matched Roosevelt's high expectation from the mixture of nations that would continue to generate the true American.

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Early in his youth Roosevelt's father confronted him with urban immigrant children and their problems. His father had taken Teddy and his siblings to Miss Sattery's Night school for Italian children and to lodging houses for newsboys who were eventually sent to work on Western farms.¹⁴ Rural solutions for urban problems are a major theme in Roosevelt's autobiography. The tales of his exploration of nature show his preference for the countryside over the city. Urban life could be tolerated only with great effort. Physical exercise and training could overcome bad behavior, which was the recipe for success that many could achieve, and a message for immigrants.¹⁵ In his reflections on his own education, he took issue with the emphasis on man making the best for oneself, because it ignored his responsibility to improve conditions in general. He credited his father with this insight.¹⁶

18

His model American immigrant was the Danish journalist, Jacob Riis, "the best American I ever knew," and he claimed that in his early political education he learned to judge people on how they behaved individually, not on the "class" they belonged to. He later applied this principle to other categories, such as ethnicity and race. One of his first labor inspection trips, to determine whether cigar manufacturing need regulation, led him to cigar makers working in tenement houses in Lower Manhattan. A visit to

a Bohemian immigrant family of five adults and several children, living, sleeping, and working in the same room, convinced him he had to support additional labor regulation, thus showing that he sided with individual qualities and looked beyond ethnic stereotyping.¹⁷

¹⁹

Roosevelt believed in analogies between the individual body and the body politic. In an undated lecture he praised the poverty of the poor man over the rich man, because the latter became distracted by all kinds of unproductive pastimes. "Real work appeals only to real men, and if he is of the right metal he will want to get out into the big world and do his part in it.... No matter how poor he may be, he, with his health and his strength, his brisk walk and shining eyes, his face all aglow with the fullness and freshness of life and of hope for the future, will ever be the envy of the rich man made poor in health in his struggle for the almighty dollar."¹⁸ Though he had never been destitute himself, the essay expressed his own belief in developing and mastering oneself, which especially immigrants could benefit from.

²⁰

His *Autobiography* bore testimony to the result of his prescription, when he came into even closer contact with the immigrant community as police commissioner of New York City. The Russian Jew, Otto Raphael, was his personal favorite for a position in the police force, because he had shown courage by rescuing women and children from a fire. Raphael's job helped spread improvement in this immigrant family and his example proved to Roosevelt that the recipe that had worked for himself, (physical courage, education, and discipline) worked wonders on immigrants as well. Furthermore, his inspections of police operations identified immigrants as model officers. He noticed they were the best bicyclists, for example. His inspection tours proved to him that the police force integrated all nationalities thanks to an emphasis on physical fitness and good instincts.¹⁹

²¹

Roosevelt developed an eye for particular situations. He did not believe "that the differences [in number of prostitutes among immigrant groups] are due to permanent race characteristics." He noted that girls from all nations behaved well after attending settlement houses. His remedy to reduce the risk of women entering prostitution was to secure proper working conditions and time to relax lest

they be tempted to seek better conditions in brothels.²⁰ All these urban encounters functioned as a testing ground for his national policies. Urban reform as a prelude for initiating national policies was not a unique Roosevelt feature. Urban experiences stood as the basis of welfare reform for many European and Western states.²¹

²²
When he moved up the political ladder, and became the governor of New York, he listed a few cases where he admitted becoming emotionally involved in procedures to grant or refuse pardons. These cases mostly involved rape, prostitution, or cruelty against women and children. He specifically remembered a case of the rape of an immigrant girl which angered and made him press for social justice. In this specific case he denied the request for a pardon and instead reprimanded the petitioners, who were wealthy and powerful. This event is a first indication that the fictional representation of Roosevelt saving Tisa was perhaps not out of character. Roosevelt's autobiography gave evidence of his emotional response to this combination of a physical threat to a young woman and exploitation by the privileged.

²²

²³
A universalist perspective gradually became more visible in the immigration measures he supported and introduced as president. He expressed an understanding of the fear that wage workers or agricultural laborers from Asia would replace American workers in California by undercutting their wages. At the same time he was very much aware of the foreign policy risks of restriction. Therefore he urged politicians to introduce restrictive measures in a polite way, taking into account "mutual fairness and reciprocal obligation."²³ His support for restriction was based on his conviction that people in substantially different stages of civilization should not be mixed, especially when immigrants were bound to come in great numbers and their economic position was weak. But he also underscored that this was a federal issue and not one to be left to the states.²⁴

²⁴
Actually the autobiography shows more concern for the proper relationship between the federal and state governments than it does for immigration per se. His recollections failed to mention the importance he had given to the immigration issue in his State of the Union

addresses, nor did it talk about the important Dillingham Report, which was his administration's effort to collect data on the issue of immigration upon which to base future policies. Political reform, conservation, and foreign policy strategy occupied most of the pages. The sparse mention of immigration in the autobiography could be explained by the function of the book as a preliminary report, which hampers final conclusions about Roosevelt deeper motives, as well as an absence of urgency on the immigration issue during the 1912 campaign. Yet, Roosevelt had taken the reconstruction of his memoirs seriously, collecting first-hand information from his former associates, and indeed, there were plenty of available records on immigration.²⁵

²⁵ In the end, his *Autobiography* leaves an impression of Roosevelt at the top of the immigrant pyramid, an aspiring urban reformer in close and meaningful personal contact with immigrants and as a politician, confident that the integration opportunities of social institutions could lighten the dark shadows of urban poverty. The universal side of economic interpretations grew stronger during the formation of his presidential immigration policy. For greater illumination of this phase, we shall now observe his political record more closely.

4. Roosevelt's Policy Record on Immigration

²⁶ Before Roosevelt connected immigration with social policy, he subjected immigrants to his nation-building agenda. His idea of a comprehensive social policy was still limited to legal protection rather than to financial redistribution. Roosevelt had coined the term "True Americanism," in an essay in 1894 in defense of public schools over parochial schools, and he would frequently revive the concept.²⁶ The central direction of Americanism was forward looking; it was "a question of spirit, conviction, and purpose, not of creed or birthplace." Reasoning from a futurist American perspective he called on European immigrants to give up their Old-World political and religious loyalties, to "cease to be European, and become Americans like the rest of us." Similarly he admonished native-born citizens to fully accept Americanized immigrants as equal citizens. "A Scandinavian, a German, or an Irishman who has really become an American," he declared in 1894, "has the right to stand on exactly the same footing as any native-born citizen in the land."²⁷

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As his career progressed, Roosevelt viewed immigration increasingly from the perspective of labor. In 1897, he showed that he understood labor's fear of restricting immigrants: "Many workingmen look with distrust upon laws which really would help them; laws for the intelligent restriction of immigration, for instance. I have no sympathy with mere dislike of immigrants; there are classes and even nationalities of them which stand at least on an equality with the citizens of native birth, as the last election showed. But in the interest of our workingmen we must in the end keep out laborers who are ignorant, vicious, and with low standards of life and comfort, just as we have shut out the Chinese."²⁸ There were also representatives of the working class that opposed unlimited immigration out of a fear that wages would be undercut. Roosevelt promised to restrict immigration when it threatened the political system, the country's economic stability, or the physical well-being of its population. When ethnic loyalties, labor agitation, or regional tensions disrupted the unity of the nation, these should be suppressed. To him Asian immigrants were more likely to jeopardize progress than European ones, simply because they occupied different civilization levels in his list of peoples and nations. But European nations could also lose their higher levels, when cultures weakened, and even America itself would run that risk if its birthrate would continue to decline.

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The event that catapulted Roosevelt into the presidency put him *in medias res*. The anarchist politics of McKinley's assassin, Leon Frank Czolgosz, provoked hysteria about the supposed threat posed by foreigners. The event spurred Roosevelt to use his first annual message to Congress on December 3, 1901 to call for the exclusion of immigrants with similar sympathies and to suppress anarchists at home. He turned the personal attack on McKinley into a general attack against the entire state. Roosevelt emphasized that social problems and tensions should never be an excuse for murder. Other solutions had to be found.²⁹ This did not mean that the root causes could be neglected. On the contrary, the social or labor issue was the most pressing one, Roosevelt told Congress. This congressional address triggered close scrutiny of immigrants to prevent anarchy from spreading and welcomed able-bodied men wanting to earn a decent wage.

The message was that unhealthy types would cause a drop in wages and threaten a balanced labor market. A minimum educational level of the immigrant would increase the chances of success. Congress responded by submitting nineteen draft proposals leading to an immigration bill fifteen months later. It contained a two dollar threshold for newcomers, an extension of the period for deportation, but no literacy test, which was considered too rough a sieve for undesirables.³⁰

²⁹

Technically, McKinley's assassin was not an immigrant. Leon Czolgosz was born in Michigan, the son of a Prussian immigrant with a Polish name. Yet, his foreign sounding name was enough to link him to a growing fear of aliens. The barring of anarchists at the gate was the first, but not the only response. The new president was very much aware that physical and social circumstances had a serious impact on an individual's behavior.³¹ He had even done his part to find a solution by cleaning up unhealthy slums and unsafe environments during his career as an urban reformer.

³⁰

Social equality was Roosevelt's aim and the federal government an instrument to secure fair conditions. Late in his second term Roosevelt expanded his protective agenda to include workmen's compensation for those employed by federal projects, an end to child labor, support for labor organizations, and a redistribution of wealth by the initiation of the progressive tax on inherited fortunes. These were still ideas, mere proposals, but they led the country in a new direction.³² At the mature stage of Roosevelt's political life, immigration regulation gave way to building a modest welfare state.

³¹

During his presidency Roosevelt continued his campaign to reform the civil service. Just as he had replaced patronage with a merit system in Washington and in the New York City police force, his reform campaign now extended to immigration officers, tax collectors, and other malfunctioning federal appointees. This intensified his inspection of performance and character and led to (forced) resignations of scores of malfunctioning government employees. Roosevelt believed strongly, perhaps too strongly, that good people in the proper place would cleanse the system. As America had little experience

beyond the local level, it needed Roosevelt's nationalist policy to pave the way.³³

³²
Roosevelt's friendships with successful European immigrants confirmed his ideas about solving urban poverty. Danish-American crime reporter Jacob Riis, Dutch editor Edward Bok, and the Jewish German entrepreneur, Oscar Straus, had all climbed the social ladder in white collar positions, but had not cut their sentimental ties to their native countries.³⁴ Roosevelt liked this limited sample of men because they were shining examples of personal success that in turn improved the American nation. It was different when, in Roosevelt's view, immigrants threatened America's stability, such as anarchists, Japanese laborers, or German-Americans active on behalf of imperial Germany in World War I. Roosevelt was no miracle worker. It was Riis who summarized the encouraging role Roosevelt played in reversing cynicism in hope of cleansing the city of its evils: "He could not set us free. We have got to do that ourselves. But he cut our bonds and gave us arms, if we chose to use them."³⁵

³³
Was it fair to credit the executive branch for these changes rather than pressure from congress? In an effort to balance the lopsided emphasis on presidential leadership in late nineteenth and early twentieth century politics, historian Elizabeth Sanders has shown how Congress challenged Progressive Era presidents to expand federal control over the economy. But no matter congressional efforts, Roosevelt was in charge, especially in the field of international relations. His administration significantly doubled the number of federal employees from one to two million. This trend continued after he left office.³⁶

³⁴
Congressmen submitted many drafts for legislation, but it was the president who set the agenda. Whether speaking in his State of the Union address, or reaching out to transcend the differences between warring factions, Roosevelt became the symbol of policy making. On the executive side, he strengthened the involvement of immigrant agencies in the defense of immigrants who were accused of violating the rules. He secured the presence of two Irishmen, two Germans, and one Jew to monitor the admission process on Ellis Island in an effort to stop deportation decisions from being based on prejudice.

Earlier on, state and local authorities had tried to dominate immigrant entry inspections, and Roosevelt was unhappy with the string of scandals associated with those authorities. He concluded that the inspection agency needed federal supervision to pressure the Ellis Island commissioner to play by the official rules. He wrestled the entrance process away from corrupt hands by firing the supervisors of Ellis Island who had allowed the sale of fake citizen certificates, had appointed political friends, or had allowed labor contractors to recruit cheap labor. He then went on to strengthen the naturalization procedure and to make the steamship companies responsible for the quality of the immigrant flow.³⁷

³⁵

Roosevelt's immigration policy clearly fit in the category of Progressive legislation seeking equal access, transparency, and solidarity, and it singled out big businesses that sacrificed America's health for a quick profit. He also believed the recruitment practices of travel agents and steamship companies attracted poor, unskilled immigrants, including those from Europe, who could undercut wages in the United States. As he saw it, the entire "coolie" class from China threatened labor relations because Chinese laborers were lured to the American shores under false pretenses and were forced to work for low wages. The deal made with Chinese labor was bound to result in a lowering of the standard of living and cause future problems. Roosevelt's response was to close the door for Asia.

³⁶

To manage the flow from Europe, the twenty-sixth president put the emphasis on the origin of the immigration flow, putting into place policies that selected persons before entry, thinking that would prevent the negative consequences of sharing the burdens of the unfit, or correcting their potentially rebellious behavior. Roosevelt was convinced that a stable and healthy immigration policy preceded an advancing social welfare system. The president made this explicit in a letter to the American Federation of Labor leadership in 1906: "We must not let our national sentiment for succoring the oppressed and unfortunate of other lands lead us into that warped moral and mental attitude of trying to succor them at the expense of pulling down our own people. Laws should be enacted to keep out all immigrants who do not show that they have the right

stuff in them to enter into our life on terms of decent equality with our own citizens. This is needed, first, in the interest of the laboring man, but furthermore in the interests of all of us as American citizens."³⁸ The goal of labor stability was also served by advancing the settlement of immigrants in the countryside. And when in 1907 the South needed laborers in the cotton industry, labor organizations protested this settling of immigrants in the countryside saying it violated the ban on labor contracts. The courts, however, upheld the policy.³⁹

³⁷

President Roosevelt did not go as far as to agree with Ellis Island Commissioner William Williams who shifted the burden of evidence to the immigrant. Williams' rubric was that an immigrant had to prove that he or she would be a good, healthy addition to the country "clearly beyond a doubt." The president instead emphasized that it was sometimes necessary to deport a person who had been allowed entry under false pretenses. According to Roosevelt, no matter how unfortunate it may be to deport some immigrants, the public should be made aware of the careful manner in which immigrants were screened. Roosevelt thought it was very important to cooperate closely with the leaders of the immigrant communities and with Congress. No discrimination according to race or creed could be allowed in deportation proceedings which were prone to considerable pressure and anxiety. Thus, the immigrant was entitled to a fair chance to convince the authorities of her or his innocence, before they reached a decision about deportation.⁴⁰

³⁸

The new naturalization act of 1906, standardized naturalization procedures by establishing the Bureau of Immigration and Naturalization under the Commerce Department to oversee a national immigration policy. New requirements for immigration included a mastery of the English language, and a homogenization of naturalization procedures which brought them under the jurisdiction of Federal courts from the five thousand state and local courts that had previously handled such matters. Also this piece of legislation was meant to prevent and severely punish fraud in the political system.⁴¹

³⁹

As a former president, Roosevelt continued to vigorously defend a directive role of the federal government

in immigration regulation in lines of what he had done when dealing with the Japanese, and as expressed in his first five State of the Union addresses. His main criticism of the Democratic Party in the 1912 campaign was its "absolutely outworn principles, especially ... the ruinous principle of States' rights."⁴²

⁴⁰

This principle was supported by personal observation. He had once again seen the need for federal protection when he witnessed a strike among teenage immigrant girls in the garment industry, who "are absolutely helpless if they are obliged to bargain for their rights individually. They must possess the right of collective bargaining." Roosevelt argued that the government should guarantee free labor organizations.⁴³

5. Conclusion

⁴¹This evidence is sufficient to positively answer the question whether President Roosevelt would have acted as a friend of the immigrant as the 1948 movie *My Girl Tisa* suggests. Based on personal experience, Roosevelt applauded the contribution of millions of immigrants to a vigorous country, but he also recognized the pressure on society of the entire immigrant inflow. Therefore he put immigration on the national agenda, deftly maneuvered between competing pressures from a variety of sources, removed obstacles to the efficient functioning of the immigration authorities, and assessed a growing number of measures to select immigrants with potential. Roosevelt paved the way for the end of free immigration, without resorting to blatantly racist exclusion except of course, in the case of Chinese exclusion which was already in place and which he did nothing to alter. The future of America, Roosevelt expressed on various occasions, was more important than pride in a European past. His most important legislative legacy regarding immigration was the Dillingham Commission, which laid the groundwork for the restrictive measures that were implemented in the 1920s. Later in the century, Europe would lose part of its privileged status, but never entirely.⁴⁴

⁴²

In addition to these individual acts, Roosevelt showed an awareness of the transition of the social welfare system from a privatized one towards a state-run system that

spanned his political career. The first type was built on charity (good) and patronage (bad). The latter system was exemplified by despicable political bosses, who bought the immigrant's vote by dispensing essential material services as food, clothing, and lodging as social services, as well as providing help in finding jobs, escaping prosecution, and solving more personal needs. In his early political career young Roosevelt did everything to wean the electoral masses from their corrupt benefactors. Throughout his career he used civic reform to build a strong nation. Immigration regulations also served this end. As it was difficult to curb democratic voting rights for legal white, male citizens, Roosevelt's solution was to select them at the gate, allowing racial stereotypes of fitness to guide the selection process.

⁴³

Roosevelt faced the growing power of Congress to secure the nation against foreign threats. While legislative power increased, even to the point that the Supreme Court felt it needed to restrain it, President Roosevelt was the exception to the rule of congressional dominance. He took the initiative and balanced immigration policy with foreign policy and skillfully used public opinion to advance harmony.⁴⁵

6. Postlude: History Beats Fiction

⁴⁴On one occasion Roosevelt actually acted similarly to the script of *My Girl Tisa*. On Wednesday September 16, 1903, he made his first visit to Ellis Island. The trip had all the elements of a dramatic movie. He traveled by presidential yacht the *Sylph* which ran into a storm that left the party and president "dripping wet," and arrived in the early afternoon. In five hours, Roosevelt characteristically moved like a whirlwind on the premises. He dashed into the Commissioner's office announced the establishment of an inspection committee, inspected the main hall, encouraged a fifteen-year-old Slav boy — an orphan on his way to his uncle in Minnesota — to go ahead, and had a five dollar note given to a young German mother with a baby in a basket. Then he entered the women's detention area. There he was surrounded by 200 women and children when a desperate dark-haired Russian woman drew his attention by crying "Oh, please, please let me out to look for my husband!" She explained that she had arrived six weeks

earlier, following her husband and oldest daughter, who had been detained because they had symptoms of the eye disease trachoma, only to subsequently escape. As a consequence the authorities had summoned the deportation of the mother and her four children.

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The president improvised a hearing and acquired sufficient information to release the family. What might have persuaded Roosevelt more than the woman's sobs was that the eldest son had earned \$25 as a barber shaving immigrants on Ellis Island. Another immigrant had only \$12 at hand and made an appeal to be allowed to enter the country to be with his son-in-law. Two out of three special commissioners present feared he would become a public charge. Von Briesen had a smart quip in reply. He told the committee that even Jakob Riis had had less money when he entered, and of course the president's presence persuaded the men to let the immigrant go.⁴⁶ So *My Girl Tisa* was based on a believable plot showing Roosevelt's concern and intervention on behalf of immigrants who he believed would succeed. It proves once again that fact can be more surprising than fiction.

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The relevance of Theodore Roosevelt for today's debate on immigration could be that he viewed the immigrant first of all from a positive perspective of his or her contribution to America's future, and then moved on to regulate any unintended consequences. Secondly, he did not consider poverty a crime, but often attributed it to oppressive situations. Thirdly, he began a comprehensive fact-finding operation, leading to the Dillingham Report, which refuted many misconceptions about immigrant behavior. Fourthly, he curtailed the activities of the transport business at all levels because it often ignored the interests of the migrants and of the country. Lastly, he was alert to prejudice and exploitation among immigrant officials. He intervened and insisted on fair treatment for those who did not comply with the access regulations. It is not too far-fetched to call *Tisa* "Roosevelt's girl," as one who dramatized Roosevelt's progressive long-term approach to immigration.⁴⁷

NOTES

1. M. Patrick Cullinane, "The Memory of Theodore Roosevelt Through Motion Pictures," in Serge Ricard, ed., *A Companion to Theodore Roosevelt* (Chichester, UK: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011), 502-520. Brian Neve, "The 'Picture Man': The Cinematic Strife of Theodore Roosevelt," in Iwan W. Morgan, ed., *Presidents in the Movies: American History and Politics on Screen* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2011), 65-86. The film was based on a play "Ever the Beginning" by Hungarian Jewish novelist, Sara B. Smith and her daughter Lucille S. Prumbs. Sidney Blackmer played Teddy Roosevelt in this and six other movies. The film was produced independently by Milton Sperling's United States Pictures, and released by Warner Bros. The leading actors Palmer and Wanamaker stood very close to the immigrant experience. Palmer was a German immigrant and Wanamaker a son of Jewish-Ukrainian parents. A brief reference in the memoirs of the director of the film: Elliott Nugent, *Events Leading up to the Comedy: An Autobiography* (New York: Trident Press, 1965), 200.
2. Bosley Crowther's review in the *New York Times*, Febr. 21, 1948.
3. *Los Angeles Times*, Febr. 7, 1948, quoted by Cullinane, "Memory," 510.
4. Matthew Frye Jacobson, *Barbarian Virtues: The United States Encounters Foreign Peoples at Home and Abroad, 1876-1917* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2000), 57.
5. See *Congressional Record*, 44th Cong., 2nd sess., vol.5 pt 3 (1877), 2004. Cited in Jacobson, *Barbarian Virtues*, 78 and 275. Economists Timothy J. Hatton and Jeffrey G. Williamson claimed that immigrants depressed American wage levels with 5 to 6 percent in 1910 due to immigration since the 1890s and even with 11 to 14 percent due to immigration since 1870. See their *The Age of Mass Migration: Causes and Economic Impact* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 154-177. Mass immigration of unskilled workers increased the inequality rate, which was a source of increased tension, but it did not lead to a dramatic drop.
6. Jacobson, *Barbarian Virtues*, 86-90; the dominance of the craft unions for skilled workers within the labor movement prevented a strong political impact. See Mel van Elteren, *Labor and the American Left: An Analytical History* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2011), 37-45; Frederic Cople Jaher, "Industrialism

and the American Aristocrat: A Social Study of John Hay and His Novel, the *Bread-Winners*," *Journal of the Illinois State Historical Society* 65.1 (1972): 69-93. The name Buffland might allude to Buffalo, but was probably taken by the author to avoid too easy identification with Cleveland, as the book was published anonymously; Roosevelt positioned himself to the left of Hay, who later claimed that Roosevelt had more sympathy for labor than for capital. Theodore Roosevelt, *An Autobiography* (New York: Macmillan, 1913), 420.

7. Kathleen M. Dalton, "Theodore Roosevelt's Contradictory Legacies: From Imperialist Nationalism to Advocacy of a Progressive Welfare State," in Serge Ricard, ed., *A Companion to Theodore Roosevelt* (Chichester, UK: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011), 485-501.

8. Dalton, "Theodore Roosevelt's Contradictory Legacies," 490. For comparison with Europe see Daniel T. Rodgers, *Atlantic Crossings: Social Politics in a Progressive Age* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University, 2000). For the ideological and organizational background emerging from farmer and labor interests see Charles Postel, *The Populist Vision* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009).

9. Gary Gerstle, *American Crucible: Race and Nation in the Twentieth Century* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), 55-56, 59. He also shows that it was logical for Roosevelt to turn towards the protection of women. The feminine support for social welfare corrected the promotion of rugged male individualism. For an overview on Roosevelt and African-Americans, see Adam D. Burns, " 'Half a Southerner': President Roosevelt, African-Americans and the South," in Ricard, *Companion*, 198-215.

10. Axel R. Schäfer, "Transnationalism and Its Dilemmas: An Analysis of Immigration and Social Policy in the U.S. from World War I to the New Deal," in F. Fasce, M. Vaudagna, and R. Baritono, eds., *Beyond the Nation: Pushing the Boundaries of U.S. History from a Transatlantic Perspective* (Turin: Otto Editore, 2013), 273-293.

11. Schäfer, "Transnationalism and Its Dilemmas," 277. A sign of the mingling of cultural and economic considerations in the 1920s was the stop on Asian immigration, the increase of Latin American immigration, and a shaping of three different worlds of immigrants and social welfare conditions for Europeans, African Americans, and Mexicans. As behavior of nations indicated the civilization level of its immigrants, there was yet little hope for quick and generous acceptance for Caribbean and Latin-American immigrants.

12. See Edmund Morris, *Colonel Roosevelt* (New York: Random House, 2010), 253-275. The issues that Lyman Abbott, the

editor of the *Outlook* cared about were prominent in the autobiography: political reform, military protection, industrial democracy. See Ira V. Brown, *Lyman Abbott, Christian Evolutionist: A Study in Religious Liberalism* (Cambridge: MA: Harvard University Press, 1953), 178-192. Money needs are expressed in the letters from to Kermit Roosevelt, 21 Jan. 21 and June 2, 1913, and a letter from Roosevelt to Joseph Bucklin Bishop, Mar 20, 1913, Theodore Roosevelt Collection. bMS Am 1514 (135), Ms Am 1541.1 (99), and Ms Am 1541.1 (110). Houghton Library, Harvard University.

13. Roosevelt to Emily Tyler Carow, Jan. 4, 1 913 in Elting Morison and John Blum, eds., *The Letters of Theodore Roosevelt* 8 vols. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1951-1954), 7: 689 (hereafter quoted as *Letters*); Joseph L. Gardner, *Departing Glory: Theodore Roosevelt as ex-President* (New York: Scribner, 1973), 283-286.

14. Roosevelt, *Autobiography*, 13.

15. *Ibid.*, 47, 49, 59.

16. *Ibid.*, 31.

17. *Ibid.*, 70 and 87, 206.

18. "Poverty and success," p. 3-4. Attributed to TR. n.d. Sagamore Hill National Historic Site. <http://www.theodorerooseveltcenter.org/Research/Digital-Library/Record.aspx?libID=o279178>, accessed August 27, 2014. See for an article praising character development in young men and nations "Character and Success," *The Outlook*, Mar. 31, 1900.

19. Roosevelt, *Autobiography*, 192-93, 204-205.

20. *Ibid.*, 217; For TR's concern with the white slave traffic, see his 31 December 1912, letter commending the conservative English MP Arthur Hamilton Lee for his bill to arrest all engaged in human trafficking as "one of the greatest feats for decency which has recently been done." *Letters* 7: 683.

21. Rodgers, *Atlantic Crossings*, 112.

22. Roosevelt, *Autobiography*, 328-329.

23. *Ibid.*, 411-17; He quoted verbatim from his public statements, see Roosevelt to Hiram Warren Johnson, Apr. 28, 1913, *Letters* 7: 721-722.

24. Roosevelt, *Autobiography*, 415.

25. See footnote 2 in *Letters* 7: 716.

26. *New York Times*, February 18, 1894. I developed these ideas with Carol Chin in the article, "'True Americanism: The Role of Race and Class in Theodore Roosevelt's Immigration Policy and its Effect on US-European Relations'" in Hans Krabbendam and John M. Thompson, eds., *America's Transatlantic Turn: Theodore Roosevelt and the "Discovery" of Europe* (Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan, 2012), 65-82.

27. Theodore Roosevelt, "True Americanism," *The Works of Theodore Roosevelt*. 20 vols. (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1926), 15:15-23. (hereafter quoted as TR, *Works*). See also Thomas G. Dyer, *Theodore Roosevelt and the Idea of Race* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1980); Gary Gerstle, "Theodore Roosevelt and the Divided Character of American Nationalism," *The Journal of American History* 86.3 (December 1999): 1280-1307.
28. Theodore Roosevelt, "How Not to Help Our Poorer Brother," *Review of Reviews*, Jan. 1897.
29. Theodore Roosevelt, "First Annual Message," Dec. 3, 1901. Online by Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, *The American Presidency Project*. <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=29542>, Accessed August 27, 2014.
30. For an overview of charity seekers among immigrants in Buffalo, see *Reports of the Immigration Commission. Vol. 34* (Washington DC: Government Printing Office, 1911), 135-56. Disability was the main reason for charity among native born, unemployment for immigrants depending on welfare. (p. 145)
31. Eric Rauchway, *Murdering McKinley: The Making of Theodore Roosevelt's America* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2003), xi.
32. Joshua David Hawley, *Theodore Roosevelt: Preacher of Righteousness* (Yale University Press, 2008), 125-29. On his view of the state 152-158, 182-189. Richard D. White Jr., *Roosevelt the Reformer: Theodore Roosevelt as Civil Service Commissioner, 1889-1895* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2003), 160-183.
33. Many charities believed too that the poor would benefit most from making the welfare system efficient, economic and rational, and thus should be separated from the direct and private interest of political machines. See Raymond A. Mohl, "The Abolition of Public Outdoor Relief, 1870-1900: A Critique of the Piven and Cloward Thesis," in Walter I. Trattner, ed., *Social Welfare or Social Control? Some Historical Reflections on Regulating the Poor* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1983), 35-50.
34. Edward W. Bok reminded the Colonel of their shared Dutch ancestry when Roosevelt denounced the hyphenated American. Edward W. Bok, *Twice Thirty: Some Short and Simple Annals of the Road* (New York: Scribner's, 1925), 253-254.
35. Jacob A. Riis, *Theodore Roosevelt the Citizen* (New York: the Outlook Company, 1904), 144.
36. Elizabeth Sanders, *Roots of Reform: Farmers, Workers, and the American State, 1877-1917* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), 390. Michael Schudson, *The Good Citizen: A History of American Civic Life* (New York: The Free Press,

- 1998), 205-208. Roger M. Smith argues that the courts were the one field where progressive legislation was successfully challenged, Roger M. Smith, *Civic Ideals: Conflicting Visions of Citizenship in U.S. History* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1999), 424-426. Solomon Fabricant, *The Rising Trend of Government Employment* (New York, 1949), 3-7. The share of federal employees rose from 15 to over 23 per cent.
37. Fifth annual message, *Works* 15: 318. Hans P. Vought, *The Bully Pulpit and the Melting Pot: American Presidents and the Immigrant, 1897-1933* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 2004), 27-60. Aristide R. Zolberg, *A Nation by Design: Immigration Policy in the Fashioning of America* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006).
38. Speech of Roosevelt to the Executive Council of the American Federation of Labor and the representatives of Labor Associated with them at the Executive Office, Mar. 21, 1906. <http://www.theodore-roosevelt.com/images/research/txtspeeches/186.txt> , accessed August 27, 2014.
39. Roosevelt to Oscar Straus, Jan. 18, 1907, *Letters* 5:556 and footnote 1. *New York Times*, Mar. 10, 1907.
40. Vincent J. Cannato, *American Passage: The History of Ellis Island* (New York: HarperCollins, 2009), 150-151; Letter from Theodore Roosevelt to William Williams. Jan. 23, 1903. Letter from Arthur Von Briesen to Theodore Roosevelt, Dec. 1, 1903. Theodore Roosevelt Papers, Manuscripts division. The Library of Congress.
41. The Basic Naturalization Act of 1906 in *Laws applicable to immigration and nationality embracing statutes of a permanent character and treaties, proclamations, executive orders, and re-organization plans affecting the Immigration and Naturalization Service*, compiled under the direction of Carl B. Hyatt / by Edwina Austin Avery, editor; Catherine Riley Gibson, assistant. Smith, *Civic Ideals*, 410-69, esp. 441-448. The courts upheld exclusion clauses in immigration legislation.
42. Roosevelt to Charles Edward Merriam, professor of political science at the University of Chicago, Nov. 23, 1912, *Letters* 7: 657.
43. Roosevelt to Michael A. Schaap, Jan. 25, 1913, *Letters* 7: 698-699.
44. Robert F. Zeidel, *Immigrants, Progressives, and Exclusion Politics: The Dillingham Commission, 1900-1927* (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 2004).
45. Donna R. Gabaccia, *Foreign Relations: American Immigration in Global Perspective* (Princeton University Press, 2012), 133-39; John M. Thompson, "Constraint and Opportunity: Theodore Roosevelt, Transatlantic Relations, and

Domestic Politics," in Krabbendam and Thompson, eds., *America's Transatlantic Turn*., 51-64.

46. Vincent J. Cannato, *American Passage: The History of Ellis Island* (New York: HarperCollins, 2009), 156-158; *New York Times*, Sept. 17, 1903.

47. Cybelle Fox, *Three Worlds of Relief: Race, Immigration, and the American Welfare State from the Progressive Era to the New Deal* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2012), 93-123. Stephan Thernstrom, ed., *Harvard Encyclopedia of American Ethnic Groups* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1980) 699-702. The number of emigrants from Mexico skyrocketed from 31,200 in the 1900-1909 to 185,300 between 1910-1919 and 498,900 from 1920-1929, mostly attracted by agriculture, mining, and the building of railroads, and pushed by political instability and economic hardship in Mexico, they concentrated in the Southwest.

ABSTRACTS

Theodore Roosevelt enjoys a positive reputation as an innovative and progressive politician. He was the first president in office to explicitly link immigration with the changing welfare system in the United States. Sensing that a system run by the state would replace the private system of welfare and that immigrants were both a key building block and a threat to a strong nation, Roosevelt put the immigration issue high on his political agenda. He wrestled this authority from the hands of Congress and kept the balance between immigration policy and foreign policy while skillfully working public opinion to enable selection at the gate. In keeping a balance between state power and public opinion, between assets and liabilities, between opportunities and threats, he set the basic course of debate and policy for decades to come. Roosevelt can be held responsible for setting in motion a selection process that included racial stereotypes, but he also deserves his reputation as beacon of hope for the immigrant.

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