

Interview with historian Dan Okrent on the centenary of the Immigration Act of 1924

Eric London
9 June 2024

*The World Socialist Web Site recently interviewed author, historian, journalist and editor Dan Okrent, on his book *The Guarded Gate: Bigotry, Eugenics and the Law that Kept Two Generations of Jews, Italians and Other European Immigrants Out of America*. Okrent's book addresses the background, passage and impact of the Immigration Act of 1924, also known as the Johnson-Reed Act, which was signed into law by President Calvin Coolidge one hundred years ago last month. Okrent was Public Editor of the *New York Times* and has written on a wide variety of cultural subjects, including prohibition, American regional history, and baseball.*

WSWS: Last week was 100 years since the enactment of the Johnson-Reed Act of 1924, perhaps the most significant immigration restriction law in American history. Could you provide the backdrop for this bill's passage?

Dan Okrent: There are two key aspects. One is the enormous immigration from eastern and southern Europe that begins around 1890. The numbers really accelerate up to the highest levels of migration just before 1910, and then crash during World War One. During this period there is a very large influx of non-English speaking people concentrated in certain cities who are looked at as being different, as being foreign. You also have, as a result of the war, a real red scare—the first real red scare in American history—with Wilson's Attorney General, A. Mitchell Palmer, conducting raids. There is the ongoing prosecution of Italian immigrant socialists Sacco and Vanzetti on false charges, another example of the scapegoating of people with unpronounceable last names.

Beginning with the 1920 elections, there's also a swing away from internationalism. The country made a deep inward turn as a result of World War One, as a result of Wilson pushing too hard for the League of Nations. This created the perfect political environment for something of this nature, where support for restriction came from across the political spectrum.

WSWS: Can you describe the political coalition pushing for the restriction of immigration at this time?

DO: It begins at the farthest right with the KKK. The KKK in the period of its rebirth was primarily concerned less with Blacks than with the Catholics and Jews, since black people had no rights. They hated foreigners because foreigners had clout. Then the coalition moves through various forms of right-wing groups to center groups, and then on the "moderate left" of the AFL, including the right-wing of the Socialist Party.

This coalition includes Progressives who believed in "good government." This was best embodied by Joseph Lee of Boston. The Lees are one of the first families of Boston, filled with benefaction. Joe Lee was called the first citizen of Boston. He paid out of his own pocket to pay for dentists for schoolchildren, he sponsored ethnic festivals, he spoke on behalf of immigrants who heavily populated Boston at the time. But he was the biggest backer of the Immigration Restriction League. To sum up Lee and others like him, their view was once immigrants are here, we'd

better clean them up and make them American, but let's not let any more come in. And that was a very pervasive view.

WSWS: So-called "Progressives" were a bipartisan group that included former presidents Teddy Roosevelt as well as Wilson. This was a largely middle-class movement which, among other things, wound-up opposing immigration, a position that some of its leading figures justified with eugenicist arguments

DO: The basic idea of the Progressives was the improvement of society through government action, something that was not really part of the menu on the American political table. They believed in science and expertise and were somewhat undemocratic in that regard. They thought, "we know better." But their instincts were basically positive. They advocated for healthcare, education, and a wide variety of social issues. They were supporters of the settlement house movement.

WSWS: But nevertheless, the eugenics "movement" takes hold among Progressives and others backing immigration restriction in this period. When does this eugenicist element factor in?

DO: Go back to 1905, roughly when the eugenics movement gets going in the scientific community. It emerges as a progressive idea: "Let's make better Americans." Slowly it morphs into "Let's make *our* kind of Americans." In 1913 the latter view is cemented. Republican Senator Henry Cabot Lodge was the leading figure in the anti-immigration movement and was the first and longest serving majority leader in the US Senate. He had been in Congress for about 20 years by this time and makes common cause with the eugenicists. He says, we're not keeping them out because we don't like Jews or Italians, but because of their "ethnic inferiority." Once these people have intermarried, we're destroying the bloodstream of the country. They term this "race suicide." This theme is once again brought up by a certain politician who is now a convicted felon.

WSWS: Your book repeatedly references the relationship between anti-communism and anti-immigrant sentiment. Lodge calls the anti-immigration legislation necessary "to prevent a flood of Bolsheviki" from entering the country (p. 255).

DO: The Russian Revolution is in October of 1917, right around the time the war is ending. There is this "Russian monster" as perceived by many Americans, hovering large on the world stage. Lenin wasn't a Jew, but Trotsky was, and many others were. There had been a lot of pro-socialist and pro-communist activity common among Jewish workers and leaders in the labor movement. It was easy to make that connection. Likewise, Sacco and Vanzetti were Italian immigrants, and all Italian immigrants were labeled as being revolutionary criminals.

WSWS: Earlier this week the *Wall Street Journal* noted the 100-year anniversary of the passage of the Johnson-Reed Act by publishing an opinion piece titled "Lessons of the 1924 Immigration Act" which repeats fears of socialism and refers to "murders committed by ... Sacco and Vanzetti," falsely maintaining their guilt.

DO: I saw that too. That surprised me, even coming from the *Wall*

Street Journal.

WSWS: Can you discuss the intellectual relationship between the architects of the Johnson-Reed Act and the Nazis?

DO: The argument that the eugenicists put forward and that was embraced and taken away from the eugenicists and put in the hands of political activists with the Eugenics Society of America was exactly the same argument that the Nazis were making. In *Mein Kampf* Hitler says the only country that has a sound immigration policy is the United States. Hitler was imprisoned at exactly the time Johnson-Reed was the topic of the day.

What the politicians added to eugenics was the notion that there is a racial element. Eugenics originally was about individuals. Charles Davenport, who was the key figure in the scientific eugenics movement in American, said that you can't make a healthy chicken with a bad chicken, and so you can't make a healthy human with an unhealthy human. But this was based on the individual, not on racial groups. Then the politicians in the anti-immigration movement tore eugenics from its roots. So, what is the argument Hitler is making about the Jews? They are corrupt and they will corrupt our blood and our society is a danger. Aryanism is the principle, not Germanism. The American eugenicists and the German eugenicists knew each other, worked together, and some of the Americans went to Germany and found what was going was fantastic.

WSWS: Your book describes in detail how the State Department compiled reports in 1920 describing the types of immigrant families that were attempting to enter the United States. Can you discuss what these reports said and how these reports became a factor in the passage of the Johnson-Reed Act?

DO: The US consulates in Europe were reporting on the inadequacies of many European immigrants, particularly of Polish Jews, Poles generally, southern Italians, some Russians, Romanians, and others. They were filing these reports and the consulates in various European cities said, "we know these people and we know they are inferior." There was no evidence for this, it was based only on what they saw, which were desperate people trying to get out of the country. And then the State Department—which for decades, including well after WWII, was the most white Anglo-Saxon Protestant portion of the federal government—their officials were the ones who were making these judgments. The evidence presented by Harry Laughlin (who is the Davenport protégé) to the House Committee led by Albert Johnson advanced the congressional debate. Add in the reports from the consulate and the momentum was on the side of the restrictionists.

WSWS: Were there any positive figures within the political establishment who opposed this?

DO: Yes. New York Congressman Fiorello LaGuardia, Boston Mayor James Curley, New York Congressman Emmanuel Celler, who in his first term in Congress was a member of the Johnson committee and stood up boldly in the House against the bill and carried that fight for 40 years. He was still in Congress when the bill that ended the national quotas was enacted and had his name on it. In the scientific community, Franz Boas, the anthropologist, is probably the leading figure against the bill.

WSWS: Edward Ross is another interesting figure. He was a Progressive who wound up in the leadership of the ACLU, but still served as a militant proponent of immigration restriction. Can you elaborate on his role? Some eugenicists wound up apologizing for their roles, while some did not, right?

DO: Ross was the founder of the American Association of University Professors and was one of the founders of American sociology. He lost his job at Stanford because he stood up to the administration. He was kind of a hero in that sense, but he was a profound racist. His most racist statements are published as early as 1903. He carries the argument of race suicide. In 1936, when he is the president of the ACLU, he apologizes for his earlier role. Ross waited a very long time, but he did say he was sorry.

Then there were the Rockefeller interests, who only apologized fifty years later for their role promoting eugenics and immigration restrictionism. They didn't break off their ties with the German eugenicists until 1936. They had funded a lot of eugenic research and by this time they were considered exemplary public citizens.

WSWS: Is it possible to quantify the human impact of the restriction on immigration enacted in the 1924 Act, especially for European Jewry?

DO: The 1924 Act made it impossible for so many Jews to emigrate to the United States. At the bare minimum, if one takes away all the other factors, it is unquestionable that hundreds of thousands of Jews who would have otherwise come to the US lost their lives because of the act. It is a horrible, horrible stain on our nation's history.

WSWS: Another interesting aspect of your book was the role played by Black nationalist figures like Booker T. Washington. Can you explain why they took the position they did on immigration restriction, even though they were lining up with eugenicists?

DO: Consider the time of the Great Migration, where Blacks are coming north desperate for work. W.E.B. DuBois was also a eugenicist. He believed in eugenics even among black people. He referred to "the talented tenth" of blacks who should marry each other and promote more smart blacks, not stupid ones. It knew no racial boundaries. There were Jews who wanted to keep the poor Jewish immigrants out. At Mt. Sinai Hospital, the management wouldn't provide kosher meals for poorer Jews, and that led to the start of a hospital downtown which was for Eastern European Jewish Immigrants. Prominent German-Jewish banker Jacob Schiff, who in many ways a great man, tried to keep immigrants out of New York and started the Galveston Project as a way to spread them out into the rest of America.

WSWS: How do you view the relevance of the 1924 Act today?

DO: It is characteristically American that restrictionist sentiment comes and goes. The American attitudes toward immigrants come in a cycle. We're in that cycle right now. It's awful that we have political leaders and former presidents making essentially eugenic arguments. Trump referred to "shithole countries," and this is straight from the playbook. A couple weeks ago he said he wished the United States had more immigrants from Scandinavia. What he didn't say was he wished we had more immigrants like his Nazi father.

WSWS: Thank you, Dan, it was a pleasure speaking with you.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact