



## *Our Country – Immigration* Josiah Strong (1891)

*Josiah Strong was a white Congregational minister from the midwestern states, whose early career included two years pastoring a congregation in Wyoming during the 1870s. After returning east, he became prominent in the ecumenical and social gospel movements. In 1885, the American Home Missionary Society published Strong's first book, Our Country, in which he discussed what he saw as contemporary threats to US society, including alcohol use, urbanization, immigration, socialism, Catholicism, and Mormonism. The book attracted considerable attention, across the United States as well as in Canada and Britain. The selections below come from an updated edition Strong issued after the 1890 census. In these selections, Strong maintains that immigration is undermining the social homogeneity that a democracy requires (by contrast, he says, to an authoritarian polity like the Roman empire). The social homogeneity that Strong wants for the United States requires immigrants to shed their ethnic identities and to conform to a certain kind of Protestant morality.*

Political optimism is one of the vices of the American people. [...] We deem ourselves a chosen people and incline to the belief that the Almighty stands pledged to our prosperity. Until within a hundred years, probably not one in a hundred of our population has ever questioned the security of our future. Such optimism is as senseless as pessimism is faithless. The one is as foolish as the other is wicked. [...]

America, as the land of promise to all the world, is the destination of the most remarkable migration of which we have any record. During the last ten years, we have suffered a peaceful invasion by an army more than four times as vast as the estimated number of Goths and Vandals that swept over southern Europe and overwhelmed Rome. During the past hundred years, 15 million foreigners have made their homes in the United States, and three-quarters of them have come since 1850, while 5,248,000 have arrived since 1880. [...] We are not yet informed by the Eleventh Census what is the present foreign-born population. But knowing what it was in 1880 and knowing what immigration has been since then, we can estimate [...that] our population which is foreign by birth or parentage numbers 21,385,000, or 33.94 percent of the whole.

So immense a foreign element must have a profound influence on our national life and character. Immigration brings unquestioned benefits, but these do not concern our argument. It complicates almost every home missionary problem and furnishes the soil which feeds the life of several of the most noxious growths of our civilization. [...] Consider briefly the moral and political influence of immigration.

**1. Influence on morals.** Let me hasten to recognize the high worth of many of our citizens of foreign birth, not a few of whom are eminent in the pulpit and in all the learned professions. Many come to us in full sympathy with our free institutions and desiring to aid us in promoting a Christian civilization. But no one knows better than these same intelligent and Christian foreigners that they do not represent the mass of immigrants. The typical immigrant is a European peasant, whose horizon has been narrow, whose moral and religious training has been meager or false, and whose ideas of life are low. [...] Moreover, immigration is demoralizing. [...] Very many [American] church members, when they go west, seem to think they have left their

Christian obligations with their church membership in the East. And a considerable element of our American-born population are apparently under the impression that the Ten Commandments are not binding west of the Mississippi. Is it strange, then, that those who come from other lands, whose old associations are all broken and whose reputations are left behind, should sink to a lower moral level? Across the sea, they suffered many restraints which are here removed. Better wages afford larger means of self-indulgence; often the back is not strong enough to bear prosperity, and liberty too often lapses into license. Our population of foreign extraction is sadly conspicuous in our criminal records. [...]

Moreover, immigration not only furnishes the greater portion of our criminals, it is also seriously affecting the morals of the native population. It is disease and not health which is contagious. Most foreigners bring with them continental ideas of the Sabbath, and the result is sadly manifest in all our cities, where it is being transformed from a holy day into a holiday. But by far the most effective instrumentality for debauching popular morals is the liquor traffic, and this is chiefly carried on by foreigners. In 1880, of the “traders and dealers in liquors and wines” (I suppose this means wholesale dealers),<sup>a</sup> 63 percent were foreign-born, and of the brewers and maltsters 75 percent, while a large proportion of the remainder were of foreign parentage. Of saloonkeepers, about 60 percent were foreign-born, while many of the remaining 40 percent of these corrupters of youth, these western Arabs, whose hand is against every man, were of foreign extraction.

**2.** We can only glance at the political aspects of immigration. As we have already seen, it is immigration which has fed fat the liquor power—and there is a liquor vote. Immigration furnishes most of the victims of Mormonism—and there is a Mormon vote. Immigration is the strength of the Catholic church—and there is a Catholic vote. Immigration is the mother and nurse of American socialism—and there is to be a socialist vote. Immigration tends strongly to the cities and gives to them their political complexion. And there is no more serious menace to our civilization than our rabble-ruled cities. [...]

Many American citizens are not Americanized. It is as unfortunate as it is natural that foreigners in this country should cherish their own language and peculiar customs and carry their nationality, as a distinct factor, into our politics. Immigration has created the “German vote” and the “Irish vote,” for which politicians bid and which have already been decisive of state elections and might easily determine national. A mass of men but little acquainted with our institutions, who will act in concert and who are controlled largely by their appetites and prejudices, constitute a very paradise for demagogues. [...] Certain quarters of many of the cities are, in language, customs, and costumes, essentially foreign. Many colonies have bought up lands and so set themselves apart from Americanizing influences. [...] In some cases, 100,000 or 200,000 acres, in one block, have been purchased by foreigners of one nationality and religion, thus building up states within a state, having different languages, different antecedents, different religions, different ideas and habits, preparing mutual jealousies and perpetuating race antipathies. [...] If our noble domain were tenfold larger than it is, it would still be too small to embrace, with safety to our national future, little Germanies here, little Scandinavias there, and little Irelands yonder. A strong centralized government, like that of Rome under the Caesars, can control heterogeneous populations; but local self-government implies close relations between

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<sup>a</sup> Strong is quoting data from the 1880 US census.

man and man, a measure of sympathy, and, to a certain extent, community of ideas. Our safety demands the assimilation of these strange populations, and the process of assimilation will become slower and more difficult as the proportion of foreigners increases.

When we consider the influence of immigration, it is by no means reassuring to reflect that so large a share of it is pouring into the formative West. Already is the proportion of foreigners in the territories from two to three times greater than in the states east of the Mississippi. In the East, institutions have been long established and are, therefore, less easily modified by foreign influence; but in the West, where institutions are formative, that influence is far more powerful. We may well ask—and with special reference to the West—whether this in-sweeping immigration is to foreignize us or we are to Americanize it.

**Source:** Josiah Strong, *Our Country: Its Possible Future and Its Present Crisis*, rev. ed. (New York: Baker & Taylor Co., for the American Home Missionary Society, 1891), 44-45, 55-61 (chap. 4), <https://hdl.handle.net/2027/hvd.ah221t>. Public domain, Google-digitized.

Excerpts edited and annotated by John-Charles Duffy. Strong’s footnotes omitted. An additional paragraph break inserted for improved parallelism in formatting. Spelling, capitalization, and punctuation emended in line with modern conventions. In statistics, spelled-out numbers converted to numerals. Numerals marking numbered points converted to bold type for greater visibility. The first word of the chapter, which was set in small caps in the source publication, converted here to plain text. The term *Southern Europe* downcased to *southern Europe*; but the capitalizing of *the East* and *the West*, as names for regions within the United States, replicates the source.

These edited excerpts from Strong’s book are intended for **teaching** purposes only. For **research** purposes, you should consult, quote, and cite the source publication listed above.



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