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*Public Attitudes  
toward Immigration  
in the United States,  
France, and Germany*

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# *Public Attitudes toward Immigration in the United States, France, and Germany*

*Public Attitudes toward Immigration in the United States, France, and Germany* explores the causes of public opposition to immigration and support for anti-immigrant political movements in the three industrialized Western countries. Combining sophisticated modeling of recent public-opinion data with analysis of the past 110 years of these nations' immigration history, the book evaluates the effects of cultural marginality, economic self-interest, and contact with immigrants. Though analysis partly confirms a role for each of these three explanations for opposition to immigrants, the author concludes that being a cultural outsider usually drives immigration-related attitudes more than economics or contact does.

Professor Joel S. Fetzer teaches West European politics and international relations at Central Michigan University. Professor Fetzer's research has been funded by the MacArthur Foundation, the Friedrich Ebert Foundation, the U.S. Institute of Peace, and the Yale Center for International and Area Studies. His main areas of investigation are comparative immigration politics, and religion and political behavior, and he has published articles on these topics in various journals and edited volumes.

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## *Marginality, Economic Self-Interest, and Contact*

In this society, will the present majority peaceably hand over its political power to a group that is simply more fertile? Can *homo contraceptivus* compete with *homo progenerivo* if our borders aren't controlled? . . . Perhaps this is the first instance in which those with their pants up are going to get caught by those with their pants down. As whites see their power and control over their lives declining, will they simply go quietly into the night? Or will there be an explosion?

U.S. English cofounder John Tanton, in Daniels (1990:399)

The French have had enough of watching the dregs of North Africa invade the country, of watching herds of Algerians roam the large cities just looking to commit a crime. The French have had enough of encountering vermin, vice, and syphilis.

French reader of the *Nouvel Observateur*, in Gastault (1993)

*Udo to me (Ali)*: How many Turks will fit in a VW?

*Me (Ali)*: Don't know.

*Udo*: Twenty thousand. Don't believe it?

*Me (Ali)*: Whatever you say.

*Udo*: You wanna know, anyhow?

*Me (Ali)*: I'd rather not.

*Udo*: Very simple. Two in the front, two in the back, the others in the ashtray.

German industrial worker, in Wallraff (1985:111)

Over the past two decades, immigration has come to dominate the internal politics of western Europe and, to a lesser extent, the United

States. Explicitly anti-immigrant political parties such as the French Front national have attracted alarmingly large proportions of the European electorate, while in the United States such arguably nativist movements as those espousing Official English and Proposition 187 have won resounding victories in many state referenda. Public debates over the "multiculturalism" brought on by the increasing migration from Latin America, Asia, and Africa rage on both sides of the Atlantic. And in the streets of Rostock, Marseilles, and Los Angeles, xenophobes have vented their frustrations, using firebombs and clubs.

Such nativism threatens not only to destabilize domestic society but also to jeopardize relations between host and sending countries. Neo-Nazi violence against Turkish nationals in Germany (Bundesministerium des Innern 1993:66–78) continues to hinder good rapport between Turkey and the Federal Republic, major trading partners and NATO allies. The racist murder of several Algerians in Marseilles in the 1970s convinced Algeria to cut off for a time the flow of migrant workers to France (Wihtol de Wenden 1988:162), and discrimination against Maghrebis in France seems to have largely motivated Kheled Kelkal's wave of deadly anti-French terrorism in the *métropole* in 1995 (Loch 1995). On the American continent, the Mexican government viewed the passage of Proposition 187 as an enormous affront to its dignity and to the human rights of its nationals (Fineman 1994). Ordinary Mexicans, meanwhile, expressed their outrage by vandalizing a U.S.-affiliated business in Mexico City (*Los Angeles Times* Wire Service 1994). Yet maintaining the goodwill of this Latin American country's government and people has become even more vital to American commercial and political interests with the signing of the North American Free Trade Agreement, or NAFTA (Lee 1994; *Los Angeles Times* Staff 1994).

Not only is nativism a problem for international peace, prosperity, and security now, but it promises to continue to trouble us for decades to come. As Paul Kennedy (1993:44) argues in *Preparing for the Twenty-First Century*, the reaction of the industrialized world to the overwhelming demographic pressures from developing nations may well be one of the most vexing problems of the next hundred years:

Given the political and social tensions that the *relatively limited* transnational migration has recently provoked, there is reason to be

concerned should a massive surge in population occur from one country to another. [Yet, i]n view of the imbalances in demographic trends between “have” and “have-not” societies, it seems unlikely that there will not be great waves of migrations [to the developed nations] in the twenty-first century. (emphasis in original)

If anything, then, the potential for public backlash against immigration threatens to increase in the decades ahead.

### *Theories of Public Attitudes toward Immigration*

This study cannot hope to solve the problem of global economic inequality, which largely drives immigration to the United States, France, and Germany (see Ravenstein 1889). But by isolating the principal causes of mass attitudes toward foreigners,<sup>1</sup> this investigation can help find ways to reduce public hatred of immigrants. In particular, the work will examine the strength of three major explanations of opposition to immigrants: marginality (especially cultural forms, but also economic, gender-based, etc.); economic self-interest (both labor-market and use-of-services versions); and contact (both individual-level and aggregate). The book not only investigates the overall persuasiveness of each interpretation but also looks for any special circumstances that increase or decrease each theory's explanatory power.

### *Examples from the Literature on Immigration Attitudes*

Each of these perspectives has its advocates in the literature on attitudes toward immigrants and immigration. Espenshade and Calhoun (1993; see also Betz 1994:100–101; Martínez-Ebers and Deng 1996; Soule 1997), for example, seem to hold to something approximating cultural-marginality theory. In their view, “cultural affinity” is one of the most important determinants of immigration-related public opinion: “Cultural and ethnic ties to immigrants promote pro-immigrant attitudes and support for a more open immigration policy.”<sup>2</sup>

More economic interpretations seem to dominate not only popular explanations of anti-immigrant sentiments but also many scholarly studies of public attitudes. One of the principal proponents of the economic self-interest school, Harwood (1986) first appears to cast doubt

on the culturally based theories: "[T]he public opinion data do not support the hypothesis that neorestrictionism is motivated by racial or ethnic prejudice." Instead, "[e]conomic concerns appear to be the main reason for the increase in opposition to both legal and illegal immigrants" (Harwood 1983). Simon (1987; see also Simon and Alexander 1993:29-47) seems to endorse a similar hypothesis focusing on labor-market competition:

Immigrants represent a greater threat to the livelihoods and living standards of lower-status respondents than they do to persons with higher education and more skills. So, the poorer the person, the greater the fear that more immigrants will mean fewer jobs, lower rates of pay, fewer opportunities for mobility, and more competition for housing, schools, and social services. Illegal immigrants are feared most because they are viewed as the strongest contenders for lower-status jobs and benefits.

Ultimately, according to these theorists, opposition to immigration arises from economic deprivation and the fear of further financial decline.<sup>3</sup>

Finally, contact analysis by Perrineau (1985) of support for the anti-immigrant Front national (FN) party represents one form of the third major theory. Showing the lack of correlation between the vote for the Front national in 1984 and the percentage of immigrants in a given city precinct (*commune*), Perrineau first dismisses the hypothesis that close, personal contact causes xenophobia (see also Charbit and Lamy 1975; Mayer 1987; Loch 1990:90-94). The high correlation between the vote for Le Pen's FN and the proportion of foreigners in the much larger *département*,<sup>4</sup> however, remains high (Perrineau 1985; Le Bras 1986:64-66, 214-221). Perrineau's explanation (1985) of these paradoxical results reminds one of the "casual contact" thesis to be examined later in this chapter:

[T]he zones where the extreme right achieves its best results are often regions where the more or less distant outlying areas have heavy concentrations of immigrants. Thus, the fears, repulsions, or worries that feed voting for the National Front sometimes seem to arise more from fantasy than from the actual perception of objective, lived difficulties or dangers. It is the unknown person who is disturbing, the stranger with whom one doesn't live but whom one senses at the city limits. . . . The modern [European] town seems to



revive the fears of the medieval town for whom the edges of the city were the realm of crime, marginality, and destitution.<sup>5</sup>

In France, contrary to the situation in the United States, the suburbs contain society's disadvantaged. Upper- and middle-class French city dwellers would therefore experience little or no close personal contact with immigrants. According to contact theory, natives might increasingly become aware of the rising foreign population in the suburbs via such superficial or "casual" contacts as riding the Métro with immigrants, passing the ubiquitous North African sanitation worker on the street, or even watching a television news program on "crime in the suburbs." Such interactions, scholars such as Perrineau would probably argue, can only breed suspicion and exacerbate hostility.

### *Marginality*

#### *Classic Statement of Theory*

Though not necessarily focusing on immigration-related attitudes, several social-science classics have set out elements of each of the three major theories. Parts of the first main explanation (marginality theory) have already been adumbrated, especially by theorists of "status politics." These various strands, however, have apparently never yet been synthesized to yield an equally generalizable theory of public opinion. A major task of this book is thus to elaborate and test this potentially powerful explanation.

In its most universal form, marginality theory states that the experience of being oneself marginalized, oppressed, or outside the "mainstream" breeds sympathy with marginalized or oppressed people in general, even if they do not belong to one's own group.<sup>6</sup> In particular, having a marginality-producing characteristic would, *all else being equal*, create greater support for the welfare and rights of other marginalized groups. A particular characteristic produces marginality if, relative to the "mainstream" or "dominant" trait, it subjects one to the threat of or actual discrimination, persecution, or widespread public hostility or ridicule.<sup>7</sup> In the United States, for example, the "mainstream" ethnicity is (northwest) European American, while being African American would be a marginality-