

# Historian's Note: Reflecting on Nativism

Teachers should stress with students that nativism, negative attitudes toward immigrants, is often catalyzed by other things happening in the society at the time. That is, that immigrants are often convenient scapegoats when people feel the negative effects of dramatic changes.

The causes of nativism are often complex. Although nativism takes a specific form in each era, there are also general patterns that frequently manifest themselves. Teachers should encourage students to look both at the **content** of these sentiments, and at their **context** -- the underlying factors that tend to catalyze negative feelings toward immigrants.

Three primary lens through which anti-immigrant sentiment is often refracted are:

1. **Cultural/racial** – fears or anxieties about perceived cultural, linguistic, religious or racial differences, concerns about demographic change. Anxiety about difference: racial, religious, cultural, linguistic: nativists view immigrants as fundamentally different and dangerous to the American norm, fragmentation, fears of a non-white majority
2. **Economic** -- economic change and instability during which immigrants become the lightning rod for fear or discontent. Economic change: immigrants are scapegoated for the loss of status or security of American workers, usually due to some larger structural change in the economy (industrialization, de-industrialization)
3. **Political/ideological** – xenophobia or scapegoating of immigrants as a reaction against US global involvements or domestic civil unrest. Fears that foreigners will undermine American democracy (papism, monarchism, fundamentalism. Fears of violence (terrorism, activism)

These three lens are not necessarily discrete; in any given situation more than one may be a factor.

The case of the Irish was chosen for this lesson because the Irish are a widespread ethnic group that, although now accepted, was once widely vilified in mainstream American culture. This victimization and discrimination was

justified primarily on grounds of race and religion. The example of the Irish also points to the constructedness and non-essential nature of racial difference. In the 19th century, race was often conflated with nation -- so one might speak of the Irish race, the Slavic race, or the German race, for example. This idea of race included ideas about national character as well as physical attributes. Teachers may use the example of the racial Othering of the Irish, for example, as a way to point to changing ideas about race in America, asking how can a group be non-white and then "become white?" Teachers can also point out that every immigrant group, such as Germans and Italians, has faced nativism historically.

Teachers should encourage students to understand the experience of the Irish and other 19<sup>th</sup> century immigrants as part of a larger story of scapegoating or hating new immigrants throughout American history. In particular students might see how categories of attitudes toward the Irish can and have transferred to other groups over time. For instance, critics and analysts of immigration today often point to the "changing face" of immigration and focus on issues of racial and religious difference as points of discomfort with new immigrants. In addition, immigrants are often disliked because they are seen to be taking jobs away from "native" Americans. Teachers should help students understand that 19<sup>th</sup> century Americans were uncomfortable with the Irish for some of the same reasons that Americans are uncomfortable with immigrants now: because they were seen as non-white, worshipping a foreign and corrupt religion, as inherently violent (sometimes even as terrorists), and as taking away native American jobs at a time of dramatic economic change.