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Naturalization Ceremonies and the Role of Immigrants in the American Nation

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Abstract

Although immigration is an essential element in the American national story, it presents difficulties for constructing national membership and national identity in terms of shared intrinsic values. In this paper, I analyze speeches made at naturalization ceremonies during two time periods (1950-1970 and 2003-present) in order to examine the evolving roles of immigrants, as articulated to immigrants themselves. Naturalization ceremonies are a unique research site because the usually implied nationalist content is made explicit to brand new members of the nation. I find a shift in the framing from immigrants as potential liabilities and weak links in the earlier period to immigrants as morally superior redeemers of the American nation in the later period. I discuss the significance of this shift and the relationship between the roles presented at naturalization ceremonies and the discourse found elsewhere in the public sphere.

Keywords

Immigrant; Identity; Obligations; Social Construction; Bad Migrant; Good Migrant

Immigration is a highly contentious topic in the United States. It may be a nation of immigrants, but questions about immigrant admission, access to social services, and language use elicit heated disagreement. Do immigrants make the country stronger? Do they threaten its character and identity? Much has been written by scholars and popular observers on the roles of immigrants in the American society. For example, Santa Ana (2002) points to prevailing negative portrayals of immigrants as dangerous invaders in the debates surrounding anti-immigrant propositions in California. Chavez (2008) details the prevalence of the Latino Threat Narrative and binary discourse of *us versus them* in many aspects of public life in the United States. Newton (2008) observes the way immigrants are divided into deserving and undeserving in policy discussions of immigration legislation. The contribution of this paper is to examine the roles of immigrants as they are articulated to immigrants themselves in ceremonies where immigrants become American citizens. It relies on an analysis of speeches made at naturalization ceremonies from 1950 to 1970 and 2003 to 2008. The question of how immigrants fit into the nation is central to the work of political philosophers who theorize group and individual rights in multicultural societies (e.g. Kymlicka 1996, Parekh 1996). At the same time, it is also of much concern to social scientists who study the adaptation of immigrants. The approach I take here has the advantage of empirically engaging the philosophically interesting questions while illuminating the issue of adaptation from a new angle: discourse aimed at immigrants.

The study of the role of immigrants in American society is part of a larger question of how immigrants and immigration fit into the national story. Migration violates the premise of the

system of bounded nations, which relies on a congruency between culture and polity within each imagined political community (Anderson 1983, Gellner 1983, Joppke 1999). Nations are necessarily exclusionary, even the United States, which has a strong identity as a nation of immigrants (Joppke 1999). Grappling with the definitional threat posed by immigration is integral to the social and political construction of nations such as the United States. Immigrants and the role they are to play are inextricable from the story of the American people and the definition of national membership.

What is expected of immigrants depends on the way citizenship is conceptualized more generally. Despite the seeming dominance of a civic conception of citizenship in the United States, some scholars have argued that membership there is also defined in more categorical terms. Smith (1997), for instance, writes that American citizenship is structured by inegalitarian ascriptive ideologies of racism and sexism, as well as by liberal and democratic republican ideals. Calhoun (1997) points out that WASP ethnic identity has been a dominant component of American identity, and that American character is defined in categorical and essentialist way. To the extent that this true, how do immigrants fit into the American story? How are these ethnic Others to be incorporated into the nation?

When speakers address immigrants at naturalization ceremonies, they face two challenges identified by Smith (2003): persuading them of the worth of belonging and convincing them that they can trust Americans, particularly American leaders. To accomplish this, they may tell economic, political power, or constitutive stories. The latter are especially difficult in this setting because they are stories “that present membership in a particular people as somehow intrinsic to who its members really are” (Smith 2003, p. 64). How to frame membership as something that is intrinsic to brand new members of the nation? In general, patriotic speech draws on appeals to kinship and giving back to national heroes in order to promote national unity (Johnson 1987). How do naturalization ceremony speakers shape their patriotic speeches to address immigrant audiences?

Nationalism, in general, can be difficult to study empirically because much of the cultural material that constitutes the idea of a particular nation consists of deep assumptions that are rarely expressed in public (Calhoun 1997, Wuthnow 2006). Naturalization ceremonies provide a unique research site for studying nationalism, particularly in relation to immigration. At these ceremonies, the content of nationalism is made explicit for an audience of brand new members, for whom things have to be spelled out because they were socialized elsewhere. Speakers try to legitimize the nation to these new co-nationals, making plain the meaning of immigrant citizenship and the role of immigrants in the nation. In some ways, remarks made at naturalization ceremonies are like an abridged civic education for immigrants, and thus provide an interesting alternative to the study of textbooks (e.g. Brand 2010). By being aimed directly at the newest members of the nation, these speeches reveal aspects of nationalism beyond what could be glimpsed in judicial decisions, congressional debates, or parliamentary speeches (Smith 1997, Brodie 2002, Newton 2008).

Naturalization ceremonies are seldom used as a source of empirical data by social scientists. I was able to locate only one study that directly investigates naturalization ceremonies. Coutin (2003) describes ten ceremonies that took place in Los Angeles in 1996 and 1997. In nationalist stories at these ceremonies, cultural differences were relegated to the private sphere, with only superficial cultural differences tolerated, such as ethnic foods that immigrants were encouraged to prepare at home. Coutin also notes an emphasis on the choice immigrants have made to naturalize, the contrasting of this choice to citizenship through birth, and the connection of the choice to rebirth and renewal that immigrants provide for the United States. These observations serve as the foundation for this study, which relies on a larger set of naturalization ceremonies over time and across the United

States. I am interested in how speakers portray the roles of immigrants: in what way do immigrants fit into the story of the nation?

Naturalization ceremonies: rituals and procedures

Naturalization requirements and procedures in the United States first became uniform in 1906. With few exceptions, applicants are required to appear at a public ceremony to take the oath of allegiance. The patriotism of the World War II era increased emphasis on the institutionalization of the naturalization ceremony as the culmination of the naturalization process. Making the ceremony more like university graduation than routine court proceedings was thought to help instill loyalty in new citizens (Miller 1942). In 1940, Congress passed a joint resolution calling for a judge or another designated individual to

address the newly naturalized citizens upon the form and genius of our Government and the privileges and responsibilities of citizenship; it being the intent and purpose of this section to enlist the aid of the judiciary, in cooperation with civil and educational authorities, and patriotic organizations in a continuous effort to dignify and emphasize the significance of citizenship. (Miller 1942, p. 3, US Department of Justice 1979)

In the mid-20th century, mass immigration was a thing of the past: ethnicity-based restrictive policies in the 1920s, along with world-wide economic depression, slowed immigration dramatically. The immigrants who were becoming citizens hailed primarily from Europe (Bloemraad 2006). In the decades following the repeal of national quotas in 1965 and the establishment of family reunification policies, the United States saw increased immigration from Latin America and Asia. In the beginning of the 21st century, the country was once again experiencing mass immigration, with as many as a million acquiring citizenship per year (USDHS 2009b). Just as during the mid-20th century, there was concern about proper administration of ceremonies, with occasional upheaval over inappropriate remarks made by some ceremony speakers (USDHS 2008). Nevertheless, only vague guidelines exist for the remarks themselves. For instance, the extent of guidelines in the Adjudication Manual for US Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) is as follows:

The speakers' remarks should focus on the form and distinctiveness of the United States Government and the privileges and responsibilities of citizenship. In keeping with the solemnity and dignity of the occasion, remarks should not include partisan political statements, religious content, or inappropriate or idiomatic references. (US Department of Homeland Security 2009a)

Ceremonies are managed locally and can vary in size and frequency, from a dozen people to ceremonies with 4,000 new citizens, and from once a month to twice a day.

The ritual recitation of the lengthy oath of allegiance is what legally makes immigrants into citizens. Immigrants swear to renounce allegiance to other states, to defend and be faithful to the Constitution, and to bear arms on behalf of the United States and perform non-combatant service and work of national importance when required by the law. In addition to the oath of allegiance, ceremonies include the pledge of allegiance ("I pledge allegiance to the flag of the United States of America, and to the republic for which it stands, one nation under God, indivisible, with liberty and justice for all") and distribution of naturalization certificates. Contemporary ceremonies observed by the author and her research assistants resemble graduations: new citizens are arranged in rows before officiating dignitaries, listen to remarks, and stand and sit when directed. When ceremony size is manageable, they are called by name to receive their certificates. Many ceremonies include the singing of the national anthem.

As mentioned, naturalization ceremonies have rarely been studied by social scientists. One likely reason for this is that no database of naturalization ceremony proceedings exists, necessitating creative approaches to compile a sizable set of speeches. I collected data in two formats: records (written, audio, and audiovisual) and direct observation. Gaining direct access to naturalization ceremonies required permission from US District Court officials at each site and/or authorization by the USCIS officials at various levels. I was able to personally record 24 ceremony speeches; my research assistants recorded 12 other speeches. In addition, I gathered 62 speeches from sources such as papers of prominent individuals, publications, historical societies, court libraries, and USCIS archives. Altogether, I rely on an archive of 98 speeches in the United States: 19 between 1950 and 1970 and 79 between 2003 and 2008. Unfortunately, there was simply not a sufficient number of ceremony records for the intervening period of 1970-2003. The few records of speeches that I was able to obtain from this time period were predominantly by the top immigration officials for the country. While it would have been fascinating to see a full progression from 1950 to the present, I err on the conservative side by focusing on the two time periods with higher quality data. Many of the speeches in the set come from the Northeast (39) and West (28) regions of the country. Speakers included district court and other judges (38), elected officials (16), various local immigration officials (9), distinguished community members such as lawyers and educators (24), and appointed officials (11). The majority were white native-born Americans, but twelve were immigrants themselves, including two speakers who were becoming citizens in the same ceremony at which they spoke.

Speeches not in written format were transcribed and analyzed using a combination of inductive and deductive strategies. I considered a few broad questions, such as: how is the role of immigrants portrayed? what is the relationship between the new citizens and the state? A close reading of the texts uncovered recurrent themes, concepts, and categories of analysis, leading to further questions used to interrogate the texts. For instance, initial analysis of the remarks led to questions about particular relationships of immigrants to the founders of the nation, the use of the language of family relationships for constructing unity, and what immigrants were expected to do with their cultures. In addition, I paid special attention to cultural material such as historical individuals and events, as well as metaphors, relying on frameworks developed by Lakoff (1980). The creation of categories of analysis was informed by theoretical work on discursive construction of the nation and previous research. In the following section, I present results of the analysis, starting with mid 20th century ceremonies and followed by contemporary ceremonies.

Evolving place of immigrants in national storytelling

1950-1970

As mentioned, the period between 1950 and 1970 was one of relatively low immigration levels in the United States. Most immigrants at naturalization ceremonies came from European countries, and many were refugees and displaced persons from World War II. Until the Immigration and Nationality Act (INA) Amendments of 1965, immigration was limited by severe quotas on Eastern and Southern Europe, and a ban on immigration from Asia. The INA Amendments established similar numerical quotas for all countries – including Latin American countries previously not under quotas – as well as provisions for family reunification outside of the quota system. Eventually, the 1965 changes resulted in a drastic increase in immigration and a change in racial composition of the immigrant population in the United States. However, these changes did not become apparent until the 1970s. The proportion of foreign-born in the population reached its 20th century nadir at 5 percent between 1960 and 1970, and in 1970, two thirds of immigrants still hailed from Canada and Europe (Smith and Edmonston 1997). The post World War II movement towards liberalization of immigration policy that culminated in the 1965 reforms was

happening at the same time as the entrenchment of the Cold War and the rise of McCarthyism, with accompanying fears of Soviet espionage and communist infiltration. Although immigration was not a particularly visible public issue in that period, there was worry about letting in refugees and displaced people from the European conflict (Zolberg 2007).

The content of speeches made at naturalization ceremonies allows us to explore the roles assigned to immigrants. In remarks made at naturalization ceremonies from 1950 to 1970, immigrants were said to be hard workers possessing desirable skills, talents, and cultural elements:

Indeed, in our dynamic and competitive society the special skills and talents which you bring with you from your homelands will find an eager and ready market, provided you are ambitious, imaginative, and do not shun hard work... If any of you are doubtful about the validity of this prediction, you can easily satisfy yourself of its truth simply by glancing at the impressive past and present rosters of distinguished non-Anglo-Saxon names reflected in various facets of American life – whether it be in business, the professions, the arts, the labor movements, the world of sport, or the field of government, including, I may say with satisfaction, the Supreme Court of the United States. (John Harlan, Supreme Court Justice, 1960)

Several speakers referenced the prevalence of immigrants and their descendants among the successful in various fields. In Judge Harlan's quote above, we see the contraposition of immigrants and their descendants with those of Anglo-Saxon background. This was not uncommon in naturalization ceremony speeches made in this period, and is evidence of ascriptive, categorical definitions of American citizenship predicated on a particular ethnic identity (Calhoun 1997, Smith 1997).

Some ceremony speakers drew parallels between the experience of the immigrants they were addressing and European immigrants in the mass migration wave that ended in the 1920s with severe immigration restrictions:

We extend a most cordial welcome to you – the new citizens. You come from some forty different countries, and bring with you the culture and traditions of the lands of your birth. The progress which America has made in the past is due in a marked degree to those who heretofore have come to this land from the countries you represent. Now America is your land, and its future is not only your future but that of your children and your children's children. (Gunnar Nordbye, US District Court Judge in Minnesota, 1954)

This particular quote is from a speaker who himself is an immigrant, having arrived from Norway in the late 19th century. Note the implicit appeal for loyalty through a reference to new citizens' children and 'children's children'. These kinship terms echo Johnson's (1987) findings: future generations are invoked in order to elicit patriotism. While constitutive stories of citizenship can be problematic when it comes to articulating shared built-in qualities of people who recently belonged to other nations, Judge Nordbye is able to create a constitutive story by constructing a shared future (Smith 2003).

The emphasis on immigrant skills and talents gives the impression of a predominantly economic model of citizenship. Yet, speakers just as often spoke of the reciprocal relationship between the government and the people, of the contract between the citizens and their state:

This oath is not an undertaking only on your part. It establishes a mutual agreement. It creates a mutual responsibility between you and our Nation. Just as

you will protect, preserve and defend the Constitution, the Constitution in turn will protect, preserve and defend you. It guarantees that you will receive equal justice under law, equal opportunity to exercise the great freedoms available to man: to worship God in your own manner, to think freely, and to express your thoughts freely. (Sidney Yates, US Representative from Illinois, 1965)

Here in America, man is limited only by his capabilities and his talents in determining the measure of his success. Meanwhile, he may expect the assistance of other agencies of democracy; by the efforts of a government charged with the responsibility of serving him, by our vast system of public education, by our trade unions which give him a collective voice, by the great and intricate network of commerce, of credit and invested capital which make free enterprise itself possible. (Earl Warren, Governor of California, 1950)

Note in the second quote the individualistic construction of a (male) American citizen and the presumed equality of opportunity. Nevertheless, this citizen enjoys public services in the form of education, organized labor, and government-supported marketplace. These quotes are evidence that in the mid 20th century United States, models of citizenship incorporated mutual ties between the state and the citizen.

In addition to economic and political aspects of citizenship, we can occasionally glimpse conceptions of a cultural citizenship. Some speakers encouraged new citizens to preserve their cultures:

You notice that the Oath doesn't require you to cast off the culture, the art, the music and all of those other attributes that make America a well-rounded country. I want you to keep them, but I hope that you will pursue your studies of American History, current history, current problems. (Waldo Rogers, US District Court Judge in New Mexico, 1960)

Judge Rogers encourages his audience to preserve the aspects of their cultures – art and music – that can be easy and exciting to consume for native Americans, and that will contribute to the American cultural eclecticism. The way he tempers this invitation to cultural preservation calls attention to the association of immigrants' culture with the past, while keeping American history and 'problems' emphatically current. The use of the term culture in this instance is typical of this context, encompassing a narrow range of cultural production of ethnic groups, rather than shared understandings or schemas.

As shown by Johnson (1987) of patriotic speech in general, speakers often invoked the sacrifices made by the founders of the nation in exhorting new citizens to be loyal Americans:

When our ancestors originally came they found a wild, bleak and hostile land. They had virtually no outside support, and nothing to sustain them except their own unconquerable and indomitable courage and determination. Difficulties did not sway them; hardships did not discourage them; obstacles did not check them. Suffering, misfortune and adversity only gave them greater determination to build a nation. Overcoming almost insurmountable barriers, they built this nation. And this morning, as you become a part of the nation they struggled so courageously to construct, one of your prime and paramount goals should be to help always preserve the dream on which they brought it into being. (Fred Smith, US District Court Judge in Minnesota, 1968)

From the fact that we have received our citizenship so freely and easily it is a common, and perhaps natural, error to ignore or forget that the rights and values of our citizenship were established by untold struggle and sacrifice, which places

upon each of us the obligation, and gives us the privilege, of making our contribution to the preservation and advancement of the citizenship. (George Boldt, US District Court Judge in Washington, 1954)

Thus, new citizens are told about the superior moral qualities of the nation's founders. As the newest addition to the nation, they are charged with preserving what these founders built. In the second quote, Judge Boldt implies that neither the new citizens nor the contemporary native born citizens (the 'we') have struggled much to come by their citizenship, and so must remember the sacrifices upon which this citizenship was founded. Now that the immigrants in the audience have crossed the citizenship line, they become part of the body of citizenry who owe sacrifice to those who came before them:

These liberties have come to us through many centuries of blood and sweat and tears, and once gone will never return. They do not exist except as we defend and protect them. In defense of these liberties and this form of government you are now enrolled with us. You and we may be called upon for sacrifices – to serve and to labor and if necessary to fight and to die that our liberties may remain to our children and to our children's children. Those who founded this Government in the Declaration of Independence pledged their lives, their fortunes and their sacred honor. We can do no less. (James Latchum, US District Court Judge in Delaware, 1951)

As in the earlier example, we see a unity being created between the new citizens and the rest of the nation through a reference to future generations. The new citizens may not have descended from those whose 'blood and sweat and tears' founded the nation, but they are brought into the obligation to preserve the nation through the desire for the prosperity of their children and grandchildren.

So far, immigrants appear to be framed as economic contributors to the nation, as newest members of the social contract between the state and its citizens, and as heirs to an obligation to repay the sacrifices of the nation's founders. Another interesting element that surfaced in multiple speeches is a strong emphasis on undivided commitment to the United States:

Those of you who are to become citizens must give your undivided allegiance to this country. You must love this country above all others. (Burnita Matthews, US District Court Judge, Washington DC, 1950)

Speakers reminded new citizens of the requirement in the oath to renounce allegiance to all other nations and rulers:

[The oath] first of all renounces completely and forever any allegiance to any other country...We do not countenance divided allegiance. America is first, it is second, it is third, it is every choice. We have but one oath, one citizenship, one country. As Theodore Roosevelt declared, any citizen "who says that he is an American but something else also, is not an American at all." And so as Woodrow Wilson a few years later remarked, "While you bring all countries with you, you come today with the purpose of leaving all countries save the United States behind – bringing what is best in their spirit, but not looking over your shoulders and seeking to [perpetuate] what you have promised to [renounce] in them." From now on out there is but one country – we call it "our" country – yours and mine. (Tom Clark, Associate Justice of the Supreme Court, 1959)

Tom Clark's citation of Woodrow Wilson implies a temporal orientation of loyalties: loyalties to other countries are left behind as the immigrant journeys down the path to American citizenship. The United States is 'our' country only if there are no other countries.

We see a negative reaction to the idea of hyphenated identity, which is associated with split allegiance rather than cultural identity. The importance of complete attachment to the United States – an emotional and moral, and not simply intellectual, attachment – had been emphasized from the time of increased government management of naturalization in the early 20th century (Gordon 2007).

Emphasis on undivided allegiance was often explicitly connected to the duty to defend the nation from external or internal enemies:

You will swear that when the interests of the United States are concerned you will have only those interests at heart and defend them against every enemy – foreign and domestic. This is particularly true at the present moment. There seem to be enemies both abroad and at home who would change our form of government and deprive us of our liberties. (James Latchum, US District Court Judge in Delaware, 1951)

In addition, fully a third of the speakers in this time period addressed the immigrant audience on the subject of loyalty. Aside from stressing that loyalty should only be to the United States, speakers framed it as a duty, a requirement, and an inspiring objective:

We solicit and require your unswerving loyalty to our form of Government. (Waldo Rogers, US District Court Judge in New Mexico, 1957)

You have a duty, first of all, to give undivided loyalty to America, the land that gives you these rights. (Clarence Southerland, Chief Justice of Delaware, 1954)

Loyalty was a requirement and something immigrants gave in exchange for formal citizenship status.

Although speakers referred to the contributions – particularly economic – of immigrants of the past, their emphasis on loyalty and undivided allegiance was combined with worry about several potential shortcomings of immigrants. First, some worried that new citizens may be particularly vulnerable to extreme political influences:

As new citizens, you may be the subjects of attempts by enemies of our government to enlist you in their cause. These elements, in my opinion, are radicals of both the right, including those similar to the Nazis and Fascists, on the one hand, and those of the left, including the Communists. My advice to you is scrupulously to avoid either extreme and to pursue a middle course, one which is liberal, and yet with a view to preserving all of our ways of life with due regard, not only to personal rights, but also the rights of property. The middle course, my friends, in my opinion, is closest to the American way of life. (Waldo Rogers, US District Court Judge in New Mexico, 1957)

The bad influences may seek to corrupt the new citizens and subvert their nascent loyalty. Another potential problem with immigrants was their intolerance – with tolerance said to be intrinsic to the American way of life:

The third duty of citizenship is – in your case – to adjust yourself to your new country. Be tolerant of your neighbors. Think in American terms and be not fooled into assuming that a narrow racial or partisan clannishness ever really works out to the best interests of yourself, your particular nationality group, or your country. (Prescott Bush, Senator in Connecticut, 1954)

This echoes a citizenship textbook analyzed by Gordon (US (1918) in Gordon (1997), p. 377): “You can not become thorough Americans if you think of yourselves in groups. America does not consist in groups.” In both cases, increasing tolerance is presumed to

come with assimilation or 'adjustment' to the United States. American identity is understood in individualist terms: even if immigrants are encouraged to preserve some aspects of their cultures, they are to do so as individuals (or families), not groups. Immigrant groups do not have the right to maintain their way of life through collective practices and institutions, ala contemporary Canadian multiculturalism.

Finally, another concern that speakers in the 1950s and 1960s had was that immigrants may make themselves a burden on the state:

It is a traditional American concept that people should do as much as they can for themselves and by themselves at all group levels. It is only by meeting problems that people grow and develop. (Burnita Matthews, US District Court Judge in Washington, DC, 1950)

I invite you to be patriots of these United States and not parasites. (Madison Scott, Pastor in Florida, 1964)

Therefore, speakers at naturalization ceremonies in this time period appeared to consider immigrants in an ambiguous light. They acknowledged their hard work and skills but also viewed immigrants as potentially morally suspect individuals – perhaps weak, intolerant, and without the American drive for self-sufficiency. Not unrelatedly, they stressed loyalty and undivided allegiance to the nation. And through invocations of the founders' sacrifices and future generations' wellbeing, immigrants were reminded of their obligation to build the nation and protect it from enemies. The emphasis on loyalty and worry about immigrants' fitness to be Americans are not surprising at a time when the public sphere was rife with paranoid anxiety over potential ties to Communist Russia. Although most of those accused of treason and disloyalty in the McCarthy era were native-born Americans, immigrants from the very places that were now behind the Iron Curtain drew anxiety as well. As we will see, this changed dramatically fifty years later.

2003-2008

Today, the foreign born comprise a much higher proportion of the American population (12%) than in the 1950-1970, and most immigrants hail from Latin America and Asia, rather than Europe. Immigration is a highly visible issue in the public sphere, particularly when it comes to the debates surrounding undocumented immigrants. The Cold War is over, yet the contemporary context brings its own anxieties. Terrorist attacks of 2001 were followed not only by official scapegoating of Muslim, Middle Eastern, and South Asian immigrants, but also by a further militarization of the border with Mexico in the name of national security.

There are a number of similarities in naturalization ceremony speeches today and fifty years ago. One such similarity is the lauding of immigrants' contributions. As in the 1950s and 1960s, naturalization ceremony speakers referred to hard working immigrants with special skills and talents. In addition to this emphasis on the economic roles of immigrants, there were discussions of the reciprocal relationship between citizens and the state, of the rights and responsibilities that new citizens were embracing:

With freedom, liberty, diversity, and opportunity comes responsibility. As citizens, you all share the responsibility of working together within a democratic system of government. To strengthen and safeguard our citizenship to ensure that the promise of America will endure for us and for all the generations to come. (Richard Berman, US District Court Judge in New York, 2007)

Note the reference to future generations: as in speeches from the earlier time period, constructing a shared future is one way to discursively incorporate the newest members of the polity. In her analysis of congressional debates on immigration acts in the mid-1990s,

Newton (2008) found a shift away from a definition of citizenship that emphasizes mutual ties between citizens and the government to a purely economic citizenship. In the naturalization ceremony speeches, however, mutual ties between the state and citizens were still important. The descriptions of political citizenship and the contract between the state and its citizens were similar to those made at naturalization ceremonies in the 1950s and 1960s.

As in the earlier period, contemporary naturalization ceremony speakers told immigrants to preserve their culture. Again, this culture was framed in terms of the past and symbolic ethnicity, rather than a system of shared understandings organizing daily life:

You owe to yourself the duty not to forget where you, as an individual, came from. Enrich this country with your unique culture, enhance us with the flavors with which you cook, with your native tongue, with the songs you sing, the fabrics you weave and the histories of your people. If you are fluent in a language other than English, speak it. If you are not fluent in English, study the language but speak your native language at home, so that your children may learn it. Do not worry that your children need to learn English, trust me, they will. Become an American citizen but remain proud of your roots. (Michael Belson, US District Court Judge in Philadelphia, 2007)

The United States is enriched by ethnic food, music, fabrics, and stories. Native languages should be preserved – at home. Immigrants' culture is not juxtaposed to Anglo-Saxon culture as was sometimes done in the older ceremonies. Similarly to the older ceremonies, however, the expectation is for immigrants to preserve user-friendly aspects of their cultures with the emphasis on what these aspects do for the United States rather for immigrants themselves, let alone immigrant communities. And, as in the earlier period, the conception of immigrant culture is narrow and focused on individuals or families.

Perhaps the most striking finding is that the emphasis on the contributions that immigrants make became much more pronounced than in the 1950s and 1960s, often expanding beyond immigrants' superior work ethic to moral characteristics such as optimism, vigor, and vitality:

Immigrants who might not bring much with them to this country, do bring a mighty work ethic. They also bring a sense of optimism and the belief that tomorrow will be brighter than today. (Lucy Lee, Lawyer in San Francisco, 2006)

For over two hundred years this country has been blessed with a constant infusion of new people from all over the world who brought their languages, their heritages and their cultural values with them. Today it is you who so bless us. (Robert Pratt, US District Court Judge in Iowa, 2007)

Judge Pratt's use of the word 'infusion' implies a nation as body metaphor that is quite common in contemporary ceremony speeches in the United States: the American nation is constantly infused with new blood. In general, much more so than in the sample from the 1950s and 1960s, immigration was seen as a blessing. We can see that in Judge Pratt's quote above. The speakers often said that they – and, by extension, the nation – were humbled, honored, or privileged by immigrant naturalization:

You see this land is now your land, and so when I say welcome to you, to the great public office of citizen I must tell you that you honor us greatly. You're making us safer and stronger by choosing to join us in that high public office... So I thank you again for the honor that you have bestowed upon this country by accepting the highest public office that we have to offer. (Douglas Woodlock, US District Court Judge in Massachusetts, 2007)

Note that Judge Woodlock refers to the choice immigrants made to naturalize as bringing safety and security to the nation.

There are several powerful elements in the role immigrants were seen to play in American society that were not observed in the earlier ceremonies. In fact, there were special expectations held of the naturalized. A strong thread that ran through many ceremony remarks is the idea that native-born Americans take many things for granted and that immigrant citizens' job is to remind the native-born what America stands for:

For it's your belief in this country that keeps alive the spirit and sacrifices of those who founded these United States. You share in their dream of liberty and freedom and understand the responsibilities incumbent in them. And in so doing, you are an inspiration to your fellow citizens. (Jonathan Russ, History professor in Delaware, 2007)

Unlike in the ceremonies in the 1950s and 1960s, the new citizens are not so much admonished that they are indebted to the much-sacrificing founders, as they are already presumed to share moral fiber with those founders. It is the native born who are somewhat morally deficient, needing reminders and inspiration:

It's always a moving experience for you, but even more importantly, I think, for us. I want all of you to understand that this landmark day for you is vitally important to the rest of us and we are incredibly privileged to be a part of it. Why is that? Because you remind us what a gift it is to be a citizen, because that's too easily forgotten by those of us who've been born into citizenship. So when you become Americans by choice, you remind us what precious gift that citizenship is and you perform a service to each and every one of us and to the country as a whole by inspiring all of us to renew our civic commitments as you do the same for yours. So we thank you for that. (Joseph Torsella, CEO of the National Constitutional Center in Philadelphia, 2007)

Naturalized citizens – citizens by choice – are juxtaposed with native born citizens. This is an interesting variant of the constitutive story of citizenship because immigrants are portrayed as the ones whose values are closest to the ideals of the nation. The newest members belong because of who they are, even as the native-born citizenry – in their moral laxity – has come to take the gift of citizenship for granted.

As mentioned above, the theme of choice was prominent at these contemporary ceremonies. The choice immigrants made to live in the United States and apply for citizenship was what put them in a position to instruct and inspire native-born citizens:

For many Americans, our citizenship was an accident. Not for you. In taking the citizenship oath, you have made a conscious choice and determined effort to be American citizens... Your desire to become citizens is a fresh reminder to those of us who were born here about the promise of America. (Patrick Leahy, Senator in Vermont, 2003)

Some went as far as to thank the new citizens for making this choice to naturalize:

Thank you! When teaching the subject of US citizenship to my law students, I always point out to them that I, like most Americans, did nothing to become a citizen except be born on the soil of this country. In contrast, many of you made almost unimaginable sacrifices just for the chance to have for yourselves what I happened to have been born with. As much as I love this country, my love is an accident of birth, whereas yours is the result of toil and struggle. For that, I want to thank you for choosing our country as your own. You show us what the true

meaning of citizenship is. (Carl Falstrom, Immigration Attorney in San Francisco, 2005)

Thank you for being here today and thank you for choosing to become part of this great nation. (David Douglas, USCIS Official in Los Angeles, 2007)

As pointed out by Coutin (2003), the distinction between accidental citizenship through birth and citizenship as a conscious decision highlights the special role that immigrant citizens are expected to play. In this way, the sacrifice story is shifted from the nation's founders to immigrants themselves.

But the role of immigrants in American society extended beyond instructing the native-born in the meaning of citizenship. It was very common to hear that immigrant citizens strengthened and enriched the nation:

While America provides each of you with the potential to achieve your dreams and aspirations, you, in turn, enrich and strengthen America with your own personal vision and cultural heritage. As American poet Ralph Waldo Emerson once said, a nation, like a tree, does not thrive well, until it is engrafted with foreign stock. The moment you arrived in this country, each of you brought unique talents and traditions that greatly enhance the richness and diversity of the American experience. (Marta Flores, USCIS Official in Los Angeles, 2007)

Indeed, it is from the diversity and talents of our immigrants, that this country has long drawn its strength and maintained its vitality. (George Shiavelli, US District Court Judge in Los Angeles, 2007)

In the first quote, Flores explicitly draws on Emerson's metaphor of the nation as a tree. Similarly to the nation as a body metaphor – where immigrants are the infusion – the nation needs immigrants to maintain its strength.

Thus, immigrants were almost universally presented as ‘supercitizens’ of sorts and immigration was viewed as a source of strength for the nation. There was very little concern about immigrants’ loyalty compared to speeches in the 1950s and 1960s. Instead of emphasizing undivided commitment, many speakers referred to the decision to naturalize as a difficult one, and some even encouraged immigrants to maintain a form of commitment to their home country:

I wish to remind you that what you solemnly renounced in that oath is allegiance to the government of another land. You did not renounce, nor should you ever renounce, the devotion you carry in your heart for the people of your native land. Preserve that always. (Robert Pratt, US District Court Judge in Iowa, 2007)

Moreover, few speakers implied that the newly naturalized were particularly susceptible to intolerance on religious or other grounds. And only two speakers, both top Bush officials (Attorney General Alberto Gonzales and USCIS Director Emilio Gonzalez) expressed anxiety that new immigrants would become burdens on the state welfare system. Instead, immigrants were said to be in touch with fundamental American values and a blessing to be honored and celebrated.

In some ways, the findings for the contemporary period are surprising. The audiences of new citizens lauded for their moral qualities and connection to foundational values are predominantly Asian and Hispanic, not white as in the earlier period. Given the dramatic way in which immigration is reshaping the racial composition of the American population, we might expect more anxiety to be expressed at naturalization ceremonies about the consequences of these changes¹. And in the post-9/11 context, it is striking that few connections are being drawn at these ceremonies between national security and immigration.

From liability to supercitizen

By definition, the permanent crossing of national boundaries by large numbers of people is a threat to the concept of a nation. Nations with large influxes of immigrants have to incorporate immigration into their self-definitions, creating acceptable roles for their immigrant members. At a time of relatively low immigration levels and widespread unease about Cold War enemies in the 1950s and 1960s, there was a struggle to clearly define how immigration fits into the story of the nation. Speakers acknowledged positive characteristics possessed by immigrants but also expressed an open sense of anxiety over their fitness to be members across several dimensions. Based in values and culture, American citizenship was viewed categorically and ascriptively, and immigrants were left out of the constitutive story due to their potential moral shortcomings (Calhoun 1997, Smith 2003). Instead, immigrants were called to unity and sacrifice by emphasizing their debt to those who came before them (Johnson 1987).

How different the discourse at naturalization ceremonies fifty years later! Instead of being presented as liabilities, these immigrants were fit into the national story as fresh blood rejuvenating the American nation. Despite the connection drawn elsewhere in the public sphere between threats to national security and immigration, little concern about immigrants' loyalty or tolerance was expressed in the ceremonies. Instead, immigrants were said to bless the nation through their moral, as well as the more traditionally economic, contributions. In constructing immigrants as true heirs to foundational values, speakers were incorporating them into constitutive stories of American people-making: immigrants belonged because of their intrinsic qualities. This is not to say that there are no similarities in the way immigrants' roles are framed in the mid 20th century and contemporary United States. There is continuity in the way immigrants are told to preserve some aspects of their cultures – cuisine, music, art – in order to enrich their new nation, as long as this preservation happens on individual or family level in the private sphere.

Naturalization ceremonies provide an opportunity to study nationalist discourse, revealing the cultural material of nationalism, with particular insight into the role of immigrants. The transition from anxiety over potentially disloyal immigrants to celebration of immigrant supercitizens happened despite the fact that the proportion of the Americans who wanted less (or no) immigration rose from one-third to more than half between the two time periods (Zolberg 2006). The contemporary combination of high anti-immigrant sentiment and glowing pictures of hero-immigrants in naturalization ceremony speeches could simply be ascribed to the purpose inherent in these ceremonies: to enact a symbolic crossing of the citizenship boundary, celebrating and congratulating the new members. This explanation is less tenable in light of the evidence from the 1950s and 1960s that these ceremonies could very well include portrayals of immigrants that are full of unease.

In thinking through this puzzle, it is useful to draw on Brand's (2010) insight that the way migrants are incorporated into the national story is affected by the relationship between the elites and the migrants. Even when they are not government employees, speakers at naturalization ceremonies are at least temporarily serving as voices of the state. In the contemporary United States, they are operating in a context of pervasive negative constructions of immigrants in the public sphere (Santa Ana 2002, Chavez 2008), yet they have to lead the ritual induction of immigrants into the national community. Perhaps they are overcompensating for anti-immigrant sentiments elsewhere. In the earlier period, immigration was not as visible an issue, and the speakers may not have been operating under

¹At the same time, what appears to be relative racial homogeneity of immigrants in the mid-century US was viewed at the time as a set of far from trivial differences (Foner 2005).

the same imperative of compensation. Moreover, with a much lower proportion of immigrants in the country, those speakers who were politicians may not have as readily conceptualized new citizens as a powerful bloc of new voters.

Another explanation for the superlative characterization of immigrants in contemporary naturalization ceremonies is the bifurcation of immigrant imagery into deserving (documented) and undeserving (undocumented) immigrants (Newton (2008)). It is reasonable to think that naturalization ceremony speakers are focusing on the 'good' immigrants: those who came to the United States legally, and have taken the steps necessary to acquire citizenship. If naturalization ceremonies are aimed at the good, deserving immigrants, it makes sense that the discourse is ratcheted up to superlatives in describing the contribution of this segment of the immigrant population. Fifty years ago, there was not the same morally laden line bisecting immigrants in the United States, and the discourse on immigration was far more ambivalent, with speakers even openly worrying about the fitness of immigrants for American citizenship.

What does this mean, if anything, for the lives of immigrants? Does their characterization as morally superior people revitalizing their new nation indicate anything for their incorporation? Contexts of reception – from the way immigrants fit into the racial stratification system to anti-immigrant attitudes to the climate created by the local media – have been shown to play a role in immigrant adaptation (Padin 2005, Portes and Rumbaut 2006). Why do speeches immigrants hear at naturalization ceremonies matter? The argument for examining naturalization ceremonies hinges on the possibility of revealing deep assumptions about the place of immigrants in society. These deep assumptions embedded in cultural schemas governing the way nations are conceptualized and maintained are not going to be changed overnight. We can see this in the aftermath of 9/11, when the positive role of immigrants remained a basic ingredient of nationalist storytelling: one could envision an alternative featuring suspicion and anxiety about all newcomers, similar to the Cold War Era. To a considerable extent, entrenched cultural schemas help shape policies affecting immigrants and even their interactions with host society institutions. Thus, one could argue that the positive roles assigned to immigrants in the contemporary national stories of the United States do matter because they signal the presence a powerful narrative – however flawed with normative assumptions and historical inaccuracies – that incorporates and embraces immigrants as indelible in the nation-building process. Such a narrative competes with constructions of immigrants centered on threat and invasion (Santa Ana 2002, Chavez 2008, Newton 2008).

Analysis of speeches made at naturalization ceremonies sheds considerable light on the roles of immigrants in the construction of the American nation. This material serves as a valuable source of empirical data on the subject that is most often discussed in theoretical terms. At the same time, the set of ceremony speeches used in this paper has some shortcomings. It is not a representative sample, making it impossible to determine whether the results are generalizable to all American ceremonies. There is only a small number of ceremonies from the 1950s and 1960s, and they tend to contain a higher proportion of very distinguished individuals and lower proportion of more ordinary ceremonies. Future research should explore the full historical development of naturalization ceremonies, including years between 1970 and 2000. In addition, scholars should compare American naturalization ceremonies to newly instituted ceremonies in many European nations, such as the Netherlands, UK, and France. These nations are institutionalizing naturalization ceremonies that are quite similar to those in the United States. A study of what is said to new citizens in countries where immigration is not central to national identity would provide an invaluable comparative angle.

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