Ambiguity in policy discourse: Congressional talk about immigration

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Abstract. Talk about immigration legislation in Congress between 1975 and 1986 drew upon competing interpretive frameworks to define ambiguous policy areas. The problem for both legislators and witnesses, as it is for all social actors, was that social realities are not objectively constituted, but socially constructed and tendentious. This essay is a cultural analysis of the language practices of legislators and other participants in the discussions, through which they created understandings of immigration. Congressional talk about immigration invoked the natural history language of ‘population.’ Despite an explicitly stated intention to avoid racist, nativist or jingoistic talk, which was largely achieved, this population talk, drawing on the ambiguous properties of language, allowed such prohibited concepts to be expressed. Particular understandings of race, gender, and class were reproduced, and not avoided or dismantled, by use of the natural history framework. It enabled speakers to displace fears and ambiguities onto objects of their talk, groups which were variously identified as ‘the problem.’ Data come from transcripts of hearings and speeches in Congress and from publications of the US Select Commission on Immigration and Refugee Policy.

Throughout the 1970s and 1980s much public talk about ‘immigration reform’ in the US took place in Congressional hearings, speeches, media reports and commentary, and other forums of deliberation. The talk about immigration used competing interpretive frameworks to define ambiguous policy areas. One such framework was a ‘natural history’ one which drew upon terms of science and science-like speech to specify what immigration problems were and how they might be resolved. ‘Natural history’ here means a particular set of presuppositions that supported the rationalization of the control and uses of ‘nature.’ ‘Population,’ for example, was prominent among these terms, and it variously entailed such implicit meanings as competition among populations for scarce resources and irrational forces of nature that required rational control or management. ‘Population’ suggested that ideas about nature being subordinated to control, in the form of unambiguous numbers and such seemingly race-free, gender-free, or class-free notions as ‘resources,’ could be used to clarify what was happening and what ought to be done in the ‘immigration crisis.’

Proponents of ‘immigration reform’ repeatedly voiced their intention that ‘nativist, xenophobic, or racist arguments for the exclusion of ethnic, regional, or linguistc groups’ (Simpson, US Congress, Senate [USS], 1982: p. 142) not be part of public talk about immigration. Senator Alan K. Simpson (R, WY) and Representative Romano L. Mazzoli (D, KY), the sponsors in Congress of the legislation that became the Immigration Reform and Control Act of 1986
[IRCA], returned to this theme innumerable times. People who spoke on behalf of increased restrictions on immigration to the United States often explicitly denied that their views stemmed from racism or nativism. Many also publicly noted that the scapegoating and violence of past national stances toward immigrants would not be part of the current reconsideration of immigration policy. There would instead, they said, be public debate, deliberations over policy, and the airing of diverse and informed opinions. That framework having been established and continuously monitored by legislators, the talk largely did not include the use of explicit, derogatory, or inflammatory terms for race, color, gender, or class; understandings of race, color, gender, and class, however, did remain, though largely implicit and rarely examined, in the talk.

The problem for both legislators and witnesses, as it is for all social actors, was that social realities are not objectively constituted, but socially constructed. The social and cultural changes that all perceived taking place were stipulated, described, and examined through the participants’ uses of particular terms; in selecting certain terms over others, speakers established frameworks of meanings (for example, natural history, moral character, or transcendence) through which they sought to understand events and to conceive immigration policy. The seemingly clear meanings of terms such as population appeared to promise to some speakers that they could reduce the potential for ambiguity, social friction, and even conflict (‘racism,’ ‘xenophobia,’ ‘nativism’) in making immigration policy. Speakers used population, for example, to diagnose what they conceived of as the social ills (unemployment, cultural dilution, and social disruption) that were brought by immigration, legal and illegal, without explicitly using terms such as race, gender, or class. Ideologies of race, gender, and class were, nonetheless, present, if tacit, in this talk. Particular understandings about race, gender, and class were in fact being reproduced, and not avoided or dismantled, by the speakers’ reliance on population.\(^1\)

What follows in this essay is a cultural analysis of part of the discourse in which this public debate about ‘immigration reform’ took place. In a cultural analysis the meanings of utterances are never taken to be independent of the contexts of people doing and saying things. That is, the meanings of terms are always both dependent on and actively emergent in the context of speaking (Hymes, 1972; Silverstein, 1976). The analysis here examines in particular the term ‘population,’ other terms with which it appeared in speech, and its meanings. Each of these is examined as part of language in its contexts of use in a ‘speech event,’ or ‘performance,’ including the situation (here, for example, the scene of hearings rooms), the participants (social statuses such as legislator or witness, their different access to the authority to speak, and their marked and unmarked\(^2\) social features such as gender or race), the sequences of speech (including rules of procedure, etiquette, and conventions of turn-taking), and other parts of talk in natural settings (such as codes, keys or moods, genres/frameworks of speech, etc.\(^3\)). Any of these aspects of speech events may be presupposed by speakers or created by them in the course of
their speaking. Patterns of relations that are found by analysis among aspects of speech events are the social and cultural ‘contexts’ in which speakers make meanings. This analysis, then, pays close attention to the contexts of use of population-related terms in talk about immigration and the contents or meanings that were being (re)-created there.4

Data for this analysis come from transcripts of hearings and speeches on immigration in Congress between 1975 and 1986 and from publications of the US Select Commission on Immigration and Refugee Policy. Participants, regardless of their party affiliations, spoke a common language. The aim of this analysis is to describe that language and its uses in formulating legislation. My strategy, then, resembles that of Wagner-Pacifici in that it is a ‘combing through the discursive surround of an event’ – a strategy that ‘imagines a world of discourses that act as if they are self-contained and natural mirrors of their own world, but that are really bearers of their own incompleteness and tendentiousness’ (1994: p. 139). I focus here on one interpretive framework that surrounded legislative talk about immigration.

Possible meanings of ‘population’

The term ‘population’ which was used in the debate often conflated meanings and referred variously to nations, regions, immigrants, or ethnic groups. One of the conceptual sources of the term included ideas derived from biology. Population in that case referred to biological properties that were imputed to social groups, such as reproduction, growth or extinction, ecological relations with environments, species differences, or enumeration. All of these meanings would imply properties or processes that are outside of human consciousness, and therefore require management or control by human agency. For example, the terms ‘native’ and ‘nativism,’ which are frequently found in talk about immigration, both refer to a natural origin, an inborn or innate character, or an indigenous connection to a place.

Another source of meanings was nationalism. Population in nationalist discourse was used in the sense of ‘a people,’ which was presumed to be an internally undifferentiated unit and to be differentiated from all other such units (as are ‘nation,’ ‘individual,’ ‘culture,’ ‘language,’ ‘race,’ and the like in this discourse5). These meanings would suggest that social actors are subject to a uniform culture or spirit or capacity into which they are ‘born,’ ‘naturalized,’ or ‘assimilated,’ and from which they cannot diverge without contributing to national or cultural disintegration. As well, in nationalist ideologies nations and peoples are ranked hierarchically. One’s ‘own’ nation or people is ranked above others; its superiority is presumed to be a natural fact.

A third source was the discourses of business and sport, from which ‘competition’ derives meanings: competition was in turn used by participants in the debate to characterize relations not between individuals or businesses but between or within population(s). These meanings, applied to immigrant and
native populations, would imply a social darwinist process in which these populations would compete with each other and one population might overcome the other. Such a competition stems ultimately from nature or human nature, one that must be brought under rational control lest it lead to a natural, national disaster.

Such natural history terms as ‘population,’ then, brought speakers to the verge of denying humanity to immigrants (legal and illegal), and even to many Americans, in that these terms focused attention upon their presumably pre-social and ahistorical biology or nature, rather than upon their consciousness, subjectivities, or cultural agency. Speakers (legislators and witnesses) tended to reserve human subjectivities and agency for themselves. Illegal immigrants in particular were being transformed by images suggested by population into something inhuman.

For example, in a speech in the House, Rep. Ronald C. Packard (R, CA) was faced with such a conceptual dilemma:

In my district made up of San Diego County and Orange County we have had a tragic increase in drugs, crime, prostitution, and social problems. Now I read ... that the aliens are preying on our schoolchildren by stealing their lunch money (Congressional Record, 1986: p. H9732; emphasis added).

As well, Rep. Robert Badham’s (R-CA) remarks in a speech suggested that he was unsure whether the ‘illegal aliens’ were people, or insects headed for Americans’ suburban homes, as he watched through ‘night vision binoculars’:

... I saw first hand thousands of illegal aliens crossing into the United States virtually unimpeded. ... I watched ... as scores of men, women, and children gathered in open fields. ... As I looked through night vision binoculars, I saw dozens of people dart through our porous border fence ... into a suburban San Diego County residential area (Congressional Record, 1986: p. H9716; emphasis added).

Here, the verbs ‘preying’ and ‘dart’ suggest predators and insects, respectively. Such images created an unbridgeable distance between illegal immigrants and the speaker. Representative Packard constructed a nation, to which ‘our schoolchildren [and ourselves]’ belong; this nation was threatened by ‘aliens’ who were not outside the nation, where they belonged, but among ‘us.’ These images showed that illegal immigrants could be and should be subordinated by national policy (by ‘control,’ ‘management’) to the social hierarchies of business (as ‘costs,’ ‘workers’) or law (through ‘apprehension,’ ‘deportation,’ ‘legalization’). Through the use of such images, perceived threats to social order (‘aliens,’ ‘crime,’ ‘separatism,’ decline of ‘well-being’) were reconstituted as part of a natural order (‘over-population,’ ‘fertility,’ ‘environmental degradation’) that had to be mastered or protected by reason, technology, and vigilance.
Hence population was not a neutral, scientific phrasing of issues surrounding immigration, but one fraught with conceptual and political dilemmas. Among these dilemmas were ambiguities regarding the equality of populations, and displacement of such social and economic contradictions as those of class, race, and gender onto populations. The population terms and the implications about immigration that they entailed were not the intellectual property of any one political position exclusively. Instead, they were available to and used by proponents of a wide spectrum of political causes, including liberal ones such as environmental protection or quality of life, and conservative ones such as social order or cultural unity.

Making meanings with ‘population’

A shift in the use of terms with which to render immigration issues occurred between 1975 and 1986. In 1975 participants had struggled to grasp what the problem, then seen as ‘a flood of illegal aliens’ set largely in the Southwest, was. The US House of Representatives Subcommittee on Immigration, Citizenship, and International Law (of the Committee on the Judiciary) (US Congress, House of Representatives [USHR], 1975), for example, had largely sought information, and the testimony focused on unemployment and on the questions of how many illegal aliens there were and whether they were taking jobs away from Americans (see Chock, 1991). Speakers called for further efforts to find out the exact number of illegal aliens, and for increased immigration law enforcement through improved technology, expanded budgets, and more personnel, for agencies such as the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) and specifically the Border Patrol.

Population terms met with a different reception in these early days as opposed to later hearings. In hearings in 1975, for example, one witness, John Tanton, from Zero Population Growth [ZPG] asked that the ‘demographic impact of illegal immigration on the United States’ be considered (USHR, 1975: p. 253). Tanton said he feared population growth in the US meant ‘further constrictions on our individual liberties’ (p. 259). He claimed that the root causes of illegal immigration, including exploding populations in the developing world, were like an incurable disease (p. 263). He said there were ‘limitations of how many people we can provide for’ (p. 255). Representatives Holtzman and Sarbanes, however, questioned him closely about what the dangers to liberties stemming from population growth might be. The use of terms such as population for thinking about ‘illegal aliens’ was largely dismissed by subcommittee members; for example, they could not see a connection between ‘constrictions on civil liberties’ and growth in population, which Tanton had tried to draw (pp. 259–260).

The goals of hearings as settings for public talk about immigration also changed between 1975 and 1980. By the 1980s, the issue of ‘illegal aliens’ (the subject of the 1975 hearings [USHR 1975]) was widened to one of
'immigration' policy. In the 1980s more use of population terms was being made in hearings about immigration, and border control shared attention with population control. Speakers still claimed that America was being inundated by a flood of illegal immigrants across US borders, but questions were also being asked about the effects of new immigrants generally on the United States. ZGP, the Federation for American Immigration Reform [FAIR], and the Environmental Fund [EF] got a somewhat better reception before subcommittees in 1982 and 1983, though their arguments sometimes left members of Congress irritated, as described below.

In 1983 a spokesman for the Environmental Fund testified at both Senate and House hearings. To one, he submitted a written statement that said his organization 'work[ed] to persuade the United States to adopt a population policy that will keep the numbers of people in balance with our resources and our environment ... and alert[ed] government and the private sector to the causes of population growth and warn them of the consequences the uncontrolled growth will have on the quality of life in America' (Thomas McMahon, EF, USS, 1983: p. 104). In oral testimony at both hearings he argued that the country's 'resources' such as land, clean air, and water, were being overwhelmed by population growth due to immigration – legal and illegal – so that a strict annual limit of 425,000 immigrants was needed. That limit, he proposed, should be

reviewed periodical[l]y ... [so] that the ceiling [can be] reset on the basis of a system to evaluate the adequacy of U.S. resources of agriculture, forest land, water, minerals, and others required to support our populace (Thomas McMahon, EF, USHR, 1983: p. 738; also USS, 1983: p. 101).

He offered such terms as 'carrying capacity', 'resources', 'population,' and 'quality of life' with which to draw seemingly clear lines for 'numerical' limits to immigration. He proposed that immigration limits be 'review[ed] ... every 2 or 4 years' (USS, 1983: p. 101). An appendix to his written statement (p. 110ff.) included tables to show various quantified 'projections' of populations, labor forces, unemployment due to illegal immigration, costs, and the like. People were coming to the United States to get jobs, he argued, and they had to be stopped; but the situation was 'like a huge electromagnet. When you turn off the switch, there is no more attraction' (US Congress, Senate and House of Representatives [USHR], 1983: pp. 768–69). Carole Baker, witness from ZPG, put it succinctly:

Ms. BAKER ... We do not see this as an illegal immigration bill. We see this as a comprehensive immigration reform bill. ... Our concern is not where the people are coming from. Our concern is strictly one of numbers and how that impacts on growth in this country (USHR, 1983: p. 769).
The EF’s spokesman in 1982 hearings, Garrett Hardin, put the relation between population and immigration in even simpler terms: ‘[H]ow does a nation produce its next generation of citizens? … As far as the population is concerned, a body is a body, and it does not matter whether it is produced by breeding our own or taking from other countries’ (USS, 1982: p. 114). He observed that with current population growth, ‘we face a diseconomy of scale … when it comes to dealing with messages … between human beings’ (p. 115). He later qualified this assertion when he noted ‘[i]mmigrants are more of a threat to national unity than are the people that we raise ourselves. … [I]mmigrants have to be acculturated if we are going to have domestic peace’ [p. 115]. ‘Bilingual education laws,’ for example, were being used ‘as a [dangerously] divisive factor,’ encouraging people ‘to keep their own language’ (p. 115).

Consideration of the possibility that any of these terms, their representations in tables, and relations between them and ‘quality of life’ or ‘domestic peace’ might be ambiguous, that is, that they might have meanings that were dependent upon a social or cultural context, was deferred by the authority of ‘science’ entailed by the terms. This understanding of science presumed that science produces knowledge that is independent of the observer’s social or cultural situation. The rhetoric of the testimony, as well, implied that ‘quality of life,’ ‘national unity,’ or ‘citizens’ might also be clarified if they were to be placed within a framework of ‘science.’ If so, they would be amenable to objective measurement and neutral assessment, and therefore would be unambiguous and apolitical. What was unambiguous could not be contested and therefore was being placed outside the political arena. Thus, these terms that suggested their origin in science enabled the speakers to place themselves above politics. As objective observers they would assume (and affirm) that their own social identities – here, nearly all men and white and upper middle-class6 – did not affect and were not affected by the meanings of their words.

However, the supposedly apolitical implications of population terms were not satisfactory in the eyes of some of the legislators, who were in a political hot-seat. They testily asked witnesses how they were to decide who the 425,000 immigrants to be admitted should be (USHR, 1983: pp. 770–771). They wanted ‘concrete proposals,’ not ‘lip service’: Where do we take them [immigrants] from? … 425,000 of whom?’ (Rep. Smith [D, FL], p. 770); ‘… you just have the number and the philosophy and let us do the dirty work?’ (Smith, p. 771). For the legislators, a body was not a body, and they were asking what kinds of people (‘where from?’) and how many of each kind ought to be admitted as immigrants – ‘the dirty work.’ That is, for them, immigration issues were contentious and volatile, and inescapably political.

But for others the population terms were at least partially persuasive and politically useful because they suggested that immigration policy called for expertise rather than public debate. Rep. Robert Garcia (D, NY), for example, agreed that ‘[i]nfluence of immigration on our Nation’s environment is considerable. … The Subcommittee on Census and Population, which I chair,
held a hearing on the Global 2000 Report and ... [n]eedless to say ... indicated that population shifts have a direct relationship to ecological stability’ (USS, 1982: p. 50). Rep. Garcia said he wanted limits on immigration, but because the ‘politics’ of immigration policy ‘is considerable... [a] depoliticized interagency council [made up of foreign policy, labor, legal, and statistical ‘experts,’ p. 52] could provide the answer’ (p. 51). Garcia reminded the Senate subcommittee, ‘We are talking about human beings when we speak about immigrants. We must do our best to avoid treating them like faceless statistics...’ (p. 52). Nevertheless, he recommended that part of the messy and irrational business of immigration policy be turned over to rational management (‘review’) by ‘experts’ (p. 52). That is, he tried to shift the topic of immigration out of political discourse into technical discourse.

Some legislators’ legislative experience had given them access to population terms as part of a technical discourse. Sen. Simpson, for example, had been a member of the Select Commission on Immigration and Refugee Policy, and he adopted some of the population language in his comments on the Commission’s final report (US Select Commission, 1981a: pp. 407–418). Some witnesses, commissioned research studies, and staff reports drew upon such terms from fields like demography and migration studies (US Select Commission, 1981b). Rep. Garcia, above, mentioned his subcommittee’s work on ‘census and population.’ Legislators, however, did not use population terms exclusively but generally used them in conjunction with terms of competing interpretive frameworks – for example, of immigrant narratives, business, or personal experience (see Chock, 1991, 1994, n.d.). They had to draw upon other terms in order to understand what population left unsaid and unclear. Who would be immigrants? How would they affect the country? These were questions for which answers could be only incompletely phrased as natural history.

In the following sections, I examine how speakers’ phrasing questions of immigration policy in population terms constructed particular conceptualizations of gender, class, and race, and how these conceptualizations rendered such differences as natural, yet national problems.

Women, fertility, and population

Gender played a significant part in considerations of immigration as population. Gender was explicitly introduced into the talk when speakers focused upon a population-related term, namely ‘fertility.’ That is, ‘women’ (and their race, which was usually marked as ‘not white’), but not ‘men,’ were discussed by speakers in terms that held women responsible for fertility (‘babies,’ ‘children’) and thus for population growth, stability, or decline. In speeches women were identified as the immigrants who were bearing large numbers of children, having crossed the ‘porous US-Mexico border.’ (Class also entered into these references to the immigrant women and their children who, it was
assumed, were not workers, and so were burdens on the ‘welfare’ agencies and budgets of states and local jurisdictions.) Some witnesses were haunted by a specter of large numbers of ‘illegal alien’ women giving birth to tiny US citizens in public (or ‘welfare’) hospitals:

The district I represent ... is but a few hours away from the porous United States-Mexico border ... Approximately 70 percent ... of the babies born in country [sic] hospitals are to undocumented alien women. These babies are automatically American citizens, and are therefore eligible for all the welfare benefits available to any U.S. citizen (William E. Dannemeyer, R, CA, Congressional Record, 1986: p. H9729).

I am told 80 percent of all children born in Los Angeles County public hospitals are born to illegal alien mothers – 80 percent! (Harry Reid, D, NV [added remarks], Congressional Record, 1986: p. H9775).

Not just women, but women’s fertility was seen by these speakers as crossing the ‘porous’ border of the nation, and confounding the distinction between citizen and alien. That is, a natural relationship between babies and mothers was blurring lines of rights and responsibilities mapped by the state between two categories of people (citizen and alien). In the speakers’ view women’s fertility multiplied the risk to the nation. How fast was the population growing? What were the implications for immigration of the fertility of women of developing countries, of the ‘native white [sic] population,’ of immigrant or foreign-born women? These were questions legislators asked of witnesses from organizations such as Zero Population Growth, the Urban Institute [UI], or the Population Council [PC], Loy Bilderback of ZPG, expressing his concern over ‘population problems’ in the Caribbean, Mexico, and Central America, said he wanted population growth of the US ‘halted’ (USS, 1982: p. 72); any ‘prolonged’ growth through immigration (in contrast presumably with U.S. births) would be ‘destructive to the fabric and fiber of the Republic. We are ... spending resource capital ... petroleum, ... topsoil ...ground water...’ (p. 73). In fact, he added later, growth of the ‘work force’ in the Caribbean ‘is going to be so horrendous [a catastrophe, disaster (p. 108)] that we must not think in terms of absorbing surplus workers’ (p. 107).

Thomas Espenshade [UI], on the basis of his ‘nonpartisan analysis,’ also cautiously drew out relationships between fertility, population growth, and numerical limits on immigration (USS, 1982: p. 87). Charles B. Keely [PC] said that research on fertility showed that ‘continuation of the current steady course’ was preferable to aiming for a higher or lower level of population, ‘that integration and assimilation do take place’ and that immigrants ‘generally ... reinvigorat[e] the commitment to the kind of society we live in’ (p. 95). Both Espenshade and Keely assured Sen. Simpson that the fertility of descendants of immigrant women was ‘indistinguishable from the fertility of American whites’ (Espenshade, USS, 1982: p. 105).
Using similar terms these speakers drew opposing conclusions from their evidence. But what was common to their talk and what none noted was the erasure of historical subjects by the terms of their discourse, which occluded gender, race, and class. Women were multivocal signs, but never subjects in this talk about fertility and welfare budgets. In the talk about welfare-funded births, women were the nameless ones who were having babies (perhaps uncontrollably, some seemed to fear) at the public expense. Women and children figured here as signs of social disorder. In the talk about fertility, women (women of color, in particular ‘Caribbean,’ ‘Mexic[an],’ ‘Central America[n]’) were also silent tokens of speakers’ fears – to be confirmed or allayed – about population growth and its effects on quality of life and national unity. They brought together, what, in this imagery, should be kept apart – what was messy, irrational, and uncontrollable from what was rational, deliberate, and market-driven. For example, in talk in such terms about ‘illegal aliens,’ women’s reproduction of labor power inside the US (their giving birth in public hospitals), rather than outside its borders (their fertility located where births would not disrupt welfare budgets), was problematical. It violated a ‘transnational’ spatial separation of the sites of the purchase and use of labor power (controlled by the market and administrative, masculine reason) and the sites of its reproduction (female, natural, instinctual [?], and irrational)

On the other hand, women were also necessary, but still nameless parts of the nuclear families who, as neighbors, classmates, or church members, looked to some like Americans, and whose salutary effect on the nation ought to be fostered by ‘family unity’ provisions of immigration law. But families were also worrisome units in which to think about immigrants, because they could force a speaker to reconsider what was entailed by population:

If you look at the issue of population control, ... you are going to have between 10 and 20 million people legalized and if only half of those people come forward and take advantage of general amnesty and you multiply that times the chain of seven relatives who will be eligible for entry into this country, then you are looking at between 50 and 100 million new faces that will be added to the population flood to this country (Harold J. Daub, R, NE, Congressional Record, 1986: p. H9727).

Arithmetic applied to population multiplied the ‘new faces’ – without names or characters – whom Americans would find in their midst. The arithmetic of population probably also conjured visions of crowded and unruly urban spaces for this Congressman from the Great Plains.
**Competition, social disorder, and population**

The population terms also entailed the possibility of ‘competition’ between groups for scarce resources. Immigrants were seen to be competing with (white? middle-class? male?) Americans for other scarce resources such as water, food, space, tax monies, or education. Thomas McMahon [EF], for example, recommended that immigration be limited so that ‘we will not destroy our own resource base that has become an important breadbasket to feed the world’ (USS, 1983: p 103). Roger Conner, witness from the Federation for American Immigration Reform [FAIR], also pointed out that ‘the effects of this ‘out of control’ immigration fall most severely on those in our society least able to withstand the pressure – the poor, minority Americans, working women, young people looking for their first jobs. In a period of 9 percent unemployment, frankly, we cannot continue to admit immigrants at the level that we are today’ (USSHR, 1982: p. 131). Here, the assumption was that the competition would strike vulnerable points of the country – female, non-white, not adult; these would be unable to defend themselves and consequently erode the defenses of those more well-placed (‘we,’ ‘Americans’). The speakers ‘we,’ used together with the population terms, constructed a world in which women and children were either dangerous in themselves or in need of protection from dangers brought by other, ‘alien’ women and children.

A related concern among legislators was how an ‘ideal’ population size would be affected by whether the national culture was ‘uniform’ or not:

Senator SIMPSON. … what would be the ideal population size or optimum population size to preserve or assure that our system would prevail?

Mr. HARDIN [EF]. … I would say rather less than our present population. I feel a great concern with things that are going on now that I do not see our getting control of…

[O]ne of the things involved here is the social system that you are presupposing. For example, if a population is extremely uniform in its culture, it can take more people with less social disruption.

[In Japan] there are no minority groups of any size at all. … And it is a uniform culture.

…

[W]e might well find ways of doing without the importation of more bodies, … of developing more labor-saving machinery. …

Senator SIMPSON. You also stated that the increases in immigration are more threatening to democracy than increases in fertility, and you cite … ‘tribalism’ as a contributing factor. How might you respond to Dr. Zolberg’s assertion that the United States has handled successfully this challenge…?

Mr. HARDIN. He may be right. … [But] now, with the ACLU, the Voting Rights Act of 1973, and so on, the assumption is that … the immi-
grant is right. ... [A]nd he says, 'Oh ho' I do not have to integrate with the society. ... [I]f we tell them we approve of separation they will remain separate. This is just human nature (USS, 1982: pp. 136–138).

In this exchange, 'the social system,' 'tribalism,' 'integration,' 'minority groups,' and 'social disruption' are terms that are modeled on population. The speakers were implying that a social system/population is not a true social system/population if internally it is not 'uniform.' Rather, in this view, such a social system would be a possibly uncontrollable mass composed of separate units ('tribes' or 'minority groups'), each a population itself that would disrupt 'the social system.' The speakers predicted that social disorder would result. They implied they (we' [Hardin and Simpson? speaking for Americans?]) had to 'tell them' (immigrants) that they (the speakers? Americans?) did not approve of separation. Voices of reason, such as the speakers', would have to 'get control of' the 'human nature' of immigrants for 'our system' or 'democracy' to prevail.

At the same hearings Simpson continued to pursue implications of this model of social and cultural unity ('assimilation') for immigration policy. He asked political scientist Aristide Zolberg, who had testified that his study of US history led him to expect that immigrants would assimilate, about what had happened 'to the social and cultural fabric of south Florida' since it 'appears to be a Spanish language-dominated area' (USS, 1982: p. 139). Simpson's understanding of 'assimilation,' like Hardin's understanding of 'the social system,' was based on an assumption that cultures, languages, social systems, and countries have the characteristics of 'a population.' That is each one is an internally undifferentiated unit, with a clearly differentiated 'outside' and 'inside' (p. 138) that separates it from other units (cf. Handler, 1988). Further, the population terms suggest that such units are not just separate but that they threaten to disrupt others by displacing, diluting, or supplanting them, competing with others for domination of communities, cities, or nations.

**The problem of class: Workers as natural resources**

The population terms equally occluded class implications of issues of employment (cf., for example, Thomas, 1985; Rouse, 1992). Witnesses spoke of workers as though they were populations or a quasi-natural resource which were subject to rational management by policy. Workers, of a different class than the managers, legislators, and experts who would make and implement policy, needed to be steered to their proper place in the nation. For example, Baker [ZPG] responded to a question about a provision for temporary 'guest workers':
Ms. BAKER. ... There have been programs in the past where people have been recruited around the country and moved into an area to work for a period of time, and I think that is where we need to look. With the unemployment that we have here, I think ... that we can better utilize the people who are here. ...

We need to develop a program to bring American workers into the system and also yes, Americans do demand and feel they have a right to decent work conditions and decent wages (USHR, 1983: pp. 772–773).

Workers were clearly a natural resource which was needed by the nation, it was concluded, if only these workers could be realigned in space so that they would be where the nation's jobs were. Legislators, thus, sometimes viewed 'migrant labor' – a category cross-cutting 'legal' and 'illegal' – as a fact of natural order which ought to be mastered by policy:

Mr. MAZZOLI. ... [It] it tough to get a guy to move from Bangor, Maine to Fresno. His roots are in Bangor, Maine. ...All of the enticement in the world, all of the pay may not get him out there. There is traditionally migrant labor, either U.S. citizen or non-U.S. citizen, willing to go with the sun, to follow mother nature's time clock (Mazzoli, KY, USHR, 1983: p. 456).

In this view, jobs were 'owned,' not by workers, not just by employers, who supply food and other necessities to the nation, but by the nation itself. So, in the best case the jobs belonged to Americans; but Americans ('in Bangor, Maine') might be 'rooted' in the land. If American workers did not follow 'mother nature's time clock,' then other, unrooted workers had to be found if the nation were to survive. The phrases 'to go with the sun' and 'mother nature's time clock' also suggested that work discipline imposed by industrial production was both natural and beneficent for workers and reflected the speaker's nostalgia for a bucolic and more natural way of life. This phrasing drew upon images of yeoman agriculture, in which workers are inseparable and unalienated from the land and the sun, for a model of work with which to mask ambiguities and contradictions of class in the talk about American workers, guest workers, and migrant workers. This model assumed that these workers had no desires or reasons to be elsewhere or to do otherwise.

'Population flood' or 'population growth' turned the nation's natural resource in workers into a natural sign of threats to the nation as 'the bread-basket of the world' (McMahon, EF, USHR, 1983: pp. 739–740). But, to put a stop to these threats equally meant damage to the 'perishable crop industry':

Today the reality is that 85 percent ... those who work in agriculture are undocumented aliens. These workers ... are often abused, live in fear, or exploited and have no rights. That is a bitter reality. ... The farmers, those who are trying to raise the crops, are subject to random raids that disrupt
their operations. ... It is a bitter reality. ... (Leon Panetta, D, CA, *Congressional Record*, 1986: p. H9719).

Rep. Robert E. Badham (R, CA) contended that ‘we must provide a stable work force to sustain our vital agricultural industry by instituting a new and carefully monitored guest-worker program’ (*Congressional Record*, 1986: p. H9716). Thus, two ‘bitter realities’ collided – abused workers and harassed farmers. Sympathy was extended to workers, but concern focused on farmers. A romance of ripe crops configured some of the talk about immigration throughout the decade of debate (See also, for example, USHR, 1983: pp. 562–567; USHR, 1975: pp. 41, 171.) Ripe crops were threatened by rot, it was said, just as farmers and agribusiness were vulnerable to government interference with labor supply to farms. Vulnerable farmers were metonymic signs of a vulnerable nation (Chock, 1991). Both could be saved only by preserving opportunity for farmers to do business. The border had to be rebuilt, it was argued, in such a way as to furnish them what was needed – workers in their natural milieu. Talk about ripe crops, like talk of population, used images of nature to render what was amiss.

‘Population,’ ambiguity, and dilemmas of difference

It was unclear to legislators and witnesses, however, whether populations could be equivalent to Americans. Population and other terms of the natural history framework confronted the legislators and witnesses with intractable political and conceptual dilemmas as they tried to answer the questions of immigration policy – ‘Who should be admitted?’ and ‘How many should be admitted?’ ‘Who?’ in population terms implied that there were qualitative, perhaps radical (or species-like) differences between populations, particularly between those of the US and ‘less developed’ countries. In population terms, fertility was one alarming difference. It was necessary for policymakers to be able to distinguish among potential immigrants in order that those admitted be most like those here (‘anxious to adapt’ [Simpson, US Select Commission, 1981a: p. 410]) so that the country would not be afflicted by ‘separatism.’ At the same time, it would not be possible to distinguish among immigrants if they were truly radically different and therefore not comparable to Americans. ‘How many?’ similarly implied that ‘a body is a body,’ resources were limited, and populations or bodies would compete for resources. ‘How many?’ then had to be answered, but on what grounds?

Population terms implied that when naturally unlike populations met, the outcome might be a social darwinist struggle, in which the competition would be won by the strongest or the largest population, or environmental degradation, in which Americans would lose out as their quality of life eroded. Either outcome would be the product of natural forces. The end would be a natural order, not a social order. Policy then had to implement rational management
of immigration in order for these irrational natural forces to be brought under control. Simpson, for example, concluded that ‘[i]mmigrants can still greatly benefit America, but only if they are limited to an appropriate number and selected within that number on the basis of traits which would truly benefit America’ (US Select Commission, 1981a: p. 409). Policy would use selection of valued ‘traits’ to replace darwinian natural selection.

Democratic values such as ‘equality,’ however, were ambiguously elided in the talk about population. Simpson’s proposed selection of ‘traits,’ for example, was a search for equivalences or likenesses between immigrants and Americans. Population suggested ‘natural’ likenesses and differences in ‘traits’ among ‘import[ed] bodies,’ be they of race or gender. In population terms it was not possible to specify social or moral qualities or relations, say, of equality, among individuals or groups. These values were introduced into the talk through the use of other frames – economic, personal, or cultural/linguistic, for example – where they were confounded with the population terms.10

In any case, the talk about immigration in population terms veered dangerously toward racism.11 In such terms people who were the subjects of this talk (whether they were immigrants or Americans who were not white) were denied subjectivities by the speakers. The subjects of this talk were constructed as units of a natural (biological?) order that resembled racial hierarchies that were part of 19th and 20th-century immigration policies. The racializing schemes of these earlier policies were based on presumed natural differences between races that were reflected in their different capacities for reason and for civilization (Williams, 1989; Horsman, 1981; Takaki, 1979, 1982; Saxton, 1990; Chock, 1995). Implicit in the talk in population terms in the 1980s were presumed natural differences between immigrants and Americans in their capacities to be rational, to be in control of their natural propensities (‘fertility,’ ‘competition’), and to be governable. At the same time, the speakers who used these terms were speaking in settings of authoritative public talk where far-reaching decisions would be made, and where they could deny or hide their own social positioning by class or race or gender from which they spoke. That positioning made them, unlike immigrants, part of a social-political order, from which they made decisions to ‘get control of’ the natural order.

The ‘natural history’ interpretive framework in the form of these population terms that speakers used had been incorporated into hegemonic ideology in talk about immigration. Some critics of the hegemony charged that increased fears about immigration being ‘out of control’ had coincided with events of the early 1980s, such as the Mariel ‘boatlift,’ the arrival of Haitian ‘boatpeople,’ and Iranian students overstaying visas (see, for example, Andaluzia and Cornelius, 1983). Recurring references in hearings to ‘south Florida,’ such as those quoted above, indicate that understandings of what was ‘out of control’ had changed since the 1970s.12 Speakers’ talk about population growth and depletion of resources redefined their own fears and public anxieties about social, economic, and cultural change. That talk also enabled
speakers to retreat into nostalgic longing for a simpler, fictive time of national social and cultural unity.

There were, however, alternative or oppositional frameworks of understanding used in the talk. In contrast to population, personal narratives, for example, offered speakers the ability to create multifarious subjectivities as ‘persons’ (see Schneider, 1968), or ‘real people,’ the term used by Vilma Martinez of the Mexican American Legal Defense and Education Fund [MALDEF] (USHR, 1981: p. 248). Martinez also explicitly countered the population terms:

Many people argue that immigration depletes natural resources. Does it? What are resources, natural or otherwise? Can we not argue that resources include more than just land and water, that resources also include people and ideas and an environment in which to develop ideas? (Martinez, 1983: p. 26).

The references to ‘people’ here defined them not as natural objects, but as creative agents who ‘develop ideas.’ The speaker accomplished this shift from objects to agents by employing an oppositional framework that encompassed the population terms (‘resources’) from the natural history framework. By querying the meanings of these terms, she proposed a new framework (active interpreters\(^\text{13}\)) in which to fit terms like ‘resources’ and ‘people’; she rearticulated their meanings so that '[people are like] resources'/but '[people are] more than just land and water'; and gave them new meanings such as ‘people develop ideas.’ Such radical shifts of interpretive frameworks are instances in which speakers set aside one vision of a social world in order to try another one, even if only provisionally (LaCapra, 1983: pp. 334–335).

Population, then, did not dominate the talk about immigration, but it did contribute to a hegemonic understanding of events and conceptualization of policy. It contributed to the occlusion of diverse subjectivities by denying that race and gender and class mattered in the ability to speak and decide. By so doing, it enabled speakers to displace fears and ambiguities onto objects of their talk, so that immigrants, women and children, and ‘minorities’ – racial and national – variously were identified as ‘the problem’ for which policy and law were needed. Consequently the population terms abetted speakers in denying participation, by silencing, marginalizing, or demonizing them, to those who lives would be most immediately affected. The public debate about ‘immigration reform’ in this light did not avoid evoking for many, who would have told about them, their bitter experiences of racism, nativism, or xenophobia. Talk about population helped legislators not to hear these people and their stories.
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Notes

1. Like Shapiro (1988), I am saying that language practices in policy-making do not simply name an 'innocent set of objects' (1988: p. 95), but evoke images that have been produced under specifiable historical circumstances to give meanings to new events. The terms and images are selections from among possible terms and images, some of which are never raised and others of which may be used to call the first into question. In the immigration talk in the 1980s, population and the natural history interpretive framework were not the only terms and frameworks used; immigrant advocates, for example, often drew upon others, as I describe below and elsewhere (Chock, 1994, n.d.).

2. 'Marked' and 'unmarked' refer to a relationship in which two terms contrast because of the presence and absence, respectively, of a particular feature; the marked term then is a special case of the unmarked term. Of interest here, for example, are marked social features, such as female or not-white, in contrast to unmarked social features, male and white.

3. This is a partial list of aspects of speech events to which Hymes (1972) directed analytical attention. Codes include verbal (speech) and nonverbal (e.g., gestures, proxemics); key includes 'tone, manner, or spirit,' and draws analytical notice to non-literal meanings of what is said humorously, ironically, parodically, etc., and to the possibility that the speaker is breaking the frame of understanding. Genres are culturally defined categories of speech events, such as greetings, proverbs, or sermons.

4. 'Culture' in this analysis is defined as both constructed and constructing relations among meanings. Culture is constructed in that meanings have particular histories. Meanings of social differences such as race, gender, or nationality, which are so powerful, yet unstable in the talk about immigration, are products of a colonial, industrial, patriarchal history (see, for example, Wade, 1993 on 'race'). Culture is also constructing: categories, meanings, and ideologies of race, gender, or nationality were, explicitly or implicitly, already there in the setting of the hearings rooms in that they were implicated in the language, the unequal relations between participants, and the routines of action there. But such meanings are unstable because, through their practical and ritual performances, social actors create, contest, negotiate, or reproduce meanings in particular social scenes (see, for example, Gregory, 1993).

5. See, for example, Handler (1988) on 'individual' and 'nation.' This work also draws on Dumont (1986).

6. That is, their identities were unmarked (see n. 2 above). Unmarked categories are those understood, and performed, as normative, typical, not requiring comment or justification. In contrast, marked categories (here, the subjects of the talk, for example, female, immigrant, poor, not white, young) are understood to be atypical, deviant, requiring justification or explanation.

7. Garcia had reason to be cautious concerning the fate of immigration policy in political arenas. His subcommittee on population and census had held its own hearings (USHR,
1981) on the US Select Commission's final report. Those hearings much more extensively aired critiques of the report, including those 'from an Hispanic point of view' (p. 1), than any of the hearings held by the House and Senate subcommittees on immigration. One point of the critiques voiced in Garcia's hearings was that the Select Commission, having been 'overloaded with Members of the House and Senate … [and] the President's Cabinet,' was 'reacting to the [anti-alien] public frenzy' (Arnoldo Torres, League of United Latin American Citizens, USHR, 1981: p. 199). Garcia's subcommittee, however, unlike the immigration subcommittees, could not take legislative action on immigration.

8. Thanks to Bonnie Urciuoli for pointing out to me the importance of 'reason' as opposed to the 'irrational' in discourses of difference in the US (See also Urciuoli, 1991.) For analyses of ambiguities of gender, race, class, and others, embedded in such categories as 'citizen,' see, for example, Shklar, 1991; Sapiro, 1984; Nelson, 1984; Fraser, 1989; and Young, 1990.


10. It is not clear whether Simpson's 'traits' were natural or cultural/linguistic; he used both (see his questions about southern Florida above).

11. See, for example, the efforts of speakers from various Latino organizations to introduce alternative frameworks, such as personal narratives of 'real people' (Vilma Martinez, Mexican American Legal Defense and Education Fund [MALDEF], USHR, 1981: p. 248), with which to point to the racism implicit in the terms of the natural history framework. (See also Chock, 1991, n.d.). Other testimony also explicitly linked 'population' with racism: 'I think no matter who states it [that repressive, exclusionary, and rejectionist policies only apply to the southern border with Mexico] or how it is stated even in words like 'population control,' 'environmental control,' or 'social fragmentation,' it is racism at its worst' (Antonio Rodriguez, Los Angeles Center for Law and Justice, USHR, 1981: p. 76).

12. The report of the US Select Commission (1981a) reflects the natural history phrasing of thought about immigration, as does its staff report (1981b). Curiously, a timeline of 'migrant events' in the staff report (US Select Commission, 1981b: pp. 43–44) omits any references to these events, as it does to all events after 1975–domestic and international, except for its own creation and accomplishment. It is a telling example of an erasure of history and an affirmation of a singular, authoritative account of history by scholars and public figures.

13. 'Active interpreters' is Wagner-Pacifici's phrase (1994: p. 121) for a framework used by the group she designates the 'organic [i.e., non-official] negotiators' in her analysis of the destruction of MOVE in Philadelphia.

References


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