

## Review Essay

### Canadian and U.S. Immigration Policies: Divergence within Convergence

**Irene Bloemraad.**

**Becoming a Citizen: Incorporating Immigrants and Refugees in the United States and Canada.**

University of California Press, 2006, 382 pp.

\$US 21.95 paper (0-520-24899-6), \$US 55.00 hardcover (0-520-24898-8)

**María Cristina García.**

**Seeking Refuge: Central American Migration to Mexico, the United States, and Canada.**

University of California Press, 2006, 289 pp.

\$US 19.95 paper (0-520-24701-9), \$US 50.00 hardcover (0-520-24700-0)

As “White settler” societies, Canada and the United States have followed parallel trajectories in immigration. Both countries initially drew on the British Isles as the primary source of immigration to North America, gradually expanding their catchment area into the north, south, and then east of Continental Europe. This “old immigration,” which lasted until about the late 1960s, was highly homogeneous – geographically European, racially White, religiously Christian, and economic in motivation. The final removal of racial preferences from both countries’ immigration policies in the second half of the 1960s paved the way for the “new immigration.” Unlike its predecessor, the new immigration to North America was defined by a high degree of heterogeneity. The former Third World replaced Europe as the main source area, bringing with it geographic, racial, and religious diversity, as well as a significant refugee component.

Within this shared context, however, Canada and the United States are separated by a “continental divide” to borrow from Seymour Martin Lipset (1990). Since the reforms of the 1960s, Canadian and U.S. immigration policies diverged in significant ways. Whereas Canadian policy became more skill-selective, U.S. policy emphasized family reunification (see Borjas 1999; but also Reitz 1998). As the leader of the “free world” during the Cold War, the United States was also heavily involved in refugee resettlement from countries in the opposing camp. Canada, too, came to play a significant role in refugee resettlement but the tenor of Canadian immigration policy remained economic. Nor did Canada have its immigrant source skewed towards a particular region or country, as in the United States where Mexican, including illegal, immigration figures disproportionately. A waning though still notable difference between the immigration discourses of the two countries concerns what to do with the “cultures” of newcomers: Canada has been officially multicultural since 1971 while the prevailing rhetoric in the United States remains assimilatory.

The two books under review, particularly Bloemraad’s, make a contribution to our understanding of the Canadian-U.S. differences in policies and practices concerning immigrants and refugees. Bloemraad’s *Becoming a Citizen* is a fine piece of political sociology along the lines of comparative institutional analysis, rich in description and persuasive in explanation. While lacking in the way of theory, García’s *Seeking Refuge* is a useful comparative description in that it reminds us of the role of international politics in understanding cross-national differences.

The “dependent variable” for Bloemraad’s analysis is immigrant political incorporation or integration,<sup>1</sup> in which she puts Canada ahead of the United States. She operationalizes it by three indicators: (a) acquisition of citizenship (citizenship level or proportion of citizens among the foreign-born population); (b) success in getting elected to political office (political representation or

proportion of the foreign-born in national parliament); and (c) community advocacy (community mobilization by community organizations and leaders). Since the early 1970s, Canada and the United States have diverged on all three indicators. In Canada, the proportion of citizens among the foreign-born population increased from 60 percent in 1971 to 72 percent in 2001. In contrast, U.S. citizenship level declined over the last three decades of the 20th century to stand at 38 percent in 2004. As for political representation, in 2000, less than two percent of the members of the U.S. Congress (compared with 11 percent of the U.S. population) were foreign-born. In 2002, 15 percent of the members of Canada's House of Commons (compared with 19 percent of the Canadian population) were foreign-born. Bloemraad observes the Canadian-U.S. variation in community mobilization mainly through a comparison of Portuguese immigrants and Vietnamese refugees in metropolitan Boston and Toronto.<sup>2</sup>

Bloemraad makes her research question more intriguing by noting that the benefits of citizenship for immigrants are greater in the United States than in Canada (pp. 48-49). In search of an explanation of the cross-national variation in acquisition of citizenship, she also discusses several other factors and finds them unsatisfactory. First, the changes in the proportion of citizens among the foreign-born population might have to do with the changes in the proportion of the foreign-born population. Thus, the decline in U.S. citizenship level can be accounted for by the increase in the proportion of the foreign-born population (in other words, rapid increase in new immigration) in the United States from under five percent in 1970 to 11 percent in 2000. To Bloemraad, this explanation is inadequate since the increase in Canadian citizenship level was concurrent with an increase in the proportion of the foreign-born population in Canada from 15 percent in 1971 to 19 percent in 2001 (pp. 28-31). The second factor considered is illegal migration. Since illegal migrants constitute a much larger proportion of the foreign-born population in the United States than in Canada, it can be argued that U.S. citizenship level is consequently lower. Bloemraad counters this argument by pointing out that, even after illegal migrants are excluded from calculation, the Canadian-U.S. difference in acquisition of citizenship remains (p. 40). Thirdly, the socioeconomic characteristics of immigrants are discussed. Bloemraad dismisses any notion of variation in immigrant language, education, and income status between the two countries to account for their different levels of citizenship (pp. 41-45).<sup>3</sup> Nor does she find any meaningful Canadian-U.S. difference in dual citizenship practices – the last of the factors against which she develops her own argument.

This procedure, then, forces Bloemraad to conclude that “something about living in Canada promotes citizenship acquisition” (p. 48). That “something” is the generous reception given by the Canadian state to immigrants in the form of orientation information, settlement and integration services, and multiculturalism, all of which are traced to the early 1970s when Canada began to break away from the United States in citizenship acquisition. Canadian interventionism is contrasted with U.S. immigration policy which “largely starts and ends at the border”: “Government attention and resources revolve around border control; later processes of immigrant integration are considered outside the purview of state action” (p. 2). The contrast can also be seen in the organization of state bureaucracy dealing with immigration. Whereas Canada has a full-fledged department of citizenship and immigration, the immigration bureaucracy in the United States has no common home and thus is spread between departments of justice and homeland security. In order to further highlight the role of state interventionism in acquisition of citizenship, Bloemraad discusses the case of Vietnamese refugees. Given the traditional U.S. support to resettled refugees (as opposed to immigrants), the Vietnamese community in Boston (and Massachusetts in general) displays characteristics similar to those of its counterpart in Toronto (and Ontario) in both citizenship acquisition and community mobilization (ch. 5).

The following paragraph summarizes Bloemraad's argument:

“With the exception of legally recognized [resettled] refugees, U.S. governments do not engage in active promotion of settlement, citizenship, and political participation. The large influx of immigrants that arrived in the United States after 1965 has received little public assistance with political integration. Over the same period, Canadian governments have expanded immigrant settlement programs and established a diversity policy that celebrates multiculturalism and citizenship. These government programs, combined with diverging approaches to interventionist public policy, have made the institutional landscape in Canada more favourable to immigrants' political incorporation than the environment in the United States, helping to explain incorporation differences and their timing” (p. 102).

Bloemraad sacrifices many, perhaps too many, factors to construct her ideal typology of “dependent” and explanatory variables. The United States might be behind Canada in aggregate citizenship level, the main plank of immigrant political incorporation in her analysis. Yet to say that citizenship acquisition has been on the decline in the United States flies in the face of the fact that, during the 1990s, “more than 5 million immigrants were naturalized, a number greater than in the three prior decades combined” (DeSipio 2001, p. 68). This calls for a serious reconsideration of the factors which Bloemraad readily dismisses, particularly the massive new immigration (including illegal migration) in the United States. Her exaggeration of Canadian interventionism, as well as of the U.S. *laissez-faire* approach, does not allow her to consider that, like the welfare regime, the immigrant settlement regime serves, or is sought out by, only a minority of its potential beneficiaries in Canada.

The international dimension, which is missing from Bloemraad's analysis, is at the centre of García's. The initial stimulus for the latter is the differential treatment the United States offered to Cuban refugees, on the one hand, and Salvadoran, Guatemalan, and Nicaraguan refugees, on the other, during the Cold War. Posing this as a question of foreign policy interests shaping immigration policy, García focuses on the refugee crisis of the 1980s in Central America (El Salvador, Guatemala, and Nicaragua in particular), and North American (including Mexican) responses to the crisis.

The civil wars in Central America between U.S.-backed forces and those of the left during the 1980s caused a massive human displacement, both within and across national borders. Of the three North American countries, Mexico was the most directly affected given its proximity to the countries in civil war. With no legal or financial instrument of refugee protection, Mexico saw its southern state of Chiapas swelled with Maya *campesinos* fleeing the conflict in Guatemala and its urban centres with Salvadoran refugees. Self-reliance and church-based aid were the only supports available for Central American refugees in Mexico. Despite its full-fledged refugee protection mechanism, the United States did not offer much public support to asylum applicants from Central America, either. Unlike resettled refugees and direct asylees from the Soviet-dominated world, who received a warm welcome from the U.S. government, Central American asylum applicants had a tough time convincing U.S. adjudicators about the merits of their case. According to García, from 1983 to 1990, “only 2.6 percent of Salvadoran asylum applicants were successful, and only 1.8 percent of Guatemalan applications for the same period were granted” in the United States (p. 90).<sup>4</sup> Concurrent with this official stance was the remarkable response of civil society in the form of the church-based sanctuary movement, which García describes very well. Sanctuary workers resisted U.S.

immigration policy through civil disobedience, including the harbouring and cross-border (U.S.-Mexican and U.S.-Canadian) transportation of Central American refugees. The sanctuary movement was also active in Canada but in conjunction with a federal response which was more accommodating of Central American refugees than its U.S. and Mexican counterparts. For example, the approval rate for Salvadoran refugee claims, which constituted the majority of Central American refugee claims in Canada, fluctuated between 21 and 60 percent from 1980 to 1986 (p. 130).

If García's aim was to emphasize the role of foreign policy interests in shaping immigration policy, particularly with regard to the United States, her book has been a success. Yet this focus is hardly a novelty. The real achievement of *Seeking Refuge* lies in its detailed description of state and civil society responses to the Central American refugee crisis in North America.

From a methodological perspective, Canadian-U.S. comparisons always carry a risk given the "distorting" influence of the huge size of the United States on Canada. Comparative immigration studies *à la* Bloemraad can thus benefit greatly from pairing Canada with a country of its size such as Australia. Canadian-Australian comparisons stand to test those between Canada and the United States.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> While Bloemraad uses the concepts of incorporation and integration interchangeably, they are understood differently in immigration studies. Integration is a deeper process than incorporation. See, e.g., Neuwirth 1999 for differences between immigrant economic incorporation and integration.

<sup>2</sup> In this comparison, Bloemraad conducted a total of 151 open-ended interviews with first- and second-generation immigrants; local community leaders; and settlement workers and government/public employees.

<sup>3</sup> She does this mainly by using the case of Portuguese immigrants in North America, who have similar socioeconomic characteristics but diverge in political integration across Canada and the United States.

<sup>4</sup> In contrast, as "victims of the Sandinista oppression," Nicaraguan asylum applicants had a composite approval rate of 25 percent during the same period, an indication of the traditional U.S. support given to refugees from leftist regimes (p. 113).

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March 2007

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