

Episode 206—Dr. David Gerber: The Continuing Relevance of Immigration History

[00:00:08] Welcome to inSocialWork, the podcast series of the University at Buffalo School of Social Work at www.inSocialWork.org. We're glad you could join us today. The purpose of inSocialWork is to engage practitioners and researchers in lifelong learning and to promote research to practice and practice to research. We educate. We connect. We care. We're inSocialWork.

[00:00:38] Hi and Happy New Year from Buffalo. Say what you'd like about 2016, it wasn't boring. So for 2017 I'd like to offer a quote from Helen Keller: "To keep our faces toward change and behave like free spirits in the presence of fate is strength undefeatable." I am Peter Sobota. Perhaps you've heard immigrants and refugees have been in the news lately. Franklin Roosevelt said "Remember always that all of us, and you and I especially, are descended from immigrants and revolutionists." In this episode our guest, Dr. David Gerber, helps us to understand the reticence to reform or change immigration law and policy and how the conversation we have about immigrants and refugees is quite different from what is really happening in our society. Through the lens of immigration history, Dr Gerber confronts the mythology that he says has informed immigration history in the United States. Additionally, he discusses how government thinking about immigrants has been historically biased by a preference to shape our immigration policy as a means to develop the United States workforce and serve the economic needs of the United States. Dr. Gerber concludes with comments about the real and practical experiences of our voluntary immigrants and refugees and why social workers have a role in the ongoing debate. David A. Gerber Ph.D. is a University at Buffalo Distinguished Professor of History Emeritus. He was interviewed in June of 2016 by our own Dr Wooksoo Kim, associate professor here at the UB School of Social Work.

[00:02:22] It's my pleasure to talk with you about immigration history.

[00:02:25] And it's my pleasure to be here to help you figure out what happened in the American past in regard to immigration.

[00:02:32] So as a first question, as a historian you have studied U.S. immigration policies for decades. Could you tell me what we can learn from the history?

[00:02:43] Well I think there are two principal things we can learn from studying the history of immigration to the United States. This is a very long history. It's as extensive as the history of the American Republic and of course it goes back before the Republic to the founding of Colonial America. The first thing I think that we can learn is to correct the heavy weight of the mythologies that are part of the popular discourse of immigration. I think we're all aware that there is a popular idea that circulates in the United States that has been present since the origins of mass migration to America that every previous wave of settlers was better material for American citizenship than those people who are now arriving. The Anglo-Americans of Colonial backgrounds said this about the mid-19th century Northern and Western European immigrants like the Germans and Irish and Scandinavians, and the Germans and Irish and Scandinavians said this about the people who arrived 60 years after them in the late 19th and early 20th century from Southern and Eastern Europe, and then the southern and eastern Europeans and their descendants said this about the people from Africa and Asia and the Middle East and the Hispanic countries of the Western Hemisphere who have been arriving in such large numbers since 1965. So every new way was found wanting from the standpoint of fitting into American life. This

mythology has a strong hold on the American people but it really is not true. It is based on self-congratulatory feeling by those who arrived previously. And it's based on bad information and bad tranced historical comparisons that historians have investigated in serious analytical ways and proven to be wanting as a way of understanding the American past. The other way in which history is beneficial to us is that since the founding of the American Republic and the governmental and state structure and structure of law that was created by the founding of the Republic, there has been a structure within that forms continuities within which the American past evolves. And these continuities, if you accept the idea that our history is a unity and the tranced historical comparisons are helpful in understanding it then you have to accept the idea that the present is not wholly new, that we can understand it with reference to the past. If you accept that idea then this abiding structure over time, these continuities, form an analytical basis for us to inquire about how the present will evolve. And it is controversial, however, among historians whether to take our subject immigration history, whether immigration history is a conceptual unity, because there are people who argue that the immigration of the present is evolving along different lines than immigration in the past because of changes in the larger nature of the institutions and the economy that have evolved since the mid 20th century and in particular from the late 20th century into the 21st century.

[00:06:20] That's very interesting. Do you think that always look at the past immigrants as a batter immigrants, does it, that kind of mythology serves a certain purpose for the political or economic kind of reasons?

[00:06:36] Yes. Well it, on the part of the people who use these arguments in talking about the inadequacies of the present waves of immigrants, it's a kind of self-congratulatory feeling. It's a way of their embracing their immigrant ancestors. It's a way of feeling good about their own genealogies. But I think it's functions in the present are that it helps create a negative impression of immigration that helps to form policy. If we believe that the immigrants of the present aren't good material for integrating and ultimately assimilating into American life then the plausibility of the argument that we should have less immigration becomes more supportable for many people because they don't want to see the country change.

[00:07:26] So what you're saying is that the American immigration policy has been always negative because they look at the current immigrants are always lesser or less desirable than the past ones.

[00:07:39] Well I wouldn't say it's always been negative, because the United States has taken in a tremendous number of immigrants. And also since World War II refugees I would say that the history of international migration to the United States has been characterized by an ongoing argument between two types of ideologies. There are really two types of discourses. One older than the present, but I'll use the present title to talk about it, is a multicultural diversity argument which is that ours is a country of strangers who are in pursuit of a better life who come together and have formed this society and ultimately find ways of getting along with one another and that not only is that true but that our society is stronger for its diversity on any number of levels. The other is essentially a racial nationalist argument which is that there is a core, an Anglo-American core, that defines American society and that is the source of American strength and that immigrants, wherever they've been from, have been able to embrace that core and become attached to the Anglo-American culture and ways of doing things that are at the center of this argument, that those immigrants have been welcome and are important for our development. But those immigrants have to change, become less of who they had been,

give up their past allegiances, and even to the extent at some points in history people arguing as Theodore Roosevelt did that people should create a tabula rasa, a blank slate in their minds, and give up even their memories. So these two discourses have played themselves out over time and they continue to exist. This is part of the dynamic of American life.

[00:09:36] That's very interesting. So in the USA story, what are the major underlying factors that have driven the formation of immigration policies?

[00:09:47] Well if you accept the idea that immigration history is a unity, a conceptual unity, if you accept the idea that there are these broad institutional structures and social practices and state behaviors that have created over time similarities that make immigration experiences over time comparable for analytical purposes, some of them that I've named that have been present since the founding of the American Republic are one the federal structure of governance that divides in very emphatic ways sovereignty between various types of governmental entities; the federal, the state, the county, and the local. For much of American history in the early part of the American Republic from 1789 into the 1870s, there was for example really no federal immigration policy and there seemed to be from the federal perspective an open door in immigration. The fact was that the local and state levels, there was regulation of immigration even to the extent of barring people from entering the country to the extent that they might be deported. So the federal system of governance has been an abiding factor and we see this playing out today. The states and even the counties at a lower level of government have a post-federal policy on immigration federal policy has grown in the last 125 years but there still is this debate as to who is sovereign in matters of immigration and the federal courts have to sort out what the limits of federal power are regularly in immigration and other matters. Another aspect of the overlying structure in which immigration and integration of groups occurs are, for example, first amendment guarantees of religious liberty and government neutrality in matters of religion, which have been worked out over time to apply to international immigrants who come here with alternative religious traditions from the Anglo-Protestant core that formed America. The way this plays out is, it's not something that we're really conscious of because it works out in ways that preserve social peace and we take for granted. The French have had tremendous difficulties working out the problem of Muslim headscarves worn by Muslim women in public. In the United States this is not an issue. How you present yourself on the street is protected by your first amendment rights and we take for granted that this is the business of no government. So that's another matter. Another thing is that we have had on every level of our federal system a commitment to public education and to the maintenance of robust, strong, unfortunately sometimes underfunded, public school system. Public schools have been a very dynamic force in the integration of the immigrants' children over time, beginning with elementary schools, then the high schools and ultimately in the mid 20th century when people began to go to college and university in large numbers, colleges and universities with dormitories have functioned as melting pots for the children of immigrants. Finally, I'd name something that isn't really defined explicitly by the Constitution of the United States, but is very much a part of the practice of the way in which the state interacts with the private sector in American life, and that is an economic system in which there has been a bias in terms over time of the freest possible markets, with the government playing the role sometimes contradictorily to the idea of free markets of supporting business but sometimes doing things for business which is simply cleared the way for free markets and facilitate the behavior of free markets outside the realm of deliberate tampering with markets. And an example of this that's relevant to immigration and refugee policy is the government bias throughout time in thinking of migration, international migration, as a tool for the development of the

workforce. This is a constant over time. Over time there has been this persistent, as I mentioned before, racial nationalist view of immigration, which is that it may not be good for us and we may be receiving the wrong people. This has really never triumphed in American life with the exception of a brief period of time in the 1920s and 1930s. Why is that? Because the underlying logic of immigration policy as far as the federal government has been concerned, as the federal government reached out to have more and more control over time over international movement into the country, has been we will have an immigration policy that will serve the needs of our economy. We will import as much labor as we need for economic growth and development. And over time into the later 20th century it was recognized that not only was immigration good as it had always been for developing the labour force, but it was also good for bolstering up a welfare state that continues to need new people paying taxes in order to support itself. So this has been, I think, the animating force behind a lot of American immigration policy. People always wonder why is it that we keep accepting more and more immigrants when the arguments for the racial nationalist discourse seem to be that we should slow this down or stop it. Why is it that people in Congress who we elect who are part of the political party that seem to agree with us continually vote not for immigration reform and for the continuance of the present system or for immigration policies for example in the 1980s under the conservative president Ronald Reagan that created amnesty for large numbers of illegal immigrants, particularly people from Mexico? The reason is because those people are interested in helping the employers to find the cheapest possible sources of labor.

[00:16:35] That's very interesting. So that's the immigration policy from the receiving ends. What about the experience of the people who immigrated into the United States? Were there any differences between racial ethnic groups will migrate to the United States?

[00:16:58] Well there were differences in regard to how state policy influenced the resettlement economic integration and ultimately the social and cultural assimilation of peoples so that the immigrants from Europe not bound by the restrictions historically of Asians for example until the mid 20th century did have a freer course to becoming citizens. But within the structures of all of the groups there are comparable experiences that play themselves out in regard to resettlement, economic integration and assimilation that make these experiences comparable to one another across even racial lines. And you see in the literature, for example, on Chinese Americans who dealt with horrifically repressive laws which nonetheless failed to bar all Chinese immigration even at the time of Chinese restriction during the approximately 75 years it existed. You see people resettling, Chinese resettling, you see them establishing families. You see the children and grandchildren being introduced to more and more of American life. You see the generational tensions that result from that. And this is even within the structures of repression that the Chinese had to live with. So there are comparable experiences not only over time but between groups.

[00:18:27] Interesting. So if we bring this story, this understanding to the social work field, as social workers what information would be helpful to understand the struggles and difficulties that immigrants to the United States have gone through? What kind of information would be helpful to understand them from the history?

[00:18:49] Well I'll begin with the obvious, and that is that for voluntary migrants, even for voluntary migrants, people who are fulfilling their aspirations through movement across borders, the experience of immigration is an experience that is a difficult experience. It's an experience of disorganization, it's often an experience of cultural shock. It's an experience of at some level, and it can vary from group to group and from family to family and

individual to individual, of generational tension as the children of immigrants and the grandchildren settle into a new society and feel comfortable there in ways that parents and grandparents didn't feel comfortable. So on one level it's an experience, it's a disorderly experience. It can be a shocking experience. On another level there are practical problems that people, voluntary immigrants now, and I'll speak about refugees in a minute. There are practical problems that people have to deal with to fulfill their own aspirations. Their aspirations are to improve themselves and to improve particularly in many cases the chances for their children. People show enormous creativity in spite of the shocks that voluntary movement itself causes in resolving those resettlement problems. They're helped a lot by the ethnic group to which they belong, by previous settlers who they identify with and whose language they also speak, who share their historical memories. They're helped a lot by the immigrant work ethic which seems to be present in the many groups over time where people have these strong aspirations and arm themselves for the struggle of fulfilling them. And we see this in many immigrant people. Now I see this in the university in the immigrants children continually and those children that I teach, how armed they are for the struggle to improve themselves. While they're improving themselves, without thinking too much about it, they also, and this is the case historically as well in the first generation to some extent but particularly in the second and third generations, without necessarily meaning to do so experience assimilation socially and culturally. They come to feel more by virtue of the need to change behaviors and acquire new mentalities in order to fulfill their own aspirations. They acquire a new language. They acquire new habits of doing things from new eating habits to learning how to use mass transportation. So they inquire all kinds of cultural knowledge that helps them to feel comfortable and be effective in the place that they're in. A lot of the panic about assimilation historically that fueled what I call the racial nationalist discourse about immigration really was misplaced because assimilation really is not something that can be ideologically driven, but it's something that occurs naturally as people fulfill their own aspirations that led them to immigrate in the first place. And as their children become comfortable in a new place in a way that the first generation finds it harder to do because the burden of their memories in the homeland and in the past is more pressing on their consciousness. Refugees are of course a different matter.

[00:22:17] Refugee resettlement is getting public attention more than immigrants these days everywhere. So could you talk about refugee experience in the context of the United States policy or their experiencing in the United States, USA context?

[00:22:35] Well in terms of policy there really was no policy almost anywhere in the world until 1950 when the UNHCR, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, was created. And this was created out of the experience of World War II where the principal nations of Europe as well as the United States and Canada and Australia and New Zealand and other places really failed to have adequate refugee policies and the result was a catastrophe. It helped to fuel the genocidal policies that the Nazi regime in Germany pursued in regard to Jews and the slaughter of large numbers of other people who were caught in the crossfire between the various warring nations. So in 1950 the first tentative steps were taken in the world by the United Nations to, one, create a definition of refugees, and two, to make explicit the governing policy of refugee policy that was supposed to be universal. And that was no one was to be sent back into a situation where they had a realistic fear of persecution based on race or religion or politics or whatever the categories were at the time. So this is relatively recent in human history. The United States was a big player in the ongoing development of refugee policy after 1950 because of the continual development of confrontations that resulted from the Cold War. So that in 1956 after the Hungarian revolution against Soviet control of the Hungarian regime there were

tremendous numbers of Hungarians who tried to flee to Western Europe out of the Soviet Warsaw Pact Zone. That was the place where the nations of the world with the United States playing a significant role applied the logic of the 1950 UN articulated policy and principles to help resettle the Hungarians in a variety of places, and the U.S. took on a large number of Hungarians. Then there was the aftermath in the mid and late 1970s and into the early 1980s of people leaving Southeast Asia after the conclusion of the Vietnam War which had spread over into Cambodia and Laos by that time. And the United States again acting on and filling in the details of the U.N. principles worked to create an international understanding of the ways in which the immigrants from Southeast Asia, the refugees from Southeast Asia could be absorbed, and the United States took large numbers of these people. It remains the case today in contrast to voluntary immigration that again applying the logic of a hands-on state presence with regard to resettling and helping refugees that refugee policy and resettlement is on a different track in the United States as elsewhere than voluntary immigrant policy. And that track is defined by principally on the ground people, refugees being resettled as a result of very deliberate planning that is a result of cooperation between the State Department, local and county governments and voluntary agencies. And one of the principal voluntary agencies in refugee matters since the Southeast Asian experience in the 1970s and early 80s has been Catholic Charities, which has helped to resettle in communities like Buffalo and St. Louis and Milwaukee and Utica, New York and many other cities in the United States, large numbers of refugees who don't necessarily have to be Catholic. Catholic Charities plays a role in the resettlement of people of all kinds of confessions and religions.

[00:27:02] That's very interesting. So based on this history could you comment on current U.S. immigration and refugee policies and how we are understanding how they are related to the past history?

[00:27:23] Well to cut immediately to the most relevant thing I think there is this economic connection that I think continues to be the primary frame within which matters of policy and law in regard to current immigration will get sorted out. And that includes the matter that we haven't spoke extensively about and that as a matter of so-called illegal immigration. One of the problems from the standpoint of attacking reform or attacking the problem of deciding whether we want to cut, or even end depending on your views of immigration, immigration into the country is that the larger material logic of the immigration policies which is that we want the cheapest possible sources of labor. And this spills over, by the way, into technical and even skilled labor, but that is trained abroad so that the burden of training people is not done and is not paid for in the United States. That's a complicated matter because what it means ultimately is that we're not subsidizing the path of our own citizens particularly people who are poor and marginal economically into those jobs, instead we created a visa program which allows people to be trained elsewhere, where the training is paid for elsewhere, to come and take the jobs that you know might be available to Americans if we had different kinds of policies in regard to financing and training and education. But the battle between how much immigration we want to have and what kind of immigration is good for us and how to deal with the problem of the undocumented immigrant, why this doesn't get sorted out continues to be, I think a matter for figuring out how much immigration we need to continue our economic growth and development and to continue being a prosperous society that aspires to high rates of economic growth and development. That's going to continue to be an impasse that we're going to have to sort out. It is no accident, though, that we have not had the reform of the immigration laws nor the successful tackling of the problem of undocumented immigrants now since, you know, for years. And the reason is that the discussion cannot get sorted out as long as we're not honest with ourselves about the roots of the immigration policy we have which is that

immigration is embraced because we believe that using the immigrants for our prosperity is a good thing. And having them take taxes is a good thing to support our ageing native population. And the other thing, I mean even the so-called illegal immigrants pay sales tax on the local area. They might not pay Social Security tax because they work off the books. But the fact is they buy food. And they do a number of other things which end up paying local sales tax with everything they do and that's important for local and county government. Every immigration policy institute in Washington has published individual state reports estimating the extent to which undocumented immigrants, illegal immigrants, contribute to the sales taxes of states all over the country, and not necessarily the ones that are the historic receivers of immigration like New York or California, but places in the interior of the country. And the amount of money that illegal immigrants are said to pay in sales tax is absolutely enormous will that helps to finance our schools and our infrastructure repairs and the care of our roads and the care of mass transportation that's paid for by government Also we have to sort out, we have to be honest with ourselves about the material roots of immigration and be honest with the voting electorate about why we have such historically high immigration and why it is that we continue to support it. The politicians haven't been honest enough with people about this. We debate immigration on two different levels and they rarely relate to one another. One is the discourses of multicultural diversity and racial nationalism would say immigration is good for us, immigration is bad for us. Homogeneity is good for us, heterogeneity is good for us right. So there's that track on which the matter is being discussed and has been discussed forever. But then there's this other trend that influences how people actually vote in Congress or don't vote because they're never going to bring up the matter for resolution that says we need these people. And whatever people think of them, the fact of the matter is we need them. Without them Social Security will die. Without them we won't have enough sales tax paid in many places that require their labor and their taxes. Until these two realities of American life are brought into relationship with one another, the Federal Government will never be able to approach immigration reform with the success that it will need to do that. We will have the situation that we have now which is stasis. A lot of people would say that stasis is good because the fact of the matter is we need the people to, you know, while we are debating homogeneity and heterogeneity the fact of the matter is we're letting these people into the country whether as refugees or immigrants and they are good for the United States. I should mention that refugees are helping to revive the center city of a lot of dying cities, Buffalo being a perfect example. But every place I go as a historian to our annual meetings in places like St. Louis and Milwaukee the formerly dying central cities of places like St. Louis and Milwaukee are filled with ethnic restaurants run by immigrants catering to the inexhaustible American demand for food other than American food and also reviving neighborhoods that were dying where people can buy cheap housing. And if that housing were not bought by immigrants and refugees who want houses for themselves and their families but can't pay top dollar for them within a generation a lot of that housing stock would be unusable and would have to be torn down. Whole neighborhoods would have to be raised by bulldozers. Every place all over the United States is profiting from refugee resettlement.

[00:34:25] So what you're saying is that the discourse we have about immigrants and refugees are different from what actually is happening. What the driving force is for this incoming new population. So based on what you said, can you make some predictions about what could happen, like you know, nothing is going to change as long as we lie to each other.

[00:34:52] Well, remember also that while nothing changes the interests that are invested in the current situation continue to profit from it. Those are governments at every level that

profit from the taxes that are paid by immigrants and refugees. And as I said at the local level even by undocumented immigrants and by employers. I remember that in the 1980s when amnesty for undocumented immigrants was being debated in Congress I had a moment of reflection and a moment where the reality of the situation hit me when the woman who was the chief lobbyist for the California Association of Landscape Gardeners, these are the people who are hired to cut people's lawn, plant flowers in front of their houses, trim their trees, she was the chief lobbyist for this immense industry in California. She was testifying under oath in behalf of her industry's views of immigration reform. She said before Congress, "If the people who were here illegally were not here the industry I represent would collapse for want of cheap labor." As long as there are people invested in the present situation at that level there is substantial reason for the situation not to change. On the other hand that situation is not necessarily good for the people who are cheap labor and there are economic reasons and social reasons to be concerned with reforming particularly the illegal immigrant situation to get better control of these workers who work under situations where they do not have the benefit of what protections people who are citizens or documented workers have. It may be the case as well that we judge that we can better balance the groups coming into the United States not for the sake of denying some people entry, but for the sake of having underpopulated groups better represented than some other groups and we may want to change the ratios of people. That's another reason why we might need to revisit the nature of the immigration laws we have. But remember as well that whatever reasons there are to change the laws there are also substantial but often unarticulated reasons not to change the laws. We've had an impasse for as long as we've had because the impasse profits institutions, governments and employers at a variety of levels. If I had to predict what would happen in regards and in the context of the polarization of our politics, which makes any kind of change enormously difficult at the federal level, I would say probably nothing will happen and that it will be a long time before anything happens. But I'm likely to be proven wrong about that because every time historians make such a prediction the world mocks them. We don't have crystal balls, all we have is the past.

[00:38:12] Thank you so much.

[00:38:13] You're welcome.

[00:38:14] You've been listening to Dr. David Gerber discuss the continuing relevance of immigration history on inSocialWork.

[00:38:30] Hi I'm Nancy Smyth, professor and Dean of the University at Buffalo School of Social Work. Thanks for listening to our podcast. We look forward to your continued support of the series. For more information about who we are as a school, our history, our online and on the ground degree and continuing education programs, we invite you to visit our website at www.socialwork.buffalo.edu. And while you're there check out our Technology and Social Work Resource Center. You'll find it under the Community Resources menu.