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Energy's Human Face: Immigrant Stories in Song

DAVID RIPLEY

MUSIC

COLLEGE OF LIBERAL ARTS

If I may borrow and reword the well-known book title of author James Agee, “Let us now praise famous energy.” There is the energy of the stars, the celestial gases a million light years away; the super nova we may one day see; the threatening black hole; the ancient atoms now split to create new earthly elements with unheard of potency.

But, there is another kind of energy equally as important as those related to unlocking the secrets of matter: the energy of the human spirit, heart, mind, and soul. There is the energy of personal decisiveness and perseverance, political upheaval, social unrest, and great social achievement.

This essay concerns people who immigrated to our country during the years 1895–1930, and whose energy helped forge our modern America. In what follows, I shall briefly discuss what I feel to be important connections between my subject and our broader topic of energy. I hope this will be a springboard for further discussion.

Long before our break from England and founding as a nation, our destiny has been closely tied to the presence, practice, and policies of immigration. Since 1500, explorers and then settlers have come to America from many countries to ultimately shape our present society—with its promise, conflict, and complexity. The historical sweep of immigration since the founding of our country can be divided into four main periods.¹

While the main focus here is to connect the immigration issue to our discussion of Energy, some historical perspective will be helpful in doing so.

During the first period, 1840–1890, the U.S. was a relatively new country with tremendous space and need for labor. Opportunity seemed boundless and restrictions unnecessary with the arrival of nearly 15 million people, primarily from Europe, Canada, and, significantly, China. From 1891–1930, immigration increased to the point where 14 percent of the population was immigrant stock. Factoring in children, that number equaled nearly a full third of our population by 1900. In the period from 1930–1960, the rate of immigration slowed significantly. There was, however, a great deal of

internal movement of our population.

From 1960–2000, our fourth major immigration period, immigration has ran counter to the earlier melting pot ideal of assimilation, as many immigrant groups have sought to retain their sense of individual culture and traditions, rather than abandon them as a cost for assimilation into American society. This cultural balancing act certainly continues to this day.

Overall, our concern with 21st Century energy issues involves finding solutions for recognized problems. As a parallel to the search for those solutions, it is important that we recognize those solutions will come from many different places and people. Just as our challenges are now global in scope, so our dialogue must become global in scope. In this sense, how we view immigration, both present and historical, has something to teach us about how we pursue these solutions.

Composer Alan Smith has written the musical piece *Vignettes: Ellis Island*, consisting of some thirty short oral histories of people who emigrated from Europe to America from 1895 to 1930. During what we might broadly term The Golden Age of Immigration, Ellis Island *functioned* as one of the major ports of entry for immigrants into the United States. I have intentionally put the word “functioned” in italics. Anyone who reads a major newspaper these days, or watches cable news networks, especially programs such as Lou Dobbs’ program *Broken Borders*, knows how controversial the issue of immigration is in today’s political arena. Congress, both House and Senate, are immersed in the issue and far apart in their views as to how to proceed. Dobb’s program seems opposed to the ideals that once greeted immigrants to Ellis Island: “Give me your tired and poor, your masses yearning to be free.”

Another obvious and highly relevant point of our initial framework is to note that Smith wrote his piece before 9/11. Smith’s setting of these beautiful stories underscores a key point in our current struggle and valid debate over sensible immigration policy, i.e., that great courage, talent, and energy have flowed into the U.S. because of our nation’s acceptance of immigrants.

From 1895–1930, not long after the Industrial Revolution, energy and resources seemed unencumbered to evolve and expand without opposition; immigration policy also was initially without a sense of restriction. Henry Ford hoped to develop an assembly line to provide an automobile for every American family. He insisted that his “worker villages” be free from alcohol and exhibit family values. His, and the nation’s, were incredible accomplishments.

But these accomplishments also paved the way for negative, if unanticipated, consequences, such as highway fatalities, pollution, spiraling costs, and international competition. In June 2006, globalization saw the United Auto Workers on the verge of asking its workers to make unheard of union concessions. In the 1970s, the UAW was over 1,500,000 workers; now it is down to roughly 400,000.

We now live in a new land, a land I call “Nexus,” a reference to the interconnectedness of things natural, physical, political, or ideological. Just as Henry Ford’s dream seemed uncomplicated at the time, so did the urge and promise of immigration. Expansion ruled the day, and nobody understood how much immigration fueled vigorous expansion in terms of providing resources and talent.

In the present time of Nexus, no single urge toward development can exist outside of the nexus of concerns forming a compulsory part of our consideration. We must ask not only what each new service, idea, or plan will provide, but how it will fit into a whole. Consequences trump untrammelled growth.

We need look only at the present news to see this truth demonstrated. For instance, back in the news these days is the disastrous Exxon Valdez oil spill of 1989—seventeen years ago! More money is needed for the continuing cleanup. The Chernobyl nuclear disaster was in the news because of updated information on cancer deaths in the area of the former Soviet Union.

Al Gore is again in the news with his movie, *An Inconvenient Truth*, regarding global warming. Top industry executives argue whether, in light of China’s construction of hundreds of new coal-burning plants each month, U.S. coal-fired plants should be equipped with the latest scrubbing technology.

Is there no component of moral leadership within the energy crisis to set examples?

My contribution to our dialogue is to stress the importance of the human face of energy. The stories presented in Alan Smith’s piece are of individuals from many countries, and of ages as young as eight years, and old enough to die from the stress of immigration aboard the ship that would deliver them to America.

I hope they remind us to continue our fight against social prejudice. The incarceration of over 100,000 Japanese in 1942, many who were American born citizens, has been called our “worst wartime mistake.” The heart-wrenching stories of immigrants to America remind us of our common humanity with all peoples and places. Our energy solutions must be global and founded on global respect.