

EXCHANGE -- IMMIGRANT HISTORY

MARCUS HANSEN AS

HISTORIAN

VICTOR R. GREENE

Professor Qualey's estimate of Marcus Hansen as an immigration historian is certainly clear and unequivocal. He finds a great deal in his subject's scholarship that needs revision and modification. At the outset, rendering a definitive judgment on Hansen's conclusions is a difficult task, for the authorship of his works is uncertain. None of Hansen's major writings is solely his own. Close friends and colleagues edited his well-known studies, and present scholars cannot be certain which of the stated interpretations were originally Hansen's. Nevertheless he was responsible for the published generalizations which, according to Qualey, are not only invalid but in fact distracting. Very simply, Hansen's weakness lay in arriving at conclusions with too little comprehension and cognizance of pertinent materials.

Scrutinizing the findings for their modern applicability, this writer joins in Professor Qualey's estimate. The pioneer historian was indeed ignorant of the later-coming nationalities; he did err in viewing all emigrants as America-bound; and he was unacquainted with the entire acculturation process.

In order to place Hansen accurately in immigrant historiography, the critic must employ two standards. Qualey effectively uses one, indicating Hansen's limited scholarship in an absolute sense. But his criticism too readily dispenses with another consideration, the comparative standard. In order to estimate any historian's accomplishments, the evaluator ought to examine the status and condition of historiography in his subject's lifetime. A judgment based on such an examination of contemporary scholarship will at least partially excuse this pioneer for his deficiencies.

The critic ought to recognize at least four extenuating circumstances affecting Hansen's work. First, the available published materials upon which to generalize were rather inadequate. As late as Hansen's death in 1938, histories of immigrant groups were still largely superficial accounts. The authors were not historians, but amateurs writing ethnocentric or restrictionist propaganda, or social workers really ignorant of, though sympathetic with, the plight of the aliens with whom they worked. No work showed an intimate and sensitive understanding of the nationalities.

Second, it is quite understandable that Hansen would be unaware of demographic or sociological research. In his time, the historical profession as a whole was still ignoring the conclusions of academicians outside their own field. Little real communication existed between disciplines before 1940.

Third, even if Hansen had been aware of and could have drawn upon the few well-known ethnic monographs, his comprehension of the immigrant experience would not have been greatly advanced. And finally, one can accept and perhaps excuse Hansen's inconsistent and erratic efforts and disorganized notes because of the fact that he was exploring a virgin field. He must have spent an inordinate amount of time just locating and accumulating material. Any scholar entering an entirely new area knows that the business of archival collection hinders thoughtful generalization.

Probably most important of Hansen's problems was that nationality histories before 1938 provided an inadequate basis for historical synthesis. There were some exceptions, like Blegen's work on the Norwegians and Stephenson's research on the Swedes.¹ But over all, most groups had no skilled historian to enlighten outsiders about their experience and adjustment. Professor Qualey names Dean Wittke's studies among Hansen's omissions. However, most of Wittke's immigration research appeared after Hansen had a chance to see it; before Hansen's death Wittke's publications were primarily on nonethnic themes. His major opus, for example, We Who Built America, did not come out until 1939, just after Hansen died.

Hansen certainly erred in stating that the motivation of immigrants leaving their homeland was a search for freedom rather than the hope of reconstructing the social milieu that they had known. But perhaps Professor Qualey's use of a work published only two years ago on the German exodus to prove his point makes Hansen's error excusable. The only complete work on the German immigrants available to scholars when Hansen was working was the double volume of Faust, a highly ethnocentric study.² The pre-1940 monographs on British-Americans were equally as sterile.

Turning to our less well-known white minorities, especially those of the new immigration, the student finds the pre-World War II publications extremely superficial. The largest nationality, Irish-Americans, were still very self-conscious and concerned with proving their nationality participation in the American Revolution. Handlin's excellent social history of their adjustment, Boston's Immigrants, did not appear until 1941 to establish a new model for ethnic histories. Only today are the pleas for introductory studies on southern and eastern Europeans being answered in English. Despite an occasional publication, enormous gaps still exist in our knowledge of their entire migration and settlement.

Hansen is guilty of ignoring completely a major sociological study on the Poles, the Thomas and Znaniecki volumes, The Polish Peasant in Europe and America (1918-1920). But his "crime" was only slightly less serious

than that of a colleague, George Stephenson, who referred to the work without any real comprehension. The fact is that through the 1930's only advanced sociologists understood the contribution of The Polish Peasant to to an understanding of human motivation.

Even overlooking The Polish Peasant is a lesser weakness than historians might think, for according to a published review of the work and to this writer's own research, the study has some major deficiencies.³ Source materials, for example, were almost exclusively gathered from rather literate individuals who were exceptional, quite above the level of most immigrants. Also, Thomas and Znaniecki overemphasized cultural shock and disorganization and understated Polonia's strength. Thus, even if Hansen had exploited the monograph effectively, it might not have yielded a completely accurate picture of Polish America.

For the past half-century, Foerster's Italian Emigration of Our Times (1919) has been the standard study on that group's Old World existence, and, to be sure, Hansen should have used it. But its value is limited because it says little about the New World experience. There is still no general work on this group's adjustment here.

The remaining available studies on the newer nationalities were weak supports for any over-arching synthesis. Thomas Capek's Cechs in America (1920) is simply a chronicle of Czech accomplishment; Henry Fairchild wrote a rather hostile, almost nativistic study of the Greeks; and the New Americans Series of the early 1920's were essentially introductory "guides" for social workers and missionaries.⁴

Immigration studies, of course, require an investigation into conditions of the Old World as well as those of the New. Professor Qualey criticizes Hansen's ignorance of European economic history. Yet we might do well to question how much is known even now of the social and material influences upon emigrating populations. Certainly European peasant life and folkways were more of a mystery twenty-five years ago.

Studies on the causes and motivation of movement are and thus were especially scarce. As Professor Qualey himself admitted in a 1964 publication,

The productivity of European historians on the emigration of Europeans to various parts of the world has been extraordinarily slight. . . . The standard works on European history and on the history of European nations mentions emigration briefly, if at all. Until very recently, and with very few exceptions, whatever has been done in this field has been by American scholars specializing in European history rather than by European scholars.⁵

Again, Hansen may have been wrong in considering the great nineteenth and twentieth century European migrations as having only one destination, to America, but historians and demographers are only now discov-

ering and evaluating the many directions and goals of those Old World transfers. One can excuse this narrowness of Hansen's writings in another way, too. Is it not understandable that a student of American, not European, history interested in America's social composition would overemphasize the population movement to the United States? How much could Hansen have possibly known about continental demography? Really very little.

As this writer sees it, the real culprits in this exaggeration of the New World transfer are actually European and Latin American historians, who until recently have neglected "grass roots" history. An English student of American society, Professor Frank Thistlethwaite, exposed this deficiency recently in a 1960 paper before the XIth International Congress of Historical Sciences. He called attention to the oversight more as an indictment of his Old World peers than as an attack on Hansen. In fact, Hansen's greatest contribution may have been in bringing the migration phenomenon to the attention of all social historians, in both America and Europe.

Unfortunately, American immigrant historians may have to wait for the growth and sophistication of local and social history in the Old World before proceeding with generalizations. Scholars of emigrant-producing countries currently admit this weakness and are attempting to remedy it. For example, at the 1964 meeting of the American Historical Association, a specialist in British history indicated the paucity of social studies, oddly enough, by commending his colleagues.⁶ He observed that research in local history was just emerging from antiquarianism to begin offering data and information for social and economic synthesis. At a session a year earlier, Professor Michael Petrovich of Wisconsin was less optimistic with his Central and Eastern European confreres. He urged them to widen their focus and begin delving more into local affairs rather than continuing to dwell upon the traditional national, nationality or imperial matters. From this writer's own experience in Slavic American research, such advice is long overdue and, incidentally, full of promise as there is a wealth of untapped sources on East European society. At any rate, Marcus Hansen can hardly be blamed for ignoring movements which only now are coming into view.

Some may not share Professor Qualey's great faith in demographic and statistical research as vital to an understanding of ethnic history in America, although they would accept the methodology, data and conclusions for the most recent periods. Hansen's unfamiliarity with quantitative analyses is not a serious handicap in pre-1900 history. In that period, the formative one for most immigrant communities, statistical materials could be very misleading. For example, nineteenth-century figures on nationality composition are conjectural. In his survey of British movement, Dr. Berthoff states that migration statistics before 1870 are rather faulty. The official figures concerning East Europeans are even more questionable. American immigration officials used "country of origin" for their designation as

to nationality prior to 1899, and the European figures are very fragmentary. "Germans" or "Austrians" on the move might have included large groups of Czechs and Poles, many of whom lived in the Empire and could speak the language; "Russians" could just as well have been Jews, Poles, Ukrainians or Lithuanians; and "Hungarians" quite likely were Magyars, Slovaks, Roumanians and others.

Hansen's ignoring of intra-European migrations may not have been a major oversight. Whether the migrant came from a static village community or wandered much before he went to the New World might have made little difference in his adjustment here. The goal of most East Europeans, for example, was always the same, earning money for land. Whatever their past travels, this end dominated their behavior in America.

Professor Qualey quite rightly criticizes Hansen's idea of the immigrant as the second comer to the frontier for it was an allegation made originally with little evidence. But immigrant historians are not yet in a firm position to say what was the relation of the alien arrival to the moving line of settlement. Poles in New England and New York, for example, seemed to support Hansen's generalization. Some newcomers did buy already-improved sections behind the forward line of civilization, so Hansen's error may have some validity.⁷

We must also recognize particular contemporary facilities which were not available to the historian in Hansen's time. Research support from government, foundations and universities offers to present practitioners significant assistance in available funds and free time. This disadvantage before 1940 may help to explain Hansen's disordered research, as he was very much involved in just collecting and organizing relevant data. Even modern immigration specialists continue to encounter this time-consuming handicap of locating their records.

Significant progress in the growth of ethnic history has come from the recent cooperation of disciplines, under the guise of cultural history, a development unknown to Hansen. It has been only since the Depression that scholars of various fields, in addition to sociology, have sought to understand group character and behavior. One must recall here that social history even in Hansen's last years was just emerging as a recognized field. It took another decade at least for historians to divest themselves of anti-quarianism and utilize the findings of sociologists and social psychologists. The New History had already suggested a wider field for practitioners in the profession, but it was really not until World War II that scholars were interpreting America's past upon an interdisciplinary basis. Historians must recall that it was not until the December, 1939, meeting of the American Historical Association that some bold Americanists first urged their colleagues to develop a cultural approach to American history. Caroline Ware's pioneer volume on the subject appeared the following year.

My response to Professor Qualey should not be misconstrued as an entirely negative one. The temptation of Hansen's reviewers is to be hypercritical of his generalizations, either too negative or too positive. Certainly no one should interpret my own assessment as simple reverence to a pioneer. Hansen's analyses do have significant weaknesses, and Professor Qualey rightly exposes them. In fact, it is to the advantage of the discipline and the credit of Professor Qualey that he could criticize Hansen's work so incisively. The validity of his remarks is proof of the field's progress in the past two and a half decades.

I would question Hansen's interpretation more seriously in another way. Since he readily admitted that his judgments were tentative, one wonders why, aware of his weaknesses, he would generalize to the extent that he did. Certainly he must have recognized that sound, scholarly works on all the major nationalities must come before any adequate synthesis is possible, a situation which is only now in the offing.

Perhaps it was Hansen's insecurity about his studies which prohibited him from constructing a magnum opus solely his own. An article entitled "Immigration as a Field for Historical Research" especially indicates his lack of conviction. In it he is so guarded that he even anticipates one of Professor Qualey's major criticisms, that the immigrant did not come one-way to America:

The exodus in [the European emigration districts] was accompanied by a social and economic reorganization usually indicating an adjustment to modern life. Such reorganizations sometimes took place without emigration to America; but they were always attended by changes in population -- perhaps a drift to the cities, perhaps a movement to hitherto waste lands or to other parts of Europe,

a movement which he later states immigration historians must analyze.⁹ This comment is only a brief allusion but it demonstrates Hansen's constant hesitation over his findings.

Our knowledge that Hansen's interpretations are faulty is striking proof to scholars that ethnic history has developed. In fact, the research currently going on is encouraging.¹⁰ Hansen's judgments are being refined and his own hopes for the field are closer to fulfillment.

Kansas State University

Footnotes:

¹ Theodore Blegen, Norwegian Migration to America 1825-1860 (Northfield, Minn., 1931); George M. Stephenson, The Religious Aspects of Swedish Immigration (Minneapolis, 1932).

² The German Element in the United States (Boston, 1909).

³ Herbert Blumer, An Appraisal of Thomas and Znaniecki's The Polish Peasant in Europe and America (New York, 1949).

⁴ Henry Fairchild, Greek Immigration to the United States (New Haven, 1911); Philip Rose, The Italians in America (New York, 1922); Paul Fox, The Poles in America (New York, 1922); and others.

⁵ "Immigration, Emigration, Migration," in O. Fritiof Ander, ed., In the Trek of Immigrants; Essays Presented to Carl Wittke (Rock Island, Ill., 1964), 34.

⁶ Professor Wallace MacCaffrey of Haverford College in a paper read at Washington, D. C.

⁷ See Stefan Wloszczewski, History of Polish American Culture (Trenton, N. J., 1945), 80 ff.

⁸ The Cultural Approach to History (New York, 1940).

⁹ Marcus Hansen, The Immigrant in American History, ed. by A. M. Schlesinger, Sr. (Harper Torchbook edition, New York, 1964), 192.

¹⁰ Besides the recent formation of the Immigration History Group and the start of several ethnic study centers, see the group studies: Theodore Saloutos, The Greeks in the United States (Cambridge, Mass., 1964); William Hoglund, Finnish Immigrants in America, 1880-1920 (Madison, Wis., 1960); Moses Rischin, The Promised City (Cambridge, Mass., 1963); and Thomas Brown, Irish American Nationalism (Philadelphia, 1966), among others. A refutation of the ethnic view of immigration historiography is in Timothy Smith, "New Approaches to the History of Immigration in Twentieth-Century America," American Historical Review, LXXI (July, 1966), 1265-1279.