

BOOK REVIEW

Immigrants and Boomers

By Dowell Myers

Russell Sage Foundation, 2007, 356 pages

Reviewed by Jackie Begley

Over the next 20 years, two distinct demographic shifts are expected to impact the U. S. population; a sizable elderly population and a large, younger, immigrant population. In his book *Immigrants and Boomers: Forging a New Social Contract for the Future of America*, Dowell Myers offers a new context for thinking about how these future demographic shifts will impact life in the United States. By using the immigrant influx to fill in the large gaps expected due to Baby-Boomer retirement, Myers argues for a new social contract between the aging population and the younger immigrant population. Through thoughtful public policy, the interests of the Baby Boomers and the foreign-born populations can dovetail to build a better future.

The book begins by reviewing the history of immigration in California and the United States. Myers points out some surprising misconceptions in the way we think about the implications of major demographic transformations. Much of what has occurred in the past is unsustainable, yet it often subconsciously and myopically influences future forecasts. For example, immigration in California has actually slowed in recent years, and immigration and migration into the state is lower than in other states. Moreover, California reached a low point economically and socially in the 1990s, yet the pessimism from this period has tainted many perceptions for the future.

Following the immigration discussion, Myers explains some of the disparities between political representation and demographic shifts. Often, there is a period of time before elected officials reflect the demographics of their communities. Again, California is highlighted as an example, as it is no longer a white majority state and yet political representation does not mirror this reality. Myers argues that this delay, combined with the aging characteristics of the people participating in the political process (who are often more likely to be conservative and unwilling to support tax increases and substantial public spending), has led to an even stronger divide – one that may have serious consequences for future generations.

The concept of the social contract, including its history and implications, is then introduced. Myers compellingly argues that immigration should be viewed as a uniting force rather than a dividing one. It is in all of our interests to have older generations (who have more political clout) act in ways today that will benefit younger generations in the future. The book concludes with suggestions of ways that the social contract can be structured to be mutually beneficial to both generations (such as increasing voter participation, educational achievement, and homeownership).

Although all the demographic trends are clearly described and for the most part supplemented with easily understood charts, Myers perhaps spends a little too much time describing the immigrant trends. The first part of the book is dedicated almost entirely to California and national shifting immigration patterns; and this section is not tempered with an equivalent discussion of Baby-Boomers or public policy. Similarly, the policy suggestions are immersed throughout the book in detail, yet their reappearance in the conclusion is too brief and almost platitudinal. In addition, the narrative would benefit from a section on the spatial implications of the social contract, especially since Myers does note that many of the demographic patterns, Latino immigration in particular, are unique to four or five states. Nevertheless, perhaps policy spatiality is the next step, for which this book lays a robust foundation.

Overall, *Immigrants and Boomers* is a persuasive statement on how thoughtful public action can create positive possibilities for our future. The book is well structured and provides a compelling argument for a public policy agenda that addresses disconnects between the younger and older population groups.