

FUTUREtakes

Transcultural Futurist Magazine

ISSN 1554-7744

Vol. 7, no. 3 (Winter 2008-2009)

Futurist Book Group Discussion

Lockout

Michele Wucker

Publisher: Public Affairs (August 13, 2007)

288 pages

ISBN-10: 1586485237

ISBN-13: 978-1586485238

Synopsis of the December 2007 meeting of the Futurist Book Group (WFS Washington DC Chapter); summarized and reviewed by Ken Harris

On the night of the first snowfall of the season, December 5, 2007, six members of the Futurist Book Group of the Washington Chapter of the World Future Society braved the elements to discuss *Lockout: Why America Keeps Getting Immigration Wrong When Our Prosperity Depends on Getting it Right*. Lisa and Milt Roney, two members of the group who both work in the immigration field, played a key part in our discussion. They noted that Wucker, a journalist, is not well known among experts in immigration and that the book contains a number of factual errors and misstatements. It further lacks citations of material, and some of the citations that it does provide are of questionable accuracy.

FUTUREtakes readers should keep in mind the full title of the book when deciding whether or not to read it. It is not primarily about the problem of illegal immigration of low-skilled workers, which has received so much media attention in recent years. It far more concerns America's need to import *skilled* workers, particularly scientists, engineers, doctors and nurses, from other lands to maintain its world technical and economic leadership because its own educational system does not graduate enough native-born Americans with these skills. FUTUREtakes readers also should bear in mind that the book is about the future only in a limited sense. Its message is that America's future will not be bright unless it undertakes a serious immigration reform program, which is outlined in the concluding chapter. Indeed chapters 2, 3, and 4 of this 11-chapter book are historical; they recount aspects of the great wave of immigration to America between 1880 and 1920 and the severe restriction of immigration between 1924 and 1965. This appears to reflect the author's concern that America is drawing the wrong lessons from history in dealing with current immigration issues.

Wucker is concerned that the complex US immigration laws and regulations, dysfunctional immigration bureaucracy, and ambivalent attitude towards all immigrants, skilled and unskilled, are

making it far more difficult now than previously for them to come here and continue to contribute substantially to the US and its culture and to acquire skills that benefit their home countries. Moreover, this is happening when other industrialized countries are more welcoming to immigrants while immigrant-sending countries, particularly China and India, now have more economic opportunities for their citizens. She says of the immigration laws, “America’s immigration laws have been called ‘second only to the Internal Revenue Code’ in complexity...” There are countless cases of people who face deportation because retroactive changes in laws, and government’s failure to notify them or their lawyers, ended up making them ‘illegal’ even though they had made every effort to follow the law – and even believed for good reason that they were complying with it.” She emphasizes that the bureaucracy administering the immigration laws in recent years has been overwhelmed not only by its workload but also by more stringent rules passed in the wake of the 9/11 terrorist attacks. Wucker sprinkles the book with case studies of how the complex and frequently changing immigration laws and regulations and overwhelmed bureaucracy have adversely affected particular immigrants, to their detriment and to the detriment of the US, but unfortunately she does not give the reader data on how common such cases are, nor does she elaborate on the difficulties of selecting meritorious cases from the huge volume of applications.

One of Wucker’s main themes is dispelling the popular notion that immigrants today are fundamentally different from those who came to America in the Great Wave between 1880 and 1920 because today’s immigrants do not want to Americanize whereas those of the past did. She points out that large numbers of the earlier immigrants came only to make their fortune and had no intention of becoming Americans. In fact, she says that, between 1901 and 1920, 36 of every 100 immigrants returned to their home countries for good. Moreover, their home countries encouraged them to return. However, the earlier immigrants who remained in America retained connections to their home countries and cultures and integrated into American society through ethnic associations like the Ancient Order of Hibernians and the German-American National Alliance and through work of the settlement houses, particularly that of Hull House in Chicago under sociologist Francis Kellor.

Wucker’s concluding chapter argues for neither stopping all nor allowing completely unrestricted immigration. She proposes a 10-point program for US immigration reform. The feasibility of some of her recommendations is doubtful. For example, will it be politically possible to limit family preference visas, which she says are a leading cause of the recent spectacular growth of the immigrant population? Will it be possible to create a cabinet-level position devoted to immigration in the face of near-certain bureaucratic opposition from the Department of Homeland Security, and would it be wise to further complicate the bureaucracy dealing with this important subject area?

In sum, the book could have been improved with more data to show how representative the “horror stories” about treatment of present-day immigrants are, more specific discussion of the future consequences of continuing the present haphazard immigration policies and programs, and more thoughtful recommendations for action. However, it is successful in dispassionately setting forth the historical context of one of the most emotionally laden subjects in the contemporary US.

POINTS FOR THE CLASSROOM (send comments to forum@futuretakes.org):

- *The book points out that large numbers of the earlier immigrants to the US came only to make their fortunes and had no intention of becoming Americans. Additionally, the author observes that the earlier immigrants who remained in the US retained connections to their home countries and cultures and integrated into American society through ethnic associations. In his own recent article (Spring-Summer 2008 issue), Stephen Aguilar-Millan discussed two immigrant assimilation models at length – the mono-cultural model and the*

multi-cultural model. In terms of these two models or others, characterize assimilation of immigrants to your nation during the next decade.

- *Discuss the future of immigration patterns among nations and/or regions. Consider:*
 - *Emerging economies, and economies that may weaken*
 - *Labor costs*
 - *Tomorrow's jobs*
 - *"Virtual immigration" (via IT)*
 - *Opportunities for workers, including emerging or dwindling opportunities in immigrants' home nations*
 - *Other demographic and related factors – for example, workforce age distribution, education levels, skills, consumer demand, and changes to the "linear" education-work-retire life pattern*
 - *Assimilation issues*
 - *The changing role of the nation-state in governance, diplomacy, and identity*