

Topic 6.7 - Effects of Migration (1750–1900)

Standards

Category	Description
Theme	Social Interactions and Organization (SIO)
Learning Objective	Explain how and why new patterns of migration affected society from 1750 to 1900
Key Concept	KC-5.4.III.A, KC-5.4.III.B, KC-5.4.III.C
Education standards met	Historical argumentation; primary source analysis; causation; continuity and change over time; comparison

Learning Objectives

- Explain how male-dominated migration changed family life and gender roles in sending societies.
- Analyze how and why migrants formed ethnic enclaves in receiving societies.
- Explain why receiving societies often responded to migrants with prejudice, exclusion, and state regulation.
- Use primary sources to analyze point of view, purpose, audience, and historical situation.
- Compare the experiences of different migrant groups in the nineteenth century.

Lesson Overview

From 1750 to 1900, migration expanded on a much larger scale than in earlier eras. Industrial capitalism, empire, plantation labor systems, steam transportation, and uneven economic development moved millions of people across regions and oceans. These new migration patterns affected both the places migrants left and the places they entered. In many sending societies, migrants were disproportionately men, leaving women to assume larger roles in household management and local economic survival. In receiving societies, migrants often created ethnic enclaves that preserved language, religion, and community support. At the same time, migrants frequently encountered racial prejudice, labor hostility, and legal exclusion.

Essential Vocabulary

- **Sojourner** — a migrant who expects to stay temporarily rather than settle permanently.
- **Restrictionism** — the belief that immigration should be limited by law.
- **Gendered migration** — migration patterns in which men and women do not move in equal numbers or under the same conditions.
- **Mutual aid** — support within a community through shared money, housing, information, or labor.
- **Remittance** — money sent by migrants back to family members in their home society.

Background Reading

Nineteenth-century migration was driven by both push and pull factors. Industrial growth in the Americas and other expanding economies created demand for labor in railroads, mines, factories, ports, and plantations. At the same time, rural poverty, land shortages, debt, and labor recruitment pushed many people to leave home.

These movements were made easier by steamships and railroads, which reduced travel time and connected distant labor markets more closely than before.

Migration changed sending societies as well as receiving ones. Because many migrants were adult men, women who remained behind often had to manage farms, children, debts, and household decisions. This did not automatically create equality, but it did alter social expectations and everyday responsibilities. Migration therefore affected gender roles not only where laborers arrived, but also in the communities they left behind. That change is one of the key social effects historians track in this period.

In receiving societies, migrants often settled near others who shared a language, region, religion, or occupation. These ethnic enclaves gave migrants access to housing, jobs, translators, familiar institutions, and mutual aid. At the same time, outside observers often treated those same enclaves as evidence that migrants were alien, threatening, or resistant to assimilation. Riis's description of New York's tenement districts shows both the existence of concentrated migrant neighborhoods and the prejudice with which many native-born reformers and officials viewed them.

Receiving societies did not always welcome immigrants. Anti-immigrant sentiment was often strongest when labor competition and racial prejudice reinforced one another. The Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 formally suspended the immigration of Chinese laborers and required documentation for return, showing that migration had become an issue of state power, labor control, and citizenship. By the late nineteenth century, migration was not merely a social process. It had become a subject of national law and political conflict.

Primary Sources

Source 1

Title: *Chinese Exclusion Act*

https://avalon.law.yale.edu/19th_century/chinese_exclusion_act.asp

"Whereas, in the opinion of the Government of the United States the coming of Chinese laborers to this country endangers the good order of certain localities within the territory thereof: Therefore, Be it enacted by the Senate and House of Representatives of the United States of America in Congress assembled, That from and after the expiration of ninety days next after the passage of this act, and until the expiration of ten years next after the passage of this act, the coming of Chinese laborers to the United States be, and the same is hereby, suspended; and during such suspension it shall not be lawful for any Chinese laborer to come, or, having so come after the expiration of said ninety days, to remain within the United States.

That the master of any vessel who shall knowingly bring within the United States on such vessel, and land, or permit to be landed, any Chinese laborer from any foreign port or place, shall be deemed guilty of a misdemeanor, and on conviction thereof shall be punished by a fine of not more than five hundred dollars for each and every such Chinese laborer so brought, and may also be imprisoned for a term not exceeding one year.

That no Chinese laborer who shall at any time have been a resident within the United States and who shall have departed therefrom shall be permitted to return to, or remain in, the United States, unless he has in his possession a certificate issued under the authority of this act and in conformity with the provisions of this act.”

Guided Analysis Questions

1. What explicit justification does the law give for restricting Chinese immigration?
2. How does the language of the act connect migration to labor and public order?
3. What does this document reveal about the growing power of the federal state over migration?
4. How does the act distinguish Chinese laborers from other categories of people?
5. How could a historian use this document to support an argument that receiving societies often did not embrace migrants?

Source 2

Title: *How the Other Half Lives*, Chapter III, “The Mixed Crowd” and Chapter V, “The Italian in New York”, Jacob A. Riis, 1890

<https://www.gutenberg.org/files/45502/45502-h/45502-h.htm>

“When once I asked the agent of a notorious Fourth Ward alley how many people might be living in it I was told: One hundred and forty families, one hundred Irish, thirty-eight Italian, and two that spoke the German tongue. Barring the agent herself, there was not a native-born individual in the court. The answer was characteristic of the cosmopolitan character of lower New York, very nearly so of the whole of it, wherever it runs to alleys and courts.

One may find for the asking an Italian, a German, a French, African, Spanish, Bohemian, Russian, Scandinavian, Jewish, and Chinese colony. Even the Arab, who peddles ‘holy earth’ from the Battery as a direct importation from Jerusalem, has his exclusive preserves at the lower end of Washington Street. The one thing you shall vainly ask for in the chief city of America is a distinctively American community. There is none; certainly not among the tenements.

Whatever the merit of the good man’s conjectures, his eyes did not deceive him. They are not here. In their place has come this queer conglomerate mass of heterogeneous elements, ever striving and working like whiskey and water in one glass, and with the like result: final union and a prevailing taint of whiskey. The once unwelcome Irishman has been followed in his turn by the Italian, the Russian Jew, and the Chinaman, and has himself taken a hand at opposition, quite as bitter and quite as ineffectual, against these later hordes. Wherever these have gone they have crowded him out, possessing the block, the street, the ward with their denser swarms.”

“Certainly a picturesque, if not very tidy, element has been added to the population in the ‘assisted’ Italian immigrant who claims so large a share of public attention, partly because he keeps coming at such a tremendous rate, but chiefly because he elects to stay in New York, or near enough for it to serve as his base of operations, and

here promptly reproduces conditions of destitution and disorder which, set in the frame-work of Mediterranean exuberance, are the delight of the artist, but in a matter-of-fact American community become its danger and reproach.

The reproduction is made easier in New York because he finds the material ready to hand in the worst of the slum tenements; but even where it is not he soon reduces what he does find to his own level, if allowed to follow his natural bent. The Italian comes in at the bottom, and in the generation that came over the sea he stays there.

In the slums he is welcomed as a tenant who ‘makes less trouble’ than the contentious Irishman or the order-loving German, that is to say: is content to live in a pig-sty and submits to robbery at the hands of the rent-collector without murmur. Yet this very tractability makes of him in good hands, when firmly and intelligently managed, a really desirable tenant.

But it is not his good fortune often to fall in with other hospitality upon his coming than that which brought him here for its own profit, and has no idea of letting go its grip upon him as long as there is a cent to be made out of him.”

Guided Analysis Questions

1. What evidence in the passage shows the formation of ethnic enclaves in New York?
2. How does Riis portray immigrant communities, and what does that reveal about his point of view?
3. What does the source suggest about competition among migrant groups in receiving societies?
4. How does the excerpt show both support networks and prejudice within migrant neighborhoods?
5. How could this source be used to analyze continuity and change in attitudes toward migrants over time?

Major Social Effects of Migration, 1750–1900

Category	Sending Societies	Receiving Societies
Gender roles	Women took on greater household and economic responsibilities when male migrants left	Labor markets in mines, railroads, docks, and plantations often became heavily male
Family structure	Families were separated for long periods; survival often depended on money sent home	Migrants often lived in boardinghouses, tenements, or shared community spaces
Culture	Home communities remained tied to migrants through remittances and kinship networks	Ethnic enclaves preserved language, foodways, religion, and customs
Social tensions	Migration could increase dependency on absent wage earners	Native-born hostility often linked migrants to disorder, crime, or low wages
State response	Sending societies sometimes relied on migration as an economic safety valve	Receiving societies increasingly used documentation, inspection, and exclusion laws

Comparing Two Effects of Migration

Historical Development	Example	Social Effect
Male-dominated labor migration	Contract or wage labor migration overseas	Women assumed larger practical roles at home
Ethnic enclave formation	Immigrant districts in New York	Mutual aid, cultural continuity, and also outside suspicion
State restriction	Chinese Exclusion Act	Immigration became regulated by law and bureaucracy

Change / Continuity / Comparison

Change over time:

From 1750 to 1900, migration became larger in scale, more global in reach, and more directly tied to industrial capitalism and empire. Earlier migration certainly existed, but in this period states and employers increasingly organized labor across long distances. Steamships and railroads made it easier to move workers quickly, while governments and private interests became more involved in regulating who could move and under what conditions. The Chinese Exclusion Act is a strong example of this shift. It shows that by the late nineteenth century migration had become an issue of federal law, border control, documentation, and state power rather than merely local settlement or labor custom.

Continuity over time:

Even as migration expanded, one important continuity remained: migrants often preserved distinct cultural identities rather than immediately blending into a receiving society. Riis's description of New York identifies separate Italian, Chinese, Jewish, and other colonies, showing that migrants clustered in familiar communities. This pattern reflects a broader historical continuity in which migration produces diasporic communities that maintain language, religion, and social networks. Such communities could help new arrivals survive, find work, and retain cultural cohesion, even while outsiders interpreted that cohesion as foreignness or refusal to assimilate.

Comparison:

Different migrant groups experienced migration differently, especially when race and labor status shaped how host societies saw them. Riis's writing shows that immigrant groups in New York competed for urban space and work, and that newer arrivals often faced hostility from earlier migrants as well as native-born residents. The Chinese Exclusion Act reveals an even more formalized and racialized response: Chinese laborers were targeted by national law as a distinct category subject to suspension, documentation, and exclusion. A comparison of these sources shows that while many migrants formed enclaves and encountered prejudice, Asian migrants often faced a sharper combination of racialization and legal restriction than many European migrants did.

Key Takeaways

- New migration patterns from 1750 to 1900 were closely tied to industrialization, labor demand, and empire.

- Male-dominated migration often changed gender roles in sending societies by expanding women’s responsibilities.
- Migrants frequently formed ethnic enclaves that preserved culture and provided mutual support.
- Receiving societies often responded with prejudice, labor hostility, and immigration laws.
- Migration was both a social process and a political issue shaped by race, labor, and state power.

SAQ Practice Section

SAQ Set 1 — Source 1: *Chinese Exclusion Act*

- Identify **ONE** specific justification the United States government gives for restricting Chinese immigration in the excerpt.
- Explain **ONE** broader historical development in the late nineteenth century that contributed to the passage of this law.
- Explain **ONE** effect of this law on Chinese migrant communities in the United States.

SAQ Set 2 — Source 2: *How the Other Half Lives*

- Identify **ONE** piece of evidence from the excerpt that shows the formation of ethnic enclaves.
- Explain **ONE** way Riis’s point of view shapes his portrayal of immigrant communities.
- Explain **ONE** broader social effect of ethnic enclaves in receiving societies during the period 1750–1900.

SAQ Set 3 — Non-stimulus SAQ (Comparison)

- Identify **ONE** similarity in the causes of migration for two migrant groups in the period 1750–1900.
- Explain **ONE** difference in how receiving societies treated migrants from different world regions in this period.
- Explain **ONE** reason for that difference in treatment.

Primary Source Citations

- United States Congress, *Chinese Exclusion Act* (1882), National Archives overview: <https://www.archives.gov/milestone-documents/chinese-exclusion-act> ; transcript text: Yale Avalon Project, https://avalon.law.yale.edu/19th_century/chinese_exclusion_act.asp
- Jacob A. Riis, *How the Other Half Lives* (1890), Project Gutenberg: <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/45502/45502-h/45502-h.htm>