Not Your Parents’ Minnesota: Immigration Politics in a Supposed Liberal Bastion

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PETER RACHLEFF & DOUG ROSSINOW

Minnesota was long known as a progressive stronghold, from its support for Ignatius Donnelly and the Populists of the 1890s and A.C. Townley and his Nonpartisan League in the First World War era to its election of Farmer-Labor governors, senators, and representatives in the 1930s to its later support for liberal Democratic heroes Hubert Humphrey and Eugene McCarthy and its status as the only state to reject Ronald Reagan in 1984. Minnesota was equally known as a bastion of whiteness, gently satirized in Garrison Keillor’s ongoing radio broadcasts. Some pundits and scholars conjectured that the state’s left-leaning politics had a foundation in its heavily Scandinavian and German ethnic make-up. Minnesota’s political move to the right in recent years—Minnesotans have not elected a Democratic governor since 1986, and anti-tax politics has dominated state lawmaking for more than a decade—has coincided with its racial and ethnic diversification, as tens of thousands of immigrants have arrived from Southeast Asia, East Africa, and Mexico and Central America. Are these political and demographic developments related? Have the politics of immigration and diversity arrived in this piece of America’s heartland to produce, from a progressive standpoint, a toxic outcome?

On East Seventh Street, in Saint Paul’s hard-scrabble East Side neighborhood, sits an excellent Salvadoran restaurant, Mañana (where much of the brainstorming for this article was done), with several taquerías within blocks. Up the street is the Mexican consulate, which opened in 2005; a few blocks further on is the Lutheran church where members of FMLN-Minnesota watched Salvadoran election returns via satellite television a year ago. Once, this was a heavily unionized blue-collar neighborhood dominated by manufacturing workers employed by 3M, Whirlpool, and Hamm’s Brewery, all of which disappeared in the deindustrialization wave of the 1980s. In their place, as rents have plummeted and low-wage service sector jobs have proliferated, have come Latinos, African Americans, Hmong, Somalis, and Ethiopians. This neighborhood encapsulates Minnesota’s changing face.

Indeed, Minnesota as a whole is less white than it long was. The Latino population in the state almost tripled in the 1990s, passing the 200,000 mark (in a state whose population is about 5.25 million). This total may seem modest to residents of Florida or California, but its significance is a matter of proportion. Between 2000 and 2008, in percentage terms, Minnesota was fourth among states with the biggest increases in their Hispanic populations. It stands out among these large Latino-population gainers by virtue of its storied whiteness. The state is still 85 percent non-Hispanic white. Other states with big recent increases in the Latino share of their populations, such as the Carolinas and Arkansas, include large African American minorities, and liberals in those states have a long history of dealing with questions of race and diversity (one way or another). Minneapolis and Saint Paul, Saint Cloud, and other cities here have become home to highly visible Southeast Asian and African populations, while Latino and African immigrants now provide the work force for meatpacking, poultry and vegetable processing, clustered in smaller, formerly all-white towns across the state. Rochester, home to the Mayo Clinic, an expanding healthcare complex, and a hotel industry that serves the families of patients, has experienced a similar influx of immigrant
workers of color. Immigrant workers seem everywhere, from the checkers at local retailers, who might be women in hijabs and burkas, to the cab drivers at the airport, many of whom are men from the Horn of Africa. Although the traditional African American population here is small, it too has been growing. The State Demographic Center projects that, between 2005 and 2035, Minnesota’s non-Hispanic white population will grow only by 8.5 percent, compared to a predicted 121 percent growth in the minority population. Already, the public schools in Minneapolis and Saint Paul have “majority minority” populations.

As some immigrants have gained stable employment, residency, and citizenship, they (and, in some cases, their maturing children) have organized, in workplaces, in communities, and in politics. At times this has generated alliances and coalitions among immigrant groups and communities of color. In 2002, the East Side Saint Paul district elected Mee Moua as the first Hmong woman state senator in the United States. Her political team mobilized Latinos, African Americans, and African immigrants, along with Hmong and Vietnamese, to sweep her into office as a Democrat. In 2000, some 1,700 hotel workers—mostly immigrants, speaking fifteen or more languages, and organized in HERE Local 17—struck the major metropolitan hotels, held firm for two weeks, and won big gains—only to lose many of them as the hospitality industry shrank after the attacks of September 11, 2001. While much of the labor movement has been pushed backward in the past three decades, the mainly immigrant janitors in SEIU Local 26 have waged two very effective contract campaigns, winning not only wage increases and expanded benefits, but also turning part-time jobs into full-time ones and increasing their rights on the job.

Their successes have inspired, informed, and supported white and African American union members who are employed as window washers, security guards, and in other occupations, some of them more highly paid. Interestingly, when 1,200 mostly white mechanics struck Northwest Airlines in 2005 and the mainstream of the labor hierarchy turned its back (the mechanics had committed the sin of leaving the International Association of Machinists to affiliate with the Aircraft Mechanics Fraternal Association, an independent union), most of the labor support came from SEIU, HERE, and a United Food and Commercial Workers’ local that had been organizing immigrant packinghouse workers. In other words, for the past decade, where there has been vim and vigor in the Minnesota labor movement, there has been an immigrant spark.

Nonetheless, increasing diversity has coincided with a now-familiar deterioration in the economic standing of white wage-earners overall. The potential for division among workers based on nationality or nativity is all too clear. In smaller meatpacking and poultry processing communities, working-class taxpayers bear the burden for education (think: the visibility of non-Anglo immigrants’ children) and public health care (think: immigrant workers and their families, lacking employer-provided health insurance, visiting emergency rooms) while corporate employers enjoy access to a low-paid work force. The costs of immigration are socialized and pressed downward, while the benefits, arguably, accrue disproportionately to employers. In Austin, one hundred miles south of the Twin Cities, Hormel has recruited a substantially Latino work force as long-term replacements (at lower pay and benefits and amid harsher conditions) for the white work force, whose defeat was depicted in the 1990 Academy Award–winning film American Dream. While that’s hardly surprising, it is disconcerting that, when the strike veterans commemorated the twenty-fifth anniversary of their iconic struggle, they excluded the new Latino workers from their events.

Opportunistic politicians tap into these resentments with demagogic appeals. Immigration has become a wedge issue for conservative forces here, who clearly believe the issue has traction. Outgoing Republican governor (and 2012 presidential contender) Tim Pawlenty ran a TV ad during his 2002 campaign featuring would-be terrorist Zacarias Moussaoui and intoning, “Terrorists are here,” and has vetoed pro-immigrant driver’s license and “DREAM Act” bills (the latter would allow undocumented college-age immigrants who graduate from state high schools to attend public colleges at in-state tuition rates). Both
Pawlenty and current GOP gubernatorial candidate Tom Emmer have endorsed Arizona’s already notorious (but rather popular) SB 1070. The indications are that such a law stands little chance of being enacted in Minnesota. But Susana DeLeón, a lawyer and immigrant rights activist here, anticipates an “under the radar” effort to encode anti-immigrant appeals in a “public safety first” message in coming election campaigns in the state.

This isn’t to say that only liberals can find immigration problematic. This is a potential wedge issue dividing the Republican coalition as well as the Democratic base. Business leaders favor a continued stream of immigrant workers who may depress wages overall, and employers have tremendous leverage, to put it mildly, when they hire undocumented workers. Business does not want to be in the sights of Immigration and Customs Enforcement agents and does not want to police its workforce for residency papers. The Wall Street Journal, the foremost platform for right-leaning policy ideas in the country, long has favored an “open-borders” policy. But the grassroots base of the GOP, reflected in the “Tea Party” gatherings, is ferociously hostile to undocumented immigrants—and, it sometimes seems, to immigrants in general. Republican politicians, for their part, are treading carefully, courting the Tea Partiers while doing little to displease their corporate sponsors. But our main concern here is with the challenge immigration poses for progressives.

Liberals would be fools to ignore the coincidence of expressions of anxiety over immigration with the ascendancy of the neoliberal dogma of lower taxes and fewer public services in Minnesota. Dane Smith, a longtime reporter for the Minneapolis Star-Tribune who now heads a liberal policy shop here called Growth and Justice, says there is “no way to deny” that the state’s increased diversity “has unsettled the progressive consensus” that long reigned here. That “consensus” succeeded in creating a high-wage, amenity-rich environment featuring ample public goods—an environment sustained by progressive taxation and by the economic growth this strategy itself generated. It was a “formula for phenomenal success” in economic and social terms, in Smith’s words. This liberal formula was what distinguished Minnesota from, say, South Dakota—and what earned the headline, on the cover of a 1973 Time issue that is still famous here, “The Good Life in Minnesota.” But this formula for “the good life” was easier to sustain politically, Smith acknowledges, “when the benefits extended to Ozzie and Harriet.” In Minnesota, as elsewhere, that is no longer the dominant image of who benefits from government policy.

Recent political history here would have been unimaginable in 1973. Jesse Ventura, a third-party governor between 1999 and 2003, began a tax-cutting trend that paved the way for Pawlenty, whose legacy to the state is a gaping structural deficit, due to his “no new taxes” (but regressive fees are all right) stance. Wayne Cox of Minnesota Citizens for Tax Justice wrote recently that when the next governor “first enters the governor’s office, it will be like entering a hoarder’s home—crammed to the gills with unpaid bills, warning notices from bond rating agencies, and crumpled up Supreme Court rulings.” (Pawlenty unilaterally mandated cuts in government programs last year, a move the state Supreme Court ruled was illegal.) At the end of the spring 2010 legislative session, the governor and Democrats agreed to cut funding for General Assistance Medical Care, the state health-care plan of last resort for many poor Minnesotans, by 75 percent; Pawlenty proposed eliminating it entirely. Under a loaded fiscal gun and with a conservative Republican governor itching to pull the trigger, liberal legislators settled for an outcome that was merely atrocious, with the only available alternative an unqualified catastrophe.

Progressives have plenty to be proud of in the state’s history, but Minnesota liberalism risks becoming a museum gallery rather than a relevant force for the future. Advocacy of civil rights and human rights has been an important component of the liberal tradition here since the 1940s. Perhaps paradoxically, Minnesota’s progressives have rarely grappled with immigration or diversity in a broad sense (at least not since German and Scandinavian families learned to speak English as their first language). Humphrey’s famous speech to the Democratic national convention of 1948, advocating that the party take a stand on civil rights, while it
reflected a genuine personal commitment, also was calculated to co-opt and defeat his left-wing rivals in the recently merged Democratic-Farmer-Labor party. Historian Jennifer Delton has pointed to the paradox of Minnesota Democrats’ identification with the cold war–era civil rights agenda during a time when the African American population in the state was tiny. Aside from the complexities of motivation behind Minnesota’s tradition of civil rights advocacy, the state’s liberal tradition has been rather color blind, which certainly represents a form of idealism, but which may leave it ill-equipped to respond to conservative wedge politics based on race, ethnicity, and nationality.

Opinions are mixed about the prospects for a new, more diversity-conscious progressivism. DeLeón, the immigrant rights lawyer, for one, is not optimistic about the courage quotient of Democrats and unions. She expects the Democrats vying for the governor’s mansion to be “really vague” in any support they give to immigrant rights and notes that unions sometimes urge their members, including many immigrants, to support candidates for public office who don’t support immigrant rights at all. On the other hand, Dan McGrath, executive director of TakeAction Minnesota, a major progressive organizing group here, is hopeful about the potential for liberals in the state to turn the page toward a politics that will be racially conscious and that can challenge the “dominant story” conservatives have used to frame political issues for years. That “story” is, “We’re all on our own” and should just compete with one another for society’s benefits. McGrath, who previously worked for SEIU, is acutely aware that Minnesota is “dramatically different racially than it was ten years ago” and believes that politicians understand that people of color can provide the “margin of victory” in close election contests, and not just in the Twin Cities. TakeAction does Saul Alinsky-style organizing in local communities around the state, building toward large gatherings such as one in Bemidji, in northern Minnesota, that brought together two hundred Native Americans, and a larger event this past May held in an inner-ring suburb of Saint Paul and focused on the area’s Hmong population. In addition to the standard liberal issue agenda of universal health-care and the like, TakeAction Minnesota frames its activities around “values” and a “vision” that its members embrace. This vision includes a rejection of the idea “that racism is a thing of the past” and of the notion “that government can solve nothing and corporations can solve everything.”

The burning question is whether new and old demographic forces can link up politically in Minnesota to pull together the ideas and political muscle to push back against the neoliberal juggernaut. No one yet knows how far TakeAction’s “politics of inclusion” can carry the progressive agenda. Everyone knows what the progressive policy agenda is: it is reflected in the promotion of higher taxes on the wealthy by Growth and Justice, in labor activists’ efforts to require businesses that benefit from public subsidies to create full-time jobs that pay a “living wage”—an idea first popularized in America by Minnesota’s own Father John Ryan—and in immigrant rights’ activists demands for drivers’ licenses, access to higher education, and full labor rights. But no one has demonstrated that this agenda can command a political majority here and now.

Minnesota liberals are running out of time in which to fashion a definite and strategic response to the new realities of immigration and increasing diversity. Unfortunately, those who wish to pose a real challenge to neoliberal hegemony here have, up to now, offered hesitant, evasive, and divided responses to these questions. In the near-to-medium-term future, growing immigration will make it an increasingly salient issue, but the state will maintain a large white majority (a majority magnified by the relatively low voting rates of immigrants). Even the success of immigrant politicians like Mee Moua—who is part of what is sometimes called the “one-and-a-half generation,” someone who came to America at a young age—depended on the politicization of an immigrant community that started arriving in the United States over thirty years ago. The empowerment of more recent immigrant arrivals will not happen overnight. The notion that Minnesota’s more diverse population will produce the “new Democratic majority” that John Judis and Ruy Teixeira have predicted will be inapplicable here for quite some time. The
“postindustrial metropolises” that figure large in the landscape Judis and Teixeira describe do not exist here. Instead, distinct suburbs and exurbs remain the vital areas of population growth. In other words, Minnesota is the scene of demographic trends pulling in two directions simultaneously: increasing diversity, which may give new heft to liberals, and continued suburbanization, a process that has empowered conservatives. The coming era of a white majority increasingly concerned over immigration may prove perilous for progressives in the state.

Progressives can respond to the new realities in one of two ways. First, they can shift the ground of argument to class politics with a tinge of populist outrage. Amid the Great Recession, with the Obama administration in Washington suffering in part from a perception that it has looked after Wall Street more than Main Street, liberal Democrats might redeem themselves by calling for sacrifice—not from everyone, but from those who have done so well under the neoliberal regime of the past thirty years. The populist gambit holds the promise of unifying working-class and middle-class voters and implies that the wedge-issue politics surrounding immigration is a distraction from what really counts. The second option is for liberals to embrace immigrants as hard-working residents who deserve the same shot at the good life that Norwegian and German immigrants had, and to build a new grassroots base for liberal politics here—one more diverse than the Democratic-Farmer-Labor coalition of a bygone era. This second, openly pro-immigrant stance is riskier, as the timorousness of Democratic politicians testifies. But it would have the advantage of luring Minnesota liberals away from their own habitual distraction: that of seeking, through invocations of the glorious past, to activate a “natural” liberal majority that some believe still exists here, and that the evidence suggests is a myth. This second path would simply take liberal politicians where the liberal votes are, and build out from there.

How have Minnesota Democrats met this challenge? Some of them don’t want to talk about it. But the issue isn’t going away. The two leading DFL politicians running for governor, former U.S. senator Mark Dayton and retiring Speaker of the Minnesota House Margaret Kelliher, have taken somewhat different tacks. Dayton has struck a populist note, emphasizing his determination to raise taxes on the wealthy and to spend money on what he calls a state-level “stimulus package.” His Web site proclaims, “Read my lips, ‘Tax the rich.’” (Dayton is the wealthy heir to a department-store fortune.) His campaign did not respond to our inquiries about his position on immigrants’ rights, and his Web site says nothing about immigration issues. Kelliher’s campaign replied, “Margaret believes immigration is both an economic and social benefit to our state,” and noted Kelliher’s co-sponsorship of the failed DREAM Act (which Minnesota’s Senator Al Franken has co-sponsored at the federal level). She “thinks the Arizona law is divisive,” the campaign stated; she “strongly opposes this law and would never sign a law” like it. TakeAction Minnesota endorsed Kelliher, but not Dayton. As for economic issues, Kelliher stated in a campaign ad that as Speaker she “fought … corporate special interests,” but she has been more muted in explaining what mix of tax increases and spending cuts she would use to fix the state’s terrible budget problem. She made a bit of news when the Republican candidate, Tom Emmer, proposed reducing the minimum wage for restaurant servers (because, he said, they make so much in tips). Kelliher got out in front of the Democratic pack to denounce this proposal as picking the pocket of the state’s working class in a time of economic distress. Of these two candidates, Kelliher has done more to combine the two strategies we outline, but her message could be more forceful. (As this article went to press, Dayton won a close victory over Kelliher in the August primary.)

Perhaps liberals can pursue both populist appeals and base-broadening strategies at the same time. Indeed, there is no way for progressives, in good conscience, not to support a combination of these two approaches. Progressives should see it as their duty to stand up against nativism whenever it surfaces. At the same time, it would be perverse for progressives not to advocate an emphatic call for greater economic equality and for fairer burden-sharing, particularly after so many years of increasing inequality and tax cuts for the rich. Conservatives try to divert white Americans’ anger over eco-
nomic frustration into resentment of immigrants and racially charged lamentations over the loss of “the America I know and love,” as many put it. Progressives, for their part, could link macroeconomic issues and immigration in a different way, by pointing to the laissez-faire dogma that has reigned for thirty years as the key to the unregulated labor markets in which immigrant workers appear as a threat rather than as potential allies in the fight for a better deal for all. Whatever approach liberals take, they can be sure that conservatives will continue to raise the immigration issue in the most destructive way possible. Progressives here haven’t yet come up with a clear and unified answer to the politics of immigration. Whatever answer they choose, they’d better find one.

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Two Who Left a Legacy of Ideas

In every issue of Dissent we encourage our readers to “Leave a Legacy of Ideas” by remembering us in their wills. Over the years, these sums, not large in the grand scheme, but invaluable to us, have helped us weather the economic storms through which all small magazines of opinion must navigate. Each gift comes as a welcome surprise, almost always at a crucial moment. In the past six months, we were touched to receive two such gifts and want to pay tribute to the longtime readers who made them.

Henry Fagin, who died at age ninety-six, was an architect; Second World War veteran and witness to the devastation in Hiroshima; machinist; urban and regional planner; and professor of political science, urban planning, and later of administration at the University of California and at the University of Wisconsin. In retirement he was a health care advocate, president of the Orange County, California, ACLU chapter, and co-founder of a men’s group that met weekly for more than a quarter-century. In the words of his daughter, he was a “lifelong thinker committed to progressive ideas and action.” He was “quick to listen, slow to speak,” and “not hesitant” to state his views “even in the face of opposition.” He led a “life of creative accomplishment, always in service of the common welfare.”

Hilbert Schwartz, who died at age ninety-one, was a graphic artist, a son of immigrants, who left no known survivors, but divided his estate among the causes and publications close to his heart. The co-executor of his estate wrote to us that his “life was most of all the books and magazines that he read. His apartment was wall-to-wall books even up to the ceiling. He loved reading Dissent for the brilliance of the ideas that it afforded him. He wanted to show his love for your magazine and its staff.”

— EDS