

Yael Schacher, “A Contrarian Expertise: Isaac Hourwich’s *Immigration and Labor*”

The Dillingham Commission reports on industries took for granted that immigration hurt American wage workers and depicted this in racial terms. Isaac Hourwich’s *Immigration and Labor*, published only months after the Commission’s reports in 1912, was a response to both. Its most important arguments were that chronic unemployment is attributable to fluctuations in the distribution of demand due to seasonal industries and cycles of business activity and that immigration supplied a necessary amount of unskilled labor that had a stimulating effect on industry. Hourwich argued restriction would not significantly improve the lives of American workers whose wages were most affected by changes in technology and when prices were kept high by trusts; indeed, Hourwich claimed restriction would hurt the labor movement and push capital abroad. My paper is about how Hourwich came to these ideas and how he presented his arguments to the public. I discuss the ways Hourwich’s background in Russia, especially his training as a statistician, research on the Russian economy, and experience as a political exile, influenced his attitude toward economic development, labor migration, and state regulation. Though Hourwich focused on economic arguments in his book, he recognized that economic arguments had political implications. In many ways, the economic debate over immigration was also quite personal, as Hourwich’s career as a lawyer and Census expert in the United States reveals. Hourwich’s arguments about unions and race put him at odds not only with progressive political economists, but also with certain members of the American Jewish Committee, which sponsored the writing of the book. My paper discusses these conflicts as well as the book’s reception and revision for a second edition. It addresses Hourwich’s attitudes towards advocacy, objectivity, and democracy, spotlighting the fraught relationship of immigration to the pervasive Progressive era discourse on the “labor problem.”