Reflections From the Editor

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The history of immigration to this country is riddled with ambiguities. Most groups immigrating since the middle nineteenth century have been met with strong initial resistance, discrimination, and sometimes violence. The parallels between the contemporary reaction to Latino immigrants and the Irish immigrants in the nineteenth century are striking. The Irish immigration to the Northeast began in the 1840s. The initial migration was a forced one, when the English colonizers of Ireland put poor Irish men, women, and children on boats to America after the devastation of the potato famine, rather than develop an economic and social infrastructure in the country they had occupied. When they arrived, the Irish were met with hostility, as businesses and legislatures in the Northeast, especially Boston, quickly summoned their political and economic power to keep Irish from working in factories, from living near non Irish, and from going to school with their children. The only institutions that welcomed the Irish were the jails and the newly constructed mental hospitals in the Northeast, many of which had wards for Irish immigrants. What was it about the Irish immigrants that frightened the native population? A peasant migration, Irish immigrants came with little education, spoke little English, and had no experience working in the factories that began to dominate the Northeast economy in the nineteenth century. They also came with a foreign religion, Catholicism, which evoked a whole host of prejudices in the native population. They were, in short, culturally different from the native population: poor and unlettered. Yet the Irish immigrants were essential to the growing manufacturing and later industrial economy of the United States. Within two decades of their first entry, by 1860, Irish were working in factories, schooling their children in public schools, migrating to the Midwest, and entering public service in the urban Northeast. Within three decades, Irish dominated police departments and local politics in these growing cities.

Latino immigrants, those who come with and those who come without permission from the U.S. government, are evoking eerily similar reactions. Currently a firestorm of anxiety and near hysteria is fueling calls for more border fences and lionization of private citizens known as Minutemen who patrol the border looking for persons who might attempt to cross into the United States. Here in California, the center of the anti- immigrant fever, both public officials and private media figures are calling for stricter border controls and organizing conventions to protest, among other issues, the possibility of giving undocumented immigrants driver's licenses. Others are demanding enforcement of measures to deport Latino immigrants without official documentation and railing against President Bush's timid suggestions that those who have worked here ought to be granted guest worker status. This whirlwind of anti immigrant sentiment has reached Congress, where a law mandating proof of legal residence for federal identification purposes is close to passage. Yet everyone in the debate is well aware of the importance of immigrants, documented or not, to the secondary labor market; a role that parallels the economic uses of Irish immigrants 150 years ago. Like the Irish, Latino immigrants seem different to some natives: cultural differences and poverty are their defining characteristics to those who want them gone. Latent fear of Latino political power parallels the nineteenth century fear of Irish Catholicism. This fear and prejudice did not stop the Irish American Catholic Church

from establishing a powerful system of parochial schools across the United States. Likewise, active Latino political power has trumped the shop worn cliché of Latinos as the "sleeping giant" of the electorate. Los Angeles has just elected its first Latino mayor since the nineteenth century, and Latino elected officials are taking office throughout the state and, to a lesser extent, the country.

The story of both Irish and Latino immigrations is the story of necessity and hope. The necessity lies in the unacknowledged need for cheap labor under industrial capitalism and the inequality that drives this need; the hope is the well-founded faith among immigrants that life here will eventually be better. We can interrupt this story with prejudice, fear and cruelty, but we will not change its ultimate outcome.