

## The Minnesota School of Immigration and Refugee Studies

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Use Google to search for information on the “Chicago School of Sociology” and you could scroll through 34,500 items, beginning with a Wikipedia article. The Chicago School is well known for its pioneering work on immigrant adaptation in American cities. Assimilation theory remains a powerful, if repeatedly challenged, model for the study of immigrant life in the United States.

Even here in Minneapolis, by contrast, only a handful of colleagues know of the “Minnesota School”-- founded by the man who is honored mainly in the name of a large classroom building. Is it Minnesota modesty that has obscured the existence of a distinctive Minnesota School begun by Theodore Blegen (1891-1969)? When I arrived in Minneapolis in 2005, I recognized that 100 Minnesota faculty researched and taught about race, ethnicity, migration or refugee life. They were not all in predictable departments such as History, American Studies, Ethnic Studies, or Sociology nor were all of them Americanists. Some were in foreign language departments, some in professional schools, including Medicine, Public Health, Education and Public Affairs. Why so many, I wondered. As I soon learned, it’s not simply that the University of Minnesota is large (although it certainly is that). Nor is this scholarly “embarrassment of riches” a simple reflection of the state’s demography. On the contrary, at 6 percent foreign-born Minnesota is well below the national average; while the state has a substantial population of American Indians (and a well respected program in American Indian Studies) the size of Minnesota’s African-American and Asian-American populations also falls well below

national averages. For many people, Minnesota epitomizes the culturally homogeneous or “white” agricultural interior of the United States.

The 100 faculty members currently teaching and researching about race, ethnicity, migration and refugee life are the legacy of a persistent and robust if fragmented and unacknowledged Minnesota School of scholarship fostered by Theodore Blegen. The research of this Minnesota School has changed over three generations but some of its defining characteristics have persisted for nine decades. Historians have been the central builders of the Minnesota School, and they have emphasized both the importance of creating archives and of working as public intellectuals. Each generation of the Minnesota School has interpreted U.S. immigration within an international context, while collaborating in ways that have fostered interdisciplinarity and international scholarly collaboration. Persistently, Minnesotans have also kept the everyday lives, experiences, and subjectivities of immigrants and refugees at the heart of their studies.

Jon Gjerde (Ph.D., University of Minnesota, 1982) has already argued for the importance to U.S. immigration history of Theodore Blegen and of Blegen’s colleague and contemporary, George Stephenson (1883-1958, and himself the subject of an article by Rudolph J. Vecoli--Gjerde’s mentor). Gjerde pointed to the Mississippi Valley origins of immigration history among a larger group of scholars he called the “Ethnic Turnerians,” correcting earlier historiographies that traced immigration studies to Harvard social historians Arthur Schlesinger, Sr. and Oscar Handlin or to the Chicago School.

Allow a blunt easterner to cast modesty aside and to assert that Blegen and Stephenson were founders of a distinctive and long-lived school of their own. Blegen’s

1917 publication of an immigrant Norwegian’s narrative (“Ole Rynning’s True Account of America”) is arguably the first scholarly effort to give American readers access to an immigrant’s point of view in a translation from his native language, while Stephenson’s 1926 monograph (*A History of American Immigration, 1820-1924*) was the first professional effort to offer an interpretation broad enough to problematize the recent political triumph of immigration restriction. Preparing to write it, Stephenson taught some of the first courses in immigration history offered anywhere in the United States. Stephenson and Blegen shared a life-long interest in making documentation on immigration written by immigrants accessible through publication and public archives. Blegen worked with both the Minnesota Historical Society and the Norwegian American Historical Association to build archival collections; into the 1950s he pursued his dream of a collaboration that would collect immigrant letters in Europe and America. Blegen and Stephenson both also taught in Europe, exploring what we would today call the transnational dimensions of migration. Their work with the public—and especially with ethnic history societies—was often contentious. But Blegen, at least, never abandoned his efforts to write for broad audiences—especially in his histories of Minnesota and in *Grass Roots History* (1947). (The Papers of Blegen and of Stephenson are now housed in the University of Minnesota Archives. For Blegen, see <http://discover.lib.umn.edu/cgi/f/findaid/findaid-idx?c=umfa;view=text;didno=uarc00961>).

Blegen was the longer lived and professionally savvier of the two. He was president of the Mississippi Valley Historical Association (forerunner of the OAH) in 1943-1944 and Dean of Minnesota’s Graduate School until 1960. His thoughts seem to

have impressed new University President O. Meredith Wilson (an historian born in Mexico), who arrived in Minnesota that year. Wilson found major funding for a second generation of immigration historians that Paul Spickard has recently termed the “Ellis Island historians.” They would interpret urban and proletarian immigrants from Europe, while working in interdisciplinary fashion, sometimes within Minnesota’s American Studies program. In 1961 Minnesota’s “Iron Range Project” began, under the leadership of Hyman Berman, Clarke Chambers and Timothy Smith (specialists on immigration and labor, social welfare and education, respectively:

<http://ihrc.umn.edu/index.php?entry=103241> ) What emerged from their research on the multi-lingual, multi-ethnic, and radical immigrant miners and industrial workers of Minnesota were the Center for Immigration Studies and the Immigrant Archives Project, later merged as the Immigration History Research Center (IHRC). With the arrival in 1967 of Rudolph Vecoli, the second generation of the Minnesota School began a period of dynamic growth.

Specialists in U.S. immigration history scarcely need an introduction to this generation of scholars, who revitalized an entire field of scholarly study, typically with their trenchant critiques of the assimilation theories of the Chicago School. Vecoli, assisted by long-time curator Joel Wurl, built the IHRC archives into one of the most important centers for research on immigration in North America. Vecoli believed in bringing researchers and ethnic communities together, although he—like his predecessors—acknowledged what a complex undertaking this particular type of public history could be. Vecoli’s own research and that of his graduate students also helped to keep scholarship on older and newer European migrations in dialogue, while maintaining

and building the international connections between sending and receiving regions fostered earlier by Blegen and Stephenson. Thus conference proceedings co-edited by Vecoli and his student Suzanne Sinke as *A Century of European Migrations* (1991) drew on Frank Thistlethwaite's earlier call for Atlantic studies of migration. Thistlethwaite had studied in Minnesota with George Stephenson on a Commonwealth Fellowship in the late 1930s. (Following in Thistlethwaite's footsteps and building on that scholars' earlier thoughts with his own work with the Atlantic Economies, Dirk Hoerder of the University of Bremen—another contributor to *A Century of European Migrations*—had received a Minnesota M.A. in History and Political Science in 1968.) As international as well as U.S.-based researchers flocked to the IHRC in the 1970s and 1980s, the IHRC publication *Spectrum* also pointed community- and library-based researchers to large interdisciplinary themes—language, autobiography, refugees, the performing arts—to be explored in its collections (<http://ihrc.umn.edu/publications/catalog/spectrum.html>). At the IHRC, Blegen's "grass roots history" again flourished as "history from the bottom up."

Beginning in the 1980s, a new generation of colleagues and students of Vecoli extended the Minnesota School while continuing what some might not have recognized as long-standing Minnesota patterns of scholarship. Beginning in 1980, the Southeast Asian Refugee Studies project—later transformed into the Center for Refugee Studies (under the successive leadership of a linguist--Bruce Downing-- an anthropologist--Glenn Hendricks—and an American Studies graduate, and former student of Vecoli's, Dan Detzner)—began work with the newest arrivals to Minnesota. Until disbanded in 1998, it numbered among a handful of university centers documenting the post-Vietnam refugee

movements (<http://www.ihrc.umn.edu/research/vitrage/all/ra/ihrc2968.html> ). Materials on forced migrations and on refugee resettlement after 1945 soon constituted a third of IHRC holdings. Independently, in 1988, a Human Rights Center in Minnesota's Law School began developing what has become a remarkable library of materials on refugees and asylum internationally ([http://www1.umn.edu/humanrts/center/asylum/refugee\\_index.html](http://www1.umn.edu/humanrts/center/asylum/refugee_index.html) ). It, and the still-newer Human Rights Program in Minnesota's Institute for Global Studies, train students to work with community, advocacy and immigrant groups within and across national borders (<http://hrp.cla.umn.edu/> ).

Two new Minnesotans—Steven Ruggles and David Roediger—created other interdisciplinary initiatives that, while important for the development of immigration and refugee studies, could scarcely have been more different. Ruggles and his colleagues in demographic history obtained major funding to develop their Minnesota Population Center (MPC) into the largest digital archive of population records worldwide (<http://www.pop.umn.edu/data> ). Creating and making accessible population samples (IPUMs and IPUMS International) from the U.S. and around the world, MPC provided a new focus for immigration specialists in the social sciences while Roediger's leadership of the Minnesota American Studies Department encouraged a network that kept humanities and cultural studies scholars within the Minnesota School's orbit. Roediger's studies of whiteness, and working-class immigrants, along with his encouragement of studies of racialized ethnicity, class and gender resulted in a short lived but productive alliance with the IHRC that hosted the REM (Race, Ethnicity, Migration) seminar and conference in 1999-2000 (<http://www.mndaily.com/daily/2000/11/17/news/new7/> ).

There, “Ellis Island” historians met younger scholars influenced by what many now think of the “California School” of immigration history with its focus on race and the exclusions of race as central themes in American immigration history.

Will there be a fourth generation of the Minnesota School? It seems likely. Minnesota now has three immigration historians working on international themes--Erika Lee, writing on law and Chinese exclusion; Mai Na Lee, a specialist on the Hmong in Southeast Asia and in diaspora, and myself (a specialist on immigrant life in the U.S. but also on Italian migration worldwide). The IHRC and MPC have begun a research project that brings together demographers, historians, and anthropologists to use IPUMS data to explore “Gender Ratios and Global Migrations”

(<http://ihrc.umn.edu/scholarly/pdf/0806GenderRatiosConf.pdf> ) The IHRC also collaborates with the Institute for Global Studies in offering seminars and conferences focused on “Global REM” (<http://igs.cla.umn.edu/research/globalREM.html> ) Half a dozen younger scholars, many in the professional schools, research newer refugee populations. The IHRC could potentially play a special role in reviving Refugee Studies at Minnesota by connecting specialists on human rights and human services to existing clusters of scholars in the humanities and social sciences. Among Minnesota’s foreign-born populations, refugees are a sizeable proportion, much larger than in any other state of the United States.

Over the course of ninety years, the Minnesota School developed into something rather different from the Chicago School. Significantly and consistently, historians were key players in its construction. Perhaps that is why the Minnesota School has so often emphasized documentation, privileged immigrants’ viewpoints over theorizing, and

viewed story-telling (or collecting) and advocacy as ways to link university and the wider public. Without ignoring the broader themes and analytical frames (settlement, labor migration, race, forced migration) that connected the lives of many different groups of migrants, past and present, the Minnesota school's preference for what Blegen called "grass roots" approaches has often led its practitioners to examine cleavages and to hear minority voices within communities that might otherwise remain silent, whether for reasons of religion, gender, class, or race. Its persistent analysis of migration as an international movement surprises only those people who still insist, wrongly, on thinking of the American Midwest as either provincial or culturally white. Working with a new generation of students who are children of refugees from Africa or Southeast Asia or labor migrants from Central America—a local population quite unlike that of New York, Miami, Phoenix, or L.A.—scholars in the Twin Cities can best continue the unique trajectory of the Minnesota School by recognizing, embracing, and celebrating the work of their predecessors.

#### NOTES AND CITATIONS

\*I wish to thank my research assistant, Lisong Liu, who helped me explore the collections of Stephenson and Blegen in the University of Minnesota Archives in Andersen Library. For the early years of the Minnesota school, see

Gjerde, Jon. "New Growth on Old Vines-The State of the Field: The Social History of Immigration to and Ethnicity in the United States," *Journal of American Ethnic History*, summer 1999, vol. 18, #4, 40–65.

Vecoli, Rudolph J. “‘Over the years I have encountered the hazards and rewards that await the historian of immigration’: George Malcolm Stephenson and the Swedish-American Community,” *Swedish American Historical Quarterly*, 51, 2 (April 2000): 130-149.