

A. Fiń, *Shaping the knowledge of Polish and other Central European immigration in the US in the 21st century: Reflections on the margins of the books by Carl J. Bon Tempo and Hasia Diner, "Immigration: An American History", and Nancy Foner, "One Quarter of the Nation: Immigration and the Transformation of America"*, „Yearbook of the Institute of East-Central Europe” 23 (2025), issue 4, pp. 193–215, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.36874/RIESW.2025.4.8>

Anna Fiń*

Shaping the knowledge of Polish and other Central European immigration in the US in the 21st century: Reflections on the margins of the books by Carl J. Bon Tempo and Hasia Diner, *Immigration: An American History*, and Nancy Foner, *One Quarter of the Nation: Immigration and the Transformation of America*¹

Kształtowanie wiedzy o polskiej i innej środkowoeuropejskiej imigracji w USA w XXI wieku: Refleksje na marginesie książek Carla J. Bon Tempo i Hasii Diner, *Immigration: An American History* oraz Nancy Foner *One Quarter of the Nation: Immigration and the Transformation of America*

ABSTRACT:

This text problematises the approach to research on contemporary Polish immigration to the US and, consequently, other groups emigrating from Central and Eastern Europe. This analysis is informed by observations derived from two seminal publications that emerged in 2022 and focus on the history of immigration and its ramifications within the context of American society: Carl J. Bon Tempo, Hasia Diner, *Immigration: An American History*, and Nancy Foner, *One Quarter of*

* Anna Fiń – University of the National Education Commission, ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0366-6652>, e-mail: annafin@interia.pl; anna.fin@uken.krakow.pl.

¹ C.J. Bon Tempo, H. Diner, *Immigration: An American History*, New Haven 2022; N. Foner, *One Quarter of the Nation: Immigration and Transformation of America*, Princeton 2022.

the Nation: Immigration and the Transformation of America. Based on observations from these two books, the author reflects on ways of shaping knowledge about Polish immigration to the US in the early 21st century and possible future avenues of interpretation. The text emphasises the significance and application of history in the research and explanation of contemporary migration processes. Referring to the approaches presented in the discussed readings, the author attempts to identify three key thematic/analytical areas with a potential impact on the further development of research on recent Polish immigration to the US: the application of history in research on recent immigration, greater contextualisation of the analyses conducted, and the inclusion of the issues of knowledge production and reflexivity in research on Polish immigration to the US.

KEYWORDS:

Polish immigration in the US, Polonia studies, immigration from Central and Eastern Europe in the US, uses of history, knowledge production on migration, contextualisation

STRESZCZENIE:

Niniejszy tekst problematyzuje kwestie podejścia do badań nad współczesną polską imigracją w USA, a tym samym i innych grup emigrujących z Europy Środkowej oraz Wschodniej. Bazując na spostrzeżeniach wokół dwóch ważnych, opublikowanych w 2022 r. książek dotyczących historii imigracji oraz jej konsekwencji w społeczeństwie amerykańskim: Carl J. Bon Tempo, Hasia Diner, *Immigration. An American History* oraz Nancy Foner, *One Quarter of the Nation. Immigration and the Transformation of America*, autorka podejmuje refleksje dotyczące sposobów wytwarzania wiedzy o współczesnej polskiej imigracji w USA oraz możliwych, przyszłych dróg interpretacyjnych. W tekście uwypuklona zostaje rola zastosowania historii w badaniu i wyjaśnianiu współczesnych procesów migracyjnych. Odnosząc się do podejść zaprezentowanych w omawianych lekturach, autorka podejmuje próbę wskazania trzech zasadniczych obszarów tematycznych/analitycznych o potencjalnym wpływie na dalszy rozwój badań nad najnowszą polską imigracją w USA: zastosowania historii w badaniach najnowszej imigracji, większego ukontekstuwowania prowadzonych analiz oraz włączenia kwestii produkcji wiedzy i refleksyjności w badania nad polską imigracją w USA.

SŁOWA KLUCZOWE:

polska imigracja w USA, Polonia, imigracja z Europy Środkowej i Wschodniej w USA, zastosowanie historii, produkcja wiedzy o migracji, ukontekstowanie badań

1. Preliminary remarks

In 2022, two significant books were published that offer important insights into the study of immigration in American society. The first, *Immigration: An American History* by Carl J. Bon Tempo and Hasia Diner, provides a historical overview of migration to the United States, spanning from the 17th century to the present day. The second, *One Quarter of the Nation: Immigration and the Transformation of America* by Nancy Foner, presents a sociological analysis of the changing dynamics of immigration – its causes, consequences, and evolving patterns. Both works encourage a deeper sensitivity to viewing immigration as a *long durée*² phenomenon.

When read together, these books offer a comprehensive understanding of the shifting nature of American immigration and the driving forces behind those changes. They also illuminate how the changing character of immigration over more than two centuries has shaped American society. Moreover, this juxtaposition of historical and sociological perspectives creates a fruitful interdisciplinary dialogue, prompting a re-examination of how knowledge about specific immigrant and ethnic groups in the United States is produced. It situates this inquiry within broader contexts of change and transformation – in migration, politics, economics, culture, and society – not only within the US but also from a more global and transnational perspective.

The reading of these two books served as the inspiration for the present article. On one level, the text can be seen as a partial review of the aforementioned works. On another level, however, it aims – based on the discussion of these publications – to initiate a broader reflection on how research on Polish immigration to the United States might be conducted today, in the early 21st Century. This overarching question raises several more specific inquiries: What role does history play in generating knowledge about contemporary Polish immigration to the US? How do historical narratives about Polish immigrants and the Polish/American community (often referred to as Polonia) shape that knowledge? What is the role of US immigration historiography in this process? Which theoretical and analytical approaches should be considered when describing this immigrant group? And finally, the central question: Should we, in light of the perspectives presented in these

² M. Kula, *Migracje. Zmienne zjawisko długiego trwania*, “Przegląd Polonijny” 2007, no. 2, pp. 9–17.

two books, reconsider or even redefine our approach to the study of Polish immigration to the US – and by extension, to Polonia itself?

These questions – in the form of reflections, thoughts, and doubts – have accompanied my research for the past decade, during which I have examined the transformation of the Polish immigrant group in the US under the influence of new waves of immigration and shifts in its overall character. These changes were driven not so much by the 1989 political transformation in Central and Eastern Europe as by the accession of Poland and other Central European countries to the European Union in 2004. These questions can be extrapolated to other groups that have emigrated from Central and Eastern Europe. If, as argued by C. Bon Tempo and H. Diner³, the Cold War was a pivotal factor in shaping immigration to the US in the 20th century, then the expansion of the European Union (EU) in 2004, and its consequences, should be regarded as a similarly crucial factor in examining the transformation of European immigrant groups and contemporary emigration from Europe to the US. The questions delineated above fundamentally pose the issue of how to study the experiences of transatlantic migration to the US from Central and Eastern European countries in the context of these entirely novel geopolitical, economic, and sociocultural circumstances.

2. Immigration and One Quarter of the Nation, or what's new in US immigration research

Immigration: An American History and *One Quarter of the Nation* are part of the now extensive and rich body of literature devoted to immigration in the United States, its history, and related issues of ethnicity. While early studies on migration in the US were pioneered by sociologists and social anthropologists affiliated with the Chicago School, active since 1915, it was not until the groundbreaking works of historians such as Carl Wittke, Marcus Lee Hansen, and Oscar Handlin⁴ that a more synthetic and comprehensive view of American immigration history began to emerge. These authors helped

³ C.J. Bon Tempo, H. Diner, op. cit., p. 217, per: A. Fiń, *Polska imigracja w USA w okresie poakcesyjnym. Portret statystyczny i przyczyny wyjazdów*, "Studia Migracyjne – Przegląd Polonijny" 2024, no. 4, p. 79.

⁴ See C. Wittke, *We Who Built America: The Saga of the Immigrant*, New York 1939; M.L. Hansen, *The Immigrant in American History*, Cambridge 1940; O. Handlin, *The Uprooted*:

shape a particular way of thinking about American society and its various ethnic groups – a perspective that continues to resonate in the work of later immigration historians, such as Rudolph Vecoli, John Bodnar, Roger Daniels, and Frederick Binder.

C.J. Bon Tempo, H. Diner, and N. Foner contribute new and significant threads to this ongoing history of American immigration. Importantly, they contextualise and enrich the discourse by emphasising the element of social change. These authors, as highly experienced scholars in the field of migration studies, are uniquely positioned to draw upon the vast and evolving body of migration scholarship, theories of migration, and historiographical approaches. This enables them to adopt a more critical and discursive perspective on immigration in the US.

In their book *Immigration: An American History*, published by Yale University Press, C.J. Bon Tempo and H. Diner set out to provide a historical synthesis of immigration to the United States, covering the period from the early formation of American society to the present day. The book is structured around 13 chapters that, rather than adhering strictly to chronology (though a chronological framework is maintained), focus on illustrating the continuity of immigration in US history and concentrate on specific themes central to understanding immigration and ethnic history. As a result, already in the first three chapters – dedicated to the 18th century and the first half of the 19th century – the authors present information not only about European newcomers (typically dominant in historical accounts of immigration during that period) but also about the arrival of Chinese and Mexican migrants. From the outset, then, the authors introduce the reader to the intertwined issues of ethnic origin and race, as well as the complex relationships between these categories.

In the chapters that follow, the interaction between race and ethnicity becomes even more pronounced, especially in the context of evolving immigration legislation, state policy, and economic conditions. For instance, Chapters 9 and 10 provide a detailed account of the development and dynamics of the Bracero Program – a government initiative aimed at addressing labour shortages in the US by recruiting Mexican workers under short-term contracts to work in agriculture and the railroad industry.

The Epic Story of the Great Migrations that made the American People, 2nd ed., Philadelphia 2002.

Running from 1942 to 1965, the Bracero Program not only had economic consequences – fuelling American capitalism, a link the authors underscore from the book's earliest chapters – but also left a lasting impact on the character of Mexican immigration and the social situation of the Mexican-American community. In their nuanced account of the Bracero Program, Bon Tempo and Diner also illustrate the emergence of unauthorised migration routes from Mexico and the phenomenon of temporary migration to the US – topics which, as they point out in the concluding chapters, remain under-researched and still await comprehensive scholarly attention.

Using the example of Jewish and Italian immigrants from Europe, Bon Tempo and Diner illustrate the fluidity of the category of race – showing how, in response to shifting political, economic, and social contexts, members of these groups gradually “became white”. This theme recalls Noel Ignatiev’s influential and provocatively titled book *How the Irish Became White*⁵, and draws attention to the complex nature of intergroup and interracial relations in the United States. Bon Tempo and Diner do not shy away from this issue. On the contrary, it runs throughout nearly every chapter of *Immigration: An American History* and is closely tied to their analysis of the role of religion in both immigration patterns and the development of immigration regulations. As they write about the early stages of US immigration, “Religion shaped this era’s immigration”⁶.

Moreover, the intricacies of intergroup relations serve as a framework for examining changing public attitudes toward immigrants and immigration, including the rise of nativist politics. While Chapter 6 is devoted entirely to public sentiment toward immigrants, the topic is also skilfully woven into other chapters, illustrating how anti-immigrant discourse and increasingly restrictive immigration policies developed over time.

The history of the establishment of The Office of the Superintendent of Immigration in 1891; the opening of Angel Island in San Francisco in 1910 (which, as Bon Tempo and Diner suggest, functioned less as a port of entry and more as a mechanism for exclusion and deportation, particularly of Asian immigrants); the categorisation of people deemed “inadmissible” (such as anarchists, beggars, the physically and mentally ill, homosexuals, unaccompanied minors, and the sick); the creation of a quota-based system

⁵ N. Ignatiev, *How the Irish became white*, New York 1995.

⁶ C.J. Bon Tempo, H. Diner, op. cit., p. 34.

and the increasing selectivity of admissions up to the more contemporary consequences of the 1965 immigration policy reforms – are in fact an in-depth analysis of the political, ideological, and legislative forces shaping immigration – along with their real-world impact on individual lives. In the book's conclusion, the authors clearly state: "Throughout American history, the state – that constellation of federal, state, and local governance – shaped immigration. It regulated, or chose not to regulate, entry to the United States. It outlined who could stay, and who could become a citizen, and as such, the state held great powers to shape the decisions of those immigrating"⁷. This is a critical insight. It reminds us that the histories of individual immigrant groups cannot be analysed apart from the broader dynamics of immigration policy and state interests. It also highlights the significant influence that political forces exert on migration decisions.

Although Bon Tempo and Diner do not explicitly draw upon the existing theoretical apparatus of migration studies, their narrative resonates with many key concepts explaining the nature of migration processes. These include the classic push-pull model, more recent economic paradigms, migration networks, the idea of migration capital, and transnationalism. It is evident that, as historians, they engage deeply with insights from the social sciences.

David A. Gerber, in the preface to his 2013 book *Ethnic Historians and the Mainstream: Shaping America's Immigration Story*, wrote: "The immigrants' histories did not begin in the United States, but rather in their homelands"⁸. With this statement, he drew attention to the role of the migration system – that is, the complex web of relations between sending and receiving countries – and to transnational connections in generating migration to the US. Bon Tempo and Diner deepen this thread by offering compelling examples, including cases of emigration from Poland, Germany, and Mexico (among others). "No history of immigration would be complete without thinking about the ongoing conversations between sending and receiving societies"⁹ they argue, proceeding to demonstrate, through specific examples, how macrohistorical, geopolitical, and global trends have significantly influenced

⁷ Ibid., pp. 362–363.

⁸ D.A. Gerber, *Introduction*, [in:] A.M. Kraut, D.A. Gerber (eds.), *Ethnic Historians and the Mainstream: Shaping America's Immigration Story*, New Brunswick 2013, p. 5.

⁹ C.J. Bon Tempo, H. Diner, op. cit., p. 7.

migration flows. Moreover, these global forces have proven essential in enabling ethnic mobilisation. Using the examples of Poles, Armenians, and Italians, the authors conceptualise ethnic mobilisation not only as a reaction to discrimination, the formation of organised ethnic communities, or ethnic revival, but also as a result of emerging transnational ties, homeland connections, and the global nature of migration. In this regard, Bon Tempo and Diner appear to emphasise the “global nature of the United States’ immigration history”¹⁰ more clearly than many earlier historians of migration and ethnicity. These conclusions are particularly important for scholars studying Polish immigration to the US – especially its most recent iterations, as will be discussed further in the following section.

Given the above, it can be stated that Bon Tempo and Diner’s book represents an intriguing example of the transformation of American immigration historiography – from an ethnification of this history to a more synthetic, cross-sectional depiction of immigration. This transition is characterised by the treatment of immigration in terms of diversity, social change, and the profound political, global, legal, and economic frameworks that shape it. The discerning reader may find the epilogue of the book somewhat disappointing; after engaging with the preceding chapters, one might have expected a more daring and definitive interpretative stance. Instead, the authors conclude their analysis with a relatively optimistic and generalised claim that three main factors have historically drawn people to the United States – and continue to do so: political and religious freedom, economic opportunities, and the vision of a better life¹¹. In light of the extensive body of literature on the mechanisms driving contemporary migratory movements – and taking into account the profound global transformations of recent decades in the social, economic, and political spheres – these categories seem not so much outdated as insufficient for fully explaining the complexities of present-day mobility. Moreover, *Immigration: An American History* leaves the reader somewhat wanting in terms of its treatment of immigration’s impact on American culture, public institutions, and politics. What is underexplored in Bon Tempo and Diner’s work, however, is thoroughly addressed in *One Quarter of the Nation: Immigration and the Transformation of America* by Nancy Foner.

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 8.

¹¹ C.J. Bon Tempo, H. Diner, op. cit., p. 362.

Published by Princeton University Press, *One Quarter of the Nation* is guided by a central theme showing the impact that immigrants from around the world have had on American society – its culture, economy, politics, and everyday life. The topic is developed across seven chapters, each offering the reader insight into a key sphere of American life influenced by immigration. Chapter 2, for example, explores immigration's effects on the racial order and on racial and intergroup relations in the US. Chapter 3 addresses the relationship between migration and the development and transformation of American cities. Subsequent chapters examine the mutual interactions of immigration with economic life, culture, the arts, and political institutions.

While Foner's perspective overlaps in some respects with Bon Tempo and Diner's – particularly in her attention to the legal, global, and structural contexts of immigration – it differs in one key emphasis: she treats immigration primarily as a driver of social change. Whereas Bon Tempo and Diner ask how immigration to the US has evolved and under what influences, Foner poses a different question: What broad social transformations has immigration produced within American society? In his commentary on Foner's book, the prominent American sociologist and migration scholar Richard Alba rightly observed that “the book disproves a common point of view, which holds that immigration does not change the receiving society fundamentally because its institutional foundations are generally unaffected”¹².

Drawing on an impressive range of data, scholarly literature, and her own long-standing research experience, Foner convincingly demonstrates that the arrival of different immigrant groups has left a lasting mark on the American urban landscape – not only by changing its aesthetics and reshaping space but also by establishing new institutions and influencing everyday practices, behavioural patterns, and cultural life. The latter receives particularly close attention. Foner explores not only how immigration has transformed cultural norms, but also how immigrants have helped drive the American cultural industry itself. Immigrants and their descendants have played formative roles in shaping Hollywood and the broader sphere of popular culture. Today, many of them are recognised as leading figures in American art and culture (Andy Warhol, to name just one). This approach is especially compelling because it frames immigrants as agents in the creation of cultural

¹² R. Alba, *A two-way street: Nancy Foner, One Quarter of the Nation: Immigration and the Transformation of America*, “Patterns of Prejudice” 2023, no. 1–2, p. 99.

heritage – both at the national level and within specific American cities. This perspective represents a shift in emphasis: whereas migration studies have traditionally focused on how immigrant groups preserve the cultural heritage of their countries of origin, Foner explores how immigrants have contributed to the creation of new cultural elements that, over time, become part of the receiving society's own heritage. Throughout every chapter of the book, immigrants are portrayed as sources of innovation and transformation within American society. Foner articulates this vision clearly, writing: "Immigration is entwined with the evolution of American society in every era of our history... Throughout American history, immigration has driven fundamental changes in this country's culture, institutions, and values"¹³. This approach, I believe, could also be successfully applied in research on Polish immigration to the United States.

Another important analytical theme emerging in *One Quarter of the Nation* is the use of history within this sociological study of the dynamics of immigrant influence on American society. Those familiar with Nancy Foner's work will not be surprised by this emphasis. The author of *One Quarter of the Nation* has previously published several influential articles¹⁴ addressing the applicability of historical perspectives in migration research – particularly within sociology. Indeed, her overall approach to studying migration and ethnicity (which is clearly present throughout this book) could be aptly summarised by the words of Cracow-based sociologist Władysław Kwaśniewicz: "against the marginalization of the historical perspective"¹⁵. Foner's position

¹³ N. Foner, *One Quarter of the Nation...*, p. 2.

¹⁴ See, i.a., N. Foner, *Then and Now or Then to Now: Immigration to New York in Contemporary and Historical Perspective*, "Journal of American Ethnic History" 2006, vol. 25, pp. 33–47; eadem, *The uses and abuses of history: Understanding contemporary U.S. immigration*, "Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies" 2019, no. 1, pp. 4–20; eadem, *The Challenge and Promise of Past-Present Comparisons*, "Journal of American Ethnic History" 2006, no. 4, pp. 142–152; C. Bertossi, J.W. Duyvendak, N. Foner, *Past in the present: Migration and the uses of history in the contemporary era*, "Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies" 2021, no. 18, pp. 4155–4171.

¹⁵ Władysław Kwaśniewicz is the author of a thought-provoking article published in "Studia Socjologiczne", in which he offers a critique of the dominant sociological approach of the 1970s – a trend characterised by a focus on analysing primarily current trends and phenomena, often relying heavily on quantitative research methods, without adequately exploring their historical roots and underlying dynamics. His reflections, articulated in what can be seen as a kind of manifesto, call for a reintegration of historical grounding into the analysis of contemporary social phenomena. See W. Kwaśniewicz, *Przeciw lek-*

is not only decidedly historical, but she also attributes a central role to history in the study of migration phenomena. In one of her earlier works, she argues that “the ability to be sensitive to history is one important criterion against which the scholarship on current immigration and multiculturalism can be evaluated”¹⁶. At the same time, Foner distinguishes between two principal ways of using history in the analysis of immigration: the “then and now” approach and the “then to now”¹⁷ approach. The first is comparative in nature, relying on contrasts and continuities between past and present to highlight similarities and differences. The second, which Foner refers to as the historical “becoming” approach¹⁸, allows researchers to trace how changes over time help explain contemporary migration experiences and phenomena.

In *One Quarter of the Nation*, this historical perspective is central to Foner’s analytical framework. It allows her to grasp the dynamic nature of immigrant influence across various spheres of American society. In describing the multifaceted contexts in which immigrants shape the functioning of the United States, Foner adopts a dialectical approach: she identifies parallels and differences between the activities of past and present immigrants, while also emphasising the processual character of migration phenomena. For instance, she highlights the fact that certain immigrant experiences offering theoretical perspectives that guide research – such as the formation of ethnic communities – have a universal dimension. Immigrants in the interwar period experienced the consequences of restrictive immigration policies in ways that closely resemble the experiences of immigrants today. The paths toward integration into American society were difficult at the beginning of both the 20th and the 21st centuries. Similarly, immigrants played a foundational role in building the American railroad system in the early 20th century, just as they have in the explosive growth of Silicon Valley in recent decades. At the same time, Foner compellingly shows how earlier waves of immigrants shaped the conditions for those who arrived after them. In doing so, she suggests that immigrant groups are not ahistorical entities; rather, they have been continuously evolving and acting as agents of social, cultural, economic, and political transformation throughout the course of US history.

ceważeniu historycznego punktu widzenia w badaniach socjologicznych, “Studia Socjologiczne” 1982, no. 1–2, pp. 5–30.

¹⁶ Ch. Bertossi, J.W. Duyvendak, N. Foner, op. cit., p. 4158.

¹⁷ N. Foner, *Then and Now or Then to Now...*

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 33.

Through *One Quarter of the Nation*, Foner convincingly demonstrates the value of incorporating history into the analysis of contemporary migration phenomena. Her oft-cited term “historical sensitivity” refers precisely to the applicability of historical perspectives in sociological migration research. This approach broadens our understanding of immigration and ethnic history, and in doing so, deepens our insight into the experiences of migrants – especially contemporary ones. It also yields significant theoretical benefits. As Foner writes in one of her articles: “Past–present comparisons, which inevitably involve going beyond disciplinary boundaries, can enrich and invigorate the field of US immigration and ethnic history by raising new questions, offering new insights, and providing a way to evaluate, and perhaps further develop, theoretical perspectives that guide research”¹⁹.

Both *Immigration: An American History* by Bon Tempo and Diner, and *One Quarter of the Nation* by Foner, serve as excellent examples of how the erosion of disciplinary boundaries can lead to more comprehensive and nuanced understandings of social phenomena. Few other works manage to link past and present so effectively – particularly in the field of migration studies, which has often been criticised for its fragmentary nature and a disproportionate focus on the “here” and “now”.

Focusing on the processual and dynamic aspects of migration brings to the forefront crucial questions about a pressing issue in contemporary migration studies: the categorisation and classification of immigrant groups. Both books show how the classification of immigrants has shifted in tandem with changing social moods, political climates, and institutional contexts. They not only examine who has been defined as an immigrant – and who has not – but also trace the evolution of narratives surrounding ethnic, racial, and national-origin categories. Both Bon Tempo and Diner, as well as Foner, offer powerful illustrations of how immigration history is inextricably tied to the labelling and categorisation of immigrant groups. One could argue that immigration itself has been, and continues to be, shaped and regulated through these acts of labelling. Bon Tempo and Diner, for example, show how the category of Central European immigrants, which was still present in pre-war US census records, all but disappeared from statistical databases and public discourse in the post-Yalta period²⁰. The authors highlight the

¹⁹ N. Foner, *The Challenge and Promise...*, p. 142.

²⁰ See the table in C.J. Bon Tempo, H. Diner, op. cit., p. 163.

fluidity and ambiguity of such classifications through numerous other examples – Jews, Italians, Latinos, Black and white populations, and the distinction between “old” and “new” European immigration, or the pre- and post-1965 waves of immigration demarcated by the Hart-Celler Act. Both books offer compelling evidence for the socially and politically constructed nature of these categories, as well as their historical mutability.

Two years after the publication of *Immigration* and *One Quarter of the Nation*, Anne-Katrin Will engaged in a critical reflection on the function of categorisation in the production of knowledge about migration. She demonstrated that such categories are often overly simplistic and fail to reflect the complexity of migration as a phenomenon and the diversity of migrant populations²¹. Moreover, Will underscored the ambivalent and utilitarian nature of these classifications: statisticians in official agencies, for instance, often possess significant latitude in constructing them, and such categories constitute a “crucial part of ruling and re-enacting power asymmetries”²².

Scholars in the field have also emphasised that categories – and related naming practices – carry significant social, economic, and political consequences. They shape not only the lived experiences of individuals but also the very production of knowledge about migration processes²³. Researchers note that the logic guiding the construction and application of such categories is frequently reductionist and value-laden, contributing to the formation of interpretive frameworks²⁴ that can influence the perspectives of scholars themselves. If we also take into account the fact that “migration is a socially generated, historically specific, and changeable phenomenon”²⁵, it becomes clear how the mismatch between classification systems and evolving social conditions – or the reliance on historically dominant discourses, or what

²¹ A.-K. Will, *Challenging knowledge production on migration with stactivism: The category ‘migration background’ and some destabilizations*, “Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies” 2024, no. 9, pp. 2247–2267.

²² Ibid., p. 2250.

²³ See A. Amelina, *Knowledge production for whom? Doing migrations, colonialities and standpoints in non-hegemonic migration research*, “Ethnic and Racial Studies” 2022, no. 13, pp. 2393–2415; J. Dahinden, C. Fischer, J. Menet, *Knowledge production, reflexivity, and the use of categories in migration studies: Tackling challenges in the field*, “Ethnic and Racial Studies” 2021, no. 4, pp. 535–554.

²⁴ A.-K. Will, op. cit; J. Dahinden, C. Fischer, J. Menet, op. cit; N. Amelung, S. Scheel, R. van Reekum, *Reinventing the politics of knowledge production in migration studies: Introduction to the special issue*, “Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies” 2024, no. 9, pp. 2163–2187.

²⁵ A. Amelina, op. cit., p. 2406.

Foner has termed *historical repertoires*²⁶ – can lead to excessive generalisations in scholarly interpretation. One illustrative example is the way European immigrant groups in the United States have been classified according to rigid regional divisions, which have in turn shaped public and academic thinking about those groups. The dichotomy between “old” (Western and Northern Europe) and “new” (Central, Eastern, and Southern Europe) European immigration not only shaped American societal perceptions of different European groups but also determined their social status for decades, influenced public narratives, and became a longstanding foundation for scholarly interpretations.

Another example is the politically driven classification of immigrants from Central and Eastern Europe as “Eastern Europeans”, a designation tied to Cold War-era affiliations with the so-called “Eastern Bloc”²⁷. As a result, many contemporary analyses and interpretations of these immigrant groups in the US continue to be framed within socialist or post-socialist contexts – even though thirty-six years have passed since the fall of the Iron Curtain²⁸, and profound geopolitical, socio-cultural, and economic changes have occurred in the meantime²⁹. This persistence of outdated interpretive

²⁶ In migration research, the concept of *historical repertoires* refers to the ways in which views of the past are mobilised to interpret and justify the present. Historical repertoires function as framing processes through which multiple narratives are produced and subsequently employed in public, political, and academic discourse. see C. Bertossi, J.W. Duyvendak, N. Foner, op. cit., p. 4155.

²⁷ It is worth noting the ambiguity and fluidity of this classification criterion: for example, Germany is excluded, despite the fact that half of the country (the GDR) was located behind the “Iron Curtain”. I have discussed this issue in greater detail elsewhere (see A. Fiń, op. cit.).

²⁸ See, i.a., M. Robila, *Eastern European Immigrant Families*, New York 2010; N. Michalikova, *New Eastern European Immigrants in the United States*, New York, 2017, J. Batalova, F. Oyolola, *European Immigrants in the United States*, Migration Information Source, Migration Policy Institute, 2024, <https://www.migrationpolicy.org/article/european-immigrants-united-states-2022> [21.08.2024].

²⁹ Recently, migration scholarship has seen a growing number of critical voices addressing the inertia of many foundational assumptions, the tendency to replicate rather than challenge them, and the appropriation and transformation of migration narratives for the purposes of academic consumption. See, i.a., I. Danewid, *White Innocence in the Black Mediterranean: Hospitality and the Erasure of History*, “Third World Quarterly” 2017, no. 7, pp. 1674–1689; C. Lenette, *Arts-Based Methods in Refugee Research: Creating Sanctuary*, Singapore 2019, pp. 27–56; F. Wiedemann, *Migration and Narration: How European Historians in the nineteenth and early twentieth Centuries Told the History of Human Mass Migrations or Völkerwanderungen*, “History and Theory” 2020, no. 1, pp. 42–60.

frameworks prevents scholars from recognising new dimensions of immigrant life and experience – especially those of the most recent arrivals. In her discussion of the role of history in the study of contemporary migration phenomena, Nancy Foner warned against what she termed the *abuses of history*³⁰. In her view, while history profoundly shapes our understanding of present-day migration, its application should not lead to analytical or interpretive simplifications or generalisations. Within this context, one of the key challenges is to engage in critical reflection on the ways in which specific immigrant groups are studied, as well as on the analytical strategies adopted. The books under discussion undoubtedly encourage such reflection and, indirectly, they prompt scholars to pursue more self-aware and critically engaged research on various immigrant groups in the United States. It would not be an overstatement to suggest that both volumes will take their place within the canon of American migration and ethnic historiography.

3. History, knowledge production, and research on early 21st-century Polish immigration to the US: Concluding reflections

To conclude, I would like to return to the questions outlined in the introduction of this article and consider the potential impact the approaches presented in the discussed works have on the development of research into recent Polish immigration to the United States. My aim is not to reinvent the wheel, but rather to highlight certain *analytical sensitivities* generated by the latest advancements in migration studies – sensitivities that may, in the future, enrich our understanding of the Polish immigrant group. I will briefly address three thematic areas referenced in this article: the application of history in studies of recent immigration, the need for deeper contextualisation of analyses, and the inclusion of knowledge production and reflexivity in research on Polish immigration to the US.

³⁰ In the context of migration research, this term refers to various distortions and inaccuracies resulting from the use of history as a resource in formulating claims about the current situation of migrants, as well as distortions related to prevailing ways of perceiving the history of immigration (particularly in the United States). See N. Foner, *The uses and abuses...*, p. 4.

The first aspect might be summarised as “*against the marginalization of the historical perspective*” in studies of contemporary Polish immigration to the United States. The works presented here offer ample evidence of the benefits that historical perspective brings to the study of more recent waves of immigration. When it comes to research on Polish immigration – understood as a *longue durée* group within the history of American immigration and society – two previously discussed perspectives could be successfully applied. The first, which examines the processual dynamics of change within the Polish community in the US, would allow scholars to trace how the group has evolved over decades, how its character has shifted, and how these transformations have been shaped by legislative, social, economic, political, global, and transnational contexts. The second perspective, which considers immigrant groups as active agents of socio-cultural, economic, and political innovation and change, would allow us to analyse the shifting influence of Polish immigrants across various sectors of American society. It would be essential here to examine the specific domains in which that influence has been felt – and those in which it has not. What elements of the host society’s cultural heritage have been co-created through the presence of Polish immigrants? What innovations or tangible transformations can be attributed to their agency? It must also be acknowledged that certain individuals, events, actions, or cultural products may hold significance for the immigrant group but not for the receiving society³¹. Conversely, some contributions by

³¹ It is evident that there is a substantial body of literature addressing the subject of Polish immigrants in American society and the transformation of the Polonia within the context of American society. This literature includes numerous examples of the presence of Poles and Polish Americans in American cities and culture (see, i.a., E. Barczyk (ed.), *Footprints of Polonia: Polish Historical Sites Across North America*, New York 2022, or J. Wojdon, *Polish American History after 1939: Polish American History from 1854 to 2004. Volume 2*, New York 2024 [this is particularly relevant in the final chapter of the book]). Nevertheless, the proposed perspective, in which the immigrant group is conceptualised in terms of an active actor producing specific elements of the cultural heritage of the host society, is a relatively recent development. It is only recently that more comprehensive theoretical and empirical works have begun to appear, integrating research on cultural heritage into issues of migration and mobility, and postulating the agency of immigrants in the production of cultural heritage (see more K. Nikielska-Sekula, *Migrating heritage? Recreating ancestral and new homeland heritage in the practices of immigrant minorities*, “International Journal of Heritage Studies” 2019, no. 11, pp. 1113–1127, M. Banaszkiewicz, K. Nikielska-Sekula (eds.), *Cultural Heritage and Mobility from a Multisensory Perspective*, New York 2025). In view of the above, the mentioned perspective also seems extremely promising for research on the Polish immigrant group in the USA in the early 21st century.

members of the immigrant community may prove important to the host society, even if they hold lesser meaning for the group itself – yet these contributions still have the potential to shape broader societal transformations. A historical approach would allow researchers to capture such nuances. Moreover, it could offer a foundation for speculating about future developments within the group. As Nancy Foner aptly observes: “History, in fact, can deepen and expand our understanding of the contemporary immigrant (...) it can also provide some useful hints about the future”³².

The incorporation of history into the study of contemporary Polish immigration to the United States also calls for a clearer *contextualisation* of this phenomenon. By *contextualisation*, I refer to two interrelated aspects: first, the need to embed analyses more deeply within the framework of broader socio-cultural, historical, political, and global transformations, including changes in both sending and receiving societies as well as the relationships between them; and second, the necessity of integrating recent theoretical perspectives and research approaches developed within the field of migration studies into research on Polish immigration to the US.

As Bon Tempo and Diner note, “the dynamic relationship between sending and receiving countries and regions shaped every immigrant’s experiences and the places they came to and from”³³. This perspective is not entirely new. Proposals to treat migration “as a complex social process, intrinsic to broader processes of socioeconomic, technological, political, and demographic transformation”³⁴ have periodically emerged in migration scholarship. My aim here is to emphasise the importance of more deliberately applying such approaches in studies of contemporary Polish immigration to the US, in order to avoid interpretative tendencies that lean toward overgeneralisation. Within this context, analyses based on socialist and post-socialist frameworks may require further reflection – or even revision. Poland’s global repositioning, brought about by a series of socio-cultural, legal, and economic changes following globalisation, its accession to NATO, and particularly its entry into the European Union in 2004, has had significant implications for

³² N. Foner, *The uses and abuses...*, p. 4.

³³ C. Bon Tempo, H. Diner, op. cit., p. 8.

³⁴ M.D. Smith, L. Wool, *The Power of Participation and the Co-Production of Knowledge in Migration Research: A Critical Reflection on Methods*, “International Migration Review” 2025, p. 6; see also A. Triandafyllidou et al., *Rethinking Migration Studies for 2050*, “Journal of Immigrant & Refugee Studies” 2023, no. 1, pp. 1–21.

migration phenomena and processes. These shifts have influenced multiple dimensions of migration, including the composition of migratory flows, migration decision-making, and the legal and social status of migrants. At the same time, American society has undergone its own transformations over the past thirty-six years, and these developments must be taken into account in research on early 21st-century Polish immigration to the United States. They represent key factors for understanding both the evolution of the Polish immigrant group and current migration patterns from Europe to America.

A stronger contextual orientation could also help move migration analyses beyond the dominant narrative in American migration historiography, which often frames immigration in terms of a contrast between the “Old” and “New” Worlds. This dichotomy, shaped by the discourse of *American exceptionalism*, sometimes exaggerates the differences between the two spheres³⁵. Reframing analyses in this way would increase the applicability of contemporary theoretical perspectives emerging from migration research. One such perspective is that of *superdiversity*, which facilitates a nuanced understanding of group complexity along multiple dimensions such as gender, race, class, legal status, language, sexual orientation, migration motivations, immigrant identities, and the multifaceted processes and pathways of integration – both with the host society and within the immigrant group itself³⁶. Many scholars of immigration and ethnicity argue that this concept holds the potential for “bringing new perspectives to familiar issues and advancing our understanding of social processes by reconstituting our perceptual field and identifying connections not previously seen or emphasized”³⁷. This appears to be a highly promising direction for the analysis of contemporary Polish immigration today.

When discussing the applicability of recent advances in migration studies to research on Polish immigration in the United States, one cannot overlook the widely debated – already mentioned in this text – *perspectives on knowledge production and reflexivity*. As early as 2003, Ewa Morawska, following

³⁵ See, i.a., A. Molho, G.S. Wood, *Introduction*, [in:] eidem (eds.), *Imagined Histories. American Historians Interpret the Past*, Princeton 1998, p. 4, and N. Foner, R. Alba, *Comparing Immigrant Integration in North America and Western Europe: How Much Do the Grand Narratives Tell Us?*, “International Migration Review” 2014, vol. 48, pp. 268–273.

³⁶ S. Vertovec, *Superdiversity: Migration and Social Complexity*, New York 2023.

³⁷ N. Foner, J.W. Duyvendak, P. Kasinitz, *Introduction: super-diversity in everyday life*, “Ethnic and Racial Studies” 2019, no. 1, p. 2.

Herbert Gans, called for deeper reflection on the epistemological foundations of immigration research³⁸. However, it is only relatively recently that the question of how knowledge about migration processes and phenomena is produced has been integrated on a broader scale into the field of migration studies. According to scholars specialising in this domain, engaging with the production of migration knowledge requires the inclusion of *reflexivity*³⁹, understood as a research attitude that distances itself from established ideas, concepts, and categories. It involves critical reflection on one's research objects, data interpretations, and prevailing theories. As argued in the literature⁴⁰, "Reflexive migration research asks how the historical development, political interconnectedness and material conditions of knowledge production on migration both in scholarship and beyond affect the categories and assumptions with which migration is presented as a social and political reality"⁴¹. Within this approach, scholars examine, for example, the multi-perspectival nature of naming practices, the contexts in which categorisations emerge and function, the participatory role of research subjects in the research process, and the representations of migration across various forms of discourse. This includes not only academic but also non-academic knowledge production practices⁴².

Because the aim of these approaches is to enhance the value of research and deepen the understanding of migration, it is important that studies on Polish immigration in the US remain open to them. This is especially pertinent given Joanna Wojdon's apt observation that "there is no single correct way to adequately present Polish Americans. Instead, there have existed a multitude of stories and perspectives"⁴³. Embedded in this plurality are discursive patterns such as the lens of *American exceptionalism*, the tendency to frame Polish immigration to the US as a transition into a more modern, developed, and promising society, or to interpret migration as a kind of mission with obligations to the country of origin (as in the concept of the

³⁸ See E. Morawska, *Disciplinary Agendas and Analytic Strategies of Research on Immigrant Transnationalism: Challenges of Interdisciplinary Knowledge*, "The International Migration Review" 2003, no. 3, pp. 611–640.

³⁹ See, i.a., J. Dahinden, C. Fischer, J. Menet, op. cit.; A. Amelina, op. cit.

⁴⁰ See more J. Dahinden, C. Fischer, J. Menet, op. cit., p. 536.

⁴¹ L. Stielike et al., *Rethinking the production of knowledge on migration: A moral economies approach*, "Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies" 2025, no. 10, p. 2507.

⁴² See more J. Dahinden, C. Fischer, J. Menet, op. cit.

⁴³ J. Wojdon, *Polish American History...*, p. 2.

“Fourth Partition”, biographies of activist figures, or monographs on ethnic organisations). Even the concept of *Polonia* itself could be viewed as part of these established frameworks (though, of course, the examples listed here are not exhaustive⁴⁴). It is also significant that much of the research in this field has been conducted by individuals in various ways affiliated with Polonia. In this context, introducing knowledge production and reflexive perspectives into the study of Polish immigration in the US could offer valuable insights. Particularly compelling would be research focused on migration narratives (understood as representations of migration), the historiography and narrativity of Polish migration in the US, and the narrative structures underlying the scholarly discourse on this subject. Such analyses have not yet been pursued, but they would undoubtedly contribute meaningfully to the study of migration in the early 21st century. Once again, this is a topic that would likely benefit from collaboration between social scientists and historians. The books discussed in this paper have shown that such interdisciplinary engagement is not only possible but indeed productive. With the development of research on Polish immigration in the US – and more broadly, of *Polonia studies* as a branch of migration research – it is worth bearing in mind the increasingly emphasised view that “academic migration research should make knowledge production an essential part of its research agenda if it wants to remain relevant in the transnational field of migration research”⁴⁵.

In summary, the principal objective of this text was to illustrate the conceptual and analytical assumptions underlying the study of Polish immigration to the United States in the early 21st century, in the context of two seminal publications – Carl J. Bon Tempo and Hasia Diner’s *Immigration: An American History* and Nancy Foner’s *One Quarter of the Nation: Immigration and the Transformation of America* – that address immigration in the United States, its transformations, and its impact on American society. The present volume provides a significant source of inspiration for the development of approaches to researching Polish immigrants in the United States. An attempt has been made to demonstrate how the implementation

⁴⁴ See more M.P. Erdmans, “So They Will Know Their Heritage”: A Review of Contemporary Research on Polish Americans, 1995–2015, “Polish American Studies” 2016, no. 1, pp. 31–46; J. Wojdon, *Stan i perspektywy badań nad Polonią amerykańską po 1939 roku*, [in:] S. Łukasiewicz (ed.), *Polska emigracja polityczna 1939–1990: Stan badań*, Warsaw 2016, pp. 426–471.

⁴⁵ N. Amelung, S. Scheel, R. van Reekum, op. cit., p. 2163.

of certain assumptions or approaches presented by the authors of the books discussed can enrich Polonia studies and expand knowledge about the current situation and condition of individual Central European groups in the United States. In order to respond to the question posed in the introduction of the article – namely, which analytical approaches should be considered when describing this immigrant group? – the following three fundamental research/analytical postulates are proposed on the basis of the analyses conducted herein: a) The applicability of history (the postulate “against the marginalization of the historical perspective”) in the analysis of contemporary Polish immigration in the USA, which will allow for two things: firstly, monitoring the processes of transformation of the diaspora and the immigrant group; and secondly, capturing the scope of its impact on the host society; b) A broader *contextualization*, which will enable the inclusion of new research perspectives and a move beyond established patterns, descriptive frameworks, and dominant narratives (in particular, I assign a special role here to moving beyond the constraints of the socialist and post-socialist context); and c) The integration of issues pertaining to knowledge production and reflexivity into Polish diaspora research, which in turn allows for the incorporation of new research areas into its scope, thereby contributing to the further development of the field. These three postulates hold considerable potential for application in analyses of other Central European groups.

References:

- Alba R., *A two-way street: Nancy Foner, One Quarter of the Nation: Immigration and the Transformation of America*, “Patterns of Prejudice” 2023, no. 1–2, pp. 99–101.
- Amelina A., *Knowledge production for whom? Doing migrations, colonialities and standpoints in non-hegemonic migration research*, “Ethnic and Racial Studies” 2022, no. 13, pp. 2393–2415.
- Amelung N., Scheel S., Van Reekum R., *Reinventing the politics of knowledge production in migration studies: Introduction to the special issue*, “Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies” 2024, no. 9, pp. 2163–2187.
- Banaszkiewicz M., Nikielska-Sekula K. (eds.), *Cultural Heritage and Mobility from a Multisensory Perspective*, New York 2025.
- Barczyk E. (ed.), *Footprints of Polonia: Polish Historical Sites Across North America*, New York 2022.

- Batalova J., Oyolola F., *European Immigrants in the United States*, Migration Information Source, Migration Policy Institute, 2024, <https://www.migrationpolicy.org/article/european-immigrants-united-states-2022> [21.08.2024].
- Bertossi C., Duyvendak J.W., Foner N., *Past in the present: Migration and the uses of history in the contemporary era*, "Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies" 2021, no. 18, pp. 4155–4171.
- Dahinden J., Fischer C., Menet J., *Knowledge production, reflexivity, and the use of categories in migration studies: Tackling challenges in the field*, "Ethnic and Racial Studies" 2021, no. 4, pp. 535–554.
- Danewid I., *White Innocence in the Black Mediterranean: Hospitality and the Erasure of History*, "Third World Quarterly" 2017, no. 7, pp. 1674–1689.
- Diner H., Bon Tempo C., *Immigration: An American History*, New Haven 2022.
- Erdmans M.P., "So They Will Know Their Heritage": A Review of Contemporary Research on Polish Americans, 1995–2015, "Polish American Studies" 2016, no. 1, pp. 31–46.
- Fiń A., *Polska imigracja w USA w okresie poakcesyjnym: Portret statystyczny i przyczyny wyjazdów*, "Studia Migracyjne – Przegląd Polonijny" 2024, no. 4, pp. 75–103.
- Foner N., *One Quarter of the Nation: Immigration and Transformation of America*, Princeton 2022.
- Foner N., *The Challenge and Promise of Past-Present Comparisons*, "Journal of American Ethnic History" 2006, no. 4, pp. 142–152.
- Foner N., *The uses and abuses of history: Understanding contemporary U.S. immigration*, "Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies" 2019, no. 1, pp. 4–20.
- Foner N., *Then and Now or Then to Now: Immigration to New York in Contemporary and Historical Perspective*, "Journal of American Ethnic History" 2006, vol. 25, pp. 33–47.
- Foner N., Alba R., *Comparing Immigrant Integration in North America and Western Europe: How Much Do the Grand Narratives Tell Us?*, "International Migration Review" 2014, vol. 48, pp. 263–291.
- Foner N., Duyvendak J.W., Kasinitz P., *Introduction: Super-diversity in everyday life*, "Ethnic and Racial Studies" 2019, no. 1, pp. 1–16.
- Gerber D.A., *Introduction*, [in:] A.M. Kraut, D.A. Gerber (eds.), *Ethnic Historians and the Mainstream: Shaping America's Immigration Story*, New Brunswick 2013, pp. 1–16.
- Handlin O., *The Uprooted: The Epic Story of the Great Migrations that made the American People*, 2nd ed., Philadelphia 2002.
- Hansen M.L., *The Immigrant in American History*, Cambridge 1940.
- Ignatiev N., *How the Irish became white*, New York 1995.
- Kula M., *Migracje. Zmienne zjawisko długiego trwania*, "Przegląd Polonijny" 2007, no. 2, pp. 9–17.
- Kwaśniewicz W., *Przeciw lekceważeniu historycznego punktu widzenia w badaniach socjologicznych*, "Studia Socjologiczne" 1982, no. 1–2, pp. 5–30.
- Lenette C., *Arts-Based Methods in Refugee Research: Creating Sanctuary*, Singapore 2019.

- Michalikova N., *New Eastern European Immigrants in the United States*, New York 2017.
- Molho A., Wood G.S., *Introduction*, [in:] A. Molho, G.S. Wood (eds.), *Imagined Histories: American Historians Interpret the Past*, Princeton 1998.
- Morawska E., *Disciplinary Agendas and Analytic Strategies of Research on Immigrant Transnationalism: Challenges of Interdisciplinary Knowledge*, "The International Migration Review" 2003, no. 3, pp. 611–640.
- Nikielska-Sekula K., *Migrating heritage? Recreating ancestral and new homeland heritage in the practices of immigrant minorities*, "International Journal of Heritage Studies" 2019, no. 11, pp. 1113–1127.
- Robila M., *Eastern European Immigrant Families*, New York 2010.
- Smith M.D., Wool L., *The Power of Participation and the Co-Production of Knowledge in Migration Research: A Critical Reflection on Methods*, "International Migration Review" 2025, pp. 1–28.
- Stielike L. et al., *Rethinking the production of knowledge on migration: A moral economies approach*, "Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies" 2025, no. 10, pp. 2505–2528.
- Triandafyllidou A. et al., *Rethinking Migration Studies for 2050*, "Journal of Immigrant & Refugee Studies" 2023, no. 1, pp. 1–21.
- Vertovec S., *Superdiversity: Migration and Social Complexity*, New York 2023.
- Wiedemann F., *Migration and Narration: How European Historians in the nineteenth and early twentieth Centuries Told the History of Human Mass Migrations or Völk-erwanderungen*, "History and Theory" 2020, no. 1, pp. 42–60.
- Will A.-K., *Challenging knowledge production on migration with statactivism: The category 'migration background' and some destabilizations*, "Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies" 2024, no. 9, pp. 2247–2267.
- Wittke C., *We Who Built America: The Saga of the Immigrant*, New York 1939.
- Wojdon J., *Polish American History after 1939: Polish American History from 1854 to 2004. Volume 2*, New York 2024.
- Wojdon J., *Stan i perspektywy badań nad Polonią amerykańską po 1939 roku*, [in:] S. Łukasiewicz (ed.), *Polska emigracja polityczna 1939–1990: Stan badań*, Warsaw 2016, pp. 426–471.