Restrictions and beliefs based on race, ethnicity, gender, and national origin were prominent in the last half of the nineteenth century in the United States. One of the most prominent ways that these beliefs and restrictions shaped American society was in determining who could vote. African American males had gained the right to vote with the ratification of the 15th amendment in 1870, yet African Americans also faced increasing segregation in the form of Jim Crow Laws. Women were still unable to vote and were barred from most professions, and Native Americans were considered “Wards of the Government”, and were only able to gain citizenship by accepting the terms of the Dawes Act (Barnes & Bowles, 2015, Section 1.3).

                These restrictions and beliefs shaped the way that immigrants experienced the industrial revolution, as the political status of immigrants was highly contested during this time. As Barnes and Bowles (2015) point out, “Describing the new immigrants as distinct “races” from inferior civilizations, these nativists pointed to the newcomers’ cultural differences and willingness to work for low wages as causes for alarm” (Section 2.1). We see this further in the way that immigrants were depicted in racist cartoons, such as the one featured in O’Malley (2004). Racial perceptions of immigrants often determined who could get citizenship, according to Barnes & Bowles (2015), laws “barred non-Whites from becoming naturalized citizens” (Section 2.1). In most cases, these beliefs and restrictions kept immigrants in low-paying jobs with long hours and dangerous conditions.

                Immigrants created change by forming ethnic enclaves where they could look after their particular ethnic group. Barnes and Bowles (2015), describe the way that immigrants formed benevolent societies and support systems to help those in their ethnic group find jobs and other resources. This empowered immigrant groups, as well as workers, creating a burgeoning labor movement. It also solidified ethnic and racial identities and divisions, deepening the sense that different ethnic groups were in competition with one another, paving the way for future racial tension.

Sources:

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