From Metropolis to Cosmopolis

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1. Los Angeles and its immigrants

Immigrants to the United States have always been urban-bound. While one is tempted to argue that the situation is no different today, the urban attraction is in some sense greater than ever before. In 1910, when immigration from Europe hit its peak, the five largest US cities contained just over a quarter of the nation's 13.5 million foreign-born residents. By 1990, when a different set of areas topped the list of the largest metropolitan regions, just over half of the country's immigrants lived in these five largest urban places. Of course, the United States is a more urban society than it was 80 years ago. But relative to total population, the five largest urban places of 1990 are comparable to the five largest cities of 1910 in their share of the foreign-born. Still, geographical concentration remains the salient trait of contemporary immigration.

Comparing Los Angeles with the major immigrant metropoles of the past and present puts the distinctive features of today's immigrant LA into relief. Gazing backwards, contemporary Los Angeles is home to a far larger share of today's foreign-born population than the immigrant New York of yore. Large as it is, Los Angeles contains a relatively small portion of the nation's total population, indeed smaller than New York in the early 1900s. Consequently, immigrants are over-represented to a far greater degree in the Los Angeles of the 1990s than they were in the New York of the 1910s (see Figures 1 and 2).

Impressively retrospectively, contemporary Los Angeles also heads the 1990 list, standing out from the other major immigrant areas in more ways than one. In 1990, Los Angeles was home to 3.9 million immigrants, 400,000 more than New York, which stood at second place. Among Angelenos, the foreign-born proportion outranked all the other major cities by a good degree; only much smaller Miami, where 34 per cent of the region's population comes from abroad, pulls ahead of L.A. on this count. L.A. also exceeded the others as a magnet for the very recently arrived; the immigrant wave of the 1980s made up 13 per cent of the region's population, as opposed to 4 per cent for the USA as a whole.
The advent of immigrant L.A. also took place suddenly. Though Los Angeles had been home to a substantial foreign-born population at the earlier part of the century, the immigrant presence dropped sharply during mid-century, as a wave of domestic migrants - a largely white, conservative, Protestant group of midwesterners - flocked to Los Angeles in search of the good life. Thus, by 1960, just eight per cent of the region's population had been born abroad, with the great majority of the immigrants tracing their origins to Europe.

**Figure 1: Urban immigrant concentrations, 1910**

Foreign-born numbers began creeping upwards again in the 1960s, and then leaping ahead at an explosive pace, so that over the next two decades, Los Angeles would become the nation's most intensive immigration focal point. Not only did L.A.'s immigration rate - a flow indicator relating the number of immigrants arriving during a decade to the total population at the end of the decade - jump sharply in each decade since 1970, as Figure 3 shows; it also grew increasingly out of line with trends for the USA overall. Very large immigrant inflows, combined with net domestic out-migration during the 1970s, and reduced domestic in-migration during the 1980s, sharply boosted immigrant population shares: by 1990, immigrants comprised 27 per cent of the region's population and 33 per cent of those living in Los Angeles county. The alternation of internal and international migration waves is one of the crucial features distinguishing Los Angeles from New York - the other immigrant capital of the USA.

As Figure 4 shows, New York has retained a very substantial foreign-born population throughout the twentieth century; consequently, the very large immigrant inflows registered since the mid-1960s, have had a more modest effect on the foreign-born share of the city's population.

In a sense, the key to understanding immigrant L.A. is the border and its proximity to the city of the Angels. In 1990, 44 per cent of L.A.'s immigrants had come from a single source country - Mexico; another 9 per cent were comprised of arrivals from El Salvador and Guatemala (see Figure 5). Since many of the newcomers entered into the USA through the backdoor, L.A.'s role as the principal magnet for migrants from Mexico and Central America meant that it attracted far more than its share of unauthorized immigrants. The Los Angeles region accounted for a third of the undocumented immigrants estimated to have been counted in the 1980 and roughly the same proportion of the population who obtained amnesty under IRCA. Notwithstanding the large number of amnesty applications, which temporarily diminished the pool of unauthorized immigrants living in Los Angeles, the undocumented population continued to grow in the late 1980s and early 1990s.

Though diversity is seen as a salient characteristic of current immigration to the United States, Los Angeles has known a different experience. High volume immigration from Mexico and Central America is clearly the differentiating factor; as Figure 5 shows, Asians have moved to Los Angeles in substantial numbers, but their numbers remain dwarfed by the Mexican and Central American presence. Overall, ten countries accounted for 70 per cent of all of the region's foreign-born residents, an unusual pattern, since elsewhere immigrant origins are far more scrambled. The ten sending countries that dominate the flow to LA account for only 40 per cent of the immigrants living outside Los Angeles. Even an immigrant-dense region like New York is far more in line with the overall national pattern than is Los Angeles. Dominicans comprised the single largest foreign-born group counted in the 1990 census, accounting for only 8 per cent of all immigrants living in New York, with Italians, at 6 per cent, Jamaicans, at 5 per cent, and Chinese, at 4 per cent, following behind.
Attractive as it may be for Mexicans and Central Americans drawn by the lure of el norte, Los Angeles also exerts its magnetic pull on Asia, the principal, though by no means unique, source of its high-skilled, foreign-born arrivals. Starting from a relatively small base in 1970, the Asian population skyrocketed; as immigrants from China, the Philippines, Korea, Vietnam, and India (in that order) poured into the region, Asians emerged as L.A.'s third largest group, outpacing the older established African American population. The newcomers transformed Los Angeles into the capital of contemporary Asian America, pushing it well beyond the other major Asian American centers of New York, San Francisco-Oakland, and Honolulu.

With the exception of the Vietnamese and the much less numerous Cambodians and Hmong, the new Asians comprised a source of extraordinarily high-skilled labor, importing schooling levels that left natives far behind, as well as other endowments like capital and entrepreneurial talents that gave them a competitive edge. Though the most numerous, the Asians were not the only group of middle-class immigrants to gravitate toward L.A. New arrivals from the Middle East, many of them professionals and/or entrepreneurs, also converged on Los Angeles, yielding the largest regional concentration of Middle Easterners in the entire USA.

The newcomers to L.A. come from all walks of life. But the very distinctive national origins of L.A.'s immigrants means that socio-economic polarization, not diversity, is the right word to describe its foreign-born mix. Elsewhere in the United States, as Figure 7 shows, the educational profile of the foreign-born tilts toward the better educated; college graduates are as common among immigrants as among the native-born. In Los Angeles, immigrant ranks are weighted down by the
prevalence of newcomers with little or no schooling at all - reflecting the size and skill characteristics of the region's large Mexican and Central American populations.

2. Ethnicity and opportunity in L.A.

If L.A.'s transformation from Iowa on the Pacific to a multicultural metropolis has been more rapid than similar transitions in other urban areas, the scope and direction of change remains roughly the same. Like other metropolitan areas, L.A. now has a "majority minority" population, along with an economy that increasingly tilts toward higher level, service-sector jobs. Hence, the question of how L.A.'s population base fits into its evolving economy ranks high on the research agenda.

Figure 4: Percentage foreign-born, US, NYC, LA, 1900-1990

![Graph showing percentage foreign-born, US, NYC, LA, 1900-1990](image)


For the first half of this century, the nation's large urban areas worked as staging grounds for the integration of unskilled newcomer groups. Not only did cities possess large concentrations of low-skilled newcomers, but they had an industrial structure which allowed for upward movement based on gradual acquisition of skills acquired on the job. Low-skilled migrants could get a job and slowly start the climb up the occupational ladder; with modest effort their children could count on surpassing the attainments of their parents.

Figure 5: Immigrants by place of birth, LA v. US-LA, 1990

![Graph showing immigrants by place of birth, LA v. US-LA, 1990](image)


But an influential set of writings, associated with such well-known researchers as William J. Wilson and John Kasarda, tells us that this scenario no longer holds. In their view, the post-industrial transformation of late 20th century America has robbed urban areas of their absorptive capacity. Changes in technology and communications, argues John Kasarda, decimated the "traditional goods-processing industries that once constituted the economic backbone of cities, and provided entry level employment for lesser skilled African Americans". In return for the eroding factory sector, cities have gained a new economy dominated by "knowledge-intensive white-collar service industries that typically required education beyond high school and therefore precluded most poorly employed inner city minorities from obtaining employment". Thus, on the demand side, the "very jobs that in the past attracted and socially upgraded waves of disadvantaged persons...were disappearing"; on the supply side, the number of "minority residents who lack the education for employment in the new information processing indus-
tries [was] increasing" (see Kasarda 1993: 83). In part, the burgeoning ranks of low-skilled workers reflected the advent of African American baby boomers; in part, it resulted from the renewal of mass immigration and the arrival of poorly schooled newcomers. But whatever the precise source of demographic change, it boded ill for urban America and its future.

Figure 6: Immigrants by place of birth, NY v. US-NY, 1990

![Chart showing immigrants by place of birth, NY vs. US-NY, 1990.](chart)


Figure 7: Years of education completed, 1990, 18 years and older

A. USA minus Los Angeles

B. Los Angeles

![Bar charts showing years of education completed in NY and US-NY, 1990.](chart)

Source: Waldinger and Bozorgmehr 1996
While enormously influential and providing the underpinnings for the "underclass debate", this perspective sheds little light on Los Angeles and its ethnic groups. From an empirical standpoint, the basic facts about the area's population and economic changes do not fit with the tenets of the skills mismatch hypothesis outlined above. To begin with, the story of industrial decline - whether of light manufacturing in New York and Philadelphia or auto and steel in the cities of the Great Lakes - has no ready parallel in Los Angeles. Employment in L.A.'s goods-producing sector has followed an upward course for most of the post-war period. Admittedly, Los Angeles can now boast a "rustbelt" of its own, thanks to the demise of its auto and auto-related branch plants and the more recent erosion of its aerospace and defense sector. But manufacturing decline has come rather late in the day, and more importantly, the industries that have weathered the recent declines never provided much employment shelter to L.A.'s minorities. It is also true that employers in Los Angeles, like their counterparts in other urban econom-
far better schooled than the recently arrived, but more commonly employed, immigrants from Mexico and Central America, as Figure 9 shows. The region’s abundance of goods-producing jobs suggests that manufacturing decline is the wrong culprit for the deteriorating fortunes of less-educated black men. Black males enjoyed only limited success in gaining access to the factory sector in the first place—which implies that they stood less exposed than others to the dislocation associated with any industrial decline. And if job scarcity accounts for the economic problems of African-Americans, why are the most educated black men employed at rates below the least educated of their Mexican immigrant counterparts? And how is one to account for the yawning gap in employment rates between the relatively small population of poorly schooled black men and the vastly larger group of low educated, foreign-born newcomers (see Figure 10).

Of course, as immigration has made urban populations increasingly diverse, the mismatch hypothesis has been recast; in this updated incarnation, the population mismatched with the urban economy is now an undifferentiated aggregate of everyone classified by the government as non-white. In this guise, the mismatch hypothesis is fundamentally at odds with the immigrant phenomenon that has so dramatically transformed L.A. If indeed the region’s employers are hiring none but the highly educated, why has the region emerged as the choice immigrant destination—and a particularly favored location for newcomers with the lowest skills?

An oft-cited answer, and one in keeping with the region’s specific experience, suggests that immigration is part and parcel of a fundamental process of urban “economic restructuring”, in which the growth of services breeds a demand for both high and low-skilled labor, while increasingly excluding workers with middle-level qualifications. In this view, the post-industrial transformation of American cities yields service industries with a bifurcated job structure, offering low wages and unstable employment for less skilled workers displaced from manufacturing, and therefore increasingly high levels of inequality. Job arrangements in the service sector also lack well-developed internal labor markets, with the result that low-skilled workers, whether new entrants to the labor market or displaced from manufacturing industries, have few opportunities for upward mobility.

Figure 10: Employment rates by education, African-American and foreign-born Mexican men, 1990, Los Angeles

![Graph showing employment rates by education](image-url)


Restructuring, so the argument goes, works in dynamic relationship with immigration: by creating jobs for people with low skills it also creates the demand for workers willing to work at low status, low paying jobs. While such low wage jobs are increasingly found in the advanced services, the simultaneous proliferation of high paid service workers adds further to the demand for immigrant workers. Once in place, the immigrant labor force can bolster the declining goods-producing sector and help revive sagging urban economies (see Harrison and Bluestone 1988; Sassen 1988, 1992).
Thus, unlike the mismatch hypothesis, the restructuring hypothesis tells us that urban areas retain abundant, perhaps even increasing, numbers of easy entry jobs. The downside of the restructured metropolis is not the paucity of starting places, as in the mismatch view, but rather the absence of better jobs, or developed mobility paths, that would let the newcomers get ahead.

Even skeptics will admit that the restructuring hypothesis enjoys at least some validity when applied to Los Angeles. As we have noted, Los Angeles has become a favored place for the lowest skilled among the nation's new arrivals. The region's massive absorption of immigrants has paralleled an equally great shift in its industrial structure: low-wage, immigrant dominated, manufacturing industries have flourished, continuing to do well even in recessionary years, while high-wage, high-value-added manufacturing has floundered in a 20-year long state of decline. Not surprisingly, then, Los Angeles has known what to do with its newcomers, even those who arrive with low, or possibly even no, formal skills. Consider the following statistic, illustrated by Figure 10: in 1990, employment rates for Mexican immigrant men began at the 80 percent level for those with no schooling at all, and went up from there.

But there is more to this story, with a new cultural division of labor emerging along with a widening high wage/lower wage gap, and Hispanic immigrants increasingly separated off from the rest of the manufacturing workforce in a tier of poorly paid jobs. Evidence of the linkage between restructuring and immigration need not be limited to manufacturing alone: among Guatemalans and Salvadorans, for example, one of every four works as a private servant, janitor, maid, or cook. For some groups, the immigrant job ceiling also appears to be very low - indeed getting lower over time. The emergence of an hourglass economy may also provide the best explanation for the limited occupational attainments of the region's former-born Mexican Americans, a population pattern that will burgeon rapidly in the very near future.

A useful guide to the impact of changes in opportunity structures, the restructuring hypothesis is nonetheless incomplete. It offers a plausible explanation of the immigrant convergence on L.A. - in contrast to the mismatch hypothesis - but treats the foreign-born as an undifferentiated mass. However, the newcomers are highly diverse, not just in original characteristics but in the social and economic experiences they undergo once in L.A. How immigrants do will be influenced by the endowments they bring with them - and here the fact that Los Angeles has been the destination for a large group of highly-skilled, sometimes affluent professionals and entrepreneurs - is an especially important consideration. An adequate analysis needs to contend with the emergence of a large, diversified immigrant middle-class, the growth of a variety of ethnic economies, as well as the expansion of the immigrant working-class and burgeoning sub-proletariat.

More importantly, the restructuring hypothesis neglects the economic problems of blacks. As an explanatory framework, it shares the deficiencies of the mismatch approach, starting from the premise that workers are matched to jobs on the basis of skill. This assumption begs the question of why so many low-level jobs went to the newest arrivals from abroad and not to African Americans. And it forecloses the possibility of labor market competition - between immigrants and various native groups, and among different immigrant groups themselves.

In the end, both mismatch and restructuring approaches tell a story of faceless, impersonal structures inexorably performing their actions on an inert urban mass. In our view, by contrast, the historical transformations of L.A.'s economy yield a set of parameters for adaptation, within which groups might follow a variety of possible paths. From this perspective, the ethnic division of labor in L.A.'s economy represents a social arrangement, responding to broader economic forces, but shaped by the various groups that make and maintain the structures of the region's economy.

Sensitivity to immigrant diversity in social and national origins reminds us that L.A.'s ethnic groups differ from the outset. But they also vary in the historical context of incorporation, a point that directs our attention to the interaction between structures and groups. Because ethnic incorporation is a social process, seemingly similar groups get sorted into different positions. The contrast between Mexican and Central American immigrants nicely illustrates the point. As groups, both tend to cluster at the bottom tier of the region's economy, but not necessarily in the same positions. Domestic service, for example, which counts as a sector of high Central American concentration, employs a relatively low proportion of Mexicans whereas agriculture, which still ranks high in the Mexican profile, has absorbed few Central Americans.

Aggregated together, individual cases of clustering yield distinctive occupational or industrial patterns. Clear lines of ethnic demarcation show up, not just among lower-skilled groups like Mexicans or Central Americans, but among groups that are more likely to work in upper-tier positions - for example, Middle Easterners or Asians. And in some cases, the economic disparities among groups conventionally gathered under the same ethnic rubric are sufficiently great as to bring the category itself into question - the region's highly variegated Asian population a case in point.
Table 1. Niche characteristics, Los Angeles, 1990

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Industrial niches</th>
<th>As percentage of group education employed</th>
<th>Mean years of schooling (USS)</th>
<th>Public sector</th>
<th>Self employment</th>
<th>Mfg</th>
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<td>32</td>
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<tr>
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<td>51,060</td>
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<td>24</td>
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Ethnic economic distinctiveness often reflects the development of an ethnic niche, an occupational or industrial specialization in which a group is over-represented by at least 50 per cent (see Table 1). Ethnic networks sort workers among jobs, with the result that groups move into distinctive places in the labor market and then maintain those concentrations, albeit at varying rates of persistence, over time.¹ The burgeoning of L.A.'s ethnic economies exemplifies this process, which we can trace out through the development of initial specializations and then the diffusion of ethnic entrepreneurs into related occupations and trades. The case of self-employment illuminates the economic singularities in this classic ethnic niche. Not all groups move into entrepre-
3. Immigrants' progress

One is often tempted to argue that immigrant Los Angeles has returned to the world of Jacob Riis' How The Other Half Lives; like their turn-of-the-century predecessors, the latest wave of immigrants are learning, sometimes to their sorrow, that the streets are not paved with gold. Of course, even the garment sweatshops of downtown Los Angeles and the dilapidated Victorian boarding-houses of the Westlake district compare favorably with conditions that prevailed on the old lower East Side of New York. And while outsiders may be struck by the gap between immigrant and native standards and compensations, the immigrants keep coming - which suggests that for them settlement in Los Angeles represents a change for the better.

From a historical perspective, starting out at the bottom is the American way - as long as the newcomers and their descendants can gradually climb or even claw their way out of the socio-economic cellar. In this respect, reports on Los Angeles and its newcomers provide occasion for both congratulation and concern. On the one hand, substantial numbers of immigrants are clearly making it and doing so more rapidly than immigrants have ever done in the past. For the most part, these newcomers, coming from South and East Asia and from the Middle East, arrive with skills and other assets that ease their entry into American society and hasten their move up the totem pole. Clearly, care needs to be exercised when generalizing about Asian and Middle Eastern immigrants and their success. Some groups, for example, Vietnamese, Cambodians, Armenians from the Soviet Union, are doing notably worse than others. In most cases, the newest arrivals start quite far down the scale. All groups contain substantial numbers that are not faring particularly well: however glorious the earnings of Korean physicists or Chinese engineers, Korean cooks and Chinese sewing machine operators bring home considerably smaller checks - although one must note that they do a good deal better than their Mexican or Central American counterparts. While poverty rates tend to be lower than the region's average - again with national group exceptions - the proportion of Asian immigrant children living in poverty is disturbingly high, with the combination of large family size and reduced earnings associated with recent arrivals depressing per capita income.

But if today's snapshot contains more than a few somber patches, the bigger, and more importantly, moving picture looks a good deal brighter. Migrations generally become less selective over time, and the advent of large refugee populations has worked against immigrant selectivity for both Asians and Middle Easterners; nonetheless, each decade has consistently brought a cohort of highly skilled newcomers. Not all of the immigrants manage to take advantage of the efficiencies they bring with them, one reason why so many get drawn into occupational and industrial niches. While the various Asian and Middle Eastern niches contain their share of less desirable jobs, they range widely over the job spectrum; hence, average earnings in the ethnic concentrations have gone up, in real terms, over time. On the whole, many of the problems experienced by the region's Asian and Middle Eastern immigrants seem to be associated with the trivials of initial adjustment. The foreign-born disadvantage fades as the immigrants gain the skills, experience, and familiarity with local employers needed to compete favorably with native-born white workers. Catching-up is not simply an experience associated with a highly selective cohort of early arrivals: the Asian immigrants of the 1970s appear to have progressed faster than did their predecessors who came during the 1960s. Since Asian immigrant women make faster progress toward closing the gap with native white women and they are also more likely to be employed, the prospects for improving family incomes are rosier still.

The true test of immigrant adaptation lies in the future and it is too early to tell how the children of the newcomers will fare. However, the experience of native-born Asians is instructive. While discrimination against Asians persists, it takes the form of preventing male engineers or pharmacists from earning quite as much as comparable white males - not a satisfactory outcome, but one that has not barred progress into the middle-class. On most indicators of family well-being, native-born Asians do better, on average, than do the region's native whites, as noted above. Of course, today's population of native-born adults is a numerically small group; the pessimist might argue that conditions will change for the worst once the large cohort of immigrant children enters the labor market - an event happening as we write. There is no gainsaying that scenario, but what we know of the immigrant children suggests that they will begin well-positioned to move ahead. Fewer Asian teenagers than whites drop out of high school, and the rate plummets further for children who arrived in the USA under the age of 10, i.e., the 1.5 generation. The disparity widens when it comes to college attendance: 18 to 24 year olds in every Asian group attend college at a rate that exceeds whites, with the native-born leagues ahead of whites on this count. Forecasts as to how well employers will treat these students when they graduate college are risky; but it seems reasonable to predict that the prevalence of college education will steadily lift the Asian economic boat in an economy that increasingly values high-level skills.

The trajectory followed by the newcomers from Mexico and Central America, however, is quite another matter. Clearly, some of the region's residents - mainly Anglos, but not Anglos alone - are unhappy about the massive flow from south of the border. But for now, living the good life in Southern California has much to do with immigration -
as suggested by the fact that the region employed twice as many gardeners and servants in 1990 as it did ten years before. There can be little question that L.A. "needs" the large Mexican and Central American population that it has acquired over the past few decades. It is not just anecdotal evidence which suggests that there would be no gardeners, no baby-sitters, no garment workers, no hotel housekeepers, without the Mexican and Central American newcomers. The census data tell the same story: the bottom tier of L.A.'s manufacturing and service sectors rests on a labor force that disproportionately - at the 50, 60 or 70 per cent level - comes from Latino immigrant ranks. Having discovered the virtues of network recruitment, employers and their staffing practices have been shaped by the continuing availability of immigrant labor. One indicator shows how thoroughly the newcomers have been integrated into the production systems of the region's low-cost manufacturing and service complexes: of the 83 manufacturing industries with 1,000 employees or more identified by the censuses in 1990, 53 were Mexican niches.

So while some segments of the region's population may dream of "sending them home", the reality is that L.A's Mexican and Central American immigrants are here to stay - largely because the economy has learned to make good use of them. But it is not clear that the move to Los Angeles has been all that good for the immigrants. And even if judged satisfactory in relative terms for now - better a minimum wage job in the garment center than an unyielding plot of land in Mexico's central plateau, not to speak of a visit from El Salvador's death squads - the terms of comparison might shift drastically in the future, once the immigrants compare their conditions against the standards enjoyed by other Angelenos.

A search for immigrant progress will find few glimmers of hope in the record of the past two decades. The route into the region's economy has occurred through a relatively small tier of low-paying occupations and industries, as can be best be seen by focusing, for convenience purposes, on Mexicans, the very largest group. The chief Mexican concentrations of 1970, as noted above had extraordinary absorptive power. Channelization was not a particularly fortunate development; as Figure 11 shows, the chief Mexican industrial concentrations consisted of such activities as restaurants, apparel, furniture, auto-repairing and the like, all of them low-wage, competitive industries where the expansion of the labor supply had the predictably depressing effect on paychecks. Of course, Mexican employment spilled over into a broader set of industries as the labor force expanded: nonetheless, 55 per cent of employed Mexican immigrants found themselves working in the Mexican niches of 1970, virtually the same percentage recorded two decades later. While the Mexican industrial and occupational base diversified, it paradoxically became more distinct from that of the rest of the labor force: already very segregated from other groups in 1970, Mexicans became more and more so, in occupational and industrial terms, over time, as can be seen from Figure 11. The growing segregation of Mexican immigrants from their native-born counterparts points both to the former's increasing isolation and the latter's gradual progress. Together, all these indicators tell us that as Mexican numbers increased, the newcomers found themselves crowding into a narrow set of industries in the secondary labor market that proved highly responsive - as theory would suggest - to shifts in supply. Wage depression was aggravated by the impact of network recruitment, which operates in such a way as to reproduce the characteristics of the existing labor force. Employers adapted to the increased availability of greenhorns by expanding employment; but as the newcomers headed for the same industries and occupations in which their kin and friends were already employed, they unwittingly depressed wages for all. Consequently, the terms of compensation at the bottom of L.A.'s economy got worse over the past two decades: between 1970 and 1990, real earnings in the Mexican immigrant industrial niches declined by over $6,000. The downturn is not simply a matter of exchanging bad jobs for worse: real earnings also declined in all of the industries that served as Mexican niches in 1970, before the massive immigration truly began. Contributors to the combination of demographic and economic changes that gave the region a more unequal wage structure in 1990 than it had 20 years before, Mexicans and other Latino immigrants were also its victims: applying 1970 quintile levels to the 1990 distributions shows that 29 per cent of Latino immigrant earners fell into the bottom quintile in 1970, but 42 per cent languished there two decades later.

But a picture like this, which paints the portrait in aggregate terms, might be misleading: with half of the Mexican immigrant population having arrived in the 1980s, their problems might push the average down, obscuring the progress made by earlier arrivals, and which, by inference, the newcomers would be judged likely to repeat. One wishes for optimism, but again the data dash brighter hopes. The immigrants of the 1980s are in depressed circumstances indeed: but a comparison with earlier cohorts at a comparable period of time shows that such low earnings are not simply a correlate of recent arrival and the associated pains of adjustment, but rather something new, reflecting the increasingly adverse labor market environment of the 1980s. That environment does not work well for the earlier arrivals either. Ten years after their arrival in the United States, the immigrants of the 1970s are doing worse than were the immigrants of the 1960s at the same point in time. And all cohorts have seen the gap separating them from natives grow -
a statement that remains true both before and after adjusting for differences in background characteristics.

**Figure 11: Industrial concentrations, Latino immigrants, 1990**

So there is substantial evidence to indicate that the newcomers from Mexico (and Central America as well) find themselves not only at the bottom, but at a bottom that is increasingly removed from the top, and from which exit is awfully hard to find. The immigrants' low skill levels lend further credence to this point of view. The massive absorption of a barely-schooled - in some cases, utterly unschooled - population provides the ironic side to L.A.'s march - or is it slide - into post-industrialism.

Of course, the fact that the immigrants are so extensively employed suggests that these exiles from the fields and factories of Mexico and Central America do indeed arrive with skills that employers want - in contrast to a black or Chicano native high school graduate or dropout whose training consists of whatever can be learned in the region's troubled schools. But if immigrants' manual, home-grown proficiencies fit nicely with the wants of employers in the secondary sector, employers at a higher level are looking for skills that schools do - or at any rate should - teach. And these types of skills are precisely what the immigrants lack.

For a decade now, the immigration literature has been embroiled in a debate over charges that America's immigrants are of "declining quality". Translated into English, the question concerns the skill levels of the latest newcomers, compared to those of their predecessors. In absolute terms, the educational levels of the region's immigrants from Mexico and Central America have actually gone up over the past two decades. Since that climb was relatively modest, took off from a low base and left the great majority (76 percent) of the most recent cohort with less than a high school education, it probably means little to prospective employers. And in any case, the better measure is probably relative, comparing the immigrants to the natives, and more importantly, to those natives with jobs (a proxy for skill requirements). Since on these counts the disparity evident in 1970 has grown to a yawning divide, one doubts that the immigrants have the wherewithal needed to find better-paying jobs of the sort where some level of literacy and numeracy are a must.

But if the future lies with the children, as we have argued above, then the immigrants and their problems of today may all be beside the point. Indeed considerable solace is to be gained from a look at the children of the foreign-born, but not quite enough to convince that the newer generation has moved to the right, that is to say, upward-learning track. As Sabagh and Bozorgmehr showed in their chapter on population change, the region's age structure has a distinctive ethnic twist, with Hispanics greatly over-represented among the young. What that means is that Mexican immigrant households contain lots of children; factor in parents (or other household members) with very low earnings and you not only have the lowest per capita earnings of all ethnic groups, but a very high proportion of children in those households who are living in poverty. History suggests that those children will grow up with greater expectations than their parents; but an impoverished family background will make it harder to realize those
dreams. Moving beyond the world of cleaning and factory work will require the literate, numerate, and interpersonal competencies learned in school; the schooling data, such as they are, suggest that immigrants' children are indeed acquiring those skills, although possibly not at an adequate rate. To be sure, settlement does school performance considerable good: half of the Mexican teenagers who came to the United States after the age of 10 have dropped out of school; but that per cent age drops to 31 per cent for the 1.5 generation, and 14 per cent for the native-born (mostly the offspring of the foreign-born). Even at that rate, Mexican native-born teenagers are doing worse than their African American counterparts - too few of whom are completing high school studies. College attendance shows a brighter picture, with a big jump from the first (as defined above) to the 1.5 generation, and another leap to the native-born, who attend college at a rate below, but still reasonably close, to white native-born College graduation, increasingly the key to earning power, is another matter altogether, and young Mexican adults - whether 1st, 1.5, or 2nd generation and beyond - fall considerably below the white, not to speak of the Asian rate.

However a slightly cynical realist, one attentive to the immigrant trajectories of the past, would find grounds for satisfaction - not complacency - in a future of a Polish or Italian American type. From this point of view, what counts for now are the prospects that go along with a truck driver's seat - the well-paying blue-collar occupation that happens to be the single largest Mexican American occupational niche. Rising college attendance and graduation rates are important, to be sure, but if one can forecast entry into the lower-middle and skilled working classes, a good deal of solace can be found in successful pursuit of the traditional path of immigrant progress. Strictly speaking, it is too early to tell: only the oldest children born to the relatively small cohort of immigrants who arrived in the 1960s had entered the labor market in any significant numbers by 1990. And with most of the Latino immigration compressed into the 1980s, the full arrival of the second generation will be delayed for another decade or two. Still, the experience of the region's Mexican American population has lessons to offer - provided we recognize that this group is only a crude proxy, and therefore uncertain predictor, for the second-generation yet to come.

In many respects, the Mexican American story in Los Angeles bears more than a passing resemblance to the white ethnics of the northeast and midwest, circa 1930-1960. Though certainly not at the top of the region's pecking order, Mexican Americans are not at the bottom either, finding themselves at midpoint on most indicators, which puts them slightly ahead of African Americans. Median household income is up compared with 1970 and per capita income more so, thanks to reduced household size. Real earnings have also increased, for men and for women, although relative to native whites, men have fallen further behind.

As Mexican Americans have diversified economically, shifting from a position of high to low concentration in niches, their employment profile has increasingly converged with the pattern of whites. Occupational integration has brought upgrading - the proportion with professional and managerial jobs almost doubled between 1970 and 1990. And unlike African Americans, the region's Mexican Americans have a solid base in skilled, blue-collar jobs. These economic changes have their ethnic correlates, of which more below. For the moment, we simply note that Mexican Americans have followed the rest of the population in the drift toward the suburban ring where mixing is more prevalent and far fewer ghettos are to be found.

On balance, one can detect a passage from humble to modest status. Not all signs point in the same direction, however. Male job-holding slipped considerably after 1970. High school graduation rates, as noted above, also leave much to be desired. More importantly, one wonders whether one could not have asked for more. L.A. boomed during the past two decades and not much had to be done to absorb the relatively small Mexican American cohorts that entered the labor market during these years. With a return to prosperity still far off on the horizon and a massive second-generation ready to hunt for jobs, the region will be hard-pressed to do as well.

And that might not be good enough. The children of the Italian and Polish peasants who moved to America began with little, ended up with more, but never expected a lot. Then again, they never experienced the rampant consumerism of the late twentieth century, nor the relentless exposure to the standards of upper-middle class life that the mass media currently provides. With these cultural changes in mind, one doubts that a truck-driving future will satisfy the children of today's servants and assemblers. And the scenario gets a good deal more pessimistic if the region's next economy fails to deliver, or simply throws up another passel of lousy jobs.

Notes

1 See Kasarda 1993: 82. The article cited here provides a particularly succinct and clear expression of Kasarda's views, which he has elaborated in many publications over the past 15 or so years. For other examples, see Kasarda 1984, 1988 and 1990. William J. Wil-
son, a still more prominent mismatch proponent, liberally cites Kasarda's findings, while endorsing views, in his influential book, The Truly Disadvantaged (1987).

2. Though using the term "special niches", Stanley Lieberson similarly argues that "most racial and ethnic groups tend to develop concentrations in certain jobs which either reflect some distinctive cultural characteristics, special skills initially held by some members, or the opportunity structures at the time of their arrival" (Lieberson 1980: 379). He then notes that "such specialties can only absorb a small part of a group's total work force when its population grows rapidly or is a substantial proportion of the total population" - a contention not supported by the evidence provided elsewhere. For a formulation analogous to ours, see Suzanne Model's chapter on "The Ethnic Niche and the Structure of Opportunity: Immigrants and Minorities in New York City". Model operationalizes a niche as a "job" in which the "percentage of workers who are group members is at least one and a half times greater than the group's percentage in the labor force (Model 1983: 164). For a further discussion of the ethnic niche and its consequences, see Roger Waldinger, Still the Promised City? New Immigrants and African-Americans in Postindustrial New York, 1940-1990 (1996).

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