

REINVENTING THE MELTING POT

THE NEW IMMIGRANTS
AND WHAT IT MEANS
TO BE AMERICAN

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THE 21ST CENTURY: AN ENTIRELY NEW STORY

by Roger Waldinger

THE MIGRATIONS OF THE TURN of the twentieth century transformed America and transfixed its social science observers. Immigrants from Eastern and Southern Europe arrived without skills, started at the bottom, and encountered dislike and discrimination at almost every step up the ladder. But at the turn of the twenty-first century, the descendants of those bedraggled newcomers have clearly made it, moving ahead, even beyond, the people who previously held them in contempt.

Does this story have any bearing for today?

Optimists answer yes. In their view, the past provides a reliable guide to the route ahead: remembering that the America of the early twentieth century was deeply exclusionary, optimists emphasize the upside of the newcomers' encounter with today's more open and democratic society. Immigrants, now as then, are strongly motivated by the quest for the better life. Just as they did earlier, immigrants' earnings improve over time, and with economic progress come changes in lifestyles and personal relationships that make ethnicity purely optional. Just as their predecessors did, today's newcomers and their

descendants will move from ethnic ghetto to suburb, and from a specialized ethnic niche into the general economy. Gradually they will drop old country ties and take their children to communities where friends, and eventually mates, come from various ethnic backgrounds.

Pessimists, by contrast, look at the same history and see irrelevance. In their view, Italians, Poles and Jews shared a common European heritage with America's ruling WASPs, while the contemporary immigrants from Mexico, Central America, Asia and elsewhere have no such connection. As "people of color," today's newcomers are said to encounter resistance that is far more entrenched. Moreover, the old factory economy allowed for a gradual move up the totem pole. Immigrants' children could drop out of high school and still find blue-collar jobs that paid well, and the grandchildren could then progress from this solid, if modest, base. By contrast, today's knowledge economy gives immigrant offspring no time to play catch-up. To get ahead, the second generation, which generally starts out in deeply troubled, big-city school systems, has to do well in school and stay enrolled through college. Some will surely make it; many, however, will fail.

In fact, neither optimists nor pessimists get it right. Ironically, since both subscribe to the same story about the past, both fail to detect how different things are today when it comes to politics, ethnicity and group mobilization.

First, politics. The conditions for membership in the American people changed in the decades after the last mass migration ended. The United States was then an ethnocracy, dominated by one ethnic group; it has since been transformed into a democracy. Politically, civil rights have been extended to all citizens; culturally, the boundaries of "we, the people" have been enlarged to encompass everyone in the United States, origins notwithstanding.

Second, ethnicity: the group affiliations newcomers bring take a different form. New immigrants now arrive with broad, politicized group identities, which, in turn, make them more confident contenders for a piece of the American pie.

Third, group mobilization: mobilizing on an explicitly ethnic basis is currently accepted today as it has never been before. In the

past, ethnicity often competed unsuccessfully with other forms of allegiance rooted in class or religion. These alternatives have since lost influence, replaced by a minority-group model that gives new immigrants a much more effective means of making their claims heard.

Taken together, these three changes make it easier than ever before for new immigrants to become full-fledged Americans.

MEMBERSHIP IN THE AMERICAN PEOPLE: THEN AND NOW

The first change involves the politics of belonging: how can a foreigner become one of "us"?

America's answer to this question has fluctuated significantly over the last two hundred years. Yes, America has seen itself as uniquely fluid, always in the process of being forged from peoples of many different kinds. But this expansive notion has also competed with a narrower conception in which true "American-ness" was defined restrictively—on the basis of ancestry. The arrival of vast numbers of new immigrants between 1880 and 1920 provoked such a narrowing of the definition of American identity, redefining membership in ways that made it much harder to belong.

In the early twentieth century, immigrants to the United States encountered a nation that was, as the historian Alexander Saxton put it, a white republic—though the definition of "whiteness" itself remained a matter of debate and contention. Until the late nineteenth century, the formation of American identity mainly involved distinguishing whites from domestic "outsiders": African-Americans and American Indians. With the upsurge of immigration, however, the ethnic majority increasingly defined the national community in opposition to the newly arriving "aliens." Immigrants born in Asia were legally barred from naturalizing as U.S. citizens—discrimination that paved the way for further discrimination and, eventually, the internment of Japanese-Americans during World War II. Similarly, German Jews, previously well accepted in America, experienced ostracism after the arrival of Russian Jewish

immigrants who were not as wealthy or well educated. In the end came immigration restriction: the National Origins Act of 1924 spelled out the American reaction against people seen to be unacceptably different and foreign.

Things were very different by the time mass migration began again at the end of the twentieth century. Most important, the immigrants of the late twentieth century entered an America democratized by the civil rights revolution: one in which racial and ethnic origins were formally irrelevant to both membership and citizenship. Likewise, racialized conceptions of American identity have become almost entirely things of the past. As sociologist Nathan Glazer has powerfully argued, we are all multiculturalists now: the boundaries of the American "we" have been enlarged, and its definition relaxed. The terms of belonging aren't fixed but are the subject of continuing discussion in which the range of participants continues to grow. The prevailing view is increasingly expansive: America is a nation made and remade by people who may come from any part of the globe, but who all wish to be Americans.

Not all the foreigners living in the United States find acceptance as Americans, of course. The millions of illegal immigrants who work hard and play mainly by the rules are explicitly excluded from the club. Even legal immigrants often find the road to citizenship difficult: an America less ambivalent about immigration and more committed to assimilation would be making citizenship easier, not harder, to obtain. And the stigma associated with the low-status jobs that so many newcomers fill provides longer-established groups with additional reason for thinking that immigrants are not fully respectable.

But making it in America has never been easy or automatic. Now, as in the past, it involves a complex, protracted negotiation between newcomers and established groups. Yet today's more open vision of American nationhood gives contemporary immigrants a kind of cultural leverage that they can use to claim membership in the national club. Thanks to the democratization of the American people, contemporary immigrants enjoy a significant advantage unavailable to their predecessors of a century ago.

GROUP IDENTITY, YESTERDAY AND TODAY

Today is also different from the past in a second way. Migrants' backgrounds and experience are different and, as a result, ethnic affiliations take very different forms.

The last great wave of immigrants came mostly from peasant societies not yet transformed into nation-states. Eastern Europeans came mainly from the multiethnic empires of Russia and Austro-Hungary, in which nationality and ethnicity rarely converged. Italian immigrants came from a newly founded state that had made little progress in turning its various regions into a unified country. Thus, before their arrival on American shores, Italians and Slavs knew almost nothing of the "nation" to which they were supposed to belong. Instead, the relevant homeland was local, a place with its own dialect, customs, clothing and cuisine, all different from those on the other side of the valley. Immigrants' local ties were so strong that moving across the Atlantic often meant re-creating their original village on New York's Lower East Side or some similar neighborhood.

Yet because such local cultures were largely taken for granted and were rooted in local custom and routine, they were hard to transmit to children who had not shared the same experience. Nor did these "migration chains," as scholars call them, necessarily produce a sense of connection to immigrants from some other place in the old country—how could they, if the transplanted villagers spoke mutually unintelligible dialects? What's more, since many migrants came to America only temporarily—a pattern reflected in rates of re-migration far higher than those known today—it was easy to break the ties formed during a stint of labor in the United States.

So in speaking of the assimilation of ethnic groups, the classical literature is misleading. Immigrants came to America as members of small-scale local communities that evolved into ethnic groups only after settlement in the New World. Outsiders, who could not tell Neapolitans from Sicilians, or Galician Jews from Lithuanian Jews, unwittingly taught immigrants that they shared an identity with

people they had once viewed as very different. Ideologues and intellectuals in the immigrant community tried to impart a similar view, creating allegiances and kindling connections to a national ideal often first encountered in the United States. But the process took a long time. Regional and hometown loyalties and jealousies remained strong until well after the end of the great immigration. Local attachments faded only with the second generation, by which time knowledge of the mother tongue and other aspects of the parental culture were also usually discarded.

Today's immigrants face far different circumstances. They come mainly from established nation-states, which means that they arrive with identities that extend far beyond the local village. They are already fully equipped to understand themselves as members of an ethnic group. As in the last era of mass migration, ties to particular places back home and to hometown contacts already living in the United States remain significant: these are the connections that immigrants use to get started in the new land. But unlike in the past, these aren't the only loyalties that count. And if some of today's newcomers haven't fully absorbed the ethnic ideal—remaining more attached to their village or region than to the nation from which they came—there are intellectuals in almost all immigrant communities ready to teach their peers how to think about identity.

The result is that immigrants find their ethnic identities more significant today, in part because such local differences are so much less important than they were a century ago. Paradoxically, such ethnic mobilization is encouraged by the very openness of American society to today's immigrants. It is often assumed that increased contact between immigrants and the native-born breeds acceptance. But the opposite can also be true: exposure to the American mainstream makes immigrants sensitive to deprivations they wouldn't have noticed from a greater distance. And today more than ever before, newcomers can respond to the divergence between the promise of America and its reality by taking recourse in their ethnic identities. Ironically, then, such identities are often forged not from the elements of traditional culture—which have been lost or jettisoned in the

transition to America—but out of entirely new notions of ethnicity, learned in the United States.

ETHNIC "MINORITIES" THEN AND NOW

We used to think about immigrants as "the uprooted," a term coined by historian Oscar Handlin in a famous study four decades ago. Now we describe them as "the transplanted," a term from a slightly less celebrated but no less influential history produced twenty-five years later. These shifting metaphors convey the essence of what is different today: we now understand that immigrants aren't lonely adventurers but members of a community whose ties guide the transition from the old country to the new. And this institutional context provides yet another point of contrast between immigration today and in the past. The strong institutions that once helped form immigrants' religious and class identities have changed radically, removing what were once significant incentives to replace old ethnic identities with new identities of a different sort.

One of the most important such institutions is the Roman Catholic Church, once a major force in detaching immigrants from their Old World loyalties. Today's immigrants are introducing unparalleled religious diversity into American life—and entering a society characterized by unusually high levels of religious innovation. Religious diversity was not unknown in the past: the immigrants of the 1880–1920 period gave Judaism and Eastern Orthodox Christianity far higher profiles on the American scene than ever before. But the main challenge posed by immigrants to the American religious establishment involved their imported versions of Catholicism. Italian and Polish Catholics arrived in cities where earlier Catholic migrations, from Ireland and Germany, had already created powerful institutions. These older Catholic hierarchies strove to remake the new immigrants' religious practices and loyalties.

This encounter between immigrants and the American Catholic Church was deeply conflicted; but in the end, the Church always won.

In the short term, immigrant preferences for rituals performed as in the old country, and for parishes organized along the lines of national origin, often prevailed. In the long term, however, such preferences and traditions gradually withered. As immigrants and their children moved up the occupational ladder, they also moved out of the neighborhoods where they had first settled, heading for more comfortable areas with more diverse parishioners. In the process, the institutional influence of American Catholicism took hold. The Church sought to replace ethnic loyalties with an identity rooted in its own universal teachings. And in the long run it succeeded, using the local priest and the parish school to consolidate ethnic loyalties in a broader religious community.

Nor was religion the only force working to weaken ethnic attachments among early twentieth-century immigrants and their descendants. The former peasants, artisans, and petty shopkeepers who arrived in the United States at the turn of the last century held jobs a good deal more modest and less varied than those held by immigrants today. These immigrant workers' shared attributes and interests frequently led them to identify as members of a working class, regardless of differences of nationality or ethnicity. Although ethnic solidarity often provided the cohesion required by the picket line, the picket line stood only if it encompassed workers of all ethnic types. What's more, unions and influential labor radicals—many of them foreign-born themselves—saw the labor movement as a means by which newcomers could escape the cramped quarters of immigrant life—in effect, promoting a strategy of “Americanization from the bottom up.” When they joined the labor movement, immigrant workers thus found their allegiances reshaped, class loyalties gradually replaced ethnic attachments.

Today, all this has changed. Contemporary immigrants work and worship in a much less organized and more diverse environment than in the past. Religious institutions, already used to compromise with the forces of modernity, are far more ready to accommodate themselves to immigrants' practices and preferences. Similarly, the working-class ethos and institutional life of the first half of the twentieth

century have largely disappeared; unions survive only in an embattled and bureaucratized form.

While religion and class exercise a weakened influence on immigrants' allegiance, ethnicity has become more potent. The immigration of the late twentieth century occurred in an America whose politics and culture had been transformed by the civil rights movement. And, as a result, ethnicity has now emerged as the accepted and expected way of mobilizing to advance group interests.

Earlier in the century, immigrants were stigmatized for their foreign origins and old-country ways; Americanization convinced the newcomers and their children to accept this view themselves. But the dynamic altered once the Black Power movement persuaded the rest of America that black was beautiful. Not only did ethnicity then become a value to be preserved rather than discarded, it became a matter of strategic interest. Membership in a minority group served as a source of pride and a tool for achieving redress—a way to force white Americans to confront the shame of their own bigoted attitudes and discriminatory ways.

Changes in the political realm pushed matters even farther. The policy innovations described by sociologist John Skrentny as the “minority rights revolution”—affirmative action, bilingual education, voting rights and a more liberal immigration code—took ethnicity out of the private realm of neighborhoods, friendship networks and even self-help organizations and gave it institutional form. Starting in the public sector but spreading to the private sector, these policies acknowledged that certain, though not all, ethnic minorities had experienced collective discrimination. Since those groups were entitled to targeted efforts designed to undo the adverse effects of past and present unfairness, the incentives that had earlier led immigrants to abandon ethnicity suddenly altered. Immigrant political leaders realized that they could gain access to resources by organizing themselves as members of a minority—a message relayed to the immigrant rank and file through the process of acculturation and its eye-opening lessons in how to “make it” in the United States. What's more, because ethnicity became the basis for distributing public and private benefits,

immigrants found reason to adopt a broad, officially recognized ethnic category, such as "Asian-American" or "Latino," regardless of how it corresponded to the identities and self-definitions current back home.

Thus, history made all the difference—though not in ways that most observers think. Arriving in the aftermath of the civil rights movement, the immigrants of the turn of the twenty-first century encountered a transformed political culture, one that supported the assertion of ethnicity, not its abandonment, as had been the case at the time of the earlier great migration. Not only did the class and religious attachments that had earlier competed for immigrants' loyalty lose sway. But the potential to accumulate political and social power by acting as members of minority groups provided newfound motivation to organize along ethnic lines.

CONCLUSION

The history of immigration in the United States certainly offers reasons for discouragement. But that history also teaches us that even the weak have weapons. In everyday life, immigrants have always fought for dignity and a place in American society, and they continue to do so today. What's more, in the United States, insiders have never been quite as strong as they think, nor are outsiders as powerless as they might imagine.

Today, even more than in the past, immigration is forcing Americans to debate the boundaries of our national community. Past immigrants entered this discussion in a position of weakness. They faced a native population that equated American-ness with whiteness; they lacked the cultural and intellectual resources needed for self-conscious ethnic assertion; and they were linked to institutions that diluted the loyalties and allegiances they brought with them from their home countries. By contrast, today's newcomers have the good fortune of encountering a society transformed by the civil rights struggle and its expanded understanding of what it means to be American. Contem-

porary immigrants also defend their own interests more effectively: they arrive with an established ethnic identity and can benefit from a highly effective new model of group mobilization. For all these reasons, today's immigrants and their descendants are going to remake the United States in ways more fundamental and far-reaching than their predecessors ever imagined. And that is good news for all Americans, whether their ancestors came to these shores in the seventeenth century or the twenty-first.