

## ***Second Generation Decline? Children of Immigrants, Past and Present – A Reconsideration<sup>1</sup>***

Joel Perlmann

*Jerome Levy Economics Institute of Bard College*

Roger Waldinger

*University of California, Los Angeles*

Is the contemporary second generation on the road to the upward mobility and assimilation that in retrospect characterized the second generation of earlier immigrations? Or are the American economic context and the racial origins of today's immigration likely to result in a much less favorable future for the contemporary second generation? While several recent papers have argued for the latter position, we suspect they are too pessimistic. We briefly review the second generation upward mobility in the past and then turn to the crucial comparisons between past and present.

Thirty years after the 1965 Hart-Celler Act brought renewed immigration to the United States, the immigration research agenda is slowly shifting from the newcomers to their children. While the timing is hardly fortuitous – as the immigrants' children have only recently become a sizable presence in American schools and are just now moving from the schools into the labor market – the striking feature of this emerging scholarship is pessimism. Recent publications by Herbert Gans, Alejandro Portes, Rubén Rumbaut, and Min Zhou – leading students of American ethnic life – outline, with clarity and acuity, the reasons for concern: coming from everywhere but Europe, today's newcomers are visibly identifiable and enter a mainly white society still not cured of its racist afflictions. Shifts in the structure of the economy aggravate the impact of discrimination: while poorly-educated immigrant parents seem to have no trouble getting started at the very bottom, the shift toward knowledge-intensive jobs means that the next generation will have to do well in school if it wishes to surpass the achievements of the foreign born. With big-city schools in more trouble than ever before, the outlook for successful passage through the educational system seems dim. As second generation expectations are unlikely to remain unchanged, we can count on a mismatch between the aspirations of immigrant children and requirements of the

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jobs which they seek (Gans, 1992; Portes and Zhou, 1993; Portes and Rumbaut, 1996; Zhou and Bankston, forthcoming).

There is another factor influencing scholarly views of today's immigrant children, and that has to do with the past. Though the historical comparisons have not been fully articulated, the new scholarship offers a story that reads like this – the descendants of the last great migration started out at the very bottom; but, they have now either caught up with – or surpassed – their WASP betters of yore (Lieberson and Waters, 1988). While one might find cause for comfort in the success of yesterday's downtrodden, future developments are likely to follow a different, less hopeful path. To begin with, the immigrants of old shared a common European heritage with the then-dominant WASPs, and that blunted discrimination's edge. The old factory-based economy also allowed for a multigenerational move up the totem pole. Immigrant children could do better if they just hung on through the high school years, after which time well-paid manufacturing jobs would await them. The third or fourth generation would continue on through college and beyond, completing the move from peddler to plumber to professional. By contrast, the restructuring of the U.S. economy gives the children of today's immigrants no time to play catch-up, requiring strong and extended performance as the condition for moving ahead.

That the situation of today's immigrant children is in some ways distinctive lies beyond debate. But we argue that the interpretive stance towards the past, and towards certain features of the present situation as well, puts the contemporary situation in an especially unfavorable light. This article takes another, albeit still preliminary, look at prospects for the second generation in light of historical experience. We begin with a quick overview of second generation upward mobility in the past. We then take up what appear the crucial similarities and differences between the past and present prospects of the second generation.

## SECOND GENERATION LESSONS

Oscar Handlin's celebrated quip – "Once I thought to write a history of the immigrants in America. Then I discovered that the immigrants were American history" (Handlin, 1951:3) – does not oblige us to consider all American immigrations. For our purpose, the 1890–1920 wave, heavily dominated by immigrants from southern and eastern Europe, the last mass immigration to occur before legislation choked off the European flow, provides the crucial comparison. Compared to their predecessors, the immigrants of the turn of the century were far more likely to converge on the nation's cities and far less likely to move into agriculture – in striking parallel

to the situation today. These "new immigrants" of old encountered an economy very different from the postindustrial capitalism of late twentieth century America, but nonetheless far closer to the contemporary situation than the American economy of 1850 or before. The 1890–1920 period also saw far smaller waves of migration from Mexico, Asia, and the Caribbean, and some will think that the experiences of these populations are relevant to how those of similar regional and racial origin will fare today. We disagree; the issue is whether today's immigrant children are likely to adapt in ways that parallel or diverge from the trajectory followed by their second generation predecessors, and those were overwhelmingly of southern and eastern European origins. The appropriate way to ask the question about race is to ask whether being an Asian, black or Mexican immigrant is a big handicap for immigrants today, a handicap that distinguishes them from southern and eastern Europeans of the last wave. That Asian, black or Mexican immigrants faced especially destructive discrimination in 1900 does not address that crucial question; assuming otherwise is to reify racial classifications.

The great majority of the 1890–1920 immigrants entered the American economy and class structure near the bottom, dramatically below the average native-born family's position. True, there were entrepreneurs among the immigrants of old – mainly persons with a background in trade or crafts (as among the Jews) or unskilled laborers who somehow managed to move into entrepreneurial endeavors. Nonetheless, in 1910, as Table 1 shows, immigrants from all major groups, save the British, were far more likely to work at the least skilled jobs than were native whites of native parentage, and all were less likely to work in white collar jobs, whether at high or low levels. Low levels of literacy also distinguished these groups from the natives and from late nineteenth century immigrants from northwestern Europe – just over half of the "other eastern and southern Europeans" reported that they could read, and just over half of the Italians could not speak English, for example. Though the Jews entered America at occupational and literacy levels above their counterparts from southern and eastern Europe, they still began with quite a disadvantage compared to the native born. The children of immigrants were a good deal less likely than the children of natives to remain in school, and those who remained in school were more likely to have fallen behind in grade attainment.

It is within the context of these generalizations that studies of the economic mobility of European immigrants fall. These studies are of two kinds: the first is a set of historical studies of mobility among European immigrants and their children; the second is the series of ancestry studies based chiefly on the 1980 and 1990 censuses, which provide novel information on individu-

TABLE 1  
IMMIGRANTS AND ETHNICS IN 1910

	First Generation							Other E&S Eur
	British	Irish	Scand.	German	Italian	Polish	Jews EE	
Men 10-64, Occups (% of nonfarm)								
% Mgrl, Prof	10%	6%	6%	10%	2%	2%	9%	3%
%Technical, Sales	15%	11%	8%	14%	7%	5%	29%	8%
%Craft	40%	22%	41%	34%	23%	23%	31%	25%
%Ops, Laborers	28%	47%	39%	34%	59%	68%	28%	60%
All Males 10 and Over								
%Speaking English	99%	100%	91%	90%	49%	46%	78%	51%
%Able to read	99%	96%	98%	97%	65%	73%	90%	55%
%14-18 yr Old in School								
Boys	45%	47%	48%	39%	28%	28%	57%	N/A
Girls	47%	49%	54%	37%	34%	26%	55%	N/A
Second Generation								
	British	Irish	Scand.	German	NWNM			
Men 10-64, Occups (% of nonfarm)								
% Mgrl, Prof	12%	11%	10%	11%	13%			
%Technical, Sales	22%	21%	27%	21%	24%			
%Craft	31%	24%	25%	27%	24%			
%Ops, Laborers	30%	35%	33%	32%	32%			
All Males 10 and Over								
%Speaking English	99%	99%	99%	98%	99%			
%Able to read	98%	98%	98%	98%	96%			
%14-18 yr Old in School								
Boys	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	58%			
Girls	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	60%			

Source: Watkins, 1994: Tables B1, B2, B3, B4

Note: First generation=foreign born; second generation=native born with at least a foreign-born mother. NWNM=native born of native mothers. For group definitions, see Watkins, 1994:366-371. "Other East and Southern Europeans" includes Greeks, Russians, Magyars, Bohemians and Moravians, Slovaks, Lithuanians and Letts, Slovenians, and Croatians.

also who are later-generation descendants of immigrants – third, fourth, fifth, or later generations. These two strands of research treat populations that do not quite connect: the first group focusing on immigrants and their children, the second a set of distant descendants, with the bridging generation(s) often falling from view (as with the Germans, Irish, and English). The research results highlight this gap: the historical studies of social mobility tend to show that ethnic differences in the economic standing of groups remained very important into the second generation; the outcome studies based on ancestry show that eventually these differences disappeared.

The American studies of social mobility were mostly conducted in the sixties and seventies, when they were a staple crop among the then-new social historians. Associated most closely with the name of Stephan Thernstrom (1964, 1973), these studies came to a crashing halt in the late seventies, in

part due to increasing disenchantment with quantification among historians, in part because the research on social mobility in particular quickly reached a conceptual impasse. These studies had sought to explore the extent to which upward mobility characterized American life. Several conclusions quickly emerged: 1) that social mobility in America had indeed been considerable; 2) that it was not as salient as stated in the most naive versions of the rags-to-riches stories of the Horatio Alger type; 3) that it was more salient than Thernstrom's first, paradigmatic study (of Newburyport, Massachusetts) had suggested; and 4) that the quality of the data then available and of the quantitative skills of most authors were too poor to determine whether the extent of American social mobility varied much across time and place and whether American social mobility differed much from European rates of mobility. Given this state of affairs, interest declined. (For historical studies, see Thernstrom, 1973:Ch. 9; Bodnar, 1935:Ch. 6; see also Ferrie, 1995.)

The historians were also interested in educational differences among ethnic groups, although historical information on school attainment was rare since the U. S. census began asking about grades of school completed only in 1940; the question that had been asked earlier, whether a given child was in school in the census year was a poor proxy for school performance. The studies that did manage to include information on schooling supported the generalization obvious from published surveys of the time, that the children of native-born parents were more likely to be in school and in the higher grades than were the children of immigrants. Also, some immigrant groups differed dramatically in the amount of schooling their children received although much of this difference is easily explained by dramatic differences in the levels of economic well-being of the families. Nonetheless, there do appear to have been some significant ethnic differences in years of schooling completed by different ethnic groups, even when all measurable family background factors are taken into account. The classic difference between the Jews and other immigrant groups from southern and eastern Europe, such as the Italians is a case in point. On the other hand, the other easily observed major line of division is between immigrants from more and less economically developed parts of Europe (as for example, the Slavs and Italians on the one hand and the British, Germans, or Scandinavians on the other, circa 1910). The value of schooling for the social progress of these groups – measured as returns to schooling – may have differed somewhat (again, contrasts between Jews and others have been made in the literature). However, the truly glaring ethnic difference in terms of returns to schooling involves the low degree of occupational advancement experienced by relatively better educated blacks in the North compared to various whites groups with the same education (see Perlmann, 1988; Lieberman, 1980).

All this impinges in tantalizing but ill-developed ways on the study of today's second generation. For our purposes, studies of immigrant and second generation mobility compared to the mobility of natives yield mildly interesting results – establishing for example, that there were indeed differences in the starting points and in the degree of upward mobility by ethnic origins – although explaining such differences is another matter. The description of the extent of mobility through the second generation sounds rather different if one reads Stephen Thernstrom's summary (1973:249–252) or John Bodnar's (1985:169–175) – two major efforts at synthesis. However, the most important observation about this historical literature in the present context is that it focused on the question of the extent of mobility by group much more than on paths to upward mobility; yet it is precisely the question of paths that lies at the heart of today's debate. The extent to which the second generation was in fact crucially indebted to semi-skilled jobs in factories and the extent to which the decline in those jobs today means that route is now blocked is not a well-developed theme of this historical mobility literature.

Skipping a generation or two from the immigrants and their children to the "twilight" of European-origin ethnicity, we have the ancestry studies from 1980–1990 (Lieberson and Waters, 1988, Niedert and Farley, 1985; Hirschman and Falcon, 1985; Alba, 1985, 1988, 1990; Waters, 1990). These show that socioeconomic assimilation has been accomplished largely for the European-origin groups and that the rank ordering of well-being today is generally unrelated to that at the turn of the century, with the experience of Jews notably at variance from this generalization. The matter of pathways once again appears – where the groups stand in the contemporary ethnic division of labor and whether they occupy positions of any distinctiveness are questions that remain largely unasked (*see, however, Lieberson and Waters, 1988*).

We note one curious exception – in contrast to these sociological studies of ancestry that stress convergence, George Borjas (1994) stresses that a key ordering at time of immigration, 1910 literacy levels in the immigrants' country of origin, continues to be correlated with the economic position of their descendants for perhaps a century. How well these perspectives can be meshed neither he nor the relevant sociologists (Lieberson and Waters, 1988; Niedert and Farley, 1985; Alba, 1990; etc.) have undertaken to show. We suspect that the resolution is a matter of interpretive spin – the "convergence today" need not contradict "differences lasted as long as a century." Also Borjas tends to focus on third and later generations, while some sociologists tried to separate the third from fourth and later generations. Nevertheless, the contrast between Borjas and the sociologists is important. Economists read Borjas, sociologists read their colleagues, and historians do not regularly read the literature produced by either discipline. Since Borjas's writings are also

widely read and cited by policy analysts in connection with immigration restriction issues, this divergence of emphasis regarding the "common knowledge" about long-term character of immigrant absorption should not be ignored.

In any case, our perspective leads us to stress that the "catching up" occurred not in the first or second generation, but in those later generations on whom data are difficult to obtain. By the third generation, the levels of intermarriage among groups of European origin became very high, so that the grandchildren of Slavic immigrants are also the grandchildren of many other ethnic groups. The ancestry question bypasses this problem by throwing it in the lap of the respondent – with whom does he or she identify? Yet if our goal is to understand socioeconomic mobility from the second generation to the present-day generation, we need the sort of data the genealogist wants – the actual ethnic ancestors of individuals, not the subjective identities of the present generation. Much more than the scarcity and complexity of data are involved here. The substantive significance of all this is that the socioeconomic assimilation of the immigrants' descendants occurred at the same time that the meaning of ethnic descent became complex and indistinct; and these two developments are part of one story, a story as yet poorly told because of the available data, as well as its subtlety and complexity.

## SECOND GENERATION STARTING POINTS

Given the distinctive economic characteristics of the post-1965 immigrants, one might not have expected the discussions of their children's prospects to have turned pessimistic so quickly. In contrast to the immigrants of 1890–1920, concentrated at the bottom of the occupational distribution, socioeconomic diversity is a salient feature of the new immigration. High-skilled immigrants have played a modest but significant role in immigration to the United States ever since the enactment of the Hart-Celler Act in 1965. Notwithstanding charges that America's immigrants are of "declining quality," the 1990 census found that a college degree was as common among all immigrants as among natives (1 out of 5). Moreover, the high skilled are often present at levels well above the U.S. average, with the college-graduate share ranging from 27 percent among Russians to 65 percent among Indians. Consequently, a good proportion of the recent arrivals begins not at the bottom, but in the middle class or above. In contemporary Los Angeles, for example, coveted professional occupations have become immigrant concentrations: more than 35 percent of the pharmacists in the L.A. region are foreign born, as are more than 25 percent of the dentists, and more than 20 percent of the engineers, various computer specialists and physicians.

At the same time, many of today's immigrants do start at the bottom. Thus, in 1990, only 5 percent of all U.S.-born adults, but 18 percent of the foreign-born adults had not received any secondary schooling. We can refine this contemporary native-immigrant comparison in a crucial way: a great share of the immigrants coming in at the bottom are from Mexico, which is also by far the most important sending country numerically – 22 percent of the 1990 foreign-born population was from in Mexico. The next most prominent source country, the Philippines, accounted for less than 5 percent. If we look at the immigrants from the many other sending countries we find that the educational achievements of native-born and (non-Mexican) foreign-born adults no longer appear very different. The foreign born are actually the more likely to have reached college than the native born, although other foreign-born adults are still overrepresented among those with little or no formal schooling. In other words, were it not for the Mexican immigration, we would be looking at an immigration 80 percent as large as the current one and saying that its members, on average, begin their progress through the American economy no worse off than other Americans who are not immigrants. The usual generalizations about contemporary immigration provide no hint of this reality.

Mexicans loom large among the foreign-born population, but even more so among the children of the foreign born. Roughly one out of every three immigrant children has at least one Mexican-born parent. Because those parents live under depressed socioeconomic circumstances, the size and characteristics of the Mexican population strongly influence the overall profile of today's second generation, as can be seen in Table 2, which supplements the usual comparison of the children of immigrants and natives with a further contrast between Mexicans and all other immigrants. The four indicators displayed in Table 2 – percent of children living in households where the head is on public assistance, a single parent, a college graduate, or employed in an upper white-collar occupation – are recalculated from research done by others (Oropesa and Landale, 1995) and are not meant to be determinative. Still, they too suggest a pattern more complex and nuanced than one would expect given prevailing notions of the second generation. For three of the four indicators, the children of all immigrants are living in less desirable circumstances than their native-born counterparts. But that disadvantage disappears when the Mexican population is excluded from the analysis, the lead passing to the children of the foreign born.

A more complete analysis would certainly muddy the waters further; we have no doubt, for example, that the proportion of non-Mexican-origin immigrant children living in households with heads who lack a high school degree or work in blue-collar jobs is higher than the average among natives. At this stage of the game, however, our ambitions are not so great as to require a complete analysis

TABLE 2  
CHARACTERISTICS OF IMMIGRANT CHILDREN, AGED 0-17: 1990

	1st Gen	2nd Gen	All Imm. Kids	3rd Plus Gen.
Head College Graduate				
Total	20%	22%	21%	23%
Mexican	3%	4%	4%	8%
Non-Mexican	27%	30%	30%	23%
Head Single Parents				
Total	25%	18%	20%	25%
Mexican	23%	19%	20%	39%
Non-Mexican	25%	17%	19%	25%
Public Assistance				
Total	13%	9%	10%	9%
Mexican	17%	10%	11%	13%
Non-Mexican	12%	9%	9%	9%
Head Upper White-Collar				
Total	16%	22%	21%	25%
Mexican	4%	6%	6%	13%
Non-Mexican	21%	30%	28%	25%

Source: Oropesa and Landale, 1995.

Note: 1st Gen. = born abroad; 2nd Gen. = born in U.S. of at least one foreign-born parent;

All Imm. Kids = first+second generations.

of the most recent U.S. census. The thrust of this article concerns the contrast with the children of the 1890–1920 wave; from that perspective, one is hard pressed to argue that today's immigrant children – Mexicans excepted – are starting out from circumstances less favorable than those of the past. And they may indeed be better: to note that 30 percent of today's non-Mexican second generation live in households where the head has a college degree is no trivial observation in light of the historical experience – especially when the level for all natives is seven percentage points lower.

Regardless of comparisons to immigrants of the past, today's debate asks about the effect of the "new economy." While the new economy may render the children of non-Mexican immigrants vulnerable, it must be having about the same influence on the children of the native born. For children in some of these immigrant families the new economy may indeed confront them with 'missing rungs' on the ladder out of the bottom – but no more so on average than it does for the children of native-born families. Only the Mexican immigrant population, therefore, stands distinctively at risk; and only its magnitude makes immigrants as a whole appear distinctively exposed to the winds of economic change. By contrast, at the turn of the century no single group could have altered the generalization that most immigrants were much more likely than natives to start out near the bottom (*see* Table 1). Indeed, that generalization applied to every one of the major southern and eastern European groups – the relatively better-skilled Jews included.

### SECOND GENERATION RACE: THEN

The European immigrants of 1890–1920, write Portes and Zhou, were "uniformly white," consequently "skin color reduced a major barrier to entry into

the American mainstream" (1993:76). Using the categories of Milton Gordon (1964), Gans concurs: "while dark-skinned immigrants from overseas cultures will also acculturate, racial discrimination will not encourage their assimilation, at least not into white society," (Gans, 1992:177).

"Race," as historian Barbara Fields has argued, explains nothing, but is something that has to be explained. So contentions such as these beg the question at hand – Under what conditions do such categorical distinctions among groups gain salience? A look at other societies demonstrates that neither skin color nor any other physical attribute is a necessary condition for the erection of racial divisions. The central complaint of modern European anti-Semitism was precisely the point that the Jews had become indistinguishable from everyone else. And current French attitudes are far less antagonistic to black Africans or Antilleans than to North Africans, yet the latter are frequently blond and of fair complexion.

One can agree that race is a social construction and still retort that by the late nineteenth century, "the social construction of race" in the particular historical context of the United States had led to an association between skin color on the one hand and slavery and its legacy on the other. But this historical legacy, as two streams of American historical writing emphasize, did not fully determine how the European immigrants of the past would be slotted into the American racial classifications. A generation ago, John Higham's *Strangers in the Land* (1955) showed the influence of racial thinking – with its distinctions among "Nordic," "Alpine" and "Mediterranean" races – among intellectual and political circles and in the framing of the immigration restriction legislation of the 1920s. As applied to the European immigrants, those racial classifications often employed visible physical features, including differences in skin color. In the nineteenth century, for example, the Irish were labeled a "race" and regularly characterized as "savage," "simian," "low-browed," and "bestial" (Roediger, 1991). Black Americans were referred to as "smoked Irishmen," suggesting that these two groups were then looked at through a remarkably similar lens (Ignatiev, 1995). Later observers stressed the "Saracen blood" of the southern Italians, whose "dark complexion . . . sometimes resembles African more than Caucasian hues" (Rieder, 1985:32).

Over the past half-dozen years, several scholars have taken such evidence seriously and linked it to the very low social class position of the immigrant arrivals. It is easy to imagine, they point out, that the immigrants could have been defined not as "white," perhaps not as black, but as some distinctive, stigmatized "other." That such an alternative grouping never emerged had much to do with the actions of the immigrant European groups themselves, who engaged in deliberate strategies that distinguished themselves from blacks and which, in turn, yielded "whitening." We need not argue that contemporaries distinguished "races" of the "Nordic" and "Mediterranean" kind

in quite the same way as they constructed the racial opposition between "Negroes" and "whites," nor even that they would necessarily have excluded "Mediterraneans" from the broader "white" category. It suffices, for today's debate, to note that they saw "racial" divisions among "whites" and that these divisions included looks, and even skin "hue" – a meaning for "peoples of color" circa 1900 (see Higham, 1955; Rieder, 1985:32; Roediger, 1991; Ignatiev, 1995).

Moreover, these racial divisions faded at a very gradual pace. Social scientists today will make sport of E.A. Ross, whose book *The Old World and the New* contains such gems as this quote from a physician who claimed that "the Slavs are immune to certain kinds of dirt. They can stand what would kill a white man" (quoted in Lieberman, 1980:25). But it is well to remember that as late as 1945, Warner and Srole (286–293) could distinguish between "light" and "dark" "Caucasoids," the latter "a mixture of Caucasoid and Mongoloid" blood, slated for very gradual assimilation – anywhere from six generations to "a very long time in the future which is not yet discernible."

It could not have been more than a few years after 1945 that Warner and Srole's "dark Caucasoids" became "white ethnics." Racial perceptions changed as the Irish, Poles, Italians, and Jews moved ahead; in this sense, for the descendants of the European immigrants, race was an achieved, not an ascribed status. Yet today we are told that the earlier immigrants were able to move ahead because they were white and that the immigrants of today will have trouble doing so because they are not white. At best, this view drastically needs to be fleshed out with historical detail and with ample shades of gray; at worst it mistakes cause and effect.

## SECOND GENERATION RACE: NOW

The recent historical treatment of "whiteness" attends to the processes by which the European immigrants distanced themselves from the natives of African descent. "Proximity – real and imagined – to the dark-skinned other was pivotal to the emergence" of the hyphenated identities that the European ethnics established in their quest for acceptance in America. The struggle for place in a contested, ethnic order provided ample motivations for the newcomers to resolve any ambiguity over how their racial identity was to be defined. As Robert Orsi writes, the "effort to establish the border against the dark-skinned other required an intimate struggle, a contest against the initial uncertainty over which side of the racial dichotomy the swarthy immigrants were on and against the facts of history and geography that inscribed this ambiguity on the urban landscape" (1992:318). Labor competition furnished additional incentives, though as the Italians often found themselves pitted against the Irish, and the Irish against the Germans, the conflict over jobs does not suffice to explain why

they all became white (*see* Ignatiev, 1995). But they did; and in becoming white, the immigrants and their descendants also became party to strategies of social closure that maintained black exclusion and ensured more stable employment and better wages for others of their own kind.

Can today's immigrants draw on a similar ethnic card? The answer is not yet in, but there is no question that they certainly can try, especially when it comes to differentiating themselves from poorer, less educated African Americans who fall at the bottom of the racial order. We all know about the tensions that suffuse the relations between African Americans and the new middleman minorities that run businesses in the Harlems and Watts of today's United States. Whatever their causes, these conflicts yield the consequence of shifting entrepreneurial, but visibly identifiable, immigrants to the advantaged side of America's racial division.

It is not difficult to imagine that professional or entrepreneurial immigrants find rewards for falling on the "right side" of the color divide. We suggest that the same can be said for the labor migrants whose presence so many Americans now seem to dislike. Certainly, urban employers in New York, Los Angeles, or Chicago have come to prefer immigrants to native-born, American blacks (Kirschenman and Neckerman, 1991; Waldinger, 1996a, 1996b).

As in the past, conflict at the racial divide coexists with tensions among workers of diverging national or regional attachments. We have repeatedly heard reports of bad blood between Mexicans and various Central American groups, as well as of intraethnic conflict within Central American populations, when interviewing employers in the Los Angeles region.<sup>2</sup> Nevertheless, far more Latino hostility seems to be directed towards blacks.

Today, as at the turn of the century, then, the second generation will move into a context in which their parents have been busily at work distancing themselves from native blacks. But there is a rejoinder to the argument just advanced, namely the contention that the geographic and ethnic origins of the new immigrants leave them in no position to play the "race card." From this perspective, the influence of the past is important in that it defines today's newcomers as "people of color." Consequently, immigrants from Latin America, the Caribbean, or Asia will not be able to separate themselves from caste-like treatment, unlike the immigrants of the past (*see*, for example, Okihiro, 1994:Ch. 2).

One need only look at the present dynamics of white-Asian relations today to realize that the argument for this sort of historical continuity falls short. It is not just that all of the legislated racial divisions seem now curiously barbarous and are disowned; in crucial respects the eradication of the legal barriers is paralleled by changes in social conditions. There are Asians at the bottom of the class structure, but there are Asians throughout the class structure as well, in

<sup>2</sup>Ongoing research by Roger Waldinger is the source of the material reported in the remainder of this section. For a preliminary discussion of the study, *see* Waldinger, 1996b.

impressive numbers. Further, the educational achievement of large numbers of Asians ensures that for significant numbers of the second generation, the disappearance of the lower rungs of manufacturing jobs is about as relevant to their economic advancement as it is for readers of this journal. Moreover, trends in intermarriage between the offspring of new Asian immigrants are far closer to historic trends in immigrant-native intermarriage than to historic trends in black-white intermarriage. In contrast to the pattern that prevailed during the great immigrations of 1830–1920, a quantitatively meaningful plurality of "races" is now evident on the national scene in the United States. At the same time, white, Asian, Hispanic and Native-American groups are engaged in extensive intermingling. The conjunction of these two facts alone may help diminish the significance of the black-white divide in American life. In the same way, the fact that tremendous numbers, and great proportions, of the Latin American arrivals come with an interracial legacy – having 'Indian' and/or black ancestors as well as white ancestors – also creates a novel and quantitatively massive race complexity in America (Perlmann, 1997). All this may help erode the centrality of the black-white divide.

Acknowledging these tendencies, we think, yields a pessimistic and an optimistic scenario. The pessimistic scenario suggests that the crucial line will remain between blacks and all others, with some segmented assimilation leading a fraction of the second generation to integrate into the black population and the rest into some as yet undefined category that may not be "white" in any meaningful sense and may not remain designated as such. All we lack to make this scenario more plausible is a term in the popular culture to replace white – a term that can include Asians and Hispanics easily enough and that essentially means "native born, and not black." If that term emerges, we should note it as an important and worrisome development.

The more optimistic forecast rests on the evolution of black-white relations themselves. It may seem worse than frivolous in a period of so much black-white tension to insist on the prospect for qualitative change in relations across that divide and, if not frivolous, then hard to take seriously. One need not argue that black-white dynamics are at a happy pass to understand that they have shifted enormously for the better in the past six decades. It is highly significant that black-white intermarriage remains low; but with 10 percent of young black men marrying whites, it is now significantly above zero and rising (Alba, 1995:17). If the social class and educational situation of inner-city blacks is a national disaster, there is, nevertheless, also a serious growth in the black middle class and in black collegiate enrollment. The point is simply that the black-white divide, while remaining terribly salient, is itself very different from what it was when immigrants and their children defined themselves in the past.

One measure of change even in the most recent years is the fate of the phrase "the Browning of America," denoting the expectation that the crucial divide will separate non-Hispanic whites from all others, to be loosely united as "browns." In this sense, the term "Browning of America" is as common today as was the term "the Greening of America" a generation ago – and about as reliable in predictive value. Another measure, along a different dimension, is the problem that federal agencies have in trying to fit the children of racial intermarriages into their racial classification systems. These problems should be viewed as symptoms of transition to a time in which those classifications seem quaintly passe. The present racial situation is in flux, as *Time Magazine* (1997) told us in connection with Tiger Woods. If we truly believe that race is socially constructed, then we should know that the broader dynamics of American culture and politics and not the skin complexion of the new immigrants will matter most to their absorption. Race, as David Montejano has written, "represents an arena of struggle and accommodation" (1987:4). For that reason, the new second generation will have some say in America's complex racial and ethnic order.

## SECOND GENERATION ADVANCE

Clearly, one form of contemporary adaptation "replicates the time-honored portrayal of growing acculturation and parallel integration into the white middle class" (Portes and Zhou, 1993:82). There is little question that many, possibly even most, of today's immigrant children are heading upward, exemplified by the large number of Asian students enrolled in the nation's leading universities – some the children of workers, others the descendants of immigrants who moved right into the middle class. The rapid Asian ascent evokes parallels with the past, most clearly with the first and second generation Russian Jews who began appearing at the City College of New York and then at Harvard, Columbia, and other prestigious schools shortly after 1900.

If there is a similarity between past and present experiences of second generation movement into the middle class, we are more struck by variation; in particular, the distinctive institutional reactions to the Jewish and Asian inflows, respectively, into higher education. The history of the quotas against Jewish students is reasonably well known. By the second decade of the twentieth century, the number of Jews seeking admission to elite academic institutions was still a relatively small minority of the Jewish age cohort, but the numbers were nonetheless large enough to create a notable presence and to discomfit the then-dominant WASPS. Columbia University, positioned "at the gateway of European immigration," was the first to try turning the situation around: it implemented a new set of admission procedures that successfully reduced the Jewish share of entering from 40 percent to 17 percent by

1934 (Wechsler, 1977:163–164; 168). By the end of the 1920s, Harvard, Yale, Princeton, Duke, Rutgers, Barnard, Adelphi, Cornell, Johns Hopkins, Northwestern, Penn State, Ohio State, Washington and Lee, and the Universities of Illinois, Kansas, Minnesota, Texas, Virginia, and Washington had all adopted measures that restricted Jewish enrollment (Dinnerstein, 1994:85–86). Professional schools essentially followed the same course.

Less well known are the circumstances under which these policies were reversed. The tide began to change during World War II, when the draft made it harder for colleges, like so many institutions, to pursue discriminatory practices without immediately harming themselves. More decisive, however, was the new legal and social environment that emerged during the war and thereafter. Having just endured a conflict fought to promote democracy – and in which racial equality emerged as a war issue – Jews felt themselves newly emboldened to act – in 1945, the American Jewish Congress challenged Columbia University's tax-exemption in court, arguing that New York State tax laws forbade discrimination by tax-exempt institutions on grounds of race or religion (Wechsler, 1984). Unsuccessful before the bench, Jewish organizations moved onto the political arena, there to reap greater rewards – in 1946, the New York City Council passed a resolution, clearly aimed at Columbia, that threatened the tax exempt status of colleges and universities that used racial or religious criteria in selecting students. Anxious to avert any similar threat, Yale acted preemptively, outlawing quotas and giving first priority to students of highest merit (Oren, 1985). In 1948, New York State forbade discrimination on grounds of religion or race in higher education and simultaneously established a state university, threatening the hegemony of Columbia and the other privates while also promising greater accessibility to Jews, Catholics, and blacks. Other states shortly followed suit, with antidiscrimination more stringent than New York's.

Other postwar developments hastened the assault on quotas. As John Skrentny (1997) has argued, post-World War II competition with the Soviet Union led the United States to embrace a "new moral model," rendering earlier discriminatory practices illegitimate. Global competition also placed a greater premium on preparation of a labor force suited for a technologically advanced economy, further pushing universities to open, rather than close, doors. Thus, the 1947 report of Truman's Commission on Higher Education linked expansion of educational opportunity with its equalization, blasting the quotas directed against Jews (as well as the confinement of black students to black colleges) (Levine, 1986); the American Council on Higher Education weighed in with additional condemnation and documentation of anti-Jewish restriction. And so the era of anti-Jewish discrimination in higher education ended in some places, like medical schools, quickly; in others, like Yale or Princeton, not until the mid- to late-1960s (Wechsler, 1982).



An echo of this earlier controversy arose in the 1980s, amidst charges that prestigious colleges, private and public, had established quotas against Asians, just as they had against Jews several decades before (*see* Wang, 1988:201–205). By the mid-1980s, something strange was happening at elite educational institutions. Public institutions, even the more selective among them, were rapidly increasing their Asian enrollments and admitting Asians in much the same fashion, and using the same criteria, as for everyone else. But Asian students with records comparable to those of their white counterparts were not doing as well when it came to admission to the most selective, private institutions. Moreover, Asian enrollments, which had been rising quite sharply in the late 1970s and early 1980s, suddenly flattened out at schools like Princeton, Brown, Harvard, Stanford, and their like (Hsia, 1988:90–91).

If the pattern was reminiscent of the earlier experience and the underlying cause familiar – competition with native whites over scarce and valued resources – the controversy worked itself out in different ways. In contrast to the earlier experience, Asian administrators, faculty, and students were numerous and influential, sufficiently so that their voice could not be ignored. Several of the universities accused of discrimination – Princeton, Harvard, Stanford, and Brown, to name just a few – took a critical look at their own admissions practices and then took steps that led to significant increases in Asian-American admissions.

The external response also proved distinctive. In contrast to the Jews, who, in the 1920s and 1930s, were isolated politically and intimidated by a rising tide of anti-Semitism, Asian American organizations were able and willing to use political influence; that, in turn, galvanized the scrutiny of outside monitors. In California, where admissions policies at UC Berkeley became highly suspect, the state's leading Democratic politicians "held numerous fact-finding hearings, intervened by bringing together university officials and Asian American community leaders, passed special resolutions on admissions, and had the state Auditor General undertake an unprecedented audit of admissions policies . . ." (Nakanishi, 1995:277). In Washington, both liberals and conservatives kept the spotlight on allegations of discrimination in admissions. And even Harvard was not exempt from review, with the Office of Civil Rights undertaking a major investigation which cleared Harvard of charges of discrimination, but found that Asians did suffer from the preferences granted to alumni children and athletes.

There are a number of lessons to be drawn from this story of Asian and Jewish efforts to scale the ivy walls. First, note the sequence of changes in second generation status. East European Jewish acculturation had proceeded rapidly, judged by success in academic achievement. Second generation Jews did not find that their parents' ethnic economy served "as a platform enabling

them to climb into the mainstream economy at high levels" (*see* Alba and Nee, 1997); nor were they able to move up the pecking order by taking over the positions vacated by others who moved even further ahead. Instead, above a certain level of attainment and outside the expanding ethnic niche, Jews encountered exclusion. Scholastic success had moved them into competition with the nation's elite, who found effective means of blocking Jewish ascent. Moreover, the reaction in the academic world reflected broader social patterns, in which the doors of New York's large corporate organizations were generally closed (Broun and Britt, 1931:224). In the strongly nativist, anti-Semitic environment of the 1920s and 1930s, organized efforts to overturn discriminatory practices were of little avail. Hence, the second generation was forced to fall back on the institutions of the ethnic community, which by the 1930s included not just a greatly expanded business sector but also substantial employment in the civil service (Waldinger, 1996a).

Changed power relations after World War II upended the exclusionary practices put into place during the interwar years. Once quotas were removed, the Jewish presence on campuses swelled. Contact probabilities shifted, producing greater exposure to gentiles, which in turn accelerated Jewish "structural assimilation" into the American mainstream, to use the concept made famous by Milton Gordon (1964). But this portrait stands at variance with the belief that "the process of assimilation (of the European origin groups) largely depended on individual decisions to leave the immigrant culture behind and embrace American ways" (Portes and Zhou, 1993:76). The Asian chapter of our story reveals the same dynamics of exclusion and conflict that followed educational attainment and adequate economic resources to support college enrollment.

The contemporary controversy also arose in a different historical moment. Earlier struggles against discrimination had changed the rules of the game – the struggles over the Jewish quotas themselves, the post-World War II climate, and not least the Civil Rights movement. It had become far more difficult for dominant groups to engage in strategies of social closure than was the case earlier in the century. Moreover, insider groups operated under greater constraint than before, while outsider groups enjoyed more leverage within the affected institutions and more scope for mobilization outside them. The relatively high class standing of Asian immigrants did not simply carry them to the threshold of membership, as in the Jewish case earlier in the century, but generated the resources needed to quickly overturn barriers. And the advantages derived from the more open society of the late twentieth century should temper generalizations about the determining position of skin pigmentation in the fate of the new second generation.

### THE SECOND GENERATION IN THE HOURGLASS ECONOMY

Gans (1992) and Portes and Zhou (1993) argue that the mismatch between aspiration and opportunity is greater today than before. In their view, the conundrum of the contemporary second generation lies in the continuing transformation of the U.S. economy. The manufacturing economy of old allowed for a three – possibly four – generational sequence of modest steps that took the immigrants' descendants far beyond the bottom-most positions to which their ancestors had been originally consigned. By contrast, today's occupational segmentation has "reduced the opportunities for incremental upward mobility through well-paid, blue-collar positions" (Portes and Zhou, 1993:85). The declining viability of small business reduces the possibilities for advancement through the expansion of businesses established by the immigrant generation. The general stalling of mobility reduces the chances for ethnic succession: Jews and Italians followed the Irish into the public sector as the latter moved on to more lucrative pursuits; today's civil servants are unlikely to enjoy the same options, which will close off this path of mobility to today's second generation (Gans, 1992). Thus emerges the hourglass economy – many good jobs at the top, many bad jobs at the bottom, few decent jobs between. How, then, will the second generation move up? This formulation of the question, coupled with consideration of the racial origins of the second generation, drives the new second generation literature to its pessimism.

One restriction on the scope of the hourglass argument is that the crisis will not affect the offspring of the very large fraction of immigrants who arrive with useful skills – for example, with educational attainments comparable to the median among white American workers. These immigrants can and do support an extended education for their second generation children. The children of immigrants comprise 41 percent of the first year students enrolled in the City University of New York – a rate that leaves immigrant children overrepresented in the third largest public system of higher education in the United States by a factor of almost 50 percent (City University of New York, 1994:10). The New York experience is not unique: nationwide 74 percent of all college-age immigrants are enrolled in some form of postsecondary schooling as opposed to 65 percent among the native born; likewise, in-school rates for immigrant 18–21 year olds are above native-born levels (Vernez and Abrahamse, 1996:38).

But what of the rest, the less-fortunate segment envisioned by "segmented assimilation"? A restriction of the theory's explanatory power concerns its poor specification of supply and demand. The theory stresses the changing nature of the U.S. economy, thereby implying that the economy's demand for low-skilled work (especially in manufacturing) is what pulled the relevant steps off the mobility ladder. What about the supply of low-skilled workers,

given several decades of high-volume immigration? The increasing supply of low-skilled workers can dramatically change the outlook for such workers, just as much as the real or imagined changes in demand for them in "the new economy." What is more, to the extent that supply (or demand for that matter) drives down their prospects and they are less able to help support their children's schooling, their children may be channeled into similar or only slightly better jobs than their parents. If so, the second generation, too, is hurt by the magnitude of supply over an extended period. A more refined specification of the supply and demand for low-skilled workers, then, is a desideratum for the theory of "missing steps on the ladder of mobility." The pessimists may retort that, strictly speaking, more refined specification would not matter to the claim that the steps on the old ladder are now missing. True – but the specification does matter for a broader understanding of what is happening.

These considerations aside, it does seem reasonable to think that the less educationally successful of today's second generation, especially those stemming from the immigrant families entering near the bottom, will be likely to run into trouble. But do they differ, in this respect, from their counterparts of the past? Questions about the future of yesterday's second generation were commonplace earlier in the century. At the time, contemporaries did not fret over the possibility that large number of jobs would remain at the bottom of an economy shifting toward an hourglass shape. Nevertheless, they observed that increasing proportions of decent jobs required extended levels of schooling, and they argued forcefully and often that the children of workers generally, and the children of the immigrant workers in particular, would not obtain those jobs unless they were convinced to stay in school longer than it seemed their wont to do (*see* Douglas, 1921; Lazerson, 1971:Ch. 5; Krug, 1969:Ch. 8, 10; Bremner *et al.*, 1974).

It is one thing to remember that contemporary observers were concerned about the prospects of yesterday's immigrant children, another thing to note that those concerns were founded in a reality of continuing educational disadvantage, still another thing to argue that because predictions were wrong in the past they are wrong today. Obviously we do not make this last claim. Nevertheless, insofar as the predictions were wrong, they do suggest caution in simply assuming that growing demands for high-skilled labor foreclose the possibility that the children of immigrants can move beyond their parents. Moreover, the historical parallel is instructive insofar as it is in part true: the economy did in fact require more jobs for the educated; but the second generation and their children also found pathways to amelioration, in part by acquiring the additional increments of schooling that the industrial economy of the 1920–1970 period demanded. Both the relatively slow pace of economic change and the ability of the ethnics to respond to the changes are relevant.

Other considerations also suggest some optimism. For one thing, as Portes and Zhou (1993) themselves were careful to stress, the shift towards the hourglass-shaped labor force is something happening fairly slowly. There are many low-skill jobs in that economy. Second, the U.S. economy is enormous, with today's second generation a relatively small fraction of its workforce. If there is one cliché about ethnicity and the economy, it is that ethnic groups are not randomly distributed but are clustered in various types of niches, which both provide shelter from competition and yield mechanisms for progress up the ladder. Unless we rule out the emergence of second generation niches, the observation that manufacturing jobs generally have declined in this economy does not end the task of analysis but begins it; it is not impossible, for example, that despite any decline, the remaining decent, less-skilled jobs are heavily populated by and are sufficient for the current day second generation aspirants.

Finally, remember that most employed persons without college degrees are neither immigrants nor their children nor native-born racial minorities. If the new hourglass economy poses serious problems of upward mobility for the offspring of these workers, it thereby confronts American society and all its working-class families with a very serious and widespread problem. For once it would seem true that we really can ignore ethnicity and focus on class.

### SECOND GENERATION REVOLT?

The immigrants arrive willing to do the jobs that natives won't hold – however low the jobs may fall in the U.S. hierarchy, they still offer wages and compensation superior to the opportunities back home. Having been exposed to different wage and consumption standards from the start, the children want more. This process inheres in the immigration experience, an endogenous source of changing aspirations and outlooks; following Piore (1979), we can call this “second generation revolt.” To say it is inherent in the immigration experience is to imply that it is by no means unique to the current second generation, but rather that it characterized those of the past as well. Both Gans (1992) and Portes and Zhou (1993) draw on this source of changing attitudes. However, especially in the formulation of Portes and Zhou, other factors, exogenous to this process, are found to be interacting with it. For them, whether second generation “careers . . . keep pace with their U.S.-acquired aspirations” (Portes and Zhou, 1993:85) will be answered in a new historical context. These new exogenous factors include the racial composition of the new immigration and the nature of the hourglass economy already discussed. Also new is a kind of cultural diffusion. The new immigrants converge on central cities where they live in close contact with earlier established native minorities. Proximity to African and Mexican Americans yields exposure to the “adversarial” norms of “marginalized youth.” As immigrant chil-

dren come into contact with the reactive subculture developed by native minorities, they undergo a process of “socialization” that “can effectively block parental plans for intergenerational mobility” (Portes and Zhou, 1993:83).

In the concept of an “oppositional” or “adversarial” culture we see the shadow of the anthropologist John Ogbu (1978). For Ogbu, an oppositional culture is the indigenous response adopted by African Americans and other supposedly like groups to the experience of oppression and exploitation in America. On the one hand, the legacy of discrimination breeds ties of extraordinary, kinlike solidarity; not only does group loyalty take primacy over the quest for individual achievement, but any effort to break out from the pack is seen as a betrayal of the group and appropriately sanctioned. On the other hand, African Americans have pursued a strategy of cultural inversion, as have the other subordinated groups, responding to mainstream society's rejection by rejecting the mainstream and its values (*see* Gibson, 1988; Matute-Bianchi, 1986). As Foley (1991:66) puts it, “This sort of occupational logic dictates that they must choose between being occupationally successful (white) and culturally successful (black). Quite ironically, the battle to preserve their ethnic culture becomes the very thing that dooms castelike minorities of color to academic failure.”

But just as second-generation revolt is not a phenomenon distinctive to African Americans or Ogbu's other caste-like minorities, there is good reason to assume that an oppositional culture does not characterize today's second generation alone. As we've emphasized, discrimination and stigmatization were well known to the earlier generations of European immigrants. Whatever the faults of today's multicultural education, it could not possibly be as dismissive of the immigrants' background and culture as were the Americanization programs of the 1910s, 20s, or 30s; a common reaction to this curriculum must have been resentment and opposition, especially in those schools where alienation from school values of educational achievement and extended education were prevalent.

Nor should we forget that solidarity has always been among the most cherished of working-class values with effects besides those one sees on the picket line. Here is Pete Hamill, a son of an Irish immigrant, on growing up in Brooklyn during the forties:

In the final three years of grammar school at Holy Name, I always finished at the top of the class in grades, averaging 98 or 99, was placed on the honor roll and granted awards for general excellence. But there was an assumption that if you got good grades you must be soft, a sissy, or an AK – an ass kisser. This was part of the most sickening aspect of Irish-American life in those days: the assumption that if you rose above an acceptable level of mediocrity, you were guilty of the sin of pride. You were to accept your place and stay in it for the rest of your life; the true rewards

would be given to you in heaven, after you were dead. There was ferocious pressure to conform, to avoid breaking out of the pack; self-denial was the supreme virtue. . . . it was arrogant, a sin of pride, to conceive of a life beyond the certainties, rhythms, and traditions of the Neighborhood. Sometimes the attitude was expressed directly. . . . More often, it was implied. But the Neighborhood view of the world had fierce power. Who did I think I was? Forget these kid's dreams, I told myself, give 'em up. Do what everybody else does: drop out of high school, go to work, join the army or navy, get married, settle down, have children. (1994:110–111, 146)

This pressure for leveling in solidarity again implies a we-they division between the neighborhood and the middle-class norms. That the precise cultural content of the division is not that which Ogbu describes does not mean that the we-they division was less oppositional.

Other descriptions of second generation youth culture in the early twentieth century make the skepticism about the value of schooling and the opposition between ethnic youth and schools explicit. Ewa Morawska provides this summary of the second generation outlook among the East European immigrants in a Pennsylvania steeltown:

the sons and the daughters of the immigrants were . . . keenly aware of the gulf between . . . [the] ideals [of the dominant society] and their actual chances in Johnstown. This perception was summarized by Mike T., a second generation Serb, born in 1905: "At school we learned [about how man is master of his fate], but we knew that we had a double strike against us, foreign extraction and poor and uneducated parents." In the perceptions of the second generation, some schooling and some personal advancement were correlated, but education, the basis of individual achievement in the dominant cultural paradigm, "was not the most important [factor] for your future." By and large, success was determined by particularistic considerations: "In 70 percent of the cases, it mattered more who your father was, his nationality and all . . . and whom he knew, and whom you knew." (1985:267–268)

Caroline Ware's book in 1935, on the Italians of Greenwich Village in the 1920s and the 1930s, sounds the same themes of skepticism toward the value of education, combined with cultural conflicts between school and community. "Among the boys in the district," she wrote, "it had always been very much the code to hate school. Although there is nothing unique in boy's antagonism to school, the intensity with which the local boys hated school was conspicuous" (1965:337). As Ware tells it, conflict had various roots: the curriculum and teachings had little in common with what the children learned in the streets; the schools disregarded the cultural background of the children; they also rejected the behavioral norms that the children had acquired at home, which "often set the children vigorously against the school." Writing contemporaneously, Leonard Covello (1967) recounts a similar story about the Italians of East Harlem; there the accent lies on the extraordinary cohesion of the Italian community and on the way in which

parental pressures and children's preferences converged to produce high dropout rates by high school years. Composed 25 years later, Gans' description of the Italians of Boston's West End differs only in degree: the students are poorly motivated; the parents are ambivalent; the schools clash with the attractions of the children's peer groups; the "junior high school principal's main problem [is] truancy, and the parental acquiescence concerning this" (Gans, 1962:133). The school was "anathema to many" of the teenagers, in large measure for the reasons adduced by Caroline Ware 25 years earlier – it sought to train them for a way of life diametrically opposed to the one for which they had been prepared at home (Gans, 1962:68). And a good part of that opposition stemmed from the parents' rejection of middle-class society and its values and their hostility toward individualistic striving. What little we know of more contemporary, ethnic working-class communities suggests that the school-child antagonism has not since been significantly tempered (*see, for example, McLeod, 1987*).

Moreover, the accommodation to the routine of working-class life was often made grudgingly and few of the 16-year-old boys who dropped out of high school, as did Hamill, made a beeline for the factory. Instead, they spent their time on the street corner, hanging around, drinking liquor, and getting into fights; Hamill describes the "times of the gangs" in pages differing little from those of today's newspaper, only in that the arsenal of violence was not as complete (*see Spergel, 1964:38–47*). Whether gangs were present or not, the nature of the youth labor market made for an extended "moratorium," as Paul Osterman (1980) termed it, in which youths were excluded from positions of the primary or craft type and bounced from one more or less casual job to another. Unstable employment was compatible with that form of protest against the routines and aims of both school and work described by Gans as "action-orientation": youths "want the material appurtenances of modern life – especially cars and spending money – and they want to be freed from the routine-seeking society which 'bugs' – (or imposes on) – them" (1962:68). Since the youth labor market provided plenty of jobs, deficient only because they were boring and badly paid, action-orientation could persist until other commitments forced a reckoning with routinization (*see Spergel, 1964:149–152; Wial, 1988*).

The historical evidence, reviewed above, is certainly not definitive. However, it implies that an "oppositional culture" can emerge from the immigrant working class experience without exposure to a "proximal host" comprised of visible, stigmatized, native-born minorities. Our discussion of "second generation revolt" points to greater continuities in the experiences of immigrants past and present; it reminds us of the difficulties experienced by the earlier groups. It also suggests that the time frame for immigrant accommodation was extended and that we should not expect different today.

The comparison also brings class back into current debates. Though the context for the discussion above is ethnic, the explanatory factors seem to be of a different nature, having to do with the disarticulation between schools, on the one hand, and the world of manual work to which immigrant children were destined, on the other. That disconnection breeds revolt: working-class children perceive that school has little to do with their chances in life, and they also react against the middle-class culture of the school and its denigration of working-class life and labor. Indeed, Ogbu's concept of an "oppositional culture" recalls Paul Willis's (1977) influential description of rebellious "lads" versus the no less working-class, but bourgeois-minded "earholes." Yet Willis's account of Birmingham, England, tells a story of working-class, adolescent revolt, pure and simple – not a story of "second-generation" revolt at all, much less the second generation of today's immigration of color into the changing American economy. Are there subtle differences between the rebellion of Willis's working-class youth, Piore's second generation, Ogbu's caste-like minorities, and the youth passing through Portes and Zhou's lowest path of segmented assimilation? There may be; but we are struck by how much is common among these descriptions, and class-based.

Whether mainly or only partly a class phenomenon, the youthful revolt described in the paragraphs above is almost certainly conditioned by the subsequent opportunities that working-class children encounter. School could be flaunted with relative impunity as long as there was a vibrant factory-based economy, which unsuccessful students could access through the help of relatives and neighborhood friends. The stronger the industrial economy, the greater the value placed on manual work, which in turn sanctioned youth rebellion and gave it a ritualized form. Though the literature is fragmentary, it appears that these same circumstances persist, in attenuated form, in the remaining ethnic working-class enclaves in the northeast and midwest. One can certainly hypothesize that similar conditions come into play in Los Angeles, with its massive, thriving factory-based economy and the movement of Mexican immigrants and Mexican-Americans into the ranks of the skilled working class. But outcomes are sure to take a different form in a deindustrialized city like New York or in a service-based city like Miami, where school drop-outs have few alternatives and the erosion of the industrial economy has sorely devalued manual work. As these are also the conditions that have intensified the "oppositional culture" among native minorities, it may be common experience, and not exposure, that yields self-defeating rebellion among the children of the innercity, whether of foreign-born or native-born roots.

## CONCLUSION: SECOND GENERATION PROSPECTS

The descendants of the last great immigration to the United States have now moved far up the totem pole; from the perspective of the 1990s, it is hard to imagine that their adaptation to America could have turned out differently. But this view of an inexorable climb up the social ladder is certainly not how the children and grandchildren of the European immigrants experienced the process themselves. Their beginnings, as we have noted, were not particularly promising; nor were the established groups of the time ready to accept the newcomers and their descendants. Even the most skilled of the lot, the Jews, found that rapid acculturation and the acquisition of schooling were not sufficient to open the doors. The acquisition of full membership was an uncertain, protracted process to which the immigrants and their descendants contributed – both through attempts to undo obstacles to progress and to place themselves on the white side of America's racial divide.

At a minimum, this portrait of the past suggests that, overall, the children of the post-1965 immigration begin with disadvantages no greater than those encountered by immigrant children before. That generalization is probably too cautious. On the one hand, the immigrants' class composition is far more heavily weighted toward the middle class than was true earlier in the century. On the other hand, American society is more receptive to immigrant incorporation – in large measure, due to the efforts by earlier groups of outsiders (including native-born blacks) to widen access to opportunity. Two themes emerge from this comparison: class and agency.

### *Class*

While America's new immigrant population is extraordinarily diverse, its overwhelmingly largest component – the Mexicans – falls at the very bottom of the skill ladder; the Mexicans are even more heavily represented among the immigrants' children. Absent the Mexicans, today's second generation looks little different from the rest of the American population in socioeconomic characteristics. Those characteristics are not sufficient to guarantee satisfactory adjustment to the economy of the next generation; but the same can be said for young, "third generation plus" Americans of any ethnic stripe. The immigrant children most notably at risk are the Mexicans (most notable, surely, in numbers and as notable as any other immigrant group in the low level of economic well-being). It is the presence of a single large group, so far below the others in skills, that distinguishes today's from yesterday's second generation. However, we note that the advent of the new economy means trouble for the children of the native-born members of America's working class, who also find themselves in conflict with the middle-class values and expectations of schools. These are the main reasons why we should worry about the future for the offspring of Mexican immigrants and of other less skilled newcomers.

### Agency

As did their predecessors, the children of today's new immigrants will transform America. The relatively high class background of so many immigrant children makes it more likely that they will do so quickly and on their terms – witness the contrast between the Jewish and Asian fate in higher education. That higher class standing is also likely to change the import of race, historically fluid except at the black/white divide, and currently under rapid transition even there. One can certainly imagine that some section of African, Latin American and Asian-origin Americans will find themselves pigeonholed in some new but stigmatized and subordinated “other” category. But other options are clearly visible. The ever growing ethnic diversity of American life – thanks, in large measure to immigration itself – suggest that those possibilities are more likely. We expect that today's second generation will make itself busy reshaping the meaning of race – an endeavor to be pursued with at least some modicum of success.

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## Assimilation and Its Discontents: Between Rhetoric and Reality<sup>1</sup>

Rubén G. Rumbaut  
Michigan State University

The process of immigrant assimilation is typically and uncritically conceived as one of linear progress – becoming similar to the dominant group in the place of destination is presumed to be a good thing. But a compelling body of evidence on the adaptation of immigrants and their children points to a deterioration of outcomes over time and generation in the United States, as well as to nonlinear processes of change. While linguistic assimilation among children of immigrants does proceed rapidly and inexorably as a linear function, other outcomes – in such diverse areas as infant and adolescent health, diet and divorce, delinquency and risk behaviors, educational achievement and aspirations, an ethos of hard work, and the development of an ethnic identity – contradict conventional expectations, expose underlying ethnocentric pretensions, and point instead to assimilation's discontents. By examining such paradoxes of immigrant adaptation that emerge in the conceptual interstices between rhetoric and reality, fruitful reformulations of a seminal sociological concept may be stimulated and advanced.

I have endeavored to guard myself against the enthusiastic prejudice which holds that our civilization is the most precious thing that we possess or could acquire and that its path will necessarily lead to heights of unimagined perfection. One thing only do I know for certain and that is that man's judgements of value follow directly his wishes for happiness – that, accordingly, they are an attempt to support his illusions with arguments.

SIGMUND FREUD, 1930 (1961:110-111)

Material goods have gained an increasing and finally an inexorable power over the lives of men as at no previous period in history. . . . In the field of its highest development, in the United States, the pursuit of wealth, stripped of its religious and eth-

<sup>1</sup>This is a substantial revision of a paper presented at the conference "Becoming American/America Becoming: International Migration to the United States," sponsored by the Social Science Research Council, Sanibel Island, Florida, January 18-21, 1996, and an elaboration of the argument sketched in "Paradoxes (and Orthodoxies) of Assimilation," *Sociological Perspectives*, 40(3)1997. I gratefully acknowledge the support provided by the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation and the Russell Sage Foundation for the project "Children of Immigrants: The Adaptation Process of the Second Generation," some results from which are reported herein.