

Not the Promised City: Los Angeles and Its Immigrants

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Ellis Island has been turned into a museum; the Statue of Liberty stands in a harbor deserted of passenger ships. Miss Liberty may still frame the iconography of New York City and shape the self-understandings of New Yorkers, but immigrant America has decisively moved west. Today's capital of the new immigration is unquestionably Los Angeles, that ill-defined, sprawling blob, located on the other coast. Los Angeles is now a migrant metropolis *par excellence*, no less than New York, quite in contrast to its previous incarnation. For most of the twentieth century Los Angeles grew thanks to its appeal to U.S.-born migrants in search of an alternative to the congested, conflictual, multiethnic cities of the Northeast and Midwest. Only in the last thirty years has the immigrant presence transformed and ultimately redefined Los Angeles. But the immigrants arriving in Los Angeles have no Statue of Liberty to encounter, nor do Angelenos share an iconic image that ties the region to its newest residents. At best, one must travel to the U.S.-Mexican border to see signs warning motorists to observe caution, for fear of injuring the mothers, fathers, and children illegally crossing the border in search of a better life in the United States. The boat may not be full, but the message hardly announces a lighted lamp. Rather, the newcomers are at once alien and unwanted; having come to do better, their choice of destination puts that goal at risk.¹

1. For an overview of Los Angeles and its ethnic transformation, see Roger

This is an admittedly one-sided, even pessimistic portrayal. Like the rest of the United States, Los Angeles has gained a large population of highly skilled immigrants: Well-educated, entrepreneurial, entering the professions in great and growing numbers, these newcomers are making American history. They move right into the middle class. Their imprint is found throughout suburban Los Angeles, and especially in the region's universities, where the children of immigrants—many of those children foreign-born themselves—are a burgeoning presence.²

So I do not mean to ignore the good news. Nonetheless, the advent of high-skilled immigration does not distinguish Los Angeles. Rather, Los Angeles has blossomed as a destination for the least skilled of America's newcomers. It may well represent the cutting edge of tomorrow's America, but its immigrant experience raises troubling questions about the character of that future. In Los Angeles the newcomers find themselves not only at the bottom but at greater distance from their native-born counterparts than elsewhere in the United States. Thus, there is a profoundly paradoxical quality to contemporary ethnic Los Angeles: It has made a place for so many immigrants doing yesterday's work, at a price paid currently in impoverishment, but tomorrow in possibly a very different coin. And if current prospects look dim, the future seems hardly better. After all, the immigrants' major legacy takes the form of their children, too many of whom are growing up in poverty, coming of age in a city and state that have perversely decided that now is the time to disinvest in education. No, Los Angeles is *not* the immigrant's promised city.

And Yet They Come

As we head toward the year 2000, it is now clear that the twentieth has been the century of immigration. True, the doors

closed in the mid-1920s. For many, especially during the dark days of World War II, they remained fatally shut. But even at the height of immigration restriction, the back door remained open, which means that the Mexican presence also grew. However, the advent of the Bracero program in 1943 augured the shape of things to come. Immigration began growing in the late 1940s and has continued to increase. At the end of the century, the numbers of newcomers are adding up to the flow seen at the century's dawn.

Numerical equivalency, however, does not yield equivalent impact. At the end of the twentieth century, the country's population is three and a half times larger than in 1900; relatively speaking, today's flow does not measure up to yesterday's. The overall shape of a line more sensitive to changes in relative size looks the same: a U-curve, sagging in mid-century. Whether the line measures percent foreign-born or the immigration rate—a flow indicator relating the size of a decade's immigrant cohort to the total population at the end of the decade—its late-century uptick is decidedly more modest than the early twentieth-century surge.

But what is true of the whole does not characterize its parts. The immigrant path has always led to the nation's cities. In 1910, 10 percent of the total U.S. population lived in its five largest cities. Those same cities were home to 25 percent of the foreign-born; 15 percent of the foreign-born lived in New York alone.³ Move ahead eight and a half decades, adjust for the new pattern of urbanization by looking at urban regions rather than cities, and one finds much the same pattern. While 20 percent of all Americans live in five of the largest urban regions—New York, Los Angeles, Miami, San Francisco, and Chicago—these also serve as home to 53 percent of all immigrants. *Plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose.*⁴

3. Roger Waldinger and Mehdi Bozorgmehr, "The Making of a Multicultural Metropolis," in *ibid.*, 13.

4. This essay draws on a number of statistical sources, most importantly the Public Use Samples of the 1970, 1980, and 1990 Censuses of Population, and a merged sample from the 1994–1997 Current Population Survey (CPS). For the most part, the temporal reference is the mid-1990s, unless specified differently. Through the remainder of the paper, data pertaining to either 1970, 1980, or 1990 come from the Census Public Use Microdata Samples (PUMS) files, while those pertaining to the mid-1990s come from the CPS. The Appendix to Waldinger and Bozorgmehr, eds., *Ethnic Los Angeles*, 471–480, provides details on the PUMS data.

Waldinger and Mehdi Bozorgmehr, eds., *Ethnic Los Angeles* (New York, 1996); Roger Waldinger, "From Ellis Island to LAX: Immigrant Prospects in the American City," *International Migration Review*, 30 (1996), 1078–1086, represents an earlier attempt to think through the contrasts between our leading immigration cities.

2. Lucie Cheng and Philip Yang, "Asians: The 'Model Minority' Deconstructed," in Waldinger and Bozorgmehr, eds., *Ethnic Los Angeles*, chapter 11; Mehdi Bozorgmehr, Georges Sabagh, and Claudia Der-Martirosian, "Middle Easterners: A New Kind of Immigrant," in *ibid.*, chapter 12.

Yet the similarity is not quite so neat. America's immigrant capital is no longer New York. The nation's most densely immigrant area is Miami, where 37 percent of all residents are foreign-born. But with all due respect to our Florida cousins and colleagues, theirs remains a rather modest urban center, home to only six of every hundred immigrants. The immigrant center of gravity lies in southern California, and its epicenter is the Los Angeles region, where one out of every five immigrants lives.

As already noted, immigrant Los Angeles is a novel creation, so it differs greatly from its counterpart on the East Coast. Immigration waxed and waned in the Big Apple, yet even at its lowest, the foreign-born presence never receded below the 20 percent mark recorded in 1970. Thus, the new immigration, beginning in the 1960s, represented continuity with the old: a change, to be sure, but not a fundamental departure from the past. To be a New Yorker was to be an immigrant or an immigrant's close descendant.⁵

Los Angeles, of course, has known a different history. Immigrants to Los Angeles were more than a curiosity at the century's beginning, but by mid-century their visibility had declined significantly. While Los Angeles grew at phenomenal rates during the war and the succeeding quarter-century, the new Angelenos were largely white and native-born. These enormous flows of internal migrants ceded place to shifts from abroad, at first almost imperceptibly, and then with sudden, massive force. In

The Current Population Survey is a monthly survey of a national probability sample of approximately 60,000 households. In light of the limited size of the populations of greatest interest to this paper—immigrants, on the one hand, and residents of major metropolitan areas, on the other—I have sought to increase the size of these target populations by merging the March CPS samples from 1994 through 1997. However, the nature of the CPS precludes utilization of each year's full CPS sample. The CPS retains respondents during a two-year period, interviewing individuals for a period of four consecutive months, dropping them from the sample for the next eight months, and then re-interviewing them for another four consecutive months, after which time they are dropped from the sample completely. Consequently, half of the persons interviewed in any given month reappear in the following year's sample in the same month. To avoid duplicate cases, I have retained non-overlapping halves of the 1994, 1995, and 1996 samples, and included the entire 1997 sample. This procedure almost triples the size of the total sample.

5. Roger Waldinger, *Still the Promised City? African-Americans and New Immigrants in Postindustrial New York* (Cambridge, Mass., 1996), chapter 2.

the 1960s, however, foreign migration to Los Angeles took on new significance—a departure from the past—but not a unique development since New York saw the same change. Thereafter, the movement of newcomers to Los Angeles accelerated in a radical way, as the Los Angeles-bound immigration grew steadily out of line, not just with the nation, but with historical trends as well. Thus, immigration not only hit the Los Angeles region harder and faster than it did almost anywhere else. The passage from the 1960s to the 1970s marked a sharp alternation in migration flows, with the recent brand of newcomers most unlike and far less welcomed by the old. Not surprisingly, the region's old-timers—and not-so-old-timers—were disconcerted by the new arrivals from abroad and acted out their unhappiness, with assistance from the state's political class, in that temper tantrum known as Proposition 187.

Immigrants to Los Angeles comprise a distinctive lot. Some of our local *cognoscenti* are fond of describing Los Angeles as the nation's—sometimes even the world's—most diverse city.⁶ The reality, I regret to inform them, looks quite different, as can be discerned from Figure 1. Los Angeles's immigrants are in fact relatively homogeneous. As of the mid-1990s, a single source country—Mexico—accounted for almost half of the region's foreign-born residents, with El Salvador and Guatemala collectively contributing another 10 percent. Add in the remaining seven top-sending countries (all but one located in Asia), and the ten leading places of origin account for 75 percent of all foreign-born Angelenos. In the rest of the country, by contrast, newcomers from Mexico, El Salvador, and Guatemala make up just under a quarter of the foreign-born population. And as a total, immigrants hailing from the same sending countries that make the top ten list in Los Angeles account for less than half of those foreign-born persons living outside the five-county region.

Origins may not be destinies, but they are certainly influential. For Los Angeles, national origin matters because it is so strongly associated with class. Socioeconomic diversity can rea-

6. See, for example, Edward W. Soja, "Los Angeles, 1965–1992: From Restructuring-Generated Crisis to Crisis-Generated Restructuring," in Allen J. Scott and Edward W. Soja, eds., *The City: Los Angeles and Urban Theory at the End of the Twentieth Century* (Berkeley, 1996), 426–462.

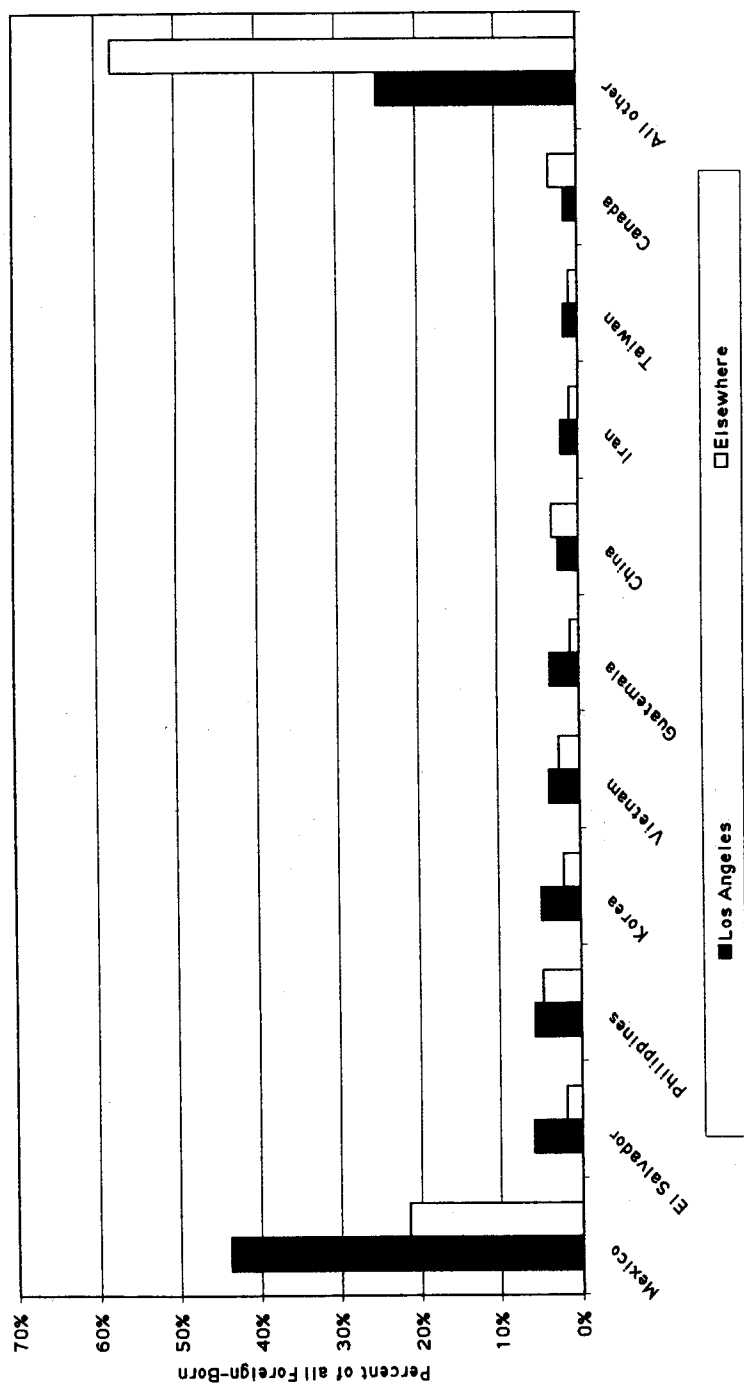


Figure 1. Immigrants to Los Angeles and the Rest of the United States, by Country of Origin. Source: Current Population Survey, 1994–1997.

sonably qualify as the distinguishing characteristic of the “new immigration.” Arriving with no capital, few useful skills, and (Jews excepted) limited literacy, many of the southern and eastern European predecessors of the 1880–1920 period moved into the bottom rungs: servants, laborers, longshoremen, *schleppers* all.⁷ Today’s immigrant, however, is quite likely to come with a college degree, or even more. Rates of college completion among Indians, Koreans, Taiwanese, Chinese, Iranians, and others considerably outrank the native-born norm, yielding a similar gap in the level of upper white-collar employment.⁸ But substantial low-skilled contingents accompany these high-skilled immigrants, the very least skilled being also the overwhelmingly largest group—namely, the Mexicans.

Consequently, the Los Angeles migration stream is dominated by immigrants with modest, often scant, amounts of schooling. Although the region has gained plenty of high-skilled immigrants, their numbers look less impressive when compared with the patterns elsewhere. Outside of Los Angeles, the newcomer with a college education or more comprises the modal type; within the Los Angeles region, this high-skilled arrival cedes place to the immigrant with a primary-school education or less. For the most part, the skill differential has little to do with selectivity within streams: Mexicans in Los Angeles are neither more nor less skilled than those who head elsewhere in the United States. *Grosso modo*, the same generalization holds for all the other groups. Los Angeles differs simply in the over-representation of those immigrant groups that arrive with the least education.

Of course, cities have always been havens for the least skilled, and the same applies to Los Angeles. Those immigrants with the fewest resources, and those most dependent on migration networks, converge on the largest urban centers. For the more skilled, formal education offers a way up *and* a way

7. For a detailed analysis of the socioeconomic characteristics of the “old” new immigrants, see Susan Cotts Watkins, ed., *After Ellis Island: Newcomers and Natives in the 1910 Census* (New York, 1994).

8. Ruben Rumbaut, “Ties that Bind: Immigration and Immigrant Families in the United States,” in Alan Booth, Ann C. Crouter, and Nancy S. Landale, eds., *Immigration and the Family: Research and Policy on U.S. Immigrants* (Mahwah, N.J., 1997), 3–46.

out. The higher the level of formal schooling, the greater the access to national labor markets, which in turn produces greater geographic diffusion.⁹ But even when compared to the major immigrant destinations, Los Angeles appears distinct, outranking other preferred immigrant places—New York, Miami, San Francisco, and Chicago—in the proportion of adult immigrants who have neither obtained nor gone beyond a high school degree. In all five metropolitan regions, low skills put immigrants far behind natives. Since formal education tends not to increase over the life course, its absence is likely to keep immigrants from catching up. More distressingly, the native-immigrant skills gap looms largest in Los Angeles.

However grim current-day characteristics are in Los Angeles, must we worry with such concern? History might suggest not. Today's displaced *campesino* resembles no one better than yesterday's uprooted *contadino*. Italians, like the Mexicans or Central Americans, started out at the bottom, laboring for a pittance in the garment sweatshops of the immigrant capitals of the time. The children of the *contadini* did better over time, with their descendants moving further up the economic escalator. Should we not expect the same for the offspring of today's least skilled newcomers?¹⁰

One would like to answer affirmatively, but the context differs radically. While today's immigrant capital needs more muscle and brawn than the conventional wisdom would suggest, the winds of change do not favor the unskilled. Like other large urban regions, changes in Los Angeles put its least-schooled residents at risk, with growth concentrated in jobs that require formal education and specialized skills. For immigrants, as we shall see, these developments spell bad news, pitting a burgeoning population in competition against one another for a dwindling share of economic benefits. While these crosscurrents affect an ethnically mixed group of low-skilled immigrant Angelenos, their impact falls hardest on Mexicans and Central Americans. Their prospects stand at the center of the sections that follow.

9. Alejandro Portes and Ruben Rumbaut, *Immigrant America: A Portrait* (Berkeley, 1996), chapter 2.

10. See, for example, Stanely Lieberman and Mary Waters, *From Many Strands: Ethnic and Racial Groups in Contemporary America* (New York, 1988).

Los Angeles as Dead-End Mobility Trap

Los Angeles breaks the mold, highlighting the relationship between immigration and urban change in new, intensely paradoxical ways. Conventional academic wisdom insists on a mismatch between demography and economy in the nation's largest urban places. Employers in the postindustrial city are looking for workers who can create, process, and exchange information, leaving little place for the unlettered, no matter how willing. The equation between cities' economic function and their population base leaves no place for the less skilled, robbing urban areas of their historic capacity to absorb newcomers.¹¹

However persuasive and plausible, this view leaves one wondering. If indeed urban employers are hiring none but the highly educated, why has Los Angeles emerged as the capital of today's immigrant America? The answer, in part, involves distinguishing between the direction and rate of change; skill demands are indeed on the rise, but upgrading is proceeding at a far slower pace than the conventional wisdom would have us believe. And there is more. If the typical metropolis diverges from the precepts of urban theory, Los Angeles departs still further, remaining a growth machine for jobs of all types at both the high and low ends. To be sure, job gains are disproportionately concentrated near the top of the totem pole. In 1970 the typical working Angeleno held a high school degree; by 1990 her counterpart boasted at least some college, with college graduates more commonly employed than those who had not gone beyond high school. But in contrast to the paradigmatic postindustrial centers like New York or San Francisco, Los Angeles generates new jobs for low-skilled workers. In Los Angeles the last three decades have yielded a bulge in employment for workers with some high school education, with primary school or less, and even the utterly untutored.

So Los Angeles is different, in ways that open the door to less-skilled immigrants. In part, the Los Angeles factor has to do with the strength of its manufacturing sector. For all the loose

11. John Kasarda, "Cities as Places Where People Live and Work: Urban Change and Neighborhood Distress," in Henry Cisneros, ed., *Interwoven Destinies: Cities and the Nation* (New York, 1993); William Julius Wilson, *When Work Disappears: The World of the New Urban Poor* (New York, 1996).

talk about Southern California's "rust belt," visits to a few industrial parks will confirm what the statistics reveal. Manufacturing may have been down in 1990s, but it was still a colossus—alive, reasonably well, and providing ample employment. Only Chicago, among the other major immigrant metropolitan areas, offers proportionately greater manufacturing opportunities to its immigrant workers. Moreover, the distress of the Los Angeles manufacturing sector has hastened the outflow of its native workers, creating a game of musical chairs, in which immigrants can pick up jobs by taking the place of the natives who depart for greener pastures.

Thus, the structure of the Los Angeles economy creates a place for low-skilled newcomers. While the region's established residents are at best ambivalent about the immigrants, its employers know a good deal when they see one. Why complain about an incessant flow of job-seekers, willing to do any job, at bargain basement rates? So the Los Angeles economy has adapted to the availability of low-skilled help by opening the door to workers with few if any formal skills, as evidenced by the trajectories in such immigrant-absorbing, low-skilled occupations as janitors, gardeners, or servants, where the numbers nearly doubled during the ten years between 1980 and 1990. The factory or office of the future notwithstanding, the reality of immigrant Los Angeles remains closer to the work world of the past, with plenty of jobs for poorly educated but manually proficient workers.¹²

For all of their problems, and there are many, these low-skilled immigrants work at levels that defy the conventional social science wisdom. As of 1990, 80 percent of Mexican immigrant men with *no formal schooling at all* were working, with employment rates rising, though only slightly, for men at each higher increment of education. These statistics may hide the unemployment that is exported when undocumented workers are laid off and head for home to wait for better times. But if this qualifier holds some water for the very least skilled, it carries much less force for those with at least some primary education, who comprise the modal group and have increasingly sunk deep roots in Los Angeles.

12. See Allen J. Scott, "The Manufacturing Economy: Ethnic and Gender Divisions of Labor," in Waldinger and Bozorgmehr, eds., *Ethnic Los Angeles*, chapter 8.

More recent data from a merged data set of the 1994–1997 Current Population Surveys allow an even sharper picture. In terms of only men with a high school education or less, Mexican immigrant men in Los Angeles are actually less likely to be unemployed than their white counterparts, and far more likely to be employed than similarly schooled blacks. Indeed, careful statistical analysis suggests that when background characteristics are held constant, the Mexican employment rate is equal to that of native whites, although the African American disadvantage remains constant as well.

Although the good news for immigrants is that some type of job is clearly better than no job at all, the problem is that low-skilled newcomers get shunted into low-quality jobs. Immigrant jobs rank low in two respects. Either they fail disproportionately to provide full-time, full-week employment (contrary to the workers' preferences), or they keep the workers going forty hours or more but at wages that do not allow someone to break out of poverty. Employment of inadequate quality mainly reflects the vulnerabilities encountered by all low-skilled workers, regardless of ethnicity. Less-educated Mexican immigrants in Los Angeles who are working are no more likely than comparable whites—or blacks—to work in jobs that fall short on either one of the two counts just mentioned. The problem, however, is that the less skilled make up the modal category among immigrants but a small and steadily diminishing group among both whites and blacks.

The story gets still worse when one looks at the pattern of change over time. In general, the economic situation of immigrants starts off badly but improves as the newcomers learn the ropes, acquire the skills employers want, and discover how to send the signals employers seek. That story describes the experience of Mexican immigrants of the 1960s, who have consistently moved ahead from decade to decade, although at a rate that has done relatively little to diminish the gap with their native white counterparts. The cohort of the 1970s, however, did not enjoy the same luck, barely forging ahead over the 1980s, as measured in absolute dollar terms, which in turn has meant no progress toward reducing the substantial native white lead. As for the immigrants of the 1980s, they started even further behind their predecessors—not a good beginning, considering

the protracted recession that struck the Los Angeles economy in the 1990s. Space prohibits a similarly detailed consideration of the trajectory of Central American immigrants, but the story is much the same.¹³

In the end, Mexican and Central American immigrants in Los Angeles suffer penalties of three types: one linked to their disproportionately low skills; a second deriving from the negative consequences of the social networks that so effectively move them into the Los Angeles economy; and a third associated with their role as stigmatized migrant laborers. Let us begin with the matter of skills, for now is a bad time to be a less-skilled worker in America, regardless of nativity or ethnicity. The demand for less-educated workers of all ethnic backgrounds has decreased since the late 1970s, thanks to a combination of globalization, declining goods production in Los Angeles, and the diminishing need among the remaining manufacturers for low-skilled help. But the difficulties of the less skilled would not be so pressing were it not for the supply-side shifts so clearly at work in Los Angeles—namely, the failure of supply to decline at a rate comparable to demand. In Los Angeles we have actually witnessed the opposite, namely an extraordinary influx of very low-skilled help. To be sure, the ratio of low-skilled Angelenos to low-skilled jobs was no worse in 1990 than it was two decades before, but given the other forces pushing wages downward, stability of this sort can provide only cold comfort.

The fact that successive immigrant cohorts have begun at progressively lower levels adds another twist to this story. The very same networks that funnel the newcomers into the economy aggravate competition among the low-skilled.¹⁴ The immigrants' route into the region's economy has occurred through a relatively small tier of low-paying occupations and industries, as can best be seen by focusing, for convenience, on Mexicans.

13. Vilma Ortiz, "The Mexican-Origin Population: Permanent Working Class or Emerging Middle Class?," in *ibid.*, chapter 9; David Lopez, Eric Popkin, and Edward Telles, "Central Americans: At the Bottom, Struggling to Get Ahead," in *ibid.*, chapter 10.

14. On the ethnic niche, see Waldinger, *Still the Promised City?*, especially chapter 4; on the operation of immigrant networks in the Los Angeles economy, see Waldinger, "Black/Immigrant Competition Re-assessed: New Evidence from Los Angeles," *Sociological Perspectives*, 40 (1997), 365–386.

Network recruitment funnels immigrants into a narrow set of economic specializations that quickly develop into ethnic niches. The chief Mexican concentrations of 1970 had extraordinary absorptive power—not a particularly fortunate development, since these were low-wage, competitive industries to begin with, and the expansion of the labor supply had the predictably depressing effect on paychecks. Although Mexican employment spilled over into a broader set of industries as the labor force expanded, little diffusion occurred. By 1990, 55 percent of employed Mexican immigrants found themselves working in the Mexican niches of 1970, virtually the same percentage that had been recorded then. While the Mexican industrial and occupational base diversified, it paradoxically became more distinct from that of the rest of the labor force. Already very segregated from other groups in 1970, Mexicans became more and more so, in occupational and industrial terms, over time. What all these indicators tell us is that, as their numbers increased, Mexican immigrants found themselves crowding into a narrow set of industries in the secondary labor market that proved highly responsive to shifts in supply.

Finally, Mexican and Central Americans have suffered from the very same factors that make them so desirable in employers' eyes: namely, their role as stigmatized workers, more vulnerable to exploitative practices than their native-born competitors. From the employers' standpoint, the immigrants' charms are of a varying sort. As an organizer from the heavily immigrant janitors' union commented, "That the immigrants would work for lower wages was only part of the motivation to recruit among the foreign-born: I think 'cheap' was less of a question as sort of 'cheap' in addition to 'controllable.'"¹⁵ The contacts between veterans and newcomers give employers greater freedom to deploy the labor force as they wish. The use of immigrant networks can also reduce turnover, while providing ready access to new labor, when needed. And mobilizing the immigrant network is often compatible with out-sourcing labor, as more veteran immigrants can be deployed as crew leaders, encouraged or delegated to take on the tasks of recruiting, hiring, firing, and paying workers.

15. As quoted in Roger Waldinger, *et al.*, "Helots No More—A Case Study of the Justice for Janitors Campaign," in Kate Bronfenbrenner, *et al.*, eds. *Organizing to Win: New Research on Union Strategies* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1997).

For all these reasons, the terms of compensation at the bottom of the Los Angeles economy have gotten worse over the past two decades. Between 1970 and 1990, real earnings in the Mexican immigrant industrial niches declined by over \$6,000. The downturn was not simply a matter of exchanging bad jobs for worse, for real earnings also declined in all of the industries that served as Mexican niches in 1970, before the massive immigration truly began. Contributors to the combination of demographic and economic changes that gave the region a more unequal wage structure in 1990 than it had had twenty years before, Mexicans and other Latino immigrants were also its victims. Applying 1970 quintile levels to the 1990 distributions shows that 29 percent of Latino immigrant earners fell into the bottom quintile in 1970, but 42 percent languished there two decades later.

Second-Generation Prospects

The true test of immigrant adaptation lies in the future. From a historical perspective, starting out at the bottom is the American way, so long as the immigrants' descendants can gradually climb or claw their way out of the socioeconomic cellar. Though such was the experience in years gone by, the past may not be prologue.

To be sure, the future is not yet here. Though there is a large, rapidly burgeoning literature on the second generation—those children of immigrants born in the United States—the advent of this new second generation remains some years away. As of the mid-1990s, almost two-thirds of this true second generation were seventeen years old or younger, outnumbering the slightly older grouping of second-generation adolescents and young adults aged eighteen to thirty-four by almost three to one.

But the second generation's impending arrival is unmistakable. As of the mid-1990s the region's age structure had developed a remarkable ethnic twist, with Hispanics comprising 52 percent of the under-fifteen population, compared with 31 percent for whites. In contrast, the region's graying population of residents older than sixty-five remained overwhelmingly white-dominated, at the 68 percent level. High fertility rates

among the Mexican and Central American immigrants, combined with their youthfulness and low average age at first pregnancy, ensure that the region's age structure will shift even more radically in the same direction.

How will these children fare?¹⁶ While the answer is not yet in, there is cause for concern because of the impoverished situation under which too many of the region's immigrant children grow up, the inadequacy of the schools they attend, and the performance they achieve. It is not simply the case that the earnings of Mexican and Central American immigrants are lagging behind. One must also remember that their households contain lots of children, resulting in a very low per capita income and a high proportion of children growing up in poverty. In 1990 Hispanic children were the most likely of all groups, including native blacks, to be living in families where income was at or below 150 percent of the poverty level. That spells bad news, as we know from the large library of research demonstrating that growing up in poverty harms school achievement.

But all is not bleak. Mexican immigrants in Los Angeles, as we have seen, arrive with relatively scant amounts of schooling, a liability that constitutes a near-permanent source of disadvantage, since education remains almost invariant over the adult life-course. But compared to the immigrants, the later generations do substantially better, as shown in Figure 2, which displays educational data for the cohort currently aged eighteen to thirty-four, representing the cutting edge of the emerging second generation. In a sense, the second and third generations are converging with the native-born pattern. Virtually everyone has surpassed the modal pattern for the foreign-born, namely the primary grades. There are signs of progress at the higher end as well, since substantial proportions have now obtained some college education. But for the most part, the figure conveys a sobering lesson: There is little catch up in the relative share of college graduates, the only group of

16. For a pessimistic, highly influential assessment, see Alejandro Portes and Min Zhou, "The New Second Generation: Segmented Assimilation and its Variants among Post-1965 Immigrant Youth," *Annals*, No. 530 (1993), 74–96; for a second opinion, see Roger Waldinger and Joel Perlmann, "Second Generation Decline? Immigrant Children Past and Present—A Reconsideration," *International Migration Review*, 31 (1997), 893–922.

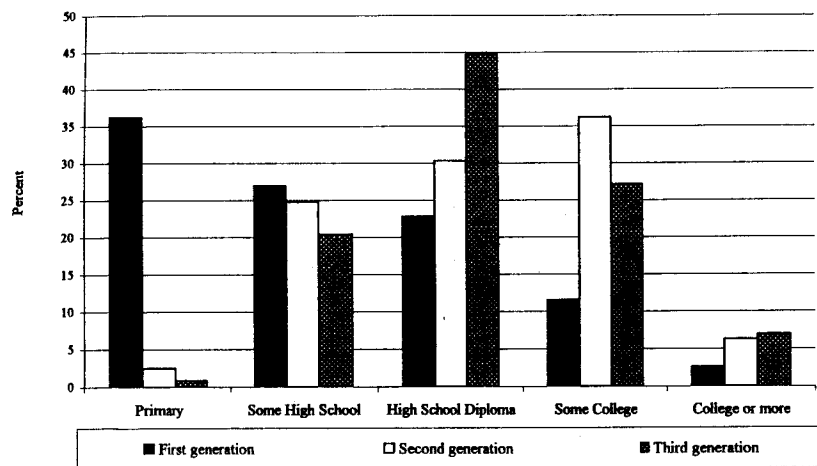


Figure 2. Amount of Education among Mexican-Origin Population (Age 18 to 34), by Generation. Source: Current Population Survey, 1994–1997.

earners for whom real earnings has been going up. Whether one looks at second or third generation, the majority consists of persons with a high school degree or less—precisely those workers likely to be most vulnerable to the economic adjustments in years to come.¹⁷

Nonetheless, immigrants make do, however poorly, with the minimal skills they bring with them. Cannot later generations, having improved their school performance, repeat the immigrant experience in employment? Perhaps, but there are ample reasons to suspect not. Immigrants evaluate the rewards in Los Angeles relative to the less favorable alternatives available back home; not so the second generation, for whom the standards enjoyed by other Angelenos provide the relevant point of comparison.¹⁸ That being the case, second-generation workers may simply decide to abandon the world of work, es-

pecially if their educational performance consigns them to the tail of the hiring queue.¹⁹

Although this is a reasonable hypothesis, the latest data suggest that we can breathe a sigh of relief. Assimilation is at work, but convergence toward the native-born norm means different things for men and women. For later generation Mexican men, taking on the native-born norms involves diminishing employment rates; for later generation women, by contrast, the trajectory yields much higher rates of economic activity, compared to the foreign-born. In neither case is there any evidence that the “underclass” scenario prevails. Second- and third-generation Mexican Angelenos, of either gender, have a far more secure position in the labor market than their African American counterparts. If marriage and fertility rates similarly move toward the pattern evinced by native-born whites, then upward mobility via dual earner families seems the likely scenario, not downward movement into the “underclass.”

It is not simply a matter of just having a job, however much that counts. At some basic level, later generation Mexican Angelenos show clear signs of occupational improvement relative to their immigrant counterparts, as shown in Figure 3. By the second generation, the uniformly proletarian nature of the immigrant population gives way to an occupational profile in white-collar employment more clearly in line with the economy of the times. To be sure, most of the gain involves a shift into the less skilled, less well-remunerated, nonmanual jobs involved in sales, administrative, and clerical work. Relative to native whites, second- and even third-generation Mexican Americans lag substantially behind in terms of professional or managerial employment. Nonetheless, the issue at stake is whether later generation Mexicans are stuck at the very bottom. At the moment, the best answer appears to be no.

So, if the immigrants are struggling just to stay afloat, their descendants seem to be doing better. “Seem” is the right word, since the time is not yet ripe for a definitive assessment. The ranks of the second-generation cohort are still quite small.

19. This was hypothesized by Herbert Gans in “Second-generation decline: scenarios for the economic and ethnic futures of the post-1965 American immigrants,” *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 15 (1992), 173–192.

17. See Stephen J. Trejo, “Why do Mexican Americans earn low wages,” *Journal of Political Economy*, 105 (1997), 1235–1268.

18. On the differences between first- and second-generation aspirations, and the effects of those differences, see Michael J. Piore, *Birds of Passage: Migrant Labor and Industrial Societies* (New York, 1979).

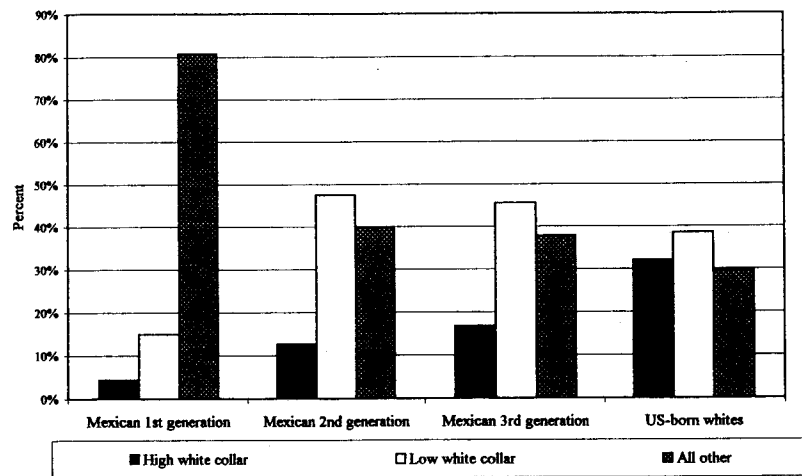


Figure 3. Major Types of Occupation among Mexican-Origin Population, by Generation, and Compared to U.S.-Born Whites.

These barely grown-up children of Mexican immigrants are the descendants of persons who came to the United States in the 1960s, 1950s, or before. As noted above, these relatively early immigrants fared considerably better than those who arrived in subsequent years. Today's eighteen to thirty-four-year-old second-generation Mexican Angelenos grew up in a world less heavily influenced by Los Angeles's immigrant transformations and were educated in schools that probably functioned at a level somewhat superior to the conditions today.

For all these reasons, one can imagine a positive as well as a negative reading of second-generation prospects. In many respects, today's second-generation Mexican Angelenos bear more than a passing resemblance to their southern and eastern European counterparts of the Northeast and Midwest, circa 1930 to 1960. Though certainly not at the top of the region's pecking order, today's second generation is not at the bottom either, finding themselves at midpoint on many indicators and registering clear advances over the immigrant generation.

Unlike the children of the Italian and Polish immigrants who began with little, ended up with more, but never expected a lot, today's second-generation Mexican Americans experience

rampant consumerism and relentless media exposure to the standards of upper-middle-class life. One doubts, therefore, that the passage from humble to modest status will fully satisfy the children of today's servants and assemblers. The scenario gets a good deal more pessimistic if the region's next economy fails to deliver or simply throws up more bad jobs.

Conclusion

If the past is prologue, we can count on immigrants to keep on flocking to the Los Angeles region. Overall, the regional economy has been changing in ways that will impede the long-term mobility of immigrants with lower than average skills. At the moment, even lower-skilled immigrants do seem to find plenty of work. As noted above, their greater difficulty involves finding work that pays well, not to speak of jobs that provide health and other benefits or employers who make a minimal effort to comply with health, safety, and wage codes that have long been on the books.

Moreover, preoccupation with the region's foreign-born residents obscures their long-range legacy—their children. Clearly, a substantial portion of this new second generation is progressing beyond their parents. While this evidence yields reason for optimism, the key question is whether the children of the least-skilled immigrants can complete and obtain a decent secondary schooling and then go on to at least some post-secondary education. As of now, we lack a definitive answer to that question. While the evidence reviewed in this article runs against the most pessimistic assessment, it still offers ample reason for concern.

The most optimistic forecast suggests that the problems confronted by the children of immigrants are not all that different from the problems faced by the much larger population of children with U.S.-born, working-class parents: the supply/demand equation for less skilled workers has turned highly unfavorable, making extended schooling an imperative. Instead of the usual palaver, the state's political class might contemplate serious moves on the educational front, taking steps to ensure that children start out on the right foot by establishing all-day kindergartens and developing public preschools

while making sure that adolescents get ready for today's labor market—by improving the quality of secondary schooling and expanding access to higher education. Initiatives such as these will do much for all of the region's working-class families, including those with foreign-born children or parents.

One suspects that still more will be needed. Stable working-class status eludes a large portion of the region's immigrant wage-earning population. Though labor force participation rates may be high, and two adult members in a household are often working, low skills and employers' ability to evade any upward pressures on wages yield a situation in which many immigrant children live in poverty. As in the past, unionization would do much to move immigrants out of the socioeconomic cellar. Were they also able to find affordable day care (which would increase female labor force participation) and improve skills (especially through the acquisition of English-language proficiency), movement from the bottom to a modest position somewhere in the middle might well be on the horizon. This might be too much to ask in an era of reduced government expectations, but as of this writing, there is reason to think that Californians may once again be open to an expanded role for the public sector.

In the end, one cannot deny the extraordinary pull of Los Angeles on newcomers, domestic as well as international. The issue, however, is not one of short-term magnetism but rather long-term absorptive and integrative capacities. Right now those prospects remain deeply uncertain, good enough reason to conclude that Los Angeles is *not* the immigrants' promised city.

Triadic Politics: Ethnicity, Race, and Politics in Miami, 1959–1998

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Mandela in Miami

In 1990 Nelson Mandela made a triumphant tour of the United States, receiving accolades in city after city. Unlike the civic honors bestowed on him elsewhere, though, the reception in Miami was cool. Cubans and to a lesser extent Jewish leaders were outraged at his refusal to disavow Fidel Castro and Yasser Arafat. The mayors of Miami Beach and Miami, as well as the Miami-Dade Commission, refused to honor or meet with Mandela, much to the anger of local black leaders. Yet most black elected officials did not take a public stand on this issue, a symbol of both divisions in the community and fear of Cuban political power.

About a week after Mandela left, a fight between a Cuban shopkeeper and a Haitian customer in Little Haiti resulted in a public disturbance. Dozens of Haitians demonstrated in front of the small grocery store, resulting in police intervention and, eventually, charges of police brutality. That same week, a group of black professionals and community leaders, including the Black Lawyers' Association headed by H. T. Smith, called for national organizations to boycott Miami until its elected officials apologized to Mandela, took measures to promote African