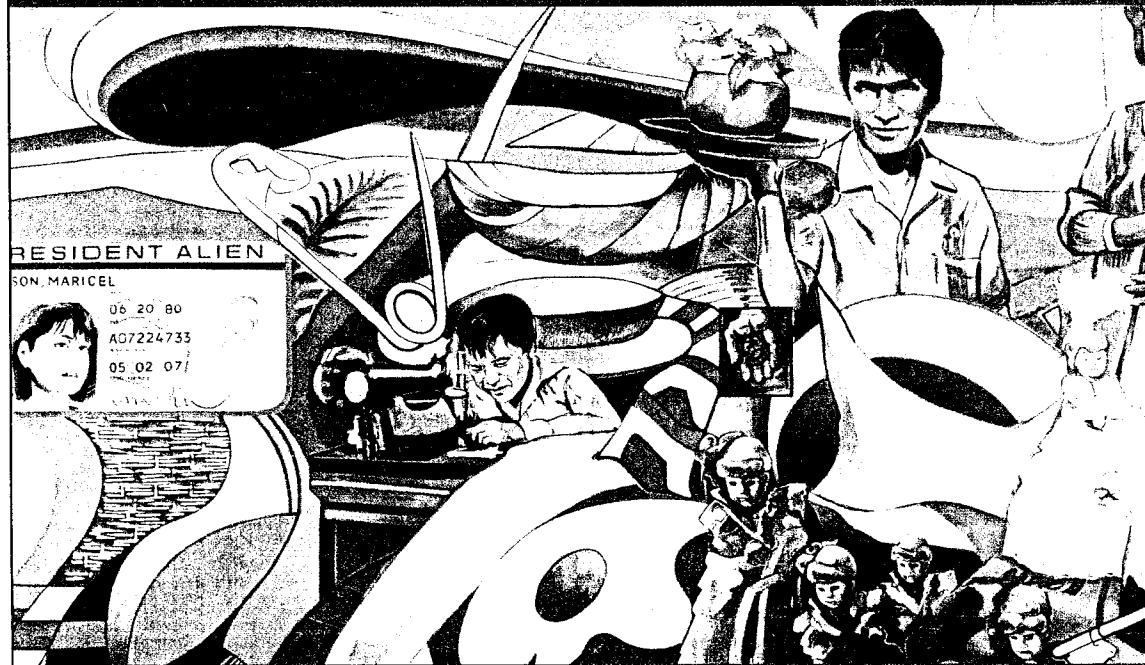


HOW THE OTHER HALF WORKS

Immigration
and the
Social
Organization
of Labor



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University of California Press
Berkeley and Los Angeles, California

University of California Press, Ltd.
London, England

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Waldinger, Roger David.

How the other half works: immigration and the social
organization of labor/Roger David Waldinger, Michael
Ira Lichter.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 0-520-22980-0 (Cloth : alk. paper)—ISBN
0-520-23162-7 (Paper: alk. paper)

1. Alien labor—California—Los Angeles County.
2. Unskilled labor—California—Los Angeles County.
3. Immigrants—Social networks—California—Los An-
geles County. 4. Employer attitude surveys—Califor-
nia—Los Angeles County. 7. I. Lichter, Michael Ira,
1960— II. Title.

HD8083.C2 W35 2003

331.6'2'097949409049—dc21
2002007571

Manufactured in the United States of America

10 09 08 07 06 05 04 03

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

The paper used in this publication meets the minimum
requirements of ANSI/NISO Z39.48-1992 (R 1997)
(*Permanence of Paper*). ♻

For Joey—R. W.

For my grandparents—M. L.

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Acknowledgments

Those of us who have pursued a career in academia presumably chose to do so in search of the contemplative life. But the sad reality is that most of us have succumbed to the over-programmed cycle of excess production and activity that seems to characterize much of American life. Thus, we begin with a confession: that other commitments got in the way of completion of this book, which is why it took much longer to finish than we anticipated. But this is also reason for us to commence with heartfelt thanks to those who helped start the project and kindly waited until it was done.

Responsibility for the project's inception truly belongs to the distinguished geographer Allen Scott, in his former incarnation as Director of the Lewis Center for Regional Policy Studies at the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA). Thinking that immigration would be a fruitful point of focus for the Lewis Center, Allen enlisted Roger Waldinger to write a grant proposal that Allen then submitted to the John Randolph Haynes and Dora Haynes foundation. Fortunately, the Haynes foundation, long an important source of support for research on Los Angeles, saw merit in the proposal. We are deeply grateful to the foundation and especially to Diane Cornwell, its executive director, for support of this project and for so patiently awaiting its completion. Many thanks also to Allen, without whom we would never have begun; his assistance and support has meant a great deal to Roger Waldinger throughout his career at UCLA.

Even the most generously supported project usually requires some additional financial help, and this one is no exception. Small grants from the UCLA Academic Senate, the UCLA Institute of Industrial Relations, and the UC-MEXUS program made all the difference to us, and we are glad to have this opportunity to express our appreciation.

Roger Waldinger enjoyed the luxury of a sabbatical during 1998–99, during which he devoted much attention to this book. He is deeply grateful to his home institution, UCLA—and indirectly, the taxpayers of California—for such generous support.

For most of its existence, this project was housed at the Lewis Center, a unit within UCLA's School of Public Policy and Social Research. Vanessa Dingley, then the center's assistant director, oversaw the complicated logistics with the good-humored efficiency for which she is widely and justly admired. It was a pleasure working with her and we are delighted to thank her publicly for all her help.

Collecting and processing the data on which this book is based involved a small army of helpers, and we are grateful to everyone who assisted us. Special thanks go to the past and present graduate students who helped develop the study's questionnaire and did many of the interviews: Daniel Malpica, Richard Massaro, Julie Press, Elizabeth Roach, and Margaret Zamudio. An additional word of gratitude for Johanna Shih, who contributed interpretations of several parts of the data. A number of gifted UCLA undergraduates, including Deborah Ho, Divya Gupta, and Folosade Windokun helped manage and code the interview data, working under the direction of Elizabeth Roach and Marian Katz; we are grateful to them as well. Judy Iriye, a Los Angeles native then completing her B.A. at Harvard University, spent a summer on the project, in search of exposure to the research process. That she ended up going to law school says something about what she found, but we certainly enjoyed her presence and are happy to acknowledge her help. Roger Waldinger is also delighted to have yet another chance to thank Deborah Ho, then a UCLA undergraduate, for research assistance of the most extraordinary kind.

Given the book's extended gestation, portions made their way to numerous readers, though some of the earlier incarnations we sent around are only vaguely perceptible here. The names of those who read and commented on our papers show how fortunate we are to belong to the intellectual community interested in the questions posed by this book. A special word of gratitude to Mehdi Bozorgmehr, Rogers Brubaker, Claudia Der-Martirosian, Katherine Edin, Herbert Gans, Robert Gottlieb,

Jacqueline Hagan, Nelson Lim, Douglas Massey, Ruth Milkman, Daniel J. B. Mitchell, Ruben Rumbaut, Julie Silverstein, and John Skrentny. Earlier versions of some chapters were presented to colleagues at Middlebury College, University of Pennsylvania, University of Chicago, University of Wisconsin, Harvard University, and Yale University, as well as to gatherings on the University of California—Berkeley and UCLA campuses. We learned much from those encounters and wish to thank everyone who took our ideas seriously and tried to help. Roger Waldinger also thanks his colleagues in UCLA's Department of Sociology for providing a uniquely supportive and stimulating intellectual environment, without which this book could not have been written.

We consider it a piece of signal good luck to have engaged the interest of our editor, Naomi Schneider. A wonderful reader, whose sharp eye caught problems we had hoped to keep hidden, Naomi, by her enthusiasm for this project, ensured that it saw the light of day. She also found us two wonderful reviewers in Steve Gold and Mary Waters. We tried hard to respond to their probing criticisms; while probably not successful, we ask their continuing indulgence and thank them for their great help. Thanks, also, to Suzanne Knott, the project editor at the University of California Press, who made sure that this manuscript actually got into print, and to the copyeditor, Paula Friedman, for her meticulous efforts to improve our prose.

This book draws on lengthy interviews conducted with over two hundred business owners and managers; their cooperation and interest was essential. We suspect that our interviewees may not like the interpretations we offer of what they told us, but we can assure them that we have made every effort to be faithful to the record. We remain deeply grateful for the time and information they provided us.

Last but not least, we want to mention those whose support mattered the most—our families and close friends.

Roger Waldinger notes that a preoccupation like this does get in the way of family life. As usual, the members of Roger's family reminded him of other matters of importance in the world; as usual, they were right. Good times were had in writing this book; the best times were spent with Hilary, Max, Mimi, and Joey. Special thanks are due to Silvia Reyes, without whose help the Waldinger household would have come to a halt. After the penultimate draft had been written, Roger's mother, Renée, turned her critical eye to the manuscript, preventing many a gaffe. Of course, thanking her for this help is only the beginning.

For Michael Lichter, this project stretched over a period in which he

lost three grandparents: Lillian Harrison, Esther Ungerleider, and Irving Ungerleider. He is grateful for the love and inspiration they gave to him and others during their lives. He is also grateful to Roger for his (mostly) patient mentoring, for the assistance he has provided over the years, and for the suggestion that Michael participate in this project and work with him on this book. Finally, Michael owes a debt of more than gratitude to his friends and colleagues who have been associated with the UCLA Center for the Study of Urban Poverty and made it such a vibrant intellectual environment, especially Elizabeth Gonzalez, David Grant, Melvin Oliver, Julie Press, and Abel Valenzuela.

PART ONE

How the Other Half Works

Introduction

Across the threshold of the twenty-first century, America again finds itself transformed by immigration. Stretching back nearly four decades, the immigrant tide has yielded newcomers in unprecedented numbers. Evidence of a changed nation shows up wherever one goes. Venture deep into the heartland, and one runs into foreign accents; dig a little deeper, and one encounters the networks that link the immigrants and the institutions that sustain them.

But the most impressive signs appear in the country's chief urban concentrations. Travel to New York or Los Angeles or Miami or San Francisco, and the sounds are those of the tower of Babel, the faces those of a cross-section of humanity. In these capitals of immigrant America, we seem to have returned to the turn of the past century. Amid the dawn of a technologically different (we hesitate to say *new*) age, the numbers tell us that immigrant America has returned.

But have we just come full circle? Native Americans included, we all arrived from somewhere else. True, not all came in eager search of a better life—those transported to the new world as slave ship cargo, for example, were anything but hopeful fortune-seekers. Nevertheless, a nation of immigrants is how we think of ourselves; after all, our country bears the peculiarly abstract name of the United States of America; it is a place that no one claims as a motherland or fatherland.¹ As unsettled as the newcomers' advent often makes us, we realize that there is something here of which to be proud: immigration is proof of the power of the American dream.

Although the new immigrants quickly find out that the streets are not paved with gold, this too is part of our shared historical experience. Conditions may be tough in the cities of immigrant America, but the opportunities have to be better than the prospects “back home.” Ours is a world of instantaneous global telecommunication, where “my hometown” is only a click of the internet-connected mouse or, at worst, a telephone call away; if opportunities in the United States did not beckon, why would the immigrants come? Why would they stay?

There is something deeply familiar about America’s re-emergence as an immigrant magnet. There is also something bewildering. Last time around, there seemed a fit between the evolving economy and the types of immigrants we received. The American economy on the brink of the twentieth century was growing at a rapid clip. In a tight labor market, employers wanted no more than brawn and a willingness to work hard—just what the newcomers provided. Arriving with no capital, few useful skills, and—the Jews excepted—limited literacy, the southern and eastern European predecessors of the 1880–1920 period moved easily into the new urban economy’s bottom rungs: servants, laborers, long-shoremen, *schleppers* all. Gradually, their descendants moved toward the top, making the best of the old factory-based economy, which allowed for a multigenerational climb up the totem pole. Immigrant children did well just by hanging on through the high school years, with well-paid manufacturing jobs awaiting them upon graduation. The third generation continued through college and beyond, completing the move from peddler to plumber to professor (the dirty secret being that the wages of brainwork did not always exceed the earnings enjoyed by workers in the skilled crafts).

In some ways, contemporary immigration has turned the process around.² The hidden story of today’s immigration involves the many newcomers who arrive here with considerable advantages and quickly accumulate more. Well-educated, entrepreneurial, entering the professions in growing numbers, these newcomers fit right into the new economy, eschewing the bottom and entering at or near the top.

The story of highly educated immigrants who bring the skills required by the New World Order is, however, but half the tale. Contemporary immigration to the United States has a split personality, its legions of scantily schooled laborers and service workers uncannily recalling the immigrant proletarians of yore. But now, unlike then, the least-skilled workers are overwhelmingly foreign-born, with the schooling gap separating them from natives extraordinarily large.³

Somehow, America is making room for large numbers of immigrants who are not simply recently arrived, unfamiliar with American ways, and unable to make do in English but also lacking the rudiments of formal schooling that nearly all U.S.-born adults, regardless of ethnic background, take for granted. Our postindustrial, high-tech economy would seem to have no place for “foreigners” with little more sophistication than their European predecessors of a century ago. Yet these immigrants appear to enjoy other traits that employers sorely want. The predictions of economic experts notwithstanding, the newcomers are working, often holding jobs at enviable rates. And although the hard-working immigrant fits the iconography of American life, the public is more than a little ambivalent, concerned that new immigrants are taking jobs that would otherwise be held by less-skilled domestic workers with few other resorts.

WHAT ARE THEY DOING HERE?

Immigration scholars have no problem in plausibly explaining why less-skilled immigrants might *want* to come. Economic incentives provide the pull. For most immigrants, wages at the very bottom of the U.S. labor market tower over the alternatives available back home. True, one needs to take into account the cost of migration, a considerable factor for migrants traveling long distances. Those who attempt to enter surreptitiously, whether by land, sea, or air, pay an additional freight, first in the fees handed over to smugglers and *coyotes*, second in the potential costs of apprehension and return. There also is no guarantee that newly arrived immigrants will find a job. After all, theirs tend to be labor markets in which joblessness, if only of the frictional sort, is usually high. Many others, moreover, have come upon the same idea of bettering their lives by heading for the United States, which means that arrival puts one at the end of a long queue of newcomers vying for the same jobs. For the individual migrant, therefore, competition with other newcomers adds an additional item to the cost of moving to the Promised Land. Still, the balance sheet is likely to favor coming; those who forecast that the benefits of migration will outweigh the associated costs have good grounds for wagering on life in this particular piece of the New World.

This narrative of migration—related mainly, but not exclusively, by economists—illuminates the considerations that motivate potential immigrants.⁴ But one could also say that it simply elaborates on common sense: it stands to reason that people are not going to migrate unless they

have good reason. If one is looking for an understanding of why migrations begin or intensify, the conventional narrative does not provide a convincing explanation. Unless the comparative advantage of moving to the United States, taking account of the associated costs, increases, migration rates would, one might expect, remain where they were—as opposed to the dramatic uptick experienced by the United States in the three past decades.

Consider Mexican migration to California, the best case in point. Although Mexicans might have done well in crossing the border at almost any time over the past century, their migration to the United States has ebbed and flowed. The most recent inflection point (upward) dates to the mid-1960s. Between the 1860s and the 1960s, most who moved to California—and who presumably undertook the type of crude cost/benefit analysis imagined by the economists—came from elsewhere in the United States. Something changed in the 1960s, however, that in turn loosened the flow to *el Norte*, in a stream that has since expanded at an ever-increasing pace. What confounds the economists' story is that the California/Mexico wage gap was a yawning divide before as well as after the sudden increase in migration from Mexico. The underlying impetus to the migration inevitably lies somewhere else.

If migrants move in response to perceived opportunity, one has to wonder about the relationship between this perception and the reality to be encountered, given the economies of the destinations on which today's less-educated arrivals converge. As in the past, newcomers today are flocking to cities, heading for the very largest—Los Angeles, New York, San Francisco, Chicago—where their compatriots have already put down roots. There is nothing surprising about this predilection; it is simply that our understanding of the evolution of urban America suggests that the metropolitan economies should have little place for the low-skilled. In an era when the marketability of America's less-educated urbanites has plummeted, how can immigrants find even minimal success?

After all, America spent the last half of the twentieth century struggling with an "urban problem" derived from the barriers faced by ghetto-dwelling African Americans striving to get ahead. While academics, journalists, and politicians produced a plethora of explanations for the sluggishness of black progress, the most influential emphasized the mismatch between the requirements of urban employers and the skills of black ghetto residents, providing an account that took the following form:⁵ African Americans entered the American metropolis as the least skilled of all workers, and apathetic reception in urban schools kept

their offspring at the low end of the education spectrum. Consequently, they found themselves vulnerable as a steady accretion in skill requirements increasingly put less-schooled workers at risk, no matter where they lived. Moreover, the drift of jobs from the cities toward the urban fringe proved an additional disaster: disproportionately concentrated in cities, African Americans experienced the deindustrialization of urban America with particular severity. Suffering from residential segregation, they rarely had the option of following less-skilled jobs to the suburban and, later, exurban hinterlands. While America's major urban places generally recovered from the loss of their industrial base, over the past two decades, new sources of urban economic growth provided few viable alternatives for less-skilled men and women struggling to support families. And thus episodes of urban prosperity in the 1960s, 1980s, and late 1990s did little to help African-American fortunes.

This story enjoys the ring of plausibility, mainly because it links the fate of black city dwellers to the extraordinary and visible economic changes in American cities. The conventional wisdom, however, focusing on skill deficiencies of blacks, fails to give adequate weight to the considerable educational upgrading that African Americans have undergone since the bad old days—when they were employed at much higher rates; if the problem hinges on a diminishing demand for less-skilled workers, then the distance that African Americans have traversed over the past several decades should have greatly reduced their vulnerability. Persons with a high school degree or less may still be in trouble, but as of the late 1990s, this comprises a declining proportion of the black population, reflecting substantial improvement over earlier decades.

But the accounts emphasizing the mismatch between urban populations and economic boom have even more trouble explaining the immigrant tide that has transformed metropolitan America in recent decades. The limited education of the immigrants with whom we are concerned ought to put them at the bottom of employers' lists, but it does not. Unskilled immigrants, far less schooled than the least-schooled American blacks, have found jobs that, if the received wisdom of the last forty years is correct, should not exist. And the newcomers have not just discovered a handful of overlooked jobs, they have secured niches that allow them to work at remarkably high rates even during recessionary times. There is good reason to wonder at the paradox of high employment among less-educated immigrants when the American metropolis has long been said to suffer a shortage of jobs suited to the unskilled.

True, no one argued that the urban economy had dispensed with dishwashers and floor sweepers, but the new immigrant phenomenon is of a far greater magnitude. The massive infusion of less-skilled immigrants into urban America is convincing evidence that they have found a role well beyond such a small cluster of indelibly manual jobs.⁶

SEGMENTATION AND LABOR MARKET STRUCTURE

The answer lies in the social processes that structure America's economy, encouraging new groups to enter the U.S. labor market, there to consolidate their own space. Immigrants to the U.S. make their way to a labor market far from uniform in structure, consisting, instead, of several segments, where jobs of a particular type are linked with categorically distinctive workers.⁷ The role played by gender in structuring access to jobs and occupations provides the best illustration. In spite of the massive entry of women into jobs from which they had previously been excluded, men and women continue to experience high levels of occupational segregation. The barriers that make it difficult for women to move into male-dominated occupations—and unlikely, if not quite so difficult, for men to move into fields dominated by women—tell us that when employers are looking for the most “appropriate” worker, suitability is largely determined *categorically*, heavily influenced by the sex of the person who *typically* fills the job. Much the same holds for ethnicity.

To each category of person, that is, a type of job. In our market economy, employers allocate jobs to the “best” workers, but “best” is not only defined in terms of the qualities—aptitude, skill, experience, productivity—that directly impinge on ability to get the job done. Any national or local economy bears the imprint of the social structure in which it is embedded. In a racialized society like the United States, entire ethnic groups are ranked according to sets of socially meaningful but arbitrary traits; these rankings determine fitness for broad categories of jobs. All other qualifications equal, members of the top-ranked group are picked first when employers decide whom to hire; the rest follow in order of rank. We refer to this ordering of job candidates by ethnic or racial groups as a *hiring queue*.⁸

The ordering of an employer's hiring queue is always subject to change. Growth pulls the topmost group up the totem pole, leaving vacancies that lower-ranking groups may seize, thus producing openings at the bottom, which employers can fill by recruiting workers from outside the economy—migrants. For awhile—the period often coincides with

the working life of the migrants' generation—the newcomers work in the jobs for which they were recruited; however, their children are almost always oriented toward better prospects, thus creating new demand for migrants.⁹

Not only do workers get ranked. Jobs also stand in a hierarchy, with the characteristics that workers value (pay, stability, benefits, and autonomy) typically going together. So there are “good jobs” and “bad jobs,” and the size of the potential pool of candidates varies with the quality of a given position. At the top of the labor market, there is often an ample labor supply; even if employers experience spot shortages, the job-seeker correctly perceives that the number of good jobs is almost never sufficient.

At the bottom of the labor market, by contrast, the labor supply is inherently unstable. “Bad jobs” are a defining trait of our unequal (indeed, increasingly unequal) capitalist society. Insiders—members of the society by birth or socialization—have plenty of reasons to look for alternatives to jobs of the least desirable sort, starting with the fact that working at the bottom of the pecking order is inherently stigmatizing. But natives do not respond solely to a job's low standing, or to the inherently unpleasant, sometimes demeaning conditions associated with its performance. They also note that jobs at the bottom repeatedly attract stigmatized outsider groups, whose disrepute becomes an aspect of the work. So when economic expansion makes mobility possible, the established native workforce opts for the alternative—in quest of better coin, but also of greater esteem.

Replacements might be found at home, but the force of competition, often from countries where wages are lower, deters employers from the changes—higher wages, improved working conditions—needed to attract those natives not yet involved in paid labor. Hence, openings arise to be filled by workers from abroad. The stigmatized status of bottom-level work impinges differently on the immigrants, who operate with a dual frame of reference, judging conditions “here” by the standards “back home.” As long as the comparison remains relevant, low-status—indeed, disreputable—work in an advanced capitalist society like the United States does not rate too badly.

These preferences, however, only tell us why immigrants might accept work that natives disdain, not why the newcomers can fill today's “bad jobs” with success. Recall that many immigrants arrive with scant levels of formal schooling, and that most portraits of the economy suggest that its skill demands are becoming increasingly severe. Yet immigrants somehow fit in.

One influential explanation emphasizes those forces in the broader economy that produce changes at *both ends* of the job structure. The economy requires an increasing complement of workers with higher levels of skill, but the “up-skilling” has been uneven, uncertain, and not as far-reaching as often thought. In fact, change works both ways: capitalism’s destructive impulse *downgrades* many previously moderate-skilled jobs, even as technological innovations drive the proliferation of high-skilled positions. A case in point is the “dumbing-down” of cashier work by using “smart” cash registers, the demand for which simultaneously generates employment for a class of computer-savvy information technology workers.¹⁰ Thus, the growth in the number of low-skilled jobs inevitably yields expansion in the number of high-skilled positions, producing a dynamic of skills polarization.¹¹

The available data do not demonstrate that jobs in the middle of the skill spectrum have been rendered obsolete, as expected by those who focus on the *polarization* of skills, but instead show that there remain many jobs requiring relatively low levels of formal education or training. For our purposes, however, it is as important to ask whether low levels of schooling equate to low levels of skill. While there may well be some jobs for which the label of “unskilled” means what it says,¹² this number is small. In the real world of work, contingency, uncertainty, and unpredictability cannot be fully eliminated; moreover, getting things done in *any* line of work requires know-how of more than trivial degree. Workers usually cannot get this practical knowledge in school, but pick it up on the spot, through interaction with co-workers knowledgeable through hands-on experience.¹³

Put somewhat differently, work is a fundamentally social phenomenon; one both acquires the necessary skills and gets things done by working successfully with others. While one need not be exactly like one’s co-workers, it usually helps—especially in a work world where jobs are scarce and where jealousies at the workplace may be fed by competition in the neighborhood or conflict on the street. Even if the established workforce will accept outsiders, one cannot learn if one cannot communicate: persons unable to participate in the linguistic community of the workplace may find it hard to get started. Therefore, who you are has much to do with what you do; social ties become the crucial factors lubricating movement through the labor market and across the threshold of the employer’s door. Thus, at the bottom of the labor market, formal education counts much less than the ability to acquire job-specific skills through cooperation with specific others—which explains why new-

comers with so little schooling have seen their economic role burgeon in recent years.

NETWORKS AND MIGRATION

We used to think about migrants as “the uprooted,” to quote Oscar Handlin’s famous immigration history of five decades ago; we might just as well describe them as “the transplanted,” to cite a less celebrated but no less influential history produced twenty-five years later.¹⁴ The shifting metaphors of our scholarly discourse convey the essence of the new approach; we now understand that migrants move not as solo adventurers but as actors linked to associates here and there, their social ties lubricating and structuring their transition from one society to the next.

These ties form *social networks*. Social networks provide the mechanism for connecting an initial, highly selective group of seedbed immigrants with a gradually growing base of followers from back home. The linkages work effectively because they involve social relationships that developed organically, having grown up before anyone left town. The key ties are those that connect kith and kin—who can act with the confidence that one will reliably and regularly help the other. Consequently, migrant networks provide durable, efficient conduits for the flow of resources needed to give newcomers the information and social support for moving to a new home and getting started.

Over time, migration networks evolve in such a way as to produce qualitative changes on both ends, making further migration easier. In the *host society*, veteran immigrants, as they consolidate their place, find it easier and less costly to help out, which widens the pool of hometown candidates to whom they can lend a hand. In the *home society*, a growing proportion of the community finds itself linked to expatriates in a position to provide assistance. In turn, these changes lower the costs and risks of movement, increasing migration’s net expected returns. Very quickly, these processes of network consolidation and expansion make migration a self-feeding phenomenon, with ties to settlers diffusing so broadly that almost everyone in the home community enjoys access to a contact abroad.¹⁵

Network theory, our label for the account summarized above, has proven deeply influential for reasons not difficult to understand. It shows how the actions of individual migrants are rooted in social structure; it overturns the older “individualistic” view of migration, which cast the migrant as a solitary cost/benefit calculator. It also helps to explain how migrants, once established, get ahead. The connections that

span immigrant communities constitute a source of *social capital*, providing social structures that facilitate action—in this case, the search for jobs and the drive to acquire skills and other resources to move up the economic ladder.¹⁶ Networks tying veterans to newcomers allow for rapid transmission of information about workplace openings or opportunities for new business start-ups. The networks send information the other way, as well, telling bosses about applicants, thus reducing the risks associated with hiring.¹⁷ Once in place, the networks reproduce themselves: once arrived, incumbents recruit friends or relatives, while entrepreneurs gravitate to the cluster of business opportunities already identified by their associates in the community. Moreover, relationships among co-ethnics are likely to be many-sided rather than specialized, leading community effects to go beyond informational value and engendering both codes of conduct and the mechanisms for sanctioning those who violate norms.¹⁸ As this description makes clear, sociological attempts to theorize the economic sociology of immigration—whether under the label of *ethnic economy*, *ethnic enclave*, *ethnic niche*, or of the latest neologism of the day—involve applications of the basic social-network approach.¹⁹

So far so good—but network theory suffers from a built-in contradiction. It does a nice job of explaining why tomorrow's workforce looks a good deal like today's; it does not tell us how today's labor force configuration came to be. The relationship between today and tomorrow is not difficult to understand: the established immigrant workers learn about job openings before anyone else, and, once in the know, tell their friends and relatives the good news. They also reassure the boss that their referrals are the right candidates to fill the vacancies, a pledge that sounds all the more meaningful when the boss thinks that birds of a feather flock together, and likes the birds he currently has.

But not every new day is like the preceding day; at some point, today's immigrant veterans were outsiders, knocking on doors, with few if any contacts inside. How did the tables turn? To some extent, we have already provided the answer. On the one hand, conditions at the very bottom of the labor market keep workers engaged in extensive churning; a high turnover rate produces constant vacancies. On the other hand, immigrants line up for entry-level jobs at a more rapid rate than anyone else, precisely since, as mentioned above, the conditions and stigma associated with the economy's "bad jobs" motivates natives to seek other options. So, even if once excluded from bottom-level portals, immigrants quickly, through succession, build up concentrations at the economy's

lowest points of entry. In the process, the number of immigrants with the ability to help a friend or family member obtain and keep a job quickly increases. Given bosses' usual preference for recruiting from inside, the immigrant presence automatically grows.

This type of explanation tells us why there are many immigrant sweepers and kitchen helpers. If these were the only possibilities, opportunities would be very limited and low-skill migration streams, a good deal smaller than they are. Network theory, however, contends that migration quickly becomes a self-feeding process; once the first crop of migrants take hold, the theory predicts that the networks will normally continue to grow.²⁰ For this to happen, some immigrant job-holders must come to possess more than inside dope about the next dishwasher or janitorial opening; they need to be in the position to grant access to better and more varied jobs to their needy friends and kin. In other words, they have to either rise to positions of authority or compel the authorities to comply with their wishes. But how do stigmatized outsiders manage to gain such leverage?

The answer lies in the power that immigrant social networks acquire, once imported into the workplace. As noted above, informal ties help because they meet the ends of workers and managers alike; social, rather than market processes, yield the most efficient result.²¹ But matters can change, if and when the balance of power between workers and employer shifts. After all, veterans enjoy the benefits of insider knowledge, often having a better clue than bosses as to the likely comings and goings of their colleagues on the shop or selling floor. While they can filter that knowledge in ways that suit management's objectives, they also feel impelled to respond to the needs of their kin and associates chasing after jobs always in too short supply. From the workers' standpoint, therefore, nepotism is rarely too much of a good thing; not so for management, which discovers that bossing a department filled with cousins, friends, and neighbors involves no small constraint. In taking care of their own, moreover, veterans *implicitly* exclude those ethnic others who do not possess the right connection. Sometimes the numerically dominant group *explicitly* seeks to secure its place at the expense of anyone different—no surprise given the brutal competition among workers with the fewest options, and the related tensions played out on street corners and in workplaces. Of course, networks rarely place hiring mechanisms under watertight controls; outsiders almost always leak in. Still, the need to accomplish tasks through cooperation puts numerical minorities at a disadvantage—forcing management to attend to the preferences of those

groups it counts on to get the work done. In the end, the ties that bind the workforce comprise a resource that group members can use to maintain and expand their share of employment, even *against* management's wishes.

Of course, the properties described above aren't unique to *immigrant* networks. The old-boy network of private boarding schools and country clubs need take lessons from no one when it comes to using connections to exclude. Craft unions in the construction trades know how to use informal ties among their (skilled) workers to play the same game, stomping on the employer's ability to run the firm as he or she would like. African Americans have also successfully implanted networks in particular sectors of the economy, especially government, and these have expanded in much the way described above.²²

BUREAUCRACY AND BOSSES

As any student of sociology will recall, the development of bureaucracy involves the increasing separation of *person* from *position*: bureaucratization makes the job the property of the organization, taking it out of the hands of the individual who occupies it while also removing it from the grasp of his or her clique. The contemporary appreciation of the networked nature of organizational life leads today's student to respond by saying that practice and theory diverge. Nonetheless, the persistence and the continued usefulness of familial and ethnic ties within modern organizations signal only that universalism has yet to fully supplant particularism, *not* that particularism is again triumphant. The two tendencies co-exist in tension, defining alternative organizational strategies, each with its own costs and benefits.

Consequently, the everyday social structures of the low-wage labor market can provide fertile ground for ethnic networks to take root and grow, without yielding a situation in which network hiring is all-pervasive. For the reasons noted above, employers are sensitive to the perils of filling slots with the friends and relatives of incumbent workers. Extensive social ties among workers may be desirable, but only to the right degree. At bottom, *employers want workers whose first loyalty is to the organization, not to each other.*

Not in the business of building labor solidarity, employers have other reasons to ensure that the "birds of a feather" principle only gets applied when the occasion merits. Organizations have to be mindful of the face they present, since in some cases, having too many "of one kind" creates

the wrong appearance. The problem does not arise when the work is demeaning and the consumers come from the dominant group; Anglo hotel guests in Los Angeles would have no objections to a housekeeping force that is foreign-born. But diversity does matter when the clientele takes a multi-ethnic form and both provider and recipient see the interaction as a source of respect. Under these conditions, evidence of exclusion leaves customers rankled; they certainly don't like to see people of their own kind left out, and often they prefer to encounter service providers who look or sound like themselves. Reputational considerations can work toward the same end, especially today, when organizations concerned about public image want to avoid the appearance of bias.

But trouble may loom whenever network hiring produces a mono-ethnic workforce, since homogeneity of this sort can both threaten the organization's legitimacy and leave it exposed to legal sanctions. Consequently, considerations of customer satisfaction or public legitimacy may put adequate, if not equal, representation of specific groups high on the personnel agenda. When confronted with these circumstances, organizations are likely to control the hiring process in ways that meet their goals; the key tool involves the time-tested method of formalization, applied to the recruitment of labor, the screening of candidates, and the final selection. Using bureaucracy in these ways limits the ability of a group *as such*, immigrant or otherwise, to colonize the workplace with its networks. It also introduces a set of screening and selection criteria applied, in theory, to all comers. To the extent that universalism implies fairness, this is good news for those excluded from the most powerful ethnic networks—an unfortunate crowd that, in the largest U.S. urban areas, includes most African Americans.

WHOM DO EMPLOYERS WANT?

In this context, we should take careful note of the skills and qualities that employers seek. Scholarly research tells us that literacy, numeracy, and familiarity with computers comprise the competencies that today's workers must possess. While cognitive skills, at some baseline level, are surely needed to do most jobs, this hardly exhausts the list. Simply put, bosses want *willing* subordinates. After all, employers are looking for workers who will do the job as told, with the minimum amount of "lip." In the postindustrial service economy, the quality of the service interaction matters more and more, so it is no surprise that employers are also

searching for workers with a “friendly” feel, or approach.²³ But employers want not simply “friendly”—which to a large extent means the ability to keep a smile regardless of how unpleasant the customers or working conditions. They also prefer “cooperative” to “combative,” and deferential over rebellious—in other words, a worker who knows her or his place.

But how to select those with the “right attitude” and reject those likely to cause trouble? Sifting and straining is one answer, but no test or check ever provides enough information to dispense with person-to-person assessment. And few organizations can devote the resources needed to examine with such care, especially when the jobs in question are not of great importance. Consequently, final decisions rarely involve a faceless bureaucrat choosing according to a set of inflexible criteria set in advance. Instead, particular people hire idiosyncratically, in ways that correspond to the specifics of their situation. In other words, the influence of stereotypes and prejudiced views can always creep through the organizational back door—big or small business notwithstanding.

Thus, stereotypes and prejudices are likely to matter, perhaps at the beginning of the hiring process in the small family-run firm, perhaps at the end of the day in the large, professionally managed organization. Job-related proficiencies also count, but the issue at hand involves the *personal* attributes that employers prefer.

We could turn to the abundant literature on prejudice and discrimination, much of it insightful, but most of it missing a crucial point.²⁴ The literature’s central question—whom do I want as my neighbor, friend, colleague, or spouse?—betrays its understandable, indeed laudatory, concern with the conditions of equality. But this literature assumes that motivations in the personal realm operate in like fashion in public settings, a presumption that takes too much for granted. While one is the same person at home and at work, one’s role certainly differs—the more so when the position at work yields authority over the activities of others. It may be that employers prefer to hire the very same type of people with whom they party and play, staying away from those whose company they would never entertain. But maybe not, since *personal* preferences—for *and* against—are not directly relevant to the relationship between the bosses and the bossed.

The employer is not looking for friends, just hired hands. All the more so, at the bottom of the labor market, where the work is typically disreputable and the social distance between the boss and the bossed is considerable, regardless of whether the two share an ethnic origin. On the

look-out for persons ready to accept commands, the practical manager has little interest in workers whose social eligibility for friendship makes their subaltern status difficult. Considerations of social esteem also rule out closeness with the type of person willing to do jobs that otherwise qualify one for contempt. Put somewhat differently, the qualities that make for good underlings may well preclude the potential for relationships of a more intimate sort—and all for the better, since who wants intimacy with those assigned to tasks that one disdains? Thus it may be possible, perhaps even likely, that employers will *prefer* workers towards whom they feel a personal distaste.²⁵

Any such preference will carry more weight if employers perceive what we earlier suggested, that immigrants comprise a class of worker that evaluates conditions “here” in light of how bad they are “there.” Viewing the labor market through this lens, employers may choose immigrants over Euro- and African-American competitors whose sights have been set on rewards higher than those available at the bottom of the totem pole. If so, the choice takes a form for which the scholarly literature has not left us prepared: employers value immigrants precisely because they are not like “us.” In this light, African Americans can be seen to be at a double disadvantage in the labor market, sharing the liabilities of the native-born American worker—that is, a sense of entitlement greater than the employer thinks appropriate—but few of the advantages that accrue to native whites. Thus, when the employer selects from a mix of candidates, African Americans may stand at the end of the queue.

It is not to exculpate the boss to note that other actors, as well as considerations beyond his or her personal preferences, normally come into play. To some extent, as already suggested, the employer may have little leeway. Personal preferences are unlikely to make much difference if a group, through its networks, has seized control of the hiring process; nor will these preferences matter much if some formal procedure provides the essential decision criterion or if no alternatives can be found to the person who shows up on the spot. Further, the wishes of customers—whose preferences for interacting with workers of the same background may be a force toward diversity or homogeneity—cannot be ignored. Therefore, discriminatory outcomes do not *necessarily* stem from employers’ preferences, although management remains responsible for its decisions. And we note that the boss does not always have the last word, as actors both inside and external to the workplace may have their own points of view, which they advance whenever they have a chance.

ON THE BACKS OF BLACKS?

Scholars and policymakers worry that poorly educated native-born Americans stand vulnerable to competition with less-educated immigrants. If so, then less-skilled African Americans, already overrepresented in the labor market's lower ranks, are likely to comprise the most vulnerable group. History certainly provides reasons for anxiety. In the mid-nineteenth century, native-born Protestants had little fondness for the members of the Irish Catholic "race," whom they regularly characterized as "savage," "simian," "low-browed," and "bestial." But it did not take long for the Irish immigrants to realize that accepting the then-regnant racism toward African Americans would prove a convenient tool for moving up the totem pole and enhancing their ethnic esteem—though it took longer for the Irish to gain full membership in the "white" club.

The same holds true for the southern and eastern European immigrants who arrived at the turn of the twentieth century and were seen as, at best, "not quite white" in the eyes of their WASP predecessors. They were gradually let into the fold after establishing their legitimacy, in part by adopting the racist practices perfected by their "betters," namely, restriction of African Americans from their neighborhoods and from the jobs or unions they dominated.²⁶

Can it happen again? While today's immigrants surely bring their own particularized hatreds and dislikes, history does point to the advantages of adopting the Euro-American disdain for African Americans. Moreover, joining the white bandwagon may be even easier now than in the early twentieth century, given the internationalization of the U.S. economy and its greater openness to workers from all parts of the world. In any event, our concern involves a narrower, more tractable question: are immigrants replacing or displacing black workers?

After at least two decades of study, immigration scholars have yet to produce a definitive answer.²⁷ One would think that the case for competition is compelling. Immigration increases the supply of labor, especially at the labor market's lower rungs. Under these conditions, expanding the pool of labor should make it more difficult for less-educated Americans to find work, and depress wages for those lucky enough to have jobs.

The argument sounds plausible, but convincing evidence has been scarce. Social scientists have looked for differences in unemployment and wage rates among cities and metropolitan areas that vary in the size of their immigrant populations, assuming that adverse effects will be found in those areas where immigrants have concentrated. Although results

varied, most experts concluded that competitive effects were small. Immigration seemed to have no effects on the wages or employment of white natives, whether males or females, and very slight, if any, negative effects on the wages and employment of native blacks. Indeed, if anyone seemed to suffer from the immigrant influx, it was earlier immigrants of similar origins.

What accounts for these results? Economists remind us that immigrants can both replace natives *and* work alongside natives in supporting functions. For example, instead of succumbing to foreign competition as has the rest of America's clothing industry, Los Angeles's garment manufacturing has thrived, thanks to a steady flow of newcomers seeking work in the region's sewing shops. Immigrants may have displaced some native-born workers, but the industry's strength may have meant more work for local clothing designers, who are more likely than production workers to be U.S.-born; in this case, the adverse and positive effects of immigration may have canceled each other out. A city experiencing an influx of immigrants may find itself with more buying power than before they arrived (assuming that the immigrant inflow does not produce an even greater outflow of natives, who depart with their significantly greater buying power). Since many of the additional goods and services that immigrants consume are provided by Americans—consider the teachers who instruct immigrant children—immigration can have a further beneficial effect on jobs for the native-born.

Of course, immigration could have a positive or neutral effect on the native population as a whole, yet exercise an adverse impact on some particular native-born segment. In this respect, a crucial consideration is simply that the collective characteristics of African Americans may reduce their exposure to immigrant competition. Compared to the least-skilled immigrants, African Americans possess relatively high levels of education. Moreover, African Americans have moved into employment concentrations where the barriers to immigrant entry are high; the chief African-American niche involves the public sector, and government jobs prove difficult for low-skilled immigrants to obtain.

Measuring the impact of immigrants on natives is an endeavor fraught with dilemmas, including the best way to identify competing skill groups, and the appropriate areal unit in which competition might take place. For instance, it may be that standard research methods cause us to overlook the people most adversely affected by immigration. Until recently, researchers neglected to consider the possibility that internal migration acts as a safety valve, with the victims of immigrant competition

seeking out other areas of the country where immigrants are rarer and their impact less evident. Low-income African Americans and others with few resources may not, however, have this option, leaving them tied to the inner city.

The debate over competition cannot be settled within the framework of this book. But we can make progress. At the minimum, we can try to illuminate the mechanisms through which immigrant and native groups contend over the division of labor—an adequate dividend when, as the well-known economist George Borjas will concede, “we still do not fully understand how immigrants affect the employment opportunities of natives in local labor markets.”²⁸ We note that, for there to be widespread competition, both groups of workers would have to be actively looking for the same jobs. We suggest that relatively few African-American workers are even *trying* to compete with immigrants in the latter’s industrial and occupational concentrations. At the same time, we find considerable evidence of conflict between immigrants and African Americans, and conflict is *prima facie* evidence of competition. For the most part, the instances of tension also involve situations in which the foreign-born workers hold the upper hand. Given the exclusionary effects of immigrant networks, the general preference among employers for immigrant workers, and the long-standing aversion of white managers towards African Americans, the latter appear to face some formidable barriers to employment.

One can imagine two scenarios. In the first, today’s stigmatized immigrants replace African Americans as the least desired workers, hired only in the last resort. In the second, the newcomers, for whom there seems plenty of dislike, nonetheless push ahead of African Americans, shoving the latter to the very end of the queue.²⁹ Unfortunately, our material does not allow us to adjudicate between these two, leading us to a more modest, though not trivial, conclusion: the large-scale immigrant arrival is not doing anything good for less-skilled African-American workers. Moreover, the availability of the immigrants facilitates the activation of employers’ preferences, which lead them to seek out workers from the group they perceive least likely to give trouble.³⁰

STUDYING HOW THE OTHER HALF WORKS

This book documents immigration’s transformation of the social organization of work. Our prism is the low-skilled labor market in Los Angeles, a somewhat singular region but still a microcosm of twenty-first-

century America. Los Angeles, after all, is not an old, decaying inner city. Instead, it is America’s quintessential suburb, the dynamic product of postwar U.S. capitalism. What better place than the City of the Angels and its environs—here defined as the County of Los Angeles—to study how immigrants fit into the new American order?³¹

Of course, our story encompasses more than just the immigrants themselves, who join what was already an ethnic mosaic of extraordinary complexity. Today’s newcomers have moved into a region with a long and complicated history of migration. In moving to Southern California, today’s immigrants have entered an area where the historic succession of migrant streams from diverse origins produced an elaborate ethnic division of labor, which the newest arrivals have rearranged without diminishing the strength of the boundaries. Moreover, the newcomers are hardly of a piece; differences in national origin, ethnic background, and language are at least as great among foreign-born Angelenos as among their native-born counterparts. Los Angeles’s economy is where these groupings get thrown into the mix, an encounter not without feeling, often not of the most favorable kind. Workers jostle one another for a better job, often for any job; these conflicts reinforce a sense of in-group attachment and a complementary dislike for outsiders.³²

This book is firmly planted in the broad sociological literatures on immigration and ethnicity. We engage the central concepts used by our co-workers in the field to build an argument directed at the main intellectual issues in play. Though informed by contemporary controversies, this is also a book of ideas developed in the effort to understand the material we collected in the field—it is *not* a book driven by the ideas with which we began.

Indeed, this book is very different from the one we imagined when we started. At the time, we undertook a project to see whether low-skilled immigrants were displacing low-skilled African Americans; as already noted, we found some indicators of competition, and plenty of evidence that the encounter between immigrant and African-American workers has not been frictionless. However, as we realized in the course of studying our notes and the transcripts of our interviews, the focus on competition obscured a more interesting development. That story involved the interlocking of ethnicity with the organization of a modern economy, an issue that broadened the scope of investigation and engaged us with issues we had not taken note of before.

From the standpoint of a positivistic social science, working in deductive fashion from a highly abstract set of general principles, ours is

opportunism of the worst kind. Perhaps. But we are happy to align ourselves with those intellectual traditions that validate and value a more inductive approach to social analysis; we offer this book as an example of grounded theory, our central arguments emerging from the intellectual encounter with the raw material we collected. We have written the work in such a way as to retain as much flavor and context as possible, while also striving to give the reader enough data to take an independent, skeptical view of our arguments.

What We Did

From the outset, we opted for a comparative case study approach, focusing on a theoretically relevant selective portion of the low-wage labor market. The argument for the comparative case study is straightforward: it yields far more variation than found in a single case study, and much greater depth than produced by a representative sample survey. In particular, it allows us to illuminate those institutional features that affect the outcomes and processes of interest to us, but that would be lost in a survey sampling the entire economy.

The Six Industries Consequently, we selected six industries for close examination—printing, furniture manufacturing, hospitals, department stores, hotels, and restaurants (see Table 1.1). Several criteria influenced our selection. First, we sought to focus on industries that could reasonably be classified as low-skilled; as of 1990, the median level of education for workers in each of these industries stood at twelve years or less of schooling. Second, we wanted to compare industries that varied in degree of immigrant penetration; hotels and restaurants, for example, recorded very high levels of immigrant representation, with a quite different situation in department stores or printing. Finally, we wanted to include industries that also varied in degree of African-American representation; hospitals, for example, include a disproportionately large African-American component, whereas African-American workers were conspicuously underrepresented in hotels.

Restaurants and hotels are prototypical service industries, featuring a large proportion of menial, poorly compensated jobs. The health care industry also provides services, but hospitals have a much more elaborate division of labor, employing significant numbers of workers with both far more and somewhat less education than the average American. Although department stores employ clerical workers and also maintain

TABLE 1.1. INDUSTRIES INCLUDED IN THE STUDY

		African Americans	
		<i>Low</i>	<i>Moderate/High</i>
	<i>Low</i>	Printing	Department Stores, Hospitals
Latino Immigrants	<i>Moderate/High</i>	Furniture Manufacturing, Restaurants	Hotels

SOURCE: 1990 U.S. Census of Population.

NOTE: For African Americans, "low" indicates that fewer than 5 percent of employees in the industry were African American, according to the 1990 Census. For Latino immigrants, "low" indicates that fewer than 25 percent of employees in the industry were Latino immigrants, according to the 1990 Census.

shipping rooms and warehouse-type facilities, the bulk of the work involves direct contact with customers. Furniture manufacturing and printing represent the "small batch" end of manufacturing industries, requiring more skills than old-style "Fordist" mass production industries but not as much as older craft industries. Additional details on these industries and how their ethnic composition has changed over past decades can be found in the appendix.

The Survey A team of faculty members and graduate students carried out the field research in 1992, 1993, and 1994. We conducted a series of in-person, in-depth interviews with managers and owners in 228 establishments throughout Los Angeles County (see Table 1.2 for a breakdown by industry).³³ In each instance, we spoke with the highest-ranking person we could meet who was involved in the hiring process. We structured our interviews with a series of closed- and open-ended questions. We began talking with respondents by asking them to identify the largest category of "entry-level" positions; the remainder of our discussion focused on these jobs and the workers who filled them. The interviews averaged roughly ninety minutes, ranging from under thirty minutes to more than three hours.³⁴

The open-ended nature of the interview produced both a conversational tone and lengthy, often highly detailed discussions of matters perceived as important by respondents. In turn, the level of detail in the data that we collected allowed for a quasi-ethnographic investigation, in

TABLE I.2. SKILLS STUDY INTERVIEWS

Industry	Interviews Completed	Percent of Total
Department Stores	25	11
Furniture Manufacturers	39	17
Hospitals	36	16
Hotels	40	18
Printers	44	19
Restaurants	44	19
Total	228	100

SOURCE: Skills Study

which the transcripts and lengthy field notes provided clues to patterns that we had not anticipated at the start.

While we were interested in what employers had to *say* about immigrants, African Americans, and other ethnic groups in the workforce, we wanted to be able to evaluate these attitudes contextually, informed by an understanding of what employers *did*. Consequently, we started with relatively anodyne but highly pertinent questions, pertaining to skill requirements, recruitment practices, and selection procedures. Respondents' answers to these questions provided the basis for chapter 3. Our queries about these matters made no mention of immigration or ethnic differences in the workforce. But more often than not, our respondents spontaneously moved the discussion toward our underlying interests, talking about skills in light of the problems entailed in employing a workforce that did not speak English (the focus of chapter 4) or explaining the use of network hiring as a consequence of relying on immigrant workers characterized by tight connections (the substance of chapters 5–7).

Thus, the interviews gradually and almost naturally gravitated toward the potentially controversial questions having to do with perceptions about immigration or views of particular ethnic groups. That these were also practical questions, in the sense that employment strategies were informed by the respondents' understandings of ethnic differences in the labor market, and of their implications, facilitated the progression toward more sensitive topics having to do with ethnicity as such (discussed in chapters 8–9). Even so, we trod gingerly. To probe employers' attitudes and, through discussions of intergroup relations, the attitudes of employees, we began indirectly, asking employers how "managing diversity" was a challenge (the source for chapter 10); we then asked em-

ployers to supply accounts of how any particular group came to comprise the majority in their labor force. Finally, we inquired into views of the work ethic of the labor force generally, and only then, to gauge employers' perceptions and beliefs, asked their views of the "work ethic" of particular groups.

Thus, many respondents began telling their views of specific ethnic groups long before we asked; others, like the manager who answered, "I'll leave that to you sociologists," proved more guarded. A number of respondents expressed an "aversion to innate generalizations—generalizations about groups are prejudiced"; others objected to our efforts to elicit generalizations and contended that they could not "think of negative traits among workers employed here"; others sought to avoid an impolitic comment:

Employer: Some of them [immigrants] seem to be more technical. A lot of it has to do with attitude. Some groups are hard to deal with.

Interviewer: Any group in particular?

Employer: I have my own feelings, let's skip that.

Some respondents were also suspicious about the direction in which our questions seemed headed, as with one manager who rebuffed our effort to ask about work ethic, conceding that "we no longer have an employee base who values walking uphill in the snow," but contending, "I'm always bothered by questions like this because of cultural biases." Overall, however, we found limited hesitancy to take on our questions. Managers gave responses that highlighted clearly defined, invidious distinctions among groups, while registering sensitivity to a range of differences within groups.

Still, there were systematic differences in self-censorship across organizations, with establishment size and conversational circumspection rising together. In smaller establishments, we were more likely to speak with an owner or general manager responsible for personnel and operations. By contrast, we usually talked with a human resource (HR) manager when visiting a larger organization, and almost always did, in department stores and hospitals. The owners and general managers evinced little discomfort in discussing ethnic matters, answering our questions with a frankness that often surprised us. Not so the human resource managers, who by dint of education, professional socialization, and sensitivity to the visible nature of the institution for which they worked, were more likely to be both more careful about their responses and more

attentive to filtering out prejudices. "We learn to be color blind in human relations," noted one interviewee. "I feel that when I'm doing my job, no person has color, no person has a disability. We train ourselves not to notice a person's limp, or whatever." It is also the case that human resources has been a favored route of upward mobility for both women and minorities, making HR managers somewhat more likely to see ethnic diversity as a good in and of itself.

Nonetheless, tongues loosened in the course of conversations that lasted an hour or more. For example, a hospital manager who insisted, "I hate talking about groups like this because it's so general," went on to a later discussion of group traits in a detailed, highly specific way. Close inspection of the transcripts and field notes reveals that initial disclaimers rarely lasted for long. We should also note that self-censoring should reduce variation in the views of managers toward the ethnic groups with whom they interact and yield relatively favorable views toward more stigmatized groups. That we found relatively little flattening, with the human resource managers describing and ranking the workforce in light of the preferences already described, makes our evidence all the more credible.

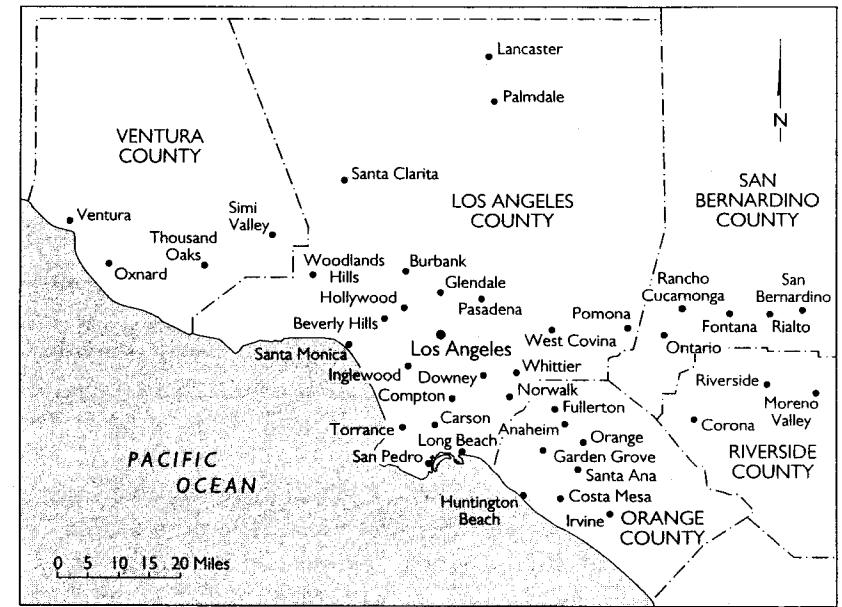
A NOTE ON LOCAL GEOGRAPHY

In this book, we will often refer to the specific community in which a firm is located. We know this can be confusing to readers not intimately familiar to the area; we hope this brief note will help.

Los Angeles County boasts innumerable distinct communities, of which roughly 120 take the form of incorporated cities (see Figure 1.1). The City of Los Angeles has about one-third of the population of the county but a much smaller proportion of its area. The county is divided into several well-recognized if somewhat fuzzily defined areas. The Antelope Valley, in the northern part of Los Angeles County, is undergoing rapid real estate development, but is still sparsely populated. An area of hills and desert, it is home to such cities as Palmdale, Lancaster, and Santa Clarita. To the south and west of the Antelope Valley lies the San Fernando Valley, the suburban heartland of the 1950s and 1960s, physically separated from the central city by ranges of hills, though largely belonging to the City of Los Angeles.

The San Gabriel Valley, occupying a large area north and east of downtown, is probably most famous for Pasadena, home of the Rose Bowl, and Monterey Park, the nation's "first suburban Chinatown."

Figure 1.1. The Los Angeles Region



SOURCE: Adapted from *Ethnic Los Angeles*, edited by Roger Waldinger and Mehdi Borzorgmehr (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1996), p. 6.

Glendale, the third largest city in the county (after Los Angeles and Long Beach), is also considered part of the San Gabriel Valley. The central city includes downtown Los Angeles and such nearby districts as Chinatown and Koreatown. As in most southwestern cities, much of the city center is not densely populated. East of downtown lies a sprawling, heavily Latino area, much of it consisting of unincorporated county territory.

Our headquarters at the University of California, Los Angeles, is firmly ensconced in the affluent "West" area of the county, which is located west of downtown and encompasses such well-known communities as Beverly Hills, Santa Monica, and Hollywood.

The area south of downtown encompasses most of what is popularly known as South Central Los Angeles. Underscoring the social nature of most geographical boundaries, the area is defined as much by the skin color of its residents as by physical landmarks or political boundaries. The South Central ghetto first came to national attention with the Watts Riots of 1965, and entered the national stage again in the early 1990s through films like "Boyz 'n the Hood" and "South Central" as well as

the riots that broke out hours after the acquittal of the police officers who beat Rodney King. Watts, Compton, Inglewood, and Florence are among the communities in this area. The southern area of the county is known as the South Bay, dominated by the city of Long Beach and populated with mostly white suburbs like Torrance and more diverse cities like Gardena.

A ROAD MAP

We have organized our story into three primary sections, each of which begins with a conceptual overview, followed by two chapters presenting an analysis of our interview data. The first section details the nature of work in the low-skilled segment of the labor market, with special attention to how ethnicity affects the social organization of labor. The second section focuses on the interface between social networks and formal hiring practices, and the ways in which these two mechanisms for allocating labor affect who gets which jobs. The third section examines prejudice and discrimination, focusing on the nature of employers' ethnic preferences and the role of ethnic conflict at the workplace. In a concluding section, we revisit the question of competition between immigrant and African-American workers and then peer into the future, asking what our story portends about the role of the new Angelenos in years to come.

PART TWO

The Social Organization of Labor