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Immigration and the American city

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Migrations internationales et Relations Interethniques

Recherche, politique et société

*Actes du colloque Migrations Internationales
et Relations Interethniques
Rennes 18-19-20 septembre 1997*

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Over the last thirty years, immigration has re-emerged as a transforming influence on the United States. As a share of total population, the foreign-born presence is quite far from turn of the century dimensions ; and many states and areas in the United States have not witnessed immigrant inflows of significant size. But in absolute terms, the population of newcomers who moved to the United States during the 1980s was massive, exceeded only by the even larger tide of immigrants who came to the United States in the first decade of the 20th century. So far, the 1990s have seen immigrant numbers grow more rapidly still. And cities like Los Angeles, Miami, New York, and San Francisco have been utterly transformed by this latest wave of migration, evolving into polyglot metropolises of great ethnic diversity.

As in the past, the American public is uneasy about the arrival of newcomers from abroad. Numbers is one cause for anxiety ; the national origins of today's arrivals another, perhaps deeper source of concern. The current wave of immigrants differs from yesterday's in one prime respect. The overwhelming majority of immigrants who flocked to the New World from the 17th century to the mid-20th century came from Europe (though any account of the peopling of the United States must note the very large numbers of Africans imported as slaves). Today Europeans prefer to stay home ; most of the new Americans come from Asia, the Caribbean, Central America, and Mexico, with small, but growing numbers arriving from Africa and the Middle East.

So the descendants of yesterday's immigrants wonder whether today's newcomers can make it in America — as did their forerunners, though only with much pain and toil. Increasingly influential voices say

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no. The U.S. is in danger of becoming an "alien natio" proclaims U.K.-born journalist Peter Brimelow, with today's tide of "unassimilable" Third World immigrants threatening to undo the European heritage on which this nation was supposedly born¹. Cultural baggage does not disturb Cuban-born economist George Borjas, who instead worries about the low skill levels of immigrants and the very great difficulties they will encounter in moving ahead². California's Governor Pete Wilson, himself a former employer of an illegal immigrant and a politician always sensitive to California's need for cheap alien farm labor, tells the voters that the cost of providing services to immigrants is bankrupting the public treasury.

But immigration anxiety runs like a red thread through American history and before condemning the new immigrants, one should remember the naysayers of old. In the mid-19th century, native-born Americans had little fondness for the members of the Irish Catholic "race", whom they regularly characterized as "savage", "simian", "low-browed", and "bestial"³. The turn of the 20th century brought a new set of immigrants — Italians, Poles, Slovaks, and Jews — and they were no more liked among the native-born. The new immigrants were "beaten members of beaten breeds", declared the influential sociologist E.A. Ross, lacking "the ancestral foundations of American character". Madison Grant, who lamented *The Passing of a Great Race*, foresaw the "mongrelization" of America, as "Nordics" — the descendants of the older immigrants from England, Ireland and elsewhere in western Europe — married "Mediterraneans" — the new immigrants of the time, who came from southern and eastern Europe⁴.

Of course, the descendants of these formerly despised immigrants have since climbed to the highest rungs of American society; they have also become the neighbors, friends, and increasingly, spouses of the white Anglo-Saxon Protestants who were supposedly their betters. The historical experience inclines one toward skepticism, as regards current claims of an utterly distinctive, supposedly unassimilable immigrant mass. And one also recalls that an earlier wave of immigrant anxiety caused America to close its doors to newcomers in 1924 — and keep

them shut during the Holocaust, when the most desperate of refugees found the gates to the United States locked⁵.

The politics of the moment aside, immigration is clearly a defining American characteristic and also a major aspect of national policy; as such it deserves a close and searching look. This essay uses the prism of Los Angeles — America's premier immigrant metropolis — to examine the encounter between today's newcomers to the United States and the urban centers on which they have so massively converged. I begin with a summary of immigration trends and then move on to a discussion of the factors that shape immigrants' fate.

Immigration trends and policies

Home to a relatively sparse group of indigenous peoples, the land that became the United States was peopled by newcomers from abroad: free laborers, in the main, who came from Europe; and slaves, who were imported from Africa. While the slave trade was stopped in the early 19th century, immigration went on, moving in waves, and changing in composition. In mid-19th century, the new arrivals mainly came from England, Ireland, Germany, and elsewhere in western Europe. After 1880, immigrant origins shifted to southern and eastern Europe and numbers skyrocketed. Following decades of restrictionist agitation, xenophobic alarms eventually won out in the aftermath of World War I, the Bolshevik Revolution, and the Red Scare it produced. In 1924, Congress voted to close the gates, reducing immigration to a trickle, and all but barring newcomers from eastern and southern Europe.

After four decades of reduced immigration, a more tolerant climate, induced by the civil rights movement of the 1960s, re-opened the doors; in 1965, Congress passed the Hart-Celler Act, which provides the conventional date for the onset of the new immigration to the United States. The 1965 reform transformed the immigration system with a few bold strokes. First, it abolished the old country of origins quotas, which allotted small quotas to Southern and Eastern Europe and still smaller, almost prohibitively small quotas to Asia. Second, it established two principal criteria for admission to the United States: family ties to citizens or permanent residents or possession of scarce and wanted skills.

1. Peter Brimelow, *Alien Nation: Common Sense about America's Immigration Disaster*, New York: Random House, 1995.

2.. George Borjas, *Friends of Stangers*, New York: Basic, 1990.

3. David R. Roediger, *The Wages of Whiteness*, London: Verso, 1991.

4. John Higham, *Strangers in the Land: Patterns of American Nativism, 1880-1925*, New York: Atheneum (2nd edition), 1963.

5. David Wyman, *The Abandonment of the Jews: America and the Holocaust, 1941-5*, New York: Pantheon, 1984.

Third, it increased the total numbers of immigrants to be admitted to the United States⁶.

The system established by the 1965 reforms essentially remains in place to this day, despite constant debate and continuous overhauling. But the Hart-Celler Act spawned changes that were entirely different from its advocates' plans. The reformers thought that the new act would keep the size of the immigrant influx to modest proportions. But for various reasons the numbers quickly spiraled: 7.3 million new immigrants arrived in the United States during the 1980s — second only to the peak of 8.8 million newcomers recorded during the first decade of the 20th century. To be sure, at 8 percent, the immigrants comprised a far more modest share of the nation's population in 1990 than was true in 1910 — when 15 of every 100 Americans were foreign-born. Still, the 1990 level represented a substantial increase over the 5 percent level recorded when the foreign-born share of the U.S. population fell to its bottom point in 1970.

Figure 1. Immigration to the United States, 1900-1994



Source: Statistical Yearbook of the Immigration and Naturalization Service

A second unexpected twist concerned the act's beneficiaries. The 1965 legislation was principally targeted at Eastern and Southern Europeans — the groups hardest hit by the nativist legislation of the 1920s. By the 1960s, however, workers from Italy or Greece had fallen out of the orbit of trans-Atlantic migration, and restrictions on *emigration* in the then-Communist of eastern Europe kept prospective Polish or Russian migrants at home. Instead, the newcomers who took advantage of the newly liberalized system came from Asia, Latin America, and the Caribbean area.

What no one anticipated in 1965 was the burgeoning of Asian immigration. The reforms tilted the new system toward immigrants with kinship ties to permanent residents or citizens. Since there had been so little Asian immigration in the previous fifty years, how could Asian newcomers find settlers with whom to seek reunification? The answer is that kinship connections were helpful, yet not essential. The 1965 reforms also created opportunities for immigrants whose skills — as engineers, doctors, nurses, pharmacists — were in short supply. Along with students already living in the United States and who enjoyed easy access to American employers, these professionals comprised the first wave of new Asian immigrants — creating the basis for the kinship migration of less well-educated relatives. The system was sufficiently flexible for longer established groups, like the Chinese, to renew migration streams, while also allowing entirely new groups — most notably Koreans and Asian Indians — to put a nucleus in place and then quickly expand⁷. The professional route allowed Asian migration to follow a sudden growth curve. For example, between 1940 and 1960 fewer than 400 Indians moved to the United States each a year; in the 1960s the flow ratcheted up to 2,700 per annum, and then increased steadily till it reached the 25,000 per year mark in the 1980s⁸.

By contrast, migration from Latin American and the Caribbean had already swelled to more than a trickle by the time immigration reform occurred. These pioneering immigrants established beachheads in the economy that encouraged newcomers to try their chance as well. As Eugenia Georges recounts in her reconstruction of the history of migration from one small Dominican village to New York :

7. The same trajectory was followed by other groups — various Middle Easterners and Africans — with the result that the immigrant population diversified to groups that had never previously made the United States their home.

8. Calculated from the Statistical Yearbooks of the Immigration and

6. David Reimers, *Still the Golden Door: The Third World Comes to America*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1988.

"However small in number, the earliest migrants, all of whom settled in New York, were nonetheless important for the immediate example they provided to future migrants. They demonstrated that migration was feasible. Once the next wave of Pineros began to arrive in New York, these pioneers provided many with a place to stay, with orientation, and with other forms of assistance"⁹. A somewhat similar chain of events affected black immigrants from the former British crown colonies in the West Indies, who had established a sizable presence in New York before 1930, but then found their way to the United States blocked by the depression of the 1930s, the advent of World War II, and then new legislative restrictions on colonial immigrants. Once the Hart-Celler Act reopened the front door, newcomers could reactivate the base of kinship connections left by the earlier migrations.

Political developments added substantial, and unexpected momentum to the migrant flow. Though the United States had largely closed its doors to refugees fleeing the Holocaust, pressure to admit immigrants fleeing from persecution increased steadily in the years following World War II. Sizable numbers of "displaced persons", including victims of the Holocaust and other Europeans uprooted in the aftermath of World War II moved to the United States in the late 1940s and the Hungarian revolution of 1956 produced another smaller, but still significant refugee flow. The Cuban revolution of 1959 produced an exodus of 200,000 persons who fled to the United States over the next three years.

This backdrop notwithstanding, the 1965 Act allowed for only a limited influx of refugees, carefully defined so as to give preference to those fleeing Communist regimes; unexpected pressures repeatedly forced the United States to greatly expand its admission of refugees. The sudden collapse of the U.S.-supported regime in South Vietnam, followed by Communist takeovers in Cambodia and Laos, triggered a massive, sudden outflow of refugees, many of whom settled on the west coast. Discontent with conditions in Cuba, led to repeated efforts at escape, most importantly, in 1980, when Fidel Castro suddenly lowered the barriers to emigration, and Cubans fled to the United States in a motley flotilla of fishing boats and any other vessels they could find. While in these instances, the United States played the role of reluctant host, U.S. pressure was largely responsible for emigration from the former Soviet Union, which waxed and waned during the 1970s and 1980s in response

to changing U.S.-Soviet relations; the final collapse of the Soviet Union in 1989, led to a massive outpouring, mainly of Jews, but also of other minorities; in 1992 alone, more than 43,000 persons moved to the United States from the countries of the ex-Soviet Union.

Thus immigrants who could activate kinship ties to U.S. residents or citizens, or who possessed special skills, or who were seeking asylum from Communist regimes were able to pass through the front door opened by the 1965 reforms in a variety of ways. Mexicans, and later on, Central Americans, were more likely to come through the backdoor of unauthorized or undocumented immigration. The immediate roots of Mexican unauthorized migration lie further back, in the Bracero program begun during World War II to eliminate shortages of agricultural workers. Ostensibly, the Bracero program was destined for a short existence, and the workers it imported were supposed to head back to Mexico after a short stint of temporary labor in the United States. But the influence of agribusiness kept the Bracero program alive until 1964 and with time, an increasing number of migrants "dropped out" of the Bracero stream, heading for better jobs in Los Angeles, San Francisco, and other urban areas. By 1964, when Congress abolished the Bracero program, networks between the U.S. and sending villages throughout Mexico's central plateau were already in place, providing all the information and connections needed to keep the migrants coming — whether legal documents were in hand or not¹⁰.

Once the ex-braceros abandoned the farm labor stream, the institutional mechanisms of the 1965 Act facilitated the passage to legal status. Marriage to a citizen or legal resident, a change in the legal status of one's sibling, assistance from an employer eager to retain a skilled and valued hand — any one of these events was enough to eventually transform yesterday's undocumented worker into today's legal immigrant. Since the newly minted legal immigrant could then bring over those immediate relatives still lingering in Mexico, albeit with some delay, the official statistics show a steadily expanding stream of legal migration from Mexico.

While Mexicans were drawn by the inducements of American employers, the Salvadorans and Guatemalans who headed for the U.S. border in increasing numbers in the late 1970s and afterwards, responded to different factors. Like the Vietnamese, Cambodians, and Laotians, the

9. Eugenia Georges, *The Making of a Transnational Community: Migration, Development and Cultural Change in the Dominican Republic*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1990, p. 81.

10. Ernesto Galarza, *Merchants of Labor: The Mexican Bracero Story*. Santa Barbara: McNally and Loftin, 1964; Douglas Massey et. al., *Return to Aztlan*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988.

Central Americans were escaping political unrest ; but unlike their Asian counterparts, the Central Americans had the bad fortune to flee right-wing regimes propped up with U.S. government support. Hence, these newcomers mainly moved across the border as unauthorized migrants. During the late 1980s, court battles forced the U.S. government to grant some of these refugees temporary asylum, though the number benefiting from this status has dwindled over the years, and the asylum itself seems doomed as I write!¹

Just how many newcomers have arrived without authorization has long been a matter of dispute, with wildly disparate estimates and guesstimates, ranging from 2 to 12 million, a stock in trade in the undocumented immigration debate. More recently, demographers have settled on a methodology for "counting the uncountable", which has in turn yielded estimates on which much of the immigration research community can agree. This methodology suggests an undocumented population of about 2 to 4 million residing in the United States as of 1980, of whom over half had come from Mexico!²

Doing something about undocumented immigration dominated immigration policy debates ever since enactment of the Hart-Celler Act ; with the passage of the Immigration Reform and Control Act of 1986, known as IRCA, the Congress attempted to close the back door and control this unauthorized flow. IRCA had three major provisions : a so-called general amnesty for undocumented immigrants who had resided continuously in the United States since January 1, 1982 ; a second, "special agricultural workers" program, inserted at the behest of agricultural interests and with the help of California's then-Senator Pete Wilson, for agricultural workers who had been in the United States for a minimum of 90 days in the year preceding May 1986 ; and sanctions against the employers of illegal immigrants. In IRCA, undocumented immigrants found at best a "cautious welcome", as Susan Gonzalez Baker concluded, with countless bureaucratic hurdles and anxiety-provoking administrative rules littering their path to amnesty!³ In the

11. David Lopez, Eric Popkin, and Edward Telles, "Central Americans: At the Bottom, Struggling to Get Ahead", in Roger Waldinger and Mehdi Bozorgmehr (ds.), *Ethnic Los Angeles*, New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1996.

12. Robert Warren and Jeffrey Passel, "A Count of the Uncountable : estimates of undocumented aliens counted in the 1980 United States Census", *Demography*, V. 24, 3 (1987).

13. Susan Gonzalez Baker, *The Cautious Welcome: The Legalization Programs of the Immigration Reform and Control Act*, Santa Monica : Rand Corporation, 1990.

end, 1.76 million persons applied for IRCA's general amnesty, alongside approximately 1.3 millions persons who used the special agricultural worker option, a program widely known for its openness to fraud and abuse!⁴

As expected, amnesty did diminish the pool of undocumented immigrants. Although Congress designed sanctions and the more stringent border controls adopted in the wake of IRCA to curb future undocumented flows, the available evidence suggests that these efforts, while yielding some initial results, in due course failed to curb the flow. Unauthorized migration clearly persists, contributing a net increment of 300,000 undocumented entrants each year!⁵ The best estimates suggest that the total number of undocumented residents grew by over 50 percent between 1980 and 1992, even though more than 3 million persons had passed from illegal to legal status as a result of IRCA!⁶

In its various twists and turns, the country's evolving immigration policy has reshaped the face of immigrant America in varying ways. As noted above, numbers are up. Legal immigration has moved well beyond the annual average of 374,000 recorded in the late 1960s, heading to an annual inflow of 770,000 during the years 1990-1994, a figure that excludes the several million persons admitted through the amnesty program. Large as it is, the legal influx is just part of a broader tide : much to most experts' surprise, the Census Bureau discovered that the U.S. received more immigrants between 1990 and 1994 than it had during the entire decade of the 1970s !

Second, European immigration, historically dominant, has been swamped by migrant flows coming from all other parts of the world. The

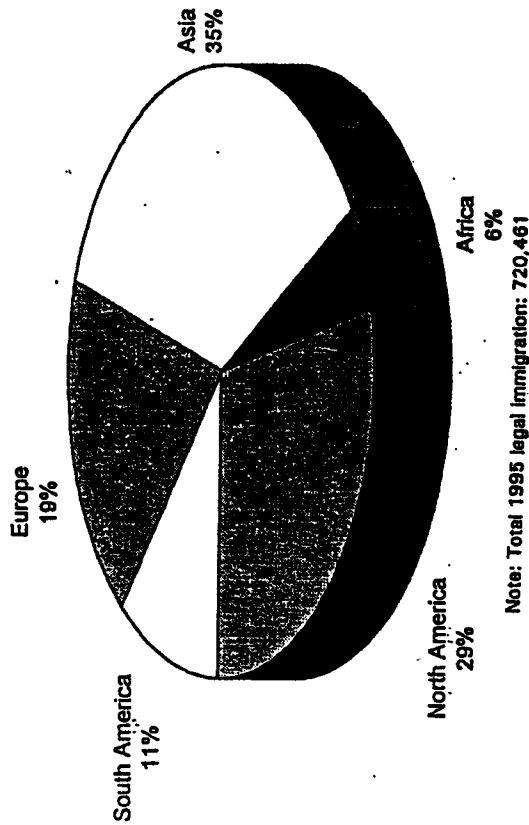
14. In point of fact, IRCA enabled two groups of illegal aliens to become temporary and then permanent residents of the United States: aliens who had been living illegally in the United States since January 1982, technically known as legalization applicants ; and aliens who were employed in seasonal agricultural work for a minimum of 90 days in the year preceding May 1986 (Special Agricultural Workers (SAW) applicants). As of 1992, the Immigration and Naturalization Service had received 1,759,705 legalization applicants and an additional 1,272,143 SAW applicants.

15. Barry Edmonston and Jeffrey Passell, "The Future Immigrant Population of the United States", in Edmonston and Passell (eds.), *Immigration and Ethnicity : The Integration of America's Newest Arrivals*, Washington (D.C.) : The Urban Institute, 1994, Chapter 11.

16. Robert Warren, "Estimates of the Unauthorized Immigration Population Residing in the United States, by Country of Origin and State of Residence : October 1994", Immigration and Naturalization Service Statistics Division, 1994., p. 30.

single largest group of legal immigrants (39 percent in 1993) came from Asia, followed by North America, a geographic entity comprised of Canada, Mexico, and the Caribbean and Central America, accounting for another 34 percent of the 1993 arrivals.

Figure 2. National origins of legal immigrants to the United States, 1995

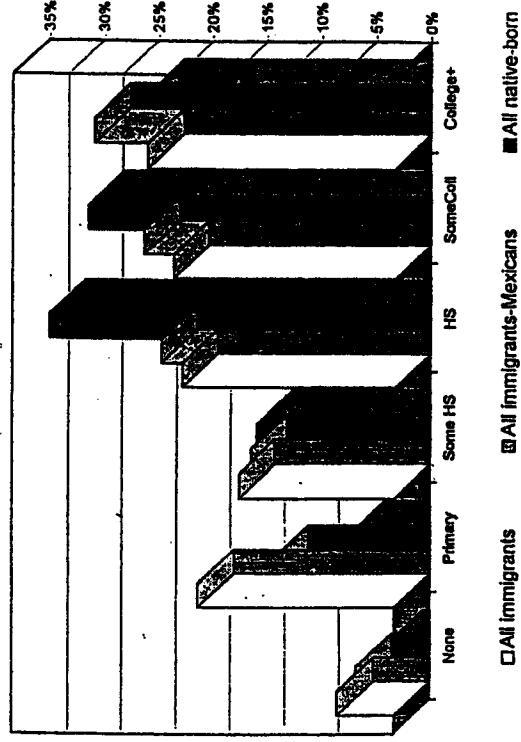


Third, the national origins of the foreign-born population are increasingly diverse. To be sure, ten countries account for roughly a half of the legal immigrants who move to the United States every year. Though Mexico, the Philippines, China, India, the Dominican Republic, and Vietnam generally lead the pack from year to year, others move in and out. In some cases, political developments lead to sudden changes, as when the Soviet Union first shut the door on emigration in the early 1980s, then relaxed, and finally, dropped controls in the late 1980s and early 1990s. In other cases, a combination of economic developments at home and political changes in the United States account for the decisive shift. Korea, for example, had been a major emigration country throughout the 1970s and 1980s; but over the past five years, the flows have dramatically shrunk, as economic prospects in Korea have improved, and potential immigrants are better informed about the problems that await them in the United States. While individual countries thus move in and out of the U.S.-bound migration stream, the past two decades have seen brand new additions — for example, various

countries in Africa — which have become quantitatively significant as the overall immigration flows have grown.

Given the many circumstances of migration, it should be no surprise that the newcomers of the post-1965 years comprise an extraordinarily diverse lot. Some experts have looked at the educational characteristics of the foreign-born to conclude that the “quality” of America’s immigrant streams has gone down¹⁷, by which they mean that the educational and skill backgrounds of the immigrants are no longer as high as in years past. Indeed, a contrast of educational attainment shows that immigrants, aged 25-64 years old, compare unfavorably with comparably aged native-born persons. The sharpest disparities show up at the lower end of the educational spectrum: whereas 95 percent of all U.S.-born adults had at least received some secondary schooling as of 1990, 18 percent of the foreign-born population had not completed elementary and about 5 percent appear not to have received any schooling at all.

Figure 3. Educational levels. Immigrants and natives compared, 1990



17. See Borjas’ book, *Friends or Strangers*, where he argues that educational levels among immigrants have declined over the past several decades.

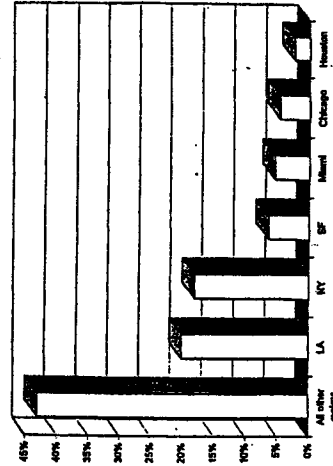
But comparisons of this sort miss the point, given the extraordinary educational differences among various immigrant groups. Highly educated professionals and managers dominate some streams — most notably those from the Middle East, from Africa, and from South and Southeast Asia; among many of these groups, median levels of schooling leave America's native white workers far behind. Manual workers with little schooling predominate among other groups — Mexicans being the most conspicuous such example — and the contribution of low-skilled workers to America's immigrant pool has risen substantially in recent years. Those populations with refugee origins tend to be internally diverse, with highly educated immigrants characteristic of the early arrivals and less well schooled newcomers more common among those who emigrate in later years. Leaving the very large group of predominantly unskilled Mexican immigrants apart, the educational achievements of native- and foreign-born adults appear roughly similar, with the immigrants having an edge in the proportion who have obtained a college-education or more.

Diversity in both national and social characteristics is thus the defining trait of the newcomers who have moved to the United States since 1965. As we shall see, the immigrants have also followed different paths, in their encounter with the society that they have joined.

The geography of the new immigration

As in the past, immigration to the United States is urban-bound. Today's newcomers are overwhelmingly to be found in metropolitan areas, where they live, to a disproportionate extent, in central cities. For the most part, the recent arrivals have converged on a handful of metropolitan regions: 38 percent of the nation's foreign-born population lives in either the Los Angeles or the New York metropolitan regions; another 19 percent lives in the Chicago, San Francisco, Miami, and Houston metropolitan regions.

Figure 4. Immigrant concentration in major metro areas, 1990



The leading immigrant metropolises vary, not only in the diversity and composition of their new immigrant populations, but also in their immigration histories, as a comparison of New York and Los Angeles makes clear. As late as 1960, Los Angeles was what it had been for most of the century: a heavily Anglo city filled with midwesterners, still holding their reunions in a downtown park that now borders the city's largest Central American concentration. To be sure, a Mexican presence never disappeared from L.A. But on the eve of the 1965 Hart-Celler act, the great majority of the Mexican population was native-born.

And then the tables suddenly turned: the foreign-born population shot up from just under 9 percent of the population in 1960 to 28 percent in the Los Angeles region and even higher levels in Los Angeles county and still more in the city of Los Angeles itself. This massive upsurge in immigration has reconnected contemporary Los Angeles to its Mexican roots — origins which Anglo Angelenos have until now either ignored or else transmuted into a mythical "Spanish" past. But history has returned with a vengeance: late 20th century LA is an increasingly Mexican city.

Despite the image of L.A. as the nation's most diverse immigrant area, the key to understanding immigrant L.A. is the border and its proximity to the city of the Angels. In 1990, more than half of LA's post-65 adult immigrants came from three countries alone, Mexico, El Salvador, and Guatemala, with Mexico accounting for the great bulk of this group. For many of these newcomers, entry into the U.S. occurred through the backdoor — which is why LA accounted for a third of all the undocumented immigrants counted in the 1980 census and roughly the same proportion of the population who legalized under IRCA. Notwithstanding the large number of amnesty applications, which temporarily diminished the pool of unauthorized immigrants living in Los Angeles, the undocumented population continued to grow in the late '80s and early '90s.

New York differs sharply from LA — not only in its immigrant past, but in its immigrant present. New York always retained more of an immigrant presence than America's other big cities, and it was among the first to welcome a sizable non-European population, well before the Hart-Celler Act took effect. But compositional factors slowed the new immigrant impact. Throughout the 1960s, the losses due to deaths and outmigration among the old-time, European population offset the influx of the post-65 arrivals: by 1970, immigrant New York reached its 20th century nadir. The immigrant comeback did not show up until the 1980 census: by then, not only were the foreign-born numbers bigger, but their

make-up had greatly changed, tilting away from Europe and toward the Third World. By 1990, the new New Yorkers from abroad accounted for 28 percent of the city's population — a substantial proportion, but still less than L.A.

So New York's immigrant build-up started from a higher level and grew at a slower rate; the composition of the immigrant population has been strikingly different as well. The new New Yorkers tend not to come from the same countries as the new Angelenos: some of New York's most important new immigrant groups — Dominicans, Jamaicans, Haitians, Guyanese — are rarely found in L.A. More important is the fact that New York's new immigrant population is extraordinarily diverse. Dominicans comprised the single largest post-65 group counted in the 1990 census — and they accounted for just over 12 percent of the new immigrant arrivals. Chinese were the next largest, with just over 9 percent, followed by Jamaicans, with barely six percent; no other foreign country accounts for more than five percent of the new immigrant arrivals.

Of course, geography counts for New York as well as for L.A.: the Caribbean acts as the New York's most important source area. But the Caribbean is itself extraordinarily variegated, culturally, linguistically, and ethnically; New York's three most important Caribbean source countries, the Dominican Republic, Jamaica, and Haiti, each represent distinct cultural systems. Geography has also kept undocumented migration relatively contained. The 1980 census found that New York was home to just over 10 percent of the undocumented population; just over 5 percent of the legalizes lived in New York; and about 40 percent of New York's legalizes had overstayed non-immigrant visas, as opposed to 11 percent in L.A.

The newcomers' convergence on metropolitan America highlights the social nature of the migration process: new arrivals head to areas where they already have connections, which means that immigrant populations build up local concentrations, rather than fanning out throughout the United States. For this reason, the immigrant destiny is a largely urban fate: the ability of urban institutions to absorb and integrate the newcomers has a great deal to do with the success of immigrant adaptation, or lack thereof. But metropolitan convergence also breeds a fundamental political imbalance, since Washington makes the decisions about which immigrants and how many to admit, and localities pay the costs of their absorption.

Assimilation and its prospects

At the top of the immigration research agenda stands the question of how the newcomers change after they have arrived. The conventional wisdom, both academic and popular, answers by saying that immigrants *should* change by entering the American mainstream. The concept of assimilation stands as a shorthand for this point of view.

The traditional paradigm of ethnic assimilation began with two crucial assumptions: first, that immigrants arrived as "ethnics"; and second, that they started at the bottom and gradually moved up. From these premises it followed that groups were most distinctive at the point of their entry into American society. Over time, the immigrants and their children would advance up the pecking order, narrowing the economic gap. Economic progress would yield cultural convergence: the newcomers and their offspring would give up their old country identities and cultural orientations as they increasingly resembled other Americans¹⁸.

Though it retains its defenders, assimilation theory no longer shapes the direction of current immigration research. The best-developed line of attack contends that the assimilation model works much better for some groups than for others. "Straight-line" theory, as Herbert Gans put it, does seem to fit the trajectory of European-origin groups¹⁹. In general, the historical experience of non-European-origin groups requires a different approach. In straight-line theory, ethnic disadvantages ease, and then gradually fade with the passage of time. But trends have followed a different path among the non-European-origin groups. In some cases, as among Mexican-Americans, time has worked less effectively: in part, the Mexican-American lag reflects persistently lower skills; but it also results from an opportunity structure that rewards Mexican-Americans less well than native whites. The Asian-American experience comes closer to the assimilation model of gradual convergence with native whites. Still, the historical background is one of much greater, and more persistent disadvantage. And though the relatively small population of native-born Asians (mainly Chinese and Japanese) generally does very

18. Milton Gordon, *Assimilation in American Life*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1964; Nathan Glazer and Daniel P. Moynihan, *Beyond the Melting Pot*, Cambridge (Mass.): MIT Press, 1969.

19. Herbert J. Gans, "Second-generation decline: scenarios for the economic and ethnic futures of the post-1965 American immigrants", *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 15, 1992, pp. 173-192.

well, they do not quite share the same deserts as their counterparts among native whites.

The latest wave of immigration to the United States, confronts the assimilation framework with an additional, indeed thornier set of problems. The classic assimilation trajectory projects great difference at the start, which then narrows over time. That assumption made good sense at the turn of the twentieth century when immigrants were a homogeneous population of persons narrowly concentrated at the bottom of the occupational scale. At the time, domestic servants and general laborers dominated the ranks of immigrants; one could assume that newcomers were similarly low-skilled and therefore entered at the bottom²⁰.

But the immigrant situation at the end of the 20th century looks very different since today's newcomers stand out for their social and economic diversity. On the one hand, large numbers of highly-skilled, often middle-class immigrants have moved to the United States. In Los Angeles, for example, levels of college education among most Asian and Middle Eastern immigrant groups exceed the region's average — often, by a very significant degree. These high skilled groups also find that advanced training generates superior rewards — namely earnings and employment in upper-level occupations that surpass the regional average.

With the advent of the high-skilled immigrant, a good proportion of the newcomers begins, not at the bottom, but in the middle-class or beyond. That starting point reverses the tenets of assimilation theory — since now the newcomers often start out close to parity with native whites, if not actually ahead. Consider the transformation of Beverly Hills — known globally for its movie stars, but locally for its more recent evolution as the capital of the Iranian refugee elite. Still a better case is that of Monterey Park, a small city just east of downtown Los Angeles, which emerged in the late 1980s as the nation's first suburban Chinatown — thanks in part, to the marketing efforts of a clever Chinese real estate developer market who sold affluent Taiwanese on the idea of moving to the "Asian Beverly Hill". "In this middle-class suburb", ethnographer John Horton found that: "established residents take particular note of affluent immigrants who do not conform to the traditional immigrant stereotypes. One elderly white resident expressed a frequently heard complaint: 'Before, immigrants were poor. They lived in their own

neighborhoods and moved into ours after they learned English, got a good job, and became accustomed to our ways. Today, the Chinese come right in with their money and their ways. We are the aliens.'²¹ While Monterey Park's sudden evolution seemed out of pattern to its established, native white residents, it marked the beginning of a trend. Today, Monterey Park is just one piece in a growing belt of Asian middle-class suburbs in the western parts of Los Angeles county.

So many immigrants leap right into the middle-class, not only because they import skills or capital, but also bring exposure to American culture and styles of living and making money. Part of the story involves the relentless spread of the mass media and the globalization of American culture: in contrast to the past, acculturation begins *before* the newcomers ever move to the U.S. But some newcomers are likely to arrive more acculturated than the rest. Philipinos and Indians, for example, grow up in English-proficient environments. Others — Iranians, Israelis, Taiwanese, and Koreanese — move through home-country school systems that gravitate toward the U.S. orbit. Many come to the region as students, motivated by the dream of returning home with a prestigious U.S. degree, but discovering, years later, that they have stayed for the duration. Still other immigrants, most notably among the Taiwanese, come as entrepreneurs, extending trans-oceanic business networks. Whatever the precise nexus connecting the region to the home societies from which its newcomers stem, that linkage makes today's newcomers more "American" than were their predecessors of a century ago right from the start.

That the region's well-heeled immigrants begin with advantages does not mean that they compete on equal terrain. Middle-class Iranians, Koreans, or Chinese do better than the average white Angeleno — but they don't surpass their similarly educated white counterparts. The same proficiencies and skills yield better rewards for whites than for immigrants; consequently, the debate over immigrants' progress runs into complications and complexities foreign to the simpler assimilation framework: yes, the high-skilled immigrants are doing well, the argument goes, but, having run into a glass ceiling, not as well they *should*. It's not clear what normative expectations inform that "should": is it reasonable to anticipate that the foreign-born — as opposed to their children — will ever catch-up with comparably schooled natives? would

20. Richard Easterlin, "Immigration: Social and Economic Characteristics", in S. Thernstrom, ed. *Harvard Encyclopedia of American Ethnic Groups*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1980.

21. John Horton, "The Politics of Diversity in Monterey Park, California", in Louise Lamphere (ed), *Structuring Diversity: Ethnographic Perspectives on the New Immigration*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992, pp. 222-223.

such a forecast be in line with the historical record? However one answers these questions, the controversies engulfing the concept of "model minority" illustrate the difficulties in analysing the adaptation of the more successful newcomers.

As for those immigrants who start out on the other side of the skill spectrum, many of today's newcomers seem to resemble their turn-of-the-century counterparts: at first glance, the *ex-campesinos* from Mexico or El Salvador can be seen as the functional equivalents of the Slovaks, Poles, or Italians of yesteryear. But a closer look induces caution. If assimilation theory assumed a gap between natives and low-skilled newcomers, the disparity between natives of native parentage and Mexican immigrants — both the largest, and the lowest-skilled component among today's immigrants — has grown to a yawning divide. Historians, for example, point to contrasting literacy rates as an indicator of skill differences at the turn of the century; in 1910, 61 percent of Italian immigrants aged ten or over were literate as opposed to 95 percent among comparably aged native white descendants of native-born parents²². However dramatic this contrast may strike historians, it pales alongside the disparities to be found in a contemporary immigrant city like Los Angeles. Take the case of completion of primary education — virtually universal in 1990 among native whites, but a good deal less common among the region's immigrant Latinos, among whom one out of ten adult had no formal schooling at all, and an additional four out of ten had advanced no further than the eighth grade. One might argue that these initial deficits can — and will — be overcome with time. But one suspects not. Latino immigrants have become more, not less likely, to live and work in environments that have grown increasingly segregated from whites. Relative to older arrivals, the most recently arrived newcomers are lagging ever further behind Anglos. And the transformations in the region's economy — the burgeoning of its low-wage sector, the attenuation of its high wage manufacturing core, the expansion of its knowledge-intensive industries — create structural obstacles to moving beyond the initial, low-level placements that the immigrants have achieved.

To all this we should factor in a final trait that puts today's immigration at odds with earlier immigration histories — and with the intellectual attempts to understand those experiences. In a sense, the

assimilation paradigm abstracts from the historically specific circumstances under which newcomers from Europe moved to and settled down in the United States. While the immigrant waves from the old world brought extraordinarily large numbers of people to U.S. shores, they lasted for limited periods of time. Immigration from northern and western Europe, for example, hit its heyday before 1880 and then went into eclipse — in part, because accelerated industrialization in the old world kept would-be emigrants at home. The large-scale exodus from southern and eastern Europe similarly lasted for about 40 years; in this case, the triumph of nativism, not home-country development, stopped the immigrant flows.

But the cessation of immigration, not its causes, is what counts for patterns of ethnic adaptation. No sooner did the flow of newcomers stop, than old-country influences declined. As the immigrant presence weakened and diminished, the second generation moved to center stage, shifting out of the jobs, neighborhoods and cultural institutions that the foreign-born had established. At root, the assimilation paradigm tells the story of this particular sequence of generational succession.

That pattern stands at some remove from the contemporary scene. Thirty years after the Hart-Celler Act sparked the renewal of mass immigration, the second generation has only begun to emerge from the shadows cast by its elders. Only among the Mexicans, the most sizeable, but also the long-established of L.A.'s new ethnic groups, do we find a native-born population that measures up, quantitatively, to the foreign-born. Even in this case, half of the region's native-born Mexicans were younger than 15 as of 1990.

More important still is the fact that the large foreign-born population is recently arrived. Angelinos of Mexican birth comprise the longest-established, best-settled of the region's newcomer groups. But even among the Mexican-born, half came to the United States between 1980 and 1990 and other groups are still more heavily tilted toward the recently arrived.

The prevalence of recent arrivals means that for many, if not for most of the region's immigrants, the process of assimilation has only begun. And the future only holds more of the same. With immigration on the upswing, the "foreign-ness" of L.A.'s newcomer population will surely grow. Granted, time will push longer-established immigrants in the direction of assimilation and acculturation. But any continuing influx of large newcomer cohorts will certainly slow that process, and not just by maintaining an active link to the culture and language of the immigrants'

22. Calculated from Susan Cotts Watkins (ed), *After Ellis Island: Newcomers and Natives in the 1910 Census*, Russell Sage Foundation Press, 1994, Table B.1, p. 97.

home country. Growing immigrant numbers will retard the process of diffusion out of established residential and occupational enclaves. And they are also likely to yield changes in the behavior of native-born Angelenos — who have already begun to leave the region, and whose continued departure will produce lower, rather than higher levels of ethnic mixing.

A future of continuing, high levels of immigration also complicates the analytic tasks. Generation provides the master concept in the analysis of assimilation: with each succeeding generation the descendants of the immigrants move further and further away from the values, orientations, and identities of their ancestral forebears²³. But how are to make sense of inter-generation comparisons among the ethnic populations that dominate today's newly arriving groups? While native-born Mexicans, Chinese, or Japanese have moved down the road toward assimilation, we should be wary about extrapolating from these experiences to the prospects for tomorrow's second or third generation. Today's adult Mexican — or Chinese — or Japanese-Americans are the offspring of an earlier, small immigration. Most importantly, they came of age at a time when the the foreign-born presence did not loom so large and the region's economy was strong — conditions unlikely to hold for the children of today's immigrants.

In a sense, we suffer the problems of the still photographer trying to capture a moving target, not knowing just where that target might head after the shutter has been snapped. The data show that the region's neighborhoods have changed: twenty years ago, Angelenos lived with people of their own ethnic kind; today, they live with neighbors of increasingly diverse type. But is today's diversity a stable arrangement — or is it simply a stage on the route to a new type of homogeneity, in which most residents are foreign-born? The answer lies largely in the size and attributes of tomorrow's immigration, characteristics that we can't accurately predict.

Of course, the prospects for ethnic Los Angeles do not simply hinge on the the immigrants alone. Just how the newcomers change will depend a good deal on whether they succeed in moving ahead. But optimism about immigrants' progress is tempered by concern over the structural shifts under way in the region, and in American cities at large. While immigrants join a much larger group of Angelenos imperiled by

the urban economic transformations of the late 20th century, their advent complicates the adjustments to the challenges of the 1990s.

Ethnicity and Opportunity in L.A.

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

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

But an influential set of writings, associated with such well-known researchers as William J. Wilson and John Kasarda, tells us that this scenario no longer holds. In their view, the post-industrial transformation of late 20th century America has robbed urban areas of their absorptive capacity. Changes in technology and communications, argues John Kasarda, decimated the "traditional goods-processing industries that once constituted the economic backbone of cities, and provided entry level employment for lesser skilled African Americans". In return for the eroding factory sector, cities have gained a new economy dominated by "knowledge-intensive white-collar service industries that typically required education beyond high school and therefore precluded most poorly employed inner city minorities from obtaining employment"²⁴.

24. John Kasarda, "Cities as places where people live and work: Urban change and neighborhood distress", in Henry Cisneros, *Intervoven Destinies: Cities and the Nation*, New York: Norton, 1993, p. 82. The article that we are citing here provides a particularly succinct and clear expression of Kasarda's views, which he has elaborated in many publications over the past fifteen or so years. For other examples, see "Entry-level jobs, mobility, and urban minority employment", *Urban Affairs Quarterly*, V. 19, 1, 1984, pp. 21-40; "Jobs, mismatches, and emerging urban mismatches", pp. 148-198, in M.G.H. Geary and L. Lynn (eds), *Urban Change and Poverty*, Washington (D.C.): National Academy Press, 1988; "Structural factors affecting the location and timing of urban underclass growth",

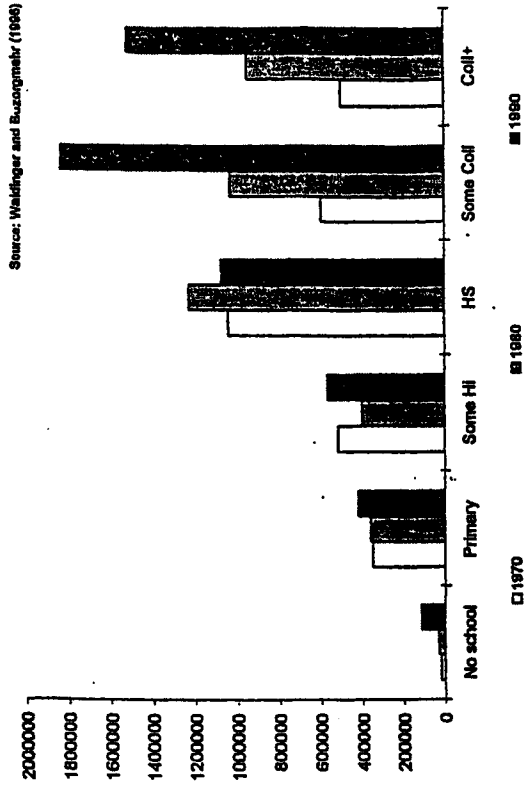
23. Richard Alba, *Ethnicity Identity*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990.

Thus, on the demand side, the "very jobs that in the past attracted and socially upgraded waves of disadvantaged persons...were disappearing"; on the supply side, the number of "minority residents who lack the education for employment in the new information processing industries [was] increasing"²⁵. In part, the burgeoning ranks of low-skilled workers reflected the advent of African American baby boomers; in part, it resulted from the renewal of mass immigration and the arrival of poorly schooled newcomers. But whatever the precise source of demographic change, it boded ill for urban America and its future.

While enormously influential and providing the underpinnings for the "underclass debate", this perspective sheds little light on Los Angeles and its ethnic groups. From an empirical standpoint, the basic facts about the area's population and economic changes do not fit with the tenets of the skills mismatch hypothesis outlined above. To begin with, the story of industrial decline — whether of light manufacturing in New York and Philadelphia or auto and steel in the cities of the Great Lakes — has no ready parallel in Los Angeles. Employment in L.A.'s goods producing sector has followed an upward course for most of the post-war period. Admittedly, Los Angeles can now boast a "rustbelt" of its own, thanks to the demise of its auto and auto-related branch plants and the more recent erosion of its aerospace and defense sector. But manufacturing decline has come rather late in the day, and more importantly, the industries that have weathered the recent declines never provided much employment shelter to L.A.'s minorities. It is also true that employers in Los Angeles, like their counterparts in other urban economies, have increasingly desired workers with higher level skills: as Figure 5 shows, in 1970, L.A.'s modal worker had a high school education; twenty years later, some college education. But unlike the older, industrial cities of the north and the east, L.A.'s low-skilled sector has not declined: in 1990, there were more jobs for the least skilled Angelenos (a group encompassing all those who had not completed a high school education) than had been the case twenty years before.

Urban Geography, V. 11, 3, 1990, pp. 234-264. William J. Wilson, a still more prominent mismatch proponents, liberally cites Kasarda's findings, while endorsing views, in his influential book, *The Truly Disadvantaged*.
25. J. Kasarda, "Cities as places where people live and work" . n. 83.

Figure 5. Employment by education. L.A., 1970-1990



A second problem concerns the interactions between supply and demand. The mismatch hypothesis began as an account of the economic problems of black men, and it is on these grounds that it has remained most compelling. In Los Angeles, as in other cities, the economic position of African American men has indeed changed for the worse; an increasing proportion of the region's black males are either out of work or have dropped out of the labor force entirely. In Los Angeles, blacks are far better schooled than the recently arrived, but more commonly employed immigrants from Mexico and Central America, as Figure 6 shows. The region's abundance of goods producing jobs suggests that manufacturing decline is the wrong culprit for the deteriorating fortunes of less-educated black men. Black males enjoyed only limited success in gaining access to the factory sector in the first place — which implies that they stood less exposed than others to the dislocation associated with any industrial decline. And if job scarcity accounts for the economic problems of African-Americans, why are the most educated black men employed at rates below the least educated of their Mexican immigrant counterparts? And how is one to account for the yawning gap in employment rates between the relatively small population of poorly schooled black men and the vastly larger group of low educated, foreign-born newcomers (see Figure 7).

Figures 6. Educational distribution. African-American and foreign-born Mexican men. 1990, Los Angeles

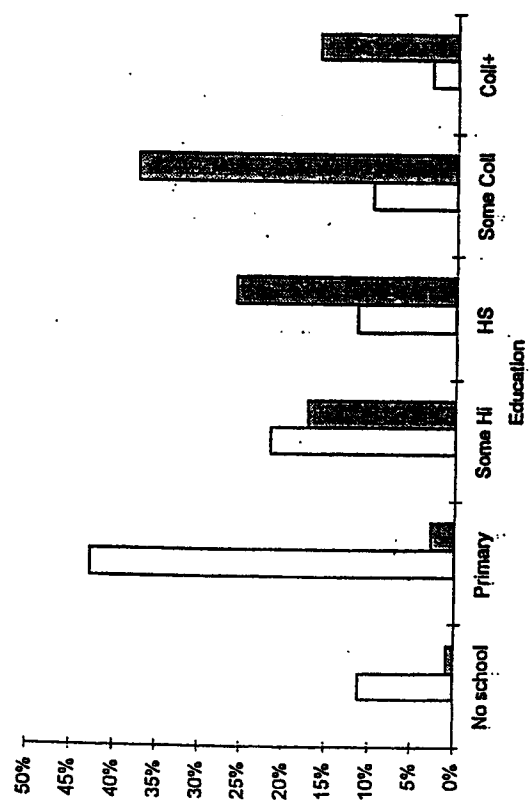
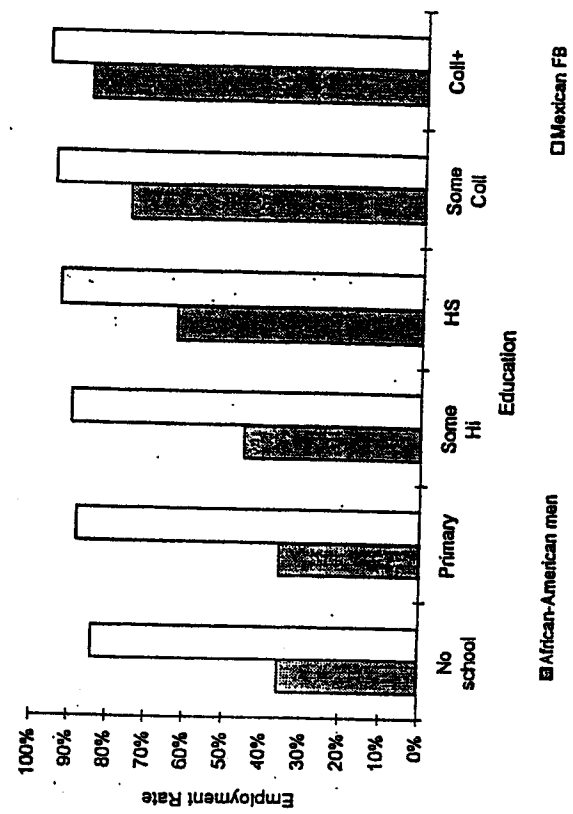


Figure 7. Employment rates by education. African-American and foreign-born Mexican men. 1990, Los Angeles



Source: Waldinger and Bozorgmehr (1998)

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

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

Restructuring, so the argument goes, works in dynamic relationship with immigration : by creating jobs for people with low skills it also creates the demand for workers willing to work at low status, low paying jobs. While such low wage jobs are increasingly found in the advanced services, the simultaneous proliferation of high paid service workers adds further to the demand for immigrant workers. Once in place, the immigrant labor force can bolster the declining goods producing sector and help revive sagging urban economies²⁶.

Thus, unlike the mismatch hypothesis, the restructuring hypothesis tells us that urban areas retain abundant, perhaps even increasing numbers of easy entry jobs. The downside of the restructured metropolis is not the paucity of starting places, as in the mismatch view, but rather

26. Saskia Sassen, *The Mobility of Capital and Labor*. New York : Cambridge University Press, 1988 ; *The Global City : New York, London, Tokyo*, Princeton : Princeton University Press, 1992 ; Bennett Harrison and Barry Bluestone, *The Great U-Turn*, New York : Basic, 1988.

the absence of better jobs, or developed mobility paths, that would let the newcomers get ahead.

Even skeptics will admit that the restructuring hypothesis enjoys at least some validity when applied to Los Angeles. As we have noted, Los Angeles has become a favored place for the lowest skilled among the nation's new arrivals. The region's massive absorption of immigrants has paralleled an equally great shift in its industrial structure: low-wage, immigrant dominated, manufacturing industries have flourished, continuing to do well even in recessionary years, while high-wage, high-value added manufacturing has floundered in a twenty year long state of decline. Not surprisingly, then, Los Angeles has known what to do with its newcomers, even those who arrive with low, or possible even, no formal skills. Consider the following statistic, illustrated by Figure 8: in 1990, employment rates for Mexican immigrant men began at the 80 percent level for those *with no schooling at all*, and went up from there.

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

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

class, the growth of a variety of ethnic economies, as well as the expansion of the immigrant working-class and burgeoning sub-proletariat.

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

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

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

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

Ethnic economic distinctiveness often reflects the development of an ethnic niche, an occupational or industrial specialization in which, a group is over-represented by at least 50 percent (see Table 1). Ethnic networks sort workers among jobs, with the result that groups move into distinctive places in the labor market and then maintain those concentrations, albeit at varying rates of persistence, over time²⁷. The burgeoning of L.A.'s ethnic economies exemplifies this process, which we can trace out through the development of initial specializations and then the diffusion of ethnic entrepreneurs into related occupations and trades. The case of self-employment illuminates the economic singularities in this classic ethnic niche. Not all groups move into entrepreneurship at equal rates: consider the contrast between Mexicans, among whom roughly 7 out of every 100 men are self-employed, and Iranians, among whom 1 out of every 3 men is working on his own account. Sorting also occurs among the most entrepreneurially active groups, with the Chinese, for example, carving out a niche in high tech and advanced services, such as engineering services or data processing, while the Koreans concentrate in traditional middleman minority lines.

27. Though using the term "special niches", Stanley Lieberzon similarly argues that "most racial and ethnic groups tend to develop concentrations in certain jobs which either reflect some distinctive cultural characteristics, special skills initially held by some members, or the opportunity structures at the time of their arrival (*A Piece of the Pie*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980, p. 379). He then notes that "such specialties can only absorb a small part of group's total work force when its population grows rapidly or is a substantial proportion of the total population" — a contention not supported by our research on either New York or Los Angeles. For a formulation analogous to ours, see Suzanne Model's chapter on "The ethnic niche and the structure of opportunity: Immigrants and minorities in New York city", in Michael Katz (ed), *The Historical Origins of the Underclass*, New York: Princeton University Press, 1993. Model operationalizes a niche as a "job" in which the "percentage of workers who are group members is at least one and a half times greater than the group's percentage in the labor force" (p. 164). For a further discussion of the ethnic niche and its consequences, see Roger Waldinger, *Still the Promised City? New Immigrants and African-Americans in New York, 1940-1990*, Harvard University Press forthcoming.

Table 1: Niche Characteristics, Los Angeles, 1990

Ethnic Group	Percent of niche employment in:				Earnings	Mean Years Education	As percent of group employed	Industrial niches
	Pubsec	Self-Emp	Mfg	Mgr/Prof				
Israeli FB	6%	31%	18%	44%	\$47,678	14	64%	
Mexican FB	0%	6%	50%	4%	\$16,589	7	55%	
Salvadoran FB	0%	8%	37%	4%	\$12,748	8	53%	
Guatemalan FB	0%	7%	32%	3%	\$12,805	8	52%	
Chinese NB	16%	9%	24%	78%	\$51,060	16	51%	
Filipino FB	20%	3%	9%	50%	\$34,568	15	47%	
Iranian FB	3%	35%	4%	41%	\$34,278	15	47%	
Korean FB	0%	47%	13%	18%	\$28,618	13	46%	
Vietnamese FB	9%	7%	73%	27%	\$26,839	13	45%	
Chinese FB	5%	17%	21%	38%	\$31,481	13	44%	
Arab FB	7%	23%	4%	35%	\$35,307	14	44%	
Russian NB	5%	35%	0%	68%	\$75,513	16	42%	
Armenian FB	2%	28%	12%	21%	\$25,395	12	40%	
Armenian NB	6%	24%	8%	55%	\$38,319	15	38%	
Japanese NB	36%	10%	18%	58%	\$45,036	15	37%	
African-American	57%	1%	1%	33%	\$31,900	13	36%	
Mexican NB	52%	3%	11%	18%	\$34,813	13	18%	

Source: Waldinger and Bozorgmehr (1996)

Business represents one classic ethnic niche — public employment another. In Los Angeles, as in most other American cities, the search for opportunity and mobility has taken African Americans deeply into the public sector. The black experience in government illustrates both the tendency toward concentration and its consequences: just six government functions, each providing wages well above the region's average, employ 13 percent of the region's black workforce.

In the conventional wisdom niching is a transitory experience, limited to the first generation, and then abandoned once later generations move up and diffuse through the occupational structure. Even the first generation is likely to spill over beyond the boundaries of the niche, since few economic specializations seem large enough to absorb a continuing influx of new arrivals.

But in Los Angeles, as in other metropolitan areas, ethnic concentration turns out to be an enduring element of the economic scene. Ethnic carrying capacity naturally differs from one industry or occupation to another; still, many of L.A.'s ethnic groups concentrate in some relatively small set of specializations. Nor does clustering inevitably diminish over time; the African American convergence on government employment increased substantially in recent decades. The public sector seems a likely destination point for second-generation Mexicans, as well as for Asians, who have already established notable concentrations in a variety of government functions.

In the end, events on both supply and demand sides have probably reduced the region's ability both to absorb newcomers and propel its residents up the occupational ladder; in this respect, the turn-of-the-century urban pattern seems unlikely to recur in late-twentieth century Los Angeles. But if changes in demography and economy have limited the possibilities for some portion of L.A.'s myriad ethnic groups, they have not done so in the deterministic way that the literature often suggests. Since ethnicity turns out to be crucial in understanding who gets which jobs in L.A.'s economy and why, we can count on diverging ethnic fates as the region's cultural division of labor evolves.

The Lessons of Los Angeles

Congress revised U.S. immigration laws in 1965 having little inkling of the unanticipated consequences that would flow from this act. It certainly had good intentions, although the Congressional mindset was more on the past and its injustices than on the factors that would influence future flows to the United States. As the legislative history

shows, Congress was conservative, indeed far too so, in its assumptions about how immigration would unfold in years to come. What no one in Washington expected, and in fact, what no one there wanted, was a flood of newcomers from the countries that have sent the great majority of immigrants who have arrived over the past 30 years.

But those immigrants had good reason to come to the United States: namely, jobs and the possibility of doing better than they could at home. If the immigrants sought to move to the U.S., there were others looking for workers to fill unpleasant jobs at pleasantly low rates, and those workers happened to be foreign-born. In the Los Angeles region, farmers in the still verdant outlying areas found a growing immigrant labor force to be particularly handy; so did hospitals, hotels, restaurants, manufacturers, and also the region's good burghers, who came to enjoy the convenience of an expanding servant and gardening class.

The fit between the desires of immigrants and those of the region's established inhabitants goes far to explain L.A.'s continuing attraction for the foreign-born. History is important too, most notably the eight-decade long tradition of recruitment in Mexico's Central Plateau for work in California's fields and farms. Geography also comes into play, for reasons of proximity to Mexico and location on the Pacific Rim which makes L.A. a natural reception point for newcomers from Asia. The post-war economic boom, once seemingly endless, added to the magnetic force, ensuring that there was always room, indeed usually need, for an extra hand.

But once a nucleus of newcomers had been put in place, immigration became a self-feeding mechanism, with a momentum all of its own. The more immigrants who moved to Los Angeles, the easier it was for the next batch to just follow behind. Incumbents were able to help with jobs, housing, and the money needed to come to L.A. Employers became accustomed to recruiting and hiring newcomers, all the more so once there was a cadre of experienced hands who not only furnished a continuing supply of applicants from back home, but vouched for them, trained them, and made sure that they fulfilled the boss's basic expectations.

These mechanisms made for a steadily expanding immigrant economic base, in part through their effects on natives. With immigrant recruitment networks keeping job information from leaking out into the broader labor market, natives found it harder to get jobs in industries and occupations that became immigrant dependent. They also found those jobs less desirable, especially as the immigrant influx made it easy for employers to push the wage level down. And as the region's core manufacturing sector eroded, replaced by labor-intensive industries that

could make good use of the growing immigrant workforce, restructuring further weakened the region's hold on its native workers, Anglo and African American workers alike. Once an importer, L.A. became an exporter of less-skilled Anglos who left for better opportunities in neighboring states. African Americans also joined the outward flow, although with fewer resources, not as many could do so; proportionately more dropped out of the labor force altogether. As the supply of natives dwindled, options for immigrants correspondingly increased.

And so Los Angeles became an intensely immigrant region, receiving a disproportionate share of the immigrant inflow that began to grow in the 1970s and then burgeoned in the following decades. Native Angelenos found the sudden, massive ethnic transformation unsettling, but the boom times of the 1980s had a soothing effect on their nerves. The region's elite, sensitive to the downside of immigration, nonetheless accepted it as the price for catapulting the region into the ranks of the world's global cities. Thanks to understanding administrations in Sacramento and Washington, there was never any reason to worry about policies that might have curbed the region's hunger for cheap, immigrant labor — more vigorous protection of labor standards, a more permissive environment for union organizing, enforcement of the penalties against hiring undocumented immigrants enacted as part of the Immigration Reform and Control Act of 1986, not to speak of a stiff hike in the minimum wage. And the immigrant advocates played their role in the process as well, assuring those members of the public who cared to listen that the newcomers had come here only to work at jobs that no one else wanted to fill.

However, the good times eventually ended, and once they did the politics and perceptions of immigration changed as well. Thinking that they had imported workers, the region's Anglos were aghast to find that they had gotten mothers and fathers equipped with children, instead. True, the newcomers had been willing to do the region's dirty jobs, as the immigrant advocates had noted, and at the convenience of bargain basement wages. But in a state where the tax system retained some progressivity, low earners made relatively slight contributions to the public's till. Moreover, the arrival of the newcomers' children, and there were many of them relative to the number of immigrant earners, meant that immigration eventually produced claims on the state's services. As some observers worried that the immigrants' children would be less eager than their parents to take on the region's lousy jobs but not equipped with

the skills to do much better, one began to sense that the bill for immigration had finally come due.

Unfortunately, Californians had grown accustomed to hearing their political leaders tell them that something could be had for nothing, and, when it came to immigration matters, the state's political class was not about to change the tune. Hence, the electorate succumbed to the sirens of Proposition 187, and who could blame them, since few political figures of any prominence had dared to tell them the unpalatable truth that immigration was now part and parcel of the good, southern California life. And it was not simply that the region's economy had learned to accommodate to the immigrant presence; more importantly, its adaptation to immigration was so deep and pervasive that any shift in the abundant flow of newcomers would bring a fairly stiff price. One could reduce the supply of immigrant cooks and maids, but hotel and restaurant prices would then go up, with less than salutary effects on the region's crucial tourist trades. One could curb the inflow of foreign-born garment workers, but that would simply transform what had been a growth industry into another one of the region's declining sectors. And one could encourage the legions of foreign-born laborers and construction workers to go home, but their departure would not help the region's hard-pressed builders nor do anything to contain home prices that were already far too high.

And so, where to now? As of this writing, immigration policy in the United States takes two forms. One involves restricting the flow of newcomers, with much talk about reducing the number of legal immigrants, and action almost entirely limited to efforts to keep out or send home those foreign-born persons who come to the United States illegally, or who came legally but declined to return home at the appointed time. The second involves efforts to punish those immigrants already residing in the United States, whether legal or illegal, as long as they have not yet been able to obtain U.S. citizenship, mainly by removing eligibility for most forms of public welfare.

Punishment seems to be in favor these days, and there is little reason to doubt that political authorities will do much to eliminate the entitlements to welfare and other services heretofore enjoyed by immigrants of any vulnerability. While quite willing to lash out at others, political leaders and the citizens who elect them seem most reluctant to change their own behavior. Self-respecting Angelenos, after all, are not known for mowing their own lawns, and why should they, when ready labor at discount rates can be found on a nearby streetcorner? Nor is the

standard factory or store owner under much pressure to reduce utilization of immigrants, as long wage and hour enforcement efforts get short shrift, as they do in this state. And though correlation is not causality, as any social scientist will remind you, there is a certain coincidence between the decline of the United Farm Workers and the unprecedentedly high rates at which undocumented immigrants are employed in California's farms. Conservatives are quite right in remind us that there is no free lunch; for that reason, it does not seem plausible that one can one get serious about reducing undocumented immigration to Los Angeles without substantially raising the floor at which the region's least skilled workers are employed. Doing more to control the border won't hurt; but meaningful progress in reducing immigrant numbers won't occur unless native-born Angelenos are willing to bear some of the pain.

Political debate on immigration has been obsessed with how to keep unwanted foreigners out. But these are matters of very limited relevance when the most important fact about L.A.'s very large immigrant population is that it has come to stay. To be sure, more effective border enforcement would reduce the number of very low-skilled immigrants who have been crowded into highly competitive labor markets where they find dead-end jobs at wages that are low and declining. However, even if undocumented immigration could be reduced from roughly 300,000 net new illegals arrivals a year to zero — not a very likely prospect — the United States would still be the recipient of roughly 800,000 newcomers who arrive via the legal system. The very source of the region's economic punch — its integration with the global economy — is precisely the factors that keeps its doors open to the world. The international traffic at LAX is a crude indicator of the extraordinary numbers of people entering the U.S. at anyone time, only a tiny fraction of whom need decide to stay to affect the amplitude of permanent immigration to Los Angeles.

If the past is prologue, then those newcomers will continue to converge on southern California. Overall, L.A.'s 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, whether in agriculture, services, or labor intensive manufacturing industries. Their greater difficulties involve finding work that pays well, not to speak of jobs that provide health and other benefits, and connecting with employers that make a minimal effort to comply with health, safety, and wage codes that have long been on the books.

Moreover, preoccupation with the foreign-born residents of the state obscures their long-range legacy — which takes the form of their children. 40 percent of all foreign-born children in the United States reside in California as do 32 percent of all native-born children with at least one foreign-parent, with the latter group comprising the bulk of the new second generation. As we have noted, some 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 immigrants can complete and obtain a decent secondary schooling, and then go on to at least some post-secondary education.

The most optimistic forecast suggests that the problems confronted by the children of immigrants are not all that different from the quite serious 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. Improving the quality of secondary schooling and improving access to higher education will do much for all of California's working-class families, including those with foreign-born children or parents.

But there is reason to think 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 at least two adult members in a household working, low-skills and employers' ability to evade any upward pressures on wages yield a situation in which many immigrant children are living in poverty. History suggests that those children will grow up with greater expectations than their parents; but an impoverished family background will make it harder to realize those dreams. Moving beyond the world of cleaning and factory work will require the literacy and numeracy obtained through extended schooling. But for those skills to get transmitted, a society needs to first make education a priority of the highest rank. The wisest immigration policy involves an investment in the young immigrant children and adolescents who will remake Los Angeles in years to come. Regrettably, California's current ability to attain that goal seems much in doubt.