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Alejandro Portes

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*Immigration Theory for a New Century: Some Problems and Opportunities*¹

Alejandro Portes
Princeton University

This essay examines some of the pitfalls in contemporary immigration theory and reviews some of the most promising developments in research in this field. As a data-driven field of study, immigration has not had to contend with grand generalizations for highly abstract theorizing. On the contrary, the bias has run in the opposite direction, that is toward ground-level studies of particular migrant groups or analysis of official migration policies. As the distillate of past research in the field and a source of guidance for future work, theory represents one of the most valuable products of our collective intellectual endeavor. Ways to foster it and problems presented by certain common misunderstandings about the meaning and scope of scientific theorizing are discussed.

At the turn of the century, many immigrants launched their American careers not only in new cities and new jobs, but with new names. How this happened symbolized the confident and careless way in which the country treated its newcomers then. At Ellis Island, busy immigration inspectors did not have much time to scrutinize papers or to struggle with difficult spellings. When needed, they just rebaptized the immigrant on the spot. Thus, the German Jew who, flustered by the impatient questioning of the inspector, blurted out in Yiddish, “Schoyn Vergessen” (I forget), upon which the inspector promptly welcomed “Sean Ferguson” to America. Poor penmanship plus the similar sound of their native “G” and the English “H,” left half an Ukrainian family named Heskes, and the other half Gesker (Kraut, 1982:57).

That sort of symbolic violence reflected well the position of immigrants in the American pecking order and simultaneously gave them a powerful first shove toward assimilation. The country was young then, in the midst of its major period of industrial expansion, and poised for world hegemony. The role that newcomers were expected to play in the American labor market was

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transparent, and the Immigration Office was confidently in control. Out of these foreign masses received so unceremoniously in their American ports of entry grew new urban forms, new institutions, new social problems, and a changed concept of what the nation was about. By World War II, the offspring of those Eastern Europeans processed and often rebaptized at Ellis Island were in the trenches. In Norman Mailer's (1948) classic war novel, most of the platoon led by the Anglo-Saxon lieutenant Hearn were children of immigrants – the Italian Minetta, the Jew Goldstein, the Mexican Martinez.

In the army, as in society, ethnicity was securely established at the core of a man's identity. Women at the time followed a similar, but subordinate, course. It is not necessary for my purposes to inflict upon the reader yet another rendition of assimilation theory, the melting pot, and the other concepts that emerged at the time to explain the American immigrant experience. It suffices to make two general points. First, these theories and concepts, arising out of the momentous historical experience of turn-of-the-century immigration, represent our intellectual legacy as we set out to make sense of similar events taking place today. Research on present day immigration started with the attempt to use assimilation, amalgamation, melting pot, cultural pluralism, and other concepts stemming from that earlier era as interpretive guides for contemporary events.

Second, a good part of that legacy was flawed, in part by stereotypical characterizations of immigrant groups but, more importantly, by a persistent focus on relatively superficial aspects of the process of adaptation. Issues of language, cultural habits, and spatial patterns commonly took precedence over the structural forces driving immigration. Debates took place on whether the widespread adoption of English and Anglicization of immigrant names meant that "Anglo hegemony" was paramount or whether the incorporation of items of Italian, Mexican and Chinese cuisine into the American menu indicated that a "melting pot" was underway. Those debates ended indecisively because they never addressed the fundamentals of immigration and remained at the level of public perceptions of the process. Those fundamentals were grounded in political economy and, with few exceptions, exemplified by the works of Brinley Thomas (1973), Gerald Rosenblum (1973), and Enrique Santibáñez (1930), among others, the research literature on immigration did not address them systematically.

As we prepare to confront the challenge of advancing immigration theory in the contemporary world, we will do well to reflect on the course traveled so far. It has involved describing the novelty and complexity of contemporary immigration, culling concepts and insights from the classic literature on the subject and, simultaneously, getting rid of the dead weight of irrelevant debates. Overall, we are well poised to confront the present challenge because the con-

tributions of social scientists from different disciplines have grounded the study of today's immigration firmly on its fundamental realities: the sustained demand for an elastic supply of labor, the pressures and constraints of sending Third World economies, the dislocations wrought by struggles for the creation and control of national states in less developed regions, and the microstructures of support created by migrants themselves across political borders.

Contemporary immigration theory has not only sought to understand the fundamental forces driving the process, but has even gone beyond them to explore how social networks, community normative expectations, and household strategies modify and, at times, subvert those structural determinants. This rapid advance suggests that the task of an introductory essay should be to summarize the main theoretical perspectives and research findings and comment on how they relate to one another. This will not do, however, because several quality reviews already exist and because many of the articles in this issue are also devoted to covering the same terrain. Instead, I will use this opportunity to invite reflection into what may be some of the major pitfalls as we move toward more encompassing and more powerful theoretical models and what are the lines of investigation that offer greatest potential to further this movement.

IMMIGRATION THEORY FOR A NEW CENTURY: FOUR COMMON PITFALLS

It seems to me that there are four important misconceptions about the ways that we go about developing theory. Some are misconceptions about what this type of activity entails; others refer to the weight of evidence as it is brought to bear on the products of that activity. Each such problem may be introduced by a somewhat rash statement whose meaning I will then seek to clarify.

Theories Do Not Grow Additively

A first misconception is that the accumulation of evidence leads to theoretical innovation. Generally, this is not the case. Data, whether quantitative or qualitative, may accumulate endlessly without producing any significant conceptual breakthrough. Indeed, much of what we do as part of our everyday work is simply to produce information on one aspect or another of social reality within the intellectual frameworks already in place, without altering them to any significant extent. Ideas, especially those of a broader reach, are few and far between and certainly do not emerge out of masses of data. There is one sense, however, in which the presence of information does lead to conceptual innovation. This happens when puzzles emerge from the accumulated evidence requiring new explanations.

Contradictions may not be self-evident, and indeed it is a theoretical gift

to be able to identify them and single them out for analysis. People had seen Chinese and Japanese immigrants engage in small business on the West Coast for decades. Similarly, everyone knew that Jewish and Italian pawnshops, liquor stores, and clothing stores proliferated in urban ghetto areas in the East. Books and articles were even written on the subject but, until Edna Bonacich came along, nobody had asked the obvious questions: Why is small entrepreneurship so widespread among some first-generation immigrants, but not others? And why do they locate their businesses in low-income areas, precisely where the market for most goods and services is poorer? Out of the analysis of this puzzle came the theory of middleman minorities, a keystone to understand the economic adaptation path followed by a number of immigrant groups and the predecessor of later concepts such as ethnic niches and ethnic enclaves (Bonacich, 1973; Bonacich and Modell, 1980). When Korean stores were systematically looted during the 1992 riots in Los Angeles, those familiar with the theory had an indispensable tool to understand what was happening and why.

The contemporary literature provides other good examples. We know that immigrants have been coming by the tens of thousands during the last decades and that the destinations of many are the core of large cities. These are the very areas that have been undergoing a rapid process of de-industrialization, shedding thousands of jobs. Why should job-seeking immigrants want to go there? Why indeed should the flow continue at all in the absence of such opportunities? Saskia Sassen focused on that particular puzzle, and her analysis yielded the concepts of a "degraded manufacturing sector" and increasing service sector demand in "global cities" which have proven useful for the analysis of immigrant employment and adaptation in recent years (Sassen, 1989, 1991).

After the concept of ethnic enclave came along, a question that emerged was how could these small ethnic firms retain their labor force. Several authors observed that while entrepreneurs fared well economically, the same was not the case with their employees. Family members and new arrivals provided part of the requisite labor supply, but they did not satisfactorily answer the question of how the more long-term and skilled positions required for the survival of these firms could be staffed. Thomas Bailey and Roger Waldinger (1991) tackled this particular puzzle, developing the concept of "informal training system," a mechanism that not only replenishes the supply of entrepreneurs in immigrant communities, but can offer attractive mobility opportunities for the more experienced and skilled workers. The metaphor of the enclave as a "business engine" rather than as a den of relentless exploitation contributed to our understanding of these structures and of the reasons why apparently exploited workers remain there.

Theoretical breakthroughs do not arise out of additional data, but out of

the ability to reconstitute a perceptual field identifying connections not previously seen. Such insights require that we gain some distance from reality in order to identify patterns lost at close range. For purposes of theory, more is not necessarily better, since an avalanche of empirical content can make the task of working out solutions at some level of generalizability more difficult.

Theories Do Not Necessarily Correspond to People's Perceptions

The study of immigration has been, for the most part, data-driven. This is a healthy feature, but it has a significant drawback, namely the tendency to put to test theoretical propositions by comparing them with individual self-reports. All theory worthy of the name requires simplification and abstraction. Hence, actors involved in a given process may not be aware of the broader issues at play or may have a different opinion of them. The various stages of the process of acculturation and assimilation, described in Richard Alba and Victor Nee's essay in this issue, may be at variance with how immigrants themselves view their situations. Thus, a group can be in rapid process of assimilation according to some external standard, while their members may still consider themselves quite foreign to the receiving society (Alba and Nee, 1997).

People's subjective orientations are certainly important and represent a legitimate field of study but, unless a theory specifically refers to them (such as theories of ethnic identity), it is improper to make them a standard of evaluation. In my hometown of many years, Baltimore, Korean immigrants have developed a vigorous middleman economy in the midst of the African-American innercity. Yet when confronted with the concept and its implications, many Korean entrepreneurs would balk and vigorously deny that they are doing this. The usefulness of the theory does not hinge on these reactions, but on how well it can explain and predict these immigrants' patterns of economic adaptation, residential settlement, and relationships with the native minority population.

Once made, the point is obvious, but I believe that it is worth emphasizing since claims to the "higher authority" of the actual participants are a common occurrence. The theory of social capital as it applies to immigrant and ethnic communities provides a case in point. In an article published in 1993, Julia Sensenbrenner and I discussed "bounded solidarity" and "enforceable trust" as sources of social capital in these communities, allowing members to gain access to economic resources otherwise unavailable to them and to conduct business transactions flexibly (Portes and Sensenbrenner, 1993). The problem comes when investigators try to fit these concepts into everyday perceptions. For some, the theory of social capital suggests that immigrants go about spouting love messages about the solidarity they feel to one another and how trustworthy their fellow ethnics are. Nothing can be farther from the truth.

In the heart of Cuban Miami, shopkeepers bicker nonstop with each other, denounce others' unethical business practices, and would be hard put to say a kind word about many of their business associates. Similar tendencies of everyday disagreements and competition are evident in Min Zhou's (1992) description of New York's Chinatown and in the Nees' account of its San Francisco counterpart (Nee and Nee, 1992). These are not cozy environments and, at close range, they appear quite "unsolidaristic." Sources of social capital and their effects are not observable at this level; they manifest themselves instead over time and in aggregates of multiple individual transactions. Bounded solidarity emerges as an aggregate "elective affinity" on the choice of business partners, employees, and customers, and in patterns of associational participation. Enforceable trust is reflected in the routine behavior of participants in business transactions, relative to how similar operations are conducted on the outside.

The town of Otavalo in the Ecuadorean Andes has become justly famous for the economic success of its indigenous population. Based on a dense web of ethnically bounded networks, Otavalans have been able to fan all over the world selling their woolens, native crafts, and even their folk music. In street fairs of large North American and European cities, one can readily spot Otavalans wearing their characteristic pigtailed and felt hats. They peddle ponchos, CDs of Andean music, and the crafts of other indigenous tribes, sold as their own. However, when David Kyle (1995) visited the town to inquire on the origins of Otavalan entrepreneurship, he found a community riven with factions and, on the surface at least, in conflict with itself. It was only after several layers of public discourse had been peeled off that the patterns of cooperative entrepreneurship and ethnic-bounded business support began to emerge.

There is a second related practice that also does harm to theoretical progress. This may be called the "pseudo-test" and consists of dressing up modest empirical findings as if they were suitable for examining a general hypothesis. The purpose is to exalt the significance of a particular study by linking it up with broader theoretical concerns but, in the process, invalid inferences are made. There are two variants of the problem. The first occurs when individual instances of marginal importance are held up as contradicting general propositions. Obviously, it is valid to call attention to individual negative findings, but one must have a sense of proportion. A case study of a small group of immigrants cannot, for example, invalidate a general theory supported by large-scale trends. I suspect that this is what Alba and Nee (1997) have in mind when they complain about how many past critiques of assimilation theory have been grounded on partial evidence. Alba and Nee recognize problems and exceptions to what they call the "canonical statement" by Milton Gordon (1964), but they argue that these difficulties do not entirely eliminate the value of his perspective.

A more serious variant occurs when measurement and sample selection fit the theory awkwardly, but the researcher goes on anyway to draw conclusions about its validity. In the short and eventful life of the concept of ethnic enclave (Wilson and Martin, 1982; Portes and Bach, 1985), there have been several such instances. In some cases, theoretical predictions derived from the concept have been supported for the wrong reasons; in others, they are rejected with data that bear little resemblance to the original formulation. In a recent article, the enclave is defined as Hispanic businesses in New York City and the negative evidence consists of the lower wages and poor working conditions of immigrant women employed by these firms, relative to those in nonethnic employment (Gilbertson, 1995). To my knowledge, there is no such thing as a "Hispanic" enclave in New York since there is no immigrant nationality that goes by that name. Nor is there anything in the finding of worse employment conditions for a cross-section of immigrant workers in ethnic employment that contradicts the original predictions. The real questions, from the standpoint of that theory, are the viability of these firms, their capacity to spawn new enterprises, and the extent to which workers can become entrepreneurs themselves.

Theoretical insights in the social sciences have the character of a public good. They are not covered by any special form of protection and, once formulated, enter the public domain to be freely used by anyone. This is necessary in order to submit new ideas to logical scrutiny and to the test of empirical evidence, but it has its downside. This consists of theories being invoked rather than seriously examined, either to add luster to modest findings or to serve as a foil for contrary arguments. In recent years, social scientists have become increasingly respectful of empirical evidence and leery of doing violence to it. As a result, a methodological literature on issues of measurement, sampling design, and data analysis has grown rapidly. The same respect has not yet been accorded to the basic elements of theory – concepts and propositions – which, as free public goods, have been handled with considerably less concern. As abstracted knowledge, theory is the end product of the scientific enterprise and the necessary guide for its future development. The study of immigration has not had to contend with extremely abstract notions and operates instead at a data-sensitive middle range. For that very reason, concepts that capture and synthesize insights from past research should not be simply invoked, but examined with careful attention to their scope and original definitions.

Typologies Are Not Theories

In her analysis of self-identification among second generation Caribbean youth, Mary Waters (1994) distinguishes between the immigrant-identified,

ethnic-identified and American-identified members of her sample. Studies of the undocumented population commonly distinguish between “visa-overstayers” and “entries-without-inspection” (EWIs). Similarly, research on legal arrivals usually separate refugees and asylees from quota and nonquota immigrants and, more recently, from the amnestied population (INS, 1996). Along the same lines, Rubén Rumbaut and I developed a typology of manual labor immigrants, professional immigrants, immigrant entrepreneurs, and political refugees as the framework for our description of contemporary U.S.-bound immigration (Portes and Rumbaut, 1996).

Typologies such as these are valid intellectual exercises, but they are not theories. This is self-evident in administrative categories, such as those employed by the Immigration and Naturalization Service. The distinction, for example, between refugees and asylees or between visa overstayers and EWIs does not say anything about the causal origins of each flow or its particular patterns of adaptation. All that these terms reflect is primarily an accident of bureaucratic processing. Typologies such as those of Waters (1994) or Rumbaut and Portes (1996) may become building blocks for theories but, by themselves, they do not amount to a theoretical statement because they simply assert differences without specifying their origins or anticipating their consequences.

The point is again evident once made, but it is worth emphasizing because the field of immigration encourages and depends on such categorical distinctions both for research and for administrative purposes. Typologies enter the construction of theory in one of two ways: as interaction effects or as categorical endogenous values. As interaction effects, typologies specify the scope that certain propositions can take or the way that their predictions vary between different categories of people. To take a familiar example from a related field, the typology of labor market segmentation predicts differential effects of human capital variables in the primary and secondary sectors of the labor market. Years of education are expected to have a significant effect on wages in primary sector employment, but not in the secondary (Edwards, Reich and Gordon, 1975; Gordon, 1972). This is an interaction effect. To take a second example, the effects of acculturation are expected to be benign among children of professional immigrants and entrepreneurs, but problematic among the offspring of labor immigrants, especially those living in close proximity to impoverished innercity areas. This interaction is the core of the concept of segmented assimilation (Fernández-Kelly and Schaufliker, 1994; Portes and Zhou, 1993).

Waters’ (1994) typology provides an example of a categorical endogenous variable. The three types of self-identification that she describes can be interpreted as the range of a variable to be explained through various characteristics of immigrant families and the social context that receives them. In turn,

these types of identification may be expected to have differential effects on other aspects of immigrant children's social and educational adaptation. An earlier example is Irvin Child's well-known typology of "conformists," "escapists," and "rebels" to describe the stance taken by Italian-American youth to the conflict between their parents' efforts at cultural preservation and the pull of the American mainstream (Child, 1943). This is also a categorical endogenous variable in need of explanation and which is expected, in turn, to have some significant consequences on individuals so classified.

To rank as a full-fledged theory, a statement should have four elements: first, a delimitation and description of some patch of reality; second, an identification and definition of a process or characteristic to be explained (the dependent variable); third, one or more explanatory factors and their types of effects, additive or interactive; fourth, a logical link to at least one other similar proposition. By coding as 1 the presence of each of these four elements, it is possible to build a hierarchy of statements used in the course of theory construction as follows:

Description of Specific Instances	Identification of an Issue or Problem in Need of Explanation	Identification of Explanatory Factors	Links with Other Predictive Statements	
1	0	0	0	= Case Study
1	1	0	0	= Empirical Generalization
1	0	0	0	= Theoretical Statement
1	1	1	1	= Theory

Historical accounts of the origins of certain immigrant communities and their present characteristics provide examples of the first type of endeavor. They are descriptive case studies, limited in scope to a certain space and time and focused on a specific sequence of events. Oscar Handlin's (1972) classic study of the Boston Irish; Thomas and Znaniecki's (1984) *The Polish Peasant in Europe and America*; and William Foote Whyte's (1955) *Street Corner Society* are classic examples. Illsoo Kim's (1981) study of Koreans in New York City; Alex Stepick's (1992) account of the Haitian community in South Florida; and Terry Repak's (1995) monograph on Central Americans in Washington, D.C., provide contemporary ones. These studies, which not incidentally are at the core of the immigration literature, are not theory. They provide, instead, the basic materials for the development of theoretical statements and, subsequently, the empirical ground and means to test them.

Along with monographs on particular immigrant groups, we often encounter in the literature statements like: "Mexicans have low levels of entrepreneurship"; "Chinese settle in spatially clustered areas"; "Filipinos have the greatest propensity to acquire U.S. citizenship." These statements, which are

sometimes confused with theory, are empirical generalizations. They contain two elements: a referential statement to a certain period, place, or category of people and a statement of fact about the value or values taken by a certain variable. In each case, there is an assertion that people or events possess specific values or fit into particular profiles, but there is no explanation of how this state of affairs comes about. In contrast to broad descriptive statements, the specific contribution of empirical generalizations is to focus on a limited aspect of reality worthy of attention. As such, they provide a more proximate building block for theory.

A theoretical proposition contains both a universal quantifier specifying its scope of predication and a statement of a relationship between something to be explained and possible factors leading to it. In the best formulations, there is a specification of the character of that relationship (whether additive or interactive) and some clarification of those social contexts in which the prediction is or is not expected to hold. Typologies that specify interaction effects fit here. Because immigration theorizing has generally proceeded at a low level of abstraction, it is perhaps important to note that theoretical statements possess two other characteristics, often missing from those discussed in the literature: first, they are not constrained to a single time and place; second, they can support subjunctive conditionals.

A statement like “among Cuban refugees who arrived between 1960 and 1970 in Miami, social connections in their country of origin led to ready access to business loans” is not a theoretical proposition. Nor is the following, that could be drawn from Robert Smith’s excellent monograph on long-distance Mexican migration: “In the village of Ticuaní, Puebla, during the 1980s, the greater the number of migrant families going to New York, the faster the rate of completion of local public works” (Smith, 1992). Such statements are accidental universals that specify causal relationships in a particular locality or migrant group, but that lack the requisite level of generality to qualify as theoretical propositions. The latter can “travel” – that is, they are applicable in times and places other than those that gave rise to them in the first place. Thus a theory of long-distance migration and remittances limited to Mexicans in New York or a theory of entrepreneurship limited to Cubans in Miami would be suspect.

Second, theoretical propositions possess an element of logical necessity that is absent from other statements. This is best seen if one attempts to transform an empirical generalization into a causal proposition. “All immigrants in Salt Lake City are undocumented.” This may be true, but it would not support the subjunctive conditional: “For every immigrant, if he or she were in Salt Lake City, he or she would be undocumented.” There is nothing about being in Salt Lake that necessarily brings about the condition “undocumented.” Compare this with Massey’s theory of cumulative social networks which

predicts that the greater the number of present or former migrants a person in a sending area knows, the greater the probability that he or she will also migrate (Massey and García España, 1987; Massey and Espinosa, 1996). This can be transformed into the conditional: "For every person in a sending area, if he or she were to maintain contacts with present or former migrants, he or she would also be more likely to migrate than others with identical characteristics." Migrant networks are not an accident, but contain the necessary causal element to produce the predicted outcome.

Philosophers of science such as Ernest Nagel (1961) are content to label isolated theoretical propositions "theories." I would prefer to reserve the label for those interrelated set of propositions that not only "travel" in the sense of being applicable to different spatial and temporal contexts, but that also tell a coherent story about certain finite aspects of reality. For all its empirical shortcomings, the "canonical" statement of assimilation developed by Gordon (1964) and summarized by Alba and Nee (1997) exemplifies such a theory. With the help of a few auxiliary assumptions, we can formalize it into a series of logically interrelated causal propositions about the trajectory or trajectories that immigrants are expected to follow after their initial settlement.

Zolberg's theory of the role of the state system in the origins and control of international migration flows provides a second example. His insight that enforced borders represent the crucial dividing line between the developed world or "core" and the increasingly subordinate economic periphery can be transformed into a series of propositions about between-country economic inequalities, the role of migration flows in ameliorating them, and that of political borders in reproducing the global hierarchy (Zolberg, Suhrke and Aguayo, 1986; Zolberg, 1989). One of the significant merits of this theory is that it links anew the study of immigration with broader issues of political economy, thus avoiding an exclusive focus on the characteristics and adaptation process of individual migrants.

I have dwelt in such laborious detail over typologies and levels of theory because, in my view, this is the area in the field of immigration that stands in need of greatest attention. While we may rightfully complain about the lack of a parental nationality question in the decennial census or the surprising lack of a national longitudinal survey of immigrants, the fact is that empirical knowledge about contemporary immigration has grown by leaps and bounds in recent years and can be expected to continue doing so. On the other hand, the cumulative character of the enterprise depends on the insertion of the case monographs and typologies developed in the field into some sort of coherent framework that only theory can provide. While abstract speculation may have bedeviled other fields of inquiry, the problem with one so close to the ground as immigration is precisely the opposite. There is some danger that qualitative studies of immigrant communities and quantitative

analyses of their economic and political adaptation may pile up without any systematic guide as to what all this information means and how can it be brought to bear, in a focused way, on major policy concerns.

There Is No Overall Encompassing Theory of Immigration

The pitch for theory has its limits too. The final issue is, in a sense, the opposite of that just discussed. There does not seem to be much danger that someone might be attempting a grand theory of immigration any time soon but, just in case, I would like to argue that this kind of endeavor would be futile. The reason is that the different areas that compose this field are so disparate that they can only be unified at a highly abstract and probably vacuous level. For starters, consider the division between macrostructural issues, such as the role of global capitalist expansion on the onset of migrant flows or the power of the state system to regulate such movements, and microstructural issues, such as the effects of community networks on individual decisions to migrate. Contrary to much conventional wisdom about the need to integrate microstructural and macrostructural theories, I would argue that, in the case of immigration, the two levels are not fungible.

The theory that colonial capitalist penetration played a significant role in the initiation of large-scale labor migration from less developed countries says nothing about who among the population of those countries was more likely to migrate, nor can it be tested at the level of individual decisionmaking. It requires comparative historical data to establish the existence of such a relationship between overt or covert capitalist penetration and the timing and volume of labor outflows. (For variants of this theory, *see* Portes and Walton, 1981:Ch. 3; Sassen, 1988.) Similarly, individual-level processes of acculturation and labor market incorporation cannot simply be aggregated into structural effects. A hundred thousand Mexican immigrants trying to learn English and find jobs in Houston, Texas, will have a very different impact there than the same number doing this in Boston, Massachusetts, or Charlotte, North Carolina. Mexican immigrants in Houston are a familiar and expected presence, and their paths of cultural adaptation and labor market participation have been charted by past immigrant generations. Such is not the case in the industrial cities of the Northeast, much less in the emerging metropolitan areas of the South.

Over a decade ago, Robert Bach and I proposed a four-fold categorization of topics around which existing theories of immigration could be organized. Although subject to modification, the classification seems still serviceable. These topics were: the origins of immigration, the directionality and continuity of migrant flows, the utilization of immigrant labor, and the sociocultural adaptation of immigrants (Portes and Bach, 1985:Ch. 1).

Each of these topics may be approached theoretically at a close-range level or from a broad structural perspective. For example, the issues of what particular places migrants go to and how long a particular movement lasts may be examined at the level of aggregate labor demand and the past history of labor recruitment in sending areas, as Michael Piore (1979) has done, or at the level of cross-national networks pointing individual immigrants in a particular direction and sustaining the flow over time, as Douglas Massey (Massey *et al.*, 1987) or Sherri Grasmuck and Patricia Pessar (1991) have. Although obviously interrelated, each of these areas requires separate attention and, hence, mid-range theories targeted on one or two of them are preferable to an all-encompassing statement. A general theory of immigration must climb to such a level of abstraction as to render its predictions vacuously true. To say, for example, that international labor migration and immigrant sociocultural assimilation are both "equilibrium restoring processes" may be readily accepted without this assertion advancing in any way our understanding of either.

In a related vein, the method of analytic induction deserves a final comment. Analytic induction is the attempt to progressively refine explanation of a particular phenomenon until all exceptions have been taken into account. The method was popular in sociology and anthropology during the fifties and early sixties because it offered the promise of a gradual progression toward explaining the full range of a given phenomenon (Robinson, 1951; Turner, 1953). That popularity quickly faded when it was discovered that applications of the method ended up redefining the problem until it was co-terminous with its explanation. The attempt to account for a social phenomenon in its entirety leads to circular reasoning because it inexorably reduces the conceptual space between the thing to be explained and its alleged causes.

Though no one uses the term analytic induction any more, the logic of the method creeps in all the time in the analysis of social phenomena. To take an example from a related field, political scientist Robert Putnam redefined the concept of "social capital" from the original statements by James Coleman (1988), who had defined it as an individual or family resource stemming from participation in certain social structures. In Putnam's analysis, social capital became instead a collective feature of communities and even countries, measured by such variables as high levels of voting, high associational participation, and a civic culture. The concept was redefined in this fashion in order to serve as an explanatory factor of differences between cities or countries in democratic governance. Gradually, cause and effect come together until the reasoning becomes circular. Differences between the well-governed cities of northern Italy and the poorly governed ones of the Italian south are thus explained as follows: ". . . 'civic' communities value solidarity, civic participation, and integrity and here democracy works. At the other pole are

'uncivic' regions like Calabria and Sicily, aptly characterized by the French term *incivisme*. The very concept of citizenship is stunted here" (Putnam, 1993:36). In other words, if your town is "civic," it does civic things; if it is "uncivic," it does not.

Theory-building is a delicate enterprise where novel and useful ideas occur rarely and where they are constantly exposed to the risks of misuse and misinterpretation or, alternatively, to the threat of conceptual overreach. We cannot explain everything, but we can explain some things with a reasonable margin of certainty. A set of mid-range theories designed to do this by drawing on the wealth of historical and contemporary research on immigration seems the strategy most worth pursuing.

A SAMPLER OF THEMES FOR IMMIGRATION RESEARCH AND THEORY

Despite the set of pitfalls just seen, there is reason to be optimistic about theoretical progress in the field of immigration. Part of this optimism is based on what has been accomplished in exploring the structural determinants of contemporary migrant flows and the microstructures that sustain them over time. A second factor underlying this optimism is the research programs started in recent years that hold the promise not only of adding to our stock of information, but also of expanding immigration theory in new directions. To my knowledge, none of these programs began with a clearly delineated theoretical agenda, but their own subject matter dictated the development of new typologies, concepts, and propositions. The list is non-exhaustive and certainly biased toward my own interests and preferences. While other topics of equal merit may be identified, the following ones provide a sampler of research issues with significant theoretical potential.

Transnational Communities

Transnational communities are dense networks across political borders created by immigrants in their quest for economic advancement and social recognition. Through these networks, an increasing number of people are able to lead dual lives. Participants are often bilingual, move easily between different cultures, frequently maintain homes in two countries, and pursue economic, political and cultural interests that require their presence in both. In a pioneering statement on the topic, Linda Basch and her collaborators describe their initial attitude toward this emergent phenomenon:

We define "transnationalism" as the process by which immigrants forge and sustain multi-stranded social relations that link together their societies of origin and settlement. We call these processes transnationalism to emphasize that many immigrants

today build social fields that cross geographic, cultural, and political borders. . . . An essential element . . . is the multiplicity of involvements that transmigrants sustain in both home and host societies. We are still groping for a language to describe these social locations. (Basch, Glick-Schiller and Blanc-Szanton, 1994:6)

That puzzled attitude toward a novel phenomenon is what makes the study of this topic promising from a theoretical standpoint. In a recent essay, Glick Schiller (1996) argues that similar processes of back-and-forth movement and intensive investments and contacts with sending countries also took place among European immigrants at the turn of the century. I agree, but I would add that the present transnational communities possess a distinct character that justifies coining a new concept to refer to them. This character is defined by three features: the number of people involved, the nearly instantaneous character of communications across space, and the fact that the cumulative character of the process makes participation “normative” within certain immigrant groups.

As studies by Basch and associates (1994), Glick-Schiller and associates (1992), Guarnizo (1994), Goldring (1992), and others show, the numbers involved in transnational activities of different sorts – economic, political, and social – can represent a significant proportion of the population of both sending areas and immigrant communities. In this sense, they become a novel path of adaptation quite different from those found among immigrants at the turn of the century. This path is reinforced by technologies that facilitate rapid displacement across long distances and instant communication. The “astronauts” – Chinese entrepreneurs who live in Monterrey Park and other California cities, but make their living by commuting by air across the Pacific – could not have existed in an earlier era (Fong, 1994). Nor could have the immigrant civic committee, described by Robert Smith (1992) who traveled, over the weekend, to the interior of Mexico to inspect public works in their village in order to be back at work in New York City by Monday.

These communication facilities, added to the economic, social and psychological benefits that transnational enterprise can bring, may turn these activities into the normative adaptation path for certain immigrant groups. Just as in the Mexican towns described by Massey and Goldring (1994), migration north is the “thing to do” during adverse economic times, so involvement in transnational activities may become the thing to do for immigrants otherwise confined to dead-end jobs and an inferior, discriminated status. That path is, of course, at variance with those envisioned by the “canonical” assimilation perspective, with direct implications for immigration theory.

Elsewhere, I have argued that the construction of transnational communities by immigrants is a process driven by the very forces promoting economic globalization, as common people are caught in their web and learn to use new technologies (Portes, 1996). Involvement in these emerging activities

may represent an effective response of popular groups to the new forces unleashed by globalization and the strategies of large corporate actors. The aphorism, "capital is global, labor is local," may still hold on the aggregate, but it is being increasingly subverted by these grassroots initiatives based on long-distance networks and a newly acquired command of communication technologies.

The New Second Generation

A second line of research has to do with the adaptation process of the second generation. The case for the second generation as a "strategic research site" is based on two features.² First, the long-term effects of immigration for the host society depend less on the fate of first generation immigrants than on their descendants. Patterns of adaptation of the first generation set the stage for what is to come, but issues such as the continuing dominance of English, the growth of a welfare dependent population, the resilience or disappearance of culturally distinct ethnic enclaves, and the decline or growth of ethnic intermarriages will be decided among its children and grandchildren. For example, the much debated issue of the loss of English hegemony in certain American cities heavily affected by immigration will not be settled by immigrants, but by their offspring. Loyalty to the home language among the foreign born is a time-honored pattern; in the past, the key linguistic shift has taken place in the second generation (Lieberson, 1981; Lieberson and Hansen, 1974; Veltman, 1983). Whether this is occurring today represents a major issue for the cities and communities where today's immigrants concentrate.

Second, the experiences of the present second generation cannot be inferred from those of children of earlier European immigrants. The "canonical" statement of assimilation theory may be reread as an abstracted version of the typical course of adaptation among these earlier children of immigrants. With exceptions, that course featured an orderly progression from the poverty and discrimination endured by the first generation to the rapid acculturation of the second generation and its gradual economic advancement. By the third generation, the loss of "ethnic" linguistic and cultural traits, as well as the disappearance of earlier labor market disadvantages, could be virtually complete.

There are reasons to doubt that a similarly benign and straightforward course will be followed by members of today's second generation. First, the

²The concept of "strategic research site" was coined by Merton (1987:10–11) to refer to an area of research where processes of more general import are manifested with unusual clarity. In his words, "the empirical material exhibits the phenomenon to be explained or interpreted to such advantage and in such accessible form that it enables the fruitful investigation and the discovery of new problems for further inquiry."

proliferation of transnational activities among first generation immigrants complicates the course of adaptation to be followed by their offspring and render its outcome uncertain. Second, discrimination against nonwhites and changing requirements of the American labor market create obstacles for economic progress and the fulfillment of rising aspirations among many second generation youth. Third, and perhaps more insidiously, these difficulties can be readily interpreted within the adversarial framework developed in the innercity among descendants of earlier labor migrants. The blocked mobility experienced by these groups became translated over time into an oppositional stance toward mainstream society. Socialization into the outlooks and role models provided by this segment of the American population creates yet another hazard in the process of social and economic progress of today's children of immigrants.

The concept of segmented assimilation was coined to call attention to these alternative and not always benign paths and to signal differences with the normative course described by earlier theory. A telling example is the alternative interpretations given to the speed of acculturation across generations yesterday and today. The fact that children of immigrants often become their "parents' parents" as their knowledge of the new language and culture races ahead has been repeatedly noted, both at the turn of the century and today.

But there is a difference. Whereas the phenomenon of generational role reversal was expected and even celebrated as it took place among children of Europeans, today it compares unfavorably with other acculturation paths and is even regarded as a danger signal. At the time of Irvin Child's (1943) study, Italian-American youth who refused to take the step of joining the American cultural mainstream were dubbed "escapists." Today, Zhou and Bankston (1994) describe how Vietnamese-American children who take the same step become prime candidates for downward assimilation. The reason is that rapid acculturation and generational role reversal undercuts parental authority to control youth as they enter an increasingly complex society, marked by the ready availability of counter-cultural models.

The pattern where the first and second generations learn the ways of American society at different paces may be labeled "dissonant acculturation." The opposite – consonant acculturation – occurs either because parents acculturate at the same speed as their children or because the process is slowed among youth by the influence of the co-ethnic community (Portes and Rumbaut, 1996:Ch. 7). This last path, dubbed "selective acculturation," has been associated in studies by Waters (1994), Gibson (1989), Suarez-Orozco (1987), Fernández-Kelly and Schaufliker (1994), and others with consistently more favorable adaptation outcomes among second generation children than those brought about by role reversal. In any case, the typology of dissonant,

consonant and selective acculturation across generations and the different evaluations placed on each type in the research literatures of the 1940s and of the 1990s offer a promising point of departure for theory and for a more sophisticated understanding of the social sequel to large-scale migration.

Households and Gender

For a number of years, the field of immigration studies tended to neglect the role of gender. At present, a new wave of studies is redressing this imbalance. The significance of research on women goes beyond covering a previously neglected segment of the migrant population. Instead, like class and race, gender represents a master dimension of social structure and a focus on this dimension can yield novel insights into many phenomena. For this to become reality, the analytic focus cannot be exclusively women (or men for that matter), but the socially patterned relationships between the sexes as they influence and, in turn, are influenced by the process of immigration. As Patricia Pessar notes (1996:32) "the challenge still remains to branch out from a concentration on female immigrants in order to apply appropriately gender-inflected research questions and methods to both men and women."

There is indeed a variable geometry of relationships between the sexes that is not adequately captured by a single-sex focus or by an unnuanced repetition of the realities of sexual exploitation and subordination. The latter do exist, but they do not exhaust the story. As in the case of class and race, the multiple configurations found in different social contexts is what makes the study of gender relations both interesting and capable of yielding new theoretical insights. A cautionary note must be introduced here about analyses that concentrate exclusively on the individual motivations of household members and the conflict of interests between them. This has often become the center of gender-focused studies.

Undoubtedly, men, women, and children within a household may differ and even struggle for conflicting goals. But an exclusive focus on these internal disagreements makes us lose sight of two other important considerations. First, households can still act as units despite internal differences. Hence, it is possible to theorize at the level of household strategies. An exclusive concentration on individual motivations would do away with the possibility of understanding how these small social units pull resources to organize a process as complex as international migration.

Second, there can be differences between people's perceptions and their actual behavior. On this point, the earlier warning against making respondents' definitions of the situation the ultimate test for theoretical propositions comes in handy. Such definitions are important, but they do not exhaust all there is about a particular social process and may even be at variance with the

actual conduct of households when examined in the aggregate. Put differently, theory can exist at different levels of abstraction. Reducing everything to the individual plane would unduly constrain the enterprise by preventing the utilization of more complex units of analysis – families, households, and communities, as the basis for explanation and prediction.

States and State-Systems

The analysis of the role of states and state-building on the onset of refugee flows, pioneered by Zolberg and his associates, offers an example of a fourth line of investigation with significant theoretical promise (Zolberg, Suhrke and Aguayo, 1986; Zolberg, 1989). Detailed accounts of the process leading to major legislation, such as the Immigration Reform and Control Act of 1986, do exist, but they have not been transformed into a systematic theoretical analysis of both the external pressures impinging on the state and the internal dynamics of the legislative and administrative bodies dealing with immigration.

Recent work by Hollifield (1992) and Freeman (1995) has begun to move in the direction of a general model of the political forces promoting immigration in the advanced Western democracies. Freeman even provides a typology of countries according to how their particular histories and political systems affect the play of these forces. But, as his critic Rogers Brubaker (1995) points out, the model still has to be fleshed out to specify the conditions under which restrictionist and antirestrictionist discourses come into vogue and the adaptation of state agencies to conflicting pressures and demands. There is a need for greater information about the inner workings of state legislative and administrative bureaucracies in order to advance this area of immigration theory beyond the plane of broad generalities.

The research questions that lie at the core of this line of inquiry and that hold the potential for theoretical innovation are twofold:

- 1) How is it that, in the face of widespread public opposition to the continuation of large-scale immigration, governments in the receiving countries have proven unable or unwilling to prevent it?
- 2) Why is it that recent laws and administrative measures designed to control immigration often end up having consequences that are almost the opposite of those originally intended?

The economic concept of “path dependence” and its sociological equivalent, “cumulative causation,” offer suitable points of departure for the analysis of the first question, insofar as they can guide the explanation of recalcitrant immigration flows in the face of widespread public opposition. (For a more detailed discussion of these concepts and related ones in economic sociology, see Portes, 1995.) Yet an inside analysis of how the legislative and administrative branches of the modern state operate to neutralize the mani-

fest public will against mass immigration is only in its early stages. The outside forces and agents that promote continuation of an open door policy are easy enough to identify, but the internal dynamics of state agencies, the ways they absorb information and react to conflicting pressures, are not. The recent review of determinants and constraints of governmental immigration policies in Western Europe by Hollifield (1996) offers a promising point of departure for addressing this question.

Similarly, the Mertonian concept of "unintended consequences" may be used with profit in the analysis of the second question (Merton, 1936, 1968). It fits well what happened to certain pieces of recent legislation, most notably the Immigration Reform and Control Act of 1986. The process by which this set of measures, manifestly designed to control immigration, ended up promoting it has been analyzed by a number of authors. Missing still is a broader set of propositions explaining how such a paradoxical outcome could come about and to what extent the same set of forces can explain or predict similar results elsewhere. For instance, French, German, and Scandinavian policies designed to reverse labor migration have generally ended up promoting further immigration and the emergence of permanent ethnic settlements. (For a recent review of the German case, *see* Kurthen, 1995; for the French experience, *see* Body-Gentrot, 1995, and Hollifield, 1994; for the Danish case, *see* Enoch, 1994.) The extent to which a common theoretical model is applicable to those experiences and recent American ones remains an open question.

As several political analysts have emphasized, migration control and the perpetuation of social and economic inequalities between advanced countries and the Third World are closely intertwined. The extent to which states succeed in maintaining such controls or are derailed in their enforcement efforts represents a central policy concern as well as a topic of considerable theoretical import.

Cross-National Comparisons

The vigorous resurgence of the sociology of immigration in recent years has been, by and large, a single-country phenomenon. I am less clear about developments in the other social sciences, but what seems certain is that the wave of novel research and theory on immigration in the United States has not been accompanied by a comparative thrust of similar vigor. To be sure, numerous conferences on the topic have been convened that bring together North American, European and, sometimes, Asian scholars. Comparative reports also have been published that examine how specific policies, such as amnesty programs for illegal aliens, have fared in different advanced countries. Applied research agencies like the Urban Institute and the Rand Corporation have been notably active in these policy comparisons.

These efforts are valuable, but they are not theory. Conferences seldom yield more than a collection of papers that describe how things have evolved in different countries. Applied policy reports do not usually contain general concepts or propositions that help explain present events or anticipate future ones. In the absence of theory, predictions generated by these reports commonly assume an immutable social reality. For example, projections about the ethnic composition of the population of countries receiving mass immigration assume that the race/ethnic classifications currently in vogue will not be affected by the presence of immigrants and their subsequent patterns of adaptation. Under similar assumptions, projections made in the early twentieth century would have predicted that the American population would become mostly nonwhite 50 years later since the bulk of Eastern and Southern European immigrants arriving at that time were not considered “white” in the popular and academic racial taxonomy of the time.

Along the same lines, projections made today about the size of the non-white population by mid twenty-first century do not take into account the effects of the process of segmented assimilation. As it unfolds, it is likely that descendants of immigrants classified today as Asian, as well as some groups coming from Latin America and classified initially as Hispanic, will enter the mainstream, intermarry, and become sociologically “white,” redefining the meaning and scope of the term. By the same token, other groups who are phenotypically white or mestizo, may become sociologically “black,” as this racial term is used today because of a failed process of second generation adaptation (*see* Fernández-Kelly and Schauffler, 1994; Waters, 1994).

In the absence of theory, what we have today is mostly an amorphous mass of data on immigration to different countries and a series of concepts whose scope seldom exceeds those of a particular nation-state. Needed are explicitly comparative projects that focus on research topics at a higher level of abstraction than those guiding policy concerns and that employ a common cross-national methodology. Each of the four topics outlined – the rise of transnational communities, the adaptation process of the second generation, gender cleavages and household strategies, and the enactment and enforcement of state immigration laws – is amenable to such comparative analysis.

Other subjects that have been dealt with at length in the North American immigration literature lack a comparative dimension. To cite but three examples: the role of social networks and social capital in initiating and sustaining migration flows in different national contexts; the types of immigrant enterprise that exist in different advanced societies and their role in the economic and social adaptation of immigrants; the patterns of race/ethnic self-identification of first and second generation immigrants in countries that promote rapid legal integration while tolerating ethnic differences (the United States), those that promote legal integration but resist the rise of ethnic subcultures

(France), and those that delay indefinitely legal integration (Germany) (Hollifield, 1994; Münz and Ulrich, 1995).

Systematic cross-national research is useful for three purposes: first, to examine the extent to which theoretical propositions “travel,” that is, are applicable in national contexts different from that which produced them; second, to generate typologies of interaction effects specifying the variable influence of causal factors across different national contexts; third, to themselves produce concepts and propositions of broader scope. In some cases, large-*N* quantitative designs with nation-states as units of analysis are appropriate. In most cases, however, what Przeworski and Teune (1970) call the “small-*N* maximum differences” design or Kohn (1987) the “nation-as-context” design would be most appropriate. The reason is that these designs are most appropriate to understand how the specific characteristics of national societies condition the validity of the set of mid-range theories that structure the field of immigration.

CONCLUSION

The inventory of theoretical pitfalls and potentially strategic research sites outlined in this essay is meant to be neither exhaustive nor representative of a consensus in our field. They represent a personal vision and hence are subject to well-justified critiques of incompleteness and topical bias. In my defense, I will only adduce that the inventory is based on long experience attempting to tease regularities out of empirical data and that, even if not consensually agreed upon, it may still provide the basis for useful discussion.

Because of rising public interest in immigration, greater priority has been given to the field by the media, foundations, and government agencies. This is both a blessing and a curse, as the new availability of resources has also given rise to a babel of voices seeking access to them. Applied research has its functions, but it can also lead the field astray by focusing on superficial issues and bureaucratically defined problems. The pressure for “policy relevant” results should not distract us from the painstaking development of concepts and propositions that alone can advance social science knowledge and provide a sound basis for both public understanding of immigration and policies that do not backfire on their original goals.

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