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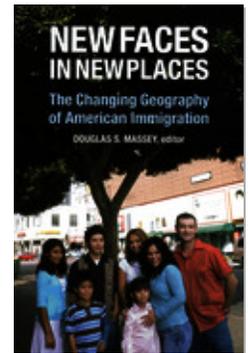
Published by Russell Sage Foundation

Massey, Douglas S.

New Faces in New Places: The Changing Geography of American Immigration.

New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 2008.

Project MUSE. Web. 7 Feb. 2015. <http://muse.jhu.edu/>.



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CHAPTER 13



ASSIMILATION IN A NEW GEOGRAPHY

DOUGLAS S. MASSEY

The foregoing chapters have clearly documented the remarkable transformation of immigration to the United States that began during the 1990s and continued into the early years of the twenty-first century. During this time, immigration shifted from being a regional phenomenon affecting a handful of states and a few metropolitan areas to a national phenomenon affecting communities of all sizes throughout all fifty states. Although this geographic diversification of destinations was experienced by all immigrant groups, it was most evident among Mexicans and, to a lesser extent, other Latin Americans. Among major immigrant groups, the diversification of destination was least evident for Asians. As a result of this unprecedented geographic transformation, millions of native white and black Americans found themselves directly exposed to the Spanish language and to Latin American culture for the very first time.

CAUSES OF GEOGRAPHIC DIVERSIFICATION

The fact that the geographic diversification was most significant among Mexicans suggests the relevance of United States border policies to the transformation. The 1990s were characterized by the selective hardening of the border in two sectors—the Tijuana–San Diego and Juarez–El Paso border crossings in California and Texas, respectively, which earlier had been the two busiest border-crossing points, where more than 80 percent of undocumented migrants had entered the United States (Massey, Durand, and Malone 2002). The placement of steel walls and metal fences in these sectors was accompanied by the deployment of newly hired U.S. Border Patrol officers and newly purchased detection equipment on the American side, and together these measures raised the odds of apprehension to the

point where the likelihood of capture became quite high (Durand and Massey 2003). In response, migrants quite rationally sought out new crossing points that lacked such concentrations of enforcement resources, notably the desert between Sonora State and Arizona, thereby deflecting migratory flows away from historical pathways and toward new destinations outside traditional gateway cities in California, Texas, and Illinois (Orrenius 2004).

Although the diversification of destinations was most pronounced among Mexicans, it was not confined to them, and its emergence among other immigrant groups, especially Latinos from Central and South America, suggests that other forces besides border enforcement were also at work in effecting the transformation. Judging from the chapters in this volume, foremost among these forces is the restructuring of manufacturing, particularly nondurables manufacturing, and food processing that occurred in the final decades of the twentieth century. Producers of apparel, meat, poultry, and other agricultural products came under intense competitive pressure during the 1990s as the economy globalized and foreign producers gained access to American markets. In order to keep plants in the United States and prevent their relocation overseas, American firms responded by consolidating ownership to achieve administrative efficiencies and economies of scale. Then, in factory after factory, the consolidated corporate owners undertook a massive deskilling of the productive process, a deunionization of the workforce, and the subcontracting of labor. These actions often required closing unionized factories with skilled workers in metropolitan areas and opening new, larger, and more efficient factories with unskilled workers in nonmetropolitan areas. In some cases, plants in smaller communities that were unionized were simply closed and reopened under a new production regime and new terms of employment; in the process the workforce in such factories shifted from predominantly native to predominantly foreign.

This restructuring of production may have been taken to ensure survival in a global market and preserve American jobs, but it made the jobs that remained in this country much less attractive to native-born workers. In addition, the relocation of plants to nonmetropolitan areas may have worked to escape the areas where unions were centered, but it placed the plants in a demographic setting characterized by a declining, aging population and few young people, thereby necessitating the recruitment of workers from elsewhere. The only people really interested in moving to nonunionized plants located in small towns in out-of-the-way states were foreigners, mainly workers from poorer nations in Latin America, particularly Mexico.

In most cases, immigration to new destinations in the South and Midwest did not simply erupt spontaneously, but was jump-started by private recruitment efforts. Companies took out ads in Mexican newspapers and broadcast the availability of jobs on Mexican radio and then sent down subcontractors to recruit workers directly, at times under the auspices of the program of temporary H-visas, but more often outside of official channels. As Mark Leach and Frank D. Bean note (see chapter 3), however the flows began, once started they continued to perpetuate themselves through network-based processes of cumulative causation. In a few short years, places that had no experience of immigration within living memory suddenly came to house large pluralities, and sometimes even majorities, of foreign-born residents, overwhelming local schools, clinics, hospitals, and other social services that were ill equipped to handle a rapid increase in clients, much less the sudden appearance of immigrants speaking different languages and bearing unfamiliar cultures.

THE PROSPECTS FOR ASSIMILATION

As several chapters chronicle, within the new receiving communities, native-born Americans occupying administrative, professional, and other privileged positions generally expressed openness and tolerance with respect to the newcomers, whereas working class natives, especially in nonmetropolitan areas that had never before experienced immigration, at best expressed ambivalence and often expressed outright hostility toward the Spanish-speaking arrivals. As several authors in this book have shown, tensions were particularly acute in the South, where the arrival of large numbers of brown-skinned people upset a traditional system of race relations that historically had revolved around a black-white color line and a one-drop rule of racial identification, whereby just “one drop” of black blood meant that one’s social identity was that of a black person. Moreover, given the legacy of Jim Crow and the imperfect realization of civil rights after the 1960s, African Americans often felt more threatened than whites and generally expressed greater animosity toward the new immigrants, though the degree of hostility varied depending on the relative size of the black population and whether one considers the political or economic realm.

Despite acknowledging these emerging indications of nativism, xenophobia, and anti-immigrant hostility, most of the authors remain mostly cautiously optimistic about the prospects for assimilation, suggesting that today’s immigrants will follow in the path of those in the past and integrate into American society by learning English, forming relationships

with native-born Americans, moving up the economic ladder, and eventually intermarrying with native-born European Americans. Although they recognize that United States labor markets may be more segmented now than in the past, and that immigrants today have relatively less education than in earlier times, they take comfort in the fact that, culturally and socially, American society is much more open and tolerant than it was before the 1960s. In general, strict norms of Anglo conformity no longer prevail and unilateral assimilation to the “American way of life” is not demanded in the way it once was.

As evidence for their sanguine view, the authors point to immigrants’ low rates of retention of their original languages, significant socioeconomic progress among immigrants who spend significant time in the United States, clear evidence of intergenerational mobility, and relatively high rates of intermarriage between European whites and both Hispanics and Asians in the second and third generations. Against this optimistic scenario, however, I see at least five reasons to believe that the path of immigrant adaptation may be more difficult than in the past and that worry about the future of assimilation is not entirely misplaced. The features of contemporary American society that give me pause are the changed nature of the United States’ opportunity structure; the stagnation of educational achievement beyond the second generation; the perpetual nature of contemporary immigration; the rapid growth of the undocumented population; and remarkable revival of immigrant baiting and ethnic demonization currently being undertaken by demagogues in politics, the media, and even academia.

After World War II, the postwar economic boom was a major engine driving the assimilation of the children and grandchildren of immigrants from Southern and Eastern Europe (Alba and Nee 2003), which steadily increased earnings throughout the income distribution and offered unprecedented opportunities for social mobility as the service sector expanded while the manufacturing sector remained strong (Levy 1998). From 1945 to 1975, average incomes rose, poverty rates dropped, and millions of Americans entered the middle class, purchasing homes, cars, and a new panoply of consumer goods. In such an economy, it was possible for working class Americans with no more than a high school degree to advance economically, thanks to strong unions and generous contracts. Millions of working class parents were able to use this firm economic base to purchase a college education for their children, many of whom went on to become a part of the white collar world. The end result was a “diamond shaped” socioeconomic distribution that was wide in the middle and narrow at the top and bottom and that provided numerous avenues for mobil-

ity and material improvement, many of which did not rely on educational achievement (Massey 2007).

After 1975, however, this fluid socioeconomic structure which was so conducive to intergenerational mobility and integration came under increasing attack both internally and externally—internationally from rising competition in the global marketplace that was exacerbated by an oil crisis and domestically from the collapse of the economically progressive New Deal coalition over the issue of race (Massey 2005). From 1975 to 2005, median incomes stagnated, real wages fell, income inequality increased, wealth distributions polarized, and both poverty and affluence became more concentrated geographically (Massey 2007). Instead of a diamond-shape structure, the socioeconomic distribution increasingly resembled an “hourglass,” with large strata at the top and bottom and a small stratum in between, a configuration offering few opportunities for mobility for those without a college education (Massey and Hirst 1998).

In the new political economy, workers faced bleak economic prospects as levels of unionization declined to record lows, strikes became a rarity, wages fell in real terms, benefits steadily eroded, and federal safety nets that had been erected in the New Deal and Lyndon Johnson’s Great Society were steadily cut back (Massey 2007). The only reliable way to advance in the new postindustrial economy was through the acquisition of education, and increasingly not simply a college degree but postgraduate education was needed (Massey 2000). The economic returns to education skyrocketed during the 1980s and 1990s (Autor, Katz, and Kearny 2006). Those who possessed high levels of education were able to earn high salaries and to translate their material security into education for their children, thus passing on their advantaged class position (Massey 2007).

Unfortunately, access to education is not equally distributed and as the income distribution polarized over time, so did the distribution of schools offering high-quality education (Phillips and Chin 2004). Given the very low levels of schooling possessed by most Mexican immigrants to the United States (an average of eight years), educational achievement has been particularly problematic for their children and grandchildren. Although studies generally confirm a substantial upgrading of educational attainment from the first to the second generation, this improvement reflects the very low educational level of parents as much as the attainments of their children, and a particularly troubling pattern is the apparent stagnation of attainment in the third and fourth generations, with the result that the average level of schooling of native-born is just twelve years (Smith 2003; Tienda and Mitchell 2006; Telles and Ortiz forthcoming). Clearly this offers a poor prognosis for these citizens’ economic future in the United

States, as high school education is no longer sufficient to ensure membership in the middle class, much less to gain access to the higher reaches of the hourglass economy.

In addition to the favorable opportunity structure of the postwar political economy and the mobility it provided to those with little more than a high school education, another factor in the assimilation of the children and grandchildren of European immigrants was the long hiatus in immigration that occurred between 1925 and 1965 (Massey 1995). The passage of restrictive immigration quotas in the early 1920s and the economic depression that began in 1929 effectively ended immigration from Southern and Eastern Europe—indeed, it ended virtually all immigration for several decades.

As a result of this hiatus, processes of adaptation, integration, and mobility played out within just one or two generations at a time. Ethnic identity, which was dominated by the experience of first and second generation immigrants before the 1940s, came to be defined by the experiences of second generation immigrants from 1945 to 1975 and by third and fourth generation immigrants thereafter—with no renewal of the first generation by arriving immigrants. The absence of new immigrants—who would have lacked English and would have brought with them the cultures of their sending countries—thus facilitated assimilation of the earlier wave of European immigrants.

Immigration since 1965 has seen no hiatus, even for a short period, much less for decades. Mexican immigration has been constant since it was revived by the Bracero program in the 1940s, and additions to the Mexican-origin population have been steady. Similar trends are observed for other Latin American groups beginning in the 1970s. As a consequence, Latin American immigrant populations in general and Mexicans in particular are characterized by a multigenerational complexity that never prevailed for Italians, Poles, or Russian Jews. Rather than being defined by steady advance of generation cohorts without experiencing “dilution” from newcomers, Mexican identity is constantly renewed by large numbers of new immigrants. Now, the Mexican American population comprises people who have just arrived from Mexico, long-settled immigrants, native-born children and grandchildren, and even significant numbers in the fourth and fifth generations (Telles and Ortiz forthcoming). In sum, since the 1940s the Mexican-origin population has steadily been renewed linguistically and culturally by a constant stream of new arrivals from south of the border.

If anything, in recent years there has been a dramatic increase in the rate of growth and thus of the proportion of the foreign-born Mexican

origin population (Massey, Durand, and Malone 2002) as the rate of return migration has fallen, in response to America's militarization of the Mexico-United States border. Unlike earlier cohorts of European immigrants, moreover, these most recent arrivals from Mexico and Latin America generally have undocumented status, especially those going to new destination areas. Never before has such a large share of immigrants—those with illegal status—lacked even the most elemental economic, social, and political rights (Massey and Bartley 2005). At present at least half of all foreign-born Mexicans in the United States—and a fifth of all persons of Mexican origin—are undocumented (Massey 2007). The growing share of undocumented Mexican migrants is far more exploitable and patently much less assimilable than earlier immigrants.

Consequently, in my view predictions that today's Mexican and Latino immigrants will follow the path to assimilation established by earlier cohorts of immigrants are hardly assured, despite the prevailing optimism. In contrast to European immigrants earlier in the twentieth century, and even Latino immigrants arriving before 1980, the latest arrivals face a remarkably unfavorable context for adaptation, integration, and assimilation. Mexicans, in particular, are arriving and settling in growing numbers with no sign of a hiatus to facilitate the process of assimilation. Most of these newcomers arrive without legal documents and possess low levels of education, and once in the United States they face a polarized hourglass economy that offers few avenues of upward mobility without a college education. Moreover, despite educational progress between the first and second generations, the gains are insufficient to assure middle class status in a postindustrial economy and even these modest educational gains are not sustained into the third generation and beyond.

In sum, Mexicans are poorly equipped to compete in an economy where the returns to education are sharply rising and a college degree has become a prerequisite of middle class status. And if these conditions are not daunting enough, public discourse has taken a sharp turn toward nativism and xenophobia in recent decades and anti-Mexican hostility has risen to new heights. Leo R. Chavez (2001) examined magazine covers relating to articles about immigration in American publications between 1965 and 2000 and coded them as "affirmative" (with text and images celebrating immigration), "alarmist" (with text and images conveying problems, fears, and dangers associated with immigration), or "neutral" (text and images in articles that offered balanced and factual coverage of immigration). He found that nearly three quarters of the covers were alarmist and the prevalence of alarmist covers steadily increase through the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s.

Chavez (2001) found that the most common metaphorical device used to frame alarmist covers was martial in nature, portraying the border as a “battleground” that was “under attack” from “alien invaders” and where Border Patrol agents were “outgunned” “defenders” trying to “hold the line” against attacking “hoards.” Within the United States, illegal aliens constituted a “ticking time bomb” waiting to explode and destroy American culture and values. Whatever the framing device, however, immigration from Latin America was always portrayed as a “crisis.”

Although anti-immigrant sentiments may have been visible before 2001, after the events of September 11 they have become more public and strident. In academia, Professor Samuel P. Huntington (2004, 30–32) of Harvard warned Americans of the “Hispanic Challenge,” which threatened “to divide the United States into two peoples, two cultures, and two languages”: “Unlike past immigrant groups, Mexicans and other Latinos have not assimilated into mainstream U.S. culture, forming instead their own political and linguistic enclaves—from Los Angeles to Miami—and rejecting the Anglo-Protestant values that built the American dream. . . . The United States ignores this challenge at its peril.”

In similar vein, the former presidential candidate and political pundit Patrick Buchanan (2006) sees a “state of emergency” brought about by the “third world invasion and conquest of America.” In his recent book, aptly titled *State of Emergency* (2006), he revealed to Americans the existence of an “Aztlán Plot” hatched by Mexican elites to “reconquer” lands lost in 1848, when the United States annexed the northern third of Mexico in the wake of the Mexican–American War. In an interview with *Time* magazine (August 28, 2006, 6), Buchanan warned, “If we do not get control of our borders and stop this greatest invasion in history, I see the dissolution of the U.S. and the loss of the American Southwest—culturally and linguistically, if not politically—to Mexico.”

This alarmist attitude is perhaps given its maximum expression in the nightly commentaries of Lou Dobbs, the anchor and managing editor of CNN’s popular *Lou Dobbs Tonight*, which has a viewing audience of about 800,000. At the beginning of his March 21, 2007, broadcast, for example, he announced a series devoted to the “broken border” and the “illegal alien invasion” it caused. Calling on viewers to “feel violated,” he argued that “a common front in our illegal-alien crisis [is] the war on drugs and the global war on terror. That front line is easily defined as our nation’s borders, airports, and seaports. And Arizonans know only too well the pain and problems of living and working on the front line of our border with Mexico.”

It is perhaps too early to tell what effect these blatant appeals to nativism and xenophobia might have on American public opinion or on

the acceptance of immigrants within American society. Recent work by Tiane L. Lee and Susan T. Fiske (2006) suggests that undocumented migrants have moved into the perceptual space of American social cognition usually reserved for despised out-groups such as drug dealers and the homeless. Whatever the ultimate influence of these anti-immigrant tirades, they represent a level of ethnic demonization not seen since the 1920s (see Higham 1955); whatever their intent, they clearly serve to harden the lines of categorical inequality between immigrants and the native-born population (Massey 2007).

NEW PLACES, NEW ASSIMILATION?

This troubling societal context prevails for immigrants in traditional as well as new destination areas, and can be expected to undermine the prospects for assimilation throughout the United States. But in many ways traditional immigrant gateways such as New York, Chicago, Los Angeles, Miami, and Houston are quite different from the new, nonmetropolitan destinations that emerged in the 1990s. Natives in traditional immigrant-receiving cities have considerable experience interacting with immigrants on a daily basis and often have immigrant roots themselves, making them quite tolerant of the newcomers. In addition, native inhabitants of gateway metropolitan areas are among the most educated of all Americans, and pro-immigrant attitudes generally rise with schooling (Haubert and Fussell 2006).

Gateway areas are also home to well-developed institutions within and outside the immigrant community to facilitate integration and advancement. Government institutions generally have multilingual specialists so that immigrants seeking public services can communicate in their native language. Bilingual classrooms, ballots, and written instructions are commonplace, and people in positions of public responsibility are often second- or third-generation immigrants themselves, who if they do not speak the language will at least share many cultural affinities with the newcomers. At the same time, in gateway cities numerous civil organizations such as the ACLU (American Civil Liberties Union), the National Council of La Raza, the Mexican American Legal Defense Fund, the League of Latin American Citizens, and the National Council of Churches generally are on hand to provide assistance and defend the interests of immigrants and their children. Private welfare and social-service agencies are also prevalent to provide material assistance, not to mention immigrants' own hometown associations and other civic organizations.

In a very real way, gateway cities have historically served as "assimilation machines" for the nation, incorporating immigrants, helping them

to adjust to American society, and turning their children into Americans who then move outward to encounter native whites and blacks in the rest of the country. Gateway cities thus served as buffers between the masses of immigrants and the rest of American society, easing their entry so that most natives never encountered relatively unassimilated, monolingual, and culturally foreign immigrants, only their English-speaking children and grandchildren who had grown up in the United States, attended American schools, and were substantially Americanized.

The geographic dispersion of immigrants away from urban gateways into smaller communities throughout the country means that for the first time in living memory, millions of natives lacking any experience with foreigners are now having and will continue to have direct and sustained contact with unassimilated immigrants. In the new destinations, moreover, immigrants will have few institutional resources to rely on to bridge the social and cultural gap. How this experiment in intergroup relations will play out is, of course, an open question, but whatever happens, low levels of immigrant education and the rising tide of xenophobia cannot help the situation. One thing is crystal clear: undocumented status constitutes an unprecedented barrier to immigrant integration. Removing this barrier is an essential first step in giving the new immigrants a fighting chance of realizing the American dream.

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