

# GLOBAL SHIFTS: U.S. IMMIGRATION AND THE CULTURAL IMPACT OF DEMOGRAPHIC CHANGE. AN ADDRESS

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At the turn of the millennium we are witnessing intense new worldwide migration and refugee flows. There are now some 100 million transnational immigrants plus an estimated 30 million refugees displaced from their homelands. These flows are largely structured by the intensification of globalization—a process of economic, social, and cultural transformation rapidly accelerating in the last decade.<sup>1</sup> Globalization has increased immigration in a variety of ways. First, transnational capital flows (roughly a trillion dollars cross national boundaries every day) tend to stimulate migration because where capital flows, immigrants tend to follow.<sup>2</sup> Second, the new information and communication technologies that are at the heart of globalization tend to stimulate migration because they encourage new standards of consumption and life-style choices. Would-be immigrants imagine better opportunities elsewhere and mobilize to achieve them. Third, the affordability of mass transportation—last year approximately 1.5 billion airline tickets were sold—has put the migration option within the reach of millions who heretofore could not consider it. Fourth, globalization has stimulated new migration because it has produced uneven results—big winners and losers.

Globalization pains have been felt in many regions of the developing world—perpetuating unemployment and further depressing wages.<sup>3</sup> On

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<sup>1</sup> See Suárez-Orozco, Marcelo, forthcoming, "Global Acts: Immigrant Children, Education and the Post National." *Harvard Educational Review*.

<sup>2</sup> See, among others, Sassen, Saskia, 1988, *The Mobility of Labor and Capital*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

<sup>3</sup> See, for example, Bauman, Z., 1998, *Globalization: The Human Consequences*. New York: Columbia University Press; Dussel, E. P., 2000, *Polarizing Mexico: The Impact of Liberalization*. New York: Lynne Rienner.

the winning side of the new globalization game has been the explosion of jobs in some regions of world. These jobs include the knowledge-intensive sector of the new economy as well as more traditional jobs in service and agriculture. The growth in jobs in globalization's winning zones has acted as an unstoppable vacuum pulling millions of immigrants—skilled and unskilled, legal and illegal—from the developing world into the wealthier centers of the north, the United States especially.

It follows, then, that the greatest peacetime expansion of the U.S. economy coincided with the largest number of immigrants in history.<sup>4</sup> By the year 2000 the “foreign-stock” (foreign-born plus the U.S.-born second generation) population of the United States was nearly 55 million people—roughly 30 million of them foreign-born.<sup>5</sup> Two dominant features characterize this most recent wave of immigration: its intensity (the immigrant population grew by over 30 percent in the 1990s) and the somewhat radical shift in the sources of new immigration. Up to 1950, nearly 90 percent of all immigrants were Europeans or Canadians. Today, over 50 percent of all immigrants are from Latin America and over 25 percent are from Asia, the regions of the world where globalization has generated especially uneven results (Figure 1).

## IMMIGRATION IN THE GLOBAL ERA

Immigrants today are a heterogeneous population, defying easy generalizations.<sup>6</sup> They include highly educated, highly skilled individuals drawn by the explosive growth in the knowledge-intensive sectors of the economy, and they are more likely to have advanced degrees than the native-born population (Figure 2).

These immigrants come to thrive. Immigrants now, especially those originating in Asia, are among the best-educated and skilled folk in the United States. They are overrepresented in the category of people with doctorates. Fully half of all entering physics graduate students in 1998 were foreign-born.<sup>7</sup> Thirty-two percent of all scientists and engineers working in California's Silicon Valley are immigrants.<sup>8</sup> Roughly a third of

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<sup>4</sup> See, for example, U.S. Census Bureau, 1999, *Current Population Reports*, “Profile of the Foreign-Born Population in the United States: 1997.” Washington, DC: U.S. Census Bureau.

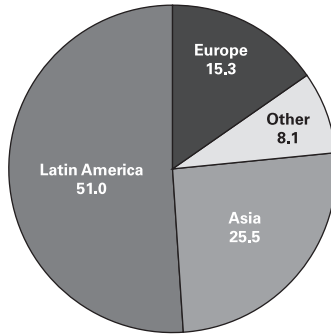
<sup>5</sup> See Portes, A. and R. Rumbaut, 2001, *Legacies: The Story of the Immigrant Second Generation*. Berkeley and London: University of California Press.

<sup>6</sup> See, for example, Carola Suárez-Orozco and Marcelo M. Suárez-Orozco, 2001, *Children of Immigration*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

<sup>7</sup> See “Wanted: American Physicists,” *New York Times*, July 23, 1999, p. A27. Of course, not all of these foreign-born physics graduate students are immigrants. Some will indeed return to their countries of birth while others will surely go on to have productive scientific careers in the United States.

<sup>8</sup> See Saxenian, AnnaLee, 1999, *Silicon Valley's New Immigrant Entrepreneurs*. San Francisco: Public Policy Institute of California.

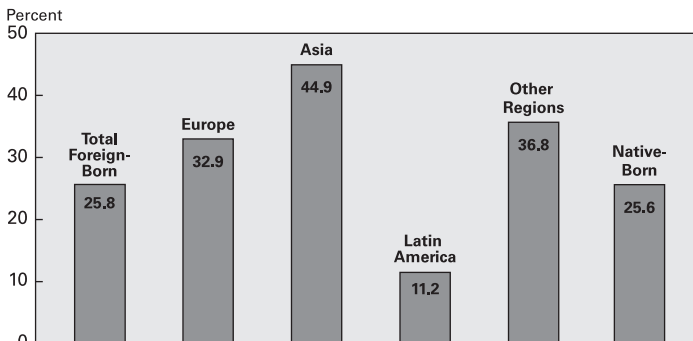
**Figure 1**  
**Percent Distribution of Foreign-Born in the United States, by Region of Birth, 2000**



Source: *Current Population Survey*, March 2000, PGP-3.

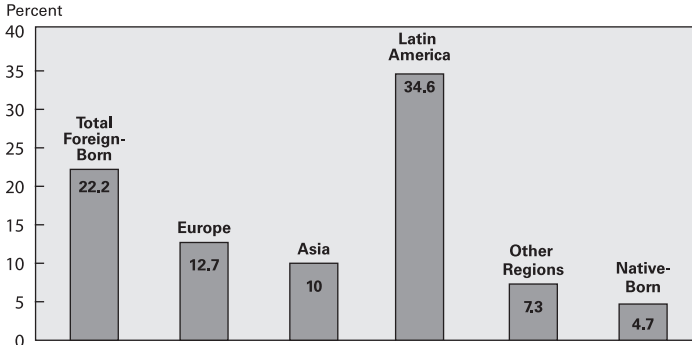
all Nobel Prize winners in the United States have been immigrants. In 1999, all (100 percent!) U.S. winners of the Nobel Prize were immigrants. Perhaps with the exception of the highly educated immigrants and refugees escaping Nazi Europe, immigrants in the past tended to be more

**Figure 2**  
**Percent of U.S. Population with a Bachelor's Degree or Higher, by Region of Origin, 2000**



Source: *Current Population Survey*, March 2000, PGP-3.

**Figure 3**  
**Percent of U.S. Population with Less Than 9th**  
**Grade Education, by Region of Origin, 2000**



Source: *Current Population Survey*, March 2000, PGR-3.

uniformly poorly educated and relatively unskilled than they are today.<sup>9</sup> Never in the history of U.S. immigration have so many immigrants done so well so fast.

At the same time, the new immigration contains large numbers of poorly schooled, semi-skilled or unskilled workers—many of them in the United States without proper documentation, as illegal aliens. In the year 2000, over 22 percent of all immigrants here had less than a ninth grade education (Figure 3).

These workers, many of them from Latin America, are drawn by the service sector of the U. S. economy, where there seems to be an insatiable appetite for foreign folk. They typically end up in poorly paid jobs lacking insurance and basic safety protections. Unlike the low-skilled factory jobs of yesterday, the kinds of jobs typically available to low-skilled immigrants today do not hold much realistic promise for upward mobility.<sup>10</sup> These immigrants tend to settle in areas of deep poverty and racial segregation.<sup>11</sup> Concentrated poverty is associated with the “disap-

<sup>9</sup> See, for example, Borjas, George, “Assimilation in Cohort Quality Revisited: What Happened to Immigrant Earnings in the 1980s?” *Journal of Labor Economics* 13(2), pp. 201-45.

<sup>10</sup> See for example, Portes, Alejandro, *The New Second Generation*, especially pp. 1-15.

<sup>11</sup> See Orfield, Gary, “Commentary,” in Marcelo M. Suárez-Orozco and Mariela Paez, eds., 2002, *Latinos! Remaking America*. Berkeley and London: University of California Press.

pearance of meaningful work opportunities.”<sup>12</sup> When poverty is combined with racial segregation, the outcomes can be dim.

## THE “ACCUULTURATION” OF IMMIGRANTS

The latest wave of immigration has rekindled the eternal American debate about the long-term consequences of large-scale immigration. Some worry about its economic dimensions, while many others have focused on its cultural implications.<sup>13</sup> Here I will briefly examine some of the cultural concerns about immigration because, I think, they rest on a somewhat flawed understanding of culture.

Analytically, it is sometimes useful to differentiate between two broad spheres of culture: “instrumental culture” and “expressive culture.” By instrumental culture, I mean the skills, competencies, and social behaviors that are required to successfully make a living and contribute to society. By expressive culture, I mean the realm of values, the worldviews, and the patterning of interpersonal relations that give meaning and sustain the sense of self. Taken together, these qualities of culture generate shared meanings and understandings, and a sense of belonging. In sum, the sense of who you are and where you belong is deeply patterned by these qualities of culture.

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<sup>12</sup> Wilson, William, 1997, *When Work Disappears: The World of the New Urban Poor*. New York: Vintage Books.

<sup>13</sup> A great deal of energy has gone into assessing the economic consequences of immigration. The research findings are often contradictory, with some economists claiming that the new immigrants are a burden to taxpayers and an overall negative influence on the U.S. economy and others suggesting that they continue to be an important asset.

A recent study on the economic, demographic, and fiscal effects of immigration by the National Research Council (NRC) concludes that “immigration produces net economic gains for domestic residents.” National Research Council, 1997, *The New Americans: Economic, Demographic, and Fiscal Effects of Immigration*, p. 3. Washington, DC: National Academy Press. Not only do immigrants “increase the supply of labor and help produce new goods and services” but their presence also “allows domestic workers to be used more productively, specializing in producing goods at which they are relatively more efficient. Specialization in consumption also yields a gain” (pp. 3-4). The NRC estimates that the immigration-related “domestic gain may run on the order of \$1 billion to \$10 billion a year” (p. 5). On the other hand, in fiscal terms the NRC data suggest that “immigrants receive more in services than they pay in taxes” (p. 7). Although there are important differences by state—California, for example, is more negatively affected than other states—the panel calculates that “if the net fiscal impact of all U.S. immigrant-headed households were averaged across all native households the burden would be . . . on the order of \$166 to \$226 per native household” (p. 5). The NRC study further suggests that while immigration is a plus in overall economic terms, low-skilled new immigrants have contributed to a modest drop in the minimum wage of low-skilled workers; a 5 percent drop in wages since 1980 among high school dropouts can be attributed to the new immigrants. There is, however, no evidence to suggest that new immigration has “hurt” the economic condition of African-Americans (p. 5). For another overview of immigrants and the economy, see Borjas, George, 1999, *Heaven’s Door: Immigration Policy and the American Economy*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

In the instrumental realm, globalization is stimulating a worldwide convergence in the skills that are needed to function in today's economy. Whether in Los Angeles, Lima, or Lagos, the skills required to thrive are in fundamental respects the same. These include communication and higher-order symbolic and cognitive skills, as well as habits of work and interpersonal talents that are common in any cosmopolitan setting. Working with the culturally 'other' today is a skill that, thanks to globalization, will be increasingly remunerated.

Immigrant parents are very much aware that if their children are to thrive they must acquire these skills. Indeed, immigration for many parents represents nothing more, and nothing less, than the opportunity to offer children access to these skills. In the course of our research with immigrants we have yet to meet a parent who tells us that he does not want his daughter to learn English or to acquire the skills and work habits that will prepare her for a successful career, whether in the United States or "back home."

While immigrant parents encourage their children to cultivate the "instrumental" aspects of culture in the new setting, they are decidedly more ambivalent about their children's exposure to some of the "expressive" elements of culture in the new land. During the course of our research, it has not been difficult to detect that many immigrant parents strongly resist a whole array of cultural models and social practices in American youth culture that they consider undesirable. These include cultural attitudes and behaviors that are anti-schooling, glorify violence, and are sexually precocious. Many immigrant parents reject and resist this form of acculturation.

Hence, I claim that the incantation of many observers—acculturate, acculturate, acculturate—needs rethinking. If acculturation is superficially defined as acquiring linguistic skills, job skills, and participation in the political process, then there is a universal consensus on these shared goals. If, on the other hand, we choose a broader and more ambitious definition of assimilation and acculturation as also including the realm of values, worldviews, and interpersonal relations, then a worthy debate ensues.

The first issue that needs airing is the basic question of "acculturating to what?" American society is no longer, if it ever was, a uniform or coherent system.<sup>14</sup> Given their diverse origins, financial resources, and

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<sup>14</sup> I concur with Alejandro Portes when he argues that we can no longer assume that new immigrants will assimilate into a coherent mainstream. He articulates a critical question that is now in the minds of many observers of immigration:

"The question today is, to what sector of American society will a particular immigrant group assimilate? Instead of a relatively uniform 'mainstream' whose mores and prejudices dictate a common path of integration, we observe today several distinct forms of adaptation. One of them replicates the time-honored portrayal of growing acculturation and parallel

social networks, immigrants end up gravitating to very different sectors of American society. While some are able to join integrated well-to-do neighborhoods, the majority of today's immigrants come to experience American culture from the vantage point of poor urban settings. Limited economic opportunities, toxic schools, ethnic tensions, violence, drugs, and gangs characterize many of these settings. The structural inequalities found in what some social theorists have called "American Apartheid" are implicated in the creation of a cultural ethos of ambivalence, pessimism, and despair. Asking immigrant youth to give up their values, worldviews, and interpersonal relations to join this ethos is a formula for disaster.<sup>15</sup>

For those immigrants who come into intimate contact with middle-class mainstream culture, other trade-offs will be required. Indeed, new data suggest many immigrant children perceive that mainstream Americans do not welcome them and, indeed, disparage them as not deserving to partake in the American dream.<sup>16</sup> Identifying wholeheartedly with a culture that rejects you has its psychological costs, usually paid with the currency of shame, doubt, and even self-hatred.

But even if the new immigrants were unambivalently embraced by middle-class mainstream Americans, it is far from clear that mimicking their behaviors would in the long term prove to be an adaptive strategy for immigrants of color. Mainstream middle-class children are protected by webs of social safety nets that give them leeway to experiment with an array of dystopian behaviors, including drugs, sex, and alcohol. On the other hand, for many immigrant youth, without robust socioeconomic and cultural safety nets, engaging in such behaviors is a high-stakes proposition where one mistake can have lifelong consequences. A white middle-class youth who is caught in possession of drugs is likely to be referred to counseling and rehabilitation; an immigrant youth convicted of the same offense is likely to be deported.

The current wave of immigration involves people from fantastically diverse and heterogeneous cultural backgrounds. Beneath surface differences, however, a common grammar can be identified among groups as culturally distinct from each other as Chinese, Haitian, and Mexican immigrants. The importance of family ties, the importance of hard work,

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integration into the white middle class. A second leads straight in the opposite direction to permanent poverty and assimilation to the underclass. Still a third associates rapid economic advancement with deliberate preservation of the immigrant community's values and tight solidarity" (Alejandro Portes, *The New Second Generation*).

<sup>15</sup> Massey, Douglas and Nancy Denton, 1993, *American Apartheid*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

<sup>16</sup> See Suárez-Orozco, Carola, "Identities Under Siege," in A. Robben and M. M. Suárez-Orozco, eds., 2000, *Cultures Under Siege: Collective Violence and Trauma*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

and optimism about the future are examples of shared immigrant values.<sup>17</sup>

These three realms are aspects of culture that become highlighted and come to the fore in the process of immigration. Consider, for example, the case of strong family ties among immigrants. Many immigrants come from cultures where the family system is an integral part of the person's sense of self. These family ties play a critical role in family reunification—an important force driving the new immigration. Furthermore, once immigrants settle, family ties are accentuated because immigration poses many emotional and practical challenges forcing immigrants to turn to one another for support.<sup>18</sup>

Hard work and optimism about the future are likewise central to the immigrant's *raison d'être*.<sup>19</sup> The immigrant's most fundamental motivation is to find a better life. Immigrants tend to view hard work as essential to this project. The fact that many immigrants will do the impossible jobs that native workers simply refuse to consider is an indication of just how hard they are willing to work. Immigrant family ties, work ethic, and optimism about the future are unique assets that should be celebrated as adding to the total cultural stock of the nation.

## THE VALUE OF MULTIPLE CULTURAL CODES

Immigration generates change. The immigrants themselves undergo a variety of transformations. Likewise, the immigration process inevitably changes the members of the dominant culture. In the United States today we eat, speak, and dance differently than we did thirty years ago,

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<sup>17</sup> For an overview of recent research on immigration and family ties, see Rumbaut, Ruben, "Ties that Bind: Immigration and Immigrant Families in the United States," in A. Booth, A.C. Crouter, and N. Landale, eds., 1996, *Immigration and the Family: Research and Policy on U.S. Immigrants*. New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum. See also Carola and Marcelo Suárez-Orozco, 1995, *Transformations: Immigration, Family Life and Achievement Motivation Among Latino Adolescents*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, and Falicov, Celia, 1998, *Latino Families in Therapy: A Guide to Multicultural Practice*. New York: Guilford. For an overview of immigrant optimism and achievement orientation, see Kao, Grace and M. Tienda, 1995, "Optimism and Achievement: The Educational Performance of Immigrant Youth," *Social Science Quarterly* 76(1), pp. 1-19.

<sup>18</sup> See Carola Suárez-Orozco and Marcelo M. Suárez-Orozco, *Children of Immigration*.

<sup>19</sup> See Kao, G. and M. Tienda, 1995, "Optimism and Achievement: The Educational Performance of Immigrant Youth," *Social Science Quarterly* 76 (1), pp. 1-19; National Research Council, 1998, *From Generation to Generation: The Health and Well-Being of Children in Immigrant Families*. Washington, DC: National Academy Press; Rumbaut, R., "The New Californians: Comparative Research Findings on the Educational Progress of Immigrant Children," in R. Rumbaut and W. Cornelius, eds., 1995, *California's Immigrant Children*. La Jolla, CA: Center for US-Mexican Studies; Steinberg, L., B. Bradford Brown, and Sanford Dornbusch, 1996, *Beyond the Classroom: Why School Reform Has Failed & What Parents Need to Do*. New York: Simon & Schuster; and Carola and Marcelo Suárez-Orozco, 1995, *Transformations: Immigration, Family Life and Achievement Motivation Among Latino Adolescents*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.



in part because of large-scale immigration. But change is never easy. The changes brought about by the new immigration require mutual calibrations and negotiations.

Rather than advocating that immigrant children abandon all elements of their culture as they embark on their uncertain assimilation journey, a more promising path is to cultivate and nurture the emergence of new hybrid identities and transcultural competencies.<sup>20</sup> These hybrid cultural styles creatively blend elements of the old culture with that of the new, unleashing new energies and potentials.<sup>21</sup>

The skills and work habits that are required to thrive in the new century are essential elements of assimilation. Immigrant children, like all children, must develop this repertoire of instrumental skills. At the same time, maintaining a sense of belonging and social cohesion with their immigrant roots is equally important. When immigrant children lose their expressive culture, social cohesion is weakened, parental authority is undermined, and interpersonal relations suffer. The unthinking call for immigrant children to massively abandon their culture can only result in loss, anomie, and social disruption.

The model of unilineal assimilation, where the bargain was straightforward—please check all your cultural baggage before you pass through the Golden Gate—emerged in another era. The young nation, then, was eager to turn large numbers of European immigrants into loyal citizen workers and consumers. It was an era of nation building and bounded national projects. Immigrants today are actors on a global economic stage. The old straight-line model of thinking about assimilation and national cultures is, in some ways, being bypassed by the globalized, transnationalized strategies that the new immigrants deploy. Today, roughly \$100 billion cross national boundaries each year as immigrants send remittances back home. Last year, remittances from U.S. workers were the largest source of capital inflows for a number of Latin American countries.

Immigrants today are also political actors who no longer give up their participation in the home countries, the way we saw immigrants give up those alliances and allegiances one hundred years ago. The

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<sup>20</sup> I concur with Teresa LaFromboise and her colleagues on the need to reconceptualize what they call the “linear model of cultural acquisition.” See LaFromboise, T. et al., “Psychological Impact of Biculturalism: Evidence and Theory,” in P. B. Organista, K. Chun, and G. Martin, eds., 1998, *Readings in Ethnic Psychology*. New York: Routledge.

<sup>21</sup> Margaret Gibson articulates a theoretical argument on immigrant transculturation and a calculated strategy of “accommodation without assimilation” in her study of highly successful Sikh immigrants in California. See Gibson, Margaret, 1988, *Accommodation without Assimilation: Sikh Immigrants in an American High School*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press. For a theoretical statement on the psychology of ethnic identity and cultural pluralism, see Phinney, Jean S., “Ethnic Identity in Adolescents and Adults: Review of Research,” in P. B. Organista, K. Chun and G. Martin, eds., 1998, *Readings in Ethnic Psychology*. New York: Routledge.

Mexican President made history last December when he went to the U.S. border to personally welcome, symbolically, a handful of Mexican immigrants returning to their country for the Christmas break. This telecast to all a new attitude in the political leadership in Mexico. The Dominicans had figured out earlier that immigrants remain tremendously important political players in the countries they left behind. We see the same thing in Colombia, and in Ecuador. Increasingly, important source countries of immigrants develop dual-nationality arrangements and laws in order to cultivate relationships with their people who have moved away.

But even long ago, accounts of immigrants rushing in unison to trade their culture for American culture were greatly exaggerated. German-Americans, Italian-Americans, and Irish-Americans have all left deep cultural imprints in the molding of American culture. Even among fifth-generation descendants of the previous great wave of immigration, symbolic culture and ethnicity remain an emotional gravitational field.<sup>22</sup>

But beyond the argument that maintaining the expressive elements of culture is symbolically important and strategic from the point of view of social cohesion, another argument is worth considering. In the global era, the tenets of unilineal assimilation are no longer relevant. Today there are clear and unequivocal advantages to being able to operate in multiple cultural codes, as anyone working in a major corporation knows. There are social, economic, cognitive, and aesthetic advantages to being able to transverse cultural spaces. Dual consciousness has its instrumental and expressive advantages. Immigrant children are posed to maximize that unique advantage. While many view their cultural—including linguistic—skills as a threat, I see them as precious assets to be cultivated.

Oscar Handlin, a renowned historian, once said the history of the United States is in fundamental respects the history of immigration.<sup>23</sup> Throughout history, U.S. citizens have ambivalently welcomed newcomers. The fear then, as now, focused on whether the immigrants would contribute to the American project. The gift of hindsight demonstrates just how essential immigration has proved to the making and remaking of the American fabric.

However, with diversity come conflict and dissent. Working through frictions in the public sphere by reasoned debate and compromise is central to the idea and practice of democracy.

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<sup>22</sup> See, for example, Glazer, Nathan and D. P. Moynihan, 1970, *Beyond the Melting Pot*. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press.

<sup>23</sup> Handlin, Oscar, 1951, *The Uprooted*. Boston: Little, Brown.