

# America 2050: Immigration and the Hourglass

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Adapting to the United States is not what it used to be. The general trend at the turn of the century was to find a blue collar job and stay within the ethnic community for the first generation. Then, the second generation gradually moved up to the supervisory jobs, and the third generation joined the middle classes. Today, the society is far more differentiated than it was at the turn of the century. You have increasingly an hour-glass economy with a lot of minimally paying low-level jobs and a lot of well-paying professional jobs. At the same time, there are greater expectations of consumption and achievement. The new immigrants are in a very real race against time to jump from the entry level jobs, pass through that narrow center of the hourglass, and reach the professional mainstream. But, increasingly, many second-generation children do not make it because of the shape of that economy. They are frustrated because they are Americans and have in a sense already assimilated the aspirations and the patterns of consumption of the society. Thus, for both parents and children, it's a one generation race to make it-- which makes it a very demanding adaptation experience.

Fortunately, the resources of the ethnic community help in different ways. They help in allowing first generation immigrants to become entrepreneurs, and through that route, place their children in a better position to climb up through the narrow center. That is the case of many Chinese, Lebanese, and Korean shop owners whose children we now see in colleges and universities.

Second, the ethnic communities offer a certain reinforcement of immigrant parental values, not least of which is the significance of hard work and achievement. In one study of the children of immigrants, we found a perfect positive relationship between homework hours and academic performance, and a perfect negative relationship between hours of TV watching and academic performance.

Third, the immigrant community can offer a safety valve for those who do not make it here by providing access to the home networks. For instance, some immigrants find a way to send their kids home to be educated when they see them in danger here. In many ways, we are witnessing more functional adaptations that combine instrumental learning of U.S. culture with strong bonds within the immigrant community.

These adaptations reflect the increasing complexity of U.S. society. Instead of a clearly dominant mainstream culture preaching certain virtues associated with a puritan ethic, we now have a number of differential lifestyles and orientations, and a number of perils along the way as well. Clearly, mass culture as diffused by the media is a double-edged sword. It is a means to get a lot of information about the rest of the world and to be entertained. But it is also often a means to foster expectations that may not be within the immediate reach of particular groups.

That gap creates processes of relative deprivation which, in turn, evolve in different directions. The native-born Americans with long experience in the country have developed different lifestyles as a way to selectively adapt to these messages and to navigate a complex society. The immigrants arrive for the most part with the belief that the streets of America are paved with gold, that they are going to make it here. What they find is a very different reality. Their fate is often problematic in terms of the resources they can bring to bear on these issues. For that reason, another concept that has been developed recently by sociologists is that of *segmented assimilation*. No longer do we have assimilation to one society; we can also have assimilation to different segments of it.

For example, there have now been several careful studies of black immigrants which have led to surprising and-- what one might call-- perverse results. In New York, for example, one finds that ultimately it is the West Indian immigrants, who are black, who become the supervisors and it is the U.S.- born blacks who are workers at the dead end. Which, when you think of it, is somewhat perverse because the native born should be the supervisors socializing the newcomers.

This awkward situation is due to an interesting concatenation of circumstances. American- born workers, whether black or white, are more aware of their rights, and they approach dead-end jobs without much possibility of promotion as just that: dead end jobs. "You pay me this little for that and I will do my work; but don't expect me to do much more than that because you are not paying me for extra work. And I want my rights, I want social security and so on, which is what an advanced society provides." And here comes a flow of immigrants who generally are more educated and more motivated because their standard of comparison is with wages received in the country of origin. For them these entry level jobs are desirable because they represent a move up. So they are willing to invest more in them and to ask fewer questions. Eventually, that dichotomy between the native- born and the foreign- born educates management into a different pattern of expectations. They begin to develop the stereotypes of the black American worker being lazier or being less motivated. And they themselves become spoiled into expecting workers to be highly motivated and do whatever they want for low pay, which they should not

be. When a supervisory position opens, guess who gets it: the good, motivated workers. This pattern further reinforces stereotypes about both the lazy American black and the greedy and inconsiderate foreigner who comes here to take our jobs.

Stereotypes feed on labels that impose a certain form of symbolic violence in the conceptualization of ethnic groups. For example, the labels Hispanic American or Asian American are often void of content from the point of view of the groups of designation. The experience of Mexican Americans in the West, a profound experience of generations of exploitation, is closer to that of black Americans in the East than to the experience of immigrants from the rest of Latin America who happen to be coming often from privileged backgrounds. So the idea of incorporating a Rodriguez in the Hispanic group because he happens to be Rodriguez is symbolic violence exercised against the individual and also against the history of the group. Similarly, to lump all Africans, Jamaicans, Haitians and so on as "black" will lead to confusions. I have argued repeatedly that the identities that count are for the most part national, because that's where individuals are rooted in a particular history.

Of course, national identities cut both ways. Thus, chauvinistic and xenophobic observers are often afraid of the new immigrants. They think that this country is falling apart, and they generate a lot of writing about the fragmentation of America. There was a book by a former governor of Colorado called by that label, *The Fragmentation of American*.

Those fears are unfounded. Most immigrant communities are very keen on making it in America and having their children make it in America. Their loyalties and ties are not set up in an adversarial sense toward the mainstream of the society. Rather, they aim to adapt better economically and socially, and in an instrumental sense, to that mainstream.

The more xenophobic commentators fail to see this process of adaptation and the role it gives to the transition between generations. The first generation may remain culturally closed and so are its ethnic communities. But because of the achievements of that first generation, members of the second generation are very often able to jump into a good college education. These second-generation kids are Americans. In our data, we find that by age fourteen children of immigrants speak English fluently, almost without exception, and about 85 percent prefer to speak English over their parental language-- even if living in the middle of an ethnic community and going to bilingual schools, as it happens in Miami. In a sense, what is at risk in the second generation is not Americanness or the English language. What is at risk is *the preservation of the parental language*, which is a resource for these kids. It would be better to speak two languages rather than one. So, some of them will go to college and

will painfully relearn the language of their parents, the very one they lost when they were children. In short, fragmentation does not happen as predicted.

Further, it is important to realize that the immigrant flow does not occur as an "invasion" from the Third World. Immigration is certainly pushed, but it is also pulled by the interests of politically influential groups within the U.S., such as growers and other employers, who have managed to keep the immigration door open *de facto*, if not *de jure*. In a sense, the nation needs to get better control of its borders and implement more orderly programs of entry but, by and large, immigration has been positive for America. The variety, the energy, the cultural diversity of the country that we see today in American cities are consequences of immigration.

The most concrete recommendation that comes from research on the new immigration is to pay attention, first, to context. If you receive people, make the contextual setting one in which they can at least swim. In many cases, people are being irresponsibly admitted when they are almost certain to drown, at least economically. The second lesson is: allow likes to be with likes. Do not be too concerned if in the first generation enclaves and communities are created here. These practices are not anti-American and they do not lead to back-door fragmentation. Rather, that is often the first step towards successful adaptation, economically and socially.

The new migrations will certainly modify the categories through which Americans see themselves and are seen by others. At the turn of the century, white natives of Northwestern European extraction used to look at Southern and Eastern Europeans as individuals of different races that would somehow change the character of the nation, pollute America, and turn it into a second-rate country. The categories at that time singled out Southern and Eastern Europeans, and there were projections that by the end of the century over half of the population would be made up of these people. Well, today nobody remembers, because they have all become "white." So the very process of adaptation to America has made the category "white" inclusive enough to accommodate both Southern and Eastern Europeans. In southern Florida and southern California today, it doesn't matter if your grandparents were Italian, Polish, or English. I think that by the year 2050, a number of descendants of current immigrant groups that are today categorized as Mestizo, Hispanic or Asian will be white as well, sociologically, and that adaptation will change the categories.

It is more difficult to guess at what will happen to black immigrants, given the very strong race lines that still exist in the country. Black immigrants confront a unique situation. They may on the one hand, put forth their own image of identity and pride in achievement or, on the other, be assimilated

into the category of American blacks which itself continues to lag behind the mainstream for a number of reasons, including prejudice.

So on the one hand, heavier Nigerian, Jamaican, Haitian immigration may modify the definition of what "blacks" are. On the other, the black migration might become segmented if confronted with negative reactions, with an elite adding to the ranks of the already existing black middle-class, and a group going into the inner cities, the underclass. Whether some blacks will become "white" or whether the cleavage will become even greater, there is no doubt that the society will change. The fate of these groups and their patterns of segmented assimilation will to a large extent determine the picture of America by 2050.

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