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**Foreigners Transformed:
International Migration and the Remaking of a Divided People¹**
by

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Richard Alba and Victor Nee, *Remaking the American Mainstream: Assimilation and Contemporary Immigration* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003)

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When it comes to the question of assimilation, the American academy and the American people no longer agree. The people and the professors earlier thought alike, both expecting that the newcomers and their descendants would abandon old country ties and habits for the ways and affiliations of the new national community that they had joined. But whereas the people continue to believe in the old-time religion, the professors have changed their minds. Conceptually, they find that assimilation lacks appeal, mainly because it has almost always overlapped with the ideology and practices it should have analyzed – namely assimilationism. Empirically, the scholars conclude that theory and reality diverge, with the very best that can be said for assimilation is that it did a good job of predicting the past. The professors generally do concede that the descendants of the Italian, Polish, and other mass migrations of the turn of the 20th century have now climbed to the higher reaches of American society, leaving behind their ethnic attachments. But that was then, this is now: conditions at the turn of the 21st

century, at least as the professors see them, make it unlikely that the immigrant past will be prologue to the immigrant future about to unfold.

In the new view, associated with the hypothesis of “segmented assimilation” propounded by Alejandro Portes, Ruben Rumbaut, and Min Zhou, today’s reality is far less forgiving of any problems that the immigrants might import or encounter.² The newcomers of the last age of mass migration may not have found favor with the elites of the time, but this was just a passing phenomenon: in the end, what mattered is that both newcomers and oldtimers were white. Today’s migrants, however, originating from everywhere but Europe and visibly distinctive, enter a mainly white society still not cured of its racist afflictions.

As these scholars see it, getting ahead for these new Americans of color will not be easy. Back then, the children of peasant migrants could drop out of high school and move on to well-paying, secure, blue-collar factory jobs; the progression from peddler to plumber to professor could wait for the third generation. There’s little such hope today. While the immigrant parents arrive willing to do the jobs that natives won’t hold, the children want more; unfortunately, the steady shrinkage of well-paid, blue-collar jobs makes incremental improvement hard. Immigrant children *could* acquire the advanced degrees needed to move into the professional/managerial elite. However, the experience

¹ Thanks to David Fitzgerald, Nancy Foner, Jennifer Lee, David Lopez, Joel Perlmann, Edward Telles, Andreas Wimmer, and especially Khachig Tololyan, for their critical and probing comments on earlier drafts of this paper.

² Alejandro Portes and Min Zhou, "The New Second Generation: Segmented Assimilation and its Variants among Post-1965 Immigrant Youth," *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, No. 530: 74-96, 1993.; Min Zhou and Carl Bankston, III. *Growing Up American*. New York: Russell Sage Foundation: 1997; Alejandro Portes and Ruben Rumbaut. *Legacies*. Berkeley: U. California Press: 2001..

of growing up as stigmatized strangers lead the new Americans to act in ways that imperil success, and all the more so since they often hang around with the wrong crowd – namely, the native-born minorities who supposedly think that doing well in school is a synonym for “acting white” For that reason, the proponents of segmented assimilation tell us that it’s time to start worrying about a “rainbow underclass” of the dispossessed, its ranks swollen by an infusion of first and particularly, second generation Americans.³

To be sure, the advocates of segmented assimilation will note that not all immigrants begin at the bottom. Indeed, the fact that so many of today’s newcomers arrive with skills that let them start right in the middle-class means that assimilation is not so much dead as very different from the past. On the other hand, these middle-class immigrants have arrived in an America where the pressure to melt has declined, replaced by a new set of incentives to retain and burnish ethnic ties. While some of the newest ethnics will undoubtedly vanish from the fold, globalization will make it impossible for the U.S. to cut itself off at the water’s edge. Consequently, the contemporary scene is one of continuing linkages between “here” and “there”, which is why the diasporic or transnational idea has such appeal to scholars and ethnics alike. If one can build a life in two places, then there’s every reason to assume that assimilation – as both concept and reality – belongs to yesterday’s world, not today’s.

So goes the conventional wisdom. But as argued by Richard Alba and Victor Nee in their important new book, *Remaking the American Mainstream: Assimilation and Contemporary Immigration*, it simply isn’t so. As concept, the authors contend, assimilation retains its social scientific validity. And more importantly, assimilation is

² Alejandro Portes and Ruben Rumbaut, *Legacies* p. 45 and *passim*.

the right way to understand the immigrant experience in America – whether at the turn of the 20th or the 21st centuries.

As reviewer, I need to tell you that I was there at the beginning: namely, a 1996 conference at which Alba and Nee presented the paper that would eventually evolve into this book. It was then my view that this was one of the few conference papers that absolutely called out for development into a book; as best I recall, most other participants reacted exactly the same way. While waiting for the authors to complete the task, I made sure that all my students, whether in undergraduate or graduate classes, read the conference paper's published version – which quickly became a classic. Somewhat later, when the publisher asked me to review the completed manuscript, I delivered the following assessment:

Alba and Nee have accomplished a *tour de force*. They have an important story to tell and they've told it with great verve and skill, using prose that will allow the book to be widely read. I predict many course adoptions (it's already on my reading list), considerable media attention, and high profile reviews – though some are bound to be critical, for all the obvious reasons. I am delighted to recommend this book for publication, and I do so enthusiastically, and without any reservations whatsoever.

My blurb (drawn from the quote above) appears as an endorsement on the back of *Remaking the American Mainstream*; I assign the book (in hardcover!) to my graduate *and* undergraduate classes; and I tell everyone who inquires, that it is a must read.

But *Rethinking* is also a book with which I almost entirely disagree. Admiring the authors' achievement – I certainly wish that I had possessed the foresight to attack so big

a question in such forthright a way – I can accept neither their approach nor their conclusions. In the end, their quest for a sociology of assimilation shorn of assimilationism strikes me as unsuccessful, most importantly, because their key concept – the mainstream – is not a detached, analytical tool, but rather an ideological weapon, part of the conflict over “who is what.” By emphasizing assimilation into the “mainstream,” moreover, Alba and Nee obscure both the transformation of foreigners into Americans and the contradictions of that process. While the foreigners and their descendants willingly, and often eagerly, become Americans, in so doing they just replace one particularism with another. Paradoxically, they often also fall back on attachments to people of their own kind, largely because the so-called mainstreamers fail to live up to the promises of their own American creed.

These complaints notwithstanding, I unambiguously consider *Remaking* to be required reading. Let me first tell you why you need to buy this book and then detail why dissent with the authors’ approach and their assessment of the situation on the ground is also in order.

The Case for Assimilation

Alba and Nee’s quest is at once theoretical and empirical: to rehabilitate the concept of assimilation; and then to show that, of all the intellectual options, it best illuminates the reality to which it refers. While willing to take on the challenge posed them by the conventional wisdom – that today and yesterday fundamentally diverge – they don’t begin with the assumption that history is bunk.

The authors concede that the concept of assimilation suffers from a slightly checkered past. At mid-20th century, for example, the influential

sociologist/anthropologist Lloyd Warner conflated analysis and prescription, confusing a detached analysis of changes in ethnic affiliations and identities with normative expectations of how immigrants and their descendants ought to change.⁴ Writing later, Milton Gordon did somewhat better, portraying a variegated American ethnic order, whose pluralism he fundamentally approved.⁵ But as Gordon never went beyond his well known distinction between acculturation – denoting a change in way of life – and structural assimilation – referring to a shift in social relations –he simply provided a typology of assimilation and its components, not a theory. In formulating the concept of “acculturation” Gordon also took the point of view of the dominants – namely, that they were the Americans and theirs the core culture, leaving all the others as “ethnics” destined to internalize the outlook and way of life of their betters.

If the career of this concept leaves something to be desired, it is also the case that no concept has always been well-used. And as Alba and Nee contend, one can productively build on the earlier work, by staying clear of its penchant for assimilationism, refining an approach that keeps one above the fray.

Assimilation retains value if it refers to the process of change, the authors maintain; the earlier literature notwithstanding, one need not identify assimilation as an end-state. For the authors, assimilation involves “the decline of an ethnic distinction and its corollary cultural and social differences (14).” What matters is the boundary between the mainstream and the outsiders and the way in which that boundary evolves.

⁴ W. Lloyd Warner and Leo Srole, *The Social Systems of American Ethnic Groups*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1945.

⁵ Milton Myron Gordon. *Assimilation in American life: the role of race, religion, and national origins*. New York, Oxford University Press: 1964.

Boundaries can be crossed by *individuals* who can effectively transfer attachments from one group to another; *group* boundaries can also blur and eventually shift. In the first instance – as for example, when persons of Irish, Polish, and Italian backgrounds developed overlapping social circles on the job, in the neighborhood, and in the union hall – group boundaries get blurred. In the second – when persons of English ancestry are more or less indifferent to the ancestry of their partners, providing they originate from Europe – group boundaries have shifted. Either way, values, symbolic attachments, and cultural practices flow both ways.

Moreover, in the contemporary United States, there is no ur-American group in to which the outsiders must melt. Assimilation, contend the authors, involves inclusion into the American “mainstream”. The concept of the “mainstream” is a bit fuzzy, as the authors themselves concede (12). But for their purposes, the idea is perfectly serviceable: the “mainstream is that part of society *within* which ethnic and racial differences” have but a modest impact on obtaining the good things in life (12). Moreover, the mainstream is itself in process, transformed by the infusion of earlier groups of outsiders. Though the newcomers and their descendants loosen and lose their ethnic attachments through assimilation, they simultaneously transform the mainstream itself.

But definitional matters only get one so far: why do ethnic differences decline? And why do any remaining distinctions make less of a difference? In briefest compass, the authors argue that assimilation is propelled by three mechanisms: the purposive actions of immigrants; the role of social networks; and institutional responses. The first point, in a way, is the most fundamental: immigration is motivated by the search for the better life. That quest usually has no inherent relationship to assimilation. Only in some

instances is assimilation self-consciously embraced; often, it is precisely the end that the immigrants wish to *avoid*. Nonetheless, the effort to secure a better future – find a better job, a safer neighborhood, a higher quality school – confronts immigrants with the need to choose between strategies of an “ethnic” or “mainstream” sort. Insofar as the better future is found in a place where out-group contacts are more plentiful than in the neighborhoods or workplaces where the newcomers begin, the new Americans are likely to select “mainstream strategies” – and thereby progress toward assimilation, whether wanted or not.

Social networks also matter, as they provide the collective resources needed to both get started and advance when later faced with obstacles imposed by established groups. More important, however, are institutional responses, which can either block acceptance – and thereby motivate continued adhesion to the group – or promote acceptance – and thereby encourage immigrants and their descendants to enter social structures of progressively greater ethnic diversity. In Alba and Nee’s view, change in the latter mechanisms distinguishes today’s immigrant world from yesterday’s: on the one hand, racism, and its associated ways of thinking and feeling, has lost legitimacy; on the other hand, discrimination on the basis of racial or ethnic origins has been prohibited, to very significant effect. Most significant is the change in the “*formal rules of state organizations* (53; italics in the original):” the “institutional mechanisms extending civil rights to minorities and women have increased the cost of discrimination...in non-trivial ways (57).” While today’s immigrants don’t come from the same places as yesterday’s, the impact of national or ethnic origins is contingent and variable, which is why they don’t determine destinies. “Race in American society has not really lost its bedrock

importance,” contend the authors; nonetheless, it “has become much more complex and differentiated as a result of institutional change.” (59)

Equipped with a fully-fleshed out, original conceptualization Alba and Nee then proceed to demonstrate the relevance of the experience of earlier, European- and Asian-origin groups. Reviewing the evidence on intermarriage, residential segregation, linguistic change, they put to rest any doubts that might have lingered regarding the assimilation of the so-called “unmeltable ethnics:” while a residue of the ethnic affiliations and particularities from the previous turn of the century can still be found, erosion is well advanced. Among younger people of Italian or Polish background, there is almost always an ancestor of some other background to be found. Even American Jews, who long resisted assimilation have now succumbed to its siren song, outmarrying at such high rates that, for all practical purposes, almost every Jew has a non-Jewish relative. And as the same thing can be said for the Japanese Americans, among whom the inter-marriage rate appears higher than among the Jews, there is every reason to think that America’s ethnic past and future are not as different as conventional wisdom insist.

If the past is indeed prologue, we need to understand why things turned out as they did. The authors set out on that goal, but find it a bit elusive, in part, because the descendants of the last mass migration made it during a period when social scientists had largely lost interest in their fate. For that reason, they note that the contemporary student “can only speculate about how the bulk of the group got from here to there (124).” Nonetheless, the authors’ reading of the available evidence leads them to conclude that social mobility did much of the trick. As the expansion of the American economy pulled immigrants and their descendants up from the bottom, they moved out of ethnic niches in

the economy; simultaneously, they abandoned inner city ethnic neighborhoods for more diverse suburban settings. Associated changes in the cultural landscape helped: as America came to define itself as a nation of immigrants – in part, thanks to the nation-building efforts encouraged by the two world wars – ethnic difference became a matter of reduced import. Institutional resistance to acceptance also lessened, in part because the European ethnics had the power to force institutional change, in part, because the emerging civil rights era contributed to a lessening of ethnic exclusions of all sorts.

With an account of the earlier experience in hand, Alba and Nee then do a still more convincing job of dispensing with the various arguments that insist on the irrelevance of history. Whereas the conventional social science wisdom argues that today and yesterday fundamentally diverge – contemporary immigration will persist; today's newcomers are racially distinctive; the economy's structure impedes upward mobility; thanks to multiculturalism, ethnicity is a more important factor than before – Alba and Nee systematically assess each of these possibilities and show that they fall short.

Rather, they contend that the

...forces promoting assimilation are well entrenched in the American social order, despite all the historical contingencies that must be aligned in order to explain how assimilation has come about. Above all, these forces appear to be concentrated in the ways that the structure of opportunities more or less *compels* the American-born descendants of European and Asian immigrants to *choose* between the optimum range of mobility chances, on the one hand, and strong attachment to an ethnic community and its culture, on the other (125; emphasis added).

From this point on, Alba and Nee focus on today's unfolding reality. They provide a capsule summary of recent immigrant history and of the migration experience of the major immigrant groups. They then review the evidence pertaining to contemporary patterns of assimilation and acculturation, masterfully synthesizing a vast array of data regarding language, social relations, economic attainment, education, and residential patterns. They draw a portrait of extensive assimilation in many domains:

- In language, for example, the shift to English is widespread; the great majority of most groups have become English monolinguals by the third generation. Even among Mexicans, the largest group and the only one living in close proximity to the home territory, the same basic pattern applies, albeit not quite as pervasively.
- Residential patterns show moderate levels of segregation, fall well below the levels of black/white segregation, and have failed to rise over the past decade, despite the huge increases in foreign-born numbers. As incomes and English-language facility improve, moreover, Latinos and Asians move from areas of higher to lower ethnic densities, a shift that yields an improvement in neighborhood amenities;
- Although ethnic economic clusters – variously thought of as enclaves or niches – have expanded as immigration has grown, they mainly serve as points of transition. Among the first generation, those who can, head off into the “mainstream” economy; as for the immigrants’ children, the concentrations established by their parents – whether as small business owners or simple workers – appear to have little attraction.

However, the view is never one-dimensional: the authors are at pains to note significant variations among groups. The authors do emphasize the socio-economic diversity of today's foreign-born population underscoring the large proportion of highly educated newcomers with children who are more successful still. Employing popular social science terminology, the authors make much of the different "forms of capital" – human, cultural, social, and family – on which immigrants can draw. As the different forms of capital often cluster together, the many newcomers who arrive with high levels of human capital have other resources which they can mobilize – speeding their progress toward assimilation.

Alba and Nee are also never Panglossian: they worry about the prospects for the relatively large population of low-skilled immigrants and their descendants. They observe that many of these immigrants are living in that legal twilight zone of unauthorized status, left alone to work, but not given the green light to put down roots. They readily admit that the future is uncertain, especially as the mass migrants of the turn of the 20th century never lived under the shadow of illegality. But they insist that even for the least skilled there are many indicators of advancement, and far more so, than the prevailing pessimistic wisdom would allow. Thus, contrary to claims that the children of today's labor migrants are slated for "downward assimilation" into tomorrow's "rainbow underclass," Alba and Nee show that even the offspring of the least fortunate new Americans appear to be headed on an upward path. Likewise, their review of the Mexican and Mexican-American experience – assimilation's acid test case, given this group's history, size, and relatively low class standing – repeatedly shows that the move

up from the bottom is not only possible, but inevitably yields a more diversified set of ethnic relations in its wake.

Assimilation in Question

From my perspective and for my taste, this book is an unquestioned accomplishment. The authors are deeply knowledgeable; they take historical questions seriously; they are steeped in the intellectual history of the field; their key sources cut across the disciplines and the usual methodological divides; they distill an extraordinary amount of information into clear, unadorned prose.

So, what's not to like?

Assimilation without assimilationism? The authors appropriately aspire to a theory of assimilation shorn of the normative and prescriptive aspects that have led previous efforts to fall into disrepute. The goal is worthy, but I'm not convinced that it has been attained.

The relationship between origins and destinies is the key issue at hand: do origins – proximate or distant – in a foreign land affect the “life chances” of the varying peoples of the United States? The question is inherently interesting, but I doubt that it would have been pursued with such intensity were it not for the normative and political issues at stake. In theory, a self-consciously liberal society, like the United States, couldn't tolerate a tight linkage between ethnic origins and destinies. The reality has proven otherwise: the American version of liberalism was never quite as thorough-going as it claimed, a failing that produced the American dilemma.

By this reasoning, one might expect assimilation to be another word for the American creed. The authors, however, have something quite different in mind.

Although they define assimilation as “the decline of an ethnic distinction,” what they really mean is its transmutation. For the authors, assimilation takes “minority individuals and groups” and brings them into the mainstream. However, it does so *without erasing* the boundary between the mainstream and that never named part of society where “ethnic and racial origins” are “powerful determinants of opportunities (13)”. But in conceding that ethnic and racial origins can matter, one wonders whether the authors haven’t constructed their own trap. Just as there is no minority without a majority, there can be no mainstream without a sidestream – either way, one is as ethnic as the next. One can readily agree that the sidestreamers are prepared to abandon ethnic “strategies” in order to seek out the good life. Yet if the sidestreamers are ready to let go, why do ethnic and racial origins still matter and who makes it so?

The authors don’t ever answer this question, perhaps because their framework never allows it to arise. While they define assimilation as the reduction of an ethnic difference, they never explain why the issue should be framed in just these terms. The answer isn’t really self-evident. Were we talking about social class, we would naturally be interested in the production and reproduction of class difference, and *not just its reduction*. Moreover, one would also assume that class differences, like them or not, are normal, though often changing in magnitude and impact. One doesn’t know why ethnic matters should be so distinctive from class, unless the former were an unexpected deviation from the normal condition of things – that is to say, an ethnically homogeneous people fully contained within their own state.

The problem, for a sociology of assimilation hoping to go beyond assimilationism, is that the man and woman in the street might hold exactly hold the same

point of view – namely, that people in the state and of the state should be one and the same. While the people of the state know that they are Americans, and not just any- or every-one, that particularism suddenly disappears when the contrast extends to the people in the state who just so happen to come from outside the state’s bounds: the foreigners and their descendants are “ethnics”, not the Americans or the mainstreamers. Moreover, emphasizing the reduction of the differences supposedly imported by the immigrants, also suits the insiders’ convenience, as it shifts the focus to *them*, as opposed to *us*. But shouldn’t a sociology seeking critical distance from the local point of view note that it is usually the nationals who hire, and indeed, sometimes actively recruit, the immigrants, and not the other way around? Likewise, shouldn’t a detached analysis pay more attention to the discrepancy between what nationals say and what they do. Yes, the nationals believe in a bounded community, in which foreign distinctions are erased. In practice, however, the nationals of the United States do seem to prefer markets to community, opting for foreign workers (not to speak of foreign-made things!) whenever they get a chance, all the while wondering why the world doesn’t stop at the water’s edge. Put somewhat differently, one can’t help but detect overlap between local views and the sociological perspective developed by Alba and Nee: for both, ethnic differences are fundamentally imported by the foreigners whose intrusions disrupt what would otherwise be an integrated whole. But if the sociological and the local views converge, then the former may be not so much a theory, as a part of the process itself.

The “people” and the “mainstream”: “What is the American...?”, asked Crèvecoeur, in his *Letters from an American Farmer*, more than two centuries ago. Alba and Nee duly quote the famous Frenchman, but then leave the question behind. By

focusing on the “remaking of the mainstream,” the Americanization of the immigrants and their descendants becomes the story untold.

As concept, “mainstream” is central to the entire book; as best I can tell, it is also an innovation, absent from the earlier authors to whom reference is always made. In retrospect, a prognosis of assimilation into a mainstream was one that neither Lloyd Warner, nor Milton Gordon, nor even Nathan Glazer and Daniel Patrick Moynihan could have forecast, as nothing even resembling a “mainstream” then existed. Descendants of the founding immigrant groups dominated, not only during the last era of mass migration, but well beyond it: as the dominants saw it, *they* were the Americans, and as long as they defined the situation, there was no mainstream into which any one could join. Thus, the earlier authors depicted an America far closer to ethnic pluralism than the situation dissected by Alba and Nee. As Glazer and Moynihan famously put it, “the point about the melting pot is that it never happened.” Even the “triple melting pot” of Will Herberg and Ruby Jo Reeves Kennedy entailed far more rigid divisions than the blurred boundaries identified by Alba and Nee.⁶ And though generally classified as an assimilationist, Gordon’s saw ethnic boundaries as remaining hard and fast; his book provided little hint of the rapidity with which “structural assimilation” was to unfold in the immediate decades to come.

But ethnic realities are no longer the same: the civil rights revolution enlarged the boundaries of “we, the people.” The citizens of the United States are all Americans now, ethnic and national origins notwithstanding. Of course, practice diverges from principle;

⁶ Will Herberg, *Protestant-Catholic-Jew: An Essay in American Religious Sociology*, Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1956; Ruby Jo Reeves Kennedy, “Single or Triple Melting

as Alba and Nee note, ethnic and racial origins still matter. But they matter in a way different from before: America and American identity are no longer the undisputed property of a self-proclaimed, founding immigrant group.

So if America is too porous and too mutable to be captured by a differentialist vision, in which ethnic boundaries are depicted as rigid and little changing, as we understand them to have been 100 or even 50 years ago, a new concept is needed. But it is not clear to me that “mainstream” serves us well. To be sure, it is a good, old-fashioned, English word. The dictionary, however, provides little hint of the usage employed by Alba and Nee: e.g., “The principal stream or current (of a river, etc.);” the prevailing trend of opinion, fashion, society, etc.; “a stream or class for pupils without special needs.” In scholarship, the concept’s standing and definition is at best unclear. An article search in the JSTOR data base produced only 17 publications in Sociology, Anthropology, and History in which the term “mainstream” appeared in the title. Upon inspection, the authors almost always used the concept for contrastive purposes (“marginal v. mainstream”)⁷, employing the term to refer to groups or identities or practices that are seen as “nonproblematic.”⁸ But, as noted by the southern historian, George Tindall in a 1974 article entitled “Beyond the Mainstream: The Ethnic

Pot? Intermarriage Trends in New Haven, 1870-1940, *American Journal of Sociology*, V 49 (1944)

⁷ See Amy L. Hequembourg; Michael P. Farrell, “Lesbian Motherhood: Negotiating Mainstream-Marginal Identities,” *Gender and Society*, Vol. 13, No. 4. (Aug., 1999), pp. 540-557

⁸ Cf Myra Marx Ferree and Elaine J. Hall, who define “mainstream sociology” as “the sociology that teachers, students, and textbook publishers have treated as nonproblematic.” See “Rethinking Stratification from a Feminist Perspective: Gender, Race, and Class in Mainstream Textbooks,” *American Sociological Review*, Vol. 61, No. 6. (Dec., 1996), p 929 and 930-1.

Southerners,” the identity of the parties labeled “mainstream” and “distinctive” is anything but sure, with the northern mainstream, not the south, vanishing during the turbulence of the times.⁹ Thus, if the “non-problematic” status of the “mainstream” simply lies in the eye of the beholder, scholarly usage leaves us lost in circularity – wondering just who insists that the “mainstream” is nonproblematic, and for whom that might be so.

A look at popular usage doesn’t help. Yes, the phrase is in currency in ways that resonate with Alba and Nee. An examination of media usage – for example, 135 headlines from newspapers in the northeastern United States, found in a Nexis-Lexis search -- turned up numerous examples from 2004 that echo this book: for instance, a Boston Globe article on “How Spaghetti And Meatballs Went From Ethnic To Mainstream.”¹⁰ Yet general practice may be precisely the problem. As do the scholars, the media gives the mainstream an exclusive connotation, implying center, as opposed to retro or avant-garde, not to speak of left and right. More problematically, public conflict actually pivots on the question of who is to be found in the mainstream and where it is located. For example, when exit polls from the 2004 Presidential elections revealed that a substantial portion of voters were motivated by a concern with values, conservative groups used these data “to make a case that mainstream America agrees with the conservative agenda that Mr. Bush now claims a mandate to enact,” as noted by the *New*

⁹ Geroge Tindall, “Beyond the Mainstream: The Ethnic Southerners,” *The Journal of Southern History*, V 40, 1: 3-18

¹⁰ Sheryl Julian and Julie Riven, “Italian-American Pride How Spaghetti And Meatballs Went From Ethnic To Mainstream,” *Boston Globe*, October 24, 2004, P. 58; http://web.lexis-nexis.com/universe/document?_m=1c1bd86895ac2da5e395c3fed886eaab&_docnum=2&wchp=dGLbVzz-zSkVb&_md5=9f41dd120e53a488c349739805f8622c

York Times.¹¹ Consequently, it's hard not to conclude that the term is really a weapon, an ideological tool that insiders and outsiders use to struggle over who is what – which is precisely why it has to be considered as part of the process that gets studied, and not an analytic concept itself.

In this light, it can be no surprise that Alba and Nee never succeed in clarifying what the mainstream might actually be. As suggested above, the American mainstream and the American people would seem necessarily distinctive, but the authors don't always see it that way. Alba and Nee endorse the view of the Chicago sociologists, who envisioned a “diverse mainstream *society*” made up of different ethnic and racial groups who nonetheless develop “a common culture that enables them to sustain a common *national* existence (10; emphases added).”¹² However, a national people and a mainstream society can't be one and the same thing: while we – or are all members of the people, not all of us can belong to its mainstream. As Alba and Nee note, the mainstream refers to only “a *part* of society”: that in “which ethnic and racial origins have at most minor impacts on life chances and opportunities (11).”

But this definition does little more than frame the issue from the standpoint of the dominant group itself. It is all well and good to say that assimilation occurs when the mainstream offers acceptance. Doesn't it also follow that it's precisely the

¹¹ Jim Rutenberg, “Poll Question Stirs Debate On Meaning Of 'Values'”, New York Times, November 6, 2004 Saturday, A6, 13; http://web.lexis-nexis.com/universe/document?_m=f45c0b511dc6ad255599328bb03a637a&_docnum=212&wchp=dGLbVzz-zSkVb&_md5=4ea2ace86c31656cec9a2e50aeced2db

¹² Quoting from Robert Park, the authors note that he applied the concept of social assimilation to “the process or processes by which peoples of diverse racial origins and different cultural heritages, occupying a common territory, achieve a cultural solidarity sufficient at least to sustain a national existence (Alba and Nee, 19-20).”

mainstreamers who ensure that ethnic and racial origins have more than minor impacts on the life chances of those who haven't yet been brought into mainstream ranks? If assimilation fundamentally entails boundary spanning and altering (59), as Alba and Nee contend, explaining just why and how the mainstream is bounded, and persistently so, would seem the order of the day. And that task is all the more important if not just internal, but the external boundaries distinguishing the Americans from the other peoples of the world eager to move to the United States, prove to be interconnected. If there's no mainstream without a sidestream, then some fully-fledged Americans are not considered part of the club. Moreover, the mainstream is intent on maintaining not one, but *two* sets of boundaries: those that separate the United States from the rest of the world; and also those that distinguish the Americans from those foreigners improperly resident on U.S. soil.

As it happens, the various groups of the excluded are often overlapping. When California's Anglos, for example, decide that a driver's license is too fine a privilege for the likes of the state's undocumented immigrants – let them take the bus! – the Mexican-American sidestreamers understandably conclude that the message is targeted at them as well. Likewise, the mainstreamers who indulge their addiction for unauthorized immigrant workers while adamantly opposing the idea of legalization, let alone meaningful sanctions against the employers of illegal immigrants, are also keeping the American sidestreamers on the wrong side of the ethnic boundary. Because stigma attaches to the many former illegals, not to speak of those who may be connected to immigrant friends, relatives, or neighbors who don't yet or, even worse, may never enjoy legal status, the mainstream has effectively put itself out of reach.

Moreover, it's the distinctively American – not mainstream -- dream that excites the immigrant imagination. The United States is the self-proclaimed civic nation – where membership is available to all who wish to commit: is it any wonder that many foreigners find an appeal that's hard to resist? The problem is that immigrant and American dreams don't always converge, largely because the Americans have constructed nationhood in terms that have been both *externally* and *internally* contrastive, excluding not just aliens but also the outsiders – most notably, African Americans -- found within the territory of the state. While the combination of internal and external contrasts has parallels elsewhere, the political circumstances under which those contrasts developed have been unique. Only in the United States have ethnocultural understandings of the American people been so firmly rooted in political and social life and yet simultaneously so deeply in conflict with the fundamentally liberal principles to which that same people was committed. Moreover, the very creed which the ethnic majority has violated – namely, that the United States is a nation where membership is available to all who wish to commit – is precisely what outsiders, whether originating from within the territory of the United States, or from outside -- have found attractive. As the ethnic outsiders of the United States have mainly understood themselves as Americans, *not* as separate nations, the relationship between “majority” and “minority” Americans has been one of contention over the terms of inclusion in the people, *not* national autonomy or the rights of secession.

Thus, both the boundaries of the dominant group, as well as its claim to represent the “mainstream”, have always been a matter of conflict. While foreigners arrive thinking that they are not worthy of equal treatment, their American born or raised

children quickly pick up the idea that they are no less deserving than anyone else. And it's not just the immigrants or their children who buy into the democratic vision of an America as a consensual nation, open to *all* the peoples of the United States; the African-American struggle for full inclusion has been inspired by the very same ideal. Has there ever been anything more mainstream than the civil rights movement or, for that matter, the wish to be treated as a person like any other, and never have to worry that about the possibility of getting arrested for "driving while black"?

Not only has the dominant group has maintained a narrower, more constricted understanding of the American people than the view to which the sidestreamers adhere; the possibility that a mainstream culture represents what's recognizably American doesn't seem very different from the self-conceit of the dominant group itself. That perspective surely isn't shared by the sidestreamers, who have always seen membership in both the minority and the American people as fully compatible. Though few Americans were then ready to listen, DuBois was proclaiming his fundamental twoness – "an American, a Negro" -- more than 100 years ago.¹³ The same point was recently made by Colin Powell, who, in discussing the issue of race and American society in his autobiography wrote that "My blackness has been a source of pride, strength and inspiration, and so has my being an American"¹⁴. And let me also remind the reader of the question posed by Ralph Ellison years ago: "Imagine what the United States would have been..had there been no blacks to give it – if I may dare to say so – color?" As

¹³ W.E.B. DuBois, *The souls of black folk: authoritative texts, context, criticism*, ed. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. and Terri Hulme Oliver (New York: W.W. Norton, 1999).

¹⁴ Colin Powell (with Joseph Persico), *My American Journey*, New York : Random House, 1995, pp. 534-35.

Ellison bluntly concluded, there would have been “nothing recognizably American.”¹⁵

Put somewhat differently, the culture of the Americans and that of its self-proclaimed mainstreamers are not exactly the same thing.

For that reason, the neat linear progression of stages predicted by assimilation theory doesn't hold. Immigration is a transitional phenomenon, in which immigrants slowly give up the attachments that rooted them to their earlier lives. At the outset, immigrants begin with a "dual frame of reference," judging conditions “here” in light of the standards that prevail back “home,” to which they often expect to return. Over time, however, “here” replaces “there” as the standard for judging success, the perspective changes. While the foreign-born may consent to circumstances that natives cannot accept, the children almost always want more, having been exposed to different wage, consumption, and behavioral norms right from the start. Therefore, the causes of second generation revolt go beyond the strictly material: economic disparities are objectionable because the immigrant children perceive the gap separating them from the mainstream through *distinctively American justice frames*. Ironically, it is the Americanization of the sidestreamers that also produces their ethnicization: expecting to get ahead on their own, the foreigners and their descendants fall back on their own kind when it turns out that the mainstreamers don't live up to the promises of acceptance that they claim to profess.

In the end, it's thanks to the American creed – and *not* the particularistic culture of the mainstream – that Americanization has repeatedly proven a smashing success.

Consequently, the change described by Alba and Nee as the “decline of an ethnic

¹⁵ Ralph Ellison, *Going to the Territory*, New York: Random House, 1986, p. 108; quoted in Dean E. Robinson, *Black Nationalism in American Politics and Thought*, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001, p. 115.

difference” also transforms foreigners and turns them into Americans. The *making of a national difference distinguishing the Americans from the other peoples of the world* is an outcome that necessarily disappears when one only looks at the “mainstream.” It can’t, however, be denied.

Politics: If Alba and Nee depart from earlier scholars in emphasizing the possibilities for assimilation into the “mainstream,” they keep company with their predecessors in understanding the phenomenon in purely socio-cultural terms. For earlier thinkers, immigrants and their descendants were social outsiders, which in turn provided their distinguishing trait. Thus, the people from abroad and their descendants could be compared with social outsiders of a somewhat different sort, as announced by Irving Kristol (1966) in his famous article entitled “The Negro of Today is Like the Immigrant of Yesterday.”¹⁶ Kristol was hardly alone. As Nathan Glazer noted in his 1969 introduction to the second edition of *Beyond the Melting Pot*, he and Moynihan had assumed that “Negroes and Puerto Ricans could be seen as the latest of the series of major ethnic groups that had....come as *immigrants* (emphasis added).”¹⁷ Similarly, Milton Gordon applied the same assimilation scheme to Italians, Jews, Negroes, and Mexicans, providing further indication that the scholarly authorities of the time understood these as minorities of a similar, if not necessarily, the same type.

¹⁶ Irving Kristol, “The Negro of Today is like the Immigrant of Yesterday,” in Peter I. Rose, ed. *Nation of Nations: The Ethnic Experience and the Racial Crisis.*, New York: Random House, 1972; Kristol’s essay originally appeared in the *New York Times Magazine* in 1966.

¹⁷Nathan Glazer and Daniel P. Moynihan, *Beyond the Melting Pot*, Cambridge: MIT Press, 2nd edition, 1969: xiii.

Of course, these earlier writers also thought that as all groups had begun on the bottom, it followed that African-Americans, like the European immigrants, would gradually move ahead – a contention with which Alba and Nee clearly disagree. But like their predecessors, they take little note of the distinctively political nature of international migration, let alone the ways in which the politics of migration control and citizenship affect the would-be new Americans and the options that they can pursue.

Population movement across state boundaries is an inherently *political* matter, as it threatens to sever the alignment of territory, political institutions, and society that states try to create and in which nationals so fervently believe. *States* make migrations international: implementing controls at internal as well as external levels, they regulate both movement across territorial borders and membership in the national collectivity as well as. Because they occur in a world carved up by nation-states, contemporary migrations are both international and political in ways that were simply not true before.

Thus contrary to Alba and Nee’s updated sociology of assimilation, the internal boundaries among persons living in the contemporary United States aren’t simply defined by “social and cultural differences” of purely local provenance. Instead, the crucial categorical memberships derive from the political organization of the contemporary migration regime – as is true throughout the rich states of the north. After all, the categories of “asylee”, “refugee, ” “non-immigrant resident,” and “naturalized citizen,” refer to traits that are administrative, can only be understood within the contexts of the state system, and are more or less interchangeable from one state to another. They are transparently *not* properties of persons – no one is a born a refugee – and therefore bear no relationship to either “race” or “ethnicity” as conventionally defined. In its majesty,

moreover, the law also makes no distinctions among foreigners of different ethnic backgrounds: they all have to line up at the immigration office at the earliest hour of the morning and convince the immigration bureaucrat that no, it's not a sham marriage, I really love my spouse, and not just because she or he was born in this country!

Political exclusions at external and internal levels have also proven inextricably intertwined. Seeking to restrict immigration, the rich states of the north have all created the "illegal immigrant," a new class of person never seen during the earlier age of mass migration. Likewise, the failure to successfully restrict illegal immigration has made for ever greater efforts at reserving public goods for members of the club, distinguishing between bona fide members and excluded persons, who nonetheless live on the national soil, and policing those boundaries with ever intensifying effort. As to the American mainstream, it seems more intent on enforcing external borders with a vigilance never seen before: having long cast a blind eye at unauthorized crossings of the border – no matter how many times – it now sees such crossings as grounds for permanent exclusion from the United States. Consequently, many of today's unauthorized border crossers have migration histories that make them ineligible for permanent residence: though living on U.S. soil, one can only describe them as aliens, not immigrants.

Moreover, even foreigners legally resident and interested in life-long settlement aren't guaranteed membership in the club of the privileged peoples; instead, citizenship is carefully rationed. As the size of America's foreign-born population has grown, the proportion obtaining citizenship has declined, and failed efforts at naturalizing have become ever more common. Consequently, America, like many of the other immigrant-receiving rich democracies, includes far more people with no effective say than

democratic theory would allow. One hesitates to compare Los Angeles with the Athens of antiquity, but as democracies the two may have more in common than one usually thinks. In neither case does one find electorate and population to be one and the same. While southern California may be the epicenter of immigrant America, for the moment, it is native white voters – usually with no children in the household – who make policy. Is it little wonder that a state ranking tenth in per capita income ranks twenty-fourth in school expenditure for child? And is one to really suppose that policies of this sort have only a minor impact on the life chances of the foreigners' children, otherwise known as the newest Americans?

Moreover, it is precisely the political nature of the contemporary migration regime that accounts for much of the success celebrated by Alba and Nee. Unlike the mass migrations of the turn of the 20th century, today's are increasingly and deliberately chosen; the selection criterion is one that makes it harder for the undesirables to get in. At the turn of the 21st century, the rich democracies have decided to let market considerations weaken earlier ethnicized understandings of the national community, which is why they are all on the look-out for skilled workers, place of birth notwithstanding. Self-interest shouldn't be confused with liberalism: were it otherwise, refugees, not foreign-born professionals, would be flocking to the United States in growing numbers. One can certainly say, as do Alba and Nee, that the high levels of human and social capital found among professional migrants explain why the latter have so rapidly entered the "mainstream," but any such argument is tautological. By definition, states seeking professional immigrants will get persons with the high level skills that place them in the middle class right at the very start; likewise, one can't attract

foreign-born professionals if one treats them like proletarian guestworkers expected to leave spouses and children behind. As to the potential labor migrants, they do find a way into the United States, but unlike in years past, increasingly as illegal immigrants. And with borders increasingly difficult to cross, is it any surprise that children get left behind? To be sure, the various groups of foreigners who have moved to the United States in recent years possess human, social, and cultural capital in varying degrees. However, this is as much a trait of the “immigration” system as it is of the aliens themselves – only some of whom will ever have the good luck of being immigrants.

The search for the good life: Alba and Nee are most convincing when arguing that assimilation is often an unintended and unwanted consequence of the search for the good life. Immigrant parents may well prefer the traditional ethnic neighborhood, filled with familiar smells and sounds, where friends and relatives can be regularly met on the corner block. But often, the “old neighborhood” proves wanting in other respects: schools are old and overcrowded; the boys on the street corner prove a little too threatening; the parks have become rundown; and the air (at least in Los Angeles) is hard to breathe. So with sadness in their heart, the immigrant parents decamp for a suburban locale, where public amenities of superior quality can be found. The intended goal is securing a better future for the new little Americans; the unintended consequence entails a much higher probability of exposure to little Americans of far greater ethnic variety. Repeat the experience a generation or two and so many childhood inter-ethnic friendships have been converted into inter-ethnic marriages that the majority of the immigrants’ descendants enjoy the luxury of multiple ethnic origins.

It is easy to agree with Alba and Nee in their emphasis on the search for the good life and the consequences; but as the process isn't quite as individualistic or as innocent as they suggest, I can only go with them part of the way. Although Alba and Nee argue that the "forces promoting assimilation are well entrenched in the American social order, despite all the historical contingencies that must be aligned in order to explain how assimilation has come about (125)," their own framework is largely built upon a contingent event: namely, the private and particularly public sector, institutional policies that diminished the incentives for racial or ethnic discrimination. But these changes were hardly inevitability: it took a civil rights revolution – one entirely unanticipated by the social science experts of the time – to bring them about. Moreover, what should be done to reduce discrimination, and by whom, remains very much a matter of conflict and dispute. Writing almost four decades after the apogee of the civil rights era, it seems difficult to argue that the forces favoring greater government regulation and monitoring of private sector behavior now exercise the upper hand.

Moreover, a close look at the authors' account of suburbanization shows that they too largely emphasize contingent, fundamentally political factors. Since "the state played a central role" in the ethnics' departure from the old neighborhoods of central city (111), as noted by the authors, the process can't be adequately understood in terms of a "choice" to pursue mainstream versus ethnic strategies. Rather, both push and pull took a collective, political form. City elites, concerned with rescuing decaying downtowns, used public funds to bulldoze nearby ethnic neighborhoods, replacing them with office towers and apartment buildings for highly educated "mainstreamers." Housing developers, abetted by federal policy makers, abandoned the cities, starving urban areas

of new investment that might have retained an ethnic population. Instead, money flowed to the suburbs, where government-subsidized mortgages made it particularly easy for the ethnic ex-G.I.'s to abandon apartment for house. And the politics of mainstream/sidestream relations were hardly alien to the process. Public and private housing officials identified neighborhoods containing or in close proximity to African-American residents as the prime targets for disinvestment. As Alba and Nee note, "federal action...imposed a continuing racial division on the city-suburb division...(112)." Without the perverse logic of African-American hypersegregation, moreover, the suburban flight of European ethnics might well have occurred in more protracted and less pervasive fashion. To understand the sudden ethnic transitions that characterized urban America during the 1960s, one can't forget the pressure generated by African-American residents, bottled up in ghettoized neighborhoods and prepared to bid up the price for available housing. In concluding that suburbanization's ultimate effects were to "diminish once-salient social distinctions among the European and Asian ethnic groups, while scoring deeply the lines separating them from blacks, Puerto Ricans, and Mexicans" (113), the authors tell us that assimilation and dis-assimilation were one and the same.

That was then, this is now; government subsidies for deserving ethnics looking for affordable housing in the suburbs are nowhere to be found now. Still, the view that immigrant parents are just trying to escape the negative externalities of life in a neighborhood of poorly paid factory workers, pure and simple, doesn't quite seem right. After all, the difficulties of life in the old ethnic neighborhoods seem inseparable from the American dilemma itself. Black/white residential segregation may have declined

slightly over the past two decades, but whites retain an aversion to neighborhoods with more than a scattering of blacks, and have yet to find virtue in an abundance of nearby Latinos. Insofar as white neighborhoods are also likely to contain the amenities needed to secure the good life, the search for the latter is not independent, but rather a by-product of racial stratification itself. Since residential segregation further compounds the impact of class segregation, as Douglas Massey has explained, it provides additional impetus to escape the “old neighborhood” – at least for all those who can. Likewise, big city school systems are underfunded because that’s what the – dare we call it? -- mainstream wants. That the sidestream doesn’t have an effective voice – largely because so many of the sidestreamers aren’t legal members of the club – simply makes it easier for the mainstream to siphon off more resources for its own use. By the same token, differences in city/suburban school financing generate the motivation to move beyond city boundaries. In the end, the ethnic and class *choices* of the “mainstreamers” largely circumscribe the “sidestreamers’” ethnic options.

How the "ethnics" became "white": As Alba and Nee's book makes clear, a central problem for both “then” and “now” involves understanding how the newcomers from eastern and southern Europe and their descendants were transformed from swarthy, olive-skinned members of inferior races into the “white ethnics” that they became sometime in the second half of the 20th century. As the authors quite correctly note, that transformation signals the flexibility of ethnic and racial assignments, a point not adequately appreciated by the regnant sociological wisdom.

If race and racial difference were part of the warp and woof of the America that greeted the turn of the *last* century immigrants it was nonetheless bewildering to the

greenhorn, who stepped off the boat as a racial *naif*. The pressures of American society were such that one quickly picked up a new tune. The struggle for place in a contested, ethnic order provided ample motivations for the newcomers to resolve any ambiguity over how their racial identity was to be defined. As Robert Orsi writes, the "effort to establish the border against the dark-skinned other required an intimate struggle, a contest against the initial uncertainty over which side of the racial dichotomy the swarthy immigrants were on and against the facts of history and geography that inscribed this ambiguity on the urban landscape."¹⁸ Labor competition furnished additional incentives, though as the Italians often found themselves pitted against the Irish, and the Irish against the Germans, the conflict over jobs does not suffice to explain why they all became white. Today's literature concludes that the answer lies in the "wages of whiteness," to quote David Roediger, picking up on DuBois.¹⁹ Above and beyond the material were the psychic benefits generated by distance from America's most stigmatized grouping and the reassurance that whiteness provided to immigrants whose migration to the new world otherwise entailed a succession of indignities.

Thus, the once swarthy immigrants from southern, eastern, and even northern Europe eventually became white, which is another way of saying that "race" is an achieved, not an ascribed status. One can try to reconcile this observation with the assimilation story, which contends that racial perceptions changed as the Irish, Poles, Italians, and Jews moved ahead, and were then able to move among the same people who

¹⁸ Robert Orsi, "The Religious Boundaries of an Inbetween People: Street *Feste* and the Problem of the Dark-Skinned Other in Italian Harlem, 1920-1990," *American Quarterly*, V. 44, 3 1992: 318

¹⁹ David R. Roediger, *The wages of whiteness : race and the making of the American working class* London ; New York : Verso, 1991..

had previously held them in contempt. However, this formulation leaves out the essential, contrastive element: in becoming white, the immigrants and their descendants also became party to strategies of social closure that maintained black exclusion and ensured more stable employment and better wages for others of their own kind. Consequently, the survival strategies that produced Italian or eastern European concentration in steel, autos, construction and other industries were soon turned into something else: mechanisms for preventing African-Americans from getting in the door. As Bruce Nelson argued in *Divided We Stand*, the exclusionary strategies of the newly minted ethnic whites were particularly significant in impeding black progress, since they were most effective just when American manufacturing entered its post World War II, golden age.²⁰ One can argue, as do Alba and Nee, that exclusion had little material impact on “white ethnic advance” and that “much upward mobility would have happened in any event (106).” Perhaps. But if it is also the case that if “scholars don’t know for sure”...how assimilation happened for the so-called white ethnics (102), then the latter contention is surely a matter of speculation. In any case, the argument that the immigrants of yore assimilated – simply obscures the much uglier reality: that the American nation they joined was thoroughly racialized, incomplete, and in fundamental contradiction with the democratic principles it avowed.

If the children of the southern and eastern European immigrants joined a highly imperfect American nation, it was nonetheless a better, more democratic nation than the one their parents had originally encountered. *Moreover, the immigrants’ children*

²⁰ Bruce Nelson *Divided we stand : American workers and the struggle for Black equality*, Princeton, N.J. : Princeton University Press, 2001.

deserve much of the credit for the change. Whereas the immigrants may have been willing to settle for “hunky work” and “dago jobs”, their children wanted more. Though not fully self-respecting, they had nonetheless been effectively acculturated; unlike their parents, the immigrants’ offspring had absorbed the American creed, which is why they resented the everyday ethnocentrism they encountered, not to speak of the ethnocentric *and* autocratic regimes of the factories in which they worked. Resentment bred revolt, in the form of the mass union organizing drives and support for the deformed American welfare state that took shape precisely when the children of the mass migrants from eastern and southern Europe came of age. Most importantly, the tumultuous times of the 1930s changed the structure of rewards, reducing the economic disparities between higher and lower skilled workers in ways that profoundly facilitated the ethnic factory worker’s search for a better life.

Thus, the success that Alba and Nee celebrate had little to do with the diffusionary processes of spatial, economic, and marital assimilation highlighted by their account. Believing in the American dream, the children of the immigrants surely sought membership in the American people. But one couldn’t say that they joined the mainstream, since the rigid ethnic order of the times – against which they so roundly rebelled -- meant that there was no such thing. The results of their efforts produced a more equal America, now sadly departed. For a period that coincided with our economy’s golden age, that more equal America gave the immigrants’ grandchildren access to the middle class. Enjoying stability and a modicum of material comfort, the immigrants’ grandchildren could then choose whether to retain ethnic affiliations or not. But those possibilities were preconditioned on the social resources generated by the

ethnic networks and institutions that tied together workplace, neighborhood, union hall, and voting booth. It was the *initial* success of these second generation “ethnic strategies” that allowed for the ethnic options and “mainstream strategies” later pursued by the third generation.

The new age of inequality: Though never noted in this book, the authors’ story about the disappearance of ethnic difference is set in a society in which class differences have grown, and precisely during the period when the foreign-born population has so dramatically expanded. It is not simply that the United States that greets the turn-of-the 21st century immigrants is a far more unequal society than the one in which the descendants of the turn of the 20th century immigrants gained acceptance. The immigrants of contemporary America have also been converging on those places – New York, Los Angeles, and Chicago – in which inequality takes its most severe form.

If indeed trends are promoting greater inequality, then the assimilative tendencies underscored by Alba and Nee are unlikely to follow the trajectory they project. Consider, for example, the process of residential change. For the authors, the underlying dynamics of “spatial assimilation” highlight the entrenched forces that produced diminished ethnic differences. Admittedly, the contemporary scene is not identical with the past: today’s immigrants move to a very different landscape, one dominated by the suburbs, and not the cities; many of the middle-class immigrants never make the move from city to suburb, as life in America is suburban right from the start; in the sunbelt, moreover, the urban/suburban distinction no longer makes much sense. But these differences notwithstanding, there is ample evidence of continuity. For Asians and Latinos, the greater the income and higher the educational status, the larger the percentage of non-

Hispanic whites in the census tract. Other factors – language and homeownership, in particular, influence the likelihood that Asians and Latinos will live in neighborhoods in which whites comprise the majority of the population. As they argue, “the entry of many middle-class Asians and Hispanics into the neighborhoods of the majority population is a strong demonstration of contemporary spatial assimilation (237-9).”

However, spatial assimilation is really a second-order effect, contingent on those processes that allow outsiders to catch up economically with the “mainstream.” It is one thing, to argue that among Asians and Hispanics, the probability of residence in “white” communities increases as Asian or Hispanic income rises....it is another thing to ask whether circumstances are such as to allow for the growing incomes that the model requires. As Alba and Nee themselves note, the earnings trajectories of the large group of relatively low skilled, labor migrants leave much to be desired. It’s not simply that their socioeconomic status is depressed – which precludes or impedes spatial assimilation in the Alba and Nee model. Circumstances are further likely to keep that status or low, or at least prevent it from growing at the same pace as immigrants who arrive with higher levels of skill. After all, now is a bad time to be a low-skilled worker in the United States, whatever one’s ethnic background might be. That condition gets sorely aggravated among less-skilled immigrants, precisely because their tendency to converge on the same set of places leads them to compete with one another for the same set of lousy jobs. And if the wage structure is systematically different in the places of high immigrant concentration – such that the return to low skills is even more depressed in New York or LA than it is in the places to which immigrants generally don’t go – then the prospects for spatial assimilation among our less skilled immigrants are bleaker still.

Unmentioned by the authors, there is a further aggravating factor: privileged groupings, whether of a class or ethnic kind, have long attempted to both distance themselves from less favored groupings and to set up roadblocks that keep the outsiders away. To be sure, the tools for doing so have not stayed the same: racial covenants, for example, played a prominent role in the early to mid-20th century; they're no longer important now. But the history of land development in the regions where immigrants live – most importantly, the creation of a fragmented metropolis – constitutes a significant barrier to the type of spatial assimilation which Alba and Nee forecast. Metropolitan fragmentation gives the affluent yet another tool for guarding the gate: suburban communities that zone neighborhoods for McMansions or to prevent multi-family housing raise the economic threshold for movement out of the immigrant neighborhoods. As fragmentation represents an attempt on the part of privileged groups to monopolize the good things in life – clean air, parks, safe streets – and avoid the costs of sharing with the less fortunate, it also increases the burdens shouldered by the immigrants as a result of their location in less favored places. Moreover, there are few countervailing forces. The public investments in housing, which played so important a role in the outward diffusion of the European immigrants, are nowhere to be found in the contemporary scene. And though the cities of immigrant America are surely not burning, they are places of high class segregation, with little in the way of affordable housing, and a concentration of problems in those places where the least skilled immigrants are most likely to live.

Conclusion

Notwithstanding these criticisms, *Remaking the American Mainstream*, is the very best effort to engage with the over-arching issue in the study of international migration to the United States. Whether teaching in the classroom or writing in these pages, I've learned much by thinking about this book and working its arguments through.

Although the virtues of the book can also be its vices, *Remaking the American Mainstream* has a crucial message, one that can't be ignored, and with which I fundamentally agree: the people prepared to abandon home in search for the good life are often willing to try other novelties as well. Regardless of what the immigrants want for themselves and their kin, the new context matters: as most migrants are quantitative minorities, many have at least some, if not much, exposure to people of different sorts, not to speak of hosts and their ways. And while not all newcomers move ahead rapidly from the bottom, many do move upward – at which point, exposure to outsiders necessarily grows. As contacts become increasingly diverse, ethnic options grow, and old country ties attenuate. Of course, in the view of the excitable ethnic posing as reviewer, the authors go a bit too far in their preoccupation with the immigrant search for the good life, never adequately attending to the obstacles or the people that get in the way. Their account would also have been stronger, had they noted that the foreigners and their descendants don't so much become mainstreamers, as Americans.

On the other hand, without the perspective advanced by the authors, one wouldn't appreciate the multi-ethnic society emerging in the United States, nor understand why it has come about. For that reason, Alba and Nee have written a book that is required reading, belonging on the bookshelves of all students and scholars interested in international migration and the transformations it has wrought.

Remaking the American Mainstream is an outstanding work, one that is truly worthy of the important topic it addresses.