ISSC WORKING PAPER SERIES 2003-04.03

Muslims and Jews, Moving with God: Re-thinking the Relationship between Immigration, Religion and Theory

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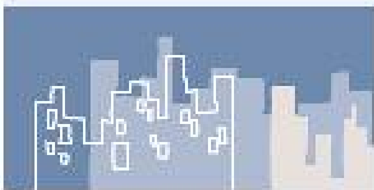
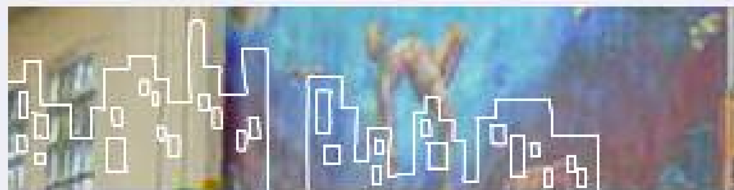
June 2, 2005





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Researchers who study recent shifts in immigration in the United States focus primarily on either how well new immigrants manage to integrate into the American economy or how poorly they integrate into American culture. In general, scholars have tended to ignore the dynamic relationship between immigrants' cultural belief systems and their integration into the United States' economy. In this paper, I begin to develop a theoretical map that links these two areas by examining the interrelationship of strongly held cultural beliefs and socioeconomic conditions of immigrants. I consider the experiences of Jewish and Muslim immigrants in the United States and critique the theories of Bourdieu and Wallerstein to argue that culture, and specifically religion, is necessary for understanding social relations inside the immigrant community as well as the ways in which immigrants interact with both individuals and institutions outside of immigrant enclaves. I conclude by suggesting how the theoretical map that I propose might inform future research.

Introduction

During the first century of European settlement in the New World, many people came to North America in search of greater religious freedom. Today, those who migrate to the United States follow more faiths than early colonizers ever imagined existed. These people come in search of not only freedom – often conceived of in the broadest sense of human rights – but, as in the past, economic opportunities unfound in their native lands. Since the Hart-Cellar Act of 1965, which removed racial quotas from the Naturalization and Immigration Act of 1924, the United States has seen a substantial increase – far larger than ever before – in the number of immigrants coming from places other than North and South America and Europe. With this influx of non-European immigrants, there has been a concomitant increase in the number of faiths now practiced in the United States. These faiths are not thought of as native to white Euro-American culture, and in fact are perceived by some as quite alien and threatening to it.

Scholarly reaction to this shift in immigration has been to focus primarily on either how well new immigrants manage to integrate into the American economy or how poorly they integrate into American culture (see Waldinger 2001, Warner and Wittner 1998, and Heisler 1992 for detailed overviews). Sociologists of religion are inclined not to situate their studies within a larger socioeconomic context, while those who focus on immigration are unlikely to include the role of strongly held cultural beliefs in their inquiries. In general, scholars have tended to ignore the dynamic relationship between immigrants' cultural belief systems and their integration into the United States' economy, either for fear of rekindling old deterministic

assertions about the role of culture or because there is a belief among social scientists that, since people emigrate for economic reasons, these reasons alone account for the changes seen.

In this paper, I begin to develop a theoretical map that links these two areas by focusing on the interrelationship of strongly held cultural beliefs and socioeconomic conditions of immigrants. The economic situation of immigrants must be analyzed as part of the larger social context in which they exist. An analysis of immigrant enclaves that focuses on culture, and specifically religion, is necessary for understanding social relations inside the immigrant community as well as the ways in which immigrants interact with both individuals and institutions outside of enclaves.

Current theories of how immigrants fair in the United States draw primarily upon models of resource utilization. Scholars adopt two main foci when studying immigration. These are, at the micro-level, social networks (Waldinger and Lichter 2003, Portes and Stepick 1993), and, at the macro-level, world systems (Portes and Walton 1981). In studying social networks, scholars often argue (in line with Bourdieu 1984), explicitly or implicitly, that what enables the success or failure of particular groups of immigrants are the varying forms of capital they bring with them when they emigrate. However, their analysis of immigrant experiences often makes short shrift of varieties of capital (which is often differentiated as social, cultural or educational), and instead waters them down to their economic components alone. Immigrant enclaves develop out of networks of social relations that are either pre-existing (dating back to the sending country) or forged in the crucible of poverty and racism that immigrants encounter in their new country. Yet these networks are generally only examined in terms of economic transactions, as though *gessellschaft* reigns supreme once migrants arrive in the modern world. But what of the strong cultural forms that social relations embody? In particular, what happens to an immigrant group

that is devoutly religious – and non-Christian, and thus less likely to find a welcoming committee with similar leanings in terms of faith, if nothing else – when it arrives in the United States?

Similarly, world systems theory, the macro-level approach to understanding immigrant experiences, denies the influence of (and often the mere existence of) what might loosely be called culture. Migration occurs because core countries, which control the world capitalist system, require labor from peripheral countries. Internal circumstances within a sending country tend to be ignored, or are seen as the result of actions of core countries (i.e., internal disturbances, famines or revolutions are due to manipulations by core countries). Clearly this argument explains aspects of migration and immigration, as does social network theory. However, both theories, by emphasizing economics, ignore the role of cultural systems[1].

In this paper, I concentrate on religion as a powerful cultural phenomenon that both constrains and enables systems of social relations. If religion, as Durkheim ([1912] 1995) suggests, is both the reflection and the instantiation of society, what happens when a group with a radically different conception of the world (and therefore of itself) is forced to reinvent itself in essentially alien social terrain? Or, to think of it another way, if systems of discipline (Foucault 1977) are formulated through a power/knowledge nexus that is constructed through religious dogma, liturgy and practice, how are immigrants transformed when forced to exist within a framework that is radically different from this – say, a system of modern Western global capitalism, one in which the disciplinary framework is constituted through secular education, the workplace, and other social institutions?

1I refer to cultural systems in an attempt to encompass the many ways in which social scientists examine culture. Drawing on Geertz (1973) and Sewell (1996, 1999), I define culture as both practices and symbols, as a loosely coherent grouping of a large yet bounded universe of ways of doing things that involve symbolic representations. Culture is not devoid of power, as institutional arrangements in a given arena often dictate the terms of cultural existence (Foucault 1977, Sewell 1999). Although anthropologists have labored to show that societies do not actually have unified, undiluted or unmodified cultures, it is still useful to consider the commonalities that geographically bounded (at least at some point in time if no longer currently) societies have; these practices and symbols generally include what is classically thought of as culture: religion, art, music, kinship relations, etc.

Consider two immigrant groups, Jews and Muslims.[2] In their orthodox forms, both religions provide a solid framework of beliefs heavily at odds with contemporary American (Protestant) society. Like Christian fundamentalists in the United States, both groups may be inward looking and reject modern capitalism; unlike Christian fundamentalism, both Islam and Judaism provide a codified legal system (in addition to a belief system) for living. Both faiths have blueprints for institutions to govern daily life for practitioners. This highly unified and codified framework dictates all aspects of life, and is generally escaped only by forsaking one's faith (in the sense that for the "true believer," liberal interpretation of a religion is not true faith).

Muslim and Jewish religious ethnic enclaves present fertile ground for rethinking a theoretical approach to immigration. Religion is not simply a convenient entry point. For many immigrants, religion, as both a set of practices and beliefs as well as a source of community, provides order, meaning and dignity to their lives, offering assistance in both spiritual and secular matters. Religion may provide a way out of the unpleasantness of the immigrant experience. It might be a salve against the pain of poverty, the intolerable work conditions, and the dehumanization that seems to go hand-in-hand with being an immigrant in the United States. Or it may be that radically different worldviews, shaped by religious beliefs, cause resistance to dominant society in the United States, rather than acculturation and assimilation.

In this paper I juxtapose these propositions in order to offer a new theoretical framework for thinking about immigration, one that draws heavily on the cultural systems of immigrants and situates economic relations soundly within social relations. Because the United States has been and continues to be a predominantly Christian nation,[3] the experiences of two non-Christian groups, Jews and Muslims, provide a useful test of my theoretical arguments. After providing a

2 One might also consider comparing a Hindu immigrant community as a third non-Christian enclave.

3 Recent surveys indicate that over three-quarters of Americans identify as Christian (General Social Survey 2001).

brief overview of the history of Jewish and Muslim immigration to the U.S., I present more fully my critiques of the current theories used to consider immigration and propose an alternative way of thinking about the relationship between immigration, religion and theory. I conclude by suggesting avenues for further research.

A Tale of Two Immigrant Groups: Jews and Muslims

Both Jews and Muslims arrived in North America early on in the history of white colonization. However, both communities grew from a wide range of migration streams and each has its own distinctive history. Both groups may be characterized as *landsmeinschaft* congregations, with mosques and synagogues changing as new groups of immigrants entered the United States.

Jews first arrived in North America in 1654 when a group of Dutch/Portuguese Jews fled Brazil for New Amsterdam. The earliest immigrants were Sephardic, although by the turn of the nineteenth century, most immigrants were Ashkenazic, coming from Germany, Poland and other parts of Northern and Western Europe. However, with the great wave of European immigration that flowed between 1880 and 1920, a vast influx of Eastern European Jews (Ashkenazic as well, but with different traditions) came to the United States.

After 1924, with the passage of the Naturalization and Immigration Act, the flow of Jewish immigrants subsided. However by that time, the population had reached over four million, or about three percent of the total United States population. After 1924, Jewish immigration continued, primarily due to people fleeing the Holocaust. From the 1970s to the present, Jewish immigrants are mostly from Russia, the former Soviet Republics, and the Middle East (mostly Iran), but the total number of émigrés has been relatively small. Jewish

immigration has ebbed since World War II in part because of the creation of the state of Israel, which provided an alternative destination for many. In striking contrast to the experience of most migrants, who flee their homeland for a new one, Jews now have the choice of choosing the Jewish homeland as a final destination.

Scholars estimate that there are from about 5.6 to 6.1 million Jews in the United States (or between one and two percent of the total U.S. population), with about half of that number actually identifying as religious. Jews are found in all parts of the country, but tend to form larger communities in large metropolitan areas. New York City alone has a larger Jewish population than Israel. Yet the Jewish community is seen as shrinking by concerned observers, with net population growth believed to be negative, regardless of immigration. Some scholars believe that the number of Jews in the U.S. would be much larger if people who identify as Jewish but are not technically Jewish (e.g., did not have a Jewish mother) were counted (Cohen and Eisen 2000).

As with Judaism, Islam came to North America early on. Muslims have probably been in this country since the first slaves were brought over, but few African slaves maintained their religion or religious identity. Willing Muslim immigrants from North Africa and the Middle East began to arrive between 1875 and 1912. The end of World War I brought another wave of Muslim immigrants, but this subsided after the legislation of 1924 was passed. Although there were Muslim immigrants from the Middle East and North Africa who continued to come, only after the 1965 immigration reforms did a large number of Muslim immigrants migrate to the United States.

The lowest estimate of the number of Muslims in the United States is about one million and the highest is just over six million. However, a recent survey places the number of Muslims

in the United States at about 1.1 million (Leonard 2001).[4] This population is quite diverse, as recent U. S. State Department data reveal. About one-third of Muslims in the United States are of South Asian origin, with nearly an equal number of African American Muslims. One-quarter of American Muslims are of Arab heritage, although Iranians, who sometimes prefer not to be classified as Arab, make up about three or four percent of this number. Of the remaining twelve percent, there are approximately equal numbers of Muslims of African, European or South Asian descent. As with Jews, Muslims tend to congregate in larger metropolitan areas, but live in different parts of the country. The largest Muslim communities are found in California, New York, New Jersey, Michigan and Pennsylvania (U.S. State Department 2004).

Although there is considerable diversity within each group, contemporary immigration by these groups is somewhat similar. There are devout Jewish and Muslim communities made up of recent immigrants in both southern and northern California. In the south, a large Iranian community (with both Jewish and Muslim members) lives in Los Angeles. Over 90 percent of its Jewish members have maintained a level of devotion similar to what they practiced in Iran (Feher 1998). In the north, near San Francisco, there are Iranian Jews in the South Bay and South Asian Muslims in the East Bay.[5]

Re-Thinking Theoretical Frameworks

Unlike religion, which has received considerable attention in both classical and contemporary social theory, migration and immigration remain primarily within the economic realm of inquiry. In this section, I briefly outline several ways that social theory can be used to

[4] The highest numbers are from Muslim groups themselves, but there has been no national survey by a Muslim group that is similar to the national decennial censuses undertaken by the large, well-established Jewish organizations. The American Jewish Committee contracts with NORC at the University of Chicago to conduct its censuses, thus attempting to make the data more reliable (AJC Website 2004).

[5] Unfortunately, I do not have comparable data concerning devotional practices for Muslims, although according to Leonard (2003) it tends to be high for most Muslim immigrant enclaves.

better understand the relationship between immigration and religion, and thereby invigorate theoretical understandings of immigration in general. First, I draw on Pierre Bourdieu and others who emphasize the role of various forms of human capital and the fields or markets in which capital is deployed. Second, I consider the world systems approach to immigration (Wallerstein 1974), and Marxism more specifically, which does not account for the varied ways that capitalism interacts with the religious practices of immigrants. Finally, I consider the interaction between the disciplinary logic of capitalism and symbolic representations, pairing Foucault and Durkheim.

Theories of Capital

Pierre Bourdieu (1984) and other social theorists conceptualize social relations as interactive practices that take place within fields of action. People who have accumulated enough capital, or who have the right *habitus*, do better in a given field than those who lack these attributes; indeed, capital accumulation can compensate for a less than spectacular background. Yet a key question remains: what happens when an actor must play in a new field with completely different rules? This is exactly what migrants face upon arriving in a new country. Habitus generally counts for very little in the receiving country, although there are a couple of key exceptions. First, habitus may enable new immigrants to claim positions of power relative to other newcomers or even earlier arriving migrants if the receiving community recreates the social structure of the sending country successfully in the new land. For example, Portes and Stepick (1993) have shown that ethnic enclaves often recreate the system of social relations from the old country in the new one. This process helps cohere the new community by providing a

sense of solidarity and belonging, but it is also a mechanism that restricts endeavors outside of the enclave.

Second, habitus may matter more if the receiving country were a colony or protectorate of the receiving country. Although not all colonies developed equally, many had extensive infrastructure or offered the opportunity (at least for the native elite) to obtain education in the colonizing country overseas. As many scholars in post-colonial studies have discussed, the natives have (re)turned to the metropole. These individuals often come educated and acculturated in the ways of the colonizing country (Malkki 1997). This situation creates a quandary concerning habitus: if habitus is a set of tastes and dispositions of a class position that are inculcated from birth but are culturally specific, can parallel habiti arise in separate locations under similar socio-cultural conditions? Even if the answer is "yes" – although such an answer is preliminary and in need of empirical verification – there often exists a racial element that taints (at best) or trumps (at worst) the habitus of the émigré.

Nonetheless, in general habitus seems to matter less in the receiving country than in the sending country because of the different social hierarchy in the new land. Human capital accumulation (here lumping together educational attainment, cultural know-how, etc., but leaving social capital out) seems to matter much more. [6] (Obviously, economic capital accumulation matters a great deal as well.)

Scholars agree that the amount and type of human capital that an immigrant has can influence his or her fate in the receiving country. [7] Less is known, however, about the ways in which human capital is accumulated and "spent" in the receiving country. In particular, what is

[6] Individuals concerned with immigrant networks have already given considerable attention to social capital, and so I will not discuss it here (Waldinger and Lichter 2003, Portes and Zhou 1993).
[7] An examination of the equivalency of different forms of human capital would be an interesting sociological inquiry, but lies beyond the scope of this paper. It is enough to note that individuals with ostensibly high levels of human capital – such as doctors or lawyers – often face challenges in the receiving country, where their capital is simply valued on a different scale rather than converted at a one-to-one equivalency.

the balancing act of human capital accumulation and spending between activities that provide obvious economic benefits and those that do not, such as expenditures of human capital that are made for apparently purely social reasons?

Of course, very often in immigrant communities (as in much of life), situations that appear to be purely social often have economic benefits; for example, attending a cousin's confirmation may lead to a job opportunity by way of the cousin's father or mother.[8] In a similar vein, there are also processes of capital accumulation that appear not to benefit the recipient economically. Specifically, I am considering religious observance and practice. Scholars have long noted the ways in which the Catholic Church has assisted immigrants in the United States (Tomasi 1970, Warner and Wittner 1998), and recently attention has been paid to how evangelical churches have pursued similar ends through very different means (Menjivar 2003). Still, the process of how human capital is created and used for non-economic purposes remains only loosely theorized.

One way that scholars have discussed the accumulation and expenditure of human capital has been in terms of a trade-off between economic capital creating activities and religious activities. For example, Chiswick (1999), an economist, argues that for European Jews who emigrated during the period 1880 to 1920, the emphasis on economic capital accumulation led to a neglect in human capital expenditures and accumulations, as evidenced by the lack of development of synagogues. This lack of initial investment led to a "lost generation" of children of Jewish immigrants who received only a cursory Jewish education. Chiswick then theorizes that this has contributed to a decline in the number of practicing Jews and to the increased rate of intermarriage among the grandchildren of immigrants. Members of the third generation, lacking

[8] The importance of social relations, however, is likely to be stronger in immigrant communities that are separated by language and custom from other social systems that could provide them economic opportunities (Portes and Zhou 1993).

much of a traditional Jewish upbringing, choose either to re-immerse themselves in this tradition or break from it entirely.

Chiswick assumes that individuals consciously decide to trade observance of Judaism for greater earnings; religion is undervalued compared to secular economic capital accumulation. Secular capital accumulation is valued higher than sacred capital accumulation – a choice that middle-class natives may never have to make, perhaps because such a decision was made for them several generations ago. This assumption, however, begs the question: why would religion become undervalued vis à vis economic standing? One explanation might be found in Durkheim's ([1912] 1995) claim that modernity is epitomized by a transformation from traditional faith to a strong belief in individualism. Another might be traced to Weber (1946), who argued that modernity increases rationalization, and in the process the sacred is removed from human existence.

Both of these explanations assume what they prove: modern capitalism supercedes religion in the West. What remains to be shown is how on a day-to-day basis specific groups handle the influx of modern, Western capitalism into their social and physical space. The actual operationalization of capitalism in the context of religious practice (and vice versa) must be explored to understand how contemporary immigrant groups alter their practices and beliefs. I will take up this point again in the section "The Logic of Capitalism," below. However, before discussing it further, I consider Marxist approaches to understanding immigration.

World Systems Theory

To understand macro-level patterns of migration and immigration, many scholars have turned to Wallerstein's (1974) world systems theory. Immigration and migration are viewed as

integral parts of the world-capitalist system, based on inequality and domination. Immigration is structured to keep less developed nations in a state of dependence with respect to developed nations. Yet this macro-level perspective is unsatisfying in the ways in which it considers the flow of non-economic capital both within and between nations. World systems theory notes that there are cultural and ideological exports from core nations to peripheral ones. However, the flow of symbolic systems is seen not as a dynamic process but rather as a one-way street: core countries export, peripheral countries absorb. This conception does not match reality; migrations of all sorts flow back and forth between countries, and culture and ideologies can be accepted or not by the receiving nations. Similarly, receiving groups can strategically accept and use these symbols and practices in ways unintended by the original sending group.

Cultures are permeable and mutable; therefore, it is unrealistic to expect that migration (and the return of migrants, even just for visits) and immigration would not affect both the sending and receiving countries. Even more importantly, this perspective ignores the cultural determinants and ramifications of immigration on both sending and receiving nations; both groups of states are radically changed by immigration, and stasis is not the result in general. World systems theory implies that receiving countries simply absorb immigrants as cogs in the economic engine without any difficulties. Similarly, it does not ask what the ramifications are for sending nations when individuals, families, or whole communities leave (and sometimes return). Finally, as remittances have become more common through advances in transit and communication technologies, it is harder to prove that less-developed nations are not benefiting economically from migration (i.e., consider the national policies of countries such as the Philippines that encourage migration in order to obtain remittances).

Marxism also ignores the relationship between immigration and religion, and it does not explain one of the contradictions of late capitalism: Rather than attempting to salve their pain through religion, as Marx predicted, immigrants, who are usually members of the proletariat, often become less religious after they have become more accustomed to the United States. Riesebrodt (1993) has shown that a turn to fundamentalism is often a reaction to the inhumane nature of the modern capitalist system, and there are growing numbers of immigrants who practice a fundamentalist faith: common examples are Korean Baptists and Presbyterians, Mexican fundamentalists, and Christian Orthodox groups from South Asia. Yet in many immigrant communities, the children of immigrants are far less religious than their parents.

Again, this raises both theoretical and empirical sociological questions. Research indicates that there are both immigrant groups who maintain their previous levels of religiosity and those who become less religious after staying in their host country for a long period of time. There are also immigrant groups for whom religion becomes more important after their arrival for various reasons, often external to the immigrants themselves. For example, in order to cater to a larger and devout clientele, some Muslim immigrant entrepreneurs have become more observant than they were prior to immigrating to the United States.[9] This example suggests that capitalism interacts with the cultural systems that immigrant groups bring with them to the United States in a variety of ways, leading to different circumstances for different groups of immigrants. Although economic conditions clearly influence immigrant actions, immigrants also actively use their culture to accomplish certain goals, and conversely may also find that different cultural ideas, arguably alien to their homeland, may serve them better in their new nation.

[9] David Minkus of the Institute for the Study of Social Change provided this information based on informal fieldwork he has conducted in the Islamic immigrant enclave located in the East Bay of the San Francisco area.

The Logic of Capitalism

Clearly there exists a world capitalist system in the early part of the twenty-first century of which both sending and receiving countries are part. The United States is perhaps the pinnacle of this system, having fully incorporated the logic of capitalism into its day-to-day life in ways beyond that of most other industrialized nations. Economic success has become a cultural norm, a measuring stick for all people. Even those who attempt to opt out (such as the Amish, hippies during the 1960s, or contemporary survivalists) serve as points of contrast that reinforce the strength of this concept in guiding people's actions. Capitalism is the disciplinary logic (Foucault 1991) that engulfs contemporary American life, from government public policy initiatives to private decisions by individuals. However, capitalism is not simply a given, an omnipresent shroud over the nation; instead, it is enacted in actual and symbolic ways everyday. Although the symbolic mechanisms for enacting capitalism may be contested (Wedeen 1999), they form part of the symbolic representations (Durkheim [1912] 1995) that serve to instantiate society in the United States. As Weber ([1930] 1992) has argued, religion and capitalism are intimately tied in that the construction of the meaningfulness of life (the symbolic valuation of existence) has led some culture groups and not others to develop capitalism.

So what happens when an immigrant enclave grows in the United States where a different set of symbolic representations – say, based on religious but non-Christian dogma and doctrine – reign? Although this might lead to a re-consideration of assimilation for a possible answer, Heisler (1992) notes that assimilation theory does not fit post-1965 immigrant communities well. Other scholars have found that immigrants often accommodate themselves to contemporary capitalism to lesser or greater degrees (Portes and Zhou 1993). What is missing is an examination of how this accommodation affects the day-to-day social relations of immigrant

communities – especially those with religiously devout members. Because such studies have not been undertaken, the question of whether disciplinary logic of capitalism fundamentally alters the symbolic representations of a community remains unanswered. However, if anthropology, in its revisits to lands only relatively recently touched by modern capitalism, is to be believed, it would seem that such an alteration does occur.

Conclusion

In this paper I have presented a theoretical framework that attempts to bridge micro-level and macro-level considerations of culture and immigration. I have argued that because capitalism works as a disciplinary logic, functioning in everyday life as well as across the globe, an analysis of immigration must also consider the ways that cultural systems – and more specifically, religion, which presents a unified (at least in theory if not in practice) set of cultural rules, symbols and practices – receive and rebut this logic.

My propositions for how to re-conceptualize the relationship between immigration, religion and social theory require empirical tests to support (or contradict) them. Specifically, a comparative ethnographic study of Jewish and Muslim immigrant enclaves would enable a researcher to study the confrontation between disciplinary practices and symbolic representations of society within immigrant communities. It would provide a means for mapping the ways that religion transforms and is transformed by immigrant experiences and document in greater detail how immigrant experiences are related to personal devotion and observance and the effects of living in the United States on these experiences. Future empirical work must also account for the interrelatedness of various forms of capital in social life, noting the ways in which culture and religion interact with economic capital.

It must also be noted that religious practice dictates not only the social relationships, but the spatial arrangements for many communities of faith. For example, not only must observant Muslims have a space (facing the proper direction) to pray five times daily, they must also be able to hear the call to prayer (although communication technologies are making this slightly less spatially defined), buy meat from a *hallal* butcher, and separate women from men as needed. An analysis of spatial relations will reveal much about the constitution of local culture; both religious practices (Norman 2001, Becker 1999) and the logic of capitalism (Hayden 1995) are embodied in architecture and place. Thus, in addition to traditional participant-observation, a study of the religious practices of immigrant communities must also map and analyze the spatial relations of each community.

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