

UCLA
Working Paper Series

Title

Los Angeles in the Context of the New Immigration

Permalink

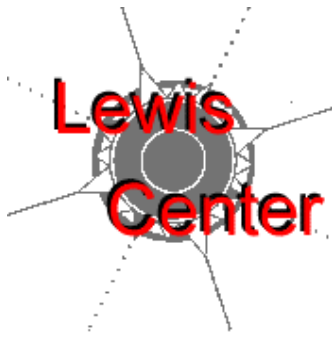
<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/8wd7t9r2>

Author

Portes, Alejandro

Publication Date

1997



Lewis Center for Regional Policy Studies
Working Paper Series

Los Angeles in the Context of the New Immigration

Keynote address to the conference on Ethnic Los Angeles, Lewis Center and
Department of Sociology, UCLA, January 17-19, 1997

By: Alejandro Portes
Princeton University
and
University of Miami

Working Paper #18 in the series

The Lewis Center for Regional Policy Studies

School of Public Policy and Social Research
3250 Public Policy Building
Los Angeles CA 90095-1656

Director: Paul Ong

Phone: (310) 206-4417

Fax: (310) 825-1575

<http://www.sppsr.ucla.edu/lewis>

January 1997

INTRODUCTION

In one of the most memorable passages in the classic literature on immigration, Nathan Glazer noted how newcomers to North America suddenly embraced nationalities and ethnicities to which they had been indifferent or oblivious at home. Hence, Sicilian peasants, to whom Mussolini's war against Libya would have been a major affliction at home, became Italian patriots in New York ardently defending there that pathetic attempt at late imperialism. Similarly, rural immigrants from Poland learned to call themselves Polish in America and to bond accordingly. In their home land, they had just been peasants. The same point has been made in picturesque and forceful terms by Father Andrew Greeley, who adds to this resurgence of nationality among immigrants the fact that such sentiment and its ramifications are not short-lived and can last for generations.

The splendid book that is the occasion for this conference reflects well this process. Its subject matter is, to a large extent, immigration but its title is ethnicity. The title anticipates the future. It says that out of the kaleidoscope of currently arriving newcomers a far more diverse mosaic of self-identities, loyalties, business enterprises, and voting blocks can be expected. As Los Angeles is the focal point of today's foreign inflow, so will it be the fulcrum of this emerging new diversity, and possible fragmentation.

The transformation of immigrants into ethnics is not inevitable. A plausible continuum may be posited here. At one end, there are white, English-speaking, and Protestant newcomers for whom the transformation from immigrants into non-hyphenated Americans can take place in a generation. Next come groups for whom immigration does lead to ethnicity and for whom the dropping of the hyphen as in Italian-American or Chinese-American takes from two to four or five generations. Lastly, there are the groups labeled by an earlier literature as colonized minorities or unmeltable ethnics who, by reason of color or an unusually unfavorable incorporation into the American labor market, become stuck in the ethnic phase and are, hence, compelled to develop separate identities and social worlds.

By and large, as the title and editors of *Ethnic Los Angeles* assert, the immigrants of today will be the ethnics of tomorrow and their processes of adaptation and entry into the mainstream of their adopted country will be anything but straightforward. The process can indeed become segmented, with some groups making the transition from ethnics into plain Americans in a relatively short span while others go on to augment that Other America poorer and subordinate, associated with unshakable ethnicity. That possibility constitutes, in my view, the core reason why the importance of today's immigration transcends the fate and performance of the immigrants themselves. It is their children and their children's children who, as native-born Americans and citizens, will establish the long-term consequences of the current inflow to this society.

More needs to be said about ethnic segmentation and about Los Angeles, but first it is important to consider other aspects in which today's immigration resembles the momentous displacement of Europeans that took place at the end of the last century. The fact that immigrants turn quickly into ethnics is the first, but by no means the similitude between both periods.

In each case, immigration also led to rapid acculturation. The newcomers' children learned the new language, transferred their loyalties, and rapidly forgot the folkways of the old country. A world of difference separates the cultural outlook and life goals of the first and second generations. As the son of a friend, a Cuban-born professor in Miami, told him upon being chastised about scant homework and indifference to grades: Dad, you came in the boat. That's why you're so gung-ho about grades . . . We are Americans, we don't have to work that hard. The very process of ethnic transformation referred to earlier is an intrinsic part of acculturation. People become ethnics *because* they become American. The renewed salience of national identity and culture comes about by confronting the new social milieu and by seeing oneself reflected in the looking-glass of the host society. As Greeley aptly puts it, many Italian-Americans were Americans before they ever learned that they were Italian. For this reason, U.S.-made ethnic identities and customs are often quite at variance with the original ones from the home country.

Once stated, the fact that immigration is followed by rapid acculturation seems commonplace. How could it be otherwise? But it is important to emphasize the process in times when rapid immigration is being followed by increasing nativism. This correlation immigration leading to xenophobia is also one of the commonalities between the 1900s and the 1990s. It is manifested today in the emergence of movements, such as U.S. English, that believe that people speaking a foreign language will become a permanent fixture and give rise to linguistic enclaves and cultural fragmentation. Nothing is further from the truth, at least in terms of language maintenance. As second and third generation Italians, Czechs, and Poles rapidly gave up their ancestors' language for unaccented English, today's second generation is shifting equally fast away from Korean, Chinese, or Spanish.

In our study of over 5,000 children of immigrants attending high school in South Florida and Southern California, Rubén Rumbaut and I found that, by grade nine, over 99 percent spoke English fluently. More importantly, over 70 percent actually preferred English to their parents' home language. What was at risk among these students was clearly not the dominance of English, but the preservation of some fluency in their parents' tongue. Only one-third of our respondents in South Florida reported speaking their parents' language fluently, the figure falling to 12 percent among Haitians and just 17 percent among children of Asian and European immigrants. Among students attending private bilingual schools in the heart of Cuban Miami, a remarkable 93 percent preferred English while 62 percent had already lost full fluency in Spanish, despite all of their parents' and teachers' efforts. When I have been asked to lecture to students in one of these schools, I have had to do so in English because their second generation Spanish is just too poor for proper understanding. What better proof can one give against the tenets of today's nativists?

Rapid acculturation among immigrants and their offspring has a second important implication. It means that their stance towards the mainstream of American society depends on what they have learned about it and how they have been treated by it. Whether the ethnic bonds and identities that follow immigration become an intervening step toward easy integration into middle-class America or devolve into an adversarial stance toward it depends, in large part, on the reception experienced by newcomers and the opportunities offered to them. In a nutshell, the long-term consequences of today's immigration for American society will reflect, to a large extent, what this society did or did not do for these immigrants. Acculturation will inevitably take place, but the key questions are: To what segments of the host culture and labor market will today's newcomers acculturate to? What will they learn from them? What collective reactions will be triggered by these experiences? As elsewhere in social life, what goes around comes around.

A third similarity I have mentioned already, namely the rise of nativist xenophobia in periods of high immigration. Tracts like Peter Brimelow's, *Alien Nation* and Richard Lamm's, *The Immigration Time Bomb* are typical of this time-honored trend and should be read accordingly. Two points must be emphasized, however, about the current rise of xenophobia and the subsequent anti-immigrant policies. First, this hostile environment is an integral part of the American context to which current immigrants are acculturating and can be expected to have predictable consequences in the future. In other words, immigrants are becoming ethnics in a context where their presence is increasingly defined as unwelcome and where a number of policy measures are taken against them. A process of reactive formation of equal force may be anticipated from many of the groups experiencing these conditions.

Second, serious research on the origins, outlooks, and patterns of adaptation of present immigrants, such as that presented in the individual chapters of *Ethnic Los Angeles*, is needed more than ever. Not that this knowledge will modify present trends. The historical record shows that the real battle for control of immigration is not between measured scientific analysis *versus* blind stereotypes, but between the interests of employers set on maintaining access to an ample pool of docile labor and those of the general citizenry alarmed by the presence of so many foreigners in its midst. Whipped up to fever pitch by professional xenophobes, these fears can sometimes countermand the concentrated interests of those who have long profited from foreign labor. Academic research is not likely to alter the outcome of this struggle, but it is needed to establish a rational basis for policy once the stage of collective hysteria blows away and to set the historical record straight as to the real causes, effects, and benefits of immigration.

Along with nativism, periods of high immigration have also given rise to schools of research, at least in sociology. The famous Chicago School, associated with Robert Park, Ernest Burgess, and their collaborators, cannot be separated from the masses of Irish, Italian, and Polish peasants that populated that city's fringes at the beginnings of American social science. *Ethnic Los Angeles* is not really a school book in the sense that it advances a homogenous theoretical or methodological

outlook on the field. Its chapters are as diverse as the disciplinary backgrounds and research orientations of the UCLA faculty. The book showcases that diversity and uses it to highlight the many ways in which ethnicity can be approached and understood in the nation's new immigrant capital. Out of this joint effort, a new L.A. School of immigration and ethnic studies may emerge, but it is too soon to tell.

Having outlined some of the similarities between immigration then and now, it might be important to focus on some of the differences that make ethnic Los Angeles and, for that matter, immigrant America, distinct today. First, as the introduction by Waldinger and Bozorgmehr makes clear, the particular legal framework in which the present inflow takes place has given rise to significant fragmentation between immigrant professionals and entrepreneurs, on the one hand, and unskilled laborers, on the other. This is not to say that there was not occupational and educational diversity among Europeans, Asians, and Latin Americans arriving earlier in the century but, with some significant exceptions, the vast majority of that foreign population was composed of manual workers. There did not exist then, as it exists now, a legally patterned way to segment the foreign inflow through certain preference categories of the law or through the capacity of some would-be migrants to by-pass that preference system altogether.

Los Angeles is not only the nation's immigration capital, but the place where this bifurcation of today's foreign population is most sustained and most evident. In no other city of high immigration does one observe the contrast with equal force. The foreign population of the second immigrant city, New York, is very diverse with no single-nationality or occupational group exercising an overwhelming preponderance. To be sure, there are illegal unskilled laborers as well as highly trained foreign professionals and business people going to New York, but the close association of occupational status, education, and ethnicity is not as well marked. What predominates in New York is a *mix* among people tightly packed together so that a single metro stop separates one Asian neighborhood from one Latin American neighborhood, and even within nationally defined enclaves such as Washington Heights, Brighton Beach, or Chinatown there is considerable class diversity.

In Miami, after the arrival of the Cuban upper- and middle-classes in the 1960s and 1970s, no national group has been closely associated with a distinct or privileged occupational niche. There are Jamaican nurses and Jamaican common laborers, just as there are Colombian businessmen and janitors. Since the Mariel exodus of the 1980s, Cuban immigration has been marked by the peculiar absence of class differences at least in a capitalist sense that marks the sending nation. Only the numbers and the sustained power of the earlier Cuban waves have allowed this ethnic group to reproduce its relatively advantaged local position.

This is not to deny that there is internal diversity in Los Angeles' new ethnic neighborhoods, but circumstances of law and geography have converged in this case to highlight the pattern of

educational and occupational bifurcation among today's immigrants with greater force. Foreigners of Latin American origin are found overwhelmingly at the bottom of the human capital hierarchy and class structure; several sizable Asian and Middle-Eastern nationalities are found at the other end.

The contrast is due, in large part, to the geographical position of the city. Los Angeles faces the Pacific, not the Atlantic or the Caribbean Sea. Neither New York nor Miami has a nearby territorial border with a large Third World country. This geographical accident accounts, in large part, for the ethnically coded economic bifurcation of L.A.-bound immigration, but it has other ramifications. It would be but a slight exaggeration to say that, for reasons of history and economy, this city of Nuestra Señora de los Angeles de Porciuncula is simultaneously in two countries. Not only was it founded from Mexico, but the ties to the country to the south were never severed and, if anything, have grown in size and complexity. In terms of population, Los Angeles is today Mexico's third largest city and the bonds created with that nation are strong enough to prompt the governors of several Mexican states to travel to Los Angeles regularly for meetings with their respective communities.

This is not to say that there is any irredentist sentiment, either in Mexico or among its diaspora. Despite the exaggerations of some nativist organizations, the last thing that the resident Mexican-American community wants is political reunion with Mexico. The legal location and national sovereignty over the city are not in question, the key issue lies in the *symbolic* perceptions of the city and the goals sought by different segments of its population. For the native-born, the city is and must be American and it should function to satisfy the consumptions and career aspirations of its citizens. For the better-off among them, this means the right to enjoy the climate and landscape in peace and in as pristine a state as possible, that is without the intrusion of impoverished aliens. Those aliens soil the place and embody a definition of the city entirely at odds with the views and lifestyles of native professionals and executives. Members of these classes paid good money to enjoy the advantages of weather and scenery within an advanced, modern civilization. Dealing with Third World peoples and their needs was not part of the deal.

From a Mexican point of view, on the other hand, Los Angeles is the end-point of a familiar and well-established route going back for generations. Los Angeles, and California for that matter, are not alien territory but part, in some profound sense, of the same national whole. Large segments of the Mexican population have lived here, or have ancestors who were here, or relatives who still do live here. Mexican California never ceased to exist, which is the reason for the perceptive but generally misunderstood title of another major work in our field, Massey and his Mexican collaborators', *Return to Aztlan*. It is also the reason for the sense of place that Mexican immigrants exhibit in Los Angeles, quite different from their far more discreet presence in New York or in the outskirts of Miami. Mexicans in California may be legally illegal, but socially and culturally they do not regard themselves as such, nor do their communities of origin. The *gringos* and the *migra* may have other opinions, but for the immigrants themselves, crossing the border into California is neither a sin nor an invasion of alien territory.

And hence we have the paradox of a native citizenry voting for all kinds of amendments and restrictions to keep the Mexicans out, while the governors of Sinaloa or Michoacan hop on a plane to meet and celebrate, in Los Angeles, the large and self-assured communities of their compatriots. These episodes, portrayed in rich detail by Robert Smith, reveal how, in a deep cultural sense, Mexican immigrants do not really Ago to California but return to it.

For these reasons, despite the antics of Governor Wilson and his minions, Mexican immigration is not going to go away. As long-time researchers of this movement have made clear, the social ties that bind Californian and Mexican communities are just too dense and too resilient to be undone by punitive laws. No matter how far away the canyon or the hill is that the affluent move to seeking a lily white environment, immigrants will still keep coming and the reality of ethnic Los Angeles will catch up, sooner or later, with the escapees in their exurbs. Far wiser than seeking to change the city by passing laws or by abandoning it would have been to come to terms with a history of shared origins and a present of converging economic forces. This fact, well documented by several chapters in the book, offers simultaneously a blueprint for policies that would allow the different visions of the city and its functions to co-exist.

Lastly, contemporary immigration is different from that of a century ago in the proliferation of transnational communities. These are based on dense networks across political borders created by immigrants and their home country associates in their quests for social and economic advancements. A transnational entrepreneur is someone whose occupation requires regular contact and travel across national frontiers. Such persons are mostly involved in economic activities, but there are political and cultural activists, as well. Through these cross-national networks, an increasing number of people are able to lead dual lives. Participants are often bilingual, move easily between cultures, and frequently maintain homes in two different countries.

Immigrants become transnational entrepreneurs in order to escape the fate of cheap labor commonly assigned to them in the host labor market. They do so by mobilizing their kin and friendship networks and by making use of modern transportation and electronic communication technologies. Thus, rather than accept a minimum wage job in New York's service sector, some Dominican immigrants get together to buy a Latin *bodega* or grocery store whose stocks of fresh produce and culturally defined goods are supplied by informal partners back home. Faced with the same circumstances in Washington D.C., some Salvadorans become *viajeros*, itinerant merchants transporting U.S. goods from home appliances to old school buses back to El Salvador and bringing back favorite goods of their land for sale in ethnic markets. Ecuadorian Otavalan Indians are the transnational entrepreneurs *par excellence*. They are found marketing colorful woolens and CDs of their plaintive music in street fairs all over the First World and then bringing back from it all kinds of items, including European wives. As Kyle reports in his study of this remarkable entrepreneurial

group, it is common to see in the streets of Otavalo white women attired in the colorful indigenous garbs, who are the wives of successful transnational merchants.

Running parallel to a transnational economy from above, organized by large banks and multinational corporations, there is then an emergent transnational economy from below, organized by common people who have learned to take advantage of the same transportation and communication technologies utilized by the majors. Immigrants and their associates involved in these activities compensate for their lack of financial capital by mobilizing the social capital available through their long-distance networks. Anthropologist Nina Glick Schiller has argued that the same phenomenon took place among European immigrants earlier in the century. Although this may be true in some exceptional cases, differences with the present situation are striking on three counts: first, the number of people involved; second, the nearly instantaneous character of exchange and communications across national borders; third, the cumulative nature of the process, leading to some transnational activities becoming normative among some immigrant groups.

As studies by Basch, Glick-Schiller, Guarnizo, Goldring, Kyle and others show, the numbers involved in transnational activities of different sorts economic, political, and social can represent today a significant proportion of the population of both sending areas and immigrant communities. In this sense, these activities become a distinct path of adaptation quite different from those found among migrants at the turn of the century. That path is made possible by technologies that facilitate rapid displacement across long distances and instantaneous communication. The astronauts Chinese entrepreneurs who live in Monterey Park and other Los Angeles suburbs, but make their living by commuting by air across the Pacific could not have existed in an earlier era. Nor could have the immigrant civic committee, described by Smith, whose members traveled to Mexico to inspect public works in their village over the weekend in order to be back at work in New York City by Monday.

Technological advances, added to the economic, social, and psychological benefits that transnational enterprise can bring, may turn these activities into *the* normative adaptation path for certain migrant groups. Just as in the Mexican towns described in Massey and Espinosa's recent paper, periodic labor migration north was *de rigueur* among young people, so involvement in transnational activities may become the thing to do for immigrants otherwise confined to dead-end jobs and an inferior, discriminated status. That path is, of course, quite different from those envisioned by the canonical assimilation perspective, with direct implications for theory.

As the capital of today's immigration, Los Angeles is, of course, at the forefront of this development. It suffices to visit the suburban enclaves of Monterey Park or Bolsa Avenue, veritable Asian cities in the midst of an American metropolis, to realize how far the phenomenon of transnationalization has progressed. It is worth emphasizing that the concept of transnational enterprise does not refer to immigrant remittances, occasional visits back home, or return migration. These are familiar

phenomena, long described in the classic and contemporary literatures. The concept means something distinct only to the extent that it is restricted to enduring occupational pursuits that require regular communication and contact across international borders. The immigrant who returns home bearing gifts at the time of the town's *fiesta* is not a transnational entrepreneur; the owner of a Dominican garment shop who travels to New York regularly to sell her wares, bringing back fashion designs for her business, is.

Thus restricted, the phenomenon of transnationalism still registers a multiplicity of forms. In Los Angeles, they range from the well-heeled, transpacific activities of Korean and Chinese business people to the far more modest ventures of Salvadoran immigrants setting up informal remittance agencies or going back home to establish U.S.-style small businesses. Worth mentioning as well are the Belizean and Dominican educators who set up schools back home to which children of immigrants are sent to protect them from urban gangs and U.S.-style permissiveness.

The study of this phenomenon is still in its infancy but, after the initial phase of a study designed to understand its origins and reach, Luis Guarnizo and I are able to advance three tentative conclusions: First, our informants tend to see these activities as a positive means to help immigrants cope with difficult labor market conditions and, hence, facilitate their economic progress. Second, transnational activities of an economic, political, and cultural sort vary systematically with the national origins, socio-economic backgrounds, and modes of incorporation of immigrants. Third, the impact of transnational activities commonly is most visible and most deeply felt in the migrants' home communities. From U.S.-style fashions and fast food to the emergence of L.A.-style street gangs, towns and cities in El Salvador, Belize, Guatemala, and other countries have been thoroughly transformed by this process.

Finally, it may be appropriate to reflect a bit on the course traveled by the field of immigration studies in the course of the century and the role of books such as *Ethnic Los Angeles* in it. I will not inflict upon you another rendition of assimilation theory, the melting pot, Anglo hegemony, or other concepts that emerged from the study of earlier European and Asian immigrations. It is enough for my purposes to make just two points. First, those theories and concepts, arising out of a momentous historical experience, represent our intellectual legacy as we attempt to make sense of similar events taking place today. The study of post-1965 immigration and its transformation into new ethnicities started by drawing on this legacy and attempting to fit concepts like assimilation, amalgamation, melting pot, and cultural pluralism, inherited from that era, to the new realities.

Second, much of this legacy is flawed not only because of differences in the origins of immigrants and their contexts of reception, but because that earlier literature featured a tendency to focus on superficial aspects of the process of immigration, often neglecting its structural determinants. Thus debates raged on whether rapid adoption of English and Anglicization of foreign names meant that

Anglo hegemony was paramount or whether the incorporation of items of Italian, Mexican, and Chinese cuisine into American foodways indicated that a melting pot was underway. The literature of the time was fertile in anecdotes featuring a normative adaptation path: from bewildered arrival and discrimination, to hard toil and final acceptance and ascent into middle-class American circles. These debates about the meaning of assimilation ended indecisively because they never addressed the fundamentals of immigration and thus remained at the level of surface perceptions of the process. Those fundamentals were grounded in the political economy and, with few exceptions exemplified by the works of Brinley Thomas, Gerald Rosenblum, and Enrique Santibañez, the research literature did not address them systematically.

As we confront the challenge of advancing theory in this field and providing a sound basis for policy, it is well to reflect on the course traveled from such beginnings. This course has involved describing the novelty and complexity of today's immigration, culling concepts and insights from the classic literature, and simultaneously getting rid of irrelevant debates. Overall, we seem well poised to confront the present challenge because the contributions of researchers from several disciplines have grounded the study of present immigration on its deep structural determinants: the demand for an elastic supply of labor, the pressures and constraints of underdeveloped economies, the dislocations wrought by struggles for the creation and control of national states, and the structures of support created by migrants themselves across political borders.

Contemporary immigration theory has not only sought to understand these basic forces, but has gone beyond them to explore how networks, community normative expectations, and household strategies modify and, at times, subvert structural determinants. This advance is well reflected in the chapters of this book, both in its up-to-date reviews of the literature and in its empirical analyses well grounded in recent theoretical advances. Although again, this is not a school volume, and the chapters do not add up to a unified statement, it represents some of the best empirical work to date in the field. *Ethnic Los Angeles* puts this city squarely at the center of immigration and ethnicity studies, a place so long monopolized by New York, while simultaneously advancing facts of broader import. I am pleased to be the first in this conference to commend the editors and authors and augur to them both good sales and a prompt and strong collegial backlash in the Big Apple and in the Second Havana.