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Authors

Portes, Alejandro
Rumbaut, Rubén G

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IMMIGRANT AMERICA: A PORTRAIT

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Alejandro Portes and Rubén G. Rumbaut

Chapter 2

Theoretical Overview

There is no comprehensive theory of international migration. Those that exist tend to focus on manual labor migrants and then extend, haphazardly, to the origins and patterns of settlement of professional migrants, entrepreneurs, and refugees. Existing theories can be organized into four categories: a) determinants of the origins of migration; b) determinants of its continuation and directionality; c) uses of migrant labor; and d) patterns of migrant settlement and adaptation. We review and evaluate these theories and note their applicability to the different types of migrant described in the prior chapter.

The Origins of Migration

a. *Push-pull*

The most widely held approach to the causes of migration is that of *push-pull theories*. Generally, they consist of a compilation of economic, social, and political factors deemed to force individuals to leave their native region or country and of a similar list impelling them toward another. This approach is employed *mutatis mutandis* for explaining movements other than manual labor migrations. Thus, refugee flows are frequently contrasted with labor migrations by noting the greater importance of “push” factors in the former.¹ Students of professional emigration have compiled polar lists of incentives, often termed *differentials of advantage*, to explain the causes of the brain drain from certain countries.²

These theories of migration also emphasize the gap in wage incentives between sending and receiving regions. The notion of *unlimited supplies of labor*, employed in analysis of both internal and international migrations, is based on the existence of a permanent large differential in favor of receiving areas. A well-known study of international migration notes, for example, that “unlimited supply,” demonstrated by the ease with which new labor flows are initiated when older ones are cut off, is attributed to vast income advantages of advanced countries over peripheral ones.³ The existence of an unlimited labor supply suggests that the initiation of migrants flows depends almost exclusively on labor demand in receiving areas. When such demand exists, migration takes place. Thus, these theories shift emphasis from “push” factors to the “pull” exercised by receiving economies.

This position is a common one among analysts of immigration to the United States. In a study published in 1926, H. Jerome declared that “the pull was stronger than the ‘push’ since the size of the flow was almost always governed by labor conditions in the United States.”⁴ The same position was taken by Brinley Thomas in his study of trans-Atlantic migration. For Thomas, overseas migration from Europe in the nineteenth century was accompanied by substantial flows of capital in the same direction. A positive lagged correlation existed between the two movements: capital investments in North America gave rise to labor demand, which in turn stimulated migration from the old countries.⁵

Several problems exist with these theories on the origins of migration. Lists of push and pull factors are drawn almost invariably *post factum* to explain existing flows. Seldom are they used to predict the beginnings of such movements. The limitations of these theories boil down, ultimately, to their inability to explain why sizable migration occur from certain countries and regions whereas others in similar or even worse conditions fail to generate them. Studies of undocumented labor migration from Mexico to the United States indicate, for example, that the

bulk of this flow originated, until recently, in a few Mexican states that are neither the most impoverished nor necessarily the closest to the U.S. border. Mexican immigrants also come from the urban working class rather than from the most impoverished sectors of the peasantry, where the gap with U.S. wages is presumably largest.⁶

Similarly, analyses of professional emigration from Third World countries reveal that differentials of advantage measured in either economic or social terms are poor predictors of the origins of such flows. Professional migration tends to originate in mid-income countries rather than the poorest ones where wage differentials are greatest. In addition, only a minority of professionals actually emigrate from the sending countries, a fact that the theory cannot successfully explain since all such individuals are presumably subject to the same “push” pressures.⁷

Modern history is replete with instances in which the “pull” of higher wages has failed to attract migration from less developed regions. When labor has been needed, it has had to be coerced out of such places, as in the forced employment of native peoples from Africa and the Americas in mines and plantations. The failure of push-pull theories to explain migration flows adequately has led some scholars to propose an alternative interpretation, based on deliberate labor recruitment, according to which differentials of advantage between sending and receiving regions determine only the *potentiality* for migration. Actual flows begin with planned recruitment by the labor-scarce (and generally more advanced) country. Recruiters inform prospective migrants of the opportunities and advantages to be gained by the movement and facilitate it by providing free transportation and other inducements.

Thus, the vaunted “pull” of American wages had to be actualized in the early years of European migration by organized recruitment. In the 1820s and 1830s, American migration agents were sent to Ireland and the Continent to apprise people of “the better meals and higher wages” available for work in the Hudson and other Canal companies.⁸ Similarly, labor migration from Mexico, later attributed to the vast wage differences between that country and the United States, was initiated by recruiters sent by railroad companies into the interior of the country. Studies of Puerto Rican migration to New England also indicated that this apparently spontaneous flow started with the recruiting activities of large manufacturing concerns among the rural population of the island.⁹

b. Macro- and Micro-economic Theories

Closely related to push-pull theories are those proposed by orthodox economists who analyze migration as an equilibrium-restoring mechanism between labor abundant, but capital-poor countries and regions and those in the opposite situation. As famously proposed by Sir Arthur Lewis, areas where the marginal productivity of workers is near zero benefit from out-migration to those where they can be gainfully employed. The flow is expected to continue until wage rates in sending regions rise to a level comparable to receiving ones, at which point it ceases.¹⁰ Flows of both unskilled labor and highly skilled professionals follow the same equilibrium-restoring logic. The theory focuses exclusively on labor-market imbalances and does not address politically- induced refugee flows.

Paralleling this macro-economic approach, there is a micro-theory of individual decision-making based on cost-benefit analysis. According to it, individuals move to places where they can maximize returns on their human capital, adjusted for the costs of the journey.¹¹ Borjas elaborated a detailed model for this kind where “expected earnings” at places of destination, computed as those corresponding to the actor’s skills, times the probability of employment there are subtracted from expected earnings at home plus the costs of the journey. If the balance is positive for some defined time period, the rational actor migrates; if not, he or she stays.¹²

Economic theories suffer from the same empirical shortcomings as push-pull ones, namely that countries and regions in the less developed world featuring comparable levels of under-employment and poverty produce very different migration streams. Some are sources of sizable flows while, in others, the population stays put. Since all such areas are subject to the same equilibrium- restoring pressures, the theory leaves unexplained why these empirical differences exist. Similarly, at the individual level, it is unclear why rational actors subject to the same cost-benefit calculations in a potential migrant population exhibit different behavior. Some leave, but many others do not. Only a minority of Global South professionals and highly-skilled workers actually become migrants, despite all being subjected to the same pressures.¹³

c. World-System and Dependency Theories

At the opposite end of the ideological continuum are a set of structural theories that view migration flows as a reflection of the ever-growing articulation of the global capitalist economy and its changing labor needs. From this perspective, the central difficulty with push-pull, economic, and labor recruitment theories is not that they fail to identify important forces, but that they do not take into account the changing historical context of migration. For each of these theories, migration occurs between two distinct, autonomous social units: that which expels labor and that which receives it. The possibility that such flows may actually be *internal* to a broader system to which both units belong is not contemplated. An alternative conceptualization of the origins of migration requires a grasp of the character of this changing global system and of the mode of incorporation of different areas into it.

A point of departure for this alternative approach is the fairly obvious observation that the pull of high wages has meant nothing in areas external to the international capitalist economy, since such areas have possessed their own internal economic logic and integration. Hence, when dominant countries wanted to put the population of these outlying regions to work in mines or plantations, force, not economic incentives, had to be used. Labor recruitment worked only when the groups addressed were sufficiently integrated into the capitalist system to apprehend the significance of inducements in relation to their existing economic conditions.

More recently, networks of trade and information across the world, the homogenization of culture, and the extension of consumption expectations even to remote areas have resulted in the “inexhaustible supplies of labor” described in the economic literature. Countries at the center of the system are today in the enviable position of requiring neither force nor recruitment efforts to meet labor demands, but simply regulating a permanently available supply at their borders. The gradual articulation of an international economic system has resulted in changing forces underlying labor migrations. The effects of this articulation on such flows have not been limited to the diffusion of new life standards and expectations. More generally, the penetration of

outlying regions by capitalism has produced imbalances in their internal social and economic structures. Though first induced from the outside, such imbalances become internal to the incorporated societies and lead in time to migratory pressures. As Massey et al. put it:

In essence, world-systems theory argues that the penetration of capitalist economic relations into non-capitalist and pre-capitalist societies creates a mobile population that is prone to migrate... International migration emerges as a natural outgrowth of disruptions and dislocations that inevitably occur in the process of capitalist development.¹⁴

Hence the “pull” from advanced economies is based not primarily on invidious comparisons of advantage with the outside world, but on the solution that migration represents to otherwise insoluble problems *internal* to the sending countries. Studies of both manual and professional flows indicate that immigrants leave their countries not merely to increase their earnings by X amount, but to solve problems rooted in their own national situations. For immigrants, these problems seem internal ones, but in reality they have been induced by the expansion of a global economic system.¹⁵

The imbalancing of peripheral areas ranges from the outright imposition of taxes among native African populations to create a need for ready cash, to the maintenance of wage scales bearing little relation to costs of consumption in contemporary Latin America. It includes as well the training of new Third World professionals for career expectations compatible with the advanced economies but divorced from actual conditions in their own labor markets, a process examined in the preceding chapter.

Labor recruitment was a device used at certain periods in the expansion of the capitalist world economy to make certain populations in backward areas aware of the advantages of out-migration. The pull of the advanced economies, insufficient to provoke migrant flows then, is today more than enough to permit routine control of an “inexhaustible supply.” The changing character of push and pull, the obsolescence of labor recruitment, and the “spontaneous” origins of recent migrant flows are all consequences of the development of the international economy and of the shifting modes of incorporation of countries into it.¹⁶ These relational dynamics within a global order appears to offer the most adequate historical explanation for the origins of international migration.

d. The “New Economics” of Migration

Structural-historical and world systems theories are able to account for why migration flows originate in certain areas of the Global South, depending on the level of colonial and semi-colonial penetration to which they have been subjected. These theories are less successful in accounting for why some communities and individuals in specific labor-exporting countries are more susceptible to these pressures than others. For this task, a more empirically grounded theory is necessary. The “new economics of migration” was formulated to fill this gap. According to it, labor migration is not an individual, but a family strategy to address the economic uncertainties created by imperfectly developed markets in areas affected by the penetration of capitalist corporations and other institutions.¹⁷

In rural communities of the less developed world, families have none or extremely limited access to credit markets to finance investments, future markets to insure crops, or state programs to alleviate spells of unemployment. Their solution is to send some family members, commonly young sons and daughters, to urban areas in the same country or abroad. Families plan diverse migration strategies in order to address various uncertainties. The remittances that their young abroad generate can provide the necessary capital for needed investments and a reserve for economic contingences, such as crop failures or loss of wage employment at home:

In most developed countries, consumers have instantaneous access to credit through universal bank cards such as MasterCard and Visa. As markets expand into domains formerly governed by non-market mechanisms, consumers in developing countries often find themselves filled with a range of near material aspirations acquired from the mass media, but without access to the credit mechanisms that make mass consumption possible...nascent demand for consumer goods creates another motivation for migration abroad.¹⁸

A related mechanism highlighted by the “New Economics” is relative deprivation among non-migrant families when witnessing the significant improvements in the material situation of families with members abroad. Thus, even when no migration pressures existed before, the need to “keep up” with the rising migrant-fueled standards of consumption among members of the community spur other families to adopt the same strategy. As seen in the first chapter, relative deprivation is also a powerful mechanism underlying professional migration as under-employed but highly skilled workers compare their own economic and work situations with more fortunate brethren at home and abroad.¹⁹

World-systems and the “New Economics” approaches complement each other nicely, the first accounting for the broad macro-historical context producing major labor and professional flows and, the second, identifying the micro-dynamics that propel specific families in migrant-sending nations to adopt this strategy as a solution to the disruptions of imperfect capitalist development.

The Stability of Migration

A second aspect discussed by current theories of migration concerns the directionality of these flows and their stability over time. Orthodox economic analyses tend to view migration in fairly simple terms: people leave their home country in response to economic or political conditions, move to another with the hope of a better life, and struggle for years or generations to attain equality within the new society. Once initiated, the movement can be expected to continue as long as push and pull factors remain and as long as the receiving nation permits it. Massive returns of immigrants to their home country only occur under conditions of deliberate repatriation or severe economic depression.

Classic studies of immigration to the United States such as those by Handlin, Thomas and Znaniecki, Child, Wittke, and others generally assumed this basic process and proceeded to analyze the mechanisms for survival among different groups.²⁰ Such studies were concerned with European immigrants--the successive flows of Germans, Irish, Italians, Poles, Jews, and Scandinavians coming to meet labor demand in an expanding economy. While some references

were made to returns to the home country, these reverse flows were generally attributed to individual circumstances or to periodic recessions in the United States.

The experience of massive immigration from peripheral to advanced countries in the post-World War II period has given rise to a different theoretical emphasis. The bulk of labor migrations in this period has taken place under “guest worker” arrangements or as a surreptitious movement. These immigrants have been labeled *target earners*, since they are assumed to be motivated by the accumulation of money with which to fulfill goals in the home country. It has been noted that a very high proportion of their earnings are sent home as remittances, either to subsidize consumption needs or for investment.²¹

This “economic man” characterization was accompanied by an emphasis on these immigrants’ lack of integration and their general indifference to the institutions of the host society. Immigrants seldom speak the language of the receiving country and seldom take part in its associations or in intimate relationships with members of the majority. This divorce from the surrounding society enables them to concentrate exclusively on monetary rewards and to perform jobs that they would reject in their own country.

This theory has accorded central importance to the phenomenon of return migration. Unlike earlier analyses, it views return to the home country as part of the normal, patterned sequence of labor displacements. While it acknowledges the settlement of vast numbers of European immigrants the United States at an earlier period, it contends that permanence in the receiving country is not at present a sign of immigrant success:

It is absolutely essential to dispel the notion that seems to emerge in naive versions of this idea of settlement as *success* that the essential aspect of *success is income*. Migrants tend to be target earners, and *the effect of rising incomes, all other things being equal, is to increase the rate at which they return home*. This late effect occurs because, in terms of the original motivations of migrants, settlement is the product of failure.²²

This ebb-and-flow characterization of immigration advances our understanding in comparison with earlier descriptions of a simple unidirectional movement. The emphasis on return migration also agrees with *some* aspects of contemporary labor flows to the United States, as described by recent studies. Still, this alternative theory also runs into difficulties. First, there is evidence that many immigrants do stay in the host country precisely because they have been economically successful. Second, the movement in many cases does not involve a single coming and going, but a series of displacements, frequently involving a seasonal pattern.²³

More generally, this new theory, like earlier ones, is based on the perspective of the receiving country and, hence, fails to capture the process in its totality. It does not take into account for instance the actual nature of “return” migration, that may be either to the actual places of origin or to others. Similarly, it does not consider common patterns in which individuals alternate between internal and international migration or in which households “assign” some members to travel abroad and some to journey to cities within the country. These omissions stem from the fact that this theory conceives of international migration as a process occurring *between two separate national units*. An alternative conceptualization would again be based on a definition of the flow as internal to the same global economic system. Migration has a

dual economic function: from the standpoint of capital, it is the means to fulfill labor demand at different points of the system; from the standpoint of labor, it is the means to take advantage of opportunities distributed unequally in space.²⁴

The complexity of international labor flows is a function not only of the shifting locations of opportunities, but of the fact that those locations sought by individuals and families change over time. Opportunities for wage earnings are often better in national and international centers, while those for investment in land or small enterprises are often better in the places of origin. The progressive articulation of a global economic order allows individuals and families in remote areas to gain access to a much broader range of economic opportunities and to “map” their use. Villages in the interior of Mexico today maintain regular contact with ethnic communities in Chicago. Remote towns in the mountains of the Dominican Republic are accurately informed about labor market conditions in Queens and the Bronx.²⁵

The more recent theory of migrant transnationalism has been developed precisely to emphasize the resilient relations of migrants with their places of origin and the complexity that these relations acquire over time. These “multi-stranded” relationships lead a number of immigrants into dual lives—traveling frequently back home, sending remittances and making investments there, and maintaining dual residences.²⁶ Immigrants frequently create organizations to formalize and stabilize such contacts over time. These range from “hometown committees” created by humble migrants from rural areas to formal professional and alumni associations created by the highly skilled. Recent research on transnational organizations have unveiled the important fact that migrant involvement in them does not decline over time and actually increases with education, income, length of residence, and security of legal status.²⁷ We will have to more to say on the subject later on but, for the moment the crucial idea is that immigration theory has left behind the image of these flows as unidirectional escapes from misery and want and the parallel idea of their occurrence among self-contained nation-states. The progressive articulation of a single global economy and the complexity of common people’s adaptations to it is more properly captured by the transnational perspective.

A related question is the perpetuation of migrant flows over time. Regardless of the impulses and motivations that gave rise to migration in the first place, they commonly do not suffice to account for the sustainability of such movements. To accomplish this we must introduce the concept of social networks. As Massey *et al.* put it:

Migrant networks are sets of interpersonal ties that connect migrants, former migrants, and non-migrants in origins and destination areas through ties of kinship, friendship, and shared community origins. They increase the likelihood of international movements because they lower the cost and risk of such movements.²⁸

Social scientists have long recognized the importance of networks in the build-up of migration systems. This recognition goes as far back as such classics as Thomas and Znaniecki’s *The Polish Peasant in Europe and America*. Tilly conceptualizes migration as a process of network-building that depends on and, in turn, reinforces social relationships across space.²⁹ The microstructures thus created not only permit the survival of immigrants, but also constitute a significant undercurrent running counter to dominant economic trends.

This alternative perspective helps explain a phenomenon that escapes earlier theories, namely the resilience of migrant flows after original push and pull forces have disappeared or after original opportunities for target earning have been removed. The fact that migrant flows do not respond automatically to such changes is related to their organization through social networks. Once in place, these structures stabilize such movements by adapting to shifting economic conditions and by generating new opportunities apart from the original incentives. While not indifferent to the broader context, the network structures of migration have frequently led to outcomes quite different from those anticipated by conventional economic hypotheses.

It is commonly recognized that pioneer migrants face the highest costs, as they confront the risks of the journey unaided. Once, several such trips have been successfully completed, the costs of migration are significantly lowered for future migrants who can draw on the pioneers' knowledge and experience. The ability to obtain such information and assistance constitutes the would-be migrants' social capital.³⁰ The pool of such capital increases with each additional journey, leading to the emergence of veritable migration systems. These systems can become self-perpetuating even after the disappearance of the original incentives for migration because of the emergence of secondary consideration, such as family events and obligations.

The durability of migration systems is not open-ended, however, since they can be brought to an end by external circumstances. One such circumstance is the literal emptying of places of origin, aside from the old and the infirm; another is a glut of migrants in places of destination, reducing chances for employment and taxing the ability of settled migrants to assist newcomers. As de Haas has emphasized, the operation of such forces lead to the slowing down of migration systems, in such way that the effect of social networks over time can be charted as an S-asymptote—increasing sharply in the early years before reaching a plateau and then declining rapidly.³¹

Other forces may also bring migration systems to an end. They include fertility decline and sustained economic development in areas of out-migration, as well as the investments and philanthropic initiatives of transnational migrant organizations that may significantly improve living conditions there. Paradoxically, social networks that, at an earlier stage, underlie the emergence of migration systems may, at a later time, undermine them through the developmental activities of expatriates.³²

The Uses of Labor Migration

Most contemporary theorizing on international migration has focused neither on its origins nor on its directionality and stability over time. Instead, the theories have dealt with the two remaining aspects: uses of migration for the receiving economy and the adaptation of immigrants. The different theoretical positions on these issues are both more complex and more controversial than those reviewed above, since each lays claim to a supporting empirical literature.

The orthodox, neoclassical economic perspective views immigrant labor as a supplement to a scarce domestic labor force. Immigrants are recruited to fill jobs in an expanding economy that has run out of hands in its own population. This is the type of situation assumed since the time of classical political economy. John Stuart Mill, for example, defended labor emigration in

those terms. He noted, however, that such labor could be profitably utilized by capital in the new countries only if immigrants were prevented from gaining access to land. In the latter case, immigrants would work only for themselves, denying their labor to employers. In the last chapter of *Principles of Political Economy*, Mill had no qualms in abandoning laissez faire doctrines to advocate government sponsorship of emigration. Only state power could prevent migrants from turning into colonists of little or no use to capital.³³

The situation studied by Mill was obviously one in which land was plentiful. The actual mechanism by which labor scarcity and demand for new labor were created in nineteenth-century America has been described by Lebergott. The supply of cheap land then appeared inexhaustible. The availability of the western frontier enabled domestic workers to invest directly in land, abandoning wage labor for agricultural self-employment. The same could be done by immigrants after a few years:

In 1820 when lands were worth \$50 per acre in Massachusetts and one dollar in Ohio, the New England farmer improved his condition by emigrating to Ohio, and when in 1840 the best lands of Ohio were worth \$50 per acre and those of Illinois one dollar and a quarter he could again move with profit to Illinois; and again in 1850 from lands worth \$50 in Illinois to the cheap lands of Minnesota and Kansas.³⁴

Westward emigration by natives and older immigrants maintained a downward pressure on the labor supply, helping to keep wages high and attracting new immigrant flows. But why didn't new immigrants take immediate advantage of frontier lands? The answer was the combined lack of capital and lack of experience in the new country. They concentrated in eastern cities, and only after accumulating sufficient savings and experience did many start the trek westward. This pattern explains both the attractiveness of immigrant labor to eastern employers and the rapid fluctuations of the flow corresponding to the ups and downs of U.S. labor demand.³⁵

Orthodox economic theory explains the gravitation of immigrants toward the worst jobs as a natural consequence of an expanding economy. In this view, native workers move upward toward better paid, more prestigious, or more autonomous positions. In the United States, the existence of a frontier played a central role in maintaining an "open" economic structure and abundant opportunities for advancement. This situation can occur, at least in theory, even in the absence of cheap land through the expansion of an industrial economy. Because labor scarcity occurs at the bottom, wages for unskilled and semiskilled workers tend to rise as a result of employer competition. The dual consequences are the attraction of prospective immigrants and the need for employers to seek new sources of labor as means of controlling or reducing wages. Both trends encourage further immigration.

As target earners, immigrant workers possess an additional desirable characteristic, namely their disregard, at least initially, of status considerations. For native workers, wages signal a position in the occupational status system so that they shy away from the lowest-wage menial jobs. Raising wage levels at the bottom in order to attract native workers triggers *structural inflation*, as higher-status workers demand higher pay in order to preserve their relative standing. An abundance of unskilled foreign labor neutralizes this danger.³⁶

For orthodox economic theory, immigrant workers are not qualitatively different from native ones except that they are new entrants in the labor force and have less experience and perhaps less education. With time, immigrants acquire the experience and qualifications to move upward as well, leaving the bottom of the occupational structure to new labor flows. The process helps maintain three moving equilibria over time: (1) between labor scarcity in some countries and labor abundance in others; (2) between the needs of employers and the needs and skills of workers; and (3) between workers' aspirations and mobility opportunities in the economic structure.

A second theoretical perspective has focused on the experience of those immigrant groups who have not come of their own free will or who have been made to work under conditions of slavery, servitude, or peonage. These *colonized minorities* also meet a labor demand, but one qualitatively distinct from that described by orthodox theory. They occupy positions at the bottom of the occupational structure; not, however, positions vacated by domestic workers, but rather ones requiring a particular class of worker since no free domestic labor can be found to perform them.

In his classic analysis of plantation economies, Edgar Thompson noted the gradual development of this institution and its shifts from white indentured servants to black slave labor. In areas of open resources, where land was far more abundant than labor, it was easier to recruit a work force than to keep it. Indentured servants were not motivated to work for planters, since they were paid in advance, but they were highly motivated to escape and work for themselves. Natives were also difficult to control. In the land of their birth, they would rebel or escape to remote places rather than submit to the planter's yoke.

It thus became necessary to locate a labor force fit for the hard work but so alien that it would become entirely dependent on the planter's providence. For such workers, the plantation would not be a work-place but a "total institution", where laborers spent their entire lives and without which they would lack the means of survival. Thus, the choice of African slaves and the transformation of plantations into social and political as well as economic organizations evolved together. Not until these developments had taken place did a racial ideology emerge as a means of legitimizing them.³⁷

The incorporation of a colonized minority to a host economy has been marked in general by two central features. First, the group is employed in nonurban extractive tasks, primarily mining and agriculture. Second, production is organized along precapitalist lines, where labor is subject, under various legal arrangements, to the will of employers. The existence of labor under these circumstances gives rise, in turn, to ideologies that justify the situation in terms of racial or cultural differences and the need to educate and control the subordinate group. For Blauner, the colonization process is marked by five major events:

First, colonization begins with a forced, involuntary entrance into the dominant society. Second, the colonizing power acts on a policy to constrain, transform, or destroy the indigenous culture. Third, representatives of the dominant power administer the law and control the government bureaucracy. Fourth, there is a separation of labor status between the colonizers and the colonized. Fifth, racism develops as a principle through which people are seen as biologically inferior in order to justify their exploitation.³⁸

The shift from precapitalist unfree arrangements to fully capitalist relations of production is experienced only in partial form by colonized minorities. Though, in theory, these minorities come eventually to join the “free” labor force, they are still relegated to the worst menial jobs. This situation is strikingly different from that portrayed by orthodox theory: when employed as wage labor, colonized minorities are not simply “new” entrants in the work force capable of moving upwards after a period of time. For colonized minorities that mobility is blocked by a variety of legal and informal mechanisms. Racial and cultural ideologies legitimize both their condition and the deliberate closure of opportunities to move out of it. No colonized minorities exist at present in the United States, but the legacy of slavery and, to a lesser extent, the colonization of the Mexican population of the Southwest left major historical traces that lasts to our day. The condition of these groups --generations after their formal release from colonial bonds and the end of overt discrimination -- is what these theories attempt to capture.

The central feature of the colonial perspective on immigration is that it regards the use of this labor force as useful for the dominant racial/ cultural group *as a whole*. The different classes of the dominant group benefit from the colonial situation in different ways. Employers gain because they have at their disposal a cheap and exploitable source of labor to which they can dictate their own terms. Dominant-group workers benefit in various ways. First, they gain symbolically by the existence of an inferior group with which they can compare their own lot. This allows them to entertain feelings of superiority and to identify vicariously with the dominant classes. Second, they stand to gain materially through three mechanisms: (1) the exclusion of the colonized from competition for the better-paid menial and supervisory jobs; (2) the lowering of the cost of goods and services produced with colonized labor, which cheapens their own consumption; (3) the redistribution of part of the surplus extracted from that labor by the employer class in the form of higher wages and other benefits for dominant-group workers.

The ethnically dominant group as a whole thus endeavors to stabilize its monopoly of economic and social advantages through mechanisms that reserve the best positions for its members. In the United States, the formal end of slavery was accompanied by the creation of the Jim Crow legal system to perpetuate the condition of the colonized; a set of similar practices emerged in the Southwest to preserve the subordinate status of Mexicans.³⁹

A third perspective on the uses of migrant labor also stresses the significance of racial/cultural differences and a racist ideology, but interprets its effects differently. Employing migrants from culturally and racially distinct origins is identified here as a common strategy used by the employer class *against* organizations of domestic workers. Hence, the benefits brought about by a subordinate minority in the labor market accrue not to all members of the dominant racial/ethnic group, but only to members of the employer class. Such benefits are extracted precisely against the interests of the domestic proletariat, which is pitted against the new source of labor.

Immigrant workers, whether free or coerced, are generally in a weaker position to resist employer dictates than domestic ones. First, immigrants lack familiarity with economic and social conditions in places of destination, and do not have the means to resist exploitation. Second, they are separated from the domestic working class by linguistic and cultural barriers and by the all too common prejudices among the latter. Third, conditions in places of origin are frequently so desperate that immigrants willingly accept whatever kind of compensation is given

them. Fourth, an immigrant labor force is usually brought under legal constraints that place it from the start in a vulnerable position. While the nature of these arrangements varies with the country or period, their common effect is to render immigrants subject to ready exclusion or deportation. Organizational efforts or protests among immigrants can thus be defined as a police matter, rather than one involving legitimate class revindications.⁴⁰

This theory of labor immigration does not necessarily contradict the colonialist one since each is applicable to a different historical period. However, this last perspective calls attention to an important outcome neglected by most analysts of colonialism: a division of labor that works to the direct advantage of certain classes within the racially dominant group and to the direct disadvantage of others. In this model, ideology is employed less to legitimize the privileges of a race or cultural group over another than to sustain the separation between two segments of the working class and to fragment organizations based on class solidarity. The widespread racism among domestic workers is thus, ultimately, an ideology directed against themselves.

This analysis directly contradicts predictions stemming from the orthodox economic perspective on labor immigration. If foreign labor is imported to serve exclusively as a supplement to the domestic labor force, a strong inverse correlation should obtain between domestic levels of unemployment and size of the immigrant flow: periods of economic recession that bring about higher unemployment should produce, within a relatively short time, a decrease in immigration. On the other hand, if the function of immigration is not solely to supplement the domestic labor force but to discipline it, the result would be quite different. In this case, there should be a *positive* correlation over time between levels of unemployment and immigration. An organized and militant labor force becomes “useless” to capital, that then opts in favor of hiring immigrant workers over domestic ones. The presence of this new preferred source of labor has the effect of accelerating the displacement of domestic workers, thus leading to higher unemployment. As we saw in the first chapter, this was the motivation that undergirded the shift by industrial employers in the Northeast and Midwest from white European to Southern black labor starting in the mid- 1910s.

This historical experience was given theoretical form by Edna Bonacich. She labels her thesis “a split-labor market interpretation”. During the decades following World War I, southern black migrants constituted a “preferred” labor force because of their willingness to work at menial jobs for low wages, their lack of organizational experience, and their deferential attitude toward bosses. The strategy through which employers targeted this migrant labor force against the organizational efforts of white workers took three forms: first, strikebreaking; second, replacement of white workers with lower-paid black labor; third, a policy of paternalism towards black workers and organizations that cemented their alliance with employers against all- white unions.⁴¹

As we have seen, European workers had been used before blacks to fill a similar role. In 1832, the directors of the Delaware and Hudson Canal, confronted with demands for higher wages, found that “against this evil the only effective remedy was the introduction of additional miners from abroad.” Immigrant labor was imported as promptly as possible and to such an extent that a recurrence of the “evil” was not experienced for some time. More recently, Galarza describes a similar process involving the use of Mexican labor against organizational efforts of domestic farm workers in California and throughout the Southwest.⁴² In this manner, the role of

Southern black and Mexican workers shifted from that of colonized minorities to that of being the core of a split labor market developed against the organizational efforts of the white (native and European) working class in the first half of the twentieth century.

The fourth perspective on immigrant labor combines elements of the preceding two, though it focuses primarily on the post-World War II situation. Different versions of this perspective exist, but the most coherent one is that based on an analysis of the increasing segmentation of social relationships of production under advanced capitalism. The core of this “dual economy” thesis is the observation that advanced economies generate an oligopolistic segment in which control of the different facets of production and commercialization is far more extensive than among earlier capitalist firms.

The emergence of oligopolies in different segments of the economy is a process common to all the industrialized capitalist countries. These firms are said to control a significant portion of their respective markets, rely on capital intensive technology to enhance productivity, and are able to pass on part or all of the increases in the wage bill to consumers through their control of markets. Their social relationships of production have several distinct characteristics determined both by requirements of firms and by past struggles between management and labor for control of the production process.⁴³

A prime goal of corporations in this oligopolistic sector is stability in labor relations, and the main strategy to accomplish it is bureaucratization of the production process and the creation of so-called internal markets. *Bureaucratization* means the substitution of a system of control based on direct personal command by one based on adherence to impersonal rules. *Internal markets* means the division of work into finely graded job ladders. Hiring is generally at the bottom, and access to higher positions is usually through internal promotion rather than external recruitment. Stability is promoted by the fact that workers confront not the arbitrary orders of a boss or foremen, but rather a set of explicitly laid-out rules. More importantly job ladders offer incentives to remain with a particular firm, since seniority and training are rewarded with increases in pay and status. Oligopolistic corporations are able to create internal markets because of their size and because they can compensate for increases in labor costs with increases in productivity, higher prices for the final product, or both. Wages in this sector of the economy are thus higher and fringe benefits and work conditions more desirable.⁴⁴

A second segment of the economy is formed by those smaller competitive enterprises that more faithfully reflect the structural conditions under early industrial capitalism. Such firms operate in an environment of considerable economic uncertainty. Their markets are usually local and regional, they do not generate their own technology, and they often rely on labor-intensive processes of production. Firms in this sector do not have internal markets. Because they also lack a monopoly position, they face greater difficulties in passing on increases in their wage bill. The conditions of production in this sector thus lead to a strong downward pressure on wages. Control over workers cannot depend on the incentives attached to job ladders or be based on impersonal rules. Instead, discipline is imposed directly, and it is often harsh. Firing is a permanent threat and a common practice, since most labor employed by these firms can be easily replaced. Wages are not only lower than in the oligopolistic sector, but their distribution is flat over time.

For workers in the secondary sector, seniority is not a guarantee of higher income job security. High labor turnover in these firms is a joint consequence of employer dismissals and of worker dissatisfaction. The viability of these relationships of production depends on the presence of a labor force that is both abundant and powerless. Otherwise, labor costs would go up and the existence of firms, as presently structured, would be threatened.⁴⁵

Differences in conditions of employment in a dual economy do not depend primarily on the requirements of the job or on the qualifications of the worker. Advantages in income and security enjoyed by those in the oligopolistic sector are the direct outcome of earlier class struggles that resulted in an eventual accommodation: organized labor gained advantages and security, while firms gained control over the work process in a manner that promoted stability and minimized disturbances in production. Hence, it is perfectly possible that *jobs* with equal requirements are unequally rewarded depending on the segment of the economy in which they are situated.

Entrance into the oligopolistic labor market is primarily a function of the requirements of firms and not the qualifications of workers. As part of its control over the work process, management has systematically opted for capital-intensive technology that reduces labor demand. The supply of qualified workers for available positions in the oligopolistic sector consistently exceeds demand. Hence, it is perfectly possible that *individuals* with equal qualification are rewarded unequally depending on the segment of the economy in which they are employed.

The class struggles that led to the bifurcation of relationships of production into a dual labor market in the United States were conducted when most workers were white. They involved both white Americans and older European immigrants. The final consolidation of a protected, unionized labor force in this segment of the economy took place only after the New Deal and World War II. Subsequent entrants into the labor market confronted a situation of progressive closure of oligopolistic corporations and employment restricted to the competitive sector. These new entrants were, for the most part, unorganized and hence vulnerable. They included white women, white teenagers, and white rural migrants, as well as black and Puerto Rican migrants and immigrants.⁴⁶ Hence, the same minorities that had previously served as the mainstay of colonial and split-labor regimes now found themselves confined to the secondary sector.

Students of immigration in the United States noted the increasing reliance of competitive firms on immigrants, primarily unauthorized ones, as a source of labor. This process accelerated in the mid- 1960s (coinciding with the end of the Bracero Program) and reached both numerical importance and notoriety during the 1970s. It coincided with the exhaustion of certain labor sources-- teenagers and rural migrants-- and the increasing resistance of others to accept conditions of employment in these firms. The analysis offered by dual-economy theory and its predictions concerning labor immigration are more complex than both the colonialist and split-labor market theories. This complexity is not necessarily a function of shortcomings in the other perspectives, but derives from an emphasis on the more recent transformation of advanced economies.

The dual-economy thesis agrees with notions advanced by the two preceding perspectives, but in a modified form. It agrees with colonialist theory that the incorporation of a

subordinate racial or cultural minority into the labor market can benefit both employers and workers among the dominant group. This prediction is valid *if* we limit the definition of domestic labor to those in the primary market. Workers in this sector benefit from the labor of subordinate immigrant groups for all the reasons advanced by colonialist theory: lower costs of goods and services, the possibility of sharing in the surplus extracted from immigrants, and the symbolic rewards of a superior status.

The dual-economy analysis also agrees with split-labor market theory in its characterization of immigrants as a “preferred” labor force used against the organizational efforts of domestic workers. This prediction is valid *if* we limit the definition of domestic labor to those in the competitive sector. The increase in illegal immigration during the last decades of the twentieth century and its employment by competitive firms were developments targeted against the resistance of the domestic-minority work force to accept low wages and harsh treatment and their efforts to improve their lot. The situation in this case is different from that described by Bonacich, because it does not pit vulnerable immigrant labor against an unionized working class in the forward sectors of the economy. Instead, immigrants were used to undercut domestic workers who were themselves weak and frequently unorganized and who were employed by the most technologically backward firms. Oligopolistic labor, most of it white, was largely insulated from the competition of illegal foreign workers and could actually profit from their presence.

The rapid de-industrialization of the American economy, described in the first chapter, has significantly altered the portrait of the labor market and uses of migrant labor outlined by the dual economy thesis. Large swathes of what had been previously portrayed as the primary market disappeared, as formerly oligopolistic firms were forced to cope with increasing foreign competition. They did so by ditching the “historic pact” with organized labor in the post-World War II era. The process of “industrial re-structuring” in effect did away with much of American industry through massive plant closures and relocations of production facilities abroad. Predictably, vast segments of the formerly protected primary labor market just melted away.

The new service economy that replaced the old industrial order and the accompanying “hourglass” labor market portrayed in Figure 1.2 have had predictably effects in the uses of migrant labor. Industrial re-structuring and labor flexibility opened the top of the hourglass market to highly qualified foreign workers. As seen in Chapter 1, the H1-B program has been explicitly designed to facilitate their arrival. Menial jobs in services and agriculture at the bottom of the hourglass continued to attract unskilled workers from Mexico, Central America, and the Caribbean. They actually became the preferred labor source for this sector by dint of their vulnerability and willingness to perform harsh jobs for low pay.⁴⁷ In the absence of legal channels for entry, the bulk of this immigration arrived clandestinely. More recently, as seen previously, the H2-A program has been significantly expanded in order to attract migrant workers needed in U.S. agriculture and services, but increasingly unwilling to brave the risks and costs of a clandestine journey. The expansion of this program contains the seeds of a regular temporary labor system to address the needs of competitive firms in these sectors of the economy on a regular basis.

The Entrepreneurial Path

Theories of the use of migrant labor have covered in detail different aspects of the historical experience of migrant workers. They have neglected, however, an important alternative to wage work, namely self-employment. Since the late nineteenth century, students of immigration have noted the high prosperity of migrants to go into small business. In chapter 1, we saw that entrepreneurs represent one of the main types of contemporary immigrants to the United States and explored some of the consequences of this alternative path.

Several theories have been advanced to explain the phenomenon of immigrant entrepreneurship.⁵⁰ The best known is probably Ivan Light and Edna Bonacich's theory of minority disadvantage. As immigrants find themselves handicapped by generalized discrimination and lack of knowledge of the host language and culture, they turn to small business as an alternative means of economic survival. The early experience of Chinatowns in California and Japanese small business throughout the West Coast, related in Chapter 1, provide evidence in support of this theory.⁵¹ However, important anomalies do exist. Other equally discriminated foreign groups have been unable to reproduce the dense entrepreneurial networks created by Jewish immigrants at the turn of the twentieth century or by Koreans, Cubans, and Chinese in its last decades.

Further, independent entrepreneurship turned out to be not merely a survival alternative, but a path toward rapid economic mobility in many instances. The creation of business enclaves by Russian Jews in the Lower East Side of Manhattan and by the Japanese in San Francisco, Los Angeles, and Seattle allowed these groups to move ahead rapidly in the economic ladder leaving other groups composed mainly of wage workers behind. The more recent Cuban enclave of Miami, the Koreatown of Los Angeles; the New York and San Francisco Chinatowns; and the Little Saigon area of Orange County have yielded, by and large, the same results.⁵²

The concepts of social networks and social capital, discussed earlier in connection with the origins of immigrant flows, can be invoked again for the explanation of these economic phenomena. It is clear that entrepreneurially-oriented foreign groups make use of intra-ethnic networks and cultural solidarity to compensate for the barriers posed by discrimination and lack of business contacts in the outside world. As will be seen in greater detail in Chapter 4, the ethnic community can become in these circumstances, a source of capital, labor, and market information supporting business success. In a sense, immigrant entrepreneurs compensate for their lack of money capital with the extensive social capital borne out of ethnic solidarity.⁵³

Yet, this theory also falls short because social networks and solidarity are common among all minority groups, immigrant or otherwise, but only a few of them have managed to create viable economic enclaves. An extensive literature on African-American inner cities, for example, has demonstrated the existence and vital role of social networks and social capital as means for personal and family survival. However, the operation of these mechanisms never managed to lift these areas out of a situation of permanent poverty and social marginalization. These areas, as those created by most immigrant minorities, develop into ethnic neighborhoods, but not economic enclaves.⁵⁴

The key element for collective business advancement lies in the presence of a critical mass of migrants with business expertise acquired in their country of origin and brought along into the host society. As seen in chapter 1, every experience where entrepreneurship has led to the emergence of a viable enclave has been marked by the presence of individuals skilled in industrial and commercial trades.⁵⁵ Broad human capital resulting from a general liberal education does not suffice; instead, the key has been specific expertise in organizing and operating different types of firms. When a class of such persons has existed in an ethnic community, businesses have emerged in sufficient numbers to provide an alternative path to wage employment in the outside economy. In time, managerial and investment knowledge diffuse from the early entrepreneurs to their co-ethnic workers providing a platform for sustained economic mobility. Zhou concludes her well-known review of ethnic enterprise in the United States on the following note:

The central idea of the enclave economy concept is that the enclave is more than just a shelter for the disadvantaged who are forced to take on either self-employment or marginal work in small businesses. Rather, the ethnic enclaves possesses the potential to develop a distinct structure of economic opportunities as an effective alternative path to social mobility.⁵⁶

As we shall see in Chapter 7, this path has significant effects for the educational and occupational achievement of the offspring of these immigrants—the second generation. Although the enclave path is exceptional, it possesses significant theoretical implications as a means to escape the secondary labor market and the bottom tier of the labor market “hourglass”.

Immigrant Adaptation

The last set of the theories deals with the social relationships between immigrants and members of the native majority and their cultural interactions. Different perspectives on immigrant adaptation correspond to different theories on the uses of immigrant labor. Thus, the theory that views immigrants essentially as a supplement to the domestic labor force is complemented by a first perspective on adaptation in terms of social and cultural assimilation. The *assimilationist school*, as these writing are collectively known, comprises most of the classic studies of immigrants in the United States. These include the work of such sociologists and historians as Handlin on the urban Irish, Child on the second-generation Italians, Wittke on the Germans, and Blegen on the Norwegians. It also includes an array of subsequent scholars, from Milton Gordon to Thomas Sowell.⁵⁷

The assimilationist perspective defines the situation of immigrants as involving a clash between conflicting cultural values and norms. The native majority represents the “core” while immigrants are the “periphery”. Assimilation occurs by the diffusion of values and norms from core to periphery. By osmosis, as it were, these new cultural forms are gradually absorbed by immigrants bringing them closer to the majority. The process, sometimes called *acculturation*, is generally seen as irreversible though it may take different lengths of time for different groups.⁵⁸

In the most extensive treatise on assimilation, Milton Gordon defines acculturation as a precondition for other forms of assimilation. Next in line comes structural assimilation, or extensive participation of immigrants in primary groups of the core society. This is followed, in a

loose sequence, by amalgamation, or intermarriage, between immigrants and natives and by identificational assimilation, of the development of a common national identity based on the symbols of the core group. Attitudinal assimilation reflects the absence of prejudice toward immigrants, while behavioral assimilation represents the absence of discrimination.⁵⁹

According to Gordon, there is no necessary linear relationship between different types of assimilation past the stage of acculturation. Learning the norms and values of the society may lead to an immediate reduction of prejudice and discrimination, with both groups choosing to remain apart in terms of social interaction. Identificational assimilation might occur in the absence of amalgamation and even of extensive structural assimilation. Nevertheless, it is the latter process-- extensive primary-level interaction between immigrants and members of the core group-- that Gordon defines as central to assimilation.⁶⁰

This view is shared by other sociologists of the same school, such as Warner and Srole. For them, assimilation is a linear process, but the speed at which immigrants gain access to closer interaction with members of the core groups is affected by three variables: race, religion, and language. The more similar an immigrant groups is to the white, Protestant, English speaking majority, the faster they will be assimilated. The process may take many generations for immigrants different from the majority in all three variables. For Warner and Srole, race is the primary criterion and nonwhite groups are those whose assimilation is most difficult.⁶¹

Gordon examines three alternative ideological tendencies or viewpoints on assimilation labeled Anglo conformity, the melting pot, and cultural pluralism. As the label indicates, *Anglo conformity* refers to the complete surrender of immigrants' symbols and values and their absorption by the core culture. The process culminates in identificational assimilation, though it may not lead to structural assimilation or to the total elimination of discrimination and prejudice. The *melting pot* thesis holds that assimilation results in a blend of the values, norms, life styles, and institutions of the different groups, both core and peripheral. This is manifested, for example, in "American" food, in the incorporation into the language of a number of foreign expressions, and in the adoption of symbols and festivities brought by different immigrant groups.

Cultural pluralism refers to a situation in which immigrants are able to retain their own culture, modified by contact with the core but still preserved in its distinct character. Under pluralism, these differences do not result in prejudice and discrimination; each group is allowed to function in a plane of relative equality with limited structural assimilation and amalgamation among them. While cultural pluralism is the option favored by most immigrants, Gordon asserts that it has never really existed in the United States. In his view, the acculturation process has led to outcomes best reflected in the Anglo conformity thesis: basic values, norms, and symbols taught to immigrants and fully absorbed by their children correspond to those of the dominant culture.⁶²

Other assimilationists, such as Sowell, argue that the more benevolent melting-pot imagery is actually the more empirically accurate. American society and culture are a distillate of many national contributions, of which the Anglo-Protestant tradition is a most significant but by no means exclusive one. In words that parallel those of many others, Sowell asserts that:

The American culture is built on the food, the language, the attitudes, and the skills from numerous groups...features of American culture...are a common heritage, despite ethnic diversities that still exist. Budweiser is drunk in Harlem, Jews eat pizza, and Chinese restaurants are patronized by customers who are obviously not Chinese.⁶³

While rejecting such statements as superficial, other writers believe, nonetheless, that the melting-pot concept is useful as a description of more fundamental processes. Rebuffed in their attempts to translate acculturation into structural assimilation, second- and third- generation “immigrants” have developed their own melting pots segmented along religious lines. Kennedy and, subsequently, Herberg elaborated the notion of a *triple melting pot*, in which primary-level relations and intermarriages occur within broad groupings defined by religion: Protestants, Catholics, and Jews. While ethnic identities might persist within each of these broad segments, the general tendency is toward emergence of an undifferentiated “American” population within each of them.⁶⁴ Gordon endorsed this typology concluding that Anglo conformity in the culture and segmented melting pots in the social structure are the basic tendencies of immigrant assimilation in the United States. Other authors, particularly Glazer and Moynihan, have added to the triple melting pot a fourth segment separated from the others not by religious, but by racial lines. Blacks and perhaps other nonwhites do not readily “melt” into the broader society or its subsegments, although they have also been acculturated in the dominant values.⁶⁵

Despite the many qualifications and typologies that pervade the assimilationist literature, its basic insight is that contact between a foreign minority and an established majority will lead, through a series of stages, to an eventual merging of values, symbols, and identities. This integration into a single society and culture, or perhaps into several major subsegments, is held to be a good thing. For the majority, such merging represents a guarantee of social stability and the enrichment provided by elements of new cultures. For the minority, it offers the possibility of access to positions of higher prestige and power and the promise of a better future for their children.

The assimilation perspective reflects a view of society as a consensual structure. Social change consists of attempts to restore equilibrium disrupted by external forces. The massive arrival of individuals with a foreign culture represents such a disruption. Assimilation is the process by which equilibrium is restored. As immigrants come to learn the new culture and language, they shed traditional preconceptions and early feelings of alienation. As they come to know and understand members of the core majority, they adopt a more positive attitude towards them. This process of apprenticeship is rewarded, in turn, by greater openness of the host society and greater opportunities for economic and social advancement.⁶⁶

The internal colonialist, split-labor market, and dual-economy perspective on immigrant labor correspond to a very different analysis of immigrant adaptation. From these alternative viewpoints, greater knowledge of the core language and culture by new immigrants and greater familiarity with members of the dominant group do not necessarily lead to more positive attitudes and more rapid assimilation. Such conditions can lead precisely to the opposite, as immigrants learn their true economic position and are exposed to racist ideologies directed against them as instruments of domination. This perspective on immigrant adaptation emphasizes *ethnic resilience* as an instrument of resistance by oppressed minorities.

Studies of ethnicity typically begin by noting the persistence of distinct cultural traits among groups formed by immigration despite extensive periods of time in the host country. This situation can only be explained, from an assimilationist perspective, by the insufficient diffusion of the culture of the core to peripheral groups. However, this kind of explanation runs contrary to the actual experience of many immigrant groups that have been in the receiving country for several generations. These groups have learned the language, are thoroughly familiar with the values and life styles of the majority, and are completely integrated into the economic structure. Still, they have not abandoned their distinct cultural traits and self-identities and often resist further assimilation.⁶⁷

At this point, the ethnic resilience literature splits into two currents. One notes the functional advantages of ethnicity, ranging from the moral and material support provided by ethnic networks to political gains made through ethnic bloc voting. It “pays” to preserve ethnic solidarity, which is often the only edge that immigrants and their descendants have for advance in the broader society. This line of argument is associated in the United States with the works of Greeley, Suttles, and Glazer and Moynihan. Research supporting this position has dealt primarily with the experience of “white ethnics,” the descendants of European immigrant groups, though it has been extended to nonwhite minorities.⁶⁸

Glazer and Moynihan concluded poignantly that “the point of the melting pot is that it did not happen.” For Greeley, ethnic resilience is not a cultural “lag” from premodern times but rather the communal basis on which modern social structures rest. Far from constituting a “social problem,” ethnic bonds represent one of the few sources of emotional support and social solidarity left in the modern urban context:

The ethnics groups...came into existence so that the primordial ties of the peasant commune could somehow or other be salvaged...But because the primordial ties have been transmitted does not mean that they have been eliminated... they are every bit as decisive for human relationships as they were in the past.⁶⁹

The positive consequences of ethnic resilience and solidarity receive additional support from the literature on ethnic enclaves and other forms of immigrant entrepreneurship. As seen previously, this economic path could not exist without the social capital flowing from social networks and ethnic solidarity. From this standpoint, rapid acculturation and structural assimilation, as advocated by Gordon, Warner and Srole and other authors of the same school, is not necessarily a boon to the mobility chances of immigrants and their offspring, as it prematurely weakens the bonds that undergird co-ethnic social capital. Instead, *selective acculturation* which combines instrumental learning of the host languages and culture with retention of cultural traditions brought from the home country offers the most effective path for entrepreneurially- oriented immigrants.⁷⁰

A second current of the ethnic resilience literature generally agrees with these statements, but focuses on the origins of ethnic solidarity for oppressed minorities. It emphasizes the experience of immigrant groups, which, though thoroughly acculturated to dominant values and norms, have been rebuffed in their attempts to seek entrance into the mainstream. As seen above, assimilation theories have also noted these experiences but do not draw from them any implications beyond the “triple segmentation” of the melting pot. In this second current of the

ethnic literature, such rejection is a necessary consequence of the subordinate position of certain immigrant minorities in the labor market and of the ideologies employed to legitimize it. Blacks and Mexicans, like Chinese and Japanese or Poles and Italians before them, have been kept “in their place” because they have formed, each in their time, the mainstay of a segmented labor market.⁷¹ As colonized minorities or fresh labor supplies for the secondary sector, they constituted an indispensable component of the economic structure. Granting such groups admittance into the core society on the basis of merit would jeopardize their utility to employers and to the entire ethnically dominant group. Learning the “right” values and behavior patterns is thus not enough for these minorities to gain access to the core society.⁷²

The rejection experienced by immigrants and their descendants in their attempts to become fully assimilated constitutes a central element in the reconstruction of ethnic culture. As several authors have noted, this culture is not a mere continuation of that originally brought by immigrants, but is a distinct emergent product. It is forged in the interaction of the group with the dominant majority, incorporating some aspects of the core culture, and privileging those from the past that appear most suited for the struggle for dignity and economic mobility. “Nationalities” may thus emerge among immigrants who shared only the most tenuous linkages to the old country. They are brought together by the imputation of a common ethnicity by the core society and its use to justify their exploitation.⁷³

The central insight of the ethnic-resilience perspective is that the same racial ideology employed to justify the subordination of colonized and other groups can be eventually turned around as an instrument of solidarity. As they discover assimilation to be a deceptive path, minorities come to rely on in-group cohesiveness and cultural reassertion as the only effective means to break out of their situation. The emergence of ethnicity as *the* central identity among these minorities is aided by their common fate both inside and outside the workplace. They tend to work in the same industries and jobs and to live in the same areas. In both spheres, they suffer the pervasive effects of discrimination. This unity of work and life, of production and consumption, greatly facilitates intragroup interaction. For this reason, when discontent finally turns into political mobilization, the rallying symbols for these groups are those of race and culture, rather than those of a universal proletarian class.⁷⁴

The critiques advanced by the various strands of ethnic resilience theory severely weakened the assimilation perspective, confining it to near oblivion. Recently, there has been an attempt to revive assimilation as a “master concept” by grounding it not on the work on Gordon and Warner and Srole, but on the earlier Chicago School. This attempt, led by sociologists Richard Alba and Victor Nee, asserts that cultural and linguistic assimilation has been the dominant experience of immigrant groups in the United States, leading to their incorporation into the social mainstream that is, in turn, modified and enriched by them.⁷⁵ To buttress their case, Alba and Nee revisit the history of European immigrant groups and their descendants, as they gradually abandoned their language and culture to join a broadly-encompassing American society. For these authors, assimilation is “something that happens” to people as they are engaged in other pursuits. Following the lead of Robert Park and other classic authors of the Chicago School, the new assimilationism accepts that the process can take many different forms and even not take place at all. However, the thrust of the argument is that, on the whole, cultural and social assimilation to the American mainstream have been the dominant or “canonical” path.⁷⁶

On the opposite side, other authors have reinforced ethnic resilience theory by documenting the experience of groups that, though thoroughly acculturated, have remained confined to a subordinate economic and occupational status over generations. Based on a detailed study of Mexican-Americans across generations, Telles and Ortiz advanced a *racialization* thesis that reproduces, in its essentials, the earlier ethnic resilience argument. Mexican-American youths are racialized by the dominant white society that associates their phenotypical traits with an inferior educational potential and a subordinate status in the labor market. Mexican-American youths react by rejecting the conventional path of social mobility through education and rallying around the symbols of an injured common ethnicity.⁷⁷

Ultimately, the controversy between these opposite perspectives revolves around a differential emphasis on cultural *vs.* structural indicators of assimilation. The basic emphasis of Alba and Nee's neo-assimilationism revolves around the overwhelmingly evidence of acculturation, linguistic and otherwise, among descendants of immigrant groups. They are less mindful that this process does not necessarily translate into structural mobility into the hierarchies of societal wealth and power. Thus, despite being thoroughly acculturated, minorities such as descendants of earlier Mexican, Puerto Rican, and Caribbean migrants are still confined to an inferior socio-economic position and continue to be racialized by a predominantly white mainstream.⁷⁸

The experiences of successful immigrant groups, including those that have developed economic enclaves, also weakens neo-assimilationist views, as they show the importance of ethnic resilience for structural mobility. For these groups, co-ethnic solidarity has not been so much a reaction to outside discrimination as a proactive means to carve a viable economic niche. As seen above, "selective acculturation" rather than the full-throttle variety advocated by the assimilation school, has been the chosen means for these groups to reach their economic and social goals.

For Alba and Nee, the American "mainstream" can encompass all these options, both positive and negative, but from the immigrants' point of view, it makes a great deal of difference what paths of assimilation they and their offspring follow. Those able to move upwards educationally and occupationally readily join the middle-class mainstream, while racialized minorities can be confined to an inferior socio—economic status for generations. The contrasting experiences of children of professional and entrepreneurial groups in the past and present and descendants of colonized minorities provide additional support for this critical perspective.⁷⁹

Conclusion: Transnationalism and Assimilation

The transnational perspective, reviewed previously as the latest approach to the directionality of migrant movements, also has a direct bearing on immigrant adaptation. To the extent that immigrants adopt a pattern of back-and-forth movement across international borders, the questions of assimilation *vs* ethnic resilience is cast in a new light. In principle, transnationalism may be regarded as retarding assimilation to the extent that it keeps alive contacts and memories of the old country. Curiously, the reality is more complex-- research on the topic has shown that active participants in transnational activities and organizations are

usually the more established and better educated immigrants.⁸⁰ These are precisely the candidates for a more rapid and more successful integration to the host society.

The process at play seems to be one in which newly-arrived migrants concentrate in carving a niche for themselves without much time to look back at events in their places or origin. It is only when they have become relatively secure and have reached a measure of occupational success that they can consider engaging in regular transnational activities or joining transnational organizations. These findings re-define, among other things, the meaning of citizenship acquisition. From an assimilation perspective acquiring the citizenship of the host nation represents a decisive step in the process of acculturation and integration. From a transnational lens, however, the greater legal security stemming from citizenship acquisition functions to facilitate further cross-border travel and contacts abroad.⁸¹

Transnationalism highlights the possibility that preserving ties to the home culture and language may be not incompatible with acculturation. Indeed economically successful immigrants have commonly practiced this mix of the old and new. The practice of selective acculturation has not been inimical to their structural economic advancement, but has generally supported it. For first generation immigrants, regular contact with their places of origin often translates into the possibility of accessing unique economic resources. As recent studies have shown, most successful businesses established by immigrants include a transnational component. This is frequently vital to gain access to tradable goods, capital, and information.⁸²

For children of immigrants, the possibility of periodic trips home and continuing contact with kin and friends there can serve to cement their sense of belonging and self-esteem. This, in turn, insulates them from the racialization to which foreign minorities are commonly subjected and reinforces their goals for the future. This alternative perspective suggests that the opposition between assimilation and ethnic resilience that have dominated scholarly debates in the past may be exaggerated. Under certain conditions, ethnic resilience in the first and second generations leads to successful assimilation. When this happens, the likely consequence is the loss of salience of ethnic markers in future generations, precisely the opposite outcome of reactive ethnicity among permanently subordinate minorities.

It shall be clear then that transnationalism and its conceptual cousin, selective acculturation, are not the same as multiculturalism, if the latter is understood as the preservation of culturally distinct and institutionally complete communities across generations. On the contrary, transnational practices offer a viable bridge and platform for successful integration in the second and successive generations. The fate of immigrant groups that have been unable to use the resources offered by this path stands in stark contrast, showing the dangers of premature acculturation without means for educational and economic advancement. In the following chapters, we elaborate these theoretical considerations by showing how they apply to the condition of different immigrant minorities and their descendants in America.