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Part V

Fusions of diversity
Assimilation, diversity, and change

Nancy Foner

Understanding immigration and diversity has long been a major concern in the social sciences in the United States. This is not surprising. As a classic settler society, immigration has played a central role in the United States since its inception. Moreover, important social science works on immigration were written in the wake of the last great wave of immigration in the early twentieth century. Indeed in 1910, the US population was nearly 15 per cent foreign born, a height it still has not reached again, though at 13 per cent in 2010 it is coming close.

A guiding concept in the immigration literature for many years has been assimilation, which was elaborated a century ago in the context of classic studies of the Chicago School of Sociology (at the University of Chicago, the nation’s first sociology department); assimilation has continued to be a central theoretical concept even as it has been critiqued, reworked, and reformulated (Alba et al. 2012; Foner and Lucassen 2012; Waters 2000).

Classic assimilation theory as it developed in the United States has focused on how immigrants and their children become part of American mainstream society, and the newest conceptions of assimilation have continued this emphasis. Despite its main title, Remaking the American Mainstream: Assimilation and Contemporary Immigration (Alba and Nee 2003), which has played an important role in the field of immigration studies, is almost entirely concerned with how immigrants and the second generation assimilate to American society rather than the other side of the equation – how they remake it.

It is time, I believe, to shift gears to put more emphasis on how immigration, and the diversity it has brought, have transformed — and continue to transform — American society itself. What follows offers some reflections on these processes. I begin with a brief background on various approaches emphasizing assimilation, before turning to the heart of the matter: some of the ways that immigration has affected cultural and social patterns in American society. A key issue is how the continuous inflow of immigrants has been an engine of change in the United States over the past 100 years, introducing new kinds of diversity and transforming American institutions and culture and the very “model of integration” implicated in how immigrants are incorporated into the nation today. The focus is mainly on ethnic and religious diversity – and on developments in the past that have shaped the context for present-day newcomers and their children. Not only do we know the outcomes of developments that took place in the past, but also a historical perspective brings out, in a powerful way, how ideas about diversity are not fixed.
or static but change over time. I come back in the conclusion to some comments about changes afoot today and about some additional aspects of diversity.

**Assimilation approaches**

Until recently, assimilation in the United States, at least in sociological circles, was largely synonymous with William Lloyd Warner, Leo Srole, and Milton Gordon. In their study of Newburyport, Massachusetts, in the 1930s, Warner and Srole (1945) described the intergenerational progression of ethnic groups from the residential and occupational segregation of the first generation to the residential, occupational, and identificational integration and Americanization of later generations. In what has been called a “canonical synthesis” (Alba and Nee 2003: 23), Gordon (1964) in *Assimilation in American Life* set out several stages of the assimilation process, beginning with identification with cultural patterns of the host society. Once structural assimilation, or integration into primary groups, occurred, then other types of assimilation would follow, including intermarriage, the waning of a separate ethnic identity, and decline not only of prejudice and discrimination against the group, but also of ethnic distinction.

Over the years, American sociologists and historians have raised many objections to these conceptions, among them that assimilation is presented as inevitable; that middle-class whites of British ancestry set the norm by which other groups are assessed; that minority groups are assumed to change in order to assimilate while the majority culture remains unaffected; and that there is no room for the positive role of ethnic and racial groups (for a summary of the objections, see Alba and Nee 2003: 3–5).

Most prominent among the new conceptions of assimilation is Richard Alba and Victor Nee’s (2003) revised theory which is laid out in *Remaking the American Mainstream*. Based on a detailed analysis of, among other things, intermarriage and linguistic acculturation, they argue that not only was assimilation the master trend for the children and grandchildren of the earlier European immigration, but also it is the most likely path for most descendants of the post-1965 immigration. Although assimilation remains a powerful force, they argue, it also needs to be reconceptualized. (Assimilation, as they define the term, is the decline – or attenuation in salience – of an ethnic distinction and its corollary cultural and social differences so that an individual’s ethnic origins become less relevant in relation to members of other ethnic groups.) In their view, ethnicity does not inevitably disappear or weaken as assimilation takes place – many ethnic markers and features of ethnic culture may persist. Moreover, immigrants and their descendants may change the mainstream culture at the same time as they are incorporated into it (ibid.: 11).

What has been presented as an alternative to the “conventional assimilation model” – segmented assimilation – takes diversity into account in a different way, yet keeps the focus on the incorporation of the second generation, with little concern for the impact of immigrants and their descendants on the wider society. As elaborated by Alejandro Portes and his colleagues, segmented assimilation, as the term implies, asks what segment of American society a group assimilates into. “Instead of a relatively uniform mainstream whose mores and prejudices dictate a common path of integration,” segmented assimilation presumes “several distinct forms of adaptation,” including integration into the white middle class, into the minority underclass, or advancement through preservation of the immigrant community’s values and tight solidarity (Portes and Zhou 1993: 82). Much of the controversy over segmented assimilation concerns how widespread downward assimilation actually is, but the point here is that this perspective sees the children of immigrants as being affected by existing ethno-racial divisions – not changing them.
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Immigration as an engine of change

Important as it is to understand how immigrants and their children become incorporated into American society, we also need to appreciate how the very process of incorporation has the potential to change significant elements in American society, including the structure of and attitudes to diversity. Throughout American history, immigrant inflows have not only introduced individuals with new ethnic, cultural, and religious features – or new diversity. These inflows, and the way they are incorporated in each period, also alter the social, economic, political, and cultural context that greets – and affects the experiences of – the next wave of inflows (Foner 2006, 2013, 2014). Immigration itself can thus be viewed as generating new forms of diversity and, over time, leading to new conceptions of diversity. Often, the new groups initially have been scorned and stigmatized but, owing to a wide range of factors, including processes of social and economic assimilation, generally they have come to be more accepted, and the diversity they represent has, in many ways, become “normalized.”

Religion

One example concerns religion, in particular the incorporation of Catholicism and Judaism into the system of American pluralism. Immigrants today enter a society in which Catholicism and Judaism, along with Protestantism, are seen as the three main American religions, but 100 years ago this was certainly not true.

It was the massive immigration of the Irish, Italians, and Jews in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries that dramatically changed the religious composition of the US population in the first place, of course. And it was the integration of nineteenth- and twentieth-century immigrants and their children that led to an eventual acceptance of Judaism and Catholicism as American religions so that, by the end of World War II, “the Judeo-Christian tradition as the American way had become ubiquitous” (Gerstle, forthcoming).

For much of US history, mainstream America had a decidedly Christian, even Protestant, character – and anti-Catholicism and anti-Semitism have been threaded throughout that history. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Protestant denominations were more or less “established” in that they dominated the public square, crowding out Catholicism and Judaism, both associated with disparaged Southern and Eastern European immigrants and seen by nativist observers as incompatible with mainstream institutions and culture. Even earlier in the nineteenth century, Irish immigrants, who constituted the first mass immigration of Catholics to the United States, were the target of deep-seated and virulent anti-Catholic nativism. Many native Protestants viewed the assimilation of the Irish as blocked by what was seen as a fanatical and unholy devotion to the Catholic Church and a foreign, anti-republican pope. The fear that a Catholic president would be beholden to papal influence helped defeat Democratic Irish Catholic nominee Al Smith in 1928. Even in 1960, John F. Kennedy, who would become the nation’s first Catholic president, had to appear before a group of Protestant ministers in Texas to prove that his election would not make the Vatican the ruler of Washington (Gerstle, forthcoming). In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, non-Protestant religions had either separated from the dominant society to create their own institutions – Catholic parochial schools and universities are a major example – or, as was true for much of American Judaism, confined their religious beliefs and practices to the private realm and “thus acceded to Protestant domination in the public realm” (Wolfe 2006: 159).

Eventually, however – by the middle of the twentieth century – Catholics and Jews were incorporated into the system of American religious pluralism. Or, as Richard Alba has put it, the
boundary dividing Catholics and Jews from the Protestant majority moved to include alternative models of religious belief and practice (Alba 2005: 31). One reason was that the descendants of the immigrants became part of the American mainstream – in terms, for example, of economic and educational achievements. The legal separation of church and state in the United States also played a role in enabling the religions imported by earlier immigration streams to achieve parity with Protestant versions of Christianity (Foner and Alba 2008). Whatever the reasons, Americans came to think in terms of a tripartite perspective – Protestant, Catholic, and Jew – with Judaism treated as a kind of branch or denomination within the larger Judeo-Christian framework, a religion of believers who just happened to attend churches called synagogues (Wuthnow 2005). By the late twentieth and early twenty-first century, opponents of multiculturalism were even referring to “our Judeo-Christian heritage” in upholding the value of Western civilization (Alba 2005: 30).

The very transformation of America into a “Judeo-Christian” nation – and Protestant, Catholic, and Jew into the three main denominations in American religious life – has meant that post-1965 immigrants enter a more religiously open society than their predecessors did 100 or 150 years ago. Today, the encounter of immigrant religions with American society benefits from the awareness of and legal context deriving from the earlier incorporation of Jewish and Catholic immigrant groups. In the mid-1990s, President Bill Clinton proclaimed in a Rose Garden ceremony that “Islam is an American religion,” and George W. Bush confirmed this by making a point of visiting a mosque in the wake of the September 11 attacks. In the midst of heated debates about the building of the Muslim community center near the World Trade Center site in the summer of 2010, President Obama hosted the annual Iftar Ramadan dinner at the White House, a tradition, he noted, “that goes back several years just as we host Christmas parties, seders, and Diwali celebrations” (Los Angeles Times 2010). This does not necessarily mean that the new religions, most notably Islam, will eventually attain the charter status now occupied by Catholicism and Judaism. It is important to stress this point. The outcomes of the current encounter between non-Western religions and the American mainstream are not predictable; at least so far, anti-Muslim sentiment is unfortunately alive and well among sectors of the US population. What it does mean, however, is that today’s immigrants benefit from an acceptance that is the result of the difficult integration of Catholicism and Judaism into mainstream America, and they enter a society more tolerant of non-Protestant religions than the one that confronted newcomers 100 years ago.

Hyphenated Americans

Immigrants in the United States today are also living in a society that is more open to diversity in another way: Americans are generally comfortable with hyphenated identities. This openness is part of what has been called a “national integration model,” and it contrasts markedly with the melting-pot model that dominated a century ago (Foner 2012). In the contemporary United States, holding onto earlier identities and cultures is viewed as acceptable as long as these are additions to a fundamentally American core. New Americans can retain what they wish of the old country, but, as Waldinger (2007: 141) has put it, they need to “master the native code.” Ethnicity, in short, is not a barrier to integration, but reconcilable with acquiring a new American identity.

Whereas in present-day Europe the second generation tends to feel more pressured to express an exclusive national identity, you can be an American and “ethnic” at the same time. In the United States today, moreover, it is not just the children of immigrants who often embrace hyphenated identities. So do many long-established natives, at least some of the time. Being a
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hyphenated American, one might say, is the American way and not something that makes the second generation stand out as a group apart. Just as there are Chinese-Americans and Mexican-Americans with immigrant parents, so, too, there are millions of Irish-Americans and Italian-Americans, well established in the mainstream whose immigrant ancestors go much further back. To borrow from Glazer (1997), we are all or – virtually all – hyphenated Americans.

This acceptance of hyphenated identities is not an inherent American characteristic; far from it. “Life on the hyphen” (Perez Firmat 1994) was hardly de rigueur 100 years ago. In the midst of the massive Eastern and Southern European immigration a century ago, hyphenated Americanism, as the historian Matthew Frye Jacobson (2006: 9) observes, even “amounted to un-Americanism” to some. Indeed, then the emphasis was on “100 percent Americanism.” As former president Theodore Roosevelt proclaimed in a 1915 speech: “There is no such thing as a hyphenated American who is a good American. The only man who is a good American is the man who is an American and nothing else.” (Roosevelt cited in Foner 2012.)

What explains the dramatic change from then to now? The cessation of Eastern and Southern European inflows after the 1920s meant that immigration aroused less anxiety, and white ethnic communities were no longer being replenished with Old World cultures. The European second generation’s economic successes and assimilation to American ways also contributed to greater comfort with ethnic identities (Foner 2005). So did the second generation’s patriotic embrace of America during World War II. As the children of European immigrants fought together, the image of the “multi-ethnic platoon with its Protestant, Irish, Polish, Italian and Jewish soldiers fighting side by side to preserve American democracy and freedom” became, in Gary Gerstle’s words, an “honored image of the nation” (Gerstle, forthcoming).

In the post-war period, the American national narrative was refashioned to elevate immigration to a central role in the country’s myth of origin. By the 1940s, the notion that America was a “melting pot” had entered the majority of American history textbooks (Fitzgerald 1979). In the next two decades, “Ellis Island identities” began to replace “Plymouth Rock ones” (Jacobson 2006) as the ideal of Anglo-Conformity was dethroned and the mainstream opened up; at the same time, the phrase “nation of immigrants” became widely and popularly used as a celebration of the United States (Alba 2009).

Also of critical importance was another dimension of diversity in the United States that has not yet been mentioned: the huge African-American population. The struggle for civil rights by African Americans, to be free of legal segregation, ghettoization, and subordination, and the “minority rights revolution” (Skrentny 2002) that the civil rights movement brought about had enormous implications for all ethnic groups in the country. The acknowledgment of racial and ethnic group experiences in the dominant discourse in national civic life that followed the civil rights legislative successes of 1964 and 1965, as one historian writes, was “electrifying” (Jacobson 2006: 19f.).

Policy and legislative changes begun in the civil rights era to combat discrimination and open up opportunities for African Americans in schools, workplaces, and at the ballot box were extended to other racial minorities and thus to many immigrants and their children. One result was to move decisively “the discourse on integration in the United States beyond a singular focus on Americanization” and change “the cultural idiom of American national identity” (Bloemraad, forthcoming). Ethno-racial diversity was not only tolerated but also often celebrated as part of America’s founding principles, and, by the 1990s, it had become central to a program of national belonging. Following the Black is Beautiful movement, immigrant groups, both old and new, adopted a similar stance in regard to their own ethnic cultures, in this way “broadening and intensifying the effort to locate America’s vitality in its ethnic and racial diversity” (Gerstle, forthcoming). Ethnic hyphenation became a “natural idiom of national belonging,” and, as the history
textbooks make clear, the United States, once conceived as male and Anglo Saxon, became filled with blacks, white ethnics, Latinos, native Americans, and Asians.

**Concluding comments: looking ahead**

If, as we have seen, the incorporation of earlier immigrations in the United States played a role in creating a more receptive context for present-day newcomers and their children in some ways, then a host of issues arises about possible changes in the future. How will the incorporation of today’s first-generation immigrants and the second generation change the nature and perceptions of diversity – and its impact on American society as a whole? Predicting the future is, of course, risky, but let me end by raising some questions about what may lie ahead as well as aspects of diversity that I have not yet considered.

Immigrants, because of cultural traditions they bring, almost invariably change – indeed, we can say, diversify – the tastes and cuisines that are dominant in the receiving society, or at least this has been the case in the United States. Bagels and pizza, to name a Russian Jewish and an Italian import in the past, are now as American as apple pie. Today, salsa outsells ketchup, and Chinese restaurants outnumber all the McDonald’s, Burger Kings, and Kentucky Fried Chickens in the United States combined. Immigrants have added new art and music styles (hip hop among them) to the American landscape. A main theoretical issue is whether cultural change occurs as the mainstream expands to accommodate cultural alternatives, usually after being “Americanized” to some extent (Alba and Nee 2003) – or if some cultural changes reflect a “creolization” process, with elements from the cultures of immigrant and native-born groups blending into something new (Foner 1997).

Then there is the impact of immigration, and the diversity it brings, on community institutions. Do these institutions undergo changes in form and function as they adjust to the needs and demands of newcomers who have new, and diverse, cultural and linguistic backgrounds? Many US schools and health-care facilities, for example, have introduced new programs to serve immigrant populations, including modern bilingual education in schools and translation services in hospitals, which have become “normal” features of these institutions. Altogether new institutions have emerged, such as newcomer schools with language and cultural training programs for new student arrivals from abroad. So have new kinds of neighborhoods, including neighborhoods which are home to native whites and racial minorities as well as multiple immigrant groups.

Earlier European immigrants pioneered – and established – ethnic politics as an accepted feature of the American urban landscape. The Irish, and later Southern and Eastern Europeans, in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries rallied voters, built coalitions, and gained political influence by appealing to voters on ethnic grounds. The civil rights movement reinforced and strengthened this pathway to political influence for non-white groups. Today, candidates of all colors and ethnicities in presidential and local elections eat tacos on the campaign trail and sprinkle their speeches with Spanish in the quest for the large and growing Latino vote. A more basic question, currently the subject of much debate in the United States, is whether the rising electoral power of immigrants and their children, especially Latinos who are now the nation’s largest minority group, will lead to more fundamental political and policy shifts, potentially changing the electoral balance between the two major parties. Political pundits are now asking whether the Republican Party is in jeopardy, at least in presidential elections, if it continues to be indifferent, and sometimes downright hostile, to the country’s diverse constituencies – blacks, women, Latinos, Asians, and gays (Tanenhaus 2013).
Finally, there is the matter of race. This is an essential topic in any discussion of diversity in the United States because of its fundamental role in inequality since the nation’s very founding as a country is based on chattel slavery, but it is also intrinsic to discussions of earlier European immigrations. The historical literature on immigration has been concerned with the racialization of earlier European immigrants – and how the second- and third-generation descendants of Jewish and Italian immigrants, who were initially considered racial inferiors and whose status as whites was often doubted, came to be considered part of an all-encompassing white racial majority. Among the many factors involved were the economic successes of the second and third generations in the context of post-war prosperity and educational expansion; the end of massive immigration from Southern and Eastern Europe in the late 1920s; the role of the Nazi genocide in making anti-Semitism less respectable; the struggles of the groups themselves to eliminate exclusionary barriers; and the physical resemblance of those of Eastern and Southern European descent to members of older Northern and Western European groups (Foner 2000, 2005).

Social scientists are now asking whether any of the factors responsible for enabling Jews and Italians to meld into the white majority will operate in changing ethno-racial boundaries confronting descendants of contemporary Latino, Asian, and black immigrants. Will any groups currently thought of as non-white, as well as non-black, come to be seen as white? Will ethno-racial boundaries and meanings shift in an altogether different way? Given how prominent color is in today’s racial discourse, will intermarriage be a more important agent of racial change than in the past (Perlmann and Waters 2007)? Will, as Alba (2009) argues, members of the second generation in racial minority groups be able to take advantage of non-zero sum mobility – ascending socially without adversely affecting the life chances of the established majority – as happened among Jews and Italians in the past?

The study of immigration, in short, raises some fundamental questions about diversity and change in American society. An emphasis on assimilation puts the spotlight on how immigrants and their children change as they adapt to the society where they now live – processes that are, to be sure, of the utmost importance and relevance, which is why they have been the subject of so much study. Yet, we need to also pay attention to how immigrants themselves, with the particular kinds of diversity they bring, are agents of change who continually remake and transform their societies. Understanding how immigrants and their descendants are bringing about these transformations in the contemporary period is a topic that deserves to be at the top of our research agenda.

Note

1 The following paragraphs on religion in American society draw on Foner and Alba (2008).

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