Immigration and the American Realities of Assimilation and Multiculturalism

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Immigration is once again transforming the racial and ethnic contours of American society. Current estimates place annual immigration (legal and undocumentated) to the United States at approximately 1 million persons per year (National Research Council, 1997). Despite aggressive nativist attack (e.g., Brimelow, 1995), there is little prospect that this pace will slacken anytime soon. If it continues into the middle of the next century, then, according to much-cited population projections, the majoritarian status of European Americans will be in jeopardy—at least numerically—as African Americans, Asians, Latinos, and Native Americans will constitute nearly half of the population. This projected shift has been seen by many commentators as implying the possibility of revolutionary changes in the relationship between majority and minority Americans, including a decline of, or even an end to, European American social and cultural dominance and a flowering of multiculturalism. In this paper, I intend to put these implications under a sociological magnifying glass and consider some alternative scenarios.

To make sense of the present and near future, one has to ask about the relevance of lessons taken from past eras of immigration (DeWind and Kasinitz, 1997). Much discussion of contemporary immigration starts from the premise that the patterns of previous eras are not likely to be repeated. Any number of reasons are given for distinguishing the contemporary era: the racial distinctiveness of contemporary immigrants, who come mainly from Asia, Latin America, and the Caribbean rather than from Europe:


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the absence of a foreseeable hiatus in immigration comparable to the four-decade lull starting in the 1920s; and the dualistic tendencies in the American economy that are believed to be shrinking the middle of the occupational structure. These are just some of the factors cited as invalidating the assimilation model abstracted from the experience of European Americans (see, e.g., Sassen, 1988; Portes and Rumbaut, 1996; cf. Foner, 1997). Nevertheless, I will argue that there are likely to be some continuities between past and present, and that we should ask to what conclusions they lead us about the future. I do this without imagining in the slightest that the future will precisely replicate what occurred to European immigrants and their descendants.

THE POPULATION PROJECTIONS: A GLANCE A QUARTER CENTURY DOWN THE ROAD

I begin with some projections and what they might reveal about the depth of racial and ethnic change. I have deliberately chosen the year 2025 as a reference point because it is at least plausible that between now and then immigration patterns will not so depart from the present as to render the projections grossly invalid as forecasts. Admittedly, there has been much more discussion of the projections for the year 2050, which show much deeper levels of racial/ethnic change, but I don’t think it makes sense to take population projections a half century into the future as anything other than what projections really are: numerical exercises in working out the implications of a particular set of demographic assumptions. Imagine if we could go back in time from the present by half a century—to 1950, say—and, without knowledge of the intervening years, project forward: How much would the results resemble contemporary realities? Very little. I think, and the same is likely to be true of current projections so far into the future.

As Fig. 1, which is adapted from the National Research Council (NRC, 1997) report, demonstrates, the projections do reveal a decline in the percentage of the population that is non-Latino white or, alternatively put, of predominantly European ancestry: This share falls from 74% in 1995 to 62% in 2025, a substantial decline but obviously not one that would overturn the majoritarian status of European Americans in most regions. 3 The biggest gains are experienced by Asians and by Latinos, the two populations ex-

3Except for the 1995 data, which represent population estimates rather than projections, the mid-decade values result from my interpolations from the tables of the NRC report. I have chosen the projections based on the “medium” assumption about immigration levels, which most closely resembles the contemporary pattern (see Tables 3.3 and 3.7 in the report).
panding most rapidly as a result of immigration. Asians roughly double
their population share, from 3 to 6%, while Latinos nearly do this, growing
from 10 to 18% and forging ahead of African Americans to become the
largest minority population, at least when we conceive of the population
in these very broad categories. The growth of the African American popu-
lation will more or less keep pace with that of the total population, so that
its population percentage changes little under this scenario (the same holds
for Native Americans, who are not separately identified in the NRC projec-
tions). In the near future, then, the biggest changes to be wrought by
immigration are likely to come in terms of a reordering among minority
populations, rather than in terms of the balance between European and
other Americans.

A corollary of the projections is that the immigrant and second genera-
tions will make up an increasingly large proportion of the American popula-
tion—in some places, this proportion could rival, if not exceed, the high-
water marks attained during the early part of this century (Edmonston and
Passel, 1994). One has to be reminded, however, how stunningly high
those earlier figures were, even by today’s standards—for instance, in 1920,
immigrants and their children constituted 72% of Chicago’s population and
76% of New York’s (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1922: Table 11). As of
today, these levels may have been attained in a few places—one thinks
especially of Los Angeles and Miami, whose metropolitan areas were over-
whelmingly non-Latino and white as late as 1970, but now house by far
the largest proportions of immigrants to be found in the United States
(Farley, 1996). In 1920, the levels of immigrant concentration I just cited
were fairly widespread among America’s industrial cities of the Northeast
and Midwest. While racial and ethnic change will be quite profound in
some areas of the United States, it has so far been quite modest in others and could remain so (Frey, 1996).

Projections are, of course, vulnerable in all sorts of ways. Most obviously, their demographic assumptions could be falsified. But racial/ethnic projections are vulnerable in another way, linked to their categories. For such projections are generally forced to assume that racial/ethnic categories are stable enclosures within the total configuration the historian David Hollinger, in his influential book *Post-Ethnic America* (1995), calls the "ethno-racial pentagon" (referring to the five major racial/ethnic populations in the United States: Asians, blacks, Latinos, Native Americans, and whites). Projections presume that the categories meaningful today will also be meaningful tomorrow and, in the usual case, also that intermarriage is not of a magnitude to shift significant numbers of the next generation from one category to another (Waters, 1999; Hirschman, 1999). Hollinger notes that the compartments of the racial/ethnic pentagon may disguise as much as they reveal: In his opinion, they are more useful for capturing the main dimensions of historic discrimination and injustice than for depicting cultural diversity, which lies as much within the categories as between them.

ASSIMILATION AND MULTICULTURALISM AS ANALYTIC CONCEPTS AND NORMATIVE PRECEPTS

To highlight the possibly problematic nature of racial/ethnic categories backs us into an even larger question: How should we think about the societal changes that are likely to be associated with continued immigration and racial/ethnic shift? Two polarities in both scholarly and lay discourse are represented by the terms *assimilation* and *multiculturalism*. These terms are truly raveled complexes, bundling social–scientific conceptions that have analytic utility together with normative notions about, and idealized projections of, American life. Consequently, they are weighted with emotional and attitudinal valences. Some might argue that the complexities are too much, that the terms ought to be replaced by more neutral language.

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4The NRC projections do attempt to take the consequences of intermarriage into account, but by means that I think are dubious. Specifically, the projections assume that every person belongs to only one racial/ethnic category—an assumption that is in doubt for the growing number of mixed-race individuals—and that the racial/ethnic attributions parents make on census forms about their mixed-race children indicate these category memberships. That the boxes checked by parents on a census form predict the adult social identities of such children seems very questionable.

5There is a bothersome lack of linguistic parallelism in the terms *assimilation* and *multiculturalism*, since the latter denotes an ideological or normative precept (an "ism"), while the former does not. But despite my attempts to come up with parallel forms, I have not succeeded.
Some scholars throw up their hands in disbelief at the mention of "assimilation"; others reach for their intellectual firepower when they hear the term "multiculturalism." But I don't think that the tension represented in this polarity is resolvable through a merely terminological solution, for the terms also bear impulses and concerns that lie behind and flit through much of the social-scientific discussion of contemporary immigration; these will not be dispelled by a linguistic shift. Better than the invention of new terms, in my view, is a careful peeling back of the layers of analytic conceptualization and normative idealization in both. That way, one can hope to lay bare what is genuinely useful for understanding immigration and its likely impact and to come to terms with the normative considerations that perhaps inevitably are present when social scientists discuss this phenomenon of huge import.

Let me start at the assimilation pole. The problems associated with the social-scientific concept of assimilation are one reason that we have such difficulty in connecting past and present immigration eras. Over time, the concept has become so distorted, and not just by its detractors, that it no longer reflects adequately the experiences from which it presumably derives—namely, those ensuing from European immigration. As commonly portrayed—I am tempted to say, caricatured—assimilation is a radical, unidirectional process of simplification: ethnic minorities shed themselves of all that makes them distinctive and become carbon copies of the ethnic majority. In this view, assimilation imposes a bland homogeneity where a more interesting heterogeneity had existed before. I grant that there is some basis for this conception in the writings of previous generations of scholars who used assimilation as an analytic tool—for instance, W. Lloyd Warner and Leo Srole (1945), in their classic study of New Haven, describe ethnic groups as "unlearning" their "inferior" cultural traits, in order to "successfully learn the new way of life necessary for full acceptance" (in fairness to Warner and Srole, I must point out that they recognize that this "inferiority" is socially defined, not inherent). However, the degraded conception of assimilation loses sight of two things: one is, of course, that American society is far from homogeneous, and the other that immigrant ethnicity has affected American society as much as American society has affected it.

One can, I believe, find both in the scholarship about past immigration as well as in the historical record a more intellectually generous conception of assimilation, one that may also have greater relevance for the contemporary era; it sees assimilation as the decline, and only at some ultimate endpoint the disappearance, of an ethnic distinction and its allied differences (see Alba and Nee, 1997). One implication of this definition is that assimilation need not be a wholly one-sided process: It can take place as
changes in two (or more) groups, or parts of them, shrink the differences and social distance between them. This is not some merely academic revision, for some of the qualities and practices that are seen today as quintessentially "American" have a rather recent historical origin in immigration. For instance, some archetypal American recreational practices, such as the Sunday outing and bowling, originate more with 19th-century German immigrants than with their Anglo American predecessors, many of whom possessed religious beliefs that frowned on such diversions (Sowell, 1996).

To discuss assimilation prospects intelligently, we need also to recognize that assimilation can take place despite the intentions of immigrants to resist it. Assimilation can occur as the often unintended cumulative by-product of choices made by individuals seeking to take advantage of opportunities to improve their social situations. This sort of assimilation was exemplified when socially mobile European ethnicities departed from urban, working-class, ethnic neighborhoods for middle-class and more ethnically mixed suburbs, with obvious ramifications for the environments in which their children would be raised (Alba, 1995; Gans, 1979; Perlmann and Waldinger, 1997; Waters, 1990).

What about multiculturalism? One of the commonplace observations about immigration's impact is that it is contributing to the United States becoming a multicultural society. In one sense of this term, however, the United States has always been a multicultural society, and it is at least arguable, as Vincent Parrillo (1994) pointed out on the pages of Sociological Forum several years ago, that the United States has been more multicultural in the past than it is today. This is true, if by "multicultural society," we mean the factual existence of plural cultures, each associated with a distinctive ethnic origin and all contained within a single societal frame. If we take, say, language diversity as the index, the United States was at least as polyglot in the early 20th century as it is today. Too little remembered in the contemporary discussion, except by historians, are the widespread extent in the early 20th century of bilingual public schools, teaching in German and English, and that of a Catholic school system dedicated to the perpetuation of French and serving a people fired by what would today be deemed a multicultural ambition, la Survivance (Kamphefner, 1994; Gerstle, 1989).

That these terms have normative dimensions is quite evident at the multicultural pole, for it presents itself frequently, and is often discussed, in the guise of an "ism." In the influential formulation of the Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor (1992), multiculturalism is about the "politics of recognition"—in particular, a recognition by the cultural majority of the equal worth of minority cultures. This implies more than the Enlightenment concept of tolerance, allowing the minority to live as it chooses (with the usual qualifier: so long as this does not interfere with the right of others
to live as they choose). According to Taylor, who may be influenced here by Canadian arrangements, multiculturalism implies that the majority is willing, at least in some circumstances, to adopt measures that assure the survival of a minority culture. David Hollinger (1995) presents a more differentiated view of the politics of recognition and discerns two stances within it: cosmopolitanism and pluralism. The cosmopolitan stance is an eclectc one that appreciates the benefits of ethnic and cultural melange and insists on the voluntary nature of cultural commitments, while the pluralist stance, more overtly concerned with the survival of cultures, insists on the claim of the ancestral group on the loyalty of the individual (see also Appiah, 1997; Glazer, 1997; Walzer, 1997).

Assimilation is not without normative aspects, too (see, most recently, Salins, 1997). Today, assimilationism is often depicted in terms of a demand that minority individuals abandon their native cultures to accept the majority one, a demand that can be viewed as placing them in a position of inferiority and disadvantage. But the assimilationist position can be, and once was, formulated more positively: as a form of emancipation from the constricting bonds of group loyalty, the ethnic expectation that the individual remain a parochial and behave in a manner consistent with the group identity. This positive view of assimilation is precisely counterpoised against what Hollinger describes as the pluralist strand of multiculturalism. But both multiculturalism and assimilationism approach each other in Hollinger’s cosmopolitan, who appreciates the value of cultural diversity but is sufficiently liberated from any particularistic loyalty to take advantage of the offerings of the multicultural palette.

While I accept that normative concerns are never entirely absent from social science research, normative inquiry itself is not one of our strengths, in my opinion. I find sociology to be most powerful when it is able to formulate its debates in ways that can be adjudicated by a combination of dispassionate reasoning and empirical evidence. And in this manner, sociology can contribute to the normative subtext of the assimilation–multiculturalism dialogue—by identifying the empirical conditions under which normative claims might come to be realized or the consequences that might flow from their realization. What I would like to do next is to examine briefly how this strategy might play out in the context of minority languages, whose persistence is an index *sine qua non* of cultural persistence.

**LANGUAGE ASSIMILATION AND BILINGUALISM**

A strong form of multiculturalism envisions plural cultures existing on a level plane of parity; this presumably implies an end to the hegemony of the
English language-based culture. Yet a considerable body of sociolinguistic research shows that, at least in the past, a powerful process of linguistic assimilation has generally produced ethnics who speak English to the exclusion of their mother tongue within three generations of immigration (see Veltman, 1983; Stevens, 1992). Does this process still function? Recent data demonstrate unequivocally that there can be little doubt concerning the acquisition of English; this happens quickly, certainly by the second generation, except in unusual cases (see Portes and Schauffler, 1994). In all probability, the acquisition of English occurs more rapidly now than in the past, because there is less possibility for immigrants to isolate themselves and their children from the Anglophone culture of the majority, which bombards them even in their home countries. Thus, the central question for research concerns retention of the mother tongue, the status of bilingualism, in other words. Portes and Rumbaut (1996) have made a thoughtful case that cognitive benefits accrue to bilinguals; and many observers have commented on the advantages of bilingualism in a global economy. What is its feasibility for contemporary postimmigrant generations?

On a collective plane, there can be little question that bilingual and, in some instances multilingual, zones, where immigrant languages and English coexist, each with its own institutional infrastructure, have emerged in metropolitan areas where immigrants have congregated. In Los Angeles, for instance, the immigrant metropolis par excellence, the public use of Spanish, and to a lesser extent other immigrant languages, is widespread, notes David Lopez (1996). Spanish is the dominant language in many parts of the metropolitan region and on a number of its broadcast frequencies. Even in neighborhoods where English dominates, Spanish is a constant background murmur, spoken by the immigrants who fill many service and other manual jobs. In the current situation of mass immigration, this biculturalism can be expected to intensify and extend itself as the sizes of the first and second generations, the bulwarks of bilingualism, grow.

Yet when the focus turns away from the collective plane to that of individuals, the currents of assimilation, especially intergenerational assimilation, come much more plainly into view. For instance, Portes and Rumbaut's 1994 survey of the children of immigrants in Miami and San Diego shows a very high level of preference for using English rather than their parental tongues—in 1994, nearly three-quarters of the total sample preferred to speak English, and this figure was greater still among the members of the second generation (Rumbaut, 1994:768; Portes and Schauffler, 1994). Three years later, according to a new set of interviews with the original respondents, the position of English has grown stronger: reported competency in English has increased, while that in the mother tongue has declined.
(Rumbaut, 1998). Such data suggest that the pressures to convert to English have not abated. Perhaps they have intensified, since globalization assists linguistic assimilation because of the emergence of English as a worldwide lingua franca and the general currency and prestige of cultural products produced in English.

Another way of looking at linguistic assimilation is to examine the languages children speak at home, which are reported in census data. Home language data are, of course, not isomorphic with linguistic competencies; individuals who report only English can still speak other languages outside the home. Nevertheless, the roots of mother-tongue ability lie mainly in the parental home; if children do not speak a language with their parents, the likelihood that they will ultimately have fluency in it is probably small (this follows from the well-known age differential in language learning [Krashen et al., 1979]). In tracing the intergenerational arc of linguistic change, the Mexicans probably establish the outer limit of what is possible in preserving bilingualism. The large size of the Mexican group, its concentration in states along the Mexican–U.S. border, and lengthy history in the United States should all be conducive to the establishment of an infrastructure supportive of Spanish. Yet the evidence, shown in Fig. 2, reveals that by the third and later generations, approximately 60% of Mexican children (5–14-year olds) speak only English at home. The retention of Spanish does vary by proximity to the U.S.–Mexican border and, presumably, by immersion in a bicultural environment (Jasso and Rosenzweig, 1990). But only children growing up more or less in the immediate vicinity of the border substantially improve upon the 60% figure. Those growing up in border states but away from the border—and this includes the Mexican children in Los Angeles—resemble the overall national average. Even in home where a parent uses Spanish, a fairly high fraction of third- and fourth-generation children speak only English.

These data certainly do not exclude intergenerationally stable bilingualism in some portions of the Mexican group. One might take encouragement from the fact that 40% of the third and later generations speak some Spanish at home, although census data, it should be noted, reveal nothing about how well they do it. (One can be quite confident that the third generation, with rare exceptions, speaks English fluently, but there has to be more doubt about its abilities in other tongues.) Yet overall the evidence suggests a sort of compatibility between the multiculturalist and assimilation

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*All the evidence appears to demonstrate that linguistic assimilation occurs very rapidly among Asian groups. As David Lopez (1996) has suggested, the linguistic distance between English and the Asian languages may be so great that sustaining bilingualism requires a level of virtuosity not likely to be found on a mass scale.*
views: bilingual environments have emerged, and they undoubtedly will survive, sustained partly by continuing immigration. We will continue to be a multicultural society in this sense. We will also continue to be a society where linguistic and other forms of assimilation will be patterns of major significance among the descendants of immigrants. The assimilationist drift so evident in the individual-level data throws cold water on the possibility that multiculturalism in a more radical form, a parity among linguistically different cultures, will soon emerge in the United States. Even should Spanish gain the status of a second language in some regions, the hegemony of English will remain—at least for the foreseeable future—and will be reflected, among other places, in an asymmetry of expectations. That is, native Spanish speakers will still be expected to master English, unless they are prepared to suffer social and economic disadvantages (Espinosa and Massey, 1997). But there will be no equivalent expectation for native English speakers: learning Spanish, probably not to the point of fluency in most cases, will be an option, perhaps one that will be widely exercised, but it will not be a normative requirement. Bilingualism, then, is an issue for immigrant populations, but not for native speakers of English. This asymmetry simply adds to the burdens involved in maintaining a bilingual pattern.
RACIAL/ETHNIC BOUNDARY CHANGE

Multiculturalism is also believed to be favored by the racial/ethnic population shifts projected to result from immigration, which are increasing the part of the population that is not of European descent. Earlier, I questioned whether they have been exaggerated by the frequent use of a scenario from a rather distant time point, 2050. Here I want to consider a different issue: the assumption of a fixed set of racial/ethnic categories that is critical to the projections and to the implications that are drawn from them.

Racial and ethnic change on a mass scale has been intrinsic to the American experience of immigration, and so have racial distinctions. Irish Catholics, Italians, and Eastern European Jews were the most prominent of the European groups to be singled out for a social disdain with a racist cast. When Irish Catholics were arriving in huge numbers during the famine years of the middle of the 19th century, they were coming to a society where slavery was widespread and rationalized by biological notions of superiority and inferiority. It was probably inevitable that their very obvious ethnic departure from the Anglo-American type would also be seen as bordering on racial difference. An additional contributing factor was the centuries-long history together of the British and Irish, largely one of British conquest and colonial domination and the attempted eradication of Irish culture and the Catholic religion (Ignatiev, 1995). The perception of the Irish as racially different is illustrated by their image in 19th-century cartoons, where, as John Higham (1970:212) describes, they were commonly portrayed with “a pug nose, an underslung jaw, and an air of tattered truculence usually augmented by whiskey.” These were stereotypical traits that allowed a rather easy transformation into simian features, as Fig. 3 portrays.

By the time Eastern European Jews and Italians were coming in large numbers to American shores, a theoretical and scientific racism, originally the product of European conditions, was arriving as well. This racism cast the then new immigrants in a position of racial inferiority and projected a vision of national apocalypse in which the superiority associated with Nordic Americans would be drowned in a genetic flood unleashed by the prolific newcomers. The character of this view can be illustrated by a quotation from Francis A. Walker, a president of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and one of the leading intellectual lights in the nativism of his day, who, almost exactly a century ago, issued a clarion call about the dangers posed by these immigrants. With a Darwinian framework in mind, he characterized them as “beaten men from beaten races; representing the
worst failures in the struggle for existence. They have none of the ideas and aptitudes which . . . belong to those who are descended from the tribes that met under the oak trees of old Germany to make laws and choose chieftains” (quoted by Higham, 1970:143).

The language of color was also to some extent a part of these racial perceptions, and at least in one instance survived well into the middle of the 20th century, in an epithet for Italians that was still around when I was a child, namely, “guinea.” As H. L. Mencken pointed out a long time ago in *The American Language*, this is a reference to the part of the African
coast from which many slaves were taken, and its use in 19th-century America was definitely in the context of slavery (see also Barrett and Roediger, 1997).

Today, the racial edge to the perception of ethnic differences among whites has disappeared. In saying this, I do not mean to deny that there are still prejudices concerning some of these groups, but they are comparatively mild and have lost their former footing in racist modes of thought. When I show my students the cartoon Irishman and ask them who is being represented, they don’t know. The cartoon’s pictorial vocabulary is defunct. How this happened is an important and, to a large extent, unanswered question. Historians are just beginning to sketch the processes by which the Irish and other groups became fully and unquestionably “white” (Ignatiew, 1995; Perlmann and Waldinger, 1997; Roediger, 1991). The new historical studies, such as Noel Ignatiev’s How the Irish Became White, reveal that achieving whiteness was not a benign process, as immigrants used violence and other means to create social distance between themselves and African Americans. And their acceptability to other white Americans, and thus their “whiteness,” grew as they climbed the social ladder. Their success at achieving whiteness underscores, of course, that the Irish, Jews, and Italians, despite the racism that greeted them, were not on the same plane as African Americans in the first place (Lieberson, 1980).

But the point is that racial/ethnic boundaries can blur, stretch, and move, as the current emphasis on the social construction of race implies (Omi and Winant, 1994). Therefore, the numerical predominance of a racial/ethnic majority group, probably not defined precisely as it is today, may not be as endangered as current population projections make it seem. Indeed, were it not for the fluidity of boundaries, there might be no racial/ethnic numerical majority in the United States today. According to my back-of-the-envelope calculations from census data, between a quarter and a third of the population can trace some ancestry to Protestants from the British Isles, a former “majority” group.7

Might boundaries change again? Of course they might, and it seems a safe bet that they will to some degree. Where changes will take place and what their nature will be are, of course, the key questions, impossible to answer definitively at the present. However, important clues to assimilatory boundary change are suggested by narrowings in the social distances between new immigrant minorities and the European American majority. Such narrowings are a two-sided process: members of the minority must

7More precisely, in the 1990 Census, 28% of Americans are white and claim ancestry from the British Isles other than Ireland. To make the estimate generous, I included whites who cite only “American” ancestry in this count.
seek entry into social contexts occupied by the majority group; and the majority must find their entry acceptable. Evidence that they are occurring, at least for some portions of the ethnic groups emerging from immigration, comes from studies of residential patterns and of intermarriage.

The work that John Logan and I have done indicates that many middle-class Asians and middle-class, light-skinned Latinos reside in the same neighborhoods as their white peers (e.g., Alba and Logan, 1993; Logan et al., 1996). For individuals in these groups, such neighborhood characteristics as average income, indicative not only of a community's affluence but of its quality of life, and European American representation change markedly as household and personal statuses do. Both neighborhood characteristics rise sharply with greater household income and other increases in socioeconomic status indicators; they are also much higher in suburbs, where in fact high proportions of the new immigrant groups have settled; and they go up, though more strongly among Latinos than among Asians, with increasing linguistic assimilation. These results are portrayed in simplified form in Fig. 4 for Los Angeles and New York in 1990. At a certain point (note the right-hand part of each of the four panels), members of the immigrant minorities approach parity with whites, something that is not true for socioeconomically successful African Americans. Thus, the characteristics of the neighborhoods where Asians and Latinos reside are nearly the same as those where similar whites live—hence, the conclusion that many members of the new immigrant groups are living in the same neighborhoods as their white peers. The role of skin color among Latinos has to be underscored here, for our analyses demonstrate that dark-skinned Latinos reside in less advantaged neighborhood settings (see also Denton and Massey, 1989). I also must be careful in characterizing the definitiveness of our findings—new immigrant groups are still concentrated in a relatively small number of unusually diverse metropolitan regions, and as immigration continues, the proportion of European Americans in the population of these regions is almost certainly going to continue to decline, making them less available as neighbors (Frey, 1996; Waldinger and Bozorgmehr, 1996). Nevertheless, socioeconomic integration brings greater proximity to the majority group, residential proximity at least, as does greater linguistic assimilation. This residential assimilation is likely to have a particularly strong impact on the next generations, since children are more dependent on, and therefore susceptible to, the influences exerted by their local environments than are adults. Children also acquire fluency in English with relative ease through schooling, the mass media, and contact with peers.

The high intermarriage rates among the second and later generations of the new groups are even more convincing as evidence of changing boundaries. According to Zhenchao Qian's (1997) analysis of 1990 Census data,
Fig. 4. The residential situations of Asians and light-skinned Latinos compared to those of socioeconomically similar whites and blacks.
nearly two-thirds of young, U.S.-born Asians marry non-Asians, the great majority of them whites; and nearly 40% of their Latino counterparts marry non-Latinos, again the majority of them whites. Qian does not look at the correlation between skin color and intermarriage within the Latino population, but it seems plausible that this intermarriage is dominated by the light-skinned. Once again, one has to be careful about the definitiveness of conclusions, for intermarriage rates could decline as the sizes of these heavily second-generation populations inevitably increase, since increasing size expands the pool of in-group eligibles and thus should lift the level of endogamy. However, endogamy decreased between 1980 and 1990—a time when Asian and Latino populations of all generational groups were growing.

Not all assimilation is toward the Euro-American mainstream. Portes and Zhou (1993) have recently developed the concept of "segmented assimilation" (see also Gans, 1992). They refer to the observable narrowings of social distance between very disadvantaged segments of the new immigrant groups and the native, urban underclass. Unlike assimilation into the mainstream, segmented assimilation involves little or no upward socioeconomic mobility between the immigrant and subsequent generations. One of its signals is the adoption by second- and third-generation youth of the oppositional subculture and outward signs associated with the underclass (Ogbu, 1991). This form of assimilation appears most likely when immigrants are phenotypically "black" according to North American standards, come from the lower socioeconomic strata among immigrant groups, and are located in the inner city. Waters's (1994) study of West Indian youth in New York City underscores the significance of segmented assimilation for Afro-Caribbeans. A black American identity is one of the most common among these youths, and there is a link between identity and social-class trajectory, with a black American identity the option favored by youths apparently heading into the lower class. However, segmented assimilation is not limited to black immigrant groups. Matute-Bianchi (1991) has found its hallmarks among some Mexican American youth in California.

All these signs of narrowing social distance lead me to consider more carefully the notion of racial and ethnic boundary change. A useful set of distinctions points to three boundary-related processes: boundary crossing, boundary blurring, and boundary shifting (Bauböck, 1994; Zolberg and Long, 1997). These are ideal types, I want to underscore, and hard to operationalize in a precise way; but they are nonetheless valuable as a vocabulary. Boundary crossing corresponds to individual-level assimilation—someone moves by a process of assimilation from one group to another, without any real change to the boundary itself. The lack of impact on the social structure may not hold indefinitely, to be sure, for if boundary
crossings happen on a large scale and in a consistent direction, the structure is being altered. Boundary blurring implies that the social profile of a boundary has become less distinct: The clarity of the social distinction involved has become clouded. This sort of change is invoked by many current discussions of the ramifications of increasing interracial marriage rates, including the growing but still low rate of intermarriage between African Americans and whites. A great deal of attention is now being focused on the social category of mixed-race persons (Root, 1992; Spickard and Fong, 1995), and the Census Bureau has made a change in its procedures to make room for mixed racial identities in the 2000 census. Though racially mixed ancestry has been a common occurrence throughout American history, the mixed-race issue today seems to hit with a fresh force because of the much greater acceptance of racial intermarriage, which was illegal in some states as late as 1967. Many commentators seem to envision the mixed-race population as constituting an interstitial social grouping, one that creates a new racial/ethnic zone in the middle of the ethno-racial pentagon and begins to break down the rigidities separating the five major racial/ethnic populations. Whether it will work out this way it is impossible to say as yet. The final process, boundary shifting, involves the relocation of a boundary so that populations that once lay on one side are now included on the other: those who were once outsiders are thereby transformed into insiders.

The European American experience has involved all of these modes. But what has given it its singular significance is the radical boundary shifts it has involved. Groups once regarded as racial outsiders, such as Jews or Italians, have become part of the racial/ethnic majority. Ethnic boundaries among whites have not entirely disappeared, but they have become so faint as to pale beside other racial/ethnic boundaries. It is reasonable, I think, to see this shifting as a consequence of historical contingencies, such as post-World War II prosperity and the four-decade hiatus in mass immigration from outside the Western hemisphere, brought on by the restrictionist legislation of the 1920s and ended by the 1965 revision of immigration law, which signaled a new era of mass immigration. The contemporary immigration era may lack their equivalents.

What does this suggest about the new immigrant groups? Will the narrowings of social distance lead to boundary crossing; boundary blurring.

As Douglas Massey and Ruben Rumbaut have pointed out, an upsurge of immigration from Latin America predates the 1965 law, and therefore it is wrong to see this law as the "cause" of the new immigration. However, it is still the symbolic watershed, in my opinion, because it removed the discriminatory barriers based on nation of origin from American law and signaled, even if unintentionally, that the United States would recruit immigrants on a world-wide basis.
implying some decline in the salience of racial/ethnic boundaries; or to boundary shifting, which might bring the new groups, or at least large proportions of them, into the racial/ethnic majority? That there will be boundary crossing, overwhelmingly away from the new immigrant minorities and into the majority group as well as to some extent into the African American one, is beyond question. As should be obvious from the preceding discussion, the opportunities for this individual-level assimilation will not be spread uniformly among the new immigrants and their descendants. Boundary crossing into the majority mainstream will depend upon social class, ethnic origin, racial appearance, and geographic location, among other factors. But the prospect of large-scale boundary crossing renders the population projections highly problematic, as it implies a larger majority group than they do.

Further, that there will be boundary blurring, brought on by intermarriage and an expansion of the range of phenotypes recognized as part of the majority, is likely. That, however, there will be the type of radical boundary rearrangement that will bring all or a substantial portion of the new groups into the majority, the type we now view as an outcome of European immigration, is doubtful. For one thing, a high level of immigration, if it continues, will revitalize many of the ethnic groups of the new immigration despite assimilation. This, then, rather than the unimportance of assimilation, seems to be a key difference between the present era and the past ones.

How will these boundary processes affect the social meaning of race for African Americans? The optimistic scenario is that they will ultimately lead to a broad decline in the salience of racial/ethnic boundaries, and that this will finally soften the hitherto hard-and-fast character of the black/white divide. Until now the expansion of the racial majority to include previously disparaged groups, like the "swarthy" southern Italians, has not altered the character of that divide because the inclusion of these groups occurred by redefining them as fully "white." But this will presumably no longer be possible if many Asians, for instance, are brought into the majority. Such an expansion could dissolve the transparency of racial distinctions and thus impact upon the distinctions that set African Americans racially apart. A continuing increase in the frequency of black-white marriage, which has grown since the 1960s (Kalmijn, 1993), and the demands of the children of these marriages for social recognition of their multiracial ancestry could also contribute to the blurring of America's most salient and hitherto indestructible racial divide.

But a more pessimistic scenario, which involves a possible boundary shift, is equally plausible. As the many descendants of new immigrant groups come to be included in the racial majority, the nature of the distinc-
tion between blacks and the majority could simply change without losing its social salience or its import for the distribution of social goods and statuses: instead of a division between whites and blacks, the fundamental social chasm would now lie between lighter- and darker-skinned Americans, who, by a process of "segmented assimilation," could also expand to include the most unsuccessful portions of some immigrant groups. Playing into such a distinction could be new social mythologies, already at hand, about basic similarities in the characteristics of "hard-working" immigrant groups, wherever they come from, in contrast to other, especially native, minorities.

CONCLUSION

Both assimilation and multiculturalism are likely to figure importantly in the American future. Assimilation has been the predominant pattern among the descendants of earlier immigrants, as we now recognize in retrospect; and it is likely to be a highly prevalent one among the descendants of contemporary immigrants, though not as paramount as it has been. It is necessary to add here that assimilation most often occurs in the form of a series of small shifts that takes place over generations: those undergoing assimilation still carry ethnic markers in a number of ways. Assimilation does not require the absolute extinction of ethnic difference, in other words.

The motive power for contemporary and future assimilation into the majority group will be substantially the same as it has been in the past: namely, the desire to take advantage of opportunities to improve the social and material circumstances of one's life, whether this involves residential mobility to a new neighborhood or an upward educational and occupational trajectory. On average, it is still true that the opportunities outside an immigrant ethnic group are greater than it can provide within its residential and economic enclaves. The lure of opportunities motivates some individuals to undertake specific forms of assimilation in anticipation of enhancing mobility prospects, as when some second-generation parents raise their children speaking only English in the belief that their educational life chances will be improved by their more complete mastery of the host language. In addition, the exploitation of opportunities for improvement usually carries some ramifications for further assimilation, as when families move to better neighborhoods, which usually entails greater interaction with members of the majority.

Yet American society has been culturally diverse from its beginning, and immigration has consistently added to that diversity. The use of languages other than English is one index, and according to it, diversity has waxed and waned throughout our history. This diversity has had staying
power; the languages introduced by the European immigration of the 19th and early 20th centuries have not disappeared and there is little prospect that they will do so in the foreseeable future. As long as contemporary immigration continues at a robust level, it will expand and reinforce diversity even if assimilation is a major pattern among second- and third-generation individuals. As I have depicted this situation, diversity is sustained by aggregate processes—especially high levels of immigration and the resulting communities and infrastructures. There are no doubt also individual-level processes that sustain it, circumstances that motivate individuals to resist assimilation, but we know less about these than we do about their equivalents behind assimilation (see, e.g., Zhou and Bankston, 1998).

It is in their normative dimensions that assimilationism and multiculturalism seem most likely to prove misleading. At the extreme, both project utopian visions in which racial and ethnic stratification dissipates: for multiculturalism this happens as the hegemony of European American culture disintegrates and parity emerges among different origins and cultures; for assimilationism the key is the fading of ethnic origins as a basis for social differentiation. Racial and ethnic stratification is, however, part of the bedrock of the American social structure, and there is little prospect that this fact will be altered substantially in the foreseeable future. Instead, assimilation seems likely to bolster the majority group, which will retain a decisive numerical predominance as a consequence; it will also expand the underclass group and perhaps add a Latino flavor to what has been its disproportionately African American character. Large-scale immigration, which is unlikely to fall back to pre-1960s levels in a globalized world economy, will favor a blooming cultural diversity but within a framework of inequality that it will lack the capacity to revise fundamentally. These at least seem to be the tendencies built into the American social structure as a realist sociology can describe them. As we know from our past, they can be modified by human agency, especially through collective action, in ways that are not easily foreseen by sociological analysis. Whether these will be so altered anytime in the near future must remain an open question.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Parts of this address grow out of my collaborative projects with John Logan and with Victor Nee, and I am grateful to both for their contributions to my thinking. Amy Lutz, Brian Stults, and Wenquan Zhang gave me valuable computational and other forms of assistance. The comments of Nancy Denton, Richard Hall, Amy Lutz, Gwen Moore, Caroline Persell, and Mary Waters helped me to improve upon earlier drafts. The statistical
and computational work was supported by National Science Foundation grant SBR95-07920.

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