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*International Migration Review*, Vol. 31, No. 4, Special Issue: Immigrant Adaptation and Native-Born Responses in the Making of Americans (Winter, 1997), 826-874.

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# *Rethinking Assimilation Theory for a New Era of Immigration*<sup>1</sup>

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Assimilation theory has been subject to intensive critique for decades. Yet no other framework has provided the social science community with as deep a corpus of cumulative findings concerning the incorporation of immigrants and their descendants. We argue that assimilation theory has not lost its utility for the study of contemporary immigration to the United States. In making our case, we review critically the canonical account of assimilation provided by Milton Gordon and others; we refer to Shibutani and Kwan's theory of ethnic stratification to suggest some directions to take in reformulating assimilation theory. We also examine some of the arguments frequently made to distinguish between the earlier mass immigration of Europeans and the immigration of the contemporary era and find them to be inconclusive. Finally, we sift through some of the evidence about the socioeconomic and residential assimilation of recent immigrant groups. Though the record is clearly mixed, we find evidence consistent with the view that assimilation is taking place, albeit unevenly.

Assimilation has fallen into disrepute. In an essay tellingly entitled "Is Assimilation Dead?" Nathan Glazer (1993:122) summarizes pithily the contemporary view: "Assimilation today is not a popular term." Glazer writes that he asked some Harvard students what they thought of the term and discovered that "the large majority had a negative reaction to it." The rejection of assimilation is not limited to students. While it was once the unquestioned

<sup>1</sup>Revised version of paper presented at the conference "Becoming American/America Becoming: International Migration to the United States," sponsored by the Social Science Research Council, Sanibel Island, Florida, January 18–21, 1996. We are grateful to the Social Science Research Council and to Josh DeWind for providing us with the opportunity and encouragement to work on this project. The participants at the conference gave us numerous helpful comments and suggestions, as well as the encouragement to see the project as worthy of continuing. In both respects, the comments of Phil Kasinitz, Rubén Rumbaut, and Joel Perlmann and Roger Waldinger deserve special acknowledgment. Victor Nee also acknowledges fellowship support from NSF grant No. SBR-9022192 as a Fellow of the Center for Advanced Study in the Behavioral Sciences.

organizing concept in sociological studies of ethnic relations, in recent decades assimilation has come to be viewed by social scientists as a worn-out theory which imposes ethnocentric and patronizing demands on minority peoples struggling to retain their cultural and ethnic integrity.

Without question, earlier social scientists in this field committed what are now regarded as intellectual sins. For instance, Warner and Srole (1945:285 ff.), in their classic account of assimilation among ethnic groups in New Haven, describe ethnic groups as “unlearning” their “inferior” cultural traits (inferior, that is, from the standpoint of the host society) in order to “successfully learn the new way of life necessary for full acceptance.” Warner and Srole also correlated the potential for assimilation with a hierarchy of racial and cultural acceptability, ranging from English-speaking Protestants at the top to “Negroes and all Negroid mixtures” at the bottom. The depiction of the ethnocentric tendency in classical American assimilation could hardly be clearer.

Yet, whatever the deficiencies of earlier formulations and applications of assimilation, we hold that this social science concept offers the best way to understand and describe the integration into the mainstream experienced across generations by many individuals and ethnic groups, even if it cannot be regarded as a universal outcome of American life. In this essay, we attempt to redefine assimilation in order to render it useful in the study of the new immigration. (We are not alone in this attempt; *see*, for instance, Barkan, 1995; Kazal, 1995; Morowska, 1994.) Our reformulation of assimilation emphasizes its utility for understanding the social dynamics of ethnicity in American society, as opposed to its past normative or ideological applications. As a state-imposed normative program aimed at eradicating minority cultures, assimilation has been justifiably repudiated. But as a social process that occurs spontaneously and often unintendedly in the course of interaction between majority and minority groups, assimilation remains a key concept for the study of intergroup relations. In what follows, we review the sociological literature on assimilation, with an eye to assessing its strengths and weaknesses; assay the validity of arguments for rejecting assimilation in understanding the new immigration; and sift through recent studies for clues concerning assimilation’s course among the new immigrant groups.

### *THE CANONICAL ACCOUNT*

Whatever the precise words, conceptions of assimilation have been central to understanding the American experience at least since colonial times. The centrality of assimilation for the scientific understanding of immigration is more recent, traceable to the Chicago School of the early twentieth century and especially to the work of Robert E. Park, W. I. Thomas, and their collabora-

tors and students (McKee, 1993). The social science use of assimilation thus emerged at the highpoint of a previous era of immigration and by means of observations in a city where the first and second generations then constituted the great majority of residents.

In 1921, Park and E.W. Burgess (1969:735) provided an early definition of assimilation: "a process of interpenetration and fusion in which persons and groups acquire the memories, sentiments, and attitudes of other persons and groups and, by sharing their experience and history, are incorporated with them in a common cultural life." When read closely, this definition does not appear to require what many critics assume assimilation must – namely, the erasure of all signs of ethnic origins. Instead, it equates assimilation with the social processes that bring ethnic minorities into the mainstream of American life. The limited extent of the assimilation Park envisioned was made even more clear by another definition that he later created for the *Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences*, where "social" assimilation was "the name given to the process or processes by which peoples of diverse racial origins and different cultural heritages, occupying a common territory, achieve a cultural solidarity sufficient at least to sustain a national existence" (Park, 1930:281).

Park's legacy is closely identified with the notion of assimilation as the end-stage of a "race-relations cycle" of "contact, competition, accommodation, and eventual assimilation," a sequence that, in the most famous statement of it, was viewed as "apparently progressive and irreversible" (Park, 1950:138; see Barkan, 1995:39–40; Lal, 1990:41–45). In depicting the race-relations cycle, Park was rather deliberately painting with broad brush strokes on a large canvas, for the cycle refers obliquely to the processes in the modern world, including long-distance labor migration, that are bringing once separated peoples into closer contact. Competition is the initial, unstable consequence of contact as groups struggle to gain advantages over one another, and it eventuates in the more stable stage of accommodation, where a social structure of typically unequal relations among groups and a settled understanding of group position have come into being (Shibutani and Kwan, 1965; Lal, 1990:41–45). But no matter how stable, accommodation will eventually be undermined by the personal relationships that cross group boundaries, according to Park, who wrote that "in our estimates of race relations we have not reckoned with the effects of personal intercourse and the friendships that grow up out of them" (Park, 1950:150).

Park has been faulted by many later writers for appearing to portray assimilation as an inevitable outcome in multiethnic societies (e.g., Lyman, 1973; Stone, 1985). This is implied in Park's conception of stages. However, recent scholarship, as by Lal (1990), argues that the race-relations cycle played but a minor role in Park's sociology and that its fame rests more on his students' writings than on his own (see also McKee, 1993:109–111). Park's students

and associates did, in fact, make seminal contributions to the formulation of assimilation (*e.g.*, Burgess, 1925; Wirth, 1956; Warner and Srole, 1945).

### *Assimilation Concepts: Milton Gordon's Framework*

The confusion among various formulations of assimilation in the early sociological literature has often been noted (*e.g.*, Barkan, 1995; Gordon, 1964; for other general reviews of assimilation concepts, *see* Abramson, 1980; Gleason, 1980; Hirschman, 1983). This problem was not solved until Milton Gordon's *Assimilation in American Life* (1964) provided a systematic dissection of the concept. His multidimensional formulation has proven attractive in part because it readily lends itself to operationalization and hypothesis formulation suitable for middle-range research. Although Gordon conceived of seven dimensions in all, the critical distinction in his conceptual scheme lay between acculturation and what he termed "structural" assimilation, by which he meant the entry of members of an ethnic minority into primary-group relationships with the majority group. This distinction, and its emphasis in particular on the character of an individual's primary-group affiliations, suggests one of the limitations of Gordon's scheme, namely, that it is oriented to a microsociological account of assimilation not conceptually integrated to larger social processes (*e.g.*, the dynamics of ethnic boundaries, Barth, 1956). Nevertheless, Gordon's conceptual scheme proved to be useful to many students of ethnicity and has profoundly influenced scholarship on assimilation and ethnic change.

Acculturation, the minority group's adoption of the "cultural patterns" of the host society, typically comes first and is inevitable, Gordon argued. His discussion makes clear that these patterns extend beyond the acquisition of the English language, to dress and outward emotional expression, and to personal values (Gordon, 1964:79). He distinguished intrinsic cultural traits, those that are "vital ingredients of the group's cultural heritage," exemplified by religion and musical tastes, from extrinsic traits, which "tend to be products of the historical vicissitudes of the group's adjustment to the local environment" and thus are deemed less central to group identity (Gordon, 1964:79). The distinction would seem to imply that extrinsic traits are readily surrendered by the group in making more or less necessary accommodations to the host society, but its implications are less clear about intrinsic ones. Certainly, Gordon had no expectation that fundamental religious identities are given up as a result of acculturation.

Gordon defined a cultural standard that represented the direction and eventual outcome of acculturation – the "middle-class cultural patterns of, largely, white Protestant, Anglo-Saxon origins," which he also described with Joshua Fishman's term as the "core culture" (Gordon, 1964:72). In his view,

acculturation was a largely one-way process; except in the domain of institutional religion, the minority group adopted the core culture, which remained in Gordon's view basically unchanged by this absorption. Gordon acknowledged only the possibility of change at the margins – "minor modifications in cuisine, recreational patterns, place names, speech, residential architecture, sources of artistic inspiration, and perhaps few other areas" (Gordon, 1964:100).

In Gordon's account, acculturation could occur without being accompanied by other forms of assimilation, and the stage of acculturation only could last indefinitely. The catalyst for more complete assimilation instead is structural assimilation, which Gordon defined as "entrance of the minority group into the social cliques, clubs, and institutions of the core society at the primary group level." He hypothesized that "*once structural assimilation has occurred . . . all of the other types of assimilation will naturally follow*" (Gordon, 1964:80–81, italics in original). This means in particular that prejudice and discrimination will decline (if not disappear), intermarriage will be common, and the minority's separate identity will wane.

On closer examination, Gordon's hypothesis is ambiguous as to whether it is meant to apply to individuals or groups. Even though the measurement of assimilation was put at the individual level, the hypothesis has been interpreted as applying literally to groups – a reading that becomes obvious when one recognizes that the hypothesized relationships among the different dimensions of assimilation need not hold in fact at the level of individuals. For example, individuals may be structurally assimilated, but prejudice and discrimination can still be widespread, as Gordon clearly understood. This ambiguity is important because of the desirability of formulating a concept of assimilation in which some independence between the individual and group levels is explicitly preserved (Barkan, 1995). We will return to this point subsequently.

Another limitation of Gordon's account was that it conceived of assimilation within a two-group framework of analysis (the "Sylvanians" and "Mundovians") and thus did not take account of the multigroup nature of American society. The language used by Gordon's definition ("social cliques, clubs, and institutions of the core society") implies that structural assimilation is to be equated with minority-group relationships to members of the majority group. The problem has been accentuated as American society has become more heterogeneous and the majority group smaller relative to the number of minority groups. Strictly speaking, Gordon's account does not extend to relationships between members of different ethnic minorities. Yet, such situations are increasingly common. A broad rather than a narrow two-group conception should be entertained if assimilation is to be faithful to the level of ethnic intermixing in American society (especially evident in terms of intermarriage and embodied in the Triple Melting Pot idea of Kennedy, 1944).

Perhaps Gordon's structural-assimilation hypothesis should not be given the causal inflection his language implies. The strength of Gordon's conceptual scheme lies in its lucid articulation of some of the key dimensions of assimilation viewed as a composite concept. This leads to the recognition that, to some extent, the dimensions of assimilation can be arranged in terms of stages (Barkan, 1995). When his hypothesis is read in this spirit, the core of the assertion is seen to be that structural assimilation signals the maturity of the assimilation process. Indeed, this has been the main use of the concept in the literature, as indicated by the frequent use of intermarriage data to measure assimilation's progress (*e.g.*, Alba and Golden, 1986; Lieberman and Waters, 1988).

Identificational assimilation, which represents a third dimension of Gordon's schema, has taken on importance in contemporary discussion of assimilation with respect to both the descendants of European immigrants and the new immigrant groups. Gordon (1964:71) defined this as the "development of [a] sense of peoplehood based exclusively on [the] host society." He recognized, too, that ethnic identity was not an undifferentiated concept and distinguished between "historical identification," which derived from a sense of the "interdependence of fate" in Kurt Lewin's phrase and typically extended to the ethnic group as a whole, and "participational identity," whose locus was the segment of the group most socially similar to the individual (the "ethclass" in Gordon's terminology, 1964:53). With the benefit of hindsight, Gordon's concept of identificational assimilation appears overly demanding, requiring the extinction of any form of ethnic identity in favor of an exclusively national, American identity. Consequently, it would seem to imply even the loss of family memories of extra-American origins, which seems not only an extraordinary expectation, but one that flies in the face of the data demonstrating that the overwhelming majority of Americans still acknowledge some non-American ethnic ancestry (Lieberman, 1985; Lieberman and Waters, 1993). However, the knowledge many individuals possess about their family histories should not be conflated with an ethnic identity that has practical consequences (Alba, 1990; Gans, 1979; Waters, 1990).

An important part of Gordon's legacy is his delineation of alternative conceptions of the process and outcome of assimilation in the United States. Gordon described these as Anglo-Conformity and the Melting Pot. (He also identified a third model, Cultural Pluralism, which is less relevant to the canonical account.) These alternative conceptions are appropriately viewed as expressions of popular beliefs or ideologies about the constitution of civil society in America. The model of Anglo-Conformity, which corresponds in spirit with the campaign for rapid, "pressure-cooker" Americanization during and after World War I, equated assimilation with acculturation in the Anglo-American mold and ignored other assimilation dimensions, being therefore

indifferent to the occurrence or nonoccurrence of structural assimilation. The model of the Melting Pot has enjoyed several periods of popularity in American discussions of ethnicity, most recently in the immediate aftermath of World War II. It offered an idealistic vision of American society and identity as arising from the biological and cultural fusion of different peoples; and while its exponents usually emphasized the contributions of Europeans to the mixture, it allowed for a recognition of those of non-European groups as well. In terms of Gordon's scheme, the model operated along the dimensions of cultural and structural assimilation. This latter was invoked by the forecast of widespread intermarriage (Gordon, 1964:125; Herberg, 1960; Kennedy, 1944, 1952). The cultural assimilation portion of the Melting Pot idea was rather ambiguous, however. Many early exponents spoke in ways that suggested a truly syncretic American culture blending elements from many different groups, but later commentators were more consistent with Gordon's own conception, that acculturation is a mostly one-directional acceptance of Anglo-American patterns (Gordon, 1964:127-128).

Gordon was an adherent of neither model. This may come as a surprise to many who know Gordon's views only in the context of the contemporary discussion of assimilation, for he has often been identified with a school that portrays assimilation as an almost inevitable outcome for immigrant groups. But this is not, in fact, a fair characterization. Although Gordon left little doubt that, in his view, acculturation was inevitable to a large degree, he did not see structural assimilation as similarly foreordained. His analysis of American society led to the conclusion that structural pluralism rather than cultural pluralism was the more accurate description. He envisioned the United States as constituted from ethnic subsocieties, in whose institutions and social networks most individuals spend the major portions of their social lives, literally from cradle to grave in many cases (Gordon, 1964:159).

### *Straight-Line Assimilation*

Another major piece of the canon is the notion of "straight-line assimilation," a phrase popularized by Gans (1973) and Sandberg (1973) to describe an idea stemming from Warner and Srole (1945). The straight-line notion adds a dynamic dimension to Gordon's somewhat static formulation in that it envisions a process unfolding in a sequence of generational steps; each new generation represents on average a new stage of adjustment to the host society, *i.e.*, a further step away from ethnic "ground zero," the community and culture established by the immigrants, and a step closer to more complete assimilation (Lieberson, 1973). Implied is the idea that generations are the motor for ethnic change, not just the time frame within which assimilation takes place. Each generation faces a distinctive set of issues in its relationship to the



larger society and to the ethnic group, and their resolution brings about a distinctive pattern of accommodation. The idea of the generational inevitability of assimilation has been criticized, however, for assuming that all ethnic content is imported by immigrants and not recognizing that it can be created in response to conditions and out of cultural materials in the host society. Critics of the straight-line notion have argued that, instead, ethnicity may go through periods of recreation, if not renaissance (Glazer and Moynihan, 1970; Yancey, Ericksen and Juliani, 1976; Greeley, 1977; Conzen *et al.*, 1992). In recognition of this criticism, Gans (1992) has modified his description to the “bumpy-line theory of ethnicity,” while still adhering to the core of the original concept – namely, that there is a generational dynamic behind ethnic change and that it moves, perhaps with tangents, in the general direction of assimilation.

The generational time frame assumes a view of ethnic change that is decidedly endogenous and that, perhaps ironically, tends to be ahistorical. By casting assimilation in terms of a dynamic internal to the group, the straight-line notion overlooks the impact of historically specific changes, as, for example, the shifts in residential patterns resulting from the rapid expansion of suburbs in the post-World War II era. This, in combination with the hiatus of mass immigration in the 1920s, led to ethnic changes that corresponded closely with generational status – in, for example, mother tongue competence (Stevens, 1985). Such generational effects may not be as pronounced in the current immigration where births in an ethnic group may be scattered across decades. Consequently, a common set of historical experiences is not likely to coincide with generational status, as was the case in the earlier mass immigration from Europe (and also Japan).

### *Extensions of the Conceptual Canon*

Assimilation has been criticized over the decades, both from outside by those who reject it as a valid approach and by others who, operating within its conceptual frame, point out gaps or identify features that seem idiosyncratic to the experiences of some groups. Our concern here is to address criticism internal to the framework, leading us to consider some extensions of Gordon's contribution to the canon.

Gordon's concept of culture has been criticized for being static and overly homogeneous. As already noted, Gordon assumed that acculturation involved change on the part of an ethnic group in the direction of middle-class Anglo-American culture, which itself remained largely unaffected, except possibly for “minor modifications.” An obvious problem with Gordon's view is that American culture varies greatly by locale and social class; acculturation hardly takes place in the shadow of a single, middle-class cul-

tural standard. What is lacking in Gordon is a more differentiated and syncretic conception of culture and a recognition that American culture was and is more mixed, much more an amalgam of diverse influences, and that it continues to evolve.

It does not require a radical shift in perspective to recognize that assimilation and its expression in the form of acculturation are, at bottom, no more than the attenuation of an ethnic or racial distinction and the cultural and social differences that are associated with it.<sup>2</sup> Such processes can occur by changes in one group that make it more like another or by changes in two (or more) groups that shrink the differences and distance between them – group convergence, in other words. Moreover, acculturation need not be defined simply as the substitution of one cultural expression for its equivalent, whether the replacement comes from the majority or minority cultures, though such substitution certainly takes place. This narrow conception of acculturation is at the root of the frequently encountered view that one group “adopts” the cultural traits of another. The influence of minority ethnic cultures can occur also by an expansion of the range of what is considered normative behavior within the mainstream; thus elements of minority cultures are absorbed alongside their Anglo-American equivalents or are fused with mainstream elements to create a hybrid cultural mix.

We suspect that ethnic influences on the mainstream American culture happen continuously – as the recent literature on the invention of ethnic and national traditions suggests (Conzen *et al.*, 1992; Hobsbawm and Ranger, 1983; Sollors, 1989) – and that their occurrence is not limited to the domains where expansion and hybridization are most apparent, such as food and music. An obvious question is how one can recognize the incorporation into American culture of ethnic influences. The hallmark, we think, is that a cultural trait gradually loses its association with an ethnic group. In part, this happens because nongroup members take it on, so that the empirical correlation between the trait and group membership is weakened. In part, it occurs as the trait is no longer labeled in an ethnic way. Over a longer time frame, the ethnic origins of a new element may be forgotten, and it becomes part of the mainstream repertoire, like the currently archetypal American recreational practices which, as Thomas Sowell (1996) notes, are derived from those brought by German immigrants. Similarly, the more intense family contacts that Greeley (1977) has documented for some groups, such as Irish and Italians, may have gradually influenced American conceptions of family life.

<sup>2</sup>We view “racial” distinctions as a type of “ethnic” distinction, one where physical characteristics constitute part of the way that a group is socially defined. (For a reasoned justification of this usage, see Waldinger and Bozorgmehr, 1996.) In our usage, then, the term “racial” is implied in “ethnic.” Because this usage is not universal, however, we sometimes use both terms to remind the reader that our discussion includes racial as well as nonracial ethnic groups.

As noted earlier, Gordon's scheme did not recognize the distinction between individual and group levels of ethnic change. Thereby, it inadvertently sidestepped some of the most important lines of investigation within the assimilation framework – the reciprocal effects between group processes and individual attainment. The insight that a theory of assimilation must take the interaction between micro (individual) and mezzo (group or community) levels into account dates at least as far back as Breton's (1964) hypothesis that an ethnic community's "institutional completeness" influences its members' propensities to assimilate. In other words, the supply-side of ethnicity, the group and community context, may be decisive to the outcome at the individual level (Portes and Rumbaut, 1996). If at the community level the opportunities to express ethnicity are meager or socially inappropriate, the intent to maintain ethnicity, assuming it exists, may be thwarted or transformed. The desire to find ethnic modes of behavior and expression, then, is likely to succeed where the supply-side of ethnicity is fairly rich in possibility. Where individuals assimilate in large numbers and are not replaced by a continuing immigration stream, a pattern characterizing many European-ancestry groups, the supply-side of ethnicity is diminished as a whole as well as narrowed in specific respects. Organizations dwindle in membership or find that their members belong to early generations or those with a more parochial outlook. Neighborhoods fail to retain the socially mobile sons and daughters of their residents, and their class character does not change to match the expanding class distribution of the group.

Some gaps in Gordon's account lend themselves to natural extensions by the addition of further dimensions of assimilation. (Odd though it seems, his multidimensional formulation overlooked important forms of assimilation.) Occupational mobility and economic assimilation, the key dimensions of socioeconomic assimilation, are not addressed in his discussion of assimilation. Yet this kind of assimilation is of paramount significance, both in itself, because parity of life chances with natives is a critical indicator of the decline of ethnic boundaries, and for the reason that entry into the occupational and economic mainstream has undoubtedly provided many ethnics with a motive for social (*i.e.*, structural, in Gordon's sense) assimilation. Furthermore, socioeconomic mobility creates the social conditions conducive to other forms of assimilation since it likely results in equal status contact across ethnic lines in workplaces and neighborhoods.

Yet the concept of socioeconomic assimilation is not unambiguous, and two different usages need to be distinguished. In one, by far the more common in the literature on ethnicity and assimilation, socioeconomic assimilation is equated with attainment of average or above average socioeconomic standing, as measured by indicators such as education, occupation, and

income (*e.g.*, Neidert and Farley, 1985), a usage that can be traced to Warner and Srole (1945). Since many immigrant groups have entered the American social structure on its lower rungs, this meaning of socioeconomic assimilation is usually conflated with social mobility, leading to the frequently expressed expectation that assimilation and social mobility are inextricably linked. In the second usage, socioeconomic assimilation can be defined as minority participation in institutions such as the labor market and education on the basis of parity with native groups of similar backgrounds. If the emphasis in the first version falls on equality of attainment or position, the emphasis in the second is on equality of treatment; members of the immigrant minority and similarly situated members of native groups (which could be other minorities) have the same life chances in the pursuit of such scarce values as high-status jobs and higher education. The key question for the second version is: To what extent has an ethnic distinction lost its relevance for processes of socioeconomic attainment, except for initial conditions?

The distinction between the two types of socioeconomic assimilation is important because it pertains to whether the relationship between socioeconomic and other forms of assimilation is historically contingent. The descendants of European immigrants of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries experienced a close link between social mobility and other forms of assimilation. But this may have reflected the opportunity structure available during a particular era in American history (Gans, 1992; Portes and Zhou, 1993). The question of whether the possible narrowing of opportunities in the contemporary United States will limit the prospects for socioeconomic assimilation of new immigrant groups or, instead, lead to a different pattern of assimilation must be kept open for the time being. The second kind of socioeconomic assimilation allows for "segmented" assimilation (Portes and Zhou, 1993). According to this view, many labor migrants, with Mexicans as the preeminent example, may end up in the lower rungs of the stratification order, while human capital immigrants, common among Asian groups and Russian Jews in the current mass immigration, experience rapid social mobility.

Another dimension of assimilation that has received attention in recent years is residential or, following Massey (1985), spatial assimilation. Massey's formulation is the most systematic and has been used as a standard to assess the residential segregation of major racial/ethnic populations in the United States (Massey and Denton, 1987, 1993). Spatial assimilation as a concept is linked to a model of incorporation that continues the Chicago School's ecological tradition and that views the spatial distribution of groups as a reflection of their human capital and the state of their assimilation, broadly construed. The basic tenets of the ecological model are that residential mobility follows from the acculturation and social mobility of individuals and that residential mobility is an intermediate step on the way to structural assimilation.

As members of minority groups acculturate and establish themselves in American labor markets, they attempt to leave behind less successful members of their groups and to convert occupational mobility and economic assimilation into residential gain, by “purchasing” residence in places with greater advantages and amenities. This process entails a tendency toward dispersion of minority group members, opening the way for increased contact with members of the ethnic majority and thus desegregation. According to the model, entry into relatively advantaged suburban communities that contain many whites is a key stage in the process (Massey and Denton, 1988).

Like socioeconomic assimilation, residential assimilation has been given related but distinguishable interpretations in past discussion. Analogously, one is that the residential distribution of the minority approximates that of the majority – in other words, that the group is found in the same locations and in similar concentrations as the majority. This is the condition of no segregation and is applicable only on the group level. A second meaning is that the residential opportunities of minority group members are equivalent to those of majority group members with similar resources. “Opportunities” here should be given a broad interpretation to include not just location (*e.g.*, access to desirable suburbs) but also housing (*e.g.*, home ownership, quality of dwelling). The question of whether minority group members can achieve residential situations as desirable as those of others with similar qualifications is one that can be posed at the individual level. A third and final meaning of residential assimilation refers to the existence of ethnic neighborhoods, which are generally viewed as housing social structures and cultural milieux supportive of ethnic distinctiveness (*e.g.*, LaRuffa, 1988; Alba, Logan and Crowder, 1997).

### *Creating Assimilation Theory: Shibutani and Kwan's Ecological Analysis*

Even when extended as above, Gordon's analysis, the touchstone for all subsequent studies of assimilation, remains limited. Most important, it lacks a specification of the causal mechanisms giving rise to assimilation. Despite Gordon's reference to theories of assimilation, he did not formulate a theory in this sense. His contribution was to define a multidimensional framework whose descriptive concepts have proven highly useful, allowing analysts to measure the extent of the assimilation of racial and ethnic groups along various empirical dimensions. His linchpin hypothesis asserts that incorporation into primary groups of the dominant group precedes and stimulates other forms of assimilation. Yet the direction of causality could well be the opposite of what was claimed by the structural assimilation hypothesis, a question that cannot be resolved within Gordon's framework because there is no causal theory of assimilation.

At least one attempt to formulate a more complete theory of ethnic stratification and assimilation exists; although it is not now a part of the assimilation canon, we include it in our discussion to suggest a direction in which the canon might fruitfully be expanded. The attempt we have in mind is that of Tomatsu Shibutani and Kian Kwan in *Ethnic Stratification* (1965). Whereas Gordon focused his study on assimilation in American society, Shibutani and Kwan elaborated a theory that expanded upon Park's race-relations cycle, to focus broadly on explaining the dynamics of ethnic stratification around the globe. Despite this reach, their underlying aim was to gain new insights on the American experience of race relations through comparative historical analysis of systems of ethnic domination in diverse historical and societal settings, ranging widely to include Manchu rule over Han Chinese and ethnic stratification in the Roman empire.

As Chicago School sociologists, Shibutani and Kwan employed Mead's symbolic interactionism as a core building block of their theory. Following Mead, they argued that how a person is treated in society depends "not on what he is," but on the "manner in which he is defined." Out of necessity, humans place people into categories, each associated with expected behavior and treatment, in order to deal in a routine and predictable manner with strangers and acquaintances outside of their primary groups. Differences giving rise to social distances are created and sustained symbolically through the practice of classifying and ranking. The social distances that arise thereby are the fundament of the color line that segregates minorities and impedes assimilation.

By social distance, Shibutani and Kwan (1965:263–271) mean the subjective state of nearness felt to certain individuals, not physical distance between groups. In their account, change in subjective states – reduction of social distance – precedes and stimulates structural assimilation, and not the reverse as implied in Gordon's hypothesis. When social distance is low, there is a feeling of common identity, closeness, and shared experiences. But when social distance is high, people perceive and treat the other as belonging to a different category; and even after long acquaintance, there are still feelings of apprehension and reserve. Social distance may be institutionalized, as it is in the case of the color line, where stereotypes, customs, social norms, and formal institutional arrangements maintain a system of stratification that employs ethnic markers to determine differential access to opportunity structures (Merton, 1968). In Shibutani and Kwan's view of the American experience, social mobility through economic advancement, though not as common as it is perceived to be, allows for upward movement in class standing. But the system of ethnic stratification is more rigid. Ethnic identity for nonwhites is especially resilient to change. Although a member of a racial minority can improve his or her position in the opportunity structure, "ethnic identity, in those areas in

which it makes a difference, places a ceiling upon the extent to which he can rise" (Shibutani and Kwan, 1965:33).

Shibutani and Kwan intended their theory as an extension of Park's natural history of the race-relations cycle. Through a comparative historical approach, they examined case studies of contact, competition, accommodation, and assimilation stemming from migration. Their analysis uncovered many apparent exceptions to Park's optimistic conception of assimilation, for ethnic stratification orders tend to be long-lasting once established and institutionalized. Domination is initially gained through competitive advantages accruing to the group whose culture is best adapted to exploit the resources of the environment. Competition and natural selection push minorities into the least desirable residential locations and economic niches. A stable system of ethnic stratification is rooted in part in a moral order in which the dominant group is convinced that its advantages derive from natural differences and minorities come to believe in their inferiority and accept their lot at the bottom. But the dominant group also upholds its position and privileges through institutionalized power and outright coercion. Individual minority group members may achieve social mobility and gain economic parity, but as exceptions to the rule. Such upwardly mobile individuals, often of mixed race, acquire a marginal status that gives them a modicum of privilege and respect, but they are fully accepted neither by the dominant group nor by their own ethnic community. In a stable ethnic stratification order, individual assimilation can occur even while the system maintaining dominance remains intact.

Nevertheless, Shibutani and Kwan agree with Park that even stable ethnic stratification orders ultimately tend to become undone and that assimilation occurs at the final stage of the natural history of the race-relations cycle. Their use of ecological theory, which informs their analysis of ethnic stratification, plays a central role here, too, contributing a dynamic, macrosociological dimension that is vital to their theoretical framework. It provides the crucial causal links between the microsociological part of the theory and much larger structures and processes.

The causal mechanisms that bring about the reduction of social distance stem from changes in "life conditions" that occur at the ecological level. In the absence of such changes, ethnic stratification orders tend towards stable equilibrium. In explaining the transformation of such orders, Shibutani and Kwan emphasize particularly the importance of technological innovation, which in turn induces alterations in the mode of production. As an illustration, they cite the invention of the automatic cotton picker, which diminished the demand for cheap labor in the south and sparked the migration of poor blacks and whites to the industrial north, altering the pattern of racial stratification throughout the United States. Changes in the economic system associated with technological shifts often introduce opportunities for minor-

ity groups to acquire new competitive advantages that make them indispensable to employers. These in turn lead employers to seek institutional changes favorable to the interests of minority groups – changes that, in a capitalist system, are relatively easy to institute when organizations and individuals pursuing profits find it in their economic interest to do so. As a contemporary example, one could point to the role of employers in supporting the immigration of workers, both skilled and unskilled, legal and undocumented, despite the public clamor for greater limits on legal immigration and a curtailing of illegal immigration. At one end of the economic spectrum, the interest of employers stems from the growing labor market demand for highly skilled workers (*e.g.*, computer programmers) because of the postindustrial transformation of the American economy; at the other end, there is a continuing need for elastic sources of low-wage labor in the agricultural sector, in “degraded” manufacturing sectors such as the garment industry, and in personal service such as childcare (Sassen, 1988).

Another ecological source of change stems from shifts in the often unstable demographic balance between majority and minority groups. As the relative size of minority groups increases, shifts in power become likely. For example, the increasing percentage of nonwhites in the United States contributes to the pressure on employers and schools to institute changes, such as policies promoting the value of diversity, to accommodate a more heterogeneous population; similar changes can also be observed in other countries with large immigrant populations, such as Germany, where multiculturalist pressures have also arisen as an accommodative response to growing population diversity (Cohn-Bendit and Schmid, 1992). Likewise, increases in population density, mainly in cities, alter ethnic relations by increasing the probability of chance meetings and, eventually, of stable relationships between members of different ethnic groups.

The effects of ecological changes notwithstanding, Shibutani and Kwan assert that the most immediate source of a decline in social distance occurs when other changes stimulate the introduction of new ideas that challenge values and cultural beliefs previously taken for granted, as in the discrediting of white supremacist ideologies in the postcolonial world, and a “transformation of values” ensues.

Systems of ethnic stratification begin to break down when minority peoples develop new self-conceptions and refuse to accept subordinate roles. As they become more aware of their worth in comparison to members of the dominant group, what they had once accepted as natural becomes unbearable. (Shibutani and Kwan, 1965:350)

In Shibutani and Kwan’s account, the context giving rise to higher rates of assimilation often follows the outbreak of protests and opposition. Social



movements are the engine that sparks interest among dominant elites in instituting changes and reforms to alter the relationship between majority and minority in a manner that promotes assimilation.

We intend our brief discussion of Shibutani and Kwan's theory of ethnic stratification to sketch the outline of a missing component in the canon of assimilation, but not necessarily to provide the exact blueprint. Without a dynamic of the sort provided by this theory, Gordon's analysis of assimilation remains static, allowing for individual-level assimilation but not for more wholesale shifts in ethnic and racial boundaries. (As we noted earlier, Gordon remained a structural pluralist in his view of American society.) The link between microsociological changes in social distance, and thus interethnic relations and structural assimilation, and macrosociological shifts points in the direction in which a theory of assimilation must move. Although the causal mechanisms that the Shibutani-Kwan theory posits may be revised in light of new research, clearly any analysis of the potential for assimilation in the United States, or anywhere else for that matter, cannot rely solely on confidence in processes of individual-level assimilation alone, but must pay attention to macroscopic processes rooted in population ecology, and how these impinge on prospects for assimilation.

### *HOW RELEVANT ARE THE DIFFERENCES BETWEEN PAST AND PRESENT "ERAS OF IMMIGRATION"?*

There is abundant evidence that assimilation has been the master trend among the descendants of the immigrants of the previous era of mass immigration, who mainly came from Europe in the period before 1930. This assimilation can be equated, above all, with long-term processes that have eroded the social foundations for ethnic distinctions and ultimately the distinctions themselves. These processes have brought about a rough parity of opportunities (among groups, not individuals) to obtain the desirable social goods of the society, such as prestigious and remunerative jobs, and loosened the ties between ethnicity and specific economic niches (Greeley, 1976; Lieberman, 1980; Lieberman and Waters, 1988; Neidert and Farley, 1985). Parity here refers to a broad convergence toward the life chances of the "average" white American, which has particularly affected the descendants of immigrants from peasant backgrounds (*e.g.*, southern Italians) and does not exclude the exceptional achievements of a few small groups, such as Eastern European Jews. Assimilation has diminished cultural differences that once served to signal ethnic membership to others and to sustain ethnic solidarity; one result has been an implosion of European mother tongues (Alba, 1988; Stevens, 1992; Veltman, 1983). Assimilation is also associated with a massive shift in residence during the postwar era – away from urban ethnic neigh-

borhoods towards ethnically intermixed suburbs (Alba, Logan and Crowder, 1997; Gans, 1967; Guest, 1980) – and with relatively easy social intermixing across ethnic lines which has resulted in high rates of ethnic intermarriage and ethnically mixed ancestry (Alba, 1995; Alba and Golden, 1986; Lieberman and Waters, 1988). Finally, assimilation finds expression in the ethnic identities of many whites, which are “symbolic” in the sense defined by Herbert Gans and involve few commitments in everyday social life (Gans, 1979; Alba, 1990; Waters, 1990).

Admittedly, the causes of this assimilation of European ancestry ethnic groups are much less well understood than is the result. But, at a minimum, the fact that this assimilation has involved groups with very different characteristics at time of immigration and varied histories in the United States suggests that the forces promoting it have been, and perhaps still are, deeply embedded in American society. Yet many scholars of contemporary immigration reject assimilation as a likely outcome on a mass scale for contemporary immigrant groups. One of the most compelling arguments they raise is that assimilation, as represented by the canonical account, is specific to a set of historical circumstances that characterized mass immigration from Europe but does not, and will not, apply to contemporary non-European immigrant groups (*see* Massey, 1994; Portes and Rumbaut, 1996).

### *The Absence of a Foreseeable Hiatus in the Immigration Stream*

The decisive halt in the stream of mass immigration from Europe in the late 1920s, induced by restrictive immigration legislation followed by the Great Depression, is widely thought to have been fateful for ethnic groups. The ensuing, four-decade interruption in steady, large-scale immigration virtually guaranteed that ethnic communities and cultures would be steadily weakened over time. The social mobility of individuals and families drained these communities, especially of native-born ethnics, and undermined the cultures they supported. There were few newcomers available as replacements. Over time, the modal generation shifted from the immigrant to the second and then from the second to the third.

Many students of post-1965 immigration believe that a similar hiatus in the contemporary immigration stream is unlikely. One reason is the apparent disinclination of the federal government to ratchet down the level of immigration, though this may be changing as the political climate generated by immigration issues heats up (*see* Brimelow, 1995). The legislation that has set the main parameters for immigration during the 1990s, the Immigration Act of 1990, appears to have raised the level of legal immigration above the nearly record-setting pace of the 1980s (Heer, 1996; Reimers, 1992:262). Moreover, recent attempts to control the immigration flow, such as the 1986

IRCA law, have generally had unanticipated and even counterproductive consequences in the end, perhaps, many suggest, because the immigration-generating forces in the United States and in sending societies are so powerful that they thwart or bypass the attempts of the U.S. government to harness them (Donato, Durand and Massey, 1992; Heer, 1996).

Movement across national borders appears to be an endemic feature of the contemporary international system, and this adds to the difficulty of substantially limiting contemporary immigration. United Nations projections of the world population suggest very large population increases in the near future (by 2025), which will occur mostly outside the highly developed nations and thus add to the huge reservoir of people available to move (Heer, 1996:137–145). Needless to say, emigration from less developed countries is not just a product of population pressure but of the curve of economic development, which instills in broad segments of the population consumption tastes that cannot be satisfied by their native economies, and of the historical linkages that exists between less and more developed nations in the international system (Sassen, 1988; Portes and Rumbaut, 1996). Further, it is more difficult for national governments to control emigration than was the case a century ago. Such forces seem likely to engender large, difficult-to-control population movements far into the future, as exemplified by the large legal and illegal flows from Mexico to the United States.

If immigration to the United States continues indefinitely at its current level, then population projections show that many of the ethnic groups arising from it will be dominated by the first and second generations well into the next century (Edmonston and Passel, 1994). This will create a fundamentally different ethnic context from that faced by the descendants of European immigrants, for the new ethnic communities are highly likely to remain large, culturally vibrant, and institutionally rich. Ethnic community life in combination with ethnic economies, according to this scenario, are likely to provide particularistic channels of mobility. In sum, there are likely to be strong incentives to keep ethnic affiliations alive even for the third generation, as long as the distance between the generations does not grow so great as to alienate them from one another.

Yet, if there is any proven rule in population projections, it is that the patterns of the present cannot be projected indefinitely into the future, for they will change in unforeseeable ways. The level of immigration could go up, to be sure, but it could also go down – as a result of restrictive legislation backed up by tougher enforcement, a decline in the attractiveness of the United States to one or more of the main sources of current immigration, a weakening of the forces generating emigration from these countries, or some combination of these changes. Despite the current pessimism about efforts to control immigration flows to the United States, especially the undocumented

immigration, control is not impossible, as is shown by the example of Germany, which has lengthy land borders with Eastern Europe, a potential source of many immigrants, but only a small residential population of undocumented immigrants in comparison with that of the United States.

Moreover, a decline in the attractiveness of the United States to potential immigrants could happen for any of a number of reasons – such as changes in the labor market that eliminate some of the niches exploited by immigrants, declines in the relative quality of life in the metropolitan areas that are the main receiving areas, or a rise in the relative attractiveness and accessibility of other countries as immigrant destinations.

Raising the prospect of a future decline in the general level of immigration is admittedly speculative. We are on firmer ground, we believe, in predicting that the immigration of some groups will decline and will not live up to the assumption of continued inflow far into the future. The assumption, in other words, will hold selectively, not uniformly. One reason for suspecting such declines is that the level of economic development of some sending nations may approach or even catch up to that of the United States, undermining a principal motive for immigration. This has happened in the case of Japan, which sent many immigrants around the turn of the century, but currently is the source for few immigrants, other than managers in Japanese companies who are doing a tour of duty at U.S. branches. It could well happen in the cases of Korea and Taiwan. Indeed, there are signs of an incipient decline in Korean immigration; between 1990 and 1994, the number of immigrant visas allocated to Koreans fell by 60 percent while the number returning home surged (Belluck, 1995; Min, 1996). For groups whose immigration abates, the prediction of ethnic communities continually revitalized by new immigration will prove inaccurate.

Finally, it perhaps should not be assumed that the cessation of mass immigration was essential to opening the way for assimilation for the descendants of late European immigration. We do not know whether and to what extent assimilation would have taken place in any case. It is certainly a plausible hypothesis that assimilation would have proceeded, albeit at a slower pace. Similarly, in the new era of mass immigration, even if immigration continues at present levels, there is no reason to assume that the second and third generation will be locked into the same communal life and economic niches of the first generation. With the possible exception of Mexican immigration, which might be compared to the French-Canadian situation, the numbers of immigrants from each of the many immigrant streams are small relative to the overall U.S. population. Far from the closed ethnic boundaries common to situations of stable ethnic stratification often involving only a few ethnic groups, such heterogeneity increases the likelihood of chance meeting and associations across groups. Moreover, as long as ethnic economies are popu-

lated by small businesses with limited opportunities for advancement, the direction of job changes over time, even for the first generation, will be to secure jobs with better conditions of employment and returns to human capital in the mainstream economy (Nee, Sanders and Sernau, 1994).

### *The Racial Distinctiveness of Many New Immigrant Groups*

A common argument holds that the descendants of earlier European immigrations, even those composed of peasants from economically backward parts of Europe, could eventually assimilate because their European origins made them culturally and racially similar to American ethnic core groups – those from the British Isles and some northern and western European countries. The option of assimilation will be less available to the second and later generations of most new immigrant groups because their non-European origins mean that they are more distinctive, with their distinctiveness of skin color especially fateful.

While we wish to avoid at all cost a Panglossian optimism about American racism, we find this argument less compelling than many do because we think that it treats perceptions of racial difference as more rigid than they have proven themselves historically. We grant that American treatment of non-Europeans has generally been characterized by racist discrimination of a more extreme cast than anything experienced by even the most disparaged of the European groups, as the well-known examples of the Chinese Exclusion Act of the late nineteenth century and the internment of Japanese Americans during World War II testify. Nevertheless, the view that the pathway to assimilation was smoothed for the descendants of European immigrants by their racial identification is an anachronism, inappropriately imposing contemporary racial perceptions on the past. There is ample evidence that native-born whites perceived some of the major European immigrant groups, such as the Irish, Jews, and Italians, as racially distinct from themselves and that such perceptions flowered into full-blown racist theorizing during the high-water period of mass immigration in the early decades of this century (Higham, 1970). This is not just a matter of a language usage in which “race” was treated as a synonym for “nation” or “ethnic group.” Many Americans believed that they could identify the members of some groups by their characteristic appearance (e.g., “Jewish” facial features), and nineteenth-century caricatures of the Irish frequently gave them a distinctly simian cast.

Over time, racial perceptions of the most disparaged European groups shifted. The Irish, and perhaps other groups, initially struggled to put some racial and social distance between themselves and African Americans (Ignatiev, 1995; Roediger, 1991). But as these groups climbed the socioeconomic ladder and mixed residentially with other whites, their perceived dis-

inctiveness from the majority faded. (World War II, a watershed in many ways for ethnic relations among whites, also had a powerful impact on attitudes towards European ethnics.) Intermarriage both marked this shift and accelerated it. We see no a priori reason why a similar shift could not take place for some contemporary immigrant groups and some segments of other groups. We think here particularly of Asians and light-skinned Latinos. In the case of some Asian groups, the relatively high intermarriage rates of their U.S.-born members suggest their acceptability to many whites, the most frequent partners in intermarriage, and the absence of a deep racial divide (Lee and Yamanaka, 1990; Qian, 1997). Loewen's (1971) study of Chinese immigrants who migrated from the Western states to the South in the 1870's documents a transformation of racial attitudes that parallels that for the Irish. When Chinese laborers first arrived in the Mississippi Delta they joined free blacks as part of the "colored" agricultural labor force in a race-segregated society. Chinese immigrants and their descendants gradually "crossed-over" to gain acceptance in the white community by distancing themselves socially from blacks and acculturating to southern white culture. The post-1965 immigration of Asians to the United States takes place in a substantially different historical context of the post-Civil Rights Movement and a new era of mass immigration. Although Loewen's case study of the Mississippi Chinese may not be applicable to the current immigration, it nonetheless shows that ethnic identity and boundaries are socially constructed and malleable.

The most intractable racial boundary remains that separating those deemed phenotypically black from whites. This boundary is likely to exert a powerful influence on the adaptation possibilities of immigrant groups, depending on where they are situated with respect to it. The evidence of this influence is already apparent; it is registered in the research observations about the identificational dilemmas confronted by the children of black Caribbean parentage (Waters, 1994; Woldemikael, 1989) and recognized in the concept of "segmented assimilation" (Portes and Zhou, 1993). But despite such evidence, there is also the countervailing experience of South Asian immigrants. Although South Asians have dark skin color, they are the highest income group in the United States and are predominantly suburban in their residence (Portes and Rumbaut, 1996). Their experience suggests that not dark skin color per se, but the appearance of connection to the African-American group raises the most impassable racist barriers in the United States.

### *The Impact of Economic Restructuring on Immigrant Opportunity*

The assimilation of European-ancestry Americans is linked to opportunities for social mobility that, within a brief historical period, brought about a

rough parity of life chances across many ethnic groups (though not within them, as life chances remained structured by social class origins) (Greeley, 1976; Lieberman, 1980). These opportunities were in turn linked to historically contingent, broad avenues of intergenerational movement that allowed immigrants of peasant origins with few work skills of relevance in an urban industrial economy nevertheless to gain a foothold through steady employment, often beginning in manufacturing sectors (Bodnar, 1985). According to a common view, similar openings are not to be found with the same frequency in the contemporary economy because of economic restructuring, which has led to the elimination of many manufacturing jobs and the degradation of others and to their replacement in the spectrum of jobs open to immigrant workers with low-level service jobs that do not offer comparable wages, stability of employment, or mobility ladders (Sassen, 1988). This result of economic restructuring is described by Portes and Zhou (1993) as an "hourglass economy," with a narrowed band of middle-level jobs and bulging strata at the bottom and the top. The presumption is that it will be more difficult for the descendants of contemporary immigrants, many of whom enter the labor force at or near the bottom, to make the gradual intergenerational transition upwards, because footholds in the middle of the occupational structure are relatively scarce (Portes and Zhou, 1993). Movement into the top strata requires substantial human capital, particularly higher educational credentials, that is not likely to be within reach of all members of the second generation. A conclusion drawn by a number of scholars is that, to a degree not true of European ethnics, the current second generation is at risk of experiencing no, or even downward, mobility, unless the American economy becomes more dynamic than it has been since the early 1970s (Gans, 1992).

Without question, economic opportunities are critical to the assimilation prospects of new immigrant groups. But the restructuring of the economy does not have an equally negative impact on the opportunities of all groups, because of the enormous variety among groups in the forms of capital – economic, cultural and social – they bring with them and in degree of support provided by the community contexts they enter (Light, 1984; Portes and Rumbaut, 1996; Waldinger, 1986/87, 1996). Some groups, like the Cubans of Miami, have distinguished themselves by the development of ethnic sub-economies that are likely to afford the second generation better-than-average chances to succeed in the educational system and enter professional occupations. Others – several Asian groups spring readily to mind – enjoy, whether because of the professional occupations of their immigrant parents or the cultural capital they possess, high levels of educational attainment in the United States (Gibson, 1988; Hirschman and Wong, 1986; Model, 1988; Nee and Sanders, 1985; Light and Bonacich, 1988). Moreover, the 1980s economic restructuring has stimulated economic growth in the 1990s, and this has

brought about a sharp reduction of unemployment. As a result of tighter labor markets, even low-skilled manual laborers have experienced increases in hourly earnings.

The significance of economic restructuring for the second and subsequent generations would appear to be greatest for those groups described by Portes and Rumbaut (1996) as "labor migrant" groups, like the Mexicans. Even here, we caution that the distinction from the experiences of comparable European groups (*e.g.*, southern Italians) can be overdrawn, for they too did not enter an economy that was continuously generating a bountiful supply of opportunities for secure employment and upward mobility. A large portion of the second generation of the southern and eastern European groups came of age in the teeth of the Depression. Like the children of some contemporary immigrants, many in the earlier second generation responded to their perceived lack of opportunity and to their rejection at the hands of nativist whites by constructing what are now called "reactive identities," identities premised upon value schemes that invert those of the mainstream in important ways. We know for instance that, during the 1930s and perhaps afterwards, the children of southern Italian immigrants were widely perceived as posing problems in the educational system – they had high rates of dropout, truancy, and delinquency (Covello, 1972), all signs that they were rejecting the conventions and values of a system that they perceived as rejecting them.

Yet the analyses of Lieberman (1980) demonstrate that the U.S.-born members of these groups experienced a fairly steady upgrading of educational and occupational attainment, even in the cohorts whose life chances would have been most affected by the Depression. This suggests to us that the emphasis on economic restructuring in the discussion of assimilation chances for contemporary immigrant groups may produce a too pessimistic reading of their prospects. Our additional remarks can only be suggestive at this point. But, since there is as yet no fully satisfactory explanation for the assimilation of the once disparaged southern and eastern European groups, it seems premature to judge the assimilation chances of contemporary immigrant groups as diminished because the socioeconomic structure of the United States has changed in the interim. As Perlmann and Waldinger (1997) note, to insist that assimilation is likely only if the situation of contemporary groups parallels that of earlier ones in precise ways seems to require something that history almost never does – repeat itself exactly. With respect to mobility, such an insistence loses sight of the ability of individuals and groups to adjust their strategies to the economic structures they find. We note in particular that the focus of the economic restructuring argument as applied to immigrants has been almost entirely on the labor market, and it has therefore ignored the educational system. However, not only has the association between social origins and educational attainment weakened over time (Hout *et al.*, 1993), but



postsecondary education is more available in some of the states where immigrants have concentrated (California and New York, especially) than elsewhere in the nation. Perhaps the pathways followed by earlier groups have been narrowed over time, but other pathways are likely to have opened up.

We are not denying that there are differences, and important ones, between the immigrations of the past and present and in the circumstances facing immigrant groups after arrival, nor are we claiming that the parallels between the situations faced by the descendants of contemporary immigrants and those of earlier ones are so strong that patterns of assimilation among European Americans can be inferred as a likely outcome for new immigrant groups. But the distinctions between these situations are not as clearcut as they are usually made out to be. None of them is, in our judgment, sufficiently compelling to rule out *a priori* the possibility of assimilation as a widespread outcome for some, or even most, contemporary immigrant groups. It is therefore imperative to examine with an open mind the cultural, residential, educational and other patterns established by the new immigrants and their children for clues about the potential importance of assimilation.

### *EVIDENCE OF ASSIMILATION BY NEW IMMIGRANT GROUPS*

The evidence bearing on the assimilation of new immigrant groups remains fragmentary in important respects, but it is nevertheless essential to review it for hints about the trajectory of these groups, especially across generations. It is critical at the outset, however, to emphasize the limited nature of the data available about the second generation and the virtual absence of any about the third or later generations. It is widely accepted that the immigrant generation does experience changes as it accommodates itself to life in a new society, but that these changes are limited for individuals who come mostly as adults and have been socialized in another society, invariably quite different from the United States. Hence, the changes experienced by the immigrants themselves cannot be decisive for conclusions about assimilation. It is only with the U.S. born, or at a minimum the foreign born who immigrate at young ages and are raised mostly in the United States (usefully labeled by Rumbaut, 1994, as the 1.5 generation), that there is the possibility of assessing the limits of assimilation for new immigrant groups. But even in the case of the second generation, the literature on the assimilation of white ethnics offers reason to be cautious about inferences.

For most European groups, the assimilation of the second generation was partial. Indeed, the well-known studies of this generation depict in general individuals whose lives were profoundly affected by their ethnic origins, who mostly resided in ethnic communities and exhibited in a variety of ways

thinking and behavior characteristic of the group as well as some degree of loyalty to it. (For the Italians, for example, there are the studies of Child, 1943; Gans, 1982; Whyte, 1955.) It was only with the third and, in some cases, the fourth generations that the powerful undercurrent of assimilation came unmistakably to the surface. But for the new immigrant groups, the second generation is still young (Mexicans being the principal exception), and the studies that focus on it generally can track only its progress in school. The probative value of evidence about the second generation must be carefully examined.

Another critical limitation is the very limited time of exposure to American society for the subjects of many of the studies of new immigrant groups. Half of the Punjabi Sikh high school students on whom Gibson's (1988) study focuses arrived in the United States within the five years preceding the fieldwork; all of the subjects of Suarez-Orozco's (1989) study of Central American refugee school children had come within the preceding five years; and so on. Much of the data we possess about new immigrant groups can be characterized as pertinent to the earliest phases of their settlement in the United States, the phase that Park (1950) characterized as involving contact and competition. In the past histories of immigration and intergroup relations in the United States, the period of stable accommodation extended beyond the first and second generations. Thus, the observations that assimilation is far from complete or that immigrants and their children do not appear to want to assimilate should not be regarded as definitive for the longer-term changes which will occur to these groups. In what follows, we limit our review of the evidence for reasons of space; we have chosen, therefore, the two areas that we, as researchers, know best.

### *Socioeconomic Attainment*

As many scholars have noted, a defining feature of the post-1965 immigration is the diversity of the socioeconomic backgrounds of contemporary immigrants. Rather than hailing primarily from rural communities, the new immigrants come from both rural and urban backgrounds, from underdeveloped regions of the Western Hemisphere as well as from industrially developed areas of East Asia. Occupationally, the new immigration encompasses the full spectrum of jobs. Professional immigrants – engineers, mathematicians, computer scientists, natural scientists, teachers, and health workers – come mainly from Asian countries, and nearly a quarter come from other developing countries (Kanjapan, 1994). Hence, they are predominantly nonwhite. Many human-capital immigrants enter the labor market from professional and graduate schools in the United States. Their transition to jobs in the mainstream economy involves a school-to-job transition not dis-

similar from that of the native born. Most professional immigrants, however, enter the labor force through the occupational and family reunification categories of the 1965 immigration law (Jasso and Rosenzweig, 1990). Human-capital immigrants educated abroad, after a period of downward adjustment, appear to shift into mainstream jobs as they acquire local work experience and acquire facility with the English language (Farley, 1996), or they go into self-employment (Sanders and Nee, 1996; Nee, Sanders and Sernau, 1994).

The economic assimilation of human-capital immigrants is less well known, however, than are the experiences of immigrant entrepreneurs and workers in the ethnic economy and of traditional labor migrants. These are the groups that clump together into visible ethnic economies and communities. They are also the groups on which researchers have concentrated their attention because of theoretical and empirical differences centering on assimilation theory (Wilson and Portes, 1980; Portes and Bach, 1985) and because of growing concerns over the declining quality of immigrants (Chiswick, 1986; Greenwood, 1983) and its consequences for prospects for economic assimilation (Borjas, 1990).

*The Ethnic Economy.* The early literature on ethnic economies focused on the experiences of Asian immigrant groups – the Chinese and Japanese (Light, 1972; Bonacich and Modell, 1980). These studies emphasized the importance of the ethnic economy in providing employment and profit for minorities facing harsh societal hostility. Despite institutional racism that excluded Asian ethnics from opportunities in the mainstream economy, these groups were able to sustain themselves through small-business economies that created alternative sources of opportunities under group control. This pattern gave rise to a stable accommodation that provided the economic basis for rearing and educating a second generation. The salient feature of the Chinese and Japanese ethnic economies was the extensive reliance on ethnic resources and solidarity in the accumulation of start-up capital and in competition with white firms.

In many respects, the ethnic economies of early Chinese and Japanese immigrants served a similar role in the subsequent assimilation of Asian ethnics as they did for the Jewish immigrant community. They provided a means for survival and modest economic gain when racial discrimination barred even the college-educated second generation from opportunities in the mainstream economy. The abatement of societal hostility and the assimilation of the American-born generations of Asian ethnics following World War II resulted in a secular decline of Chinatowns, which was not reversed until the start of the post-1965 immigration (Nee and Nee, 1973). The Japanese ethnic economy was never fully reconstituted after the internment experience (Bonacich and Modell, 1980). But once the color line broke down, the assim-

ilated second generation abandoned parental small businesses to seek jobs in the mainstream. Implied in this choice is a perception of the limited nature of the economic mobility and opportunities provided by the ethnic economy, which is constituted by very small firms with limited capital and bounded markets (Nee and Nee, 1973; Bonacich and Modell, 1980).

In the case of Chinese immigrant workers, Mar (1991) showed that jobs in the enclave provide even lower earnings than do those in the competitive secondary sector, which has been presumed to be associated with economic disadvantages for immigrants. Analyzing the job transitions of Asian immigrants, Nee, Sanders, and Sernau (1994) found that enclave workers received lower net earnings and lower returns to their human capital, but immigrants who previously worked for a co-ethnic employer were more likely to enter into self-employment. In Farley's analysis of the 1990 census, Chinese men earned the lowest net wages of male income earners in any immigrant group. Farley (1996) attributed this to the enclave economy effect on workers' wages:

More so than other streams of current immigrants, it appears that the uneducated from China are concentrated in or trapped in a low-wage enclave economy, helping to explain why the Chinese are less effective than other immigrants in translating their characteristics into earnings. (p. 191)

One response to the enclave-economy debate has been to question the limits of the central concept (Sanders and Nee, 1987). Light, Sabagh, Bozorgmehr, and Der-Martirosian (1994) argued that a broader concept of an ethnic economy better serves the needs of research. Defined as the self-employed and their co-ethnic employees, the ethnic economy can be readily measured (Bonacich and Modell, 1980). By contrast, the enclave-economy concept is empirically unwieldy. Portes and Bach (1985) were unable to specify its boundaries with the precision needed for empirical study. Light and Karageorgis (1994) also point out that the debate over the enclave hypothesis overlooks a key datum: ethnic enterprises in fact employ very few paid co-ethnic employees. Hence, the main object of study is not the co-ethnic employee in the ethnic economy, but the self-employed. Another limitation of the enclave concept is that relatively few ethnic economies have the spatial concentration and breadth of firms required to qualify as enclave economies (Logan, Alba and McNulty, 1994). This is not strictly speaking a limitation of the hypothesis, but of its relevance for groups other than Cubans in Miami, Koreans in Los Angeles, Japanese in Honolulu, and a few other cases.

A side effect of the enclave-economy debate, therefore, was to focus attention on the economic assimilation of immigrant entrepreneurs. Although researchers agree that self-employment constitutes an important aspect of the immigrant experience, they disagree about the relative advantages it confers. Borjas (1990) argues that the self-employed in the ethnic economy are not

better off than immigrant workers with similar human capital. However, according to Portes and Zhou (1996), the analysis of earnings, when conducted with nominal income values rather than the logged form preferred by economists, reveals the “success stories” in the population of self-employed. In Los Angeles, for example, self-employed Asian immigrants earn \$6.00 more per hour than other immigrants with comparable characteristics (Nee, Sanders and Sernau, 1994). Yet, as Portes and Zhou (1996) concede, if the average return for immigrant entrepreneurship is the main concern, then Borjas (1990) is right in arguing that entrepreneurs in the ethnic economy are not particularly successful.

Although the ethnic economy is an important institutional arrangement for immigrants, by no means does it provide the main route for their economic advancement. We agree with Borjas’s assessment that “self-employment represents an important component of the immigrant experience in the U.S. labor market” (1986:505). However, in our view, the literature on the economic incorporation of contemporary immigrants risks overstating its significance (Aldrich and Waldinger, 1990; Light and Karageorgis, 1994). It is useful to keep in mind that just 14 percent of native-born non-Hispanic whites are self-employed and that only Korean immigrants show a higher concentration (28%) in self-employment. Despite the emphasis on immigrant entrepreneurship, in other words, all other immigrant groups report a lower level of involvement in the small-business sector than whites (Farley, 1996). The modal labor market experience of immigrants is not in the ethnic economy nor in small-business ownership, but in the open economy. Immigrant workers may first establish a foothold in the immigrant labor market by working in the ethnic economy, but over time the direction of job changes is generally towards jobs with better remuneration and conditions of work, and these are mostly available in the mainstream labor market. Nee, Sanders, and Sernau (1994) show in their study of Asians in the Los Angeles immigrant labor market that ethnic boundaries and labor market sectors are much more permeable than they are assumed to be by the segmented labor market literature.

*Immigrants in the Open Labor Market.* In the analysis of economic assimilation of immigrant workers, labor economists have contributed important findings. Chiswick’s (1977, 1978) pioneering studies of the earnings of immigrants indicated that after an initial period of income decline – which he interpreted as stemming from the “cost of immigration” – the earnings of immigrants gradually achieved parity within a 10-to-15 year time-line and then surpassed the earnings of native-born workers of the same ethnic background. However, this finding was subsequently challenged by Borjas (1985, 1987) as inconclusive because Chiswick relied on a cross-sectional research

design, which conflated aging and immigration-cohort effects. By examining cohort changes, Borjas's analysis suggested that in the past five decades there was a major decline in the skills of immigrants. He pooled the 1970 and 1980 census data and found that the earnings growth of recent cohorts did not exceed the earnings levels of the native born and were lower than the growth experienced by earlier cohorts of immigrants. He concluded that the third-world origin of many immigrants accounted for the decline in immigrant "quality," or human capital, compared with the earlier immigration from Europe. Like Chiswick's, Borjas's conclusions are vulnerable because of the use of census cross-sectional data. Even though he pooled data from two decennial censuses to examine cohort effects, he was nonetheless unable to study changes in earnings for the same workers while they acquired work experience and human capital in the United States (his data were not longitudinal, in other words). Moreover, the effect of the deep economic recession in the 1980s could not be taken into account in his analysis.

The debate stimulated by Borjas's criticism of Chiswick's optimistic forecast has been largely inconclusive, according to the assessment of Tienda and Liang (1994). To be sure, considerable variation exists in the quality of cohorts by national origin in the post-1965 immigration. The lower average skill of immigrants overall stems from the large relative size of the immigration from Mexico and some less-developed regions of Asia and Latin America. Other contingents of immigrants, such as those from India and Korea, bring levels of education considerably higher than that of the average American. Moreover, the effect of lower skill on economic mobility depends on the comparison group, as LaLonde and Topel (1991) have shown. If the comparison group consists of the U.S.-born members of the same ethnic group, then Chiswick's results are confirmed: even recent cohorts of immigrants quickly achieve economic parity. This is not the case when native-born Americans in general make up the comparison group. But immigrants who came to the United States as children do achieve economic parity with the latter group of workers (Borjas and Freeman, 1992). This finding is, of course, consistent with assimilation theory. Further, Kossoudji (1988) has argued that if English is learned promptly after arrival in the United States, "then language assimilation, as it is translated into a job-usable skill, may represent one vehicle of upward mobility."

A different order of problem with respect to economic assimilation is posed, however, by the large-scale migration of poorly educated and illegal aliens (Borjas, 1994). One facet of the problem is that illegal immigrants concentrate in particular geographical locations (*e.g.*, California) and then in enclaves within these. Spatial concentration of undocumented immigrants probably leads to substantial differences from other immigrants in the extent of economic disadvantage, which in turn is translated into a lower rate of eco-

conomic assimilation for the children of illegal immigrants. Farley (1996), in examining the low educational background of Hispanic immigrants – legal and illegal – conjectures that the children of Hispanic immigrants in general may continue to suffer the consequences of their parents' low stock of human capital.

Overall, the economic literature on earnings assimilation suggests that post-1965 immigrants are handicapped not so much by race as by a lack of usable human capital (Borjas, 1994). If earnings growth is slow, this is accounted for by the low stocks of human capital of recent cohorts of immigrants from developing economies. Their slower pace of economic assimilation can be attributed to the transformation of the American economy, *i.e.*, the general erosion of labor market demand for unskilled labor and the increasing demand for highly skilled workers (Katz, 1994), though this affects natives and immigrants alike. By contrast, the sociological literature has highlighted the adverse labor market experience of racial minorities, with sociological analysts often conflating the cost of immigration with the cost of race. When the former is controlled for, however, the earnings gap between non-Hispanic whites and native-born children of immigrants narrows, so that Asian ethnics – mostly Chinese and Japanese among the U.S. born old enough to be in the labor market – achieve substantive parity with whites in earnings growth (Nee and Sanders, 1985; Farley, 1996).

The relative openness of the American labor market stems from the regulatory environment facing large firms and bureaucracies. In the post-civil rights era, Title VII and other civil rights legislation make it more costly for firms (except possibly small businesses, due to difficulty of monitoring and enforcement) to discriminate by gender and race. As a result, the workplace is more regulated today than it was at the time of the earlier immigrant waves to the United States. The principle of equality under the law has been definitively extended to legal immigrants and naturalized citizens. Even illegal immigrants are entitled to due process and have legal rights. As Liebman (1992) observed in a review of key court cases defining immigrant rights,

The net effect . . . would seem to be that aliens are a protected class for purposes of constitutional adjudication, that state rules barring aliens from particular occupations will be scrutinized carefully by courts to see whether it is appropriate that a particular job be restricted to persons . . . even federal restrictions are constitutionally dubious unless enacted by Congress and justified by significant needs. (p. 372)

However, equality under the law does not extend to illegal immigrants, even though they are entitled to due process and possess limited rights of access to public services. This class of immigrants, estimated to be about 2.6 million at the time of the 1990 census (Fix and Passel, 1994), is likely to concentrate in the underground informal ethnic and open labor markets in order

to avoid deportation. Undocumented status restricts their labor market mobility since it effectively closes off opportunities to find jobs in the regulated portion of the urban labor market – large firms and government bureaucracies, where monitoring and enforcement of immigration laws are routine. The penalty for illegal status to human-capital immigrants is high, which in part explains why there are so few highly educated workers among the undocumented. Most illegal aliens have no more than an elementary school education, and a sizable number have no formal schooling. Tienda and Singer's (1994) analysis shows that the pattern of earnings growth of undocumented immigrants reflects "economywide shifts in the structure of wages as well as changing returns to different levels of schooling." In their view, the fact that "wages of undocumented immigrants increased at all is remarkable," given the general performance of the U.S. economy in the 1980s and the restrictions on labor mobility faced by illegal aliens.

The jobs that immigrants find in U.S. labor markets closely correspond to their level of education (Bean and Tienda, 1987; Farley, 1996). Human-capital immigrant streams – from India, China, Africa, Western Europe, and Canada – have a higher proportion of professionals and managers than the native-born American population. By contrast, immigrant groups with large numbers of workers who come with little formal education – from Cuba and other Caribbean nations, El Salvador, Mexico, and other Central American countries – are disproportionately represented in low-wage blue-collar and service jobs. Consequently, there is a bimodal attainment pattern evident in the occupations and earnings of human-capital immigrants and labor migrants, roughly corresponding to the differences between Asian and Hispanic immigrants. Farley (1996) has compared the earnings of immigrants as reported in the 1990 census with the earnings of native-born workers in fourteen immigrant metropolises, including New York, Los Angeles, Miami, Washington, DC, and Houston. He confirms the pattern, first discovered by Chiswick (1977), that the cost of immigration is most clearly felt in the years immediately following arrival to the United States, but that considerable economic mobility occurs over time. After 25 years of residence in the United States, immigrants reported earnings that are 93 percent of those of native-born non-Hispanic whites. The earnings gap between immigrants and the native born was smaller for women than for men.

However, taking the national origins of immigrants into account unveils a mixed picture of economic assimilation for non-European immigrants in the nation as a whole. Hispanic men – foreign and native born – earn substantially less than Anglos, while Asian men – including the foreign born – earn as much as men from the majority group. For women, the wage gap between Hispanic and Anglo workers is nearly as large as among men, but Asian women report higher wages than do Anglos. When Farley controlled for



social and demographic characteristics – place of residence, education, reported English-speaking ability, work disability, and marital status – he found that Hispanic men earn 84 percent and foreign-born Asian men 87 percent as much as their Anglo counterparts. But native-born Asian men have achieved earnings parity with comparable Anglo males, and accordingly their position has improved since the 1980 census. The wage gap is less for women, with both native- and foreign-born Asian women and native-born Hispanic women earning more than comparable Anglo women. In sum, the early analyses of the 1990 census report results that are in line with expectations of assimilation theory. If anything, the economic assimilation of immigrants has progressed more rapidly for many post-1965 immigrants than it did for the earlier waves of immigrants from Europe due to the technological transformation of the American economy, which results in increased demand for high-skilled workers.

### *Spatial Patterns*

One of the most noted features of the new immigration is its high degree of geographic concentration (Farley, 1996; Portes and Rumbaut, 1996; Waldinger, 1989). Just a handful of states and metropolitan areas receive a majority of new immigrants and remain the primary areas of residence and work for immigrants and their children. Of the immigrants who came during the late 1980s, more than 80 percent ended up in only six states, in order of share: California, New York, Florida, Texas, New Jersey, and Illinois (Farley, 1996:169; *see also* Portes and Rumbaut, 1996). Concentration within specific metropolitan areas is nearly as extreme: Los Angeles, San Francisco, New York City, Miami, Houston, and Chicago, taken in their broadest sense, as what the Census Bureau defines as “Consolidated Metropolitan Statistical Areas,” were the places of settlement for more than half of the immigrants of 1985–1990. In total, only fourteen metropolitan areas had above average concentrations of the foreign born in their populations as of 1990, but these fourteen, some of them among the largest metropolitan regions of the country, accounted for two-thirds of all immigrants (Farley, 1996:185).

Some degree of geographic concentration is an inevitable by-product of immigration, which is guided by social networks and leads to settlement patterns determined partly by the need of new immigrants – unfamiliar with American society and frequently lacking proficiency in English – for assistance from kin and co-ethnics (Massey, 1987). Even so, the impression is that the degree of geographic concentration among new immigrant groups exceeds that of older ones at a comparable stage of immigration (Massey, 1994). Only immigrant groups with a heavy professional stratum, *e.g.*,

Indians, appear to be exceptions to contemporary concentration, since job considerations for professionals typically override the tendency to settle where large numbers of fellow ethnics have already done so. Places of settlement are also initially more dispersed for refugees whose original destinations in the United States are usually determined by government agencies and private sponsorship; secondary migration, however, tends to bring about greater ethnic concentration, exemplified by the roles of Miami as a mecca for Cubans and Orange County, California, for Vietnamese (Gold, 1992; Portes and Rumbaut, 1996). The high degree of geographic concentration of the new immigrant groups is consistent with the notion that institutionally complete ethnic communities will support ethnicity for the second and subsequent generations and retard assimilation.

But the concentration of immigrant groups in a small number of metropolitan areas and of specific groups in an even smaller number appears incompatible with the rapid growth of ethnic populations that is projected to occur if immigration remains at its current level. The projections of the National Research Council (Smith and Edmonston, 1997), for instance, suggest in their middle-of-the-road scenario that by 2020 Latinos and Asians, the two racial/ethnic populations receiving the bulk of the new immigration, will nearly double their combined share of the population, going from 12 percent (in 1990) up to 22 percent. It seems self-evident that these groups cannot remain as concentrated in a few states and metropolitan areas as they are today if growth occurs on this scale, although the implications of any dispersal can be debated. One possibility is the emergence of a much larger number of immigrant cultural centers, especially those associated with Spanish speakers, given their size in the immigrant stream (Massey, 1994). Other areas of the country might begin to resemble the multicultural concentrations presently epitomized by Los Angeles, Miami, and New York. Yet the hypothesis that movement away from areas of original settlement tends to be associated with a ratcheting forward of assimilation seems generally borne out in the experiences of European-descent groups. This is also plausible in application to new immigrant groups, in which case new areas of concentration may be more culturally and ethnically diverse than they were before but not as diverse as the original immigrant meccas. Much will depend on whether any dispersal is the result of a movement by native-born generations away from ethnic centers or of a fanning out of the immigration stream itself.

One form of spatial dispersal is less conjectural – within the regions where they reside, new immigrants are on the whole but moderately segregated from the non-Latino white majority. In particular, research into metropolitan levels of residential segregation has established that, by the measure of standard segregation indices such as the index of dissimilarity, Asian and Hispanic segregation from the majority is considerably less than that of African Americans

and within a range usually deemed as "moderate." Analyzing 1990 census data for all metropolitan areas with substantial black populations ( $N=232$ ) and at a small unit of aggregation, the census block group, which should raise segregation index values on average, Farley and Frey (1994) find that the average index of dissimilarity between Hispanics from non-Hispanics is .43, virtually unchanged from the 1980 index calculated in an equivalent way. That of Asians from non-Asians is also .43, representing in this case a slight increase from the 1980 value (.41). By contrast, the average 1990 value for blacks is .64 (*see also* Massey and Denton, 1987). Given that the Asian and Hispanic populations are growing rapidly through immigration and that newly arrived immigrants tend to enter communities where their group is already present in sizable numbers, an increase in the level of segregation is not unexpected and tells little about changes in the residential patterns of more long-standing Asian residents. In sum, the metropolitan-wide studies suggest that the segregation of new immigrant populations is not extreme, just as was true of earlier European immigrants. A drawback of this research is that little attention has been paid to the residential patterns of specific groups within the Asian and Hispanic populations; obviously, such residential patterns can vary considerably. Also, there has not been sufficient attention to the segregation of black immigrants, although an analysis of the impact of race on the residential situations of Hispanics strongly suggests that immigrants of black skin are likely to be channeled into black neighborhoods (Denton and Massey, 1989; *see also* Kasinitz, 1992).

Metropolitan-wide levels of segregation are aggregates that can disguise great individual variation in residential situation. Individual-level analyses are therefore warranted to determine how residential situation corresponds with personal and household characteristics, such as nativity and income. The model of spatial assimilation leads to the hypothesis that residential exposure to members of the racial/ethnic majority should increase in tandem with socioeconomic standing, acculturation as measured by proficiency in speaking the English language, and generational status. Alba and Logan have conducted a series of relevant studies for some of the main metropolitan regions of immigrant concentration, and by and large their findings uphold the spatial-assimilation hypothesis (*see* Alba and Logan, 1993; Alba, Logan and Stults, 1997; Logan and Alba, 1993; Logan, Alba and Leung, 1996; Logan, Alba and McNulty, 1996; *see also* White, Biddlecom and Guo, 1993). For Asians and Latinos, the most powerful determinant of the racial and ethnic composition of their neighborhoods (*i.e.*, census tracts) is their own socioeconomic position; the greater their income and the higher their educational status, the larger the percentage of non-Latino whites in the population of the neighborhood where they reside. The ability to own a home also tends to increase residential exposure to the majority group, as does residence in the

suburbs, which reflects socioeconomic status to an important degree. Linguistic acculturation is yet another determinant, but generational status (*i.e.*, nativity) has little influence once these other variables are taken into account. The difference associated with linguistic assimilation is especially sizeable among Latinos and is most pronounced between those who speak only English at home and those who do not speak English well. Bilinguals, who speak a mother tongue but are proficient at English too, are intermediate in terms of residing with non-Latino whites. The Alba-Logan analyses reveal again the important role played by skin color among Latinos. Light-skinned Latinos, *i.e.*, those who describe themselves on census forms as "white" (about half of all Latinos in 1990), find it easiest to enter neighborhoods with large numbers of non-Latino whites. Latinos who describe themselves racially as other than white or black reside on average in neighborhoods where the percentage of non-Latino whites is modestly lower, while those who self-describe as "black" (a small minority of all Latinos) live, as noted above, with far fewer members of the racial/ethnic majority.

The general consistency of these individual-level patterns with those predicted by the spatial-assimilation model suggests that the residential integration of immigrant and second generation households with the majority population ought to increase over time. But a powerful countervailing trend is produced by the impact of continuing immigration into the metropolitan regions where immigrants and their children are concentrated. The immigration into these regions, combined with the apparent inclination of native groups to move away from them (Frey, 1995), is altering the racial/ethnic composition of their neighborhoods in a way that reduces the availability of majority-group members as neighbors for upwardly mobile immigrant households. This impact is apparent when the Alba-Logan analyses are compared between 1980 and 1990, for the diversity of the neighborhoods where Asians and Latinos live increased noticeably during the 1980s (and, presumably, continues to increase). Still, even in the areas most heavily impacted by immigration, middle-income, linguistically assimilated Asian and Latino suburbanites tended as of 1990 to live in areas where non-Latino whites predominated. This statement is most in jeopardy in Los Angeles and Miami, the two regions with the highest proportions of foreign born in their populations and where, therefore, the racial/ethnic shifts spurred by immigration are the farthest developed (Farley, 1996:170). In other regions of immigrant settlement, such as San Francisco or New York which have the third and fourth highest concentrations of new immigrant groups, the neighborhoods of even modestly affluent Asians and Latinos generally contain quite substantial non-Latino white majorities. Presumably the same would be even more true for most other metropolitan regions, where the concentrations of new immigrant groups are necessarily more modest.

From the standpoint of spatial-assimilation theory, the most intriguing feature of the residential patterns of new immigrants is frequent settlement in suburbs immediately upon, or soon after, arrival in the United States (Alba and Logan, 1991; Alba *et al.*, 1997; Waldinger, 1989). This hallmark of the new immigration presents a remarkable contrast to the process of spatial assimilation as experienced by earlier, European immigrant groups, whose members generally first established urban enclaves and subsequently migrated as individuals and families to the suburbs, typically after spending a generation or more in cities (Alba, Logan and Crowder, 1997; Glazer and Moynihan, 1970; Massey, 1985). However, according to 1990 census data, 43 percent of immigrants who arrived during the 1980s and were living in metropolitan areas already resided outside of central cities, *i.e.*, in areas commonly designated as "suburban." The percentages of suburbanites were particularly high and growing among Asian groups; according to unpublished findings of Nee and Sanders's study of residential mobility of Asian immigrants in Los Angeles, within the first decade after their arrival many immigrant families "buy up" into ethnically mixed suburban neighborhoods. Thus, in 1990, 58 percent of Filipino households in metropolitan areas of the nation were located in suburbs, up from 49 percent in 1980 (data from Alba *et al.*, 1997). The comparable 1990 figure for whites is only modestly higher, 67 percent. The lowest suburbanization percentage among Asian groups is found for the Chinese, who have long-standing urban enclaves (Nee and Nee, 1973; Zhou, 1992); but their 1990 rate, 46 percent, still represents a substantial increase from what it was a decade before (38%), despite the heavy immigration of ethnic Chinese during the 1980s. Rates of suburbanization are on average lower for Latino groups, although they are near 50 percent for two of the three largest: Mexicans (46% in 1990) and Cubans (51%).

The obvious question is whether suburbanization will have the same meaning for new immigrant groups that it held for older ones. There cannot be a definitive answer at this point in the history of the new immigration; the presently available indicators yield a mixed picture. In any event, one has to recognize that the term "suburbia" now covers such a vast range of residential contexts that a single, unqualified answer is ultimately unlikely. On one side of the ledger is the indisputable existence of extensive suburban ethnic enclaves, such as Monterey Park in Los Angeles (Horton, 1995). The huge Los Angeles barrio is also for the most part outside of the central city. While these are but two examples, and relatively extreme ones, evidence of a more general pattern comes from the Alba and Logan analyses of the predictors of suburban residence in the 1980 and 1990 censuses (Alba and Logan, 1991; Alba *et al.*, 1997). Specifically for Asian groups, they find that during the 1980s suburban residence became much less selective of the linguistically assimilated. This suggests that barriers to suburban entry have fallen for fresh-

ly arrived immigrants who may not speak English well. They can now reside in suburbia without detriment to their ability to function in daily life (*e.g.*, shop or participate in recreational activities), presumably because they find sufficient numbers of co-ethnics and an ethnic infrastructure in their vicinity. However, among Latino groups, linguistic assimilation is more consistently a predictor of suburban residence. It should also be noted that, among all immigrant groups, suburban residence is linked to higher socioeconomic position, as the spatial-assimilation model would predict.

On the other side of the ledger is the strong evidence that suburbanization means greater residential integration with non-Latino whites, the racial/ethnic majority. This finding emerges from the Alba-Logan analyses of who lives in which neighborhoods. After socioeconomic standing, residence in a suburb rather than a city is the strongest predictor of the percentage of non-Hispanic white in the neighborhoods where Asians and Latinos live; even in metropolitan regions most affected by the new immigration and where, therefore, many new immigrants are potential neighbors, this variable still typically adds about 20 percentage points to the share of the neighborhood constituted by the racial/ethnic majority. Perhaps this has little bearing for the immigrants themselves, who may find enough co-ethnics in their vicinity to maintain a life like the one they would have in a more traditional ethnic enclave, but it is likely to have a considerable impact on their children, who grow up in contexts that bring them frequently together with whites and members of other groups in schools and in play groups.

The evidence on residential patterns exhibits a contradictory quality that is probably inevitable at an early stage in the unfolding of the consequences of large-scale immigration. Immigrant groups are rather strongly concentrated in a small number of metropolitan regions, which continue to receive the bulk of the immigration stream. Within these regions, these groups are not strongly segregated from the majority population, and their exposure to non-Hispanic whites through their neighborhoods increases rather predictably with improvements in English-language proficiency, income, education, and with the purchase of a home or movement to the suburbs. While these seem like signs of incipient spatial assimilation, it is too early to draw such a conclusion, and much more research is needed on the impact of residential context. We are not yet able to say with any confidence whether residence in an area with many members of the majority is necessarily associated with greater and more socially intimate contact with it. There is also a dearth of data about forms of ethnic affiliation, such as ethnic churches, that might serve as agents of ethnic socialization for the children of suburbanized immigrants. Given the significance of suburbanization for many new immigrant groups, such questions demand more research attention than they have received.

## CONCLUSION

Assimilation as a concept and as a theory has been subjected to withering criticism in recent decades. Much of this criticism rejects assimilation out of hand as hopelessly burdened with ethnocentric, ideological biases and as out of touch with contemporary multicultural realities. It has been common in this critique to portray assimilation as reliant upon simplistic conceptions of a static homogeneous American culture and to target the normative or ideological expression of assimilation – Anglo-conformity. While we think this criticism is frequently unfair in that it fails to consider, and properly discount, the intellectual and social context in which the canonical statements of assimilation were written, we recognize that it often enough hits the mark. But there is danger in the view of many critics that they have provided a strong rationale for rejecting assimilation, rather than for amending it. We believe that the latter is the appropriate course, for assimilation still has great power for an understanding of the contemporary ethnic scene in the United States. It must, in our view, remain part of the theoretical tool kit of students of ethnicity and race, especially those who are concerned with the new immigration.

One challenge that must be faced is whether the language of assimilation can bear this refashioning. If the terminology of assimilation is so freighted with bias and ambiguity, as many critics believe, then perhaps it must be abandoned and a new vocabulary invented, even if this merely redeploys some of assimilation's conceptual arsenal. We think a change in language would be unwise. Assimilation has had a central place in the American experience, and the issue of the continuity between the experiences of European Americans and those of new immigrant groups lies at the very heart of the doubts about the relevance of assimilation for the contemporary United States. To invent a new vocabulary is, in effect, to foreclose the examination of this issue with a terminological solution, separating contemporary realities from past ones with new words. The question of continuity must be left open.

In the most general terms, assimilation can be defined as the decline, and at its endpoint the disappearance, of an ethnic/racial distinction and the cultural and social differences that express it. This definition does not assume that one of these groups must be the ethnic majority; assimilation can involve minority groups only, in which case the ethnic boundary between the majority and the merged minority groups presumably remains intact. Assimilation of this sort is not a mere theoretical possibility, as the assimilation of many descendants of earlier Caribbean black immigration into the native African-American group indicates. Nevertheless, the type of assimilation that is of greatest interest does involve the majority group. The definition stated above

avoids a pitfall frequently stumbled upon by conventional definitions, which focus exclusively on the minority ethnic group, assuming implicitly that only it changes. By intent, our definition is agnostic about whether the changes wrought by assimilation are one-sided or more mutual. Indeed, there should be no definitional prescription on this point, for it is likely that the unilaterality of the changes depends upon the minority group, the era, and the aspect of group difference under consideration. Language acculturation in the United States appears to be overwhelmingly one-sided, even if American English contains many borrowings from other tongues, indigenous and immigrant; we still understand the English of the British and they ours, indicating that our language has not strayed very far from its roots. Acculturation in some other areas – cuisine the most obvious, perhaps – is more mutual.

The above definition of assimilation is formulated at the group level, and the next question is how it is to be translated to the individual plane. Here there may be no alternative to defining assimilation in a more one-sided manner. It seems impossible to meaningfully discuss assimilation at the individual level as other than changes that make the individuals in one ethnic group more like, and more socially integrated with, the members of another. When assimilation implicates both majority and minority groups, the assimilation of individuals of minority origins involves changes that enable them to function in the mainstream society. From their point of view, acculturation, say, takes place in the direction of the mainstream culture, even if on another plane that culture is itself changing through the ingestion of elements from minority cultures. Over time, then, the cultural and social distance that minority-group individuals traverse while assimilating may narrow.

Though its definition of assimilation requires modification, the canonical account, especially as extended in the direction of manner suggested by Shibutani and Kwan (1965), has much to offer to the analysis of contemporary immigrant groups. Assimilation as a social process is in progress along a variety of indicators, as our review of the evidence indicates. The socioeconomic mobility of the new immigrants shows a distinct bimodal pattern. Human capital immigrants in particular appear to be experiencing substantial economic and residential mobility. By contrast, labor migrants have made slower progress, a finding that Borjas has attributed to the very low educational attainment of migrants from Central America and other underdeveloped regions of the world. Analyses of spatial assimilation show a mixed pattern of ethnic concentration and residential mobility. Labor migrants appear to concentrate in ethnic communities, while human capital immigrants show rapid transition to suburban residence and are less likely to congregate in dense settlement patterns. Not only does the early evidence attest to assimilation as a social process being experienced to greater or lesser extent by new immigrants, but it is difficult even to discuss the new immigration without



encountering the need to refer to the very substantial literature on assimilation. Only by contrasting differences and similarities between the old and new immigration will scholars gain a deeper understanding of the meaning of ethnicity in this new era of immigration.

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