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# HOW ENDURING WERE THE INEQUALITIES AMONG EUROPEAN IMMIGRANT GROUPS IN THE UNITED STATES?\*

RICHARD ALBA, AMY LUTZ, AND ELENA VESSELINOV

*A long-standing and unresolved issue in the study of racial and ethnic groups concerns the persistence of initial inequalities among groups. Recently it has surfaced again in the study of U.S. immigrant groups, in George Borjas's (1994) claim that the human capital differences among early-twentieth-century immigrant groups are reflected in the relative socioeconomic achievements of their third generations. Reexamining this claim, we find that Borjas's analysis hinges on a series of problematic decisions, such as his inclusion of non-European groups as well as his failure to take ethnically mixed ancestry into account and to compensate for the weak correspondence in eastern Europe between ethnic ancestry and the national frontiers of the early 1900s. We replicate a portion of his analysis, correcting for these problems. Our results reveal no correspondence between the literacy of the first generation and the educational attainment of the third among European groups. Borjas's analysis seems to go farthest astray in including non-Europeans, especially Mexicans, because of the more systematic legal and social liabilities suffered by these groups.*

**H**ow enduring are the inequalities among migrant groups at their arrival and initial incorporation? According to one sociological tradition, initial differences are highly consequential for the groups' ultimate positions. This tradition is exemplified in Stanley Lieberson's (1961) well-known power-differential theory, which identifies the relative power between indigenous and migrant groups as determining the form of the relationship between the two. A second tradition, associated with the concept of assimilation, foresees for many immigrant groups a gradual erosion of the inequalities that initially place them on the margins of the host society (Alba and Nee 1997; M. Gordon 1964).

In application to the United States, these two traditions do not differ greatly on the broad classification of racial and ethnic minorities. The first sees the groups that entered the United States through free immigration as ultimately assimilating into the mainstream; the second acknowledges that assimilation may not extend to groups, such as African Ameri-

cans, that have been incorporated as racial minorities (e.g., Massey 1995). One potential area of difference, however, concerns the speed at which initially disadvantaged immigrant groups can close the gap that separates them from the mainstream. By implication, this difference also concerns the length of time for which ethnic differences due to immigration remain visible in the social fabric, affecting the life chances of individuals of varied origins.

In this vein, George Borjas (1994, 1999) claims that the human-capital differences among immigrant groups at the beginning of the twentieth century were still in evidence three-quarters of a century later, though in a muted form, among their third-generation descendants. (For an earlier, similar claim, see Schooler 1976.) By his estimate, it may take a century or more until the differences among immigrant groups disappear from among the ethnic groups they engender. Although this claim may not directly contradict other analyses that find ethnic inequalities greatly diminished among third-generation descendants of European immigrants (e.g., Alba 1990; Chiswick 1988; Lieberson and Waters 1988; Neidert and Farley 1985; Waters 1990), it suggests that ethnic differences are more important than the other analyses recognize. As Borjas states in his recent book, *Heaven's Door* (1999:144), "Ethnicity matters, and it matters for a very long time."

This claim becomes more important because of the enormous variation in levels of human capital among contemporary immigrant groups coming to the United States; the range appears to be greater than among the European immigrant groups of a century ago (Portes and Rumbaut 1996). Thus, if Borjas's claim is true and the underlying processes are still in effect today, we should expect the ethnic divisions arising from current immigration to persist far into the future. Borjas, in fact, suggests that the "stickiness" of ethnicity, as he describes it, is a cause for concern and should be taken into account in formulating a national immigration policy (see Borjas 1999: chap. 1). Given such an implication, we must look carefully at the basis for his claim.

We begin by reviewing Borjas's argument and evidence; then we explore their problematic aspects. This exploration leads us to re-create his analysis with major refinements. We show that his results are due mainly to an inappropriate mixing of groups that occupied quite different legal and social positions during the first half of the twentieth century (e.g., Mexicans and Chinese versus Italians and Poles); they are further confounded by national boundary changes in Europe over the course of the century and by the failure to take eth-

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nically mixed ancestry fully into account. Our reanalysis reveals little evidence that the socioeconomic position of the European-American third generation is correlated with the human capital of the immigrant generation.

### BORJAS'S ARGUMENT AND EVIDENCE

Borjas argues in effect that ethnicity plays a significant role in determining the socioeconomic attainments of immigrants' children and grandchildren. Ethnicity here embodies the average human capital brought by the immigrants from different countries, which determines the "quality" of ethnic community and family environments; this, in turn, influences the "human capital accumulation process" with effects that can last across the generations (Borjas 1994:572).

To test this hypothesis, Borjas analyzes individual-level data from the 1910, 1940, and 1980 censuses and from the General Social Survey. The individual, rather than the group, is the appropriate level for testing for assimilation; by one definition, assimilation is to be equated with the decline in significance of ethnic backgrounds for individuals' life chances (Alba and Nee 1997). In the initial step, in which he employs the 1910 census, Borjas establishes that there are substantial differences in literacy, occupational position, and wages among immigrant men from 32 different countries and between immigrants and the native-born. The literacy and logged wage rates of the immigrant groups subsequently provide the key measures of ethnic human capital; in the analysis of microdata from the 1940 census, Borjas then demonstrates the persistence of these differences into the second generation, where they are reflected in education as well as wages.

The step that is crucial for the analysis concerns the third generation. Borjas performs this with two different data sets, 1980 census microdata and the General Social Survey (GSS). Precise identification of the third generation requires data on parents' and grandparents' birthplaces, which are lacking in the 1980 census, but Borjas assumes that the time distance from the era of mass immigration assures the predominance of the third generation among the U.S.-born. The analysis is limited to individuals who name as their first or only ancestry one of the 32 groups involved in what Borjas labels the "Great Migration." The dependent variables are schooling (i.e., years of education) and wages. Borjas analyzes the first as a function of the 1910 literacy rate of each person's ethnic group and the second as a function of the 1910 wage rate. Even with other control variables in the models, he finds that "although the [ethnic] differentials had narrowed by the 'third generation,' there still remained significant differences, even among groups of European origin" (1994:564).

The data from the General Social Survey include information on parents' and grandparents' birthplaces; they permit Borjas to narrow the analysis to the third generation, defined as individuals with U.S.-born parents but one or more foreign-born grandparents. Once again analyzing schooling and wages, he continues to find evidence of differences in the transmission of skills and in earnings across the three

generations. Overall, Borjas concludes that inequalities among third-generation descendants of the Great Migration remain tied to their immigrant ancestors' human capital. He contends that at least another generation must pass before these ethnic differences disappear.

### PROBLEMS AND DEFICIENCIES

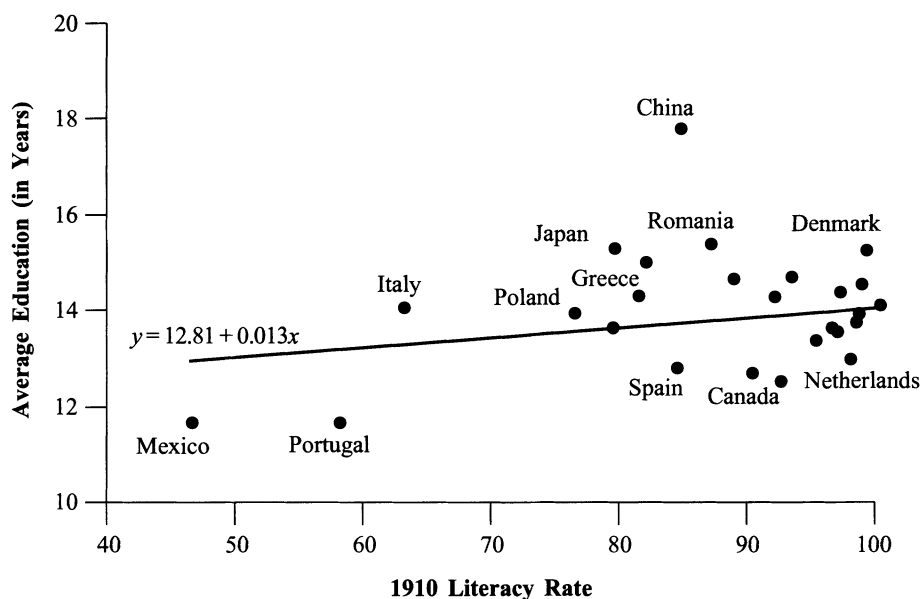
On close examination, Borjas's analysis is burdened by a series of difficulties that render his conclusions problematic. These difficulties are not technical or narrowly methodological; rather, they reflect decisions that went into the framing of the analysis, and are based on substantive assumptions or have substantive implications.

First, although most readers probably will assume that the groups of the Great Migration are all or almost all European, Borjas includes several non-European groups in the analysis, notably the Mexicans, Chinese, and Japanese. The difficulty in this decision is not that these groups were absent from the immigration of 1880–1920, but that their immigrants and even the second generation suffered from legal and social liabilities different from those endured by Europeans. Immigration from Japan was barred by bilateral agreement (1907–1908) and by legislation; immigration from China, by the Chinese Exclusion Acts (beginning in 1882). Immigrants from Asia were blocked from ever becoming citizens by the racist provisions of naturalization law; this barrier stood until 1952. The classification of Asians as "aliens ineligible for citizenship" provided a basis for California's Alien Land Acts of 1913 and 1920, directed against Japanese farmers; and, of course, the Japanese of the West Coast were interned during World War II, losing much of their property in the process.

The situation of Mexicans is quite central to the results obtained by Borjas, as Figure 1 suggests.<sup>1</sup> The combination of very low human capital in the immigrant generation and relatively low attainment in the third generation indicates that the Mexicans occupy the lower end of a bivariate regression line with a positive slope; in the absence of their scores, it seems apparent that the slope of the line would be less positive, perhaps null. (The Portuguese are in roughly the same position as the Mexicans but are a much smaller group, with little impact on a regression of individual attainment.) The Mexicans perhaps should not be included in the same analysis as European groups because they suffered more severe liabilities. These are revealed, to take one telling episode, by the mass deportations of Mexicans, both citizens and noncitizens, during the 1930s (see Acuña 1988; Sánchez 1993). Quite obviously these liabilities may have interfered with any continuous process of adjustment and socioeconomic upgrading. Even today, Mexican Americans show a puzzling lack of improvement in educational attainment between the second and the third generations (see Bean

1. We created Figure 1 from the GSS data and the 1910 literacy rates, though it is very similar to figures displayed by Borjas (e.g., Borjas 1999:141). The line shows the bivariate regression estimated from the individual data.

FIGURE 1. THIRD-GENERATION EDUCATIONAL ATTAINMENT, 1986–1994, BY 1910 IMMIGRANT LITERACY RATE



*Note:* The educational attainment values are taken from our analysis of GSS data; the 1910 literacy rates are taken from Borjas (1994).

et al. 1994; Wojtkiewicz and Donato 1995); this may be a sign that the stereotypes and the discrimination have not abated to the same degree as for the Italians, the Jews, and other formerly denigrated Europeans (see Lopez and Stanton-Salazar 2001).

Second, Borjas's analysis overlooks the vast and remarkable boundary changes that took place in central and eastern Europe during the twentieth century. These disrupt any attempt to correlate the human capital of the immigrants from these countries in 1910 with the attainments of the third generations of the seemingly equivalent ancestry groups later in the century. The map of eastern and central Europe in 1910 submerged a number of aspiring nations within multiethnic states, most notably the Austro-Hungarian Dual Monarchy. The map was soon altered, starting with the Balkan wars of 1912 and 1913, which restructured southeastern Europe. New states reflecting ethnic and linguistic territorial concentrations emerged after World War I. The most dramatic effect in this respect was the resurrection of Poland as an independent state more than a century after its partition; in addition, the entirely new states of Czechoslovakia and the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes (which eventually became Yugoslavia) were created.

These territorial changes pose enormous difficulties for the kind of analysis Borjas undertakes, as illustrated by the gross mismatches in magnitude between some of the immigrant groups of 1910 and ancestry groups circa 1990. These are displayed in Table 1, which shows the 1910 counts of immigrants from different countries along with the percent-

ages of the equivalent ancestries for the third generation in GSS data (from the period 1986 to 1994). The GSS data are produced by a question about "countries or parts of the world" from which ancestors come. For these data, all of the ethnic elements in ancestry mixtures are tabulated: for example, a person of Irish-Italian ancestry contributes to both the Irish and the Italian percentages.

Not surprisingly, two of the largest immigrant groups of 1910 are those from Austria and from Hungary, which account respectively for 8.8% and 4.2% of the immigrant population under study.<sup>2</sup> By contrast, they are among the smaller of the relevant ancestry groups circa 1990, undoubtedly because the respondents are describing their ethnic origins rather than their grandparents' birthplaces on an out-of-date map of Europe. The problems of the 1910–1990 correspondence are epitomized by the Poles, who in 1990 were the seventh largest European-ancestry group in the United States. Poland did not exist in 1910, however. Borjas still can include Poles in the analysis because the Census Bureau recorded a tiny number of immigrants (48) as Polish. According to the instructions given to the enumerators of 1910, most Poles were counted in the states where they were born, according to the contemporary political geography: Austria,

2. In 1910, census enumerators were asked to record every person's birthplace as well as that of his or her parents. Instructions regarding foreign place of birth emphasized the need to be specific and to identify nativity in the context of 1910 political geography. (Census enumerators, however, were instructed to list England, Ireland, Scotland, and Wales rather than Great Britain.)

**TABLE 1. NATIONAL ORIGIN AND ANCESTRY, THE 1910 CENSUS AND THE 1986–1994 GENERAL SOCIAL SURVEY**

Country of Origin	1910 Census Immigrants From Selected National-Origin Groups <sup>a</sup>	1910 Census Immigrants From Selected National- Origin Groups (Percentages)	1986–1994 GSS Third Generation Reporting Selected Ancestry Groups (Percentages)
Austria	1,719	8.8	2.3
Belgium	71	0.4	0.4
Canada	1,590	8.1	5.3
China	231	1.2	0.0
Denmark	347	1.8	2.2
England and Wales	1,502	7.7	22.7
Finland	237	1.2	0.8
France	149	0.8	6.7
Germany	3,395	17.3	36.6
Greece	221	1.1	0.9
Hungary	823	4.2	2.0
Ireland	1,630	8.3	25.1
Italy	2,216	11.3	12.5
Japan	315	1.6	0.1
Mexico	255	1.3	3.4
Netherlands	171	0.9	3.6
Norway	580	3.0	6.1
Poland	48	0.2	9.7
Portugal	98	0.5	0.8
Romania	84	0.4	0.6
Russia/USSR	2,244	11.4	6.3
Scotland	384	2.0	7.5
Spain	36	0.2	1.8
Sweden	1,073	5.5	5.4
Switzerland	187	1.0	1.8
Yugoslavia	12	0.1	1.0
Total Number	19,618	19,618	2,853

*Note:* We have dropped a few small groups, such as Bulgarians and individuals from the Atlantic Islands, that appear in Borjas's analysis but are not to be found in the General Social Survey data.

<sup>a</sup>*Source:* Borjas (1994).

Germany, or Russia. The small number of Poles probably results from enumerators' or respondents' inability to locate birthplaces in these terms. It seems likely that this group would have been selective in ways that make it unrepresentative of the ethnically Polish immigrants of 1910.

Therein lies the more general problem. Third-generation descendants of turn-of-the-century immigrants undoubtedly answer questions about their backgrounds in terms of ethnic origins (and with various misunderstandings and gaps in their knowledge of these origins; see Alba 1990; Lieberman and Waters 1993). The 1910 map of central and eastern Europe, however, profiles state boundaries that coincide poorly with ethnicity as understood by inhabitants of the region. In Borjas's analysis, Austrians, Hungarians, Poles, and Yugoslavs are affected most profoundly by this problem, but it also extends to Germany, whose immigrants in 1910 included many ethnic Poles, and to Russia.

Third, Borjas's analysis also neglects the complications created by ethnically mixed ancestry, which is a critical outcome in the intergenerational process of assimilation. His operationalization assigns each mixed-ancestry respondent to a single ethnic category, namely the first reported ancestry in census data and the one with which the individual identifies most closely in the General Social Survey data. In the latter case, as an unfortunate consequence, individuals with mixed ancestry who do not identify with a single ethnicity are dropped altogether from the analysis. We estimate that this might have happened to approximately 15% of the third-generation respondents otherwise eligible for the analysis. Obviously it is a source of bias insofar as some of the most fully assimilated persons are omitted.

Fourth, Borjas's analysis of the third generation in census data is confounded by the generational diversity of the population he is able to identify. After 1970, the only nativ-

ity variable in census data is the individual's birthplace. Borjas thus is forced to assume that the native-born adults from each ancestry group belong largely to the third generation. Yet this assumption is demonstrably false in some cases. For instance, as Alba (1985:114) shows with data from the General Social Survey, even in the late 1970s the second generation predominated in the adult Italian American population. Quite likely the same would be true of other groups from southern, central, and eastern Europe; certainly it would be true of Mexicans, whose immigration continued after the decline in European immigration following the restrictive legislation of the 1920s. One implication of these facts is that the native-born groups identified in census data differ systematically in generational composition according to the concentrations of their arrivals during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries; these differences correlate, to an important extent, with the human capital of immigrants in 1910 (see Borjas 1994:558). For this reason, the census analysis cannot tell us much about Borjas's hypothesis.

Finally, Borjas's measures of human capital are problematic as measures of the qualifications and skills possessed by immigrants when they entered United States. The literacy rates are affected by the U.S. education of foreign-born individuals who arrived as children.<sup>3</sup> This fact implies some inflation of the apparent immigrant literacy of northern and western European groups, such as the Germans and the Swedes, who mainly arrived well before 1910, in comparison with the southern and eastern Europeans, whose peak period of arrival was the decade from 1901 to 1910 (and whose immigrant children were not yet adults in 1910). The immigrant groups' 1910 wage rates are even more problematic: a cursory glance shows that non-Europeans (e.g., the Japanese) were penalized and that English speakers were advantaged (see Borjas 1994:558). Both of these facts are reminders that immigrants' reception in the labor market was influenced not only by human capital but also by employers' ethnic and racial preferences (Lieberson 1980). Further, the wage rates certainly are affected by the great variation in the different groups' average lengths of time in the United States; again, this variation tends to make the northern and western Europeans appear more advantaged.

## OUR RE-CREATION

We now re-create some of Borjas's analysis while attempting to correct the problems outlined above. We confine the re-creation to the data of the General Social Survey, where members of the third generation can be precisely identified as U.S.-born individuals with U.S.-born parents but at least one foreign-born grandparent.

Moreover, we regard mixed ethnic ancestry as a critical stage of the assimilation process, which therefore must be

taken into account. Thus we use a later set of GSS years than does Borjas because the GSS did not begin to record all of the ancestries named by respondents until the mid-1980s (Davis and Smith 1996: app. N). In our re-creation we use the GSS data for 1986–1994 (thus centering our analysis on 1990); as a check, however, we also replicate Borjas's analysis for 1977–1989, the period he uses.

Finally, we restrict our attention to education as a dependent variable. Borjas also includes an analysis of third-generation wages; we could not easily reproduce this because the variable is a construction based on the average wages in the 1970 census for each occupation. Yet because the results obtained by Borjas are similar for both dependent variables and because the 1910 literacy rate, which is more relevant for educational performance, is arguably the more accurate measure of immigrants' human capital, we should lose little, if anything, in focusing only on the educational outcome.

Our analysis includes members of the third generation who are aged 25 to 64. This range is somewhat narrower than the population considered by Borjas. Like us, he considers men and women together in the GSS analyses, but inexplicably he expands the age range to 18–64, thereby including a substantial number of young people whose educations are incomplete. Also, it appears that Borjas eliminates students from the analysis.<sup>4</sup> Because of this combination of circumstances, the persons under age 25 included in his analysis overrepresent those of lower educational attainment; therefore we use the higher age limit. We follow Borjas, however, in controlling for a number of background factors in our regression analyses: age, gender, region, metropolitan residence, and year of survey.

After replicating Borjas's analysis, we test variations to assess the import of problematic decisions. We base these on different recodings of ethnicity, starting with Borjas's version, which assigns the appropriate 1910 literacy value to the ethnicity with which a respondent identifies. (In the GSS, Borjas defines this as the ethnicity reported when the respondent reports only one, or the ethnicity preferred when the respondent reports mixed ancestry and prefers one. By this definition there is no ethnicity when a respondent of mixed ancestry expresses no preference.)

One version that we create parallels Borjas's definition of ethnicity in census data: for those respondents without a preferred ethnicity, we use the first ethnicity named, and thus at least include all respondents. Another version involves a more radical shift: for respondents of mixed ancestry, we average the 1910 literacy scores of the different ethnic elements in their backgrounds.<sup>5</sup> For each of the ethnic coding variations, we first analyze the entire third generation; then we omit the respondents with non-European an-

3. Literacy was defined to mean the ability to read and write in any language. Census enumerators were instructed to collect such data for all individuals age 10 or older, but Borjas's rates are based on an analysis of census microdata for working-age men. We are grateful to a reviewer for reminding us about the potential importance of immigrants who arrived as children.

4. From reading the text, one cannot be entirely sure about this exclusion in Borjas's GSS analysis. We assume that its construction in this respect parallels his census analysis, in which he excludes men who were enrolled in school (Borjas 1994:564). In his other analyses, however, Borjas did not include the 18–24 age group.

5. Of course we can do this only for those ethnicities for which such scores are available.

cestries (these are principally Mexican); finally, we exclude the central and eastern European ancestries affected most strongly by post-1910 boundary changes (Austrian, Hungarian, Polish, and Yugoslavian).

## RESULTS

Table 2 presents the key results from our regression analyses. The coefficients shown are those associated with the independent variable under scrutiny: the 1910 literacy rate associated with each respondent's ethnic background. Borjas's results are re-created in the top panel. The leftmost coefficient, taken from an analysis that includes the most complete set of groups, shows the approximate relationship he found, which could be described as modest in strength: a 10-percentage-point rise in the immigrant literacy rate would raise a third-generation individual's educational attainment by one-quarter of a year. Thus the predicted educational difference between third-generation Portuguese and Danes, just about the largest immigrant literacy difference to be found among Europeans (see Figure 1), would be one year.

In the second panel, we shift the years of the GSS to a later period in order to use the improved ancestry coding in

the data (while restricting the ages under consideration to 25–64); we use Borjas's definition of ethnicity, however. The leftmost column reveals only a small effect from these changes. The coefficient is slightly weaker, however; this result could be due as much to the exclusion of individuals age 18–24 as to the use of a later time point.

The effect of ethnic origin or of 1910 literacy rate is weakened further when all individuals of mixed ethnic ancestry are included (third and fourth panels). How we code their ethnic backgrounds appears to make little difference, however: the results are similar whether we average the scores of the elements in an ethnic mixture (fourth panel) or use the first ethnicity named (third panel). In either event, the results suggest that the effect found by Borjas is more prominent among individuals with more salient ethnicities, such as those who come from ethnically undivided families. As others have found, ethnic mixture tends to weaken individuals' links to ethnicity.

The effect of background is nullified altogether by removing the non-Europeans from the analysis; the results of this step are reported in the second column of each table. Not many cases are involved: in the analyses for the 1986–

**TABLE 2. THIRD-GENERATION EDUCATIONAL ATTAINMENT AS A FUNCTION OF 1910 IMMIGRANT LITERACY RATE (WITH CONTROL VARIABLES)**

	All Countries	Without China, Mexico, and Japan	Without China, Mexico, Japan, Poland, Yugoslavia, Austria, and Hungary
Borjas's Way of Defining Ethnicity, GSS Years 1977–1989, Ages 18–64			
Literacy rate	0.024*** (0.004)	0.006 (0.004)	0.008 (0.004)
$R^2$	0.070	0.063	0.062
$N$	2,612	2,512	2,248
Borjas's Way of Defining Ethnicity, GSS Years 1986–1994, Ages 25–64			
Literacy rate	0.020*** (0.004)	0.004 (0.005)	0.004 (0.005)
$R^2$	0.054	0.044	0.041
$N$	1,785	1,718	1,537
Preferred or First-Named Ethnicity, GSS Years 1986–1994, Ages 25–64			
Literacy rate	0.016*** (0.004)	0.001 (0.005)	–0.000 (0.005)
$R^2$	0.052	0.046	0.045
$N$	2,064	1,994	1,770
Averaged Ethnic Scores, GSS Years 1986–1994, Ages 25–64			
Literacy rate	0.017*** (0.005)	–0.004 (0.006)	0.001 (0.006)
$R^2$	0.051	0.047	0.048
$N$	2,153	2,072	1,706

*Notes:* These regressions control for age, gender, region, metropolitan residence, and year of GSS survey. Standard errors are shown in parentheses.

\*\*\* $p < .001$

1994 period, just 70 to 80 cases are removed from a base of about 2,000. Most of these cases are individuals of Mexican ancestry. Yet the impact of restricting the analysis to European ancestries is quite strong: significant and positive coefficients decline to tiny, insignificant magnitudes (and, in one case, take a negative sign). In a subsequent step, we also remove the individuals with ancestry from the central and eastern European nations most strongly affected by boundary changes in the twentieth century. This step exerts at most a modest effect on the regressions; we also obtain this result when we remove these European groups before removing the non-Europeans.

It seems fair to conclude, then, that Borjas's results depend on the inclusion of Mexicans in the analysis. This decision is highly questionable when we consider that Mexicans suffered greater societal exclusion than did any Europeans. In a sample of 2,000 third-generation European Americans, we find no sign of a relationship between the literacy rates of their immigrant grandparents' generation and their own educational attainment.<sup>6</sup>

To be fair, there is one variation in which some effect of first-generation inequalities remains. If we use 1910 logged wages as the measure of human capital in predicting third-generation educational attainment (as Borjas did not do), its coefficient is significant throughout the equivalent version of Table 2. Eliminating the non-Europeans nevertheless reduces its magnitude by half. Further analysis suggests that, among Europeans, the remaining effect is due chiefly to the extraordinary educational attainments of eastern European Jews, whose immigrant ancestors score quite high in relative wages but not in literacy. That is, when Rumanians and Russians, two highly Jewish categories, are dropped from the analysis, the coefficients become statistically insignificant. We have already discussed the problematic nature of 1910 wages as a human-capital measure. Insofar as those wages can be regarded as such a measure here, the role of logged wages indicates that the erosion of inequalities across three generations largely benefited groups for which one would predict a low educational trajectory because of their peasant origins in Europe. It did not eliminate the exceptional attainments of a few small groups such as the Jews.

## CONCLUSION

George Borjas claims that the human-capital differences among immigrants at the beginning of the twentieth century persist among their third-generation descendants. For empirical verification, this claim depends on a number of problematic decisions such as overlooking mixed ancestry and the massive boundary changes in central and eastern Europe after 1910, as well as mixing European and non-European groups in the same analysis. Our reanalysis shows that, when these problems are resolved appropriately, the findings on which Borjas bases his claim largely disappear.

By far the most critical problem concerns the inclusion of non-Europeans, who are mostly Mexican, in the analysis.

This seems inappropriate when we consider that Mexican Americans and other non-Europeans suffered the most severe forms of exclusion from the American mainstream during the early part of the last century. Possibly this situation involved a more durable racial exclusion than that which confronted, say, Italians: as Lopez and Stanton-Salazar (2001:72) observe, many Mexicans "fit the mestizo/Indian phenotype" and thus "cannot escape racial stereotyping any more than African Americans, though the stigma is usually not so severe." Any number of incidents, especially during the first half of the twentieth century, suggest that Mexican Americans' incorporation occurred on different terms than that of European groups: the mass kidnapping of "white" children from Mexican American adoptive families (see L. Gordon 1999); the use of "Mexican" as a racial category in the 1930 census (Lee 1993); the large-scale deportations of Mexican Americans, including U.S. citizens, during the 1930s; the "zoot suit" riot of 1943 (Sánchez 1993:267); and the Mexican government's hesitation to agree to the wartime *bracero* program because Mexicans already suffered severe discrimination in the United States (Calavita 1992). Mexican Americans' socioeconomic attainments remain lower than those of European-origin groups, even in the third generation (Bean et al. 1994; Wojtkiewicz and Donato 1995).

When Mexicans and other non-European groups are omitted from the analysis, the variation in the human capital of early-twentieth-century immigrants is restricted only slightly. Although Mexican immigrants' 1910 literacy rate, 46%, anchors the low end of the spectrum, the Portuguese rate of 58% is not dramatically higher; this is followed closely by the rate of 63% for the Italians, quite a numerous group among third-generation whites. The Italians' literacy rate was far below that of the groups from northern and western Europe, such as the English (99%), the Germans (96%), the Irish (97%), and the Swedes (98%).

Among the Europeans there appears to be little correlation between third-generation educational attainment, at least as measured quantitatively, and the 1910 literacy rate of the immigrant group. We might well find a much stronger correlation if we could measure the literacy of the specific immigrant ancestors of third-generation Americans; that, however, would be a different analysis, one of family rather than of ethnic origins. Our findings apparently testify to the potency of assimilation, at least among the groups of European origin. Over the two generational transitions reflected here, assimilation has largely eradicated the disadvantages suffered by groups of peasant origins in Europe. The Italian immigrants, for example, brought high rates of illiteracy and relatively few skills of use in an industrial society, but their third and fourth generations, on average, have attained socioeconomic parity with other white Americans.

Will assimilation of this sort apply equally to new immigrant groups, who come mainly from areas of the world other than Europe? This remains an unsettled, profoundly important question. On the one hand, the legal and institutional impediments that most severely obstructed non-European immigrants' entry into the socioeconomic mainstream in the

6. Our findings are identical if we restrict the analyses to men only.



earlier period have been largely dismantled. On the other hand, many scholars see new impediments that may lead to "segmented assimilation" for those non-European groups with low levels of human capital and other disadvantages, such as high rates of undocumented status (Portes and Zhou 1993). This cardinal uncertainty, however, is resolved neither by our results nor by those of Borjas; resolution must await analyses of the new arrivals' U.S.-born generations.

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