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Assimilation and Its Discontents: Between Rhetoric and Reality[1]

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The process of immigrant assimilation is typically and uncritically conceived as one of linear progress – becoming similar to the dominant group in the place of destination is presumed to be a good thing. But a compelling body of evidence on the adaptation of immigrants and their children points to a deterioration of outcomes over time and generation in the United States, as well as to nonlinear processes of change. While linguistic assimilation among children of immigrants does proceed rapidly and inexorably as a linear function, other outcomes – in such diverse areas as infant and adolescent health, diet and divorce, delinquency and risk behaviors, educational achievement and aspirations, an ethos of hard work, and the development of an ethnic identity – contradict conventional expectations, expose underlying ethnocentric pretensions, and point instead to assimilation's discontents. By examining such paradoxes of immigrant adaptation that emerge in the conceptual interstices between rhetoric and reality, fruitful reformulations of a seminal sociological concept may be stimulated and advanced.

> I have endeavored to guard myself against the enthusiastic prejudice which holds that our civilization is the most precious thing that we possess or could acquire and that its path will necessarily lead to heights of unimagined perfection. One thing only do I know for certain and that is that man's judgements of value follow directly his wishes for happiness – that, accordingly, they are an attempt to support his illusions with arguments.
>
> SIGMUND FREUD, 1930 (1961:110–111)

> Material goods have gained an increasing and finally an inexorable power over the lives of men as at no previous period in history. . . . In the field of its highest development, in the United States, the pursuit of wealth, stripped of its religious and eth-

[1]This is a substantial revision of a 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, and an elaboration of the argument sketched in "Paradoxes (and Orthodoxies) of Assimilation," *Sociological Perspectives*, 40(3)1997. I gratefully acknowledge the support provided by the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation and the Russell Sage Foundation for the project "Children of Immigrants: The Adaptation Process of the Second Generation," some results from which are reported herein.

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> ical meaning, tends to become associated with purely mundane passions, which often actually give it the character of sport . . . For of the last stage of this cultural development, it might well be truly said: 'Specialists without spirit, sensualists without heart; this nullity imagines that it has attained a level of civilization never before achieved.
>
> MAX WEBER, 1904–05 (1958:182)

> There is nothing wrong with Americans except their ideals. The real American is all right; it is the ideal American who is all wrong.
>
> G. K. CHESTERTON, *The New York Times*, February 1, 1931 (1992:153)

Few concepts in the history of American sociology have been as all-encompassing and consequential as "assimilation." Few have so tapped and touched the pulse of the American experience. Few have so penetrated the public discourse and seeped into the national narrative. Few have so readily offered an elemental explanation for a phenomenal accomplishment – the remarkable capacity of a self-professed nation of immigrants to absorb tens of millions of newcomers of all classes and countries from all over the world – becoming along the way synonymous with the process of "Americanization," "becoming American" and achieving the "American Dream."[2] Few, too, have been so misused and misunderstood, or erected on such deep layers of ethnocentric pretensions. Few have so thoroughly conflated the real with the rhetorical, the idea with the ideal and the ideological, the description of what is observable with prescriptions of what is wished for. And few have so tellingly entailed and entangled an attempt to support national illusions with arguments.

There is a certain fateful passivity and one-wayness implied in "assimilation." As it is most commonly used, which is to say, unthinkingly, the term connotes a more or less fixed, given and recognizable target state to which the foreign element is to "Americanize," dissolving into "it," becoming, in a word, "American." That exosmotic usage recalls the no-nonsense coerciveness of Theodore Roosevelt's plain formulation of a century ago: "There can be no fifty-fifty Americanism in this country . . . there is room here only for 100 percent Americanism, only for those who are American and nothing

[2]For all the hue and cry about the allegedly inassimilable "new immigration" from pre-World War I Europe, Robert Park could write at the time that "In America it has become proverbial that a Pole, Lithuanian, or Norwegian cannot be distinguished, in the second generation, from an American born of native parents. . . . As a matter of fact, the ease and rapidity with which aliens, under existing conditions in the United States, have been able to assimilate themselves to the customs and manners of American life have enabled this country to swallow and digest every sort of normal human difference, except the purely external ones, like color of the skin" (1914; reproduced in Park and Burgess, 1924:757–758).

else."[3] But it also recalls Ralph Linton's (1937) devastating spoof of the "100 Per Cent American," as well as Henry James' contemporary critique of Roosevelt: "impaired . . . by the puerility of his simplifications," James wrote bitingly in 1898,

> Mr. Roosevelt makes very free with the "American" name, but it is after all not a symbol revealed once for all in some book of Mormon dug up under a tree. Just as it is not criticism that makes critics, but critics who make criticism, so the national type is the result not of what we take from it, but of what we give to it, not of our impoverishment, but of our enrichment of it. (1992:252–253)

That critical interactive view was not in vogue in sociological treatments of the subject around midcentury. In *The Social Systems of American Ethnic Groups*, for example, Warner and Srole (1945) described the straight-line "progressive advance" of eight immigrant groups in the major status hierarchies of Yankee City (Newburyport, Massachusetts), explicitly linking upward social mobility to assimilation, which they saw as determined largely by the degree of ethnocultural (religion and language) and, above all, racial difference from the dominant group. While "racial groups" were subordinated through caste restrictions on residential, occupational, associational and marital choice, the clash of "ethnic groups" with the dominant institutions of the "host society" was not much of a contest, particularly among the young. The polity, the industrial economy, the public school, the American family system all undercut and absorbed ethnicity in various ways, so that even when "the ethnic parent tries to orient the child to an ethnic past . . . the child often insists on being more American than Americans" (p. 284). And for the upwardly mobile, with socioeconomic success came intermarriage and the further dilution of ethnicity.

That view of assimilation as linear progress, with sociocultural similarity and socioeconomic success marching in lock step, was not so much challenged as refined by Milton Gordon (1964) in *Assimilation in American Life*, published ironically on the eve of the beginning of the latest era of mass immigration to the United States – and of the denouement of the concept itself in the wake of the 1960s. He broke down the assimilation sequence into

[3]Park and Burgess would have advised a different approach: "Not by the suppression of old memories, but by their incorporation in his new life is assimilation achieved. . . . Assimilation cannot be promoted directly, but only indirectly, that is, by supplying the conditions that make for participation. There is no process but life itself that can effectually wipe out the immigrant's memory of his past. The inclusion of the immigrant in our common life may perhaps best be reached, therefore, in cooperation that looks not so much to the past as to the future. The second generation of the immigrant may share fully in our memories, but practically all that we can ask of the foreign-born is participation in our ideals, our wishes, and our common enterprises" (1924:739–740).

seven stages, of which "identificational assimilation" – *i.e.*, a self-image as an unhyphenated American – was the end point of a process that began with cultural assimilation, proceeded through structural assimilation and intermarriage, and was accompanied by an absence of prejudice and discrimination in the "core society." Once structural assimilation had occurred (*i.e.*, extensive primary-level interaction with members of the "core group"), either in tandem with or subsequent to acculturation, "the remaining types of assimilation have all taken place like a row of tenpins bowled over in rapid succession by a well placed strike" (p. 81). For the children of white European immigrants, in fact, the acculturation process was so "overwhelmingly triumphant" that "the greater risk consisted in alienation from family ties and in role reversals of the generations that could subvert normal parent-child relationships" (p. 107). Still, what it was that one was assimilating to remained largely taken for granted.

Gordon was aware of the ways in which the ideal and the ideological get wrapped up in the idea of assimilation, and he saw "Anglo-conformity" as the most prevalent ideology of assimilation in American history.[4] But he was about to be ambushed by the unexpected: he could not have guessed at the time what was in store both for American society and his assimilation paradigm. What had seemed like a bland and straightforward enough description – an observable outcome of adaptation to new environments, a familiar process of "learning the ropes" and "fitting in" through which "they" become like "we," a convergence hypothesis, a sort of regression to the mean – could become an explosive and contested prescription, value laden with arrogant presumptions of ethnic superiority and inferiority and fraught with the bitter baggage of the past and the fractious politics of the present. By 1993, after years of academic neglect and disrepute, no longer privileged in intellectual circles as either proverbial or canonical, Nathan Glazer could ask, matter of factly, "Is Assimilation Dead?"

Yet no sooner was that funereal question posed that, in what may be yet another of the pendulum swings that have characterized scholarship on American immigration, incorporation, and ethnicity in this century, several major essays appeared that provide thoroughgoing reappraisals of the sociol-

[4]Of the other two main ideological tendencies, "cultural pluralism" more often reflected the sentiments of the immigrants themselves; and the "melting pot" metaphor had been dismissed by Park and Burgess as a '"magic crucible' notion of assimilation" where "the ideal of assimilation was conceived to be that of feeling, thinking, and acting alike" (1924:735). Much later Glazer and Moynihan would write, famously, that "The point about the melting pot . . . is that it did not happen . . . the American ethos is nowhere better perceived than in the disinclination of the third and fourth generation of newcomers to blend into a standard, uniform national type" (1963:*xcvii*).

ogy and historiography of assimilation, casting a critical look not only at the concept, theory, and latest evidence, but also at the historical contexts that have shaped the ideas and ideals embodied in the notion of assimilation (*see* especially Alba and Nee, 1996, 1997; Barkan, 1995; Kazal, 1995; Morawska, 1994). Thus Kazal (1995) sees the apogee of the concept in the 1950s and early 1960s as reflecting the need generated by World War II for national unity and the postwar tendency to see American history as a narrative of consensus rather than conflict; and he sees the political and social upheavals of the 1960s as shattering the "consensus school" and the rationale for studying assimilation, bringing back instead a focus on the ethnic group and ethnic resilience and more inclusive conceptions of American society. "To know how immigrants came to fit in, one had to understand what it was they were fitting into. . . . When the notion of an Anglo-American core collapsed amid the turmoil of the 1960s, assimilation lost its allure" (1995:437). The point is well taken, an invitation to a self-reflexive sociology of knowledge that is keenly conscious of the fact that all our theories of reality are socially and historically grounded (*see*, for example, Kivisto and Blanck, 1990).

Still, in the ideological contest, partly through policies and programs of "Americanization" and other intentional efforts to make a process described by social observers into a practice prescribed by the guardians of the social order; partly by the patronizing ethnocentrism built into assumptions about immigrant adjustment that equated "foreign" with "inferior" and the ways of the "host" or "core" society and culture with "superior"; partly as a product of the linear logic of a positivist narrative within which the tale, and the *telos*, of assimilation is told; indeed, partly as a corollary to the central myth of progress at the heart of the core culture, it became difficult to disentangle the rhetorical from the historical, and the use of the term itself was tarred with the suspicion that an Anglo-conformist demand hid within it, like an ideological Trojan Horse. As a result, as Alba and Nee (1996) argue, "assimilation as a scientific concept has fallen into undeserved disrepute."

It is in these conceptual interstices between theory, rhetoric, and reality that paradoxes (or at least what may appear as paradoxes) emerge. By focusing on paradoxes – on evidence that contradicts orthodox expectations and points instead to assimilation's discontents – the aim of this article is to test empirically the conception of assimilation as a linear process leading to improvements in immigrant outcomes over time and generation in the United States, to unmask underlying pre-theoretical ethnocentric pretensions, and to identify areas in need of conceptual, analytical and theoretical refinement. It is precisely through the examination of paradoxical cases – in effect, deviant case analyses – that fruitful reformulations can be stimulated, considered, and advanced.

ASSIMILATION AND ITS DISCONTENTS

A few years ago, a Vietnamese physician presented data he had collected each year since 1975 on blood cholesterol levels of Vietnamese children in Connecticut. As the only co-ethnic physician in the area, he provided primary health care services for the bulk of Vietnamese families who had been resettled there – including routine annual physical exams and blood tests. The results of those blood tests among the children showed that without exception their cholesterol levels increased for each year of residence in the United States. On reflection, that by-product of assimilation to the American diet should surprise no one, but that is not the sort of assimilative upward mobility Warner and Srole had in mind.

Nor does it fit with the view that assimilation is a more or less linear process of progressive improvement in the immigrants' adjustment to American life. That view is premised on an implicit deficit model: to get ahead immigrants need to learn how to "become American," to overcome their deficits with respect to the new language and culture, the new health care and educational systems, the new economy and society. As they shed the old and acquire the new over time, they surmount those obstacles and make their way more successfully – a process more or less completed by the second or third generation. Since today's immigration is overwhelmingly composed of newcomers from developing nations in Asia and Latin America, concerns have been raised about the speed and degree to which they can become assimilated – and hence about the social "costs" of the new immigrants – before they begin to produce net "benefits" to the new society. Recent research findings, however, especially in the areas of immigrant health, risk behavior, educational achievement and ethnic self-identity, raise significant questions about such assumptions. Indeed, the findings often run precisely in the opposite direction of what might be expected from traditional perspectives on assimilation. Some of those findings on the relationship of assimilation, broadly conceived, to various types of outcomes are highlighted below.

Epidemiological Paradoxes: Is Assimilation Hazardous to Infant Health?

It seems only appropriate to begin at the beginning: with babies. Over the last decade a remarkably consistent and compelling body of evidence about the pregnancy outcomes of immigrant and native-born women has been emerging that turns the usual hypotheses about assimilation and socioeconomic status upside down. In particular, the research literature has pointed to an infant health "epidemiological paradox" among new immigrants (*see* Markides and Coreil, 1986). High-risk groups, particularly low-income immigrants from Mexico and Southeast Asia, show unexpectedly favorable perinatal outcomes. When these findings first came to light, particularly with reference to those

classified as Hispanics, there was a tendency to dismiss them as being a result of migration selectivity or incomplete data. After all, lower socioeconomic status immigrants, such as refugees from Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos, and undocumented migrants from Mexico, El Salvador, and Guatemala, generally combine high fertility rates with high poverty rates and face formidable barriers in accessing health care and prenatal care services (Rumbaut *et al.*, 1988). Conventional wisdom would expect these least "Americanized" groups of disadvantaged newcomers to exhibit worse than average health outcomes; but the opposite is true. Indeed, it soon enough became clear that these results could not be explained by special circumstances or bad data.

In one of the first such reports, Williams and his colleagues (1986) analyzed data from California's matched birth-death cohort file for four groups: non-Hispanic whites, blacks, U.S.-born Hispanics (mostly of Mexican descent), and Mexican immigrants. In terms of maternal risk factors, the Mexican-born women had less education, more children, shorter birth spacing, and a later start to prenatal care than any of the other three groups. Yet, in terms of perinatal outcomes, the Mexican-born women had the lowest percentage of low birth weight babies, the lowest postneonatal infant mortality rates, and neonatal and total infant mortality rates that just matched the lower-risk white mothers. African Americans had the highest rates in these categories, followed by U.S.-born Hispanics, and whites. The authors could not explain why the Mexican immigrants, despite their adverse socioeconomic circumstances and higher risk factors, produced such positive outcomes, but they speculated that it could be "the result of better nutrition, lower rates of smoking and alcohol consumption, or a higher regard for parental roles . . . [or that] migration has selected out healthier individuals among newly arrived Latinos" (1986:390). An earlier study had found similarly that Chinese Americans had lower fetal, neonatal and postneonatal mortality rates than whites and other major ethnic/racial groups, and the superior health profile of Chinese infants was observed at every level of maternal education and for all maternal ages (Yu, 1982). Again, the available vital statistics lacked data with which to measure possible explanatory factors.

We reported similar evidence in a study of linked live birth and infant death records in San Diego County for the period 1978–1985, covering some 270,000 live births (Rumbaut and Weeks, 1989). The data showed that the infant mortality rate was lowest for Southeast Asians (6.6 per 1,000), followed by other Asians (7.0), Hispanics (7.3), non-Hispanic whites (8.0), and African Americans (16.3). In fact, among the Southeast Asians, the lowest infant death rates in the county were found for the Vietnamese (5.5) and the Cambodians (5.8). These highly positive outcomes were all the more remarkable because the Indochinese refugee groups (including the Vietnamese) had significantly higher rates of poverty, unemployment, welfare dependency, fer-

tility, prior infant mortality (before arrival in the United States), and late use of prenatal care services than any other racial-ethnic groups in the San Diego metropolitan area, and because a high proportion of refugee mothers came from rural backgrounds with little or no prior education or literacy, proficiency in English, or readily transferable occupational skills. We also found that those results were not unique to San Diego but were reflected statewide. In 1985, the State of California began publishing data on live births and infant deaths for more detailed ethnic groupings, including Vietnamese and Cambodians, using mother's place of birth as the principal criterion for ethnic identification. We compiled these statewide data and confirmed that during the late 1980s the Cambodians and Vietnamese had infant mortality rates of 5.2 and 7.5, compared to 7.7 for Mexican-born women and 8.5 for non-Hispanic whites (Weeks and Rumbaut, 1991). These differences were statistically significant. But just what was it that explained these differences could not be determined on the basis of the available vital statistics. The Indochinese and Hispanics had lower infant mortality rates regardless of whether the mother was a teenager or not and regardless of whether the mother was married or not; the findings also held after controlling for birth weight and onset of prenatal care.

Other regional studies with widely different ethnic populations in various parts of the country have reported similarly unexpected outcomes. In Illinois, Collins and Shay (1994) discovered that foreign-born Mexican and Central American mothers residing in very low income census tracts had much better pregnancy outcomes than either Puerto Rican or other U.S.-born Hispanics. In Massachusetts, a study of low-income black women served by Boston City Hospital found significant differences in health behaviors and birth outcomes between natives and immigrants – the latter mostly from Haiti, Jamaica, and other Caribbean and African countries (Cabral *et al.*, 1990). Compared to the United States born, the foreign-born women had better prepregnancy nutrition, were far less likely to use cigarettes, marijuana, alcohol, cocaine, or opiates during pregnancy, and gave birth to babies that were larger in head circumference and significantly less likely to be of low birth weight or premature – health advantages that remained even after controlling for many of the factors suspected to influence fetal growth.

Research with national-level datasets confirms these findings across the board. By 1995, foreign-born mothers accounted for nearly one-fifth of all U.S. births (18%), but over four-fifths (82%) of all Asian-origin babies and nearly two-thirds (62%) of all Hispanic-origin babies in the United States were born to immigrant women (*see* Landale, Oropesa and Gorman, 1997). A recent review of the literature (Eberstein, 1991) cites research indicating that among blacks and Hispanics nationally, pregnancy outcomes (birth weight, infant mortality) are better for babies born to immigrant than to

native mothers. Among Hispanics, an analysis of the 1983 and 1984 national datasets showed that infant mortality and low birth weight rates were lower for babies born to foreign-born mothers versus U.S.-born Mexican and Cuban mothers and for island-born mothers versus mainland-born Puerto Rican mothers, again despite a lack of correspondence between the socioeconomic profiles of these Hispanic groups and their health outcomes (Becerra *et al.*, 1991).

More conclusive evidence comes from a new study using the 1989, 1990 and 1991 Linked Birth/Infant Death national datasets (Landale, Oropesa and Gorman, 1997). The study examined the birth outcomes of immigrant versus native-born mothers among ten ethnoracial groups – Chinese, Filipino, Japanese, Other Asian, Mexican, Puerto Rican (island born versus mainland born), Cuban, Central/South American, non-Hispanic blacks, and non-Hispanic whites. For all groups with one exception, the babies of immigrant mothers had lower rates of prematurity, low birth weight, and infant mortality than those of U.S.-born mothers. The sole exception was the Japanese, for whom identically low rates of low birth weight and infant mortality were observed regardless of whether the mothers were born in Japan or in the United States (and at 3.7 deaths per 1,000 live births, their infant mortality rate was the lowest in the country over those three years). Native-born mothers nationally and for each of the main groups were also more likely than foreign-born mothers to be young (less than 20) and single, and to have smoked cigarettes during their pregnancies. In multivariate models the gap in birth outcomes by nativity and ethnicity was attenuated, but the offspring of immigrant mothers retained a health advantage over those of native-born mothers.

We attempted to unravel the reasons for this infant health paradox by examining an in-depth dataset drawn from a Comprehensive Perinatal Program (CPP) in San Diego County providing prenatal care services to low-income pregnant women (*see* Rumbaut and Weeks, 1996, 1997). The CPP dataset consisted of nearly 500 independent variables per case (including most of those listed in the research literature as likely biomedical and sociocultural determinants of pregnancy outcomes) for a large sample of both foreign-born (mostly immigrants from Mexico and various Asian countries) and U.S.-born women, matched to infant health outcome measures collected from hospital records for every baby delivered by CPP mothers during 1989–1991. The analysis focused on the identification of maternal risk factors that best explained observed ethnic and/or nativity differences in pregnancy outcomes, such as birth weight, diagnoses at birth, complications, and length of hospitalization of the baby. Our findings caution from jumping too quickly to conclusions based solely on racial classifications, nativity status, education, or length of time in the United States. For instance, the best infant health outcomes were observed for Asian immigrant groups (the Indochinese,

who were also the least educated), but the worst outcomes for a white immigrant group (the Middle Easterners, who were also the most educated of all). And while immigrants indeed do better than natives overall, the most assimilated immigrants (white Europeans and Canadians) do worse than U.S.-born Asians, Hispanics and blacks.

Still, given these caveats, the following general picture emerges from our data: Asians and Hispanics (mostly foreign born) clearly had superior outcomes relative to Anglos and African Americans (mostly U.S. born); and within racial-ethnic groups, outcomes were better for immigrants than for natives. Specifically, U.S.-born women (in this sample, mainly Anglos) were significantly more likely than immigrant women (in this sample, mainly Mexicans and Indochinese) to: 1) have higher levels of education, employment, and per capita income; 2) be taller, heavier, and gain more weight during their pregnancies; 3) have had fewer live births and more abortions; 4) have diets lower in fruits and cereals and higher in fats and milk products; 5) report more medical conditions, especially venereal disease and genitourinary problems; 6) smoke, abuse drugs and alcohol, and be at risk for AIDS; 7) have a personal history of significant psychosocial problems, including having been a victim of child abuse and now of spousal abuse and having currently stressful relationships both with the father of the baby and with their own families and parents; 8) be depressed, considered at risk psychosocially, and referred to a social worker; and 9) have generally poorer pregnancy outcomes – which is why infant health outcomes seem to worsen as the levels of education, English literacy, and general assimilation of the mother increase. In this context, then, part of the assimilation puzzle begins to clear up: that is, relative to the foreign-born in this sample of low-income women, the comparative socioeconomic advantages of the U.S. born appear to be overwhelmed by biomedical, nutritional and psychosocial disadvantages.

The 1982–1984 Hispanic Health and Nutrition Examination Survey (HHANES), with a very large regional sample of Mexicans, Puerto Ricans, and Cubans, has also provided a wealth of evidence that contradicts orthodox theoretical expectations. For example, low-birth weight (LBW) rates were significantly higher for (more acculturated) second generation U.S.-born women of Mexican descent compared with (less acculturated) first generation Mexico-born women, despite the fact that the latter had lower socioeconomic status, a higher percentage of mothers over 35 years of age, and less adequate prenatal care (Guendelman *et al*,. 1990). The risk of LBW was about four times higher for second than for first generation primiparous women, and double for second than first generation multiparous women. Other studies based on the HHANES have also observed this association between greater acculturation and low birth weight (Scribner and Dwyer, 1989). In addition, first generation Mexican women, despite their socioeconomic dis-

advantages, had a lower risk of eating a poor diet than second generation Mexican-American women, whose nutrient intake resembled that of non-Hispanic white native women (Guendelman and Abrams, 1995). For the immigrants, food choices actually deteriorated as income increased – and as the degree of assimilation increased (as indicated in this study by generational status).

Findings from the HHANES, however, have shown a link between increasing acculturation and health risk behaviors (Marks, García and Solis, 1990), cigarette smoking (Haynes *et al.*, 1990), and drug use (Amaro *et al.*, 1990; *see also* Vega and Amaro, 1994). Adverse effects of acculturation have also been reported among Mexican Americans with respect to alcohol consumption patterns (Gilbert, 1989) and psychological distress (Kaplan and Marks, 1990). Indeed, intriguing questions have been raised by recent research on the mental health of ethnic minorities in the United States, including immigrants and refugees. A review of prevalence rates reported in the most important research studies conducted over the past two decades suggests that rapid acculturation does not necessarily lead to conventionally anticipated outcomes (Vega and Rumbaut, 1991). Thus, teenaged children of middle-class Filipino immigrants, the most "Americanized" of contemporary Asian-origin newcomer groups, exhibit higher rates of suicidal ideation and attempts than most other immigrant groups (*see* Wolf, 1997; Kann *et al.*, 1995; Rumbaut, 1994b).

Adolescent Health and Risk Behavior: Patterns of Intragenerational and Intergenerational Assimilation

Perhaps at no stage of the life course are assimilative processes more intensely experienced, or assimilative outcomes more sharply exhibited, than during the formative years of adolescence. A new source of data – the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health (Add Health) – provides a unique opportunity to examine intragenerational and intergenerational processes and outcomes of assimilation among a large, nationally representative sample of adolescents. The data come from the first wave of the study, which in 1995 surveyed over 20,000 adolescents (and their parents) enrolled in grades 7 to 12 in 80 high schools drawn from a stratified probability sample of high schools nationwide and included an oversample of high-income black youth and several ethnic samples. The sample includes sizable numbers of immigrant children and children of immigrants, and for the former data were collected on age at arrival and length of residence in the United States. An analysis focusing on physical health characteristics and risk behaviors of three generational groups – first (immigrant children), second (native-born children of immigrant parents) and third or higher (native born of native-born parents)

generation – further broken down by major national-origin groups, provides a tell-tale test of the linear progress hypothesis (Harris, 1997).

First, looking at intergenerational results, for virtually every empirical indicator, second generation youth have poorer physical health outcomes and are more prone to engage in risk behavior than the foreign-born youth. In particular, Harris found that second generation youth were more likely than the first generation to report poor or fair health, to have missed school due to a health or emotional problem in the previous month, to have learning disabilities, to be obese, to have asthma, to ever have had sex and at a younger age, and to have engaged in deviant behaviors (delinquency, violence, and substance abuse). Outcomes for the third+ generation vary significantly across race and ethnic groups, but in general native minorities report the poorest health and the highest levels of risk behaviors. The findings, which remain after adjusting for age differences, suggest a strongly linear assimilative pattern, but in the direction of deteriorating rather than improving outcomes.

Second, looking at intragenerational results for the foreign-born youth (that is, by length of residence in the United States), the pattern of assimilation outcomes reinforces the above conclusion: the longer time in and exposure to the United States, the poorer are the physical health outcomes and the greater the propensity to engage in each of the risk behaviors measured. Furthermore, a breakdown by national or regional origin for the most sizable subsamples – Mexico, Cuba, Puerto Rico (island-born versus mainland-born youth and parents), Central/South America, China, the Philippines, Vietnam, Other Asia, Africa and the Afro-Caribbean, Europe, and Canada – generally confirm the intergenerational patterns, with outcomes worsening the further removed from the immigrant generation, most strongly seen among Mexicans and Filipinos. A main exception – where first-generation youth are more likely to engage in some risk behaviors than the second generation (earlier sexual initiation and more substance abuse – involves youths who were in some respects more Americanized prior to immigration: those from the English-speaking Caribbean and from Europe and Canada.

Despite these positive results among immigrant youth, their families actually had the highest poverty rates in the sample (38%), while the third generation+ natives had the lowest (20%). By contrast, third generation youth were the least likely to live in intact families and the most likely to live with a single parent, whereas second generation youth were most likely to live with both natural parents.[5] Controlling in multivariate analyses for socioeconom-

[5]The intergenerational findings on family structure reflect census and other data which indicate lower rates of divorce and single-parent families in the first (immigrant) generation, but striking increases in the prevalence of marital disruption over time and generation in the United States, particularly by the third generation (see Jensen and Chitose 1994; Rumbaut 1997:26–28).

ic status, family structure, degree of parental supervision, and neighborhood contexts actually increased the protective aspects of the immigrant first generation on both physical health and risk behavior outcomes. In fact, on both of these outcome indices, the results showed that every first generation nationality (with the sole exception of island-born Puerto Ricans, who are not immigrants but U.S. citizens) had significantly fewer health problems and engaged in fewer risk behaviors than the referent group of native non-Hispanic whites. These findings vividly parallel those discussed above with respect to infant health and mortality and, while still consistent with a linear hypothesis of assimilation to native norms, run directly contrary to the expectation of progressive improvement over time.

Educational Paradoxes: Is Assimilation Detrimental to Academic Achievement?

What is the relationship of immigrant assimilation to academic achievement? Given the enormous variability in the socioeconomic status of immigrant families in the United States today, their language handicaps, and the relative recency of arrival of so many, how does the school performance of their children compare to that of natives? Relatively few studies, including a handful of ethnographies, have explored these questions systematically, but still their results are also remarkably consistent and relevant to our concerns herein.

Part of the difficulty in obtaining useful data to address these issues is that school systems do not collect information on the nativity or immigration status of their students or the parents. A rough proxy for immigrant family status may be obtained from the home language census that is mandated by law in public school systems such as those in California to ascertain the English proficiency of students whose primary home language is not English. Those students are then assessed and classified as LEP (Limited English Proficient) or FEP (Fluent English Proficient). One large-scale study in the San Diego Unified School District (the country's eighth largest, with a sizable and diverse immigrant population) obtained data on educational achievement for the entire high school student cohorts (all sophomores, juniors and seniors, including all active and inactive students) for two periods: the 1986–87 and 1989–90 school years, a combined total of nearly 80,000 students (*see* Rumbaut 1995; Portes and Rumbaut, 1996). Among Asian and Hispanic students, about one-quarter spoke English only, while three-fourths spoke a language other than English at home (with a larger proportion of FEPs than LEPs overall among them, although varying greatly by national origin – the overwhelming proportion of Filipinos were FEP, while an equally large proportion of Cambodians and Laotians were LEP). Cumulative academic GPAs earned by the students since the ninth grade were compared for all the ethnic

groups by language status. The overall GPA for white Anglo students was 2.24, above the overall district norm of 2.11; but all of the non-English immigrant minorities outperformed their English-only co-ethnics (except for Hispanics) as well as majority white students. This applied in most cases to FEP and LEP students alike, though clearly FEP students did significantly better. The highest GPAs were found for immigrant Chinese, Korean, Japanese, Vietnamese and Filipino students. More remarkable still, even the Hmong, whose parents were preliterate peasants from the Laotian highlands, and the more recently arrived Cambodians, who were mostly rural-origin survivors of the "killing fields" of the late 1970s, were outperforming all native born English-only American students; and again this pattern applied for both FEP and LEP students among these refugee groups. This finding held for GPAs in both ESL (English as a Second Language) and mainstream courses; that is, the refugees' GPAs were not an artifact of the curriculum (Rumbaut and Ima, 1988; *see also* Caplan, Choy and Whitmore, 1991).

A much more systematic analysis of the educational progress of children of immigrants in San Diego city schools was made possible by a recently completed longitudinal study. Survey data (supplemented by academic records from the school system) were collected in 1992 (T1) and again over three years later in 1995–96 (T2). The T1 sample totaled 2,420 Mexican, Filipino, Indochinese (Vietnamese, Cambodian, Lao and Hmong), and other Asian and Latin American students who were enrolled in the eighth and ninth grades in San Diego city schools (a grade level at which dropout rates are still relatively rare, to avoid the potential bias of differential dropout rates between ethnic groups at the senior high school level). Most of the respondents were 14 or 15 years old at T1, and the sample was evenly split by gender, grade, and generation: 45 percent were U.S.-born children of immigrant parents (second generation), and 55 percent were foreign-born youths who immigrated to the United States before age 12 (the "1.5" generation). Only 1.4 percent of the total sample in San Diego checked "white" to a structured question on racial self-identification. The respondents were tracked over time, including students who dropped out or transferred from the school district, and over 85 percent (2,063) were successfully reinterviewed by T2. By that time, most were about 18 years old and entering young adulthood. That longitudinal panel of 2,063 does not differ significantly by gender, generation, or national origin from the T1 baseline sample.

Academic grade point averages for all schools districtwide in San Diego were compared against the GPAs earned in grades 9 through 12 in those schools by the entire original T1 sample of 2,420 children of immigrants during 1992–1995. The result showed that at every grade level the children of immigrants outperformed the district norms, although the gap narrows over time and grade level. For example, only 29 percent of all ninth graders in the

district had GPAs above 3.0, compared to a much higher 44 percent of the ninth graders from immigrant families; and while 36 percent of ninth graders districtwide had low GPAs under 2.0, only half as many (18%) of the children of immigrants performed as poorly. Those differentials decline over time by grade level, so that the advantage by the twelfth grade is reduced to a few percentage points in favor of the children of immigrants. Part of that narrowing of the GPA seemed to be due to the fact that a greater proportion of students districtwide dropped out of school than did the youth from immigrant families. The multiyear dropout rate for grades 9 through 12 in the San Diego schools was 16.2 percent, nearly triple the rate of 5.7 percent for the entire original sample of children of immigrants. That dropout rate was significantly lower than the dropout rates for preponderantly native non-Hispanic white (10.5%) and black (17.8%) high school students. Among the students from immigrant families, the highest dropout rate (8.5%) was that for Mexican-origin students, but even that rate was noticeably lower than the district norm and slightly lower than the rate for non-Hispanic whites.

These results are remarkable enough in view of the relatively low socioeconomic status of a substantial proportion of the immigrant families. They become all the more remarkable in the context of other school data. At T1, over one-quarter (29%) of the sample were classified as LEP, ranging from virtually none of the native-born Filipinos to around two-thirds of the foreign-born Mexican, Cambodian and Hmong students. That classification is supported by nationally standardized ASAT (Abbreviated Stanford Achievement Test) scores measuring English reading skills: the sample as a whole scored just below the fortieth percentile nationally, and the foreign-born groups with the highest proportion of LEP students scored in the bottom quartile nationally. On the other hand, all groups do better in math computation than English reading tests. At T1, their ASAT math achievement test scores placed the sample as a whole at the fiftieth percentile nationally, with some students achieving extraordinarily high scores (notably the "first-wave" Vietnamese, and Chinese, Japanese, Indian and Korean students, placing most of them in the top quartile nationally).

One key reason for these students' above-average academic GPAs, despite significant socioeconomic and linguistic handicaps, is elementary: they work for it. At both T1 and T2, these students reported spending an average of over two hours per day on homework, with the foreign-born students compensating for language and other handicaps by significantly outworking their U.S.-born peers. (By comparison, national data suggest that American high school students average less than an hour daily on homework.) From the end of junior high at T1 to the end of senior high at T2, the level of effort put into schoolwork increased across all nationalities. The sole exception in this regard were the Hmong, who at T1 posted the highest average number of daily homework hours (2.9), but decreased to 2.6 hours at T2 (still above the

sample average); not surprisingly, that drop in effort was matched by the drop in their GPAs from 2.92 (at T1) to 2.63 (at T2), the main drop in GPA among all the groups in the sample. Overall, the children of immigrants generally maintained their level of GPA attainment from T1 (2.80) to T2 (2.77).

In multivariate analyses at T1, examining a wide range of likely predictors, the number of daily homework hours emerged as the strongest single predictor of higher GPAs, while the number of hours spent watching television daily was significantly associated with lower GPAs (*see* Rumbaut, 1995, 1997). By T2, the data show that students who had dedicated more hours to schoolwork in junior high did significantly better in terms of educational achievement three years later. More significant for our purposes here is the negative association of length of residence in the United States and second generation status with both GPA and educational aspirations. What is more, students whose parents are both immigrants outperform their counterparts whose mother or father is U.S.-born. Those findings do not support a conventional linear assimilation hypothesis.

Similar findings on educational achievement, aspirations and attitudes have been reported by Kao and Tienda (1995) with national-level data from the NELS:88 dataset, with a sample of over 25,000 eighth graders, again indicative of deterioration in outcomes over generations in the United States. Essentially the same general intergenerational pattern has also been reported in ethnographic case studies in California of Mexican-origin and Punjabi Sikh students (*see* Matute-Bianchi, 1991; Gibson, 1989) and by a comparative cross-generational and cross-national study using projective tests (such as the TAT) of Mexican, Mexican immigrant, Mexican-American and non-Hispanic white students (Suárez-Orozco and Suárez-Orozco, 1995). And remarkably consistent results about the erosion of an ethos of achievement and hard work from the immigrant generation to the third generation have also been recently reported from a three-generational study of a sample of 1,100 secondary school students in California (Fuligni, 1997) and from a survey of more than 20,000 teenagers from nine high schools in Wisconsin and California (for an overall summary, *see* Steinberg, 1996).

The Arrow and the Boomerang: Linguistic Assimilation and Ethnic Self-Identity

Similarly provocative findings come from our panel study of the adaptation of children of immigrants in San Diego, described above, focusing for our purposes on changes in their patterns of English preference and proficiency and in their ethnic self-identities. A "straight-line" hypothesis would predict additional movement over time and generation in the direction of both increasing linguistic assimilation (anglicization) and increasing identificational assimilation (Milton Gordon's term) – *i.e.*, of a primary self-identity as an unhyphenated "American."

Our findings on language preference, a key index of cultural assimilation, are unequivocal. Over 90 percent of these children of immigrants report speaking a language other than English at home, mostly with their parents. But as seen in Table 1, at T1 two-thirds of the total sample (66%) already preferred to speak English instead of their parents' native tongue, including 56 percent of the foreign-born youth and 78 percent of the U.S. born. Three years later, the proportion had grown significantly to over four-fifths (82%), including 76 percent of the foreign born and over 90 percent of the U.S. born. The most linguistically assimilated in this respect were the Filipinos, among whom 92 percent of those born in the Philippines (where English is an official language) and 98 percent of those born in the United States preferred English by T2. But even among the most mother-tongue-retentive group – the Mexican-origin youth living in a Spanish-named city on the Mexican border with a large Spanish-speaking immigrant population and a wide range of Spanish radio and TV stations – the force of linguistic assimilation was incontrovertible: while at T1 only one-third (32%) of the Mexico-born children preferred English, by T2 that preference had doubled to 61 percent; and while just over half (53%) of the U.S. born preferred English at T1, that proportion had jumped to four-fifths (79%) three years later.

A main reason for this rapid language shift in use and preference has to do with increasing fluency in English (both spoken and written) relative to their level of fluency in the mother tongue. Respondents were asked to evaluate their ability to speak, understand, read, and write in both English and the non-English mother tongue; the response format (identical to the item used in the U.S. census) ranged from "not at all" and "not well" to "well" and "very well." Over two-thirds of the total sample reported speaking English "very well" (67% at T1, increasing to 71% at T2), compared to only about one-third who reported an equivalent level of spoken fluency in the non-English language. Naturally, these differentials are much more pronounced among U.S.-born youth, most of whom (87%) spoke English "very well," while only one-fourth of them could speak the parental language "very well." But even among the foreign born, those who spoke English very well surpassed by 59 percent to 44 percent those who spoke the foreign language just as well.

And the differences in reading fluency (not shown) are sharper still; those who can read English "very well" triple the proportion of those who can read a non-English language very well (68% to 23%). Only the Mexico-born youth maintained by T2 an edge in their reported knowledge of Spanish over English, and even they nonetheless indicated a preference for English. The ability to maintain a sound level of literacy in a language – particularly in languages with entirely different alphabets and rules of syntax and grammar such as many of the Asian languages brought by immigrants to California – is nearly impossible in the absence of schools that teach it and a community in which it can be regularly practiced. As a consequence, the bilingualism of

TABLE 1

THE ARROW AND THE BOOMERANG: LANGUAGE SHIFTS, ETHNIC SELF-IDENTITY, AND PERCEPTIONS OF DISCRIMINATION AMONG CHILDREN OF IMMIGRANTS IN SAN DIEGO, CALIFORNIA, BY NATIVITY OF THE CHILDREN AND NATIONAL ORIGIN OF THEIR PARENTS, IN 1992 AND 1995[a] (IN PERCENTAGES)

Characteristics by National Origin and Nativity	Time	Mexico		Philippines		Vietnam		Cambodia	Laos		All Others		TOTAL		
		FB[b]	US[c]	FB[b]	US[c]	FB[b]	US[c]	FB[b]	Lao FB[b]	Hmong FB[b]	FB[b]	US[c]	FB[b]	US[c]	TOTAL
Language:															
Prefers English (%)	T1	32.1	52.8	81.4	95.8	43.9	91.5	67.0	51.7	66.0	55.7	92.9	56.1	78.4	66.0
	T2	62.5	78.2	92.6	98.0	69.0	91.5	85.2	74.1	58.0	72.7	99.0	75.8	89.8	82.0
Speaks "very well" English	T1	38.5	74.1	75.2	94.3	45.9	95.7	48.9	44.1	22.0	59.8	93.9	52.2	86.2	67.3
	T2	48.2	77.7	83.3	93.6	47.8	89.4	50.0	49.0	30.0	70.5	93.9	58.5	87.0	71.2
Non-English	T1	74.0	44.8	23.2	2.0	41.3	10.6	33.3	42.0	50.0	49.4	11.2	43.4	20.3	33.1
	T2	78.1	49.9	23.0	3.6	38.7	4.3	33.3	40.6	44.0	50.6	18.2	43.7	25.7	36.3
Ethnic Self-Identity[d]															
"American"	T1	0.0	2.8	0.3	5.2	2.4	8.5	2.3	0.7	4.0	3.4	18.4	1.3	5.8	3.3
	T2	0.0	2.0	1.0	2.0	0.0	2.1	0.0	0 7	0.0	3.4	9.2	0.6	2.7	1.6
Hyphenated-American	T1	14.7	40.4	50.8	66.2	43.9	70.2	46.6	28.7	26.0	18.2	38.8	35.8	53.0	43.4
	T2	12.1	39.3	21.9	48.4	28.2	51.1	30.7	19.6	12.0	9.1	25.5	20.2	42.4	30.1
National origin	T1	33.5	8.2	41.8	21.5	45.9	19.1	40.9	61.5	62.0	44.3	11.2	44.3	15.7	31.6
	T2	67.9	26.3	72.7	42.5	56.1	36.2	48.9	67.1	48.0	18.2	11.2	60.7	32.3	48.1
Racial/panethnic	T1	51.3	44.9	3.5	1.2	0.4	0.0	1.1	2.1	2.0	22.7	17.3	13.2	19.8	16.1
	T2	18.8	27.7	0.6	2.0	14.5	8.5	20.5	11.2	38.0	58.0	40.8	15.8	16.8	16.2
Mixed ethnicity, other	T1	0.4	3.7	3.5	5.9	7.5	2.1	9.1	7.0	6.0	11.4	14.3	5.4	5.7	5.5
	T2	1.3	4.8	3.9	5.2	1.2	2.1	0.0	1.4	2.0	11.4	13.3	2.7	5.7	4.0
Discrimination:[e]															
Has experienced being discriminated against	T1	62.5	63.8	60.8	66.2	65.5	70.2	61.4	71.3	56.0	64.8	58.2	63.7	64.5	64.0
	T2	68.8	64.4	69.1	68.9	71.8	70.2	65.9	74.8	82.0	60.2	63.3	69.9	66.8	68.5
Expects discrimination regardless of merit	T1	33.5	35.6	35.0	41.0	33.3	40.4	38.6	46.2	40.0	29.5	32.7	35.8	37.9	36.7
	T2	39.3	38.4	43.7	44.2	36.9	40.4	39.8	43.4	50.0	42.0	31.6	40.9	40.7	40.8

[a] 1992 = T1; 1995 = T2

[b] FB = Foreign born. [c] US = U.S. born.

[d] Responses to the open-ended survey question: "How do you identify, that is, what do you call yourself?" "Hispanic," "Chicano," "Latino," "Black," and "Asian" areclassified as racial/panethnic identities; a Hmong ethnic identity is included under "national origin;" "Cuban-Mexican" or "Chinese-Thai" under "mixed" identities.

[e] Responses to 1) an open-ended question on experiences of discrimination, and 2) an item asking to agree or disagree with the statement: "No matter how much education I get, people will still discriminate against me." Data above show percent who agreed.

these children of immigrants becomes increasingly uneven and unstable. The data vividly underscore the rapidity with which English triumphs and foreign languages atrophy in the United States – even in a border city like San Diego – as the second generation not only comes to speak, read, and write it fluently, but prefers it overwhelmingly over their parents' native tongue. This linear pattern of rapid linguistic assimilation is constant across nationalities and socioeconomic levels and suggests that, over time, the use of and fluency in foreign languages will inevitably decline.

In both surveys, an identical open-ended question was asked to ascertain the respondent's ethnic self-identity. The results (and the wording of the question) are presented in the middle panel of Table 1. Four main types of ethnic identities became apparent: 1) a plain "American" identity, 2) a hyphenated-American identity, 3) a national-origin identity (*e.g.*, Mexican, Filipino, Vietnamese), and 4) a pan-ethnic minority identity (*e.g.*, Hispanic, Latino, Chicano, Asian, black). The way that adolescents see themselves is significant. Self-identities and ethnic loyalties can often influence patterns of behavior and outlook independently of the status of the families or the types of schools that children attend. But unlike language, which changes in straight-line fashion, like an arrow, ethnic self-identities vary significantly over time – not in linear fashion but in a reactive, dialectical fashion, like a boomerang. The data in Table 1 illustrate that pattern compellingly.

In 1992, almost one-third (32%) of the sample identified by national origin; the largest proportion (43%) chose a hyphenated-American identification; a small fraction (3.3%) identified as plain "American"; and 16 percent selected pan-ethnic minority identities. Whether the youth was born in the United States or not made a great deal of difference in the type of identity selected at T1 – the foreign born were three times more likely to identify by national origins (44%) than were the U.S. born (16%); conversely, the U.S. born were much more likely to identify as "American" or hyphenated American than were the foreign born, and they were somewhat more likely to identify in pan-ethnic terms. Those findings at T1 seemed suggestive of an assimilative trend from one generation to another. But by the T2 survey – conducted in the months after the passage (with 59 percent of the vote) of Proposition 187 in California in November 1994 – the results were quite the opposite from what would have been predicted by a straight-line identificational assimilation perspective.

In 1995, the biggest gainer by far in terms of the self-image of these youths was the foreign nationality identity, increasing from 32 percent of the sample at T1 to nearly half (48%) now. This boomerang effect took place among both the foreign born and the U.S. born. It occurred among most but not all national-origin groups, and it was particularly sharp among the youth of Mexican and Filipino descent. Overall, pan-ethnic identities remained at 16 percent at T2, but that figure conceals a notable decline among Mexican-ori-

gin youth in "Hispanic" and "Chicano" self-identities and an extremely sharp upswing in the proportion of youths now identifying pan-ethnically as "Asian" or "Asian American," especially among the smallest groups such as the "Other Asians" (Chinese, Korean, Japanese, Thai) and the Hmong. The simultaneous rapid decline of both the plain "American" (cut in half to a minuscule 1.6%) and hyphenated-American (dropping from 43% to 30%) self-identities points to the rapid growth of a reactive ethnic consciousness (*cf.* Portes, 1984; Rumbaut, 1994b). Furthermore, the measure of the salience or importance that the youths gave to their chosen identities showed that the strongest salience scores were reported for national-origin identities and the weakest for plain "American" ones, with hyphenates scoring between them in salience.

Change over time, thus, has been not toward assimilative mainstream identities (with or without a hyphen), but rather a return to and a valorization of the immigrant identity for the largest groups and toward pan-ethnic identities among the smallest groups as these youths become increasingly aware of the ethnic and racial categories in which they are classified by mainstream society. While the results are based on a limited measure taken at two points in time spanning the period from mid to late adolescence, still they go against the grain of a linear assimilation perspective. In any case, "becoming American" for these children of immigrants may well turn out to be a lifelong occupation, itself a suggestion of the importance of applying a life-course perspective to the analysis of social change and individual identity.

The process of growing ethnic awareness is also evident in the evolution of their perceptions, experiences, and expectations of racial and ethnic discrimination. These are detailed in the bottom panel of Table 1. Reported experiences of discrimination increased from 64 percent to 69 percent of the sample in the last survey. Virtually every group reported more such experiences of rejection or unfair treatment as they grew older, with the Hmong registering the sharpest increase (to 82%). There is little doubt that race and ethnic prejudice are the main factors driving such negative experiences. Among those suffering discrimination, race or nationality are the overwhelming forces perceived to account for the unfair treatment. Furthermore, such experiences of discrimination tend to be associated with the development of a distinctly more pessimistic stance about their chances to reduce discriminatory treatment on meritocratic grounds through higher educational achievement. As Table 1 shows, in both surveys the students were asked to agree or disagree with the statement, "No matter how much education I get, people will still discriminate against me." In 1992, 37 percent of the total sample agreed with that gloomy assessment; by 1995–96, the proportion agreeing had edged up to 41 percent. Such expectations of external discrimination on ascribed rather than achieved grounds – and thus of perceived danger and threatening circumstances beyond one's control – were found in a multivariate analysis of the original survey data to be significant predictors of depressive symptomatology

(*see* Rumbaut, 1994b). That finding is now confirmed again three years later.

Nonetheless, it is important to emphasize as well that, despite their growing awareness of the realities of American racism and intolerance, most continue to affirm a sanguine belief in the promise of equal opportunity through educational achievement – including nearly 60 percent in the latest survey who disagreed with the statement that people will discriminate against them regardless of educational merit. Even more tellingly, 63 percent of these youths agreed in the original survey that "there is no better country to live in than the United States," and that endorsement grew to 71 percent three years later. Majorities of every nationality, regardless of whether they were foreign born or U.S. born, agreed with that appraisal, ranging from nearly 60 percent among the Mexicans and Cambodians to a high of 85 percent among the U.S.-born children of the 1975 Vietnamese refugees, whose families generally experienced a supportive and welcoming context of reception through a historic resettlement program organized by the U.S. government.

ASSIMILATION FROM WHAT? TO WHAT? FOR WHAT?

As has by now been amply documented, the diversity and dynamics of the "new immigration" to the United States over the past few decades differ, in many respects, from that of the last period of mass immigration in the first few decades of the century. The immigrants themselves differ greatly in their social class and national origins, and so do the American society, economy, and polity that receive them – raising perennial questions about their modes of incorporation and challenging conventional accounts of assimilation processes that were framed during previous epochs of mass migration. In this respect, the differences in the historical contexts of immigration and incorporation themselves need to be taken far more seriously and systematically into account if we are to deepen our understanding of these processes; too often sociological analyses present "structural" and "cultural" explanations in a decontextualized historical vacuum. A few thoughts are proposed in what follows to tease out some of the conceptual and analytical questions posed by the new realities that are not taken into account by conventional perspectives on assimilation. But before looking forward to these, it may be useful to glance briefly backward at the original canonical statement, too often misread and trivialized – the seminal work by Park and Burgess (1924) – and see what may still be gleaned from it.

Accommodation and Assimilation: A Generational Divide?

In their 1921 *Introduction to the Science of Sociology*, arguably the most influential single text in the history of American sociology, Park and Burgess gave the concept of assimilation its classic formulation: "a process of interpenetration and fusion in which persons and groups acquire the memories, senti-

ments, and attitudes of other persons and groups and, by sharing their experience and history, are incorporated with them in a common cultural life" (1924:735). They distinguished systematically between "four great types of interaction" – competition, conflict, accommodation, and assimilation – which they related respectively to economic, political, social and cultural institutions.[6] The distinction they elaborate between accommodation and assimilation is instructive. An accommodation (of a conflict or to a new situation) may take place quickly, and the person or group is typically a highly conscious protagonist of the process of accommodating those circumstances. In assimilation, by contrast, the changes are more subtle and gradual, and the process is typically unconscious, so that the person is incorporated into the common life of the group largely unaware of how it happened. Assimilation thus takes place most rapidly and completely in primary – intimate and intense–social contacts; accommodation may be facilitated through secondary contacts, but they are too distant and remote to promote assimilation. Since the nature (especially the intimacy) of the social contacts is what is decisive, it follows that "a common language is indispensable for the most intimate associations of the members of the group," and its absence is "an insurmountable barrier to assimilation" since it is through communication that gradual and unconscious changes of the attitudes and sentiments of the members of the group are produced.

The psychosocial mechanisms through which assimilation occurs, a key issue but one addressed by Park and Burgess only in passing, are those of "imitation and suggestion." The end result is not "like-mindedness,"[7] but rather "a unity of experience and orientation, out of which may develop a community of purpose and action." Race and place become critical structural determinants of the degree of assimilation precisely insofar as they delimit possible forms of primary social contact; for Park and Burgess, social relations are inevitably embedded and bounded in space, which is why social distance is typically indexed by physical distance and patterns of residential segregation. In sum, an exegesis of their argument compels the conclusion that accommodation is the modal adaptation of the older first generation immi-

[6]Of these, "Assimilation takes place not so much as a result of changes in the organization as in the content, i.e., the memories, of the personality. The individual units, as a result of intimate association, interpenetrate, so to speak, and come in this way into possession of a common experience and a common tradition. The permanence and solidarity of the group rest finally upon this body of common experience and tradition" (p. 510).

[7]Park again: "The extent and importance of the kind of homogeneity and 'like-mindedness' that individuals of the same nationality exhibit has been greatly exaggerated. Like-mindedness . . . contributes little or nothing to national solidarity. Likeness is, after all, a purely formal concept which by itself cannot hold anything together" (1914; reproduced in Park and Burgess, 1924:759).

grant, while assimilation can become a modal outcome ultimately only for the malleable young and for the second generation, who are like palimpsests, and then only if and when permitted by structural conditions of inclusion at the primary group level.[8]

This formulation underscores the centrality of both the 1.5 and the second generations of children of immigrants as strategic research sites (Merton, 1987)for the study of assimilation processes and outcomes. Or perhaps it may be more precise to say that the family, albeit an underprivileged social structure in most of our professions, may be the strategic research site for understanding the dynamics of immigration and of immigrant adaptation processes, as well as for their long-term consequences. Immigration to the United States is largely a family affair, and kinship is the basis for longstanding selection criteria built into U.S. immigration law. Haves and have-nots alike, from manual laborers to professionals to entrepreneurs to once well-heeled exiles, immigrant families come in all shapes and confront dramatically different contexts of adaptation. To make sense of their diversity – and of the complexity of assimilation processes and outcomes that then ensue, particularly among the 1.5 and second generation – we need to begin with the recognition that it makes no sense to speak of a singular immigrant or immigrant family experience.

Often the most insightful statements of what goes on within such families are found in both fictional and non-fictional autobiographical (yet not filiopietistic) tracts written with a perspicaciously nuanced mastery of the new language by children of immigrants (for a selected list, *see* Rumbaut, 1997). Why and how? Perhaps because of the emancipatory and innovative energies that marginality, for all and possibly because of all its emotional costs, can release in individuals who come of age between colliding cultural worlds, between centripetal and centrifugal force fields, outside of the routinized social comfort zones that ossify reflection, less bound to worship the idols of any tribe, and who manage to achieve a creative synthesis of insiderness and outsiderness, proximity and distance, aloofness and involvement. Perhaps when such marginal and malleable individuals in their formative years, in whose minds those dissonant worlds and memories conflict and fuse (*cf.* Park,

[8]This is an analytical frame quite different from that of another classic of the period, Thomas and Znaniecki's *The Polish Peasant in Europe and America* (1958), an immigrant-family-centered analysis, based partly on a methodology of life-course narratives, but one not focused on individual assimilation (as has often but erroneously been asserted in the literature) but focused on ethnic group formation. Thomas and Znaniecki themselves, writing before the publication of Park and Burgess' seminal text, were quite clear on that point: "The problem of individual assimilation is at present an entirely secondary and unimportant issue. . . . The fundamental process which has been going on during this period is *the formation of a new Polish-American society* out of those fragments separated from Polish society and embedded in American society" (quoted in Conzen, 1996:18).

1928), become critically self-conscious of the relativity of intergroup boundaries – and of "imagined communities" and assimilation processes – and can make them an object of sustained inquiry, becoming not so much "citizens of the world" or of "America" as of their own imaginations. We can learn much from that literature – often much more than from any academic text.

Socioeconomic Assimilation: Origins Shape Destinies

"Socioeconomic assimilation" is often defined as achieving "parity" with the native majority in such indicators as education, employment, and income. A leading economist puts the matter this way:

> When a newly arrived immigrant first enters the U.S. labor market, his wage is much lower than that of natives. Over time, the immigrant becomes proficient in the English language, learns about alternative job opportunities, and acquires skills that are valued by American employers. As immigrants adapt to the U.S. labor market, therefore, they become more and more like natives, and their wages begin to catch up to those of natives. . . . Economic assimilation is defined as the rate at which immigrant earnings catch up with those of natives as both groups age in the United States. (Borjas, 1990:97,99)

Put this way, "immigrants" and "natives" are considered as lump sums, as if these were homogeneous aggregates worthy of meaningful comparison, and assimilative processes are reduced to a game of catch-up measured in dollars.

Among the many problems with that formulation, of course, is the fact that a substantial proportion of contemporary immigrants, from the start, exceed such native norms by a wide margin, especially in education. These more highly educated, professional or managerial immigrants are likely to speak English, live in the suburbs ("spatially assimilated," relatively dispersed, and "invisibly," at that), and accommodate readily to "American ways." Still others immigrate precisely because of the demand for their labor by American employers, who prefer it over that of natives or more "assimilated" workers (*cf.* Waldinger, 1997; Tienda and Stier, 1996). With regard to the former, what does the concept of "socioeconomic assimilation" mean for immigrant groups who arrive in the United States already well above (let alone at "parity" with) the educational and occupational medians of the native majority population – who are relatively affluent and integrated almost from the get go?

Available occupational data from the INS – the percent of professionals, executives, and managers at the time of immigrant admission – show that over the past three decades more than 2 million immigrant engineers, scientists, university professors, physicians, nurses, and other professionals and executives and their immediate families have been admitted into the United States. From the late 1960s to the early 1980s, worldwide about one-third of all legal immigrants to the United States (excluding dependents) were high-

status professionals, executives, or managers in their countries of origin. The proportion of these so-called "brain drain" immigrants declined somewhat to 26.5 percent by the late 1980s – still a higher percentage than that of the native-born American population – but then rebounded again to 34 percent by 1993, despite the fact that the overwhelming majority of immigrants had been admitted under family preferences (Rumbaut, 1997).

There are very sharp differences in the class character of contemporary legal immigration to the United States. Regionally, the flows from Asia, Africa, and Europe had achieved rough parity with each other by the 1980s, with close to half (44 to 48%) of all occupationally active immigrants from these regions in 1993 consisting of professionals and managers – in sharp contrast to the less than 10 percent from Latin America and the Caribbean. Highly skilled immigrants have dominated the flows of Indians, Koreans, Filipinos, and Chinese (including especially the Taiwanese) since the 1960s, and their proportions increased noticeably after the passage of the Immigration Act of 1990, which nearly tripled the number of such employment-based visas. By contrast, legal immigration from Mexico, El Salvador, the Dominican Republic, and (until recently) Italy has consisted predominantly of manual laborers and low-wage service workers, as has also been the case among refugees from Laos and Cambodia and the more recent waves of Vietnamese, Cubans, and Haitians. In fact, the diversity of contemporary immigration is such that, among all ethnic groups in America today, native and foreign born, different immigrant nationalities account at once for the highest and the lowest rates of education, self-employment, homeownership, poverty, welfare dependency, and fertility, as well as the lowest rates of divorce and female-headed single-parent families, and the highest proportions of children under age 18 residing with both natural parents. These differential starting points, especially the internal socioeconomic diversification of particular waves and "vintages" within the same nationalities over time, augur differential modes of incorporation and assimilation outcomes that cannot be extrapolated simply from the experience of earlier immigrant groups of the same nationality, let alone from immigrants as an undifferentiated whole.

In addition to those differing starting points, recent scholarship has suggested that the incorporation of today's new immigration is likely to be segmented and to take different pathways, depending on a variety of vulnerabilities and resources, experiences and exposures, and contexts of exit and of reception, including the changing structure of economic opportunity and the sector of American society to which a particular immigrant group assimilates (Gans, 1992a; Fernández-Kelly and Schauffler, 1994; Portes, 1995; Portes and Rumbaut, 1996; Rumbaut, 1994b). Thus, one path may follow the relatively "straight-line" theory (or "bumpy-line theory," as Gans, 1992b, suggests may be a more apt term) of assimilation into the white middle-class

majority; an opposite type of adaptation may lead to downward mobility and assimilation into the inner-city underclass; yet another may combine upward mobility and heightened ethnic awareness within solidary immigrant communities. Such divergent modes of incorporation in turn are likely to be accompanied by changes in the character and salience of ethnicity – including "linear" and "reactive" processes of ethnic solidarity and identity formation – and hence by divergent modes of ethnic self-identification. Other paths are possible, and segmented assimilation processes, in any case, are nothing new in the American experience (as the older concepts of "triple melting pot" and the like illustrate).

Cultural Assimilation: Pre-Migration Americanization and the Role of the Mass Media

An assumption in conventional depictions of "cultural assimilation" or acculturation often seems to be that immigrants start at some point near American cultural ground zero and then proceed only postarrival to "become American" in word, deed, and ultimately in thought. Along these lines, current restrictionist discourse sometimes makes the point that a "moratorium" in immigration is needed now to give folks already here a chance to "assimilate." But in fact many immigrants (and nonimmigrants) these days are already "Americanized" to varying degrees in the countries of origin, a reflection of the global reach and widespread diffusion of American consumption patterns, lifestyles, and popular culture. They may have visited the United States in the past and established contacts here (including family and friends) with whom they keep in regular communication, or they may even have been living in the United States for years before they seek immigrant visas. This is so, above all, in the case of countries with whom the United States has close economic, military, political, cultural and historical ties. Indeed, the ultimate boomerang effect lies in the fact that contemporary immigration to the United States can be seen as a dialectical consequence of the expansion of the nation to its post-World War II position of global hegemony. Who is doing the assimilating, from what, to what, and for what are critical questions that need to be placed not only within the appropriate structural contexts, but within historical contexts as well.

A recent poll in the Dominican Republic yielded a stunning statistic: half of the 7.5 million Dominicans have relatives in the United States and two-thirds would move to the United States if they could. Similarly, by the end of the 1980s, national surveys in Mexico had found that about half of adult Mexicans were related to someone living in the United States, and one-third of all Mexicans have been to the United States at some point in their lives (*cf.* Massey and Espinosa, 1997). Deep structural linkages and potentially vast

social networks of family and friends are implied by those figures, microsocial structures that can shape both future migration as well as adaptation processes. By the same token, the proportion of immigrants in the United States in 1990 who hailed from countries in the English-speaking Caribbean, notably from Jamaica, Barbados, Trinidad and Tobago, Belize, and Guyana, already constituted between 10 and 20 percent of the 1990 populations of their respective countries – a growing double-digit group to which can be added El Salvador (Rumbaut, 1992). I estimate that perhaps one-third of Cuba's population of 11 million have relatives in the United States and Puerto Rico. Only Mexico (by far) and the Philippines (a U.S. colony for half a century) have sent more immigrants to the United States than Cuba since 1960. The history of U.S.-Cuba relations is a long and complex one ("bound to us by ties of singular intimacy" is how President William McKinley had put it in his State of the Union message in 1899 – an intimacy that led to a revolutionary divorce in 1959). Still, Wayne Smith, an informed observer of the historical development of these ties and of the Americanization of the Cuban scene, could write recently that at least in the cities "it is probably fair to say that by 1959, no other country in the world, with the exception of Canada, quite so resembled the United States" (quoted in Rumbaut, 1992).

Curiously, moreover, little studied systematically in the literature on cultural assimilation is the role of the mass media, especially television, in the pervasive dissemination of impersonal messages and cultural propaganda and how this exposure – what may be called the context of perception – shapes the acculturation (prearrival and postarrival) of immigrant groups, particularly of their children's world view. (The ethnic-immigrant media is largely a first-generation resource.) After all, the so-called "post-1965" immigration is also the first immigrant generation to live and grow up in the "Age of Television," where the medium itself is part of the message. Indeed, the two coincided historically; the critical shift from print to televised media occurred during the 1960s and has intensified since.

Television is the most widely shared experience in the United States: as of 1990, the Census Bureau reported that 98 percent of all U.S. households had at least one TV set (and on average two sets per household), and those in an average household watched TV over seven hours per day. The only activity American children engage in more than watching television is sleeping. In short, television and other mass media are powerful "assimilative" agencies, and while the jury is still out on the extent of its effects on viewers' attitudes and behavior, available evidence points to negative consequences for children of immigrants of this mode of cultural assimilation *par excellence* on such indicators of "successful" outcomes as educational attainment and aspirations.

Linguistic Assimilation: Pre-Migration English Proficiency?

Much of the world already speaks English (itself a "glorious mongrel")as a second language or even as an official language.[9] So do many immigrants to the United States even before their arrival.[10] Yet uncritical discussions of "linguistic assimilation" often presuppose that immigrants start at some point near English language zero and then proceed to learn to speak, read, and write it, but that is not at all the case across the board. Of the 19.8 million foreign-born persons counted in the 1990 census, 21 percent spoke English only, and another 53 percent spoke it "very well" or "well," even though close to half (44%) had just arrived in the United States during the 1980s. The 26 percent who reported that they spoke English "not well" or "not at all" included, disproportionately, the elderly (especially those in dense ethnic enclaves, such as Cubans in Miami), the undocumented, and the least educated among recent arrivals (*see* Rumbaut, 1994a).

On another point concerning the acquisition of the English language by non-English-speaking immigrants, although sociologists are not wont to admit it, there is a biology of language learning that is as powerful a factor as any in the arsenal of the social sciences to explain the patterns of linguistic assimilation – including the fact that of all the dimensions of assimilation, language acquisition is the one most likely to follow a straight-line trajectory, and within one generation at that. Essentially, the capacity to learn and to speak a language like a native is a function of age, and it is especially high between the ages of three and the early teens; immigrants who arrive before the age of six (what I have called 1.75ers)[11] are considerably more likely to speak English without an accent, while those who arrive after puberty may learn it, but not

[9] "Linguistic strength is basically political strength. Lyautey used to say that a language is a dialect that has a navy. Whether with the help of sailors, airmen, or atomic bombs, languages assert themselves by force, even when this force is not actually used. A major state that champions a language is usually particularly intolerant of linguistic diversity; its history is typically one of progressive absorption of peripheral languages and minorities" (Laponce, 1987:200).

[10]Immigrants from India and the Philippines stand out in this regard, and for that matter from Germany and Iran, as does the substantial majority of immigrants from Africa (over three-fifths, by my analysis of the 1990 census, with Egypt and Nigeria alone accounting for a third of all African immigration – to say nothing of course of the Jamaicans and others from the English-speaking Caribbean, and the Canadians, the Irish, and the British themselves (who continue to send a substantial number of immigrants to their former colony).

[11]I coined the concept of the 'one-and-a-half' or '1.5' generation in the 1970s to describe the situation of immigrant children who are socialized and begin their primary schooling abroad but immigrate before puberty (about age 12) and complete their education in the country of destination. Subsequently I have distinguished the fundamentally different development stages and social contexts of children who immigrate at ages 0–5 (pre-school) and 13–17 (adolescence and secondary school), and have labeled them 1.75er's and 1.25er's, respectively. For an empirical test of this typology, see Oropesa and Landale, 1997.

without a telltale accent. "After puberty, the ability . . . to adjust to the physiological demands of verbal behavior quickly declines. The brain behaves as if it had become set in its ways and primary basic language skills not acquired by that time, except for articulation, usually remain deficient for life" (Lennenberg, 1967: 53; *see* also Laponce, 1987; Bialystok and Hakuta, 1994).

Finally, on the prospects of sustaining bilingualism: without strong social structural supports, the chances seem slim, even among highly motivated individuals and despite the range of benefits it can confer. As Laponce (1987) puts it, "Bilingualism is costly, in terms of both memory and reaction time. Thus for an individual to become or remain bilingual, the social benefit must outweigh the mental cost; and this mental cost explains why the tendency toward unilingualism never entirely disappears . . . and merely confirms the norm: the mind works more quickly and with less effort in a unilingual semantic system; its natural inclination is toward unilingualism." Positive bilingualism thus requires the collaboration of parents, teachers, and children: "These children do not choose to become bilingual; society forces them to do so. If society and parents collaborate in an undertaking perceived by the child to be socially advantageous, success will probably be achieved; but if the child sees no important social advantage in the undertaking, he or she will probably fail in it. The biological and mental obstacles to the acquisition of two languages can be overcome only with a heavy expenditure of social and psychological energy. . . . Within a bilingual society, the minority group tends to learn the language of the dominant group, rather than vice versa" (1987:15, 21). For all of these reasons, in any event, linguistic assimilation is the domain of adaptation most likely to proceed exactly as a linear function, in the direction predicted by assimilation theory.

Political Assimilation, Emigration, Selectivity, and Other Matters

A central dimension of the process of immigrant incorporation involves their political "assimilation," naturalization, and voting patterns (*cf.* Portes and Rumbaut, 1996:Ch. 4). While I cannot dwell on this here, it is worth noting that one of the paradoxical and unintended consequences of the aftermath of the passage of Proposition 187 in California by a landslide margin, and its political aftereffects in legislation already passed or pending in the U.S. Congress to eliminate eligibility for medical and social services from legal permanent residents and to deny citizenship to the U.S.-born children of illegal immigrants, was a rush by noncitizen immigrants to apply for naturalization in California, southern Florida, and elsewhere, overwhelming the INS ability to process them. Another was the response of the Mexican government to consider extending dual nationality to permit persons of Mexican origin in the United States to maintain their rights as Mexican citizens to own proper-

ty in Mexico, while at the same time gaining the political power to vote as U.S. citizens. Ironically, although the British and Canadians have been viewed as the most "assimilated" immigrants in the United States, they share (with Mexicans) about the lowest rates of naturalization among all long-term immigrants in the country.

Many immigrants do not stay in the United States but leave after a period of time. When we talk of "assimilation" we are, of course, talking primarily about the children (and grandchildren) of those immigrants who came and stayed in the United States; practically no attention is paid, comparatively or otherwise, to those who came and went back to their countries of origin or elsewhere, despite the fact that emigration was very substantial in the early part of this century and remains so today (even granting that reliable data are absent and that none have been officially collected since 1957).

This is only one dimension of a broader issue of "selectivity" in immigration flows that deserves more analytical attention. Immigrants who stay long enough to be included in accounts of "assimilation" have already gone through multiple layers of selection at the time of entry – from self-selection to (legal) selection by the criteria of U.S. immigration and refugee policies – to which is added still more selectivity in the decision to stay versus that to return. Exactly how such "selection" factors shape adaptation processes and outcomes, and how they may distinguish the motives and frames of reference of first versus second generation immigrants in such processes, remains to be investigated systematically and critically.

BETWEEN RHETORIC AND REALITY, AND BEYOND

To study the "assimilation" of persons and groups in American life is, among other things, to examine the modes of incorporation of periphery to core and to reflect on the tumultuous histories and social processes that have made (and are continuing to make) "Americans" out of a remarkable and motley crew. Indeed, as these unfold, we might recall, metaphorically, an old biological dictum – ontogeny recapitulates phylogeny. The biographical process of becoming American today recapitulates the historical process of America becoming, fragmented across color lines, classes, creeds and locations.

If in this article we have considered various ways in which paradox emerges between the rhetoric and the reality of assimilation American-style, it is in part a reflection of the paradoxical character and internal contradictions of American society itself. In his comparative survey, *American Exceptionalism: A Double-Edged Sword,* Seymour Martin Lipset put the matter this way:

> Exceptionalism is a two-edged phenomenon; it does not mean better. This country is an outlier. It is the most religious, optimistic, patriotic, rights-oriented, and individualistic . . . it has the highest crime rates . . . the most people locked up in jail

> . . . the most lawyers per capita of any country in the world. It also has close to the lowest percentage of the eligible electorate voting, but the highest rate of participation in voluntary organizations. The country remains the wealthiest in real income terms, the most productive in worker output, the highest in proportions of people who graduate from or enroll in higher education . . . but the least egalitarian among developed nations with respect to income distribution, at the bottom as a provider of welfare benefits, the lowest in savings, and the least taxed. . . .
>
> The positive and negative are frequently opposite sides of the same coin. . . . The stress on success . . . presses the unsuccessful to violate the rules of the game. Individualism as a value leads not only to self-reliance and a reluctance to be dependent on others, but also to independence in family relationships, including a greater propensity to leave a mate if the marital relationship becomes troubled. America is the most moralistic country in the developed world. . . . Given this background, it is also not surprising that Americans are also very critical of their society's institutions and leaders. (1996:26–27)

Given this background, indeed, it is not surprising that assimilation has its paradoxes and its discontents.

As an analytical tool, the concept of assimilation need not be used unimaginatively as a bland, deterministic and formulaic depiction of mechanical adjustments (producing as outcome a "tasteless, colorless fluid of uniformity," as Randolph Bourne, 1916:90, put it in his vigorous and provocative essay "Trans-National America," published eight decades ago but still fresher than this morning's newspaper and worth rereading periodically whenever intellectual sonambulance begins to set in) – or worse, pejoratively as a synonym for campaigns of coerced Americanization on one hand and a cover for racism on the other (*see also* Hollinger, 1995). More intriguingly, assimilation need not be, or be seen as, a zero-sum game. If it is to be rescued from the intellectual gulch of disrepute into which it fell, it will help to give free rein to the "sociological imagination," a la C. Wright Mills, to grasp the human variety in the intersections of biography and history within social structure.

Assimilation looks to the future, not to the past; it works its alchemy chiefly in the realm of the young and the malleable next generation, but mostly superficially on those already formed adults who made the fateful decision to come, and who bring with them a dual frame of reference. Assimilation is about seduction and not simply coercion; about discovery and not only loss and twilight; about profound conflicts of loyalties and a kind of existential red-alertness and not merely conformity to group pressure (as if the process of assimilation were but a gigantic Asch experiment) and taking the path of least resistance. It is also about creative interminglings and extraordinary hybridities and not at all simply surrender on the terms of a dominant core.

Assimilating processes involve the inventiveness of human agency, mothered by necessity and the sheer weight of circumstance, and the dialectical ironies of human history, suffused by pervasive processes of change of which

the protagonists may be no more conscious than fish are of water or we of the air we breathe – all the more so in a world that is changing seemingly faster than are the individuals who seek to adjust to it. Neither assimilator nor assimilatee are fixed, static things, in any case, but permanently unfinished creations with vexing degrees of autonomy. The ultimate paradox of assimilation American-style may well be that, in the process, what is being assimilated metamorphoses into something quite dissimilar from what any of the protagonists ever imagined or intended, and the core itself is ineluctably transmuted, even as it keeps its continental name: America (named for an Italian adventurer, at that).

For Milton Gordon (1964), in *Assimilation in American Life*, the final stage of the process that began with acculturation and moved through structural assimilation and intermarriage came with the embrace of an identity as an unhyphenated "American." In *The Book of Embraces*, by appropriate contrast, the Uruguayan novelist Eduardo Galeano has a haunting passage – he called it a "celebration of contradictions" – that expresses vividly the dialectical sense of paradox and poetic justice that I seek here to convey and to conclude:

> Idiot memory repeats itself as tragic litany. Lively memory, on the other hand, is born every day, springing from the past and set against it. . . . Human history . . . is born as it dies and builds as it destroys. . . . Every loss is a discovery. Courage is born of fear, certainly of doubt. What it all comes down to is that we are the sum of our efforts to change who we are. Identity is no museum piece sitting stock-still in a display case, but rather the endlessly astonishing synthesis of the contradictions of everyday life. (1991:124–125)

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