INTRODUCTION

WE SAY COMPLACENTLY that "America is a land of immigrants" only because we also say that "America is the land of opportunity." When confidence in upward mobility dims, so too does confidence that immigrants and their descendants will enter the mainstream. And because upwards of twenty million immigrants are once again coming to America in the course of a generation, it is natural to ask whether the conditions relevant to immigrant progress in the past are the same today. The stories of immigration and social mobility are tightly linked not only in American mythology, but as well in American history. The immigrants typically started out at or near the bottom and climbed, or clawed, their way to something better—to something vastly better in the mythology, to something at least appreciably better in the eyes of both those doing the climbing and the historians. Above all, those immigrants anticipated a better life for their children. And rightly so, for whatever they had to endure, their children seemed generally to be doing better and their grandchildren—or was it their great-great-grandchildren?—could hardly be differentiated from the descendants of the Mayflower arrivals (Lieberson and Waters 1988). More precisely, these generalizations hold for the immigrants from Europe, for most of American history the overwhelming majority of all immigrants—not least because America restricted immigration from Asia. But will this upward mobility continue to be the American immigrant story? Accepting all the reminders that the climb in the past was slow and painful, can American society today continue to provide immigrants and their descendants a reasonably similar rate of improvement?

The past, even in the United States, covers a long time. The most useful way to sharpen the question of immigrant prospects in past and present is to restrict "the past" under discussion to the last mass immigration prior to our own time, the immigrations of the 1890 to 1914 period. One practical

reason for doing so concerns the records: we can say much more about this last wave of immigration because the statistical evidence covering the immigrants and their descendants is much fuller than for earlier periods. There are also many strong substantive reasons for choosing this last immigration wave of 1890 to 1914 as the point of comparison to the present. America at the end of the nineteenth century seems much more familiar to us than the America of earlier times; by the late nineteenth century, large-scale industry was transforming the country and while over half the population still lived in places smaller than 2,500, ever larger numbers lived in, or at least near, large cities—some of them among the largest in the world. The immigration of 1890 to 1914 involved a new set of origins: the peoples of southern, central, and eastern Europe, particularly the Italians, Poles and other Slavs, and the east-European Jews. During the 1890s these became the majority of all arrivals. They arrived poor, typically with few industrial skills, and took up low-skill work in industry, construction, and mining. They spoke languages new to the United States and settled together in immigrant neighborhoods where poverty and cultural distinctiveness were pronounced. Contemporary native-born Americans of the time distinguished these immigrants from their predecessors by calling them "the new immigrants," a description that stuck among historians until the designation was applied instead to immigrants of our own time. At the time their influx appeared to be a serious social challenge—to cities, class structure, mobility patterns, schools, and the political system. It was not long before popular animosities and elite theorists arose to distinguish between the new and old immigrant stocks in racialized terms. There was much reflection, too, about whether America could absorb so many new immigrants (Higham 1955; Archdeacon 1983).

Following Stanley Lieberson (1980), I refer to these southern, central, and eastern Europeans as SCE immigrants; and in comparing past and present I use their experience to represent the past. In one way, however, the contemporary immigration is not at all like theirs. Today, large numbers of immigrants arrive with relatively extensive education—at, or even well above, the norm for the native-born American workforce. They therefore take jobs open to more educated workers. Many immigrants today also come with some economic resources and can set up a business quite soon after arrival. Such educationally and economically advantaged immigrants raise intriguing and subtle issues about absorption into the American mainstream. Nevertheless, these are not the issues crucial to the American narrative of immigration and upward mobility. The question about whether the present will be like the past involves instead families that start out at the bottom. This is not a question we can answer by focusing on Iranian businessmen, PhDs from India or Taiwan, or even nurses from the Philippines or electricians from Jamaica.

However, while the immigrants coming in at the bottom of the economy are no longer as dominant in the immigration flow as in the past, the proportion that do start there is still high, and their absolute numbers are huge. Following Alejandro Portes and Rubén Rumbaut (1996), I refer to these immigrants as labor migrants, as opposed to professional or entrepreneurial migrants. By far the largest single group of contemporary immigrants, in terms of national origin, are from Mexico, and the great majority of Mexican immigrants move into low-wage jobs. The question explored here, then, is whether the Mexican immigrants of today and their American-born children are following the paths of the Italians and Poles of a century ago, or whether too much in American economic life has changed, changed in ways that make the climb more treacherous.

A pessimistic answer is articulated in the influential segmented assimilation theory that deals especially with the second generation (Portes and Zhou 1993). Alejandro Portes and his colleagues have warned that the children of today's low-skill immigrants may not be able to advance in the way that was possible during the 1910 to 1960 period, for several reasons. First, the nature of the economy has changed, especially in the decline of manufacturing jobs. Today far fewer American jobs require minimal education but still offer advancement over the unskilled work of immigrant arrivals. Second, an extended education, necessary for today's better jobs, is out of the reach of immigrant families that enter at the bottom. Third, labor migrants of today and their children are nonwhite, and American society is a long way from ignoring race. Finally, an alienated, inner-city, nonwhite youth culture will appeal to these new lower-class second-generation youth who encounter blocked mobility and reinforce the problem (Portes and Zhou 1993; Portes and Rumbaut 1996, 2001b; Gans 1992). Indeed, part of the power of the segmented assimilation theory is that it not only asks whether the labor migrants of today will be like their European predecessors, but also suggests that perhaps the descendants of today's labor migrants may come to resemble instead today's inner-city black poor. Put differently, the theory implicitly asks which historical analogy is appropriate for today: the upward mobility of European labor-migrant groups or (notwithstanding vast differences in their social history) the blocked progress of African Americans.

I and my colleague Roger Waldinger have questioned the segmented assimilation hypothesis. We noted, first, that low-skill work is not as scarce as claimed; second, that educational attainment may be adequate for notable upward mobility; third, that race divisions are famously social constructions and were constructed to work against the immigrants of the 1890 to 1914 period; and, fourth, that concerns about youth culture are not new to today's inner-city minorities, and in any case such a cultural outcome depends on the first three concerns for its force (Perlmann and Waldinger

1996, 1997; Waldinger and Perlmann 1998).[1] I summarize these arguments not to reopen an old debate but to provide some background on the way the intellectual issues took shape, certainly for me and I believe for many other social scientists as well (Alba and Nee 2003). The theory helped focus attention on the past-present comparisons in a certain way. Indeed, one way I respond to the stimulus of this theory is to structure this book around not merely a comparison of immigrants and their children past and present, but also the comparison of the contemporary Mexican second generation and contemporary native blacks. In chapters 3 and 4, I devote the first part of the chapter to comparing the contemporary Mexican second generation with the European second generation of the past, and the second part to comparing the contemporary Mexican second generation with native blacks.

Another important stimulus to my exploration was a long review of past and present trends in immigration by Christopher Jencks in the *New York Review of Books.* Especially intriguing was the way Jencks drew on work by economist George Borjas to offer a clear measure by which to compare SCE immigrant well-being in 1910 and Mexican immigrant well-being today, and to conclude that the Mexican situation today is much the worse. I argue in chapter 2 that this comparison was based on data which, although tested as fully as possible at the time, must be sharply revised in the light of subsequent work by economic historians. Nevertheless, both the issues that Jencks and Borjas raised and the methods they used have strongly influenced this book.

The book takes up four themes, in successive chapters. The first concerns population history. At first, I specify which national-origin groups can most sensibly be compared to Mexicans today. However, as soon as I tried to determine not only which national-origin groups to include but also from what years, I realized that some questions have received remarkably little attention, given a century of historical study of modern immigration. Just when did most SCE second-generation members emerge on the scene? And, in any case, just who do we mean to include when we conceptualize the second generation? For example, I explore how the particular history of the SCE immigration—in particular its short span and rapid end through restriction—shaped factors such as the pool of potential spouses for immigrants. And as a consequence of the choice of spouses, surprisingly large (and rapidly shifting) proportions of second-generation members had one parent who had been born in the United States or had arrived as a young child. The chapter also takes up the same themes for the Mexican immigration; but almost everything about the Mexican immigration's very long span makes the timing and composition of the contemporary second generation very different from those of the older SCE immigration. These themes are important in themselves and I think they will be new to readers. Furthermore, these explorations turn out to be essential for specifying groups

of immigrants and their children that can be meaningfully compared across many decades.

Chapter 2 explores the economic level of the labor-migrant immigrants, then and now. My work draws from the toolbox and the research of economists and economic historians; but I offer reasons early on why those who are not economists should pay attention. Claudia Goldin, Robert Margo, and Lawrence Katz have offered a new historical narrative concerning great swings in American wage inequality over the course of the twentieth century; and this narrative suggests ways to rework the historical comparisons of immigrant well-being. I conclude that the immigrant situation in 1910 was far less advantaged compared to today's than Jencks believed. But placing immigrant well-being, both then and now, within the context of the swings in inequality makes it clear that any single-year comparisons of past and present will be of limited value; the context was changing rapidly within the course of one adult's work life, both then and now. And these shifting realities are now working against the Mexicans.

The third chapter examines the schooling of the American-born generations. I try to offer meaningful comparisons of second-generation educational attainments across a century in which the length of a typical education was greatly extended. Whatever the educational lags of the European immigrants of the past, and of their children, today's Mexican second generation appears to be lagging somewhat further behind native whites than did the relevant immigrants of the past. Quite apart from such comparisons, I also stress the alarming high school dropout rates among the Mexican second generation today. The segmented assimilation hypothesis suggests that such a school pattern would emerge as part of a wider dysfunctional youth subculture of the inner city minorities; in the second half of the chapter I therefore set the high Mexican-second-generation dropout pattern in the context of the prevalence of other risk factors among Mexicans and native blacks–for example, factors related to family and work patterns.

Chapter 4 turns to second-generation economic well-being. Given less-complete educational catch-up than past second-generation members, the Mexican second generation today also experiences less-complete economic catch-up. But there is more involved because American wage inequality is considerably greater today and puts a higher premium on education. In this context, I emphasize particularly the policy implication of the Mexican secondary school dropout rates. Finally, some of the relative wage gap between Mexicans and native whites today is not explained by schooling differences. Once more, the comparisons with blacks today is important. I stress the need to compare not only the full-time workers, male and female, in both groups but also all families in each group before reaching conclusions.

By far the best source of information on these issues remains the decennial census of the United States. The Census Bureau has released giant

public use samples—samples that include between 1 percent and 6 percent of the American population—from the decennial enumerations of 1960 through 2000, and teams of historical researchers have constructed comparable samples from the manuscript schedules of the earlier enumerations. Also, during the past decade, the Minnesota Population Center at the University of Minnesota developed the IPUMS datasets, the integrated public use microdata samples, which have made the census samples far easier to use than they originally were, saving countless hours of research time and effort (Ruggles et al. 2005).[2] Far from having been exhausted, then, historical records a century old have quite recently emerged in new forms that permits entirely different modes of analysis than were possible even a decade ago. For our purposes, the old censuses of 1910, 1920, and 1940 through 1970 will be especially valuable for information about immigrants of 1890 through 1914 and about their children (the dataset for 1930 is still being constructed).[3]

Census 2000 is the most valuable for information about the contemporary immigration and about today's second-generation young adults. However, the older censuses, whatever their limitations, have one great advantage over recent censuses for the study of immigration: the earlier censuses all asked respondents for their parents' birthplaces. The censuses of 1980 through 2000 dropped the relevant questions. Why this change from the old format was introduced is a long and sad story; the result, however, is clear: at a time when American second generations are numbering in the tens of millions, and when their social characteristics are a matter of lively and well-deserved interest, we have lost the ability to identify them in an irreplaceable source.[4]

Fortunately, there are two ways to work around this great gap in the evidence. The familiar solution is to turn to another federal sample of the population, the Current Population Survey (CPS). Every person sampled in the CPS is now asked for parental birthplace information.[5] By exploiting the CPS, researchers are able to obtain tens of thousands of sampled households every year and by stringing several years' datasets together, the sample grows in size. For this study, I have exploited the CPS datasets from 1998 to 2001.[6] Nevertheless, while the CPS is huge by standards of a private survey, it is tiny by comparison to the public-use samples that the Census Bureau draws from the decennial census.[7]

I first explored the contemporary issues with the CPS datasets; but in the end I reanalyzed all of it using Census 2000. For the work in chapters 3 and 4, I identified a proxy group very much like the "true" second generation. This proxy group was born in Mexico, but was brought to the United States at a very early age—before their third birthday.[8] I call attention to this proxy measure at the outset because I think it can be useful to others who study contemporary ethnicity. For this study, it provided a way to mine the gigantic but otherwise inaccessible resources of the 2000 census.