

Chapter 1

Introduction

THE FACES of new arrivals to our shores, ports, and cities reinforce the self-image of the United States as a country of immigration. At the same time, this newest wave of immigrants brings challenges and opportunities. In the eyes of some observers, it challenges key values of American society. For others, it reinforces those values. For some, it strengthens the economy; for others, it limits the economic opportunities of residents and raises the prospect of a mass of unskilled newcomers on the bottom rungs of society. Unquestionably, recent years have witnessed one of the largest flows of immigrants in U.S. history. Such a volume raises questions about the absorptive capacity of American society.

Immigration is contentious territory. In large part this is precisely because immigration brings new faces and new voices to the destination country. Historically, immigration flows to the United States have been from diverse origins. The recent period is no exception. Typically, immigrants have been less skilled than their American resident counterparts, though the universality of this generalization holds better in mythology than it does in fact. All told, the cultural distance, the demographic distinction, and the vagaries of economic absorption raise questions about how well immigrants and their children do in their new environment. This book examines that issue. Our objective is to look at the assimilation of immigrants in school, the workforce, and in residential communities. Where possible, we take an explicitly longitudinal view. This is of course not the only way to look at contemporary immigration, but it is a crucial vantage point from which to see how well the first and second generation are faring and what the future may hold.

Immigration is also controversial political territory because it is one of the few aspects of national population change that is seen as totally appropriate for the government to regulate. Nation-states may decide who may legitimately enter. Even the phrase *control of our borders*, so often invoked in U.S. political rhetoric, is built on this assumption. Note also the asymmetry in this population regulation. Although the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights (Article 13) asserts the right of freedom of movement within a state and includes a right of departure, there is no corresponding right of arrival and settlement into other sovereign nations. There are certainly examples of governments trying to influence natural increase; these are mostly indirect and limited in scope. Indeed, direct intervention to increase birth rates (such as in some European countries now) has met with at best modest success, and direct intervention to decrease birth rates (such as China's one-child policy) is met with deep concern about draconian policies used to achieve targets. Throughout, states are seen as totally within bounds to limit immigrants and return undocumented migrants to their origins. Hence, regulating the flow and composition of immigrants is totally up for grabs in the policy arena. In the U.S. context, everything from the national identity to the economic prospects for the nation in the twenty-first century global economy is fodder in the debate about how many get in and who they are.

Our efforts in the following chapters are designed to speak to this widening debate about U.S. immigration. Among recent academic writers, Samuel Huntington has engaged the debate most vividly with his publication of *Who Are We?* He argues precisely that immigration challenges American identity, even referring to a contemporary crisis of national identity, a crisis linked in large part to the arrival of new faces from distinct and nontraditional origins. This, in Huntington's view, is not an entirely new phenomenon, and even the assimilation process itself is implicated: "The ethnic component of American identity gradually weakened as a result of the assimilation of the Irish and the Germans who came in the mid-nineteenth century and the southern and eastern Europeans who came between 1800 and 1914" (2004, 17).

Huntington goes on to weave his argument, examining both historical patterns and contemporary trends. He is careful not to privilege Anglo-Saxon persons, but clearly worries about the loss of Anglo-Saxon values in American society. In his chapter on assimilation, Huntington tendentiously questions whether assimilation is still a success: "The great American success story may face an uncertain future" (2004, 184). Our aim here is not to set up Huntington as a straw figure, and several of his points about the changing immigration landscape are well taken, but rather we see him as an academic representative of a line of thought questioning features of the current U.S. immigrant stream. This line of thinking—questioning the size,

pace, and composition of immigration to the United States—has many adherents.

The economist George Borjas has contributed extensively to the literature on the adjustment of immigrants in the United States. It was his early work that challenged the notion of immigrant super-achievement in the post-1965 period. The outset of Borjas' book-length treatment of the immigrant experience, *Heaven's Door*, raises the same basic question about immigrant assimilability: "And there's the traditional concern over assimilation: Will today's immigrants find it harder to assimilate than earlier waves? . . . Will the presence of hard-to-assimilate immigrants further balkanize the country, leading to undesirable social, economic, and political consequences in the next century?" (1999, 4).

Borjas takes up a number of economic issues regarding the arrival and absorption of immigrants. Some focus on the labor market impact of immigrants on those already here; others view the relative success or failure of immigrants in the U.S. economy. In his treatment, Borjas raises concerns about the declining skill levels of recent immigrants and offers a very dour assessment of their prospects: "There is little hope that they will reach economic parity with native workers during their lifetimes" (1999, 38). Borjas is quite concerned with policy, as are we. His analysis leads him to recommend that the stream of immigrants should be smaller and more skilled. We will take up some of the same policy questions, though our overlap with Borjas will be more focused on the aspect of the adjustment of immigrants themselves.

The prominence and centrality of the immigration issue has attracted the attention of the U.S. National Academy of Sciences (NAS) on multiple occasions. In 1997, it published a synthesis of research on immigration that gave a generally favorable review of immigration but concentrated on the economic impacts: overall economic growth and native workers (Smith and Edmonston 1997). This is unquestionably a key window on the effect of immigration. The volume, however, was relatively silent about the progress of the foreign born specifically, and on the assimilation process generally. It is our view that immigrant assimilation is very much a part of the debate about immigration, sometimes at the surface and sometimes beneath it. Indeed, Huntington and Borjas raised questions on both economic and cultural grounds about whether new immigrants will adapt and play the same role as their counterparts of a century ago.

The arrival in the contemporary period of so many immigrants from a single country (Mexico) or world region (Latin America) speaking the same non-English language has exacerbated the concern about assimilability. Whereas in the past the cacophony of foreign languages hastened the adoption of the core tongue, there is—so the speculation goes—less prospect for quick linguistic assimilation now. This critical mass of those speaking another

language, compounded further by the illegal arrival of many across the southern land border, has shed particularly strong light on Latino migration.¹ This too has attracted the attention of the NAS, which formed a Panel on Hispanics in the United States. After acknowledging the size, growth, and diversity of the Hispanic population of the United States, the NAS panel's volume *Multiple Origins, Uncertain Destinies* examines several aspects of the accommodation and position of this major ethnic group (Tienda and Mitchell 2006).

Trends in wages, household income, wealth, and home ownership across time and generations point to the gradual ascension of many U.S.-born Hispanics to the middle class. But, as a group, Hispanics are losing economic ground relative to whites because of the weak economic position of the many low-skilled immigrants, large numbers of whom are undocumented, which lowers the population averages on numerous socioeconomic measures. Several important features distinguish the Hispanic experience from those of other ethnic and minority groups. Understanding these differences is essential to appreciating the opportunities that the growing numbers of Hispanics represent for their communities and for the nation, as well as for alerting policymakers of potential risks to the nation's economic and political life (Tienda and Mitchell 2006, 5).

In measured prose, the Panel on Hispanics identifies similarities and differences of the Hispanic experience to that of earlier ethnic and immigrant groups. One can also detect in that report the challenge inherent in separating ethnicity and immigration, given that immigration so often generates or reinforces ethnic diversification. In this volume we examine, when possible, both ethnicity and generation, assessing the degree to which the progress of immigrants and their descendants is separable from their racial and ethnic category.

The Panel on Hispanics authors came to doubt the movement of the United States toward becoming a two-language nation as generations of Hispanics adopt English. More somberly, however, the authors point out that the U.S. economy has changed and may not provide the upward economic escalator that assisted previous waves of immigrants and their descendants. They also call attention to the educational differentials—high-school dropout rates and lagging postsecondary attendance—that characterize the current Latino population. Educational attainment is prominent in the NAS discussion and we shed light on the school as a locus of achievement for immigrants and ethnic groups.

These two NAS panels have generally seen immigration in a more positive light than some of the critical or worrisome views cited. Other scholarship is also more optimistic about assimilation. Richard Alba and Victor Nee, in their discussion *Remaking the Mainstream* (2003), see positive trajectories for immigrants, on balance. Philip Kasinitz, John Mollenkopf, and Mary Waters, in focusing specifically on the experience of New York, paint a portrait

of a highly variegated second-generation experience, but one that ultimately seems to accord with successful adaptation: “By and large, these young people are joining—while also profoundly reshaping—the economic, cultural, and social mainstream” (2004, 396).

The interplay between assimilation and policy is dynamic and feeds a policy circuit. If immigrants are perceived to fail in social or economic life, or cause excessive stress to the receiving society, the cry is one of restriction. If immigrants succeed, however we think of success, then there is call for maintaining the current flow, a call for tolerance and acceptance. Our approach, which we describe in more detail later, is to focus on differentiating starting point and trajectory where possible. Thus, we look at how achievement unfolds within the lives of individuals and across generations. We also give particular attention to timing of arrival, noting the case of the 1.5 generation—those who are in the first generation but arrived in time to receive almost all their schooling in the United States.² We can exploit this level of resolution in our analysis of schooling and the labor force. We also look at residential patterns, because the intermingling of neighbors—immigrants, ethnics—provides a crucial window on the fabric of American society. It is our view that by better understanding how well immigrants do, and how they compare to members of their own age cohorts, we can better develop policy for addressing immigration.

THE PLAN OF THIS BOOK

In this first chapter, we attempted to introduce broad issues that frame the immigration debate. In chapter 2, we look more carefully at the flow of immigration, to better understand its historical scale and the change in its composition over time. We take a demographic view of the relative size of contemporary U.S. immigration compared to other periods and other countries now receiving substantial numbers of immigrants. We also look at the changing composition of immigrants over time.

Chapter 3 looks at theory surrounding assimilation. The new great wave of immigration has ushered in a corresponding backwash of theoretical discussions about assimilation. These theories become the frameworks on which the empirical results of the scholarly community hang. The concepts and paradigms of assimilation influence our interpretation of results. In particular, recent thinking among social scientists has come to challenge the orthodox notion of gradual but inexorable assimilation. The conventional long-standing presumption of upward socioeconomic mobility has been replaced, in the eyes of some, by a world of alternative paths—some more successful, some less.

Chapter 4 turns to policy. Given that immigration is one area in which

government can intervene to dramatically change future population size and composition, we review some of the key changes in U.S. immigration policy with concentration on the period since legislation in 1965 removed national origin quotas. Policymaking, of course, has been extensive in this area over the history—even just recent history—of the nation. We try to provide the reader some of the key policy events of the last century, with particular attention to those that bear on assimilation. We also distinguish immigration policy (rules about how many get in and who they are) from immigrant policy (rules and provisions for the foreign born residing in the United States). These policy shifts not only determined the demographic structure of immigration itself, they also placed in relief the historical policy and social context for earlier immigration and attendant views of assimilation. This context in turn provides the backlighting for present discussions of immigrant assimilation.

Chapter 5 begins the presentation of our empirical results. We first examine schooling, for schools are the crucible of socioeconomic achievement. We analyze, in turn, national cross-sectional data from the U.S. Current Population Survey and two longitudinal surveys spaced about a decade apart, High School and Beyond (HSB) and the National Educational Longitudinal Study (NELS). The two surveys have the virtue of following nationally representative cohorts of individuals through high school and into young adulthood. These longitudinal data also have the advantage of containing relatively rich information about family background and performance within school. Our approach incorporates the emphasis on distinguishing starting point and trajectory, as we discuss in chapters 3 and 4. Our results indicate that generation status (birth outside the United States or membership in the second generation) is not an obstacle in and of itself to advancing in the U.S. educational system.

In chapter 6 we examine economic progress data for age and entry cohorts of immigrants, comparing them to U.S.-born age cohorts, again drawing on the Current Population Survey. Then we turn to analyzing the same longitudinal data sources as in chapter 5, examining economic outcomes beyond school. Here, too, we can take advantage of the longitudinal nature of the data and include earlier schooling information in our analysis of labor market performance. Again, we find that immigrants, and often the second generation, do no worse than others, once we adjust for their socioeconomic origins. We also find that overall, the second generation looks much more like the third and subsequent generations in occupation and economic status than the first generation.

Chapter 7 turns to a different playing field—the neighborhood—and examines patterns of residential segregation for immigrants and ethnic groups. We rely on decennial census data from 2000 to gain insights into the degree to which residential intermingling (or segregation) is linked to length of

U.S. residence or to national origin. Residential or spatial patterns are seen as part of the assimilation process in contemporary scholarly writing (see Massey 2008). Much interest has arisen in new destinations, that is, the overall spread of immigrants across the United States. We extend this spatial analysis to looking within metropolitan regions and ask about proximity of urban neighbors. Based on our empirical results and a wider body of literature, we argue that time, both within and across generations, is clearly associated with residential mixing, but that national origin (thus, ethnic) differences continue to show through. These results for residential patterns provide a valuable counterpoint to the inferences made solely from socioeconomic data. The degree to which immigrants (and their ethnic descendants) are intermingled with persons of other generations, ethnic groups of different immigrant vintages,³ and other Americans provides an alternative assessment of assimilation.

In chapter 8, which concludes this volume, we return to the themes that motivate us here at the outset. We look back on our empirical results and review additional research to discuss how well immigrants do. Our goal is to shed light for both social science knowledge and policy practice on the consequences of the arrival of these new faces.