

Edward E. Telles and Vilma Ortiz

critique of existing theoretical approaches—despite the fact that in my opinion it does not go far enough—opens up the possibility of starting a more adequate elaboration of how race and class structure paths of incorporation. In fact, Telles and Ortiz allow us to reencounter the path of social analysis and critique that Du Bois started and that American social sciences have abandoned for too long.

Corresponding author: Professor José Itzigsohn, Department of Sociology, Brown University, Providence, RI 02912. E-mail: jose_itzigsohn@brown.edu.

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Racialization and Mexican American Incorporation: A Reply to Lawrence Bobo and José Itzigsohn

Edward E. Telles

Department of Sociology, Princeton University

Vilma Ortiz

Department of Sociology, University of California, Los Angeles

We thank Lawrence Bobo and José Itzigsohn for their thoughtful reviews of *Generations of Exclusion* and the *Du Bois Review* for providing space for an important debate about race and immigrant incorporation. *Generations of Exclusion* examines how Mexicans have been integrated into the United States in four to five generations over the course of the twentieth century. We show—through careful empirical research—that after more than four generations, Mexican Americans have moved mostly into the working class and lower middle class and much less into the solid middle class. More problematically, a disproportionate number are in poverty or near poverty. The educational attainment of fourth- and fifth-generation Mexican Americans remains well below that of European Americans. In roughly the same amount of time and by the third generation, the bulk of European Americans became middle class. The experiences of European Americans have provided the basis for assimilation theory, the dominant paradigm in the field of immigrant incorporation (Alba and Nee, 2003).

We are gratified that these scholars find our research exemplary and our findings convincing. Bobo comments that our book “sets a very high and exacting bar for scholarship” and Itzigsohn claims that this “is empirical research at its best.” Both seem to agree that our evidence presents a major challenge to assimilation theory and that this will move the field forward. Itzigsohn claims that our book “breaks the theoretical logjam in which the study of immigrant incorporation currently finds itself.” Despite their high praise for our study and their general agreement with our interpretation, their primary criticism is that we did not go far enough in challenging the assimilation paradigm. Bobo claims “Telles and Ortiz probably could have pursued an even more pointed critique—arguably even a complete dismissal—of assimilation theory than the one they embrace here.”

Our study sought to conduct the most extensive empirical analysis of Mexican Americans to date. We strategically examined whether Mexican Americans assimilate on a wide range of outcomes—including education, socioeconomic status, language, identity, cultural practices, residence, and politics—by the fourth generation, as hypothesized by assimilation scholars (Bean and Stevens, 2003; Perlman 2005). Unlike other empirical studies of immigrant incorporation, we examine changes over four generations, we study respondents who are fully adults in their thirties and forties, we pay particular attention to variation among the group, we examine actual intergenerational change from a 1960s sample to their adult children in recent years, and we carefully weight to account for survey losses in the intervening thirty-five years.

Besides finding that assimilation does not hold for several generations of Mexican Americans, we also concluded that racialized barriers impede Mexican Americans from fully assimilating, based on evidence such as persistent socioeconomic disadvantages and high reports of stereotyping and discrimination across all four generations. Admittedly, we stopped short of a full-blown critique, as Bobo and Itzigsohn would have preferred. A stronger critique of assimilation theory and deeper analysis of the role that racism and other barriers play in shaping socioeconomic outcomes might have distracted skeptical readers from our robust empirical findings about the lack of Mexican American assimilation.

A related critique voiced by Itzigsohn, citing the experiences of a young W. E. B. Du Bois, is his skepticism that “society is not enlightened by reasoned arguments rooted in carefully assembled evidence.” However, Itzigsohn seems of two minds when he then notes “Often, the presentation of careful research data can make a difference if there are social actors that can use it to advocate for social change.” We agree with this latter point, and so far, that seems to be the case. We provided persuasive evidence, which activists can use to advocate for social change. We are gratified to know that our research has not been confined to libraries but it has been read by and presented to policymakers, educational scholars, practitioners, activists, and various stakeholders concerned about the low status of the Mexican-origin and other Latino populations.

Bobo calls attention to our bias toward structural explanations in interpreting the findings of our study, and away from cultural and social-psychological processes that affect group status. As he notes, this is a critique of the field more generally. We accept Bobo’s point that we lean toward structural explanations although we note that we considered the role of attitudes, such as the nativist and racist feelings directed at Mexican immigrants, which redound to U.S.-born Mexican Americans.

Ultimately, our evidence supports the notion that racialization plays a role in the lives of Mexican Americans. We conclude that a range of institutional and interpersonal discrimination and racial practices—including disparate school quality, differential teacher expectations, stereotyping of Mexican students, and the threat of these

stereotypes to their self-concept and school success—limit the educational attainment of Mexican Americans. Nevertheless, Bobo's and Itzigsohn's points are well taken and can move the field of immigrant incorporation forward to more fully integrate the role of social barriers such as race.

THE BROADER DEBATE ON IMMIGRANT INCORPORATION

A generation of scholars since the 1970s, especially those in history and ethnic studies, has examined the role of race in immigrant integration into U.S. society. In contrast, mainstream sociologists continue to be guided mostly by assimilation theory, simultaneously denying or downplaying the role of race and failing to seriously address how race affects immigrant incorporation. More than a decade ago, Sanchez (1999) denounced this incessant focus on assimilation as creating an analytical paralysis. Recently, Jung (2009) criticized the assumptions of assimilation theory for their deceptive and flawed treatments of race.

The central role of assimilation theory in the immigrant incorporation field is revealed in a recent debate by leading sociologists in the pages of *Social Forces* (Alba et al., 2011; Haller et al., 2011), which we use to illustrate the current status and shortcomings of the assimilation paradigm, beyond those identified by Sanchez (1999) and Jung (2009). This particular debate showed a recent shift toward emphasizing structural incorporation, namely in education and economic status; arenas where race matters greatly. A consensus emerged on many points, because both sets of authors carefully considered empirical evidence like ours and acknowledged that the patterns of outcomes are more nuanced than previously theorized. However, they clearly diverged on their level of optimism. We mostly agree with Portes and his collaborators (Haller et al., 2011) about the inadequacy of assimilation theory for explaining the fate of these immigrants and their emphasis on barriers. Our main disagreements are with Alba, Kasinitz, and Waters.

While Alba et al. (2011) acknowledge barriers to assimilation, they downplay their insidiousness. We find this optimism deeply problematic in that they underestimate the seriousness of the problem and the need for intervention. Assimilation scholars continue to present an optimistic portrait based on evidence that some Mexican Americans are middle class and that the second generation fares better than the first generation. In addition, they suggest that groups such as Mexican Americans should not necessarily be judged by the high attainments of European Americans.

Our evidence does not square well with their optimism. We show that in the second, third, and fourth generation, most Mexican Americans are less educated and less middle class than the comparable White population. Relatively high rates of intermarriage and moderate levels of residential segregation have also been used to suggest there is much assimilation for Mexican Americans. But to the extent that intermarriage occurs, it is mostly among those with more education. Residential integration is less than it is for African Americans, yet Mexican Americans are just as likely to live in Latino communities today as they did in the 1960s. These findings suggest that racial barriers between Mexican Americans and Whites may not be as great those between African Americans and Whites, but they do not indicate the absence of racial barriers. For most Mexican Americans, particularly those who do not intermarry, their mobility falls well short of the average White person, even after several generations.

Most studies of European ethnic groups consider assimilation accomplished when the group, on average, is similar to the majority population as in Alba and Nee's (2003) extensive discussion of European Americans. However, assimilation theorists

are inconsistent regarding how assimilation is evaluated when examining other racial-ethnic groups. Should the group reach the overall accomplishments of the reference group or is it sufficient that some members of the group reach the middle class? For example, Alba and Nee (2003) argue that some Mexican Americans are assimilated based on the fact that part of the group has become middle class and that the marital and residential separation is not as sharp as it is for African Americans.

In support of an optimistic portrayal, Kasinitz and his colleagues (2008) emphasize that the second generation does better than their immigrant parents. This is not surprising given that the parents in the groups they studied have low levels of education by U.S. standards. We also find a second-generation advantage for Mexican Americans and agree that this is progress. However we further show that later generations have educational and economic outcomes similar to those of the second generation and are disadvantaged relative to native-born Whites. So the main problem is that their progress stops well short of full assimilation.

Moreover, to further this optimistic portrayal, Kasinitz et al. (2008) use “natives of the same-race” as the reference goalposts for assimilation, effectively racializing the end points (p. 16). This allows them to draw the optimistic conclusions that Dominicans are doing as well as Puerto Ricans and West Indians as well as African Americans. They inadequately problematize why Dominicans and West Indians, and especially Puerto Rican and African Americans, face difficulties. We find this a dangerous precedent.

Interestingly, Itzigsohn (2009) makes a similar comparison for second-generation Dominicans to the more established and racialized Puerto Rican population but he problematizes his findings by being critical of the racial order. He argues that the incorporation of second-generation minorities puts them in the lower rungs of the U.S. stratification system, along with Puerto Ricans and African Americans. For him, that Dominicans are treated as Puerto Ricans is not progress but a process of racialization, resulting in what he calls stratified ethno-racial incorporation. In *Generations of Exclusion*, we also find that the second generation matches, if not surpasses, the status of third and fourth generation Mexican Americans, but the fact that all generational groups remain well short of parity with Whites suggests that they assimilate into the lower rungs of a racialized order.

Finally, Alba et al. (2011) criticize us for presenting research findings that right-wing extremists opposed to immigration have used to promote their cause. Haller et al. (2011) respond that this criticism implies that “social scientists should suppress problematic findings, lest they fall into the wrong hands” (p. 780). We agree and we add that no matter how we present our findings, we would have been unable to overcome commonsense notions among large segments of society that the lack of assimilation simply reflects deficiencies among the “unassimilable.” Social structural barriers, like race and other negative contexts of reception, are absent from the analysis of right-wing extremists and other segments of society. It is incumbent upon us to present our findings in an honest manner and with interpretations that fit the evidence. And we are not responsible when our findings are interpreted within a folk ideology of assimilation that blames individuals for not overcoming structural limitations.

Alba and Nee (2003) are careful to distance assimilation theory in sociology from assimilation ideology in society. They are well justified in doing so, and others have largely followed suit. However, we suspect that the resonance of assimilation theory is buttressed by commonsense beliefs, so that challenging assimilation theory might also be read as challenging a hegemonic assimilation ideology. Certainly, ideologies emerge for many reasons which academics do not control and which empirical

research cannot influence, but a social-science theory that overlaps with a mythical folk ideology cannot be easily disentangled from that ideology.

CONCLUSIONS

We believe that immigrant incorporation scholars need to refocus and more seriously examine barriers, such as race, to full citizenship at the structural and political levels. The problem of emphasizing race and other barriers in assimilation theory is starkly revealed in that assimilation scholars no longer try to account for and are completely incapable of explaining the African American case. We cannot settle for a theory whose explanation of the largest and longest immigration in the United States is inadequate to the realities of that immigration. Given the size and historical role of the Mexican-origin population, its fate is largely the story of U.S. immigration more generally. As Bobo and Itzigsohn note, future generations of Mexican Americans may fare even worse, given the large number of undocumented Mexican immigrants today and the pervasive inequality that they encounter.

While it is commendable that the field of immigrant incorporation continues to develop, we feel as Bobo and Itzigsohn do that we need to move beyond assimilation theory. Through careful empirical research, we have demonstrated the limited utility of that paradigm and indicated that racialization affects the lives of all generations of Mexican Americans. We believe that as a result, we are now in a better position to move beyond assimilation. We are very satisfied that we have changed the direction of a debate that will surely continue for many years. We appreciate the opportunity to further engage this debate in this forum provided by the *Du Bois Review*.

Corresponding author: Edward Telles, Department of Sociology, 151 Wallace Hall, Princeton University, Princeton, NJ 08544. E-mail: etelles@princeton.edu

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