RACIALIZATION, ASSIMILATION, AND THE MEXICAN AMERICAN EXPERIENCE

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Racialization in Ascendance

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Generations of Exclusion: Mexican Americans, *Assimilation*, *and Race* is a powerful and important sociological analysis of the changing status of Mexican Americans. Edward E. Telles and Vilma Ortiz have produced a piece of scholarship worthy of wide readership and heartfelt praise. They have set a very high and exacting bar for scholarship not merely for research on the Mexican American experience, but for the fields of immigration studies and race and ethnic relations more broadly.

First and foremost, the work deserves praise as an example of scholars seizing upon and bringing to fruition an unexpected research opportunity. With the earthquake remodeling of Powell Library on the UCLA campus in 1993, the original set of interviews from Leo Grebler, Joan Moore, and Ralph Guzman's (1970) pioneering *The Mexican American People: The Nation's Second Largest Minority Group* was discovered. Ortiz and Telles saw the potential in this "find" to take-up a remarkable investigation of social change in the conditions and status of Mexican Americans. They set out to re-interview all of those respondents from the original Los Angeles County and San Antonio samples who were under the age of fifty at the time of the original 1965 interviews and to develop a new sample of their children. This ambition would provide them not only with unique panel data from the first major social-scientific survey of Mexican Americans, it would also allow them unusual leverage on possible change over time.

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In the end, Telles and Ortiz raised the funds, mobilized the graduate students, and meticulously worked to obtain interviews with nearly 60% of their original target sample, yielding 684 interviews. In addition, they conducted interviews with 758 of the children of respondents to the original survey. They can examine, as a result, not only change over the life course but, critically, can specify far more directly matters of within-family social mobility than virtually any other study of changing minority group status in the United States.

Telles and Ortiz are careful in all key phases of the project. From the design of the questionnaire through each segment of the analysis, one observes attention to detail. Thus, for example, they systematically review the process of locating respondents more than thirty years after the original study (which had not included any of the information one might have obtained if later interviews had been planned all along). This resulted in a specific weighting strategy given that factors such as home ownership and marital status influenced whom they were able to locate. The questionnaire itself covered a rich terrain measuring not just education levels, occupations, and earnings, but also English and Spanish language usage, ethnic and racial identity, political outlooks, religion, stereotypes, perceived discrimination, and views on intermarriage. In addition, and of great substantive importance, they specify in Chapter 3 (especially Fig. 3.3 and Table 3.10) exactly how their data provides analytical leverage lacking in most studies of immigrant populations and processes of social incorporation. In particular, Telles and Ortiz have unique power to test assimilation theory claims about change across generations.

Second, *Generations of Exclusion* deserves high praise for its effective wedding of theory-driven research with a major contemporary social-problem focus. Latinos as a broad social category now constitute the nation's largest minority group. Mexican Americans are the largest national origin group among Latinos, by themselves constituting the nation's second largest minority behind African Americans. In the context of intensifying nativism and the potential for another major round of immigration legislation reform, it is vitally important that sociologists provide solid evidence on the conditions, experiences, and processes underlying the status of major social groups.

Telles and Ortiz provide a rich historical chapter on the Mexican American experience. This chapter traces out in detail developments that make the Mexican American experience unique. In particular, the lengthy and often porous border, the longstanding desire for a cheap labor pool, changing national immigration policy models, and state and local variation in the erection of discriminatory barriers against those of Mexican origin all play a part in establishing a unique set of experiences and conditions. Critical among these factors, they conclude, are the overall size of the Mexican origin population, the steady demand for labor, the continuous replenishment of the population of new immigrants, and restrictive immigration policy regimes.

But *Generations of Exclusion* is never just a dry exercise in historical exegesis or empirical description. Telles and Ortiz set their research in the context of a longstanding tension between two different models or ideal types for understanding race and ethnic relations: the assimilation model and the racialization model. The former model, of course, is largely based upon the experiences of the Southern, Central, and Eastern European immigrants who came to the United States at the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth century. The latter model is largely based on assessments of the African American experience. Throughout the book, they are careful to consider the evolution of assimilation theory and racialization theory. They are equally careful in analyzing their data to show when and how their results support or undermine the claims of these models.

Third, Telles and Ortiz give us a complex and nuanced sociological portrait of the Mexican American population. Where relevant, they provide national comparisons, as well as data on the Latino population, the White population, and the African American population. They never settle for simple analyses or sleights of hand that play into favored interpretations. They take the data as they are. This is important to know since the work provides one of the most potent challenges to assimilation theory, whether the classical (Park 1926; Gordon 1964) or the neoclassical varieties (Portes and Rumbaut, 2001 or Alba and Nee, 2003). Early on Telles and Ortiz foreshadow that their results will show that in some key features the Mexican American experience departs strongly from straightforward expectations of assimilation models.

Indeed, their most provocative finding is that the educational attainments of Mexican Americans stagnate rather than progress as one moves across generations. This is an outcome with wide ramifying effects as education, in turn, influences economic attainments, relations with White Americans and other groups, and plays a part in matters of language retention, ethnic identity, and politics.

What exactly do they find? Telles and Ortiz (2008) write:

> There is a progressive decline in years of education for each subsequent generation-since-immigration in the multivariate analysis. Immigrant children who came to the United States at a young age with their parents, the so-called 1.5 generation, have the highest levels of schooling, once all the other variables are controlled. They have about a half-year greater schooling than the second generation, who have a half-year greater schooling than the 2.5 generation, who in turn have a half-year more schooling than the third generation. The third and fourth generations have the least schooling and there is no difference between them (p. 130).

They go on to conclude that: "our results show that educational attainment worsens in each subsequent generation until at least the third generation-since-immigration, clearly suggesting a linear and downward pattern of assimilation!" (pp. 130–131).

This pattern of educational outcomes does not bode well for assimilation theory. As they write:

> . . . with assimilation theory two conditions must be met: those with higher status inherit higher status from the previous generation and status is increased with successive generations-since-immigration. For the Mexican case, the first condition is met but not the second. Status attainment is important, but when it comes to generation-since-immigration, status gains passed down from parents are stalled or even reversed by the third and subsequent generations. Our evidence thus strongly supports research claiming that racial stereotyping and discrimination have largely contributed to enduring Mexican American disadvantage (pp. 133–134).

Accordingly, when they assess in a later chapter occupational status, earnings, income, and net worth, Telles and Ortiz (2008) provide an even more stunning blow to assimilation theory. They write: "Interestingly, generation-since-immigration is not significantly related to socioeconomic status. The prediction posed by assimilation theory that socioeconomic status should increase with generational status was not supported by our regression, just as it had not been shown in the descriptive tables" (p. 153).

If I have any criticism of the book it would be threefold and each critique should be read against an overarching strongly positive assessment of *Generations of Exclusion*. First and foremost, 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. For example, the status of Mexican Americans has deteriorated to such an extent that Doug Massey (2009) has recently written that:

> U.S. policies are moving Mexican Americans steadily away from their middle position in the economic hierarchy and toward the formation of a racialized underclass. Segregation levels are rising, discrimination is increasing, poverty is deepening, educational levels are stagnating, and the social safety net has been deliberately poked full of holes to allow immigrants to fall through. Whether or not Mexicans become a new urban underclass remains to be seen; but it is already clear that after occupying a middle socioeconomic position between whites and blacks for generations, the economic fortunes of Mexicans have fallen to levels at or below those of African Americans (pp. 24–25).

In this context, trenchant critique of assimilation theory of the sort recently offered by political sociologist Moon-Kie Jung is particularly apt. The case of African Americans, as we all know, has long be-deviled assimilation theory. As Jung (2009) put it: "On the whole, assimilation theory, now ensconced in the sociology of immigration, no longer encompasses native-born Blacks within its purview. Yet, African Americans, through their absence, continue to shape and haunt assimilation theory" (p. 383). In light of the findings of Telles and Ortiz, one must wonder whether Mexican Americans will come to be another great exception haunting the analyses and predictions of assimilation theorists?

But there is another reason for mentioning Massey and Jung in relation to *Generations of Exclusion*. Ironically, Telles and Ortiz paint the optimistic results for Mexican Americans. Virtually all of their respondents are U.S. citizens. The enormous number of Mexicans and their children currently in the United States who are undocumented—in an age of increasingly restrictive immigration and citizenship policies and hostility to low-skill immigrants, Mexicans in particular—does not bode well for future trends. That is, Telles and Ortiz's results almost certainly do not represent the low point or nadir. For the near term, particularly for the now enormous number of undocumented individuals of Mexican origin and their children, the future prospects are arguably quite grim.

Second, by way of critique of the book, the authors' results, I believe, must be read as further proof that students of race and ethnicity have tilted too far in the direction of structural and institutional models and thereby underestimate or misanalyze the importance of social-psychological and cultural factors in the dynamics of inequality and group relations. This is more a criticism of the origins and some uses of racialization models, particularly of the Blaunerian internal colonial model, than of Telles and Ortiz per se. But, they too exhibit this structuralist bias. At the end of the book they stress the structural factors of population size, the physical geography of a long border, and the economic appetites of American capitalism for cheap labor as the fundamental sources of Mexican disadvantage. However, good scholars that they are, they realize structure is not the whole story. They pose the hypothetical or counter-factual question of what would have happened without continuous immigration. To my mind, the answer is telling. They write:

> . . . the absence of immigration, though it is unlikely to happen anytime soon, does not guarantee assimilation. The example of San Antonio today shows the persistence of racial boundaries despite little immigration to that city since 1929. The state of New Mexico is an even better case in that it has seen even less Mexican immigration since about the same time. There, Mexican Americans continue to be racialized, even with little immigration. An entrenched racialized way of thinking that places Mexicans in the lower rungs of society seems to be at least partly responsible for their persistently low status, though the stigmatized nature of Mexican immigration has maintained or lowered their status (Telles and Ortiz, 2008, pp. 289–290).

To wit, as I would state the more general theoretical implication of this observation, social-psychological and cultural processes are constitutive, not structurally derivative, aspects of racialized social inequality. Ideas, attitudes, beliefs, and cultural notions about Mexicans and Mexican Americans can exert important autonomous effects on group status and the trajectory of group relations. These processes remain sorely under theorized in sociological literature generally.

Third, *Generations of Exclusion* insists on remaining so "close to the data," to borrow a phrase, that at times it reads as if it embraces what Jung has called "the racial unconscious of assimilation theory." The normative presumption in favor of established White middle-class standards is not interrogated or seriously problematized, nor are the dynamics of postindustrial American capitalism and neoliberal political strategies. For example, it is taken largely as just a social fact in Telles and Ortiz's analysis that African Americans probably face the most rigid and durable exclusionary boundaries. Probing and criticism of this racist social condition is left largely implicit: it simply is. Likewise, the expanding ranks of marginalized workers and now hyper exploited undocumented noncitizens, is largely an unexamined social circumstance.

Of course, in fairness to the authors, it must be said that *Generations of Exclusion* is not primarily a policy or theoretical document. The first and primary goal of their efforts is careful analysis of important new data. However, they are not without an eye on politics and public policy and though they strive for analytical objectivity, they are not so naïve as to presume values have no influence on research. Thus, Telles and Ortiz do explicitly, and rightly so, treat the disadvantaged status of Mexican Americans and stagnation in later generations as a deeply problematic circumstance. And, based on their results, they expressly argue in favor of a Marshall Plan–like intervention in the public education system to assure that Latinos and other low-income groups received high quality and effective schooling. Yet, they stop well short of criticizing the deep cultural racism in the United States and the spread of economic hardship and marginalization under the neo-liberal state. Their own evidence, I believe, provides Telles and Ortiz a basis of not just a more searching critique of assimilation theory, but in fact could sustain a direct commentary on larger ills in American society. It is something of a disappointment that they chose not to venture even a few steps down this path.

These limitations notwithstanding, *Generations of Exclusion* is an ambitious, rigorous, and ultimately convincing piece of scholarship. It provides a compelling, indeed authoritative, assessment of processes of incorporation in the United States for those of Mexican American heritage. The end result of this powerful sociological work is a profound questioning of the assumptions of the assimilation model and identification of the serious challenges that remain ahead if deeper patterns of racialization for Mexican Americans are to be avoided. The debate over assimilation

versus racialization does not end with *Generations of Exclusion*, but the terms of this debate are greatly adjusted by Telles and Ortiz's contributions. Assimilation theory can no longer credibly be regarded as the opening ante in scholarly discourse on the Mexican American experience. No one can say with certainty where the debate will end, but for now the odds are tilted decidedly in favor of the racialization model as a result of what Telles and Ortiz have shown.

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Rethinking Incorporation: The Mexican American Experience

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Generations of Exclusion is one of the most important books written in the field of immigrant incorporation. The book makes two key contributions. First, Telles and Ortiz provide the most authoritative analysis of the trajectories of incorporation of generations of Mexican Americans available today. Given that this is the largest immigrant group, and also the group with the longest generational reach in terms of continuous migration, the importance of the data and the analysis presented by Telles and Ortiz is invaluable. Second, the book advances the theoretical understanding of the immigrant incorporation process.

Generations of Exclusion is empirical research at its best and the richness of the empirical data analyzed in this book is unique. In a minor part, this is due to sheer good luck. Fortune smiled on Telles and Ortiz when, as a result of renovations at UCLA,