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**REMAKING THE  
AMERICAN MAINSTREAM**  
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Assimilation and  
Contemporary  
Immigration

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*Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data*

Alba, Richard.

Remaking the American mainstream : assimilation and contemporary immigration,  
Richard Alba and Victor Nee.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.  
ISBN 0-674-01040-X (cloth : alk. paper)

1. United States—Emigration and immigration—Social aspects.  
2. Americanization. 3. Immigrants—United States—Social conditions.  
I. Nee, Victor, 1945– II. Title.

JV6475.A433 2003

303.48'273—dc21 2002191300

**HARVARD UNIVERSITY PRESS**

Cambridge, Massachusetts, and London, England 2003

## Rethinking Assimilation

Assimilation is a contested idea today. Since the 1960s it has been seen in a mostly negative light, as an ethnocentric and patronizing imposition on minority peoples struggling to retain their cultural and ethnic integrity. The very word seems to conjure up a bygone era, when the multicultural nature of American society was not comprehended, let alone respected, and there appeared, at least to white Americans, to be a unitary and unquestioned American way of life. The sociologist Nathan Glazer, in an essay tellingly titled "Is Assimilation Dead?" describes the present attitude thus: "'Assimilation' is not today a popular term. Recently I asked a group of Harvard students taking a class on race and ethnicity what their attitude to the term 'assimilation' was. The large majority had a negative reaction to it. Had I asked what they thought of the term 'Americanization,' the reaction, I am sure, would have been even more hostile."<sup>1</sup> The rejection of the old assimilation canon is not limited to students and the young. Assimilation was once unquestionably the foundational concept for the study of ethnic relations, but in recent decades it has come to be seen by sociologists and others as an ideologically laden residue of worn-out notions. For many, it smacks of the era when functionalism reigned supreme and when ethnic and racial groups could be rated according to a cultural profile presumed to be required for success in an advanced industrial society. The assimilation concept of the earlier era is now condemned for the expectation that minority groups would inevita-

bly want to shed their own cultures, as if these were old skins no longer possessing any vital force, and wrap themselves in the mantle of Anglo-American culture. The one-sidedness of this conception overlooked the value and sustainability of minority cultures and, in addition, masked barely hidden ethnocentric assumptions about the superiority of Anglo-American culture. Indeed, it has been viewed as a form of "Eurocentric hegemony," a weapon of the majority for putting minorities at a disadvantage by forcing them to live by cultural standards that are not their own.<sup>2</sup>

This old conception of assimilation has become passé. It was done in by many forces and events, but perhaps above all by the sociological equivalent of Arthur Conan Doyle's telltale "dog that didn't bark": namely, the virtually universal failure of social scientists to predict the broad impact of the civil rights movement and the identity politics it spawned. Ever since, the argument has been that their view was blinkered by the uncritical acceptance of an assimilation model of American life, which led them to assume that black Americans sought no more than quiet integration with white America.<sup>3</sup>

Without question, many of the intellectual sins now attributed to assimilation can also be documented in the mid-twentieth-century literature that describes the adjustments made by ethnic and immigrant groups to enter the mainstream of American society. They can be found, for instance, in W. Lloyd Warner and Leo Srole's *Social Systems of American Ethnic Groups* (1945), a classic study of ethnic assimilation in "Yankee City." Warner and Srole conclude that American ethnic groups are destined to be no more than temporary phenomena, doomed by the egalitarian values of the United States and by widespread social mobility: "The future of American ethnic groups seems to be limited; it is likely that they will be quickly absorbed. When this happens one of the great epochs of American history will have ended. . . . Paradoxically, the force of American equalitarianism, which attempts to make all men American and alike, and the force of our class order, which creates differences among ethnic peoples, have combined to dissolve our ethnic groups."<sup>4</sup> As part of this assimilation process, ethnic groups must, according to the authors, "unlearn" their cultural traits, which are "evaluated by the host society as inferior," in order to "successfully learn the new way of life necessary for full acceptance."<sup>5</sup> Even more disturbing to the present-day viewpoint, Warner and Srole correlated the potential for speedy assimilation with

a hierarchy of racial and cultural acceptability, ranging from English-speaking Protestants at the top to "Negroes and all Negroid mixtures" at the bottom. Whereas the assimilation of fair-skinned Protestants, whether English-speaking or not, was expected to be unproblematic and therefore of short duration, that of groups deviating from this ethnic prototype in any significant respect would be considerably more prolonged, if not doubtful. Thus, the assimilation of "dark-skinned" Mediterranean Catholics, such as the Italians, was expected by Warner and Srole to demand a "moderate" period, which the authors equate with six generations or more! The assimilation of non-European groups was even more problematic and was expected to continue into the indefinite future or even, in the case of African Americans, to be delayed until "the present American social order changes gradually or by revolution."<sup>6</sup>

Exhibited here are some of the features of the old assimilation conception that scholars now vigorously reject in relation to new immigrants and their American-born children. One is the seeming inevitability of assimilation, which is presented as the natural end point of the process of incorporation into American society. Even black Americans, blocked by the racism of U.S. society from full pursuit of the assimilation goal, are presumed by Warner and Srole to be assimilating, albeit at a glacial pace. Further, by equating assimilation with full or successful incorporation, these and other earlier writers viewed African Americans and other racial minorities as, in effect, incompletely assimilated, rather than as incorporated into the society on some other basis. In relation to black Americans in particular, this older assimilation conception was consistent with liberal incrementalist strategies for pursuing racial justice, which, on the one hand, sought to remove legal and institutional barriers to equality and to combat white prejudice and discrimination and, on the other, urged blacks to seek integration and to become more like middle-class whites.<sup>7</sup> In his classic work, *An American Dilemma*, Gunnar Myrdal stated this premise baldly: "We assume that it is to the advantage of American Negroes as individuals and as a group to become assimilated into American culture, to acquire the traits held in esteem by dominant white Americans."<sup>8</sup> By this standard, black Americans and other racial minorities should want to assimilate rather than seek support and protection in the company of their racial/ethnic peers.

Another feature that has been found objectionable in the old for-

mulation of assimilation is its apparent ethnocentrism, which elevates a particular cultural model, that of middle-class Protestant whites of British ancestry, to the normative standard by which other groups are to be assessed and toward which they should aspire. This is bluntly apparent in the ranking of groups by Warner and Srole, which places groups higher in the scale, and thus more rapidly assimilating, the closer they are at the outset to the Anglo-Saxon cultural (and physical) model. Assimilation, then, meant becoming more like middle-class Protestant whites. That this was in fact the cultural prototype for assimilation was quite explicit in the most authoritative discussion of the concept in the post-World War II era, Milton Gordon's *Assimilation in American Life* (1964). Gordon wrote, for instance, that "if there is anything in American life which can be described as an overall American culture which serves as a reference point for immigrants and their children, it can best be described, it seems to us, as the middle-class cultural patterns of, largely, white Protestant, Anglo-Saxon origins."<sup>9</sup> He did not argue that this cultural standard enjoyed its pre-eminence because of inherent superiority, just that it was the first one established by the European colonists and was associated with the ethnic core of U.S. society. He recognized, moreover, that the mere acquisition of this cultural prototype did not guarantee acceptance by the core group and thus social assimilation to it; discrimination could still be practiced against minority individuals, even if they perfectly mimicked the behavioral repertoire of the WASP upper-middle class.<sup>10</sup> But what Gordon and other writers on assimilation failed to recognize was the possibility of successful incorporation into the society on a cultural basis other than that of the WASP mainstream. Insofar as individuals and groups retained ethnic cultural distinctiveness, they were presumed to be hampered in achieving socioeconomic and other forms of integration and, of course, to be incompletely assimilated, with the implication that over time their similarity to the middle-class Anglo-Saxon standard would grow.

The one-sided nature of the assimilation process, as traditionally conceived, and the cultural and ethnic homogeneity it allegedly produces have also provided the basis for disputing it. As Warner and Srole's reference to an "unlearning" process suggests, the old assimilation concept assumed that the minority group would change almost completely in order to assimilate (except for areas where it already resembled the majority group), while the majority culture would remain

unaffected. Gordon was quite explicit about this. In a well-known passage, he asked whether acculturation was "entirely a one-way process? Was the core culture entirely unaffected by the presence of the immigrants and the colored minorities?"<sup>11</sup> Although he took pains to stress the contributions to American life of many minority individuals, his answer was for the most part affirmative: other than in the area of institutional religion, and aside from what he characterized as "minor modifications" made by minority cultures, the culture of the Anglo-Saxon core was accepted intact by assimilating ethnic groups and thus took the place of their own. From the contemporary standpoint, this view of the predominance of the culture of Anglo-American groups that settled in North America in the colonial era downplays the multiple cultural streams that have fed into American culture, affecting even the English language as spoken by Americans.<sup>12</sup> And it presumes that assimilation will impose a cultural homogeneity where diversity previously reigned. Not only does this view seem in contradiction to the riotous cultural bloom of the United States, but also, in the contemporary, rapidly globalizing world, it seems quite undesirable to extinguish the distinctive cultural and linguistic knowledge that immigrants could pass on to their children.

The final fatal flaw in the old assimilation canon, according to a common view, is that it allows no room for a positive role for the ethnic or racial group. The ethnic community could provide temporary shelter for immigrants and their children seeking to withstand the intense stresses associated with the early stages of immigration to a new society; according to frequently used images, the ethnic community was a "way station" or a "decompression chamber." But, past a certain point, attachment to the ethnic group would hinder minority individuals from taking full advantage of the opportunities offered by American society, which require individualistic mobility, not ethnic loyalty. What assimilationist scholars appeared to overlook was that, in some cases, the ethnic group could, by dominating some economic niches, be the source of better socioeconomic opportunities for ethnic entrepreneurs. In New York's garment industry throughout the first half of the twentieth century, it was an advantage for businessmen to be Jewish or Italian, and it would have been difficult for members of other groups to establish themselves in the industry's network of particularistic transactions. There are also important non-economic ways in which the ethnic group can contribute to the well-being of its

members, such as through the solidarity and support provided by co-ethnics with whom one shares a diffuse sense of a common heritage.<sup>13</sup>

Clearly there are marked deficiencies in the old assimilation canon. Events and intellectual trends since the 1960s have brought about social changes that make these deficiencies very apparent. The 1960s were a watershed period shaped by social movements that raised probing and far-reaching questions about the constitution of American society, especially with respect to the status of minorities and women. In light of the insitutional changes that followed in the wake of these social movements, future historians may view this period as just as transformative for American society as was the Protestant Reformation for European civilization. Intellectual trends responding to the unfolding events emphasized the rights of groups whose history of exclusion and discrimination was viewed as justifying remedial action. Criticism of the old canonical formulation of assimilation reflects a new consensus involving a mandate for the inclusion of all groups in civil society and for remedial action to secure *equality of rights*, interpreted broadly as meaning parity in life chances. This logic has permeated thinking about the incorporation of immigrant minorities, imparting a strong momentum to the rejection of the old assimilation canon.

Alternative models have developed describing how immigrants adapt in a new historical context of globalization and non-European immigration. One such alternative envisions enhanced prospects for a vigorous ethnic pluralism in the contemporary world, generated partly by the advantages to be derived from welfare-maximizing features of ethnic connections and partly by globalization driven by enormous advances in information technology, market integration, and mass air transportation—all of which make it feasible for immigrants and perhaps the second and later generations to maintain significant relationships with their homeland and with the relatives and towns that hold a special place in their hearts and memories. So remarkable has the prospect for such relationships seemed that a substantial body of scholarship has mushroomed around it under the somewhat faddish name of *transnationalism* (though the phenomenon is not entirely new, as we will observe in a later chapter).<sup>14</sup> The pluralist alternative envisions that, in the contemporary world, the choice to live in an ethnic social and cultural matrix need not be associated with the loss of the advantages once afforded almost exclusively by the mainstream.

The prospect that pluralism will flourish to a degree not seen before in the United States begins with the observation that some level of pluralism has in fact survived all along, though often at the societal margins. Growing interest in multiculturalism has led to a recognition that minority cultures have retained a vitality that was not acknowledged during the period when the melting pot was the paramount metaphor for American society. Native American languages such as Navaho (178,000 speakers in 2000) continue to thrive, for instance, as do African American religious traditions and numerous customs brought by immigrant groups. Recent scholarship adds the innovative claim that ethnic individuals can derive advantages from a group's culture and institutions. The claim comes in varied forms: the argument that bilingual individuals possess cognitive advantages over those who speak only one tongue; the suggestion that ethnic sub-economics, epitomized by the extensive Cuban sub-economy in Miami, can provide opportunities for income and mobility equal to those in the mainstream economy; and the observation that involvement with an ethnic culture and institutions offers protection to second-generation adolescents from some of the hazards of growing up in the inner city.<sup>15</sup> In each case, it is implied that ethnics have a motivation to reject assimilation, at least in its crassest forms.

Transnationalism may strengthen that motivation. The idea of transnationalism emphasizes the prospects for achieving an almost seamless connection between workaday lives in America and the origin society through a web of border-spanning cultural, social, and economic ties. An example of a style of transnationalism rooted in globalization is seen in the large Japanese business community in America, where corporate executives and technical personnel maintain close linkages with their home offices and business associates in Tokyo through information technology and frequent air travel to Japan. Another example of transnationalism is the new form of sojourning by low-wage laborers and entrepreneurs from the Caribbean Basin and Central America.<sup>16</sup> Border-spanning social networks enable sojourners to send remittances, operate cross-national small businesses, invest their savings in the hometown economy, and sustain ongoing communal life in two countries.

While the pluralist alternative to assimilation envisions opportunities that are at least the equivalent of those found in the mainstream, another alternative model foresees a form of incorporation associated with constricted opportunities. It focuses on the possibility that many

in the second and third generations from the new immigrant groups, hindered by their very humble initial locations in American society and barred from entry into the mainstream by their race and their class location, will be incorporated into American society as disadvantaged minorities. This approach is associated with the terms “segmented” and “downward” assimilation.<sup>17</sup> In application to low-income nonwhite immigrants, the term refers to a route of assimilation guided by the cultural models of poor, native-born African Americans and Latinos, a route which has probably been traveled in previous immigration eras—for example, by the Afro-Caribbean immigrants of the early twentieth century and their children, many of whom gradually became part of the black American population.<sup>18</sup> The segmented assimilation concept thus alerts us to an emergent social problem: individuals in the second generation who perceive that they are likely to remain in their parents’ status at the bottom of the occupational hierarchy and are then tempted to drop out of school and join the inner-city underclass.

Yet the segmented assimilation concept risks essentializing central-city black culture in the image of the underclass, which the American mainstream views as the undeserving poor.<sup>19</sup> This image overlooks the variety of cultural models found among urban African Americans and inflates the magnitude of the underclass population.<sup>20</sup> To be sure, the black underclass may exercise a greater influence in shaping the cultural practices of the inner city than its relative size warrants.<sup>21</sup> But the great majority of adult urban African Americans and Latinos hold down jobs, have families, and aspire to a better future for their children.<sup>22</sup> For this group, middle-class aspirations and norms are an important feature of ordinary lives in the central city.<sup>23</sup> Thus, segmented assimilation, which has value in calling attention to an emergent social problem facing Afro-Caribbeans and arguably Mexicans and other Latinos,<sup>24</sup> may predict an excessively pessimistic future for central-city minority youths.

The demographic realities of the United States have given additional momentum to the rethinking in progress on the assimilation of immigrants and their descendants. The emerging demographic contours of an American society that has received more than 20 million legal immigrants since the passage of the Immigration Act of 1965 can be found sharply etched in the data from the 2000 U.S. Census. The foreign-born and their children now constitute about 20 percent of

the American population. They are concentrated in a number of large states such as California, Florida, New York, Texas, and Illinois, magnifying the regional impacts of immigration. Their presence has been dramatically visible in California, the nation’s most populous state, where one in eight Americans resides. The state’s robust population growth during the 1990s, almost 10 percent, was largely driven by the rapid increase in the Hispanic and Asian populations, which grew by 33 and 43 percent respectively. Within the span of two decades, the population of non-Hispanic whites declined from two-thirds to slightly less than half of the state’s population.<sup>25</sup> Hispanics and Asians have become the two largest minority groups, with African Americans’ share of the population declining. The pace of demographic change is even more intense in an immigrant metropolis such as Los Angeles, where Hispanics were 45 percent of the county’s population in 2000, followed by non-Hispanic whites (31 percent), Asians (12 percent), and African Americans (9 percent). Although it should be noted that nearly half of Hispanics identify themselves racially as white,<sup>26</sup> a mainstream that constitutes a majority of California’s population will need to be racially diverse, especially in the largest metropolitan areas. The profundity and rapidity of California’s demographic change are unlikely to be replicated on a large scale elsewhere in the United States in the near future; but in some other large states and metropolitan areas, nonwhites and Latinos have achieved a critical mass sufficient to exercise a strong, if not increasingly dominant, influence on regional developments.

What can assimilation look like in such a diverse and ethnically dynamic society? The aim of this book is to address this question by providing new ways of theorizing assimilation as a social process stemming from immigration. We argue that, while both of the alternative models of incorporation—pluralist and segmented—possess their own spheres of validity, neither rules out the possibility that assimilation in the form of entry into the mainstream has a major role to play in the future. Despite the accuracy of some of the criticisms of the canonical formulation of assimilation, we believe that there is still a vital core to the concept, which has not lost its utility for illuminating many of the experiences of contemporary immigrants and the new second generation.

The contemporary debate over assimilation and the changing realities of the United States point to the need to rethink some of the classi-

cal writings on assimilation, including those of the early years of the Chicago School of sociology. The founders of the Chicago School were responding to the transformative changes and social problems associated with the mass immigration of their time, which have some similarities with those of today. In reflecting on the issues raised by the ethnic and racial diversity of immigrant groups, they posited a conception of the mainstream as rooted in what now must be viewed as a *composite culture* evolving out of the interpenetration of diverse cultural practices and beliefs. By “composite culture,” we refer to the mixed, hybrid character of the ensemble of cultural practices and beliefs that has evolved in the United States since the colonial period. By contrast, the idea of multiculturalism, though it may appear to be similar, implies more or less autonomous cultural centers organized around discrete ethnic groups, with much less interpenetration of cultural life.

The Chicago School’s definition of assimilation envisioned a diverse mainstream society in which people of different ethnic/racial origins and cultural heritages evolve a common culture that enables them to sustain a common national existence.<sup>27</sup> This more flexible and open-ended specification of assimilation largely receded into the background in the later writings of Warner and Srole and Gordon, which we identify with the old assimilation approach. The view of American culture and society that emerged in the subsequent assimilation canon was heavily influenced by the functionalism of Talcott Parsons and other sociologists who built structural functionalism into the reigning paradigm.<sup>28</sup> This paradigm conceived of society as a largely homogeneous social system integrated around core values and norms, in which stable equilibrium between the structures and functions of component subsystems sustained social order. Such a conception of society is built into the old assimilation formulation of the core Anglo-American middle-class culture and society—the putative mainstream—which was the end point of assimilation. In rethinking assimilation, we have sought a reformulation of the concept that adheres in spirit to the classic Chicago School definition; but we extend this foundation with the aim of adapting assimilation to the demographic realities of American society stemming from contemporary immigration.<sup>29</sup>

How then should assimilation be defined, given the prospects for a more racially diverse mainstream society arising from large-scale

immigration of non-Europeans? A viable conceptualization must recognize that (1) ethnicity is essentially a social boundary, a distinction that individuals make in their everyday lives and that shapes their actions and mental orientations toward others;<sup>30</sup> (2) this distinction is typically embedded in a variety of social and cultural differences between groups that give an ethnic boundary concrete significance (so that members of one group think, “They are not like us because . . .”); and (3) assimilation, as a form of ethnic change, may occur through changes taking place in groups on both sides of the boundary. Consequently, we define assimilation as the decline of an ethnic distinction and its corollary cultural and social differences. “Decline” means in this context that a distinction attenuates in salience, that the occurrences for which it is relevant diminish in number and contract to fewer and fewer domains of social life. Individuals’ ethnic origins become less and less relevant in relation to the members of another ethnic group (typically, but not necessarily, the ethnic majority group), and individuals on both sides of the boundary see themselves more and more as alike, assuming they are similar in terms of some other critical factors such as social class; in other words, they mutually perceive themselves with less and less frequency in terms of ethnic categories and increasingly only under specific circumstances. To speak in terms of extremes, at one time an ethnic distinction may be relevant for virtually all of the life chances of members of two different groups—where they live, what kinds of jobs they get, and so forth—while at a later time it may have receded to the point where it is observed only in occasional family rituals. Yet assimilation, as we define it, does not require the disappearance of ethnicity; and the individuals undergoing it may still bear a number of ethnic markers. Assimilation can occur on a large scale to members of a group even as the group itself remains a highly visible point of reference on the social landscape, embodied in an ethnic culture, neighborhoods, and institutional infrastructures.

Our definition of assimilation intentionally allows for the possibility that the nature of the mainstream into which minority individuals and groups are assimilating is changed in the process; assimilation is eased insofar as members of minority groups do not sense a rupture between participation in mainstream institutions and familiar social and cultural practices. Given demographic trends, the mainstream is likely to evolve in the direction of including members of ethnic and ra-



cial groups that were formerly excluded. Given the plasticity of the mainstream, an obvious question is, How does one bound or define it? The American mainstream encompasses a core set of interrelated institutional structures and organizations regulated by rules and practices that weaken, even undermine, the influence of ethnic origins *per se*. For example, university admissions committees operate within the framework of formal and informal rules that specify guidelines for selecting incoming students. Once they are admitted, the university's rules governing the treatment of students do not distinguish among them by their ethnic origin. A useful way of defining the mainstream is as that part of the society *within* which ethnic and racial origins have at most minor impacts on life chances or opportunities.<sup>31</sup> This conception, we want to underscore, allows for ethnic and racial origins to be powerful determinants of opportunities in the society as a whole, particularly when those outside the mainstream are compared to those in it. Moreover, it does not imply that full equality of opportunities obtains within the mainstream, because life chances are still strongly differentiated by social class and other non-ethnic factors. Thus, we do not limit the mainstream to the middle class: it contains a working class and even some who are poor, not just affluent suburbanites. One objection to our definition could be that the boundary between the mainstream and the rest of the society is not as clear as the definition makes it seem. We concede that there is undoubtedly some fuzziness at the boundary, but we see the definition as a valuable heuristic conception.

Historically, the American mainstream, which originated with the colonial northern European settlers, has evolved through incremental inclusion of ethnic and racial groups that formerly were excluded and accretion of parts of their cultures to the composite culture. Although cultural elements from the earliest groups have been preserved—in this sense there is great cultural continuity—elements contributed from subsequent immigrant groups have been incorporated continually into the mainstream. Such elements are most easily seen in cuisine and in highbrow and middlebrow forms of entertainment and artistic expression; and in many cases they have diffused well beyond the regions where the groups that brought them have concentrated. For example, the recreational practices of Germans played an important role in relaxing puritanical strictures against Sunday pleasures and left a deep mark on what is now viewed as the quintessentially Ameri-

can culture of leisure: "American culture in the century after 1880 moved in fits and starts toward the values cherished by German Americans. A love of music and drama and liberal attitudes about card playing, drinking, and Sunday relaxation ceased to be regarded as foreign imports."<sup>32</sup> This influence was in addition to the most obvious cultural borrowing—German Christmas customs, including the decorated Christmas tree. The mainstream can even encompass alternative institutional forms. For instance, when Jewish and Catholic immigrants were pouring into the United States at the beginning of the twentieth century, the mainstream was still defined as Christian, even Protestant; but during and shortly after World War II, the boundary shifted to include Judaism and Catholicism as mainstream American religions, as they are viewed today (see Chapter 3).

Thus, the mainstream culture, which is highly variegated in any event—by social class and region, among other factors—changes as elements of the cultures of the newer groups are incorporated into it. The composite culture that we identify with the mainstream is made up of multiple interpenetrating layers and allows individuals and sub-populations to forge identities out of its materials to distinguish themselves from others in the mainstream—as do, for instance, Baptists in Alabama and Jews in New York—in ways that are still recognizably American.

This process of incorporation is certain to continue and to encompass portions of the new immigrant groups and their cultures. We can see this in the ready acceptance of intermarriage between whites and Asian Americans and the ongoing incorporation into the American mainstream of cultural practices and cuisine from East Asia. This will likely lead to a break with the conventional equation of the mainstream with white America. We view it as unlikely, in other words, that the assimilation of the near future will be accomplished by redefining non-European groups as "white," even though this did happen in the past to the racially "in-between" European groups, such as the Italians and eastern European Jews.<sup>33</sup> Rather, in the next quarter century, we expect some blurring of the main ethnic and racial boundaries of American life. For portions of nonwhite and Hispanic groups, the social and cultural distance from the mainstream will shrink: these individuals will live and work in ethnically and racially mixed milieus, much of the time without a sense that their social interactions are greatly affected by their origins; some will be the products of inter-

marriage, or they or their children will intermarry. Indeed, this process is already visibly under way, but it will expand in the future. This will not, we want to underscore, mean an end to the profound racial and ethnic inequalities of the United States. But it will alter the racial compartmentalization of American society to an important extent. These considerations leave a fundamental question: What will contemporary assimilation mean for the most intractable boundary, the black-white one? In our concluding chapter, as we spell out the implications for the future, we address this difficult question.

Any effort such as this requires a theoretical base to give coherence to its argument. The theoretical approach we take is influenced by the new institutionalism, a cross-disciplinary paradigm oriented to explaining the stability and change of institutional structures.<sup>34</sup> An underlying claim of the new institutionalist approach is that institutionalized incentives matter in channeling the action of individuals and groups.<sup>35</sup> Our rethinking has led us to formulate a “new assimilation theory” that specifies the mechanisms of assimilation. This is outlined in the second half of Chapter 2. We argue that one key to understanding trajectories of incorporation lies in the interplay between the purposive action of immigrants and their descendants and the contexts—that is, institutional structures, cultural beliefs, and social networks—that shape it. The mainstream encompasses structures of opportunity offering powerful incentives that make assimilation rewarding for many immigrants and their descendants.<sup>36</sup>

Another crucial factor lies in the ability and willingness of established groups in the white majority to resist and exclude the newcomers, which are presently greatly reduced from what was the case during the first half of the twentieth century. The children of immigrants from southern and eastern Europe experienced intense nativist hostility and some discrimination. Nevertheless, their constitutional rights based on European origins (and their legally unchallenged whiteness) differentiated them from nonwhite migrant groups of the time, such as the Chinese and the Mexicans, who were denied these rights. As we will show in Chapter 3, civil rights—and the political incorporation that followed from them—were critically important to the gradual assimilation of these European groups, who continued to face prejudice and discrimination. Because of the subsequent extension of civil rights to nonwhites, the monitoring and enforcement of formal rules that once worked to effect exclusion from the mainstream now contribute

to lowering the barriers to entry for immigrant minorities and the new second generation. The institutional boundaries of the mainstream are more open now to the entry of nonwhites than they have been in any other period of American history. In Chapter 2 we argue that by attacking racial discrimination, the institutional changes of the civil rights period introduced a tidal shift, even if they have not been successful in eradicating racism. In addition, the legitimacy of overtly racist belief and practice has never been lower in the eyes of most Americans. These changes have subtly but noticeably shifted societal incentives in the direction of promoting improved, predictable chances for minorities. Even as we make this argument, we recognize that these improvements are still small for some minority groups, especially non-immigrant ones, such as African Americans.

As with social mobility in industrial societies for all ethnic groups, majority or minority, assimilation into the mainstream mainly occurs as an individual, family-based process.<sup>37</sup> The extent of intergenerational upward mobility is more limited in industrial societies than is commonly assumed, and there is a divergence in outcomes for all ethnic groups, whereby many experience upward social mobility while most move laterally, and some even move downward in the stratification order. Hence, assimilation linked to actual social mobility proceeds unevenly and varies across ethnic groups and within the same group. It depends in part on the forms of capital that immigrants bring, as we elaborate in Chapter 2. In a high-technology society, immigrant families who bring large volumes of human and cultural capital obviously have an advantage over low-wage laborers with little formal schooling.

The conception of assimilation that we put forward is neither normative nor prescriptive. We recognize that the separation between positive and normative science has been, and still is, difficult to achieve in the study of human affairs, and that much of the conceptual literature in the field of ethnicity and race mixes the two together. A normative slant on assimilation is exemplified by the earlier quotations from Warner and Srole and could be amply illustrated by quotations with a similar character from elsewhere in the classical literature. It was commonly assumed that assimilation is not only a “normal” outcome for an ethnic minority in American society but also a beneficial one, bringing an end to prejudice and discrimination and a liberation from the constricting bonds of parochial group loyal-

ties. As numerous critics have pointed out, the classical assimilation literature thus appears to presume, or at least seems consistent with, a now outdated view that ethnicity is a primordial bond destined to weaken as a consequence of the spreading rational individualism and enlightenment of modern society. Part of our task is to free the concept of assimilation from this unnecessary baggage.

Much of the skepticism today about the relevance of assimilation for the immigration of the current era is mirrored by perceptions about immigrants in past eras. Needless to say, the mere existence of such parallels does not prove that contemporary immigrants and their descendants will undergo a process of assimilation comparable to that of the past; it only alerts us to the possibility that there may be more continuity than our sense of the uniqueness of the present moment may readily grant. Therefore, after laying out the basis for a new theory of assimilation in Chapter 2, we take up the historical record and its relevance. In Chapter 3, we examine in some depth the evidence about assimilation among the European-ancestry groups and East Asian groups from the earlier era of mass immigration. This evidence is instructive, for it demonstrates the complexity of the historical assimilation process, which differs in some important respects from the stereotyped view. It leads us to a consideration of frequently advanced claims about the differences between past and contemporary immigration eras, which is the subject of Chapter 4. There we assess the various arguments that express skepticism over the relevance of assimilation for contemporary immigration. Suffice it to say here that we find these putative differences less decisive than they seem at first sight. In Chapters 5 and 6 we turn our attention fully to the new immigrant groups. Chapter 5 depicts the historical background of the new immigration and provides illustrative capsule summaries of some of the new groups. In Chapter 6 we sift recent data for clues concerning the potential relevance of assimilation, considering the domains of language, socioeconomic standing, residential situation, and intermarriage. Chapter 7 summarizes our argument and also attempts to address implications for the American future and for the place of ethnic and racial cleavages in it.

## Assimilation Theory, Old and New

Whatever the precise words, conceptions of assimilation have been central to understanding the American experience at least since colonial times. Even then, assimilation was a contested idea, reflecting different visions of a society that was coming into being. Nation building through immigration has been a source of contention throughout America's history as a settler society. The alarm expressed by Benjamin Franklin about the swelling number of Germans in Pennsylvania has a very contemporary ring: "Why should the Palatine boors be suffered to swarm into our settlements and by herding together establish their language and manners to the exclusion of ours? Why should *Pennsylvania*, founded by the *English*, become a colony of aliens, who will shortly be so numerous as to germanize us instead of our anglicizing them?"<sup>1</sup> Implicit here is an early version of what has since become known as Anglo-conformity, the expectation that immigrant groups should swallow intact the existing Anglo-American culture while simultaneously disgorging their own.<sup>2</sup> A different spirit runs through the now well-known words of the French-born J. Hector St. John Crèvecoeur, who in his *Letters from an American Farmer* (1782) gives an early articulation of the melting pot conception of assimilation:

What is the American, this new man? He is either an European, or the descendant of an European, hence that strange mixture of blood, which

you will find in no other country. I could point out to you a family whose grandfather was an Englishman, whose wife was Dutch, whose son married a French woman, and whose present four sons now have four wives of different nations. *He* is an American, who leaving behind him all his ancient prejudices and manners, receives new ones from the new mode of life he has embraced, the new government he obeys, and the new rank he holds. . . . Here individuals of all nations are melted into a new race of men, whose labours and posterity will one day cause great changes in the world.<sup>3</sup>

In 1845, Ralph Waldo Emerson extended the melting pot idea beyond Europeans when he referred to the energy not only “of Irish, Germans, Swedes, Poles, and Cossacks, and all the European tribes,” but also “of the Africans, and of the Polynesians,” who would contribute to “a new race, a new religion, a new state, a new literature, which will be as vigorous as the new Europe which came out of the smelting-pot of the Dark Ages.”<sup>4</sup>

These quotations reflect different visions of assimilation that existed even during the early experience of nation building through the incorporation of immigrants and their descendants. They also illustrate how ideas regarding assimilation are rooted in historical experiences of immigration, from the colonial era of immigration from northwestern Europe to the nineteenth-century transition to mass immigration from southern and eastern Europe and Asia. Each new wave of immigration expanded the range of groups that contributed to the ethnic diversity of American society, which in turn stimulated new thinking about the assimilation of newcomers. More recently, conceptions of assimilation have undergone further rethinking in response to the contemporary nonwhite immigration from Asia, the Caribbean, and Latin America. Assimilation is not a static or unchanging concept; its definition and specifications have evolved steadily as American society has changed in its more than several-century experience of immigration. Conceptions of the American mainstream likewise have changed as immigration has contributed to the growing diversity of ethnic and racial groups that inhabit the United States.

#### Assimilation and the Chicago School

Assimilation as a paradigm for the social-scientific understanding of immigration is traceable to the Chicago School sociologists of the

early twentieth century and especially to the work of Robert E. Park, W. I. Thomas, and their collaborators and students.<sup>5</sup> That a scientifically oriented conception of assimilation should have arisen there is understandable, for the members of the Chicago School achieved distinction partly through the close observation of the urban environment around them, and Chicago was then a city growing by leaps and bounds as a result of massive migrations and industrial growth.<sup>6</sup> As late as 1833, when Chicago was incorporated as a town, its site was almost bare, and its population numbered some 350 souls. Scarcely three-quarters of a century later, its population had swelled to more than 2 million. The migrations responsible for this growth brought people from rural areas of the United States but even more from other countries. In 1910, 70 percent of the city’s population consisted of immigrants and their children, who came from numerous, primarily European countries and frequently from peasant backgrounds.<sup>7</sup> The next decade witnessed the initial large-scale migration to the city of blacks from the rural South and the resulting intense racial conflicts. All around the city in this era, one could observe the difficult adjustments that ethnic minorities and rural migrants were making to urban American life.

At the newly founded University of Chicago (1890), sociologists took up the challenge to understand the experiences of migrants to the city. Robert Park and E. W. Burgess provided a widely known early definition of assimilation—“a process of interpenetration and fusion in which persons and groups acquire the memories, sentiments, and attitudes of other persons and groups and, by sharing their experience and history, are incorporated with them in a common cultural life.”<sup>8</sup> When read closely, this definition clearly does not require what many critics of assimilation theory assume, namely, the erasure of all signs of ethnic origins. Instead, it equates assimilation with changes that bring ethnic minorities into the mainstream of American life. It is in its way a critical response to the total Americanization of immigrants that at the time was being aggressively promoted by many Americans. The limited nature of the assimilation Park envisioned was made even clearer by another definition that he later created for the *Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences*, whereby “social” assimilation was “the name given to the process or processes by which peoples of diverse racial origins and different cultural heritages, occupying a common territory, achieve a cultural solidarity sufficient at least

to sustain a national existence."<sup>9</sup> This definition expresses an understanding of assimilation with contemporary appeal, leaving ample room for the persistence of ethnic elements set within a common national frame.<sup>10</sup>

Nonetheless, Park's legacy is closely identified with the notion of assimilation as the end stage of a "race-relations cycle" of "contact, competition, accommodation, and eventual assimilation," a sequence that, in his best-known formulation, was viewed as "apparently progressive and irreversible."<sup>11</sup> In depicting the race relations cycle, Park was rather deliberately painting with broad brush strokes on a large canvas, for the cycle refers obliquely to the processes in the modern world economy, including long-distance labor migrations, that bring once-separated peoples into closer contact. Competition is the initial, unstable consequence of contact, as the groups struggle to gain advantages over one another, eventuating in the more stable stage of accommodation, where a social structure of typically unequal relations among groups and a settled understanding of group positions have emerged.<sup>12</sup> But no matter how stable this social structure, ethnic differences would eventually diminish, according to Park, who wrote that "in our estimates of race relations we have not reckoned with the effects of personal intercourse and the friendships that inevitably grow up out of them."<sup>13</sup>

The Chicago School of sociology contributed to the elaboration of the concept of assimilation through important empirical studies directed at informing social policy. One of the early ones, *Old World Traits Transplanted* (1921), which was originally published under the names of Robert Park and Herbert Miller but is now known to have been written largely by W. I. Thomas, was self-consciously formulated against the campaign for rapid and complete Americanization waged during and immediately after World War I.<sup>14</sup> In a profound insight that remains current today, Thomas, Park, and Miller recognized that assimilation would proceed more unproblematically if immigrant groups were left to adjust at their own pace to American life, rather than being compelled to drop their familiar ways: "A wise policy of assimilation, like a wise educational policy, does not seek to destroy the attitudes and memories that are there, but to build on them. There is a current opinion in America, of the 'ordering and forbidding' type, demanding from the immigrant a quick and complete American-

ization through the suppression and repudiation of all the signs that distinguish him from us."<sup>15</sup>

Members of the Chicago School were pioneers in the study of city life, and the most enduring empirical studies of assimilation they produced examine it as a social process embedded in the urban landscape. These studies take as their point of departure Park's axiom that "social relations are . . . inevitably correlated with spatial relations; physical distances . . . are, or seem to be, indexes of social distances."<sup>16</sup> From this it follows that upwardly mobile immigrants and their descendants will leave ethnic enclaves, since "changes of economic and social status . . . tend to be registered in changes of location."<sup>17</sup> When combined with E. W. Burgess's zonal model of the city, in which immigrants settle initially in dilapidated areas in a city's industrial and commercial center, Park's dictum implies a correspondence among assimilation, socioeconomic mobility, and spatial mobility outward from the city center toward the suburban ring. In Burgess's formulation, immigrant groups initially enter slums "crowded to overflowing with immigrant colonies," move in the next generation to ethnic working-class neighborhoods, and may eventually disperse into the "Promised Land" at the city's edge.<sup>18</sup>

In *The Ghetto* (1928), Park's student Louis Wirth analyzed this process for Jewish neighborhoods in Chicago. Where "a steady influx of new immigrants has replenished the . . . community, there a ghetto, with all the characteristic local color, has grown up and maintains itself." But the ghetto is weakened as many residents increasingly desire to break free from the narrowness of ghetto existence. Immigrants, or more typically their children, consequently leave it for "the more modern and less Jewish area of second settlement," a neighborhood with "a new complexion, unmistakably Jewish, though not quite as genuine as that of the ghetto itself." Since aspects of the ghetto follow the "partially assimilated Jews" into the new area, some move on again to a third neighborhood, changing their character and institutions at each of these stages.<sup>19</sup>

The seminal ideas of the Chicago School on assimilation were formulated during the final decades of mass immigration from southern and eastern Europe. These ideas guided the empirical studies of immigrant adaptation that established the University of Chicago as the pre-

eminent center for research on the social problems of American urban society. But the empirical study that had the greatest subsequent impact, extending the Chicago School's ideas to the study of the descendants of turn-of-the-century immigrants, was W. Lloyd Warner and Leo Srole's *Social Systems of American Ethnic Groups* (1945). Concentrating on an older industrial city in New England, Warner and Srole observed a series of corresponding changes that occurred over the course of successive generations of various European ethnic groups following the end of mass immigration in the 1920s and the Great Depression of the 1930s. Their study was conducted during World War II, which contributed to lifting the New England economy out of the long slump stemming from the depression. They documented the decline of white ethnic enclaves in the context of the war-time economic boom as the native-born generations shifted out of the working class to higher occupational and class positions and better residential neighborhoods. In addition, they identified behavioral changes in the private spheres of ethnic groups, in the relations between husbands and wives and between parents and their children, as well as in the friendships formed by the children. In interpreting their findings, Warner and Srole posited that assimilation was the direction in which all groups were moving, but that there was great variation among them in the time required for it to occur. For virtually all groups of European origin, including the groups they characterized as "dark Caucasoids," such as Armenians and Sicilians, the time required was no more than "short" to "moderate," though, as we noted in the previous chapter, the scale of time involved could be longer than these terms might appear to imply, since the authors defined a "short" duration as a period anywhere in the range of one to six generations. For non-European groups, all of whom were in their view racially distinct, assimilation would be "slow" or "very slow," with the adjectives actually conveying the uncertainty of the process: "slow" refers to "a very long time in the future which is not yet discernible," while "very slow" indicates that "the group will not be totally assimilated until the present American social order changes gradually or by revolution."<sup>20</sup> "Dark-skinned" Jews were the one European group to whom this uncertain prognosis also applied. Despite the uncertainty about the prospects for assimilation of nonwhites and some Jews, the assumption that assimilation was the point on the horizon toward which all groups were moving, albeit in some cases with

glacial slowness, was unquestioned. The stage had been set for the post-World War II synthesis.

### The Canonical Synthesis

By the middle of the twentieth century, the apogee of the "melting pot" as metaphor, assimilation was integral to the American self-understanding as the pivot around which social science investigations of ethnicity and even of race turned. Yet, oddly, the concept itself was loosely specified and quite murky. There existed a broad consensus about the scope of assimilation, stemming from the early Chicago School formulation; but relatively little had been accomplished in the way of developing clear and consistent operational concepts that could be employed, in an analytically useful fashion, to measure the extent of assimilation of individuals and groups. Over the decades, a proliferation of definitions, created by anthropologists, sociologists, and others to fit the needs of particular research agendas, had accumulated, with attendant confusion generated by definitions that partly overlapped and partly did not.<sup>21</sup> The problem of disentangling the strands associated with assimilation to reveal its distinct elements and thereby fashion a set of operational concepts with analytic value in a broad range of research settings was not solved until Milton Gordon's *Assimilation in American Life* (1964). It is with his book that a canonical account takes on a sharply etched conceptual profile.<sup>22</sup>

Gordon's singular contribution was to set down a synthesis that elaborated a multidimensional concept of assimilation. Acculturation, he argued, was the dimension that typically came first and was, to a large degree, inevitable. He defined acculturation very broadly as the minority group's adoption of the "cultural patterns" of the host society—patterns extending beyond the acquisition of the English language and such other obvious externals as dress to include aspects normally regarded as part of the inner or private self, such as characteristic emotional expression or core values and life goals. The specific cultural standard that represented the direction and eventual outcome of the acculturation process was the "middle-class cultural patterns of, largely, white Protestant, Anglo-Saxon origins," which Gordon also described as the "core culture."<sup>23</sup> In his view, acculturation was a largely one-way process: except in the area of institutional religion,

the minority group adopted the core culture, which remained basically unchanged by acculturation. Gordon also distinguished *intrinsic* cultural traits, those that are “vital ingredients of the group’s cultural heritage,” exemplified by religion and musical traditions, from *extrinsic* traits, which “tend to be products of the historical vicissitudes of the group’s adjustment to the local environment” and thus are deemed less central to group identity.<sup>24</sup> The distinction seems to imply that extrinsic traits are readily surrendered by the group in making more or less necessary accommodations to the host society, but its implications are less clear about intrinsic ones. Certainly, Gordon had no expectation that the fundamental religious identities (e.g., Catholic, Jewish) of different immigrant groups would be given up as a result of acculturation.<sup>25</sup>

Acculturation could occur in the absence of other types of assimilation, and the stage of “acculturation only” could last indefinitely, according to Gordon. His major hypothesis was that structural assimilation—that is, integration into primary groups—is associated with, or stimulates, all other types of assimilation (“*Once structural assimilation has occurred, . . . all of the other types of assimilation will naturally follow*”). In particular, this meant that prejudice and discrimination would decline, if not disappear, that intermarriage would be common, and that the minority’s separate identity would wane.<sup>26</sup> The hypothesis suggests a relationship of cause and effect, but it should not be given the causal inflection Gordon’s language implies. Gordon did not develop a theory of assimilation specifying which causal mechanisms impede or promote the assimilation of individuals and ethnic groups. It could be just as true that a decline in prejudice allows structural assimilation to take place as the reverse. Gordon’s contribution was the codification of a conceptual framework through lucid specification of some of the key dimensions of assimilation. His synthesis identifies various indicators of assimilation, which are not causally distinct but describe different dimensions of the same underlying process. These seven dimensions—cultural, structural, marital, identity, prejudice, discrimination, civic—provided a composite multi-dimensional index of assimilation that was useful as a guide in determining the extent of a group’s assimilation according to both individual- and group-level criteria. Such specification of empirical indicators of assimilation was readily adapted to the variable research

of quantitative sociology, which in the 1960s was in rapid ascendance.<sup>27</sup>

As noted, Gordon assumed that acculturation involved change on the part of an ethnic group in the direction of middle-class Anglo-American culture, which remained itself largely unaffected, except for what he described as “minor modifications” in areas such as food and place names.<sup>28</sup> An obvious difficulty, one that Gordon recognized elsewhere in his work (in his concept of the “ethclass,” for instance), is that American culture varies greatly by locale and social class; acculturation hardly takes place in the shadow of a single middle-class cultural standard. But what was lacking more profoundly was a more differentiated and syncretic concept, a recognition that American culture was and is mixed, an amalgam of diverse influences, and that it continues to evolve “from the unsystematic fusion of various regional and racial customs and traditions,” as Michael Lind points out in his discussion of what he calls the “vernacular” culture.<sup>29</sup>

It does not require a radical shift in perspective to recognize that assimilation and acculturation processes can occur not just through changes in one group that make it more like another, but also through changes in two (or more) groups that shrink the differences between them. In short, acculturation can result from processes of group convergence. Moreover, acculturation need not be limited to the substitution of one cultural element for its equivalent, whether the replacement comes from the majority or minority cultures, though such substitution certainly takes place; this narrow conception of acculturation is at the root of the frequently encountered notion that one group “adopts” the cultural traits of another. In a process of convergence, the impact of minority ethnic cultures on the mainstream can occur also by an expansion of the range of what is considered normative behavior within the mainstream; thus, elements of minority cultures are absorbed alongside their equivalents of Anglo-American or other origins or are fused with mainstream elements to create a composite culture. The cultural fusion that results, especially evident in urban life, remakes the repertoire of styles, cuisine, popular culture, and myths, and incrementally becomes incorporated into the American mainstream.

Gordon’s legacy also includes codification of alternative conceptions of assimilation in the United States. Gordon described these as

the “theories” of Anglo-conformity and of the melting pot, but they are more appropriately viewed as alternative popular beliefs or ideologies about the composition and nature of civil society. The model of Anglo-conformity, which corresponds in spirit with the campaign for rapid, “pressure-cooker” Americanization during and immediately after World War I, equated assimilation with acculturation in the Anglo-American mold. It ignored other aspects, and was therefore indifferent with regard to structural assimilation. The model of the melting pot has enjoyed several periods of popularity in American discussions of ethnicity, most recently in the aftermath of World War II. It offers an idealistic vision of American society and identity as arising from the biological and cultural fusion of different peoples; and while its exponents have usually emphasized the contributions of Europeans to the mixture, it allows for recognition of those of non-European groups as well. In terms of Gordon’s scheme, the model emphasized cultural and structural assimilation. It forecast widespread intermarriage; a well-known variant, the triple melting pot, foresaw intermarriage as taking place within population pools defined by religious boundaries.<sup>30</sup> The cultural assimilation portion of the melting pot idea was rather ambiguous, however. Many early exponents spoke in ways that suggested a truly syncretic American culture blending elements from many different groups, but later commentators were more consistent with Gordon’s own conception that acculturation is a mostly one-directional acceptance of Anglo-American patterns.<sup>31</sup>

Gordon discussed a third model, cultural pluralism, which, though not strictly speaking a part of the assimilation canon, nevertheless tended to bolster the assimilation concept by providing an unconvincing alternative. Here Gordon hewed rather strictly to an early-twentieth-century conception of pluralism articulated by the philosopher Horace Kallen. The basic idea was quite simple: that a society benefited when the different ethnic elements in it retained their cultural distinctiveness, analogous to the way that the sound of an orchestra gains in richness from the distinctive voices of the assembled instruments. Cultural pluralism is thus the intellectual ancestor of contemporary multiculturalism.<sup>32</sup> The difficulty, as Gordon recognized, is that Kallen’s conception more or less required preservation of the cultural integrity of different groups and thus largely overlooked the cultural change and mixing arising from their interactions.

Interestingly, Gordon himself espoused none of these models. This

may come as a surprise to many who know his views only in the context of the present-day, disparaging discussion of assimilation, for he has often been identified with a school that portrays assimilation as an almost inevitable outcome for groups that have entered the United States through immigration. But this is not, in fact, a fair characterization. Although Gordon left little doubt that, in his view, acculturation was inevitable to a large degree, he did not see structural assimilation as similarly foreordained. His analysis of American society led to the conclusion that *structural pluralism* rather than cultural pluralism was the more accurate description. He envisioned the United States as constituted from ethnic subsocieties, in whose institutions and social networks most individuals spend the major portion of their social lives.<sup>33</sup>

Another prominent element of the canonical synthesis is the notion of “straight-line assimilation,” popularized by Herbert Gans and Neil Sandberg. (Gans later changed the straight line to a “bumpy” one.)<sup>34</sup> The straight-line idea envisions a process unfolding in a sequence of generational steps: each new generation represents on average a new stage of adjustment to the host society, that is, a further step away from ethnic “ground zero,” the community and ethnoculture established by the immigrants, and a step closer in a variety of ways to more complete assimilation.<sup>35</sup> The idea of an inherent generational dynamic is well illustrated by the hypothesis of third-generation return, which has an ambiguous relationship to the assimilation thesis.<sup>36</sup> The logic behind the hypothesis is that the second generation, the children of the immigrant generation, feels impelled to assimilate by the need to demonstrate that it is truly part of the society and no longer foreign, while the third generation, in no doubt about being American, can afford to exhibit signs of ethnicity. “What the son wishes to forget, the grandson wishes to remember” was Will Herberg’s pithy formulation that helped to popularize the idea.<sup>37</sup>

#### Extending the Canon

Gordon described his multidimensional schema as “assimilation variables”; and although he illustrated its applicability with a chart that employed only qualitative measures such as “yes,” “no,” “mostly,” and “partly,” his synthesis nonetheless opened the way for the development of quantitative indicators of assimilation. The specification of



precise measures of assimilation gained ground in the 1960s, inspired by the breakthrough in quantitative research, especially in the field of stratification. Following the publication of seminal studies such as Peter Blau and Otis Dudley Duncan's *American Occupational Structure* (1967),<sup>38</sup> researchers shifted their focus in the 1970s from structural assimilation—integration into primary groups, intermarriage—to what became identified as “socioeconomic assimilation.”

Status-attainment research reinforced the view that assimilation and social mobility are inextricably linked (and, conversely, that there is no assimilation if social mobility has not also occurred). Although this view had been adumbrated earlier, the explicit link between socioeconomic attainment and assimilation represented a conceptual reformulation, one that was in accord with the postwar interest in comparative research on social mobility. According to the most common conception, socioeconomic assimilation was equated with the attainment of average or above-average socioeconomic standing, as measured by indicators such as education, occupation, and income. It was deemed to have occurred to the degree that the socioeconomic distribution of the minority group resembles that of the majority.<sup>39</sup> Since many immigrant groups, especially those coming from agricultural backgrounds, such as the Irish, Italians, and Mexicans, entered the American social structure on its lowest rungs, this meaning of socioeconomic assimilation was often conflated with social mobility.

A more sophisticated conception of socioeconomic assimilation is needed to recognize that immigrant groups no longer start inevitably at the bottom of the labor market, that contemporary immigration includes numerous groups that bring substantial educational credentials, professional training, and other forms of human capital. One way to avoid the historical specificity in the conventional formulation is to define socioeconomic assimilation as minority participation in mainstream socioeconomic institutions (e.g., labor market, education) on the basis of parity with ethnic-majority individuals of similar socioeconomic origins. If the emphasis in the first conception falls on equality of attainments or position, the emphasis in the second is on equality of treatment: members of the immigrant minority and others similarly positioned have the same life chances in the pursuit of contested goods, such as desirable occupations. In this sense, the ethnic distinction has lost its relevance for processes of socioeconomic at-

tainment.<sup>40</sup> In this sense, too, one can assimilate into the working class, and many do.

Also added to the quantitative repertoire of assimilation studies was a focus on residential mobility, which was not included in Gordon's synthesis either. This was a curious omission in that the settlement of immigrants in segregated ethnic communities, from which a gradual dispersal took place in tandem with other forms of assimilation, frequently after a generation or two, was one of the best-known observations of the Chicago School of sociology. The inclusion of residential mobility would appear to be consistent with Gordon's thinking on structural assimilation because it can be viewed as a “determinant” of spatial opportunity, that is, it expands the ethnic mix of everyday social contacts, especially for the generation growing up. Douglas Massey's “spatial assimilation” model formalized the significance of residence for the assimilation paradigm.<sup>41</sup> The model, a continuation of the Chicago School's ecological tradition, treats the spatial distribution of racial and ethnic groups as a reflection of their human capital and the state of their assimilation, broadly construed. Its basic tenets are that residential mobility follows from the acculturation and social mobility of ethnic families, and that residential mobility is an intermediate step on the way to structural assimilation. As members of minority groups acculturate and establish themselves in American labor markets, they attempt to leave behind less successful members of their groups and to convert socioeconomic and assimilation progress into residential gain by “purchasing” residence in places with greater advantages and amenities. But because good schools, clean streets, and other amenities are more common in the communities where the majority is concentrated, and these communities have been largely suburban since the 1950s, the search by ethnic minority families for better surroundings leads them toward suburbanization and greater contact with the majority.

Status-attainment and segregation research provided assimilation studies with quantitative measures, by means of powerful statistical methods, of the extent to which the life chances of immigrants and their descendants were similar or dissimilar to the mainstream experience. The study of ethnic and racial groups was linked to the general interest in understanding social and spatial mobility in a manner that shifted analytic interest from the examination of the cultural and in-

terpersonal dimensions of assimilation to questions of comparative ethnic stratification. Accordingly, ethnic and racial minorities were regarded as moving in the direction of assimilation insofar as their educational, occupational, income, and residential characteristics approached, equaled, or exceeded those of Anglo-Americans or native-born non-Hispanic whites. Findings of persistent inequality in life chances, measured quantitatively with large public-use data sets, could be interpreted as evidence of discrimination and restrictions on the opportunity for assimilation.

### A Return to the Chicago School's Roots

Gordon's analysis, the touchstone for all subsequent studies of assimilation, focused attention on the last stage of Park's race relations cycle. This has had the effect of influencing subsequent researchers to conceive of assimilation as an outcome expected to be rapidly achieved. Often they are quick to conclude that if signs of incipient assimilation are not abundant in the first and second generations, as in the naïve view that assimilation is contingent on attainment of middle-class status, the theory should be rejected. Yet the race relations cycle pioneered by Park took the long view of ethnic and race relations as a protracted historical process. (Warner and Srole, as we have noted, viewed six generations—the period they thought would be required by groups such as the Armenians and the Italians—as a “moderate” time to assimilation. Moreover, they did not conflate assimilation with entry into the middle class but identified it with the reduction of differences with Anglo-Americans, including presumably those in the laboring classes.) What later got eclipsed was the ethnic stratification in the period of accommodation for the first and second generations after immigration. In other words, the modal experience of these generations is within an ethnic stratification order, not rapid assimilation.

At virtually the same time as Gordon's seminal volume, another book appeared that represented a plausible attempt to formulate a complex and sophisticated theoretical analysis of ethnic stratification and assimilation. What distinguishes Tomatsu Shibutani and Kian Kwan from Gordon is their interest in reviving and updating the Chicago School approach to studies of assimilation. Although their study has had only a limited influence in shaping the subsequent literature

on assimilation, it was an important early effort to specify causal mechanisms within the assimilation paradigm. Shibutani and Kwan employed a worldwide canvas for their study of assimilation—the case studies they used to ground their theoretical analysis included such diverse instances as Manchu rule over Han Chinese and ethnic stratification in the Roman Empire—and their underlying aim was to gain a deeper understanding of the American experience of race relations through comparative analysis of systems of ethnic domination in diverse historical and societal settings.

Shibutani and Kwan drew upon core conceptual themes of the Chicago School—George Herbert Mead's symbolic interactionism, Robert Park's race relations cycle, and Charles Darwin's evolutionary theory as extended by human ecologists—which they then applied to the study of assimilation and stratification of ethnic and racial minorities. The starting point of their analysis was the assertion that genetic differences between groups, if they even exist, cannot explain the social distances between them. Instead, differences giving rise to social distances are created and sustained symbolically through the human practice of classifying people into ranked categories. Following Mead, Shibutani and Kwan argued that how a person is treated in society depends “not on what he is” but on the “manner in which he is defined.” Placing people into categories, each associated with expected behavior and treatment, allows humans to deal in a routine and predictable manner with strangers and acquaintances outside their primary groups. “Except in a small village one cannot possibly treat each individual he encounters as a unique human being, for he has neither the time nor the opportunity to acquire all the pertinent details. In such contexts as these, ethnic categories assume importance.”<sup>42</sup> The claim that the classification of human beings into ethnic and racial groups stems from a *cognitive* mechanism embedded in social interactions, not biological difference, has a very contemporary ring, so much so that a name has been fashioned for it: *social construction*.<sup>43</sup>

Social distance is the linchpin concept in the explanation of the color line that segregates minorities and impedes assimilation. By social distance, Shibutani and Kwan refer to the subjective state of “nearness felt to certain individuals,” not physical distance between groups.<sup>44</sup> In their account, change in subjective states—reduction of social distance—precedes and stimulates structural assimilation (in contradiction to Gordon's reasoning about structural assimilation, we

may note). When social distance is small, there is a feeling of common identity, closeness, and shared experiences. But when social distance is great, people perceive and treat the other as belonging to a different category; and even after long acquaintance, there are still feelings of apprehension and reserve.

Shibutani and Kwan's use of the Chicago School's evolutionary approach contributed a vital macroscopic dimension which was missing from Gordon's synthesis. The large processes behind Park's race relations cycle, they argued, stem from competition and natural selection arising out of human migration and intergroup contact, as individuals, through groups, compete for resources and symbolic domination in a territorial space. Following the lead of the Norwegian anthropologist Frederik Barth, Shibutani and Kwan emphasized the social processes governing the boundary between ethnic groups rather than the attributes of specific groups.<sup>45</sup> Majority and minorities, they argued, must be studied in terms of their relationship to each other rather than separately. There are usually multiple groups sharing a territorial space, rather than only two, and they are bound by mutual interdependencies in such a way that the unit of analysis is the community as a whole, not distinct, enclosed ethnic groups.

Shibutani and Kwan linked the processes governing the symbolic construction of ethnic differences to the economic and status interests of corporate actors at the community level. Not only did this insight allow them to bring power—a concept absent from Gordon's scheme—into their analysis of assimilation, but also it pointed to the linkages between large-scale institutional processes and change at the individual level. For Shibutani and Kwan, a stable system of ethnic stratification is embedded not just in informal arrangements—social norms, customs, and conventions operating at the micro-sociological level—but also in an institutional order in which the dominant group upholds its position and privileges through control of formal institutions, the state, and coercive forces. Thus, the subordination of ethnic minorities is maintained not merely by moral consensus but ultimately by institutionalized power and outright coercion.

Their comparative analysis uncovered many exceptions to Park's optimistic conception of assimilation: interethnic contacts that resulted in the segregation, expulsion, or even the extermination of minority groups. It thus provides a soberly realistic assessment of the prospects for assimilation of non-European minorities. Domination is gained through competitive advantages accruing to the group whose

culture is best adapted to exploit the resources of the ecology. Competition and natural selection push minorities into the least desirable residential locations and economic niches. Ethnic stratification orders tend to be long-lasting once established and institutionalized. They are based on a moral order in which the dominant group is convinced that its advantages derive from natural differences, and minorities come to believe in their inferiority and accept their lot at the bottom of the stratification order. Individual minority group members may achieve social mobility within the stratification order and gain economic parity, but as exceptions to the rule. Such upwardly mobile individuals, often of mixed race, acquire a marginal status that gives them a modicum of privilege and respect, but they are fully accepted neither by the dominant group nor by their own ethnic community. In a stable ethnic stratification order, individual assimilation occurs even while the system maintaining dominance remains intact.

In most of the cases Shibutani and Kwan analyzed, the assimilation of racial minorities occurs only incrementally as social distance is gradually reduced and the color line begins to break down. The mechanisms that bring about the reduction of social distance stem from structural changes that occur at the macro level. In the absence of such changes, ethnic stratification orders tend toward stable equilibrium. In other words, the segregation of racial minorities into ethnic enclaves would persist indefinitely in the absence of exogenous change. In explaining the changes that alter stable ethnic stratification orders, Shibutani and Kwan emphasize the importance of technological innovation, which in turn induces alterations in the mode of production. Changes in the economic system associated with technological shifts often introduce opportunities for minority groups to acquire new competitive advantages that make them indispensable to employers. These in turn lead employers to seek institutional changes favorable to the interests of minority groups, changes that, in a capitalist system, are relatively easy to institute when elites find this in their economic interest. As a contemporary example, one could point to the role of employers in supporting the immigration of workers, both skilled and unskilled, legal and undocumented, despite the public clamor for greater limits on legal immigration and a curtailment of illegal immigration. At one end of the economic spectrum, there is the growing labor market demand for highly skilled workers (e.g., Silicon Valley's use of foreign-born computer programmers), given the post-industrial transformation of the American economy; at the other end,

there is a continuing need for elastic sources of low-wage labor in the agricultural sector, in “degraded” manufacturing sectors such as the garment industry, and in personal services such as child care.<sup>46</sup>

The most immediate source of a decline in social distance, Shibutani and Kwan assert, occurs when institutional change stimulates the introduction of new ideas that challenge values and cultural beliefs previously taken for granted, as in the discrediting of white supremacist ideologies in the postcolonial world, and a “transformation of values” ensues. “Systems of ethnic stratification begin to break down when minority peoples develop new self-conceptions and refuse to accept subordinate roles. As they become more aware of their worth in comparison to members of the dominant group, what they had once accepted as natural becomes unbearable.”<sup>47</sup> Social movements, often involving protests and rebellions, are the motor that sparks interest among the political elite in instituting changes and reforms to alter the relationship between majority and minority in a manner that promotes assimilation.

In sum, their analysis of assimilation focuses attention on the extent to which change at the macroscopic level opens the way for concomitant change in subjective states at the individual and primary group levels. Their study adds several features that are missing in the canonical account. One is a complex causal analysis that allows for the introduction of contingency (i.e., variable group trajectories), in contrast to the uniformity produced by the reliance on generationally induced change. Another is the preservation of the distinctions among levels of aggregation so that the interaction among individuals, groups, and the larger social environment is incorporated into the analytic accounting. Their analysis acknowledges exogenous influences, such as technological innovations, along with shifts in conditions at the societal and group levels as affecting individual decisions and actions that do or do not advance assimilation. Finally, their analysis quite explicitly recognizes the centrality of stratification in the ethnic experience; it does not, as the canonical formulation does, slight the persistence of social inequalities while presenting assimilation as the seemingly universal experience of immigrant minorities.

These advances notwithstanding, Shibutani and Kwan’s theoretical analysis proved to be less influential than Gordon’s, in part because it was not amenable to the multivariate design of quantitative sociology. Nevertheless, recognition of a theoretical impoverishment of quantitative sociology, which tacitly came to conceive of theory as the “sum

of variables,” has given rise to an interest in explanation that specifies the causal mechanisms which produce the outcome to be explained.<sup>48</sup> In light of this development, Shibutani and Kwan’s synthesis of the Chicago School provides useful clues for the construction of a new institutionalist theory of assimilation, one that specifies causal mechanisms which explain the coexistence of both segregating and blending processes in society.

### New Assimilation Theory

The aim of theory is to help us understand the causes of a phenomenon. In constructing a theory of assimilation, we follow the “new realists” in the philosophy of science in moving away from the “covering law” approach to explanation associated with classical positivism.<sup>49</sup> Causation, instead, is identified as a *central cluster of diverse and specific processes conceived as mechanisms that produce or generate the phenomenon to be explained*.<sup>50</sup> In other words, a theory is the approximately true description of the underlying causes of what one seeks to explain.

In any era, theorizing about a particular domain is shaped by a more general theoretical language, the modalities of conceptualizing social processes that are current at that time. As we noted, Shibutani and Kwan’s theoretical analysis was deeply imbued with the principal elements of the Chicago School approach, including Darwinian evolutionary theory. The language these presuppositions gave rise to accounts for some of the limitations of their framework. For instance, Shibutani and Kwan wanted to address theoretically events at an institutional level, but institutions, properly defined as the formal and informal rules of the game, are poorly conceived as features of a physical ecology within which competition and natural selection operate. For one thing, the selection processes stemming from institutions are constrained by cultural beliefs and social networks, which set institutional processes apart from natural selection in the biotic world where Darwinian evolutionary theory has demonstrated its explanatory mettle.

### The Conceptual Framework

We draw for our theoretical language on recent advances in institutional analysis in the social sciences. Institutional theories evolved out of two distinct traditions, the methodological individualism of Max

Weber's comparative institutional analysis, and methodological holism, stemming from the influence of the French sociologist Emile Durkheim, which asserts that institutional structures cannot be reduced to the action of individuals.<sup>51</sup> These rival traditions have gradually moved in the direction of convergence, through efforts to integrate purposive action with large-scale institutional processes.<sup>52</sup> In the new institutionalist approaches, explanations for institutional change generally refer to causal mechanisms embedded in the purposive action of individual and corporate actors, which in turn are shaped by cultural beliefs, relational structures, path dependence, and changing relative costs.

Institutions structure incentives and specify the rules of legitimate social action within which individuals and organizations compete for control over resources. Institutions, defined as a web of interrelated norms, formal and informal, govern social relationships.<sup>53</sup> As Durkheim argued, they serve as constraints shaping social and economic exchange at all levels of society. Institutions are not merely constraints, however, but are also resources that make possible the achievement of goals not otherwise attainable; hence, individuals and organizations compete for influence and control over institutional structures. Those who control the direction of institutional change can remake the rules of the game to favor their interests. Thus, firms lobby to change the legal environment in a manner that accrues to their competitive advantage, and political parties compete for control. Changes in formal rules are enacted by formal organizations such as the state. Change in the informal rules such as customs, conventions, and social norms involve a more bottom-up evolutionary process of cultural and social change. Consequently, informal constraints often are resilient to efforts at change imposed by the state. For instance, changes in the formal rules legislated by Congress in the wake of the civil rights movement in the 1960s brought about institutional changes dismantling *de jure* segregation in the South and increasing the cost of discrimination in the workplace nationwide. The subsequent backlash, first expressed through informal resistance and then through formal challenges to federal programs, suggests the resilience of the informal constraints—the customs, conventions, etiquette, and social norms—regulating the color line between blacks and whites.

History matters in understanding the deep patterns of stability and change in institutional structures.<sup>54</sup> Opposition to changes in the for-

mal rules of the game often arises out of social groups whose interests are adversely affected by the new rules. Whereas self-reinforcing mechanisms in institutions tend to frustrate efforts to bring about change, other aspects of the institutional environment may facilitate changes in certain directions.<sup>55</sup> As individuals and organizations attempt to innovate institutional change to open the way for new opportunities, they undermine or remake the existing institutional framework, often with effects not anticipated by those initiating the change. This is seen in the landmark Immigration Act of 1965, whose supporters in Congress never envisioned that their legislation, aimed at eliminating national origins quotas restricting southern and eastern European immigration, would result in altering profoundly the racial and ethnic composition of major cities and even regions of the United States. In order to ensure continuity in the ethnic mix of immigration, they drafted a family reunification clause to the new immigration law. But they did not anticipate that family members of European Americans would prefer to remain in Europe and that relatively small existing ethnic populations would generate a high volume of chain migration from Asia through the family reunification option.

Our theory of assimilation builds on the behavioral assumptions of the new institutionalism in sociology. Agents act according to mental models shaped by cultural beliefs—customs, social norms, law, ideology, and religion—that mold perceptions of self-interest. They follow rule-of-thumb heuristics in solving problems that arise, and make decisions in the face of uncertainty stemming from incomplete information and the risk of opportunism in the institutional environment. For this reason, new institutionalists view rationality as *context-bound* and contingent in contrast to the rationality assumption of neoclassical economics that individuals maximize their utility with complete information and unbounded cognitive capacity. Context-bound rationality focuses analytic attention on integrating accounts of choices made by individuals with an analysis of the institutional context.<sup>56</sup> It involves a “thick” as opposed to a “thin” view of rationality. The latter depends on an abstract account of goals as motivated by a self-interest rooted in utility or preferences and posits utility maximization as the mode of reasoning for actors who calculate costs and benefits of alternative courses of action in selecting the most efficient means to an end. By contrast, a context-bound rationality views agency as stemming from choices made by actors according to perceptions of

costs and benefits embedded in the institutional environment. It assumes limited cognitive ability on the part of actors and interprets rationality partly as a product of institutional processes. Adaptations based on unintended consequences of action that result in success or rewards also fall within the purview of context-bound rationality.<sup>57</sup> If an unintended consequence results in success, actors are likely to repeat the action. Similarly, if the informal norms of a close-knit group contribute to producing unintended beneficial outcome, the group will reinforce these norms.

#### *Mechanisms of Assimilation*

Our aim in this section is to specify a repertoire of mechanisms operating at the individual, primary-group, and institutional levels that shape the trajectories of adaptation by immigrants and their descendants. The causal mechanisms we propose fall broadly into two groups that are general to social behavior: the *proximate* causes which operate at the individual and social network (primary-group and community) levels and are shaped by the forms of capital that individuals and groups possess, and the *distal*, often deeper causes, which are embedded in large structures such as the institutional arrangements of the state, firm, and labor market.

We do not assume that assimilation is a universal outcome, occurring in a straight-line trajectory from the time of arrival to entry into the middle class. The assumption of inevitability assumes away what requires explanation. Assimilation, defined as the attenuation of distinctions based on ethnic origin, is not an inevitable outcome of adaptation by ethnic and racial minorities, as even a cursory reflection on the extent and scope of ethnic conflict around the world would suggest.

To the extent that assimilation occurs, it proceeds incrementally, usually as an intergenerational process, stemming both from individuals' purposive action and from the unintended consequences of their workaday decisions. In the case of immigrants and their descendants who may not intentionally seek to assimilate, the cumulative effect of pragmatic decisions aimed at successful adaptation can give rise to changes in behavior that nevertheless lead to eventual assimilation. Assimilation occurs at different rates within different ethnic and racial groups, so that within the same ethnic group there is very considerable variation in the extent of assimilation—as is clear, for example,

in the sharp contrast between intermarried Jews and the residents of socially encapsulated Hasidic communities.

Finally, we assume that no single causal mechanism explains immigrants' adaptation to their host society; instead a variety of mechanisms operating at different levels are involved. Similarly, the set of mechanisms varies across ethnic and racial groups, sometimes involving more collectivist modes of accommodation (e.g., among Jews, Japanese, Cubans, and Koreans) and sometimes more individualist modes of adaptation (e.g., among Germans, Scandinavians, Italians, and Filipinos). Moreover, for most ethnic groups a mix of collectivist and individualist mechanisms contributes to shaping the trajectory of adaptation, so that even while the modal experience is defined by the purposive activity of individuals, this does not rule out the importance of collectivist efforts at the group level which help to secure opportunities for gain at the individual level.

*Purposive action.* Although individual and corporate actors typically meliorize, rather than maximize—that is, their choices are “intentionally rational, but only limitedly so”<sup>58</sup>—their actions are purposive in the sense that interest and incentives obviously matter. A satisfactory theory of assimilation must, at the individual level, conceptually incorporate agency stemming from purposive action and self-interest and provide an account of the incentives and motivation for assimilation.

Like all of us, immigrants and their descendants act in accordance with mental models shaped by cultural beliefs that mold perceptions of self-interest. They follow rule-of-thumb heuristics in solving problems, and make decisions in the face of uncertainty stemming from incomplete information. Their choices are inevitably context-bound, shaped not only by cultural beliefs but also by institutional constraints.

This is illustrated in the story of a Mexican laborer named Flores who was interviewed by a *New York Times* correspondent along the Mexico-Arizona border. That border is known to be the most dangerous point of entry for illegal migrants because it adjoins the vast Altar Desert. Flores is described as a stout man with the coarse and stubby fingers of someone who works the land. He had “heard of dozens of stories about immigrants who had died from exposure to the heat and cold” crossing the desert and readily “acknowledged that the journey ahead might seem foolhardy.” Yet even without full information of