

THE NEW AMERICANS

A GUIDE TO IMMIGRATION SINCE 1965

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Assimilation

Richard Alba and Victor Nee

The idea of assimilation has undergone a transformation since the middle of the 20th century. Then it was a foundational concept in American thinking about race and ethnicity—not only part of the core of the social science study of these phenomena but accepted by liberal Americans as an ideal toward which their society was inevitably moving, as prejudices were eroded and legal and social handicaps were removed. This dual existence was one source of its subsequent difficulties.

Within a decade of the greatest successes of the civil rights movement in the mid-1960s, the idea of assimilation was under fierce attack. It was now seen on the social science side as the ideology-laden residue of a worn-out functionalism, and on the political and ideological side as an ethnocentric and patronizing imposition on minority peoples struggling to retain their cultural and ethnic integrity. The very word seemed to conjure up a bygone era when the multiracial and multiethnic nature of American society was not comprehended. By 1993, Nathan Glazer could write an essay tellingly entitled “Is Assimilation Dead?”

Yet as social scientists and others struggle to understand the full ramifications of the new era of mass immigration, which began in the U.S. during the 1960s, they are almost inevitably resurrecting the assimilation idea, but now in forms that take into account the critiques of the preceding decades. To be useful as a means of understanding contemporary social realities and their relationship to the past and future, this rehabilitation requires us to strip the concept of assimilation of the normative encumbrances it acquired in its prior existence and provide a theory of assimilation, an account of the mechanisms producing it. At the same time, we must recognize that assimilation is not the only modality of incorporation into American society—that pluralism and racial exclusion are other patterns by which individuals and groups come to be recognized as part of that society.

The Chicago School

Assimilation as a paradigm for the social scientific understanding of the incorporation of immigrants and their descendants is traceable to the Chicago School of Sociology of the early 20th century, and especially to the work of Robert E. Park, W. I. Thomas, and their collaborators and students. At the then newly founded University of Chicago (1890), sociologists took up the challenge of understanding the consequences of the huge migrations flowing into their city. Robert Park and E. W. Burgess defined assimilation as “a process of interpenetration and fusion in which persons and groups acquire the memory, sentiments, and attitudes of other persons and groups and, by sharing their experience and history, are incorporated with them in a common historical life” (p. 735). This definition, which clearly does not require the erasure of all signs of ethnic origins, equates assimilation with changes that bring ethnic minorities into mainstream American life. It expresses an understanding of assimilation with contemporary appeal, leaving ample room for the persistence of ethnic elements set within a common frame.

Nonetheless, Park’s legacy is closely identified with a teleological notion of assimilation as the end stage of a “race-relations cycle” of “contact, competition, accommodation, and eventual assimilation,” a sequence that, in its most famous statement, was viewed as “apparently progressive and irreversible” (1950, p. 150). Park’s analysis referred to the large-scale processes in the modern world economy that are bringing once-separated peoples into closer contact. Competition is the initial, unstable consequence of contact, as the groups struggle to gain advantages over one another, leading to the more stable stage of accommodation, in which a social structure of typically unequal relations among groups and a settled understanding of group positions have emerged. But no matter how stable the social order, 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 grow up out of them.”

Members of the Chicago School were pioneers in the study of city life, and the most enduring empirical studies they produced examine assimilation 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” (1926, p. 18). 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.” In *The Ghetto*, Park’s student Louis Wirth analyzed this process for Jewish settlements in Chicago.

The empirical study that had the greatest subsequent impact was W. Lloyd Warner and Leo Srole’s *The Social Systems of American Ethnic Groups*, published in

1945. Concentrating on an older industrial city in New England, Warner and Srole observed a series of correlated changes over successive generations of various European ethnic groups. They documented the decline of white ethnic enclaves as the native-born generations shifted out of the working class to higher occupational and class positions and into better residential neighborhoods. In addition, they found behavioral changes in the private spheres of ethnic groups, in the relations between husbands and wives and between parents and children, and 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, though they varied greatly in the time required for it to occur.

The Canonical Synthesis

By the middle of the 20th century, the zenith of the melting pot as metaphor, assimilation was integral to American self-understanding and the pivot around which social science investigations of ethnicity and even of race turned. Yet little had been accomplished in the way of developing clear and consistent operational concepts that could be deployed to measure the extent of assimilation. This problem was not solved until Milton Gordon's *Assimilation in American Life* in 1964.

Gordon's singular contribution was to delineate in a lucid way the multiple dimensions of assimilation. Acculturation, he argued, was the dimension that typically came first and was inevitable, to a large degree. 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 host 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 key life goals. In the U.S., the specific 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." In his view, acculturation was predominantly a one-way process: the minority group adopted the core culture, which remained basically unchanged by acculturation. Only institutional religion was exempt: he did not expect that different immigrant groups would give up their fundamental religious identities—e.g., Catholic or Jewish—as a result of acculturation.

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 kinds of assimilation ("*Once structural assimilation has occurred, . . . all of the other types of assimilation will naturally follow*"; p. 81). 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. All told, Gordon identified seven dimensions of assimilation—cultural, structural, marital, identity, prejudice, discrimination, and civic.

Gordon's legacy also includes codification of alternative conceptions of assimilation in the U.S. Gordon described these as the "theories" of Anglo-conformity and 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 World War I, equated assimilation with acculturation in the Anglo-American mold, ignoring its other dimensions. The model of the melting pot has enjoyed several periods of popularity, 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, defined by Will Herberg, foresaw intermarriage as taking place within population pools defined by religious boundaries. 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.

Another prominent element of the canonical synthesis is the notion of "straight-line assimilation," popularized by Herbert Gans. This idea envisions 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 to more complete assimilation.

Though Gordon presented a complex multidimensional specification of assimilation, it soon became clear that his account omitted some critical dimensions. One was socioeconomic assimilation, which researchers began to consider in the aftermath of Peter Blau and Otis Dudley Duncan's seminal status-attainment study, *The American Occupational Structure*. The emphasis on socioeconomic position reinforced the preexisting view that assimilation and social mobility are inextricably linked. Socioeconomic assimilation was frequently equated with attainment of average or above-average socioeconomic standing, as measured by indicators such as education, occupation, and income. 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 conflated it with social mobility.

This conception has become problematic in the contemporary era of mass immigration, because immigrant groups no longer inevitably start at the bottom of the labor market; numerous groups today bring financial capital as well as substantial educational credentials, professional training, and other forms of human capital. One way to avoid the historical specificity of the conventional formulation is to define socioeconomic assimilation as minority participation in mainstream institutional structures (e.g., labor market, schools) on a par 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 similarly positioned others 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 attainment. In this way, one can assimilate into the working class, and many do.

Another addition to the repertoire of assimilation concepts involved residential mobility. Douglas Massey's "spatial assimilation" model formalized the significance of residence for the assimilation paradigm. Its basic tenet holds that 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 convert socioeconomic and assimilation progress into residential gain, by "purchasing" homes in places with greater advantages and amenities. Because good schools, clean streets, and other amenities are more common in communities where the majority is concentrated and these communities have been largely suburban since the 1950s, the search for better surroundings leads ethnic minority families toward suburbanization and greater contact with the majority.

Status attainment and residential segregation research provided assimilation studies with quantitative measures 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 mobility, so that the study of assimilation shifted away from the examination of cultural and interpersonal dimensions 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. Numerous findings of persistent inequality in life chances, especially between racially defined groups, were interpreted as evidence of discrimination and restrictions on the opportunity for assimilation.

The Critique of Assimilation

The intellectual blinders of the assimilation literature of the mid-20th century are abundantly illustrated by Warner and Srole's classic study. They concluded that American ethnic groups are destined to be no more than temporary phenomena, doomed by the assimilatory power of the American context. As part of the assimilation process, ethnic groups must, according to these 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." Even more disturbing from the current viewpoint, Warner and Srole correlate 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. While the assimilation of fair-skinned Protestants 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 Italians, was expected to demand a "moderate" period (which Warner and Srole equated with six generations or more!). The assimilation of non-European groups was more problematic still and would continue into the indefinite future or even, in the case of African Americans, be delayed until "the present American social order changes gradually or by revolution."

One problem in this formulation is the inevitability of assimilation, which is presented as the natural conclusion 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 to be assimilating, albeit at a glacial pace. Further, by equating assimilation with full or successful incorporation, Warner and Srole viewed 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 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.

Another objectionable feature is the ethnocentrism of this formulation, 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 to which they should aspire. This is bluntly apparent in the ranking of groups by Warner and Srole, which places groups higher on 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, as Milton Gordon and, more recently, Samuel Huntington also claimed.

From the contemporary standpoint, the 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. Not only does this view seem to contradict the riotous cultural bloom of the U.S., but in our 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 is the absence of a positive role for the ethnic or racial group. From the assimilation perspective, the ethnic community could provide temporary shelter for immigrants 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 required individual mobility, not ethnic loyalty. What this perspective overlooked is that in some cases the ethnic group could, by dominating some economic niches, be the source of better socioeconomic opportunities than the mainstream. There are also important noneconomic ways in which the ethnic group can contribute to the well-being of its members, such as the solidarity and support provided by coethnics.

Redefining (and Refining) Assimilation

The changing demographic realities of the U.S. and the need for a viable concept of assimilation point to the value of rethinking some of the classical views on assimilation. Some contemporary scholars have taken up the challenge. Rogers Brubaker, for example, describes assimilation as "a process of becoming similar, in some respect, to some reference population." We start from the recognition of assimilation as a form of ethnic change. As the anthropologist Frederick Barth emphasized, ethnicity itself is a social boundary, a distinction that individuals make in their everyday lives and that shapes their actions and mental orientations toward others. 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 . . .").

In our own work, assimilation, as a form of ethnic change, can be defined 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. As ethnic boundaries become blurred or weakened, 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 from both sides of the boundary perceive themselves with less and less

frequency in terms of ethnic categories and increasingly only under specific circumstances. Assimilation, moreover, is not a dichotomous outcome and does not require the disappearance of ethnicity; consequently, the individuals and groups undergoing assimilation may still bear a number of ethnic markers. It can occur on a large scale to members of a group even as the group itself remains as a highly visible point of reference on the social landscape, embodied in an ethnic culture, neighborhoods, and institutional infrastructures.

Our definition calls attention to the importance of boundaries for processes of ethnic stability and change, raising the possibility that features of social boundaries may make assimilation more or less likely and influence the specific forms that it takes. Aristide Zolberg and Long Litt Woon have introduced an extremely useful typology of boundary-related changes that sheds light on different ways that assimilation can occur. Boundary crossing corresponds to the classic version of individual-level assimilation: someone moves from one group to another without any real change to the boundary itself (although if such boundary crossings happen on a large scale and in a consistent direction, then the social structure is being altered). Boundary blurring implies that the social profile of a boundary has become less distinct: the clarity of the social distinction involved has become clouded, and individuals' location with respect to the boundary may appear indeterminate. The final process, boundary shifting, involves the relocation of a boundary so that populations once situated on one side are now included on the other: former outsiders are thereby transformed into insiders.

Boundary crossing could be said to represent assimilation à la Warner and Srole; that is, the boundary is crossed when a minority individual becomes like the majority through wholesale acculturation. But boundary shifting represents a possibility not truly recognized in the older literature but captured recently in the intensive discussion of how various disparaged immigration groups, such as the Irish and eastern European Jews, made themselves acceptable as "whites" in the U.S. racial order: a radical shift in a group's position. Yet boundary blurring may represent the most intriguing and underexplored possibility among the three. Blurring entails the ambiguity of a boundary with respect to some set of individuals. This could mean that they are seen simultaneously as members of the groups on both sides of the boundary or that sometimes they appear to be members of one and at other times members of the other. Under these circumstances, assimilation may be eased, insofar as the individuals undergoing it do not sense a rupture between participation in mainstream institutions and familiar social and cultural practices and identities. Assimilation of this type involves intermediate or hyphenated stages that allow individuals to feel that they are members of an ethnic minority and of the mainstream simultaneously. Boundary blurring could occur when the mainstream culture and identity are relatively porous and allow for the incorporation of cultural elements brought by immigrant groups—i.e., two-sided cultural change.

Another innovation is the concept of segmented assimilation, formulated by Alejandro Portes and Min Zhou. They argue that a critical question concerns the segment of American society into which individuals assimilate and that multiple trajectories are required for the answer. One trajectory leads to entry to the middle-class mainstream. But another leads to incorporation into the racialized population at the bottom of American society. This trajectory may be followed by many of those in the second and third generations of immigrant groups handicapped by their very humble initial locations in American society and barred from entry to the mainstream by their race. On this route of assimilation, they are guided by the cultural models of poor, native-born African Americans and Latinos. Perceiving that they are likely to remain in their parents' status at the bottom of the occupational hierarchy and evaluating this prospect negatively, because unlike their parents they have absorbed the standards of the American mainstream, they succumb to the temptation to drop out of school and join the inner-city underclass.

A New Theory of Assimilation

The successful restoration of the concept of assimilation to its rightful place as an important pattern of incorporation requires a theory, a specification of the causal mechanisms that bring it about. Earlier writings posited that assimilation was an inevitable outcome of human migration to North America. We hold that assimilation should not be assumed but instead must be explained as a variable outcome of the dynamics of intergroup relations. In our theory, the pace and success of assimilation depend principally on three factors. First is the crucial effect of informal and formal institutions—customs, norms, conventions, and rules—which establish the underlying framework of competition and cooperation in a society. Second are the workaday decisions of individual immigrants and their descendants, which often lead to assimilation, not as a stated goal but as an unintended consequence of social behavior oriented to successful accommodation. And third are the network ties embedded in the immigrant community and family, which shape the particular ways in which their members adapt to American life.

Institutional mechanisms. The most dramatic change affecting assimilation in the past half-century took place at the level of law and public policy. Immigrants from southern and eastern Europe did encounter discrimination, but their path to assimilation was never legally blocked, and their constitutional rights provided basic legal safeguards. By contrast, for nonwhite minorities before World War II, the formal rules and their enforcement bolstered the racism that excluded them from civil society. For example, Asian immigrants were ineligible for citizenship until 1952 and faced many discriminatory local and regional laws that restricted their property rights and civil liberties.

But this blockage yielded as a result of the legal changes of the civil rights era,

which extended fundamental constitutional rights to racial minorities. These changes have not been merely formal; they have been accompanied by new institutional arrangements, the monitoring and enforcement mechanisms that have increased the cost of discrimination. For instance, Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 gives the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission the right to intervene in private bias lawsuits when it deems that a case is of "general public importance." Although enforcement of Title VII has been inconsistent under different federal administrations, corporations and nonprofit firms have become more attentive in observing its guidelines, with increasing numbers of firms offering diversity and multicultural training workshops for managers and employees and instituting company rules against racial and gender discrimination. Landmark settlements of federal discrimination lawsuits, such as that against Texaco in 1997, have significantly raised the cost of discrimination.

Institutional changes have gone hand in hand with changes in mainstream values. One of these is the remarkable decline in the power of racist ideologies since the end of World War II. An examination of more than half a century of survey data demonstrates unequivocally that belief in racial separation—endorsed by a majority of white Americans at midcentury, when only a third of whites believed that "white students and black students should go to the same schools"—has steadily eroded. Americans have generally embraced the principle of racial equality, even if they are ambivalent about policies such as affirmative action that are intended to bring about equality as a matter of fact.

Such institutional and ideological shifts have not ended racial prejudice and racist practice, but they have changed their character. Racism is now outlawed and as a consequence has become more covert and subterranean, and it can no longer be advocated publicly without sanction. America's commitment to the rule of law has over the course of the latter half of the 20th century brought about far-reaching institutional change that has removed race as an insurmountable obstacle to assimilation for most of today's immigrants.

Individual action. A satisfactory theory of assimilation must acknowledge that individuals are not merely the passive vectors of abstract social forces and must factor in their purposive action and self-interest by providing an account of the incentives and motivations for assimilation. In adapting to life in the U.S., immigrants and the second generation face choices in which the degrees of risk and benefit are hard to gauge and involve unforeseeable long-term consequences. In contemplating the strategies best suited to improve their lives and those of their children, they weigh the risks and potential benefits of "ethnic" strategies, dependent on opportunities available through ethnic networks, versus "mainstream" ones, which involve the American educational system and the open labor market. Often enough, there may be little choice in these matters. When immigrants have little human and financial capital and/or they are undocumented, they will usually be limited to jobs located

through ethnic networks and constrained to residence in ethnic areas. But others may try mixed strategies, built from ethnic and mainstream elements, as when second-generation young adults obtain jobs through family and ethnic networks while continuing their education, thus leaving multiple options open.

Individuals striving for success in American society often do not see themselves as assimilating. Yet unintended consequences of practical strategies taken in pursuit of highly valued goals—a good education, a good job, a nice place to live, interesting friends and acquaintances—often result in specific forms of assimilation. It is not uncommon, for instance, for first- and second-generation Asian parents to raise their children speaking only English in the belief that their chances for success in school will be improved by more complete mastery of the host language. Likewise, the search for a desirable place to live—with good schools and opportunities for children to grow up away from the seductions of deviant models of behavior—often leads immigrant families to ethnically mixed suburbs (if and when socioeconomic success permits this). One consequence, whether intended or not, is greater interaction with families of other backgrounds; such increased contact tends to encourage acculturation, especially for children.

Network mechanisms. Network mechanisms involve social processes that monitor and enforce norms within groups. Norms are the informal rules that provide guidelines for action; they arise from the problem-solving activity of individuals as they strive to improve their chances for success through cooperation with similar others. The role of such mechanisms carries over into the settlement process: newly arrived immigrants turn to relatives and friends for assistance in meeting practical needs, from the first weeks following their arrival to the subsequent sequence of jobs and residences that form the basis of long-term accommodation. Networks lower the risks of international migration and increase the chances of success in making the transition to settled lives in America. Consequently, one can view network ties as a form of social capital, providing an array of tangible forms of assistance, especially timely and accurate information about the availability of start-up jobs and places to live. They become especially critical when discriminatory barriers block an individualistic pattern of social mobility, for then assimilation, when it occurs, depends on collectivist strategies.

Most ethnic groups in America have relied on collectivist strategies to a greater or lesser extent, even though the dominant pattern of assimilation conforms to the individualistic pattern. For instance, Irish Americans, in their effort to shed the stereotype of “shanty Irish,” socially distanced themselves from African Americans as a group strategy to gain acceptance from Anglo-Americans, ostracizing those who intermarried with blacks. More recently, South Asians who settled in an agricultural town in northern California evolved norms encouraging selective acculturation while discouraging social contact with local white youths who taunted the Punjabi youths. The Punjabi immigrants’ strategy, according to the anthropologist Margaret

Gibson, emphasized academic achievement in the public schools as a means to success, which they defined not locally but in terms of the opportunity structures of the mainstream.

As a form of capital, network ties can become a fungible asset, which, like human capital, can be converted into material gain. Such social capital is accumulated as a byproduct of ongoing social relationships, manifested in the buildup of goodwill and trust between members of a group who have cooperated in the past. For immigrants, it is made up of the webs of network ties that they have accumulated over the course of the migration experience, starting with the strong ties of family, kinship, and friendship and extending to the weak ties of acquaintanceship.

A profound alteration to the social scientific understanding of immigrant group incorporation is that it is no longer exclusively focused on assimilation. Very abstractly, three documented patterns describe today how immigrants and their descendants become “incorporated into”—that is, a recognized part of—American society (or possibly any society). The pattern of assimilation involves a progressive, typically multigenerational process of socioeconomic, cultural, and social integration into the mainstream, that part of American society where racial and ethnic origins have at most minor effects on the life chances of individuals. A second pattern entails racial exclusion and absorption into a racial minority status, which implies persistent and substantial disadvantages vis-à-vis the members of the mainstream. A third pattern is that of pluralism, in which individuals and groups are able to draw social and economic advantages by keeping some aspects of their lives within the confines of an ethnic matrix (e.g., ethnic economic niches, ethnic communities). A huge literature has developed these ideas and applied them to the ethnic and generational groups arising from contemporary immigration.

All three patterns can be found in the American past, and all are likely to figure in the American present and future, though not in ways identical to those of the past. The pattern of assimilation has been the master trend among Americans of European origin. The pattern of racial exclusion has characterized the experiences of non-European immigrant groups, such as the Chinese, who were confined to ghettos and deprived of basic civil rights because American law defined them as “aliens ineligible for citizenship.” The pattern of pluralism is evident in the minority of European Americans whose lives play out primarily in ethnic social worlds, which remain visible in the form of ethnic neighborhoods in such cities as New York and Chicago.

In contemplating contemporary immigration, most observers readily concede the continued relevance of the patterns of racialization and pluralism. The first reappears in the new concept of segmented assimilation, and the second has been elaborated in old and new forms, in the guise of such concepts as “ethnic economic enclaves” and “ethnic niches.” It is the pattern of assimilation whose continued sig-

nificance has been doubted or rejected. But it is increasingly apparent that all three remain relevant. It may be unlikely that the assimilation pattern will achieve the hegemonic status it held for the descendants of the earlier era of mass immigration: in the long term, it applied even to many descendants of Asian immigrants, despite the racial exclusion the immigrants themselves initially suffered. But it is not outmoded, as a great deal of evidence about such matters as linguistic assimilation and intermarriage demonstrates. Any reflection on the American future must take assimilation into account.

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Transforming Foreigners into Americans

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In popular belief as well as social science wisdom, the bounds of "society" and the "nation-state" normally converge. While society and state generally overlapped during the mid-20th century, conditions at the turns of the 20th and the 21st century took a different form, making it hard for nation-state societies to wall themselves off from the world. Consequently, the long-term view indicates that social relations regularly span state boundaries. For that reason, international migrants, those people from beyond the nation-state's boundaries, persistently reappear.

In the rich, liberal democracies of the old and new worlds, the advent of international migration produces a social dilemma, as it runs into efforts to force society back inside state boundaries. States seek to bound the societies they enclose: they strive to regulate membership in the national collectivity as well as movement across territorial borders, often using illiberal means to fulfill liberal ends. Nationals, believing in the idea of the national community, endeavor to implement it, making sure that membership is available only to some, and signaling to newcomers that acceptance is contingent on conformity.

In large measure the effort is successful, as foreigners get transformed into nationals. Engaging in the necessary adjustments is often acceptable to those who were earlier willing to abandon home in search of the good life; the everyday demands of fitting in, as well as the attenuation of home-country loyalties and ties, make the foreigners and their descendants increasingly similar to the nationals whose community they have joined. But the ex-foreigners also respond to the message conveyed by nationals and state institutions. In this respect, the assimilation literature, emphasizing the decline of an ethnic difference, largely misleads us: the ex-foreigners do not abandon particularism; rather, they replace an old particularism for one that is new. Finding appeal in the idea of a national community, they also think that their new national community should be bounded, agreeing that the gates through which future foreigners enter ought to be controlled.