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Second Generations: Past, Present, Future

by

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Working Paper No. 200

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### *Abstract*

This paper takes a doubting, though friendly, look at the hypotheses of “second generation decline” and “segmented assimilation” that have framed the emerging research agenda on the new second generation. We begin with a review of the basic approach, outlining the logic of argument, and specifying the central contentions. We then head toward the past, in search of material that will illuminate both the parallels and points of distinction between the immigrant children who grew up in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and those who will move into adulthood during the century to come. Last, we return to the present, inquiring both into the characteristics of those children of immigrants who might find themselves at risk, and the precise source of any such peril.

Thirty years after the Hart-Celler Act brought renewed immigration to the United States, the immigration research agenda is slowly shifting from the newcomers to their children. The timing is just right, as it is only within the past decade that immigrants' children have become a sizable presence in American schools, and still more recently that they have moved from the schools into the labor market. But the tenor of the times is clearly not good. America is in the throes of another debate over immigration, and this time, the parties that would narrow, if not close, the door to immigration seem to have the upper hand. An unhealthy brew of popular anxiety whipped up by politicians who can never stoop too low in search of votes lies behind the emerging trend toward restriction. Nonetheless, there are non-partisan, scholarly reasons for worry. Many of the newcomers arrive with low levels of skill, converging on a handful of metropolitan areas that lack the resources needed to speed the process of immigrant adaptation. And these days, even the friends of immigration will concede that serious questions have been raised about immigrants' prospects and about the costs associated with absorbing the many newcomers who have moved to the United States over the past fifteen years.

Not surprisingly, then, the emerging scholarship on the children of immigrants has begun on a note of inflected pessimism. Recent publications by Herbert Gans, Alejandro Portes, Ruben Rumbaut, and Min Zhou -- leading students of American ethnic life, and immigrants themselves -- outline, with clarity and acuity, the reasons for concern: Coming from everywhere but Europe, today's newcomers are visibly identifiable, and enter a mainly white society still not cured of its racist afflictions. Shifts in the structure of the economy aggravate the impact of discrimination: while poorly-educated immigrant parents seem to have no trouble getting started at the very bottom, the shift toward knowledge-

intensive jobs means that the next generation will have to do well in school if it wishes to surpass the achievements of the foreign-born. With big-city schools in more trouble than ever before, the outlook for successful passage through the educational system seems dim. As second generation expectations are unlikely to remain unchanged, we can count on a mismatch between the aspirations of immigrant children and requirements of the jobs which they seek.<sup>1</sup>

So our leading sociological commentators on ethnicity are worried about “second generation decline”. Their anxieties, however, take a very different form from that voiced in the popular press: there we read that the children of today’s immigrants are failing to assimilate, in supposed contrast to their predecessors of earlier in the century. The scholarly literature assures us that new second generation is assimilating, all right, but in “segmented” fashion, with some large, though so far undefined, proportion likely to converge with the “urban underclass.”

This new perspective on second generation change emerged just as the topic of immigrants’ children showed up on the scholarly radar screen. As such, it seems likely to have been designed for agenda-setting purposes, laying out a set of leads and sensitizing concepts for subsequent researchers to modify, extend, alter, and systematize as empirical work on the new second generation moved ahead. But these ideas have struck a particularly deep chord: consequently, the hypotheses of “second generation decline” or “segmented assimilation” have already assumed canonical form. As can be seen from the articles appearing in the *International Migration Review*’s special issue on “The New

Second Generation”, or from any other perusal of this rapidly growing literature, the research community has taken the new perspective as conventional wisdom.<sup>2</sup>

One can only admire the persuasive power of ideas. But it does seem that a skeptical review is long overdue. While the new views present a powerful case, the core contentions rest on a set of assumptions neither adequately specified and nor beyond reproach. Moreover, the current pessimism is heavily influenced by a particular, never fully articulated view of the past, adopting an interpretive perspective that puts the contemporary situation in an especially unfavorable light. The anxiety about emerging second generation trends is also notably broad-brushed: while one can argue that some portion of today’s second generation is either stalled or headed downward, the relative size of that portion is certainly relevant, and that matter is never addressed. And the underlying case for pessimism relies on a set of analogies to the experience of other, contemporary minorities that have not yet received much attention, and may not bear up under the scrutiny.

Thus, this paper takes a doubting, if friendly, look at the hypotheses of “second generation decline” and “segmented assimilation”. We begin with a review of the basic approach, outlining the logic of argument, and specifying the central contentions. We then head toward the past, in search of material that will illuminate both the parallels and points of distinction between the immigrant children who grew up in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and those who will move into adulthood during the century to come. Last, we return to the present, inquiring both into the characteristics of those children of immigrant who might find themselves at risk, and the precise source of any such peril.

### Second generation decline?

There is little question that many, possibly even most immigrant children are heading upward, exemplified by the large number of Asian students enrolled in the nation's leading university, some the children of workers, others the descendants of immigrants who moved right into the middle-class. The rapid Asian ascent evokes parallels with the past, most clearly the first and second generation Jews who began appearing at City College, and then Harvard, Columbia, and other prestigious schools in numbers that discomfited the then dominant WASPs. As Steinberg (1981) pointed out some years ago, it was the Jews' good fortune to have moved to America just when the educational system was expanding and moving away from its classical past, and to have converged on the Northeast, where opportunities to pursue schooling were particularly good. But even so, *schleppers* greatly outnumbered scholars, and the proportion of Jews who made their way to Harvard or its proletarian cousin, CCNY, was dwarfed by those who moved ahead as skilled workers, clerks, or small businessowners. In this light, the Asian advance into higher education remains phenomenal: in the Los Angeles region, for example, 18 to 24 year olds in *every* Asian group (Vietnamese immigrants who arrived in the United States *after the age of 10* included) attend college at a rate that exceeds native-born whites, with the native-born leagues ahead of native-born whites on this count. And ironically, the temper tantrums of "angry white men" seem likely to accelerate, rather than reverse this trend -- quite a different turn of events than that which transpired in the Ivy League 70 years ago.

Even though some portion of today's second generation is rapidly ascending the totem pole, others appear to be left behind; it is this group that has attracted scholarly interest and concern. As we read the emerging literature, the obstacles to progress appear to stem from a complex of intersecting economic, social, and psychological factors. The starting point is race: since the European immigrants, as Portes and Zhou write, were "uniformly white", "skin color reduced a major barrier to entry into the American mainstream (76)." Like beauty, skin color lies in the eyes of the beholder, and as Gans reminds us, white southern and eastern European immigrants were earlier characterized as races. Henry Adams, E.A. Ross and others of their ilk were certainly convinced that the swarthy masses of the turn of the century were of a different kind; since Portes and Zhou are quite right in arguing that race, or rather the meanings associated with it, "is a trait belonging to the host society", one wonders whether levels of xenophobia and racism are indeed higher today than they were in the 1920s or 1930s -- when the last second generation came of age. Still, the thinking today concludes that the "ethnic and racial discrimination" suffered by contemporary dark-skinned and non-Caucasian immigrants seems "more permanent" (Gans, 176).

Perhaps. But the argumentation has more to do with second generation response than with the mainstream's problems with race. After all, discriminatory practices felt by the children must surely be experienced by the parents, who, in self-presentation and cultural attributes, are far more distinct than their offspring. The children, however, respond differently: they have a heightened perception of discrimination and its



prevalence; and they react to actual and perceived discrimination by rejecting the dreams that impelled their parents.

But how to account for this distinctive second generational response? Answer: the advent of the second generation yields an attitudinal shift, which in turn, stems from varying sources. One derives from the immigration process itself; following Piore (1979), we can call this "second generation revolt". The immigrants arrive willing to do the jobs that natives won't hold: however low the jobs may fall in the U.S. hierarchy, they still offer wages and compensation superior to the opportunities back home. Having been exposed to different wage and consumption standards from the start, the children want more; consequently, the question is whether their "careers...keep pace with their U.S.-acquired aspirations" (Portes and Zhou, 85).

For Piore, the generational shift in immigrant aspirations was inherent in the processes of migration and settlement and thus a recurrent phenomenon. This would suggest greater continuity between yesterday's and today's second generations, but Portes, Zhou, and Gans all argue that the mismatch between aspiration and opportunity is greater today than ever before, and therefore the greater likelihood of frustration as well (shades of Merton!) The conundrum of the contemporary second generation lies in the continuing transformation of the U.S. economy. The manufacturing economy of old allowed for a three, possibly four generational move beyond the bottom-most positions to which the immigrants were originally consigned. Even though low-skilled jobs persist, occupational segmentation has "reduced the opportunities for incremental upward mobility through well-paid, blue-collar positions" (Portes and Zhou, 85). The declining viability of small

business reduce the possibilities for advancement through the expansion of businesses established by the immigrant generation. And the general stalling of mobility reduces the chances for ethnic succession: Jews and Italians followed the Irish into the public sector as the latter moved on to more lucrative pursuits; today's civil servants are unlikely to enjoy the same options, which will close off this path of mobility to today's second generation.

Of course, the manner in which the comparison is constructed heightens the contrast between the experience of the earlier and the later second generations. The children of the European immigrants, it appears, automatically moved up the ladder, taking over the "relatively secure but low-status blue- and white-collar jobs that WASPs and the descendants of earlier immigrants would no longer accept" (Gans, 177). The history of the earlier second generation is also removed from time, recounted in the afterglow of the prosperity of the post- World War II period, when in reality the children of immigrants began entering the labor market in the 1920s, 1930s, and even before.

Historical considerations aside, the advent of the hourglass economy confronts the immigrant children with a cruel choice: either acquire the college, and other advanced degrees needed to move into the professional/managerial elite, or else accept the same menial jobs to which the first generation was consigned. Given the aspirational shift entailed in "second generation revolt", the latter possibility is not in the cards. As Gans writes:

If the young people are offered immigrant jobs, there are some good reasons why they might turn them down. They come to the world of work with American standards, and may not even be familiar with the old-country conditions..by which immigrants..judged the urban job market. Nor do they have the long-range goals that persuaded their parents to work long hours at low wages; they know they cannot be deported and are here to stay in America, and most likely they are not obliged to send money to relatives left in the old country. From their perspective,

immigrant jobs are demeaning; moreover, illegal jobs and scams may pay more and look better socially -- especially when peer pressure is also present (182).

The scenario has the ring of plausibility; but note the slippage in the argument. One need not have discriminating employers and "poor young men with dark skins" (Gans 182) for the hourglass economy to still yield the same effect. As long as the parents arrive with very little schooling (consider the fact that 10 percent of Mexican immigrants in the L.A. region report *zero* years of schooling), and doing better requires a substantial increment of formal education, immigrant children who drop out of high school or learn little or nothing while there will do poorly -- even in a world of color-blind and benevolent employers.

Gans links aspirational change to the process of settlement; that element appears in Portes and Zhou as well, but they place greater accent on contingent factors. The new immigrants converge on central cities where they live in close contact with earlier established, native minorities. Proximity to African- and Mexican-Americans yields two effects. One has to do with outsider categorization: oblivious to finer distinctions of nativity and ethnicity, whites simplify reality, identifying immigrants with their native-born homologs. More importantly, propinquity yields exposure to the "adversarial" norms of "marginalized youth". As immigrant children come into contact with the reactive subculture developed by native minorities, they undergo a process of "socialization" that "can effectively block parental plans for intergenerational mobility." (Portes and Zhou, 83).

In all likelihood, factors inherent to the migration process, as well as those of a more contingent nature, are at work. At the very least, theoretical clarity requires that we distinguish between the two; empirical research will also need to assess their relative

importance. While both explanations yield the same effect, "second generation revolt", in the Piore/Gans view, does not require the presence of native minorities and their oppositional subculture. By contrast, it is not clear whether exposure to a pre-existing oppositional subculture would work in equally insidious ways, were there not an immigrant predisposition toward that point of view, born out of the frustration produced by the hourglass economy. Alternatively, the "oppositional subculture" may be nothing more than the expression of "second generation revolt", in which case the explanation founders on an attribution error. Historical evidence is germane to this question, since it would allow us to determine whether or not an "oppositional subculture" is *sui generis* to the situation of contemporary immigrants, for whom the "proximal host" is a visible, stigmatized, native-born minority.

Both explanations also highlight a similar factor: namely, exposure to influences *outside* the immigrant communities. The argument for inherent factors underlines the impact of the broader society, and its culture of consumption. By contrast, the argument for contingent factors underlines the impact of a subsociety and its distinctive sub-culture; to the extent that the subculture reflects the broader culture in its emphasis on individualism, acquisitiveness, and materialism, the two lines of influence may be highly intertwined.

It is also worth recalling that the type of immigrants around which Piore organized his theoretical framework began as temporary migrants and came from peasant societies. It is precisely those origins and circumstances that account for the divergence between first generation expectations and the wage and consumption standards of the native-born.

Though the argument is never developed, it would follow that the diffusion of consumption norms from host to sending countries could alter expectations *prior* to migration, and therefore would also accelerate the process of second generation revolt. In that case, the new immigration may differ from the old in the degree of *pre*-migration cultural change; if the old world communities were more isolated and more attached to traditional modes of scarcity-bound consumption, the influence of U.S. consumption patterns may have worked with a more delayed effect, making second generation revolt less intense than it is today.

In sum, the recent attempts to conceptualize the dilemmas the second generation have the great merit of laying out an important research agenda and directing our attention toward hypotheses which can be measured and assessed. While these conceptual efforts suffer from the usual drawbacks of logical consistency, adequacy of evidence, and appropriateness of the comparative frame, the main problem may simply be that the effort is premature. The children of today's immigrants may well be star-crossed; but a careful comparison at the past may prevent us from consigning them to oblivion and offer a more realistic assessment of second generation prospects and the time-honored, predictable travails they will encounter.

### **Second Generations Past**

Given the distinctive characteristics of today's immigrants, one might not have expected the debate over their children's prospects to have quickly taken such a pessimistic turn. At the early part of the 20th century, immigrants were a relatively homogenous population of persons narrowly concentrated at the bottom of the

occupational scale. True, there were entrepreneurs among the immigrants of old -- mainly persons with a background in trade (as among the Jews) or unskilled laborers who somehow managed to move into entrepreneurial endeavors. Nonetheless, in 1910, immigrants from all major groups, save the British, were far more likely to work at the least skilled jobs than were native whites of native parentage and all were less likely to work in white collar jobs, whether at high or low levels. Italians, Poles, and other Eastern and Southern Europeans disproportionately fell into jobs at the very bottom of the occupational ladder. Low levels of literacy -- just over half of the "other Eastern and Southern Europeans" reported that they could read, and just over half of the Italians could not speak English, for example -- also distinguished these groups from the newcomers from western and northern Europe. Though the Jews entered America at a level above their counterparts from elsewhere in southern and eastern Europe, they still began with quite a disadvantage -- in clear contrast to the high skilled immigrants of the post-1965 period.

To be sure, the adult second generation of the time found itself at less of a disadvantage -- although the British and German, and even the Irish immigrants of an earlier wave began with advantages that the newcomers of the turn of the century never possessed. Even so, immigrant adolescents of all national origins were a good deal less likely than natives of native parentage to remain in school. The gap in school attendance in school attendance is surely worth recalling: among 14 and 18 year old boys, the children of Polish, Italian, and other Eastern and Southern European origin were about three times less likely to attend school than native whites of native parentage. Differences

in background characteristics account for part of that gap: with all conditions equal and, and taking the best of the cases, Italian 14-18 year old boys were about two-thirds as likely as their native white counterparts to be enrolled in school. Since in reality, conditions weren't equal, disparities of this nature were unlikely to have been inconsequential for the young people who entered the labor market around World War I and continued working on to the mid-1960s, a period when skill requirements were continually enhanced.

Put simply: the good old days....they were terrible. Distance and nostalgia should not blind us to the very significant disadvantages that the earlier second generation encountered. It may be the case that today's second generation begins equally far behind the starting line -- though the large number of middle-class immigrants makes this an unlikely scenario for many. The immigrant children of the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century might still have to race harder and faster than their historical counterparts, given the nature and pace of economic change. But any comparison with the past has to build on an appropriate understanding of how the earlier catch-up took place; and in this respect, the new approaches do not quite seem adequate.

**Paths:** Today's literature begins with the assumption that yesterday's second generation followed a common upward path, of which the first step involved access to manufacturing jobs one or more rungs above the positions held by their parents. That assumption has the ring of plausibility: the immigrants themselves were recruited to staff the growing industrial complex, which in turn continued to provide a large share of employment through mid-century, especially in those regions of the country on which the

immigrants of the 1880-1920 period converged. But the historical literature is silent on this issue, perhaps because manufacturing as a mobility ladder has gained importance only in retrospect, that is, now that we no longer have it, or at least, not in the same form. More importantly, the conventional view is likely persuasive in part because its view of the past is simple, and simple always runs the risk of being simplistic. Some groups clearly moved up faster than the others, with the Jews the best case in point, and for them, manufacturing clearly did not serve as the crucial ladder of second generation advance (however helpful it might have been for the foreign-born): by 1940, for example, manufacturing accounted for less than a third of employment in the second generation Jewish niches in New York City, and its importance eroded severely over the following ten years (Waldinger, 1996).

Other groups also found alternative paths of upward movement, for example, the Irish, with their reliance on the public sector (and their much greater dependence on service employment, especially among women, but still true for men as well). And though the matter has not been well explored, it seems reasonable to expect considerable variation among the very least skilled of the new immigrants of old, if for no other reason than geographic factors. The Italians, for example, were far more likely than the non-Jewish East Europeans to cluster in the New England and Mid-Atlantic regions, where heavy manufacturing was not nearly as important a source of employment as in the mid-west, where the Polish and Slavic concentration was especially prominent. It's worth recalling that manufacturing peaked in New York City quite early in the century (though somewhat later in the greater New York metropolitan area); hence those children of the



earlier immigrants who came of age in New York found a way upward despite a rather different industrial mix than the structure encountered by those who entered the labor market in Chicago, Cleveland, or Detroit. Unlike their Jewish counterparts, the second generation Italians of the 1940s and 1950s did concentrate in manufacturing, but the mix of manufacturing industries -- publishing and printing, apparel, and such like -- took a form reflecting the distinctive nature of New York economic specializations, and was complemented by important clusters in self-employment and the civil service (Waldinger, 1996). And while industrial structure was a factor influencing the types of paths followed by particular groups, it was unlikely to have been a factor of determining influence; then as now, groups are likely to have established niches in the economy, so that even similarly low-skilled groups sharing a common spatial arena (let's say Italians and Poles in Chicago), ended up with distinctive patterns of economic specialization.

**Gendered pathways:** So there is reason to think that the earlier second generations moved ahead along several, not one pathways. Historical precedent need not preclude the possibility that only one path can lead the children of today's less skilled immigrants upwards; but at the very least, we should be attentive to the alternatives. In any case, today's reconstruction of yesterday's upward movement is an undeniably gendered account: the manufacturing story is really about heavy industry and the relatively high wages paid to the semi-skilled workers employed in durable manufacturing from roughly 1920 to 1970. But to tell the story this way makes it clear that it's a story about men, since heavy industry had little room or need for women, war time years excepted. Clearly, we don't think it likely that manufacturing mattered equally for all

ethnic groups; but to the extent that second generation groups depended on factory jobs, they counted far more for second generation men than for their female counterparts; and the more we move from early 20th century to mid-century, the truer that generalization holds. Certainly, the women who came of age after the 1920s, were more likely to move into the then burgeoning white-collar sector than they were to gravitate into manufacturing, as did those of their mothers who worked. After all, the 1920-1970 period was the golden age of the female secretary and the grade school teacher, and the prevalence of female store clerks was increasing rapidly as well. These women may not have stayed in the labor force after they married, but many returned in later years; later cohorts certainly enjoyed much longer work careers.

We note that these generalizations are unlikely to hold in the same way for all groups; and the types of spatial variations noted above may apply with ever greater force for women, since a financial/headquarters complex like New York probably generated a much stronger demand for office workers than a less variegated, industrial city like Detroit or Cleveland. At a minimum, however, a gendered view will further complicate our vision of earlier second generation pathways up from the bottom.

But taking gender into account is likely to do more. On the one hand, it will remind us that there was historically a feedback between changes on the demand side and the behavior of second generation groups. After all, entry into clerical employment was contingent on a different set of skills than those demanded by manufacturing, with clerical employers more likely to insist on higher levels of literacy and numeracy. As historians have already shown us, the immigrant offspring of the past altered their attitudes toward

and behavior in school when they realized that more education would yield dividends -- the recently documented history of Italian-American women in New York City a perfect case in point. For the 1910-1950 period, those attaining school levels modestly above the norm -- high school graduation, for example -- were often women, with the benefits reaped not only in the marriage, but in the job market as well. On the other hand, consideration of gender suggests that second generation movement upward involved income packaging within households and male as well as female strategies for getting ahead. Recall, that the work careers of the descendants of the 1880-1920 immigrants extended from the 1920s to the 1970s, also a period of steadily rising female labor force participation (notwithstanding the momentarily downward slide during the baby boom years). Not all groups of second generation women will have traveled up the curve of rising labor force participation at quite the same rate -- and establishing these differences will again help flesh out our understanding of the complexity of earlier experiences -- but an upward curve appears to apply to most.

These historical parallels are relevant to today's debates, since progress among the "at risk" groups of the contemporary second generation is likely to be largely contingent on the labor market situation of their female members. Indeed, the historical comparison suggests new lines of inquiry to be pursued when examining the contemporary situation, since the match between second generation skills and job requirements might look much better for women and than men. Second generation women might be particularly likely to benefit from ethnic succession in "pink collar" occupations, from which native white women may be exiting as their job profile gets upgraded. One can also imagine parallels

to the semi-professional and less prestigious professional positions (nurse/school teacher/social worker) that the earlier, female second generation used to get ahead. And this possibility suggests that first generation niches may not be useless as commonly thought: second generation West Indians, for example, might well use their mothers' implantation in health care as a platform for moving ahead. We should also recall that not all workers among the less-educated have fared poorly: declining earnings among the high school (or less well-) educated is a male, not a female phenomenon. This matters since the relevant question, with regard to second generation advance or decline, has more to do with household levels of living, rather than with differences in individual earnings. Should female members of today's second generation substantially exceed their mothers in levels of schooling (which, in the Mexican case, would be represented by completion of high school) *and* also move into the labor force at a higher rate, any decline in men's earnings might be offset by the greater value of women's contribution to the household. While this is a matter for another paper, it underscores this section's central point: that the new conventional wisdom has delivered a deeply gendered account.

**Educational advance:** In today's new conventional wisdom, the second generation runs into trouble for a variety of reasons, but most importantly, because children of less skilled immigrants find conditions on the demand side so much less favorable than before. Though as a blanket generalization, such a statement is open to doubt on several counts, it still has the ring of truth. Nonetheless, it overlooks a likely source of important constraint on earlier second generation advance: namely, the very low skill levels of many groups, and the abundance of equally low-skilled competitors.

Economic historians are still debating the question of whether the turn-of-the-century immigrants exercised a negative effect on the wages and employment of the native-born; as with today's debate, it seems a good deal safer to weigh in on the side of immigrant/immigrant competition. Those children who entered the labor market prior to 1924 also had to deal with presence of many low-skilled foreign-born competitors, though their counterparts who entered maturity in the late 1920s and after no longer confronted this problem. But it's worth remembering that these second generation cohorts were very large: after all, fertility was high among the new immigrant groups in question. And whenever they entered the labor market, the children of Italian, Polish, Slovak and other non-Jewish Eastern European immigrants still had to overcome the legacy of their parents' very low educational attainments.

Relevant also is the fact that questions about the future of yesterday's second generation were a commonplace earlier in the century. At the time, contemporaries did not fret over the possibility that large number of jobs would remain at the bottom of an economy shifting toward an hourglass shape. Rather, they observed that increasing proportions of decent jobs required extended levels of schooling, and worried that the children of workers, generally, and the children of the immigrant workers, in particular, would not obtain those jobs, unless they were convinced to stay in school longer than it seemed their wont to do. Contemporary accounts, such as Leonard Covello's study of Italians in East Harlem (1943/1967), based on observation and research from the 1920s and 1930s, show that the situation was not good: yes, the children stayed in school longer than the parents would have desired; but on the other hand, they dropped out long before

the school authorities of the time deemed desirable. Similarly Gans' study of Italians in Boston's East End, written two decades later, detected modest change, noting, for example, that "the *junior* high school principal's main problem [is] truancy and the parental acquiescence concerning this (Gans, 1962: 133; emphasis added). Joel Perlmann's (1988) book on ethnic differences in schooling in Providence, RI, albeit treating a somewhat earlier period (1880-1920) points to very large lags in school performance on the part of Italian children, and little evidence of catch up. Borjas (1994) has shown that 1910 aggregate differences in the literacy rate of immigrant groups had a persistent effect on the educational attainment and earnings of the children of the foreign born as of 1940 and 1970, and even on their later descendants as of 1990, providing further reason to think that the earlier second generation remained at a considerable disadvantage relative to their third generation-plus counterparts and furthermore, that any such disadvantage mattered.

Note that persistent disadvantage does not imply stasis: clearly, the long-run trend involved catch-up. That pattern of catch-up is relevant for today's debate for a variety of reasons: first, it tells us that educational performance (and presumably attitudes toward education) changed in the direction of convergence with the mainstream, even among groups that started out as far from mainstream norms as today's low skilled immigrants are alleged to be. It also reminds us of the slow pace of any convergence, which provides some perspective on what we should expect of the children of the most disadvantaged immigrants today.

**Mobility regimes:** In the new conventional wisdom, structure is largely, if not all, determining. The descendants of yesterday's immigrants had the good fortune of

encountering an economy that allowed for gradual moves upwards; the children's of today's newcomers need to move ahead in one giant step. Whether the structure of today's economy is actually so inimical to second generation progress deserves greater debate, but that is a matter for another paper. The question at hand has to do with the past.

The presentist orientation that prevails in today's discussions takes yesterday's structure for granted. But we should give the descendants of yesterday's immigrants at least some credit for the conditions that allowed for their success: unwilling to continue under the same circumstances that their parents' endured, this earlier second generation aspired to more -- and got it. Their collective efforts, involving unionization and active support of the New Deal and its successors, created a mobility regime that redistributed resources in a more egalitarian way. Put somewhat differently, the sons and daughters of the unskilled immigrants of yore needed only modest educations to move a notch or two beyond their parents. But those jobs proved beneficial precisely because the ethnic laborers of the 1930s through 1960s were able to use their bargaining capacity to increase the working class share of the pie.

### **Second Generations Today and Tomorrow**

**Who is at risk?** The theory of segmented assimilation is almost certainly right in identifying multiple, divergent paths of second generation adaptation. But the importance of that discovery is bound up with the matter of the relative size of the cohorts following the different paths; strikingly that question is never addressed. Considering today's situation in light of the historical experience puts the issue in an entirely light. While

America's new immigrant population is extraordinarily diverse, its overwhelmingly largest component -- the Mexicans -- falls at the very bottom of the skill ladder. As of 1990, Mexicans accounted for just over 1 out of every 5 immigrants, but they made up *1 out of every 3 children of immigrants*; put somewhat differently, Mexicans are over-represented among the second generation, relative to their share among the foreign-born, by 50 percent. *Absent the Mexicans, today's second generation looks little different from the rest of the American population in socio-economic characteristics.* Those characteristics are not sufficient to guarantee satisfactory adjustment to the economy of the next generation; but the same can be said for young, third-generation-plus Americans of any ethnic stripe. And a very large proportion of the second generation begins with a substantial edge over their third-generation-plus counterparts.

By contrast, at the turn of the century, no single group could have altered the generalization that most immigrants were much more likely than natives to start out near the bottom. Of course, there has been heterogeneity among immigrant flows in every period; there were high-skilled Germans and English immigrants coming in large numbers in the 1890-1920 period, for example; likewise, the literate, English-speaking, though low-skilled Irish remained important up until the shut-off of immigration in the 1920s. But the skill level of the skilled today is very much higher than in the past; the situation in which one group is especially large and especially low-skilled is unique too. One could not, we suspect, remove the Italians from the discussions of immigration in 1920 and find that generalizations about differences between immigrants and natives, or about the skill level of immigrants, change dramatically. More to the point: that generalization applied to



every one of the major southern and eastern European groups – the relatively better-skilled Jews included.

Emphasizing the importance of the Mexican-origin component doesn't make it *all*-important. Clearly, there are individuals in every group (including the children of native whites) who are "at risk" in the sense of having little education and access to few resources of a parental or neighborhood kind. Nor are the Mexicans the only origin group among whom many are at risk. But a comparison of Mexicans with Cubans, a group that has received great attention in the literature, puts the matter in sharp relief. It is not simply that Cuban immigrants are a much smaller group than the Mexicans; relative to their share of the immigrant population (3.7 percent in 1990), Cubans are under-represented among the children of the foreign-born (2 percent in 1990). Moreover, the Cuban population is slow growing, characterized by a high median age and low fertility. While it may well be the case that Cubans are all moving into the middle-class, either through a path mediated by the enclave economy or through assimilation, classical style, the quantitative import is relatively slight. And it will also get slighter, given fertility patterns and immigration trends (indeed, the Cuban share of the total foreign-born population has declined since 1990). By contrast, in the six years since 1990, Mexicans have grown from 22 percent to 27 percent of the foreign-born, with no evidence that the most recent immigrants are more skilled or better educated than their predecessors. The key point, therefore, is that no group is at all similar to the Mexicans in being simultaneously (1) the lowest-skilled of all the major immigrant groups and (2) the overwhelmingly largest part of the total immigrant population.

Specifying the at-risk component of the second generation, and understanding the dynamics behind its growth, is important for other reasons. The segmented assimilation hypothesis takes the presence of at-risk populations for granted, contending instead that shifts on the demand side are the key factors changing the opportunities for the offspring of the foreign-born. But even if the demand side conditions are changing just as the theory of segmented assimilation would predict, the impact would be a good deal less severe if Mexican-origin children were not so heavily over-represented among the children of the foreign-born. That fact has little to do with the considerations of changing economic structure emphasized in the literature, but rather with the age structure of the Mexican immigrant population, its fertility, and the timing of its moves to the United States -- factors which no one has yet unpacked. Moreover, second generation outcomes do seem to vary with other demographic factors -- whether a child was born abroad or in the U.S.; the presence of other foreign-born children in the household; and the nativity status of parents. We suspect that these factors differ among immigrant groups, with the result that the assimilation process will be more advanced among some groups than among others simply because the timing of migration reduces the likelihood of a child's foreign birth and the characteristics of household structure provide less exposure to foreign-born persons. Thinking about the Cuban/Mexican comparison is instructive in this respect: a somewhat higher proportion of the children of Cuban parents are U.S.-born than is true among Mexicans (and U.S. birth is actually more common among Mexican than among the groups whose arrival was concentrated in the 1980s and 1990s). And migration from Cuba has been more likely to involve displacement of full household units (as has been

true for many, though not all, refugee groups), whereas the Mexican pattern has been one of serial migration, with men forming households in Mexico, and then only much later bringing spouse and children over to "the other side."

**Educational attainment and labor market outcomes:** The possibility that we have a new, expanded underclass in the making lends the edge to research on today's second generation. In our view, applying the "underclass" concept to issues of second generation adaptation is not a happy event, as the concept has been mainly successful in generating debate, less so in shedding light in the area where it originated -- namely the discussion of problems of urban, African-American poor. But whatever the problems of the concept when used on its home territory, it has traveled poorly, as it is employed inconsistently. More importantly, its invocation serves the rhetorical device of implying identity between an evolving underclass of immigrant origins and an African-American underclass, made plausible mainly because the latter's existence is presumed to be a matter of fact. Whatever one's view of the applicability and usefulness of the underclass concept, there is clearly slippage in the explanation, as the former is generally ascribed to structural changes in the environment (as in Wilson's account), whereas the advent of a second generation underclass results from cultural diffusion, notwithstanding a very different environment.

The chapter on "Growing up American" in Portes and Rumbaut's new edition of their justly influential *Immigrant America* (1996) exemplifies both the tenor and the cast taken by today's discussion. On the one hand, today's immigrants converge on poor, central cities, where they come "into close contact with the urban underclass." To be

sure, Portes and Rumbaut note that the making of this urban underclass results from discrimination and changing economic structure of the cities; but to these causes they ascribe "the development of an adversarial outlook toward middle-class *culture* (emphasis added);" and they also see no need to explain what the underclass is and how it differs from a lower or poor working-class of before.

In any case, geographic proximity to the underclass matters because it leaves second generation kids hanging around with the wrong crowd, not a good thing since immigrant kids pick up the wrong attitudes of their native-born peers (an argument which implicitly revives earlier theories, from the deviance literature, of differential association). Native born underclass youth "exercise a powerful influence on newly arrived youth by reinterpreting for them the difficult conditions of adaptation....creating the conditions for a problematic mode of dissonant *acculturation* (248-9; emphasis added)." Through a "*socialization* process" (emphasis added), newcomers' loyalties "shift toward the common adversarial stance of their native-born peers." (249)

Children who pick up the adversarial stance are unlikely to do well in school. Of course, this doesn't necessarily translate into labor market disaster: after all, there are the low-level jobs occupied by their parents, supposedly so abundant. But the parents are caught in a dead-end mobility trap; and educationally unsuccessful immigrant children "run the risk of being trapped into the same low-paid occupations paid by their parents, confirming the dismal portrayals of a *permanent underclass*." (250; emphasis added). That may well be; but this sort of a permanent underclass is not that the one described by Wilson and those who have worked on the terrain he has laid out. As made clear by the

title of his most recent book, the group studied by Wilson (1996) lives in a world where work has disappeared. Whereas African-American ghetto dwellers seem to face a penury of jobs, low-skilled immigrants enjoy an abundant opportunities to work, albeit at low wages. From this perspective, the scenario of segmented assimilation implies a transition from an underclass, consisting of people employed at the very bottom, to an outclass, of persons extruded from paid employment.

Here the contrast between the two accounts of underclass development becomes clear. In the Wilsonian view, the underclass is the product of the disappearance of the factory sector, the outmigration of the black middle class, and the resulting social isolation of the poor. Lacking the regulative structure of work, as well as the institutions, informal connections, and role models provided by the more complete ghetto community of old, ghetto dwellers alter behavioral patterns and attitudes; they respond to the changes around them in self-defeating and self-reproducing ways. In comparison, the low-wage sector (and in southern California, at least, this largely means a factory sector) is still going strong in immigrant communities. Indeed, the low-wage sector is so strong that almost everyone works -- consider the fact that in Los Angeles employment rates for Mexican immigrant men begin at the 80 percent level for those *with no schooling at all* and go up from there; from the Wilsonian approach, employment rates of these magnitudes would make work normative. The density of persons with jobs is itself a source of social capital, improving the quantity and quality of job-related information and embedding job-seekers in informal networks that transmit skills once jobs are acquired. Is it unreasonable to

assume that the deep embedding of immigrant networks in the labor market has no salutary effect on the opportunities available to the newcomers' children?

Granted, we are describing a first generation phenomenon and one can certainly imagine a scenario characterized by inter-generational discontinuity, as suggested by the hypothesis of segmented assimilation. But we caution against going down that road too fast. The analogy is clearly overdrawn: East Los Angeles bears little resemblance to the south side of Chicago, in either its past or present incarnations. If the concept of social capital has any meaning at all, it implies that social structure has an independent effect: since the children of less-skilled immigrants are far more likely, than comparable African-Americans, to live in neighborhoods with dense job networks, and to also grow up in households where the head is employed, we would expect higher employment rates among second generation school-leavers or high school completers, as compared to their African-American counterparts. It is also worth recalling that the embedding of immigrant communities is, at least in part, a response to employers' favorable views of the work ethic and behavior of the foreign-born; for that reason, one can expect that immigrant children enter a reception context quite different from that encountered by their African-American counterparts. The penetration of immigrant networks is also now very deep, which in the Los Angeles case means that there are still plenty of Mexican sweepers and sewers, but also quite a few foremen and skilled workers, which in turn provides the second generation with access to job opportunities well above the bottom. As immigration itself generates ample needs for bilingual speakers (whether in hospitals, department stores, or

factories), it creates positions for which the children of immigrants are ideally suited (Waldinger, 1996; 1997; Waldinger and Bozorgmehr, 1996).

But couldn't this all be undone by the workings of the famous "oppositional culture"? Perhaps, but we note that an "oppositional culture" has historically been a characteristic of working-class communities; in the past, it emerged from the immigrant experience *without* exposure to a "proximal host" comprised of visible, stigmatized, native-born minorities (see Perlmann and Waldinger, forthcoming). The "oppositional culture" of the traditional kind had its origins in the disarticulation between schools, on the one hand, and the world of manual work to which immigrant children were destined, on the other. That disconnection bred revolt: working-class children correctly perceived that school had little to do with their chances in life; *and* they also reacted against the middle-class culture of the school and *its* denigration of working-class life and labor. Moreover, the world of the factory legitimates values quite different from those of the classroom -- physicality, toughness, labor -- the themes sounded by Paul Willis (1997) in his ethnography of working-class "lads" in Britain, but which reappear in Douglas Foley's description of lower-status, Mexican *vatos* in a south Texas high school:

Most aspired to working class jobs like their fathers', such as driving a tractor, trucking melons, fixing cars, setting irrigation rigs, and working in packing sheds. Some wanted to be carpenters and bricklayers, or work for the highway road crew. Being able to survive on a blacktopping crew during the summer heat was considered a very prestigious job...It was dangerous, dirty, heavy work that only "real men" did. It was a true test of a young man's body and character...the *vatos* preferred...rough physical work...They considered working with their hands honorable...In contrast, school work was seen as boring, sissy stuff (1990: 87)

As this quote suggests, the opposition between working-class students and their schools is also gendered -- no surprise, as it is prefigured in such earlier ethnographic works as

Gans. Relative to the factory, the high school is a more “feminine” institution, one in which women play a prominent role; as the high school also transmits skills that are more likely to be immediately valued by the employers of women than by the employers of men, male working-class adolescents are more likely to drift into revolt than their female counterparts.

We concede that, in the past, school could be flaunted with relative impunity, as long as there was a vibrant factory-based economy, which unsuccessful students could access through the help of relatives and neighborhood-based friends. The stronger the industrial economy, the greater the value placed on manual work, which in turn sanctioned youth rebellion and gave it a ritualized form. But to make the point this way also implies that any “oppositional culture,” if so it should be characterized, was a transitional phenomenon, associated with the passage from adolescence to adulthood, and fading in salience as attachment to work progressed.

And it is one thing to concede that today’s factory sector is no longer so strong as in the past; another to note that neither manufacturing nor other forms of manual work have disappeared, especially in such areas of immigrant concentration as Texas or California. Though the literature is fragmentary, it appears that both the traditional working-class oppositional culture and its related pattern of protracted settling down into the labor market persist, albeit in attenuated form, in the remaining ethnic working-class enclaves in the Northeast and Midwest. And for all the reasons noted above, an “oppositional culture” may therefore remain an aspect of the second generation, working class transition to adulthood, and not involve resocialization into the underclass.



Although the implicit worry surrounding the second generation literature is that the children of immigrants face a future of an African-American type, we are also struck by the fact that the comparison, while implicit in all the discussions, has not squarely been framed. The conventional wisdom strikes the underclass note in a second way, through historical analogy, implying that the at-risk children of today's immigrants may recapitulate the earlier black (or Puerto Rican experience), not so much for the reasons of cultural diffusion mentioned above, but because of similarity in the historical experiences. The latter groups got struck, due to discrimination and diminishing opportunities for the low skilled; as Portes puts it (1996:5), the "perpetuation of these negative conditions eventually led to an interrelated set of urban pathologies." This characterization faithfully echoes the basic Wilsonian view; but the underlying similarity of experience requires a second look. Certainly, contrasts abound, at least if the relevant comparisons, involve the African-American migrants from the south, circa 1940-1965, with the low-skilled immigrants of today, and if we can use Los Angeles as a case in point. The former occupied a marginal position in the urban economy, still heavily dependent on the traditional service occupations, en route to a concentration in the public sector, and enjoying only limited success in finding manufacturing jobs. By contrast, Mexican immigrants, exploited proletarians that they are, have nonetheless moved into a wide swath of the region's economy, from which they are unlikely to be dislodged. In this respect, the most oppressed of America's new immigrants occupy a position of structural centrality, quite unlike the marginal role filled by urban African-Americans at a comparable point in their movement to urban centers. For that reason, the children of today's

Mexican immigration will probably have a better chance of finding positions up the job ladder than did the children of the great black migration northwards.

### **Conclusion: Second Generation Prospects**

The descendants of the last great immigration to the United States have now moved far up the totem pole; from the perspective of the 1990s, it is hard to imagine that their adaptation to American could have turned out differently. But this view of an inexorable climb up the social ladder is certainly not how the children and grandchildren of the European immigrants experienced the process themselves. Their beginnings were not particularly promising; nor were the established groups of the time ready to accept the newcomers and their descendants. And there is every reason to think that the earlier second generation movement upward involved a variety of patterns and strategies, sufficiently complex to defy a characterization as dependent on good manufacturing jobs alone.

At a minimum, this portrait of the past suggests that the children of the post-1965 immigration begin with disadvantages no greater than those encountered by immigrant children before. That generalization is probably too cautious. On the one hand, the immigrants' class composition is far more heavily weighted toward the middle-class than was true earlier in the century. And on the other hand, American society is more receptive to immigrant incorporation -- in large measure, due to the efforts by earlier groups of outsiders widen access to opportunity.

Two themes emerge from this comparison: class and mobility regimes.

*Class:* While America's new immigrant population is extraordinarily diverse, its overwhelmingly largest component -- the Mexicans -- falls at the very bottom of the skill

ladder; the Mexicans are even more heavily represented among the immigrants' children. Absent the Mexicans, today's second generation looks little different from the rest of the American population in socio-economic characteristics. Those characteristics are not sufficient to guarantee satisfactory adjustment to the economy of the next generation; but the same can be said for young, third-generation-plus Americans of any ethnic stripe. The immigrant children most at risk are the Mexicans; and it is the presence of this very large group, so far below the others in skills, that distinguishes today's from yesterday's second generation. However, we note that the advent of the new economy means trouble for the children of the native-born members of America's working-class, who also find themselves in conflict with the middle-class values and expectations of schools. These are the main reasons why we should worry about the future for the offspring of Mexican immigrants and of other less skilled newcomers.

*Mobility regimes:* In the main, the offspring of the 1880-1920 immigrant wave advanced through movement into a prosperous working-class. But that prosperity was, at least, in part the result of concerted, collective efforts, transforming mobility regimes from the highly inegalitarian pattern that characterized the immigrant period, to the more redistributionist pattern in place during the New Deal era. The children of today's immigrants come of age in a different mobility regime, in which market is taking precedence over state. Good news for the children of middle-class immigrants, as well as for those many immigrant children of working-class parents who do well in school, and take advantage of the large, and relatively open U.S. system of higher education. After all, college educated persons are the winners in today's economy, which rewards the

highly skilled in increasingly generous ways: the high rates of college attendance and completion among the children of Asian, Middle Eastern, and other immigrant backgrounds leave these groups positioned for improving fortunes in the new economy.

Bad news, however, for those children of working-class -- or poor -- immigrant parents. The metaphor of the "hourglass economy" -- many good jobs at top, many bad jobs at bottom, few decent jobs in-between -- provides one way for describing their problems, but it takes the structure for granted. While the supply/demand equation for less skilled workers of all ethnic backgrounds has turned unfavorable for a host of reasons, the decline of working-class power, and of the collective institutions established during the New Deal era, ranks high on the list. As in the past, "second generation revolt" could well be the engine for turning things around; and second generation rebellion need not only take the individualistic form assumed by the literature on segmented assimilation. Yet it is one thing to imagine a turn toward collective efforts at group advancement among the children of Mexican and other working-class immigrants, still another to think that those collective efforts would yield results comparable to the gains produced by the New Deal era. Perhaps, but only if current trends toward an increasingly global, increasingly competitive economy reverse. Those prospects, regrettably, do not seem bright.

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<sup>1</sup> See Gans, 1992; Portes and Zhou (1993); Portes and Rumbaut, 1996; Zhou and Bankston, forthcoming.

<sup>2</sup> See the articles in the republished version of the special *IMR* issues that appears as *The New Second Generation* (Portes, 1996).

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