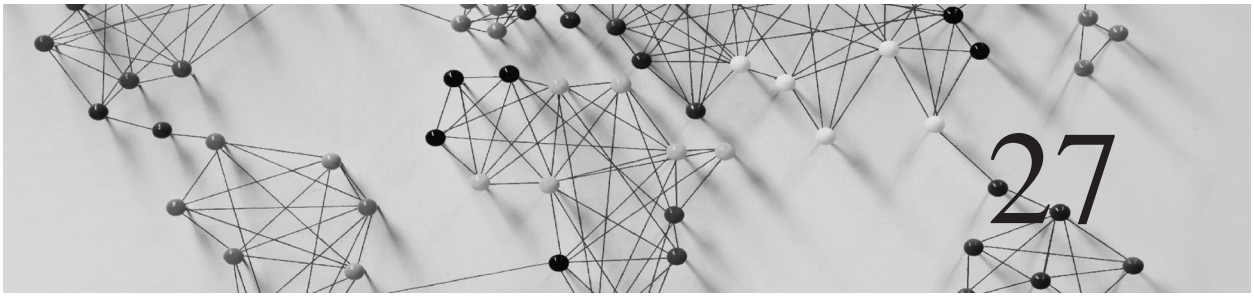

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Assimilation

Richard Alba and Victor Nee

The idea of assimilation has returned as an important approach to understanding the incorporation of immigrants and their descendants. First developed by sociologists in the United States in the early decades of the 20th century, assimilation reigned supreme for a time as *the* conception of the ultimate outcome toward which majority–minority relations were assumed to be moving inevitably. But raked by criticism starting in the 1960s, when race-centric theories came to occupy a more central place in sociological theorizing, assimilation seemed subsequently in retreat, even moribund. In the early 1990s, Nathan Glazer (1993) could seriously inquire, 'Is assimilation dead?' Yet within a decade it had risen, Lazarus-like, stimulated by reconsiderations in western Europe of the role of multiculturalism (Brubaker, 2001) and by a theoretical updating to make it viable for the 21st-century United States. In place of a teleological conception, Alba and Nee (2003) reconceived assimilation as a social process to be explained, and not assumed. As such, assimilation offers a framework for investigating the changes taking place in the societies that have received large numbers of immigrants since the middle of the last century. Despite the promising return of this classic idea, the major applications of assimilation theory remain largely confined to the United States.

Assimilation, like any social science theory, consists of concepts and a specification of the mechanisms that make the phenomena referenced by these concepts manifest in the lives of immigrants and their descendants and also in the societies that have received them. The main concept defines what assimilation consists of, implying ways that we can observe and measure it. Assimilation is a multidimensional phenomenon – cultural change in the domain of language is subject to different mechanisms from social integration with members of the dominant majority, for instance – and exists along a spectrum, so that it is always a matter of degree. The mechanisms that propel assimilation work on

different levels, some through networks and institutions that enable, but can also impede, assimilation. Other mechanisms exist at level of the individual actor, but interact with the ways that opportunities are socially structured (Merton, 1968). For example, public schools require individuals to pass through gateways in the education system that are largely controlled by members of the native majority.

Assimilation theory has evolved considerably from its classical formulation by the Chicago School of Sociology. This chapter begins with its early history, which combines valuable early formulations with conceptual blinders that set the stage for later severe criticism. Recent decades have witnessed two fundamental revisions, segmented assimilation and neo-assimilation, which will be discussed next. Pursuing the idea of mainstream assimilation, which is developed in the latter, the chapter will identify the most important mechanisms associated with it, describe lessons learned from the history of assimilation in the US, as well as the evidence about assimilation there today. The discussion will elaborate on the relationship between assimilation and integration, a concept preferred by social scientists in many other immigration societies. It will close with a consideration of research conducted in France and Germany that is relevant to assimilation.

THE HISTORY OF ASSIMILATION THOUGHT

The origins of assimilation theory lie in observations and theorizing stimulated by the great wave of immigration to the United States at the turn of the 20th century. The early conception of assimilation developed from the research by sociologists at the University of Chicago about the migrants drawn to the industrializing city. Responding to the transformative changes and social problems visible around them, the founders of the Chicago School elaborated the assimilation paradigm. This framework has influenced all subsequent sociological research on the incorporation of immigrants and their descendants (Gordon, 1964; Portes and Rumbaut, 2001; Alba and Nee, 2003; Bean and Stevens, 2003; Waters and Jiménez, 2005; Kasinitz et al., 2008).

The Chicago School's initial definition of assimilation was quite open-ended: 'the name given to the process or processes by which peoples of diverse racial origins and different cultural heritages, occupying a common territory, achieve a cultural solidarity sufficient at least to sustain a national existence' (Park, 1930: 281). Such a definition allowed for assimilation processes to be two-sided, involving changes in the dominant group, not just among the immigrant newcomers. And it also left ample room for cultural differences between immigrant and native groups to persist. Cultural 'solidarity,' after all, need not mean more than consensus on some foundational elements, such as democratic values.

However, more restrictive aspects soon made their appearance. One came in the form of a seminal formulation by Robert Park (1950: 150) of a 'race-relations cycle' of 'contact, competition, accommodation, and eventual assimilation,' a teleological framework that, in its most famous statement, was viewed as 'progressive and irreversible.' The classical texts on the race-relations cycle established the seeming inevitability of assimilation as the endpoint to which majority–minority relations were moving. And if assimilation is such an endpoint, then it makes sense to assess the situations of different minorities by the extent to which they are assimilating.

The logical next step was taken in a major mid-century empirical study, *The Social Systems of American Ethnic Groups* (1945), by W. Lloyd Warner and Leo Srole. Their empirical focus was trained on an older industrial city in New England, where they observed progressive changes that occurred over the course of successive generations of

various European ethnic groups. They documented the decline of white ethnic enclaves in the context of the wartime economic boom, as the native-born generations shifted out of the working class to higher occupational and class positions and to 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 their children, as well as in the friendships formed by the children. Their study gave birth to the idea that assimilation was brought about by the unavoidable lockstep of mobility and cultural change between one generation and the next, which became fixed in the widely used phrase, 'straight-line assimilation.'

Yet if all groups seem to be moving in the direction of assimilation, it cannot be said that they are all likely to reach that endpoint at the same time. Warner and Srole introduced an overtly racial dimension to account for group variation – that is, they posited that some groups were favored by ethno-racial resemblance to the core of the mainstream society, presumably, whites with ancestors from the British Isles, while others were slowed, sometimes to the point that their progress was glacial, by racial difference. Warner and Srole perceived race-like differences even among the white, or European-descent, groups. They characterized groups like the Armenians and Sicilians as 'dark Caucausoids,' whose assimilation could require as many as six generations. For non-European groups, all of whom were in their view racially distinct, assimilation would be 'slow' or 'very slow,' with the adjectives actually implying the uncertainty of the process. This racial aspect of assimilation was a major blot on the theory that loomed large in the Civil Rights era.

The 1960s produced an enduring synthesis, the canonical statement for the second half of the 20th century, Milton Gordon's *Assimilation in American Life* (1964). The book had the virtue of laying out in a clear way for the first time a multidimensional concept, a necessity in light of the complexity of the phenomena that were included under the rubric of assimilation. Although his account depicted seven dimensions in all, he rightly placed particular stress on the distinction between the cultural aspects of assimilation, or acculturation, and social integration into the mainstream and its institutions, or 'structural' assimilation in his lexicon. Gordon also formulated two famous hypotheses: that acculturation typically happened first but did not inevitably lead to structural assimilation; but that once the latter took place, then assimilation would follow along all other dimensions.

However, Gordon's canonical formulation also entailed some problematic aspects and thus sowed the seeds of future criticism. One such was the clearly one-sided nature of assimilation: it was, in his view, a process that changed the immigrant group but not the mainstream society. In a famous passage, Gordon described acculturation as the adoption by the immigrant-origin groups of the traits of what he called the 'core culture,' which he identified with 'middle-class cultural patterns of, largely, white Protestant, Anglo-Saxon origins.' Not only did Gordon fail to acknowledge the complexity of the mainstream culture of his time, which varied substantially from one region to another, but implicitly his concept viewed assimilation as the crossing over of ethnic-minority individuals into the ethnic majority. This was not a concept that could transfer well to the contemporary immigration landscape of the United States, given the non-white racial status of the majority of immigrants and their descendants. For Gordon's concept would seem to require that non-whites would need to become whites in order to fully assimilate.

By the end of the 1960s, assimilation was coming under increasing attack for its weaknesses. In the latter part of the 20th century, assimilation seemed passé to many social scientists. The very word seems to conjure up a bygone era, when the multicultural

nature of American society was not comprehended, let alone respected, and there appeared, at least to white Americans, to be a unitary and unquestioned American way of life. Assimilation's one-sided conception of change overlooked the value and sustainability of minority cultures and, in addition, masked barely hidden ethnocentric assumptions about the superiority of Anglo-American culture. Indeed, it was viewed as a form of 'Eurocentric hegemony,' a weapon of the majority for putting minorities at a disadvantage by forcing them to live by cultural standards that are not their own.

INTEGRATION AND ASSIMILATION

Because of these weaknesses an alternative conception, integration, has developed outside the United States. Indeed, by the turn of the 21st century, 'integration' was much more widely used by non-US scholars than 'assimilation.' Integration is not always clearly defined, but most scholars who rely on it do so in order to avoid what they see as the ethnicity-extinguishing aspects of assimilation. What they presume is that many immigrant families desire to retain distinctive features of their cultural backgrounds and identities and can find ways to achieve economic and social advancement without surrendering them (Berry, 1997; Vermeulen and Penninx, 2000; Alba et al., 2012).

In this light, 'integration,' can be defined as the processes that increase the opportunities of immigrants and their descendants to obtain the valued 'stuff' of a society, as well as social acceptance, through participation in major institutions such as the educational and political system and the labor and housing markets. Full integration implies parity of life chances with members of the native majority group and being recognized as a legitimate part of the national community.

Like assimilation, integration occurs in relation to the mainstream part of a society. Consequently, as should be apparent from the definitions, there is considerable overlap between the assimilation and integration concepts. Moving to and settling in a wealthy western society inevitably involves change on the part of immigrants as they adjust to life there, and this is especially so when they come from societies with customs, values, and institutions that differ markedly from those in the new country. The changes may not all be beneficial or benign; some can have negative repercussions for immigrants and their children (National Academy of Sciences, 2015). And they are not just one-way. The presence of immigrants and the second generation alters the communities in which they live and, in some ways, the larger society as well. An obvious form of impact is on food, as immigrant cuisines, often modified for European or North American tastes, enrich the offerings in the new society. The Turkish doner kebab has become the most popular fast food in Germany, and more salsa than ketchup is sold in the United States.

How different are the ideas of assimilation and integration really? Assimilation theory posits that in general there is a relationship between cultural and social assimilation, on the one hand, and drawing close to the mainstream and the life chances of the native majority, on the other. In its most recent version, though, it does not presume there is a specific sequence among these dimensions. Rather, there is typically a mutual interaction, as individuals and families are motivated to undertake various forms of cultural and social assimilation by the attraction of greater opportunities in the mainstream; and achieving social mobility through mainstream institutions often entails constraints that accelerate some forms of assimilation (in language and in speech patterns, for example). Because assimilation envisions that majority and minority group differences may attenuate over time, it also includes the possibility that the social distinctions involved – or in other terms, the boundaries that separate groups – may weaken, eventually reaching the point

that they hold little relevance for the everyday life of most 'group' members.

The integration concept, by comparison, is intentionally agnostic about cultural and social change. Many scholars who use the term 'integration' reject the relevance of the cultural and social dimensions of assimilation and view the assimilation concept as questioning or devaluing the autonomy of immigrant families to decide on important sociocultural aspects of their lives. Dutch researchers Hans Vermeulen and Rinus Penninx (2000: 2) observe that the integration term was introduced into the discourse of several European countries 'to indicate a greater degree of tolerance and respect for ethnocultural differences.' This observation implies that there are normative, as well as scientific, aspects to the tension between these two concepts; they concern the proper standard for judging when 'successful' incorporation has taken place.

NEW ASSIMILATION THEORIES

The onset of a new immigration era in the United States led inevitably to a reconsideration of assimilation ideas (Morawska, 1994). The first serious revision was formulated by Alejandro Portes and Min Zhou (1993) in the form of 'segmented' assimilation. Portes and Zhou posited that assimilation can occur into different sectors, or 'segments,' of American society and therefore entails distinct trajectories by assimilating individuals and groups. One trajectory leads to the middle-class mainstream; this is conventional or mainstream assimilation, consistent with the canonical concept of Gordon. But another leads to incorporation into the racialized population at the bottom of US society.

According to Portes and Zhou, this 'downward' trajectory is likely to be followed by many in the second generation from the new immigrant groups, who are handicapped by their very humble starting points in US society, i.e., the low class positions of their immigrant parents, and barred from entry to the white mainstream by their non-white 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 respond with an oppositional stance and succumb to various temptations, such as dropping out of school and entering into deviant subcultures and even criminal careers.

Portes and Zhou envision a pluralist alternative to either 'upward' (i.e., mainstream) or 'downward' assimilation. That is, they argue that some individuals and groups are able to draw on social and economic advantages of ethnic solidarity found in immigrant enclave economies. Under optimal circumstances, exemplified by the Cubans of Miami, immigrant entrepreneurs experience upward mobility in an economy of co-ethnics not obtainable for racial minorities in the mainstream economy. Although immigrant workers in the enclave work at lower levels of compensation, as they gain experience from working in the ethnic economy, some start their own ethnic enterprises and experience upward mobility. In such cases, the pluralist route of incorporation would provide a truly viable alternative to assimilation, at least for a generation or so. In later statements of segmented assimilation theory, however, it appears that later generations of groups successfully employing a pluralist strategy are expected to join the mainstream.

The other major revision to the canonical theory, often dubbed 'neo-assimilation' theory, comes from Richard Alba and Victor Nee in their book, *Remaking the American Mainstream* (2003: 38). The theory starts from a new definition of assimilation – 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 this decline takes place, 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 those on both sides of an ethnic boundary mutually 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.

This definition leaves room for assimilation to occur as a two-sided process, whereby the immigrant minority influences the ethnic majority group and is not only influenced by it. The degree to which the assimilation process is in fact two-sided is an empirical question to be answered in specific cases and not a matter to be settled *a priori*. But there can be no question in the US context that the culture of the majority, the mainstream culture, has taken on layers of influence from the many immigrant groups who have come to US shores.

The Alba and Nee account also envisions that assimilation can involve entry into a mainstream (a term that probably should be put in the plural to recognize the social heterogeneity and complex cultural layering that are involved in the mainstream of an economically advanced society). In their account, legal equality for citizens under the rule of law enables relatively open access to mainstream institutions, from labor markets to housing markets, educational institutions to the armed forces, public transportation to eateries, and voting rights of citizens to participation in electoral politics. In other words, rather than emphasizing social acceptance by the native white majority, neo-assimilation theory focuses on the extent of openness of institutions and organizations of the mainstream society and economy. The distinction is critical because it implies that assimilation does not require assimilating individuals and/or groups to become like the majority in all respects.

The mainstream encompasses those social settings where the presence of members of the majority population of the appropriate age, gender, social class, etc., is unproblematic – they feel 'at home.' Even though, in the United States, mainstream institutional and organizational settings are defined by the presence of whites, their governance are regulated and guided by the rule of law. The 1960s bipartisan civil rights and immigration reforms extended constitutional rights of legal equality to all citizens. Federal civil rights legislation in turn overturned formal rules of the Jim Crow era in southern states, while in the nation as a whole discrimination by race was formally outlawed. Cumulatively, mainstream institutions and organizations instituted open access rules lowering the formal and informal barriers of entry. Foreign-born and US-born minorities who enter these settings and are accepted in them are also part of the mainstream, at least for some part of their social life. These avenues of entry often pave the way for minority inclusion in more informal mainstream settings, including neighborhoods and families. Mainstream cultures can also incorporate elements of the cultures of new arrivals, giving them a variegated character. The remainder of the chapter focuses heavily on 'mainstream assimilation,' the subject of neo-assimilation theory.

MECHANISMS OF ASSIMILATION

Assimilation involves a process of cumulative causation driven by a repertoire of

mechanisms operating at various levels of the institutional framework, such as the individual actor, social networks, and societal institutions. No single causal mechanism can fully explain the mode of immigrants' accommodation to their host society. In combination, the mechanisms of assimilation shape the trajectories of adaptation of immigrants and their children. They fall broadly within two groups: the *proximate* causes that operate at the individual level, and the *distal*, often deeper causes that are embedded in large structures, such as the institutional arrangements of the state, firm, and labor market.

The main proximate mechanism involves purposive action motivated and guided by the aspirations of immigrants and subsequent generations to improve the material and social circumstances of their lives. This mechanism does not require that individuals intend to take assimilatory steps. Often the 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 – result in specific forms of assimilation. This happens because of the social structures typical of immigration societies, which generally position members of the native ethno-racial majority as institutional gatekeepers in contexts associated with mobility. Accordingly, ambitious members of immigrant-minority groups tend to make a variety of adjustments (such as learning the appropriate accent) to improve their and their children's chances of mobility; and they may do so without in any way thinking of themselves as assimilating. (As Alba and Nee [2003: 282] put it, assimilation frequently happens while immigrant families 'are making other plans.')

Even immigrants who bring high levels of human capital may assimilate in some respects in order to improve the recognition of their qualifications by the dominant group. For legal immigrants, purposive action in job searches is oriented toward finding an optimal match between human capital and occupational attainment. Immigrant professionals and technical workers tend to optimize their human capital not in ethnic enclaves, but in sequential movement in job ladders of the 'open' mainstream labor markets (Nee et al., 1994). For these immigrants, 'good jobs' are concentrated in open labor markets of the mainstream economy. When immigrants 'are making other plans,' assimilation frequently happens as an unintended consequence of utilitarian social behavior.

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 – leads many socioeconomically successful immigrant and minority families into communities where native whites reside in large numbers, since residentially linked resources and amenities tend to be concentrated in such places. One consequence, whether intended or not, is greater interaction with families of the majority group; such increased contact tends to encourage acculturation and social integration, especially for children. To be sure, this form of assimilation can only take place when families are not excluded from desirable communities by ethno-racial segregation, and research indicates that in the United States, Asians and light-skinned Latinos are the most likely to be able to enter such communities (Massey and Denton, 1993; Alba et al., 2014).

Institutional Mechanisms

The neo-assimilation theory turns in part on the rules of the game and structure of relative rewards embedded in the institutional environment of advanced industrial economies (Nee and Alba, 2013; Nee and Holbrow, 2013). Especially critical in this respect is the role of the state, which accounts for much of the effectiveness of institutional mechanisms. The reach of centralized authority in modern societies is such that the state becomes the sovereign actor in establishing

the framework for the foundational rules of the game, which in turn determine the balance between intergroup competition and cooperation.

Consider again the United States: In the post-Civil Rights era, the institutional mechanisms for monitoring and enforcing federal and state rules outlawing racism have increased the cost of discrimination in non-trivial ways (Skrentny, 2002). For instance, landmark settlements of federal discrimination lawsuits have rendered the cost of discrimination more transparent for corporations and nonprofit organizations. As a result, firms have become more attentive in observing to anti-discrimination guidelines, with increasing numbers of them offering diversity and multicultural training workshops for managers and employees and instituting company rules against racial and gender discrimination (Dobbin, 2009).

There are also cultural sources of compliance. These have come about through the shifts since the 1960s in beliefs and values regarding ethno-racial difference and equality. The cultural openings created by the moral leadership of the Civil Rights movement have expanded to a broad revision in beliefs and norms about diversity and inclusion of racial and ethnic minorities. This ideological shift has not ended racial prejudice and racist practices, but it has made them more covert and subterranean; and racism as belief has lost much of its public legitimacy (Schuman et al., 1997).

The institutional mechanisms installed to create open access to political and economic institutions to Americans regardless of race and gender, combined with the weakening of overt racism, have been of particular value to immigrant groups. Many observers have noted the slow progress of African Americans as a group since 1960s. But the much-noted optimism of the second generation, the children of immigrants, enables some of them to advance rapidly with the help of the institutional Civil Rights legacy (Kasinitz et al., 2008). At elite universities, for instance, the youth raised in immigrant homes have benefited disproportionately from affirmative-action admissions (Massey et al., 2003). The recent literature on immigrant incorporation in advanced western societies are supportive of the predictability of the propositions of neo-assimilation theory (Drouhot and Nee 2019). In the United States and western Europe 'blending' and 'segregating' social dynamics shape the experience of immigrant minorities. Segregating social processes appear center on undocumented immigrants and illegal migration in the United States; while in western European societies, Muslim religious identity motivates segregating social dynamics. Notwithstanding segregating dynamics, sociological studies of the incorporation of immigrant minorities in advanced western societies confirm that a master trend of assimilation of the second and third generation (Waters and Jimenez 2005; Kasinitz et al. 2008; Waters et al. 2010; Jimenez 2017; Drouhot and Nee 2019).

Boundary Mechanisms

Because social boundaries are by their nature two-sided, the boundary conception brings attention to the powerful role of the majority population in affecting the life chances of minority individuals and thus influencing the calculations that immigrant-origin individuals make in assessing the possible risks and benefits of an assimilation strategy. All boundaries are not the same in this respect. As a rough cut, we can distinguish between bright and blurred boundaries (Zolberg and Long, 1999; Alba, 2005). Bright boundaries involve a distinction that is unambiguous, so that individuals know at all times which side of the boundary they are on. Blurred boundaries allow for modes of self-presentation and social representation that place individuals in ambiguous zones.

In the case of a bright boundary, assimilation takes the form of boundary crossing by individuals. This process is likely to be

experienced as something akin to a conversion, i.e., a departure from one group and a discarding of signs of membership in it, linked to an attempt to enter into another, with all of the social and psychic burdens a conversion process entails – growing distance from peers, feelings of disloyalty, and anxieties about acceptance. The epitome of this process is racial 'passing' (but boundary crossing is not limited to racially defined groups). The nature of boundary crossing suggests that it is a selective process, which not everyone will be willing to undertake.

A blurred boundary, by contrast, means that individuals are seen as members of the groups on both sides of the boundary, either simultaneously or sequentially. Under these circumstances, assimilation may be psychically 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; and they do not feel forced to choose between the mainstream and their group of origin. Assimilation of this type involves intermediate, or hyphenated stages, which allow individuals to feel simultaneously as members of an ethno-racial minority and of the mainstream. This process is less individualistic, open to cohorts of a minority group who then recognize similarities in their experiences.

The nature of a boundary is not necessarily constant, and a focus of investigation for assimilation theory must be the circumstances under which a boundary changes from bright to blurred, for a blurred boundary implies easier access to assimilation for a larger number of minority individuals (Wimmer, 2013). Another way to think about this change is in terms of the resistance of the majority population to assimilation. The majority is often invested in preserving a bright boundary because it helps to defend the systemic advantages that majority individuals enjoy (Tilly, 1999). At the extreme, some of them may use violence to rebuff challenges to a boundary, as happened in the American South during the Civil Rights movement.

Recent American history offers some persuasive cases of boundary change, such as that involving Asian Americans, who have made the transition from a racial outcast status during the early 20th century to, it appears, ethnic groups, whose members increasingly have mixed ancestry or intermarry with white Americans (Nee and Holbrow, 2013; Lee and Zhou, 2015). Another theoretically critical case is the massive, post-World War II assimilation of the so-called white ethnics, Jews, Roman Catholics and Orthodox Christians of Irish or southern and eastern European ancestry (Alba, 2009).

Another critical case of boundary blurring involves the mass assimilation of European Americans, which took place during a period of great economic growth leading to the transformation of the American occupational structure and to a rapid expansion of higher education to train the cadre of professionals and technical workers needed by advanced capitalism. In concert, these conditions produced what Alba (2009; also Myers, 2007) has described as 'non-zero-sum' mobility, a situation where minorities can advance economically without appearing to threaten the life chances that whites take for granted for themselves and their children. Such a situation is conducive to greater acceptance of mobile members of minority groups by the majority.

Non-zero-sum mobility in principle can also occur in periods characterized by much less robust economic expansion. In the near future, it could play a role in enhancing immigrant-minority mobility because of predictable demographic changes. In particular, the exodus of the baby boomers from the active ages, a massive demographic shake-up, could provide the opening. This group of Americans, born between 1946 and 1964, is disproportionately white and highly educated and occupies a huge patch of the most rewarding terrain in the labor market. As they retire between now and the early 2030s, when

the youngest of them turn 70, there will be fewer members of the white majority entering the workforce than are leaving it. Without enough whites as replacements, there could be room for young Americans of immigrant backgrounds to advance.

ADDITIONAL LESSONS FROM THE US HISTORY OF ASSIMILATION

The idea of a mainstream plays a large role in neo-assimilation theory. This idea is suited to any ethno-racially stratified society, not just one receiving immigrants, since the mainstream can be conceived as the cultural and social spaces inhabited by members of the dominant population, where they feel at home. Yet assimilation can be a two-sided process, implying that the mainstream society can be changed as a result (Jiménez and Horowitz, 2013; Jiménez, 2017). Such changes are more easily located retrospectively, in the past, than in the present, because they tend to be gradual and thus hard to discern when they are actually happening (National Academy of Sciences, 2015).

To understand mainstream change better, then, one should look to past episodes of large-scale assimilation. One such, noted above, involves the mass assimilation of the descendants of the European immigrants of the late 19th and early 20th centuries, a process that reached its apogee during the quarter-century following World War II.

On the eve of the war, the US mainstream was defined by Protestant whites (Baltzell, 1964; Higham, 1970; Gerstle, 2001; Alba, 2009). Not only were non-whites excluded, but so too were the Catholic, Jewish, and Orthodox second and third generations descended from southern and eastern European immigrants, along with the Irish. The contemporary narrative about this exclusion emphasizes its racial aspects (Roediger, 1991; Jacobson, 1998) – that is, these groups were viewed as not fully white. From this point of view, the mid-century change involved an upgrading of their racial status to become fully white. Seen in this way, the expansion of the mainstream did not alter its homogeneity.

However, the racial lens is too narrowly focused, for there are other cardinal aspects to the expansion that it renders invisible. From another perspective, the characteristics that defined these groups as outsiders were primarily ethnic and religious, and especially the latter. Religious difference was important throughout American history, from the colonial times onward. Various forms of Protestant Christianity dominated in different regions, and Roman Catholics in particular were the objects of vilification, especially once their numbers increased rapidly because of mid-19th century immigrations from Germany and Ireland (Higham, 1970; McGreevey, 2003; Schrag, 2010).

The mid-century expansion of the mainstream also made it more visibly diverse. Not only did Catholics and Jews become gradually recognized as full members, but their religions received their mainstream charters, as it were, accepted now as thoroughly American religions (Herberg, 1955). Granted, the religions as practiced by the majorities of their adherents evolved in ways that made them more compatible with mainstream values (such as increasing individualism of faith among Catholics), but assimilation did not entail mass conversion to Protestant denominations. The mainstream evolved from Protestant Christian to Judeo-Christian, a term that in fact appears to have been invented in the early 1940s, but remains in common usage. This is a very different picture from that presented through the exclusively racial lens, and it is an important corrective to the notion of expansion achieved by homogenization. Expansion can involve growing diversity within the mainstream, so long as that diversity is kept within certain bounds.

Besides non-zero-sum mobility, a number of social forces contributed the mass

entry of the previously excluded groups into the mainstream. Their shifting generational distribution – at mid-century, the young adults from these groups belonged mainly to the second and third generations – combined with the cutoff of immigration since the 1920s brought about rapid Americanization and the weakening of mother tongues. The educational attainments of low-status groups like the Italians soared in the post-war period (assisted, one should add, by the state-sponsored expansion of higher education); and occupational mobility followed (Perlmann, 2005; Alba, 2009). The development of suburbs and homeownership encouraged young ethnic families to forsake urban enclaves for mixed communities (Gans, 1967).

As a consequence of these processes, rates of interethnic and interreligious marriage climbed. As of the mid-1960s, for example, 70% of the Italian-American third generation had married out (Alba and Nee, 2003). Jews were the most sensitive barometer of these trends. From a rate that was initially quite low – around 10% at mid-century – the intermarriage rate of Jews soared to about half by the end of the century (Fishman, 2004). In effect, then, not only the mainstream became more internally diverse, so did families. The spread of intermarriage has contributed to further erosion of ethnicity and religion, which is quite apparent in the shifts occurring among American Jews (Perlmann, 2006).

One other consequence of this mass assimilation is potentially noteworthy – the persistence of ethnic identities in an attenuated, symbolic form (Gans, 1979; Alba, 1990; Waters, 1990). The acceptance of hyphenated identities, such as Italian-American, was solidified by inclusion of groups with historically recent immigration backgrounds, whose members could not easily think of themselves as just Americans. Hyphenation was not unknown in earlier eras, but was more controversial, as suggested by Theodore Roosevelt's famous injunction to 'swat the hyphen' (see Gerstle, 2001).

EVIDENCE OF ASSIMILATION IN THE UNITED STATES TODAY

The United States offers convincing evidence of important patterns of mainstream assimilation, although its magnitude today appears to be substantially less than in the post-World War II period. This assimilation, as in the past, is connected with structural forces that give rise to some degree of non-zero-sum mobility.

The post-war mass assimilation was stoked by the unusual prosperity and reduced inequality of the period. Assimilation on such a scale was made possible by a prodigious expansion of opportunity – for instance, the higher educational sector of the United States grew fivefold in the 1940–1970 period – which generated massive non-zero-sum mobility. That is, numerous ethnics of the second and third generation could move upwards without challenging the opportunities available to already established groups.

As a vast literature has established, inequality is much higher today, and social mobility more constrained. One can presume, therefore, that the scale of mainstream expansion is much less today than in the earlier, unusual period. Nevertheless, assimilation processes still operate. One structural force that promotes them is demographic shift (Alba, 2009). It has led to a widening of entry into higher occupational tiers by non-whites, as the number of whites who can compete for positions there declines.

The growing diversity in the top tiers of the workforce emerges in sharp profile from an analysis by Alba and Yrizar Barbosa (2016; also Tran and Valdez, 2016). They show that, over time and as new cohorts enter economic life, whites' onetime dominance of the top quartile of jobs (as ranked by the average pay to specific occupations) is eroding. The fraction of these jobs held by non-Hispanic whites slipped from nearly 90% in the oldest cohort (56–65 years old) in 2000 to about 70% in the youngest one (26–35 years old) of 2010. These changes have come about largely

because of the retirement of cohorts where whites monopolized the best jobs and the altered demographic composition of cohorts that are maturing and entering the workforce. The groups that are benefitting most from this growing diversity at the top are of immigrant origin – Asians, both immigrant and native-born, and native-born Latinos. Black Americans have also seen some gains, but these are modest compared to those of the other groups.

Concomittently, as socioeconomic parity between whites and some minorities rises, and demographic shifts also encourage higher rates of interaction between them, the level of mixed unions increases. Recent analyses of census data have revealed that the overall rate of intermarriage among new unions is 17%, representing a steep increase in marriage across the major lines of race and Hispanic origin over the last several decades (Livingston and Brown, 2017). This increase is normalizing intermarriage in some parts of the country. That rising intermarriage is indeed connected with mainstream expansion is shown, above all, in the characteristics of the children of these unions.

The evidence concerning these children – individuals with mixed ethno-racial backgrounds, who consequently have family connections to two different groups – is telling. These children now represent a substantial fraction of the American youth population (Alba et al., 2017) – 4–15% of the infants now born in the United States. And the great majority of them, about three-quarters, come from mixed majority-minority families – that is, one of their parents is non-Hispanic white, and the other is non-white or Hispanic.

The social contexts in which these children grow up are diagnostic for the integrative character of mixed unions, as are their identities, social affiliations, and partner choices as adults. An examination of the income and residential characteristics of the families of mixed infants indicates that, on the whole, the families that mix one majority with one minority parent resemble much more all-white families than they do the all-minority families that share the same minority origin. But it is not just a matter of having characteristics like those of all-white families, but also being located in similar residential spaces and, by implication, having white families as neighbors. Families that have a white mother and a black father, which make up the great majority of white-black unions, are the exception to these generalizations. The families that meld two minority origins look very much like other minority families.

If we examine the adult characteristics of individuals from mixed majority-minority family backgrounds – and, admittedly, the evidence is sparser here – we again find a picture consistent with integration into the white mainstream for most, with those of partly black ancestry the prominent exception. In terms of social identities, the data support the idea that, for the most part, these identities are more fluid and contingent than are the identities of individuals with unmixed backgrounds (see Lee and Bean, 2010; Pew Research Center, 2015; Alba et al., 2017). For individuals who are partly white but not black, this fluidity often 'tilts white,' in the sense that they appear to incline more to the white side of their ancestry than to the minority side – importantly, in their sense of acceptance by others. For those who are partly black, it tilts in the other direction. This pronounced divide among those from mixed backgrounds reveals the still powerful stigmatization of African heritage in American society (Alba and Foner, 2015).

The social worlds of individuals with white and non-black minority parentage also tilt white. For example, individuals whose parentage is partly white marry mostly all-white partners. In the case of individuals who are white and either American Indian or Asian, about 70% do (Miyawaki, 2015). Even in the case of adults who are partly white and partly black, a majority takes white partners.

This mixing speaks to a potent form of conviviality, which brings families from different sides of an ethno-racial divide together, at

least for important symbolic occasions such as weddings and funerals. Yet it is also deeply colored by power differentials, in which the less powerful adapt to the most powerful.

ASSIMILATION RESEARCH OUTSIDE THE UNITED STATES

The study of assimilation as a social scientific concept has declined in Australia, where assimilation was associated with state-imposed public policy toward aboriginal people and non-Anglo-Celtic immigrants. This shift coincides with the adoption of state policies of multiculturalism toward immigrant groups and self-determination for the Indigenous population. In Canada, multiculturalism has gained ascendancy to accommodate large Francophone populations in Quebec and New Brunswick provinces, where French is the official language. Notwithstanding, assimilation theory has had a considerable impact on studies of immigration groups in western Europe, where France and Germany are frequently viewed as contrasts in national 'models' guiding the incorporation of immigrants. France is usually seen as similar to the Unites States in the salience of assimilation as a pathway of incorporation, but different in its absolute rejection of ethnicity as a legal and cultural basis of identity. Germany, on the other hand, is characterized as a nation state where cultural beliefs about the nation are at odds with government policies aimed at integration of immigrant minorities such as the Turks (Brubaker, 1992).

Yet in Germany there is no question but that early studies of the incorporation of guest-worker groups were conducted within an assimilation framework largely imported from the United States. Scholars such as Hartmut Esser (1980) looked to the concepts developed by Gordon as providing the key indices by which incorporation should be assessed. Perhaps this development is not surprising, for German sociologists perceived their society as at the beginnings of a long-term process of immigrant-group absorption, a process with which the Unites States already had accumulated a great deal of experience.

More recent German research echoes the debates taking place in the Unites States and frequently references American theories. One dispute concerns the willingness of the Turks and perhaps other groups to eventually integrate into the German mainstream. Some analysts, for example, Necla Kelek (2005), have argued that the Turks in particular, partly in response to a perceived lack of welcome into German society and partly because of the strength of their transnational ties, are forming a marginalized, parallel subsociety. However, this is not, as segmented-assimilation theory has claimed, about some immigrants minorities in the Unites States, because of rapid acculturation and loss of ethnic cultural capital: The findings on language use in the second generation reveal that Turkish youth are distinctive in their continuing use of the mother tongue, though they also speak German (Segeritz et al., 2010; Strobel, 2016). Turkish Germans also maintain a relatively high rate of transnational marriage in the second generation (Kalter and Schroedter, 2010) and continue to give their infants Turkish rather than German names (Gerhards and Hans, 2009).

Nevertheless, Claudia Diehl and Rainer Schnell (2006) find that indicators of assimilation have not declined over time and that the second generation of every group ranks markedly higher on these scales than does the immigrant first generation. Frank Kalter and Nadia Granato (2002) also observe the dynamic role played by generation; however, they highlight that the educational distance of some second-generation groups, most notably, the Turks, from the mainstream is not diminishing. More recent investigations of educational attainment in the second generation confirm the continuing Turkish disadvantage (Segeritz et al 2010). Kalter (2011)

finds also that second-generation Turks are disadvantaged in the labor market even after taking into account their lower educational attainment. Higher second-generation unemployment rates are linked with embeddedness in Turkish communal networks, though which of these variables should be given causal priority is unclear.

In France, too, the picture of immigrant-group incorporation is mixed – it is more favorable for groups of European origin, such as the Spanish, than for groups of non-European origin, such as those from former African colonies, such as the Algerians and Malians and from Turkey. Recent research, especially that carried out with the large-scale TeO (*Trajectoires et origines*) survey, revises the conclusions drawn from the major survey of the 1990s, the MGIS (*L'enquête mobilité géographique et insertion sociale*). In the earlier decade, the demographer Michèle Tribalat (1995, 1996) carried out a broad assessment of the assimilation trajectory of the major immigrant groups to France. Considering the changes taking place in a variety of domains – education, language, family patterns, and religion – Tribalat arrived at the conclusion that, in most respects, the immigrant groups were drawing closer to the French mainstream.

Tribalat's investigation was conducted with an eye toward assimilation and the French Republican model that embraces it. More recent French research, in particular the comprehensive analysis of TeO reported by Beauchemin et al. (2015), is less under the spell of assimilation theory; nevertheless, the domains in which the state of integration is evaluated are the same as those that would be examined if assimilation were the focus. Broadly speaking, this research finds intergenerational patterns of assimilation evident in some major cultural dimensions – for example, in union formation and family size. In addition, intermarriage rates in the second generation are quite robust, and this is true also for Muslim groups, who elsewhere in Europe evince high rates of endogamy. However, in socioeconomic aspects, the salient finding is of cumulative disadvantages for the second generation of 'visible minorities,' those with non-European origins (see also Silberman et al., 2007; Silberman, 2011). These disadvantages are cumulative in the sense that they appear first in educational outcomes, then in employment chances net of educational credentials, and then in salaries net of prior achievements. A powerful demonstration of this research is that these disadvantages are directly linkable to reports of discrimination by respondents. The findings imply a distinct stratification of French nationals according to ethno-racial background and suggest the emergence of minorities in a country whose political heritage, crystallized in the so-called Republican model, does not acknowledge them.

The findings from France and Germany indicate a need to revise the insights from neo-assimilation and segmented-assimilation theories in order to encompass the range of incorporation trajectories found in continental Europe. The transnationalism of the Turkish group, also found elsewhere in Europe, exceeds that found among the major groups in the United States and probably counteracts to some degree the assimilation dynamics that are evident for the European immigrant-origin groups in France and Germany. In addition, ethno-racial barriers, especially important in France because of its diverse and post-colonial immigration, impede socioeconomic assimilation, but this is not different from the United States. And like the United States, mixed unions involving members of the second generation and the native majority are common in France.

The challenges are perhaps greater for segmented assimilation theory, which appears overly tuned to the circumstances of the Unites States. France and Germany lack a large indigenous minority group to represent the endpoint of downward assimilation. Moreover, the pluralist pathway, combining resistance to acculturation with second-generation socioeconomic mobility, appears

disconfirmed by the Turkish experience in both countries. The Turkish group evidences a high level of ethnic and cultural capital in combination with considerable small-business entrepreneurship; but these characteristics do not protect Turks from the sort of disadvantages associated with downward assimilation (Silberman et al., 2007; Segeritz et al., 2010; Phalet and Heath, 2011).

CONCLUSION

Assimilation has revived as an important way to understand the multi-generation incorporation of immigrants and their descendants. Particularly critical to this renewal has been the neo-assimilation theory developed by Alba and Nee (2003), which revised the definition of assimilation to remove some of the flaws inherent in the 20th-century canon, such as ethnocentrism and the teleological assumption of one-directional change. In contrast, neo-assimilation theory specifies mechanisms in propositional form applicable to advanced industrial economies to explore whether assimilation can be a likely outcome in the incorporation of immigrants and their descendants (Nee and Alba, 2013). This approach does not style itself as the exclusive way to understand incorporation, but as one important pattern, which can exist alongside other patterns (such as ethnoracial exclusion). Nevertheless, there is strong resistance among many scholars to assimilation ideas, and most outside the Unites States insist on the superiority of other concepts, especially integration. Yet there exists an obvious overlap between the concepts of integration and assimilation, and the precise differences between them have not been clearly formulated. They may be modest.

Research in the United States establishes that assimilation affects not only immigrant-origin groups but also the mainstream society. One important way that assimilation is occurring is through the expansion of the mainstream, the inclusion of some immigrants and members of the second generation in mainstream social settings, which is most evident in mixed unions and the children who issue from them. This expansion is also being fed by processes of social mobility, which are associated with demographic change, in particular, the rapid transition to diversity in the working-age population. The evidence is that immigrant-origin groups are benefitting especially from this transition; for African Americans, a native minority, the opening up from the transition has been smaller.

A rapid transition to workforce diversity will occur also in Canada and in Western Europe. The decline in the native majority of working age will be especially acute in parts of Europe, such as the Netherlands and Germany. One question that remains to be answered is whether this transition will give rise to large-scale social mobility for the children of immigrants (see Crul et al., 2012); another, whether any social mobility will be accompanied by increased social integration with the native majority. If the answers to these questions are positive, then the assimilation approach may yet be found highly relevant.

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