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Generations of Exclusion: Mexican Americans, Assimilation, and Race (review)

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Generations of Exclusion: Mexican Americans, Assimilation, and Race

Authors: Edward E. Telles and Vilma Ortiz

Foreword: Joan W. Moore

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This long-awaited book was conceived serendipitously in 1992, when boxes of questionnaires used in a household survey of Mexican Americans in Los Angeles and San Antonio in the mid 1960s were accidentally discovered by construction workers at UCLA and brought to the attention of Edward Telles and Vilma Ortiz. The boxes contained the files of the benchmark project carried out in 1965-66 by Leo Gebler, Joan W. Moore and Ralph Guzmán, which formed the basis for their 1970 book *The Mexican American People*. They would also form the basis for the unique follow-up study which Telles and Ortiz undertook and have now brought to fruition in *Generations of Exclusion*. The new book, with a fascinating foreword by Joan Moore (the surviving author of the original project, who also served as a consultant to the follow up), establishes a benchmark of its own.

With commendable tenacity they embarked on a multiyear detective effort to locate the original respondents who had been surveyed three decades before, and then during 1998-2002 proceeded not only to re-interview 684 of them (who by then were between 53 and 85), but also to interview a sample of 758 of their children (who were now between 35 and 54). In the end, 79% of the original respondents who were searched were located, and 57% were re-interviewed. Most were found still residing in the Los Angeles and San Antonio areas; those residing elsewhere were interviewed by telephone; and for those who were deceased, “informant” interviews were conducted with a surviving close relative. The data were weighted for selectivity in both the parent and children samples. The analyses follow an intergenerational longitudinal design: the original respondents were first, second, or third generation adults (i.e., born in Mexico, born in the U.S. of Mexican-born parents, or U.S.-born of U.S.-born parents); their children were second, third, or fourth generations (only 5% were 1.5-generation Mexicans who had come to the U.S. as children before 1965, when their parents were first interviewed). The parents had gone to school between the 1930s and 1950s, the children between the 1950s and 1980s. Significantly, by 2000, more than 10% of the children of the 1965 sample identified as American or white, not as Mexican, Mexican-American, Hispanic or Latino—a warning to researchers of intergenerational social mobility, especially when relying on cross-sectional data, that in later generations-since-immigration a sizable share of respondents may no longer identify with the group’s ethnic origins, and those who still do constitute a select group.

Generations of Exclusion poses a key question: are social (ethnic and racial) boundaries between Mexican Americans and other groups, especially dominant Anglos, enhanced or eroded over time and generation-since-immigration? Mexican immigrants see themselves as different: they speak Spanish, live in segregated barrios, have distinct political views. But for their descendants, what happens to those ethnic boundaries? Do they persist, blur, or disappear? What factors best explain different rates and paths of assimilation or dissimilation? The authors set out to systematically examine multiple dimensions of Mexican American integration that comprise “ethnic retention” vs. “complete assimilation,” and to measure change over time and generation in each of these dimensions, which are each considered in separate chapters: education, economic status, language and culture (including religion, use of Spanish first names, fertility, music, holidays), intermarriage, residential segregation, ethnic and racial identity, and political participation.

The book is admirably attentive to historical contexts throughout, and to key differences between the Los Angeles and San Antonio contexts which continue to shape particular outcomes (such as racial identities) among Mexican Americans (e.g., logistic regressions show that the San Antonio respondents were five times more likely to identify as white than those in Los Angeles). A chapter is devoted to tracing this history from its mid-19th century origins (with the U.S. conquest of nearly half of the territory of Mexico by 1848), through the racism of the early 20th century, the mass immigration from Mexico between 1910 and 1930 (when about a tenth of Mexico’s population migrated to the U.S.), the mass repatriations during the Great Depression, the Bracero Program instituted during World War II to meet new labor needs (which was extended until 1964), the emergence of organizational politics from the 1930s to the 1950s, the civil rights era from the 1950s to the 1970s, the new immigration since the 1970s—coincident with urban industrial restructuring and its differential effects on Los Angeles and San Antonio. Less successful is its uneven theoretical chapter, which despite nuggets of insight is marred by errors of fact, misinterpretation, and mischaracterization. But the core of the book lies in its six empirical chapters, with the data clearly presented and carefully analyzed.

In sharp contrast to assumptions of linear progress underlying conventional assimilation perspectives, the authors find that educational attainment peaks among second-generation children of immigrants, but declines for the third and fourth generations (the grandchildren and great-grandchildren of immigrants). Similarly, economic progress halts by the second generation—education was the only variable to consistently explain variation in the socioeconomic status of Mexican Americans. Poverty rates remained high for later generations, with nearly one fifth of the child sample and two-fifths of the parent sample in poverty in 2000. Skin color, which was measured in the study, had no effect on educational and occupational outcomes. Greater education increased the likelihood of intermarriage and residential integration, while low education perpetuates social isolation, limiting exposure to persons of other ethnicities and hence opportunities for intermarriage. For Telles and Ortiz, (lower) “education is the linchpin of slow assimilation.”

On the other hand, evidence of cultural assimilation was strong on several indicators, above all language, with English spoken well by the second generation and Spanish becoming nearly extinct after the fourth, although linguistic assimilation is more rapid in Los Angeles than San Antonio. Despite the decline of Spanish, ethnic identification persists into the fourth generation, with the lion’s share of respondents preferring Mexican, Mexican American and Hispanic identity labels over American—an outcome that the authors attribute in part to “racialization experiences.” They look at politics across the generations as well, focusing on formal politics and political identities, rates of naturalization, voter registration and turnout, party affiliation (overwhelmingly Democratic in 1965, declining by 2000 so that nearly a fifth self-reported as Independent and a similar proportion as Republican), presidential voting patterns (in 1964 and 2000), political attitudes, and factors affecting voting and partisanship. The authors identify institutional barriers as a major source of Mexican American disadvantage. Poorly funded school systems where Mexican American children are concentrated, punitive immigration policies coincident with

reliance on cheap Mexican labor in key states, and persistent discrimination all combine to make integration problematic. In these respects, the Mexican American trajectory differs from that of European immigrants in previous generations.

Back in 1965, as Moore notes in her Foreword, no one could have imagined that a new era of mass immigration was about to open whose end remains nowhere in sight after four decades, nor that Mexicans would constitute by far its largest and most consequential component. Strikingly, the Mexican-origin population of the U.S today has already surpassed 30 million—40% are immigrants (nearly 12 million, over 96% of whom came after 1965), and a third are second-generation (nearly 10 million, the overwhelming majority of whom were born after 1965). The Gebler-Moore-Guzmán book had been subtitled *The Nation's Second Largest Minority*; today it is nearly as large as the native-stock African American population but growing much more rapidly as a result of both natural increase and immigration. The Telles-Ortiz follow-up, while not a study of these newcomers, shows vividly the complex integration trajectories of a multigenerational sample of Mexican Americans over a 35-year period since 1965 which encompassed the end of legal segregation in the U.S. In its empirical findings and conclusions, *Generations of Exclusion* represents a major contribution that should be consulted by anyone seriously pondering the American, and the Mexican American, future.