

To Assimilate or Not...and to What Mainstream?

Comments on Richard Alba and Victor Nee's *Remaking the American Mainstream*, delivered at the Author Meets Critics meetings of the American Sociological Association, Philadelphia
August 14, 2005

by

Alejandro Portes
Princeton University

To Assimilate or Not...and to What Mainstream?

This book makes a plea for the concept of assimilation as a fundamental element of our understanding of what happens to immigrant groups when they come in contact with American society. It argues for three key points:

- There is plenty of evidence that immigrants assimilate by changing their language and culture as they get in contact with mainstream society.
- There is equally abundant evidence that this mainstream also changes by incorporating new cultural and religious elements and accepting more diversity.
- The best way of having immigrants assimilate to this mainstream is by letting them do so at their own pace in pursuit of their own interests, rather than “pressure cook” them into Anglo hegemony.

These points seem unobjectionable, and I believe most students of immigration will readily accept them. The authors, I surmise, were prompted to write this book by the summary dismissal of the concept of assimilation in most post-modern and multiculturalist writings in the recent past. They put the blame not on the post-modernists or the multi-culturalists, but on immigration scholars of an earlier era who regarded assimilation as: 1) a largely linear and irreversible process; 2) a pre-condition for entry of new immigrant groups into the circles of mainstream society. These assertions were subject to so many exceptions and so many contradictions, especially in the contemporary period, that it was easy for critics to toss them away along with the “master” concept. Not even Gans’ brave attempt to save straight-line assimilation by throwing a few bumps along the way would rescue it.

Alba and Nee want to restore the concept to its original shine by following a different route. First, they want to reinvalidate the legacy of the Chicago School which, in their view,

has been largely forgotten or distorted. Second, they want to put limits to the alleged universality of the concept by accepting the fact that it can be just *one*, albeit an important one, outcome of the encounter between immigrant and mainstream cultures. For them, assimilation is the gradual decline in salience of ethnic and linguistic markers; and the “mainstream” is the place where such markers make little difference in conditioning the opportunities for achievement and mobility of individuals. The book is at its best in the reinvindication of the Chicago School. Alba and Nee view Robert Park and his collaborators at Chicago as precursors of the idea that assimilation did not mean Americanization or Anglo conformity, but rather a gradual meshing of values, lifestyles, and patterns permitting the civilized co-existence of different groups and their eventual coalescing into a national social body with a sense of wholeness. The pace of this process of inter-penetration is gradual and, in the interim, there is value in the emergence of ethnic enclaves and the reassertion of ethnic cultures as way stations to ease the transition of newcomers into the national mainstream. In that process the character of that mainstream is also subject to change.

Similarly, the authors give us a very detailed and very fair account of the theory of Milton Gordon, easily the most important and nuanced formulation of assimilation theory in the classic period of immigration and one that has been widely misinterpreted as predicting or endorsing straight-line assimilation.

With these precedents under their belts, Richard and Victor proceed to address the more difficult question of what assimilation means in the contemporary era and what the alleged “mainstream” consists of. This is where things start to get fuzzy. “Assimilation” in the contemporary era turns out not to be the “master process”, but just one outcome of something broader called “adaptation”. Assimilation is neither inevitable nor irreversible and is essentially

a contingent adaptation outcome (p. 65, 38, 281). If that is the case, why seek so strongly to vindicate it?

The same thing happens with the concept of “mainstream” which they make so broad as to practically deprive it of any meaning. Thus in p. 12, we learn that the “mainstream” does not just encompass the middle- and upper-classes, but also the working-class and some of the poor. Who is left out? In this, as in other aspects, the authors seem to be arguing against themselves, for it is evident that if the concept of “mainstream” has any value, apart from being a rhetorical shorthand, it is to point to the affluent lifestyle of educated, largely white, and largely suburbanite Americans. This is what all immigrants want, if not for themselves, at least for their children. Thus, in another passage we read that:

It is well known that some structures of opportunity readily accessible to poor immigrants and minorities are illicit – oppositional norms, a feature of a reactive subculture formed in defiance of perceived rejection by mainstream authorities (such as teachers), contribute to maintaining the level of solidarity critical to group success. *Viewed from the perspective of the mainstream, oppositional norms have a negative effect, insofar as they are associated with social behavior that opposes mainstream values and hence reinforces negative stereotypes.*

What “mainstream” is this, pray tell, other than the one that defends its middle-class privileges and its lifestyles against the dangers of the streets?

If we accept the earlier definition of “mainstream” in p. 12, we are left with assimilation as a process a contingent entry into a social body that does not really exist or whose composition is so broad as to deprive entry into it of any value.

There is another instance of the arguing-against oneself pattern that I think needs to be brought to the fore. In their review of alternative theories to their own, Richard and Victor justly criticize cultural pluralism theory, or “multiculturalism”, as lacking any empirical support. I agree that there is precious little evidence to back the image of American society of isolated ethnic islands that interact with each other at the margins and that preserve their economic viability and cultural integrity over the generations. Nothing of that sort. Even the most viable and most integrated of immigrant enclaves have dissolved in one or two generations. Witness the Japanese and Jewish enclaves of a century ago; or the more recent Cuban, Russian, and Korean enclaves.

But then Richard and Victor put segmented assimilation theory in the same dismissal boat without, I believe, much realizing what they are doing. Earlier on, they criticize the theory as “excessively pessimistic”, (p. 8). But in repeated passages later on, they go on to assert exactly the same themes. Thus, in p. 50, we learn that:

It is reasonable to assume that a similar pattern of *divergent outcomes* will obtain for the descendants of contemporary immigration as for native groups. Hence, many in the second generation are likely to experience upward mobility into the American socio-economic mainstream...Children of low-wage labor migration are likelier to experience downward mobility into

the urban minority underclass than children of human capital migration from the same ethnic group.

Sounds familiar? And again in the Conclusion:

The contemporary immigration scene displays complex, contradictory patterns, from rapid assimilation apparent among some professionals and their children to the new way of sojourning apparent in transnational circuits, and to the potential among other immigrant groups for incorporation as racialized minorities (p. 273).

An essay on segmented assimilation could not have said it better. Similarly, the *forms-of-capital* argument adopted for explanation of these divergent outcomes draws directly on arguments advanced in the segmented assimilation literature concerning the importance of parental human capital, family and community social capital in determining chances of different second generation youths. Modes of incorporation, defined as the contexts of reception experienced by different immigrant groups, is also a central determinant of adaptation outcomes. For segmented assimilation theory is highlighted, as well, in the present work. Thus in p. 278, we encounter this by now familiar argument:

Whether or not [immigrants] commit themselves to these courses, however, and advance on trajectories of assimilation is contingent on the predictability of their chances for success...and these in turn depend on the reception they anticipate from members of the majority and other racial/ethnic groups.

Why Richard and Victor seek to make short thrift of segmented assimilation and then appropriate so much material from it is to me an enigma. The earlier theory in fact supports rather than contradicts their attempt to reinvalidate the concept of assimilation by doing three things:

- First, asserting that the vast majority of immigrant youths *will* assimilate, a position that is logically superior to saying that the process may or may not happen or may or may not be reversible.
- Second, getting rid of the concept of “mainstream”, except as a rhetorical device, and asserting that the key feature of American society at present is not its homogeneity but its diversity. Thus, if assimilation almost always takes place, the key question for the future is *what sector* of that society immigrants and their children assimilate to.
- Third, by specifying finite and discrete paths along which the process of assimilation takes place and identifying the key structural factors accounting for these divergent outcomes.

These elements add backbone to the argument that assimilation is still a prominent feature of American life while adapting this assertion, in a systematic way, to the contemporary scene.

Having pointed out the compatibility of both positions (and thus hopefully keeping us friends), I would like to conclude with what I get out of this book. I would recommend it to my graduate students for three principal reasons:

- The original and elegant reinvalidation of the Chicago School, as opposed to subsequent and more doctrinaire versions of assimilation theory.

- The recapitulation of historical and contemporary material showing how linguistic, cultural, and social assimilation have actually taken place in this country.
- The problematization of the concept in the contemporary scene which *de facto* shows that assimilation has become segmented because of diversity of contemporary immigrant flows and the complexity and heterogeneity of American society today.

The book has received several well-earned prizes and, despite my reservations, I regard it as an enduring, thoughtful contribution.