

The Melting Pot and Its Limits

THE EDITORS

American institutions rest solely on good citizenship. They were created by people who had a background of self-government. New arrivals should be limited to our capacity to absorb them into the ranks of good citizenship. America must be kept American. For this purpose, it is necessary to continue a policy of restricted immigration. It would be well to make such immigration of a selective nature with some inspection at the source, and based either on a prior census or upon the record of naturalization. Either method would insure the admission of those with the largest capacity and best intention of becoming citizens. I am convinced that our present economic and social conditions warrant a limitation of those to be admitted. We should find additional safety in a law requiring the immediate registration of all aliens. Those who do not want to be partakers of the American spirit ought not to settle in America.

—President Calvin Coolidge
December 6, 1923

As the crisis at our southern border deepens, it is sometimes easy to forget how far-reaching the cultural impact of immigration can be. Even a place as distant and exclusive as the Hamptons has not been immune. With fancy summer homes and upscale shopping, Long Island's northeastern coast has long been the seaside resort-of-choice for New York's upper classes. It has also attracted immigrant workers.

When the 2008 recession hit, about two dozen day laborers in the Hamptons ran out of housing options and took refuge in some nearby campgrounds. They built fires, butchered a deer carcass, and slept on beds of old Budweiser boxes, all in the shadow of tony vacation homes and chic department stores. The *New York Post* ran the headline "Homeless in the Hamptons," and residents were shocked at the squalor. Unsurprisingly, the sudden confluence of rich and poor caused social tensions, as angry homeowners worried about property values, and police monitored the campgrounds. Even after the recession ended, the familiar problems of overcrowded houses and schools continued to rankle the community.

Concerns about rising inequality and cultural balkanization due to immigration are often downplayed by policymakers and members of the media. They assume these problems are temporary, just as they seemed to be a hundred years ago when European peasants were coming ashore. In their view, conflicts between natives and newcomers are just transition costs, footnotes to America's long history of self-renewal.

The optimists do seem to have history on their side. Descendants of European immigrants may feel nostalgia for an idealized "Old Country" and express pride in those roots, but their ethnic identity usually has little or no importance to their daily lives. Most have undergone what John Fonte calls "patriotic assimilation." They see themselves as plain-old Americans, the people who define the cultural mainstream rather than stand apart from it.

Since 1965 we have experienced a new wave of immigration, this time primarily from the Western hemisphere rather than from Europe. Although Asian immigration has been rising — about as many immigrants arrived from Asia in 2018 than from Latin America — the overall post-1965 immigration wave has been dominated by immigrants from Mexico and increasingly Central America. Some observers expect Latin American immigrants to follow the European path to assimilation, but their optimism may not be warranted. In several ways, today's immigrants are different.

One of the most obvious differences is in numbers. Any given *individual* can potentially join the American melting pot, but the likelihood shrinks as the size of the out-group grows. In 1930, just after the Great Wave had ended, 12.6 percent of America's foreign-born population hailed from Italy, the highest percentage of any nationality at the time. By comparison, 29 percent of immigrants were born in Mexico as of the 2010 census. Adding immigrants from other Latin American coun-

tries brings the Hispanic proportion of America's foreign-born to 53 percent. The long-term effect on America's population is notable. Hispanics, both foreign and native-born, were just four percent of the overall U.S. population in 1970, but today they are more numerous than black Americans. By 2050, Hispanics are projected to be more than one quarter of the U.S. population.

A second key difference between today's immigrants and those of 100 years ago is the persistent disparity in economic status. First-generation Hispanics—like those who slept on Budweiser boxes in the Hamptons—are quite poor on average, but their children (the second generation) will certainly make economic gains. The problem is that assimilation slows at that point. The Hispanic third generation remains well behind in measures of educational attainment, test scores, and earnings.

A recent report from the Center for Immigration Studies found that in a sample of third-generation Mexican Americans born between 1980 and 1984, 24 percent graduated from college, compared to 38 percent

of the white "fourth-plus" generation (meaning people with four U.S.-born grandparents). Similarly, Mexican Americans in the third generation scored at just the 42nd percentile on a test of math and verbal skills, and they earn 20 percent less than the white fourth-plus generation.

By contrast, third-generation European Americans slightly outperform the white fourth-plus generation on education and earnings measures. The economic contrast between the grandchildren of European immigrants and the grandchildren of Mexican immigrants could not be clearer, and it raises concerns that the latter group will have trouble seeing itself as part of the American mainstream.

The situation on the ground should add to these worries. Probably the most visible evidence that Hispanic assimilation is lagging is the prevalence of ethnic lobbying groups such as the National Council of La Raza, the Hispanic Congressional Caucus, the Hispanic Chamber of Commerce, the National Association of Hispanic Journalists, and many others. They encourage



According to a PRWEB press release, "the annual Cinco de Mayo and Fiestas Patrias festivals at Whittier Narrows Regional Park in South El Monte are the largest of their kind in the United States.... The Whittier Narrows Cinco de Mayo and Fiestas Patrias festivals create a crucial sense of tradition, positivity, pride, and unity among the Southern California Hispanic community..." <http://www.prweb.com/releases/delrey/festivals/prweb11634434.htm>

ethnic awareness on a day-to-day basis, couching political issues in terms of what helps or hurts Hispanics as a group.

Most Americans reject such an ethnocentric approach to politics, but the existence of these lobbying groups seems inevitable. When an identifiable ethnic minority is noticeably poorer than the majority, someone is bound to exploit that situation for political gain. This is why it is useful only in theory to argue that Hispanic assimilation would happen much faster if La Raza were to disappear. The two are not separable phenomena in the real world. One comes with the other.

Fortunately, average Hispanics may be different from the leaders who claim to represent them. Perhaps they are not motivated by ethnic identity as much as national Hispanic organizations want them to be. But it is hard to ignore the troubling data and anecdotes that suggest ethnic consciousness is common even among ordinary Hispanics. Consider the ethnic tensions that erupted at a high school in Morgan Hill, a small city in the San Francisco Bay area. On Cinco de Mayo, four students came to school wearing bandannas and t-shirts depicting the American flag. Citing concerns about safety, an assistant principal told them to change their clothes or face disciplinary action.

The principal deemed patriotic clothing unsafe because it offended Hispanics who wanted to celebrate a Mexican holiday. “I think they should apologize ’cause it is a Mexican heritage day,” the AP quoted one Hispanic student as saying. “We don’t deserve to get disrespected like that. We wouldn’t do that on Fourth of July.” The quote betrays a decidedly unassimilated mindset—Cinco de Mayo is for us and Fourth of July is for them, the student was saying in effect. The day after the flag incident, Hispanic students organized a march through town, protesting the actions of the four students and supporting the school administration’s actions. At least one protester waved a large Mexican flag. In response, the Morgan Hill city manager promised the group, in the words of the AP reporter, “a community-wide celebration of diversity.”

Contrast Cinco de Mayo with European cultural celebrations in America. Would someone object to an American flag at a St. Patrick’s Day parade? Is Oktoberfest rife with ethnic tension? Does Mardi Gras elicit calls for sensitivity training? Because many Hispanics have not fully joined the melting pot, Cinco de Mayo can feel politicized and exclusionary as a result.

Hispanic identity was also on display during the World Cup. Global sporting events tend to encourage nationalistic fervor, with rich and poor and young and old coming together to root for their country’s team. For many Hispanic Americans, that team was Mexico’s. When the Mexican team played World Cup warm-up

matches in the U.S., it easily sold out large venues, each time filling the stands with Mexican green. Over 63,000 people in Charlotte, North Carolina, for example, packed a stadium to see a Mexico-Iceland match. The *New York Times* even suggested the Mexican national team could be the most popular soccer team in the U.S.

Moving beyond anecdotes, the Pew Research Center asked Hispanic respondents in 2002 for the first or only way they identify themselves. Three choices were available—American, Hispanic/Latino, or the specific country the respondent’s family came from. Even among third generation and higher Hispanics, just 57 percent chose American. In 2009 Pew re-asked the question, this time limiting its sample to ages 16 through 25 in order to capture “young Latinos com[ing] of age in America.” In the third generation and higher, only 50 percent selected American as their first identity.

One might be tempted to conclude that the melting pot works for Europeans but not for Hispanics. That is an oversimplification. In fact, the power of the melting pot has always been limited. The historian David Hackett Fischer observed that cultural differences among the four major settler groups from England — New England Puritans, mid-Atlantic Quakers, Southern Cavaliers, and the Appalachian Scotch-Irish — *still persist in the U.S. today*. Furthermore, George Borjas has shown that economic disparities among immigrants in 1910 were still noticeable among their descendants around 80 years later. Perhaps most surprisingly, Tom Rice and Jan Feldman have found that civic attitudes among European Americans can be predicted by present-day civic attitudes in the countries from which their ancestors came! For example, Sweden has a more civic-oriented population than Italy, and Swedish Americans are more civic-oriented than Italian Americans.

Given that cultural-economic differences can persist for so long among different groups from within Europe — and even among different groups *from the same island country*, in the case of Fischer’s work — is it any wonder that people from outside Europe are struggling to assimilate?

The melting pot does not succeed or fail in a binary fashion. It would be fairer to say that it exerts a limited power of assimilation over all groups, but that groups with greater initial differences will see those differences persist far longer. In the case of European immigrants from the Great Wave, the melting pot appears to have enabled “patriotic assimilation,” but not complete assimilation in the economic or cultural sense. Whether the descendants of immigrants from Latin America will experience even patriotic assimilation — not to mention socioeconomic parity — is an open question, but the evidence so far is not encouraging. ■