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How normative debates about immigration shape analyses of the assimilation processes of second-generation youth: lessons from Spanish Legacies

Natasha Iskander

Wagner School of Public Service, New York University, USA

ABSTRACT

In *Spanish Legacies*, Portes, Aparicio, and Haller offer the results of their longitudinal study on the assimilation of the children of immigrants in Spanish society. Thanks to their study design, which parallels the earlier Children of Immigrants Longitudinal Study conducted by Portes and Rumbaut, the authors are able to compare assimilation trajectories in Spain with those of second-generation youth in the United States. This comparison raises important considerations about how immigration policy shapes assimilation processes. More centrally, the contrast between the cases invites a deeper consideration of normative questions that not only undergird immigration policy but also shape the assimilation experiences of the second generation. The juxtaposition of the two cases also elicits provocations about how the sociological theories about assimilation might have been different if they had been developed based on the Spanish, rather than the American, experience, and how those Spanish-inflected theories might support different directions of inquiry.

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On 21 February 2017, the Trump administration issued new guidelines for the immigration control, aggressively expanding the category of people classified as “priorities for removal”, subject to immediate deportation, and calling for a dramatic increase in resources for enforcement. That afternoon, a group of private citizens, non-activists by their own description, unfurled a banner at the foot of the Statue of Liberty that read “Refugees Welcome”. The group released a statement explaining that their protest action had been sparked by Trump’s travel ban but added that it had also been motivated by concerns that were much broader: “We wanted to send a reminder about America when we’re at our best – the country that’s a beacon of freedom to the world, built by immigrants. Walling of countries or entire religions is against

CONTACT Natasha Iskander  natasha.iskander@nyu.edu

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our values" (Kirby 2017). On that Tuesday of America's winter, the normative debate about the function of immigration in the creation and definition of the nation-state to the centre stage. As Aristide Zolberg put it in the last article published before his death in 2013, the debate is fundamentally about which question should drive immigration policy: "whom shall we admit?" or "why not the whole world?" (2012, 1205).

Spanish Legacies, a study by Alejandro Portes, Rosa Aparicio, and William Haller on the assimilation of the children of immigrants in Spain, wades into this normative debate. In an elegant presentation of their research, the authors describe the findings of their longitudinal study of second-generation immigrants – students of foreign parentage – in Spain. The empirics they present raise fundamental questions about how a society resolves the normative quandary at the heart of the immigration politics and who gets to participate in resolving it.

The study featured in the book – christened in Spanish, la Investigación Longitudinal de la Segunda Generación (ILSEG) – is modelled after the Children of Immigrants Longitudinal Study (CILS), designed by Alejandro Portes and Ruben Rumbaut and active from 1991 through 2005. The goal of *Spanish Legacies* is more multifold than to replicate the CILS analysis of assimilation. To be sure, a main aim of the book is to create a statistically representative panel that would provide an empirical basis to explore the contours of the second generation in a Western European country. The authors selected Spain because it had experienced significant immigration growth, going from "practically zero" in the late 1980s to close to 13 per cent in 2010, a historically unprecedented inflow that caused Spain to resemble the United States in immigration density. This similarity is supportive of the goal that most centrally motivated the authors' study. Their aim was to interrogate the extent to which theories of assimilation and acculturation, derived from social analyses of the United States, are broadly applicable, and can be used to understand social dynamics in Europe and perhaps beyond. *Spanish Legacies* is explicitly patterned on Portes and Rumbaut's (2001) presentation of their study, in their book *Legacies: The Story of the Immigrant Second Generation*, and the European version mirrors the structure and components of that earlier work, down to the inclusion of photographic portraits of second-generation immigrants. It is through this comparison that the authors interrogate the bases of the normative overarching normative debate about immigration.

After a set of poignant narrative plates of young people of foreign parentage growing up in Spain, vignettes that echo those in the original *Legacies*, *Spanish Legacies* opens with an overview of existing theories on the adaptation of the immigrant second generation to host societies. In the almost two decades since the publication of the first *Legacies*, the conversations on assimilation have deepened and matured. Distinct strands of thought on

the patterns of assimilation, and on the social potential of that process, have cohered, and Portes, Aparicio, and Haller lay out a clear and compelling typology of the theories that have emerged. Their discussion begins with Samuel Huntington's pessimistic and frankly nativist culturalist reaction to assimilation (although they apply a respectable gloss to his racist and alarmist bent), then moves through more celebratory accounts that the authors describe as the "traditional melting pot theory ... dusted off for the twenty-first century" (2016, 19) and concludes with more variegated theories of segmented assimilation that consider the effects of family networks, human capital, and context on outcomes.

Although perhaps not their main intent, the authors show that analyses of assimilation have congealed around a normative stance that takes as its starting point the view that immigrants are the ones that make disruptive and even deleterious to the host society. The literature on assimilation tends to assume that the site of immigration – the receiving country – is a passive slate on which the process of assimilation occurs. Assimilation, in this view, occurs in the life trajectories of immigrants and their children, and far less so in the social and political life of the people who already live in the places drubbed by immigration flows. And thus, because the host society exercises minimal sway over assimilation, immigration carries risks for receiving countries. As the authors point out in their preface, "success or failure of their process of integration can have major social and political consequences for the cities and regions where they concentrate" (2016, x). Moreover, the success or failure of assimilation tends to be equated with economic attainment, and specifically the extent to which the second generation is upwardly mobile. The danger, then, of the failure in assimilation is represented as more of a structural rather than a cultural threat. Failure means the accretion of a permanent economic underclass, with all the societal dysfunction that this can cause. The assumptions that run through the literature evoke the question of "whom shall we admit?" The risks to the host society of getting the answer to that question wrong are presumably quite high.

After this review of the models used to define and analyse assimilation, the authors present their findings, which, in the contrast they present between the United States and Spain, seem to challenge many of the basic assumptions of the literature they just described. To be sure, the authors find similarities in their cross-national comparison of assimilation that seem to confirm the theoretical validity of at least some aspects of assimilation models. They note especially the significance of family income, occupation, and ties on second-generation outcomes in both countries. But they also note meaningful differences between the countries. They flag, for example, that the difference in the occupational aspirations and expectations among youth in the two countries, observing that "the children of immigrants in America appear to be significantly more oriented to success" (2016, 228). This success is defined primarily

as economic, and the authors conclude, a little prematurely for my taste, that aspirations are likely predictors of economic attainment. An alternative explanation may be that American youth may be reacting to societal pressure to subscribe to the American dream, and its myth of the United States as a meritocratic society where all that is required to success is gumption, deepening structural inequality notwithstanding. Aspirations may be a product of a specific social environment, and their relationships to outcomes may not in fact be that predictive outside the US context. Another cross-national difference the authors note that the second-generation youth in the United States were twice as likely to experience negative events – arrest or incarceration, childbearing during adolescence, school abandonment among others – that were associated with downward assimilation.

Even more significantly, the authors note the difference in perceptions of discrimination between America and Spanish youth. American youth were five times more likely than their second-generation counterparts in Spain to report experiencing discrimination, with the proportion of American youth reporting discrimination increasing over time, while in Spain, the proportion remained constant. The authors observe that in Spain, second-generation children seem to self-identify comfortably with the country. In their surveys, they find little evidence of the reactive ethnicity and alienation, with “youngsters refusing to abandon their parents’ nationalities as markers of self-identification” (2016, 137), that the US version of the study uncovered. To explain this divergence, the authors point to the ethno-racial hierarchy in the United States “under which these children are routinely classified by American institutions as well as by the general public,” and call attention to the way this “makes their integration into the native white mainstream problematic” (2016, 137).

The differences that the authors draw out in their cross-national comparison seem to show that theories that seek to explain assimilation by focusing on the immigrants supposedly doing the assimilating, rather than on the places to which they are assimilating, are flawed, or at the very least, incomplete. In the preface to the study, the authors stress that they chose Spain as an investigative site because many of the immigrants in both countries come from the same Latin American source countries. The evidence presented *Spanish Legacies* shows that tackling the issue of immigrant assimilation by focusing of “whom shall we admit” seems wholly insufficient when second-generation youth, who herald from the same national background, are confronted, in one country but not the other, with an intransigent ethno-racial hierarchy and the onslaught of negative events mediated, if not solely authored, by institutional actors (judicial system, school, and health services), in ways that, profoundly and painfully, affect their life course.

Although the differences highlighted by the cross-national comparison between Spain and the United States suggest the limitations of an analysis

of assimilation based too heavily on immigrant themselves – an analysis that implicitly endorses the question of “whom shall we admit” – the discrepancies between the United States and Spain remain puzzling and underdetermined in the authors’ account. There is some reference to institutional structures, but the main discussion in the book about policy stresses the commonality in the Spanish and US approaches to immigration and assimilation.

The authors’ characterize Spain’s approach to assimilation as “integration without a blueprint”. They describe the Spanish policy to immigrants as a pastiche of practical “responses to the issues of the day without a pre-set vision of national identity and national community into which the foreign population should be integrated”. Spain, in the face of a dramatic rise in immigration, has not adopted any version of “reactive ethnicity” that is usually attributed to immigrant youth. The United States, according to the authors, has also approached immigrant incorporation “without a blueprint”. They conclude that “American authorities have seldom compelled immigrant groups to follow a particular course, allowing them instead to carve out their own adaptation paths and create their own institutions” (2016, 52). The divergences in outcomes in assimilation between the two countries remain a paradox, then, until we consider what portions of this policy history have been omitted from the analysis. There is emphatically more to the story than is included in *Spanish Legacies*.

Post-war US immigration history is striated with anti-immigrant policy initiatives. From the creation of a major police force to enforce immigrant exclusion in the 1950s, to Operation Wetback, through the criminalization of work without documentation and the expulsion of legal immigrants from many social welfare rolls, to the historically high levels of deportation under the Obama administration which look now like they will be surpassed by the unapologetically anti-immigrant measures of the Trump administration, the process of assimilation in the United States has been bludgeoned by a drumbeat of policy measures that have both institutionally and symbolically communicated to immigrants that they are not welcome. Even measures that seemed to open the United States to immigration were not inclusive. The 1965 Immigration and Naturalization Act, for example, removed national-origin quotas for immigrants but kept the family-origin preference as a strategy to preserve whiteness by giving preference to members of presumably white families. The 1986 Immigration Reform and Control Act likewise tried to close the gate behind the population already in US borders; it combined the legalization of status of immigrants established in the United States with new measures to deter undocumented immigration and to forestall the further erosion of national identity. It is hard to imagine that this succession of restrictive immigration measures has not informed assimilation in ways both profound and intimate. In the case of the United States, at least, the authors’ of both *Legacies*, the Spanish and the original, explicit shift

away from an attention to policy as an important means through which societies answer normative questions about immigration and define the contours of assimilation seems somewhat rash.

Meanwhile, Spain, in its short immigration history, has issued a bevy of measures to affirmatively include new immigrants into Spanish society, accelerating at every step immigrants' access to full political rights. It issued four different regularization programmes in a decade, between 1996 and 2005, prompting the EU to issue a formal complaint and require that Spain consult its European partner before instituting additional regularization programmes. Over 1.2 million immigrants acquired Spanish nationality, over a base population of about 5 million foreign residents in the mid-2000s. Additionally, despite the increase in border-crossing attempts as a product of the refugee crisis facing Europe, the Spanish government has reduced its expulsions at the border by half, and has curtailed its deportation activity within the border, such that the number of deportations has dropped by two-thirds since 2008.

The policy contrast between the two countries could not be starker. While the US approach has been organized around a very racialized approach to the question of "whom shall we let in?", Spain has tended instead to address the process of assimilation by engaging the question of "why not the whole world?". To be sure, local governments in the United States at the state and city levels have been sites of openness and welcome, and there are strong and unpalatable anti-immigrant sentiments that are fiercely held and advocated by portions of Spanish society. Nevertheless, it is fair to say that overall, US policy has adopted more defensive crouch against immigration, through which it has sought to protect an imagined version of US society – the "mainstream" – from outside incursive. This is not the same as saying that the United States has been closed to immigrant entry; the numbers of immigrant entrants in the post-war period clearly establish the United States as a major – indeed the major – destination country. At issue is the policy stance that the United States has adopted over the past 50 years. The parallels between the motivations of this policy approach and the preoccupations that undergird theories on assimilation that have been derived from the American case, with their focus on the impact of assimilation on receiving societies, should give us pause.

If theories about assimilation had been derived instead from the Spanish case, where the policy viewpoint has tended towards inclusion, and where migrants have been appraised as an economic and social boon for an aging society, perhaps the theories would have focused less on immigrants and more on the receiving context. The gaze would have been turned inwards, on the characteristics of the receiving society, rather than on the ability of immigrants to merge with it. It might have examined more centrally the social processes through which nationals adapt to immigrants, rather than

the other way around, and on their successes and their failures in creating synergies that supported upward mobility. The discussion in the literature might have addressed how policy and social process could be redirected from preserving the status quo towards imagining and enacting new social and national identities.

The cross-national comparison, when considered through such a hypothetical lens, might yield different puzzles. We might ask ourselves, for example, why it is that across contexts that differ so dramatically in their policy preference for openness or closure, immigrant girls and women seem to suffer similar social exclusion. We might ponder why it was that despite their superior educational attainment and their ambitious aspirations they faced reduced labour market opportunities in both countries, and we might explore what factors in host societies truncated their upward mobility. We might broaden the inquiry to look at who gets to participate in the social conversation about whether immigration should be addressed by asking “who should we let in?” or instead asking “why not the whole world?”

In reflecting on the significance of their study, the authors observe that “studies on immigration and immigrant adaptation conducted exclusively on the United States cannot shed light on key features of the society that foreigners confront with the clarity afforded by a cross-national lens” (2016, 229). In *Spanish Legacies*, Portes, Aparicio, and Haller present evidence that invites the reader to grapple with the normative questions that inform immigrant experiences and the interpretation that others may apply to those personal histories. Their data suggest that assimilation may be less a project exclusive to immigrants, and that instead, it is in fact much more of a matter for the host society to address. By bringing the examples of the United States and Spain into dialogue, they make clear that the conflict between questions of “who shall we admit” and “why not the whole world” flares not just on a Tuesday in an American winter, after the release of newly restrictive policy guidelines, but everyday; and although the lives of immigrants are perhaps most immediately affected by these debates, evidence of the consequences of these clashes must be sought not in the immigrants’ ability or desire to merge into the receiving society, but rather in the way that host society chooses to answer those normative questions.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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