Second-generation decline: scenarios for the economic and ethnic futures of the post–1965 American immigrants

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Abstract

'Second-generation decline' questions the current American faith in the myth of nearly automatic immigrant success. In discussing economic scenarios, positive and negative, for the future of the children of the post–1965 immigrants, the possibility is proposed that a significant number of the children of poor immigrants, especially dark-skinned ones, might not obtain jobs in the mainstream economy. Neither will they be willing – or even able – to take low-wage, long-hour 'immigrant' jobs, as their parents did. As a result, they (and young males among them particularly) may join blacks and Hispanics among those already excluded, apparently permanently, from the mainstream economy. The article also deals with the relations between ethnicity and economic conditions in the USA and with the continued relevance of the assimilation and acculturation processes described by 'straight-line theory'. This issue, as well as most others discussed, may also be salient for European countries experiencing immigration, especially those countries with troubled economies.

Introduction

The children of the latest 'new immigration' that began after 1965 are now in school, some are already in the labour force, and by the mid–1990s their numbers will begin to increase rapidly. Their entry into that force raises a host of significant questions about their economic future, questions that are relevant both to public policy and ethnic theory.

Specifically, this article is impelled by the fear of 'second-generation decline', that is, if the American economy is not growing, some members of the second generation, especially those whose parents did not themselves escape poverty, could in adulthood finish in persistent poverty because they will either not be asked, or will be reluctant, to

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work at immigrant wages and hours as their parents did but will lack the job opportunities, skills and connections to do better.

Thus, they – including the Vietnamese and other Asian-Americans, Salvadorans and other Central and Latin Americans, as well as Haitians and others from the Caribbean, Africa and elsewhere – may join blacks, and the Puerto Rican, Mexican and other ‘Hispanics’, who came to the cities at an earlier time, as well as ‘Anglos’ (in some places) as excluded from, or marginal to, the economy. Indeed, even much of the joblessness, pathology and crime of today’s urban poor is associated with second-generation decline on the part of young blacks and Hispanics whose parents came to the cities a generation or longer ago and who are unable or unwilling to work in ‘immigrant’ jobs but are excluded, for skill or other reasons, from better jobs.2

Moreover, when the next spurt of economic growth rolls around, the second generation of the current immigration, as well as poor blacks and Hispanics, may be further marginalized by a new wave of immigrants ready to work in ‘un-American’ conditions. Bringing new workers ready to work at low wages and for long hours into urban areas from peasant areas overseas – as in the past from rural America – is an old American technique for renewing economic growth quickly and cheaply.

The theoretical concerns of this article are not limited to second-generation decline but extend also to the relations between ethnicity and economy. Specifically, I am interested in the theories of acculturation and assimilation that were first developed in connection with the southern and eastern European immigration of about 1880 to 1925. These theories were formulated during a time in which the American economy was growing more or less continuously, especially with the employment of immigrant physical labour.6 Today, however, that economy has changed and the need for large amounts of physical labour has ended. This raises the questions of whether and how immigrant acculturation and assimilation will be affected by the change in the economy, if at all, particularly among the non-Caucasian immigrant population.

For example, the ‘straight-line’ assimilation theory associated with Warner and Srole (1945), in which each native-born generation acculturates further and raises its status vis-à-vis the previous one is an almost entirely sociocultural theory that pays little attention to the economy in which the immigrants and their descendants work. Looking back now on the classic research conducted in Yankee City, this emphasis seems strange, because the empirical work for the study took place between 1930 and 1935, in Newburyport, Massachusetts, never an affluent city at best. None the less, Warner and Srole say little about whether and how the economy and economic problems affected ethnic upward mobility and the Great Depression is not even
an item in the book’s index. In fact, Warner and Srole seem to assume that the state of the economy is not relevant, for they introduce the book as telling ‘part of the magnificent history of the adjustment of ethnic groups to American life’, and go on to predict that ‘oncoming generations of new ethnics will ... climb to the same heights that generations of earlier groups have achieved’ (Warner and Srole 1945, p. 2).

It is most likely that the book, which began as Srole’s doctoral dissertation, reflects not the Depression era but the upward mobility of the second generation of the affluent 1920s, as well as the personal optimism of its authors and their colleagues. However, straight-line theory is still being applied, and its subsequent users, this author included, never built economic factors into it. Even so, it has remained valid for most immigrant populations so far (Alba 1990; Waters 1990).

To be sure, the line of the theory has not always been straight and bumpy-line theory might be a more apt term. Moreover, the line will not necessarily ‘decline’ into final and complete assimilation and acculturation, and it is possible, perhaps even likely, that ethnic groups reach plateaux after several generations in which they still name themselves as members of an ethnic group but indulge mainly in a familial and leisure-time ethnicity that I have called symbolic (Gans 1979). Finally, changing economic and political conditions can produce generational ‘returns’, or at least interruptions in acculturation and assimilation processes, although the history of the descendants of the 1880–1925 immigrants suggests that straight- or bumpy-line theory operates quite independently of the economy, with assimilation and acculturation continuing even during economic downturns.

Straight-line theory has been under considerable attack in recent decades, not for ignoring the economy or even for distorting what has actually happened over the generations, but because it has conjured up too many impersonal and permanent forces or ‘structures’, not left enough room for human choice or ‘agency’, and, perhaps most important, for ignoring the possibility of ethnic identity without much ethnic behaviour or group participation. The new theorists are correct in pointing out that people construct their own ethnicity (e.g., Yancey, Ericksen and Juliani 1976) or invent it (Sollors 1989), but these theorists have not paid enough attention to the fact that people also construct their own acculturation and assimilation. Thus, whatever the faults of straight-line theory, including its lack of interest in identity, the outcome predicted by it, rapid cultural Americanization and slower familial and social assimilation, is still taking place and may be occurring also among the new post–1965 immigrants.

So far the evidence for what is happening to the second generation is mostly anecdotal, and besides, that generation is still mainly composed of children and adolescents. It is, however, maturing into adult-
hood at a time when the lower or 'secondary' sectors of the national economy, and especially the urban economies in which immigrant parents are working, are no longer growing as they were during the last European immigration. Moreover, many of the immigrants are dark-skinned and non-Caucasian and suffer from various kinds of ethnic and racial discrimination, which now seem more permanent than those suffered by the white southern and eastern Europeans when they were characterized as races.\textsuperscript{4} While dark-skinned immigrants from overseas cultures will also acculturate, racial discrimination will not encourage their assimilation, at least not into white society. As a result, a number of questions can be raised about acculturation and assimilation, identity construction and other processes of ethnic adaptation among the second generation.\textsuperscript{5}

Since this article is largely about the unknown future, it is organized in terms of 'scenarios' for the economic future of the second generation, three positive for that generation and three negative, followed by a discussion of the primary policy and theoretical questions that these raise. The three positive scenarios focus around the role of education, ethnic succession and niche-improvement respectively; the three negative ones deal with their opposites: educational failure, the stalling of ethnic succession, and niche-shrinkage.\textsuperscript{6}

The positive scenarios

\textit{Education-driven upward mobility}

The extent to which education is a significant mechanism for upward mobility is difficult to ascertain. At the turn of the century, when less than 5 per cent of all Americans – and even fewer members of the second-generation ethnics – graduated from high school, even a high-school diploma must have made a big difference, especially for people who had no other resources for finding jobs and had no niches into which to enter. Today, high-school diplomas are virtually taken for granted, and the college degree is quickly becoming a prerequisite for stable white-collar employment. Only a limited number of postgraduate professional and technical specialties are so short of workers that a degree in them can still guarantee upward movement via education alone.

Popular conceptions of the acculturation process have often ignored this reality, and instead assumed that the children of the European immigrants used education to move out of immigrant poverty. In fact, however, education was a major factor for the upward mobility of only a minority of the second generation, including some but by no means all of the Jews (Steinberg 1989, ch. 3). For most other descendants of European immigrants, education probably did not make a
major difference until the third and fourth generations (Greeley 1974, p. 72).

This scenario may be repeated once more. Today's Asian-American second generation is currently being slotted into the role of the European Jews in the contemporary version of the ethnic-success myth, although (as among the Jews) only a minority of the Asian-Americans can live up to the myth. In today's economy, as in the past eras, it is the children of middle-class immigrants, Asian-American and other, who are most likely to be able to use education in upward mobility.

This time, the scenario may also apply to especially talented young people from non-middle-class homes, who will do well in high school that they will be able to go to better-quality colleges, on scholarship or otherwise, and then on to professional or graduate school. Institutions of higher education, public or private, are now so concerned with student-body diversity, not to mention affirmative action, that they are opening their doors even to children of the immigrant poor.

A related but numerically more important version of this scenario can be constructed for the many immigrant children who will use high-school graduation, technical training and perhaps some years of college to help them find, or qualify them for, jobs better than those now being held by their parents, including stable and well-paid blue- and white-collar jobs in the mainstream economy. If the economy is healthy, they will probably constitute at least the plurality of the second generation.

In the longer run, education may become a more important means for upward mobility than it is today for, as firms become larger, the global economy more competitive, and the division of labour more specialized, the most up-to-date technical or professional education will become an ever-greater job prerequisite, while parental social status may become less important. For example, banks will be able to survive only with the most talented executives, and past requirements like an Ivy League background will pale into insignificance.

*Succession-driven upward mobility*

During the European immigration, a typical second-generation scenario was the move into the relatively secure but low-status blue- and white-collar jobs that WASPs and the descendants of earlier immigrations would no longer accept because they could find better-paying and more pleasant work. For that generation and its children, this kind of ethnic succession never ended, so that by the 1980s, white ethnics who were still in blue-collar and non-professional white-collar occupations probably held the best jobs in these strata.

Many of the kinds of jobs the second generation took over, first in
the 1920s and then massively in the 1940s, have been disappearing in the last two decades, either moving out of the US into lower-wage countries, or being eliminated altogether by the computer. Thus, the ethnic-succession scenario may be coming to an end in the manufacturing sector, although it will continue in two other sectors. One is the service sector, where immigrants, or the children of immigrants, are eligible as soon as they speak English and can live up to the status-based work and behavioural codes in service firms.10

A second sector that may open up to the children of the new immigration consists of the small manufacturing and service firms which have sprung up to fill gaps created by the departure of large ones overseas. So far, many of these firms seem able to survive only as long as they can hire immigrants at low wages and with inferior working conditions. These include the sweatshops that have replaced the old 'garment district' firms of New York and other American cities. In other industries they may be illegal firms, or legal firms staffed with illegal immigrants. Whether such firms can find sufficiently stable roles in their industries to hire second-generation people at higher wages remains to be seen.

Niche improvement

The final scenario for second-generation upward mobility is to remain in and improve the economic niches that their parents occupied when they came to America (Waldinger 1986). Many children of the European immigrants took this route, staying in parental retail stores, taverns, contracting businesses and the like, both in their own ethnic neighbourhoods, black ghettos and elsewhere. Their 'choice' (and it would be interesting to discover whether they chose or had to stay in ethnic niches) became part of the American ethnic-success myth when the family food store became a regional supermarket chain; the small-town dry-goods store, a big-city department store; and the local contractor, a national development and construction company.

In most instances, the immigrant establishments grew more modestly, with the second generation perhaps taking over as owners but letting others, often from a later wave of the European immigration as well as blacks, Hispanics and others, do the work that required long hours and physical labour.

A parallel working-class version of this scenario, closer to niche retention than improvement, had immigrants in good industrial and municipal jobs pass these on to their children. Sometimes the jobs were virtually heritable via parental seniority or union rules, and sometimes there were informal arrangements in which managements seeking long-term stability encouraged their best workers to bring other family members into the firm (Newman 1988, p. 182). Similar
arrangements were found in some public agencies, notably police and fire departments.

The retail scenario is likely to be played out again among the children of immigrant store-owners. Although this time round, petty retailing may be a less successful niche, in part because of the continually growing role of national chains. However, since the large retail chains tend to locate in the suburbs and some shun the cities altogether, they have left an urban retail vacuum that is in part being filled by immigrants, and which the immigrants can at least try to hand down to their children. The expansion of the black ghettos has not only enabled a few black businesses to establish themselves, but it has also opened up new business opportunities for Korean, Indian, Yemenite and other immigrant storekeepers, and presumably at least some of them will pass their stores on to their descendants.

New retail niches were also created in the 1980s as a result of the decision of young professionals to remain urban. For example, since many of these professionals, as well as others in New York City's upper-middle class, adopted 'health diets'. Korean immigrants were able to develop urban fruit and vegetable retailing into a flourishing business. This may have been an unusual instance of being in a profitable place at the right time, however. Moreover, the Korean storekeepers, many of whom had themselves obtained college and professional degrees in Korea, are sending their children to college here and may not even want the next generation to take over the store. Similar preferences can be found among other immigrant groups: Soviet Jews are an example (Gold 1989, p. 429).

In addition, the long hours required by storekeeping may discourage members of the second generation from continuing with the family stores, if they have any choice. This depends, however, on alternative opportunities, such as white-collar and technical jobs in manufacturing and service firms, or positions in public bureaucracies. Perhaps some second-generation people will find or develop opportunities in wholesale or chain retailing or more prestigious forms of petty retailing, so that the children of these immigrants will move out of corner grocery shops and newsagents into appliance or clothing stores.

The old working-class scenario is probably nearly irrelevant now, since civil service, affirmative action, the declining power of unions and other factors have reduced the heritability of all jobs considerably, including the ethnic niches established by the European immigrants in factories and public agencies.
The negative scenarios

Educational failure

Most European immigrants who were not from urban or middle-class backgrounds put little emphasis on their children's education. Just the reverse: children were expected to leave school as quickly as legally and otherwise possible so that they could contribute to the family income. This pattern began to change in the 1960s, when future-oriented working-class parents first began to realize that their children would need to go to college if they wanted to get better jobs. Lack of money, opportunity, and cultural factors seem to have held back many of the young people, however, for the ethnic working class has not yet caught up with the middle class in college entry and completion, except perhaps at community and four-year city colleges.

Meanwhile, educational success and the correct educational credentials become more important in the job market, but it is already evident that for some of the children of the new immigrants, school success and even a high-school diploma are not in the offing. Studies of school performance are only just beginning and many of the data are in the form of grades rather than measurements of actual performance, but they suggest that, as before, the children of urban and even non-urban middle-class parents perform the best, with the children of poor peasants and others from pre-industrial cultures - as well as those from families disrupted by the Vietnam war - having the hardest time (Rumbaut and Ima 1988; Rumbaut 1990). Thus, the Asian-American success myth notwithstanding, Asian-American children from poor and poorly educated homes do not always obtain good grades, although they do far better than the children of Latin and Central American immigrants.

The stalling of ethnic succession

When access to better jobs is difficult or when jobs are scarce, ethnic succession slows down. People hold on to their jobs as best they can, and the groups next in line in the queue have to wait. This pattern is probably most graphically illustrated by the length of time Italian-Americans have held on to both low and high level jobs in organized crime. Being unable or unwilling to find alternate careers, they have let blacks and Hispanics, as well as newer immigrants, replace them mainly in the lower level and more dangerous jobs in organized crime, notably drug-selling.

I have seen no studies of the extent to which succession has ended in the legal economy, but the journalistic and impressionistic evidence suggests that the progress of the urban queue has slowed, except when firms use retirement, union-busting, and other devices to force higher-
paid workers out in favour of lower-paid ones. As long as jobs remain scarce, this pattern will also affect, and shrink, the fortunes of the second generation.

**Niche shrinkage**

When jobs become scarce and the queue stops moving up, immigrant niches are also affected. They may not improve so as to provide job opportunities at decent wages, and they may even shrink, for a variety of reasons. Even in the best of times, ethnic retailing shrinks because of the loss of its most loyal customers, its own immigrants. Those of the second generation generally speak English and are thus not limited to the ethnic enclave; nor will they be as loyal to ethnic institutions or goods. They will not often read ethnic newspapers and will shop at the supermarket rather than at the ethnic corner shop. If the original supply of immigrants is not replenished by newcomers, retail and service activities will decline considerably, unless they can, like today's Asian-American restaurants, attract non-ethnic customers.

The other reason for niche shrinkage is competition: not only can employers look for new immigrants who will work at immigrant wages, but new immigrants can themselves become employers, at least in industries that require little skill and low initial capital. Thus, they can compete with existing firms. For example, just about every post-1965 immigrant group in New York City has gone into construction, and not only within its own ethnic enclaves. As a result, it seems unlikely that any single immigrant group can achieve the kind of success needed to improve the niche significantly, and provide enough good jobs for the second generation, and perhaps in industries other than construction.

**Second-generation decline**

Business cycles go up and down, but the long-term periods of economic growth, the first that began after the Civil War and the second that started after World War II, are not likely to return soon. The first helped to spur the arrival of the new European immigrants and enabled them to find more or less steady jobs so that many of them or their children could escape poverty by the end of the 1920s. The second enabled the descendants of that immigration to move at least into the upper-working and lower-middle classes, and in many cases, firmly into the middle class.

Even if periods of long-term economic growth return, they will probably not be equally labour-intensive. No-one expects a revival in physical labour, and even many low-level service jobs may be computerized, sent abroad, or left undone. Such trends have special
meaning for the new immigration and its second generation since, among other things, they could lead to what I have earlier called second-generation decline. This could happen if the children of the immigrants, having shed the immigrant parental work norms, do not find the income, job security and working conditions they expect but are not asked to take, or they turn down, jobs involving minimal security, low wages, long hours and unpleasant working conditions, because they have become sufficiently Americanized in their work and status expectations to reject ‘immigrant jobs’.

This fate is most likely to affect the children of illegal and undocumented immigrants. Although anyone born in the USA is automatically an American citizen, the children of illegal newcomers are apt to come from poor homes, because their parents’ origins and legal status gave them access mainly to low-wage work.

Two separate processes are involved in second-generation decline. Either the second generation can be offered immigrant jobs and can accept them or turn them down, or the children of the immigrants can be denied the opportunity to make this choice. Who will have which of these choices and who then makes what choice remains to be seen, although such studies could be done now among the children of black migrants and of pre-1965 immigrants from Mexico or Puerto Rico.

If the young people are offered immigrant jobs, there are some good reasons why they might turn them down. They come to the world of work with American standards, and may not even be familiar with the old-country conditions (or those in the Deep South) by which immigrants and southern migrants judged the urban job market. Nor do they have the long-range goals that persuaded their parents to work long hours at low wages; they know they cannot be deported and are here to stay in America, and most likely they are not obliged to send money to relatives left in the old country. From their perspective, immigrant jobs are demeaning; moreover, illegal jobs and scams may pay more and look better socially – especially when peer pressure is also present.

Whatever the processes that might then be at work, however, the first to experience second-generation decline would be poor young men with dark skin, if only because all other things being equal, they seem to be the first to be extruded from the labour market when there are more workers than jobs (Wilson 1987, p. 43). Labour markets change, however, and they could also begin to extrude poor young Asians and whites of the second generation.

As long as they are young and single, and either do not have or can avoid family obligations, these young men could choose instead to hustle or work in the underworld economy, accepting steady immigrant and immigrant-like jobs only if and when they marry and have
children to support. They can also remain unmarried and live off various women, or combine this with occasional jobs and hustles. Of course, they can also enter the drug trade, whether or not they also hold other jobs on the side.

In effect, some of the immigrants' children might react in the same way as poor young urban whites, blacks and Hispanics who have not been offered or have turned down jobs of the kind that their immigrant or migrant parents took readily when they first arrived in American cities (Sullivan 1989). One likely result of second-generation decline is higher unemployment among that generation: another is the possibility of more crime, alcoholism, drug use, as well as increases in the other pathologies that go with poverty — and with the frustration of rising expectations.12

Indeed, second-generation decline is likely to produce an early convergence between the present American poor and some second-generation poor, for if immigrant parents are unable or unwilling to enforce strict school — and homework — discipline, if language problems cannot be overcome, or if the youngsters, especially those who have difficulty in school early on, see that their occupational futures are not promising, they may begin to get low grades, reject schooling, and eventually drop out or get themselves pushed out of the school system.12 Should they join the poor black, Hispanic and other youngsters in standing jobless on street corners, they will quickly be reclassified from being the children of praiseworthy immigrants to being undeserving members of the so-called underclass.

Some policy and theory questions

Since most immigrants' children are now in school and not yet in the labour force, it is essential that the school careers and the future job possibilities of these children be understood as comprehensively as possible. The most urgent priority is to study — and then find help for — the children who are not likely to find a decent job either in an ethnic niche or in the mainstream economy. I am probably being over-optimistic, but since there is still some interest in helping the immigrants, and since poor ones have not yet been dismissed by assignment to the underclass, perhaps some way can be discovered to divert those who are heading towards unemployment and/or the underworld before they leave school. The most important aspect of that diversion has to be a jobs policy: to discover what kinds of jobs these young people will take, and then to create them if they are not already available. If the diversion is successful, perhaps something can also be learned to help the black, Hispanic and Anglo youngsters who are now heading for school and economic failure in large numbers.

Many other questions, of both policy and theoretical relevance,
need to be asked about the new immigrants and their children, but
in what follows I will limit myself almost entirely to the poor among
them. First, has selective migration been operating in the post–1965
immigration, and if so, is the poverty-stricken second generation apt
to be less energetic and ambitious in adulthood than its parents? Or
have immigrants been successful mainly because they came when jobs
were available, while the second generation is less so because oppor-
tunities are scarcer. Is ambition spurred less when there is less to be
ambitious about?

One of the differences between the last European immigration and
the post–1965 one is that it is easier for many of the immigrants or
their children to go back to the old country. Travel time is lower now,
even if travel costs may not be, especially for the poor. Whether any
members of the second generation are able or willing to go back to
the old country if there is no economic future here remains to be
seen. Perhaps sojourning, a temporary stay in the USA, and the back-
and-forth migrations of Puerto Ricans will become more widespread
among other ethnic groups.¹⁵

What about the differences between immigrants who came for politi-
cal reasons and those who came for economic ones? Assuming that
the former would go home if they could, would their children look at
the old country through similar eyes? Do poor political refugees who
have any chance of going home try to insulate their children from
American culture – and to maintain old-country work habits and
standards? Or will poor political refugees, or their children, find eco-
monic reasons to stay here anyway?

In all these cases, what immigrants want is not necessarily what
their children do; thus, it is also necessary to ask who is, and who is
not, able to keep their children from becoming Americanized, includ-
ing also attitudes about work and income expectations. This is
probably affected, too, by the peer groups that the young people
encounter, and the economic future they see for themselves. One
study of poor Haitian immigrants, who are identified with a country
that seems to mean little to their children, has suggested that the
children are moving into the American black community, although
the study did not report whether this had economic causes (Woldemi-
kael 1989). Now, Waters (1991) has found the same pattern among
other poor black West Indians. Conversely, the New York Chassidic
community has insulated itself from America more successfully than
perhaps even the Amish, but because their insulation also means that
they will not work for non-Chassidim, they do not have enough jobs
for all who need work, and many are on welfare.¹⁶

The post–1965 immigration also differs in class and race from the
1880–1925 one. This time, the proportion of immigrants of middle-
class origin is higher, and this should affect the economic expectations
— and perhaps success — of their children. Whether they will also be subject to second-generation decline, or whether this danger is limited to the children of the poor will have to be looked at — especially if and when the American economy is weak.

Today’s immigrants are also far more diverse racially and ethnically. Many of the European immigrants of the 1880–1925 period looked ‘swarthy’ to the WASPs and the earlier northern European immigrants, but their skin colour seemed to lighten as they moved up in the economy. How today’s second generation will be defined, and will define itself, is still unpredictable; even the variables that will influence definition and self-definition are not yet known. Once upon a time, Asian-Americans constituted a yellow horde in the eyes of whites; today their skin colour seems to be irrelevant, at least as long as they are middle class.17

Indeed, as long as class remains crucial to economic success, it may also shape who is defined and self-defined as a desirable or undesirable race and ethnic group. However, white definitional patterns also depend in part on the white ability to distinguish the middle class from the poor. As far as self-definition is concerned, Waters (1991) has found that middle-class West Indian young people tend to remain West Indian, at least in identity and social ties, both to retain their status and to discourage whites from treating them as American (read poor) blacks. Presumably the West Indian accent also helps. Conversely, ‘Anglos’ have a much harder time telling Asian-Americans apart, as they do Central and Latin American as well as Caribbean ‘Hispanics’. However, in judging Hispanics, skin colour may be more significant than class.

What role, if any, does gender play? The European immigrants were thought to be patriarchally organized, and since many of the women did not work outside the home, they were relatively invisible.18 Today, both genders have to work, and poor immigrant women appear to have an easier time in getting jobs than do men; it is they who work in the sweatshops and as domestics. What tolerance the second generation has for such jobs remains to be seen. Women who do not want to hold ‘immigrant jobs’ may not end up on a street corner or in the drug industry, but what will they do? Whether they can avoid the single-parent family status found among poor American women may depend on how well women are sheltered by their ethnic culture, including even its patriarchal dominance patterns, nominal or real, if such persist into the second generation.

What roles do various aspects of ethnicity play? Does the cohesion of an ethnic enclave, or the attractiveness of the ethnic culture, help poor children hold on to old work habits, or slow down their Americanization when that is occupationally useful? Will kin reciprocity patterns, mutual-benefit associations and other ethnic sources of capi-
tal, as well as the availability of low-cost familial labour, disappear by the second generation? Or can that generation obtain bank loans to go into business?

Among the poorer members of the second generation, will ethnic support systems or other features of ethnicity exist to help them through the crises of poverty, and will they therefore have an easier time than appears to be the case among blacks and Hispanics, skin colour being held equal? The experiences of poor immigrants in the nineteenth century as well as today would indicate a negative answer, since the destructiveness of poverty seems to overcome the strength of ethnicity, even if poor ethnics suffered less than poor blacks because of lesser racial discrimination.

Finally, what can be learned about acculturation: the effects of America, both formal Americanization, for example, through schooling, and the informal kind, through peers, the media and the many other cultural influences that will impinge on the second generation? Here, the validity of straight-line theory is at issue, for this theory would argue that acculturation begins the moment immigrants arrive in America and accelerates in the second generation, albeit inside ethnic families and networks.

Those who emphasize that ethnicity is a matter of self-selection or invention might disagree, but in the end only empirical research can tell. On the one hand, ethnic diversity is of a higher national value these days than it was during the 1880–1925 immigration, when the pressures towards Americanization were strong, and not only if upward mobility was to be achieved.

However, in those days the cultural differences between the immigrants and the native-born were more sharply defined. Since the end of World War II, and to some extent before, American popular culture and the consumer goods of the American Dream have been diffused internationally. Roger Waldinger suggests that because many of today’s immigrants – especially those coming from Latin and Central America – are already familiar with much of American culture, the amount and stress of cultural change may be reduced.

Conversely, given the value now placed on ethnic diversity, and the possibility that upward mobility is no longer automatically available to the Americanized ethnic, perhaps some immigrants may try to persuade their children – or the children may persuade themselves – to hold on deliberately to all or some of the ethnic culture, language included, although today it is also possible to be mainly American in culture but to be so in Spanish.19

In effect, immigrants or their children may resort to ‘delayed acculturation’, as an insulation from American work and consumption expectations so that they will not reject immigrant economic niches (Gold 1989, pp. 421–2), or in the case of the West Indians being
studied by Waters, to prevent identification with a racial group of lower status. Part of the new immigrant success myth is that Asian-American parents make their children study harder than is required by American school standards, and while some do it to ensure their children's upward mobility, others may be trying to delay their acculturation as well (Rumbaut 1990, p. 23).

These patterns are not new. Poor black and Hispanic parents have insulated their children so that they devote themselves to school rather than to the adolescent street culture of the ghetto or barrio, and at the turn of the century, some eastern European Jews and other immigrants delayed their children's acculturation in the same way with the same purpose, although we do not know how many tried and succeeded and how many failed.

Findings about this practice were not incorporated in straight-line theory, but, probably because of its macrosociological bias, this theory has never concerned itself enough with the microsociology of how the immigrants and their children actually acculturated.

Whether delayed acculturation works on any but a small scale or with a very insulated population is unlikely, and success probably depends on at least four factors. First, parents have to be able to offer some reasonable assurance of future occupational and other pay-off; second, the young people have to appreciate the parental effort and have enough reasons— or lack of choice— to obey; third, they must be able and willing to cope with countervailing pressure from peers and, fourth, they have to resist the sheer attractiveness of American culture, especially for young people.

Ethnic researchers nostalgic for old-country cultures have often underestimated that attractiveness. It exists in part because American culture is in many ways a youth culture, and such a culture is still lacking in most of the countries from which the immigrants came. America also holds out freedoms to young people unavailable in the old country; among others, the ability to choose one's own friends, including 'dates' sans chaperons and even sexual partners; the right of young people to develop their own interests, cultural and occupational; and the freedom of young women from the dictates of either a patriarchal or matriarchal family. In fact, the perceived attractiveness of American culture substitutes in part for the dim economic future that faces some poor young immigrants, and thus may help to generate second-generation decline.

The attractions of America become even stronger if the immigrants do not plan to go back to the old country. In that case, the country and the immigrant culture quickly become irrelevant for the second generation—and the more so if the immigrants were exploited there and have little positive to pass on about it to their children, other than their family structure and norms.
This is why acculturation seems to have proceeded quickly in the past, and why I would be inclined to think that it will do so again in the future, more or less as predicted by straight-line theory. However, today’s second generation is growing up in a different economy and a different culture, and perhaps this time, the acculturation will be more partial or segmental, or what Rumbaut has called bicultural.

In fact, people do not acculturate into an entire culture, which only exists in textbooks. This is especially true in America, which is too diverse to be a single culture even for textbook purposes. Perhaps researchers who study today’s second generation will be able to break the host country down into the institutional and cultural sectors that are most relevant to the lives of that generation, and the processes that will shape their relationships in and to these sectors.

In any case, the term acculturation is probably too narrow, for ultimately it describes a process that combines adaptation with learning. As such, it is no different from the ‘urbanization’ of a rural migrant, or from the learning of newly minted American PhDs when they start teaching or working in a corporation. Straight-line theory’s teleological programme hid the similarities between acculturation and other kinds of forced and voluntary learning.

Conclusion

Both the Warner-Srole straight-line theory and the more recent construction-of-ethnicity theories appeared during a period of affluence and economic optimism, encouraging ethnic groups on the one hand to acculturate and assimilate into the affluent melting pot, and on the other to construct their ethnicity and their identity largely by non-economic criteria. However, many of the post-1965 immigrants are coming into a different economy, in which selective migration may count for nothing after the first generation, and traditional opportunities for the upward mobility of later generations could be absent for some or many. Indeed, straight-line theory could be turned on its head, with the people who have secured an economically viable ethnic or other niche acculturating less than did the European second and third generations.

Conversely, those without such a niche or other opportunities, who acculturate out of their parents’ immigrant jobs and end up experiencing the poverty and joblessness of second-generation decline might become more American faster than other second-generation ethnicities, but they would be turning straight-line theory on its head in another direction, of downward mobility. If I am right, then past and present ethnic theorizing would need to be re-evaluated, and the interrelationships between ethnicity and economy would have to be given more emphasis than they have been in the theorizing of the last half century.
In any case, the popular optimism about new immigrant economic successes ought to be replaced by reliable information about which members of which groups actually succeed and why—and what can be done for the rest. The cities cannot stand a cohort of immigrants’ children who will join very poor blacks, Hispanics, and Anglos on the corner or in the lines of the welfare agencies.

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Notes

1. Traditionally, new immigration has referred to the Europeans who came from about 1880 to 1925 but they stopped being new with the arrival of the Nazi refugees in the 1930s and the Displaced Persons who came after World War II. The terms new and old have long ago lost meaning and I will be discussing the second generation of the post-1965 immigration.
3. Perhaps it would be more correct to say that these theories, which were initiated by the Chicago School of Sociology, paid particular attention to upward mobility, and therefore did not notice the downward phases of the business cycle during this period.
4. The relative success of the Chinese, Japanese and Koreans, who are non-Caucasian but also light-skinned, may thus not be accidental.
5. In an era in which downward mobility is being experienced by virtually all classes (Newman, 1988), the connection between ethnicity and downward mobility can no longer be ignored.
6. My analysis focuses on the scenarios, but the various members of a second-generation group can follow different scenarios.
7. Many will probably go to work in the more practical, less prestigious professions, in which skill is not affected significantly by language ability or parental social status, such as engineering, accounting, dentistry, computer science, and a variety of public service professions. All but the first also attracted the first college-attending generations of the European immigration able to obtain a professional or technical degree. Then as now, the law, the academy, and often also medicine operate with an informal prerequisite that students should have college-educated parents of upper-middle-class status.
8. Parental social status may still influence the quality of pre-professional schooling, however, and as a result, occupational and parental status may remain correlated.
9. This succession scenario sometimes already began with the immigrants themselves, who could compete for the dirtiest jobs in mining, the steel industry, etc., while the women worked in textile mills, food processing and other lowest-level ‘pink collar’ work. (Howe, 1977) Ironically, these jobs were at times taken from blacks, who then got them back when the ethnic-succession process reached them once more during and after World War II, only to lose them again after 1965, either to deindustrialization or to the new immigrants who could be paid less.
10. In this case, they may once again be taking jobs away from blacks and Hispanics who, as Bourgois (1991) explains in a powerful but yet unpublished paper, are sometimes unable or unwilling to follow these works, and especially deference, codes.
11. Their ascent was also aided by the fact that the children of Italian and Jewish fruit and vegetable retailers did not move into the parental businesses, presumably because of long hours, low profits and poor working conditions. The same fate may overtake today’s Korean immigrant storekeepers.

12. For some early data that second-generation Filipinos, Mexicans and other Hispanics do more poorly in the second generation than other immigrants, see Gilbertson and Waldinger (1993). However, their data show that judging by per-capita income, intergenerational decline is taking place in the third generation, in this case among Mexican-Americans (ibid, Tables 5 and 6).

13. Another possible effect is disillusionment with America, which might be expressed not in the desire to leave but a romantic or nostalgic view of the old country they have never known, or the politicized, almost nationalistic, ethnicity, rarely found among the descendants of the European immigrants, but visible among Mexican Americans, Puerto Ricans and others. The Chicano and Latino movements, for example, attract mainly the middle-class second and third generation, but much of their anger expresses the poverty and deprivation among their fellow ethnicities. These movements are, needless to say, very different from the political parties which Asian, African and other immigrants bring with them and which are concerned with changing governments and economics in the countries of origin.

14. Rumbaut (1991) refers to studies that have found that Mexican-born immigrants do better in school and are less likely to drop out than American-born students of Mexican origin.

15. Roger Waldinger argues (in personal communication) that the ending of the last European immigration in 1925 helped the second generation because of the lack of competition from newcomers. The continuation of the present immigration, illegal and legal, may alter the situation for today’s second generation – and of course for poor blacks and Hispanics.

16. This raises the question of what the Chassidim will do if there are further welfare cutbacks, or when they have to register for workfare jobs.

17. But what if Japan were to become an economic enemy of the USA in the future; would the Japanese then turn into an economic yellow horde in white eyes?

18. There are scattered data to suggest that women hold more power in the immigrant family than they or their husbands will admit publicly. Moreover, among the later generations, women do more of the ‘kin work’, thus doing more also to help maintain the ethnic group (di Leonardo, 1984).

19. Rumbaut has suggested (personal communication) that among the California youngsters he is studying, acculturation may be bicultural as well as bilingual, replacing the straight-line theory pattern he calls ‘subjective Americanization’.

20. Gibson (1989) has described this practice as accommodation without assimilation, but it seems to be similar to the acculturation without (social) assimilation which took place among the 1880–1925 immigration and has long been reported by writers following straight-line theory.

21. Needless to say, the new immigrations provide a rare opportunity for microsociological ethnographic and interview studies among the immigrants and their children about all aspects of adapting to America, including the amount and degree of acculturation in the first and second generation. None of these could be conducted during the 1880–1925 immigration itself, and few were conducted afterwards because of the macrosociological emphases of the early ethnic studies.

22. This is of course directly contradicted by the ability of the Chassidic community to insulate its young people even without a promising economic future, but the Chassidim are a fundamentalist religious group and only secondarily an ethnic group.

23. This raises an interesting question about the extent of cross-cultural differences in national pressures and incentives for acculturation, and not only between the US and Europe.
24. Rogg (1974) reports that familial tensions between Cuban adults and teenagers about chaperons on dates developed shortly after they arrived. Evidently it did not take the young women, themselves immigrants, long to accept the desirability of romantic activities without chaperons.

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