

Soup or Salad: Immigrant Assimilation, Separatism, and Multiculturalism

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Migration in the Americas

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Immigration reform is a hot political topic on the national level and especially in Arizona. Immigrants are coming to the United States from Mexico in larger numbers than ever before, permanent or temporary, documented and undocumented. The closer to the US-Mexico border, the more people have strong opinions on immigration policy reform. Although many arguments on both sides of the issue focus on the economic impacts of immigrants, in this paper I will focus on an issue I believe is at the root of why so many people feel so strongly about immigration: the cultural impacts of Mexican immigrants in the United States. This paper will explore the options available to Mexican migrants for integration into American society and what some of the outcomes are for both immigrants and natives.

When it comes to integrating into the culture of the United States, immigrants have many choices. Immigrants can fully assimilate, learning the language, values, and cultural etiquette of the host society. This is the historical choice for immigrants to the United States, separated from their original countries by oceans. On the other end of the spectrum, immigrants can separate themselves from the host culture, transplanting the culture of their old home into a new place. As more and more Mexican immigrants arrive in the United States, this option has become a larger possibility for immigrants who might otherwise have been adrift in a completely new community. In between those two choices, immigrants can become multicultural, bringing elements of several cultures into their daily lives.

This paper will explore some of the pros and cons for each choice, for both the immigrant and for members of the host culture. I will be focusing mostly on recent Mexican immigrants in Arizona, but I believe many of the possibilities I discuss can apply in any cross-cultural situation.

Mexican-Americans and people of Mexican descent are unique among current and historical immigrants. Perhaps the most obvious difference is that Mexican-Americans are the fastest growing minority group, and the fastest growing ethnicity at all. In 2000, Mexican-Americans were over 80% of Arizona's Latino population (Arizona Town Hall, p. 33) and Latinos were by far the fastest growing ethnic group (Arizona Town Hall, p. 23-34). Another factor making Mexican-Americans unique among immigrants, though, is that in addition to significant numbers of new immigrants there are some Mexican-American families who have lived in Arizona since long before it became part of the United States. This split has a large impact on culture and on American perception of Hispanic culture. On the one hand, Mexican-Americans are firmly rooted in the area; on the other, the rapid growth of Latino society makes it possible for many immigrants to find community without venturing far out of their native culture.

The traditional method of acculturation for immigrants in the United States is assimilation into the host culture. That's what the "melting pot" idea is all about: immigrants come to the United States, learn English, buy a barbeque, and within a generation or two can't be separated from Europeans who came over on the Mayflower. Assimilation has become both harder and easier for immigrants than it was a hundred years ago. Technology has made it easier to both communicate with the sending country and to visit occasionally. Loved ones can send cultural foods and clothing and remind immigrants of cultural values, making it easier to maintain the culture of the sending country within the host country. Large numbers of recently arrived Hispanic immigrants also make it easier for new immigrants from Mexico to find someone who speaks Spanish and knows their culture. This may make it easier for Mexican immigrants to stay longer in their transplanted culture without venturing into the mainstream.

In many ways it's also easier to assimilate than it was 100 years ago. Widespread technology and media has made it easier to find ways to learn English. Although it may be easier to live one's whole life in an ethnically separated neighborhood, mainstream media is also much harder to avoid. Mexican immigrants arrive with baseball caps, sneakers, and McDonald's burgers. Globalization of American culture means that immigrants can arrive in the US already half-assimilated.

Some immigrants choose to assimilate as much as possible in what the book *Children of Immigration* (Suarez-Orozco, 2001) refers to as "ethnic flight" (p. 103). By actively rejecting their native language and culture, they hope to join the mainstream more easily. The benefits of this approach can include socioeconomic success, but it frequently comes at a price of guilt, shame, and inability to identify with one's family. Some immigrants equate assimilation with this kind of desertion of family, and as Tamar Jacoby says in "Defining Assimilation For The 21<sup>st</sup> Century" "None seek to lose themselves and their cultural heritage in a bland, homogenized America" (p. 4). If assimilation is loss, we cannot expect immigrants to embrace it.

The ultimate question when it comes to immigrant assimilation is: Assimilate into what? What is this American culture that immigrants are expected to join? For many immigrants living in poor urban neighborhoods, American culture is crime, prejudice, dissolving families and little to no education. No one wants immigrants to pick up those values, regardless if they came from American citizens. The book *Children of Immigration* (Suarez-Orozco, 2001) says, "Asking immigrant youth to give up their values, worldviews, and interpersonal relations to join this ethos is a formula for disaster" (p. 158).

For darker-skinned Latinos, disappearing into mainstream America is not an option the way it was for European immigrants. Third and fourth generation Mexican-Americans may still

be treated as immigrants, subjected to racial prejudice, and excluded from being American no matter how much they may want to assimilate.

Some immigrants and descendants of immigrants may react to negative images of both assimilation and their ethnic heritage by refusing mainstream America entirely. If they cannot be accepted by US culture no matter what they do, they may choose to completely separate themselves from it within their own culture. Some children of immigrants “construct identities around rejecting--after having been rejected by--the institutions of the dominant culture” (Suarez-Orozco, 2001, p. 107). The most extreme example of this choice are ethnically based gangs, which offer members a community to belong to that can be appealing. Those most attracted to this extreme form of separatism tend to be in urban areas, surrounded by low-income adults and without much hope of being anything else themselves.

The best way to stay out of the dangers, short and long term, of the economic underclass is to have a strong family structure. Luckily, this is one of the bits of culture many immigrants bring with them in spades. If United States policy encourages immigrants to Americanize in only one or two generations, the cohesiveness of the family is often one of the first things lost, as parents who knew how to guide and advise their children in Mexico have less experience than the children in American culture. To integrate immigrants into real American values and not the scary urban chaos that many Americans equate with immigrant neighborhoods, US policy must allow for and encourage anything that strengthens family bonds, most of all Mexican culture.

The majority of immigrants and their families find a way to keep that Mexican culture while still integrating into the larger culture; being Mexican-American. This can include transnationalism, traveling back and forth between Mexico and the United States, participating in both political systems, considering “home” to be both places, and other similar things. This can

also include bilingualism and speaking “Spanglish”. The goal of successful immigrants “is not to simply ‘Americanize,’ but rather to act as a bridge between [their] two very different worlds” (Suarez-Orozco, 2001, p. 113). Immigrants who succeed in America must maintain their identity and connection with their history, and bring the benefits of their culture into the larger arena.

Mexican culture has always been coexisted with Anglo Arizona, and that culture is growing rapidly. When John B. Judis (2006) interviewed anti-immigration leaders, “they invariably became most animated, and most candid, when talking about what they see as the unwillingness of Mexican immigrants--legal or illegal--to assimilate into American culture” (p. 17). People who are anti-immigration are afraid of the idea that their culture will be taken away from them, that they will wake up and be in Mexico without having moved from their house. People have an image in their heads of violence, drugs, overused and under-funded social services, and lack of education and they see immigrants coming to the United States as bringing those problems with them. What we have to realize, however, is that most of these problems are not brought by immigrants, but are forced upon immigrants by the way our society interacts with them. The possibility of social mobility is key to integration, but many immigrants are shuttled by economic and racial pressures into bad neighborhoods, bad schools, and jobs with very little opportunity for upward mobility. When this happens, a permanent underclass is created, taking more from social services than they contribute, which is the last thing that will help America not just stabilize, but grow.

What anti-immigration people seem to want is for immigrants to be invisible. This can happen two ways. Either immigrants can be denied social services, denied middle and upper class jobs, denied a voice in the political arena, or they can join US society. The second choice is much scarier. For one thing, it takes longer, historically three to five generations for descendents

of immigrants to be linguistically and culturally American. For another, immigrants cannot be absorbed without leaving some mark, changing the flavor of the soup in the melting pot, so to speak. This has been happening mostly in the arenas of food and music so far. Although Taco Bell isn't any more Mexican than a hamburger is from Hamburg, tacos and burritos are part of the American cultural landscape. Salsa is more popular than ketchup. Several Latin pop stars have crossed between Hispanic and mainstream markets, and even more musicians have been influenced by Latin beats and instrumentations.

Immigrants must integrate into the receiving society, and the receiving society has the most control over what options are available and promoted. The question is what method of integration is best for both Mexican immigrants and American natives and should thus be promoted in American immigration policy? All options have their pros and cons, of course, and each individual immigrant will decide on their process based on their own experiences and expectations. As a receiving country, the United States is in a key position to develop policies to help or hinder integration. Penninx (2003), in a look at the players in immigrant integration, notes "The receiving society, in terms of its institutional structure and the way it reacts to newcomers, has much more say in the outcome of the process" (para. 3). However, at least as important as top-level policy is integration through civic institutions including educational facilities, churches, political organizations, and any organization promoting community involvement. Not only is that an arena in which any citizen can interact with immigrants, it is key to immigrant integration. While American citizens are afraid of immigrants, assimilation will not happen.

The image that has stuck in my head from our field study was the pickup site for *guias* and walkers in the Altar Valley. Migrants had left everything from clothes to documents to

sanitary napkins, as if they were leaving everything from their former lives behind and rising empty-handed into America. American culture and interaction between native and immigrant communities will determine the identity of these migrants at least as much as the little they bring with them.

As long as the economic imbalance between Mexico and the United States exists, immigration will occur. The step we can take right now is in deciding what we want of those who are here, and helping them and ourselves to take the necessary steps.

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