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Ileana Fuentes

## ARTS, GRAPHIC. *See* Graphic Arts.

## ASSIMILATION

*The slow, at times invisible process whereby a newly arrived immigrant to the United States undergoes an outer and internal transformation that ultimately results in full-fledged integration to the welcoming society is called assimilation. But the process also creates its own reversal: as the individual changes, so does society. This composite entry, including* "Assimilation, Cultural," *and* "Assimilation, Economic," *explores the experience of Latino assimilation into the United States's so-called melting pot.*

### Assimilation, Cultural

Assimilation is a highly controversial issue among Hispanics in the United States. For many Latinos, it is a dirty word; other Latinos accept it as a fact of life. For most, it is a source of deep ambivalence and collective soul-searching.

The dominant model of assimilation originates in the mass wave of immigration to the United States at the end of the 19th century and into the first two decades of the 20th. Those immigrant groups—Irish, Italian, German, Jewish, and Slavic—integrated into American society. While the first generation often did not assimilate, by the second and third generations intermarriage was the norm, English had replaced the language of the "old country," education levels and economic advancement surged, and ethnic ghettos were left behind for the groves of suburbia. In short, millions of Europeans became, over time, Americans.

For myriad reasons, many Latinos, activists and intellectuals in particular, have rejected this model. Racism, they argue, has made it impossible for Latinos to integrate into the mainstream the way European ethnic groups did. Moreover, the largest waves of Latino immigration to the United States have taken place since the 1950s, so that the children of the first great wave of Latino immigrants grew up during the politically tumultuous 1960s. A whole generation of Latinos was deeply influenced by the civil rights movement, the movement to end the Vietnam War, struggles for Native American rights, and other political currents. Out of this experience emerged the Chicano movement, radical Puerto Rican groups such as the Young Lords, and other formations influenced by the "nationalist" motifs of the black power movement. Some Latinos active in these circles came under the influence of Marxism

and of "national liberation" struggles in various parts of the world. A hodgepodge of Maoism, cultural nationalism, and anticolonialism (sometimes called "third worldism") formed an ideological mosaic that animated the activism of politicized Latinos across the country.

These currents and discourses engendered an oppositional consciousness among many Latinos. The feeling was one not of belonging to the dominant society but of being separate from and in battle against it. In this milieu assimilation became synonymous with "selling out" and losing one's identity. Integration into American society meant accommodation with racism and imperialism. Articulating this sentiment, Margaret E. Montoya, a professor of law at the University of New Mexico, has written that "a significant aspect of subordination is the persistence with which we mimic the styles, preferences, and mannerisms of those who dominate us, even when we have become aware of the mimicry." "Lost to the Outsider," she argues, "are those identities that would have developed but for our real and perceived needs to camouflage ourselves in the masks of the Master."

As the 1960s and 1970s gave way to the 1980s and 1990s, the ethos of militant opposition to American society largely faded from the scene, among Latinos and in the country generally. The language of opposition and nationalism was challenged by the language of syncretism and hybridity. Not unlike the African American scholar W. E. B. Du Bois's notion of "double consciousness"—of feeling simultaneously black and American, inside and outside—some Latinos began to see their identity as straddling two cultures, two languages, and two "races" (in many cases, more than two).

"Spanglish," the inventive and often playful mixing of English and Spanish, came to be understood as an organic outgrowth of the Latino experience, as did musical styles like Latin boogaloo (sometimes spelled *bugalú*), which fused elements of traditional Cuban and Puerto Rican music with the popular 1960s African American style known as boogaloo, and was sung in both Spanish and English. Although the "crossover" of Latino musical artists singing in English and reaching non-Hispanic audiences was all the rage in the late 1990s, the phenomenon was far from new. It could be traced from the "mambo craze" of the 1950s (millions of white, black, and Asian Americans dancing to a Cuban beat) and the Latin boogaloo explosion of the mid-1960s to the Latin rock sensation spurred by Carlos Santana's imaginative fusion of blues, psychedelic rock, and Latin music in the 1970s and beyond. (Embodying the spirit of syncretism, the Mexican-born Santana scored one of his biggest hits with the song *Oye Como Va,* a Latin rock cover of a song by the Brooklyn-born Puerto Rican artist Tito Puente, who himself drew on traditional Cuban sounds.)

What was used as a marketing term, *crossover,* had in reality been a way of life for millions of Latinos for decades. It became clear that assimilation, if that is what it was, was far from a one-way street, a process of shedding one's culture and identity and being swallowed up into the dominant culture. It was, on the contrary, a two-way street, a process and give and take that transformed both sides. Moreover, "American" culture itself was not monolithic. When Latinos interacted with it, they were taking in more than just "white" or Anglo influences; they were absorbing black ones, as well. American culture, the African American critic Albert Murray argued, is not white, but rather "incontestably mulatto."

These motifs received perhaps their most powerful expression in the writings of the Mexican American essayist Richard Rodríguez, who has produced a trilogy of meditations over the course of 20 years exploring the "double consciousness" of Latinos in the United States. Echoing Murray, Rodríguez argues that America is "brown," by which he means a cornucopia of races, cultures, and languages which do not simply coexist alongside but interpenetrate one another, and are thus constantly recasting the whole. "I am not in favor of assimilation," he writes, "any more than I am in favor of the Pacific Ocean or clement weather. If I had a bumper sticker on the subject, it might read something like ASSIMILATION HAPPENS." This point is mirrored in the observation of sociologists Richard Alba and Victor Nee, who write that assimilation is "something that frequently enough happens to people while they are making other plans."

Rodríguez maintains that we do not speak English in the United States, but "American." Following the critic H. L. Mencken, who set out to capture and even codify this phenomenon in his 1921 book *The American Language,* Rodríguez points out that our idiom is shot through with elements of Yiddish, African American vernacular, and other non-Anglo influences. Thus when the children of Latino immi-

grants (like him) learn "English," he contends, they are not having the language of the "dominant" culture forced on them but are instead engaging in an interplay—speaking a hybrid linguistic invention and also adding to it, imbuing it with aspects of Spanish. When young Latinos growing up in U.S. urban centers engage American culture, it is more likely to take the form of hip-hop than hard rock: what Rodríguez calls "blaxican."

Rodríguez rejects the nationalism of the Chicano movement and other Latino cultural radicals as a form of tribalism and provincialism. America, he argues, is plural and hybrid. It belongs no more to Anglos than to the rest of us; it is irreducibly brown.

While Rodríguez has made the most forceful and eloquent case for Latino identity as a form of American identity, rather than a separate identity in opposition to America, it is important to note that he has been the object of venomous scorn and enmity among many Latino activists and intellectuals, who have declared him a sellout, a self-hating Chicano, and a mouthpiece for conservatives—characterizations that Rodríguez denies. As wide an audience as Rodríguez found for his arguments in the 1980s and 1990s, those years also saw the ascendancy of multiculturalism and identity politics on college campuses and elsewhere. In their stress on difference above similarity, diversity above unity, and domination above integration, they cut directly against the grain of Rodríguez's vision.

In 2004, the Harvard University political scientist Samuel P. Huntington published a widely discussed article in *Foreign Policy* magazine titled "The Hispanic Challenge," in which he advanced the controversial thesis that as a group, Latinos have failed to assimilate, something, he argued, that threatens to destabilize American society. (While he speaks broadly of Hispanics and Latinos, Huntington is in fact talking principally about Mexican immigrants.) Because of the large number of Mexican immigrants who ensconce themselves in homogeneous enclaves and use Spanish as the dominant—in many cases the exclusive—language of everyday life, Huntington argues, two separate Americas are emerging, with parallel linguistic and cultural realities. This state of affairs is leading, he maintains, toward a domestic "clash of civilizations" (a phrase he made famous in an earlier essay by that title, applying it to international relations), a cultural collision course within the United States itself.

Latino responses to Huntington's article reflected the deeply divided nature of Hispanic opinion about assimilation. Whereas Latino intellectuals and activists have spent decades criticizing and resisting the idea, the main line of criticism of Huntington's argument was to insist that Latinos have indeed assimilated, and continue to assimilate, into American society. While one message declares, in effect, "we do not want to assimilate into your society," the other proclaims "we are assimilating just fine, thanks."

The jury is still out, but statistics show that Latinos are indeed assimilating. (It is important to note that American Latinos are a heterogenous group, and their heterogeneity is reflected in assimilation patterns. Puerto Ricans, for instance, who have U.S. citizenship and can come and go freely, display one pattern; Mexicans, many of whom risk their lives to cross over and live here illegally, follow different patterns of assimilation.) The precise contours and pace of Latino assimilation might depart from the patterns of the European assimilation of yesteryear. But Latinos are carving their own path of assimilation. George J. Borjas of Harvard University has argued that on average it has taken about 100 years for the assimilation process to take full effect. Many Latinos have been here that long (indeed, longer) and are highly assimilated. But most Latino immigrants have been in the United States considerably fewer years; it will be some time yet before we know whether their experience of assimilation will harmonize with those of earlier groups of immigrants.

### Related Articles

Bilingual Education; Bilingualism; Immigration, Latino; Intermarriage; Spanglish.

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## ASSIMILATION, ECONOMIC

When one speaks of economic assimilation, what is typically meant is the process by which immigrants acquire skills, jobs, and earnings, eventually achieving the same skills, jobs, and earnings of native workers. This usually does not refer to work done at home or in nonwage or nonsalaried jobs, such as street vending, as important as this kind of work is in the lives of immigrants, as well as, for that matter, nonimmigrants. This essay will therefore discuss the slow transition to higher skills, better jobs, and increased earnings that result from economic assimilation. Broadly speaking, the last 100-year period of Latino economic activity in the United States has been dominated by employment in low skill occupations. It is true that Latinos had major economic roles historically in the southwestern United States, but these early entrepreneurs were marginalized by racist attitudes and in terms of size of enterprise when compared with the growth of the rest of the economy.

State and federal government were early and valuable sources of training opportunities for Latinos. The GI bill and employment opportunities for the small but expanding group of college educated Latinos in the 1960s offered a means for economic assimilation. Likewise, government programs propelled small-scale Latino community-based organizations into key community-level roles in employment, educational, and training programs. Meanwhile, occurring at the same time was an expanding segment of Latino small-business people. These entrepreneurs focused mostly on ethnic markets, but those markets have grown over the last 50 years. Furthermore, buying habits of the majority population have changed, making some ethnic products desirable by larger segments of the non-Latino population.

Low-skilled employment, often including hazardous conditions, holds the least promise for Latinos. The better path to assimilation includes postsecondary education and acquisition of flexible skills. With educational skills doors are opened to employment in industry, government, several forms of entrepreneurship, professional life, the entertainment industry, and sports. A good example of the importance of postsecondary education is research conducted by Manuela Romero that shows how unprepared Latinos were in the high-technology wave of the 1980s. Her work was a case study of a large high-tech firm that once employed many Latinos in manufacturing. But increasing competition in the economic environment led the company to move jobs overseas. New high-tech jobs were created in the firm, but the new jobs required education Latinos did not, for the most part, possess, thus pointing up the value of education to economic assimilation.

### Latinos and Entrepreneurship

Latino ethnic entrepreneurship, often small in scale initially, has burgeoned in size and significance to the rest of the economy. One popular barometer of economic assimilation of Latinos is *Hispanic Business* magazine, whose annual rankings of the top 500 Hispanic-owned companies (HB500) in the Unites States, based on revenues, provides a sketch of the growing value of Latino entrepreneurship and the importance of Latinos to non-Latino-owned corporate entities. Over the last six years, the revenues of the HB500 have increased by 35 percent, according to the magazine. In 1996 the top company on the listing had revenues of $812.97 million, while the top company in 2002 had revenues of $1.49 billion. Also, to make the listing in 1996, companies needed a minimum of $4.7 million in revenue, while in 2002 that number had increased to $5.1 million. These are some indications of the incorporation of Latinos into high-skill, high-salary economic activity.