

## Beguiling Mysteries and Known Unknowns

### The Research Challenges Posed by the Latino Experience

by  
Roberto Suro

#### *Author's note*

The substance of these remarks was first delivered as a lecture at the Institute for Latino Studies at the University of Notre Dame on February 25, 2004. These musings then evolved into an after-dinner talk at the Social Science Research Center's 2005 summer institute on migration, which was held at the University of California–Irvine. Now they return in written form to Notre Dame, and appropriately

so because, at a time of too many easy certainties, the Institute is a place where on various occasions I've been able to test out ideas, float hypotheses, and benefit from well-intentioned and well-informed feedback. In this case Gilberto Cárdenas, director of the Institute, encouraged me to give a presentation that posed more questions than answers, and since then the mysteries have only multiplied.

## About the Researcher



Roberto Suro is the director of the Pew Hispanic Center. Born in the United States of parents from Puerto Rico and Ecuador, Suro has more than 30 years' experience of researching and writing about Latinos. Before founding the Center in 2001 he worked as a journalist for *Time*, the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post*, both domestically and as a foreign correspondent. Suro is author of *Strangers among Us: Latino Lives in a Changing America* (Knopf, 1998; Vintage, 1999).

## Paradox Quiz

Which statement in the following pairs is true?

Latinos have experienced big job growth.  
Latinos have big unemployment problems.

Latinos are deeply concerned that their kids do not always get the best education.  
Latinos give their schools very high marks.

Latinos are assimilating to American ways.  
Latinos are holding on to distinct expressions of Hispanic identities.

Latinos' beliefs align more with the Democratic Party.  
Latinos' hold some beliefs very much in line with the Republican Party.

Latinos are highly concentrated geographically.  
Latinos are dispersing geographically.

*see answers below*

Let me start by telling you about some of the work we've been doing at the Pew Hispanic Center recently.

We put out a report tracking what is happening to Latinos in the US labor force. It produced two kinds of headlines: "Latinos experienced big job growth" and "Latinos have big unemployment problems." Both are true.

Earlier we published the findings of a major survey of Hispanic attitudes towards the schools and key issues in education policy. It showed that Latinos are deeply concerned that their kids do not always get the best education, and yet it also showed that Latinos give the schools very high marks. Both are true.

Before that we did a survey that asked a lot of questions about identity which showed that Latinos are assimilating to American ways and that they are holding on to distinct expressions of Hispanic identities. Both are true.

We did a survey on political views which showed that Latinos hold some beliefs very much in line with the Democratic Party and others that seem very Republican. Both are true.

We used census data to examine settlement patterns and found that Latinos are highly concentrated and that they are dispersing. Both are true.



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*...we need new ways to collect and think about data and new analytical frameworks to deal with a very dynamic subject matter.*

Each of these findings is a paradox waiting to be resolved. To some extent this is just a matter of disaggregating the Latino population and understanding it as a variety of groupings with different characteristics and different outcomes. Nativity, national origins, gender, and region are all important variables, and we do lots of that kind of analysis. But simply expanding the number of columns on your tables does not explain everything. Not all of the answers are to be found in the data we have at hand, as copious as they are. I stare long and hard at the numbers and I am left with beguiling mysteries about the nature of the Latino experience: the trajectories that identity is taking, the interaction between migration and the US economy, and even some of the basic demographic patterns.

My argument to you today is that we need new ways to collect and think about data and new analytical frameworks to deal with a very dynamic subject matter. We have to start by admitting that in examining the Latino experience we are dealing with a work in progress. The size of the Hispanic population doubled between 1970 and 1990 and since 1990 it has nearly doubled again. A population cannot grow that quickly without also changing. This population reminds me of my teenage son. He is a lot bigger

than he used to be and he is also a different person. There is a great deal of continuity but there are also many surprises. I feel I know him well, but I'd feel foolish trying to predict what he'll be doing and where he'll be living 20 years from now.

At the simplest level the growth and change among Latinos is a function of rapid, large-scale immigration. Immigrants and the children of immigrants make up more than two-thirds of the population, and every one of them is involved in a process of fundamental cultural transition at some stage or another. This is not simply a matter of assimilating to norms that are easily definable in the American mainstream while shedding the Spanish language and Latin American cultural expressions and attitudes. There is a process of synthesis underway and, even more unpredictably, the invention of altogether new norms, expressions, and identities. Some trajectories are becoming evident, but the final results are still very much in doubt. These are people in motion. They are not in control of the many cultural, political, and economic factors that will influence their trajectories, and so they are in no better position to predict the end points than anyone else. Accept the uncertainty and be patient; this could take a while. It could be decades. In the meantime, we who

are watching and analyzing and writing need to be humble.

I found an inspiring paean to intellectual humility in a bit of infamous doggerel. It comes from an unexpected, some might say inappropriate source, but it helps me organize my thinking about the challenges we face:

“As we know,  
there are known knowns.

There are things  
we know we know.

We also know  
there are known  
unknowns.

That is to say  
we know there are  
some things  
we do not know.

But there are also  
unknown unknowns,  
the ones we don't know  
we don't know.”

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Now, of course, you will all remember that the poet was former Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld. And, although he was talking about a different sort of quest altogether, I find that this little sonnet manqué does offer a handy epistemological framework for my work.

I am humbled  
by the poverty  
and conventionality  
of the known knowns.  
I am plagued by the  
known unknowns.  
I wake up with  
nightmares about the  
unknown unknowns.

Like many of you I am studying the great demographic change of our era: the growth of the Latino population. Unquestionably this is the single largest and most significant change in the makeup of the American population since the rise of the baby boom a half century ago, and we know without a doubt that it is bringing great changes to social structures, to the economy, to culture and that many more changes are still to come. And even as the country is changing, Latinos are changing as well. The very

content of the Hispanic population is changing as a result of migration, and the migrants are undergoing a process of change as a result of leaving their homelands to come here. The nation is changing, and Latinos are changing—that is about where the certainty stops. The task assigned to me here today is to describe the research challenges arising from the Latino experience; I could go on for a long time, there are too many.

Here's the basic problem: We know that the pace of Latino population growth started picking up in the 1970s and then accelerated through the mid 1990s due primarily to immigration. The number of foreign-born Mexicans in our basic population counts jumped from less than 800,000 in 1970 to more than 5 million in 1995. That period is pretty much a known known. Lots and lots has been written about it.

Then something else happened. In the next 10 years or so the Mexican-born population living in the United States doubled, soaring from 5 plus in 1995 to about 11 million by 2005. And, at the same time, Hispanic population growth was being fueled by a burst of fertility among immigrant parents such that the number of second-generation Latinos—children born in the United States to at least one foreign-born parent—increased by about 4 million, roughly a 50 percent jump. I am loath to engage in superlatives but I believe with increasing conviction that we are

living in a period of unprecedented demographic change; a period that evolved from, but is different from, the quarter century of very substantial Latino immigration that preceded it. We are living in a period that needs to be assessed on its own terms; a period that will eventually reveal its own distinct characteristics in migration dynamics, settlement patterns, pull factors in the US economy, social, political, and economic impacts, and acculturation/assimilation patterns. The era we live in is a known unknown. We know that enormous demographic changes are happening, but their full dimensions and consequences are unknown.

Let's just start with the basic demography. What size is the Hispanic population of the United States? Seems like a pretty reasonable question to ask the director of the Pew Hispanic Center—Hispanic is our middle name after all and demography is one of our specialties. Well, you have to figure it is more than 42 million, could be 43



*What's a few  
million people  
among friends  
anyway?*



or closer to 44, might even be 45. What's a few million people among friends anyway? Gosh, right before the 2000 census the estimates were off by 3 million, and that didn't turn out so badly.

Unfortunately, the uncertainty is no joking matter in places where the impact of Hispanic population growth is most intense—the new settlement areas where the population is growing fast: Atlanta, Raleigh, Birmingham, Indianapolis, Omaha, Des Moines, there are many. The very nature of the growth in these kinds of places makes it most susceptible to undercount and underestimation. Recently arrived immigrants scatter across neighborhoods where they were once scarce. Many are undocumented and not anxious to make their presence known. Young men crowd into group houses, and multi-family households take up residence in what were once empty nests. The problem is that the Census Bureau's population counts and estimates basically rely on two means of data collection: Residents either report their household data themselves or, if they don't respond, the bureau imputes it for them based on the characteristics of the neighborhood and/or the previous data gathered from that dwelling. That means that an extended family of eight recently arrived Mexicans could be mistakenly counted as a pair of elderly white people for a long time. The Census Bureau has

a marvelously reassuring term for this process: "hot decking."<sup>1</sup>

At a national level, these kinds of issues produce a statistical blip. In a population of nearly 300 million people why get upset if you have four or five million Latino immigrants who are miscounted as one or two million white people? You're talking about a one-percent error after all. Well, the problem is that this phenomenon is concentrated in new settlement areas, and the evidence from the new settlement areas is that the data and the reality are diverging to an alarming degree. For example, a study by the Kenan Institute at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill examined birth and school attendance records and concluded that the Hispanic population of North Carolina is 20 percent larger than the Census Bureau's number. We're seeing this in many parts of the southeast and the upper Midwest where there has been a surge of immigrant arrivals: You look at the Census numbers and you can't figure how those many people can generate all the newborns and students showing up in hospital and school records.

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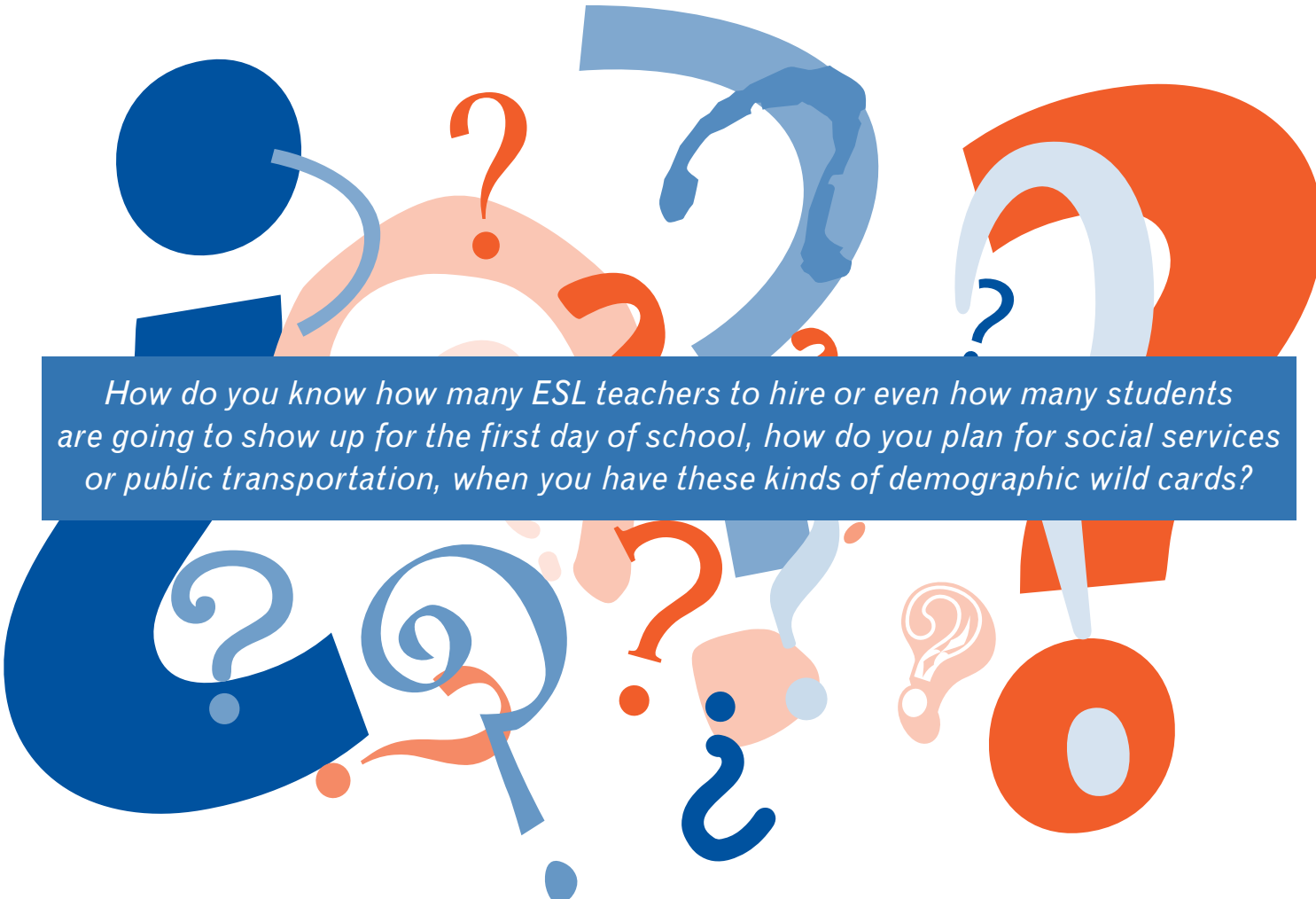
<sup>1</sup> Hot-deck imputation fills in missing values on incomplete records using values from similar but complete records of the same dataset. (The term "hot deck" dates back to the storage of data on punch cards and indicates that the information donors come from the same dataset as the recipients; the stack of cards was hot because it was currently being processed. Cold-deck imputation, by contrast, selects donors from another dataset.) Information from Wikipedia article on imputation (statistics), [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Imputation\\_%28statistics%29](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Imputation_%28statistics%29).

*Institute for Latino Studies*



**The Institute for Latino Studies' Border and Inter-American Affairs program is devoted to interdisciplinary research, scholarship, teaching, policy application, and community outreach related to transnational migration in the Americas.**

Who cares? For local officials, it's a very serious matter to face unknowns of those dimensions—a 20 percent error in the number of Latinos living in a state or city. How do you know how many ESL teachers to hire or even how many students are going to show up for the first day of school, how do you plan for social services or public transportation, when you have these kinds of demographic wild



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cards? And, the challenge is all the more acute because these new settlement areas are, by definition, places with little recent experience of immigration. They have few of the institutions, public or private, that can help absorb newcomers, few of the cultural or political traditions that can make demographic transitions more manageable.

We know for an absolute certainty that the Latino population, especially the immigrant population, is dispersing across the nation. Even as the numbers continue to build in the big traditional settlement areas, Los Angeles, Miami, New York, Chicago, etc., fast and continuous growth

is now taking place in almost every other corner of the country. The numbers of new settlement areas where the Latino population is skyrocketing from a very small base are proliferating. And we also know that speed of change, not just size of change, can produce both policy challenges and social friction. Not surprisingly, the most aggressive efforts to adopt restrictive, even punitive, policies towards immigrants at the state and local levels are emerging from new settlement areas. Those communities deserve—they need—the best research they can get. We should at least be able to give them credible population estimates.

Well enough of my complaint on demography.

The point here is that at a time of rapid change due to immigration, even the most basic data—data that we usually take for granted—have very tangible consequences. I feel a responsibility to address those consequences, and I hope you do too.

Having whinged so much about the numbers and how we need better ones, let me quickly come about on the other tack and complain that we have too many numbers. And as long as I am changing directions, let me make a sweeping generalization:



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Demography and sociology dominate the study of immigration, and as a result the focus tends to be on population statistics and other aggregate measures of group behavior such as household income or educational attainment. There is some, but not much, information from surveys that are starting to fill in our understanding of beliefs and opinions. But there is a danger in this kind of data that I call the fallacy of false protagonism.

When you are studying immigrants or a minority group or any subpopulation that is being distinguished from the rest of the population, the normal practice is to compare the subpopulation to a reference group and typically this is either the population as a whole or non-Hispanic whites. In the case of the Latino population there are indeed significant differences from the non-Hispanic white population for many important variables, and the differences are magnified by focusing on Latino immigrants. You can readily measure the relative salience of those differences among many segments of the Latino population and you can measure change in those differences over time. This is all good and valuable. Disparities defined by race, ethnicity, and nativity are enduring and important features of the American landscape, and they are relevant to policy making and pure research. But, if all you do is measure and compare group

characteristics and outcomes, there is the danger of promoting a perceptual fallacy: You can create the false impression that group characteristics alone determine outcomes.

For example, suppose you find that foreign-born Latinos earn less than non-Hispanic whites in the same occupations. Those are outcomes. Then you look at characteristics that are associated with earnings such as education and English-speaking ability and you find that the Latinos lag. If that is all you do, you will leave the impression that the characteristics

alone determined the outcomes, in other words, that Latino immigrants earn less than non-Hispanic whites in the same occupations because the Latinos lag in education and English-speaking ability. If you think of this analysis as a narrative, then the immigrants have been portrayed as the protagonists—their actions determine how the story ends. While the characteristics measured may indeed explain an important part of the wage discrepancies, many other factors have been left out of the narrative, including the functioning of transnational labor markets, the restructuring

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Javier Hernández

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to fill it.*

of occupations by employers to make use of immigrant labor, and the functioning of migrant family networks in the colonization of occupational niches.

This is a function of relying too much on the tools of demography, but a great deal of the work being done on Hispanics and immigrants is demography and little more.

The problem is particularly acute in the news media and in policy debates. When dealing with a population that often attracts attention primarily by the speed at which it is growing, there is almost a natural temptation to rely on Census numbers and other data that only depict characteristics and outcomes. What gets lost all too often is context, and I confess this is true of my work as well.

An excessively narrow focus on a subject population can produce narratives that undervalue the role played by social, political, cultural, and economic factors in shaping that population. This is especially dangerous at a time when there is a great deal of population change driven by immigration. Migration after all is always a story that involves at least two players, the newcomer and the host society. When the data are all about the newcomer, the host's role is diminished. In this case the danger is undervaluing the role that the host, the United States, plays in determining the size and content of migration flows as well as the results of migration. Sometimes during the debate over immigration

policy the valuation of these two players, the newcomers and the host society, has been seriously out of kilter, so that immigrants not only seem totally in control of their own outcomes but are determining outcomes for the population as a whole even though the native born outnumber the newcomers by nearly six-to-one.

I am going to turn to two broad subjects in which false protagonism seems especially dangerous: the nature of migration flows and the processes of social change at a time of migration. I am going to rant a little about what I see as the research challenges in these areas but, again, my comments are not meant as criticism of the work that has been done and that is in the pipeline; it is meant as encouragement, a plea to keep it coming.

Both of these subjects—the nature of migration flows and the social changes that result from migration—need to be assessed in the context of some very large, very important developments in the United States over the past half century or so. I am particularly concerned with three key elements of context, essentially three big events that took place contemporaneously with the growth of the Latino population:

- The first is demographic, the population bulge we call the Baby Boom and the population deficit, the Birth Dearth, that resulted when boomers postponed or deferred child bearing in the



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1970s and early 1980s. The Boom has produced a non-Hispanic white population that is now tilted towards the older age brackets, and the Dearth has meant that among non-Hispanic whites today the cohort of young adults is actually shrinking. Both have enormous consequences for the nature of labor demand and the supply available to fill it—and the extent to which the US economy has come to rely on a supply of young adults imported from abroad.

- The second is economic. The transformation of a manufacturing-based industrial economy into a services-based information economy has also played a critical role in determining the number and the kinds of people who are drawn to the United States and the kinds of jobs available to them here.

- The third is social and political. The current wave of Latino immigration got underway as the civil rights era was coming to a close. Hence all of the newcomers who have arrived since the 1970s have been met by a nation that was adjusting to a fundamental renegotiation of the way it deals with differences among racial and ethnic groups and resulting changes in the nature of group identity.

Applying these three contextual factors to the Latino experience is a very large undertaking, and all that I am going to try to do today is to

point to some of the questions that arise from this exercise in the two subject areas I mentioned before: the nature of migration flows and the social changes that result from migration.

Let's consider migration flows first, especially from Mexico. We are humans; we like to think in terms of narratives, we structure events with a beginning, a middle, and an end. So where are we in the Mexican migration story?

We know that we are about 35 years into a period of very substantial and growing flows. We know we are past the beginning. There is a maturity evident in the flows—deep channels run between some sending and receiving communities—and there is a maturity in the research—basic characteristics and mechanisms have been researched and documented quite thoroughly.

But, as I said before, it is also increasingly apparent that a new chapter opened in this story in the mid-1990s. The magnitude of the flow is not the only thing that changed. New sending communities in the south of Mexico became important sources of migrants, and the destinations in the United States began to proliferate. The characteristics of the migrants also changed somewhat; more come from urban settings now than 20 years ago and the educational profile of the flow has improved

measurably. But, on balance, looking at the changes in the characteristics of the migrants doesn't help much in explaining the change in the size of the flow. In order to understand this very large, very significant development, you have to look for changes in the context.

We know, for example, that the United States was changing demographically and economically. The population was aging, becoming more productive; the shift out of manufacturing accelerated; new geographic patterns of population growth and economic development emerged along with fundamental changes in the structure and distribution of wealth and income. And Mexico too experienced some historical changes: the emergence of a competitive democracy, the implementation of neoliberal economic policies, industrialization in the north as a result of trade with the United States, accelerated



The three wavy lines shown throughout this publication are a symbol from ancient times representing the human intellect in action. From *The Book of Signs*, collected, drawn, and explained by Rudolf Koch (London: The First Edition Club, 1930, page 8).

urbanization, and the expansion of the lower-middle class.

All of this suggests that something big happened starting in the mid-1990s, but it is going to be difficult work to parse out how all the contextual factors played into migration flows, individually and in combination. And it is going to be difficult to determine how much of all this related to a specific historical moment that might or might not be passing and how much has produced long-term structural change. Part of that work is going to require going back to all the conventional wisdom that was accumulated in the study of pre-1995 flows and testing it against more contemporary realities. We have a great literature on migration that was written based on the realities of the 1970s, 1980s, and early 1990s. I am not saying it should be devalued, much less discarded. But it can be reassessed and reevaluated in the light of developments in the past decade.

Moreover, you have to ask yourself at what point does size matter? Do the models constructed at the time of the 1990 Census, when there were 4.2 million Mexican natives living in the United States, accounting for 12 percent of the total foreign-born population, still hold now, when that number is getting close to 12 million, representing close to a third of the entire foreign-born population? Do migration models developed when 5 percent of the Mexican-born population was living in the United States still hold when about 10 percent is here?

We all know that family networks facilitate, even promote, migration, but I am wondering whether we really understand the effects of size and scope. What are the effects when every family in a given sending community has connections to multiple family networks? There is evidence from some of the traditional sending

communities in central Mexico that migration grows exponentially. Will that apply to the new sending regions as well? If so, we are much closer to the beginning of this story that we think. It has become commonplace to assume that if Mexico can manage steady economic growth, migration pressure will begin to ease up in 10 or 15 years because of declines in the birth rates there in the 1980s and 1990s. Fewer people entering the labor market equals fewer excess workers which equals fewer potential migrants. That formulation assumes that migration pressure is a function of population size and economic performance measured on a national basis. But regional disparities in both fertility and economic growth rates are getting larger, not smaller, as the north of Mexico industrializes and improves its standard of living much faster than the south. Moreover, this formulation does not take into account the relative density of family networks.

In the traditional sending regions of central Mexico very large shares of families have already sent multiple members north. But in the new sending regions of the south the penetration of the migration experience is much thinner. Research in the traditional sending communities shows that a kind of momentum developed that deepened and spread the migration experience through families. Was that a one-time phenomenon, resulting from unique



Javier Hernández

circumstances, or is it a mechanism likely to develop again in the new sending areas? We don't know. But if this pattern so evident in Jalisco, Guanajuato, and Michoacán is now going to replicate itself in Veracruz, Oaxaca, and Puebla, then we are in for a very long ride indeed. Flows could continue at very high levels for another 30 years and, rather than decline in the next decade, they could accelerate from a very high base as the family dynamics gain momentum.

Seems like that would be worth knowing.

Aside from not having any very solid basis for predicting long-term migration flows—at least that's my judgment—there are many other questions on the macro level. For example: We don't understand the impact of remittance flows on inflation and unemployment. We don't understand the effects of remittances on balance of payments. Is it possible that the \$20 billion in remittances that flowed into Mexico in 2005 contributed to the overvaluing of the peso, thereby reducing the competitiveness of Mexican exports and hence employment in export-producing industries? Even if the effects are marginal in the short term, could they be significant cumulatively? We don't know because large-scale remittance flows are a product of the post-1995 migration. Consider the fact that remittance receipts in Mexico roughly doubled from 2001 to 2005. Most of our empirical research and theoretical models

are based on a much smaller phenomenon.

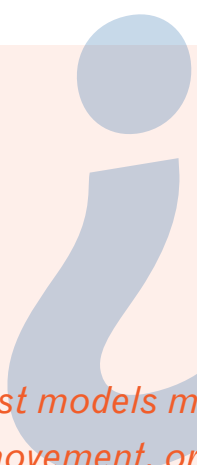
Now, on to the other broad analytical theme I promised, social change at a time of migration, and here I am talking about change in the United States alone.

What are the processes of change that take place in the life of an individual migrant, in a family, in a community, as people from another country spend time in the United States? We know that changes take place. Take language. We can measure the acquisition of English and we know that it is rapid and substantial both across the life of a migrant and then especially from the first generation to the second. If language is changing, then much else is changing, but researchers cannot agree on a name for this change, let alone a description or a theoretical model. Assimilation, incorporation, adaptation, acculturation, Americanization, each comes with its supporters and in each case there are variants on the basic concept.

I am not arguing that there is, or should be, a single accepted view of this change. In fact I am increasingly convinced that it comes in many forms, that there are many trajectories. It is a rich topic, and I hope it continues to produce a rich and varied literature. But I am concerned that here too there is an excessive focus on immigrants and their offspring as the protagonists and not enough attention on the context—in this case the nature of identity in US society.

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*Most models measure movement, or lack of it, towards a national type, but what if instead of a national type the host country offers a smorgasbord of identities to pick from?*



Take the basic assimilation model—immigrants adapt to and absorb something like a national type. Some variants on the model emphasize that assimilation does not imply a loss of the migrant's native culture, for example, learning English does not require forgetting Spanish. Other variants emphasize the migrants' contributions to the host culture and the interaction that takes place so that both change over time. But at the heart of this model is the assumption that the migrant has some kind of fixed target; that the host society offers stable, identifiable characteristics in terms of values and attitudes, language and culture. In short, that there is a mainstream towards which the migrants are gravitating.

A commonplace articulation of this view is the “back to the melting pot” school of thinking which holds that Mexicans are the new Irish. Just be patient; and like the immigrants of a century ago, they will melt. And then there is the corollary which holds that migrants today, especially Mexicans, are not melting even though they should be.

Whether you take the positive view that assimilation is alive and well or the negative view that we are headed for a nation bifurcated by culture and language, I think you are making a fundamental mistake: You are assuming that the United States has not changed in the past hundred years in ways that could produce an altogether new kind of interaction between the newcomer and the host. To

start with, both the negative and the positive views of the state of the melting pot assume that the trans-Atlantic wave of migration did nothing to change the nature of identity in the United States. In fact we know that the last great wave of migration enormously increased the salience of ethnicity in the first half of the twentieth century. We know that it created a new kind of identity within the mainstream: the hyphenated American who proudly carries vestiges of ethnic identity and loyalties inherited from Ellis Island ancestors. We also know that the nature of identity within the mainstream underwent another drastic change in the second half of the twentieth century when all kinds of folks—blacks, women, Jews, homosexuals—were admitted into the mainstream.

A hundred years ago powerful voices in the United States argued that there was a national type to which immigrants should try to assimilate, and it was white, Christian, Anglo-Saxon, monolingual English-speaking, and male in its dominant form. Today, thankfully, most conceptions of the mainstream are far broader. It encompasses home schoolers and urban gays, evangelicals and atheists, the urban gentry and the suburban poor, ghetto black and country-western white. This is now a country of proliferating identities. Most assimilation/acculturation/incorporation models measure movement, or lack of it, towards a national type, but what if instead



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of a national type the host country offers a smorgasbord, a Chinese menu of identities to pick from?

And what if the immigrants and offspring are adding to that mix? In the literature of the trans-Atlantic wave ethnicity is described as strengthening initially as a response to adversity in the new country, as a mechanism for effective social organization, and then weakening as the process of assimilation set in. Today you can look to popular culture and see many forms of synthesis and hybridization as ethnic identities drawn from migrant populations blend with forms drawn from the host culture—take Reggaeton and its blend of reggae, hip-hop, and Latin beats. Or consider the extent to which Hispanics and Asians are using and transforming the model of civil rights organizations created by blacks as a form of social and political action. In these examples, elements of migrant ethnic identity are blending with native forms to create new expressions which are almost immediately swallowed into the mainstream. Migrants then are assimilating to a national type even as they are transforming it. Much more of this was happening a hundred years ago than is acknowledged by the traditional formulations of assimilation, and certainly a great deal of it is happening now.

So, there is plenty of research to be done on how the dynamics and the forms of social identities in the US mainstream are affecting

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the processes of assimilation and the trajectories that migrants and their offspring are taking.

And there is another research agenda that should examine changes in the host society that are being produced by the rise of the foreign-born population. In my view the current era of demographic change has the potential to fundamentally transform the construct of race and ethnicity in the United States. At the simplest level that construct has been based on a racial paradigm that divided the nation into white and black for 300 years. The racial paradigm holds that individuals are marked by immutable characteristics that allow them to be sorted into two categories, even as the second category was periodically broadened to consider others, aside from blacks, as nonwhite.

The nation is undoubtedly more inclusive today than it was 50 or 75 years ago simply by virtue of having eliminated so much *de jure* exclusion. But my interest in raising this subject is not to focus on relative measures of equality. Rather I am interested in examining the effects of the growth of the Hispanic population on forms of inclusion and exclusion, the perceptions of group differences, and the interactions between groups.

At the simplest level there are three possibilities:

- Latinos become a non-white group, clearly on the excluded side of the paradigm.

- They become white. Like most of the European migrants of the trans-Atlantic era, they undergo a period of partial exclusion and then gain full acceptance, even becoming practitioners of exclusion themselves.

- The paradigm changes.

Let's start from the fact that the country is experiencing rapid demographic change through the growth of a population—Latinos—that is not a racial group, that is not consistently identifiable by phenotype or other immutable markers that can serve as the basis for exclusion. This does not mean that exclusion does not exist. In fact Latinos experience exclusion in several different forms. It can come on the basis of race but also on the basis of national origins, immigration status, poverty, and language ability, and it often results from a combination of such characteristics.

On the one hand Latinos have experienced many of the classic forms of exclusion, and indeed the experience of discrimination is a forceful aspect of group identity for Mexican Americans in particular. On the other hand, the multiple and varied characteristics of Latinos taken as a whole and the kinds of exclusion they



experience now, during the post-1995 wave of migration, do not fit the classic racial paradigm. I would argue that these contradictions essentially eliminate the first two possibilities: that Latinos in the main will end up looking like the Italians after three generations or like blacks. So, arguably, one can expect the paradigm to change, and this paradigm encompasses a great deal—perceptions, modes of inclusion and exclusion, and interactions among people of different ethnic and racial groups. All of this was in motion already. As I suggested before, the boundaries of the mainstream have become less rigid, less distinct, and more permeable in the last few decades. Now the growth of the Hispanic population is a very large, very dynamic factor in the ongoing process of redefining the American mainstream.

But how? What are the mechanisms, trajectories, and possible end points of this transformation?

One school of thought posits the emergence of a colorblind society. Race essentially disappears as a factor in American society. Immigrants pretty much just want to be white and abandon forms of social organization based on ethnicity. The public sector gives up any efforts to assuage or mediate racial or ethnic disparities, and the market ensures equal opportunities. Blacks give up on the idea of the minority group, and presto, a colorblind society. For some proponents immigrants, with

their desire for inclusion and their natural upward mobility, become a powerful counterargument to race-based remedies for any social ills. Who needs affirmative action when you have Mexicans, the colorblind would say.

*...part of the problem has been an excessive focus on newcomers as the protagonists. I worry that we can study the attitudes and behavior of the newcomers forever... and still not...fully understand how race and ethnicity are changing.*

Another variant of paradigm change is what I call the “*mestizaje* school.” In this view adding a large number of people of mixed race to the population—people with an entirely different racial consciousness—leads to a more fluid conception of race. Social categories become more malleable, and identity becomes more ambiguous. Race matters, but it is a good thing now. As a nation we celebrate diversity. Latinos and Asians are hip, so are blacks, and presto, whites don’t want to be white anymore. It is sort of like applying the concept of the metrosexual to race and ethnicity.

In one variant race disappears and in the other it becomes entirely benign. While I am attracted to some aspects of the *mestizaje* view, particularly the notion that social categories will lose definition and become permeable, I still think it is overly idealistic. Both imply too much change in the paradigm, essentially positing the disappearance of bias and competition based on race. America is changing but not that much.

Again part of the problem has been an excessive focus on newcomers as the protagonists. I worry that we can study the attitudes and behavior of the newcomers forever—say, we could prove that they do not want to be minorities or conversely that they have very distinct and enduring identities. I still do not think we would fully understand how race and ethnicity are changing in the United States. In this case a key element of the context may be how native-born whites and blacks are responding to the demographic changes we all spend so much time chronicling. On the crucial question of how the racial paradigm evolves as a result of the growth of the Hispanic population, it may be that the response ultimately has more impact on the outcome than the stimulus and, in particular, the response to the substantial share of Latino migrants who live in this country without authorization.

What can we say about the reaction at this point, how are the native born reacting to the rise of

the foreign-born population? The reaction is varied, it is polarized, it is ambivalent, it depends on circumstances and geography, it is a known unknown at best. And it is changing quickly, as is evident in the vociferousness of the restrictionist sentiments that have bubbled up in many parts of the country recently. While the restrictionist views have drawn a great deal of attention, there are many other parts of the country, including all of its largest metropolitan areas, where very large growth of the foreign-born population has produced hardly any negative reaction worthy of note. While anxiety over border controls is quite widespread, the country is about evenly divided over whether immigration is a net plus or not. And, when the phenomenon is taken from an abstraction to the particular level, there is fairly little animus towards migrants, even the undocumented, on an individual level. Indeed, many proponents of restriction laud migrants as hard working and family oriented even as they call for stringent controls over the flow. So, how do you assess a society's reaction to the growth of a foreign-stock population when that population is highly varied and the society itself manifests multiple and rapidly evolving identities of its own, some of which already embrace aspects of the newcomers' identities while others loudly evince rejection of large-scale migration?

Such questions are not merely theoretical nor merely of academic interest. This country is at the start



of a debate over the meaning of this great demographic event and its impact. Immigration policy is just one small part of it. The outcome of the debate, even the terms of the debate, is one of the huge unknown unknowns. Providing intelligent, accurate, accessible research to inform this debate is the great challenge that all of us face in doing research on the Hispanic population. More than a challenge, there is an obligation here, a moral obligation to ask the questions and search out the answers that will bring us to a more enlightened understanding of how we function as a society.

More knowledge can only help. It is ultimately the only way to dispel the dark forces of fear and envy that inevitably arise at a time of social change. Citizens are going to need a plumb line that helps them judge the arguments, a foundation of facts that helps them judge the advocates.

Good research is not an ivory tower pursuit at a time of social change, and it need not be research in the service of advocacy. So much is unknown that the subject of population change is vulnerable to distortion and demagoguery. In this situation it is our obligation to provide facts, to answer questions, and to formulate theories about social processes based on scientific research. In this context when so much is at stake, these otherwise academic activities become a form of public service.

I am confident that you will all embrace this challenge, this opportunity, this obligation. As I go about my job I am heartened by the knowledge that so many of you are hard at work on these topics. It is a long road ahead of us. I look forward to walking in your company.

Thank you.

## Known Knowns, Known Unknowns, or Beguiling Mysteries?

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Why would a one-percent error matter? (pages 5–6)

Is a lag in education and English-speaking ability the reason that Latino immigrants earn less than non-Hispanic whites? (pages 7–8)

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