

Introduction

Across the threshold of the twenty-first century, America again finds itself transformed by immigration. Stretching back nearly four decades, the immigrant tide has yielded newcomers in unprecedented numbers. Evidence of a changed nation shows up wherever one goes. Venture deep into the heartland, and one runs into foreign accents; dig a little deeper, and one encounters the networks that link the immigrants and the institutions that sustain them.

But the most impressive signs appear in the country's chief urban concentrations. Travel to New York or Los Angeles or Miami or San Francisco, and the sounds are those of the tower of Babel, the faces those of a cross-section of humanity. In these capitals of immigrant America, we seem to have returned to the turn of the past century. Amid the dawn of a technologically different (we hesitate to say *new*) age, the numbers tell us that immigrant America has returned.

But have we just come full circle? Native Americans included, we all arrived from somewhere else. True, not all came in eager search of a better life—those transported to the new world as slave ship cargo, for example, were anything but hopeful fortune-seekers. Nevertheless, a nation of immigrants is how we think of ourselves; after all, our country bears the peculiarly abstract name of the United States of America; it is a place that no one claims as a motherland or fatherland.¹ As unsettled as the newcomers' advent often makes us, we realize that there is something here of which to be proud: immigration is proof of the power of the American dream.

Although the new immigrants quickly find out that the streets are not paved with gold, this too is part of our shared historical experience. Conditions may be tough in the cities of immigrant America, but the opportunities have to be better than the prospects “back home.” Ours is a world of instantaneous global telecommunication, where “my hometown” is only a click of the internet-connected mouse or, at worst, a telephone call away; if opportunities in the United States did not beckon, why would the immigrants come? Why would they stay?

There is something deeply familiar about America’s re-emergence as an immigrant magnet. There is also something bewildering. Last time around, there seemed a fit between the evolving economy and the types of immigrants we received. The American economy on the brink of the twentieth century was growing at a rapid clip. In a tight labor market, employers wanted no more than brawn and a willingness to work hard—just what the newcomers provided. Arriving with no capital, few useful skills, and—the Jews excepted—limited literacy, the southern and eastern European predecessors of the 1880–1920 period moved easily into the new urban economy’s bottom rungs: servants, laborers, longshoremen, *schleppers* all. Gradually, their descendants moved toward the top, making the best of the old factory-based economy, which allowed for a multigenerational climb up the totem pole. Immigrant children did well just by hanging on through the high school years, with well-paid manufacturing jobs awaiting them upon graduation. The third generation continued through college and beyond, completing the move from peddler to plumber to professor (the dirty secret being that the wages of brainwork did not always exceed the earnings enjoyed by workers in the skilled crafts).

In some ways, contemporary immigration has turned the process around.² The hidden story of today’s immigration involves the many newcomers who arrive here with considerable advantages and quickly accumulate more. Well-educated, entrepreneurial, entering the professions in growing numbers, these newcomers fit right into the new economy, eschewing the bottom and entering at or near the top.

The story of highly educated immigrants who bring the skills required by the New World Order is, however, but half the tale. Contemporary immigration to the United States has a split personality, its legions of scantily schooled laborers and service workers uncannily recalling the immigrant proletarians of yore. But now, unlike then, the least-skilled workers are overwhelmingly foreign-born, with the schooling gap separating them from natives extraordinarily large.³

Somehow, America is making room for large numbers of immigrants who are not simply recently arrived, unfamiliar with American ways, and unable to make do in English but also lacking the rudiments of formal schooling that nearly all U.S.-born adults, regardless of ethnic background, take for granted. Our postindustrial, high-tech economy would seem to have no place for “foreigners” with little more sophistication than their European predecessors of a century ago. Yet these immigrants appear to enjoy other traits that employers sorely want. The predictions of economic experts notwithstanding, the newcomers are working, often holding jobs at enviable rates. And although the hard-working immigrant fits the iconography of American life, the public is more than a little ambivalent, concerned that new immigrants are taking jobs that would otherwise be held by less-skilled domestic workers with few other resorts.

WHAT ARE THEY DOING HERE?

Immigration scholars have no problem in plausibly explaining why less-skilled immigrants might *want* to come. Economic incentives provide the pull. For most immigrants, wages at the very bottom of the U.S. labor market tower over the alternatives available back home. True, one needs to take into account the cost of migration, a considerable factor for migrants traveling long distances. Those who attempt to enter surreptitiously, whether by land, sea, or air, pay an additional freight, first in the fees handed over to smugglers and *coyotes*, second in the potential costs of apprehension and return. There also is no guarantee that newly arrived immigrants will find a job. After all, theirs tend to be labor markets in which joblessness, if only of the frictional sort, is usually high. Many others, moreover, have come upon the same idea of bettering their lives by heading for the United States, which means that arrival puts one at the end of a long queue of newcomers vying for the same jobs. For the individual migrant, therefore, competition with other newcomers adds an additional item to the cost of moving to the Promised Land. Still, the balance sheet is likely to favor coming; those who forecast that the benefits of migration will outweigh the associated costs have good grounds for wagering on life in this particular piece of the New World.

This narrative of migration—related mainly, but not exclusively, by economists—illuminates the considerations that motivate potential immigrants.⁴ But one could also say that it simply elaborates on common sense: it stands to reason that people are not going to migrate unless they

have good reason. If one is looking for an understanding of why migrations begin or intensify, the conventional narrative does not provide a convincing explanation. Unless the comparative advantage of moving to the United States, taking account of the associated costs, increases, migration rates would, one might expect, remain where they were—as opposed to the dramatic uptick experienced by the United States in the three past decades.

Consider Mexican migration to California, the best case in point. Although Mexicans might have done well in crossing the border at almost any time over the past century, their migration to the United States has ebbed and flowed. The most recent inflection point (upward) dates to the mid-1960s. Between the 1860s and the 1960s, most who moved to California—and who presumably undertook the type of crude cost/benefit analysis imagined by the economists—came from elsewhere in the United States. Something changed in the 1960s, however, that in turn loosened the flow to *el Norte*, in a stream that has since expanded at an ever-increasing pace. What confounds the economists' story is that the California/Mexico wage gap was a yawning divide before as well as after the sudden increase in migration from Mexico. The underlying impetus to the migration inevitably lies somewhere else.

If migrants move in response to perceived opportunity, one has to wonder about the relationship between this perception and the reality to be encountered, given the economies of the destinations on which today's less-educated arrivals converge. As in the past, newcomers today are flocking to cities, heading for the very largest—Los Angeles, New York, San Francisco, Chicago—where their compatriots have already put down roots. There is nothing surprising about this predilection; it is simply that our understanding of the evolution of urban America suggests that the metropolitan economies should have little place for the low-skilled. In an era when the marketability of America's less-educated urbanites has plummeted, how can immigrants find even minimal success?

After all, America spent the last half of the twentieth century struggling with an “urban problem” derived from the barriers faced by ghetto-dwelling African Americans striving to get ahead. While academics, journalists, and politicians produced a plethora of explanations for the sluggishness of black progress, the most influential emphasized the mismatch between the requirements of urban employers and the skills of black ghetto residents, providing an account that took the following form:⁵ African Americans entered the American metropolis as the least skilled of all workers, and apathetic reception in urban schools kept

their offspring at the low end of the education spectrum. Consequently, they found themselves vulnerable as a steady accretion in skill requirements increasingly put less-schooled workers at risk, no matter where they lived. Moreover, the drift of jobs from the cities toward the urban fringe proved an additional disaster: disproportionately concentrated in cities, African Americans experienced the deindustrialization of urban America with particular severity. Suffering from residential segregation, they rarely had the option of following less-skilled jobs to the suburban and, later, exurban hinterlands. While America's major urban places generally recovered from the loss of their industrial base, over the past two decades, new sources of urban economic growth provided few viable alternatives for less-skilled men and women struggling to support families. And thus episodes of urban prosperity in the 1960s, 1980s, and late 1990s did little to help African-American fortunes.

This story enjoys the ring of plausibility, mainly because it links the fate of black city dwellers to the extraordinary and visible economic changes in American cities. The conventional wisdom, however, focusing on skill deficiencies of blacks, fails to give adequate weight to the considerable educational upgrading that African Americans have undergone since the bad old days—when they were employed at much higher rates; if the problem hinges on a diminishing demand for less-skilled workers, then the distance that African Americans have traversed over the past several decades should have greatly reduced their vulnerability. Persons with a high school degree or less may still be in trouble, but as of the late 1990s, this comprises a declining proportion of the black population, reflecting substantial improvement over earlier decades.

But the accounts emphasizing the mismatch between urban populations and economic boom have even more trouble explaining the immigrant tide that has transformed metropolitan America in recent decades. The limited education of the immigrants with whom we are concerned ought to put them at the bottom of employers' lists, but it does not. Unskilled immigrants, far less schooled than the least-schooled American blacks, have found jobs that, if the received wisdom of the last forty years is correct, should not exist. And the newcomers have not just discovered a handful of overlooked jobs, they have secured niches that allow them to work at remarkably high rates even during recessionary times. There is good reason to wonder at the paradox of high employment among less-educated immigrants when the American metropolis has long been said to suffer a shortage of jobs suited to the unskilled.

True, no one argued that the urban economy had dispensed with dishwashers and floor sweepers, but the new immigrant phenomenon is of a far greater magnitude. The massive infusion of less-skilled immigrants into urban America is convincing evidence that they have found a role well beyond such a small cluster of indelibly manual jobs.⁶

SEGMENTATION AND LABOR MARKET STRUCTURE

The answer lies in the social processes that structure America's economy, encouraging new groups to enter the U.S. labor market, there to consolidate their own space. Immigrants to the U.S. make their way to a labor market far from uniform in structure, consisting, instead, of several segments, where jobs of a particular type are linked with categorically distinctive workers.⁷ The role played by gender in structuring access to jobs and occupations provides the best illustration. In spite of the massive entry of women into jobs from which they had previously been excluded, men and women continue to experience high levels of occupational segregation. The barriers that make it difficult for women to move into male-dominated occupations—and unlikely, if not quite so difficult, for men to move into fields dominated by women—tell us that when employers are looking for the most “appropriate” worker, suitability is largely determined *categorically*, heavily influenced by the sex of the person who *typically* fills the job. Much the same holds for ethnicity.

To each category of person, that is, a type of job. In our market economy, employers allocate jobs to the “best” workers, but “best” is not only defined in terms of the qualities—aptitude, skill, experience, productivity—that directly impinge on ability to get the job done. Any national or local economy bears the imprint of the social structure in which it is embedded. In a racialized society like the United States, entire ethnic groups are ranked according to sets of socially meaningful but arbitrary traits; these rankings determine fitness for broad categories of jobs. All other qualifications equal, members of the top-ranked group are picked first when employers decide whom to hire; the rest follow in order of rank. We refer to this ordering of job candidates by ethnic or racial groups as a *hiring queue*.⁸

The ordering of an employer's hiring queue is always subject to change. Growth pulls the topmost group up the totem pole, leaving vacancies that lower-ranking groups may seize, thus producing openings at the bottom, which employers can fill by recruiting workers from outside the economy—migrants. For awhile—the period often coincides with

the working life of the migrants' generation—the newcomers work in the jobs for which they were recruited; however, their children are almost always oriented toward better prospects, thus creating new demand for migrants.⁹

Not only do workers get ranked. Jobs also stand in a hierarchy, with the characteristics that workers value (pay, stability, benefits, and autonomy) typically going together. So there are “good jobs” and “bad jobs,” and the size of the potential pool of candidates varies with the quality of a given position. At the top of the labor market, there is often an ample labor supply; even if employers experience spot shortages, the job-seeker correctly perceives that the number of good jobs is almost never sufficient.

At the bottom of the labor market, by contrast, the labor supply is inherently unstable. “Bad jobs” are a defining trait of our unequal (indeed, increasingly unequal) capitalist society. Insiders—members of the society by birth or socialization—have plenty of reasons to look for alternatives to jobs of the least desirable sort, starting with the fact that working at the bottom of the pecking order is inherently stigmatizing. But natives do not respond solely to a job's low standing, or to the inherently unpleasant, sometimes demeaning conditions associated with its performance. They also note that jobs at the bottom repeatedly attract stigmatized outsider groups, whose disrepute becomes an aspect of the work. So when economic expansion makes mobility possible, the established native workforce opts for the alternative—in quest of better coin, but also of greater esteem.

Replacements might be found at home, but the force of competition, often from countries where wages are lower, deters employers from the changes—higher wages, improved working conditions—needed to attract those natives not yet involved in paid labor. Hence, openings arise to be filled by workers from abroad. The stigmatized status of bottom-level work impinges differently on the immigrants, who operate with a dual frame of reference, judging conditions “here” by the standards “back home.” As long as the comparison remains relevant, low-status—indeed, disreputable—work in an advanced capitalist society like the United States does not rate too badly.

These preferences, however, only tell us why immigrants might accept work that natives disdain, not why the newcomers can fill today's “bad jobs” with success. Recall that many immigrants arrive with scant levels of formal schooling, and that most portraits of the economy suggest that its skill demands are becoming increasingly severe. Yet immigrants somehow fit in.

One influential explanation emphasizes those forces in the broader economy that produce changes at *both ends* of the job structure. The economy requires an increasing complement of workers with higher levels of skill, but the “up-skilling” has been uneven, uncertain, and not as far-reaching as often thought. In fact, change works both ways: capitalism’s destructive impulse *downgrades* many previously moderate-skilled jobs, even as technological innovations drive the proliferation of high-skilled positions. A case in point is the “dumbing-down” of cashier work by using “smart” cash registers, the demand for which simultaneously generates employment for a class of computer-savvy information technology workers.¹⁰ Thus, the growth in the number of low-skilled jobs inevitably yields expansion in the number of high-skilled positions, producing a dynamic of skills polarization.¹¹

The available data do not demonstrate that jobs in the middle of the skill spectrum have been rendered obsolete, as expected by those who focus on the *polarization* of skills, but instead show that there remain many jobs requiring relatively low levels of formal education or training. For our purposes, however, it is as important to ask whether low levels of schooling equate to low levels of skill. While there may well be some jobs for which the label of “unskilled” means what it says,¹² this number is small. In the real world of work, contingency, uncertainty, and unpredictability cannot be fully eliminated; moreover, getting things done in *any* line of work requires know-how of more than trivial degree. Workers usually cannot get this practical knowledge in school, but pick it up on the spot, through interaction with co-workers knowledgeable through hands-on experience.¹³

Put somewhat differently, work is a fundamentally social phenomenon; one both acquires the necessary skills and gets things done by working successfully with others. While one need not be exactly like one’s co-workers, it usually helps—especially in a work world where jobs are scarce and where jealousies at the workplace may be fed by competition in the neighborhood or conflict on the street. Even if the established workforce will accept outsiders, one cannot learn if one cannot communicate: persons unable to participate in the linguistic community of the workplace may find it hard to get started. Therefore, who you are has much to do with what you do; social ties become the crucial factors lubricating movement through the labor market and across the threshold of the employer’s door. Thus, at the bottom of the labor market, formal education counts much less than the ability to acquire job-specific skills through cooperation with specific others—which explains why new-

comers with so little schooling have seen their economic role burgeon in recent years.

NETWORKS AND MIGRATION

We used to think about migrants as “the uprooted,” to quote Oscar Handlin’s famous immigration history of five decades ago; we might just as well describe them as “the transplanted,” to cite a less celebrated but no less influential history produced twenty-five years later.¹⁴ The shifting metaphors of our scholarly discourse convey the essence of the new approach; we now understand that migrants move not as solo adventurers but as actors linked to associates here and there, their social ties lubricating and structuring their transition from one society to the next.

These ties form *social networks*. Social networks provide the mechanism for connecting an initial, highly selective group of seedbed immigrants with a gradually growing base of followers from back home. The linkages work effectively because they involve social relationships that developed organically, having grown up before anyone left town. The key ties are those that connect kith and kin—who can act with the confidence that one will reliably and regularly help the other. Consequently, migrant networks provide durable, efficient conduits for the flow of resources needed to give newcomers the information and social support for moving to a new home and getting started.

Over time, migration networks evolve in such a way as to produce qualitative changes on both ends, making further migration easier. In the *host society*, veteran immigrants, as they consolidate their place, find it easier and less costly to help out, which widens the pool of hometown candidates to whom they can lend a hand. In the *home society*, a growing proportion of the community finds itself linked to expatriates in a position to provide assistance. In turn, these changes lower the costs and risks of movement, increasing migration’s net expected returns. Very quickly, these processes of network consolidation and expansion make migration a self-feeding phenomenon, with ties to settlers diffusing so broadly that almost everyone in the home community enjoys access to a contact abroad.¹⁵

Network theory, our label for the account summarized above, has proven deeply influential for reasons not difficult to understand. It shows how the actions of individual migrants are rooted in social structure; it overturns the older “individualistic” view of migration, which cast the migrant as a solitary cost/benefit calculator. It also helps to explain how migrants, once established, get ahead. The connections that

span immigrant communities constitute a source of *social capital*, providing social structures that facilitate action—in this case, the search for jobs and the drive to acquire skills and other resources to move up the economic ladder.¹⁶ Networks tying veterans to newcomers allow for rapid transmission of information about workplace openings or opportunities for new business start-ups. The networks send information the other way, as well, telling bosses about applicants, thus reducing the risks associated with hiring.¹⁷ Once in place, the networks reproduce themselves: once arrived, incumbents recruit friends or relatives, while entrepreneurs gravitate to the cluster of business opportunities already identified by their associates in the community. Moreover, relationships among co-ethnics are likely to be many-sided rather than specialized, leading community effects to go beyond informational value and engendering both codes of conduct and the mechanisms for sanctioning those who violate norms.¹⁸ As this description makes clear, sociological attempts to theorize the economic sociology of immigration—whether under the label of *ethnic economy*, *ethnic enclave*, *ethnic niche*, or of the latest neologism of the day—involve applications of the basic social-network approach.¹⁹

So far so good—but network theory suffers from a built-in contradiction. It does a nice job of explaining why tomorrow’s workforce looks a good deal like today’s; it does not tell us how today’s labor force configuration came to be. The relationship between today and tomorrow is not difficult to understand: the established immigrant workers learn about job openings before anyone else, and, once in the know, tell their friends and relatives the good news. They also reassure the boss that their referrals are the right candidates to fill the vacancies, a pledge that sounds all the more meaningful when the boss thinks that birds of a feather flock together, and likes the birds he currently has.

But not every new day is like the preceding day; at some point, today’s immigrant veterans were outsiders, knocking on doors, with few if any contacts inside. How did the tables turn? To some extent, we have already provided the answer. On the one hand, conditions at the very bottom of the labor market keep workers engaged in extensive churning; a high turnover rate produces constant vacancies. On the other hand, immigrants line up for entry-level jobs at a more rapid rate than anyone else, precisely since, as mentioned above, the conditions and stigma associated with the economy’s “bad jobs” motivates natives to seek other options. So, even if once excluded from bottom-level portals, immigrants quickly, through succession, build up concentrations at the economy’s

lowest points of entry. In the process, the number of immigrants with the ability to help a friend or family member obtain and keep a job quickly increases. Given bosses' usual preference for recruiting from inside, the immigrant presence automatically grows.

This type of explanation tells us why there are many immigrant sweepers and kitchen helpers. If these were the only possibilities, opportunities would be very limited and low-skill migration streams, a good deal smaller than they are. Network theory, however, contends that migration quickly becomes a self-feeding process; once the first crop of migrants take hold, the theory predicts that the networks will normally continue to grow.²⁰ For this to happen, some immigrant job-holders must come to possess more than inside dope about the next dishwasher or janitorial opening; they need to be in the position to grant access to better and more varied jobs to their needy friends and kin. In other words, they have to either rise to positions of authority or compel the authorities to comply with their wishes. But how do stigmatized outsiders manage to gain such leverage?

The answer lies in the power that immigrant social networks acquire, once imported into the workplace. As noted above, informal ties help because they meet the ends of workers and managers alike; social, rather than market processes, yield the most efficient result.²¹ But matters can change, if and when the balance of power between workers and employer shifts. After all, veterans enjoy the benefits of insider knowledge, often having a better clue than bosses as to the likely comings and goings of their colleagues on the shop or selling floor. While they can filter that knowledge in ways that suit management's objectives, they also feel impelled to respond to the needs of their kin and associates chasing after jobs always in too short supply. From the workers' standpoint, therefore, nepotism is rarely too much of a good thing; not so for management, which discovers that bossing a department filled with cousins, friends, and neighbors involves no small constraint. In taking care of their own, moreover, veterans *implicitly* exclude those ethnic others who do not possess the right connection. Sometimes the numerically dominant group *explicitly* seeks to secure its place at the expense of anyone different—no surprise given the brutal competition among workers with the fewest options, and the related tensions played out on street corners and in workplaces. Of course, networks rarely place hiring mechanisms under watertight controls; outsiders almost always leak in. Still, the need to accomplish tasks through cooperation puts numerical minorities at a disadvantage—forcing management to attend to the preferences of those