RICHARD ALBA, NANCY FONER, STRANGERS NO MORE: IMMIGRATION AND THE CHALLENGES OF INTEGRATION IN NORTH AMERICA AND WESTERN EUROPE, 2015, PRINCETON, PRINCETON UNIVERSITY PRESS, 336 P.

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North America (the United States and Canada) and Western Europe used to differ considerably in matters of immigration and integration but they are now converging. Post-war migrations turned most European countries into receiving societies. The children of the immigrants who arrived then – the second generation – are now adults and the third generation is already in school. Canada made substantial changes to its immigration policies in the 1950s, and in 1965 the United States abolished the entry quotas that had all but put a stop to immigration. However, similarities in temporal dynamics do not mean that immigrants and their children in the various countries have similar trajectories, if only because the political, economic, cultural and social contexts are quite distinct. The question of how fully national differences shape the life paths of immigrants and their descendants is a central one in academic and policy debate.

There have been many trans-Atlantic comparative studies of immigrant and second-generation integration in recent years, but comparison is often impeded.

by the problem of data comparability. Moreover, country histories and social structures are not the only parameters that differ; the immigrants and ethnic minorities analysed in these studies come from different regions, and group social composition varies. Can Algerians in France really be compared to Turks in Germany, Mexicans in the US or Koreans in Canada? It is these key questions that Richard Alba and Nancy Foner take on in this work, synthesizing several years of data and analyses, some of which have already been published. The originality and power of their book lie not so much in its exploration of the different dimensions of integration, then, as in the authors’ extremely fine, rigorous definition of the conditions that govern comparison – and their labour of comparison itself, based on excellent data and substantiated by an immense body of source material.

Leading researchers in the field of immigration and assimilation in the United States, Alba and Foner pioneered trans-Atlantic comparison at a time when American research was still focused almost exclusively on the American case and took little interest in change on the other side. This book draws heavily on the findings of that earlier research. Six countries are compared: the United States and Canada (North America) and France, Germany, the Netherlands and the United Kingdom (Europe). In all these countries the authors chose to study immigrant groups of different origins but with the shared characteristic of being “low-status”: Mexicans (or Hispanics) in the US; North Africans and sub-Saharan Africans in France; Turks in Germany; Pakistanis, Bangladeshis and immigrants from the Caribbean in Great Britain; immigrants from Asia and the Caribbean in Canada; and non-European immigrants (Turks, Moroccans, Surinamese and West Indians) in the Netherlands. The authors’ hypothesis here was that socio-economic and political-symbolic similarities due to shared “low” status would allow for apprehending possible differences in integration trajectories despite group-specific migration histories. They observe those trajectories in different areas of social life: socio-economic position, degree of residential segregation, religion, access to elected office, education, identity and mixed unions. The question of integration is reformulated in the introduction to clarify the concepts used: rather than observe assimilation success or failure, the authors will assess whether or not immigrants and their children have as much access as the native majority group to “valuable social resources” and are accepted and recognized as full-fledged members of their settlement society “through participation in major institutions such as the educational and political system and the labor and housing markets” (p. 5). Richard Alba’s general preference for the concept of assimilation over integration is well known, though the meaning he attributed to that term was more contemporary than its classic one. (3) In this work he agrees to use the term integration, “in recognition of its greater acceptability on the international scene,” insisting nevertheless on the “considerable overlap” between the two concepts (p. 8) – a half-concession in fact.

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The introduction lays down the terms of the analysis and discusses the anticipated limitations to comparison, insightfully discussing academic debates on American exceptionalism and the use of “national models” as a grid for explaining situational differences. The second chapter describes the populations studied, briefly presenting migration histories and their demographic effects, focusing more closely on immigrants themselves than on the second generation. It is true that more detailed data is available on immigrants than their children, but the distinction between the two generations, whose constructed positions in their settlement societies are quite different, is not always clearly made in the chapters on specific areas of social life. It would have been helpful, for example, to distinguish between the two generations with regard to findings on employment positions (the data available primarily concern immigrants) or education (“immigrants’ children” not differentiated by arrival age).

It is beyond the scope of this review to present the wide range of findings condensed into this study. They do show that though immigrants and their descendants still encounter serious obstacles to social mobility, there has been progress. Educational attainment in the second generation is much higher than for their parents – and higher in some cases than in the majority population, while in politics immigrant minority candidates are beginning to win elections. Employment and residential segregation are still highly problematic in all societies studied, while mixed union rates constitute evidence that social barriers are falling. The political context in Europe is more worrisome than in North America: in all four European countries a fixation on Islam and rising anti-immigrant populist parties are observed. On the role of religion in integration, highly secular countries like France and the Netherlands contrast with countries like the United States and, to a lesser extent, Canada and Britain, where religious self-affirmation is an integral part of social life. Nonetheless, conflicts stemming from difficulties of “accommodation” are also found in countries that are relatively tolerant of religious minorities, and the United States’ post-9/11 security policies have been used to justify racial profiling of Muslims and elicited the expression of a diffuse Islamophobia.

Though there are disparities between the countries studied, none seems a clear winner as far as integrative capability is concerned. The authors even go so far as to claim that the differences observed may well be explained by the relatively weak relevance of the “national model” analytic grid. In fact, once they have discarded most of the hypotheses that might explain countries’ integration performance, they leave us with an unresolved question. The strong conclusion they draw from their findings is that there is no optimal national configuration for ensuring immigrant and second-generation integration, and yet they are confident that the integration dynamic is inexorable. As they see it, because western societies have become irreversibly multi-ethnic, social structures can only adapt to this new situation, especially as minority groups gradually manage to enter the spheres and activities of the majority population. In a way, they
reiterate the axiom of canonical assimilation theories.  

One of their optimistic predictions – baby boomer ageing – has a strictly demographic basis: in all the societies they studied, that phenomenon is opening up positions to immigrants and second and third generations. The authors’ hypothesis here is that generation replacement of the baby boomers will almost mechanically enable minorities to become integrated into the social structure and achieve greater social mobility. This seems to apply most directly to the Netherlands and Germany, where falls in fertility have been steeper than in France or the United Kingdom. However, that optimistic scenario does not take into account the possibility of strong ethno-racial segmentation in European and North American societies, along the lines of African American history: that group remained in subaltern positions in the US more than a century after slavery was abolished (in a context of institutionalized racial segregation, of course). Unfortunately, it appears perfectly possible that the best positions in these ageing societies will continue to be captured and monopolized by existing dominant groups, to the exclusion of relatively stigmatized ethno-racial minorities, who could remain confined to subaltern jobs or, worse yet, no jobs at all in a persistent context of mass unemployment. Richard Alba and Nancy Foner identify this danger, but as they see it, rising mixed union rates are fluidifying identities, blurring boundaries between groups, and may even lead to the disappearance of such groups altogether. This is indeed a possibility, though it is difficult to predict how identities will be recomposed and ranked in the short-term future. Cautious and astute as they have been throughout this clear, extremely well-documented book, Alba and Foner are careful not to commit to any middle- or long-term predictions. Are the immigrants they have studied “strangers no more”? Time will tell.

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