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Scenarios of Transformation: The Changing Consequences of Old and New Migrations

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In a New Land: A Comparative View of Immigration. Nancy Foner.
New York: New York University Press, 2005.

This book is both monograph and manifesto. If studies of international migration are too often about immigration to a single place at one time, this volume is relentlessly comparative. It bundles multi-layered comparisons between then and now, here and there, and this group and that. Anthropologist-turned-sociologist Nancy Foner draws on a long career of fieldwork to compare several immigrant streams to New York at the turn of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Another set of chapters compares contemporary West Indian migrations to New York and London. Suggestive but less developed chapters compare Jamaicans in a broader set of cities; assess the extent to which New York is exceptional as an immigrant destination relative to other US cities; and compare immigration past and present between the United States and Europe. Six of the nine chapters are primarily concerned with race, two with gender, and one with transnationalism, though all three of these topics intersect throughout the volume. As a synthesis of several distinct research projects, the book is less than the sum of its parts. Indeed, versions of many parts have already been published elsewhere. Yet, taken on its own terms, each chapter either makes useful comparisons or lays out the right questions for a promising research agenda.

There is a lively debate in the literatures on immigration and race in the United States over the extent to which racial boundaries are flexible for different categories of immigrants. How will today's immigrants be classified within the US racial system compared to earlier waves of immigrants? How will those boundaries affect their life chances? Scholars like Alejandro Portes and Ruben Rumbaut emphasize that fewer of today's immigrants are white than their predecessors, and thus they are less likely to achieve the upward mobility of earlier generations. This view is challenged by Joel Perlmann and Roger Waldinger, who emphasize the mutability of racial categorizations and the "whitening" of Jewish and Italian immigrants at the turn of the twentieth century as a historical

achievement. Foner stakes out the sensible middle ground of the empirical debate and analyzes the competing prognostications of America's racial future. The theoretical import of this story has yet to be fully conceptualized within the broader study of ethnicity, a challenge that I will begin to take up by drawing on the materials Foner provides.

Chapter 1 engages existing debates by offering a nuanced view of changing patterns of racial distinction. Established European-origin populations at the turn of the twentieth century understood and treated Jewish and Italian newcomers to New York as less than white in cultural and phenotypic terms, yet categorized them as white when it came to legal status and privileges *vis-à-vis* blacks and Asians. Italians and Jews became more accepted as fully white across all social domains over the last century. Foner guides the reader through the complex ethnic landscape of New York since the end of national-origin immigration quotas in 1965. Incisive sketches show how its older ethnic boundaries were upset by migrations of West Indians and Africans into a city with an established population of African Americans descended from domestic migrants from the US South; a Hispanic population that is unusually heterogeneous in its national origins and ambiguous racial classification; a heterogeneous Asian migration; and ongoing white immigration, primarily from Eastern Europe. The author argues that becoming a New Yorker is a much different process for contemporary immigrants than it was for Jews and Italians in the last century because of the contemporary presence of large numbers of African Americans. West Indians and Africans are lumped together with African Americans in a way that did not happen for earlier generations of arrivals seen as less than fully white. An unstated implication here is that the "one-drop rule" applies to the divide between people of European ancestry and those of African ancestry, not the divide between Europeans considered fully white and those considered only liminally white.

In Foner's view, there are three main scenarios whereby contemporary immigration might reshape the US racial system. The category "whites" might expand to include lighter multiracials and light-skinned Hispanics; a new black/non-black dichotomy might form between African Americans and all other groups; or racial boundaries might decrease, or become more porous across the board, as a result of intermarriage and intermingling. Following Richard Alba and Victor Nee, she suggests that the US racial system will become more like the Latin American racial spectrum, rather than a system of clear-cut categories.

I would argue that a racial spectrum is not just a future possibility but also an applicable historical description of one aspect of the US racial experience. Folk understandings of race in the United

States have *never* been simply about categorizing blacks and whites. Two related but distinctive racial logics have coexisted. Historically, the black/white line in the United States has been seen as a divide between two clearly demarcated groups whose members are “in” or “out.” An intermediate position is not an option in this system. The one-drop rule marking anyone with any known African ancestors as black is exceptionally rigid by international comparison, but the US black/white divide is consonant with Ronald Cohen’s classic definition of ethnicity as a series of nested dichotomizations of inclusiveness and exclusiveness. At a given level of differentiation, diacritical markers such as phenotype, dress, and language set apart insiders from outsiders.¹ For example, at a micro-level, Italian villagers might distinguish themselves from nearby villagers based on linguistic differences. Village-based distinctions would then be nested like a set of Russian dolls in larger distinctions between northern and southern Italians, which, in turn, would be nested in an even larger set of distinctions at continental, confessional, and civilizational levels, in which different diacritical markers such as religion or phenotype would become salient. At each of these levels, according to Cohen, a given individual or group is either in or out of the community.

The experience of Jews and Italians in New York at the turn of the twentieth century points to a context in which members operated with another view of ethno-racial difference—as difference increasing or decreasing along a continuum rather than a dichotomy. Categorization of a population on that continuum was based on folk understandings of their degree of assimilability. The English were the most clearly assimilable, followed by northern Europeans and Irish, with Jews, Italians, and other South Europeans further down the scale toward “black.” The experience of Europeans who originally were categorized as distinct races but changed their categorizations within one or two generations resonates with the more fluid racial system predominant in Latin America. In Latin America, ethnic boundaries tend to be relatively blurred at a group level, and individuals can also move up the racial hierarchy within their lifetime through strategies such as whitening by earning more money in Brazil or becoming mestizo by moving to the city in parts of Mexico.

Examining the collision of the two racial logics—the one-drop rule and a continuum—in the same US setting reveals a fundamental difference between the categorizations of liminal whites and those of African Americans. For all the nineteenth-century talk about the Irish and southern Italians being black, there was no one-drop rule categorizing Irish or Italians who phenotypically looked unambiguously white as *really* being black, whereas the one-drop rule did apply to light-skinned persons with African ancestors. Black

Africanness was seen as being immutable across generations in a way that did not apply to the darkness of those populations that became known as “white ethnics.”

The theoretical implication is that, rather than being exclusively a dichotomy between “we” and “they,” ethnicity can also be a like-we/like-they differentiation that is mapped onto a scale of assimilability. The very possibility of assimilation reflects ethnicity-as-spectrum. Cohen’s concept of “nesting” does not capture this dynamic, because even if the level of difference (in this case “race”) is the same, some groups are considered eternal outsiders while others could quickly become insiders. In other words, even at the same time and place, the degree to which ethno-racial differentiation is dichotomous or continuous varies depending on the reference groups involved.

Given the black/white distinction that historically has been deeply anchored in a more fluid overall racial environment, another major possibility for the effect of immigration on US racial categories is for white, Asian, Latino, and black to continue to be the dominant racial categories, with some blurring at the edges for the first three categories but less for blacks. This would be similar to the context of New York a century ago, in the sense that certain categories of difference would be more malleable than others, with the black/white divide remaining most salient. Nevertheless, the political mechanisms contributing to the maintenance of those group boundaries mark a historical shift. The racial formation of “Asians” and “Latinos” in the United States began as processes instituted from above by US census categories and immigration and nationality law. These categories are now institutionalized in American politics. While affirmative action is under assault, ethnic caucuses, advocacy groups, and university programs and clubs are a deeply entrenched part of the political landscape that draws on ethnicity as a resource for political mobilization. Such institutions are likely to continue to create incentives for the maintenance of significant ethnic boundaries, even as intermarriage and exposure to other groups blur those boundaries.

Foner’s most insightful contribution to the understanding of racial formation in the United States is a chapter comparing how the fact of an established African American population in New York caused different racial experiences for West Indians in New York than for those in London. Academic studies in New York tend to portray West Indians as a success story *vis-à-vis* African Americans, while in London, West Indians are portrayed as disadvantaged *vis-à-vis* native Britons and Asian immigrants. The established population of African Americans in New York has created possibilities for a pan-black political alliance through which West Indians have gained real

The Changing Consequences of Old and New Migrations

political power, yet the presence of the established African American population also encourages West Indians to maintain their ethnic distinctiveness on a daily basis in an effort to avoid being lumped into the same category as African Americans and suffering the resulting discrimination. Over the course of generations, lumping appears inevitable, at least in daily life, and West Indians are more residentially and maritally segregated from whites in New York than in London. Methodologically, this strategy avoids the implication that immigrant trajectories are exclusively created by differences populations bring with them from abroad and focuses attention on the context of destination and settlement.

Two chapters deal primarily with gender. One compares various aspects of Jamaican women's work and family lives in New York and London. The more theoretically fruitful chapter compares the experiences of Italian and Jewish immigrants to New York in the last century with the experiences of a more nationally diverse female immigrant stream today. The historical perspective yields an important corrective to the notion that immigration to the United States and remunerated work generally leads to an increase in gender equality. Foner found that Italian and Jewish women lost status as a result of immigration, both because they were often more cloistered in New York than they had been in the source country and because there was a general stigma attached to women who worked. Even when women were paid for their labor, it was often piecework performed at home, thus reinforcing norms of female domesticity. Today, remunerated work outside the home tends to promote more influence in household decision-making for immigrant women, though gendered inequalities remain because of men's relative lack of participation in household duties and the persistence of patriarchal ideologies brought from abroad and encountered in the United States.

Along with race and gender, transnationalism is the book's third major topic. Chapter 3 addresses current controversies about transnationalism by asking to what extent social activities of contemporary immigrants across the boundaries of states differ from those of the last great wave that arrived a century ago. To her credit, Foner does not simply frame her discussion of transnationalism in terms of the by now repetitive debate as to whether transnationalism is "new"; rather, she asks in what specific domains cross-border connectivity is different, or the same, and why. She finds that the Italians were particularly "transnational" in terms of their high rates of return, multisited households, and large-scale remittances. Even Jewish immigrants, who had far lower rates of return, given the political push-factors encouraging their exit from Europe, raised large sums of money for their European hometowns as well as for

fellow townspeople in New York. Many immigrants avidly followed the politics of their home countries and lobbied the US government for homeland causes.

What, then, is new? Foner reports that “return migration rates are actually lower now than they were in the past” (65). Return migration, which implies all manner of ongoing connections between the initial and return migrations, is arguably the gold standard of cross-border connectivity. By that standard, claims of novelty in the transnationalism literature are exactly wrong. In other areas, Foner follows the conventional argument in the transnationalism literature that new transportation and communication technologies make possible more frequent, immediate, and closer contact with home. Unfortunately, it is difficult to establish at what point a quantitative shift in the speed and frequency of contacts leads to a qualitative shift in the kind of ties. In 1927, William Thomas and Florian Znaniecki highlighted the written letter as a means of maintaining ties between Poles in Chicago and Poland, though, to be sure, the letter was a slower form of communication than e-mail and telephone contact. A systematic study that would unpack the effects of these technologies on the ability of migrants to maintain strong ties to multiple, dispersed sites remains to be done. Foner rightly points out that today there is greater tolerance for cultural difference and dual nationality. More controversial is the assertion that the globalized economy is a new feature of the contemporary migration milieu. The extent to which economic globalization is new, a continuation of a secular trend, or a return to an earlier era is one of the main issues in the globalization debate (for a sample of different views on this subject, see Held and McGrew).

What are the sources of variability in transnational ties? The book sketches a long list, including the size, gender composition, legal status, and residential concentration of the immigrant population; the generational and temporal length of their settlement in the United States; the geographic proximity of the homeland; the degree of active homeland emigrant recruitment; and forms of community organization in the homeland. These are all plausible factors, and there are certainly more, such as the historical relationship between source and destination countries. This is more of an outline of a research agenda than a finding. The critical question that persists is how important each of these factors is for given domains of cross-border connectivity.

Will the homeland connections of the second generation endure? In the earlier wave of migration, among Italians and Jews, those ties tended to wither. While suggesting that in the current wave of migration, too, the second generation will mostly sever their homeland ties, Foner forecasts that such ties will endure longer than they did in the past because of a continued inflow of immigrants, the

increasing prevalence of dual nationality, affordable long-distance transportation, a multiculturalist acceptance and even celebration of difference in the United States, and blocked economic mobility in the United States. The evidence for the latter two assertions is not clear-cut. Promotion of ethnic cultural difference might increase identification with the homeland and make it legitimate in the host country, but there is also historical evidence of a contrary pattern. Irish-Americanism as an ethnic reaction to discrimination in the United States was intimately related to long-distance Irish republican nationalism in the late nineteenth century (Brown). Increased acceptance of difference in the United States might actually weaken reactive long-distance nationalism. Today, racial discrimination is often described in the literature as a motor for maintaining cross-border ties, which is certainly plausible in the Mexican case. Yet apart from the Mexicans, the national origin groups least likely to naturalize in the United States over the last century are the English, Germans, and Canadians—populations that are hardly subject to severe discrimination. There is not always a clear, predictable relationship between the level of cultural acceptance in the host country and the level of long-distance nationalism sustained by immigrant communities.

The notion that blocked economic mobility in the United States might encourage the second generation to maintain homeland ties is similarly problematic. In the literature on segmented assimilation and blocked mobility, the Mexican second generation is considered the critical population, given its relative and absolute size and lower aggregate socioeconomic status compared to natives and most Asian immigrants. Whatever their trajectory in the United States—and the extent to which their mobility is actually blocked in the United States remains a contested empirical question—the relatively severely limited economic opportunities in Mexico are unlikely to appeal to large numbers of US-born Mexican-Americans. The wage differential between different national-origin groups in the United States is negligible compared to the international wage differentials that drive international labor migration in the first place.

The prevalence of homeland ties among the second generation, both historically and in the contemporary context, remains an empirical lacuna in the literature, despite recent work to address the question by Peggy Levitt and Mary Waters and by Rob Smith. Portes has argued that one reason the transnational perspective is useful is that it can ask new questions of old material. One such promising avenue would be to re-examine the historical record to determine the extent and quality of second-generation homeland ties that may have been ignored. For example, William Foot Whyte's 1943 *Street Corner Society* on the Italian second generation in Boston elided the fact that many of the key informants had spent several years living

in Italy as young returnees (Boelen). Are the homeland ties of the second generation not part of the canonical immigration and ethnicity literatures because such ties were rare, or because the question was never asked? Much spadework remains to be done.

It is often pointed out that edited volumes of case studies are no substitute for more systematic comparative studies. This volume reads like an edited collection because its research agenda is so far-flung and because comparison was not always part of the original design. For example, the fieldwork on West Indians in London was conducted during the 1970s, while the fieldwork on West Indians in New York was conducted during the 1980s. Only limited evidence is presented to support the claim of higher levels of transnationality between New York and Jamaica, as Foner did not ask Jamaicans in London about their visits home or if they left their children at home to work abroad. To the extent that there were stronger connections between New York and Jamaica in the 1980s than between London and Jamaica in the 1970s, was that due to differences in time or differences in place? As Foner acknowledges, the new questions cannot be answered well because they are asked of a body of evidence collected to answer different questions.

The subtitle and substance of *In a New Land* advocate “A Comparative View of Immigration.” The comparisons in this text yield important insights and ask refreshing questions about race, gender, and cross-border connectivity across many temporal and spatial settings. What student of international migration would not applaud an effort to grapple head-on with the presentism and parochialism characteristic of much of the US immigration literature? Still, one wonders if “comparison” is a useful analytic theme in itself. A “quantitative view of immigration,” an “ethnographic view of immigration,” or a “conversation-analytic view of immigration” would not hold together coherently, so why should a comparative view be any different? The comparative method is but a means, not an end. The wide range of themes treated here demonstrates the utility of the comparative means, but the ends pursued are too scattered to produce a coherent or consistently supported set of arguments. Notwithstanding these limitations, selected chapters of this accessible text would make fine additions to undergraduate or graduate courses across the social sciences and humanities on race, cities, and international migration. Its greater promise is to fire the imagination for future studies.

Notes

1. I understand “race” to be one aspect of the broader concept of “ethnicity.” Ethnicity is racial to the extent that the indicia of distinction are primarily phenotypical or based on notions of inherited and immutable biological characteristics.

The Changing Consequences of Old and New Migrations

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