

ATTITUDES AND PERSPECTIVES TO INTEGRATION, ASSIMILATION, AND MULTICULTURALISM IN THE U.S. IN A NEW ERA OF IMMIGRATION

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Abstract

Immigrants' integration in the United States is a dynamic two-way process in which immigrants and the receiving country work together to build a cohesive society. The qualitative and quantitative approaches used to conduct this research show that undergoing integration cannot happen without immigrants' intentional efforts as well as Americans' acceptance. As a reciprocal process, rubbing shoulders together will help create a new mainstream that is greater than the sum of its parts. Although America is a nation built by immigrants, it refuses any menace that could threaten the American legal status. Specific minority groups do not enjoy open access to the mainstream due to different factors, mainly race. Their experiences in the new American life do not determine how good they are at assimilating. This paper reviewed the terms integration and assimilation intending to discuss the problem of visibility that considers racial groups unassimilable by default. It will attempt to answer the following questions: Since assimilation does not offer a place for racial groups in the past, how would today's immigrants join the mainstream? If assimilation does not accept differences, will multiculturalism be a good alternative for these groups? Indeed, America should rethink assimilation and be more tolerant of differences.

Keywords: Assimilation, integration, multiculturalism, newcomers, new mainstream.

1. Introduction

The durability of the American mainstream led to think that any foreign civilizations brought with immigrants do not change it, but the mainstream does. What happened, in the past, is that integration and assimilation proved to be reciprocal approaches. Considerable overlap between immigrants and the host country resulted in a new product that is neither the original nor new. Guy Garcia calls it: 'The new mainstream.' (Guy, Garcia, 2014, p. 4). However, the US keeps this fact under wraps to help assimilation prevail.

Newcomers today see it as a requirement to find a new alternative to incorporate into American society. In his book titled *-Reinventing the Melting Pot: New Immigrants and What It Means to Be American*, Tamar Jacoby states that:

Today as in the past, immigrants' absorption has two main dimensions: objective and subjective. The first challenge facing any newcomer is to make a life in the new country: to find a job, master the language, eventually put down roots and

launch one's children toward a better life. The second dimension is more nebulous: the long, slow process of coming to feel that one belongs in the new place. (p. 17)

Regarding the first dimension that concerns the individual, newcomers tend to work at both the top and the bottom of the job ladder to achieve a high level of institutional integration. The majority are engaged in the jobs native-born Americans refuse to occupy, thus, "a large percentage work in dirty, demanding, low-paid jobs" (Jacoby, 2004, p. 18). However, the debate goes around the second dimension which is usually subtle and debatable.

When discussing immigrants' delay to integration, many sociologists believe that the slow progress in the assimilation process is due to its coercive nature that treats immigrants as strangers, mainly racial groups. Emerson's private journal entry, for instance, declares his hate for the "narrowness" of Americans against immigrants, notably, including "people of color" (Parrillo, 2009, p. 11). For Emerson, "America as a melting or smelting pot was a tomorrow to come, not a reality that was" (Parrillo, 2009, p. 11).

At the time old stock immigrants were subject to assimilation and ready to renounce their cultural background, will today's newcomers accept this subjectivity? In case they do, will America consider that racial differences do not threaten but thrive the mainstream?

2. Milton Gordon's Theory as a Guide to Assimilation Then-and-Now

The term assimilation in American life today takes a new connotation. In the past, the literature referred to it as a forcible and coercive process in which immigrants renounce their cultural backgrounds, habits, traditions, languages, and mores and obtain the new one (Do We Really Want Immigrants to Assimilate? March 1, 2000). Opponents of assimilation described it as "the inevitable evil". As long as the U.S. is a nation that is changing every day, the mechanisms to integrate new immigrant cohorts would be changed as well.

The paper examines the theory of assimilation between rhetoric and reality. Moreover, the inclusion of the approach of multiculturalism is not to conduct a comparison to assimilation, but it comes to interpret the margin that was left by the old theories. They are defined as two 'contrary processes, but they are not mutually exclusive' (Healey, 2011, p. 43). Groups that choose to keep their individual identities are thought unassimilated. However, immigrants who were placed at the edge of society are not assimilated because of an external rejection not by their own choice.

Proponents of assimilation distinguish between the cultural attainment and social integration of immigrant groups. They consider the process as a long-term system that may last for years or decades to adjust its variables into practice. This view was supported by Robert E. Park and Milton Gordon who both agree on the inevitability of immigrants to be eventually part of the new nation (Gordon, 1964). However, the exclusion of ethnic and racial groups, demonstrated by sociologists' discourse analysis, drives heated criticism.

Gordon visualized the seven dimensions of immigrants' integration and assimilation on purpose that each stage will possibly occur at different degrees. The speed or delay of the process depends on the set of immigrants coming to the nation. Undeniably, the immigrant willingness to incorporate is the motor of the process (the objective dimension). The operation *per se* may stop at any stage regarding social impediments for example segregation, prejudice, and discrimination (M. Gordon, 1964, p.70). However, the question that is worth asking is whether Gordon's facets are straightforward or one could precede the other. For him, the

presentation of the seven stages by the order would refer to assimilation as a one-way process. The stages that pursue the cultural and structural sub-processes are shown in Table one. The sociologist tends to show the different steps necessary to “operationalize” assimilation in reality.

Table 1.

Gordon's Assimilation Variables: "Assimilation in American Life (M. Gordon, 1964, p. 7).

Change of cultural patterns to those of the host Society	Cultural or behavioral assimilation
Large-scale entrance into cliques, clubs, and institutions of host society, on primary group level	Structural assimilation (Integration)
Large-scale intermarriage	Marital assimilation
Development of sense of people-hood based exclusively on host society	Identificational assimilation
Absence of prejudice	Attitude receptional assimilation
Absence of discrimination	Behavioral receptional assimilation
Absence of value and power conflict	Civic assimilation

Although Gordon's assimilation model continues to guide researchers to understanding its nature, it was subject to criticism. One voiced criticism argues that any stage of assimilation variables may precede the previous one, for instance, the structural stage precedes acculturation. In other words, 'many researchers no longer think of the process as necessarily linear, or one-way' (Healey, 2011, p. 48). In addition, a group could be very much similar to the majority culturally, for example, racial groups, but restrained and segregated in the social sphere (Marger, 2012, p. 87). Thus, it will be next to impossible for these groups to proceed to the eventual level of the process.

Today, newcomers reject subjectivity and prefer new paths to find their place in society. The rebirth of the conventional idea of cultural pluralism led to the re-emergence of the so-called multiculturalism. Many proponents of this theory are members of racial and ethnic backgrounds usually those who were not able to integrate and assimilate as a result of their physical differences. In his book titled *In Mortal Danger: The Battle for America's Border and Security*, Congressman Tom Tancredo argues that this category of immigrants may pose a danger to the unity of America. He states that 'In today's America, immigrants are welcomed in a society intoxicated with the idea of multiculturalism' (2006, p. 22). Unlike the old stock of immigrants, newcomers are not ready to give up their individual identities. According to the Congressman, 'becoming an American has changed over the years' (p.23).

3. The Analytical Approach and Quantitative Method in Use to Measure Assimilation

The success or failure of integration and assimilation, then and now, is based on two major factors: racial differences and fear of cultural confrontation. To understand the gap that was left by previous theories, it is important to use the analytical approach. It becomes clear that the biological and psychological aspects are essential to whether ease or block the process.

Back in history, African Americans were brought to America forcibly, seeking a better life, and were treated as slaves. Yet their long-term experience in the US society pushed them to go beyond the handicaps and break down the chains of racism. They sought to achieve integration and become in their identities as Americans, but still rejected. Racial minorities did not actually assimilate or even integrate within society, but this fact does not reflect the belief that they are “unassimilable” as Americans describe. Instead of being excluded from the majority, they could integrate and resemble the middle-class assimilators (Alba & Nee, 2003, p.3).

This approach is also needed regarding the analysis of previous classical literary criticism. In the very classical work entitled *An American Dilemma*, Gunnar Myrdal said that 'it is to the advantage of American Negroes as individuals and as a group to become assimilated into American culture, to acquire the traits held in esteem by dominant white Americans' (Alba & Nee, 2003, p. 3). The author considers people of color assimilated once they acquire the new culture. If they are not eventually assimilated, they should not be blamed for something out of their depth.

Scholars who attempt to analyze the process and suggest solutions assume that assimilation theory makers should consider equity and treat racial groups as they treat European immigrants. If they do so, they would never face any issue in integrating them. Bolaffi refers to the same point and poses the question '...how can one explain the apparent failure of American racial groups to assimilate at the same rates enjoyed by European immigrant groups?' (Alba & Nee, 2003, p.100). Bolaffi, Alba, and Nee call the various groups to move forward with integration and do not wait for policymakers to include them or solve their problems. On the other hand, Banton argues that racial groups' attempt to challenge social discrimination and prejudice is ineffective.

Other fundamental ways to examine the process of assimilation in the 21st century are the quantitative and qualitative methods. The former will be based on statistics that will answer the following question: How well do racial groups conform to the majority today? The latter approach will be based on immigrants' own experiences and feedback toward the terms assimilation and multiculturalism. It will also attempt to answer these questions: Is the new American immigrant familiar with the term assimilation? and does multiculturalism exist as a choice or an alternative? To cover this practical part, the paper will be based on statistics provided by the Pew Research Centre (Tamir, 2021), in addition to the qualitative study provided by the author Laila Lalami that was based on understating the term of assimilation by different categories existing in the same society (Lalami, 2017).

4. Assimilation is an Old Fashion: Does Multiculturalism Alternate?

The classical literary criticism on the field of ethnic and racial studies finds that the physical difference is the responsible factor for the delay or sometimes the complete failure of integration and assimilation. Race and skin color became a stigma for those who are left on the margin of society. It is an unavoidable obstacle that locks the different sub-processes to access a high assimilation degree. Marger (2012) distinguishes between the difficulty that both ethnic groups and racial-ethnic groups usually encounter. The public separation and refusal to allow them to share their experiences with the dominant group makes racial-ethnic people more distant than ethnic groups, who are different just culturally (Marger, 2012, p. 90).

The exclusion of blacks and intolerance of the white population come under fire. Most critiques dispute that racial groups did experience different social attributes of American life in their own neighborhood, but do not take chances to practice them on the level of social

networks. One essential element of study should be centralized on the racial construct which dominates the U.S. society, notably, the relation between “segregation, social life, and public attitudes” (Oliver, 2010, p.9). Robert C. Smith adds that “the ideology of white supremacy” thwart assimilation to some subordinate groups, such as African Americans, Asians, and the ones coming from Latin America. The conventional approach supports those supreme groups to exploit the privilege of their physical traits against the marginalized communities.

A recent study by the Pew Research Centre finds that diversity in America is increasing. In the 2021 census, 46.8 million people in the US identify their race as “Black” up from 36.2 million in 2000. Moreover, the new immigration wave of the black population is growing overtime to present 10% in 2019 (Tamir, 2021). According to Christine Tamir, this diverse black population has made it subtle to identify their identities as a result of ‘intermarriage and the “international migration”’ (Tamir, 2021). With this in mind, it is important to measure the success or failure of assimilation in such a diverse world.

A study conducted by Harvard University sociologist Mary Waters has examined the question of integration and assimilation today. Waters relied on Census Bureau and other sources to determine whether today's immigrants are integrating or not. To find accurate results, the report relied on different dimensions including: “education, occupation, residential segregation, language acquisition, poverty, health, crime rates, family type, intermarriage, and naturalization” (Powell, 2015). The study finds that immigrants today are integrating as well as their predecessors yet assimilation takes time. Therefore, it is a “multigenerational process” that proved difficult to be accurately measured.

Lalami, on the other hand, asked the question: “What does it take to assimilate in America?” To answer this question, she has examined the connotation of the term assimilation among the different groups. She finds that some people in the US identify the term as the achievement of some “pragmatic considerations”, like speaking the language of America, acquiring some of its culture and history, and realizing some educational and economic success (Lalami, 2017). For others, it is deeply based on giving up the old background and acquiring the new one (the American). Yet others completely refute the model of assimilation and believe that integrating is enough to immigrants' absorption. In this regard, retaining the individual identity does not hurt.

The American society keeps oscillating like a pendulum between hope, that immigrants will eventually assimilate, and fear, of the strident threat of foreign identities. Lalami refers to the reasons why America failed to clarify the skeptical side of assimilation and said:

One reason immigration is continuously debated in America is that there is no consensus on whether assimilation should be about national principles or national identity. Those who believe that assimilation is a matter of principle emphasize a belief in the Constitution and the rule of law; in life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness; and in a strong work ethic and equality. Where necessary, they support policy changes to further deter any cultural customs that defy those values. (para. 7)

As it was assumed, over time, integration and assimilation proved to be a mutual process in which immigrants integrate to America, and America, reciprocally, integrate to immigrants as well. According to a recent survey, integration or assimilation ‘works not just on immigrants but also on the rest of the population as well. One in seven marriages is across

racial or ethnic lines, statistics show. According to one survey, 35 percent of Americans have close relatives of a different racial or ethnic group' (Powell, 2015). Waters concludes that the model of assimilation in America is strong enough to be an ever-existing process among present and future generations.

5. The Fears of Multiculturalism: The Fact on the Ground

In their strong and quick response to current multiculturalism, the conservatives emphasize the danger of this menace. For them, as long as differences are retained, the mainstream is threatened. They believe that America is embracing new patterns of immigrants that are not seeking to cut ties with their previous heritage and culture. The matter will be easy for them with the emergence of multiculturalism. Legitimizing this system will be used as a pretext to preserve the ancestral heritage and promote "radical multiculturalism". At its core, multiculturalism does not aim to damage the old thinking, but the consequence of disuniting between people is what proponents of this ideology did not bear in mind (Tancredo, 2006, p. 22). Two approaches in the same society may not help bring all the population under the same umbrella (the mainstream).

Reconsidering the concept of multiculturalism shows that this phenomenon is a non-threatening ideology. The need to find a place among the majority led to its emergence. Likewise, the nation itself needed new analytical tools to understand the critical new mainstream. In this sense, multiculturalism is used as a mechanism to spread the voice of respect, recognition, and the strident need to speak the language of tolerance and accept individuals (Hartmann, 2014, p. 2). The nature of wide demographic changes occurring in the US in the last decades shows that multiculturalism is a fact on the ground rather than a threat.

In short, the US needs to rethink assimilation in the 21st century, otherwise, the immigration issues will remain unsolved. The balance between the two processes is found when the criteria to Americanize immigrants is based on respecting the national principles of the host country and accepting individual differences.

6. Conclusion

Multiculturalism did not come to exist as an alternative to assimilation. For thousands of years, U.S. society was regarded as a melting pot, but today it is symbolized as a salad bowl. The dramatic demographical shift has caused transformations in the mainstream. Multiculturalism exists to clarify the fact that the US becomes, to a large degree, multicultural.

When conservatives called for the support of the melting pot, they have put many undeniable facts under wraps to ensure solidarity. The emergence of multiculturalism today, as an ideology, was the unexpected consequence of racial groups' ignorance. Today, these groups seek out integration throughout diversity. In return, immigrants' integration is a requisite to survive and assimilation in the US is inescapable and will always prevail.

Indeed, integration in the west is an automatic process that forces its consistency through generations. Like it or not, the immigrant eventually assimilates to the US and the US assimilates to immigrants. After integration, immigrants split into two ways, whether they assimilate and melt themselves with the nation or they integrate at a modest level and keep their differences. The latter type is American in the public sphere and multicultural in the private.

The paper concludes that the unity of the US population depends on the extent of tolerance between the different cultures and beliefs. Integration is dynamic but assimilation takes time. Unlike other European countries, the US has a long and successful history of integrating its immigrants into the mainstream. Although the challenges immigrants have faced are difficult and time-consuming, integration prevails. As Waters said: 'it's really impressive how strong the force of integration is in America' (Powell, 2015).

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