

RESEARCH NOTE

From Ellis Island to LAX: Immigrant Prospects in the American City¹

Roger Waldinger

University of California, Los Angeles

This article seeks to bring the “urban” back into immigration research. Each immigrant receiving area has its own particular group of newcomers, and the economic and political structures of the immigrant receiving areas are also distinctive. Those structures are not all determining, as immigrant trajectories are shaped by the interaction between distinctive urban institutions and the specific characteristics of the relevant ethnic groups. But in the last analysis, the urban context makes a difference, as this study shows by examining the leading immigrant destinations – New York and Los Angeles.

Like their predecessors, the new, post-1965 immigrants have been overwhelmingly city-bound. Until very recently, most immigration researchers defined their subjects as people who just happened to live in cities. The particularities of immigrant cities – their specific economic, political and residential structures and the impact of those structures on immigrant destinies – are questions that have rarely entered the immigration debate.

These issues matter for a variety of reasons. First, immigration is an extraordinarily localized phenomenon. In 1980, four out of every ten new immigrants lived either in the greater Los Angeles or New York areas, and there has been relatively little change since. Second, the leading immigrant settlements vary greatly in the diversity and composition of their new immigration populations. Third, inattention to the key immigrant metropolises and their particularities leave us wondering how America’s post-industrial cities can integrate this latest wave of newcomers just when the opportunities for native minorities seem to be at lowest ebb.

In this article, I want to suggest how much can be gained by bringing the “urban” back in to immigration research. It is not simply that each immigrant receiving area has its own particular group of newcomers, although that is part of the point. The crux of the argument, however, is that the economic and political structures of the immigrant receiving areas shape immigrant trajectories. Those structures are not all determining, as immigrant trajectories are shaped by the interaction between distinctive urban institutions and the specific characteristics of the relevant ethnic groups. But in the last analysis, the urban context makes a difference, as we shall see by examining New York and Los Angeles – the leading immigrant destinations.

¹Earlier versions of this paper were presented at the 1993 meetings of the American Sociological Association and at the Taub Urban Research Center, at New York University.

THE IMMIGRANTS

The United States has always been an immigration country – or so the mythology goes. But Los Angeles stands apart – a piece of Iowa or Oklahoma somehow transplanted to the west coast. As late as 1960, Los Angeles was what it had been for most of the century: a heavily Anglo city filled with midwesterners, still holding their reunions in McArthur Park. To be sure, a Mexican presence never disappeared from Los Angeles. But on the eve of the 1965 Hart-Celler Act, the great majority of the Mexican population was native born.

Then the population suddenly changed. Nowhere else and at no other time did an urban area's foreign-born population grow from just over 9 percent of the population (as it was in 1960) to the 33 percent share it holds today. This massive upsurge in immigration has reconnected contemporary Los Angeles to its Mexican roots – origins which Anglo Angelenos until now have either ignored or transmuted into a mythical "Spanish" past. But history has returned with a vengeance; late twentieth century Los Angeles is an increasingly Mexican city.

Despite the image of Los Angeles as the nation's most diverse metropolis, the key to understanding immigrant Los Angeles is the border and its proximity to the City of the Angels. In 1990, more than half of its post-1965 adult immigrants came from three countries, Mexico, El Salvador and Guatemala, with Mexico accounting for the great bulk of this group. For many of these newcomers, entry into the United States occurred through the backdoor – which is why Los Angeles accounted for one-third of all the undocumented immigrants counted in the 1980 census and roughly the same proportion of the population who legalized under the 1986 Immigration and Control Act (IRCA).

New York differs sharply from Los Angeles – not only in its immigrant past, but in its immigrant present. New York always retained more of an immigrant presence than America's other big cities, and it was among the first to welcome a sizable non-European population, well before the Hart-Celler Act took effect. But compositional factors slowed the new immigrant impact. Throughout the 1960s, the losses due to deaths and outmigration among the old-time, European population offset the influx of the post-1965 arrivals: by 1970, immigrant New York reached its twentieth century nadir. The immigrant comeback did not show up until the 1980 census: by then, not only were the foreign-born numbers bigger, but their make-up had greatly changed, tilting away from Europe and toward the Third World. By 1990, the new New Yorkers from abroad accounted for 28 percent of the city's population – a substantial proportion, but still less than Los Angeles.

Not only has the immigrant build-up started from a higher level and proceeded more gradually, the composition of the immigrant population varies strikingly as well. The new New Yorkers tend not to come from the same countries as the new Angelenos: some of New York's most important new

immigrant groups – Dominicans, Jamaicans, Haitians, Guyanese – are rarely found in Los Angeles. More important is the fact that New York's new immigrant population is extraordinarily diverse. Dominicans comprised the single largest group of post-1965 arrivals counted in the 1990 census – and they accounted for just over 12 percent of the new immigrant arrivals. Chinese were the next largest, with just over 9 percent, followed by Jamaicans, with barely 6 percent; no other foreign country accounts for more than 5 percent of the new immigrant arrivals.

Of course, geography counts for New York as well as for Los Angeles: the Caribbean acts as New York's most important source area. But the Caribbean is itself extraordinarily variegated culturally, linguistically, and ethnically. New York's three most important Caribbean source countries, the Dominican Republic, Jamaica and Haiti, each represent distinct cultural systems. Geography has also kept undocumented migration relatively contained. The 1980 census found that New York was home to just over 10 percent of the undocumented population; just over 5 percent of the legalizes lived in New York, and about 40 percent of New York's legalizes had overstayed nonimmigrant visas, as opposed to 11 percent in Los Angeles.

I find an ironic conclusion in this contrast in immigrant characteristics. If we consider that diversity in national origins and socioeconomic background is the defining trait of the new immigration, then it is New York and not Los Angeles that presents the image of the immigrant world to come. Los Angeles has been the recipient of a more massive migration, to be sure; but its most numerous newcomers represent a relatively unselective group, one that is predominately proletarian, as were the immigrants of the past. The dominance of a trio of source countries is likewise a throwback to an earlier pattern, with common origins yielding common trajectories of incorporation. By contrast, New York has captured a more selective population. The new New Yorkers are more differentiated from the start, and those initial differences carry over into divergent paths into the economy.

THE LABOR MARKET

In concentrating on the characteristics of the immigrants, perhaps I have fallen into bad habits, talking about the newcomers without paying attention to the particularities of the places where they live. Focusing on those particularities alters the immigration story; rather than describing a world that the immigrants have made, emphasizing the importance of social networks, communities and ethnic economies, I will tell a story of a world that makes the immigrants, instead. By world, of course, I mean the institutions of economic and political life that the immigrants find in place when they arrive. It will surprise no one if I note that the institutional framework of economic and

political life in New York bears little resemblance to what we find in Los Angeles. But it is a measure of our inattention to the specificities of the urban immigrant context that the institutional influence on immigrant outcomes has yet to be seriously thought out.

That institutional influence emerges most clearly when we look at the immigrants' economic life. The classic immigrant industries seem to be made out of the same cloth – no pun intended – whether located on west or east coast. Of the industries employing at least 1,000 immigrants and ranking highest in terms of immigrant representation, seven fall among the top ten in both New York and Los Angeles. Among the top-ranking industries will not be found banking, insurance or business services, notwithstanding the mantra about immigration and globalization. Instead, it is the traditional immigrant industries that comprise the leading immigrant employers of today: restaurants (number one in both cities), apparel (number two in both cities), private household (number three in both cities), a variety of personal service and manufacturing industries, with services to buildings, laundries, hotels, and auto repair among the top ten in both places.

So the bicoastal comparison finds that the quintessential immigrant pursuits are pretty much the same wherever the newcomers are. But that's as far as the similarity goes. Because immigrants in New York and Los Angeles fare quite differently doing roughly the same thing.

Take the case of the clothing industry – the classic immigrant industry if ever there was one. Immigrants in New York's garment industry move into an environment where the influence of a union is still strongly felt. Most of the 20,000 or so Chinese garment workers, mainly employed in Chinese-owned factories, are members of the ILGWU. Dominicans, who figure prominently among New York's clothing workers, also boast a high level of union membership. Consequently, the wages of New York apparel workers, though deplorably low, remain the highest in the country among clothing workers. Unionized workers receive a panoply of benefits, some through contractual provisions with employers, such as healthcare, others such as child daycare or educational services, provided as a result of union action. Moreover, New York State, prodded by the needle trades unions, has become newly vigilant about labor standards laws. The New York State Department of Labor maintains an apparel industry unit that is in the business of enforcing minimum wages, child labor and homework prohibitions, and putting out of business those employers who chronically break the law. Though the industry is perpetually on the verge of returning to its evil ways of old, the pressure from the apparel unions and state regulators led to increases in real earnings during the 1980s – immigrant influx and global, competitive pressures notwithstanding.

While Los Angeles' newcomers certainly did not know it when they arrived, they entered an open-shop town, home to the type of savage capitalism that

flourished in the 1980s. To be sure, the ILGWU maintains an office in Los Angeles, but its membership rolls in the garment industry are virtually bare. The regulatory apparatus that has been revived in New York has fallen on hard times in California, thanks to more than a decade of Republican rule in Sacramento. Consequently, labor standards violators in the Los Angeles apparel industry thrive in impunity. In an industry where a nickel a collar can determine profit or loss, the persistence of New York's welfare capitalism, however tattered and torn, makes a big difference on the factory floor. In 1979, immigrant Hispanics in New York's garment industry had a \$1,300 edge over their Los Angeles counterparts in constant dollar terms; by 1989, when real wages for apparel workers had increased in both cities, the New Yorker's advantage now reached the \$2,600 mark (Table 1).

Lest I be accused of seeing the world through the needle's eye – a sin to which I earlier pled guilty – let's turn our attention to an immigrant industry linked to the service economy of the present – hotels. The hotel industry is even a better comparison than the garment industry – the same national chains predominate on both coasts; in both locations, the industry experienced a growth craze during the 1980s, the baneful effects of which it is still feeling. As an integral component of the tourist and business service complexes, the hotel story should show the effects of economic restructuring – which, as some would have it, shows no respect for the particularities of any town.

If the jobs of hotel service are the same wherever you go – cleaning rooms, making meals, checking in guests – neither the structure of hotel employment nor its rewards stack up alike on west and east coasts (Table 2). Hotel workers know that New York remains a union town, notwithstanding employers' attempts to make it otherwise. Through the 1980s, the hotel union secured wage increases sufficient to maintain the industry's position in the city's relative wage hierarchy. Within the industry, the wages of the least skilled workers, dishwashers, went up relative to the earnings of the most skilled. Movement among jobs occurs largely, though not exclusively, through institutions that the union either influences or controls. Job-changers find new positions through the union hiring hall; applicants for the very best jobs – such as banquet waiting, the wages for which can often put a professor's salary to shame – move up the pecking order according to a mechanism established through collective bargaining.

The Los Angeles hotel industry presents a somewhat better picture than garments. At least some of the hotels are unionized – though virtually every one of the properties opened since 1980 is union-free. Hotels generally hew to the letter, if not the spirit, of the labor standards codes – a mark of great superiority compared to the “rag trade.” Most hotels have an established personnel function, which insures some degree of routinized supervision, an apparel worker's dream.

The institutional differences between the two towns have a dollar and cents meaning in this industry as well. In 1979, New York's Hispanic immigrant hotel

TABLE 1
APPAREL WAGES, HISPANIC IMMIGRANTS, LOS ANGELES AND NEW YORK (DOLLARS)

	Nominal Wages		Real Wages ^a	
	1979	1989	1979	1989
Los Angeles	5,441	9,337	9,304	9,337
New York	6,195	11,932	10,594	11,932

Source: 1980, 1990 Census of Population, Public Use Microdata Samples.

^aReal earnings in 1989 dollars.

TABLE 2
HOTEL WAGES, HISPANIC IMMIGRANTS, LOS ANGELES AND NEW YORK (DOLLARS)

	Nominal Wages		Real Wages ^a	
	1979	1989	1979	1989
Los Angeles	6,167	11,064	10,546	11,064
New York	9,811	17,960	16,777	17,960

Source: 1980, 1990 Census of Population, Public Use Microdata Samples.

^aReal earnings in 1989 dollars.

workers had a \$6,200 earnings advantage over their Los Angeles counterparts; a decade later, the New York edge grew to \$6,900, once again in constant dollar terms.

While this article is not the right forum for an industry-by-industry analysis, let me just note that immigrant New Yorkers have an earnings advantage in six of the seven industries that rank as the top immigrant employers in both towns. Serial examination would reveal the impact of the same institutional features noted above – the building-service industry being a perfect case point, with New York heavily unionized and Los Angeles the site of the valiant, but so far unsuccessful “Justice for Janitors” campaign. There are other industries with high, if not highest-ranking levels of immigrant penetration where the New York advantage shows up yet again. I simply refer the reader to the hospital case, the single largest concentration of West Indian employment in New York, as a prime instance of place-specific institutional frameworks affecting immigrant outcomes.

POLITICS

Economic adaptation has loomed large in the preoccupations of the new immigration research – what more could one expect from a field that grew up during the Reagan years? But immigrant adaptation occurs within an ambit that extends beyond the workplace to include the polity. Since political differences among cities are perhaps even more marked than are economic divergences, it is here where we can best grasp the impact of place-specific institutional characteristics.

Now, as in the past, New York’s political system works in a way that hastens the integration of immigrants. In New York, politics has been a vehicle for the

expression of ethnic interests and a means for the organization of ethnic conflict ever since the mass arrival of the Irish in the nineteenth century. The pattern of ethnic group incorporation is linked to basic patterns of political conflict, in which the succession of one migrant wave after another has ensured a continuing competitive conflict over political influence. Members of ethnic groups that have gained privileged access to political resources, that is to say municipal jobs or services, have tended to exclude outsiders who have then sought to achieve inclusion through political mobilization along ethnic lines. Thus New York presents newcomer groups with a segmented political system, organized for mobilization along ethnic group lines, and a political culture that sanctions, indeed encourages, newcomers to engage in ethnic politics.

A variety of factors keeps the tradition alive and well. The political game provides a multitude of prizes, sufficiently bounteous to attract many competitors, yet still within reach of newly arrived groups. New York can still boast a political machine, perhaps enfeebled and a small cat in comparison to Tammany's tiger, but one that gets out the vote and provides material inducements for political participation – in neighborhoods of varying ethnic stripes. The same can be said for New York's four parties, with a new twist to ethnic balancing to be found in the Republican mayoral ticket of 1993, comprised of Italian Rudy Giuliani, Jewish Susan Alter, and Puerto Rican Herman Badillo. Population diversity matters as well: as in the past, New York's population is sufficiently fractured ethnically so that no single ethnic group dominates the electorate. Diversity puts a premium on building and maintaining ethnic coalitions, a risky business at best, since competitors, intra- or interparty, can up the ante and woo disgruntled ethnic groups away.

Former Mayor Koch's dalliance with West Indian leaders is one example of New York's ethnically segmented political system and its consequence for immigrant incorporation. In the end, Koch never gained the allegiance of the city's Caribbean voters, but that failure is no reflection of his inattentiveness to Caribbean political concerns. And the West Indian story – which has now produced two Caribbean representatives on the New York City Council and two in the New York State Assembly – shows that the political system not only gives outsiders and insiders an incentive to play the ethnic card, but makes it a card that produces results. Still a better case is the recent jockeying over the Dominican vote. Dominicans gained their first city council representative in 1991 – not a bad record if one considers that Los Angeles' much larger Mexican population lacked a representative on the city council between 1962 and 1985. Extending the Italy, Ireland, Israel tradition of earlier New York mayors, former Mayor David Dinkins visited the Dominican Republic as part of the windup to his unsuccessful 1993 campaign. Republican Mayor Rudy Giuliani, aware that the white population was too shrunken in size to give him a lock on the mayoralty, avidly courted Hispanic voters, not just the Puerto Ricans to whom

Badillo might appeal, but Dominicans as well. And let's not count out the Asians. Chinese and Korean candidates made strong if unsuccessful runs for several city council districts in 1991. The Korean churches were also players in the most recent school board elections, joining the backlash against then-Schools Chancellor Fernandez's Rainbow Curriculum.

The features that provide incentives for immigrant incorporation into New York's political system simply are not to be found in Los Angeles. The villain is history, or rather California's Progressive past: the Progressives eliminated parties at local levels, limited the number of political seats, and gave the civil service extraordinary autonomy.

Thus, the structure of politics differs radically between the two cities: New York simply has many more prizes, and they tend to be far more readily in reach. New York's City Council has 51 members, in contrast to Los Angeles' 12; New York contains 59 State Assembly seats in contrast to Los Angeles county's 36, 24 State Senate seats as opposed to Los Angeles county's 10, 31 community school districts each with multiple members, as opposed to the Los Angeles school council of 7. Whereas New York has neighborhood planning councils and area policy boards whose elections are open to noncitizens, nothing in New York compares to that oligarchy of five known as the Los Angeles County Board of Supervisors, whose huge districts ensure virtual perpetuity in office once elected.

The structure of Los Angeles politics makes it more difficult for newcomers to get involved. The absence of political parties and the institution of nonpartisan elections does not help. To be sure, there is now a reasonably sized Mexican-American presence on the Los Angeles City Council, but this development required a far larger population threshold than has been the case for newcomer groups in New York. All of the Mexican-American politicians elected in recent years have been strongly dependent on financial and logistic aid from white liberals and statewide black political leaders like Willie Brown – quite a difference from New York's immigrant politicians who field their own organizations and are relatively autonomous from external political elites.

Whereas New York's ethnic demography leads to electoral competition, Los Angeles' ethnic demography has the opposite result. Heavy immigrant densities make the Mexican-American districts into rotten boroughs, where only a small proportion of the adult population votes, a situation that does little to encourage electoral competition or mobilization. Thus, in the recent mayoral election, the most densely Mexican council district turned out one-fifth as many voters as did the heavily white districts in the San Fernando Valley or the west side. In New York's last mayoral election, by contrast, the turnout in substantially immigrant Crown Heights was more than two-thirds the turnout on the affluent, largely white upper eastside.

CONCLUSION

Thus, bringing the “urban” back into immigration research sheds new light on the issues that we confront. That context matters is now a familiar theme in many fields of social research. But today’s immigrants continue to converge on a handful of places; hence context is bound up with the particularities of the economic and political structures in the principal immigrant-receiving areas.

From this perspective, the characteristics of immigrant destinations carry weight. And here history comes into play. Los Angeles, the fragmented metropolis, offers little in the way of institutional arrangements that foster the integration of its massive population of newly arrived immigrants. The New York story is different, in large measure because earlier waves of immigrants created institutions that persist to this day and because those institutions had an abiding effect on the character of New York’s social and political life.

In the end, the crucial question concerns the immigrant future – will it follow a New York or a Los Angeles path? While New York has a more up-to-date look in its immigrant mix, its institutional arrangements hark back to a past that grows ever dimmer. The urban world of tomorrow, I suspect, looks a good deal like Los Angeles. And that possibility should give us second thoughts about immigrants’ prospects in the years to come.