Black Identities

West Indian Immigrant Dreams and American Realities

A key proposition of the new models of immigrant incorporation studies how the social capital immigrants bring with them, and the racial and ethnic definitions of nonwhite immigrants as minorities, combine to create a situation where becoming American in terms of culture and identity and achieving economic success are decoupled. Some immigrants and their children do better economically by maintaining a strong ethnic identity and culture and by resisting American cultural and identity influences. In fact, many authors now suggest that remaining immigrant or ethnic-identified eases economic and social incorporation into the United States. These new assumptions turn models of identity change on their head—now those who resist becoming American do well and those who lose their immigrant ethnic distinctiveness become downwardly mobile. West Indians, it turns out, fit this model very well because

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when West Indians lose their distinctiveness as immigrants or ethnics they become not just Americans, but black Americans. Given the ongoing prejudice and discrimination in American society, this represents downward mobility for the immigrants and their children. . . .

The main argument of this chapter is that black immigrants from the Caribbean come to the United States with a particular identity/culture/worldview that reflects their unique history and experiences. This culture and identity are different from the immigrant identity and culture of previous waves of European immigrants because of the unique history of the origin countries and because of the changed contexts of reception the immigrants face in the United States. This culture and identity are also different from the culture and identity of African Americans.

At first, two main aspects of the culture of West Indians help them to be successful in America. First, because they are immigrants they have a different attitude toward employment, work, and American society than native-born Americans. Employers value this highly. Their background characteristics, including human capital and social network ties, ease their entry into the U.S. labor force. Middle-class immigrants come with qualifications and training that are needed in the U.S. economy (nurses, for example). Because English is their native language, they are able to transfer their foreign qualifications (teaching credentials, nursing degrees) into American credentials. In addition, working-class immigrants have extensive networks of contacts that facilitate their entry into low-level jobs.

Second, the immigrants' unique understanding and expectations of race relations allow them to interact with American racial structures in a successful way. Specifically, their low anticipation of sour race relations allows them to have better interpersonal interactions with white Americans than many native African Americans. Because they come from a society with a majority of blacks and with many blacks in high positions, the immigrants have high ambitions and expectations. Yet their experience with blocked economic mobility due to race and their strong racial identities lead them to challenge blocked mobility in a very militant fashion when they encounter it. This combination of high ambitions, friendly relations with whites on an interpersonal level, and strong militance in encountering any perceived discrimination leads to some better outcomes in the labor market for West Indians than for black Americans.

Ultimately, however, the structural realities of American race relations begin to swamp the culture of the West Indians. Persistent and obvious racial discrimination undermines the openness toward whites the immigrants have when they first arrive. Low wages and poor working conditions are no longer attractive to the children of the immigrants, who use American, not Caribbean, yardsticks to measure how good a job is. Racial discrimination in housing channels the immigrants into neighborhoods with inadequate city services and high crime rates. Inadequate public schools undermine their hopes for their children's future. Over time the distinct elements of West Indian culture the immigrants are most proud of—a willingness to work hard, a lack of attention to racialism, a high value on education, and strong interests in saving for the future—are undermined by the realities of life in the United States.

These changes are particularly concentrated among the working-class and poor immigrants. Middle-class immigrants are able to pass along aspects of their culture and worldview to their children, but the majority of the working-class immigrants are not. Race as a master status in the United States soon overwhelms the identities of the immi-

grants and their children, and they are seen as black Americans. Many of the children of the immigrants develop "oppositional identities" to deal with that status. These identities stress that doing well in school is "acting white." The cultural behaviors associated with these oppositional identities further erode the life chances of the children of the West Indian immigrants.

While many white conservatives blame the culture of African Americans for their failures in the economy, the experiences of the West Indians show that even "good culture" is no match for racial discrimination. Over the course of one generation the structural realities of American race relations and the American economy undermine the cultures of the West Indian immigrants and create responses among the immigrants, and especially their children, that resemble the cultural responses of African Americans to long histories of exclusion and discrimination. . . .

The key factor brought to fresh light by the West Indian immigrants' experiences is the role of continuing racial inequality—the institutional failures in our inner cities to provide jobs, education, and public safety—in sustaining a cultural response of disinvestment in the face of discrimination rather than increased striving. A lifetime of interpersonal attacks based on race can lead to bitterness and anger on the part of an individual. A community of people coping with economic marginality and a lack of any avenues of institutional support for individual mobility leads to a culture of opposition. That culture might serve individuals well for those times when it protects them from the sting of racism and discrimination, but ultimately as a long-term political response to discrimination and exclusion it serves to prevent people from taking advantage of the new opportunities that do arise. Those opportunities are reserved by whites in power for immigrants who make them feel less uncomfortable about relations between the races and especially about taking orders from white supervisors or customers.

One of the African-American teachers [interviewed in this study] eloquently describes how even one act of cruelty or disdain by a white person can have long-standing effects on a young black person and on the whole cycle of black-white race relations:

> I have had this happen to me so let me relate this incident. I have been going or coming from a building and held the door for some old white person and had them walk right past me, as if I am supposed to hold the door for them. Not one word, a thank-you, or an acknowledgment of your presence was made. A seventeen-year-old, when he has something like that happen to him, the next time he is going to slam that door in the old lady's face, because I had that tendency myself. I had the hostility build up in me. The next time it happens I won't do that because I am older, but when I was seventeen it might not have made any difference to me that this was a different old lady. I would have flashed back to that previous incident and said I am not holding that door for you. Now that old lady who may have been a perfectly fine individual, who got this door slammed in her face by this young black person, her attitude is "boy, all those people are really vicious people." Her not understanding how it all came to pass. That on a large scale is what is happening in our country today. That's why our young people are very aggressive and very, very hostile when they are put in a situation of black-white confrontation. They say to themselves, "I am not going to let you treat me the way you treated my grandparents, or the way I have read or seen in books or movies that they were treated." I would rather for you to hate me than to disrespect me, is the attitude I think is coming out from our black youth today. (Black American male teacher, age 41)

The policy implications of this study lie in the ways in which the economic and cultural disinvestment in American cities erodes the social capital of immigrant families. The families need recognition of their inherent strengths and the supports necessary to maintain their ambitions. The erosion of the optimism and ambition of the first generation that I saw in their children could be stopped if job opportunities were more plentiful, inner-city schools were nurturing and safe environments that provided good educations, and neighborhoods were safer. Decent jobs, effective schools, and safe streets are not immigrant- or race-based policies. They are universal policies that would benefit all urban residents. Indeed, the strengths these immigrant families have may be in part due to their immigrant status, but the problems they face are much more likely to be due to their class status and their urban residence. Policies that benefit immigrants would equally benefit Americans.

But, in addition, the experience of these immigrants tells us that we must recognize the continuing significance of interpersonal racism in creating psychological tensions and cultural adaptations in the black community. The cycle of attack and disrespect from whites, anger and withdrawal from blacks, and disengagement and blaming behaviors by whites must be broken by changing whites' behaviors. This involves policies that specifically address racial discrimination. The immigrants' tales of blatant housing and job discrimination directly point to needed vigilance in protecting all blacks in the United States from unequal treatment in the private sector. The more difficult problem is dealing with the everyday subtle forms of prejudice and discrimination that also plague foreign-born and American-born blacks. We cannot pass laws forbidding white women from clutching their handbags when black teenagers walk past them. We cannot require old white women to thank young black men who show them courteous behavior. Those kinds of behaviors can only change when whites no longer automatically fear blacks and when whites begin to perceive the humanity and diversity of the black people they encounter.