

## INTRODUCTION

---

A walk through the streets of New York City becomes truly a tour of the earth. From Chinese to Russians and from Italians to Mexicans, different people from all over the world seem to have found a place where they can enjoy the benefits of living in the richest country on earth and at the same time to speak their language and keep their culture. But for most immigrants, things are not as easy as they seem. Although New York City is indeed a multicultural mosaic, the immigrant's experience there is still one of struggle to survive. Like others before them, the recent immigrants are helped by civil organizations that assist them to live in their new country.

For recent Mexican immigrants, one of the most effective such organizations is Tepeyac Association. This association has arisen at a crucial time in American history. In the academic and political realms, there is an ongoing debate regarding the meaning of the new wave of immigrants to the United States. The course that America will take as a nation is being questioned. In the past, immigrants arrived to be assimilated into the culture, not to be taught in their native language in public schools or to be granted any privileges because they belonged to a minority group.

The old idea of the "new man" that the immigrant once became in America, explained better than anyone by Hector St. John de Crevecoeur in *Letters of an American Farmer*, seems to be forgotten. Getting rid of the old and acquiring the new, the old ideal

of assimilation, seems to have been replaced by the ideal of integration into American society. Moreover, as we will see throughout this thesis, it could be said that Mexican immigrants are challenging this old ideal of becoming a “new man” and being part of the “melting pot.” Instead, they want only to integrate into the political, legal, and economic aspects of American life, and enjoy the benefits of doing so. More than many immigrants before them, Mexican immigrants want to keep their own language, be faithful to Mexican traditions and abide by the Catholic religion, which is professed by over 90% of the Mexican population. On the other hand, cultural assimilation, that is, a complete immersion in the language and customs of their host society, seems to be off limits.

Furthermore, the ideal of assimilation is not the only factor changing in American immigration. The face of immigration is changing as well, and in the last 20 years it has become yellow and brown (Schmitt, 2001). At the beginning of the 20th century, Europeans represented the largest block of immigrants to the United States. A century later, Asians and Latinos have replaced them (Rumbaut & Portes, 2001). Of these two, according to the 2000 census figures, Latinos are the most numerous, and within Latinos, Mexicans now represent the new largest block. Because of this, Mexicans represent the greatest threat to those who cherish assimilation in its old form. They are “invading” the country, arriving in the United States by the thousands every year and holding one of the highest birth rates of any group. To make matters worse, they are also considered by many the group least willing to assimilate. Many of them refuse to learn English and refuse to become American citizens even when it is legally possible (Barone & Fonte, 2002). Mexicans in New York City are not different from their compatriots throughout the country.

Throughout this thesis I will analyze the assimilation process of Mexican immigrants to life in New York City. The hypothesis that I will attempt to prove is that Mexican immigrants' ideal relation to American society, as compared to that of earlier immigrants, has shifted from assimilation to integration. This trend is made evident by an examination of the most important and active non-profit organization for Mexican immigrants in New York City, the Tepeyac Association. This thesis will analyze the most common assimilation theories and how they apply to the Mexican immigrants in New York City, using Tepeyac Association as an example, since it has mobilized a large number of Mexicans there better than any other organization.

The significance of this theme for the future of the United States is profound. The Latino community is on the rise in that country. In fact, it had been estimated that by the year 2005 their number would match that of Blacks. That event occurred earlier than predicted: by the year 2000, Latinos pulled even with Blacks, according to the United States 2000 census. Of these, the majority are Mexicans and many of them immigrants. Furthermore, because of the wave of such immigrants, cities experienced their biggest growth since 1990. That growth certainly affected New York City, where nearly 40% of the population claims to have been born abroad (Lambert, 2000).

Even though American society has never been homogeneous, there has always been a consensus in regards to the "new-self" that immigrants should adopt as soon as they became part of American society: they were going to become "Americans" and be part of the "melting pot" or "E Pluribus Unum" ("one out of many") (Schlesinger, 1991). But this ideal has been challenged more and more by Latino immigrants and of these, perhaps most strongly by Mexican immigrants. A study of the assimilation or

incorporation process of recent Mexican immigrants thus becomes very important. Furthermore, a study of such immigrants in a city like New York is even more crucial, as this is not only the largest city, but also the cultural capital of the United States. Thus, what happens there in terms of social and political trends could set an example for other cities and for American communities in general.

I have divided my thesis into four chapters. In Chapter One I present a historical background as well as the theoretical framework, that is, an account of the problems to be analyzed and an explanation of my own approach to these problems, together with a preview of my conclusions. Chapter Two examines the composition of today's Mexican immigrants in the United States. It also analyzes in depth the situation of Mexican immigrants regarding the three aspects of assimilation that are most cited by scholars, politicians and organizations dealing with immigrant's issues, which are cultural, political and economic. Moreover, I also discuss the current debate regarding the assimilation of Mexican immigrants in the United States. This discussion is important, since all those aspects changed after the civil rights movement (which supposedly gave way to the "minority groups' revolution") and the change of the racial composition of immigrants in America.

Chapter Three discusses the current situation of Mexican immigrants in New York City in terms of the three aspects of assimilation already presented. In Chapter Four I present the case of Tepeyac Association of New York City, considering whether it promotes assimilation or mere integration of Mexican immigrants in New York City, analyzing its impact on the cultural, economic, and political assimilation of Mexican immigrants in the city. Finally, in the conclusion I present my own suggestions regarding

specific actions that could be taken to ease the assimilation process of Mexican immigrants in New York City. I also attempt to answer the following question: Will Mexican immigrants in New York City provide a model for the assimilation process of other Mexican immigrants in the United States? Will they, indeed, change the face of America?

### *I. Research Approach*

*Secondary research:* A range of secondary sources were used to provide the theoretical framework and a portion of the thesis' data, sources such as books, journal articles, magazines, and newspaper articles. Of these, I used reliable publications such as *International Migration Review*, *Migration World*, social science journals that deal with immigration issues, and periodicals such as *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post*. I also used Internet sources such as World Wide Web pages and on-line journals and articles.

*Primary Research:* To present a case study of Tepeyac Association, I spent six weeks working as a volunteer for this organization in the summer of 2001, as the assistant to Esperanza Chacón, who is in charge of the Urgent Cases section. Hence, my primary research has included my observations of the day-to-day work in the Association, interviews of its different members and leaders, as well as pamphlets, publications, and official papers produced by the Association. Another element of primary research has been my own assessment of Mexican immigrants in New York City, as I had the opportunity to observe them during my time there.

## *II. Research Goals.*

*General Goal:* My general goal has been to find out how Mexican immigrants in New York City are assimilating to life there. The conclusion I will present is that Mexican immigrants in New York City are not even concerned about whether or not they assimilate to American society. Their main concerns are to survive within that society and to preserve their Mexican traditions and culture.

*Specific Goals:* The following are the specific goals that I propose for this investigation:

- to prove or disprove whether Mexican immigrants in New York City are replacing the ideal of assimilation with that of integration as their preferred mode of incorporating into the cultural, economic, and political life in that city; and
- to formulate, based on my research findings, a tentative assessment of how the case of Tepeyac Association and the Mexican immigrants in New York City can be taken as a model for what could happen regarding the assimilation process of such immigrants in the rest of the United States.

Throughout this thesis we will see how assimilation is not only an ideal, or a sociological theory; it is also a matter of debate among American scholars and politicians. Some still defend the old ideal of assimilation while others advocate for a pluralistic ideology. Still others are more concerned with the socioeconomic attainment of Mexican immigrants and how the future looks for their children. No matter what side of the debate one takes, what is certain is that Mexican immigrants need a certain degree of acculturation, and not exactly to the part of society they seem to be acculturating into: the underclass. Rather, they need to acculturate to the successful part of American society.

To achieve this, immigrants need to work hard to improve their human capital, and learning English is the first essential. In addition, their children need to go further than that and obtain a college education. America is not what it used to be 100 years ago, and Mexican immigrants and their children need to adjust to the new realities of their receiving country.