

CHAPTER ONE

Mexican Immigrants in New York City: From Assimilation to Integration?

Teresa García Romero is a Mexican immigrant in New York City. She attended the City University of New York (CUNY), and after getting trained at the World Marketing Alliance Company, she became a professional stockbroker. She is currently working as the Finances Chief at Tepeyac Association. Teresa's position at Tepeyac is a rewarding one. Besides handling the financial matters, she also handles the public relations duties. She lives in Queens, New York in a comfortable apartment, and she enjoys going shopping.

Thus, it could be said that Teresa has reached the American dream, having a professional job and enjoying the comforts of a middle class lifestyle, but Teresa's life was not always this good. She arrived in New York City in 1995, and for a while, she had to sleep on the floor, with six other people in the same room. She managed to get a job at a Korean-owned supermarket, where she worked for up to twelve hours a day, making \$400 a week. She bought a pick-up truck for her mother who was back in Mexico, and decided that from then on, all the money she made would be for college. She started working part-time, so she could go to school to learn English and get her General Education Diploma (GED), so she could attend a university. At this points, she heard many negative comments from people stating that it was not possible for an

undocumented immigrant to attend college in New York City. She proved all of those people wrong, and after showing that she had lived in the city for over six months, she was able to register. Now, she likes to share her story with all the immigrants who want to improve their lives and who may hear, as she once did, that the fact that they are undocumented means that they cannot get a college education in the city.

Tepeyac Association is extremely proud of Teresa. In fact, at the time I volunteered there she was on the verge, sponsored by the Association, to become documented. Tepeyac would also like to see all Mexican immigrants to follow the same path, a path some may call “assimilation” and that Tepeyac and Teresa prefer to call only “integration.” Regardless of what such a path is called, Tepeyac hopes that Teresa’s success story serves as an inspiration for Mexican immigrants (especially the undocumented ones) to work hard and experience upward mobility. But, unfortunately, Teresa is still the exception rather than the rule. Most Mexican immigrants are more concerned with daily survival and with sending money to their home communities, than with attending school. Moreover, the older ones may feel too old to pursue a college education, and the younger ones may not realize how important it is to get a college education, and how with hard work and sacrifices, Teresa’s story could become their own.

1.1 Historical Background

The assimilation of immigrants to life in America is by no means a new phenomenon. Some authorities suggest that America became officially “dominated” by the English Anglo-Saxon stock of immigrants after the French and Indian War in 1763, establishing the basis of what the nation would become. Prior to that war, the people of the different colonies coexisted in a state of mutual distrust, without thinking they had too much in

common. The war served to show them that they were able to unite for a common cause, thus establishing the precedents for a common identity (Unger, 1992). English would become, if not officially by law, the language that was “official-by-use” across the colonies. The “protestant work ethic” would be the ideal for many immigrants arriving to America. The region of New England, where English Puritans had founded the first universities in this country, would become the cultural and academic “Mecca” of the 13 colonies. In contrast to Canada, where the French-speaking immigrants in the Quebec area were allowed to stay and to keep their language and preserve their culture, in the United States immigrants were expected to assimilate to the language and culture of Anglo-Saxon dominant group.

In regard to social equality, America was then a far cry from what it is now. Even though a few years after the French and Indian War the country would gain its independence from England and establish in its Declaration of Independence “... that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness...” the United States was a country where slavery was lawfully allowed. Even after slavery was finally abolished after the Civil War in 1865, it would take about 100 years more for Blacks to gain true equality as American citizens, with the passage of the Civil Rights Acts of 1964.

African Americans were, in fact, the first minority group to unite and stand against the dominant group by demanding to be part of the “American Dream.” In fact, their main leader, Martin Luther King, was not an anarchist who did not believe in the American institutional system. He believed in the claims of the Constitution. His complaint was the same that others had uttered before him regarding the American creed

of “life, liberty and the pursue of happiness”: that it had not being applied to every citizen in America (Carlson & King, 2000).

African Americans started what in the years to come would be a “minority groups explosion.” Another group that had suffered discrimination and prejudice for many years would follow them in the fight and start what later would threaten to be an extremely militant movement: Mexican Americans. They united and joined Blacks in their cry for equality and justice. Some Mexican Americans did become very militant, adopting the word “Chicano,” which had been a pejorative term, to show pride and a new identity, and claiming that the new “Republic of Aztlan” (supposedly the original place the Aztecs had come from) had to be formed by them in the United States (Portes & Rumbaut, 1996; Gutierrez, 1997). But just as in Martin Luther King’s movement, in the end those who were extremist did not prevail and the Chicano movement evolved into a lawful, peaceful group of advocate organizations and interest groups endeavoring to promote the Latino cause (Portes & Rumbaut, 1996; Gutierrez, 1997). In the end, both groups would see their demands being legalized and institutionalized by the Civil Rights Acts of 1964, affirmative action programs, and the Bilingual Education Act of 1968.

These pieces of legislation were the intended solution to the “American Dilemma,” that is, the great discrepancy between the American ideals and the actual situation of some ethnic groups in the country. In this regard, it could be argued that the “minority groups revolution,” as the aftermath of the civil rights movement has been called, was not a “creation” of people who wanted special privileges, as some had argued, but rather a response to many years of discrimination and injustice suffered by these groups (Portes & Rumbaut, 1996).

Furthermore, according to sociologist Alejandro Portes, the transition from “immigrants” to “ethnic” is not a smooth or natural one. According to Portes, when immigrants arrive to the United States they are so overwhelmed by the demands of daily survival in a foreign country that they do not really demand their rights as an ethnic group. The transition to such demands is rather a response of the second generation to the discrimination and fear suffered by their parents (Portes & Rumbaut, 1996). Thus, during the civil rights movement, ethnic groups not only took shape and demanded privileges, but they develop a strong opposition to the ideology of “Americanization”. The ideology of “pluralism” started to become popular, developing into what is now termed “multiculturalism” (Glazer, 1997).

But just as the assimilation of immigrants to life in America is not a new phenomenon, neither was the minority group experience during the time of the civil rights movement. “The United States has never been a monoethnic nation,” states Michael Barone in his book *The New Americans*. According to Barone and other authors, the United States is truly a country of immigrants, where in the early 1900’s one could hear more than 100 languages in New York City. Moreover, ethnic enclaves, where different ethnic groups developed subcultures and seldom ventured outside their own group to get married or look for a job, were commonplace in America in the early 20th century, just as they are now (Gordon, 1964).

How does America differ from its social state of a century ago? There are two factors that are very different now: First, the racial composition of those ethnic enclaves, which was mostly European at the beginning of the 20th century, is now mostly Latino, Asian and Caribbean (Barone, 2001; Portes & Rumbaut, 1996). Second, the society has been somewhat restructured by post-civil rights movement legislation granting special rights to

minority groups (Barone & Fonte, 2001). Thus, it could be argued that America in the 21st century is finally living up to the ideal of equality for all men outlined in its Declaration of Independence. The issue, however, is by no means settled and debate proceeds apace. On the one hand, some decry the limitations and question the effectiveness of the existing legislation; and on the other hand, others argue that such legislation has gone too far, hindering assimilation, and by consequence, upward mobility, thus hurting the very groups that it was supposed to benefit.

In regards to Mexican immigrants, they too have suffered their share of discrimination in the United States. In fact, it could be argued that the radical Chicano movements of the 1960's were a direct response to the discrimination, particularly in the South, that many Mexicans suffered along with Blacks. Those years of discrimination definitely hindered the economic, political, and social assimilation of Mexicans to American society, since assimilation involves a two-way effort, by both the incoming and the receiving communities.

The current era in which Mexican immigrants and their children are living in United States can be seen as both favorable and detrimental. On the one hand, enjoying the benefits of affirmative action, bilingual education, and double nationality programs may be helping Mexican immigrants and their children to have a smoother assimilation process to American society than that of immigrants and their children 100 years ago. On the other hand, if what those who are against those programs and legislation say is true and bilingual education, for example, hinders a better performance of immigrant children in school, Mexican immigrant children may somehow be proving them right. Along with the other Latino children in New York City, Mexican immigrant children have the lowest

performance in mathematics and English classes which ultimately may hinder their social mobility (Hartocolis, 2002).

It is worthy of mention that although bilingual education is not the only factor suspected to be responsible for such low scores, the situation itself (low scores of Mexican immigrant children in mathematics and English), not only in New York City but also across the United States, is often cited by those who oppose bilingual education and call for a return to “assimilationist public policies”, such as to teach classes “only in the English language” (Chavez, 1991; Barone, 2001).

1.2 Theoretical Framework

The controversy between the ideals of integration and assimilation is basically a debate of the post-civil rights movement era. Before this time, it could be said that immigrants had no choice but to assimilate to the American system, since there were no minorities’ privileges such as affirmative action or bilingual education programs for children. Furthermore, it could be said that the debate has been greatly fostered by Latino immigrants and especially by Mexican immigrants. In this sense, the very meaning of the word “assimilation” has changed, and it is used by different groups to convey different things.

1.2.1 Definition of Terms

*“Assimilation is not today a popular term. Recently I asked a group of Harvard students taking a class on race and ethnicity in the United States what their attitude was to the term “assimilation.” The large majority had a negative reaction to it. Had I asked what they thought of the term ‘Americanization,’ the reaction I am sure would have been even more hostile. The ‘melting pot’ is not longer a uniformly praised metaphor for American society... Indeed, in recent years it has been taken for granted that assimilation –as an expectation of how different ethnic and racial groups would respond to their common presence in one society, or as an ideal of how the society should evolve, or as the expected result of a sober scientific analysis of the ultimate consequences of the meeting of people and races- is to be rejected.” (Nathan Glazer, *Multiculturalist Now*, 1997, p. 96).*

Assimilation is not easy to define. At the beginning of the American nation, it was just an ideology, the wishful idea that those immigrants arriving to the United States would become like the majority: learn the English language, acquire the customs and traditions in their new land, and participate in the civil culture of the emerging nation. One of the earliest and most respected definitions of assimilation was given by sociologist Robert E. Park in the *Encyclopedia of the Social Science*. Park defines assimilation as “the name given to the process or processes by which people of diverse racial origins and different cultural heritages, occupying a common territory, achieve a cultural solidarity sufficient at least to sustain a national existence.” (Gordon, 1964, quoting Parker, 1930, p. 63). It is important to mention that in this definition, Parker does include culture as parts of the assimilation process, because he goes on to say that:

“In the United States an immigrant is ordinarily considered assimilated as soon as he has acquired the language and the social rituals of the native community and can participate, without encountering prejudice, in the common life, economic and political. The common sense view of the matter is that an immigrant is assimilated as soon as he has shown that he can “get on in the country.” This implies among other things that in all the ordinary affairs of life he is able to find a place in the community on the basis of his individual merit without invidious or qualifying reference to his racial origin or to his cultural inheritance.” (Gordon. 1964, quoting Park, 1930, p. 63).

More recently, assimilation is defined by the *Dictionary of American Immigration History* as: “The absorption into a culture and being rendered similar.” (Cardasco, 1990, p. 20). Originally in social science, this was thought as a one-way process by which outsiders, usually immigrants, gave up much of their own culture and took on the characteristics of the dominant culture. Later research, however, suggested a process of reciprocal changes between host and immigrant communities (Cardasco, 1990). Thus, through this more recent definition, the assimilation process can be understood also as a

two-way process, a dual effort by the immigrant population as well as the receiving community. But, Nathan Glazer states in the comment cited above, assimilation is not a popular term, and there are other definitions that even equate it with Americanization, as the following one which appears in the *Dictionary of Multicultural Education*:

“Assimilation: The process of becoming similar. The primary sense of this word has been overlaid in sociology by one of its subsidiary meanings, that which denotes the absorption of nutrients by a living organism –as the body is said to assimilate food. The popularity of the organic analogy in early 20th century sociology increased the tendency to give assimilation this secondary meaning. So did the concern in the United States at that time about the influx of immigrants from Eastern Europe and the Mediterranean countries: These were suspected of being of inferior stock and less easily assimilable than immigrants from Northwestern Europe. Thus under the pressures of the age, assimilation came to be equated with Americanization just as in Britain in the 1960’s it was identified with Anglicization.” (Grant & Ladson-Billing, 1997, letter A section).

Through the previous discussion, one can assume that assimilation is not used anymore as a positive sociological term, or that its ideal is no longer alive or a goal for American society. This is not the case. Assimilation understood as making immigrants and their children a part of the “American Dream” is still a powerful force that immigrants themselves, without really knowing it, desire to achieve. In fact, the term is still used by sociologists and by different publications, but perhaps its definition sometimes really means “integration.” Integration is defined by the *American Heritage Dictionary* as: “To absorb into an existing whole. To end the racial segregation of ethnic groups, give full, equal membership in a group or society. To become racially integrated.” (Costello, 1994). Thus, when comparing the terms, it could be said that assimilation refers more to the concept of cultural heritage and giving up the “old man,” while integration refers to the desire and need of an ethnic group to achieve equal treatment within society while keeping, by implication, modes of its original culture. Nevertheless, assimilation is understood by some as integration, and certain publications

would use these terms synonymously, often implying upward mobility in society by immigrant groups. Publications like *The New York Times* or *The Washington Post* and sociologists like Alejandro Portes and Ruben Rumbaut belong to the first group, and when alluding to the assimilation process of immigrants, they refer mainly to economic upward mobility or how immigrants are changing some communities. These periodicals and scholars do not use the term in the context of attacking affirmative action, bilingual education or double nationality programs --pieces of legislation that are considered by some as a hindrance for assimilation. It is important to mention that I will use the term “assimilation” in this fashion throughout this thesis. Therefore, when I discuss the cultural, economic, and political assimilation of Mexican immigrants, I will be referring to their optimal integration to life in the United States, and more specifically, to the integration of Mexican immigrants in New York City, as this will be my main subject of analysis.

Conversely, it is also relevant to mention that the term “assimilation” is used by conservative organizations, such as the American Enterprise Institute, to defend the concepts of the Americanization movement, which strove to incorporate the immigrants of the great immigration wave of the early 1900’s (Fonte, 1999). Furthermore, other conservative politicians or scholars such as Pat Buchanan, Linda Chavez, or Samuel Huntington refer also to the lack of economic upward mobility when alluding to the assimilation processes of immigrants, but they tend to put the blame on affirmative action programs, bilingual education, or double nationality legislation for the failure of immigrants to successfully assimilate. Thus, some of them go as far as to state that America needs to go “back to the basics” and hold the same federal policies as in the

early 1900's, eliminating bilingual education, affirmative action, and double nationality programs so immigrants may experience quick assimilation.

Along with “assimilation”, another term commonly used to describe the incorporation process of immigrants to a new society is “acculturation.” Acculturation is defined as: “The process whereby individuals adopt traits from another group. Usually the adoption of material traits, language, and secular behavior is undertaken. Certain elements of the minority culture, however, may be maintained and practiced in a subcultural fashion. Later, cultural attitudes, values, and other nonmaterial traits from the dominant culture are acquired” (McKee, 2000, p.10).

Milton Gordon (1964) stated that on some occasions “assimilation” and “acculturation” have been used to convey the same meaning, while on others, usage of the terms overlaps, meaning they differ little in meaning or are used to convey almost the same basic idea. He also stated that during his time, sociologists preferred the term “assimilation,” while anthropologists favored “acculturation” (Gordon, 1964). It is important to mention that acculturation was considered by Gordon himself and it is considered now by some scholars as the first step towards assimilation in a continuum of other factors, and not as synonym of assimilation (Gordon, 1964; Portes & Rumbaut, 2001; LeMay, 2001; see Appendix A). Moreover, in the 21st century, these two terms are still used by some to convey the same meaning, and by others to mean something slightly different. In fact, Sandra Lara, a Mexican-American psychologist and consultant in New York City and who has participated with sociologist Robert Smith in his writings about Mexican immigrants there, states that the term “acculturation” is the most accurate to describe the process of incorporation of Mexicans in New York (S. Lara, personal communication, July 6, 2001). In contrast, Liliana Rivera, a Mexican immigrant and

Ph.D. student in sociology at the New School for Social Research in New York, states that neither assimilation nor acculturation describe the process of incorporation of recent waves of immigrants. According to her, the most common and recent term preferred by scholars is “incorporation” (L. Rivera, personal communication, May 25, 2002). There are in fact, other terms that intend to explain this phenomenon. Robert Smith, Assistant Professor of Sociology at Columbia University and the most prolific writer on Mexican immigrants in New York City, uses the terms “incorporation”, “segmented assimilation,” and “transnational communities”, to explain the incorporation of this population into city life.

1.2.2 A System Model of Assimilation: Assimilation Variables and Paradigms.

In the process of dealing with their new environment, immigrant groups have differed in their approaches. Sociologist Edgar Litt identifies three ways in which immigrants deal with assimilation: accommodation, separatism and radicalism (see Appendix B). He stated that some groups, especially those who emigrate voluntarily, chose to accommodate (assimilate) to their new environment. Other groups totally reject assimilation and pursue a strategy of separatism. Finally, there are some immigrant groups that try to change the majority-value system to accommodate it to their own. Litt places the Chicano movement and their leader Cesar Chavez among the latter (LeMay, 2001, quoting Litt, 1970).

According to Michael LeMay, most immigrant groups pursue one or more of these strategies and exhibit different degrees of assimilation. Furthermore, the incorporation of immigrants to American life has been a concern of scholars and policy makers for many years. Thus, different paradigms of assimilation have arisen. As previously mentioned, Milton Gordon provided a classic one in 1964. In his paradigm,

Gordon identifies a continuum of seven different stages that an immigrant community goes through to fully assimilate (see Appendix A). In the first stage, immigrants begin to acculturate, that is, they acquire new customs from their host society and abandon old ones from their native one. Finally, in the last one, which Gordon called “civic assimilation,” immigrants end up fully participating in the majority’s civic life (LeMay, 2001).

It is important to notice that Milton Gordon established these paradigms of assimilation having in mind mainly the assimilation experience of the mostly European immigrants of the early 1900’s. The great wave of “colored” immigrants began after the changes in immigration legislation in 1965. It could be argued that it was easier for White immigrants to follow Gordon’s continuum of assimilation. For example, as noted in Appendix A, the first stage mentioned by Gordon, cultural integration of immigrants, sometimes involved adopting an anglicized name, something that because of racial features would be difficult to do for today’s most common immigrants, who are mostly Asian, Caribbean, and Latino. Nevertheless, Gordon’s continuum is still very useful and is cited by different scholars when studying the assimilation patterns of different immigrant groups in the United States.

Assimilation, though, is not only a model or a set of paradigms. Certain aspects of assimilation --such as economic assimilation-- are necessary for a successful life in the United States. Likewise, there are different factors that may foster or hinder incorporation. Michael LeMay identifies two major variables that determine the level of assimilation reached by a particular group: (1) Tolerance: the majority group’s desire to accept the integration process of the immigrant group, and (2) Adaptability: the minority group’s ability to incorporate. These two elements are also controlled by other variables.

For instance, *tolerance* is controlled by four variables: the majority's fear function, the size of minority function, the perception function, and the time of entry function. The majority's fear function refers to the degree to which the majority group perceives the immigrant group as a threat. The size of minority function refers to the size of the immigrant group compared to that of the majority group. Perception refers to how the majority group perceives the immigrant group, controlled by such factors as size, visibility of the immigrant group (racial characteristics or place of concentration). All these factors affect how the immigrant group is perceived in terms of size, which becomes critical if the size of the immigrant group is perceived as a threat to wage scales, access to housing, or working conditions. Finally, the time of entry function goes along with the majority's perception of the immigrant group. For example, if many immigrants arrive in the country during a time of economic hardship or social upheaval, the majority will be less likely to accept them if they enter the country during a time of economic prosperity and social stability.

Adaptability is controlled by two variables: the minority's ability to organize function, and the similarities of culture function. The minority's ability to organize function refers to the ability of the immigrant group to organize in order to cope with prejudice and discrimination and to develop new values, norms, and customs --in other words: to acculturate. The similarities of culture function refers to how similar the minority and the majority groups are. The greater the similarities are between the immigrant group and the majority group, the faster the immigrant group will assimilate to the majority one, and the faster the majority one will adopt some aspects of the immigrant's culture. For example, if the immigrant's group mother language is similar to English, it would be easier for the immigrant group to learn English. Also, factors like

religion, child-rearing practices, urban living patterns, clothing styles, etc. are important as well.

LeMay's model also specifies the notion that I already discussed regarding assimilation as a two-way flow. It states that as immigrants acculturate, it becomes more desirable and easier for its members to do so. At the same time, as time passes, the majority group becomes more willing to accept some of cultural elements of the incoming group (LeMay, 2001). In the particular case of Mexican immigrants, for instance, Mexican food has become Americanized and the "Cinco de Mayo" holiday is becoming as acceptable as Saint Patrick's Day. Moreover, LeMay also states that a successful process of feedback influence between the two groups encourages the majority group to accept the immigrant group faster. At the same time, such acceptance encourages the desire of the immigrant group to assimilate, speeding up their assimilation process (LeMay, 2001). See figure 1.1 to observe LeMay's model of assimilation.

1.2.3 Models and Theories of Assimilation

Although the ideal of assimilation of immigrants into the American fabric is as old as the Republic itself, earlier sociological theories or scientific studies did not systematically investigate the phenomenon of assimilation (Miller, W. & Miller, R, 1996). What existed was the common notion that it was the new immigrant's responsibility to learn English and integrate to American life. As stated before, perhaps the best exponent of the assimilation ideal was the French-born Crèvecoeur in his brilliant description of an American, the individual who gets rid of the old and acquires the new. Thus, the idea of "getting rid of the old and acquiring the new" so harshly criticized by those who advocate the multicultural ideal, might have had its roots in this description given by Crèvecoeur in the late eighteenth century.

Now, over 200 years after Crèvecoeur, the social sciences have been brought to bear on the phenomenon. Beginning with sociologist Robert E. Park, who identified assimilation as a “key concept” in his studies, assimilation has gotten to appear much more complicated, resulting in different sociological theories and even changing meanings (Glazer, 1997). Milton Gordon (1964) mentioned three possible outcomes or desired goals of assimilation in the United States: Anglo-conformity, the melting pot and cultural pluralism.¹ In recent years, these goals of assimilation mentioned by Gordon have given way to different assimilationist approaches or theories in the United States. For the purpose of this thesis, I will discuss four of these approaches and theories: Americanization, linear assimilation, segmented assimilation, and transnational communities.

1.2.3.1 The Americanization movement Approach: Embracing the “Anglo-Conformity” and “Melting Pot” Ideologies

“Americanize” means “to make American, in the sense of making American in character, assimilating to U.S. customs, or naturalizing as an American citizen” (Cardasco, 1990, p.10). This is the type of movement individuals like Pat Buchanan would like to see revived. This is also the assimilation agenda held by the federal government during the early 1900’s, the years of the great waves of European immigrants

¹ Milton Gordon defines these terms as follows: “Anglo-conformity theory’ demanded the complete renunciation of the immigrant’s ancestral culture in favor of the behavior and values of the Anglo-Saxon core group; ‘the melting pot’ idea envisaged a biological merger of the Anglo-Saxon peoples with other immigrant groups and a blending of their respective cultures into a new indigenous American type; and ‘cultural pluralism’ postulated the preservation of the communal life and significant portions of the culture of the later immigrant groups within the context of American citizenship and political and economic integration into American society.” (Gordon, 1964, page 85).

to America. The Americanization movement sought to incorporate into American life the thousands of immigrants arriving to the shores of Ellis Island by means as English language instruction and classes in citizenship and American history. Although the main purpose of the Americanization movement was to help immigrants to integrate into American life, to “assimilate” in a positive way, the movement became coercive and repressive. Certain immigrants, especially those from Eastern and Southern Europe, were considered inferior. Needless to say, Mexican immigrants were considered even more inferior. In fact, although the great waves of immigrants were coming from Europe, there was a substantial immigrant presence from Mexico, and it was often considered of a lower stock and unable to assimilate (Gutierrez, 1996).

Nowadays, those who support Americanization have tried to “clean up” its meaning and state that “Americanization does not mean giving up ethnic traditions, cuisine, and birth languages. Americanization means adopting American civic values and the American heritage as one’s own. It means thinking of American history as ‘our’ history, not ‘their’ history” (Fonte, 1999, p. 1). Americanization supporters also say that “...citizenship means full membership in the American republic. The goal of the naturalization process that grants citizenship to U.S. immigrants should therefore be Americanization, stated clearly without apology or embarrassment” (Fonte, 1999. p.1). Thus, Americanization, as conceived by its current proponents, is not meant to be a coercive, threatening or violent movement, but rather it is supposed to encourage immigrants to embrace America’s civic culture and history as their own.

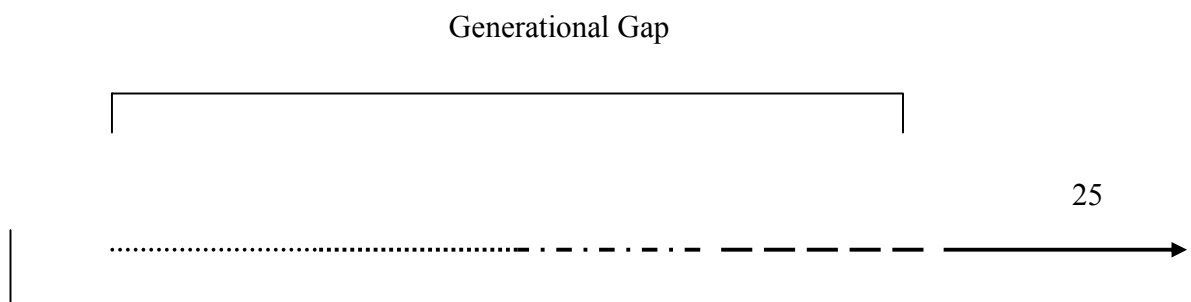
Those who criticize Americanization, mainly multiculturalists, state that this movement is in fact a threat to destroy the minorities’ “cultural heritage.” They also state that the “English Only Movement” reassembles the early Americanization movement in

its coercive form (Cardasco, 1990). It is worthy of mention that this debate over the meaning and true intentions of Americanization is not a new one. In the 1950's, there was a debate regarding whether Americanization meant to obliterate particular ethnic characteristics (the concept of the “melting pot”), or just integrating immigrants to the American fabric by granting them certain rights and opportunities (the pluralistic concept). Moreover, during those years D.W. Brogan (1956), in his book *The American Character*, argued that the ethnic diversity of American towns presented an “acute problem” of Americanization, especially because those who did not Americanize were at the lowest end of the socioeconomic spectrum. This resembles the position of the modern advocates of the movement, who state that “anti-Americanization” agendas like bilingual education or affirmative action programs just serve to slow the integration process of minorities to American life.

1.2.3.2 Linear Assimilation Theory: A Straight Path to Assimilation

This model of assimilation indicates that the longer an ethnic group has lived in the United States and the bigger the generational gap between members of that community becomes, the easier the assimilation continuum described by Gordon will take place. Thus, the children and grandchildren of immigrants will be more likely to assimilate into the mainstream society, as they have been more exposed to it than the immigrants themselves, and eventually they will not be “ethnics” anymore (Wildsmith, 2002). See figure 1.2 for an illustration of this assimilation model.

Figure 1.2 Linear Assimilation Model



Time of Entry	First Generation	Second Generation	Third Generation	Fourth Generation	End Result: Total Upward Assimilation
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(As variable factor)

This assimilation model was developed based on the successful assimilation of descendants of Europeans in the early 1900's. Many of them, immigrants from the predominately Catholic countries of Italy, Ireland, France, Poland, and Greece suffered prejudice and discrimination at the hands of the American-born white protestant majority. Today, those white ethnics have fully assimilated for the most part, and there is no apparent social difference between them and the descendants of the white Anglo-Saxon Protestant stock. Hence, the linear assimilation model establishes that the longer an immigrant group remains in the United States, the better off its descendants will do economically, socially, and politically.

1.2.3.3 Segmented Assimilation Theory: Not All Immigrant Groups Are the Same.

“Adapting to the United States is not what it used to be. The general trend at the turn of the last century was to find a blue-collar job and stay within the ethnic community for the first generation. Then, the second generation gradually moved up to the supervisory jobs, and the third generation joined the middle classes. Today, the society is far more differentiated than it was at the turn of the last century” (Alejandro Portes, America 2050: Immigration and the Hourglass, para. 1).

During the early 1990's, sociologists Alejandro Portes and Min Zhou noted that the linear assimilation model was not accurately describing the process of assimilation that new immigrant groups were following. Meaning, despite time spent in the United States, there was no longer any guarantee that every immigrant group's second generation would do better than their ancestors. According to sociologist Alejandro Portes, the term

“assimilation” commonly used to describe the incorporation process of immigrants to life in America “... doesn’t describe reality very well. Assimilation conveys the idea that there is a single path that people follow, and that they pass through certain stages on their way to join the mainstream” (Miller, 1999, quoting Portes, para. 1). The reality is different from this. As Portes and Rumbaut (1996) stated, even though assimilation is still a core subject in the study of immigration, its process has become extremely complex, making the image of a uniform and straightforward path less credible. Thus, according to these sociologists, the model of linear assimilation is too simple and insufficient to provide an answer for today second generation’s assimilation process.

As an alternative to the linear, straight-forward assimilation process, Portes and Ruben G. Rumbaut (2001), a sociologist at Michigan State University, developed a different assimilation model to describe how immigrants and their children are assimilating today: segmented assimilation (see figure 1.3). According to them, today’s second generation immigrants differ in the way they are assimilating because variations among different groups’ human and social capital² result in different paths of assimilation specific immigrant groups may take. There are groups whose members become mainly entrepreneurs and create a very successful business economy, such as the Koreans in New York City and the Cubans in Miami, Florida. There are others who bring with them high levels of human capital in the form of education, such as many Asians. Others, however, serve mainly as a source of inexpensive labor and their main concern becomes to keep their kids out of the underclass. Mexicans, these sociologists say, particularly fall

² According to Alejandro Portes: “Social capital refers to the capacity of individuals to command scarce resources by virtue of their membership in networks or broader social structures.” (Portes, 1995, pp. 12).

into this category. Thus, Portes and Rumbaut state that “the present second generation is better defined as undergoing a process of *segmented assimilation* in which outcomes vary across immigrant minorities and in which rapid integration and acceptance into the American mainstream represent just one possible alternative” (Portes, 2001, pp.6). In short, today’s immigrant children may assimilate not only to one society, but also to different segments of it. For example, some groups, such as the Asian, tend to assimilate to the “better” part of society (middle and upper middle classes). Alternatively, Latino immigrant children tend to assimilate to the “worst” part, dropping out of school at higher rates and becoming part of the underclass (Rumbaut & Portes, 2001). The work of Portes in this regard becomes important for this thesis, because according to Robert Smith, the segmented assimilation model partially describes the incorporation process of Mexican immigrants’ children in New York City.

Segmented assimilation has been widely accepted as an acceptable theory to explain immigrants’ second generation’s assimilation process. Moreover, as the model shows, there are three different outcomes that may occur among different immigrant groups, which are the result of a series of factors. Portes and Rumbaut identify four such factors: “1) the history of the immigrants first generation; 2) the pace of acculturation among parents and children and its bearing on normative integration; 3) the barriers, cultural and economic, confronted by second generation youth in their quest for successful adaptation; and 4) the family and community resources for confronting these barriers.” (Portes & Rumbaut 2001, p.47). It is important to mention that within their model, Portes and Rumbaut have also expanded the meaning of acculturation to three types, which are important to understand, especially since acculturation is considered as

the first step towards assimilation. These three types are consonant, dissonant, and selective acculturation.

Consonant acculturation takes place when parents and children learn the language and culture of their new country at the same pace, while they abandon the language and culture of their home country at roughly the same time. This situation tends to happen when parents possess enough human capital to advance at the same rate as their children in their cultural change so they can supervise it: for example, parents learn English, so they can understand their children, help them with their homework, etc. *Dissonant Acculturation* refers to the opposite situation: children learn the language and culture of their new country and leave the language and culture of their home one faster than their parents. This situation happens especially among parents who possess limited human capital, thus they cannot keep up with the cultural advancement of their children. Lastly, *selective acculturation* takes place when the learning process of the new language and culture of both parents and children happens within the frame of an ethnic community of enough size and resources, so immigrants and their children can have partial retention of the parent's home language and culture. For a graphic explanation of types of acculturation see again Figure 1.2.

As the segmented assimilation model shows, depending on the type of acculturation, there are three main outcomes, or types, within the segmented assimilation model: downward assimilation, partial upward assimilation and upward assimilation.

a) Downward Assimilation:

This happens when the learning of the English language and American cultural patterns do not prompt immigrant's children to experience upward mobility, but rather exactly the opposite. Living in poor, undesirable neighborhoods exposes the children to a

bad counterculture; thus they may drop out of school, join gangs, consume drugs, etc. Sociologists have identified Haitians in New York City and Mexicans in Los Angeles, California as two examples of this (Portes & Rumbaut, 2001).

b) Partial Upward Mobility:

This happens when the learning of the English language and American culture patterns may translate into upward social mobility, but not fully. Knowing the language and being Americanized does not guarantee upward social mobility for some immigrant groups and their children because such mobility may be blocked by discrimination. Still consonant acculturation presents significant benefits because it preserves parental authority, since as parents know English and American cultural patterns, they can offer guidance to their children and together they can confront the outside challenges (Portes & Rumbaut, 2001).

c) Upward Assimilation:

Upward assimilation indicates rapid economic advancement along with the immigrant group's deliberate effort to maintain its traditional values and customs. Some well-educated, wealthy Asians who have settled in middle class and upper-middle class suburbs in many parts of Los Angeles, forming their own immigrant enclaves, are cited as good examples of this (The Asian Nation Organization (n.d).

The process of segmented assimilation has been identified as being at work in several immigrant communities across the United States. In an article entitled "Immigrants Shunning Idea of Assimilation" published in The Washington Post in 1998, William Branigin argues that the process of segmented assimilation followed by different immigrant groups ranges from the linear assimilation model (the typical ideal of melting into the middle class) to downward assimilation, to "buffered integration" (upward

assimilation) into “immigrant enclaves”. Discussing Mexican immigrants in the city of Omaha, Nebraska, Branigin gives the example of a particular Mexican family in which the parents do not know English and their five children are bilingual and enjoy American programs like “The Simpsons.” The parents, Branigin says, are afraid that their kids may be badly influenced by American culture, and hence experience social downward assimilation by choosing to assimilate to a “bad part” of American society (Branigin, 1998).

1.2.3.4 Transnational Communities: Belonging to Two Countries.

At the turn of the 20th century, the majority of the immigrants arriving on the shores of Ellis Island had a small chance to return home any time soon or to make frequent visits to their homeland. Crossing the Atlantic ocean had not been an easy task: the trip was neither cheap nor short. Although many Italian immigrants, for example, had every intention to return home and ended up doing so, it was very difficult even for those immigrants to establish an on-going presence in both Italy and America (Barone, 2001). A century later, things are very different for the great wave of Mexicans. With advancements in communications and the closeness to the United States, Mexican immigrants now have the opportunity to establish an ongoing presence in both Mexico and the United States. Thus, transnational communities are commonplace now among these immigrants.

Transnational communities have been of great interest for immigration scholars studying recent waves of immigrants, especially from Latin America and the Caribbean. These scholars define transnationalism as “the process by which immigrants forge and

sustain multi-stranded social relations that link together their societies of origin and settlement” (Rivera-Salgado, 1997, quoting Basch, Glick Schiller, & Szanton-Blanc, 1994, p.136). From this perspective, migration is regarded as “an ongoing process through which ideas, resources and people change locations and develop meaning in multiple locations, suggesting that by retaining social, cultural and economic links with various locations and contexts, people can surmount the impediments traditionally associated with long-distance and international borders” (Rivera-Salgado, 1997, quoting Gold, 1997, p. 136). Thus, according to this concept, transnationalism becomes an innovative way to cope with the difficulties of migrating. It could be argued that it also becomes a way to maintain emotional links with the home country, especially in the cultural aspect. For example, many immigrants from Puebla, Mexico in New York City celebrate the Cinco de Mayo battle with a big festival that is covered by the Puebla based television network “T.V Azteca.” Juan Carlos Valerio, the director of “Hechos de Puebla” in the city of Puebla, goes to New York City and participates in “Hechos de Puebla en Nueva York,” a program that is televised every Saturday in the New York City metropolitan area.

1.3 Mexican Immigrants in New York: Segmented Assimilation and Transnational Communities.

The incorporation of Mexican immigrants to the New York City has only recently captured scholarly attention. After all, Mexican immigrants still prefer other major cities, such as Los Angeles and Chicago, Illinois as their primary place of destination when they emigrate to the United States. However, the increase of the Mexican population in New York City has been significant after the Immigration Reform and Control Act of 1986 (IRCA). IRCA provided an amnesty program under which many undocumented

immigrants who had been in the United States since 1986 and before could become legal residents (Foner, 2001b; Smith 1996).

In New York City, nine thousand Mexicans applied to legalize their statuses under IRCA, a number second only to Dominicans. The effects of IRCA were several. Mexican immigrants who became legal residents started to bring their families from Mexico to New York City, either legally or illegally. Also, with the hopes of a second amnesty program, other Mexicans were more eager to emigrate to that city. All these factors, along with the worsening of the Mexican economy during the 1980's, which greatly triggered Mexican emigration to the United States, contributed to increase the number of Mexicans immigrants in New York. For this reason, the assimilation process of Mexicans there has begun to be studied more intensely. As previously mentioned, the most prolific scholar studying Mexicans in New York City has been Columbia University sociologist Robert Smith. Mr. Smith's main argument is that the assimilation process of Mexicans in New York has followed mainly two approaches: segmented assimilation and transnationalism (Smith, 1996).

In this thesis, I will argue that such incorporation has also been influenced by another element: what LeMay describes as the minority's ability to organize function. The most important Mexican organization in New York City, Tepeyac Association, presents an excellent case of how this function helps Mexican immigrants to incorporate to life in this city. In this thesis, I will determine how Tepeyac plays a key role in the integration process of Mexicans in New York and how this association is opposed to the concept of assimilation, seeing it as a synonym for Anglo-conformity. It has replaced that ideal with one of incorporation. This is also closer to the idea of selective acculturation in the segmented assimilation theory, which states that some immigrant groups may chose

to assimilate as part of their ethnic communities (something that Tepeyac always advocates) without shedding their homeland roots.

At the end, we will see that, thanks to the particular characteristics of New York City as a multicultural place and to the legal framework laid out after the civil rights movement, Mexicans in that city indeed have the choice of assimilating to life there in a different manner than immigrants of 100 years ago: no longer do they have to follow the linear, straightforward assimilation model of Anglo-conformity, but they have the chance to choose their own path towards assimilation. I will also present some suggestions to ease the assimilation process of Mexican immigrants in New York City --suggestions I believe Mexican immigrants and their children could follow to experience upward social mobility-- based on the cultural, economic and political situation in that city. Furthermore, we will also see how terms such as “assimilation” or “incorporation” are unimportant to most of the immigrants themselves. Like many before them, Mexican immigrants in New York are more concerned with daily survival. All they want is to obtain a piece of the “American Dream,” which, whether they want it or not, may indeed imply a certain degree of assimilation.