

CHAPTER TWO

The Current Cultural, Economic and Political Assimilation of Mexican Immigrants in the United States

In 1964, Dr. Milton M. Gordon of the University of Massachusetts wrote a classic text regarding assimilation of ethnic groups to American life, *Assimilation in American Life*, which we have already referred to in Chapter one. He starts his book with a dialogue between Alice and the cat, from *Alice in Wonderland*. “Would you tell me, please, which way I ought to go from here?” asks Alice. “That depends a good deal on where you want to get to,” said the cat (Gordon, 1964, p. title).

Almost 50 years later, the dialogue between Alice and the cat still applies to the newly arrived immigrant to the United States. Confronted with a new environment, a new set of values, and most of the time a new language, immigrants wish they had someone to ask: “Would you tell me, please, which way I ought to go from here?” Unfortunately, most immigrants do not get a convincing answer to this question. During the time in which Gordon wrote, the answer was fairly simple. Immigrants who wanted to succeed in the United States were advised to assimilate to American life. Learning English was the first step. Immigrants’ children were placed in schools, with no classes in their native language, where they had to “sink or swim”. Although ethnic enclaves, where different ethnic groups developed subcultures and seldom ventured outside their own group to get

married or even look for a job, were commonplace in America, no such groups had legal privileges as minority groups have now with affirmative action programs (Gordon, 1964). Furthermore, undocumented immigrants were not as many as they are now. Most immigrants who arrived to America could become legal residents and after a few years obtain American citizenship, so they could have a political voice and participate in American government.

After the civil rights movement, things became different for immigrants arriving in the United States. The Bilingual Education Act was passed in 1973, and affirmative action¹ was fully implemented by the Department of Labor in 1971 (“Affirmative Action Programs,” 2002). The legal basis for affirmative action programs were set in the Civil Rights Acts of 1964. Title VII of the act “forbade employment discrimination on the basis of race, sex, religion, and national origin.” Even though this title has been seen by many just as merely a protection against discrimination, several court decisions have interpreted it as justifying affirmative action programs; the first such decision was *Steelworkers of America v. Weber* in 1979. (Cashmore, 1994). This Act also established the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) to ensure discrimination would end, placing the commission in charge of investigating any complaints of employment discrimination. Moreover, although the Civil Rights Act of 1964 originally was not intended to apply to federal employees, in 1972 an Amendment to title VII gave federal employees the same protection that private employees had. It also extended the

¹ Affirmative action is defined by the Dictionary of Race and Ethnic Relations as “a policy directed toward reversing historical trends that have consigned minority groups and women to positions of disadvantage, particularly in education and employment. It involves going beyond trying to ensure equality of individual opportunities by making discrimination illegal, by targeting for preferential benefits members of groups that have faced discrimination.” (Cashmore, 1994, p.4).

jurisdiction of the EEOC to investigate federal employment cases (Cashmore, 1994). Thus, although illegal immigration started to rise after the civil rights movement, even those undocumented immigrants would now have certain protections and privileges that previous immigrants did not have. Because of these protections, more than ever, immigrants have a choice of where they want to go in their assimilation process. The cat's answer to Alice, "that depends a good deal on where you want to get to," became even more of a reality for Mexican immigrants after the civil rights movement because now they would have the choice of placing their children in bilingual education classes, take advantage of affirmative action programs, and some years later, also keep their Mexican nationality even if they become American citizens.

2.1 The Debate Regarding Assimilation Policies.

"The solution to these political obstacles is a broad social vision which connects various controversial policies in an old and accepted framework easily understood by all: the melting pot. For most of the last century, assimilation and the ethnic melting pot were regarded as fundamental aspects of the American experience, promoted by liberals and conservatives alike. Returning national policies to the principles of the melting pot should become the primary Republican goal on ethnic issues." Ron Unz (2000, para. 5), organizer of California's successful 1998 ballot initiative that rolled back bilingual education.

As implied in this statement by Ron Unz, a Silicon Valley entrepreneur who in 1998 successfully promoted proposition 227 to end bilingual education in California, there are two strong positions when it comes to the politics of assimilation in the United States; on the one hand, the politics of the "melting pot", and on the other, the policies of multiculturalism, which resulted from the ideology of cultural pluralism. Multiculturalism is defined as: "An ideal in which diverse groups in a society coexist amicably, retaining their individual cultural identity. Through equal access to power

(pluralism) they enrich one another. This term has also been used simply in reference to ethnic diversity or to the relation between different cultures” (Cardasco, 1990, p. 154).

Supposedly, in the United States the norm has been an assimilationist ideology of the melting pot, or “Anglo-conformity”, in a very moderate form (Grant & Ladson-Billings, 1997). Others state that cultural pluralism is evident in the United States, since one of the core beliefs of the American people is individual rights, which has led to tolerance of cultural differences (Thomas, 1995). Still, a third alternative suggest that “assimilation persists as a social reality”, even though the idea has lost popularity among the American elite, especially “ethnic, racial, and minority group leaders” (Skerry, 1997). Thus, according to this position, “assimilation remains as an animating force in our (American) communities and in our national life” (Skerry, 1997, para. 2).

Although there are different sides and motives for the debate, one of the most important is whether federal policy legislation such as affirmative action, bilingual education, and more recently, during Bill Clinton’s Presidency, dual nationality of Mexican citizens who become American citizens, is helpful or detrimental to the cultural, economic, and political assimilation of immigrants in the United States. Those who oppose multiculturalism hold that such policies are detrimental, while those who support cultural pluralism (which is used almost as a synonym of multiculturalism) state that these policies are not only helpful, but also necessary to ease the assimilation process of Mexican immigrants and their children in the United States because they ensure them equal opportunities. In the political realm, as an example of the different positions, dual nationality has caused a wave of protests among some conservatives. According to John Fonte, a senior fellow at the Hudson Institute, dual nationality seriously hurts the ideal of

“Patriotic Assimilation,” as he prefers to call it. Immigrants, Fonte argues, when given the opportunity to hold their former citizenship, are not being encouraged to truly become American. Since they do not renounce all foreign allegiances, they are now “loyal” to both their former country and the United States, thus not truly loyal to anyone. This, Fonte says, is a direct threat to patriotism in the United States (Barone & Fonte, 2000).

Regarding cultural assimilation, bilingual education may be the hottest topic of debate. According to some, bilingual education² is not only stopping children from learning English and doing better in school, but it also presents the threat of balkanization, since language and culture go hand on hand (Schlesinger, 1991; Chavez, 1991). Therefore, if immigrant children keep their foreign language they are not being “true” Americans, thus presenting a threat to the unity of the American people (Vazques, 1996). For others, bilingual education is an important avenue for children to preserve their cultural identity, empowering America as a multicultural society, a trait that becomes a useful tool for any nation in today’s globalized world (Hirsch, 1997; Vazques, 1996). It is important to mention that the debate over bilingual education programs in the United States is a very emotional one because it has been political, with conservatives stereotyped as the ones opposing such programs, and liberals as the ones supporting them (Vazques, 1996). It has also been ideological, since it also includes a cultural dimension, serving as an avenue to multiculturalism (Grant & Ladson-Billing, 1997), which is seen by some as the number one enemy of the national motto “E Pluribus Unum”

² According to the Dictionary of Multicultural Education, bilingual education “can be defined simply as the use of two languages as the media of instruction. While bilingualization (the development of bilingual proficiency in students) may or may not be the goal of bilingual education, this definition implies that the issue of language proficiency development is secondary to the learning of subject matter through language. Bilingual education should be distinguished from English as a Second Language (ESL), the purpose of which is to teach English.” (Grant, C.A. & Ladson-Billings, G, 1997, p. 25).

(Schlesinger, 1991). Thus, it could be said that those who advocate bilingual education state that it helps immigrants' children to experience a non-coercive assimilation process to American life, since they are empowered to feel proud of their ethnic heritage, and they can decide to assimilate by free choice: "Pluralistics accepted the disintegration of ethnic groups and their subsequent assimilation into American life as long as it resulted from the free choice of individuals and not from coercion" (Ong, 1997, p. 135). Moreover, in a study of immigrants and Mexican-Americans in Silicon Valley in 1995, feeling part of their ethnic group was considered "positively related to mental health and social well-being," an argument that can be used to support biculturalism among immigrants and their children (Portes & Rumbaut, 1996, p. 180).

Conversely, those who oppose bilingual education state that it hinders cultural assimilation of immigrants because bilingual programs are part of the multicultural agenda, which at the same time, according to their position, promotes more pride in the immigrants' native culture than in the culture of their new country, and balkanization. In this regard, Mark Krokorian, the director of the Center for Immigration Studies, a think-tank organization based in Washington D.C., states that "these newcomers (immigrants) are bound to absorb some version of American-ness, some narrative of their new nation's past and present. The question is, which version? Do today's immigrant children in the Los Angeles or New York or Miami public schools learn to revere George Washington or Malcolm X? Do they study the history of the Puritans, or the Aztecs?" (Krikorian, 1997, p. 6).

It is worthy of mention that, although the Republican Party is the more conservative of the two major parties, their platform does support bilingual education,

with the goal of moving children to English-speaking classes. Moreover, they have recently been using the Spanish language to attract Latinos to join their party or vote for their candidates. Since he became President, George W. Bush has been celebrating a “Cinco de Mayo Fiesta” at the White House, and more recently, the party has began a weekly television program in Spanish. The program is entitled “Abriendo Caminos”; it is intended to inform the Latino community about political issues and bill proposals by President Bush that would affect their lives. However, the party does not support affirmative action programs. Regarding this, the official party position is as follows: “We believe rights inhere in individuals, not in groups. We will attain our nation’s goal of equal opportunity without quotas or other forms of preferential treatment” (The National Republican Committee, 2002, the Republican Party’s Platform, para. 8).

The debate over affirmative action, bilingual education, and dual nationality as “anti-assimilationist” is not likely to stop in the years to come. It is important for the understanding of this thesis, though, since Tepeyac Association not only supports these programs, but also holds an after-school program to teach children Mexican history and culture.

2.2 Mexican Immigrants and their Cultural, Economic and Political Assimilation

Process:

I have already discussed the debate regarding legislation that some view as hindering the optimal assimilation of immigrants in the United States. I will now discuss what immigrants, in particular Mexicans, are encountering in their cultural, economic and political assimilation process:

A recent focus on the second generation is helping immigration scholars confront the crucial question posed by the new

immigrants and by the anxiety about them: Whether, as Princeton University sociologist Alejandro Portes puts it: “they succeed economically, are accepted socially, and participate politically” (Miller, D.W. “Scholars of Immigration Focus On the Children,” *Chronicle of Higher Education*, February 1999, p. 2).

As implied in this statement from the leading periodical on higher education, the cultural, economic, and political assimilation of immigrant children, and therefore of their parents, has become a crucial field of study. Particularly, the immigrant’s offspring is getting scholars and other American leaders worried. Traditionally, it has been accepted that the first immigrant generation would suffer, work very hard, and struggle to get out of poverty. The second generation should do better --be part of the working or middle class and improve their economic status (Portes & Rumbaut, 1996). Since this is not happening for some immigrant groups, particularly Mexicans, it becomes crucial indeed to study the cultural, economic, and political setting that today’s immigrants are encountering.

2.2.1 Today’s Mexican Immigrants: Who They Are.

In 1890, 30 percent of the foreign-born population and their children in the United States were from Germany. It would take over 100 years for a country to get close to the German record on foreign resident in the United States. In the year 2000, Mexico almost did. The 2000 United States census population showed that the number of foreign-born and their children in this country reached the highest record in history: it went from 34 millions in the last three decades to 54 millions in the year 2000. Of those immigrants and their children, Mexicans were more than 25 percent, that is about 14 million people (Scott, 2002). Although it is difficult to know the exact number, it is estimated that of those immigrants, at least 2.4 million are undocumented (Orozco, 2001), but the number could be as high as 3.9 million (“Dateline Migration National,” 2002). Furthermore,

“immigrants’ children and U.S-born children of immigrants constitute the fastest growing segment of the U.S. child population,” (Rumbaut, 2001, p. 230), and with Mexican women having high birth rates, there is no doubt that a great portion of those children are Mexican.

The nature of Mexican immigration to the United States has changed over time. Mexico and the United States share the longest, most contrasting border in the world. At the Mexico-United States border, in just a few minutes, one can go from a poor, developing country to the richest country in the world. There are also only few natural barrier between them, and up to 1965, not many legal ones for their population’s mobility. Until that year with the “Bracero Program,” an agreement for temporary workers in agriculture that the United States and Mexico operated jointly and with no limits on the number of visas granted to Mexican citizens, it was relatively easy to emigrate to the United States (Bean, Edmonston & Passel, 1990). In 1965, with the end of this program, and through a reformation to the McCarran-Walter Immigration and Nationality Act of 1952 which stated that Mexico would receive the same number of visas as other nations, for the first time there was a quota for the number of Mexicans going to the United States. This marked the beginning of illegal immigration of Mexicans to the United States, since because of the proximity of one country to the other, those who wish to emigrate from Mexico to the United States and could not obtain a visa, could emigrate illegally (Bean, Edmonston & Passel 1990).

Mexican immigrants are often distinguish between legal and illegal. Legal immigrants are divided among different types: High-skilled workers, family members of American citizens and legal residents, and others such as religious workers or

entrepreneurs. Illegal immigrants are mainly either visa overstayers or EWIs (“entry without inspection”), as they have been officially labeled. Mexico is considered by some authors as the source of more than 95 percent of illegal immigrants to the United States (Portes & Rumbaut, 1996) and by others as the source of little more than 50 percent (Borjes, 1999; “Dateline Migration,” 2001). Of course, it is very difficult to know the exact number, but it is estimated that almost all EWIs are from Mexico and most visa overstayers are from other countries (Bean, Edmonston & Passel, 1993; Borjas, 1999).

Besides being the most numerous, Mexican immigrants in the United States are also mostly young, poorly educated, and willing to work hard. In terms of education, Mexican immigrants to the United States do show certain diversity. One can find some skilled and educated Mexicans, with a high school diploma, some college, or experience in a blue collar profession who decide to emigrate to the United States. The vast majority of Mexican immigrants, though, have little schooling, placing them among the least educated immigrants to the country (Portes & Rumbaut, 1996). Culturally, Mexican immigrants in the United States are very attached to their customs, traditions and language. As explained in Chapter One, transnationalism becomes the means through which Mexican immigrants keep their culture alive in the United States. Thus, perhaps more than any other immigrant group in the United States, Mexicans want to keep their culture alive (Orozco, 2001).

Since the number of immigrants in the country is at record highs, it is then understandable that the number of people speaking another language than English at home is also high. According to the 2000 census figures, out of the 255 million Americans over the age of five, 44.9 million (17.6 percent) do not speak English at home,

and 19.5 million speak English less than “very well.” Out of those 44.9 million, 26.7 million speak Spanish, and 12.5 million of them speak English less than very well (D’Agostino, 2001). This seems “staggering” for some, but 12.5 million represents only around 5 percent of the total population. Also, looking at these figures, it is easy to deduce that those immigrants want just to keep their language and customs without having to learn English. It is important to mention that this is not necessarily true. As I will discuss in Chapter Four, many Mexican immigrants involved with Tepeyac Association give a lot of emphasis to learning English as a means of succeeding in the United States. Moreover, even in Mexico, there are many English schools, and knowing English is considered not only “trendy,” but also necessary to succeed in today’s globalized world.

Economically, one might think that the vast majority of Mexican immigrants are from the poorest of the poor, but this is not necessarily true. According to some studies, the extremely poor and those without a job in their home country, not only Mexico, rarely migrate (Portes & Rumbaut, 1996). Thus, the majority of Mexican immigrants are from a household with at least a house or a piece of land, even though most of them are not from prosperous communities (Reyes, 2001). Furthermore, all studies have shown that most illegal Mexican immigrants were not unemployed in Mexico prior to arriving to the United States; rather, only around 5 percent of them were. Thus, as Portes and Rumbaut state it: “The findings indicate that it is not the lack of jobs, but of well-paid jobs, which fuels migration to the U.S. The basic reason (*to emigrate to the U.S.*), is the gap between life aspirations and expectations and the means to fulfill them in the sending countries”. (Portes, Rumbaut, 1996, p.12). Wherever in Mexico they are from, Mexican immigrants

contribute greatly to the economy of their home communities. It is estimated that they send around 7.5 billion dollars back to Mexico every year, the third largest contributor to the Mexican economy, after oil and tourism (Orozco, 2001).

Politically, Mexican immigrants in the United States show the characteristics of a transnational community. They are still very concerned with politics back home, indicating a continued sense of belonging to Mexico. In fact, Mexican politicians realize this, and governors of different Mexican states, for example, meet frequently with Mexican residents in the United States for “consultation, support and contributions” (Jones-Correa, 2001, p. 1005). But Mexicans in the United States were not so much the focus of attention for Mexican politicians for a long time. It was not until 1988 that Mexican political opposition parties, especially the “Partido de la Revolucion Democratica” (PRD), started to court Mexican immigrants in the United States, promising them to push for legislation to grant them dual nationality and the ability to vote in Mexican elections at Mexican consulates in the United States (Jones-Correa, 2001).

Since at least 2.4 million Mexican immigrants are illegal and many others are not citizens, the main power of those immigrants who can vote comes from uniting with Mexican-Americans and other Latinos in the United States. Together, they have contributed to the election of about 6,000 elected officials at different government posts, with the great majority of them being of Mexican origin. Furthermore, along with the other Latinos, they have the capacity to influence the electoral votes in five states, which represent 166 out of the 270 votes needed to win a presidential election (Orozco, 2001). It

is of little wonder that both Al Gore and George W. Bush worked heavily to court the Latino vote during their 2000 presidential campaigns.

2.2.2 Cultural Assimilation of Mexican Immigrants.

Culture is perhaps the most important element Mexican immigrants in the United States want to “protect.” Culture is defined by sociologists as “all the shared products of human groups. These products include both physical objects and the beliefs, values, and behaviors shared by a group” (Thomas, 1995, p. 87). Although cultures in the world differ from one another, sociologists identify five elements always present in every culture: Physical objects (or material culture), symbols, languages, values, and norms. As Alan Riding argued in his book *Distant Neighbors*, Mexico and the United States are indeed distant neighbors when it comes to cultural matters (Riding, 1983). What is culturally normal for Americans may be totally foreign and strange for Mexicans and viceversa. For example, Table 2.1 lists cultural values identified in each society by some sociologist and scholars:

Table 2.1 A Comparison of American and Mexican Values.

American Values	Mexican Values
Personal Achievement	Family (and loyalty to the family)
Work	Personal Dignity
Humanitarianism	Formality and Gentility.
Efficiency and Practicality	Spontaneity of Emotion.
Progress and material comfort	Emphasis on spiritual and human values over materialistic ones.
Equality and Democracy	Sense of Nationalism and desire for progress.
Freedom	Sense of History.
	Interpersonal Relations. Different Roles for Men and Women.

Source: Thomas (1995), *Sociology: The Study of Human Relations*, 1995 & Traditional Mexican Values (n.d), *The University of North Carolina Center for International Understanding*.

It is important to notice that those Americans who worry about the “anti-assimilationist” attitude of Mexicans, or about how much Mexicans could influence American society, have nothing to fear regarding the material cultural values of Mexicans in the United States, because American influence over Mexicans and other potential immigrants in this regard is much stronger. In fact, children of immigrants may even be “pre-socialized” by American culture before they arrive to the United States (Miller, 1999). Such influence has even being seen as an important reason why Mexicans want to emigrate to the United States. As previously mentioned, the poorest of the poor are not the ones emigrating, but rather those who have been exposed to the material comfort of others (mainly Americans) and desire to have the same (Portes & Rumbaut, 1996). Americans need not fear the symbols of the Mexican culture either. After all, some symbols of American culture, such as Thanksgiving or Saint Patrick’s Day are a legacy of immigrant groups; therefore celebrating Cinco de Mayo seems fair enough. They have also happily embraced Mexican food without questioning if having tacos for dinner makes them less American. What many Americans do fear is the language of Mexicans, and the values and norms that bilingual education programs may be fostering in the children enrolled in those programs. The greatest worry of those who oppose bilingual education (and in some cases even the use of Spanish language) comes from numbers, and the “anti-American” (multiculturalistic) curriculum that bilingual programs may have (Skerry, 1997).

It is important to mention that there are two main types of bilingual education programs in the United States: assimilationist and pluralistic. The first one promotes “ethnic language shift,” while the second one promotes “ethnic language maintenance.”

Contrary to what some people may believe, most bilingual programs in the United States are assimilationist (Kjolseth, 1976). This is not surprising when we take into consideration the “anti-other-language” movements that have arisen in this country after great waves of immigration. Even Benjamin Franklin gave a warning about the German immigrants of his time who seemed to be unwilling to learn English. Later, although the United States has never had an official language policy imposed by the federal government, the Americanization movement of the early 1900’s had as one of its main goals to encourage and later coerce students to learn English. More recently, by 1998 twenty-two states had adopted official English legislation. This means that those states had declared English as their official language to be used especially for government matters such as the drafting of official documents, regulations, transactions, etc. By 2001, even in the state of New York, which has one of the most diverse populations in the world, a bill had been introduced proposing an amendment to article one of the state constitution adding that English should be designated as the state’s official language. Lastly, on March 2002, Iowa signed into law the “Iowa English Language Reaffirmation Act of 2001,” declaring English as the official language in the state of Iowa (“Iowa SF 165,” 2002). Thus, currently twenty-three states have declared English as their official language.

But if many immigrants may not yet speak English “very well,” there is evidence that immigrants’ children are adopting the English language. One of the most reliable studies on immigrant children, the Children of Immigrants Longitudinal Study (CILS), conducted in Florida and California with over 5,000 immigrants’ children from 1992 to 1995, shows this fact. Taking as an example the specific case of San Diego, over half of

the Mexican immigrants' children, born either in Mexico or the United States, who responded to the survey said in 1992 they spoke Spanish "very well." By 1995, when they were surveyed again, 78 percent of United States-born and 63 percent of the Mexican-born said that they preferred to speak English (Lopez & Stanton-Salazar, 2001). In the midst of the bilingual education and English-only debates, the language assimilation of immigrants' children is taking place, something that undeniably means cultural assimilation as well.

2.2.3 Economic Assimilation of Mexican Immigrants.

The economic assimilation of immigrants is more than ever, a difficult one. As Portes (1996) states, the United States is moving towards an "hourglass economy", with jobs divided mainly into only two extreme categories: low-paying, dead-end ones mainly in the service industry, and high-skill professional ones. George J. Borjas, a professor of public policy at Harvard University who specializes in immigration and economic issues, describes economic assimilation as "the process of human capital accumulation that narrows the wage gap between immigrants and natives" (Borjas, 1999, p. 31). Taking this definition as a reference, there are two main factors to consider when referring to the economic assimilation of immigrants: the economic situation of the receiving country, and human capital, which is defined as "a person's endowment of ability and acquired skills" (Borjas, 1999, p. 19).

2.2.3.1 Economic Assimilation of Mexican Immigrants in the United States: Are the Streets Paved with Gold?

It is commonly heard that immigrants in the United States take the jobs that most American-born do not want. Although this could be an over-generalization, what is

widely observed is that immigrants have definitely found and, in some cases, created employment niches where they thrive as preferred labor sources. Mexicans, in particular, have found niches in the service industry, especially in the restaurant and hotel industries. In spite of this, the economic performance not only of Mexicans, but of all immigrants in general, has declined since the immigration reforms of 1965. According to the available studies, those immigrants who entered the country in the late 1950's had a 9 percent wage disadvantage compared to American workers. By the late 1970's, those immigrants had experienced a wage increase not only sufficient to catch up with American workers, but even to surpass them. For immigrants arriving in the late 1980's, the situation was very different. They had a wage disadvantage of 23 percent and the gap actually widened to almost 30 percent by the late 1990's. So, by looking at these numbers, we can see that the economic assimilation of immigrants is not actually taking place (Borjas, 1999.)

For Mexican immigrants, the situation seems even worse. For one thing, Latinos in the United States, among them a large proportion of Mexicans, are not moving into the middle class. The Latino median household income as a percentage of the national median income decreased from 77 percent in 1980 to 72 percent in 1998 (Barone, 2001). Furthermore, in a survey conducted by the "Mexican Migration Project" between 1982 and 1993 in households in Mexico and the United States, most Mexican immigrants surveyed were employed in unskilled jobs, and their average wage was \$3.25 an hour for males and \$2.20 an hour for females (Reyes, 2001). As recently as 1999, Mexican immigrants, along with those from El Salvador, earn 40 percent less than natives (Borjas, 1999). Thus, although they show high levels of labor force participation when compared

with other immigrant groups, because of their minimal educational attainment, they work for very low wages (Waters & Eschbach, 1995).

So an interesting fact is that most Mexican immigrants do not go the United States to make “lots of money,” at least by standards there, where the federal minimum wage established by the department of labor is \$5.15 an hour (U.S Department of Labor, 2002), and even someone who lives on that salary is considered to be poor. It is important to notice that according to scholars Portes and Rumbaut, the fact that the “poorest of the poor” are not the ones immigrating does not fully coincide with the “Push and Pull” theory. This theory is “constructed around ‘factors of expulsion’ (economic, social and political hardship in the sending countries) and ‘factors of attraction’ (comparative economic and political advantages in the receiving country)” (Portes & Rumbaut, 1996, p. 271). Portes and Rumbaut state that, if this theory is applied, only those from truly poor countries would be the ones emigrating (people from African countries, for example) or from the “poorest of the poor” in countries such as Mexico (only peasants, for example). Evidence suggests that this is not the case. In a study done on former illegal immigrants in the 1970’s, it was established that not only poor “campesinos” emigrate: only 18 percent of those surveyed had been field workers in Mexico, in comparison to between 35 percent and 60 percent who said they had been employed in white-collar and urban skilled and semiskilled occupations prior to their departure from Mexico (Portes & Rumbaut, 1996).

But, even if Portes and Rumbaut’s rationale is true and most people who emigrate do not do it because of extreme poverty, the “Push and Pull” model can of course be applied to Mexicans emigrating to the United States. If not extreme poverty, then hard

economic conditions remains as a very important reason behind Mexican immigration to the United States. The minimum wage in Mexico is divided into economic zones: A, B, and C; the salaries in each zone are \$42.15, \$40.10, and \$38.30 pesos a day respectively (Instituto Nacional de Estadística, Geografía e Informática, 2002). Thus, even when making as little as \$2.20 dollars an hour, Mexicans in the United States can at least make \$88 dollars a week (working only 40 hours a week, which we know is unlikely because they usually work more hours), which is much more than what they would make back in Mexico. In fact, Mexican workers in the United States can make at least ten times more money there than what they can make in Mexico (Weiner, 2001). Thus, compared with the salaries in Mexico, Mexican immigrants may indeed see the streets of American cities “paved with gold.”

2.2.3.2 Human Capital.

Today’s immigrants to the United States are extremely diverse in terms of their skills and resources. In contrast to the immigrants of the early 1900’s, when the great majority were European paupers, today’s immigrants range from high-tech Asian, and even some Mexicans, computer specialists (Foner, Rumbaut & Gold, 2000), to Mexican Mixteca Indians in New York City who barely know how to speak Spanish (Portes & Rumbaut, 1996). According to some scholars, though, a perception of Americans regarding today’s immigrants is that they are mostly low-skilled and that their quality, in terms of human capital, has declined over time (Borjas, 1999).

Mexican Immigrants, for the most part, do not present a great contrast in terms of their education because the great majority do not have high levels of education. According to the 2000 census figures, only 33.8 percent of Mexican immigrants over age

25 had completed high school, a low percentage when compared with the 95 percent of African immigrants (Scott, 2002). Besides former schooling, another important element of human capital for immigrants is the knowledge of English. Mexican immigrants do not rank well here either. Along with the other Latin Americans, they show the lowest levels of English language competence among immigrants, a fact that was demonstrated in the CILS study sample. In this study, Mexican immigrant parents ranked low in their level of English knowledge among other immigrant parents (Portes & Rumbaut, 2001, see Appendix C). Thus, for most Mexican immigrants, former education and knowledge of English are not the main elements of human capital they take to make it economically in the United States.

What is the main source of human capital Mexican immigrants have in the United States? Their need and desire to work hard, along with their youth. Most Mexican immigrants are young. They are also identified as a preferred labor source, which is a consequence of several factors. First of all, along with other Latino immigrants, Mexicans go the United States, above all, to work hard. This is partially because of the fact that Latin American countries do not have reliable welfare states (Barone, 2001). In Mexico for example, to put it simply "*Quien no trabaja, no come.*" It is important to mention that field studies in Texas and California, where most Mexican immigrants go, have shown that Mexican immigrants there have used social services very little, with the exception of public schools for their children, who in most cases are entitled to a public education anyway, since they were born in the United States (Arreola, 2000). Moreover, in 1996, studies showed that only 17 percent of poor Latino immigrants collected welfare, compared with 50 percent of poor Anglos and 65 percent of poor Blacks

(Barone, 2001). Thus, it could be said first generation immigrants, especially new arrivals, are not contaminated with a “welfare mentality”, especially the undocumented, who might not even be aware of how the social aid system operates in the United States (E. Chacón, personal communication, July 30, 2001).

Besides the fact that they are hard workers, another reason why Mexican immigrants are viewed as a preferred labor source is that they are considered to be excellent “in-person servers”, whose essential quality is “pleasant demeanor” (Barone, 2001, quoting former secretary of labor in the United States Robert Reich, p. 161), making them perfect to work in the American expanding service industry. In addition, because some of them are undocumented, they are “thought to be a docile and pliable work force, and so preferred by employers” (Waters & Eschbach, 1995, p. 430). It is important to mention that although Mexican immigrants have high rates of labor force participation and may be considered as a preferred labor source, this does not make up for their lack of education and their need to learn English. As evidence suggests, the fact that most of them work and are preferred by employers is not really helping them to move into the middle class.

2.2.4 *Political Assimilation of Mexican Immigrants.*

“The immigrant’s world has always been a difficult one, torn between old loyalties and new realities. For the most part, the politics of the first generation –to the extent that such politics have existed- have been characterized by an overriding preoccupation with the old country.” (Alejandro Portes and Ruben Rumbaut (1996), in *Immigrants America: a Portrait*, p.95)

In this extract from *Immigrant American: a Portrait*, Portes and Rumbaut observe that immigrants’ politics show the characteristics of transnational communities. What is interesting is that these scholars also say that participation of immigrants in the American

political scene has occurred under certain circumstances: among the most educated groups, among those who are not able to go back to their home countries, and in “exceptional circumstances in which the very survival of the group has been at stake” (Portes & Rumbaut, 1996, p. 95). To a limited extent, it could be said that the political participation of Mexican immigrants has been triggered by the last circumstance. In the last few years, some important events have taken place which Latinos in general view as a threat to their community and to their cultural identity. The “English Only” movement, California’s Proposition 187 to ban education and health care for undocumented immigrants and their children (which was not approved), Proposition 227 to ban bilingual education (which was approved), and the 1996 Welfare Reform Act banning undocumented immigrants and non-citizens from getting welfare aid are some examples. Mexican immigrants have participated in demonstrations against these proposed pieces of legislation, although without playing a very important role. In fact, as stated in Chapter One, evidence suggests that immigrants in general respond to attacks and threats with “passive endurance” more than anything else (Portes & Rumbaut, 1996).

Furthermore, other important measures, which are seen by most minority groups in the United States as beneficial, such as affirmative action and bilingual education programs, are not really the results of immigrants’ political effort. Supposedly, only once they are in the United States Mexican immigrants are “taught” that they are part of a minority group (Latinos or Hispanics, as some prefer to call them), and as members of that group they are “victims” of the majority group (white Americans) and therefore entitle to get “something” --such as the benefits of affirmative action programs and bilingual education for their children (Barone, 2001 & Chavez, 1991). Moreover, the fact

that many of them are undocumented limits the extent to which they can participate politically. Nevertheless, as I will cover in depth in Chapter Three, their mobilization at the grass root level has been effective in attracting the attention of politicians, at least to a certain extent. In fact, Mexicans in the country finally got an American president to celebrate a “Cinco de Mayo” festival at the White House (current president George W. Bush), and Mexicans in New York City finally got a governor (current governor George E. Pataki), to celebrate with them “15 de septiembre,” the Mexican independence day.

But their accomplishment as part of the Mexican community is one thing, and their individual political behavior as immigrants is a different one. Mexican immigrants do not rank well at this level. Even when eligible, they become American citizens at a lower rate than other immigrants. For example, they are 40 percent less likely than Cuban immigrants to acquire citizenship (Aguirre & Saenz, 2002), and even during the surge of naturalization during the Clinton administration with the “Citizenship U.S.A.” program, only 22 percent of Latino immigrants became naturalized, compared, for example, with 44 percent of Asian immigrants (Barone, 2001). Once they become citizens, their voting participation is also among the lowest compared with other groups. Apparently, this is due to cultural reasons. Mexican immigrants seem to hold a strong mistrust for political institutions. Since most of them are “economic immigrants,” that is, they have emigrated because of economic reasons, they obviously mistrust political institutions because, back in Mexico, they blamed them for their precarious economic situation (Barone, 2001).

But not everything is that negative in the political realm for Mexican immigrants. Their biggest asset for future political participation is their children. It is estimated that almost 50 percent of the Latino population in the United States, among them many

Mexicans, do not yet vote, either because they are still young or because they are not citizens (Orozco, 2001). The number of Latino voters is likely to increase significantly, since immigrant's children constitute the fastest growing segment of the population. Thus, it will be interesting to see what happens in future, when the "sleeping giant" (as the Latino voters have been called) wakes up and starts to influence the American political scene on a greater scale.

Another important issue regarding political assimilation of Mexican immigrants, and the one that has prompted the most heated debate, is dual nationality. According to some, the fact that Mexicans since 1998 can hold both American and Mexican nationality makes them loyal to two countries. This, the argument goes, threatens the unity of the United States and may present the danger of Mexicans being more loyal to their former country than to the United States. (Barone & Fonte, 2000). But such behavior does not pose any kind of danger to the unity of the U.S. The fact is that Mexicans are not the first group of immigrants that are more interested on politics back home and who may show more loyalty to it than to the United States. As stated before, this is normal behavior for first generation immigrants, and it is the second generation who usually becomes committed to politics in the United States. This does not mean, as some alarmists have reported, that Mexicans in the Southwest may want to reunite with Mexico (Portes & Rumbaut, 1996). As stated before, Mexicans do not trust their native political institutions, and showing more loyalty to their country of origin may only reflect a natural melancholic reaction due to the fact that they are away. Furthermore, studies have shown that the dual nationality program for Mexican immigrants and their children did not allure them the way it was expected. As of 1999, the Mexican embassy estimated that out of the

5.5 million people of Mexican-origin who were eligible to apply, only 25,000 had done it, that is, less than a half percent. Although the number is likely to increase as the December 2003 deadline approaches, the lack of interest “implies that dual nationality policies have less of an impact than sending countries may wish for and that receiving countries may fear” (Jones-Correa, 2001, p. 1024).

In the ongoing debate regarding citizenship status and its importance for assimilation, one thing that is certain is that citizenship does not necessarily guarantee that those immigrants who are indeed American citizens will experience upward social mobility. For instance, Puerto Rican immigrants are American citizens and they have “the highest proportion of persons living in poverty, show increasing withdrawal from formal labor markets, and have the highest rates of any Latino group of welfare dependency and family disruption” (Waters & Eschbach, 1995, p. 430).

2.3 Factors that Hinder the assimilation of Mexican Immigrants.

When referring to the assimilation of Mexican immigrants, some optimistic scholars and politicians mention, as Michael Barone does in his book *The New Americans*, that “we have been here before.” According to Barone and others, America has always been a country of immigrants, and just as Italians, Russian, Polish, and other non Anglo-Saxon-Protestant immigrant groups of 100 years ago are now fully assimilated into the American fabric, the new immigrants will be assimilated as well (Barone, 2001; Ong, 1997). In fact, the most optimistic even think that the new immigration, mainly Asian, Caribbean and Latin American, may even change the very concept of race in the United States, just as Italians, Irish, and Polish did, since they were not considered “white” 100 years ago, and now they are (Foner, 2001a).

Although America is indeed a country of immigrants and those immigrant groups of 100 years ago have fully assimilated, what is also certain is that the United States, and the world for that matter, is not the same in the 21st century. Besides the challenges already mentioned throughout this chapter, the assimilation of Mexican immigrants presents other significant ones. For one thing, although Italian immigrants, which are compared by some authors with Mexican immigrants, returned to Italy at high rates, they cannot compare with the return rates of Mexican immigrants (Smith, 1999; Barone 2001). According to field studies, most Mexicans who emigrate to the United States do not settle there permanently. Moreover, research has shown that most of them do not intend to stay forever, even if they end up doing so (Reyes, 2001).

This situation presents the biggest hindrance for assimilation because if they do not intend to stay, how can they be really motivated to learn English, to educate themselves so they can go up the economic ladder, and to participate politically? Their assimilation process is then partial, and does not even become integration, since as we saw in Chapter One, integration carries the ideal of giving full, equal membership to an ethnic group. To achieve such equality in the United States, Mexican immigrants need to learn English and educate themselves so they can achieve upward social mobility, something that, as we will see in Chapter Four, Tepeyac Association promotes among its members. On the other hand, even if they do not return to Mexico for good, many Mexicans establish migratory circuits, living some of the year in Mexico and some in the United States, which also becomes detrimental in their assimilation process.

There are other elements that make assimilation more difficult. Communications are highly developed compared with 100 years ago. Almost everyone has a phone now,

and telephone rates are decreasing instead of increasing. With a calling card, it is possible to call from New York City to any place in Mexico for as cheaply as 10 cents a minute. Transportation rates could be very cheap as well. Thus, communication among Mexicans in the United States and Mexicans in Mexico is much easier than it was between immigrants of 100 years ago and the people in their home countries. Lack of English presents another challenge, since it hinders cultural, economic, and political assimilation. Immigrants cannot learn about the culture where they are living now, cannot get better jobs, and cannot be fully immersed in the American political scene if they do not know English (Borjas, 1999).

Economic assimilation seems the most troubling. There are two main factors that hinder the economic assimilation of Mexican immigrants: lack of education and the changing pattern of today's American economy. As we have observed, the economic scene and labor market that today's immigrants face are different from what they were 100 years ago. Back then, the industrial sector in the United States was booming and even uneducated immigrants, such as most Italians were considered, could find a blue collar job in the industrial sector and help their children to do the same. Generational economic assimilation then took place more easily (Smith, 2001). Now the technology and service industries are the ones booming, so the decline of blue collar jobs and their replacement with white collar ones means that more education is needed to experience upward economic mobility in the United States. In regard to the second generation, even though Latino teenagers are indeed showing signs of acculturation, the biggest problem seem to be what segment of the population they are assimilating into. As the theory of segmented assimilation explains, they may chose to assimilate into the wrong part of

society and be on the path to downward social and economic mobility. Barrios in East Los Angeles, California present an example of this.

2.4 How the Future Looks.

As we have observed throughout this chapter, the challenges are many. It will take hard work and maybe an adoption of some American cultural values, such as personal achievement, progress, and the ideal of material comfort, to overcome those challenges. More than ever, Mexican immigrants need to understand that getting a job in the United States that pays more than a job in Mexico is not enough. In order to integrate successfully, a concept some may call “assimilation,” they need to value education, learn English, and invest in their children’s human capital, teaching that more than ever, a high school degree will not take them too far.

What is certain is that Mexican immigrants do not wish to assimilate, at least when this means to get rid of the old and acquire the new. Among Latin Americans, they are considered the most faithful and attached to their homeland (Orozco, 2001). This is understandable when taken into consideration the fact that two strong Mexican values are sense of history and loyalty to the family. Thus, “getting rid of the old” and “acquiring the new” may become an issue of honor. Mexican immigrants may feel that they betray their country, their family, and their values if they follow the linear assimilation path and become “too American.” But this is not a new phenomenon among immigrants. Nathan Glazer and Daniel Moynihan presented an interesting argument in 1963 in their classic book *Beyond the Melting Pot*. They stated that “assimilation, as understood conventionally, did not happen, at least in New York City.” Thus, Mexican immigrants there, and in the rest of the country for that matter, may not be the first group of

immigrants not following the conventional path of assimilation. Moreover, as stated at the beginning of this chapter, another classic scholar on immigrants' issues, Milton Gordon (1964), also states that immigrant enclaves were common place in America one hundred years ago. Thus, immigrants of that time may had been as attached to their countries and as hesitant to assimilate as Mexican immigrants are now. Nevertheless, those immigrants did assimilate and their subsequent generations have been successful in the United States. What is different now for Mexicans is the situation of the American economy ("hour glass"), the legislative scene (affirmative action, bilingual education and dual nationality programs), their sheer numbers, the proximity of their homeland, and 20th century improvements in communication, which allow them to be in closer contact with their families back home. All these factors may present strong challenges to the issue of assimilation of Mexican immigrants.

Moreover, although Mexican immigrants do want to improve their economic situation (most Mexicans emigrate to the United States for economics reasons), if most of them wish to return home, cultural, economic, and political incorporation may become only partial. For those who stay, the real issue and focus of concern becomes the second generation. After all, most first generation immigrants throughout American history have never fully assimilated --in the linear meaning of the word-- but second generations have. Evidence suggests that at least linguistically, which I use as a cultural factor in this thesis, children of immigrants are assimilating. Furthermore, some experts have replaced the old, linear assimilation model with the segmented assimilation one. In this sense, the real problem with the children of Mexican immigrants is not whether they are assimilating or not, but what segment of American society they are assimilating into. Thus, the dialogue

between Alice and the cat presented at the beginning of this chapter may well be applied to these immigrants and their children, because perhaps more than ever they have now many paths to chose from. To be successful, they need to have a strong conviction of where they want to get to, so they can integrate to the successful part of society and not to the underclass.