

CHAPTER THREE

The Assimilation Process of Mexican Immigrants in New York City

3.1 New York City: A “Heaven” for Immigrants.

Chapter Three focuses on the assimilation process of Mexican immigrants in New York City. I will analyze the current situation of New York as a city of immigrants, and how Mexican immigrants and their children are integrating there. It is important to mention that trends reflecting Mexican immigrants in New York City reflect the national trends discussed in Chapter Two. Thus, in this chapter I will cover some of the same aspects mentioned in that chapter, but focusing on the specific situation of Mexican Immigrants in this city. Perhaps better than anyone I met during the time I did my research there, Mr. Jose Antonio Lagunas, the consul for Mexican community affairs in New York City, described what the city offers to immigrants. He said that “the city is a sanctuary compared with others cities, because it gives great protection from the Immigration and Naturalization Services (INS). Especially for Mexicans, this city is very safe compared to other big cities like Los Angeles and Chicago, where the Mexican population is bigger and more noticeable” (J. A. Laguna, personal communication, July 7th, 2001),

Mr. Laguna works out of the Mexican Consulate, and his office is part of a wider effort by the Mexican federal government to reach Mexicans in the United States began by President Salinas de Gortari in the early 1990’s. In February 1990, the President authorized

the creation of the Program for Mexican Communities Abroad (PCME) (Leiken, 2001). Mr. Laguna has lived in New York City for 20 years, so he has personally witnessed the growth of the Mexican population there. In terms of job niches, according to Mr. Lagunas, the Mexican population in New York City is flexible: they are willing to work in any sector that offers work. Hence, the growing service sector has been the major receiver of Mexican workers during the last decade. Brother Joel Magallan, Tepeyac Association's director, confirmed Mr. Laguna's contention that the city is a sanctuary from pressures from the INS. Rudolf Guliani, the Mayor's city at the time of this interview, was very friendly and supportive of immigrants. This is not surprising, since immigration has been beneficial for the city. Thanks greatly to immigration, the 2000 census showed the biggest increase of population in this city in the last 30 years, which helped produce a thriving economy, more political representation in Washington D.C., and an increase of \$40 million a year under state and federal financed programs which are determined based on population number ("New York City Population Peak," 2001).

But New York is a sanctuary for other reasons. The City University of New York (CUNY), which is the biggest public university in the city, has agreed with Mr. Lagunas and other consuls not to ask immigrants for legal residency papers, and if they happen to be undocumented, to charge them the same money for tuition they charge to New York state student. This, Mr. Laguna says, reflects the priorities of the city's government, which sees more benefits in having educated, productive immigrants than uneducated ones. Unfortunately, after September 11, 2001, New York City awoke to a different reality. Its friendliness and goodwill towards immigrants did not stop a terrorist attack carried on, paradoxically, by people from another country. Many things would change after the attacks in which the World Trade Center collapsed and over 2000 people died, among them about

15 Mexican immigrants, and of course the city's friendliness towards immigrants was one of those things. Late in 2001, a 1996 federal government resolution not to allow undocumented immigrants to pay the lower in-state tuition was enforced at the state university. CUNY announced that undocumented immigrants would now have to pay the higher out-of-state tuition rate (Purnick, 2002). A heated debate began, and as late as April 2002, Governor Pataki announced that he was going to work on legislation to permit undocumented immigrants to pay the in-state rate (Arenson, 2002).

Despite the city's effort to help immigrants get an education, according to Mr. Lagunas, the New York City government's priority is not to assimilate immigrants. Its main priority is to help immigrants "to become productive in the city's economy" (personal communication, July 2001). In fact, Mr. Lagunas says, New York City is also a sanctuary for immigrants when it comes to the free expression of their culture. More so than other cities, New York respects diversity and different cultures. There is a respect for different beliefs, life styles, religions, etc. Such respect is more practical than anything else, since the city is not concern with assimilating immigrants, at least in the cultural aspect. (J.A. Laguna, July 7, 2001). Throughout this chapter I will discuss and analyze the different aspects of my conversation with Mr. Laguna.

3.1.1 Cultural, Economic, and Political Setting for Immigrants in New York City.

New York City is indeed a "Portal of Portals" to America. Castle Garden, an immigration port of entry at the tip of Manhattan that operated between 1855 and 1890, processed about 70.6 percent of the total number of immigrants arriving to America during the years it operated. On January 1892, Ellis Island opened its doors and in the next 35 years, 70 percent of all immigrants to the country would be processed there (Barkan, 1991). Today, thanks greatly to immigration to New York City, New York state is one of the top

four immigrant states, along with California, Florida and Texas (Krikorian 1997; Rumbaut & Portes, 2000). In the 2000 census, thanks to immigration, the city showed its biggest population increase in 30 years, counting a little over eight million people. Of those eight million, at least 2,774,853 declared to be foreign born, without counting Puerto Ricans, who are considered American citizens by birth. More astonishing than this number is the fact that an estimated 1,183,930 reported to have entered the country in the last decade (U.S. Census Bureau, 2002). This means that about 40 percent of all immigrants in the city have arrived in the last ten years.

But if New York City is still the prime place of destination for many immigrants, just like it was 100 years ago, the color of immigration has changed, just as it has all throughout the United States. Between 1880 and 1920 about a million and a half immigrants settled in the city. They were mostly Eastern Europeans, Jews and Southern Italians, and the majority arrived at the shores of Ellis Island, which was the biggest immigration post in the country at that time. Today's immigrants are mostly Asian, Latin Americans, and West Indians, mostly people of color. Many of them are legal immigrants who have arrived to the city by airplane, on H1B or H2B (working) visas, or to reunite with their family members. Others are visa overstayers, who have also arrived to the city by plane. Still others have traveled through a "coyote" (a smuggler) from the Mexican Mixteca (an area located in the North of Puebla, the South of Oaxaca and the East of Guerrero, all Mexican states), paying as much as \$2,000 dollars to illegally get to New York City, using different types of transportation (Foner, 2001a).

As in the rest of the country, the debate regarding federal policies to integrate minority groups, which of course includes immigrants, is also going on in New York City. Even though many do praise "the immigrant work ethic, activity and drive" (Foner, 2001a,

p. 103), many others fear that immigrants will just want to benefit from minority benefit programs (such as affirmative action or bilingual education), or that they will have problems and even resist “fitting in” in the city. Because many are of non-Western origin, others also fear that new immigrants will undermine American values. The fact is that New York has always been an immigrant city, extremely ethnically diverse and this fact has never affected its image as “The” American city (Barkan, 1991). Around the world, the image of the Statue of Liberty is the American symbol, and there is no other city that represents the whole country as New York does. Referring to this debate in the city, it is also important to mention that both Governor Pataki and Mayor Guliani are moderate Republicans who support affirmative action programs. Regarding bilingual education, the city changed its programs at the beginning of 2001. It established that children could remain in bilingual programs for no longer than three years under normal circumstances. It also expanded its two-way bilingual education programs (bilingual classes and English as a second language classes), adding a third program called “accelerated academic English” (Zehr, 2001; Unz, 2001). This, I would argue, leaves New York City with two assimilationist programs: English as a second language and accelerated academic English, and only one pluralistic program: the bilingual one. Although many saw these changes as positive, Ron Unz, who led the campaign to end bilingual education in California, saw them “as not enough.” According to him, New York state needed to end completely bilingual programs and replace them with English immersion ones, like California has (Unz, 2001). Thus, the debate is likely to continue in the years to come, and it will be relevant to see whether the reforms for bilingual education in New York do reflect in better performance by immigrant children in the schools.

In ethnic and cultural terms, as it has always been, New York City is a very heterogeneous and diverse place. Los Angeles, which along with New York City is the biggest destination for immigrants, showed that more than half of the immigrants counted in the 1990 census were from only three countries: Mexico, El Salvador and Guatemala. The situation of New York City is very different. The biggest immigrant groups counted in that census were Dominicans, Chinese and Jamaicans, and they formed under 30 percent of the immigrant population. No other immigrant group accounted for more than five percent, and there were immigrants from most European, West Indian, Asian, and Latin American nationalities, basically, from all over the world (Foner, 2001a). In fact, in 1992 New York's department of city planning called Elmhurts-Corona, a neighborhood located in Queens, "perhaps the most ethnically mixed community in the world" (Sanjek, 1998, quoting the New York Department of City Planning, p. 1).

This shows what Mr. Laguna said: that New York City is a cultural heaven for immigrants where most cultures and languages from around the world are represented and for the most part respected. In fact, the city is considered a "multicultural" place, where immigrants feel comfortable because nobody seems to care that they are "different." Since there are so many others that are different as well, they feel free to express their ethnicity. This seems to be an accurate description of New York City, which often has parades and different ethnic festivals taking place even on the same day. Robert D. McFadden describes one such day in *The New York Times*: "...hundreds of thousands of people turned out at parades saluting Israel and Cuba on Fifth avenue and the Avenue of the Americas. Midtown demonstrators shouted for Palestinian justice. And throngs celebrated a Mexican national holiday at street festivals in Harlem and Queens. In short, it was Sunday in New York..." (McFadde, para. 1, 2002).

Nevertheless, having the liberty to express one's own cultural heritage does not mean that the city does not encourage the learning of the English language. There are many English schools around the city, and the public libraries of each borough (Bronx, Brooklyn, Manhattan, Queens, and Staten Island) offer English classes for free. Furthermore, as already explained, bilingual programs have been changed in the city, having as a main purpose to speed up the process of learning English. Cultures in New York City may never mix to become a new one --although, according to Glazer and Moynihan they never have, anyway (Glazer & Moynihan, 1963)-- but in the midst of their diversity, the English language may represent the only sign of a common culture. Its perceived importance may be reflected in the bill mentioned in Chapter Two introduced in 2001 proposing an amendment to the state constitution to declare English as the official language of New York State.

Economically, the city may indeed also be a heaven for immigrants. Even though things did become more difficult in the economic realm for immigrants after the September 11th terrorist attacks --and for all Americans, for that matter-- many immigrants still can be seen working every where in the city. In a typical day, one can see that the person at the McDonald's counter is from the former Soviet Union, the flower vendor from Mexico, and the magazines and newspaper stand attendant from a West Indian country. In fact, some immigrant groups have formed very strong labor niches in which they employ other immigrants and fuel the economy in other ways. The concentration of Chinese in the garment industry, Koreans in the grocery sector, and Jamaicans in health care and public employment are good examples (Foner, 2001b).

Immigrants from all countries in New York City are, as they are around the country, a preferred labor source in certain niches, such as services (restaurants, fast food places,

and similar businesses). Studies show that New York City's employers show a strong preference for hiring immigrants, without taking notice on their race or ethnic background. In fact, immigrants are preferred over native born minorities. Employers prefer to hire Latinos from Mexico or Ecuador and blacks from the Caribbean and West Africa over native Latinos or Blacks. This does not mean that employers value immigrant culture or want to necessarily help fellow immigrants (many immigrants have business themselves and hire other immigrants). What they "generally admire," many employers state, "are a few perceived attitudes: punctuality, reliability, willingness to work hard, and to be a pliable labor force." (Foner, 2001a, p. 103). Thus, as happens in the rest of the country, immigrants in New York City may be more willing to tolerate harder work conditions and dead-end jobs than many native Americans.

But not everything is so bright for immigrants. New York City also shows the signs of having an "hour-glass economy." One hundred years ago, New York City was thriving as an industrial city, in which immigrants could arrive, hold low level position jobs and still end up as supervisors or managers. There were plenty of "in the middle" jobs, and immigrants could also help their children to obtain a job in their particular niche. In short, a college degree was not as necessary as it has become now. Now, New York's economy has evolved to the post-industrial era, where services and information jobs are the ones most available. For example, professional and business services jobs, such as banking, securities and insurance, grew 77 percent between 1970 and 1997, while manufacturing jobs shrunk from 19 percent of the total jobs in the city in 1970 to only 10 percent in 1997 (see appendix D for a complete view of New York's sectoral change in employment from 1970 to 1997). This economic restructuring has helped to create such an "hour glass economy". In fact, although the economy of the city improved from 1996 to 1997, the middle class

there was smaller in 1997 than it was in 1996, Immigrants today also arrive in a city that has not experienced as much of job increase as other immigrant destinations like Los Angeles or Chicago. New York has not shown “higher-than-average” job expansion during the last 30 years, and has in fact been outperformed by other cities in the country (Wright & Ellis, 2001).

In spite of this, New York City is still the financial capital of the world and keeps providing immigrants with many job opportunities. In 1998, New York City was the world’s leader in securities trade. The city was also home to 12 of the 20 largest international law firms and four of the five largest accounting firms in the world. It also had the largest concentration of international headquarters in the United States. (Foner, 2001a). By looking at this large concentration of financial jobs, one can see how obvious the need has become to have a college degree to “make it” in the city. If immigrants cannot get one themselves, they need to encourage their children to get a college education because this could be their only chance for upward social mobility.

In the political arena, immigrant groups in New York City also show the characteristics of transnational communities. Newly arrived immigrants may be more concerned with politics back home than what they are about politics in the City. Furthermore, with the advance in technology and easy travel, immigrants can get on an airplane and go back to their home country for presidential elections, just like many Dominicans did in the last presidential elections in their home country (Pessar & Graham, 2001). What makes them get concern about politics in the city is in many cases survival. For example, as I will explain in Chapter Four, according to Joel Magallan, the director of Tepeyac Association, Mexican immigrants participate politically (at least as much as they can, mostly with demonstrations and issuing petitions, because many are undocumented and cannot vote)

because they have been abused in their jobs or to ask for a general amnesty program to become legal residents (J. Magallan, personal communication, July 2001).

Dual nationality policies are also having effects in New York City. By the end of 1996, seven out of the ten largest immigrant groups there had the right to hold dual nationalities. Since dual nationality programs vary depending on the country, they have different effects in the city. For example, by their own national laws, Mexicans who hold dual nationalities cannot vote in Mexican elections or hold public offices there, thus their primary place of political activity would be the United States. On the other hand, Colombians can vote even at the Colombian offices in Queens and hold public offices in Colombia; thus they can engage in political activities both in Colombia and New York City. Furthermore, some immigrant groups, such as the Dominicans, encourage their nationals to become American citizens. Even though dual nationalities also concern some in New York City, for the most part showing one's ethnicity in the form of dual nationality is not viewed as anti-American (Foner, 2001a). Moreover, even with this program in effect, the 2000 census showed that less than half of immigrants in the city reported having become citizens: an estimate of 1,242,884, to be exact. Thus, as in the rest of the country, dual nationality programs may not guarantee that immigrants are becoming American citizens at a high rate.

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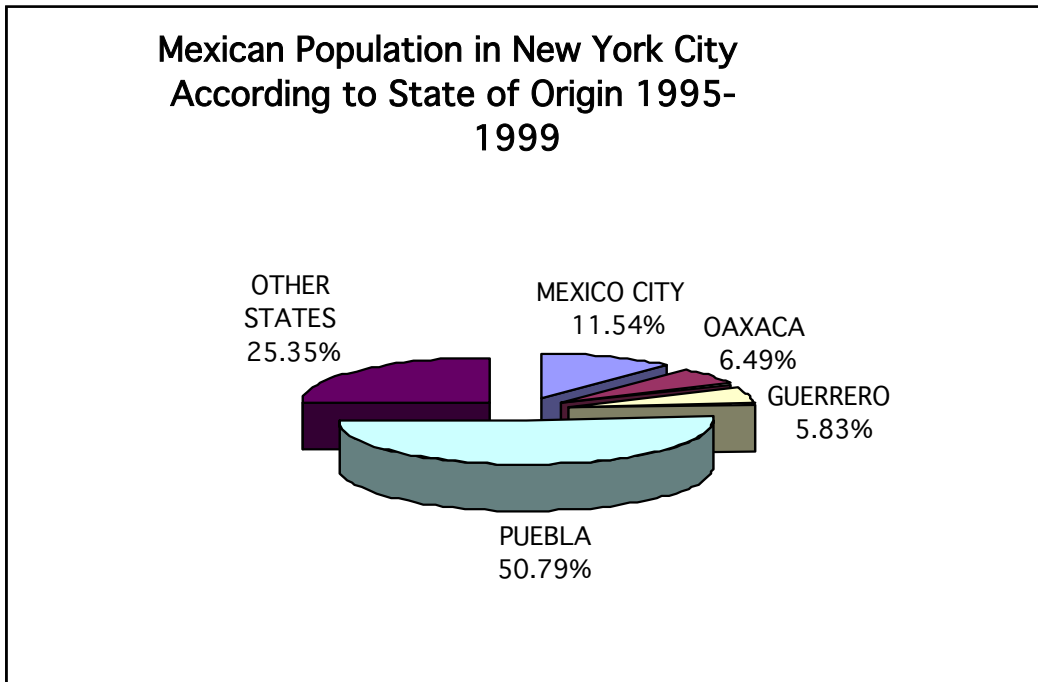
3.2.1 Mexicans in New York City: Who they are.

“So my life changed dramatically when I arrived in New York City as a college student one night 22 years ago. There were no Mexicans in New York in 1979 –none I could find, anyway. It took me a month of deep-cover detective work to find out where I could buy tortillas. I had to take the subway 15 stops downtown to an old Spanish store, and even there all I could find were three-packs of frozen white tortillas. They were disgusting, and I was depressed” Maria Hinojosa, “Living La Vida Latina”, *Time Magazine*, June 2001.

More than 20 years after Maria Hinojosa arrived to New York City, she can walk down Broadway Avenue or go to Jackson Hights in Queens and buy all the things she could not find before. From fresh tortillas to “cemitas” from Puebla, churros and “paletas de hielo” (popcicles), Mexican products can now be found in New York City with no problem. But if the products are now there, it is because Mexicans have brought them with them. As Mrs. Hinojosa states in her article, by the late 1980’s Mexicans started to have a visible presence in the city. But by the time she arrived to New York City, in the late 1970’s, there were Mexicans already there. In fact, Mexican presence in the city can be traced to the 1920’s, when some families from Yucatan emigrated there. Why immigration from Yucatan died off is not known. Although there are still a few “Yucatecos” nowadays in the city, the region sending the largest number of Mexicans to New York City is the Mixteca region (Smith, 2001). The Mexican consulate, in its last in-depth report (a demographic report based on a 115,136 sampler of people requesting official documents between 1995 and 1999), estimated that over 60 percent of Mexican immigrants in New York City are from this area. Moreover, over 50 percent are from the state of Puebla alone, which makes this Mexican state the major provider of immigrants to that city. Figure 3.1 shows the approximate percentage of immigrants by state of origin (Migration Report: Characteristics of the Mexican Community in New York , 1999).

According to Robert Smith (2001), who has written extensively on Mexican immigrants in New York City, it is estimated that there are between 250,000 to 275,000 Mexicans living in New York City, counting both Mexican immigrants and their children. Of these, Smith estimates that 50 percent are immigrants and 50 percent are native born. Tepeyac Association puts the number as high as 306,000. If it is difficult to estimate the

Figure 3.1 Mexican Immigrant Population According to State of Origin.



Source: Migration Report: Characteristics of the Mexican Community in New York. The Mexican Consulate in New York City, 1999.

total number of immigrants and native born, it is still more difficult to estimate the number of undocumented Mexicans because there is no exact data available. Again, Tepeyac Association estimates that as many as 90 percent of Mexican immigrants are undocumented. A more realistic number is given by Robert Smith. He states that at least 50 percent of immigrants are undocumented, but that the number could be much higher (Smith, 2001).

Although Mexican immigrants represent only around 13 percent of the immigrant population in New York City, there are some factors that make them an important case to study. For one thing, Mexican immigration to New York City has grown tremendously in the last 20 years, contributing to an explosive growth of the Mexican population there. There were an estimated 35,000 to 40,000 Mexicans in 1980 in the city, and about 100,000 in 1990. As we can see, the number has more than doubled by the year 2000, making

Mexicans the third largest ethnic group in the city, only behind Puerto Ricans and Dominicans (Smith, 2001). Another important issue regarding Mexican immigrants is that they present a great potential for growth, because they are not only arriving to the city in increasing numbers, but Mexican women also present a high birth-rate. According to the New York City Department of Health, between 1988 and 1996, Mexicans showed a 232 percent increase in their birth rate. Both immigration and procreation contribute to make Mexicans the fastest growing immigrant group in New York City (Smith, 2001).

Culturally, as in the rest of the country, Mexican immigrants in New York City are attached to their culture and traditions. For many Mexicans there, the Virgin of Guadalupe becomes more than a religious figure, symbolizing their culture and roots. In a city where different immigrant groups can ask for a place close to the church altar for their patron saints, thereby feeling represented, Mexicans have also asked for a place for their patron saint, the Virgin of Guadalupe, so she can represent them (Navarro, 2002)

Mexicans in New York City are proud of who they are, and they show it in different ways. They hold different festivals throughout the year, the most important being the Cinco de Mayo and Independence Day parades. They also want to keep their language and pass it on to their children. In fact, during my time volunteering at Tepeyac, two ladies told me in different occasions that they wanted to either go back to Mexico as soon as possible or send their children back so they can go to school in Mexico and not be influenced by the “cultura Americana” (American culture), which was not good for them, and so they can also learn Spanish “well”

Economically, Mexican immigrants have been able to find job niches, although low paying ones, and are also considered a preferred labor source, as I will discuss later in this chapter. As in the rest of the country, most of them do not have high levels of

education: few have studied beyond high school. Once in New York City, regardless of their level of education or previous experience, most of them work in the service sector. In fact, many Mexicans have become the “the delivery boys pedaling against mid-town Manhattan traffic.” (Sassen & Smith, 2002, p.13).

Push and pull factors also encourage Mexicans to emigrate to New York City. The push factors have been mainly the depressed state of the Mexican economy and how it affected the purchasing power of Mexicans. During the 1980’s, Mexico’s economy went from crisis to crisis, and poor states, such as Puebla, were especially affected. Thus, within the Mixteca region, the state that had established the biggest migratory circuit in New York City was greatly affected by the economic crises, particularly between 1981 to 1985. So, it was only obvious that many people, especially single men, would emigrate to the United States to reunite with friends or family in New York City, looking for a job opportunity. The pull factors complemented push factors. During the 1980’s Mexicans became identified as a preferred labor source, highly available and obedient.

Thus, Mexicans immigrants were pushed by hard economic conditions, especially in the Mixteca region, to emigrate to New York City, and were pulled by optimal labor market conditions in that city, as well as a network of other Mexicans who could help them get established there. Although the Mexican economy has somehow stabilized --it at least it did not experience an economic crisis during the change of presidential power in 2000-- there are still over 50 million poor people in the country. The Mixteca region is still very poor, and although Mexican migration to New York City from this particular area has lessened to some extent, there is another area that is sending more and more immigrants: Ciudad Nezahualcoyotl (“Neza”), in Mexico City. In fact, although it is difficult to know the exact

number, it is estimated that currently, about 25 to 30 percent of Mexican immigrants in New York City are from this particular area (Smith, 2001).

Regardless of the hard economic conditions, Mexican immigrant to New York City, as in the rest of the country, were not the poorest of the poor in their communities. One of the communities that has sent many immigrants, which Binford, and Lezama (2000) call “Salinas de Guadalupe” (they do not identified it by its real name, for privacy reasons), although poor, is not considered a “destitute” community. For example, in 1998 household heads there reported making an average of about \$40 a week, and considering that other people were working in the house, the average family income is higher. Furthermore, over 40 percent of the households had vehicles, which had been purchased with local economic resources as opposed to dollar-generated ones. Many people in this community also had diverse goods and services such as washing machines, refrigerators and even telephones. Thus, many Mexican immigrants who go to New York City may be the ones who want to bridge the gap between what they have and what a culture of consumption is telling them they should have.

Politically, Mexicans in New York City also show the characteristics of a transnational community. Politics from back home are still very important for immigrants there. Mexican politicians know this and even President Vicente Fox, when campaigning for the presidency in 1999, visited New York City to hold meetings with different leaders of the Mexican community. The government of Puebla has established "Casa Puebla", which provides some services to the Mexican community, especially those from the state of Puebla. As I will explain further in Chapter Four, many immigrants do not trust this particular institution because of its connections with the Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI). Melquiades Morales Flores was the PRI candidate, and upon his

election as Governor of Puebla in 1998, he approved the creation of Casa Puebla in New York City. Mario Riestra, the official government representative of Mexico in New York City, stated in a conversation that the government of Puebla does care about the well-being of Poblano immigrants in New York City. What is certain is that many immigrants do not perceive this and if they need help, they prefer to look for it somewhere else, as for example at the Tepeyac Association.

3.2.2 Cultural Assimilation.

Are Mexican immigrants assimilating to cultural life in New York City? In a city that supposedly has never represented the melting pot, but rather has always shown cultural pluralism, the answer may be no. Apart from the fact that first generation immigrants have always been attached to their culture of origin, most Mexican immigrants in New York City are exposed to the subculture of minority groups that according to them, may have a less rich culture and less appealing values than themselves (Smith, 1996). Since a significant number of the Mexican population in the city is relatively new, there are no strong ethnic enclaves, such as for example in Pilsen or 26th street in Chicago. Furthermore, Mexicans have tended to settle all across the five boroughs, even in Staten Island, which for a long time did not report any Mexican residents. Nevertheless, the three areas that reported the largest population of Mexican immigrants in the 2000 census were Sunset Park in Brooklyn, Trinity in Manhattan, and Manhattan Valley/ Morningside Heights in Manhattan (see Figure 3.2). This last area in particular was also heavily populated by immigrants from the Dominican Republic, the former Soviet Union, China, Jamaica, Korea, and West African countries, which along with Mexicans are the biggest immigrant groups in the city. Thus, Mexican immigrants, as other immigrant groups in the city, cling to their culture and traditions, since, even if they wish to assimilate to a majority group, there is really no such

group to which they could assimilate. New York City in general is a minority majority city, where minority groups now outnumber whites (Kraly & Miyares, 2001).

But if cultural assimilation has not taken place, at least partial incorporation has. After all, many Mexican immigrants in the city used to tend farms in the Mexican Mixteca area, whereas now they have to drive across New York City traffic to work as delivery boys. Thus, immigrants have to learn to cope with their new environment and in the process, a certain degree of assimilation, whether they want it or not, has to take place. Conversely, their culture is also influencing the city. The concept of assimilation as a two-way street is illustrated in relations between Mexicans and New Yorkers: many of the latter are now buying churros and eating in Mexican restaurants that had not existed before (Lewine, 1998). In fact, Mexicans in New York City have finally ended the city's reputation for having bet quality Mexican food (Foner, 2001). They are also celebrating "Cinco de Mayo" with Mexicans, and as stated before, for the first time even the governor celebrated with them last May 5th.

In regards to English language acquisition, the trend in New York City seems to be the same as in the rest of the country. Mexican immigrants there want to learn English because they know it is an important element to upward social mobility, but many of them find it extremely difficult. In fact, most of the immigrants I asked during my time in Tepeyac stated that they wanted to learn English (I asked about 2 or 3 a day), but that they could not find the time to do so. Only a few said that they were already taking English classes. The second generation seems to be doing much better in regard to English language learning. Although there is no hard data available, during my own observation of the teenagers that participated in Tepeyac's dancing group, I could see that most of them preferred to speak English and that in fact, the Tepeyac Association had a different program

for the immigrants' children called "Encontrando Nuestras Raices" (Finding our Roots), which was an after school program designed to teach Spanish and Mexican history and culture to the immigrants' children. Thus, it appeared that Tepeyac was not worried about those children not learning English, but rather, it was worried about them becoming monolingual and forgetting about their Mexican roots. The fact that I noticed Mexican teenagers prefer to speak English may support the findings of the Children of Immigrants Longitudinal Study (CILS) described in Chapter Two, which showed in his cohort sampler that immigrant's children are in fact adopting the English language. Moreover, the reformation of bilingual education programs that took place in the state of New York last year, adding an accelerated English immersion program for immigrant children, and the three years restriction time for those children to be enrolled in bilingual classes is likely to improve the linguistic assimilation of Mexican immigrant children in New York City.

3.2.3. Economic Assimilation

3.2.3.1 Are the Streets of New York City Paved With Gold?

Economic assimilation of Mexicans in general has also been difficult in New York City. Their economic upward mobility dropped sharply in the 1990's, and the trend seems to continue. Only a small minority of Mexicans experience upward mobility. Supposedly, a great influx of uneducated Mexicans, especially teenagers, taking low-paid jobs affected the economic outcome of the Mexican community as a group. About 81 percent of Mexican men and 70 percent of all Mexicans did not experience upward mobility during the 1980's. Mexicans went from having one of the highest incomes among Latinos, comparable to that of Cubans, in the 1980's, to one of the lowest in the 1990's. The sharpest decline occurred among those with less than a high school education. The average salary for them went from \$17,495 in 1980 to \$13,537 in 1990, which meant a drop of 22.6

percent in their per capita income in only 10 years. This figure looks even worse when Mexicans are compared with other Latino groups in New York City, which did experience upward mobility during that decade. Dominicans for example, had a 11.7 percent increase in their per capita income, Puerto Ricans a 6.4 percent and Ecuadorians a 14.5 percent increase (Smith, 2001). Out of this economic distress, Mexican immigrants seem to have had the worst part. According to Smith (2001), they disguise the progress of a significant number of Mexicans who did experience upward mobility during the 1980's and 1990's. As we can see in Table 3.1, their socioeconomic characteristics rank low when compared to the native born population, and even when compared to other immigrant groups.

Smith's argument may not be too far from reality. For example, many recent immigrants find jobs in Dominican and Korean owned green groceries stores. They work 12 hours a day, six days a week and are paid about \$180 per week, which means that they make a little over \$2 an hour (Sassen & Smith, 2002). Furthermore, many times they suffer exploitation and do not even get paid by their employers, a situation I discuss further in Chapter Four. Nevertheless, they still make more money than what they would make in Mexico. The Mexican Mixteca is considered part of the economic zone "C" in Mexico, the zone with the lowest minimum wage, which means that back home they would be making \$38.30 pesos a day, the equivalent to about \$3.80 dollars. Moreover, many of them are able to save most of their earnings because they live in crowded conditions, sharing rooms with other Mexicans, and their employers provide them with at least one meal a day (Smith, 1996).

But if salaries are not good, at least Mexican immigrants seem not to have any problems finding a job in New York City. In a city where so many new rich emerged during the 1990's, and the bifurcation of the economy created many high-end and low-end

jobs, the cheap labor force and disposability of Mexican immigrants have definitely helped them find a suitable place. Mexican immigrants in New York City have found jobs mainly in four labor niches: labor-intensive services (such as restaurants, ethnic take-out places, delivery and messenger services, and similar consumer industries), the traditional immigrant industries (like garment factories, which have been declining but still offer job opportunities), self-employment in the informal economy (such as selling churros or flowers), and the day labor market (for landscaping, site clean-up in construction, etc.) (Sassen & Smith, 2002). Those working in the later two sectors are the most vulnerable because these jobs do not offer a steady income and subject immigrants to many abuses. In fact, two day laboring immigrant workers, Israel Perez Arvizu and Magdaleno Estrada Escamilla, who were promised work but instead were physically attacked in September 2000, filed a class-action civil rights lawsuit, arguing that the attack had been part of a larger plan, in which the two attackers had been influenced by three white supremacist groups (“Gootman, 2001). Although this might be an exaggeration, the truth is that these “esquineros,” as they are called because they stand in corners waiting for someone to offer them a job, are in a highly vulnerable position, in which they could suffer many abuses. In sum, it could be said that most Mexicans, native-born and immigrants, did not experience economic assimilation in the last 20 years. Of them, Mexican immigrants did the worst, and the only positive sign has been that they do not seem to struggle to find jobs in the city. Of course, this alone does not guarantee economic upward mobility, so Mexicans do need to improve their human capital by learning English and emphasizing the importance of education for their children, which, as we will see in the next section, shows some distressing trends.

3.2.3.2 Human Capital of Mexican Immigrants in New York City.

“You go to New York,” says Antonio Martinez, an immigrant from the Mexican state of Puebla, “to work, eat and sleep.” (Michael Barone, *The New Americans: How the Melting Pot Can Work Again*, 2001).

As in the rest of the country, the main source of human capital for Mexican immigrants in New York City is their disposition to work hard, along with their youth. For the majority, education levels and English knowledge are not important sources of human capital because Mexicans are among the least educated immigrants in the city. In fact, when compared with other immigrants in New York City from the 15 most common countries of origin, in 1990 they were the immigrant group with the highest percentage of people who had less than a ninth grade education level: almost 43 percent, as compared with almost 31 percent of Dominicans, who were the next lowest Latino immigrant group (Foner, 2001). Figure 3.3 shows the education level by place of origin in Mexico, according to the Mexican Consulate in New York’s latest study. Furthermore, although learning English is considered not only important, but necessary to obtain upward economic mobility, as explained before, most immigrants just have good intentions and do not take English lessons.

But if Mexican immigrants are not educated and do not know English, their willingness to work hard makes them a preferred labor source. In fact, during the last two years, some garment industries have openly declared their preference for Mexican workers, posting announcements such as “Mexican Wanted...” (Sassen & Smith, 2002). The same goes for Korean owned green groceries and delicatessen stores, and other immigrant owned business, who even prefer to hire Mexican immigrants than their own coethnics. Korean and Greek employers, in particular, reported that “Mexicans were highly desirable

as employees, because they were cheaper to hire, and hiring them did not entail the same kind of reciprocal obligation as hiring a coethnic.” (Smith, 1996, p.77).

Another source of human capital for Mexican immigrants in New York City is their youth. The Mexican Consulate there reports that most immigrants are between 18 and 40 years old, with the highest concentration between 20 and 30 ("Migration Report," 1999, see Appendix E). In fact, research done in the community of “Salinas de Guadalupe” in Mexico shows that the great majority of people who emigrate from there to New York City are young. Many of them just finish their junior high school education and within the next few years go to New York City (Binford & Lezama, 2000). Moreover, according to Tepeyac about 50 percent of Mexican immigrants in New York are between the ages of 12 and 24. Regarding both sources of human capital discussed here --Mexican immigrants as a preferred labor source and their youth-- it is worth mentioning that during my time in New York City, I had the opportunity to notice both. I spoke with some business owners in New York City and New Jersey suburbs, who stated that they liked to hire Mexicans because they are “hard workers and do not complain as much as American workers.” (W.Hokes, Personal Communication, July 22, 2001). Also, many of the members of Tepeyac Association were young men, who came by the main offices after work to participate in different activities the association organized, or to help to organize activities in their churches or neighborhoods sponsored by Tepeyac.

3.2.4 Political Assimilation.

Mexicans immigrants in New York City are very much concerned with politics back home. The government of Puebla has in fact established a permanent presence in the city, and when necessary, the community is often visited by Mexican politicians who consider them important enough to establish a good relationship. Mexicans in New York

City are also showing more political participation. Legal immigrants are becoming citizens at higher rates than they did before. As in the rest of the country, the “anti-immigrant” policies of the mid 1990’s, explained in Chapter Two, have been a determining factor for immigrants to become citizens. As I explain further in Chapter Four, those policies have also caused Mexican immigrants, particularly the undocumented, to participate politically at the grass-root level in New York City, especially during the last 5 years, which is when Tepeyac Association started to organize them. Another important factor pushing for Mexican immigrants to become citizens may be the Mexican government itself, through the Mexican consulate in New York City, encourages immigrants who are eligible to become citizens to do so, because as a senior official of the Program of Mexican Communities Abroad stated it: “We want Mexicans in the United States and Mexican Americans to be Mexico’s friends, and we want powerful, not weak, friends” (Smith, 200, p. 284). Since transnational ties, among them dual nationality, are very much accepted in New York City, (Foner, 2001) the city may indeed be the ideal place for Mexican immigrants to experience simultaneous incorporation to both Mexico and the United States. In fact, at the beginning of President Vicente Fox’s term, Mexican leaders from New York City traveled to Mexico City to meet with him. The main petitions of those leaders were the following (Godínez, 2000):

- The opportunity for the Mexican community in New York City to participate in Mexican political life, specifically in the election of politicians.
- For the President to advocate and defend the right of Mexican immigrants before U.S authorities and the U.S Congress.

At this time, Mexicans are not allowed yet to vote abroad. Furthermore, negotiations to grant an amnesty to Mexican immigrants in the United States came to a halt after the

September 11th, 2001 terrorist attacks. During the last United States-Mexico bilateral meeting on November 2002, the general feeling was that the war against terrorism is still the main concern for the United States and that a solution to the plight of Mexicans will not occur any time soon.

Moreover, in New York City, where so many people from all over the world not only live together, but also have to make political decisions together, immigrants are of course part of the political game. Mexicans there, as a relatively new immigrant group, are confronted with choices about how to play such a game. A big question for the political future of Mexican immigrants is whether they will decide to mobilize as an ethnic group, or as part of the Latino race. If they decided to mobilize mainly as an ethnic group, as they are already doing it through Tepeyac, New York politicians might listen to them only to a limited extent, since they are not hugely significant in numbers and many of them are undocumented. Alternatively, if they become part of the Latino race and mobilize, for example, along with the Dominicans and Puerto Ricans, which are the most powerful Latino groups in the city, these groups might not be concerned with issues of particular interest for Mexican immigrants (for example, a general amnesty to legalize undocumented immigrants), or might just “push” their issues of concern and proclaim that they are acting in behalf of the city’s entire Latino community (Smith, 2001).

In the midst of this dilemma, the major hope for political participation of Mexican immigrants in New York City, at least at the polls, is the second generation. Although most children of these immigrants will not be able to participate politically at least for ten years, if the high birth-rates of Mexican immigrants’ children continue as they are, Mexicans will be able to have within a few years a larger community who can actively participate in New York’s political arena, not only at the grass-root level, but also with their votes.

3.3. Factors that Hinder the Assimilation of Mexican Immigrants in New York City.

As other Mexicans across the United States, many Mexican immigrants in New York City show the desire to work for some time there and then return to their home communities (Valdes, 1996). As stated in Chapter Two, this causes immigrants to incorporate only partially to American cultural, economic, and political life. Nevertheless, according to Smith, Mexicans are returning at a lower rate to Mexico. More and more Mexicans are establishing themselves in New York City and even taking their families with them (Smith, 2001). Still, many others follow migratory circuits and travel back and forth from their home communities to New York City. For example, in the return flight from my research there in the 2001 Summer, the two passengers next to me were returning to Mexico to spend the winter, one to Puebla and another one to Mexico City, and were planning to return to New York City in the following summer to work. Furthermore, my own observation supports the fact that many immigrants still prefer to come back to Mexico, at least for a short time. During one week while volunteering at Tepeyac, I called an average of 20 people a day to invite them to the presentation of the Tepeyac Mexican Folk Dance Company. At least once a day, I was told that the person I wanted to talk to had return to Mexico and it was uncertain whether he would come back to New York City.

In addition to the facts already mentioned in Chapter Two that hinder the assimilation of Mexican immigrants in the U.S., Mexican immigrants in New York City face other challenges. In terms of education --bilingual education as a cultural factor and school performance of the second generation-- the most troubling one is the performance of immigrants' children. Along with the other Latino children and adolescents in elementary and middle schools in the city, they lag behind Asian and white children in standard mathematics and English exams. As years of schooling pass, the gap seems to widen,

(Hartocollis, 2002). Adding this to the fact that many immigrant adolescence have emigrated to the city and are not attending school, or did not graduated from high school in Mexico, we can see that there is a great problem with the education of Mexican youth in New York City.

Another challenge is the geographic dispersion of Mexicans in the city. The Chinese, for example, have a strong community in Chinatown. There, Chinese factory and other business owners rent space from other Chinese landlords, buy equipment and material from Chinese suppliers, get credit from Chinese financial institutions, and employ fellow Chinese, mostly immigrants, who then buy products and services from other Chinese within the community. In contrast, Mexicans are located throughout the city, with a higher presence in three different areas which are far from each other. This dispersion will make it almost impossible, for example, for authorities to draw a Mexican political district, such as the one that allowed Dominicans to elect their first city council representative (Smith, 2001, see again Figure 3.2).

Of particular concern are the problems that Mexican immigrants have regarding their economic assimilation in New York City. In fact, their dispersion across industries and jobs (Smith, 2001), presents a big challenge because, aside from the low-end job niches already mentioned, Mexican immigrants have not been able to create strong ethnic networks in particular job niches where they could achieve economic upward mobility, and this might have to do more with education than with anything else. As long as immigrants do not learn English and their children do not do well in school and go on to college, the creation of job niches at the middle or high end of the economic scale is very unlikely.

3.4. How the Future Looks:

As is true with other Mexicans in the United States, Mexican immigrants in New York City do not wish to assimilate either, at least when this means leaving behind their culture and roots. More than anywhere else, New York City seems to be the perfect place to oppose the forces of cultural assimilation. But Mexicans do want to experience upward mobility and participate politically. The fact that they traveled over 5,000 miles to work in New York City and that Tepeyac reports having at least 10,000 members demonstrates it.

To achieve their “immigrant dream” of social upward mobility, Mexican immigrants in New York City still have many challenges ahead. As is true with other Mexicans across the United States, the main issue of concern becomes the second generation. Although Mexican Americans showed modest upward mobility during the 1980’s, many uneducated young immigrants are arriving to the city. These young immigrants do play a part in disguising the educational attainment of all Mexicans in New York City.

Furthermore, in 1990 Mexicans showed the highest percentages of young people between 16 and 19 years old who were not in high school and had not graduated: 47 percent. This number included many teenaged immigrants who had not finished high school in Mexico and who also had not enrolled in high school in New York City (Smith, 2001). Thus, the low levels of education of these young immigrants disguised the real educational attainment of the entire Mexican population in the city. It also presents other social problems, such as gang activities. In fact, this last has become an issue of concern among the Mexican community in the last few years. The issue, again, it is not whether the second generation and, in the particular case of New York City, young immigrants are assimilating or not, but rather to what segment of the population they are assimilating.

In Chapter Four, we will see how the Tepeyac Association deals with the different challenges that Mexican immigrants in New York City and their children face in their integration process, especially the undocumented ones. We will also see how their goal is only to integrate them into life in the city rather than assimilate them, the particular actions they take, and how effective they are in achieving their goal. New York City, as Mr. Laguna stated, may be indeed a heaven for immigrants compared with other cities, but the immigrant experience there is still full of challenges, and the work of associations like Tepeyac is still crucial to help immigrants face those challenges and integrate into American society.