

## *Latinos in New York: Communities In Transition*

Gabriel Haslip-Viera and Sherrie L. Baver (editors). Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press. 1996.

*reviewed by James Wiley*

This volume differs from many similar academic efforts in that it is a collection of essays written for the express purpose of developing course materials that focus on the distinctive Hispanic migration experience to/in New York. The editors state that their work fits into a newly emerging category of volumes that examines the "overall Latino experience in particular localities or regions," a departure from an earlier tradition of studies that focused upon specific nationality groups. The result is an eleven-chapter book that is divided into two major sections. The first offers historical and sociological perspectives on the creation of communities of Latin American origin (the authors utilize the terms "Hispanic" and "Latino" interchangeably) in New York City. Subsequently, the emphasis shifts to policy matters and their impact on those communities. Given the demographics of New York's Latino population, Puerto Rican themes command the greater share of individual chapters in the volume. Other chapters are devoted to Dominicans and Mexicans while the remaining five treat subjects that relate to all of the communities involved.

Fortunately for those unfamiliar with New York City, the first chapter offers a chronology of the evolution of its Latino community, whose origins extend back to the early 1800s. It periodizes the immigration of Hispanics to the city, identifying four eras and presenting the major flows and characteristics of each. The periods noted are 1) prior to 1900; 2) 1900-1945; 3) 1945-1965/70; and 4) from 1965 onward. The chapter is strongest in its presentation of immigration data, identification of source regions, and the eventual establishment of enclaves in New York. It is less successful in its extremely brief and oversimplified efforts to explain the changing push factors impelling so many people to leave their Latin American homelands. To be fair, such a topic fills volumes unto itself but the explanations provided were, at times, inconsistent with the demographics of those who migrated to New York, as described in later paragraphs. The

chapter would have been enhanced by maps of the city's five boroughs indicating the various neighborhoods mentioned in the text.

In Chapter 2, "Dominicans in New York: Men, Women, and Prospects," Ramona Hernandez and Silvio Torres-Saillant present an informative discussion of the causes and outcomes of large migrations into New York from the Dominican Republic since the mid-1960s. They correctly attribute Dominican emigration primarily to the economic restructuring that occurred following the U.S. intervention in 1965. This led to substantial rural displacement and capital-intensive industrial development under the U.S.-supported regime of Joaquin Balaguer. The Dominican experience in New York is depicted as a mixed set of outcomes, with success stories and dismal failures amidst an ambivalent background of strong attachments to the country of origin and a transient mentality with regard to permanent residence in the host society. A plausible argument is put forth concerning the gains registered by Dominican women in the USA but this is insufficiently documented to be convincing. Similarly, the authors' optimistic prognosis for the community's future is rather surprising as it follows a predominantly negative exposition of its socioeconomic indicators.

New York's smaller, but growing, Mexican community is the subject of Chapter 3, "Mexicans in New York: Membership and Incorporation in a New Immigrant Community," by Robert Smith. He argues that the Mexican experience does not conform to the traditional melting pot or ethnic pluralism models of immigration outcomes. Rather, he suggests that it imperfectly exemplifies Portes' and Zhou's 1993 model of "segmented assimilation," in which the maintenance of a degree of ethnic separation actually facilitates eventual assimilation and success in the new host society. He then illustrates how this occurs with New York's Mexican immigrants, a process aided considerably by the high degree



of geographic concentration of their source areas within Mexico itself and by the activities of the Mexican consulate. Smith also presents a complex discussion of the situation of largely undocumented Mexican labor in New York, arguing that their vulnerability is a contrived outcome of structural conditions reflecting the interplay of what he labels the inclusionary and exclusionary "projects" of the American state. A tension results from the interpretation of the USA's constitutional intentions to provide all residents, whether citizens or not, with the protection of law, including the right of all children to an education, while the US government simultaneously works to keep out undocumented aliens. The outcome is the persistent presence of easily exploited illegal workers.

In Chapter 4, Clara Rodriguez discusses "Racial Themes in the Literature: Puerto Ricans and other Latinos." Her focus is clearly on race as it relates to New York's Puerto Rican community but she initially presents a useful discussion of how racial classification systems differ between Latin America (considered generically) and the United States before analyzing what kinds of problems this generates for immigrants. Simply stated, the US generally considers race from a dichotomous white/non-white perspective; people with small percentages of blood from other racial groups are classified as non-whites. In Latin America, race is relatively less important as part of one's identity base but is viewed as a continuum, ranging from white to black, with many shades and mixtures in between. Whiteness is, nevertheless, highly valued, a consequence of European dominance during the colonial period, and Latin Americans consider themselves to be "white" if they have even just a small portion of white blood. Rodriguez argues that these differing views on race created problems for immigrants in New York. She presents her case through the example of Puerto Ricans, as they were the first Latinos to arrive in significant numbers to an uncertain welcome from white Americans who were not quite sure how to classify them. Her findings included the greater economic success of whiter Puerto Ricans and the general desire of all Puerto Ricans in New York to differentiate themselves clearly from African-Americans.

"The Identity and Culture of Latino College Students" is the focus of Chapter 5, which draws from an unfortunately very small sample of examinations written by CUNY students in a course on Puerto Ricans in the United

States. Author Jose Hernandez utilizes the exams as the basis for drawing conclusions about the cultural identities of contemporary Latino youth and how they differ from their parents' generation, whose youth had occurred during a less conservative era. He nevertheless presents several interesting findings, including the maintenance of a strong Puerto Rican identity, though one rooted in New York rather than in the island itself. He noted the students' willingness to look within their communities for sources of problems rather than project all blame on external factors. He also found the students less likely to rely upon government for solutions; most felt that efforts to revitalize must come from the community itself.

Ana Maria Diaz-Stevens offers one of the volume's strongest chapters in "Aspects of Puerto Rican Religious Experience: A Sociohistorical Overview." Her strong analysis of the way in which religion affects the lives of New York's Puerto Rican community devolves from the unique pattern of evolution of religious life on the island itself over several centuries. That process was characterized by a pronounced rural-urban dichotomy that interacted with issues of social class, resulting in an almost folkloric form of Catholicism that developed largely outside the boundaries of the institutional church. She then carries her analysis to New York, where a rather unwelcoming church hierarchy unknowingly replicated the conditions that once again caused many Puerto Ricans to turn to their own creativity in religious affairs. Diaz-Stevens also discusses the impact of U.S. policy on Puerto Rican religious life after 1898 and the influence of Protestant values that were transmitted through the American administration of the island.

Chapters 7 and 8 deal with exceptionally important issues but utilize relatively old data to illustrate their points, a fact noted by Chapter 7 author, Edwin Melendez, and the volume's editors. Melendez analyzes "Hispanics and Wage Inequality in New York City" to demonstrate how commonly held assumptions about the experiences of earlier groups of immigrants are thus far not replicated by the nation's Latino population. He considers a variety of supply-side and demand-side factors that influence wage levels, invoking labor market segmentation theory in the process. His findings identify labor market segmentation, with Hispanics over-represented in the low-skill secondary job markets, education, and discrimination to be the primary factors explaining the



relatively low remuneration levels of New York City's Latinos. He concludes by advocating the need to pursue demand-side employment policies like affirmative action that would benefit the majority of the city's workforce, despite their political unpopularity.

Jesse M. Vasquez tackles an immense issue with "Education and Community: Puerto Ricans and Other Latinos in the Schools and Universities." He wisely begins by linking issues and problems in the city's schools to the greater social context within which education occurs, since such problems clearly cannot be resolved in isolation from other factors. He cites several dated statistics that illustrate a rather dismal picture of Hispanic performance in a New York City school system that has not adequately adjusted to the changing demographics of its student body. He then selects a small number of issues for further analysis, noting that many others of great importance could also be discussed. His choices are parental involvement, bilingual education, a multicultural curriculum, and ethnic studies programs in the city's universities. Each of these issues serves to illustrate the politicized nature of the educational planning process in a diverse urban center and the frustrating aspects of efforts to achieve change.

In Chapter 9, "Puerto Rican Politics in New York: Beyond 'Secondhand' Theory," Jose Sanchez applies three traditional theoretical frameworks on the distribution of political power to Puerto Rican politics, finding each insufficient. He provides overviews of the pluralist, elitist, and political economy schools of thought before putting each to the test through case studies related to the political experiences of Puerto Ricans in New York. The case studies include the struggle for access to public housing, Puerto Rican political efforts during the 1950s (specifically those involving the Liberal Party), access to resources on the part of Puerto Rican organizations, and the ongoing "national question." The latter fundamentally revolves around the island's future status but interacts with the issue of whether Puerto Ricans view themselves/are viewed by others as a nationality group or as an ethnic group. Afterward, Sanchez ventures into new theoretical space, arguing in a preliminary manner that a "social power" approach may prove useful in analyzing Puerto Rican politics. This draws heavily from the political economy approach and its emphasis on productive processes and the

nature of work but differs from it by recognizing that states and other social organizations are also the loci of social power. He suggests that "social power" offers a more comprehensive theoretical framework for the analysis of Puerto Rican powerlessness in New York.

Chapter 10 is entitled "New York's Latinos and the 1986 Immigration Act: The IRCA Experience and Future Trends." Author Sherrie Bayer does not break new ground in her discussion of the two primary provisions of this critical law that focused upon the USA's undocumented population but she does offer an interesting explanation of the confusing application system through which an eligible illegal could obtain amnesty and a green card. She also presents a useful analysis of the mixed responses it generated, including the very low application rate in New York City and State, whose possible causes she briefly covers. Most of the remainder of the chapter deals with the implementation of penalties for employers who hire undocumented workers, the IRCA's other major provision. Many analysts feel this has increased the discrimination levels encountered by New York's Latino community, whether legal or not. She concludes that employer sanctions have had little impact in New York. She attributes this to the unlikelihood that most illegals would return home (a journey more costly than driving across the California-Mexico border), the failure of the law to deter new arrivals, and the tendency of the INS to direct its limited enforcement resources toward larger companies more likely to be in compliance with the law. Her analysis concludes that, if anything, the City's illegals became further marginalized as the law forced them into employment situations in smaller ethnic enterprises, as day laborers, or as pieceworkers operating out of their homes. In all of those cases, they are less likely to earn even the minimum wage and gain any social benefit coverage.

The volume's exceptionally brief conclusion, "Puerto Rican and Latino Culture at the Crossroads" by Juan Flores, does not really fulfill its title nor serve to tie together the varied offerings that precede it, always a useful exercise in multi-authored works of this nature. Flores' primary contribution is to sound a call for further research that departs from traditional norms of analysis of the cultural adjustment/assimilation of the country's immigrant populations. Given the differences between pre-1965 and post-1965 migration flows (with Puerto Ricans exemplifying the latter

groups despite their earlier arrival) he wisely suggests that future analyses proceed from within the cultures being analyzed rather than emanating from "normative measures of the dominant society" that will likely assess contemporary immigrant adjustment patterns as "deviant" or deficient. With that suggestion, he does partially succeed in bringing the volume to a coherent conclusion.

Overall, *Latinos in New York: Communities in Transition* is a worthwhile volume, potentially useful for several undergraduate and graduate courses. It is readable, interesting, and will engage many students, especially those in the metropolitan area. Its primary collective weakness, however, is its provincial nature. The authors assume knowledge of New York in

their readers, which could limit the book's marketability elsewhere. This could easily be overcome in a future edition, should one emerge, by including some background information about the basic geography of the region and, as noted earlier, a map noting the various neighborhoods mentioned in the individual chapters. With those small changes, the work would certainly make interesting, illuminating, and strongly recommended reading.

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