

# Assimilation or Colonization?

Book Review by Kevin Lamb

As the ranks of America's foreign-born population continue to swell into the next millennium, the debate over modifying U.S. immigration policy is likely to intensify. Uninterrupted, this demographic transformation foreshadows enormous cultural and societal consequences, yet the implications of this population shift remain detached from the policy elite. Immigration reform is one of the most neglected issues in the current presidential campaign even though the effects of immigration ricochet politically at the state, local and national level.

Consider the political pressures of ethnic constituencies. As the leading presidential candidates aggressively court the Hispanic vote in critical states like Texas and California, as well as the Cuban American vote in politically pivotal Florida, the outcome of future elections may hinge on the efficacy of immigrant nationalities as an ethnic voting-bloc. Some web sites provide candidates' position papers in Spanish. Moreover, political analysts regard President Clinton's recent unadvised grant of clemency to imprisoned Puerto Rican FALN terrorists as a calculated effort to sway Puerto Rican voters in the First Lady's all but certain 2000 bid for the vacant New York Senate seat. In political terms, contemporary immigration trends will merely solidify the political significance of ethnic voting-blocs. The Balkanization of increasingly diverse nations will allow culturally *unassimilable* groups to exert greater political leverage — not on behalf of the national interest — but to enhance their own cultural prominence.

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The debate surrounding immigration issues is likely to become more pronounced given the latest census figures on the Hispanic and Asian population surge during the 1990s. As more suburban communities begin to resemble Guadalajara or San Juan rather than Topeka or Des Moines, further socio-economic and cultural dislocation could galvanize public support for immigration reform. Since economic factors spur much of the concern over immigration, the work of Harvard University scholar George Borjas brings common sense and realistic sobriety to this passionately argued topic.

His latest book, *Heaven's Door*, offers reasonable proposals for amending current immigration policies. In building upon a body of solid research as a distinguished scholar, Borjas recommends two equitably broad reforms: implementing new standards for U.S. citizenship and reducing the current annual level of legal immigration by fifty percent.

Crucial to any immigration reform is the establishment of both *qualitative* and *quantitative* citizenship requirements. Since the 1960s, legislative initiatives have neglected to implement and enforce standards that would safeguard the interests of native-born citizens. Borjas makes a convincing case for establishing both *quantitative* and *qualitative* reforms. In his view, the primary aim of immigration reform should sustain the economic, cultural and social bonds of the native-born populace. Put simply, the national interest should set the parameters for U.S. immigration policy — one that fortifies American prosperity.

Along the way, Borjas punctures a number of myths promulgated by advocates of unrestricted immigration. Several crucial questions feature prominently in Borjas's analysis: How many immigrants should the United States accept every year? Should legal immigration be restricted by skill-level? Is national origin a legitimate criteria for selecting immigrants? What is the impact of immigration

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**Heaven's Door:  
Immigration  
Policy and the  
American  
Economy**

by George J. Borjas  
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for national prosperity? Is the unrestricted annual flow of skilled immigrants economically beneficial for the future prosperity of the United States? Are most immigrants assimilating into the majority culture or merely expanding the realm of ethnic ghettos? Are immigrants more likely to end up on welfare in comparison to native Americans? Should corporate interests, driven by access to unskilled labor, determine national economic policies? What is the most effective way of curtailing the flow of illegal immigration? In lucid prose, Borjas separates fact from fiction on these and other pressing aspects of the immigration debate.

Particularly revealing is the author's candid reflection on growing up through adolescence in Castro's Cuba and emigrating from Havana to Miami in 1962. Although his father passed away a few years before he and his mother left their native land, Borjas remembers the stark contrast between Havana and Miami. "Although it is less than two hundred miles from Havana to Miami, it immediately struck me — in those first few minutes — that the two places were quite different. Whereas Cuba was a dark, moody, and frightening place, Miami was bright and bold. Havana was dead, nothing was possible because the prison walls surrounded everything and everyone. Miami was alive!" As Borjas points out, his own rags to riches journey — earning his way out of the depths of poverty after arriving penniless — differs considerably from the *average* experience of many poor immigrants who discover that America's streets are not paved with gold. A couple of years ago, Borjas revisited his former Miami neighborhood. Despite the fact that very little had changed in this impoverished community, Borjas noticed that a *different* set of immigrants — Haitian refugees — had occupied the same "two-story apartment building" where Borjas once lived. This slum looked essentially as it did when he left years ago: indigent and immigrant .

Much of the economic impact of immigration is distributional in nature. High immigration levels may benefit the agricultural sector of the economy that utilizes low-skilled laborers, but this beneficial arrangement can end up costing society in terms of higher taxes for public services. Borjas carefully explains the economic costs

and benefits from absorbing skilled versus unskilled immigrants. The claim that further immigration can *only* enhance a growing economy disregards evidence to the contrary: wage differentials between average personal incomes of native and immigrant workers, differential levels of welfare dependency, language barriers, skill level, educational background, family size, differential fertility rates between domestic and immigrant households as well as other economic variables. While local farmers may benefit from the labor of unskilled migrant workers, the neighboring community may be saddled with higher infrastructure costs in meeting the demands of community growth — additional

schools for children, transportation costs or 'sprawl' and 'crawl,' social service expenditures, housing, sewer and water maintenance — what Borjas refers to as economic "externalities."

Contrary to conservative and liberal immigration proponents, Borjas shows that the total "annual net gain is a modest *one-tenth of a percent* of gross domestic product," which amounts to a financial gain of less than \$30 per person. In California, studies show that current immigration levels cost the typical native household an additional \$1,200 per year. Moreover, relatively high immigration levels suppress the wages of domestic workers in highly competitive fields. Public assistance is considerably greater among immigrant than domestic households. The percentage of native welfare recipients is 15.4% to 22.4% of immigrant recipients. Borjas documents with compelling data that economic prosperity is not undermined by reductions in immigration levels.

Advocates of unrestricted immigration passionately believe that American society can never be *too diverse*; hence, an ethnically Balkanized 'melting pot' isn't considered an oxymoron. Recently, Frank Sharry, Executive Director of the National Immigration Forum, argued in a letter to the *Washington Post* that "contemporary immigrant families" assimilate as well as other "newcomers" in "embracing the cultural norms that are part of life in the United States."<sup>1</sup> Using four standards to substantiate his claims, Sharry noted that: (1) 76.3 percent of immigrants speak English proficiently within 10 years of their arrival; (2) 76.4 percent of

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immigrants who resided 40 years in the U.S. were naturalized; (3) 60.9 percent of immigrants own their homes within 20 years of arrival; (4) Foreign born Asians and Hispanics have higher rates of intermarriage than the native-born black and white population. Such trends, according to Sharry, demonstrate that present immigration levels merely serve the national interest.

While these individual claims maybe factually correct, collectively they give a misleading impression of the socio-economic plight of *recent* immigrants. The selective nature of Sharry's argument omits critical truths about the *assimilation* process and *immigrant poverty rates*. A recent analysis by the Center for Immigration Studies points out that: (1) the gap between native and immigrant poverty levels tripled in less than two decades between 1979 and 1997; (2) one in five individuals living in poverty resided in an immigrant household; (3) 75 percent of the total increase in the size of the poor since 1989 stems directly from the growth of immigrant-related poverty; (4) levels of education, higher unemployment and larger family size contribute to relatively higher immigrant poverty rates.<sup>2</sup>

Sharry fails to substantiate his general point about cultural assimilation for the simple reason that *measurable gaps*, which involve a multitude of social, economic and cultural factors, distinguish the foreign from native-born population. As William Graham Sumner pointed out in *Folkways*, "the only way in which, in the course of time, remnants of foreign groups are apparently absorbed and the group becomes homogeneous, is that the foreign element dies out."<sup>3</sup> Yet when viewed through the lens of multiculturalism, assimilation simply means *accommodating* immigrant cultures at the expense of native-born Americans. As the nation's population becomes increasingly diverse, lacking the common bonds of a homogeneous national culture, the American 'melting pot' begins to resemble a 'Balkanized caldron'. For instance, English is now optional at ATM banking machines in major metropolitan areas with sizable immigrant populations.

Egalitarian politicians and political activists will never fail to exploit this differential gap for political gain, particularly when economic inequality lingers between immigrant and native. No matter how much assimilation occurs between ethnically diverse populations, further cultural, economic and social partitioning is likely to split along ethnic lines. As long as humanity remains divided

ethnically, egalitarian politicians will exploit this division under the rubric of economic and social justice. Borjas takes up the question of national origins and makes a compelling argument for the right of a nation's citizenry to determine its own national fate.

One proposal that Borjas endorses for immigrant selection is a modified version of the Canadian point system. Citizenship requirements would be *meritoriously* conferred on applicants who *qualify* for legal residency in the U.S. Qualifications would be similar to the present Canadian model in that candidates for citizenship would be scrutinized in terms of national priorities. Hence, points are allocated collectively (from, say, arbitrarily 1-100) over several categories: skill level, educational background, age, no criminal record, national origin, language proficiency, family size, previous employment record, etc. Architects, engineers, chemists, and neurosurgeons seeking citizenship would receive more overall points than, for example, migrant farm workers, domestics, or gas station attendants. The allocation of points would be linked to workforce demand and the granting of citizenship would become a *privilege* not a patrimonial rite of passage.

To some extent the national criteria for screening and selecting recent newcomers reflects an earlier period in this century. The 1924 immigration act implemented new standards for citizenship which emphasized IQ level and mental hygiene. A major concern then was the *qualitative* traits of the foreign-born, primarily because successful assimilation into American society hinged on a settler's adaptability to societal challenges; overcoming barriers of language, tradition, habits and social mores of the national culture. During this earlier period, officials from the Public Health Service relied upon the input of pioneering psychologist Henry Herbert Goddard in the clinical use of recently developed IQ tests to screen out *more efficiently* the 'feeble-minded' from the new arrivals passing through Ellis Island. Complicating matters around the turn of the century was the unprecedented influx of European immigrants, many of whom left undesirable conditions in disease-ridden areas. Public health officials were concerned about the effectiveness of regulating and monitoring their health conditions since it was not uncommon for a staff of twelve doctors to handle a case load of nearly 5,000 immigrants per day. The use of IQ tests by Goddard and his staff assisted public health officials to screen the mentally impaired

more effectively, alleviating the concern about time constraints in the screening process.<sup>4</sup>

Many of the contested aspects of the immigration debate ultimately boil down to the assimilation of ethnic cultures. On this question Borjas admits that there really is no objective criteria for excluding some while admitting others. By the same token, he argues forcefully that matters of fairness in regard to this selection process should be determined first and foremost by those most affected by it. It is fitting to recall what the eminent sociologist Henry Pratt Fairchild once described as the “indispensable nation:”

*The true nation is one of the finest products of cultural evolution. In it, the distinctively human traits find their fullest and most unhampered development. In the perfection and diversity of particular nationalities lies much of the richness of human life and experience. Those who long for world fellowship and a common brotherhood of humanity may easily find themselves visualizing this goal in terms of an essential uniformity of habits, customs, standards, conventions, traditions, institutions, and mores in general for all the members of the human species, so that basic groups would practically disappear. This is in many ways an alluring vision, but it is also a misleading one if conceived of as a possibility in any immediate future. If world peace had to wait for the achievement of such an ideal, we should certainly be doomed to an infinitely extended period of inconceivable chaos while some unpredictable forces were working toward that end.<sup>5</sup>*

Like Fairchild, Goddard, and other scholars of an earlier generation, Borjas recognizes the importance of numerical limits and selection criteria in deciding which applicants the U.S. should admit as legal residents. He makes an important point of noting that a diverse pool of skilled immigrants is preferable to the prevailing influx of unskilled immigrants who share common ties of national origin. Numbers matter, and as Borjas reminds us, nothing is more important for national posterity than the civic responsibility of preserving a nation’s cultural heritage.

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<sup>1</sup> Sharry, Frank, “Letters to the Editor” *The Washington Post*,

September 13, 1999, p.A26.

<sup>2</sup> Camarota, Steven A., *Importing Poverty*, Center For Immigration Studies, September 1999.

<sup>3</sup> Sumner, William Graham, *Folkways: A study of the sociological importance of usages, manners, customs, mores & morals*, Ginn & Co. 1907.

<sup>4</sup> Zenderland, Leila, *Measuring Minds: Henry Herbert Goddard and the Origins of American Intelligence Testing*, Cambridge University Press 1998, pp.263-281. Zenderland’s detailed account of Goddard’s role in testing immigrants during the early part of this century offers a more balanced and objective profile of Goddard’s work than the more subjective and critical accounts typical of the popular literature. Zenderland shreds the more critical interpretations of Goddard’s work which has received unwarranted scorn over a distinguished record of public service.

<sup>5</sup> Fairchild, Henry Pratt, *Race and Nationality as Factors in American Life*, Ronald Press Co., NY, 1947 p.197.