

Immigrants Replace Blacks in New York Jobs

Book Review by Scipio Garling

In *Still the Promised City?*, UCLA sociologist Roger Waldinger examines why immigrants have done better than black natives in securing unskilled jobs in New York's post-war economy. For the most part, nothing Waldinger says comes as a great surprise; ethnic niches are the key to economic advancement for minorities, recent immigrant groups compete with one another for entry-level work, ethnic communities tend to hire "their own kind." If you need a citation to back up any of these commonplaces, *Promised City* will come in handy (particularly if you're in New York City).

But behind all this, with some digging, you can find Waldinger's central thesis: blacks in New York don't get anywhere economically because immigrants take all the low-skilled jobs and leverage them into ethnic niches that native blacks, as "outsiders," can't break into:

Because New York's employers have repeatedly found lowest-level workers among migrants, attachment to unskilled jobs has rarely survived beyond the first generation. Thus, African-Americans have gradually fallen out of the market for low-level labor... First, the garment industry lost its black labor supply, as eroding wage conditions deterred young applicants and experienced workers found better prospects elsewhere. Then, the same fate befell the hotel industry in the 1960s and 1970s, when it added large numbers of West Indians and Dominicans to its ranks... We may already be seeing the same pattern among new immigrants, as indicated by the growth of Mexican and Central American

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laborers in industries or occupations in which Dominicans or Colombians had previously predominated (p.308).

Disappointingly, Waldinger stops far short of concluding that immigration actually harms black Americans. Much of his writing is of the "all-this-immigrant-stuff-worked-out-fine-in-the-past-and-I'm-sure-it-will-again" style. Still, Waldinger does acknowledge that this immigrant wave is different:

Unlike earlier waves, the new immigration appears not to respond to the ups and downs of the business cycle [and] no longer falls off when the economy slackens... Even if most of New York's new immigrants move onward and upward...this ethnic progress comes with a cost measured in...conflicts[.] In the scramble for jobs, the same ties that bring communities into the workplace also produce the motivation and the opportunity for excluding those New Yorkers who aren't members of the same ethnic club (p.318).

Only in his last paragraph does Waldinger clearly concede that this Darwinian struggle could touch the native-born:

By converging on New York, the immigrants have also come to an area where earlier immigrants and domestic migrants moved up through economic specialization, establishing niches to which they often remained strongly attached. Until now, those specializations have largely gone unchallenged, since the newest arrivals have been content with the modest positions they have obtained to date. But the economic orientations of New York's newcomers will inevitably change and when they do, immigrants will begin to compete for native's jobs (p.320).

Before you rush out to buy this book, a few warnings are in order. First, *Promised City* deals solely with New York City, and anyone hoping for broader

Still the Promised City? African-Americans and New Immigrants in Postindustrial New York
by Roger Waldinger
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evidence of immigrant-related job displacement will be disappointed. Second, Waldinger is writing for “his own kind” — other sociologists. The book is studded with serial exploded piecharts, tables of tiny numbers, and skyline bargraphs, none of whose meaning is intuitively obvious. Skillful explanation might make such seas of information navigable, but, unfortunately, Waldinger’s prose isn’t a compass crafted for the average reader; *Promised City?* is full of sentences like, “Multiple patterns of economic adaptation indicate that the responses to replacement demand did not follow automatically from the mechanical adjustment of the hiring queue” (p.94).

Despite being sticky with “sociopeak,” ambiguous about its findings, and tightly focused on the Big Apple, *Still the Promised City?* Is a useful addition to the arsenal of immigration reformers who are concerned with the effects of mass immigration on our country’s least advantaged.

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