

Immigrants and Culture

Immigrants to the U.S. generally represent two different value systems

by Lawrence E. Harrison

Much of the national debate on immigration bulks all immigrants together, often as “legal” or “illegal.” But the fact is that there are wide variations in the economic and political performance of immigrants, and these variations frequently reflect differences in cultural values and attitudes.

The table below summarizes two general types of cultures, one that promotes progress, one that resists it. I want to stress that it presents in black and white a reality that is gray. But many people have found it helpful in understanding why some cultures work better for human beings than others do.

Factor	Progress-Prone Culture	Progress-Resistant Culture
1. Orientation in time	Future oriented	Oriented to past or present
2. Mindset	“I can influence my destiny”	Fatalism, resignation
3. Wealth	Product of human creativity	What exists
4. Heterodoxy/Orthodoxy	Encouraged (innovation)	Suppressed (heresy)
5. Work/Achievement	Live to work: wealth is good	Work to live: poverty is OK
6. Competition	Leads to excellence	Aggression
7. Frugality	Mother of investment, prosperity	Threat to equality, redistribute!
8. Education, esp. higher ed.	Indispensable for all	A luxury for the elite
9. Advancement	On merit	Family, connections
10. Sense of community, radius of identification and trust	Extends to the broader society	Circumscribed by family
11. Ethical code	Rigorous, feeds trust	Elastic
12. Justice, fair play	A reality	A myth
13. Authority	Dispersed with checks and balances	Centralized, unfettered
14. Church-state relations	Secularized	Religion plays major civic role

Lawrence E. Harrison is currently teaching and doing research work at the Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy at Tufts University. He presented this report to the Twenty-Fifth Social Contract Writers Workshop held in Arlington, Virginia, October 21, 2001. He is co-editor, with Samuel Huntington, of Culture Matters (Basic Books, 2000).

In general, the progress-prone value system is represented in the United States by immigrants from Confucian-culture areas in East Asia, while immigrants from Latin America are predominantly influenced by the progress-resistant Ibero-American culture. Using data mostly from the Center for Immigration Studies (CIS), I focus on the contrast between Chinese and Koreans on the one hand, and Mexicans and El Salvadorans on the

other. The data require more sophisticated interpretation, but the general picture these statistics paint is sufficiently accurate for our purposes.

In the adjoining table, one can see that East Asians are more entrepreneurial than Latin Americans, a contrast reflected in the substantially higher per-capita incomes in East Asian countries than in Latin American countries. Seventeen percent of Chinese and twenty-four percent of Korean immigrants to the U.S. are self-employed, while only six percent of Mexican and three percent of El Salvadoran immigrants are self-employed. The average for native Americans is twelve percent. To be sure, East Asian immigrants – and American natives – are generally more educated than Latin American immigrants. But a RAND Corporation study of the 1990 census data concluded, “Even if immigrants had completed the same number of years as natives, a significant gap would remain between Mexicans and natives.”

The Confucian emphasis on education shows clearly in the data: fifty-five percent of Chinese and forty-six percent of Koreans have bachelor or higher degrees. The figure for Mexicans and El Salvadorans is six percent. Sixteen percent of Chinese and four percent of Koreans did not finish high school, compared to sixty-four percent of Mexicans and fifty-three percent of El Salvadorans.

Thirty percent of Chinese immigrants and twenty-nine percent of Korean immigrants are in or near poverty. The figure for Mexicans is sixty-two percent, for El Salvadorans fifty-eight percent.

Thirteen percent of Chinese and eight percent of Koreans use some form of welfare compared to twenty-nine percent of Mexicans and twenty-six percent of El Salvadorans. Thirty percent of Chinese and thirty-four percent of Koreans are without health insurance. The figure for Mexicans is fifty-three percent, for El Salvadorans fifty-seven percent.

The 1990 census data show that forty-five percent of Chinese and forty-one percent of Korean immigrants had naturalized. The figure for Mexicans who had become citizens was twenty-three percent, for El Salvadorans fifteen percent.

Comparison of Performance: Chinese and Koreans vs Mexicans and El Salvadorans				
Category	Chinese	Korean	Mexican	Salvadoran
Self-employment	17%	24%	6%	3%
Bachelor or higher	55%	46%	6%	6%
Less than high sch.	16%	4%	64%	53%
In/near poverty	30%	29%	62%	58%
Welfare use	13%	8%	29%	26%
W/o health insurance	30%	34%	53%	57%
Naturalized (1990)	45%	41%	23%	15%

The acculturation and upward mobility of the East Asian immigrants is impressive. In education, income, and professional achievement, they substantially exceed national averages; and their trajectory is reminiscent of that of Jewish immigrants. A coincidental example is the disproportionate presence of East Asian musicians in symphony orchestras. I believe that our nation has benefitted from the immigration of the Confucian Asians.

There is a variation in the performance of Latin American immigrants. Those from Cuba and South America, generally better educated, have done better than those from Mexico and Central America. But the Latin American averages for education, income, and professional achievement, dominated by the heavy Mexican component, are well below our national averages.

Conclusion

Where does this leave us? It is unlikely that we will ever again discriminate on the basis of national origin in our immigration policies. This is particularly true with respect to Hispanics, whose numbers will soon exceed those of African-Americans and who are being wooed by both political parties.

The best hope for future immigration patterns that will be more beneficial to our society, and particularly our poorest citizens, many of whom are Hispanic, is an immigration policy along the line of the Jordan Commission recommendations: emphasis on education and skills and a redoubled effort to reduce illegal immigration.