

*Inheriting the  
City: The  
Children of  
Immigrants  
Come of Age*

By  
CHARLES HIRSCHMAN

Philip Kasinitz, John H. Mollenkopf, Mary C. Waters, and Jennifer Holdway. 2008. *Inheriting the City: The Children of Immigrants Come of Age*. New York: Russell Sage Foundation; and Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

The goal of parsimony—to explain the complexity of the observed world with simple propositions—is perhaps the preeminent value of science. Yet science can also be advanced by showing the complexity of natural phenomena that may appear to be very simple. The assimilation of immigrants is sometimes thought to be a simple function of time, indexed by duration of residence or generations. This proposition, and almost every other theoretical claim and empirical generalization about the assimilation of immigrants, is questioned by Philip Kasinitz, John Mollenkopf, Mary Waters, and Jennifer Holdway in their long-awaited study of the immigrant second generation in New York City. It has been worth the wait. *Inheriting the City: The Children of Immigrants Come of Age* is a deeply learned, richly empirical, and elegantly written tour de force. All of the classical issues in migration studies, including ethnic identities, socioeconomic inequality, culture versus structure, prejudice and discrimination, and much more are examined in unflinching detail in this four-hundred-page book. The results do not point to a new theory or a concise set of empirical generalizations but rather to an appreciation of the incredible complexity in the socioeconomic and cultural lives of the children of immigrants in New York City as they find

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their way to adulthood. The notion that there is a single path to becoming American, or even that “Americanness” is a stable phenomenon, is shattered with the image of a dynamic American society, fragmented by class and race yet permeated by channels that allow for upward mobility.

The standard sociological model of gradual assimilation was never a theory with clearly specified independent variables and a sequential process, but it did focus empirical research on ethnic inequality and temporal (and intergenerational) change. The rejection of the assimilation perspective in recent decades was often accompanied by the assumption that structural racism was the key principle governing ethnic inequality. Yet social change and diversity within and between race and ethnic groups are impossible to explain with a monolithic and static hypothesis. Portes and Zhou’s (1993) nuanced and influential segmented assimilation model has generated a flurry of new research but remains empirically contested. Beyond the walls of academia is an even more raucous political debate over immigration policies, affirmative action, and the levels of social investment necessary to speed the economic mobility and the integration of domestic minorities and the descendants of immigrants. *Inheriting the City* does not resolve these issues, but it points to the myriad pathways whereby most of the children of immigrants find their place (or at least a place) in America.

Organized into a series of topical chapters on family background, ethnic identities, education, work, and other topics, *Inheriting the City* is largely an inductive study that is shaped by data rather than hypotheses. Indeed, the authors are swimming in an ocean of data. From 1998 to 2000, the authors conducted 3,415 telephone interviews with five targeted second-generation immigrant groups: Dominicans, South American Hispanics (Columbians, Peruvians, Ecuadorians), West Indians, Chinese, and Russian Jews plus three nonimmigrant comparison populations: Puerto Ricans, African Americans, and native-born whites in New York City and its inner suburbs. A subset, about 10 percent of the telephone respondents, were interviewed a second time for several hours. Each of these in-depth interviews generated eighty to one hundred transcribed pages. The authors also commissioned six ethnographies of sites where many second-generation immigrants were participating (e.g., community college, social service union, church, etc.). Summaries of the ethnographies have been published in a companion volume (*Becoming New Yorkers*, Kasinitz, Mollenkopf, and Waters 2004) and elsewhere.

These extraordinary data are a rich store from which the authors weave their account of the complex and complicated lives of young immigrant and native-born New Yorkers. A key finding is that most second-generation young adults (defined as the children of immigrants and immigrants who arrived before age twelve) are doing better than expected. On certain dimensions, some second-generation groups—Chinese and Russian Jews, in particular—outperform the native-born white comparison group, while the South Americans are doing pretty well. West Indians and Dominicans are generally intermediate with native born minorities—African Americans and Puerto Ricans—encountering the most problems. In their introduction, the authors suggest that one reading of their study is of a “second-generation advantage.”

The most compelling feature of this volume is the voices of the second generation from the in-depth interviews. Many of these personal stories are reported in gripping and vivid detail. Chinese respondents tell of the pressures from pushy parents and the high expectations from teachers who assumed every Asian student is clever. Russian Jews and South Americans tell of feeling quite comfortable living in their parents' home long after native-born whites and blacks feel compelled to establish their residential independence. Many young Dominican and Puerto Rican women report that the strict parenting rules and stereotyped gender socialization often backfired with high rates of premarital pregnancies that interrupted schooling and career beginnings. A few Chinese students who got into serious trouble, including joining gangs, had "second chances" because of interventions from the extended family or the broader community. West Indians report that the popularity of Jamaican music is a bridge to positive contacts with New Yorkers from different communities. Yet interesting stories do not always add up to a clear portrait or sociological interpretation. Even oddball cases can generate fascinating stories.

Researchers often find conflicting accounts from the in-depth interviews. For example, some respondents report that being sent home (to their parents' homeland) was a setback, while others say that the experience helped them. Subjective perceptions are not always the best guide to understanding cause and effect. For example, the postponement of marriage and childbearing is a major difference between the more successful (Chinese, Russian Jews, and South Americans) and least successful (African American, Puerto Rican, and Dominican) groups. One interpretation is that group differences in the timing of family formation are shaped by values that are passed from generation to generation through socialization. However, these groups also differ in their access to neighborhoods with better schools. Better schools and teachers with higher expectations contribute to higher educational attainment, which in turn leads to postponement of family formation. The only way to sort out competing explanations is through the specification of hypotheses that can be tested (or falsified). My only real criticism is that the authors did not present a clear and cumulative approach of how to analyze the reasons for reported differences between groups.

The statistical analyses presented in the volume are of uneven quality. Perhaps because the authors did not want to overwhelm readers with detailed statistical tables, most of the descriptive results are presented in 3D charts. This strategy works well in some cases, but a few charts are almost impossible to read. The level of detail required in a comparison of five second-generation groups and three domestic groups, sometimes divided by gender, often exceeds the number of dimensions that can be easily understood in a visual display. In their analyses of educational attainment and earnings, the authors report the results of multivariate regressions but provide little discussion of the rationale for the inclusion of covariates in different models and even less of a discussion of the results. Clearly, the authors' hearts are not in the quantitative analyses.

The major contribution of this study lies in insightful discussions inspired by the juxtaposition of the experiences and perceptions of the respondents and standard

sociological assumptions. For example, ethnic identities (from censuses and surveys) are generally considered to be stable attributes shaped by ancestry and phenotype. The in-depth interviews, however, show that many second-generation youth develop a flexible repertoire of responses depending on the situation. The insightful discussion of cultural influences should end the tired debate between structure and culture in sociological theory. Culture is embedded in social organization. The discussion of prejudice and discrimination is path-breaking. The authors carefully balance a discussion of the raw prejudice and discrimination experienced by immigrants and minorities with an insightful discussion of how some groups (Chinese and West Indians) are able to steel themselves against such treatment with the belief that they will have to outperform whites to achieve equal rewards. This book also addresses many topics that most sociological studies have avoided—that ethnicity can be a resource in an age of affirmative action. The authors note that the children of immigrants have often been the primary beneficiaries of affirmative action programs that were created by the civil rights movement led by African Americans and Puerto Ricans—the two groups that are being left behind.

This is an exceptional book about New York City, a place with a long history of immigration. The institutions that have been formed by prior immigrant waves, as well as the fiercely competitive nature of everyday life in New York, make it quite unlike the rest of the country. Although the unique features of New York City limit the scope of generalizations from this study, the broad questions addressed here and the provocative findings will set the agenda for immigration research for many years to come. One definition of a classic is that every reading yields new and deeper insights. I look forward to reading *Inheriting the City* again and again as a required text in my undergraduate and graduate courses on immigration and ethnicity.

## References

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