

immigration's complexities, assimilation's discontents

by rubén g. rumbaut

One thing I know is that popular conceptions about immigrants and their assimilation don't square with the facts.

Of the 6.5 billion people in the world today, 191 million—just under 3 percent—are international migrants. The rest, 97 percent of humanity, are “stayers” living in the countries where they were born.

Moving to a foreign country isn't easy, even under the most propitious circumstances. Those who do tend to be young and intrepid souls, which is what makes migration the selective process it is. Still, though, the total global migrant stock is up from 155 million in 1990 and 81 million in 1970.

More immigrants come to the United States than to any other country. In 2005 there were 38 million here, one fifth of the world's immigrant total. But, only 12.9 percent of the U.S. population is foreign-born. Many other countries exceed that percentage and the United States itself did, too, in each decennial census from 1860 through 1920.

These days immigrants to the United States come from extraordinarily diverse backgrounds. In fact, by far both the most and least educated groups in the United States today are immigrants. They're anything but the homogeneous lot implied in popular stereotypes.

Since World War II, labor migration has flowed increasingly from poorer to richer countries and from younger to older countries. Refugees, the least desirable migrants, move mainly from one poor country to another. By 2005, just over 1 percent of the populations of less developed countries was foreign-born, compared to nearly 10 percent of the populations of more developed countries, which have declining fertility, aging work forces, and economies that generate significant demand for both immigrant professionals and (often unauthorized) low-wage laborers.

Moreover, historical ties between countries underlie contemporary migrations. They're rooted in colonialism, war and military occupation, labor recruitment, and economic exchange. Once migration footholds are formed, family networks expand, remittances (\$268 billion in 2006) link communities across national borders, and all of this turns migration into a self-sustaining process—while producing predictable nativist reactions.

A common misconception asserts that immigrants' Babel

of tongues poses a threat to English, and that Hispanics in particular are less likely to speak English than earlier generations of European immigrants.

The facts show otherwise. Even in greater Los Angeles, where more than 6 million people of Mexican ancestry live, the second generation prefers English, and Spanish is dead by the third. The switch to English—in proficiency, preference, and use—occurs even more rapidly among Asian-origin groups. What is threatened is the survival of those immigrant languages.

Another misconception is that immigrants, especially “illegal aliens,” bring crime, drugs, and health problems to this country. Again the evidence is overwhelmingly to the contrary, as numerous studies (see page 28) have found. Immigrants are less likely to commit crimes or to go to prison than the native-born. Teenage immigrants are less likely than native-born adolescents to engage in delinquency, violence, and alcohol and drug abuse.

Immigrants are also healthier than natives, that is, until Americanization becomes hazardous to their health. As immigrants become more acculturated over time and generation, their rates of obesity, mortality, and mental and physical health problems actually rise.

Yet, popular myth overrules systematic evidence. Contemporary nativism, in the current political climate, rails against immigration without caring to understand the history and complexity of the flows, the forces that propel it, the networks that sustain it, or the demographic dynamics that will shape the American and the global futures. In so doing it exemplifies the definition of a delusion: “a false belief strongly held in spite of invalidating evidence.”

But what is the future of a delusion?

Rubén G. Rumbaut is a professor of sociology at the University of California, Irvine. He has written extensively on immigration and the adaptation of immigrants.