The Reconstituting of Borders in America

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JOHN MOLLENKOPF, JUN 4 2017

Without doubt, many white, native born adults in the US have reacted negatively to the steady increase of immigrant-origin "others." Other racial groups have been far less negative, but native born, non-Hispanic whites make up 63% of the US population and 68% of its voting age citizens, so how they react is politically important. This negative response has intensified as the foreign born have radiated out of the large, old central cities into their suburbs and other more distant "new destinations" where immigrants are more likely to encounter native born whites. Many factors have motivated this negative response. Unlike earlier periods, labor market competition is rarely one of them, as most native whites work in industries and occupations with few low wage immigrant workers. Indeed, the native middle and upper classes generally benefit from the growing supply of immigrant workers who clean their houses, care for their children and their elderly, mow their lawns, wash their laundry, etc. And many of those who react most negatively to immigrants live in racially non-diverse places where they have little direct contact with new immigrant groups.

Instead, public opinion surveys suggest that many native whites fear that the increasing diversity of the U.S. threatens their hold on the national culture. They feel that the federal government has abetted this development by doing too much to help the poor, minorities, and immigrants and not nearly enough to help people like themselves. They feel that forces beyond their control are undermining the country's values, ways of life, and work places. They see these forces partly as economic, with global competition and international trade eroding many kinds of jobs, but also as political, with national and state governments shifting resources (in their view disproportionately and unfairly) to undeserving city-dwellers, ignoring and alienating hard-working exurbanites. Labor market trends substantiates these concerns to some degree, as the large metropolitan areas have rebounded far more strongly in jobs and income since 2008 than the rest of the country.

These perceptions helped Donald Trump coalesce an unexpected victory in the 2016 presidential election. According to a 2016 Kaiser Family Foundation-CNN survey of non-college educated Americans, the mostly white Trump supporters felt angry about their situations, worried that it had become harder for them to get ahead, and feared that their children would have a worse standard of living than their own. They overwhelmingly agree that trade agreements have cost U.S. jobs. A third of them blame undocumented immigrants for the problems facing the working class. Vast majorities of working class white Trump supporters feel Christian values are under attack; more than half think that Muslims add to the crime problem and four out of five worry that they increase the threat of terrorist attacks.

Older Berliners sometimes talk about *die mauer im kopf*, or "the wall in the head." In a similar sense, the majority of white Americans who lack a college degree, living in mainly white, Protestant towns outside the big cities, have a mental wall separating them as "real Americans" from others whom they believe have lesser claims on the American heritage. This reaction is most intense among older white people. Older native born whites are upset that their supermarket sales clerks do not speak English as a first language. They are glad to see Trump proposing real walls to reinforce their metaphorical walls, either by extending the one along our southern border or by adding new enforcement and deportation activities against unauthorized immigrants. Trump's 'America First' campaign succeeded in mobilizing these sentiments more effectively than had past Republican candidates, tipping key Midwestern states in his direction.

It is important to remember, however, that more U.S. citizens feel immigration levels should be left as they are (40%) or increased (16%) than think they should be reduced somewhat (19%) or a lot (25%) (this observation comes from the author's analysis of the 2016 American National Election Survey). Moreover, the native white population segments that lean against migration are a declining share of the total, while more receptive groups are growing.

The U.S. has experienced two great waves of racial and ethnic succession since the 1960s, leading to periods of racial polarization and 'white flight', followed by new equilibriums in racial and ethnic relations. The first wave of African Americans and Puerto Ricans arriving in Northern central cities happened in the late 1960s, but later waves that included both the outward movement of native minority groups and the rapid rise of new immigrants, have affected the suburbs and now even small towns in exurban areas. The early phase of white-to-black racial transition raised huge tensions and conflicts in cities like Detroit and St. Louis, which experienced substantial disinvestment and were politically abandoned by white elites. The latter phase has been more complex and less conflictual, but no less momentous.

New York City and Los Angeles exemplify this new urban reality: native-born non-Hispanic whites make up less than one fifth of their residents and only about a third of their electorates. These long-term residents are in no position to build walls, and they no longer want to, having adapted to their new minority status. These cities and others like Miami, Chicago, and San Francisco are forerunners of trends that will, sooner or later, affect nearly every corner of the U.S. Before this process is complete, however, it will provoke anxiety and conflict and polarization. The end result in cities that have gone through this transition, for all their remaining ethnic tensions and inequalities, is that they celebrate their diversity and hybridity. While the inner suburbs where most immigrants now live, as well as the small towns and other regions, may initially react by seeking to build walls against change, it seems likely (to me, at least) that they too will find ways to get over the traumas of change.

They will not have to do it on their own. The largest cities with the biggest immigrant populations are creating new frameworks for immigrant integration from which other areas can learn. Although the Trump administration's policies are currently sharpening conflicts over immigration, this may end up backfiring. Future administrations could expand immigrant integration efforts into areas newly experiencing population change. Certainly, strong immigrant advocacy networks of nonprofit organizations are doing outstanding work in many states and have formed a National Partnership for New Americans. In the end, new immigrant communities themselves will also show that they generate economic growth and innovation and that they constitute the future of America's greatness, not a threat to it.

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