U.S. immigration and intergroup relations in the late 20th century: African Americans and Latinos.

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African American-Latino relations in the late 20th century have become highly affected by three structural processes. First, global economic restructuring produces labor migration as industrial capital is recomposed. Transnational community development also brings different ethnic groups into the same place. Finally, immigrant incorporation is shown by endogenous institutions, such as ethnic churches and culturally familiar communities.

Introduction

Various macro-structural forces are transforming the social composition of large U.S. urban areas in the late 20th century. As in other advanced Western societies, global economic restructuring and international migration are dramatically altering socio-cultural and demographic landscapes in the urban United States. In the short historical span since the 1970s, these processes have produced substantial growth of ethnic/racial populations in large U.S. urban areas, e.g., New York, Los Angeles, and Houston, with strong ties to the global economy. Large-scale immigration from Asia, Latin America, and other world regions has intensified urban change in these settings by creating new culturally distinct communities (Lamphere, 1992). Socially and culturally, and in terms of new patterns of intergroup relations, the large U.S. urban centers of the 1990s are not the same settings of 10 or 20 years ago.

This large-scale social and demographic change has produced new interrelational matrices in U.S. urban areas (Bach, 1993). With the expansion and diversification of Asian, Latino, and other ethnic/racial communities, the poles of urban race relations have been transformed from a mainly binary plane of black-white relations into multidimensional axes of ethnicity, immigrant status, nationality, race, and other social identities. Especially after the social eruptions of African Americans and Latinos in Los Angeles in the spring of 1992, this social recomposition has created concerns among mainstream institutional leaders about the interethnic/racial future of their localities. African American and Latino communities are prominent players in this future, since in many of the largest urban areas they form a collective majority of the population. Among the five largest cities in the country, this is true in New York, Los Angeles, Chicago, and Houston (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1994). In the fifth largest city, Philadelphia, African Americans and Latinos compose 45.2% of the population. In the South, Houston is a critical case of emerging intergroup relations between African Americans and Latinos in the context of high immigration levels. The 1990 census found that Houston has more black residents than any other southern city, and has the second largest Latino population in the South (if not the largest by 1995). Over 40% of Houston’s 450,000 Latino population consists of first-generation immigrants (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1993).

In this article, I focus on the arena of intergroup relations between African Americans and Latinos from the perspective of Latino immigration. In the first part of the discussion, I attempt to relate the arena of intergroup relations to larger structural processes with reference to global change and immigration. These processes are important for relations between African Americans and Latinos because they greatly affect the social geographies and related opportunity structures of intergroup interaction.

In the second part of the discussion, using findings from recent intergroup surveys and ongoing ethnographic research in the Houston area, I argue that contrary to some expectations (see Johnson et al., 1995) tensions, conflict, and community instability are not the only resulting relations between African Americans and Latinos in contexts of high immigration. Indeed, I attempt to make the case for varied modes of intergroup reactions in such settings, sometimes varying by social identities other than ethnicity or race, and sometimes forming collaborative relations based precisely on identities of minority status. Using the prominent Houston case, my purpose in this discussion also is to suggest that the highly publicized intergroup patterns of Los Angeles do not necessarily represent the future of the U.S. urban system.

Macro-Structural Contexts of Immigration And African American-Latino Relations

In the late 20th century, urban intergroup relations have become substantially affected by underlying structural processes whose reach transcends not only specific urban settings, but also the very nation-state. Three such processes - global economic restructuring, transnational community development, and immigrant incorporation - are as significant for the course of black-brown relations in Los Angeles, Houston, and other major U.S. cities as are social-psychological conditions that may predispose intergroup behavior.
Global Economic Change

A number of works have described processes of global economic restructuring that affect areas in core countries and peripheral regions of the world economy (e.g., see Henderson and Castells, 1987). According to Saskia Sassen-Koob (1987), this worldwide economic change involves the recomposition of industrial capital, concentrating managerial and specialized services in major urban areas in core countries and relocating manufacturing in peripheral regions. This restructuring stimulates labor migration among peripheral regions, as well as to new economic centers in core countries. Immigration becomes a major source of labor for the large array of low-wage, service jobs that emerge in the global centers of business management and control in core countries, and in a few semi-peripheral areas as well (Ibid.).

Global restructuring significantly affects the intergroup prospects of large urban settings in the United States as shifts in capital and labor arrangements repel certain groups and attract others. For example, Sassen-Koob (Ibid.) has demonstrated how the restructured economies of New York City, Los Angeles, and San Francisco have attracted immigrant labor from Latin American and Asia, as middle-income, blue- and white-collar U.S. workers were laid off. Sociologist Rebecca Morales has conducted a detailed study of how the social composition of Los Angeles' automobile industry became increasingly immigrant and Mexican as industry owners and managers restructured production to operate with a lower-paid labor force (Morales, 1982).

Research in Houston has shown that, similar to the recomposition of production, the restructuring of consumption can greatly affect the social landscape and its intergroup relations. According to studies of Houston's vast apartment complex industry, when the world oil economy entered a steep recession in the mid-1980s, apartment real-estate capital in the city's middle-income, west side entered a severe crisis as thousands of office workers left the city after losing their jobs in oil- and petrochemical-related industries and in supportive firms (Rodriguez, 1993). Facing the loss of billions of dollars invested in thousands of apartment complexes built mainly for young, single middle-income tenants, apartment owners and managers adopted a temporary strategy of recomposing their shrinking middle-class, and mainly Anglo, tenant populations with newly arriving immigrants from Mexico and Central America. The city's west-side apartment industry underwent a dramatic restructuring as many apartment complexes had their names changed from English to Spanish, hired bilingual rental agents, and reduced rents by half or more to attract immigrant renters. The strategy attracted large numbers of Latino immigrants, mostly low-income undocumented workers, into the predominately white west-side districts of the city. As many apartment complexes in the west side became increasingly identified as new low-cost housing, they also attracted large numbers of African Americans from the wards in the eastern half of the city (Ibid.).

To the distress of many middle-income, established residents in the west side, the recomposed tenant populations became heartlands of new communities of color as Mexicans, Central Americans, South Americans, Black-Caribs, African Americans, and other groups settled in the apartment complexes. The new apartment communities consisted heavily of working-class families. With the upswing of the area's economy in the late 1980s and 1990s and the expected return of middle-income tenants, apartment owners and managers again restructured their apartment complexes to dramatically reduce the presence of black and brown tenants (Ibid.). Living in fewer affordable apartments, African Americans and Latinos in the west side nevertheless remain a major source of black-brown intergroup relations in the Houston area.

Transnational Community Development and Intergroup Relations

Macro-structural recomposition may bring different ethnic and racial groups into the same spatial setting, but it does not necessarily produce extensive intergroup relations initially. The Houston case showed that as large numbers of Latino newcomers settled in the city in the 1970s and 1980s, much of their social interaction was maintained with fellow immigrants in their residencies and workplaces. Moreover, much of this in-group interaction was directed to the development of transnational linkages to communities of origin in Mexico, Central America, and other Latin American countries. This led to the creation of transnational communities where family households underwent social reproduction through production and consumption activities both in the United States and in the home country (Rodriguez, 1995).

In the four large, established Mexican barrios in Houston's eastern half, the development of transnational communities in the 1970s and: 1980s was actually an historical continuation, and dramatic enhancement, of processes started by the city's original Mexican immigrants in the 1910s and 1920s (De Leon, 1987). The inward social development of many new immigrants in the barrios initially only reinforced the social and cultural separation between Mexican-origin and African American
U.S. immigration and intergroup relations in the late 20th century: African Americans and Latinos.

communities in the city’s eastern half. Later, however, as transnational communities prospered and expanded after the city’s economic upturn, new Mexican immigrants begin to settle in smaller numbers in the traditional black wards. While adult African Americans and Latino immigrants mainly interacted separately in the wards, their children came together in nearby predominantly black public schools. In one ward setting, fights between black and brown students brought African American and Mexican American community leaders together to intervene.

Across the city, in the west-side apartment complex areas, new Latino immigrants have also constructed transnational structures linking their family households in Houston with their communities of origin back home (Rodriguez, 1993). Apart from causal encounters, Latino immigrants and African Americans usually live socially and culturally apart in the apartment complexes. Sharing a common settlement space, however, the two groups inevitably cross paths in routine activities of community life. For example, in a large county park in the city’s southwest area, Latino and African American residents can be found engaged in recreational activities at the same time, but with African American youth on the basketball court and Latinos on the soccer fields. With the exception of a rugby team that uses a playing field a few times during the week (but which has a 10-year park privilege), the white presence in park consists mainly of law enforcement officers who occasionally patrol the park grounds. The adjacent Anglo resident population has almost completely stopped using the park.

In addition to participating in public school programs that promote intergroup awareness, some African American and Latino residents in the west side have a chance to learn about each other’s cultures and concerns through occasional interethnic festivals organized by churches and other places of worship. In the last few years, social service providers in the city’s southwest area have also promoted intergroup encounters through monthly luncheon meetings, where they explain their programs and exchange information. One function in the southwest area that draws large numbers of residents and agency representatives is an annual festival in the county park where Anglos, African Americans, Latinos, and Asians set up booths to represent their organizations and sell different foods to raise funds for a local storefront police station.

The annual fund-raising festival is an exception to the general pattern of separate coexistence among the west side’s African Americans and large Latino immigrant populations. Over time, however, transnational communities are sure to lose some of their inward social tendencies for Latinos as the U.S.-born children of immigrants look to the United States, and not their parents’ home countries, for social and cultural standards. First-generation Latino immigrants also will look increasingly to the United States for future plans and community growth as they acquire greater social incorporation in this country.

Immigrant Incorporation and Intergroup Relations

Working-class immigrant populations have generally achieved initial incorporation into the U.S. social structure through endogenous institutions, including ethnic places of worship, traditional organizations, and culturally familiar neighborhoods. Actually, in Houston, as in many other immigration settings, many new immigrants achieve initial social, cultural, and spatial incorporation in ethnic communities and economic incorporation in mainstream settings (Rodriguez, 1993). The latter involves service work in a wide variety of workplaces, e.g., restaurants, car washes, supermarkets, office buildings, and so forth, and usually in ethnic crews. Obviously, the levels of incorporation (ethnic versus mainstream, or interethnic) for the different dimensions (social, cultural, etc.) greatly affect the opportunity structure for black-brown intergroup relations.

Native and immigrant Latinos who achieve social and cultural incorporation through ethnic communities will probably have fewer opportunities to develop relations with African Americans, or any other non-Latino group, outside workplaces. In major urban centers with large Latino populations, this may characterize as much as half the Latino residents. For example, if we use Spanish preference as an indicator of ethnic social and cultural incorporation, then in the Houston area 83.9% of foreign-born, and 14.2% of native, Latino adults are characterized by ethnic social and cultural incorporation, according to Mindiola et al. (1996). For this population the workplace becomes a major setting of intergroup relations, often across segmented work crews. Indeed, Mindiola et al. found that most respondents identified their workplaces as the primary settings of their intergroup relations. Yet, Latino incorporation in ethnic communities does not completely restrict interaction with African Americans at the community level, since in a few cases lower-income black residents turn to Latino stores and restaurants in barrios for lower-priced goods and services. Here, class similarity overrides cultural differences.

Similar political perspectives also promote intergroup relations between African Americans and Latino immigrants. African Americans, including the Reverend Jesse Jackson, have participated in Latino immigrant marches and demonstrations against Proposition 187 in
U.S. immigration and intergroup relations in the late 20th century: African Americans and Latinos.

California and other restrictive measures. For example, African American NAACP leaders and unionists joined Latinos in a San Antonio march against Proposition 187 in the spring of 1995. African American women in Houston have traveled to Mexico as election observers and have responded to a call for collective women’s action after a group of armed men assaulted and raped the official U.S. representative of the Zapatista movement in Mexico. These examples indicate that at least the civil rights activist and internationalist sectors in the African American population have supported the political incorporation of Latino immigrants in the United States and abroad.

The macro-structural contexts of global restructuring, transnational community development, and immigrant incorporation set part of the stage for emerging intergroup relations, whether cooperative or conflictive, between African Americans and Latinos. Perhaps more than before, the macro-structural perspective is important for analyzing the evolving relations between these two groups, as interaction and relations between global regions appear to have reached an unprecedented level in the late 20th century.

Houston: Varied Modes of Relations Between African American and Latinos

In the Houston area, as I suspect occurs across the country, relations between African Americans and Latinos take on a variety of characteristics. Across different institutional settings, the characteristics range from overt conflict, to peaceful coexistence, to collaboration. Although episodes of conflict get the most media attention, behind-the-scenes collaboration may have as much, or more, significance for the future relations between African Americans and Latinos, including a large immigrant sector, in the city. Research in the 1990s indicates that perceptions of the predominant quality of Houston’s black-brown relations vary by the most recent issue, by whether you ask African Americans or Latinos, and, within each group, whether you ask community leaders or ordinary residents (Romo et al., 1994). Mindiola et al. (1996) found that African American and Latino residents have ambivalent views on the quality of black-brown relations in Houston. In one section of the interview, they respond that relations between the two groups are generally good, while in another section they respond that there is too much conflict between the two groups (Ibid.).

Residential Transition and Intergroup Relations

Although the largest numbers of Latino immigrants in Houston in the 1980s have settled in Mexican barrios in the city’s east side and in new immigrant settlement zones in the west, some newcomers from Mexico and Central America located rental housing adjacent to, and inside, established African American residential communities (“wards”) near the city’s downtown (Rodriguez, 1993). Similar to developments in Compton, California, described by Johnson et al., this new Latino housing pattern represents at least a partial residential transition in the affected ward areas. The impact of the general residential change for African American-Latino relations has been very evident in public schools, as well as in the politics of the Houston Independent School District (HISD).

Not surprisingly, fights between black and Latino youth are occasionally reported in public schools near areas of residential transition. Yet in many other cases, African American and Latino youth work together in school activities, maintaining at least a peaceful coexistence, if not a harmonious one. In some other cases, African American and Latino youth unite and form black-brown gangs, sometimes with deadly consequences. In the larger teaching work force of HISD, Latino teachers constitute only 13.4% of all teachers (41.2% are black), while Latino students represent 50.0% of all students (Houston Independent School District, 1995). Yet, Latinos have not mounted a sustained effort to pressure the African American superintendent to bring in greater numbers of Latino teachers. (HISD administrators initiated a program to recruit teachers from abroad, but ran into problems validating the credentials of foreign teachers.)

African American-Latino tension and conflict, however, surfaced in the selection of the present African American superintendent of HISD, when the school board selected him from among their own. When the HISD school board announced their decision, several Latino leaders objected to the lack of an open, national search, and especially the absence of any consideration for Hispanic candidates given that Latinos constituted the largest student population in the school district. A group of Latino leaders took the matter to court, but lost when the case was dismissed. Latino interest in the matter eventually died out due to a lack of progress and the absence of a united Latino front, but not before causing a major cleavage between many African American and Latino leaders in the city. A leading African American figure in the city likened the Latino struggle against the appointment of the African American superintendent to a “political lynching.” More recently, the African American and Latino school board members have united to maintain a magnet school in an upper-class neighborhood against the wishes of some of the neighborhood residents, who want the school for the neighborhood’s children.

The findings of Romo et al. (1994) and Mindiola et al.
U.S. immigration and intergroup relations in the late 20th century: African Americans and Latinos.

(1996) demonstrate African American views on how immigrants have affected the Houston area in the 1990s. Using data from a 1992 survey, Romo et al. (1994) found that a majority (53%) of African American respondents indicated that the impact of immigrants had been "good" or "very good," while 40.3% of the African American respondents indicated that the impact had been "bad" or "very bad." The survey, of course, was conducted before the anti-immigrant sentiments generated by Governor Pete Wilson’s reelection campaign and the promotion of Proposition 187 in California. (As late as the fall of 1993, 58% of the respondents in a Time Magazine poll indicated that immigrants were "basically good, honest people," and only 29% of the respondents favored a fence along the U.S.-Mexico border; see Nelan, 1993.)

Using data from a 1995 survey, Mindiola et al. (1996) found that African Americans in Houston had reversed their perceptions of the immigrant impact in the Houston area. The survey found that 36.3% of the African American respondents judged the immigrant impact to be "good" or "very good," while a majority (53.6%) now viewed the impact to be "bad" or "very bad." Perhaps some of the negative perception concerned worries that immigrants were taking advantage of hard-won affirmative action programs, since at least one African American elected official in Houston recently asked for a study on the issue of immigrant employment through affirmative action.

Intergroup Effects of Asian Entrepreneurship

Similar to highly publicized cases in California, the Houston area has experienced some cases of tension and conflict between African American residents and Asian store owners. In a handful of cases, African Americans have boycotted Asian-owned stores in their neighborhoods to protest what they perceive to be a lack of concern among Asian business owners over the black communities where their businesses are located. In one case, similar to the Latasha Harlins case in California, a young Vietnamese clerk in a convenience store owned by his family shot and killed an African American youth who allegedly had become argumentative and left the store with beer without paying. When the store clerk was not convicted for the death, African Americans boycotted the store and eventually forced the Vietnamese family to sell the business (Inter-Ethnic Forum of Houston, 1995).

To lessen the intergroup tensions generated by this occurrence of African American-Asian conflict, leaders from the two communities met to organize joint community meetings of African Americans and Asians to address their intergroup problems. Of special importance, the meetings involved religious leaders from both communities.

Although the intergroup sessions did not reduce class differences between black customers and Asian store owners, it did give both sides an opportunity to address each other in a controlled setting. Perhaps more important, the leaders demonstrated an interest in containing the problem, rather than letting it spread. Also, the intergroup meetings created a model for dealing with future confrontations between black residents and Asian store owners.

To be sure, intergroup leadership collaboration in the Houston area appears to be common in most groups. In a nonrandom mail survey of community leaders, which was conducted along with the 1992 random survey by Romo et al. (1994), the percentages of identified leaders who reported interacting frequently with leaders from other groups were the following: African Americans, 54.8%; Anglos, 43.9%; Asians, 38.5%; and Latinos, 52.5% (Ibid.).

The high tension level between Asians and Latinos in the Los Angeles area, described by Johnson et al., is not found in the Houston area. For the most part, the two populations live apart. Asian entrepreneurship has become a significant employment source for Latino immigrants in restaurant businesses. Also, in some cases Asian-Latino partnerships create popular eating places in Latino immigrant neighborhoods. Indeed, such enterprises appear to be creating a new Asian-Latino business form where customers select dishes from bicultural, Chinese-Mexican menus. In one instance, the multicultural restaurant arrangement reached a rather intense level - a group of Korean restaurateurs hired Mexican immigrant cooks to prepare Chinese dishes for mainly African American customers.

Romo et al. (1994) found the following regarding relations among Asians and African Americans and Latinos. Among African American respondents, 41.7% viewed relations between blacks and Asians to be "fair," and 13.3% viewed the relations to be "good" or "very good," while 34.7% viewed the relations between the two groups to be "bad" or "very bad." Among Asian respondents, 44.7% viewed relations between Latinos and Asians to be "fair," and 17.0% viewed relations to be "good" or "very good," while 15.7% viewed the relations between the two groups to be "bad" or "very bad." The responses clearly indicate an absence of polarization between Asians and the two groups of African Americans and Latinos.

Employment and Intergroup Relations

The rise of immigration in Houston over the last two decades produced an abundant labor supply, particularly for the lower echelons of the area’s labor market. In some
U.S. immigration and intergroup relations in the late 20th century: African Americans and Latinos.

cases, new Latino immigrant workers became highly visible in jobs previously held by African Americans. This employment included domestic workers, hotel workers, and supermarket maintenance workers. Indeed, the rise of immigration created a sort of reserve labor market for immigrant labor, i.e., employment sectors containing only immigrant workers that U.S. workers appeared to avoid because of their immigrant character (Rodriguez, 1995).

The reserve immigrant labor markets functioned as quasi-internal labor markets. As such, recruitment and promotion of immigrant workers in specific work settings were only minimally affected by the labor supply outside the immigrant labor force. In many work settings, immigrant workers' social networks were a major basis for producing work forces, defining the division of labor, and controlling the labor process. A heaven for employers, immigrant reserve and internal labor markets thus provided a self-reproducing and self-regulating work force, and at a bargain price.

Reserve immigrant labor markets reduce direct tension and conflict among U.S. and immigrant workers by reducing contact between the two groups of workers. In many workplaces, immigrants work in crews consisting of only immigrants (see Rodriguez, 1987). Encounters with native workers thus occur mainly through interactions with U.S.-born supervisors. In large workplaces, immigrants may work among native workers, but in separate crews.

Although reserve immigrant labor markets may reduce direct conflict among U.S. and immigrant workers, employment-related tension may develop from the perception that immigrants are taking American jobs. Mindiola et al. (1996), however, found that African Americans in Houston have mixed views on this issue. While a majority (53.7%) of the African American respondents agreed "somewhat" or "strongly" that immigrants take jobs away from blacks, 39.1% disagreed "somewhat" or "strongly" that this is true, and 7.2% had no opinion. Interestingly, about one-fifth (19.8%) of the African American respondents disagreed strongly that immigrants take jobs away from blacks. The unemployment rates among the survey respondents were 7.9% for African Americans and U.S.-born Latinos, and 5.2% for foreign-born Latinos.

Language and Intergroup Relations

Language is one of the most sensitive issues in intergroup relations (Bach, 1993). Simply put, in many U.S. areas, Spanish and other non-English languages are being used more frequently and many established residents resent this. The latter perceive "foreign" languages as a threat not only to English, but also to American culture in general. In some cases, language differences may even cause tension among groups from the same world region or the same cultural origin. In Houston, for example, some Vietnamese residents dislike the use of Chinese characters on street signs in predominantly Chinese districts, and some U.S.-born Latinos avoid social settings where interaction is carried on mainly in Spanish.

For African Americans, Spanish may represent an additional barrier to employment or job promotion, especially in business and public workplaces increasingly affected by a growing Latino immigrant presence. The finding in Mindiola et al. (1996), however, indicated that African Americans in Houston have mixed views about the use of the Spanish language. When asked to respond to the statement "It is okay for people to use Spanish in the workplace," about one-half (48.6%) of the African American respondents agreed somewhat or strongly with the statement, and almost a similar proportion (45.4%) disagreed "somewhat" or "strongly" with the statement, while 6.0% had no opinion. When asked what the impact of Spanish usage for the country as a whole was, 46.0% of the African American respondents said it was "somewhat bad" or "very bad," and 42.7% said it was "somewhat good" or "very good" for the country, while 10.7% had no opinion. African Americans in Houston are clearly divided on the issue of Spanish usage.

It is important to understand that the high level of Spanish usage is greatly associated with immigration. In the Houston area, for example, 85.8% of U.S.-born Latinos prefer English over Spanish in public interaction (Ibid.). Among Latino immigrants, especially the young, the ability to use English increases with length of residence in the United States. A study of immigrants in Southern California found that 70% of immigrants who had been in the region at ages five to 14 in 1980 had mastered English by 1990 (McDonnell, 1995).

Proposition 187 and Intergroup Relations

As described by Johnson et al. (1995), the black community vote for Proposition 187 affects black-brown relations in two significant ways: the vote has become a source of tension between African Americans and Latinos in Southern California, and the passage of the proposition has prompted Latino immigrants to naturalize and, presumably, to become potential anti-black voters. Apart from the fact that a federal court recently invalidated major portions of the legislation, it is not clear what the long-term consequences of black support for immigration restriction will be from a Houston perspective. Survey results in the Houston area indicate that black concern for immigration
U.S. immigration and intergroup relations in the late 20th century: African Americans and Latinos.

Restriction is similar to the larger national trend against undocumented immigration and not particularly an anti-Latino sentiment.

The findings of Mindiola et al. (1996) indicate that African American support in Houston for immigration restriction is not generally an anti-Latino position. The study found that a majority (65%) of African Americans favor a national identification card to keep undocumented immigrants from U.S. jobs, but that a majority (58%) of Latinos also favor such a proposal. This finding and the finding mentioned above that over one-third of African American respondents viewed Houston’s immigration to be good or very good strongly suggests that African American concerns over immigration restriction are not particularly prone to induce black-brown conflict. Indeed, in HISD, African American administrators can be found hard at work in multicultural programs supporting Latino immigrant children. In the Harris County Commissioner’s Court, an African American commissioner (the only minority member in the all-male court) has questioned proposals to investigate the residency status of county hospital users, an effort directed mainly at unauthorized (read undocumented) immigrant patients (Inter-Ethnic Forum of Houston, 1995).

It is also not clear that the record high levels of naturalization by immigrants will produce a Latino voter backlash against African Americans, especially since many Latinos in California also voted for Proposition 187. From the Houston perspective, equating naturalized Latino citizens with Latino voters is still problematic. Mindiola et al. (1996) found that only about 20% of the Latino immigrant respondents were U.S. citizens. Although this proportion will increase, previous research has found mainly a low to moderate electoral interest in Houston’s immigrant concentrations. Undoubtedly, the present Latino immigrant interest in U.S. citizenship is significantly motivated by concerns about future restrictions against noncitizens, but how this will affect future electoral politics is not clear.

My attempt in this section has been to suggest that relations between African Americans and Latinos in U.S. settings of high immigration can vary considerably across urban areas. I have specifically attempted to demonstrate that the conflictive and tense character described by some (e.g., Johnson et al., 1996) for African American-Latino relations in the Los Angeles area differs significantly from conditions in the large Houston area. Across U.S. urban settings, social histories, institutional conditions, and political human agency may vary sufficiently to produce at least the potential for different intergroup responses to changes effected by immigration. However, this is not to say that different localities have completely distinct intergroup trajectories. Intergroup relations in major U.S. urban centers may have similar opportunity structures (but not necessarily identical responses) since these areas are affected by common macro-structural processes, e.g., globalization and international migration, which significantly affect the areas’ institutional environments.

Conclusion

Black-brown intergroup relations in the United States are evolving from a complicated matrix in the late 20th century that includes global, national, and local levels, as well as varying predisposing social-psychological conditions. Yet, intergroup relations among African Americans and native and foreign-born Latinos are not totally unpredictable. Black Americans are the most economically stressed group in U.S. society, and therefore it seems logical to hypothesize that the most disadvantaged members of this population, such as the unemployed and the working poor, will react against conditions they perceive to be against their interests in an already precarious existence. What happened in Los Angeles in spring 1992, I believe, is a dramatic example of this. As happens in other populations of color, however, not all African Americans react to change from a racial group perspective; some react from a class or political perspective and form linkages with Latino political actors and social movements. It is difficult to predict black-brown relations, therefore, with precision beyond the contours of possible outcomes because so much of these relations is not structurally predetermined, but is the outcome of human agency.

Any attempt to address the course of intergroup relations between African Americans and Latinos in the late 20th century soon runs into the realization that few theoretical apparatuses are available to help channel the discourse. Race and ethnic relations theories of the 1960s and 1970s seem very outdated for explaining black-brown dynamics in globalized urban settings that are dramatically different from their days of two or three decades ago. Anglo-conformity models, for example, are as useless to explain inner-city intra-minority relations, as they are to explain the present-day appropriation of ethnic cultural content and forms by the white dominant group. Indeed, the very concept of the dominant group has become a variable in urban areas like Miami and the Los Angeles suburb of Monterey Park. Macro-structural perspectives of global capitalist development still lend much conceptual power for theorizing about economic relations between groups in advanced Western societies, but appear to need greater sensitivity to the role of noneconomic identities in the development of intergroup relations in the late 20th century.
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