

E PLURIBUS UNUM

“Stagnant Dreamers” in Southern California

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Is the Golden State really the gold standard for assimilating immigrants? Four books illustrate the tensions, trade-offs, and ironies of California’s immigration policies.

Conservative pundit Reihan Salam has been watching nervously as Americans trade racial accusations. The title of his 2018 book, *Melting Pot or Civil War? A Son of Immigrants Makes the Case against Open Borders*, is not subtle. But as a Muslim, he is all too aware of how people like himself could be scapegoated for the next big jihadi attack. Raised by middle-class Bangladeshi parents in Brooklyn, now president of the Manhattan Institute, he does not want strife over immigration to wreck the Americanization machine that has served him and others well.

According to U.S. Census projections, non-Hispanic whites will fall below a majority of Americans around 2045. Hispanics or Latinos, already the second largest ethno-racial category, will rise to a quarter of the population. Anxiety over this demographic shift contributed to Donald Trump’s victory in 2016. Could competition between rival ethno-racial blocs sabotage American stability and prosperity?

Interestingly, Salam is less worried about demographic change or diversity than he is about how the U.S. economy treats working-class immigrants, the ones without transferable professional skills. It is very easy to welcome foreigners, he points out, as long as they agree to do jobs that Americans reject. Given that most such jobs pay only poverty wages, it is much harder to help them achieve the better life promised by national mythology. As for their children—second-generation immigrants—these have the still higher expectations of anyone raised in America. If this second generation looks forward only to more poverty, Salam reasons, it will understandably feel cheated, and that will deepen our already-existing pattern of racial stratification, in which poor people of color square off against well-off elites who are still mainly white.

In the short run, the fortunes of immigrants depend on the demand for their labor and how this fluctuates with the economic cycle. In less than a decade, the U.S. economy has gone from the Great Recession to the 2012-2020 expansion to falling off an epidemiological cliff. In the long run, different migration streams vary quite a bit in how they fare from one generation to the next.

State of Resistance: What California’s Dizzying Descent and Remarkable Resurgence Mean for America’s Future

Manuel Pastor
The New Press, 2018, 288 pp., \$18.99

Stagnant Dreamers: How the Inner City Shapes the Integration of Second-Generation Latinos

Maria G. Rendon
Russell Sage Foundation, 2019, 320 pp., \$39.95

Melting Pot or Civil War? A Son of Immigrants Makes the Case against Open Borders

Reihan Salam
Sentinel, 2018, 224 pp., \$27.00

The Last Best Place?: Gender, Family, and Migration in the New West

Leah Schmalzbauer
Stanford University Press, 2014, 320 pp., \$25.00

California is a good place to look at immigrant prospects because of its never-ending appeal as a dream destination. It is home to almost a quarter of the country's foreign-born residents, who now constitute a quarter of the state and, with their offspring, close to 40 percent of the population. California also staged a dramatic recovery from the 2008 financial crisis. It is home to three internet behemoths—Apple, Google, and Facebook—as well as a real estate boom that has pushed the median value of a single-family home to more than half a million dollars. What does such remarkable economic growth mean for working-class immigrants and their children?

California Dreaming

A case for optimism is made by Manuel Pastor, a sociologist at the University of Southern California. Like Salam, he is a second-generation American (he describes his father as an undocumented immigrant from Cuba). Unlike Salam, he has few doubts about the capacity of U.S. society to absorb immigrants and give them a better life.

Pastor's State of Resistance: What California's Dizzying Descent and Remarkable Resurgence Mean for America's Future begins with the shock of Trump's election to the White House. The state's highest Latino officials vowed that California would lead the resistance to the new President. “California was not a part of this nation when its history began,” senate president Kevin de León and assembly speaker Anthony Rendon declared, “but we are clearly now the keeper of its future.”

A quasi-messianic tone is nothing new for the Golden State, nor is Manuel Pastor's hope that California progressivism will lead the way for the rest of the United States. But the California Dream of the past century was enabled by two circumstances that will not be repeated. First, U.S. manufacturing dominated the globe, which ended when countries wrecked by World War II were able to rebuild and become more competitive. Second, California had seemingly infinite amounts of land for suburban development and an alluring way to connect them, the personal automobile.

The California of 1960 was populated mainly by Anglos. Everyone else added up to less than a quarter of the population. Latinos, African-Americans, and Asian-Americans suffered from *de facto* segregation, but many of them also achieved middle-class prosperity. When political protest upset California voters, they elected Ronald Reagan as governor, and later they helped him win the White House.

In the 1980s and 1990s the state's economy went into a tailspin. A brutal loss of manufacturing jobs was the most obvious cause, but taxpayer revolts and public sector-unionism also helped push the state and local governments toward bankruptcy. One trend upsetting voters was mass migration from Mexico and Central America. The higher birth rates of immigrants opened up what Pastor calls a “racial generation gap” between still-heavily Anglo voters and non-Anglo youth. When south-central Los Angeles exploded in the 1992 Rodney King riots, more than half the people arrested for looting were recently arrived Central Americans.

Immigration became an easy scapegoat for California's problems. Voters passed referendums to cut off benefits to undocumented immigrants, end affirmative action, curtail bilingual education, and incarcerate repeat offenders for 25 years

to life. The Republican Party invested heavily in these causes. Opposition to illegal immigration paid off with voters in the 1990s, only to backfire as the Anglo percentage of the electorate declined.

Nowadays a coalition of Anglo liberals, public-sector labor unions, African-Americans, and Latinos has turned coastal California into a near one-party state run by Democrats. Not only have Democrats won the political battle over an estimated 2.2 million undocumented immigrants; Democrats have provided them with “*de facto* state citizenship” via driver’s licenses, children’s health insurance, in-state tuition, and sanctuary laws that restrict police cooperation with federal immigration agents.

Over three decades of debate, California’s demographic future has been transformed—by 2019 non-Hispanic whites had slipped to 36.8 percent of Californians and Hispanics had risen to 39.3 percent. But the Democrats have yet to close the resulting social deficits. Owing to the continued flow from Mexico and Central America, known as ethnic replenishment, Latinos have continued to lag Anglo and Black Californians in virtually every income, educational, and health indicator.

Pastor concedes a “sharp increase in the working poor” but, because of his focus on state politics, doesn’t convey what this looks like up close. In Los Angeles, the trendy online retailer Fashion Nova sources its clothing from nearby sweatshops which owe millions of dollars in back-wages to Mexican and Central American workers. Oddly, some of the sweatshop owners have indigenous K’iche’ Maya surnames from Guatemala. Owners named Demetria Sajche and Eric Alfredo Ajitaz Puac figured out a piece rate that enabled them to pay their worker Teresa Garcia \$3.46 an hour.

Stagnant Dreamers

Labor outrages such as this cannot be blamed on heartless Republicans, because they have not run Southern California for decades. The conundrums facing working-class Mexican immigrants, even in a state run by Democrats, are detailed by another California sociologist in *Stagnant Dreamers: How the Inner City Shapes the Integration of Second-Generation Latinos*. María Rendón seeks to refute unduly pessimistic appraisals of migration streams that, according to earlier researchers, are at high risk of “downward assimilation” into the “underclass,” a term that sociologists now avoid.

The dreamers of Rendón’s title are not exactly the undocumented youth who, brought to the United States as children and seeking citizenship through the Dream Act, won temporary legal status through an executive order by President Barack Obama (the program has just survived a Supreme Court challenge from the Trump Administration).

Instead, her sample of 42 young men in south and east Los Angeles are mainly U.S.-born citizens. She interviewed them and their parents in 2007, when they were between 17 and 23 years-old. Five years later she reinterviewed half of them, to learn how they weathered the 2008 financial crisis and its sequel. Crucially, she also has a home-turf grasp of the challenges they face thanks to her own upbringing in similar neighborhoods.

Rendón’s character sketches go far to explain contradictory stereotypes about

Mexican immigrants. The first generation usually earns a reputation as hard workers who sacrifice for their families. The second generation usually achieves higher levels of education and income, only for progress to stall in the third and fourth generation—a mysterious phenomenon known as the “Hispanic U-Turn.” Also, why do some of these seemingly sturdy families disintegrate into single-parent households, gangs, and prison? Could something about moving to the United States wreck Mexican family values?

Some of Rendón’s findings will reassure anxious Anglos. In her sample, even youth involved with gangs or addicted to drugs are firm believers in the American credo that hard work will lead to a better life. Most maintain an upbeat narrative through thick and thin, their employment rates are high, and they blame themselves for economic failures.

Nor do most regard themselves as victims of Anglo racism. Unimpressed by

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structural explanations for their hardships, they believe that their own choices between good and evil determine their outcomes. Parents are quick to discipline sons for any sign of gang behavior, and to blame them for any confrontation with cops. Some parents, in their fierce insistence on hard work and family obligations, clearly qualify as tiger mothers. Like many other immigrants, they and their children seek to embody the American Dream and claim it as their own.

Not so reassuring is that most of Rendón’s young men, even in their mid-

to-late 20s by 2013, and after a decade or more in the labor force, are not earning enough to support a family. In the years since their parents came to California in the 1980s and 1990s, reports Rendón, a “changing economy [has] made it harder to get ahead.” They struggle against “rising college tuition, flattened wages, and a higher cost of living.”

Impossible real estate prices are a big part of this, with housing costs galloping ahead of working-class income. Thus a high-school graduate named Rigo is, by the age of 23, earning an unusually high \$25.50 an hour at Los Angeles International Airport. But apartment rents have pushed his residence so far out, to the Inland Empire, that his two-hour commute each way has turned him into a sleep-deprived wreck.

Democratic presidential candidates have been proposing free college for all, but college has not been a good investment for most of Rendón’s families. They do not grasp the advantages and disadvantages of different kinds of institutions, the hidden traps in student loans, and how different courses do or do not add up to a degree. According to one community college student in limbo, the only counselling he received was from two janitors and a school policeman. More often than not, the savings and the loans that families plow into higher education fail to boost their incomes. A few members of Rendón’s sample earned the label of “gifted and talented” in high school, enabling them to enroll in a university, only

to find themselves in remedial courses because their K-12 education was so deficient.

The Burden of Neighborhood Violence

The only members of Rendón’s sample who agree with her diagnosis of Anglo racism as a major issue are those who have attended universities. Here, as beneficiaries of liberal notions of diversity and inclusion, they find themselves classified as brown people for the first time in their lives. As for the majority of Rendón’s sample, they are so confined to immigrant neighborhoods and job networks that they may not have enough contact with Anglos to experience discrimination in the flesh.

Neighborhood criminal violence figures prominently in Rendón’s analysis of why some members of her sample are experiencing downward assimilation but the majority are not. Judging from the life stories that she collected, the reputation of inner-city Los Angeles for street violence is no exaggeration. Everyone seems to have experienced gang aggression and the victimization of boys begins at an early age. Keeping their kids away from gangs is a top priority for most parents, who define themselves against both gang members and lazy Americans.

So if the immigrant community draws strong boundaries against disruptive youth, who goes to the dark side? Homicide rates have fallen in Los Angeles, but it continues to be the country’s most prolific breeder of gangs. Here Rendón comes up with a very interesting hypothesis: Judging from her sample, young men who join gangs are “disconnected” and “socially isolated” from the patriarchal kin networks which have defined generations of movement to the United States. Such networks, hailing from small towns in northern Mexico, provide multiple father figures. They provide connections to certain kinds of employment. Last but not least, they provide a busy round of obligations and festivities to absorb the conflicting impulses of second-generation youth.

This is quite a buffer against the worst outcomes in high-risk neighborhoods, but not everyone in Rendón’s sample has such a kinship network. Some young men are produced by migrants from Mexican cities, which means that their Los Angeles network does not include dozens of relatives and neighbors from the same small town. Other young men are raised in single-parent households, by mothers who are essentially refugees from past abuse and abandonment.

For women who refuse to accept domestic violence, the United States appears to offer refuge, but the only neighborhoods they can afford to live in expose their sons to further toxic manhood. Gangs like 18th Street, perversely, give socially isolated boys the physical protection and emotional support which their parents have failed to provide. They do so through the idiom of voluntary kinship (e.g., blood brotherhood) even if, in the end, their promises are false and they spread horizontal violence to everyone around them.

With her emphasis on family networks and how these buffer shocks in dangerous neighborhoods, Rendón shows how a migration stream can be far less homogenous than it appears, and how it can produce very different outcomes.

Following other researchers, Rendón makes an important distinction between two kinds of social capital, bonding and bridging. “Bonding” enables kin networks and other community-enhancers, such as churches and migrant associations, to

support their members in a variety of ways. “Bridging,” in contrast, gives migrants connections to people in higher social classes. It builds bridges from entry-level jobs in immigrant neighborhoods to better-paying jobs in the wider economy. Most of Rendón’s young men were strong in bonding capital but weak in bridging capital: Even as they were buffered by their kin networks, they lacked ladders out of the neighborhood.

Immigrants Fleeing Other Immigrants

Rendón attributes the lack of ladders, and the resulting low wages, to the spatial segregation of Mexican Americans in Los Angeles topography. Statistically, Latinos in southern California face even higher levels of residential and school segregation than African-Americans. That is the “invisible barrier” they face to up-and-out mobility.

How did this happen? Discrimination is probably still at work, even though racially exclusionary housing covenants have been illegal for more than 50 years. Another obvious cause is high housing prices, which continue to channel Mexican and Central America migrants into the lowest-rent neighborhoods. Immigrant neighborhoods in the United States have long functioned as migration corridors, with kin networks importing more of their members in ways that are often hidden

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Chain migration turns exploitative when it brings so many relatives and neighbors that it floods a labor market, or at least those niches open to immigrants. Once jobs become scarce, immigrants are easy prey for employers who flout labor laws. The worst bosses are often co-nationals or fellow immigrants engaged in their own struggle for survival. And so immigrant

neighborhoods become, not just sources of support, but traps ensnaring immigrants in sub-standard wages and labor conditions.

All the competition can make immigrants very ambivalent about each other. Reihan Salam, with his case against “open borders,” is not alone in this regard. Immigrants do not necessarily want future immigration to be as easy as possible. Certainly many do, for example, if they want to bring up relatives. Others wish to escape crime, gender subordination, or other conflicts which will follow them to their new home if too many co-nationals arrive.

This is more or less what Mexican immigrants in Montana told anthropologist Leah Schmalzbauer. In her 2004-2012 research, she expected to find them under siege from Anglo nativism and immigration enforcement. In some respects, they were. Given that most were undocumented, they were especially afraid of being profiled for being brown or speaking Spanish, and of a traffic stop turning into a deportation. At the same time, they were relieved to be living among Montana’s

“If you are in the city you have to be careful of who is around you,” a former Californian told Schmalzbauer:

Here we don’t have to worry if we leave our car open or if we leave our keys in the car. And we don’t have to worry if our kids go outside alone to play. In California, you have to be careful about everything, absolutely everything. You can never relax.

One reason Schmalzbauer’s interlocutors wanted to get away from heavily Mexican neighborhoods was the high level of interpersonal violence. A mother was still angry with California school officials for failing to protect her children from gangs. Like Rendón’s parents in Los Angeles, they drew a strong line between good Mexicans who were hard workers and bad Mexicans who brought crime.

In keeping with earlier researchers who have been surprised by such attitudes, Schmalzbauer found “few narratives of Mexican solidarity” and more of “envy and individualism.” Mexican-Montanans were also frank on the evils of labor market saturation. “Many Latinos are beginning to arrive,” a construction worker told her:

What is going to happen is that Big Sky will become saturated like in other places, and when that happens our labor becomes worth less and less. Where there are a lot of Hispanics, the employers have more power and can pay us less.

Why Living Wages Require Immigration Limits

Let us return to California, where Manuel Pastor is not sanguine about California’s astonishing poverty rate. In 2017 36.4 percent of the state’s population lived in poverty or near poverty. Measured by cost of living, California has a higher poverty rate than Mississippi, thanks largely to the expense of renting a house and operating a car. The affordability crisis extends far beyond Rendón’s “stagnant dreamers” to millions of coastal Californians who have been forced to move inland or to other states.

This is why California must, in Pastor’s words, “reboot the middle and shore up the bottom of the labor market,” through “a new social compact that reflects the values, needs, and aspirations of all Californians.” Like the past century’s California Dream, this new one is to deliver prosperity for everyone. But for that to happen, Pastor stipulates, it must relentlessly focus on the state’s most disadvantaged people by boosting the minimum wage, cracking down on wage theft, enacting other worker protections such as affordable child care, and creating affordable housing.

The majority of California’s working poor are Mexicans, Central Americans, and their children. But Pastor’s recommendations do not include any limitations on immigration, which he regards as one of the “right-wing temptation[s]” that sent California in the wrong direction. Unauthorized immigration “has almost entirely stalled,” he believes, and that has “slowed [the] pace of demographic change.” If Pastor is correct about this, it should diminish the racial generation gap between Anglo seniors and non-Anglo youth. Unfortunately, he could easily be wrong.

Given Central American asylum seekers, stagnant Global South economies, and California’s many attractive features, including social benefits for irregular immigrants, California will continue to lure a wide range of foreign job-seekers.

True, California is not likely to be threatened by the ethno-racial civil war that Reihan Salam fears. The state leads most others in inter-racial marriages, thus approximating the “melting pot” that Salam desires. With certain exceptions such as elite college admissions, ethnic contention in California seems to be diminishing. California’s most obvious political fault lines are coastal liberals versus inland conservatives, farmers versus environmentalists, young people priced out of cities versus older property-owners, and techno-proficients versus techno-obsolètes.

But Salam has noticed one of the same phenomena that Pastor did, the racial generation gap. “Somebody else’s babies” is his term for this form of backlash, a phrase he ironically borrows from anti-immigrant Congressman Steve King. Aging Anglo voters fail to perceive that their country’s future resides in children being produced by other ethnic groups, especially if the parents showed up without asking permission. One instigator of tension over “somebody else’s babies” is competitive racial logic, and this doesn’t flow exclusively from Anglo nativists.

Pastor’s list of lessons that California can teach American progressives includes “chang[ing] the electorate,” by “step[ping] up naturalization, encourag[ing] registration, and attract[ing] the interest of new voters.” Registering new citizens to vote is Civics 101, but seeking to change the electorate is not. Pastor can argue that he is simply bowing to demographic change, but he is sufficiently pleased by it that, to conservatives who accuse liberals of trying to replace them with immigrants, changing the electorate will sound highly partisan.

The most important paradox in how liberals think about immigration, Salam argues, is that they fail to think through what immigrants need to be successful in an economy with a shrinking percentage of middle-income jobs. Their carelessness in this regard includes typical American illusions about “model minorities” such as himself, his family, and other high achievers from Asia. Their accomplishments have encouraged the idea that “anyone from anywhere can thrive in twenty-first-century America.” In actuality, people like Salam’s parents have arrived with considerable social and intellectual capital, of the kind that represents brain drain from the country that educated them. For immigrants to gain traction in the wider U.S. economy, Salam points out, they must be able to leave immigrant enclaves—the same point made by Rendón about her stagnant dreamers stuck in immigrant neighborhoods.

Pastor’s thinking about immigration has been buoyed, not just by his belief that future flows will be smaller, but by bicoastal globalism, its magnet cities, and the huge inflows of capital these attract. In the 2000s the California economy recovered thanks to windfalls from real estate speculation, the tech industry and Asian imports: Los Angeles handles nearly half of U.S.-container imports from East Asia. Yet the imports have shut down thousands of manufacturers in the American heartland, even as internet shopping sucks the life out of bricks-and-mortar retail across the country. If California’s success with imports and the internet is undermining the livelihoods of Americans across the country, then it probably cannot show the rest of us how to achieve Pastor’s social safety net for

If California is the New America, as Pastor believes, the Democratic Party has a lot to think about. In the hope of motivating Latino voters, national Democratic leadership is increasingly deferring to immigrant-rights advocates who condemn border enforcement as racist. But the problem is not just nativist reactions to immigrants—it is also the refusal of immigration advocates to accept limits. Without limits, immigrants are condemned to bitter competition with each other. The Democratic Party should acknowledge that border enforcement is needed to help immigrants.

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