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REFEREED PAPER

Migration and Inequality: A Structural Approach

Ron Hayduk

San Francisco State University, San Francisco, USA

Corresponding author: Ron Hayduk, Department of Political Science, San Francisco State University, 1600 Holloway Ave, San Francisco, CA 94132, United States. rhayduk@sfsu.edu

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Abstract

Migrants are omnipresent in cosmopolitan societies. So too are steep increases in economic inequality. These changes have pushed immigration to the top of the political agenda in the U.S and many other cosmopolitan societies. In response to the migrant crisis in the U.S., conservatives seek to erect walls, restrict immigration and deport the undocumented, while liberals seek amnesty, sanctuary policies and other measures to advance human rights. Both sets of policies, however, primarily address consequences rather than underlying causes of external drivers of migration and internal dynamics of inequalities that animate populist revolts on both the left and right. In this paper, I employ an analytic framework that highlights structural factors that contribute to immigration patterns and growing inequities in the U.S. The paper examines how U.S. immigration and immigrant policy interacts with the political economy in ways that shape unequal immigrant incorporation processes and outcomes. I conclude by pointing to contemporary social movements that promote policies aimed at producing more egalitarian outcomes for migrants and citizens alike. Given that immigrants and their offspring comprise nearly one in four people in the U.S., addressing such inequities is theoretically important and a pressing political concern.

Keywords

Migration, immigrants, inequality, structures, incorporation, equity, United States

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Introduction

How do we understand patterns of immigration and growing inequalities in cosmopolitan societies? What policies might produce greater equity? This paper seeks to address these questions focusing on the U.S.

Migrants are omnipresent in cosmopolitan societies. Today, more human beings are migrating from countryside to city, from city to city, and from country to country than at nearly any time in human history. Fueled by poverty, violence, and environmental disasters – and the promise of a better life elsewhere – mass migration has raised the proportion of immigrants in the U.S. to its highest level since the 1920s (14.8%) (Batalova, et al. 2020), with 4.8 million of the 50.7 million foreign-born residents arriving within the previous five years (IMO, 2020).

Upon arrival, migrants encounter political controversy about their impacts on everything from labor markets and crime to electoral outcomes and national identity. Just as in the past, nativist responses have led to a host of measures restricting immigration, expanding border security and limiting access to public benefits. Meanwhile, liberals celebrate immigrants' economic contributions, advocate increased pathways to citizenship and advance human rights (Hayduk & García-Castañón 2018). Yet both liberals and conservatives tend to agree that immigration policy should limit 'future flows' of migrants, and many support 'merit-based' or 'points-based' immigration policies that limit admissions to 'talented' immigrants – those with higher levels of education and skills – or to temporary guest workers. Such policies, while designed to 'promote economic growth' and meet 'labor needs' of an aging population (Chishti and Bolter 2019) instead tend to exacerbate inequalities between and within migrants and citizens.¹

Such policy proposals appear at the same time we see steep increases in economic polarization (Picketty 2014). In the U.S., growing inequalities exist in income, wealth, health care, housing, and education, inequalities which affect life chances for immigrants and

¹ I use 'liberal' and 'conservative' – and 'left' and 'right' – in general terms as they apply to the U.S. context. While simplistic, these terms are useful for analysis of policy differences manifest in dominant U.S. political parties and politics. For example, 'liberals' aligned with the Democratic Party tend to view immigrants relatively favourably, pointing to migrants' economic and cultural contributions, and favour policies that promote social rights and immigrant integration. 'Conservatives' aligned with the Republican Party tend to see immigrants as having negative economic and cultural impacts, and favour policies that restrict immigration and seek to deport unauthorized migrants. To be sure, there are important differences and nuances within each broad ideological framework and within the Democratic and Republican Parties in the U.S., ranging from more 'left-wing/progressive' factions within the Democratic Party associated with Bernie Sanders's brand of 'democratic socialism' now popular among many segments of the population (especially young people and Latinos) to more 'conservative' factions associated with Michael Bloomberg, as well as more 'moderate' pro-immigration factions within the Republican Party associated with former President Bush and Mitt Romney to more 'right-wing' factions associated with President Trump. Moreover, these terms have different meanings – or are not applicable – in other countries and other contexts. For example, in 2019 Danish Social Democrats economic policies would be considered much further to the 'left' in the US even though they also support greater restrictions on immigration. Similarly, in Ireland, Sinn Féin's recent platform contains social democratic economic policies *and* nationalist/populist restrictions. These immigration programs would be considered quite conservative in liberal/left discourse in the U.S.

citizens alike (Saez & Zucman 2016). Today, although immigrants occupy a wide variety of occupations in the U.S., studies show distinct patterns. A higher proportion of immigrants than citizens work in jobs that call for high levels of education, such as in technology and medical science, while simultaneously, a greater proportion of the foreign-born are represented in the lowest-paying jobs, such as waiters, agricultural workers and private household workers. Immigrants also account for a disproportionate number of workers in small business occupations that require little education but more job skills, such as tailors, dressmakers, and jewelers. Although immigrants in the U.S. today are remarkably heterogeneous (Waters et al. 2014), the majority of the foreign-born tend to score lower than citizens on most social indicators of well-being, including income, poverty, housing, hunger, and education (Card et al. 2013). We see similar disparities among citizens along class, race and gender lines (Gordon 2013).

Yet, immigration policies advocated by political leaders in both the Democratic and Republican Parties tend to downplay the role of the political economy and U.S. immigration policies which contribute to such inequities. Conservatives embrace the state to erect walls, restrict immigration and detain and deport the undocumented. Liberals, even as they critique conservatives for their failure to protect human rights, or the economic needs of aging populations, promote legal remedies – such employment based visas, sanctuary policies, or so-called ‘amnesties’ – to respond to U.S. economic needs as well as a humane response to the ongoing migration crisis. While laudable, however, liberal responses do not address underlying causes of both migration and inequality, and thereby, fall short of producing more effective solutions.

Neoliberal policies promoted by both parties have fostered the displacement of millions of workers and small farmers, both in the Global South and within the U.S. In the face of these forces, borders and walls do not deter desperate migrants (Massey 2009; Bacon 2014); nor do they attend to the economic needs of growing numbers of poor and working-class citizens in the Global North (Ness 2011). In the context of a shrinking middle-class and declining social mobility, these factors have become fodder for political factions on both the left and the right.

The notion that ‘immigration problems’ begin with capital accumulation and government policy has yet to fully penetrate liberal and conservative circles, but it is becoming more commonplace within progressive circles. Immigrant rights and labor advocates, for example, argue that both conservative and liberal regimes – which tend to ignore or downplay these dynamics – have contributed to the loss of public trust and ongoing crises fueling populist revolts evident across the globe (Guskin & Wilson 2017). Without addressing economic and social structures at the center of migration and immigrant incorporation processes, both conservative and liberal policies will continue to fall short of their own stated goals of achieving shared economic prosperity and political stability (Alperovitz 2013; Wright 2019).

In this paper, I argue for such a structural approach to these issues. Focusing on the U.S., I advance an analytic framework that highlights the role of economic, social and

political factors that shape growing inequalities between immigrants and citizens. In so doing, I examine immigration and immigrant policy in relation to changes in the political economy, assessing their impacts on unequal patterns of immigrant incorporation within and between groups². The paper concludes with an examination of contemporary social movements that promote alternative policies aimed at achieving more egalitarian outcomes. Given that immigrants and their offspring comprise nearly one in four people in the U.S., addressing these issues is theoretically important and a pressing public policy concern.

Immigrant Incorporation

Social scientists employ different definitions of ‘immigrant incorporation’. Some scholars posit immigrant incorporation as ‘a process’ while others describe it as ‘an outcome’ by which immigrants become ‘more like’ citizens over time (Waters & Pineau 2016, p. 3). Some studies focus on socio-economic dimensions of inclusion or exclusion while others focus on political dimensions. Some focus on ‘first generation’ or ‘foreign-born’ immigrants while others focus on ‘second generation’ immigrants. Some focus on particular immigrant groups while others focus on immigrants as a whole. Some scholars argue immigrants should be compared with citizens to assess incorporation, while others argue immigrants should be compared with certain ethnic or minority groups, or to people within the same class status. Some assess the level of immigrant incorporation in terms of socioeconomic attributes, such as educational attainment, income or social mobility. Immigrant political incorporation is examined in terms of legal status, naturalization, voting, representation and policy, and importantly, on ‘the capacity for sustained claims making about the allocation of symbolic or material public goods’ (Hochschild et al. 2013, p. 16). Still others focus on cultural dimensions, such as language acquisition or patterns of behavior. The time frame for when incorporation ‘begins’ and ‘ends’ is also debated. Some view ‘incorporation as attainment’ or ‘advancement’ and ‘intergenerational attainment’ is gauged by socio-economic outcomes of descendants over time (de Souza Briggs 2013, p. 325).

In seeking to account for divergent patterns of immigrant incorporation, much of the scholarship tends to focus on socio-economic characteristics or other factors intrinsic to immigrants themselves (or immigrant groups), such as education levels or employment skills and credentials. And while immigrants enter the US with various socio-economic characteristics that provide advantages or disadvantages, which may reflect conditions in their country of origin, their pathway to prosperity or hardship is significantly shaped by particular ‘conditions of reception.’

Some characterize immigrant incorporation as ‘partial’ or ‘acquiescent incorporation’ or ‘coercive incorporation,’ where immigrants appear to ‘accept’ discrimination and marginalization as facts of life. For example, Gerstle argues German immigrants in the U.S. during and following WWI were ‘forced’ to downplay their culture, suppress use of their

² A useful distinction can be made between ‘immigration policy’ and ‘immigrant policy’. ‘Immigration policy’ determines which immigrant groups are permitted to enter the US and in what numbers. ‘Immigrant policies’ refer to federal, state, and local laws regarding the integration or the treatment of immigrants after they have arrived. The federal government sets US immigration policy while US immigrant policy is comprised of various state and local provisions and programs.

language, which ‘inflicted a mortal cultural wound’ but which yielded economic and social benefits by doing so (2013, p. 307). By contrast, ‘transformational incorporation’ is depicted as protesting and challenging discrimination and marginalization, and which instead seeks to disrupt established power relations aimed at and reconfiguring patterns along the lines of greater equity and social justice. During the late 19th and early 20th centuries, industrialists wanted cheap, pliable and dependable labor with ‘model’ employees – ‘punctual, diligent, hardworking, followed instructions’. However, some workers ‘rebelled and organized,’ seeking to transform and/or overthrow existing relations of production and power, which achieved valuable reforms benefiting the working classes in economic and political terms. The point of such a ‘transformative incorporation,’ as Eugene V. Debs famously put it, is to challenge and change existing relations so that one can rise ‘with the ranks, and not from the ranks’ (Polner & Woods Jr. 2008). In other words, to rise with one’s class, not from one’s class (as social mobility models posit).

In this paper, I argue for such a transformative model of immigrant incorporation³. Drawing on the work of other scholars, I define immigrant incorporation as a process occurring when immigrants achieve a status of well-being on par with each other and similarly situated citizens of the population over time in economic, social and political terms (Mollenkopf & Pastor 2016; Waters & Pineau 2016; Hochschild et al. 2013). Further, if ‘attainment’ is a key marker and achieving ‘equality’ is an overarching goal of immigrant incorporation, then incorporation processes should be examined not merely in terms of whether migrants are fitting into existing and unequal economic systems, social relations, and political institutions, but by how those structures are challenged and transformed to generate greater equitable immigrant incorporation outcomes⁴. A structural analytic framework helps illuminate processes and mechanisms that produce unequal economic systems, social relations, and political institutions, which form the conditions or terrain on which immigrants must navigate to survive and thrive. The next section will consider what is the shape of that terrain and how it affects patterns of immigrant incorporation in the U.S. today

Immigration Policy and American Politics

It is common to hear that the U.S. immigration system is ‘broken’. Although there is debate about what exactly is not working well, mainstream analysts usually point to the large flow of

³ I use the terms ‘incorporation’ and ‘integration’ interchangeably.

⁴ There are key differences between these notions of immigrant incorporation versus the problematic concept of immigrant ‘assimilation’. Scholars concerned with ‘assimilation’ usually focus on social and attitudinal characteristics of the sum of individuals, ‘such as language acquisition, educational attainment, labor market participation, health behavior. If conceived or analyzed at the level of groups, it is often in terms of whether groups converge or diverge in outcomes compared with each other, such as comparing Mexican and Cuban immigrants. Some scholars of immigrant assimilation debate whether immigrants from particular countries enjoy occupational mobility; or whether different national origin groups are converging or diverging in outcomes such as intermarriage, residential dispersion, and educational attainment’ (Ramakrishnan 2013, p. 31; Wong 2013, p. 100). Indiscriminate use of these terms – immigrant incorporation, integration and assimilation – can contribute to what some scholars have described as ‘conceptual stretching’ and ‘conceptual parsimony’ (Ramakrishnan 2013, p. 29), or a ‘conceptual muddle’ (Minitte, 2009, p. 49). Like most contemporary scholars cited below, I reject offensive assumptions and expectations of ‘melting-pot assimilation’ or ‘Anglo-conformality assimilation’ endemic to these and earlier studies (Portes & Zhou, 1993; Brubaker 2003; Alba & Nee, 2009; Waldinger & Catron, 2016).

immigrants into the U.S., rising number of the undocumented and a litany of ills that immigrants allegedly bring (from disease to crime). Employers, faced with an insufficient pool of legal workers, employ unauthorized workers. American workers see their standards of living stagnate or decline and (wrongly) blame immigrants for their plight. Police and federal agents chase farmworkers, busboys, and nannies. Enforcement policies keep immigrant families marginalized or separated from loved ones.

Similarly, there is debate about what to do. Business groups want to expand foreign worker visas to match employers with willing workers. Labor groups want workers to be brought out of the shadows and given amnesty so that they can enjoy the same protections as other workers. Religious and ethnic groups call for reform to speed the reunification of families and end inhuman treatment of immigrants in detention and deportation proceedings. Security advocates call for greater border security and technocratic solutions to identify and apprehend the undocumented. A majority of Americans indicate in public opinion polls that they prefer a realistic, comprehensive and fair approach to immigration reform, one that includes a path to citizenship for undocumented immigrants (Guskin & Wilson, 2017).

Yet, these differences have largely produced a political stalemate, blocking comprehensive and coherent policy formation. As scholars have noted, the history of U.S. immigration policy is characterized by long periods of such political stalemate, punctuated by periods of policy reform (Tichenor 2002). Political gridlock occurs, in part, due unique features of American federalism which fragments power and provides numerous veto points that can block policy reform, unlike unitary governmental systems common in most other countries. Into the current stalemate, Donald Trump and a resurgent conservative movement stepped, stoking fear and hatred of immigrants during the past several years. The Trump administration has promoted a nationalist ‘America First’ policy, further restricting the flow of migrants to U.S. and criminalizing immigrants within the country, while Democrats, hoping to retake power, promise to regulate immigration better and more humanely.

Comprehensive Immigration Reform (CIR)

This political stalemate belies periods of policy and political convergence. During the early 2000s, a bi-partisan immigration reform legislation nearly passed both branches of Congress to obtain the signature of a sitting president (George Bush, Jr). The framework, usually referred to as ‘comprehensive immigration reform’ (CIR) consisted of three elements: (1) limited legalization requiring the undocumented to return ‘home,’ pay significant fines, get in line, and hope to get back to the U.S. at some unspecified time in the future; (2) strict enforcement and increased security, including construction of walls along the US/Mexican border, workplace raids, detention and deportation; and (3) a guest-worker plan for temporary workers. While CIR was not enacted, members of both parties continue to adhere to the CIR framework, reflected in legislative proposals proposed and debated in Congress to date⁵.

⁵ The Migration Policy Institute (MPI) maintains a database of CIR information at <https://www.migrationpolicy.org/topics/comprehensive-immigration-reform>

Many immigrant rights and labor advocates, however, criticize components of this framework. They object to the guest worker program, which leaves immigrant workers with few labor rights, and to detention and deportation policies that lead to the separation of families. Instead, immigrant and worker rights groups advocate for greater labor protections and pathways to legalization. Although some variations of guest worker plans attempt to provide limited labor protections for immigrant laborers, most unions and human rights advocates oppose guest worker programs because they can exploit immigrant workers and keep them vulnerable. Instead they promote a range of policies, including: (1) swift, practical, inclusive legalization, (2) the establishment of an independent body to determine labor needs, along with guarantees that all workers who come to the U.S. get full rights and an option to become permanent residents, (3) extension of the social safety net to all workers, (4) the protection of civil liberties and civil rights for all, and (5) the clearing up of the application backlog for legal immigration with a priority on family unity (Stanley-Becker 2013). And while this framework is a marked improvement over CIR, it contains flaws from a standpoint of equity. For example, immigration enforcement is at odds with enforcement of labor laws, because it allows raids targeting immigrant workers that create widespread fear, which make it nearly impossible for those workers to report abuses or otherwise defend their rights.

Increased Enforcement

More to the point, while neither CIR nor advocates' proposals were enacted, enforcement provisions within CIR have been largely put into place. Immigration restrictionists successfully lobbied to greatly expand the number and kinds of violations migrants can be charged with, as well as more than doubling immigration enforcement capacity. The Department of Homeland Security's budget rose from \$3.3 billion in 2003 to \$7.6 billion in 2019, and during the same time, the Customs and Border Patrol rose from \$7.6 billion to \$17.1 billion (American Immigration Council 2019).

Moreover, U.S. immigration enforcement operates far beyond its borders, including throughout the interior of the country and into other countries. In fact, U.S. immigration enforcement has long acted beyond its own borders, reaching into sending and intermediate states. Beginning in the 19th century, for example, U.S. immigration authorities created a system of medical inspections, visas, and passports that turned consular offices and shipping companies into frontlines for immigration enforcement. These extraterritorial boundaries became significant obstacles to entry by creating overseas mechanisms that thwarted would-be migrants from departing their home (Young 2018). Today, the U.S. has enlisted governments in Mexico and Central American to block migrants from leaving their countries or rerouting them southward.

Internally, the number of migrants who are detained within the U.S. and deported has increased markedly. President Obama deported 3 million immigrants while President Bush Jr. deported 2 million and President Clinton deported 900,000, a fact that earned Obama an infamous reputation among immigrant rights advocates who dubbed him as the 'Deporter in Chief'. President Trump is on track to exceed that record (Ong Hing 2018). Increased enforcement – which state and local officials also enact – has led to the blurring of

immigration law and criminal law, engendering growth of a new field within immigration studies, called ‘crimmigration’ (Stumpf 2006; Hernández 2017). This level of enforcement, which affects the approximately 11 million undocumented immigrants in the U.S. today, is multiplied by the fact millions of additional citizen relatives live in these same households. Approximately 8 million citizens live in ‘mixed status’ families, including over 1.2 million who have naturalized and 6 million children who are citizens (Mathema 2017).

In addition, increased immigration enforcement practices have racialized immigrant groups, particularly affecting Arab and Latino migrants (Zepeda-Millán 2017). A range of practices ‘reinforce racialized anxieties’ by focusing attention on physically distinctive and economically marginalized minorities who are defined as the nation’s immigration ‘threat,’ made increasingly salient during the past decade (Provine & Doty 2011; Armenta 2017). More recently, nationalist groups have used the COVID pandemic to stoke anti-Asian sentiment and violence.

Labor Needs and Future Flows

Immigration policy has largely been guided by the goal of meeting U.S. economic needs. Rather than labor groups, however, ‘economic need’ has largely been defined by business and political groups. From the early expansion of the U.S. westward and through its industrialization, employers have successfully lobbied congress to infuse U.S. immigration policy with provisions tailored to meet their needs for particular kinds of labor (Ness 2011). More recently, business groups have fought to win enactment of employment visas, such as the H1-B program that began in 1990, which allows employers to recruit high skilled, high educated migrants (Trimbach 2016). In addition, the U.S. enacted and expanded visas for investors (Rose 1992) and students, which similarly recruits migrants with more resources, as well as providing employers with a steady stream of graduates in Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) (Bound et al. 2009). At the other end of the income scale, agribusinesses have won provisions to import and employ low-skilled, low-wage laborers such as via the H-2A visa program (Ross 2000).

Today, business and political groups have advanced proposals that would affect the character of ‘future flows’ by modifying U.S. family unification policy, replacing it with a point system to qualify for entrance into the U.S. A point system, if enacted, would allot points to immigrants who possessed a combination of education, job skills, wealth, English proficiency, and only immediate family connections (as opposed to extended family as it now stands). That is, people with greater economic resources, job skills, education, and command of the English language would be awarded more points and thereby have greater possibilities to enter and remain in the US (Gafner & Yale-Loehr 2010). Low skilled, poorly educated, non-English speakers – even with family ties – would essentially be denied access and citizenship. The Trump administration and a growing number of members of Congress support changes to the family unification policy and introduction of a point system. Points-based systems are used in the United Kingdom, Australia, Canada, and other developed countries (Harker 2013).

Scholars point to negative consequences of point systems. Point systems tend to privilege migrants who possess resources (capital, skills, education) while relegating low-skilled and low-educated migrants to the lower social orders, and thereby contributing to both so-called 'brain drain' and brain gain' phenomena that exacerbate inequalities in both sending and receiving countries (Freeman et al. 2013). For these reasons, many immigrant advocates, labor groups, and progressives oppose such points-based provisions. They note that elites of both parties are happy to let businesses cross borders, but when low-skilled immigrant workers try to do so, they are often stripped of their rights on the job and in the political sphere (Guskin & Wilson 2017). The argument is not simply that the freer the movement of people would 'benefit' economies or that current restrictive immigration policies pose a fetter to sustained economic growth. Rather, the contention is that these policies produce greater economic inequalities between as well as within countries, negatively affecting both migrants and citizens alike.

Asylum and 'Public Charge'

The Trump administration recently blocked asylum seekers from entering the U.S., particularly at the southern border, and launched new 'public charge'⁶ rule enforcement. The 'public charge rule' restricts the admission of poorer noncitizens based on the likelihood that they will become dependent on government support. In addition, the public charge rule has a chilling effect on legal immigrants in the U.S. who fear that if they access public assistance, that would jeopardize their legal status and lead to their deportation. Studies show the major effect of the new rule is to 'chill' noncitizens from enrolling in public benefits such as health programs (Medicaid) out of fear of negative immigration consequences (Makhlouf & Sandhu 2020). In addition, public charge puts at risk documented immigrants who access nutrition or health benefits (food and health assistance) because migrants and/or their children who forgo needed health or nutrition assistance have worse health outcomes (Perreira et al. 2018). These 'chilling' effects have only worsened during the pandemic (Makhlouf & Sandhu 2020).

Taken together, these immigration policies have increased inequalities between immigrants and citizens as well as within immigrant groups, exacerbating the 'hour-glass' shape of U.S. society composed of a sizable and growing number of poor and working-class residents, a shrinking middle class and a miniscule but extremely wealthy elite. It is towards the internal characteristics of these domestic changes and policy responses that we turn our attention next.

Immigrant Policy and American Politics

A separate but related set of immigrant policies, designed and implemented at the state or local level, similarly affects patterns of immigrant incorporation. Immigrant policies govern how immigrants are treated after their arrival. Like immigration policy, immigrant policies can constrain or facilitate immigrant' effort to achieve their goals.

⁶ The 'public charge' rule prevents migrants from accessing funds from certain welfare programs, while the family unification policy allows an immigrant who becomes a US citizen to petition for their relatives from outside the country to gain entrance and obtain a permit to work legally in the U.S

Immigrant policy is characterized by divergent approaches and politics, from enforcement-oriented programs that seek to promote migrants' 'self-deportation,' to welcoming programs that seek to facilitate immigrant integration on an equal basis (Newton 2015; Williamson 2018). Leaving aside anti-immigrant enforcement policies, which tend to produce downward pressure on migrant's wages and other low-skilled and low-educated workers, as well as other negative impacts on immigrant families and the racialization of immigrants discussed above, many locales have adopted welcoming programs that seek to help newcomers adjust and integrate.

Policies that seek to integrate immigrants include refugee settlement programs; language programs for English language learners, such as English language classes and translation services for public services; access to health care programs; job training programs and assistance for small business development; a variety of legal services such as sanctuary policies, legal defense counsel, licensing for professions and naturalization; education opportunities, from pre-K programs and bilingual education to funding opportunities for undocumented students to attend colleges; housing opportunities, access to drivers' licenses, and access to some public welfare benefits such as food stamps (Bloemraad & de Graauw 2012; Newton 2015; de Graauw 2016; Williamson 2018; Papademetriou & Benton 2020). Such programs help mitigate challenges immigrants face as they seek to survive and thrive in the U.S., producing important improvements to the daily lived experience of thousands of migrants.

Yet, most states and localities provide few of these programs and opportunities, and if they do, these are modestly funded or poorly implemented, often failing to meet migrants' needs. And while nonprofit community organizations have sought to fill these gaps, again meeting vital needs and even producing laudable immigrant empowerment outcomes (de Graauw 2016; Hayduk & García-Castañón 2018), the number and capacity of nonprofit groups is limited and often corresponds to the same states and locales where public programs exist, leaving many immigrants without needed support (de Graauw & Bloemraad 2017). Even so, such programs can be seen as efforts to ameliorate negative consequences produced by restrictive immigration policy and the workings of labor and housing markets that tend to marginalize migrants. Worse still, many states and locales instead have implemented a ranged of anti-immigrant or enforcement policies that produce opposite impacts (Varsanyi 2011; Newton 2015), compounding and multiplying concomitant national policy.

The concluding point to be made in this paper is that to adequately address unequal patterns of immigrant incorporation, deeper fundamental change is needed.

A Structural Analytic Framework

'Studies of the incorporation of immigrants need to turn away from accounts of individual or group skills and toward a consideration of structural inequality with its different rewards of local labor markets to individuals with different bodies but similar skills' (Goodwin-White 2008, p.329). Drawing upon such scholars, I argue that efforts by immigrants to achieve integration and empowerment are either constrained or facilitated by several fundamental

structures: (1) pre-existing ethnic and race relations, (2) labor markets and related institutions, and (3) government policies (Reitz 2002).

Unequal patterns of immigrant incorporation are best understood as an aggregate, cumulative product of historical and contemporary economic, social, and political factors. Such an approach sheds light on how powerful economic, social and political structures *interact with* individual-level and group-level characteristics of migrants, which when taken together, can better account for patterns of immigrant incorporation over time. Elevating structural elements illuminates similar factors that shape patterns of inequality found among citizens in America. A structural analysis can also aid immigrant advocates and policy makers craft more effective programs capable of producing more egalitarian outcomes, along the lines of universal and inclusive programs that exist in many EU countries and Canada.

To be clear, this approach does not view immigrants (or citizens) as hapless victims of circumstance. Rather, the argument is that immigrants – like citizens of various ethnic and racial backgrounds – are born into circumstances that condition options for action. Labor markets, social structures, public policies, gender roles, legal status and other factors form the basis for individual and group level activity at the center of processes shaping urban life for immigrants and citizens alike. Indeed, such an approach recognizes that immigrants play an active role in their own incorporation process, embracing some aspects of their host society and resisting other aspects, as well as being agents engaged in various forms of civic and political activity aimed at shaping outcomes. As Ewa Morawska has argued, ‘(im)migrants’ activities are the products neither of structures nor of their agentic volitions but of the time- and place-specific contexts of the interactions between the two’ (2013, p. 141)⁷. This framework centers the crucial role played by economic structures in shaping fundamental conditions and options for collective action, along the lines of insights reflected in Karl Marx’s famous maxim, ‘Men [sic] make their own history, but they do not make it as they please; they do not make it under self-selected circumstances, but under circumstances existing already, given and transmitted from the past’⁸.

Economics and Immigration Status

Historically, the growth of manufacturing jobs and labor union density provided a ladder of mobility for many first- and second-generation European immigrants (Gerstle & Mollenkopf 2001), even while locking out Asian, Mexican, Native Americans and Blacks from such opportunities and relegating them to the lower social orders (Liu et al. 2006; Paul Ortiz 2018). Recent economic restructuring and the loss of unionized jobs associated with

⁷ Morawska continues, ‘How much agentic power individuals can derive from their sociocultural resources is contingent on the influence of other macro- and micro-structures that support particular orientations: dynamism or stagnation of the economy, an open or segmented labor market, the restrictiveness of sender and receiver state immigration policies and the ‘gaps’ created by their imperfections, civic-political pluralism or exclusiveness of the receiving society, parochialism or cosmopolitanism of the host culture....The structures/agency (re) constitution is an ongoing process...’ (ibid.).

⁸ *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* (1852). The passage from Marx continues, ‘The tradition of all dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brains of the living.’

globalization have narrowed employment options for immigrants, particularly those with low levels of education or work skills and credentials. Broad changes in the global economy after WWII, which have been variously characterized as shifting from a 'Fordist' to 'Post Fordist' or from a 'Keynesian' to 'Neoliberal' model, have largely reversed the growth of the middle class in the U.S. and instead put downward pressure on wages for working people nearly everywhere. As Peter Rachleff (2018) summed up such developments:

The very forces which drove down wages and benefits and undermined working conditions in an industry like meatpacking have also driven workers and peasants in southern Mexico, Guatemala, El Salvador, Bosnia, India, Pakistan, and many, many other places to leave their home communities and find their way to jobs in meatpacking and poultry processing plants, or behind the wheels of taxi cabs, pushing gurneys in hospitals and mops in commercial skyscrapers, from the metropolises of New York City and Los Angeles to the small Midwestern towns of Worthington and Willmar, Minnesota.... By imperiling the economic security of native-born workers in industrialized countries, neoliberalism has also fanned the flames of nativism and xenophobia, providing fearful and angry workers with immigrant scapegoats as the objects of their furor.

Meanwhile, immigrants who arrive with valuable work experience, skill sets, educational credentials, social capital and access to capital, can more easily make their way into rising economic sectors and favorable social structures, accessing citizenship and greater opportunities, and achieving desirable outcomes.

Research shows that the distribution of immigrants in the U.S. economy, their class position, is strongly tied to education levels and job skills, contrary to earlier periods of mass migration to the U.S. when these factors mattered less. For example, the wage income of foreign-born Asians is highly polarized, reflecting the bifurcated distribution of educational and skill levels of Asian immigrants that both U.S. immigration policy and the global economy privileges, which allows highly skilled professionals entry via various visas. According to a Pew Research Report:

'From 1970 to 2016, the gap in the standard of living between Asians near the top and the bottom of the income ladder nearly doubled, and the distribution of income among Asians transformed from being one of the most equal to being *the most unequal* among America's major racial and ethnic groups. In this process, Asians displaced blacks as the most economically divided racial or ethnic group in the U.S....' (Kochhar and Cilluffo 2018, emphasis added).

Hispanic wage income, particularly for Mexicans, is more highly concentrated at the lower ranges, reflecting lower levels of education, professional credentials and capital of most Latino immigrants, which similarly reflects unique features of U.S. immigration policy (Massey 2009; Durand and Massey 2019). Of course, for both Asian and Latino groups, and other migrants denied legal entry, life without papers tends to produce the worst outcomes in economic and social terms. Scholars have found a range of similarities and differences in other countries (Hochschild et al. 2013).

These national patterns are largely replicated in the states and cities where immigrants are concentrated. In New York City, for example, while many immigrant groups work in low-wage occupations, most immigrant groups have some members who work in a wide range of jobs. According to David Kallick, immigrants make up ‘between 25 and 80 percent of virtually all occupations, from the bottom to the top of the economic ladder,’ including big and small business owners and workers in nearly every sector (2013, p. 81). Yet, there are stark inequalities among immigrant groups. Certain immigrant groups make up sizable portions of upper income occupations: 28 percent of management analysts, 30 percent of all CEOs, and half of all accountants are foreign born, not to mention a sizable number of celebrities and sports stars. Nearly half of all immigrants living in New York City work in white-collar jobs (as do 75 percent of U.S.-born New Yorkers). Immigrants that fare well come disproportionately from three countries: India, Hong Kong, and Russia, who together comprise about three-quarters of workers in white-collar jobs, matching the share for U.S.-born workers (Kallick 2013).

However, most immigrants work at the lower end of the spectrum, concentrated in low-wage jobs. A third of receptionists and half of building cleaners are immigrants. Less than a quarter of Mexican or Ecuadorian workers are in white-collar jobs; Pakistani cab drivers, Chinese apparel workers, Mexicans working in the back of the house in restaurants, and 82 percent of taxi drivers living in New York City are foreign-born, as are 90 percent of sewing machine operators and 67 percent of food preparation workers. To be sure, there is a wide range in the middle, for example, about half of Jamaican and Guyanese workers labor in mid-range white-collar jobs, but most immigrants fall into lower-level occupations (Kallick 2013). U.S.-born Blacks and Latinos in New York City (mostly Puerto Ricans) and immigrant Latinos all have equally low incomes, while U.S.-born whites and Asians have the highest incomes (Mollenkopf and Pastor 2016, p. 33).

Similar patterns exist in other metropolitan areas across the U.S. with some interesting differences. In Los Angeles, for example, U.S.-born Latinos fare better than Blacks while immigrant Latinos do about as well as U.S.-born Blacks. Conversely, in Chicago, immigrant Latinos outpace U.S.-born Blacks but fare worse in Phoenix, Arizona. Immigrant Asians fare worse than Asians who are citizens in Los Angeles and New York City, but do better in Phoenix and Charlotte, and in San Jose, CA, Asian’ incomes exceed U.S. born whites’ incomes. Again, we see similar and different patterns in other western societies (Hochschild 2013).

Even before the COVID-19 pandemic, immigrants and their children faced a challenging economic environment, but ever since, economic conditions have deteriorated substantially. And because immigrants work in many sectors considered ‘essential,’ such as healthcare workers and in food supply, the pandemic exposes them to increased risk of contracting COVID. The undocumented in particular are loath to access health care services for fear of arrest by immigration enforcement officers, thus putting themselves and their families at greater risk of infection, as well as other workers and community members.

In sum, to explain unequal patterns of immigrant incorporation, it is critical to take into account how individual or group characteristics, such as level of education, and behavior *interact* with economic and social structures in ways that shape outcomes. Moreover, a structural approach can help immigrant advocates and elected officials craft better policies capable of producing more egalitarian outcomes.

Challenging Structural Inequality

The election of Donald Trump accompanied partisan polarization and increased conflict in the U.S. political system. In response, new organizations and social movements emerged, including vibrant immigrant rights campaigns, the fight for \$15 an hour, a wave of labor strikes, a resurgent women's movement and a radical environmental movement. According to Kauffman (2018), at least 15 million people have participated in thousands of protests since the 2016 presidential election. These burgeoning social movements have advanced a political realignment, which if it expands and deepens, could advance progressive policies challenging structural inequities and create more egalitarian patterns of immigrant incorporation.

These social movements have propelled progressive officials into government positions at every level. Indeed, states and cities have enacted a range of policies addressing inequalities, including sanctuary laws, funding for legal services, universal pre-kindergarten classes, paid sick days, increases to minimum wages, protections and expansions of affordable housing, community health centers, and participatory programs aimed at increasing pathways to immigrant inclusion and empowerment (Gonzales 2017; Colbern & Ramakrishnan 2018; Pastor 2018). These developments, in turn, open further possibilities to advance more progressive policies aimed at reversing inequalities, including opening up possibilities to forge multiracial class-based alliances capable of overcoming a politics of competition across borders (Ness 2011; Flecher & Gapasin 2008; Hayduk & Jones 2008). If such developments grow and succeed in shifting the balance of power, then the prospects for a more egalitarian form of immigrant incorporation will similarly expand.

To be sure, such outcomes are not axiomatic. Although many immigrants share similar economic and social conditions with African Americans and poor and working-class whites, alliances do not naturally occur. They must be organized. Common class interests may exist but unless connections are forged and coalesce, differences will continue to divide. As history shows, race consciousness can impede class consciousness; nationalism can impede internationalism. The current anti-immigrant climate provides fertile ground for workers of all colors to displace anxieties about rising costs, stagnating wages and an uncertain future onto immigrants. The 'presumed alliance' among working-class people of color has not been axiomatic (Vaca 2009). As Marx would argue, this class 'in itself' has not yet become a class 'for itself.'

Jane Guskin and David Wilson (2017) rightly point out that well-intentioned efforts by liberals to promote immigrant rights in terms of the contributions of immigration to economic growth often fails to convince U.S. citizens that immigrant workers do not put downward pressure on their own wages. Instead, they contend, this can contribute to a distrust and

resentment toward better off immigrant rights advocates, and worse, can distract attention from the real issues of ‘the super-exploitation of immigrant workers, and the common interests of immigrants’ and citizen workers against their bosses and forces of capital. They suggest properly diagnosing problems afflicting poor and working citizens and the foreign-born, not in terms of individual failings or as the cause of immigrants, but rather in terms of systemic features of the political economy and current social and political arrangements.

Recent political developments have set the stage to do just that. The 2018 election cycle saw a host of progressive women of color and left-populist candidates elected to office in many metropolitan areas. Far-reaching proposals to increase taxes on the rich and regulate corporate behavior promoted by several presidential candidates have gained traction that, if enacted, could fund public health programs, tuition-free higher education, a Green New Deal and ambitious pro-worker and pro-immigration policies capable of shifting the balance of power in profound ways. Socialism is viewed favorably by a significant portion of the American population (40%) for the first time since the early 1900s, according to public opinion polls (Gallup, 20 May 2018). Since 2018, Democrats took control of the House of Representatives and passed several bills that would provide a path to citizenship, such as for ‘Dreamers’ and residents with Temporary Protective Status (TPS). More recently, pushed by immigrant rights advocates and social movement activists, Democrats have embraced proposals to modify immigration and labor policies, including a path to citizenship for the undocumented and raising minimum wage. The COVID-19 pandemic and deepening economic crisis, coupled with the massive protests in response to the killing by a police officer of George Floyd, an African American, in May 2020, have produced greater volatility in the American political system. Yet, it has galvanized a multiracial, multiethnic movement for racial and economic justice not seen in decades. If the Democrats regain power in 2020 and a deepening progressive political realignment ensues, enactment of policies promoted by immigrant advocates and social movements could help produce more equitable immigrant incorporation outcomes that would also benefit other poor and working-class residents, policies such as expanding rent control, land trusts, affordable housing, worker cooperatives, public health and education programs, public transportation and infrastructure, and participatory budgeting and planning practices (Alperovitz 2013; Gonzalez 2017; Wright 2019). Similarly, if the U.S. joins other international groups, such as the United Nation’s Migrant Worker Convention and the International Labor Rights Forum and helps advance reforms these organizations promote, these could reduce inequities.

In the final analysis, people will continue to move regardless of the plans of political parties. Whether because of changes in technology, wars, economic crises, or the effects of climate change, migration will exist in the future. In such moments, people do not leave their homes lightly, but usually begrudgingly and *en masse*. Politicians of all persuasions need to face the reality that immigration will not end in the future. Immigration law should be flexible within broad parameters along the lines of the US farm bill, which is debated and renegotiated every five years. Like farming, changes in conditions necessitate updating laws at periodical intervals, and not on an ad hoc basis. Empowering workers across borders is the

best single fix for the immigration system, along with creating flexible legislation that adapts to periodic crises and problems that drive migration.

This paper has sought to elevate structural roots of inequities in America and posit a transformative model of immigrant incorporation. Equitable integration of immigrants is predicated on changing key structures that shape unequal incorporation processes and outcomes. Further research is needed to shed light on how incorporation works in different contexts.

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