Divergent Contexts, Convergent Inequalities: Immigrant Spatial Assimilation in the United States and Western Europe

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Abstract

While the United States and Europe have diverging structural features and urban landscapes, social science research highlights similar patterns and mechanims of spatial inequalities between immigrants and natives. This article sheds light on the case of Hispanic spatial assimilation by situating it within the dominant theoretical frameworks, the spatial assimilation and place stratification models, and draws comparisons with the recent empirical research on immigrants' spatial incorporation in Europe.

The French Macron government made U.S. headlines recently for its vocal criticism of "certain social science theories entirely imported from the United States" to address issues of race and post-colonialism in France (Onishi, 2021). These statements fit into a broader debate within the French social sciences about the comparability of inequalities in the two societies (regarding spatial inequalities, see, for instance, Alba, 2005; Wacquant, 2008). American-made perspectives, the argument goes, are overly focused on ethnicity/race in ways that could stoke division and undermine national unity. The ethnicity/race-centric lenses commonly used in the United States further threaten France's longstanding "colorblind" tradition that has downplayed the significance of race and migration in French society (Simon, 2008).

Yet like the United States, France and other western Europe countries have experienced substantial migration-driven demographic transformations in the past decades, reshaping their social and ethnic/racial stratification systems. Although Hispanics are altering the U.S. landscape, growing minority populations are similarly remaking European societies. These transformations are triggered by increasing migrant inflows but also by an expanding second and third generation immigrant population—children and grandchildren of migrants who are native-born citizens but

who, depending on their origin, may be perceived as ethnoracially or culturally distinct from the White majority. In France, for instance, the share of immigrants and their descendants is estimated at around 20 percent of the population—a number which would be inflated if the grandchildren of immigrants were also counted (Beauchemin, Hamel, and Simon, 2018).

Immigrant incorporation—and particularly one of its key linchpins, spatial assimilation—is therefore a crucial question on both sides of the Atlantic, and social science research in Europe draws widely on United States-based theories to understand it. In ways similar to the United States, the spatial concentration of ethnoracial minorities has become a reality in many European cities, and along with it, the correlation between neighborhood minority composition and the spatial concentration of disadvantage (McAvay and Safi, 2018; Musterd, 2005). In line with the research articles in this symposium on Hispanic spatial assimilation, a growing wealth of evidence from European countries documents that immigrants and their offspring are less likely to be homeowners (see for instance Bolt and van Kempen [2002] on the Netherlands; Constant, Roberts, and Zimmerman [2009] on Germany; Kauppinen and Vilkama [2016] on Finland; and McAvay [2018c] on France) and are more likely to live in (and remain in) poor immigrant-dense neighborhoods (see for instance Bolt and Van Kempen [2010] and Van Ham and Clark [2009] on the Netherlands; Lersch [2013] on Germany; and McAvay and Safi [2018] and Rathelot and Safi [2014] on France). At a macro level, dissimilarity indexes across European countries show significant levels of residential segregation between immigrants and natives (Arbaci, 2007; Musterd, 2005). The formation of ghettos has been of widespread concern to politicians and social scientists throughout Europe (Silver and Danielowski, 2019).

The similarity of spatial stratification patterns across national contexts could come as a surprise, given the sizeable structural differences between the United States and western Europe. European countries boast stronger welfare states and more generous redistributive policies that abate overall socioeconomic inequalities (Alvaredo et al., 2018). European countries also invest more in the public housing sector compared with the United States, reaching more than 30 percent of the total housing stock in the Netherlands, 20 percent in Sweden, and 17 percent in France (Whitehead and Scanlon, 2007). Those investments provide affordable housing opportunities, indirectly benefitting non-European origin immigrant families who are more likely to have lower income (Adsera and Chiswick, 2007). The urban landscape itself is another source of divergence: overall ethnic/racial residential segregation tends to be lower[1] (Musterd, 2005), and while the suburbs of European cities are often the poorest areas, in the United States, upwardly mobile households relocate to the suburbs to access homeownership in more affluent (and whiter) residential spaces. Finally, the degree to which immigration and ethnoracial diversity are considered socially desirable varies across contexts. Although European countries tend to see racism as a United States-specific plague, evidence from Europe shows widespread anti-immigrant sentiment, particularly against Muslims (Gorodzeisky and Semyonov, 2016; Rustenbach, 2010; Strabac and Listhaug, 2008). Migration is often portrayed as a social problem and assimilation into the White mainstream as the implicitly preferred mode of incorporation. Of course, racism and nativism are overtly expressed in the

[1] However, the accuracy of the comparison is undermined by methodological difficulties (i.e. the spatial scale used, the measurement of ethnic/racial minorities, etc.).

United States, yet the idea that America is a land of opportunity for immigrants is still a powerful founding myth that has no equivalent in Europe.

Despite these differences, perspectives on immigrant spatial incorporation forged in the United States have migrated quite well to the other side of the Atlantic. The two predominant theoretical models, spatial assimilation theory and place stratification, are widely applied in European social science research to understand immigrant trajectories in housing and neighborhoods (for recent applications, see Lersch [2013]; McAvay and Safi [2018]; Nieuwenhuis et al. [2020]; Vogiazides and Chihaya [2020]; and Wessel et al. [2017]).

Spatial assimilation theory emphasizes that migrants' access to housing and neighborhoods is dependent on individual characteristics such as years since migration, language skills, socioeconomic status, and immigrant generation (Logan and Alba, 1993; Massey and Denton, 1985). Spatial disadvantage is in this sense supposed to be temporary; with time, immigrants settle into the receiving society, acculturate, and become upwardly mobile. They convert socioeconomic status gains into improved residential situations. Perhaps most importantly, spatial assimilation posits that the children and grandchildren of immigrants will not be burdened by the same difficulties faced by their parents and should thus experience similar outcomes to the majority population.

Evidence from the research articles in this symposium point to some signs of this mode of spatial incorporation. High-income Hispanics, in particular, follow a spatial assimilation trajectory; they access homeownership in suburban locations and move into non-poor white areas (Kucheva, 2021). Studies from Europe also point to a similar dynamic: upward residential mobility tends to align with upward social mobility, yet not consistently for all groups (Bolt and Van Kempen, 2010; de Vuijst, Van Ham, and Kleinhans, 2017; McAvay, 2020; and McAvay and Safi, 2018).

Of course, spatial assimilation theory does not tell the whole story, as it fails to account for why some immigrants experience long-term disadvantage. This collection of articles documents that Hispanics are at a greater risk of sheltered and unsheltered homelessness (Chinchilla and Gabrielian, 2021) and still face significant barriers to the housing market (Arroyo, 2021). Class, race, and status contribute to these inequalities: several articles highlight the difficulties faced by low-income Hispanics, non-citizens, undocumented migrants, and those of certain national origins that are more exposed to prejudice and discrimination (Aiken, Reina, and Culhane, 2021; Chavez-Dueñas, Adames, and Organista, 2014). Low-income Hispanics are less likely to exit high-poverty neighborhoods and more likely to move into poor segregated spaces where co-ethnics live (Kucheva, 2021). The empirical literature from Europe echoes these trends: net of socioeconomic status and other individual- and household-level factors, ethnic/racial minorities still face a housing disadvantage, are more likely to remain in immigrant areas, and are less likely to improve neighborhood quality upon moving (Bolt and Van Kempen, 2010; Lersch, 2013; McAvay and Safi, 2018; Rathelot and Safi, 2014; Van Ham and Clark, 2009). Recent studies have shown these inequalities to be durable over the life course and across generations (McAvay, 2018a; Van Ham et al., 2014).

The place stratification perspective sheds light on such trends by attending to the systemic factors that underpin residential disadvantage (Charles, 2003; Logan and Alba, 1993). Despite cross-national differences, many of these structural factors operate in the United States and Europe alike. First and foremost are the urban contexts in which immigrants tend to settle—large cities where expensive, lower vacancy housing markets make decent, affordable housing units hard to come by. Further, place stratification highlights how dominant groups are able to maintain spatial distance with minorities (Logan and Molotch, 1987). Direct and indirect discrimination on the housing market channels minority housing demands to specific neighborhoods, reducing opportunities for upward residential mobility and maintaining segregation and poverty concentration at a macro level. Although the 1968 Fair Housing Act in the United States and other anti-discrimination policy interventions have removed legal barriers to residential opportunities, the spatial assimilation of ethnic/racial minorities is still restricted by more covert exclusionary processes (Charles, 2003; Massey and Denton, 1993). The collection of articles illustrates how discrimination mechanisms on housing and mortgage markets create barriers to Hispanic residential choices, for instance, by implementing English-language requirements, proof of legal status, or closing the doors to housing voucher recipients. Further, anti-immigrant housing policies at local levels (Arroyo, 2021) rely on exclusionary criteria (e.g., occupancy restrictions, beautification, parking and maintenance requirements) that disproportionately impact lower-class Hispanic households.

Place stratification mechanisms are also salient in Europe. Housing market discrimination is widespread both on the basis of race/ethnicity and place of residence (Bonnet et al., 2016; Silver and Danielowski, 2019; for a recent audit study on the Parisian rental market, see Bunel et al., 2017), yet there is no European equivalent of the Fair Housing Act to combat discrimination. Further evidence of redlining practices appears in the Netherlands, where banks have denied loans to geographical areas with large immigrant populations (Aalbers, 2005). Racial steering practices within the public housing sector have been documented in France, channeling minorities toward lower quality units in poor neighborhoods (McAvay, 2018c). Moreover, similar to White flight dynamics that are well-documented in the United States, research has illustrated "native flight" or "native avoidance" processes in neighborhoods with large immigrant populations (see for instance Andersen, 2017; Bråmå, 2006; McAvay, 2018b; Rathelot and Safi, 2014; Van Ham and Clark, 2009).

In light of such structural barriers, policies are needed to combat enduring discrimination and open up residential opportunities for migrants and their children. A major locus of policymaking in western Europe is promoting social mix in the public housing sector, which has absorbed an important share of immigrants' demand for housing. Although it plays a critical role in providing affordable housing, the concentration of migrants in large public housing estates has sometimes had perverse effects by contributing to an increase in residential segregation between immigrants and natives (McAvay, 2018c; Verdugo and Toma, 2018). In this sense, initiatives such as residential mobility programs or housing choice vouchers may be more effective to increase housing opportunities and reduce overall segregation. Urban policy in Europe could draw on these lessons to design new policy tools to favor upward residential mobility. Policymaking also needs to increase communication and trust toward the government among immigrants to encourage them to sign up for the public benefits for which they are eligible. Indeed, the articles in this symposium highlight the lower take-up of public benefits (i.e., homeless shelters, housing subsidies) among Hispanics

(Aiken, Reina, and Culhane, 2021; Chinchilla and Gabrielian, 2021). This reality counters a common narrative prevalent in European societies that immigrants are depleting welfare states, when in fact, cross-national comparisons of European countries also show that immigrants actually receive fewer contributory benefits than natives (Conte and Mazza, 2019). Public policy design on both sides of the Atlantic therefore needs to consciously address the interplay of ethnicity/race-, class- and status-based stratification mechanisms that impact immigrants' spatial incorporation.

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