

Citizenship Begins At Home: A New Approach to the Civic Integration of Immigrants

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For some time now, the debate over U.S. immigrant policy (which addresses the needs of immigrants already residing here, as opposed to *immigration* policy, which concerns how many and which immigrants should be admitted) has been stuck in an unproductive and divisive pattern. On one side are immigrant advocates, a relatively well-defined and cohesive coalition of civil rights organizations, immigrant activists, minority spokesmen and elected officials, human rights activists and civil libertarians, religious and church groups, and most recently labor unions—all of whom have been pushing for increased programmatic benefits and expanded rights for immigrants. On the other side are the immigrant-policy skeptics, a diffuse and disparate lot of fiscal conservatives, cultural conservatives, and business interests, who tend to embrace high levels of immigration but are not very enthusiastic about programs to support immigrants once they are here. What these skeptics share is the pervasive *laissez-faire* ideology that today's immigrants, just like yesterday's, can and do fend for themselves in taking advantage of the opportunities America affords them. In other words, immigrants do not need or merit any special help to become part of American society.

Both perspectives have strengths and weaknesses. Advocates are not wrong to focus on the material needs of immigrants, but as advocates tend to be, they are insufficiently attentive to the concerns of the broader political community. Moreover, the advocates' em-

phasis on immigrant rights may place their demands squarely within the American political tradition, but nevertheless it reduces the array of obstacles confronting immigrants to a monocausal preoccupation with racial discrimination. While this perspective affords immigrant advocates the considerable moral capital of the civil rights movement, it fails to address the need for the structure and order that most of us—but especially economically marginal and geographically uprooted immigrants—need.

For their part, immigrant-policy skeptics tend to ignore the material deprivations and institutional barriers with which many immigrants struggle—even while they take advantage of the genuine opportunities available to them in this country. Many skeptics ignore what increasing numbers of observers now understand to be greater gaps in skills and education between immigrants and native-born Americans today than was true in our past. Moreover, the skeptics' emphasis on the importance of communal values and the duties and obligations of immigrants is important, but by itself becomes a tone-deaf recitation of high-minded principles that neglects day-to-day realities in immigrant families and neighborhoods.

While typically presented as alternatives, a synthesis of these two perspectives is both desirable and possible. For while immigrants need specific rights and programmatic benefits, these would be of greatest help if provided within the context of communal and institutional settings providing the structure and guidance that we all need to make intelligent use of the choices—whether as consumers or as citizens—that material resources and rights afford us. Yet precisely because immigrant communities are characterized by mobility and transience, such institutional guidance is often lacking, even nonexistent. Moreover, the unfolding of American individualism has weakened or destroyed many of the institutions that in the past aided immigrant advancement. For example, urban political machines—however imperfectly—used to serve this function. In a different way, settlement houses similarly provided authoritative guidance to immigrants making their way in our cities. Labor unions were another such locus of institutional guidance. Unlike the machines and settlement houses, unions are resurgent among today's immigrants, but they remain embattled. Similarly, community organizations building

on the work of the legendary Saul Alinsky struggle to provide such support to today's immigrants.

The problem here has been highlighted by Christopher Jencks:

America's laissez-faire economy is unusually productive, but its laissez-faire culture produces an unusually high level of short-sighted, anti-social, and self-destructive behavior... while unskilled immigrants seem able to benefit from America's economy without succumbing to the social ills that afflict other poor Americans, these immigrants' children do not enjoy the same kind of immunity.

As a Mexican immigrant activist, a veteran of neighborhood controversies between immigrants and non-immigrants in metropolitan Chicago, once declared to me: "I wish to hell someone would make it clear how we're supposed to act here!" Or as Lawrence Mead, architect of 1990s welfare reform, has put it, the poor and welfare-dependent need both "aid and structure...help and hassle." So, too, do unskilled, poorly educated immigrants and their children.

To succeed in the United States—to make their way through the thicket of choices that they and their children encounter—immigrants need some sort of institutional guidance. This assertion may raise hackles, because while immigrants obviously bring certain values with them, they must invariably adapt those values to their new circumstances. While some social scientists still refer to this process as *assimilation*, others find the term misleading or objectionable. I will use *integration* to denote this process, in order to emphasize that it is not necessary—and in fact not desirable—for immigrants to rid themselves of many aspects of the cultures they bring here with them.

As Mead emphasizes, the native-born poor who need "help and hassle" typically accept conventional values, but have difficulties closing the gap between those values and their daily lives. Precisely because immigrants are less attached to conventional *American* values, their need for "help and hassle" is arguably greater. Such guidance might conceivably come from the media or other impersonal means of communication. But a more reliable source would be the face-to-face interactions where immigrants live and work—the same primary group relationships, embedded in transnational networks,

that enable immigrants with few resources and little worldly knowledge to traverse long distances, find jobs and shelter, and then move back and forth between America and their countries of origin.

A more balanced approach to immigrant policy can and should be pursued under the rubric of “civic integration.” Properly understood, such an approach would address the strengths and weaknesses of both perspectives in the immigrant-policy debate. To the advocates, it holds the promise of addressing immigrants’ material needs and self-interest, while also taking into account their broader responsibilities to the political community, even if they are not citizens. To the skeptics, it takes advantage of those institutions which are already self-consciously committed to the inculcation of values. In particular, religious and faith-based institutions seem well suited to promote the civic integration of immigrants.

This essay will scrutinize a faith-based organization that unselfconsciously embodies the civic integration synthesis just described. After examining the organization and its programs, I will explore how this model of civic integration is different from and preferable to one that focuses narrowly on naturalization.

The Resurrection Project

The Resurrection Project (TRP) is a community organization based in 14 Catholic parishes in the heavily Latino neighborhoods of southwest Chicago: Pilsen, Little Village, and Back of the Yards. Founded in 1990, TRP now has an annual budget of about \$2.3 million. Its leaders originally focused on reducing crime but soon shifted to the more manageable goal of improving the stock of neighborhood housing. Since its founding TRP has built over 140 new, owner-occupied homes for low- and moderate-income families; renovated 12 buildings to create 156 rental units that it owns and manages; helped to close almost 300 housing-related loans; became involved in commercial real estate development projects, through which it provides employment opportunities to local workers and community contractors; founded the Resurrection Construction Cooperative to help local contractors develop their own firms; and claimed credit for having generated more than \$70 million in community investment. Like many outfits with roots in Alinsky organizing,

TRP is wary of getting embroiled in the provision of social services. As a result, it has partnered with more experienced agencies that actually operate TRP's programs—including one for homeless single mothers; another called *Esperanza Familiar* (Family Hope) which helps immigrant parents improve their child-rearing skills; and finally, two family community centers providing day-care for over 400 children, as well as an after-school program, and an arts center. TRP's latest venture is a community-based college dormitory for area youth.

Described thus, TRP sounds like an admirably successful but perhaps unexceptional community development corporation. But it is more than that, because along with "help," it does provide "hassle." The organization's roots are in the Alinsky tradition, which means that TRP is wary of getting drawn into the mere provision of services. As long-time executive director Raul Raymundo puts it, TRP is not merely a builder of bricks and mortar but also "a builder of leaders." Or as a pastor working with TRP observes:

The biggest challenge is forming people and [their] critical consciousness....When we serve somebody, we want that person to be involved. And we have to have the structure for the involvement, we have to have a formation so they understand [what we're about] and get committed....If they just come for a basket of food and they get the basket and they go away....what difference have we made?

Worthy sentiments, to be sure, but how does TRP act on them? Well, in addition to helping people become home owners, the organization maintains a network of block clubs to sustain a sense of neighborhood. In Raymundo's words, "When our residents buy one of our houses, they are buying part of our community."

At the most basic level, TRP's housing programs use creative financing to lower costs to clients, while providing mortgage information to immigrants with little knowledge of such matters. But again, that is not all. Staff members emphasize that they must also "create a market for our own products." Much time, energy, and thought is devoted to persuading neighborhood residents that the risks and burdens of home-ownership are worth it. Based on their experiences in Mexico, many residents are wary of the prospect of substantial long-term debt, and are reluctant to submit to TRP's admittedly time-consuming and complicated procedures. Notably,

TRP succeeds in attracting them in part because priests in its member parishes tout the program from the pulpit, encouraging parishioners to “have faith” and to take the plunge.

Indeed, such efforts are part of a broader attempt to “change the psychology of the neighborhood.” Not only do staff consciously teach residents about “planning ahead and thinking about savings and budgeting...and saving for their kids to go to college so that they will take care of them in their old age,” they also “teach our people to discipline themselves.” Through intensive counseling sessions and months-long courses on personal finance and credit, home-ownership, refinancing and home improvement, home maintenance, and property taxes, TRP accompanies useful information with guidance in “how to be responsible tenants and home owners.”

And the ratio of hassle to help is even higher in TRP’s rental units. The organization thoroughly screens all applicants. TRP staff explain that community residents have come to expect little of landlords—and of themselves. So, again, the goal is to change attitudes and values. TRP relies on home visits to monitor tenants and enforces a zero tolerance policy for vandalism and abuse of its property. Staffers acknowledge that many tenants resent these procedures—until they realize that if others submit to them as well, then the buildings will need less maintenance and everyone’s rent will be lower.

Citizenship on a Small Scale

In classic Alinsky fashion, TRP uses material self-interest to teach broader lessons about community and the public good. While hardly on a grand scale, these lessons have real meaning and tangible consequences often missing from the lofty abstractions taught in formal citizenship classes. This perspective is similar to that of Jane Addams, who according to Jean Bethke Elshstain saw “the domestic arena...as a springboard into wider civic life rather than an inhibition to matters civic.” As Addams well knew, the terrain between the private realm of face-to-face, primary group relations and the public domain of secondary, instrumental ties is particularly daunting for poor, uneducated immigrants. Similarly, political scientist Michael Foley describes how the *bonding* social capital that holds immigrant communities together differs from the *bridging* kind that facilitates

entry into the wider society. Indeed, the strength of the former typically inhibits the growth of the latter.

But one way or another, bridges do get built. In their study of immigrant home-ownership patterns, David and Barbara Listokin cite the role of “cultural brokers” who “both understand how credit agencies and underwriters think and also understand the applicant’s language, culture, and situation.” Cultural brokers can play a positive role by anticipating misunderstandings that typically arise between lenders and immigrant clients. But such brokers have a downside, as the Listokins also explain:

Because ethnic and family networks are so insular, fewer competitive market forces are at work. Therefore, the broker often demands outlandish fees, points, interest rates, and the like, adding thousands of dollars to the cost of obtaining a home loan and keeping families from realizing home-ownership.

The lack of alternative sources of information in these communities also means that cultural brokers often trade in misinformation that can in turn thwart home-ownership.

Hence the importance of religious and faith-based institutions. The “faith factor” can of course be elusive, but it is clear that the bond of trust and moral authority that the Catholic Church enjoys among Latino immigrants, while not limitless or completely unchallenged, helps an organization like TRP displace cultural brokers by being an *honest* broker. It does so by acting as an intermediary between the informal, face-to-face relations that characterize immigrant communities and the formal, instrumental relations that characterize bureaucratic actors in institutions like the U.S. mortgage market. Before the emergence of today’s highly efficient secondary mortgage market, local lenders with direct ties to their communities were well positioned to judge applicants on other than formal criteria. Today, lenders are often deprived of such “local knowledge,” with the result that struggling immigrant families who are worthy applicants and good risks but fail to meet rigidly applied formal criteria get rejected. Programs such as TRP provide just such local knowledge by tapping into the dense networks that characterize their member congregations.

And this brokering works both ways. Just as immigrant networks help employers to find responsible employees, so does TRP serve a vetting function for lending institutions seeking likely minority candidates. Once TRP clients have passed through 12- to 15-week programs on all aspects of mortgages, home finance, and home-ownership, they are good prospects for lenders eager to increase the number of mortgages to minority households.

Beyond Racial Discrimination

It is of course important to note that lending institutions feel political pressure to increase mortgages in minority neighborhoods. Racial discrimination in lending markets has clearly been the premise behind the Community Reinvestment Act. And undeniably, this legislation has made lenders more willing to cooperate with organizations like TRP. But while TRP does not reject racial discrimination as *one* explanation for the myriad social problems confronting its immigrant clients, it does not share the immigrant-advocate propensity to regard it as *the only* explanation. From the conversations I have had at TRP and other such organizations, it is clear that racial discrimination is only part of a larger complex of factors resulting in low home-ownership among immigrants. In addition to being on target analytically, the TRP approach resonates with deeply held American notions of fairness and opportunity. In brief, it has political legs.

At the same time, TRP avoids the individualistic fallacy typical of those who argue against affirmative action and other race-conscious policies. Many conservatives now regard all expressions of racial and ethnic group consciousness, identity, or interests as suspect, even “un-American.” Yet this position is plainly contradicted by our ethnic history. Immigrants have typically entered American society less as individuals than as members of ethnic groups. Indeed, it can be argued that ethnic group consciousness—as an Italian American or a Polish American, for example—has been a way-station on the way toward integration into the mainstream.

Here again, TRP’s faith-based orientation helps. Forty years ago Will Herberg noted that in America religion was a more acceptable basis of group identity than ethnicity or race. Today it is clearly less provocative for a community organization to pursue its interests as

an affiliate of the Catholic Church than as a Latino organization. That religion can take the edge off the assertion of racial and ethnic group interests is well understood by the Bush administration, which has sought to reach out to African Americans and Hispanics not through established minority group channels but through faith-based organizations. Though not without its own problems, this strategy permits the administration to engage in racial and ethnic group politics without acknowledging it.

Civic Integration vs. Naturalization

The usual approach to the civic integration of immigrants is, of course, to urge them to declare their allegiance to the United States by naturalizing and becoming citizens. The obvious question is how does naturalization compare with the process of civic integration exemplified in The Resurrection Project. In particular, does the latter reduce a strong, clear conception of citizenship to one that is thin, vague, and venal?

I think not. The idea of citizenship embedded in TRP's housing programs is not only more meaningful to immigrants than naturalization, it also avoids certain problems. For example, a citizenship initiative focusing on naturalization might well degenerate into a frustrating and divisive debate over the nature and content of the naturalization exam. And as the Clinton administration's experience suggests, any such initiative would get evaluated in terms of numbers of new citizens, or of new voters—goals that, however laudable, would soon be politicized and perverted. Compared with the understanding of citizenship embodied in TRP's programs, this would represent an unfortunate operationalizing and narrowing of our civic aspirations.

Paradoxically, this diminished vision would be partly the result of unrealistically high expectations. Unlike refugees, most immigrants come to America not to become citizens or even "Americans," but to make as much money as possible and then return home. To be sure, after much travail and moving back and forth, most end up staying. But given such tentative and evolving commitments, urging citizenship on immigrants is bound to be disappointing.

There is also a mismatch between the middle-class bias of most citizenship initiatives, which emphasize civic and political participation, and the raw economic motives driving most immigrants. Unlike Jane Addams, who understood that enticing immigrants into the public square had to begin with their own quotidian concerns, many of her fellow Progressives were so outraged by the pandering of machine politicians that they drew a clear, bright line between the private and the public. And ever since, this high-minded dualism has predominated. Political machines were weakened, voter registration requirements were implemented, and abuses of the naturalization process were eliminated. The Progressives sought to purge the public domain of petty private interests, and they largely succeeded. Unfortunately, when corruption was reduced, so was immigrant political participation. Next came coercive “Americanization” measures, a crackdown on further immigration, and until the New Deal, the effective exclusion of immigrants from the public domain.

Today’s situation is similar. Indeed, by expecting too much of immigrants, we are risking disappointment and overly harsh judgment of them. In the 1990s, when noncitizens were denied eligibility for various government programs, naturalization rates shot up. To many immigrant-policy skeptics, this meant that the noble ideal of citizenship had become simply a self-interested scramble for social welfare benefits. As for immigrant-advocates, they did in fact reduce naturalization to a bureaucratic hurdle to be overcome. Needless to say, both perspectives are wide of the mark. Immigrant advocates aim too low, focusing solely on the perquisites of citizenship; their skeptical opponents aim too high, overlooking the vital link between private preoccupations and the public good. That is why TRP stands as a model program exemplifying a middle path between narrow instrumentalism and high-minded civic-mindedness.

Long-Term Goals

It is not my intention to deny the importance of citizenship and participation. Elsewhere I have argued that one dilemma facing contemporary American politics is that the interests of immigrants are typically articulated not by immigrants themselves but by advocates who are seldom accountable to those on whose behalf they claim to speak. So the sooner immigrants are organized politically,

the better for everyone. Yet such necessarily long-term goals should not crowd out the more immediate, day-to-day concerns of immigrants, such as housing. Nor should we overlook the potential usefulness of such immediate concerns in drawing immigrants into the wider civic realm. As TRP's housing initiatives suggest, "citizenship can begin at home."

Another problem with narrowing down citizenship to naturalization is that it makes it more difficult to appreciate and take advantage of churches that benefit immigrant communities even though they shun civic involvement. For example, many of the evangelical and fundamentalist congregations that continue to attract substantial numbers of Latino immigrants provide all variety of supports and services to their members, but also tend to discourage participation in the broader civic arena. Should we overlook or denigrate their good works simply because they do not conform to more ambitious conceptions of citizenship? Indeed, is it not possible, perhaps likely, that such churches, despite their disavowals, contribute to civic engagement?

Finally, too narrow a focus on citizenship as naturalization draws attention away from what is clearly the most daunting challenge posed by immigration: the civic integration of the second and third generations. For the most part, these individuals are U.S. citizens. Indeed, the American-born children of immigrants automatically become so. But this does not mean we can ignore the enormous problems some of them face, or take for granted their civic integration. Programs like TRP, which establish authoritative structures in immigrant communities, send critical messages to youth about what is expected of them as Americans.

It is important to note that TRP is not an isolated example. In Miami a similar program is run by the Little Haiti Housing Association. In New York City, the Faith Center encourages and supervises such programs in mostly African-American congregations around the country.

One obvious pitfall of the TRP approach is that by focusing on the rejuvenation of inner-city neighborhoods, it goes against the tide of geographical mobility out to the suburbs. An even trickier aspect is how this kind of civic integration effort can be sold to a broader

audience. I am struck that in all the materials I have read about TRP and similar programs, there is a definite tendency to omit descriptions of the “hassle” part of what these organizations actually do. Resorting to terms like “empowerment,” supporters gloss over the ways in which community residents are taught the basic lessons of neighborhood responsibility. After all, the mainstream does not like the idea of immigrants—or anyone—being told what to do. That message, too, is absorbed by today’s immigrants, usually with negative consequences. We can hope that efforts like TRP serve to counteract it. But only time will tell.