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Comment on Hartmut Esser/3

by Debora Mantovani *and* Giuseppe Sciortino

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In *Assimilation, Ethnic Stratification or Selective Acculturation?*, Hartmut Esser tackles a central topic in migration studies, one that has been a central concern for scholars and public opinion alike for at least a century. Since the Nineteenth-century mass transatlantic migrations, U.S. sociology has tried to develop an adequate understanding of the long-term consequences of population mobility both for the migrants and for the receiving society.

Historically, the main interpretative framework has been provided what is called today “classical assimilation theory.” According to this approach, immigrants and ethnic groups, over time and across generations, become virtually indistinguishable from the population of the receiving society through an inevitable and natural – albeit conflict-ridden – process of re-socialization to the norms, beliefs, values, behaviors, and characteristics of the mainstream culture and institutions of the receiving country. For decades, most scholars of immigration subscribed to the idea of a straight and uniform path toward assimilation, even if it is possible to detect different interpretations of this concept and different assessments concerning the key steps in the process.¹

¹ Some scholars considered assimilation as a relatively simple, individual and unidirectional process [see Mayo-Smith 1894a b; Simons 1901a; Simons 1901b; Simons 1901c; Simons 1901d; Simons 1901e; Portes *et al.* 2002], while others thought it was a social and reciprocal process consisting of several steps necessary to become an “American” [Park 1914; Park and Burgess 1969]; some interpreted prejudice and discrimination as the main barriers to assimilation [Gordon 1964], whereas a

As with many sociological notions, the 1960s were a fateful period. In the context of the Civil Rights Movement and the post-1965 migratory wave to the United States, “assimilation” was heavily criticized. Some emphasized the enduring lack of potential for assimilation among African-Americans, with social inequalities reproducing generation after generation. Others noticed the persistence, or even revival of difference-based claims in many areas of social life, especially education and local politics. Still others pointed to the differences between the “old” European immigrants and the Hispanic and Asian newcomers. Gradually, most migration scholars abandoned the concept of “straight-line” assimilation. Even if it eventually happens, it was discovered, the process occurs at different speeds and along an uneven and “bumpy” path [Gans 1992].

A strand of this criticism, dosed with cultural studies and normative theory, generated what is known as multiculturalism. Another thread provided the key elements for the development of an alternative framework known as “segmented assimilation.” This theory identifies three possible different outcomes of migratory processes: *straight-line assimilation*, (the traditional integration into the white middle-class), *downward assimilation* (assimilation into the oppositional culture of the streets and inclusion in the “rainbow underclass”), and *selective acculturation*, in which upward structural mobility combined with the maintenance of core elements of the values and norms of the immigrant community [Portes and Zhou 1993].

More recently, this framework has also been challenged by “new assimilation theory,” which claims that – once the original ethnocentric bias is removed – the original hypothesis is still valid over the long term. Consequently, according to this view, the other outcomes predicted by segmented assimilation theorists are either empirically marginal or phase-specific [Alba and Nee 1997; Alba and Nee 2003].

The heated, contentious debates among sociologists over the outcomes of international migration are understandable. Migration – for economic, familial, or other purposes – is an important phenomenon in contemporary world society. And it is still definitely poorly understood. International migration is becoming an ever more tangled phenomenon, both quantitatively and qualitatively. Within traditional labor importing countries, migration involves new occupational sectors and new destinations. Traditional sending countries have themselves become heavy receivers of foreign labor. Migration flows are increasingly differentiated in terms of demographics and distributions (e.g., country of origin, age, gender, migratory project, migration seniority, endowment of financial, human, and social capital). Receiving countries,

few others distinguished between cultural (nurture) and racial (nature) obstacles [Warner and Srole 1945].

moreover, are involved in a complex restructuring of their economic, social, and cultural foundations.

The increasing complexity of contemporary migration implies a serious problem for researchers. Given the variety of flows, anybody may find cases that support whatever hypothesis one may wish to advance. For example, current European migration studies rely heavily on ethnographic case studies and historical works, and each of the competing strands of reasoning may find some good examples to support virtually any theory. Even in the large-scale surveys luckily available to American researchers, competing interpretations of the results may be easily found. Moreover, with a few notable exceptions, migration studies in general are a highly under-theorized field, with few attempts to develop generalized arguments. Most migration scholarship does not travel well across national boundaries, as hypotheses, concepts, and terminologies are often highly context-bound. And most scholars are much keener in stressing differences than similarities.

Hartmut Esser clearly finds such a situation unsatisfactory. He rightly notes that current theories of assimilation are not properly “theories” (in the sense of an explicative model) but rather a set of generalizations of empirical trends complemented by typologies and lists of relevant factors. He stresses how current analyses of the integration process do not specify its underlying mechanisms. Esser has tried to develop a model able to transcend the boundaries of different contexts, treating specific individual characteristics, the peculiarities of their mobility, and the features of the host country as variables in the model. His current work builds upon an argument already presented some years ago [Esser 2004]. In both versions, Esser’s work deserves high praise, both for its intrinsic quality and for its relevance to the modern world. In an era of intellectual “patchworkism,” moreover, Esser’s work is notable for its elegance and conceptual consistency. Accordingly, the following criticisms should not be understood as dismissive of his project, but rather as an acknowledgement of its importance and an attempt to foster its further development.

Esser advances a model of intergenerational integration meant to clarify the underlying mechanisms governing the emergence of different structural outcomes. Its foundational assumption is that the process of social integration for immigrants (and their offspring) results from the combination of a limited set of crucial variables. At its core, the model focalizes on two basic options open to immigrants: investing their resources on integration into the receiving society or investing resources in activities rooted in the sending country or with co-ethnics. The outcome of such choices, however, is contingent upon some key configuration of the social structure of the receiving society. Here, Esser stresses the size of the group and the configuration of the social boundaries distinguishing immigrants and the native-born,

created through social closure or ethnicization. As the reader knows by now, these two structural elements in turn, can be explained as resulting from still other processes: group size is a function of the processes of replenishment or composition; the strength and configuration of the boundaries is a function of the (ever-changing) composition of the immigrant population. Esser shows convincingly that the main forms of assimilation discussed in the scholarly literature on the topic may be construed as structural outcomes of the interaction between the core elements of the model.

We believe that Esser's model of intergenerational integration has several important advantages in comparison to the current literature. First, it shifts from an inductive to a deductive approach: integration patterns are no longer expressed in terms of empirical generalizations, but as outcomes generated by a consistent theoretical model. As its focus is oriented on the co-variations among individual and structural level variables, the model is able both to take into account and to explain deviations from "standard" integration outcomes. Its generality makes it particularly suitable for comparative research and for generating hypotheses about immigration contexts differing in significant respects from the U.S. experience. In fact, "segmented" and "new" assimilation theories are strictly embedded in the specific elements of the migratory systems involving the United States – or at a stretch, the United Kingdom and Australia – and such analyses are not always useful for comprehending what is happening, for example, in many European countries.

In order to demonstrate the potential of the model, let's consider some of these country-specific differences. An important backdrop assumption of segmented assimilation theory is the emergence of the "hourglass economy" due to labor market deindustrialization and the ensuing decline of demand for blue-collar workers. This economic change is considered crucial by segmented assimilation theorists for examining the risk of second-generation marginalization [Portes and Zhou 1993; Portes *et al.* 2005]. However, such a labor market structure does not necessarily correspond to the economy of many European areas, where industrial manufacturing is still prosperous and the demand for blue-collar workers is still sizeable. The situation of American inner cities – with their clustering of poverty, poor educational infrastructures, high incidence of street crime, and drug use – is another important contextual consideration. It justifies the assumption that risks of downward assimilation are higher when culture, social ties, and values within an ethnic community are not strong enough to promote a selective acculturation process. Even if the existence of these *ghettos* is not exclusive to the United States, this residential pattern is typically American. Hence, it cannot be universally applied to all destination countries, as many European countries exemplify.

In the same vein, new assimilation theory is embedded in the highly particular American racial hierarchy. One of its primary claims is that assimilation is a spontaneous and unintended process of interaction between majority and minority groups, which applies not only to theorizing about “white,” pre-1924 European immigrants, but also the post-1965 influx of “non-white” Latino and Asian immigrants, even in a context of historically shifting conceptualizations of “race” as a social marker. Conversely, most U.S.-based migration literature pays only limited, if any, attention to the impact of universalistic welfare regimes, an element that clearly makes a difference in the European situation. Of course, U.S. scholarship is more than worthy reading, and it is clear that Esser has read it seriously. But he has also generated an analytical model that may be applied to a variety of contexts.

A second definitive advantage of this contribution is the macro-micro-macro circular linkage. As Esser has written, in presenting a previous version of the model, “Every collective phenomenon is, in principle, conceived of as a (more or less complicated) aggregated consequence of individual actions, which are the result of (more or less rational) decisions by human beings geared to and shaped by socially structured situations” [Esser 2004, 1132-1133]. In other words, the model of intergenerational integration envisages that objective structural characteristics of a social environment (the macro level) influence the individual selection of a specific and subjective pattern of action (options selected at the micro level), and the results of these individual actions strike again at the collective (macro) level (societal outcomes).

While we are generally sympathetic with an approach centered on purposeful social action, we cannot help being somewhat suspicious of Esser’s choice of treating individual action in terms of expected utility. As a description of individual action, expected utility theory runs contrary to the available empirical evidence from research ranging from psychology to brain science, concerning the actual processes of decision-making carried out by human beings. It is also quite difficult to apply this concept outside of the context of market choice. Where there is no money (an institutionalized medium that allows for exact quantification, evaluation and storage of value), the formalisms of expected utility theory are more a dubious metaphor than a useful tool. Finally, most immigrants’ “choices” fall into such complex categories – long-term outcomes, the contingency of the behavior of other actors, a high dependence on information and beliefs untested in advance, to name just a few – that even expected utility theorists admit they are particularly troublesome to formalize within their approach. As a matter of fact, if Esser would rather choose to employ a classical, thick, notion of *reason* instead of its emphasis on *rationality*, nothing of value would be lost and the whole argument would be even more compelling.

Even accepting Esser's framework as it is, however, it would be interesting to know more about the ways in which he conceptualizes the options available to immigrants. In his model, each option consists of negative (cost) and positive (expected utility or returns) consequences associated with a corresponding probability of the success of any given investment (choice). The only exception is the *status quo* function, in which both investments and costs are absent. Esser treats the *status quo* as equivalent to the "ethnic context" option. This is one of the main differences between the current model and its previous version, where the utility function was formulated with respect to three different possible investments, each of them consisting of positive and negative returns [*ibidem*, 1137]. Esser's main point is that in the absence of perceived benefits, immigrants would not be motivated to invest in strategies centered on assimilating into the mainstream of the receiving country. But this is different from assuming that the law of inertia would make immigrants naturally gravitate toward ethnic networks and niches. In the context of life in a foreign country, very few things may be taken for granted, and both membership in ethnic networks and access to ethnic-mediated opportunities require daily maintenance and imply significant investment.

For similar reasons, the distinction Esser draws between receiving country social capital (defined bluntly as "generalized") and ethnic capital (defined equally bluntly as tied to specific contexts) is convincing only to a certain degree. It is certainly convincing when applied, as Esser does, to acquisition of the mainstream language. It is equally convincing when referring to investments in schooling and professional skills. But it does not necessarily hold true for the whole range of adaptive activities in the receiving country. A significant portion of these activities involves the acquisition of the tacit knowledge necessary to navigate the local environment; while some of the "ethnic" resources may actually turn out being quite useful across a variety of locales, they are not necessarily tied to the original country-of-origin group. Most of the insider information necessary for a Filipino maid to navigate the Italian bureaucratic maze of nuisances is hardly useful outside a specific city or neighborhood; on the other hand, her fluency in English may turn out to be significant in tapping opportunities well beyond the local Filipino church or community. Nor it should be forgotten that, as Portes and his colleagues [2001; Portes *et al.* 2002] have convincingly shown, the most active members of transnational networks are those immigrants who, being highly and successfully integrated in the receiving country, can acquire capital (social but not only) exploiting structural holes in Ronald Burt's sense [Burt 1992].

There is also room for thinking about how to extend Esser's model in directions that are currently overshadowed by the emphasis on expected utility. We refer here to the interpretative activity that accompanies and shapes most adaptation to new

contexts and that is expressed in attitudes, beliefs, and normative models. As Talcott Parsons (and, much later, Jon Elster) have convincingly argued, these aspects cannot be treated satisfactorily through utilitarian models of action if not through a proliferation of residual categories. Migration does not involve mere spatial mobility. It also involves a lengthy learning process that begins much earlier than the actual border crossing. Thus Esser's restriction of his model to "immigrants who are *currently* present within a receiving context" (italics in the original) is particularly unfortunate. As Sun Tzu claimed centuries ago, battles are won before even setting foot on the battlefield. What happens prior to migration is actually quite important in defining both the norms that will later link the emigrant to his/her original networks and the kind of personal investments that will be considered appropriate and honorable according to the values embedded in the sending network. Immigrants embedded in a strong culture of emigration, for example, will not define the framework of their choices in the same way as isolated pioneers migrating *out* of an unpleasant situation.

Importantly, however, this point should not be taken to imply an overemphasis on the sending country "culture" in explaining immigrants' behavior. Migration is a selective process, and no immigrant group reproduces its "culture" *sic et simpliciter*. And what Esser defines as "ethnic context" in the receiving society may be equally new to arriving migrants, and thus, equally problematic as comprehending the mainstream lifestyle. Rather, what we argue here is that it is important to know how the experience of settlement is perceived, lived through, and performed in the very same process of adaptation. To do so, immigrants draw – in an equally selective way – upon symbolic elements from *both* the sending and receiving contexts. These symbolic environments are, analytically speaking, "structural" equals to the sets of relationships and resources that Esser acknowledges as crucial to immigrant integration.

To pay the interpretative dimension its due is especially important in the analysis of both group size and boundary making processes. The analysis of these two key processes cannot be developed in purely "objective" terms. The size of an ethnic group is never a purely matter of numbers and geographical distribution. It is also a function of the ways in which the ethnic group is perceived, of the symbolic cleavages that run through it, of the normative criteria that members employ to allocate central and peripheral positions, inclusion and exclusion. What to an observer appears as "1,259 Ukrainians" in a statistical table may be irredeemably fractured along religious, social, or regional lines for many of the counted individuals. Nor should the consequences of interpretation should be under-estimated: it contributes to determining the kind of selectivity that will be exercised in the receiving context in supporting new arrivals and the willingness to pursue mimetic strategies. Not to mention that

integrative strategies may be triggered not only by structural incentives, but also by normative models. The ways in which immigrants define themselves (and others) has direct consequences on the replenishment process so crucial to Esser's model.

The main value of Esser's intergenerational integration model lies in its ambition to synthesize the contributions of decades of research in a comprehensive and explicitly formulated framework. He successfully shows how a variety of structural outcomes may be generated through specific mechanisms and combinations of social processes. In doing so, Esser provides a remarkable contribution to migration studies and offers fertile ground for further theoretical and empirical work. As we have argued, however, the power and fruitfulness of his model is unduly restricted by some of his theoretical preferences, in particular, the adoption of a rational choice framework and the absence of an interpretive dimension.

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Comment on Hartmut Esser/3

Abstract: In response to several special characteristics of the so-called “new immigration” and to the well-known weaknesses of classical assimilation theory, several theoretical suggestions have recently been made and discussed, including, in particular, the “Theory of Segmented Assimilation” and the “New Assimilation Theory.” In addition to the (classical) structural outcome of assimilation, these theories assume two other possible outcomes: ethnic stratification as the enduring social descent of following generations and selective acculturation as the social advancement by using and retaining ethnic resources and identities. This contribution reconstructs these theoretical developments and the presumed structural outcomes as special cases of a comprehensive model, i.e., the model of intergenerational integration, and systematizes sub-processes and single mechanisms outlined by the various theories. Another important result is the identification of conditions and background processes that do not necessarily occur empirically, but that underlie the different theories and structural outcomes as well as the proposed model of intergenerational integration.

Keywords: immigrants, integration, rationality, individual action, utility function.

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