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A new angle to the assimilation debate in the US

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ABSTRACT

With “The Other Side of Assimilation” Jiménez provides an important and urgently needed new angle to the assimilation debate in the US. He investigates a key assumption of assimilation theory: assimilation as a two-way process in which both migrants and established groups will change through interacting with each other. In integration research, the urgency of looking at established groups in diverse cities is increasing, because in many cases they are becoming a numerical minority themselves. The different empirical building blocks Jiménez brings to the table should bear no other conclusion than that existing assimilation theories are becoming increasingly inadequate for explaining the dynamics in especially superdiverse majority minority neighbourhoods. We urgently need to look into what I would call a paralyzed white identity. Paralyzed because of losing – or the fear of losing – its dominant position, and the apparent inability to react to the changing circumstances.

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In “The Other Side of Assimilation” Tomás R. Jiménez provides an important and urgently needed new angle to the assimilation debate in the US. I have always praised the high level and innovational power of the American theoretical debate, but the highly interesting theoretical debate on assimilation that existed in the US around the turn of the century, in the last decade seemed to have become repetitive, mostly revisiting already deeply entrenched positions. Jiménez book has the potential to open up this debate making it a watershed contribution that might pave the way for a whole new strand of publications exploring new theoretical avenues. This work is also refreshing because it contributes to the debate about superdiverse neighbourhoods and cities. In Europe, more and more scholars apply

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the superdiversity lens to study diversity issues and aspects of integration in cities. Like in Jiménez' book, in Europe, there is also increasing attention for longer residing (two generations or more) migrant groups that are now part of the established groups in big cities, who are complicating the picture of the white mainstream on the one hand and migrant groups on the other. In Europe, new research among expats or knowledge workers also shows, like the book of Jiménez, that they can upset previous ethnic hierarchies. Knowledge workers in Europe are often more highly educated than people belonging to the native white mainstream, have higher spending power and sometimes have higher ambitions for their children's education. These expats do not assimilate into the native white mainstream, but live in a parallel universe, according to their own standards.

I think Jiménez's book touches upon all these issues because he has an open, empirically driven attitude towards his subjects and the environments he has studied. The book will probably be most hailed because it investigates a key assumption of assimilation theory that is nonetheless understudied: assimilation as a two-way process in which both the migrants and the established groups will change through interacting with each other. Jiménez quotes Ernest Burgess in his introduction to remind the reader that this was always an important assumption of assimilation theory as it was originally developed (Jiménez 2017, 6). As I wrote in an article myself (Crul 2016), in integration research, the urgency of looking at established groups in diverse cities is increasing, because in many cases these established groups are becoming a numerical minority themselves. This raises the question, now more than before, how well these established groups are integrated into the diverse setting of majority–minority neighbourhoods and cities. Jiménez does this by examining these groups in majority–minority neighbourhoods in Silicon Valley towns. Jiménez goes out of his way to make clear that the neighbourhoods he chose are not your old-time typical immigrant neighbourhoods. The neighbourhoods harbour many high-skilled knowledge workers typical for the Silicon Valley boom. I appreciate that the author is carefully explaining the limitations of his study, but I do think that what he describes will be more and more the standard in middle and large-sized cities in the US, Canada and Europe. Migration is no longer the story of only low-educated migrants that escaped poverty. There is a path dependency in US research to look at the most destitute migrant groups, but migration streams have become much more diversified and Jiménez is actually catching this trend.

However, Jiménez' study is most of all interesting because of his focus on the two-way process of assimilation. He shows how the established groups try to make sense of their rapidly changing neighbourhoods and how this provides all kinds of challenges to them. This includes obvious ones like language, but also far less studied topics like the competition for scarce community funds. Next to a rich description of how this new level of diversity is

affecting people's lives, the book also discusses the more problematic side of the two-way assimilation process. This includes people feeling estranged and communities becoming more divided. Jiménez shows how ethnic hierarchies are overthrown in places where new highly skilled immigrants from Asia surpass white established groups in terms of education, income and housing. This has been studied before from the perspective of the Asian groups, but hardly from the perspective of the established native white groups. This "new" reality fundamentally questions our idea that immigrants over time adjust and assimilate into the largely white mainstream. As Jiménez convincingly shows, these, mostly Asian, new successful groups set their own standards and have no intention of becoming like the, less performing, native white group.

The different empirical building blocks Jiménez brings to the table should bear no other conclusion than that existing assimilation theories are becoming increasingly inadequate for explaining the dynamics in especially superdiverse majority–minority neighbourhoods. Jiménez, however, still tries to fit his results into the old assimilation framework. In the introduction, which Jiménez might actually have written last, he is most clearly positioning his findings against assimilation theories. On page 8, he writes that assimilation scholarship relegates the established groups to the role of gatekeeper and as a benchmark for newcomers. They are seen as a passive group that is itself not a subject of change. His findings show that this is not how it works in superdiverse majority–minority neighbourhoods. However, the author seems keen on staying within the assimilation framework thinking. Also, when he coins his new term "relational assimilation", he deliberately connects it with the existing assimilation wording and theoretical legacy. I think it is a missed opportunity to not take up the challenge for a new theoretical framework that better catches the present-day reality he reveals through his open approach.

Assimilation theories challenged

The findings from Jiménez' study show that a number of trends fundamentally challenge the most important assumptions of assimilation theory. First, new groups do not necessarily integrate into the mainstream anymore, because they live their daily lives largely with other immigrant groups, where people of native white descent are largely absent. This questions the assimilation power that is still exercised on these new groups by the native white mainstream. Secondly, a number of new groups do not seem to have the ambition to become part of the white mainstream but are building what could be called "parallel mainstreams", and are largely ignoring the existing mainstream. This is also true for new low-educated migrant groups, who, in opposition to what segmented assimilation theory predicts, do not enter the black underclass, but build their own communities. If anything, we see that the established groups of

black residents in these neighbourhoods look up to these new groups of migrants in terms of their community vitality and solidarity. Thirdly, the path of segmented assimilation through strong social cohesion at the ethnic group level, like we see it for the highly skilled Asian groups, does not seem to be a temporary, sort of in-between stage that in the end will lead to assimilation into the mainstream. These new groups seem to more fundamentally challenge the white mainstream on core values. All these trends go against the idea that new groups over time become more similar to established groups through interactions in their neighbourhood, in local schools or their workplace. The primary reason why Jiménez was able to expose these dynamics is because he does not focus on the new migrant groups, but, instead, looks at the established groups. And in his research, these established people are clearly pointing out that these new groups do not seem to be interested in becoming like them at all. The observed dynamics in these superdiverse majority–minority neighbourhoods ask for a new theoretical framework. A framework in which the changed position of the established groups is also considered. Not as a passive group to which new groups want and need to adapt, but as a group challenged itself by new groups that successfully take hold of scarce resources in the neighbourhood, sometimes outpacing the established groups.

The wake-up call for native white people remains unanswered

The reaction of the native white established group is most remarkable in the study. They hardly seem to change their way of thinking nor their practices in reaction to the competition with new groups. Jiménez shows convincingly how people from the established groups do encounter new groups and learn about their culture and heritage. He also shows, in great length, the appreciation of established groups for their new superdiverse environments. He emphasizes the normalcy of diversity, especially for the younger cohort (Jiménez 2017, 48, 49). But the presented evidence that this has a real impact on either the attitudes or the practices of the established groups remains very slim. Except maybe for those in mixed relationships, the people largely are no more than spectators to the “superdiverse neighborhood theatre”. The so-called relational assimilation only goes to a certain limit. To be sure, they do show respect to other views, they do acknowledge that other people do things differently, but they do not change their practices in reaction. Jiménez also acknowledges this himself: “But it was very rare for the people we interviewed to describe deep engagement with these cultures, much less any sort of adoption of new cultural elements into their own lives” (Jiménez 2017, 87). The group that is most illustrative for this are the native white people. Especially in reaction to losing their privileged position to the highly educated Asian newcomers at the top of the

ethnic hierarchy, it seems that the term describing their behaviour best is “being paralyzed”. As a rabbit frozen in the light beam of the car, they sit still, waiting for what is to happen. Why is this group so invested in *not* changing their opinions and practices in the light of the new competition? The middle-class native white group seems to be taking the position that they simply do not want to compete with the successful new Asian migrants. Rather than to change their attitudes (what should be assumed in relational assimilation) they seem to stick to and justify their own educational and work strategies. This is most visible in relation to the schooling of their children. Quoted teachers are most outspoken about the reversal of the ethnic hierarchy, labelling the white students as the “low performing students” compared to their Asian-American peers. The white parents try to justify their unchanged attitudes by broadening the concept of being academically successful by including elements of happiness and life fulfilment. This, they argue, is more important than being at the top of the educational or work pyramid. Thus, they maintain an internalized position of privilege. On page 194, Jiménez calls this: “the ability of privilege to reinvent itself”. I would have liked Jiménez to think this through further; the emphasis of the book now remains on more superficial forms of relational assimilation. The more fundamental question – why the native white group does not seem to react to their rapidly changing environment – remains unanswered by Jiménez. His empirical findings do prompt fundamental questions to assimilation theory. If middle- and upper-class whites’ strategies are no longer strategies that bring you to the top of the education, work and income pyramid, is the white mainstream still the benchmark? How to describe a situation where the white mainstream is not only outperformed, but also seems to have given up on adjusting their own cultural repertoire to stay in competition with new groups? Exiting and interesting questions that future research projects likely will try to answer.

Young white kids in the era of identity politics

Jiménez also briefly touches upon another important issue for young white people especially: “the search for a way out of ethnic blandness”. We are living in the era of identity politics. Black, Latino, gay and trans identity politics are vivid and vibrant elements of today’s youth cultures. Where does this leave white kids? They feel that their ethnic identity is “bland” compared to that of the others. Where do they fit in the ethnic mosaic? Fitting in is, especially for youths developing their identity, important. One can understand that it is uncomfortable, in many ways, if you cannot conform to today’s norm of a strong ethnic identity. How can a white kid compete with these far more vibrant identities? How to feel empowered or proud being

white, unless of course you engage in racist white identity politics. Taking it yet a step further than Jiménez, I have found in my own research that white kids feel that their ethnic identity is problematic because being “white” carries a heavy burden of slavery, discrimination and white privilege. Not exactly markers for a positive identification. Right-wing anti-immigrant populists have monopolized the answer to this complicated position: be proud to be white. But what is the identity answer for white youths that oppose racist white identity politics? This is an important question still only few people have asked. However, answering this question is key to confront the white nativist politics Trump has unleashed in the US.

My main take away from Jiménez’ book is that we urgently need to look into what I would, for the time being, call a *paralyzed white identity*. Paralyzed because of losing – or the fear of losing – its dominant position, and the apparent inability to react to the changing circumstances where new groups are changing the rules of the game. The reaction of white people seems defensive and seems to be characterized by an active withdrawal from the competition. They do not display, as Jiménez puts it on page 115, any sense of responsibility for their lower achievements relative to Asians. Furthermore, we need to discuss *the paralyzed white identity* because being surrounded by people who positively indulge in identity politics makes the young white people feel out of place, uncomfortable and bland. And again, their reaction seems mostly to withdraw, not being capable to react or to formulate an alternative or competing identity that is equally empowering and satisfying as that of their peers of another ethnic background. None of the ethnic white strands seem like good ethnic options, as Jiménez is saying with a clear referral to the work of Mary Waters (1990). They all seem fuzzy compared to the strong ethnic identities of blacks or Latinos. White being the norm against which others had to profile themselves for such a long time seems to have resulted in white identities that are barren and not suited to embrace in today’s superdiverse society.

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