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Best of Old School

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Best of old school

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There is hardly a political issue that nowadays provides so much fuel for political controversy as the integration of ethnic minorities of immigrant origin. Of course, this increased contentiousness of immigration and integration issues is partly related to the events of 9/11 and subsequent terrorist actions in Europe, most notably in Madrid, Amsterdam and London. The perpetrators of these acts had all lived for lengthy periods of time in the West, and in the case of the Amsterdam and London events they were even born in the Netherlands and the UK. Other ethnic conflicts in Europe in

recent years were unrelated to terrorism, such as the riots in Bradford and other northern UK cities in 2001, in Birmingham UK in 2005, or the recent wave of violence that swept across the French suburbs. In each of these cases, immigrant groups originating in Muslim countries were centrally involved.

These instances of violent conflict involving ethnic minorities are related to socioeconomic problems of integration. Across Europe, there are serious problems concerning the socioeconomic advancement of ethnic minorities of immigrant origin. To be sure, some groups, such as Indians in the UK or Surinamese blacks in the Netherlands have experienced steep upward social mobility and are quickly closing (or have already closed) the gap between them and the native white population. Other groups, however, such as Pakistani and Bangladeshi in the UK, Maghrebians in France, or Turks and Moroccans in the Netherlands are doing much less well. Despite some inter-generational advancement, the socioeconomic gap, as well as the cultural distance between these groups and the native population, does not seem to be becoming significantly smaller, and they increasingly diverge from more successful immigrant groups. Notably, these groups that do socioeconomically less well are the same groups of Muslim origin that are also disproportionately involved in the ethnic violence of recent years. Whether this concentration of integration problems on Muslims is due to cultural group characteristics, to discrimination that specifically targets Muslims, or to some combination of the two is an important but unanswered research question.

In view of these developments, comparative research on the relations between ethnicity, social mobility and public policies across both countries, and ethnic groups is extremely timely. In spite of decades of intensive research on both sides of the Atlantic on the integration of ethnic minorities of immigrant origin, there remains a glaring shortage of cross-nationally comparative studies. Certainly, there have been (too) many edited volumes that put national case studies next to each other, but studies that provide systematic and controlled comparisons of ethnic minority integration across several countries are still very rare. The title of the present volume by Loury et al. promises to offer such a comparison between the USA and the UK, but alas delivers only partially on that promise.

As it turns out, only five (Chapters 3, 6, 13, 18, and 19) out of the voluminous book's 21 chapters are really about comparing the USA and the UK; the others deal only with one of these countries. Even fewer chapters compare like with like by focusing on ethnic groups that are present in both countries. An exemplary case of such a systematic comparative approach is Suzanne Model's Chapter 13, in which she combines several survey databases to compare the educational and labour market success of six groups (black Caribbeans, Indians, Pakistani, Bangladeshi, Chinese, and black Africans) between the UK and the USA. Chapter 19 by Steven Teles,

Robert Mickey, and Fawzia Ahmed is another comparative gem, and addresses three not often-studied determinants of social mobility (house ownership, crime, and health) in a comparative UK–USA perspective, with ample attention for inter-ethnic differences. Orlando Patterson’s excellent chapter (to which the editors have fortunately given the space that it deserves) on the experience of blacks in Europe and the Americas is a third example of the kind of comparison that one would have liked to have seen as the backbone of the book rather than as the exception to the majority of nationally focused chapters. While Patterson notes significant continuities across blacks in the USA, Latin America, the Caribbean, and Europe (particularly the fragility of black families and the related disproportional involvement of blacks in crime in all four contexts), he also notes that the European experience of voluntary immigration differs importantly from the much more direct and pervasive impact of the history of slavery and racial apartheid on relations between blacks and whites in the Americas.

The editors have partly tried to make up for the lack of truly cross-national chapters by focusing on the comparative aspect in their introduction to the volume, and in short synthetic introductions to the three empirical parts of the book on, respectively, informal social networks, formal structures, and politics. Obviously, a few introductory pages that draw some linkages cannot make up for the shortage of comparative perspectives in the main body of the book. But everything is relative. Compared to the dire lack of structured comparisons that characterizes the field, the steps that this volume make in that direction are laudable, even if, except for a few already mentioned chapters, the result remains far from what we – or at least this reviewer – would like to see the field move towards in the near future.

The volume also does not entirely deliver on its promise to address the relation between social mobility and public policy. Part III of the book, entitled ‘Formal Structures’, deals with ethnic minorities’ positions in the educational system and the labour market, but most of the analytic focus is on variables such as class, gender, cohort and ethnicity, and not on the impacts of the education and labour market institutions and policies in the two countries. ‘Welfare state’ is strikingly absent as an index keyword – and for good reason because the effects of the important UK–USA differences in this regard on ethnic minority social mobility are not systematically thematized anywhere in the book. Likewise, one learns little about whether differences between the US and UK school systems have any impact on the educational attainments of immigrant children in these two countries.

The four chapters in Part IV, entitled ‘Political Institutions and Processes’, do a better job of addressing the impacts of policies and institutions. Tariq Modood argues in Chapter 16 that ethnic minorities in the UK have achieved an assertiveness, prominence and civic impact ‘to a scale and in a limited period of time that seems without parallel in Western

Europe' and relates this to the UK's inclusive citizenship regime and its import of an anti-racist discourse from other parts of the Anglophone world (particularly the USA and South Africa) from which – unlike the discourses prevailing in continental Europe – notions of migrants as hosts were absent. The best exemplar of an analysis of political institutions and strategies on immigrant integration is Peter Skerry's provocative comparison of the role of political machines and the post-civil rights regime in promoting social mobility and regulating inter-ethnic conflicts in the USA. Robert Lieberman provides in Chapter 18 a very useful and interesting comparison of the genesis of anti-discrimination and positive action policies in UK and USA, but unfortunately does not discuss the effectiveness of these policies in promoting the social mobility of immigrants. The final chapter in this part of the book, the already mentioned one by Steven Teles et al., is effectively the only chapter in the entire volume that does what the book title promises, namely to offer an analysis of the impact of public policies on the social mobility of ethnic minorities in a comparative USA–UK perspective.

The most striking thing about this volume is, however, neither its limited comparative focus nor that it pays insufficient attention to institutions and policies. In view of current political and scientific debates, the volume's most remarkable feature is that it is extremely detached from these current concerns. 'Islam' is not mentioned as a keyword in the index at all, and Muslims are only discussed as a relevant category in Richard Berthoud's chapter on family formation in the multicultural UK and in Tariq Modood's chapter on ethnicity and political mobilization in the UK. This latter chapter, however, paints a very benign picture of the political participation of ethnic minorities in the UK, which fails to make any reference to the 2001 riots in northern UK cities with large Muslim minorities, and does not refer to the controversial discussions generated by the Cantle report on these events (Community Cohesion Review Team, 2001). By completely ignoring the less integrative sides of minority political participation in the UK, Modood's chapter does not provide us with a framework that helps us to understand more recent events in London and Birmingham.

To be sure, there is something to be said for a certain detachment from the current (over)emphasis on inter-ethnic violence and the problematic integration of Muslims compared to other immigrant groups. But to almost completely ignore this dimension, as this volume does, seems to be a bit too much of the good thing. My speculation is that the strange aloofness of the book from current debates has little to do with a conscious decision of the editors to avoid the overheated discussion on the role of Islam in explaining current integration problems. Much more, the book seems to be captive to an old-school (and typically Anglo-Saxon) idea of immigrant integration as being primarily a problem of *racial* equality and *racial* discrimination, in which the experience of US blacks figures as the paradigm case, and US civil

rights legislation figures as the paradigm solution. As several chapters of the book emphasize, this racial lens has largely shaped the structure of race relations institutions and policies in the UK, too (but not in the rest of Europe). Not surprisingly therefore, blacks and not Muslims are by far the most often-discussed ethnic group in this volume. Most of the US contributions focus heavily on African Americans, and almost invariably demonstrate that there is hardly any comparison to be made between native blacks and ethnic groups that derive from (voluntary) immigration. Given the exceptionality of American blacks on almost every indicator of social mobility that is investigated in the various chapters in the book, one wonders whether the whole exercise of (implicitly or explicitly) comparing immigrant groups both in the USA and in the UK to this group does not obscure and confuse more than it illuminates. At any rate, the focus on race that pervades the whole book distracts attention from the cultural cleavages that seem to be more important in understanding current integration problems in Europe and, as one may expect, increasingly also in the USA.

Having said all this, I do not want to end this review without emphasizing that I have tremendously enjoyed reading this volume and have learned a lot from it. There are many excellent chapters in this book (and not one that is really weak) and taken together they provide probably the best overview that is around of the cumulated knowledge of US and UK ethnic relations research. However, as such it is very much a 'best of old school' collection rather than a volume that addresses current problems of immigrant integration in Europe and the USA head-on.

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