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## Review of *Remaking the American Mainstream: Assimilation and Contemporary Immigration* By Richard D. Alba and Victor Nee

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**Remaking the American Mainstream: Assimilation and Contemporary Immigration.** By Richard D. Alba and Victor Nee. Cambridge: Harvard University Press 2003. xiv + 359 pp. Tables, notes, bibliography, index. \$39.95 cloth.

<sup>1</sup> Co-authored by two distinguished sociologists, this book is a valuable synthesis of scholarship on recent immigration to the United States that explores whether assimilation is still a viable theory for understanding the new arrivals' experiences. In a thorough and nuanced analysis comparing contemporary patterns of acculturation with those of earlier European and Asian immigrants, Alba and Nee argue strongly for the continued utility of the concept. Notwithstanding some serious caveats and concerns, they are extremely optimistic about the future of immigrants and of American society, which they see as increasingly more united by common social experiences than divided along ethnic and cultural lines.

On the surface, it might appear that the experiences of older waves of immigrants would have little relevance for the more recent arrivals. To a much greater degree, immigrants since 1965 have been drawn from different racial and religious groups, oriented towards transnational cultures and a global economy, and living in a society that sanctions and even celebrates cultural diversity rather than insisting on cultural homogeneity and forced Americanization. Whereas older immigrant groups assimilated more readily after immigration was restricted in 1924 and new arrivals from the sending countries no longer revitalized ethnic cultures and institutions, today's immigrants continue to pour in from the "old" country.

In contrast, Alba and Nee contend that "the distinctions between contemporary and past immigrations have been overplayed" and provide a series of measures to demonstrate the degree to which assimilation is still taking place. In terms of acculturation and language assimilation, economic and educational attainment, settlement in the suburbs, and intermarriage, the newer immigrants are moving into the mainstream and converging with the characteristics of non-Hispanic whites much as previous generations of European and Asian immigrants did earlier in the twentieth century.

These patterns do not apply equally to all immigrant groups, however, and Alba and Nee are careful to distinguish between so-called "human capital"

immigrants who move more readily into middle class lives and “labor” immigrants who start out at the very bottom of the socioeconomic scale. Even for the latter groups, however, the trend is still towards assimilation even if not as rapidly or pronounced. Still, there are troubling suggestions that for several groups, especially Mexicans, assimilation stalls in the third generation. Similarly, the children of Afro-Caribbean and darker skinned Latino immigrants show evidence of assimilating into “oppositional” cultures that are alienated from the mainstream and lessen their life chances. Indeed, race remains a significant force, and darker skinned immigrants consistently score lower on a number of measures of assimilation even as other non-European immigrants are increasingly integrated into US society. Alba and Nee conclude that “assimilation . . . is unlikely to dissolve racial distinctions entirely in the United States and to end the inequalities rooted in them. Assimilation, then, provides no reason to end the struggle against the power of racism.”

Although the categories of their analysis require them to focus on the structural dimensions of assimilation, leaving incomplete an exploration of the subjective or existential meanings of the process for the immigrants or the receiving society, Alba and Nee have given us an indispensable starting point for understanding and contextualizing this most important transformation in contemporary American society. **Hal S. Barron**, *Department of History, Harvey Mudd College and Claremont Graduate University*.