

Immigration and Immigrant Geographies

In this column, I write to invite you to the Presidential Plenary Session at the next month's AAG meeting in San Francisco. The session is entitled "America's Immigrants: New Geographies, New Debates" and will showcase the work of geographers engaged in groundbreaking work in the exploding field of immigration research. It provides a sampling of the breadth of research on immigrant geographies that is increasingly informing theory and public policy on this topic of enormous national importance.

Geographers are well aware of the tremendous growth in immigration to the United States over the past several decades and the dramatic shifts in immigration's national origins. The foreign born population of the U.S. grew from approximately 9.6 million in 1970 to over 33 million in 2005. The share of the foreign born in the U.S. population over the same period grew from 4.7% to 12.1%. As compared with immigrants a century ago, recent immigrants are overwhelmingly non-European in their national origins. Not surprisingly, immigration and its impacts have generated intense public debates at the federal, state, and local level. Issues revolve around socio-cultural transformation of the country ("will immigrants assimilate?"), economic impacts ("will immigrants take our jobs?"), fiscal implications ("who will pay for immigrant services?"), and most recently, security concerns ("will immigrants harm us?").

Over the past fifteen years, a burgeoning academic literature has sought to inform immigration policy, and to advance our understanding of the issues surrounding immigration. Scholars from a range of disciplines have weighed in, each group advancing our understanding in unique ways. For example, sociologists have drawn attention to the complexities surrounding the processes of immigrant assimilation, anthropologists to the impacts on and influences of sending societies, and political scientists to the role of the state in shaping immigration patterns. Geographers have also made important contributions by highlighting, for example, the role of scale, regions, and spatial interaction. The plenary session provides a rich sampling of this work with presentations by William A.V. Clark (UCLA), Rebecca Torres (East Carolina

University), Mark Ellis (University of Washington), and AnnaLee Saxenian (UC Berkeley).

In his presentation entitled "Is there an immigration crisis?" Bill Clark challenges the perception that the United States is in the midst of a crisis brought about by "ethnic invasion." He notes that this perception has generated federal policies involving a tightening in the rules of entry into the U.S., the militarization of borders, and fundamental changes in immigration and naturalization policies. Clark questions the expectation that, unless there is national intervention, the flow of immigrants to the U.S. will continue to increase indefinitely into the future. Instead, he focuses on the tremendous regional and local variations in the impacts of immigrants, both documented and undocumented. Clark argues for the need for humane policies that address the needs of immigrants and their families while recognizing that immigration may exact a cost on local communities and native-born workers.

Rebecca Torres focuses attention on "New Geographies of Rural Latino Transnational Migration." Her presentation highlights the important dynamics shaping new streams of migration to rural areas, and the way in which immigrant narratives can help us to understand the processes underlying the construction of new transnational spaces and communities. Torres contends that we are implicated in asymmetrical relationships that perpetuate the migration of impoverished rural populations to the U.S., e.g. at a national level through neo-liberal agricultural policies, and at the regional scale through the demand for cheap labor. Consequently we bear a responsibility to advocate fair international and domestic policies, as well as to channel our unique knowledge as geographers into praxis and the support of justice for marginalized and vulnerable immigrant groups.

Mark Ellis will speak on "Patterns on the Land: Reading Immigrant Geographies in the US." His presentation offers new perspectives on the role of geography in shaping the process of immigrant adaptation to American life. He challenges the widely held expecta-

tion of "spatial assimilation," viz. that as immigrants adapt/assimilate to the host society culture, they will increasingly disperse out of ethnic neighborhood concentrations into America's suburbs. Policymakers and academics often accept this notion uncritically and even extend the expectation of spatial assimilation to the regional scale. Ellis counters this expectation by drawing from multiculturalist, racialization, and other critical perspectives.

He also presents provocative connections between immigration discourse in America and the way in which we image immigrant geographies.

AnnaLee Saxenian's presentation, entitled "The New Argonauts: Remaking Global Geographies," highlights the role of highly skilled immigrants in shaping the global patterns of entrepreneurship and competition. Argonauts refer to the foreign-born students who, in the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s, came to the U.S. to study science and engineering and then remained to participate actively in the country's high tech boom in the 1980s and 1990s. Saxenian notes that in recent years, these highly skilled immigrants are mirroring, in their home countries, their entrepreneurial successes in Silicon Valley. In the process, the new Argonauts are creating vibrant transnational links and reshaping a migration that once was seen as a brain drain for peripheral countries into a far more complex, two-way process of "brain circulation." Her presentation illustrates how the new geographies of technology entrepreneurship are challenging the traditional core-periphery hierarchy and offering new and previously unanticipated possibilities for institutional and economic change.

Public and policy interest in immigration will only rise in the future as national fertility rates fall, concerns about America's global competitiveness rise, and regions and localities weigh the costs and benefits of immigration. Please join me at the Presidential Plenary session to hear how geographers are shaping immigration theory and policy.

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