

Latin American Immigrants in the New South: Religion and the Politics of Encounter

Summary

We request support from the Ford Foundation for three years (January 1, 2007 to December 31, 2009) to conduct a study exploring the multiple roles religion plays in shaping interethnic and interracial attitudes and relations, as well as immigrant incorporation and collective mobilization in the New South, a region that has experienced a dramatic growth in Latino population in the last decade. To highlight the dynamics of Latino immigration in this new destination, we will focus on Cobb County, located in the northwestern edge of Atlanta. The county is known for its high concentration of Latinos and its rapidly changing ethnic composition. In this county, we will study how Latin American immigrants are transforming the local racial formation, which has been hitherto anchored along black-white lines. Further, we will explore how religious institutions mediate this transformation, focusing in particular on how religious spaces serve as locations for interracial conflict, cooperation, and political mobilization. To assess the specific role of religion in the management of difference, we will also conduct qualitative work in schools and neighborhoods, elucidating patterns in the ways in which Latino immigrants, Euro-Americans, and African-Americans negotiate common public spaces.

This project builds on the extensive research our interdisciplinary and multinational team undertook in South Florida, mapping the migration experiences and religious lives of Guatemalans, Mexicans, and Brazilians. During the last four years, with generous support from the Ford Foundation, our research team has been examining the process of community formation among these three groups in South Florida, outside of Miami. Extending the scope of our previous research to the greater Atlanta metropolitan area, where the Guatemalan, Mexican, and Brazilian communities are growing, will allow us to assess comparatively the impact of Latino immigration in the New South. In view of the current debates about immigration, comparative and interdisciplinary work on a hyper-growth area for Latinos that explores the relationship between new immigrants and their host populations will have significant national implications, as the United States moves beyond its biracial configuration.

Research Site

With support from a preparatory grant from the Ford Foundation, this past summer we conducted preliminary field work in the Atlanta metro region. On the basis of this work, which included scores of interviews with community leaders and grassroots activists, we have selected Cobb County as our primary research site.

Since the 1970s, Cobb County, located northwest of Atlanta, is part of the city's increasingly de-concentrated urban and residential pattern of development. Despite having been effectively subsumed into metro Atlanta, the cities and towns of Cobb County have maintained their historic identity as bastions of the Old South, boasting several important Civil War memorials and sites featured in the classic novel of the Civil War, Margaret Mitchell's *Gone with the Wind*. Until the 1980s, the county was overwhelmingly white, middle- to upper-middle class, and politically and religiously

conservative. Since 1990, however, the county has been experiencing not only an accelerated population growth but increasing racial, ethnic, and class diversification. Of Atlanta's ten county regions, Cobb County witnessed the third largest net population increase from 448,000 persons in 1990 to 608,000 persons in 2000. This dramatic growth in the population came about primarily as a result of the extraordinary growth of the African-American, Latino and Asian populations. For example, the non-Hispanic white population grew by 8%, but declined from 86% to 69% as a proportion of the total population. In contrast, the African-American population grew by 158%. As a result, the proportion of African-American population increased from 10 to 19% of the total population. Despite this growth, the African-American population decreased as a percentage of the minority population because of the faster growing Latino and Asian populations. Between 1990 and 2000, Cobb County's Hispanic population saw a net increase of 38,000 or 422%, so that by the end of the decade, Hispanics represented 7.7% of county's total population (up from 2% in 1990).

As these statistics show, Cobb County is a harbinger for what is becoming a more racially diverse and pluralistic post-1965 America. It is, thus, an excellent site to document the ways in which immigrant and host populations are negotiating encounter and difference, as well as the role religious and non-religious institutions play in this complex negotiation.

The three groups that we will study are well represented in the Atlanta metropolitan region. Estimates for Brazilians range from 30,000 to 90,000. They are concentrated in cities like Roswell, Sandy Springs, and Marietta. As a group, Brazilians tend to have more formal education and to be better off than Mexicans and Guatemalans, but they are a diverse population. The majority of them come from the interior of Goiás and they work in construction, landscaping, house cleaning, and the service industry. A small successful entrepreneur class comes from São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro. Most leaders of local Brazilian religious and cultural organizations come from this class, a phenomenon that often leads to intra-group tensions.

Mexicans represent the largest immigrant group in metro Atlanta. Estimates range from 150,000 to 300,000. They come from both traditional sending states in central and western Mexico and from non-traditional states in the southern Mexico. Unlike in Florida, we found a much higher percentage of women and families among Mexican immigrants. Most men work in construction and landscaping while women work in food preparation and service jobs. A growing number of Mexican immigrants are operating their own businesses, especially restaurants and other retail establishments. Although Mexicans are the largest Latino group in Atlanta, only a few of the religious leaders responsible for their congregations are Mexican.

The Guatemalan population in Cobb County is significantly smaller and primarily embedded within neighborhoods with large numbers of Mexican immigrants. Utilizing census track data and interviews with key informants, we were able to locate pockets of Guatemalan immigrants within Marietta and the surrounding area. The Guatemalan immigrants are predominantly single males (we estimate close to 70%) most of whom are relatively recent arrivals to the Atlanta area (though many worked and lived in other U.S. cities prior to moving to Cobb County). They come from a geographically and ethnically diverse set of sending communities in Guatemala, including coastal ladino communities (such as Esquíntla), highland Mayan communities (such as Quezaltenango and

Totonicapán), and small towns near the border with Mexico (such as Tecún Umán).

Central Research Questions

Research on the new geography of Latino immigration in the US has focused primarily on macro and microlevel explanations for the emergence of new gateways in the Midwest and South (Zúñiga and Hernández-León 2005, Kandel and Parrardo 2004), and ethnographic research on the impact that Latino immigrants have had on these new communities of settlement (Millard and Chapa 2004). Our study builds upon this foundation and moves beyond it to address the following questions:

1) To what extent has the dramatic increase in Latino immigration transformed interethnic, interracial relations in the metro Atlanta?

Waters and Jiménez (2005) postulate that unlike traditional gateway cities where class, ethnic, and racial hierarchies are well-entrenched, in new gateways, where these hierarchies are less crystallized, immigrants may find more freedom to carve out their place. In the case of Atlanta, while the place of immigrants may not be well established, class, ethnic, and racial hierarchies have a long history and are deeply entrenched. We hypothesize that the rapid influx of Latino immigrants has destabilized the traditional biracial order in Atlanta, but that it is too early to tell what if anything will replace it. Will these demographic changes, concurrent with profound increases in the Asian populations of Atlanta, lead to a new, loosely organized “tri-racial” order posited by Bonilla-Silva (2004) – white, honorary white, and the collective black? Or will they give rise to more porous racial and ethnic hierarchies that allow for hybrid identities and “fluid exchanges across group boundaries” (Kasinitz, Mollenkopf, and Waters 2002)?

We agree with Zúñiga and Hernández-León (2005) that the fluidity of migratory processes can result in unintended consequences. On the one hand, they can produce increased public hostility and conflict over Latino immigration, as evidenced in the recent immigration restrictions passed by the Georgia legislature (*Businessweek Online*, March 31, 2006).¹ On the other hand, conflict between groups may be a “precursor to social integration” of immigrants through churches, unions, bilingual programs, and public dialogue (Zúñiga and Hernández-León 2005), xviii-xix, see also Rich and Miranda 2005). Our previous research in Florida suggests that identity-based and ethnic-based immigrant mobilization, in combination with key alliances with religious, political, and university-based actors, can lead to successful political initiatives at both the national level, such as Coalition for Immokalee Worker’s successful campaign to gain concessions from Taco Bell, and at the local level, as in the case of the recently inaugurated Neighborhood Resource Center in Jupiter (Perez 2006 and Schlosser 2005).

2) In what ways do religious, civic, and educational institutions facilitate or hamper immigrant incorporation and empowerment?

¹ State Immigration Law 529 denies state benefits to undocumented workers; requires employers to withhold 6% of wages from workers who cannot prove their legal status; and authorizes state and local police to enforce federal immigration laws.

Traditional gateway cities typically have an array of civic, political, service, and advocacy organizations that have developed over the years to service and incorporate new immigrant groups. In contrast, new gateways like Atlanta generally lack the institutional infrastructure designed to serve immigrant populations (Waters and Jiménez 2005). Our preliminary research in Atlanta indicates that churches might be among the few existing organizations that are prepared to offer these kinds of services (see also Odem 2004). We hypothesize that in the Southeast, because of the historic relationship between religious, civic, and political life, religious organizations may be more influential in facilitating immigrant incorporation than in traditional gateway cities.

Religious organizations can offer the social capital and symbolic tools to mediate insertion in the society of settlement (Ebaugh 2000, Fortuny and Williams 2007, Verba, Schlozman, and Brady 1995, Warner and Wittner 1998). First, churches and religious non-profits often provide bridges between immigrant communities and their receiving societies. For example, emerging multicultural congregations expose native populations to the human element involved in the immigration debate, and may offer spaces for cross-cultural dialogue. Second, religious organizations often provide the infrastructure (meeting space, resources, and social networks) for the mobilization of immigrant advocacy groups. Finally, as we discovered in our research in Florida, transnational religious practices, narratives, and symbols often help immigrants make sense of their experiences of dislocation and resettlement, allowing them to carve out new spaces (by reconstructing the homeland abroad, for example), as well as alternative individual and collective identities that may challenge their subordinate place in American society (Vásquez and Marquardt 2003, Leonard et al. 2005).

Our research will examine how existing religious, civic, and educational institutions have responded to the increased presence of Latino immigrants in their communities and their role in either generating conflict or facilitating new arenas for cooperation (Zúñiga and Hernández-León 2005). In addition, we will document the emergence of new programs, institutions, and local and transnational networks developed to serve immigrant populations, including those established by immigrants themselves. We are especially interested in finding local models of religious and civic organization that have been successful in bridging divisions, fostering understanding, and even multiracial alliances.

3) How are Latin American immigrants mobilizing in metro Atlanta? What accounts for the scope and forms of their political mobilization?

As the new geography of Latino immigration continues to expand in the United States, questions about how and when immigrants can successfully organize to promote their local interests have become increasingly urgent. The rapid growth of the immigrant population in Georgia, and particularly around Atlanta, has fuelled increasing hostility toward immigrants, dramatized by the highly visible presence of the Minutemen in Cobb County. In response, Latino immigrants in the area have begun to mobilize in unprecedented numbers, leading to the creation of GALEO, the Georgia Association of Latino Elected Officials. What does this case tell us about the prospect of Latino empowerment? When do immigrants mobilize to pursue their collective interests and

what tools do they have at their disposal to achieve their goals? Which contextual factors are likely to make immigrant mobilization more or less successful? What are the implications of various forms of mobilization? The massive mobilization of Latino immigrants in April/May 2006 took many observers by surprise. Even more astonishing was the large protests organized in new gateways in the Midwest and South. In Atlanta, more than 50,000 Latinos marched on April 10, 2006 (*Atlanta Journal Constitution*, 4/11/06).

We explore the hypothesis that in Atlanta, varying levels of social capital, cultural and ethnic homogeneity, and social and cultural acceptance among different Latino immigrant groups, combine to produce different levels of reactive ethnicity. According to Portes and Rumbaut (2001, 284), “reactive ethnicity is the product of confrontation with an adverse native mainstream and the rise of defensive identities and solidarities to counter it.” In turn, reactive ethnicity can provide the basis for collective solidarity and mobilization in defense of group interests. An important question, however, is whether Latino immigrants will be able to build on recent mobilizations to develop their own organizational and political infrastructure that is capable of sustained collective action.

Methodology

In order to understand the impact of Latino immigration on interethnic and interracial relations, our research will focus on religious (and to a lesser extent, for comparative purposes, on educational and neighborhood) organizations as potential arenas for interaction, conflict, and cooperation. During the first year of the project, we will complete the mapping of the religious, cultural, and socio-political landscape for the three immigrant groups, interviewing in-depth religious, educational, and civic leaders.

In the second year we plan to conduct a combination of focus groups and town hall meetings with African and Euro-Americans in Cobb County. We intend to use the preliminary results of our qualitative research in the focus groups and town hall meetings to elicit views of other ethnic and racial groups, the frequency and nature of their contact with other groups, their perceptions of ethnic and racial change in their neighborhoods, and the impact of legal and illegal immigration in their neighborhoods. Focus group interviews with Latino immigrants will seek to understand how immigrant groups perceive both discrimination by native-born populations and tension between various immigrant populations.

To understand the role of religious, educational, and civic institutions in fostering or hampering immigrant incorporation, we will interview religious and community leaders, school teachers and administrators, and local government officials. We will also conduct focus groups with church members and parents of school children to elicit their views on programs that serve new immigrant populations. Our interviews with Latino immigrants will focus on the needs of the Latino community and the adequacy of local services.

Finally, to test our hypothesis regarding Latino immigrant mobilization, we will interview organizers of and participants in the April 10 demonstration and conduct focus groups with Latino immigrants. Our interviews with immigrants will also include questions about social capital, perceptions of discrimination, and participation in the immigrant rights protests.

Benchmarks

We propose the following benchmarks, each of which is an indicator of project success:

- Enrich academic debates about Latin American immigration to the US by highlighting the specific roles religion plays in shaping interethnic and interracial attitudes and relations, as well as immigrant incorporation and collective mobilization.
- Contribute to current national, state, and local public policy debates about immigration, civil society, pluralism, and citizenship by informing them with comparative research at the regional (New South) level.
- Incorporate new knowledge generated from the research into existing courses and planning for new courses focusing on immigration, politics, and religion in the New South. This will allow us to bring undergraduate and graduate students into the conversation.
- Strengthen the collaboration between the University of Florida, Florida Atlantic University, and institutions in Brazil, Guatemala, and Mexico, and forge new partnerships with institutions in the Atlanta area.
- Encourage networking among organizations working on immigration and social and racial justice in the Atlanta area.

Communications Plan

Given that the current debates about immigration are highly polarized, during the third year of the grant, we plan to make the diffusion of the results of our research the central focus. Diffusion and outreach will take place in four primary outcomes. First, we will present our findings in a variety of academic venues, including professional conferences (Latin American Studies Association, American Academy of Religion, the American Political Science Association, the American Sociological Association, and the Association for the Sociology of Religion) and scholarly journals in the U.S. and Latin America.

Second, we will use our focus groups and town hall meetings to start a “bottom-up” process of interracial encounter and bridge-building, which is critical to develop understanding and trust in a non-traditional immigrant destination. There are already helpful models to frame this dialogue in the greater Atlanta area. For example, the Paul J. Aicher Foundation has a project called the “Study Circles Resource Center,” a national, nonpartisan, nonprofit initiative that helps communities develop their own ability to solve problems by bringing people together in dialogue across divides of race, income, age, and political viewpoints. The center works with neighborhoods, cities, and towns, paying particular attention to the racial and ethnic dimensions of the problems they address. At present, there are several study circles around Atlanta, in places such as Decatur and Smyrna. We will explore ways to extend and collaborate with these initiatives to bring a

similar process of dialogue to Cobb County.

Third, conversations at the group level will culminate in a large interdisciplinary and ecumenical conference. We have had preliminary conversations with colleagues at Emory University's Division of Religion, the Columbia Theological Seminary, Faith in the City, and the Concerned Black Clergy of Atlanta, all of whom are interested in co-hosting this conference.

Finally, our project faculty will incorporate new knowledge generated from the research into existing courses and develop new courses. Philip Williams will develop a new course on the "Politics of Immigration" that will be offered in the 2008-09 academic year. Manuel Vasquez will teach a large undergraduate course entitled "Religion and the American Immigrant Experience" in Fall 2007. Tim Steigenga will offer a new interdisciplinary co-taught course, "Immigration and the American Dream" with historian Dr. Chris Strain during the Spring of 2008. And Marie Marquardt will be teaching and new course, "Religion and Immigration" in the Spring of 2007.

