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Just Like the USA? Critical Notes on Alba and Foner's Cross-Atlantic Research Agenda

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Review of Richard Alba and Nancy Foner. 2015. *Strangers No More: Immigration and the Challenges of Integration in North America and Western Europe*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, xxii+324.

A truly sophisticated comparative cross-Atlantic field of study of immigration has been a long time coming (see Favell 2015: 69-122). Despite a few early manifestos (Massey 1998 et al; Portes and De Wind 2004) and intimations—by the few European scholars who have put in serious time on both side of the ocean—that such an agenda might prove to be a little more complicated than expected (Joppke 1999, Favell 2001, Simon 2005, Crul 2016), it has taken American immigration scholars a long time to really start thinking hard about how to do adequate cross-Atlantic comparative work on “immigrant integration”. That agenda is not yet fulfilled; and, as I will argue, Richard Alba and Nancy Foner’s *Strangers No More* may prove to be a step backwards in some respects.

Prior to its publication, there was already a growing list of incursions into Europe by all the leading North American sociologists of immigration, using new data sources to look at Europe in America’s mirror. The core weakness of this research has been to pursue comparativism using what I will call essentially “flat” comparative research designs and analysis: that is, looking at, say, France or the UK, *as if* they were the US or Canada, and assuming that we can compare societies in North America and Europe as directly symmetric, bounded and distinct nation-state units, regardless of scale, population, and international geo-political positioning (notably, the institutional reality of European Union). I have long argued that these ambitious but flawed works should be read *against the grain* for the instructive comparative problems they raise, rather than for their usually straightforward findings and well-intentioned normative motivations (other than work Alba has been involved in, a sample would also include: Parsons and Smeeding 2006, Portes and De Wind 2007, Hochschild and Mollenkopf 2009, Hochschild et al 2013, Portes et al 2010; for related critiques to mine, see Wimmer and Glick-Schiller 2002, Brubaker 2004; Wimmer 2013; Waldinger 2015).

Whatever the problems, Alba and Foner deserve warm recognition for their uniquely long standing and persistent commitment to developing this agenda. In parallel to the

appearance of his magisterial work with Victor Nee on the US (2003), Alba was from the late 1990s already in deep dialogue with French and German partners about cross-Atlantic work. Notably, the early article on blurring the color line (2005), although rough in its conclusions, has certainly provided a useful analytic. Nancy Foner's engagements go back even earlier: to doctoral work on Jamaicans in the UK (1978). And, although most of her career has been focused on urban studies in American cities, she has a long grounding in comparative historical work on immigration (Foner 2005): she has been, for instance, central to a recent spate of work comparing New York and Amsterdam (Foner, Rath et al 2014). All in all, including other work with Alba as first listed author, we now have now a brace of articles (i.e., Alba and Foner 2008; 2014), edited books (Alba and Waters 2011; Alba and Holdaway 2013), a recent piece in JEMS (Alba and Foner 2016), and now, as a culmination, a major monograph with Foner.

Strangers is a sweeping, *longue durée* work, that seeks to generalise about the broad historical pattern of post World War II change incurred in societies of immigration, comparing two North American societies (the US, Canada) with four European (Germany, France, The Netherlands, The UK). It is a synthetic work, building its conclusions across a range of typical issues to do with what it here opts to call "immigrant integration" rather than "assimilation" (on labour markets, housing, religion, political participation, education, intermarriage), from a fairly exhaustive, yet selective, reading of the "best of" current research, and the "best" available secondary cross-national data. And, in encompassing many other authors' efforts, the book goes further than any other work in the field in proscribing and operationalising a flat, straightforwardly cross-national terrain for such comparative work.

As long as it is clear "who" are the "immigrants" in the book, the approach taken here may not be controversial. Yet, while this term is often taken as self-evident in the US and Canada – an "immigrant" is a newly arrived, putative American or Canadian – in Europe, it has become hugely complicated as a result of distinctions between old and new migrations, transnational, temporary and circular migration patterns, and changing trends in types and origins of migration. In Europe, what seems self-evident, in fact is not. Mostly, Alba and Foner delimit the data and interpretations they have in the light of major "immigrant" groups—for which we should read "easily visible, non-Western, immigrant-origin populations of colour and low socio-economic status and of long standing residence in the West" (i.e., predominantly those with a second generation); amongst which are explicitly mentioned, especially, Turks and Morrocans in mainland Europe, (other) North Africans (in France), West Indians and South Asians (in Britain), and a few other archetypal "post-colonial" migrant groups in the four countries.

These groups – and not posted Polish construction workers, Chinese students, Phillipino nurses, or homeless Roma – have often been what the general public and newspapers have in mind when they complain about "immigrants", and they are indeed a large part of the population change driving European politics and society. Much of what Alba and Foner call the "demographic transition to diversity" can indeed be said to be largely uncontroversial among immigration and race/ethnicity scholars in Europe. As long as the discussion is clearly delimited to those we can easily denominate (albeit controversially) as "immigrants" in the post-war era, we can generally agree on the findings. What the data shows in this sense, is something

already well noted in Heath and associate's work (i.e., Heath and Cheung 2007): that there is an "ethnic penalty" which these so-called "immigrant" groups continue to face long after they are still "immigrants". To keep it simple, we might as well just call this penalty "racial discrimination". Heath and Cheung's important work also amalgamated its uneven population data from different countries, with their sharply different ways of counting migrants, foreigners, minorities, people of colour, and so on, in order to come to general conclusions valid across a range of OECD countries. Notably though, they used this quite clumsy synthetic method to sustain a basically different conclusion: that ethno-racial differences persist net of the "immigrant-origin" variable. Alba and Foner's book (on my reading at least) suggests something else: that ethno-racial distinctions in Europe persist *because of* the immigrant origin of these groups.

This is a hugely important difference. Although Alba and Foner quite carefully avoid stating it so plainly, I would argue it is the logic of their insistent view in the book that long standing ethnic minorities with full citizenship are still, analytically speaking, "immigrants" whose comparative "integration" can be analysed as a one-way, albeit problematic, progression towards a national mainstream. In the US and Canada, this is indeed a taken for granted notion. But in Europe, it is not so easy. In some cases, the European citizens we may be talking about are "immigrants" and their families who have been, legally and sociologically, (i.e.) "British", for over sixty years now. In other words, according to Alba and Foner it seems, Black British youth being picked on by the police after the riots in 2011 are still being picked on *because* their grandparents were "immigrants" – *not* because they are "Black".

In the UK, this kind of claim is, to say the least, utterly incendiary. In fact, it is likely to get you banned from most race and ethnicity seminars! To prove it, unfortunately, would require a research design that is not at all offered here: one that was able to separate out from the "race" variable(s) causing persistent discrimination or variations in outcome, others possible explanans such as: migrant-origin, nationality, citizenship (not always the same thing), non-migrant ethnicity (for example, visible regional minority origin), or (non-immigrant) mobility histories and trajectories, all controlled for other standard variables. Many of these would further require unpacking of the variable of "culture". Foner, especially, is concerned with religion – especially Islam – but this too is attributed to all "Muslims" as if it was an ethno-racial marker of their "immigrant" status.

All these variables, bluntly put, are effectively amalgamated into Alba and Foner's "immigrant-origin" category in order to sustain their flattening of European cases into the American immigration mirror. That seems to be a consequence of turning everything into a problem of "immigrant integration". Again, to be fair, in some of their work (for example, the recent article in JEMS 2016), they are careful to underline that the "integration" of immigrants, seen as progressing in their American data, is only likely to "bridge" "some" of the "ethno-racial" divides found in Europe. In her separate work on Islamic immigrants in cross-Atlantic perspective, Foner argues that ethno-racial discrimination of Muslims in Europe, may start to resemble the American scar of race (i.e. against African Americans) in its persistence (Foner 2015). In these more nuanced works they underline, more strongly than in the book, the idea that what we are talking about is a "transition to *diversity*", thus calling up the work of Vertovec, Crul et al (Vertovec 2007; Crul et al 2013) on "super-

diversity”. In *Strangers*, though, most of the substantive chapters use *only* data pertaining to the *visible* racialised minorities of (more or less) longstanding immigrant origin, as defined above. Elsewhere, in the opening chapters and conclusions, though, there is a serious slippage into generalisations that miss the whole point of “super-diversity”: that this is a product of “new” migrations (both new origins and new types) *not at all* in the post-colonial mould; that it is most evident in the UK; and that it raises the possibility of (im)migrant social identities, mobilities, and trajectories *nothing like* the one-way “integration” of “old” (and still crudely “visible”) post-colonial migrants.

Thus, at the same time as it is too narrowing in some places of the diversity of recent migration, in others the book inconsistently pursues a maximalist quantitative strategy in terms of counting who is an “immigrant” to be “integrated”. Perhaps to stress the drama of the transition, the earlier chapters of *Strangers* in fact make a series of inflationary amalgamations of “migrant populations”, strangely reminiscent of the dubious numbers games of the leading anti-migration demographer in the UK, David Coleman. These generate a huge percentage of “immigrants” and (particularly) “immigrant-origin” children in some European countries. This amounts to 25% of all children (in Germany), they say, and 16% in the UK, on some measures. Then they claim that one in four children is born to an “immigrant mother”. But are these parents really all “immigrants”? The UK Office of National Statistics has produced this figure by counting births to “non-nationals” as “British” babies. There are thought to be about 3 million EU nationals currently living and working as European citizens in the UK, but it is highly questionable as to whether *any* of them should be labelled “immigrants” (political speaking they may be, but legally speaking they are not). In later chapters, the authors generate similarly startling results from the UK by another route: using self-declared race and ethnic identification data as a proxy for immigrant origin, falling into the “all non-whites are immigrants” fallacy.

My point here is not to do alternate positivist gymnastics with statistics. By selectively quoting different secondary sources, without out any context-giving background to the way research terms and numbers have been constructed, or the political pressure from which such statistics emerge, I am sure we could arrive at any number of quantitative conclusions—as does Coleman, who has famously claimed over half the British population will be “non-white” by the year 2050. Basically, though, one can only get these kinds of conceptions of the UK population by “double counting” place of birth and ethnic identification statistics, essentialising “race”, and by treating many of the major sending migrants groups to the UK as if they were all also still typical “non-Western”, racially-distinct immigrants entering a pre-existing (all white) British population. But they are not. The authors are clearly more assured in their readings of France, Germany and the Netherlands; although there are doubtless issues here too to raise. For example, it is by no means clear to me that it is still advisable or acceptable to describe second and third generation North Africans as “immigrés”; a residual label mostly only used by the *Front National*. At the same time, others who *have* constructed samples of immigrant-origin French going back three generations can easily push get the percentage of “immigrant origin” French up to about 40% (Brouard and Tiberj 2005)—much higher than the UK even on the most exaggerated measures.

In the UK, significant proportions of the so-called “immigrants” are now often “white”, skilled or educated, and from high or middling income countries. Even when “non-white” (on Alba and Foner’s definition this means “non-EU” and from Africa, Asia, the Caribbean or Latin America), many of these recent residents are socio-economically relatively advantaged compared to many in the countries from which they travelled. This was, in fact, even the case for many of the original middle class Windrush migrant families from Jamaica, or (another good example), South Asians who fled Africa. This multi-dimensionality is what super diversity is all about: a diversity largely invisible in Alba and Foner’s old-fashioned post-colonial Europe.

On other aspects of Alba and Foner’s work, there is much that is basically sound in their positioning on cross-Atlantic debates. They quite rightly take aim at explanations of immigrant integration based on stylised national models. They also rightly challenge reductionism to political economy explanations based on “worlds of capitalism”. Nor, as they say, is it all just globalisation and convergence: institutions, particularly in the informal economy and in education, can be shown to matter (an argument basically they owe to Kloosterman, van de Leun and Rath 1999, and Crul 2013, respectively). On some points the US or Canada look progressive; on others, European nations have developed better ways of dealing with diversity.

Their big target generally, though, is the assumed asymmetry between settler countries of immigration, and the old nation-states of Europe. That is, they say, that there is no reason why European post-war societies should not *just* be seen as settler societies of immigration—just like the USA, in other words. On this issue, we must pause for thought. Their JEMS paper (2016) takes a slightly different line, by stressing there is still *empirical* asymmetry between the relative success of the US and Europe, but that we have no reason to predict it will not be different in future. That is, the US is a successful assimilationist machine, more or less working according to its ideology, despite all the racism, inequalities, and savage labour market conditions; a society in which the immigrant dynamic produces substantial social attainment and social mobility for many (albeit not all), as well as the inklings of a truly post-racial society through racial intermarriage (albeit heavily patterned)—all something yet to be really seen in Europe.

This reading of the US is controversial and against the grain of radical race and immigration scholars; but its sober marshalling of the evidence does put its finger on what the US gets right. Alba’s legacy in the US has been to underline that we still need the term “assimilation”, if we are to analyse these facts. This makes the turn in their subsequent European work to “integration” highly perplexing. The optimistic framing of “integration” they make is an interesting concession to European political correctness; that talking about immigrant “integration” is preferable because it supposedly recognises a two way dynamic that assimilation arguably masks. What they omit to say is that unlike assimilation models (which are simply blind to their patently methodological nationalist assumptions about the bounding unit of “society” providing the aggregate norms), “integration” in Europe is fairly explicitly an exercise in self-conscious top-down nation-building. That is, “integration” sees supposedly self-contained European national societies coercing foreigners to behave more like prototypically (moral, acculturated, patriotic) nationals in the name of some fictitious national unity. It is, in other words, the political denial of the consequences of globalisation on the 19th century idea of the bounded nation-state-society. In most

West European societies this has meant been a curbing of freedom to be be culturally or morally distinct—one of the reasons why Islam is such an issue; but it is also why free floating, but conspicuously white and Christian, Romanians or Poles, who seem to care little about British sovereignty, “belonging” or, on the whole, becoming British citizens, elicit such hostility.

Read generously, Alba and Foner are making a sensible and reasonable claim: that the national integration of certain disadvantaged migrants will mitigate the effects of racial discrimination over time; and that, in a reasonable historical reading, countries like the UK and France did indeed make slow progress towards becoming *better* integrated multi-racial, multi-cultural national societies, with significant immigrant origin diversity, in the decades before the 1990s (that is, when looking at how the second and third generations today seem, retrospectively, to have done).

Clearly, though, Alba and Foner at times want to go further, citing “super-diversity”, and overlaying the “old” story on the “new”. Britain, France, Germany, post-globalisation, are all now countries of immigration, and maybe even settler societies, they say. Here their comparative design, their data, and their flattening interpretations of migration in Europe, lead to significantly questionable conclusions. I have lingered on my differences more than my agreements, because this is an agenda which matters; and it is an agenda certainly that will lay the path for many older and younger North American scholars to come. Stubbornly “European”, and sceptical of the very idea of “national integration”, I question the progressive wisdom of reconceiving a more ethnically diverse Europe-of-the-nations as the future mirror of the USA today.

2972 words

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