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Richard Alba. *Blurring the Color Line: The New Chance for a More Integrated America.* Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009. xii + 306 pp. $32.50 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-674-03513-3.

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Assimilation Revisited

Richard Alba's *Blurring the Color Line: The New Chance for a More Integrated America* is a sociological study that argues for the expansion of the American mainstream to include racial minorities. He first proposed this idea when Henry Louis Gates Jr. invited him to present his work as part of the Nathan I. Huggins Lectures at Harvard University, which are sponsored by the W. E. B. Du Bois Institute. Using Emory Bogardus's social distance as a theoretical framework, Alba theorizes that it is only when the predominant group feels as though it has nothing to lose from the inclusion of other groups that it will be willing to include ethnic or racial minorities into the mainstream. He labels this idea the "non-zero-sum mobility theory" (p. 15). More specifically, Alba argues that as the baby boomer generation goes into retirement, Americans will have to invest in educating children of color in order to remain a powerful economic power. He reasons that the movement of the baby boomers out of the labor market can serve as an opportunity for people of color to enter the mainstream.

Alba divides his study into two parts. Part 1 traces the historical ascent of white ethnics into the mainstream. He defines Irish Americans and Americans of eastern and southern European descent as white ethnics who faced discrimination for several generations. Relying heavily on historical studies from whiteness scholars, he outlines the political, cultural, and social factors that secured the entrance of millions of these white ethnics into the mainstream after World War II. Alba maintains that three key conditions attributed to the mass assimilation of white ethnics in the middle of the twentieth century, with non-zero-sum mobility being the key condition of all three factors. Under this instance, the perceptions of those in power–in this case whites–have to be secure enough that their privilege is not threatened. As an example, Alba points to the the effects of the GI Bill on higher education. As more Americans demanded college degrees, the education system expanded to accommodate their needs and so did the employment opportunities of middle-class Americans. The second condition is a byproduct of the first: as more Americans find middle-class employment they also achieve closer proximity to the dominant group. For this condition, he points to the numerous suburban communities that emerged in postwar America. He juxtaposes white ethnics' residential options with the systematic segregation of African Americans, pointing to the fact that many black Americans were unable to break into the mainstream. Lastly, he contends that a cultural shift must occur, in where the excluded classes have the opportunity to assimilate in massive numbers. This cultural shift can be, as Alba exemplifies, a major historical event. In the case of white ethnics, World War II softened the ethnic divides as U.S.-born generations worked to demonstrate their moral allegiance to their native country. The response of the established media was to highlight their efforts.

While Alba asserts that these three conditions must exist for mass assimilation, he also acknowledges that scholars need to examine the social stratification of the mid-twentieth century. As he demonstrates, social categories were not strictly race-based, but rather cast along racial and ethno-religious lines. A three-tier hierarchy appeared to form with white ethnics of Jewish, Catholic, or Orthodox Christian backgrounds holding a place somewhere in the middle of the white/nonwhite divide. Alba notes that the key to upward movement of

these white ethnics toward the top and the disappearance of the three-tier social hierarchy lay in the fact that these groups were legally white. This legal reality allowed them to take advantage of federal government policies in higher education, labor, and housing, enabling them to move up and be accepted by the mainstream.

In part 2, Alba primarily uses sociological studies and statistical analysis from public policy agencies to underscore the current legal and social cultures in American society. Here, he examines the many barriers that racial minorities must face to secure middle-class jobs, including a crumbling education system, residential segregation, and the racial discrimination faced by those who are visibly (i.e., skin color) ethnic or nonwhite. In this section, he drives home his argument that these problems could be resolved with the cooperation of retiring baby boomers. Their retirement and social welfare would be better served than what is presently available as the result of the Great Recession. In the same way that he outlines how World War II facilitated the mass assimilation of white ethnics, he sees baby boomers' retirement as an opportunity for the federal government to repeat their mass investments in education, housing, and the economy as a gateway for the mass assimilation of racial minorities into the mainstream.

Like in the first section, Alba recreates the socioeconomic realities of racial minorities and demonstrates the opportunity that African Americans and Hispanics have in blurring the color line. He argues that conditions of non-zero-sum mobility are close at hand as changes in racial demographics have allowed for the diversification of the American labor force at all levels of the socioeconomic strata. He also points to the mass migration of baby boomers out of the labor market as they begin to retire. While he acknowledges that most of these baby boomers will continue to retire from now until the early 2030s, he emphasizes that the small amount of highly educated whites in the workforce is not sufficient to replace the number of retiring baby boomers. He cautions that demographics alone are not enough to bridge the racial divide. Therefore, he argues that the United States must create federal investments to ensure its place as an economic power. Without federal intervention, the opportunities afforded by non-zero-sum mobility will not coalesce.

Alba's study may inspire hope, but I am saddened to see the public policies that are currently being debated by local, state, and federal governments. "Right-to-work" legislative pieces have sprung up across the nation. These laws would weaken the power of labor unions, which depend on their members' dues. If members choose to not pay, it will affect union's abilities to fight for workers' rights, regardless of membership. These laws could lead to lower wages and benefits–leaving many lower-middle-class Americans without the ability to climb into a better socioeconomic status. Moreover, mainstream debates regarding the economy do little to discuss the issue of race and its effects of wealth distribution in this country. Roundtable debates on various television and radio programs, Internet blogs, or news articles primarily discuss the "shrinking middle class" without interrogating the makeup of the growing lower class.

Even Alba cautions that his study is predicated on the need for a major ideological shift that would allow many white Americans to see the ascending racial minorities as moral equals. He makes clear that while President Barack Obama's election is a move toward the creation of non-zero-sum mobility, current studies show that most white American attitudes do not support the idea of living close to a large population of African Americans. Alba points to the barring of affirmative action in California during 1996 as a limit to the blurring of the color line, and the "right-to-work" bills further show that the current political system is not ready, or willing, to allow for those barriers to come down. Much of his reasoning behind the mass assimilation of white ethnics in the middle of the twentieth century is a result of government programs that opened the doors of higher education, home ownership, and white-collar employment to white ethnics. Yet our current political structure has begun to breakdown the equality opportunity efforts made in the civil rights era. It appears that while some legal restrictions against nonwhites may have been diminished, the cultural and political shifts needed to change white Americans' attitudes have not materialized.

While his comparison of the past and present provides an interesting case study for the possible conditions of racial minorities' upward mobility, the power of Alba's study lies in the main argument that is implicit throughout the book, and that he more forcefully addresses in his conclusion: public policy incentivized change in the post-World War II era and is a major component to blurring the color line in the twenty-first century. Therefore, this study further asserts the need for structural change at the political level. It is this point that I find most valuable. Alba's study can serve as a great tool in political science, public policy, sociology, American studies, and ethnic studies courses as it reveals the dynamics of upward mobility and its attachment to political capital. I recommend this book to any instructor who seeks to start this kind of engaging debate in his/her classroom.

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