

Amy Wax Is Wrong. Immigrants Are Integrating Just Fine Into American Society.

An interview with CUNY Graduate Center professor Richard Alba.

By JORDAN WEISSMANN JULY 25, 2019 1:57 PM



Newly sworn-in U.S. citizens at a naturalization ceremony.

Joseph Prezioso/AFP/Getty Images

Amy Wax decided to say the quiet part out loud. During last week’s conference on “national conservatism” in D.C., the University of Pennsylvania law professor delivered a speech in which she argued that U.S. immigration policy should be designed to let in more migrants from “Europe and the First World” and fewer from the “Third World.” This, she admitted, “means in effect taking the position that our country will be better off with more whites and fewer nonwhites.”

Wax’s remarks were [widely condemned](#) as bigoted (though some on the right [defended them](#)). But what struck me most about the imbroglio was her rationale. The professor argued, in short, that immigrants from places like Central America were simply incapable of integrating smoothly into American society. At one point, she derided the idea that “people who come to the U.S., no matter from what cultural background, will quickly come to think, live, and act just like us” as the “the dogma of magic dirt.” She also suggested that if the U.S. did not clamp down on Central and Latin American immigrants, we are “going to sink back significantly into Third World-ism. We are going to go Venezuela.”

This is all very much at odds with what academics have found when they’ve looked at whether immigrants are successfully integrating into the country. In 2015, the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine released a more than 400-page report on the topic. “Overall, the panel found that current immigrants and their descendants are integrating into U.S. society,” it stated, simply. To learn a bit more about the issue of immigrant integration and common myths about it, I reached out to Richard Alba, a professor at the Graduate Center of the City University of New York and one of the report’s co-authors. The conversation has been edited for length and clarity.

Jordan Weissmann: Have you been following the controversy over the “national conservatism” conference?

Richard Alba: Well, rather distantly. I know that this Penn Law professor, Amy Wax, spoke there and said that the United States would be better off with more whites and fewer minorities, or words to that effect. To that effect. That’s all I know.

There is this idea on the right, especially among people like Wax, that certain kinds of immigrants can’t really assimilate or integrate. Is there any truth to that?

I don’t think so. If we go back about a century, we would find similar arguments being made against the Southern and Eastern European immigrants who were very numerous in the early 20th century. Especially Italians and Eastern European Jews. So that alone, it seems to me, should make us at least suspicious about this claim.

But I think the evidence in the NAS report is very clear that immigrants, and especially their descendants—their children and their grandchildren—are integrating in many respects into American life. There is absolutely no reason to say that on cultural grounds they are unable to do so.

I want to talk about the word integration. In the report, you guys define it as “the process by which immigrant groups and host societies come to resemble one another,” which—

Yeah, I don’t actually care for that definition. That’s interesting— I would define it differently.

How would you define it? I would define integration as meaning two things. One is that immigrants and their descendants increasingly participate in American institutions on a basis approaching parity with native-born Americans. And the second part is that immigrants and their descendants are gradually accepted as people—and this goes right to the heart of what we were just talking about—who can be seen as Americans.

I would add a third thing, which isn’t really integration. But it comes closer to what I would call assimilation. And that is, increasingly, members of immigrant groups, especially those born in the United States, develop personal relationships with other Americans that are not determined by ethno-racial difference. So, for instance, mixing in families would be an example of that kind of relationship. And maybe you’re aware that there’s a lot of data that shows increasing mixing in families, especially among white Americans and the descendants of immigrants.

What you’re saying suggests that assimilation and integration are really a two-way street. They’re about immigrants adopting customs but also natives embracing immigrants. Absolutely. And it’s a two-way street in a deeper sense. Immigrants do change the society, the nature of the mainstream society. It’s easier to see this in historical perspective. Throughout its history, until the middle of the 20th century, the mainstream of American society defined itself as white and Christian. And Christian meant not Catholic. It meant Protestant. And as part of what I would describe as the mass assimilation after World War II of white ethnics into American society, Jews and Catholics both became undoubtedly a part of the mainstream society. The very identity of the society changed from Christian to Judeo-Christian. It’s hard to imagine, I think, a more profound impact, given the tremendous importance of religion as a kind of definition of who is American throughout much of American history.

How do we measure whether integration is happening in real time? How do we tell? We have a certain set of standard measures that are very good measures of integrative shifts. For example, we look at the educational attainment of different generations. We look at the occupational position of different generations. Especially the second generation, the children of immigrants. We look at indicators of social acceptance. That would mean

what kind of neighborhood do they live in, and who are their relatives. That's where I think we're seeing really important changes that have not gotten the attention they deserve.

The rate of intermarriage across the major lines of race and ethnicity has been rising steadily. Looking at birth certificate data, I can see that 14 to 15 percent of babies born in the United States today have parents from different ethno-racial categories. And more than 10 percent have a white parent and a minority parent. And this is going up. It's going to continue to increase at least for a while. It has pretty profound implications.

There's a meme on the right that Mexican and Central American immigrants are less apt to learn English. Is there any truth to that? It's a nonsense argument. There's no data that would support it. All of the data shows that even among Latin Americans the importance of Spanish declines, especially starting with the second generation. And English dominance is really basically achieved by the second generation, but it continues to rise into later generations.

That's no different from what happened to the Europeans. I mean, the famous linguistic research by Joshua Fishman showed a three-generation conversion to English monolingualism. He didn't say, Oh, well, the immigrants all adopt English. That's total nonsense. They didn't. My grandparents were all immigrants, two from Italy and two from Ireland. And many of my Italian immigrant relatives did not speak English. Or if they did, they spoke it very haltingly. But Italian has really more or less disappeared as a family language in the United States except maybe for a small number of Italian immigrant families.

Is part of the problem that conservatives, or people who are concerned about immigrants, are focusing a lot on the first generation and expecting— Well, I think that's part of it. But there's also another part of it, which is that they don't really grasp with any nuance the history of immigration and the history of immigrant integration. They've made up a mythology that it was very rapid. No! It wasn't. So, immigration from Southern and Eastern Europe more or less was halted by the 1920s immigrant restriction legislation. And then came the Depression, of course. It wasn't really until after World War II—and for Italians it wasn't immediately after the war; it took a while—but those 25 years after 1945 were when an enormous amount of integration of second- and third-generation ethnics took place.

An interesting contrast here is between the Jews and the Italians. So the Jews had a very rapid and socio-economic rise. But! They remained a group apart, not necessarily entirely by their own choice. Of course, there was a great deal of hostility toward Jews in American society. But by the 1970s, their intermarriage rates were rising. And as you probably know, they're about 50 percent today. Much higher than they were in the immediate postwar period.

In the Italian case, it's much more a question of socio-economic rise. I mean they really brought sort of limited industrial skills to the United States and limited literacy. But in this period, you see a really rapid sort of ascent in terms of the educational attainment of a U.S.-born Italian American, and since 1970 they've caught up with whites.

It seems like the key here is that it's always a multigenerational process.

It's a multigenerational process. And the report shows this clearly. It shows that there is a large rise—for Mexicans, say—in educational attainment between the first and the second generations.

Is there anything to the idea that letting in fewer immigrants at a time helps the integration process?

It's possible that there's something to that. It's possible that there's something to that idea. But I don't think we're letting in so many immigrants. We need immigration, what I would call a rather modest rate of ongoing immigration—it's about 3 percent or so per decade. In the late 19th century and the early 20th century, immigration rose as high as 10 percent per decade. So to me it's a reasonable level given our need for

immigrants. [Editor's note: The net international migration rate in 2013 was 3.1 new migrants per 1,000 U.S. residents; between 1860 and 1910 it hovered between 5.5 and 7 per 1,000.]

What about the more abstract notions of cultural assimilation? There seems to be this notion that if someone comes from Latin America, that somehow they're not going to be able to grasp American civic responsibility, that they're going to bring a little Chavismo with them—

Is there even a shred of evidence that would support this? One factor we could point to is the service in the U.S. military of Latinos, which is, I think, relatively high. I mean, wouldn't that be a definition of accepting civic responsibility as an American? I think this is just such a specious argument. And let me say, it has an ancestor in the anti-Catholic attitudes of the white Protestant majorities of the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Catholics were in a religion where the authority of the pope and the priests was considered to be so great that they couldn't be good democratic citizens. Would anybody make such an argument today?

I want to say one more thing about Amy Wax. And that is American society needs immigrants. It needs immigrants if it's going to remain economically vital and culturally vital. If we look at things like the arts in American society, it's very clear that the new groups have added a great deal, if you will, to the palette of American culture. And Amy Wax can wax romantic, if you want, about who can come and who we can keep out, but the reality is that Europeans are not going to come to the United States in great numbers. We're going to need immigrants from a lot of different points on the globe. And we're going to have to trust that our society still has the power to integrate them as it did in the case of past waves that were also despised by native Americans at the time.

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<https://slate.com/news-and-politics/2019/07/amy-wax-richard-alba-immigrant-assimilation.html>

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You can read my forthcoming book (in 2020), *The Great Demographic Illusion*, for a analytic synthesis of the evidence. For individuals of Anglo-Hispanic parentage, there nothing substantial to support that concern. Helpful for you might be the Pew Report on Hispanic identity.

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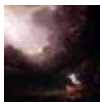
In any event I can't speak for Wax but one pertinent concern would be assimilation into a mixed-race American underclass 1

[@Auberon_Quin](#)

We have good evidence since the NAS report. The 2019 ACE report, which perhaps you should look at, reveals an Hispanic surge in college attendance and graduation--this is labeled the big story, and it is one of the early 21st century.

So the evidence is somewhat ambiguous, because a significant percentage of Hispanic-descent Americans no longer call themselves "Hispanics" by the third generation, and they tend to be more educated. But a recent ACE report finds a surge in Hispanic education since 2000.

Quote Tweet



FredR @Auberon_Quin

· Jul 25

Replying to @albamoore1

I have read that Hispanic immigrant educational/economic achievement, after rising in the 2nd gen, stalls below American mean. Is that true?

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Richard Alba

@albamoore1

1

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Replying to

@nellslad

and

@robfordmancs

Sorry, you're wrong. This is a matter of evidence, not just impressions.

1



Richard Alba

@albamoore1



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My interview with a Slate journalist about Amy Wax's racist argument that America is better off with more whites is online: ([link: https://slate.com/news-and-politics/2019/07/amy-wax-richard-alba-immigrant-assimilation.html](https://slate.com/news-and-politics/2019/07/amy-wax-richard-alba-immigrant-assimilation.html)) [slate.com/news-and-polit...?](https://slate.com/news-and-politics/2019/07/amy-wax-richard-alba-immigrant-assimilation.html)



Conservatives Like Amy Wax Are Wrong. Immigrants Are Integrating Just Fine Into the U.S.

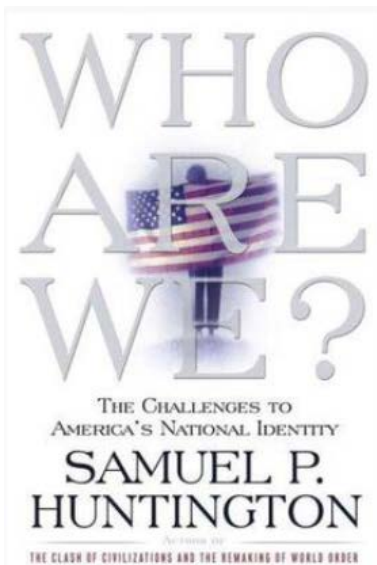
CUNY professor Richard Alba explains that today's new arrivals are assimilating the same way past generations did.

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<https://www.nytimes.com/2017/02/21/us/trump-immigration-policies-deportation.html>

www.imiscoe.org/2019-imiscoe-annual-conference/program

www.fordham.edu/info/27845/design_for_humanity_initiative

The Economic and Social Outcomes of Refugees in the United States: Evidence from the ACS

<https://www.nber.org/papers/w23498>

www.devex.com/news/pregnant-women-in-drc-finally-receive-ebola-vaccine-95204

www.latimes.com/science/story/2019-07-25/panic-lurking-why-the-long-awaited-ebola-vaccine-wont-end-the-congo-outbreak

Time for Ilha film

About 150 Migrants Drown in Shipwreck Off Libya <https://nyti.ms/2OjJnld>

65 Migrants were picked up at Sea, the the politics began 12:46 We went onboard a ship that rescues migrants in the Mediterranean and witnessed a standoff between the captain and Italian officials, who view the crew as criminals. CreditCredit Yousur Al-Hlou/The New York Times

<https://nyti.ms/2SyypqM>

'Someone Is Always Trying to Kill You' <https://nyti.ms/2CWpoRw>

www.nytimes.com/interactive/2019/04/05/opinion/honduras-women-murders.html

Trade and Development Report 2018: Power, Platforms and the Free Trade Delusion

www.nytimes.com/2019/07/25/opinion/elizabeth-warren-conservative-nationalists-global-finance.html

http://uniondelbarrio.org/main/?page_id=48

<https://www.vox.com/policy-and-politics/2019/7/25/8930424/ilhan-omar-white-men-marco-rubio>

Ilhan Omar: No debate on 'whether Trump is a racist' | UpFront Hers is a remarkable journey: from a refugee camp in Kenya to a state legislature in the United States. In 2016, Ilhan Omar became the first elected Somali-American Muslim lawmaker in the US, the same night that Donald Trump was elected president.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0UmmvROd4J8&feature=youtu.be>

Integration vs. Assimilation

<http://www.proudtobemexican.com/maria-hinojosa.html>

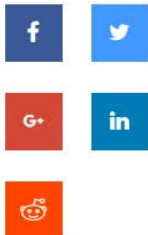
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Cargo Ship With Hundreds Of Migrants Was Headed Toward Italian Cliffs 4:23 **PLAYLIST** December 31, 2014 4:58 PM ET Heard on [All Things Considered](#) Robert Siegel talks to Italian Red Cross spokesperson Mimma Antonacci, who was in Gallipoli, Italy, to assess the situation of the migrants rescued from a cargo ship.

Are My Kids 'Latino Enough'?

By ANTONIA CEREJIDO DEC 23, 2016 ● FAMILY ● IDENTITY

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Latino parents can experience a certain kind of insecurity: Are you doing everything you

<https://www.latinousa.org/2016/12/23/kids-latino-enough/>

<https://www.pewhispanic.org/2017/12/20/hispanic-identity-fades-across-generations-as-immigrant-connections-fall-away/>

Refugees

<https://www.tent.org/our-work/hiring-supply-chain/>

For Helping Immigrants, Chobani's Founder Draws Threats

Ilhan Omar's American story: It's complicated



https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2019/07/06/ilhan-omar-is-unlike-anyone-who-has-served-congress-this-is-her-complicated-american-story/?utm_term=.6a778f7865ce

https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/walter-mondale-america-has-saved-thousands-of-refugees-we-must-again/2019/07/23/b629e6de-aa47-11e9-86dd-d7f0e60391e9_story.html?utm_term=.095725a31c24