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To cite this article: Paul DiMaggio & Patricia Fernández-Kelly (2015) Immigration and the arts: a theoretical inquiry, Ethnic and Racial Studies, 38:8, 1236-1244, DOI: [10.1080/01419870.2015.1016081](https://doi.org/10.1080/01419870.2015.1016081)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/01419870.2015.1016081>



Published online: 22 Apr 2015.



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GUEST EDITORIAL

Immigration and the arts: a theoretical inquiry

Paul DiMaggio and Patricia Fernández-Kelly

(Received 3 February 2015; accepted 3 February 2015)

This paper proposes a systematic approach to the study of immigration and art by considering relevant theoretical concepts. We focus on the role of institutions and economic change as forces shaping the expressive alternatives of immigrants and their children.

Keywords: immigration; art; immigrant assimilation; cultural incorporation; expressive entrepreneurship

Introduction

Three things are apparent with respect to immigration and art. First, work in that field is woefully underdeveloped despite the significance of expressive behaviours in processes of immigrant mobility and adaptation. As they cross borders, immigrants rely on a vast repertory of communicative behaviours to meet the challenges of dislocation and settlement in often hostile environments. In lieu of full knowledge about the mores of adopted countries, and often lacking necessary linguistic skills, immigrants resort to aesthetic means – the culinary arts, music, dance, poetry, and so on – to communicate with the wider society. They also use art to assert dignity and claim national membership. Yet little is known about the mechanisms connecting immigrant artistic behaviour and social incorporation.

Second, with a few exceptions (Martiniello 2015), texts on art and immigration give scant attention to the role of institutions and organizations that create boundaries and inducements for immigrants to engage in artistic expression. Creative behaviour is not a random occurrence driven solely by personal desires; individuals act in environments shaped by legislative and policy measures. There is, however, a paucity of research about how immigrants in concrete institutional milieus organize and produce art.

Third, little is known about the relationship between immigrant art and economic change (DiMaggio and Fernández-Kelly 2010). There is suggestive evidence that expressive behaviour is being used by both immigrants and native-born citizens as means to circumvent the rigours of labour markets affected by neo-liberal economic policies; but almost no work exists on that subject. Below, we discuss these three areas, hoping to stimulate further thinking on art and immigration.

The names of the two authors are listed alphabetically; both are equally responsible for the ideas in this paper.

Institutions, immigrants and the arts

A notable gap in research concerns the ways in which the arts are organized – both at the level of the host society and within immigrant communities. Institutions sit at the nexus of two endemic tensions that beset immigrant artists¹ and organizations sponsoring their work. How does the artist balance a commitment to a community and its culture, with the desire to experiment and transcend group boundaries, either for career success or for artistic satisfaction? The most extreme solutions are the least problematic. Not everyone embraces the romantic ideal of the artist as innovator. Many folk artisans, for example, produce traditional objects in time-honoured ways (Becker 1978). For such creative actors, remaining within the immigrant enclave and producing art for co-ethnics may be a viable strategy. By the same token, an ambitious second-generation artist whose goal is success on the national or international stage may contemplate an obvious approach: seeking fame through channels *outside* the immigrant enclave – classical oboe training at Juilliard or singing choreographed pop tunes on *America's Got Talent*. For most artists, however, the tension is real, involving both identity and career uncertainty (Bourdieu 1993).

Organizations face different quandaries: should programming present immigrant culture in its purest form or treat it as a living, evolving force, continuously absorbing elements and, in turn, influencing the arts of the host society? If the organization opts for purity, should it accomplish it by empowering artists with similar values, or should it identify curators with professional training to create exhibitions and productions that represent the community's traditional culture?

Unless they opt for an entirely commercial orientation that places no intrinsic value on immigrant culture, both artists and organizations face a *problem of authenticity*.² As sociologists of art have noted (Peterson 1997; Regev 2011), defining authenticity, much less identifying examples of it, is always problematic. The power to determine what counts as authentic is a valuable resource over which groups and individuals struggle. Just as Turkish archaeologists have oscillated from viewing Western classical or Anatolian antiquities as worthy of excavation depending on the political and cultural orientation of the country's leadership (Ozdogan 2002), immigrants must decide what aspects of their own traditions are worthy of recognition as 'authentic'.

Research on these endemic tensions must take account of the institutional forms that the host society makes available to immigrant artists. Distinct institutional forms promote different resolutions of the tensions between purity and innovation or self-portrayal and curation. They also facilitate or impede various outcomes in the political skirmishes surrounding authenticity and representation (Dávila 2012).

The USA has a distinctive system of support for the arts in two respects. First, its size and wealth enable a critical mass to sustain profitable popular-culture industries. Such industries exploit globalization whenever possible, but commercial rewards are mostly realizable at the national level. Therefore, artists may see advantages in remaining close to their immigrant communities. At the same time, demand is ample enough that markets can be segmented in many ways – for some cultural forms, commercial enterprise is a viable source of support for sufficiently large immigrant expressions.

Second, direct government support for the arts and culture in the USA is limited, but indirect support through tax deductions for donors to non-profit organizations is generous and bestows immense power on private philanthropy as opposed to government subsidies. The combination of critical mass and decentralization creates a more diverse and shifting institutional landscape than is present in many smaller countries. Moreover (and this is a central hypothesis that we propose to the research community), *each of these institutional forms bears affinities to particular modes of cultural incorporation of immigrant artists into the host community.*

Immigrant art and cultural incorporation

Without claiming to set out a full inventory of possibilities, below we consider theoretical scenarios related to cultural incorporation.

Isolation

It is possible to imagine communities in which immigrant artists pursue traditional forms without any contact with members of the host community, but this extreme is probably unsustainable for any length of time. Isolation is most likely to exist in immigrant enclaves that have not been discovered by outsiders. Artists working in isolated niches are unconcerned with authenticity because theirs is the unmarked category. Only when non-ethnic *others* present themselves are cultural boundaries salient.

Core-periphery

In other cases, a subset of immigrants may be celebrated by co-ethnics for maintaining strict boundaries around indigenous forms. Yet, entrepreneurs from inside or outside the group may link them to host-country publics who value authenticity. In Queens, New York, for example, immigrant restaurateurs have maintained the alleged purity of Chinese regional cuisines even as a tiny industry of online food blogs, devoted to ferreting out the ‘best’ and ‘most authentic’ examples of regional foods, has emerged to serve a periphery of out-group members.

Concerns over authenticity are likely to be most salient in communities characterized by the core-periphery mode of incorporation: the ability of middlemen to (re)present immigrant culture to the periphery depends on maintaining the purity of the core. Nevertheless, once outside audiences take an interest, the core begins to (dis)integrate. Two organizational forms – politically inflected community associations and not-for-profit organizations – are best equipped to maintain boundaries around autochthonous cultural forms. In the former, status derives from purity and artist participants exercise social control by equating stylistic deviation to disloyalty. In the latter, securing authenticity is the task of non-profit organizations dependent upon private donors, philanthropic foundations or government agencies with an interest in defending authentic cultures from the market (Stern, Seifert, and Vitiello 2010).³

Pan-ethnic synthesis

In other cases, especially when national-origin groups are too small to constitute effective markets or to mount large productions, cultural work may be organized around pan-ethnic identities. Murphy (2010), for example, describes how Boston-area musicians from Central American nations perform in mariachi bands, borrowing Mexican genres of sufficient breadth to generate viable audiences and re-enact a shared musical culture.

Pan-ethnic synthesis is most likely to occur when the community is so small that it cannot constitute an audience for communal artistic performances, and when commercial enterprises are the primary channels through which immigrant culture reaches the public. Under those conditions, artists will be encouraged to expand (or, at times, falsify) their ethnic identities to encompass sufficient scale to produce both artistic programmes and paying audiences to attend them. Producing pan-ethnic definitions of immigrant culture is facilitated when different national-origin groups share a common language and when intermarriage produces composite identities in the second or third generations (Kasinitz 2009; DiMaggio 1991; Wong 2010). Pressures towards pan-ethnic representations of immigrant culture are especially effective when big corporations become involved. As Mora (2014) has documented, Univision and other media outlets tapping the US Spanish-speaking market not only exploited pan-ethnicity but actively collaborated in producing and institutionalizing ‘Hispanic’ as a population category.

Selective representation

Immigrant communities may also maintain what, following Goffman (1959), may be called ‘backstage’ and ‘front-stage’ versions of a shared culture. Some Chinese restaurants consign dishes with ingredients such as pork intestines or pigeon to the Chinese-only menu, while adapting traditional dishes to host-country tastes. Similarly, Haitian and Cuban *botánicas* in Miami offer buyers an assortment of arts and crafts with double identities – to outsiders they are curios; to insiders they represent magical or sacred objects.

Selective representation requires comparatively high levels of social control and compliance, sufficient to maintain power over immigrants who might share intimate or low-status cultural forms with outsiders for profit. This is easier in small communities where informal and not-for-profit organizations, managed by individuals embedded in the immigrant power structure, play a primary role in public events such as festivals, parades and exhibits. Culture may be kept backstage because it violates normative religious beliefs (or because it represents arcane shared beliefs); because it may discredit practitioners (e.g. *narcocorrido* – tunes celebrating the exploits of local drug lords); because it is associated with disempowered minorities (as with indigenous rap music); or because elites prefer to feature immigrant contributions to high culture (e.g. ballet versus hip-hop dance).

Permeable niche

Some immigrant artists may write, create, or perform primarily for their co-ethnics, with occasional crossover productions reaching broader markets. Such niches often

provide a typical career path, whereby successful artists shift from niche to mass market and then, when their star fades, return to the fold. Ricky Martin sang with the successful Puerto Rican teen group Menudo before crossing into the mainstream pop market. Tejano artist Baldemar Huerta had a successful career as a country and rock artist under the name Freddy Fender, before returning to Spanish-language recordings towards the end of his life. This was a standard sequence among both black and rural white performers through the 1960s, when gospel music artists would try their hand at the country music or R&B markets, shifting into those performing circuits for as long as they could sustain their popularity, but returning to the gospel track as their careers ebbed.

The incorporation of immigrant culture is facilitated when immigrant communities are large enough to sustain enclave business niches representing their own art. Non-profit galleries or performance venues tend to select artists with a commitment to purity, and place constraints on their ability to deviate from communal understandings of authenticity. By contrast, commercial immigrant entities demand weaker authenticity claims, and may even encourage artists to venture outside the enclave market, so long as they can benefit through commissions or management fees. The ability of mainstream media to incorporate immigrant artists is enhanced in music and film by the rise of the internet as a major platform for publicity about and distribution of those forms.

Qualified assimilation

Immigrants may move entirely into mainstream markets by: (1) tailoring the representation of their groups to the expectations of host-country audiences; or (2) seasoning their work with elements of their culture of origin. The first mode was most prominent in the twentieth century, whereas the nineteenth-century variety stage featured English-origin comics caricaturing German, Irish, Jewish or, especially, African American stereotypes. By the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, mainstream performers drew on their ethnic backgrounds to provide flavour to popular hits: thus, 1970s Polish American pop star Bobby Vinton used elements of polka instrumentation in some of his tunes, and Italian American artists like Tony Bennett adopted songs like 'That's Amore' (the lyrics to which were penned by an English immigrant to the USA). Chris Ofili, the Nigerian English painter, and winner of the Turner Prize, exemplifies the second mode of qualified incorporation. Born in London, he combines Nigerian forms and media, including elephant dung, with iconic images from the Catholic pantheon.

Qualified assimilation will not occur until second- or third-generation immigrants assimilate into the larger society. Indeed, such artists may deploy communal cultural forms only after making their mark at the national level. Cellist Yo-Yo Ma, a first-generation Chinese American, was educated at Juilliard and Harvard and did not record an album of Chinese compositions until 2000, long after he was well established.

Outside appropriation

This mode of incorporation entails the wholesale appropriation of an imagined immigrant culture by the host society with little involvement of immigrants themselves.

Thus McDonald's offers a 'sausage burrito' and other Latin-themed menu options. Similarly, mozzarella sticks and calamari have become standard fare in 'American' restaurants far from their origins in Italian cuisine; and New York's famed *Torrisi's* gained acclaim when its Italian American chefs incorporated ingredients like dried shrimp from nearby Chinatown into conventional Italian dishes.

The appropriation of immigrant culture by outsiders requires three conditions: (1) that cultural forms are organized commercially; (2) that a cultural element (an instrumental form, a culinary ingredient, a graphic symbol) is sufficiently familiar to outsiders to be meaningful; and (3) that the immigrant community does not mobilize to contest outsiders' appropriation of their culture as illegitimate or offensive. The second and third conditions are most likely to hold when an immigrant group has been strongly incorporated into the host community through social interaction, intermarriage and representation among employees of the appropriating companies.

The strategies outlined above depend in large part on the institutional forms available to immigrant artists. Each form illustrates a particular relationship towards the community of origin, and towards particular representations of authenticity, based on the preferences and agendas of actors who control critical resources. Commercial forms tend to erode strong boundaries around genres and other cultural categories in the pursuit of markets, but the extent to which and the ways in which they do this depend on the manner in which markets for artistic expressions are segmented. Narrow segments permit greater cultural specificity, whereas broader segmentation enforces the blurring of genres and identities. Even where segments are narrow, commercial firms will rarely emphasize stylistic purity or tradition and will almost always trade off authenticity for revenues or define authenticity in a way that maximizes financial rewards (DiMaggio 1987).

Expressive entrepreneurship

Also important from a theoretical standpoint is the relationship between immigrant art and economic change. The concept of expressive entrepreneurship was first introduced to designate ways in which second- and third-generation immigrants seek to circumvent labour market uncertainties (Fernández-Kelly and Konczal 2005) by relying on artistic expression to generate income as well as meaning. The term sheds light on new dimensions of entrepreneurship in immigrant communities. First-generation arrivals tend to enter host societies as providers of cheap labour or as high-skilled workers attempting to survive in formal and informal markets. Their children and grandchildren, by contrast, are making claims on both pecuniary autonomy *and* social significance.

When they first arrive, immigrants tend to measure success through benchmarks in their countries of origin. Among working-class immigrants, even small increases in income and status match up favourably with the limited prospects left behind. The opposite is true for their descendants, whose tastes and experience are formed in host countries and whose recollection of the ancestral land is imagined, not felt through direct experience. Their search is not solely for subsistence, but often for recognition, wealth and even fame. Among low-income workers, those goals are harder to achieve, given limited opportunities in employment. But even educated second- and third-

generation immigrants yearn for levels of independence that are difficult to attain in the highly regimented corporations dotting Silicon Valley or Wall Street.

An implicit claim behind the concept of expressive entrepreneurship is that the use of art and art-related activities to secure revenues as well as meaning occurs wherever there is a convergence between: (1) rising aspirations on the part of younger populations; and (2) labour markets perceived by the young to offer limited opportunities. Starting in the 1970s, and accelerating in the subsequent decades, neo-liberal economic policies promoted deindustrialization and the relocation of manufacturing operations to less developed countries. That, in turn, severely reduced the availability of stable, long-term employment for multitudes of youngsters growing up in the USA. In a context characterized by static wages, dwindling union membership, and diminishing paths for upward mobility, young people use aesthetic expression to supplement their income and, sometimes, to achieve notoriety. Such is the case of Armando Christian Pérez, better known by his stage name Pitbull. Born in 1981, in Miami's Little Havana, a residential tract famous for its concentration of Cuban exiles, Pérez became involved in drug dealing as an adolescent. He also acquired a conscience fixed on giving voice to marginal and oppressed people. Talented and ambitious, he later became one of the most successful and richest pop singers of his generation.

In several ways, Pitbull embodies the themes summarized in this paper. His art combines the music and rhymes of his ancestral country with rap, a genre associated with African American struggles. He is equally inspired by Jose Martí, Celia Cruz, Tupac Shakur and a panoply of successful entrepreneurs. His music finds authenticity in the fusion of an immigrant past and a claim to the American Dream. In every way he represents the possibilities of expressive entrepreneurship.

Conclusion

In this paper, we have argued for a systematic approach to the study of immigration and art by focusing on institutions as critical forces shaping the aesthetic alternatives of immigrants and their children. We have drawn attention to modes of incorporation shaped by governmental and civil organizations, and underscored the part played by global economic change in opening new channels that are turning art into a significant vehicle for immigrants to attain both financial independence and social prominence. We see this brief outline as a proposal for new ways to contemplate art and for researchers to consider further exploration of a field neglected until now.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

Notes

1. We use the term 'artist' to refer to creative workers in many fields: painters, sculptors, muralists, artisans, singers, songwriters, dancers, actors, playwrights, concert violinists, DJs and turntablists, chefs, comics and fashion designers. Artists of different kinds face similar

tensions and dilemmas, but variation in the institutions that support different kinds of work have profound effects on the way that they can resolve them.

2. In this paper, we use ‘authenticity’ to refer to any claims on behalf of an artist or artwork that it represents the culture of the immigrant group in some way, with the understanding that such claims are ordinarily disputed; and we use the term ‘purity’ to refer to such artists or artworks whose status as representative of the immigrant culture is accepted by virtually all attentive members of the relevant community.

3. For example, New York’s Tutuma Social Club, devoted to promoting Afro-Peruvian jazz, was founded by an Italian American restaurateur with a strong interest in Peruvian culture. Advised by a PhD ‘curator’ on the faculty of a nearby university, engaging a network of Peruvian jazz artists, and promoting cultural tourism as well as Peruvian cuisine, the club combined features of a commercial enterprise with those of a cultural non-profit organization.

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