

Reuel R. Rogers

Afro-Caribbean Immigrants and the Politics of Incorporation: Ethnicity, Exception or Exit.

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In *Afro-Caribbean Immigrants and the Politics of Incorporation*, Reuel Rogers employs the prism of urban politics to consider how the new wave of mostly non-white immigrants will be incorporated into the American political system. Rogers uses the case of Afro-Caribbean immigrants in New York City to test the validity of the pluralist and minority group models of political incorporation. The author draws on the transnational migration perspective to highlight the shortcomings of the two models and to provide a richly nuanced explanation of the Afro-Caribbean process of political incorporation. The argument in brief is as follows: the pluralist perspective fails to consider that immigrants maintain ongoing relations with their country of origin that impact their political behavior in the US and is unable to take into account how racism complicates political incorporation; the minority group model errs as it generalizes from the African-American experience to predict the political behavior of all non-white populations.

According to Rogers a complete account of the political behavior of Afro-Caribbean immigrants must consider several transnational patterns including: the normative framework that organizes Caribbean migrations such as the idea of the sojourner and the myth of return; pre-migration socialization about politics and race relations; the existence of a dense network of communication tying New York City with the islands; and the maintenance of social relationships with persons and institutions in the homeland. Symbolic and material ties to the homeland have deep cognitive and strategic utility for Afro-Caribbean immigrants. They help persons make sense of the political world in the United States, situate themselves vis-à-vis their social and economic options in New York City and respond to racial barriers.

This is a very well written book with a strong and coherent argument. The underlying theoretical question regarding the applicability of the pluralist and minority group model of political incorporation to the experience of non-white immigrants is in constant focus. Chapter 2 sets the stage for the discussion. It uses secondary statistical sources to compare the socio-economic profile of Afro-Caribbean New Yorkers against that of other immigrant groups and African-Americans. The findings challenge the ideologically charged assumption that foreign-born (“good”) blacks are doing demonstrably better than African-Americans (“bad blacks”). Both native and foreign-born peoples of African descent experience systemic social exclusion and a denial of substantive citizenship rights.

To test the standard predictions of the pluralist model, Chapter 3 documents the scope of Afro-Caribbean participation in organizational and electoral politics. Challenging assimilationist expectations, Afro-Caribbean immigrants have low rates of naturalization regardless of years of residence in the US and socio-economic mobility. Furthermore, benign neglect and gate keeping, not incorporation, characterize the democratic political machine in New York City. Afro-Caribbean immigrants have been kept out of predominantly white-controlled local political clubs and Afro-Caribbean electoral bids have met with sabotage and legal challenges. While it is difficult to demonstrate that racism is the direct motivation for gate keeping, such party practices have the effect of reinforcing existing racial disparities in political participation.

Chapter 4 engages with the minority group model to explore why racial commonalities between Afro-Caribbean immigrants and African-Americans have not translated into a shared political platform. Rogers provides a pleasantly complex answer to this conundrum. He acknowledges the distinctive ethnic interests of Afro-Caribbean immigrants as a source of tension, but ultimately argues that the institutional landscape of New York City conspires against the consolidation of a stable political coalition. The New York City electoral system depends on neighborhood-level organizations to generate political alliances, and in the case of Afro-Caribbean and African-American New Yorkers no such institutional network has been established to bring the two groups together.

Turning his focus to Afro-Caribbean immigrants' ties to the homeland, Rogers offers a scanty map of home country ties, but his overarching argument remains persuasive: when home country ties are person-to-person and predominantly emotional there is a general disinclination to participate in formal politics; in contrast, when these transnational ties are expressed as engagement in organizational politics, they often translate into political engagement in New York City. In other words, home country ties persist and can even push immigrants towards sustaining a simultaneity of political concerns.

In Chapter 6 and 7 the author turns his focus to the minority group model. In chapter 6 he unpacks the politics of racial identity by distinguishing between group identity and group consciousness to explain why the Afro-Caribbean conception of racial group identity is not consistent with the African American understanding. According to Rogers, Afro-Caribbean political learning takes place in the Caribbean, through institutions that do not emphasize race as a source of political difference. In contrast, African-American race consciousness is a product of a political education given through a network of all-black institutions – churches, colleges social clubs and so on. Furthermore, the Afro-Caribbean response to racial discrimination is framed by the group's transnational ties. Faced with racism, Afro-Caribbean immigrants call on the “exit option.” In effect, racial obstacles faced by Afro-Caribbean immigrants will make ties to the home country and the accompanying exit option necessary. Chapter 7 considers the Afro-Caribbean political agenda and its distance from the African-American focus on redistributive policies and social reform. Not surprisingly, Rogers finds that Afro-Caribbean political priorities combine a concern with symbolic representation with demands for reform on two issues: police brutality and immigration legislation. Again Rogers links Afro-Caribbean political behavior in New York to pre-migration political socialization, which does not evidence any institutional context through which persons might learn a more radical public-protest style politics.

Afro-Caribbean Immigrants and the Politics of Incorporation makes important conceptual advances in the study of immigrant politics. It is a very strong and convincing critique of the pluralist and minority group models. Rogers provides a dynamic and context-contingent notion of political incorporation that emphasizes the process of political socialization and not simply the assumed outcomes of incorporation, i.e. naturalization and electoral participation. I particularly appreciate the author's focus on the range of home and host country institutions that frame political practice. In this account, institutions emerge as sites of struggle, gatekeeping and constant political learning. The distinction between group identity and group consciousness that Rogers uses to explain differences in race politics across the two groups is astute, and again institutions come into focus in the discussion.

I was, however, disappointed by the author's acknowledged familiarity with and yet failure to draw on the theoretical insights and research findings of the vast transnational migration scholarship.

Three dimensions of his argument would have benefited from this dialogue. The distinction established by Rogers between types of transnational ties (personal or institutional) and trajectories of political incorporation (limited or active) is well developed in the transnational migration literature. His rather absolutist conclusions about the relationship between racism and what he refers to as “the exit option” have also been picked apart and nuanced in this literature. Rogers draws on dated and problematic conceptualizations to explain the Afro-Caribbean attachment to home (i.e. birds of passage, myths of return, and sojourner / settler distinction). The problem with these formulations is that they are guided by dichotomous distinctions between home and away that the transnationalism literature has effectively challenged.

Scholars of the Caribbean may also be troubled by sweeping characterizations of the political institutions of the region. Rogers states that race conflict does not organize political institutions of the Caribbean and that there is no strong tradition of public protests. I claim no expertise in Caribbean politics; however it is simply inaccurate to suggest that countries such as Guyana and Trinidad do not have political institutions organized around racial difference, or to suggest that Jamaica, for instance, does not have a strong tradition of public protest. These rich institutional histories are absent in this book. We cannot expect a book to provide an account of all institutions everywhere, but Rogers could have narrowed his claims and focused on his data, specifically the types of institutions (social, cultural, political, leisure, etc.) in which his respondents had participated prior to migration.

Nonetheless, this is without a doubt an excellent book. It is theoretically strong and well written. It effectively takes on two sacred cows of scholarship on immigrant politics: the pluralist and minority group models of political incorporation. The policy implications of the book are significant. The clarity of argument and straightforward writing style make the book appropriate for specialists in the field and upper-level undergraduate classes.

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