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### Beyond immigrant ethnic politics?

*Organizational innovation, collaboration and competition in the Los Angeles immigrant rights movement (1980-2015)*

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## CHAPTER 2. THE RESEARCH PUZZLE IN CONTEXT: THEORIZING LOS ANGELES AS A CRITICAL CASE.

### *Abstract*

In the present chapter I place the case study and research questions of this dissertation in the context of the socio-economic and political history of Los Angeles. The chapter describes the peculiar pattern of urban growth, political nativism and economic development that characterized Los Angeles for most of its existence, and it highlights how those dynamics contributed to trapping non-European immigrants within the lowest rungs of the labor market and prevented them from exerting significant political influence. The chapter also explores immigrants' involvement in institutional and contentious politics, underscoring the importance of ethnic and racial politics. It further places such involvement in a context of widespread hostility, limited institutional backing and lack of support from other civil society actors. Finally, the chapter reframes the empirical puzzle presented in this introduction in light of the dynamics presented above.

### **Introduction**

In this chapter, I place the relevance of my case study and research questions in the context of the socio-economic and political history of Los Angeles. In order to gain a deeper understanding of the (limited) opportunities and (substantial) constraints for political participation that immigrants and their children have historically faced in Los Angeles, it is first necessary to highlight the main features of the local social, economic, cultural and political context. This is important both to appreciate the relevance of Los Angeles as a critical empirical case – characterized by unusually high levels of international in-migration, high degree of socio-economic transformation, political hostility towards migrants and yet resurgence of progressive political activism with little match in the United States in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century – as well as to better understand how the local environment shaped potential grievances and political interests of immigrant communities.

This descriptive chapter has the objective of providing a historical contextualization of the peculiar pattern of urban growth, political nativism and economic development that characterized Los Angeles for most of its existence. The chapter is organized as follows. In the first section I describe the scope and consequences of the social and demographic changes that took place in Southern California throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In particular, the period between the 1960s and 1990s was a veritable break from the past. After decades of social closure and internal migration, Los Angeles underwent a dramatic transformation that would make the city the migrant capital of the United States by the turn of the century.

In the second section I link the phenomenon of internal migration to global and local processes of economic restructuring. I highlight how those dynamics contributed to trapping non-European immigrants within the lowest rungs of the labor market, with little prospects of upward socio-economic mobility. Racialization, legal precarization and residential segregation were key processes underpinning and compounding the subaltern incorporation of immigrants and their children in Los Angeles. The latter is crucial not only to understand the grim reality of a large segment of the immigrant community – a reality which would encourage the emergence of the immigrant worker organizations examined in this research – but also to appreciate the formidable obstacles immigrants had to face to engage in collective action.

In the third and fourth sections I explore immigrants' involvement in institutional and contentious politics. I underscore their historic exclusion from the polity as well as the importance of ethnic and racial politics for channeling political engagement in both arenas. Moreover, I place political engagement of immigrants in a general context of widespread hostility and lack of support from other civil society actors, namely labor unions and large philanthropic organizations. This part sets the ground for the empirical analysis of the following chapters, as it argues that immigrant worker organizations emerged in a context characterized by hostile political and discursive opportunities. Finally, I conclude the chapter by re-stating the empirical puzzle and the project research questions in light of the information presented.

## **The Social and Economic Context of Immigrant Los Angeles**

### *Los Angeles and the Great Demographic Transformation: From 'Nativist City' to 'Capital of the Third World'*

Los Angeles is a city shaped by migration. Its formidable demographic growth, which transformed a Mexican *pueblo* into the second-largest metropolis in the United States over slightly more than a century has been largely fueled by movements of people from all walks of life. A former Mexican *pueblo* incorporated in the newly formed US State of California in 1850,<sup>13</sup> by 1880 Los Angeles was still a 30,000-people rancho town and its region scarcely reached 100,000 inhabitants in 1890 (Sabagh and Bozorgmehr 1996). By 1920, however, the regional total had already reached 1 million, and by 1930 had more than doubled to 2.3 million – a surge that could only be explained by mass movement of people rather than by mere natural increase (Waldinger and Bozorgmehr 1996b). Those arrivals were sustained and made possible by a dramatic economic transformation of the region

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<sup>13</sup> Geographically located in Alta California, present day Los Angeles is situated in an area that, between the late 18<sup>th</sup> century and early 19<sup>th</sup> century, was nominally under the Spanish colonial empire and largely administered by Catholic religious missions. Part of the Mexican Republic between 1822 and 1848, Los Angeles joined newly formed California following the US-Mexican Treaty of Guadalupe-Hidalgo of 1848 and the state's official admission to the US union in 1850 (Starr 2005).

that took place between the late 19<sup>th</sup> and the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Railroad development and seaport expansion transformed Los Angeles into the main rail and trading hub of the Southwest and linked the region to the rest of the country, greatly facilitating mass movement (Starr 2005; Lasslett 1996). Oil discovery in the 1890s gave a significant boost to the local economy, while the construction of the Owens River aqueduct to the San Fernando Valley and the Pacific Electric interurban system encouraged real estate development and agriculture (especially horticulture) (Laslett 1996; Davis 2006). Those developments encouraged the ‘suburbanization’ of Los Angeles as early as the 1930s, transforming the area in a loosely connected agglomeration of ‘residential islands’ separated by agricultural fields (Laslett 1996).

During the 1920s, Los Angeles was a fairly diverse and multicultural city. Chinese immigrants, who had come to the US as indentured laborers to build the railway in the 1870s, had since created a sizable community in downtown’s ‘Chinatown’ (Starr 2005; Laslett 1996). Small groups of Mexican and Japanese immigrants, as well as African Americans (migrated from other areas) were also present in the area (Laslett 1996). Mexican and Japanese, in particular, found employment in the expanding citrus farming in the San Gabriel and San Fernando valleys (Laslett 1996). A small contingent of Italians, Irish and Eastern Europeans, with a cross-country Jewish population of relative significance, also inhabited Los Angeles (Laslett 1996). The largest groups, however, were European migrants from older countries of emigration, such as Great Britain, Germany and France, and internal migrants of similar descent. In stark contrast with other major US cities, which at the time were attracting international, prevalently Catholic and Jewish immigrants from all parts of Europe,<sup>14</sup> Southern California mostly witnessed the mass arrival of Protestant, ‘small-town’ internal migrants of Western and Northern European origins (Laslett 1996; Foner and Waldinger 2013). The newcomers included a fairly homogenous group of middle-class retirees, businessmen, tradesmen and land developers from the Mid-West, as well as impoverished farmers from ‘Dust Bowl’ states (Starr 2005; Laslett 1996). Driven by a desire to outrival San Francisco as the key economic hub of the Pacific Coast, Southern California political and economic elites – the so-called ‘boosters’ – encouraged the arrival of new immigrants by emphasizing the area’s mild climate, its promise of social advancement and mobility, as well as its explicit anti-union business policy (Davis 2006; Milkman 2006; Waldinger and Bozorgmehr 1996b).

The Los Angeles of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century was not a place devoid of a certain degree of social mixing and tolerance (Laslett 1996). Yet, as in the rest of the United States, its social hierarchy was already largely organized around ethno-racial differences, with a ‘white’ (and male) population in a dominant position to the detriment of ‘colored’ peoples (Almaguer 2009). If ethno-racial hierarchies in other regions of the US came to be primarily defined along the black-white divide, largely due to the presence of a large

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<sup>14</sup> Only 17 percent of LA’s inhabitants were foreign-born in 1920, compared to 35 percent in New York (Waldinger and Bozorgmehr 1996b).

African American population, racialization in California (as well as in the broader US South-West) was largely the result of the early encounter between newcomers of European origin and Native Americans and, at a later stage, between Euro-American settlers and Mexican, Japanese and Chinese residents during the 19<sup>th</sup> century (Almaguer 2009; Omi and Winant 2015). This dynamic was only reinforced in the early 1900s. In fact, as Laslett (1996: 40) argued, it was the “class and cultural gap that opened up in the 1920s between the Protestant midwesterners and newcomers of color, as well as Catholics and Jews, that largely determined the uneasy set of racial and ethnic relations between Anglos and others that persist in Los Angeles to this day.” Anglo settlers, who embraced values such as “temperance and churchgoing, economic individualism and social conformity, the pursuit of rural arcadia in the form of single-family dwellings, and an easy assumption of *white social and economic superiority*” (Laslett 1996: 71; my emphasis), were key in shaping the urban and economic development of the LA region for the decades to come (Almaguer 2009). This was practically done by preventing immigrants of color (as well as the growing African American population) from accessing equal housing, schools and jobs through the use of racist zoning regulations, legislation and court rulings (Laslett 1996: 51). While white Anglos drove LA’s urban sprawling by retreating into a myriad of gated ‘suburban islands’, other groups were gradually pushed in particular areas of the city, such as East Los Angeles for Mexicans and South Los Angeles (then South Central) for African Americans (Laslett 1996). Jews, despite their ‘whiteness’ and their growing economic success – they would gradually emerge at the top of the entertainment industry coalescing around Hollywood – also suffered considerable degree of exclusion and discrimination during this period (Davis 2006; Laslett 1996).

Between the 1930s and the 1960s, as internal migration continued and US federal policy restricted international migration, Los Angeles continued to grow but its population became more homogenous. By 1960, it had reached 6 million inhabitants – second only to New York in the United States – but eight out of ten residents both in the city of LA and LA county were non-Hispanic whites (Sabagh and Bozorgmehr 1996; Waldinger and Bozorgmehr 1996b). If limited immigration from the Western hemisphere, and particularly from Mexico, continued to be encouraged for agricultural purposes in California on a seasonal basis,<sup>15</sup> US administration virtually shut down immigration channels from European and Asian countries between 1924 and 1965 (Ngai 2014; Tichenor 2002). During this period, Los Angeles became, “both culturally and demographically, the most nativist and fundamentalist of [US] big cities” (Davis 2006: 102). Immigrant communities were therefore virtually cut off from their countries of origin, and they developed their distinct ethnic identities through a variety of community-formation trajectories. If migrants of European origin consolidated an ‘Anglo’ white identity that spun different ethnic national origins and became the ‘mainstream’, growing residential

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<sup>15</sup> During this period, Mexicans immigrants came to California largely under the Bracero program (1942-1964), a federal program which allowed local farmers to recruit and employ migrant laborers in their fields on a seasonal basis (Tichenor 2002).

and school segregation, as well as racism were important factors in consolidating distinct (and subordinate) Mexican American, Chinese American and Japanese American ethnic identities among the growing second- and third-generation of non-European migrants (Ngai 2014; Laslett 1996; Acuña 1995; Muñoz 2007). The creation of these communities, in spite of their relative limited size, would also prove a source of social tensions once international borders would be open again after the reform of 1965.

In the meantime, between the 1930s and the 1950s, Los Angeles began to develop a substantial industrial base. As the area shifted the core of its economy from agriculture towards manufacturing, its first autochthonous working class emerged. During the 1930s, attracted by the availability of cheap oil, an expanding consumer market and an aggressive 'open shop' policy,<sup>16</sup> steel, auto and rubber manufacturers established several plants in the region (Milkman 2006). By 1936, companies of the likes of Ford, General Motors, Chrysler, Goodyear and Firestone already employed more than 40,000 people, and by 1939 Los Angeles ranked second nationwide in both auto assembly (behind Detroit) and tire and rubber production (Laslett 1996). In the following decade, driven by federal funding, LA underwent a spectacular industrial growth that made it the leading aircraft manufacturer in the country (Laslett 1996; Davis 2006). The military compartment, which included production of complex aerospace and related technology, became the major industry in the area in the 1950s,<sup>17</sup> employing 36 percent of the total regional manufacturing workforce as of 1957 (Moore and Vigil 1993: 33). By 1970, the region could offer three million jobs, employing three times as many people as in 1940 (Laslett 1996). Durable manufacturing, by now firmly unionized<sup>18</sup> and offering high wages and stable jobs, emerged as key regional employer (Milkman 2006). Unsurprisingly, given the social make-up the area, the first industrial working class in the area was predominantly white and native-born. As impoverished white migrants from Oklahoma or Arkansas captured the vast majority of these jobs,<sup>19</sup> it was African Americans<sup>20</sup> who came distant second (Laslett 1996). Initially, Mexicans remained largely concentrated in agricultural jobs, furthermore suffering racial and geographical discrimination in accessing high-level industrial jobs (Laslett 1996; Moore and Vigil 1993; Scott 1996a). However, over time, they

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<sup>16</sup> Since at least the 1920s, local elites had promoted Los Angeles as the 'Citadel of Open Shop' a way to ensure a competitive advantage over heavily unionized cities, such as San Francisco (Milkman 2006). During this period, organizations such as the Merchants and Manufacturers' Associations were able to effectively 'militarize' industrial relations, ensuring that no unions would be allowed to organize in Los Angeles. Picketing was illegal and labor activists were frequently terrorized by the expanding Los Angeles Police Department (LAPD) (Davis 2006).

<sup>17</sup> In the context of Cold War arms-racing, this sector would remain strong until the end of the 1980s.

<sup>18</sup> Industrial unions, which came together as the newly formed Congress of Industrial Relations (CIO), were able to finally gain a foothold in Los Angeles during the 1930s (Tait 2016).

<sup>19</sup> Whites held 82 percent of the region's jobs in 1940, and they would continue to hold as much as 72 percent in 1970 (Laslett 1996). Yet, as shown by the fact that the local working class was largely composed of poor white Midwesterners, which themselves suffered significant prejudice and discrimination vis-à-vis white entrepreneurs and businessmen, intra-group differences in class and status also clearly mattered (Laslett 1996).

<sup>20</sup> Attracted by economic opportunities as well as what was a (comparatively) less hostile environment, a sizable African American population migrated from southern US states between the 1930s and 1950s. The black population grew especially fast in the early 1940s, increasing from 63,774 to 118,888 between 1940 and 1944 (Grant, Oliver, and James 1996: 381).

were able to enter both durable and nondurable manufacturing, establishing key connections with industrial employers that would be crucial to link them up with the massive migrant arrivals of the subsequent decades (Laslett 1996). Likewise, Chinese and Japanese Americans abandoned employment in agriculture, but they were able to find occupations in a variety of economic sectors, including health, education and engineering (Laslett 1996: 65-66). Nevertheless, first and second generation international migrants remained a relatively inconspicuous presence in LA up until 1970. Mexican immigrants and Mexican Americans represented only 6 percent of the regional workforce in 1940; by 1970 they had barely increased to 7 percent – 211,500 workers (half of which native-born) over a total population of more than seven million (Laslett 1996). Asian immigrants and Asian Americans – mostly of Japanese and Chinese origin – were an even smaller percentage (2 percent in 1940, 3 percent in 1970) (Laslett 1996).

The state of affairs in Los Angeles dramatically changed between the mid-1960s and the 1990s. Over three decades, the metropolitan region<sup>21</sup> almost doubled its population, from 7.75 to 14.5 million (Sabagh and Bozorgmehr 1996). Slightly half of this increase (3.3 million) came from international migrants, with the foreign-born population increasing from 8 percent to 27 percent between 1960 and 1990 (Waldinger and Bozorgmehr 1996b). LA County,<sup>22</sup> while it lost a significant share of its resident population – particularly its older white population retreating to neighboring counties – still managed to grow from slightly more than 6 million to 8.86 million (Sabagh and Bozorgmehr 1996). In 1990, while the nationwide rate grew to 8 percent, concentration of foreign-born in metropolitan LA, LA County and LA City respectively climbed up to 27, 33 and 37<sup>23</sup> percent (Waldinger and Bozorgmehr 1996b; Sabagh and Bozorgmehr 1996). By 1990, in absolute terms, LA metropolitan region was the nation's immigrant capital with 3.9 million foreign-born, 400,000 more than New York (second) (Waldinger and Bozorgmehr 1996b). The pace of this growth was also phenomenal. In 1990, 13 percent of the region's population was composed of immigrants who had arrived during the previous decade (Waldinger and Bozorgmehr 1996b).

The most astonishing difference from the past, apart from the raw numbers, was the origin of the newcomers. Migrants from Mexico, Central America and a variety of Asian countries entirely replaced the older generations of European and native-born internal migrants in the LA metropolitan area. Through immigration and high fertility

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<sup>21</sup> This region, used for statistical purposes, is composed of five counties, including LA County (its core and most populous area), Orange, San Bernardino, Riverside and Ventura Counties.

<sup>22</sup> The reason for relying on metropolitan and county demographic data has to do with the fragmented administrative geography of the area. Unlike some other major cities such as New York, the City of Los Angeles proper cannot be considered a self-contained political and social unit (Foner and Waldinger 2013). This has to do with the urban history of the area, characterized by suburbanization, processes of administrative secession, complex division of functions between the city and the county, as well the continued existence of residential pockets that remain unincorporated (Davis, 2006; Foner and Waldinger 2013; Laslett 1996). Areas such as East Los Angeles are still not part of the City of Los Angeles proper, but part of Los Angeles county.

<sup>23</sup> To put these numbers into perspective, at the peak of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century migratory wave – the only other moment in history that parallels the phenomena from the 1970-1990 – New York roughly counted 40 percent of its population as foreign-born (Waldinger and Bozorgmehr 1996b).

rates, the population of Mexicans and Mexican Americans combined more than tripled between 1970 and 1990, from 1.12 million to 3.72 million (Sabagh and Bozorgmehr 1996). Almost 800,000 newcomers from Mexico settled during the 1980s, the share of foreign-born Mexicans within the larger community growing from 25 percent to 46 during the 1970-1990 period (Sabagh and Bozorgmehr 1996). Central Americans went from being a marginal presence to half a million by 1990, their numbers largely rising as a result of the growing refugee flows from El Salvador (241,000) and Guatemala (126,000) (Sabagh and Bozorgmehr 1996; Hamilton and Chinchilla 2001). Asian and Asian Americans, around half a million in 1970, rose to 1.3 million in 1990 largely through immigration, with Filipinos, Koreans and Vietnamese joining in large numbers pre-existing Chinese and Japanese communities (Sabagh and Bozorgmehr 1996). During the 1980s, the Asian community further diversified with the arrival of a substantial number of refugees from Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos (Hamilton and Chinchilla 2001; Sabagh and Bozorgmehr 1996). Those communities largely surpassed pre-existing ethnic minority groups, such as Native Americans (63,000 in 1990) but also African Americans (1.1 million) (Sabagh and Bozorgmehr 1996). While an observer called Los Angeles the ‘Capital of the Third World’ in 1991 (Rieff 1991), a decade later Hamilton and Chinchilla (2001: 41) noted that Los Angeles had “the largest Mexican, Central American, Asian, and Middle Eastern populations in the United States, and ... the largest populations of Koreans, Filipinos, and Iranians outside of their respective countries... [, furthermore being] the largest Mexican metropolis outside of Mexico and the largest Salvadoran metropolis outside of El Salvador.”

This new wave of immigration was due to a combination of political, economic, social and cultural factors that, to an extent, escaped the reach of the local context. The change in federal immigration regime, in conjunction with growing economic globalization and neoliberalization, were key in fostering immigration to the US from new regions (Tichenor 2002; Massey, Durand and Malone 2002). For once, federal legislation reshaped the scope and intensity of international migration flows directed to the United States. The 1965 Immigration and Naturalization Act, which finally allowed immigration quotas from the Eastern Hemisphere while facilitating immigration for family reunification or local economic need, was in fact a “watershed in the development of American immigration policy” (Tichenor 2002: 218). Against government expectations of attracting immigration from Europe, the act ended up encouraging unprecedented levels of migration from Asian countries (Tichenor 2002; Ngai 2014). The long-standing geopolitical relations between the US and the Philippines or South Korea, founded on colonial and neo-colonial arrangements, were key in channeling migrants from those countries towards the United States (Espiritu 1993; Chung 2007; Kramer 2006).

Pre-existing migrant networks and geographical proximity played a key role in sustaining flows from other regions. In fact, while immigration from the Western



Hemisphere was instead for the first time restricted,<sup>24</sup> economic incentives and migrant receiving infrastructures in the US remained in place. This was especially true for those set up under the agricultural Bracero program (1942-1964). New migrants from Mexico continued to enter the US well beyond the annual quotas expected,<sup>25</sup> many of them thus *de facto* crossing the border irregularly (Massey, Durand and Malone 2002; Ngai 2014; Massey and Pren 2012). In this respect, LA's proximity to the US-Mexico border was arguably a key factor in facilitating the continuation and further escalation of such dynamics (Waldinger and Bozorgmehr 1996b). In addition to economic migrants, the United States, and Los Angeles in particular, also attracted thousands of people fleeing political conflict from regions such as Central America or South-East Asia (Waldinger and Bozorgmehr 1996b; Hamilton and Chinchilla 2001). In regions of origin, particularly in Central America and in Mexico, international migration was encouraged by fast-paced industrialization, agricultural modernization and forced urbanization; those processes contributed to the uprooting of peasant and farming communities and to the fast deterioration of their livelihoods (Hamilton and Chinchilla 2001; Henderson 2011). The gradual integration of North and Central America within a common economic market, through instruments such as the North Atlantic Free Trade Agreement of 1994, accelerated those dynamics and further encouraged international migration (Massey, Durand and Malone 2002)

The overall result of these immigration waves was a complete make-over of greater Los Angeles over less than three decades. No other area in the United States experienced such a massive demographic growth and change within such a short period of time. Moreover, no other area experienced such a substantial migratory flow from the same country. If 70 percent of all Mexican immigrants heading to the United States during the period 1965-85 selected California as their destination, 30 percent of the grand total settled in Los Angeles alone (Massey, Durand and Malone 2002). Migration from Mexico and Central America would begin to stabilize only during the second half of the 1990s, following the escalation of anti-immigrant hostility in the region (such as the passing of State Proposition 187) and increasing militarization of the San Diego-Tijuana border (Massey, Durand and Malone 2002). All in all, by the 1990s, Los Angeles had become the second most populated metropolis in the country, set to overtake New York in the early decades of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.<sup>26</sup> Moreover, it had become the most diverse city in the country

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<sup>24</sup> In fact, observers have argued that it was precisely such restrictions which disrupted old patterns of circular and temporary migration among Mexican migrants and created a large pool of stranded immigrants in a wide variety of irregular situations (Massey and Pren 2012; Massey, Durand and Malone 2002).

<sup>25</sup> The 1965 Act initially established an overall annual quota of 120,000 migrants from the Western Hemisphere – a 40 percent drop from the annual entries during the previous years. In 1976 Congress placed further pressure on Mexico – by far the largest immigrant-sending country – by specifying the internal quota allocation among Western Hemisphere countries and granting a mere 20,000 slots to Mexico (Ngai 2014).

<sup>26</sup> As a matter of fact, while overall population as well as absolute numbers of international migrants have continued to grow since, the percentage of the foreign-born population and the main national composition of flows has since remained broadly the same (Foner and Waldinger 2013). LA County has grown from 8.8 million in 1990 to 9.5 million in 2000 and 9.8 million in 2010

by sheer number of foreign-born, second only to Miami metropolitan region in relative terms (Waldinger and Bozorgmehr 1996b). However, as we will see in the second section, the social and economic incorporation of this new population in Los Angeles proved a formidable challenge.

*Between Economic Restructuring, Legal Precarity and Differential Racialization: Creating an Immigrant Working Class*

The arrival of post-1965 immigrants in Los Angeles needs to be contextualized. International migration largely coincided with and was to an extent fueled by the vast transformations that altered the economic structure of Southern California between the 1970s and the 1990s. Those changes were linked to broader processes of economic restructuring spanning an increasingly interconnected global economy (Jessop 1994; Moore and Pinderhughes 1993; Scott 2011). Driven by the declining productivity of Fordist modes of production, as well as by internationalization of trade and production chains and the growing competition threat posed by Asian economies, urban economies in the United States underwent a large-scale process of restructuring; the latter resulted in widespread de-industrialization and delocalization overseas of heavy manufacturing, expansion of the service economy, and successive re-industrialization oriented towards light manufacturing and high-tech production (Jessop 2002; Soja and Scott 1996; Moore and Pinderhughes 1993; Pastor 2001a). Simultaneously, the fiscal crisis of the welfare state in the early 1970s and the ideological decline of Keynesianism opened the door to the hegemony of neoliberalism as a political and economic project (Peck and Tickell 2007). The ascendance of Ronald Reagan to the US presidency in 1980, and the election of George Deukmejian as governor of California in 1982 coincided with this turn. Concretely, this resulted in the dismantling of national and local social wage policies, the weakening of workplace protections, as well as the privatization, liberalization and deregulation of vast sectors of the economy (Peck and Tickell 2007; Hamilton and Chinchilla 2001; Milkman 2006). Moreover, such political vision also underscored international migrant labor (both low- and highly-skilled) as a key resource to be mobilized for economic growth and competitiveness, particularly by cities (Scott 2011; Sassen 2005). Not incidentally, this period also witnessed a concerted attack by business and political institutions against organized labor, who saw its membership and political influence dramatically decline, particularly in industrial sectors (Milkman 2006).

In Los Angeles, where durable manufacturing was one of the largest in the country, and still remained strong until the late 1970s, economic and political changes were heavily felt shortly thereafter. The economic recession that hit the US economy in the early 1980s, and the growing competitive pressures from expanding manufacturing

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(US Census), but its foreign-born population has grown. While class and human capital differences have to an extent faded due to more differentiated migrant flows, they remain relevant as of the mid-2010s.

production in the Global South resulted in significant downsizing or delocalization overseas of many LA-based plants (Pastor 2001a; Scott 1996). In response to the erosion of part of the region's industrial base, political and business elites sought to diversify manufacturing production, to attract foreign capital investment and to expand the area's service economy (Scott and Soja 1996; Sonenshein 1993). They therefore promoted the development of large communication and transportation infrastructures (such as the modernization of the San Pedro and Long Beach port, or the upgrading of the LAX Airport), set up attractive tax incentives to attract transnational corporations and relaxed labor law requirements and regulations for prospective employers (Milkman 2006; Scott and Soja 1996). The LA region refocused the upper tier of its industrial economy towards high-tech manufacturing, particularly in electronics and aerospace industries, and drew on the influx of foreign capital (mainly from Japan) to become the major financial, trading and managerial hub of the Pacific Rim (Moore and Vigil 1993). In parallel, at the lower tier, the region also witnessed the revitalization of low-technology, labor-intensive industries that had been declining since the 1950s (Scott 1996; Ong and Blumenberg 1996). Through an aggressive cost-cutting strategy that relied on low-wage labor to undercut global competition, local manufacturers turned Los Angeles into one of the few remaining urban economies in the Global North still involved in industries such as textile, clothing, furniture and printing (Scott 1996). Thanks to this conversion, and unlike cities such as Chicago or New York, where the overall manufacturing sector shrunk dramatically, Los Angeles still continued to offer large and diversified employment opportunities throughout the 1980s and well into the 1990s (Moore and Pinderhughes 1993; Waldinger and Bozorgmehr 1996b). Moreover, the real estate boom in houses and office buildings, hotels and restaurants, as well as the growth of a very affluent upper class resulted in a proliferation of a variety of low-skilled, low-wage jobs<sup>27</sup> (Hamilton and Chinchilla 2001; Scott and Soja 1996). In the case of this expanding light manufacturing and service economy, however, the result was the creation of jobs of *lower quality*, which boosted comparatively lower wages, longer hours, and less or non-existent social benefits than older durable manufacturing employment (Pastor 2001a; Zentgraf 2001). The loss of mid-level, unionized and protected jobs exacerbated the 'hourglass' character of the local economy, leaving people working at the bottom with diminishing chances of upper mobility (Zentgraf 2001; Moore and Pinderhughes 1993). Overall, economic restructuring significantly widened the gap between high- and low-tiers type of job occupations throughout the 1980s and 1990s, and more generally greatly contributed to rising social and economic inequalities in the LA region during the same period (Scott and Soja 1996; Ong and Blumenberg 1996; Ong and Valenzuela 1996).

From 1970 onwards, in conjunction with the growing international migration influx, foreign-born workers became a strong presence both in the changing

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<sup>27</sup> According to Hamilton and Chinchilla (2001: 72), "by 1990, construction jobs had increased by 50 percent of their 1972 levels in Los Angeles county, while jobs in restaurants were up by nearly 100 percent and hotel jobs by 125 percent".

manufacturing and expanding service sectors. If immigrants from Mexico and Central America represented only 2.9 percent of the entire manufacturing workforce in the region in 1950, by 1990 they made up 30.8 percent; Asian immigrants, in a similar fashion, grew from 0.5 to 8.2 percent during the same period (Scott 1996). While this was not the case for all immigrants, the majority of newcomers and the growing native-born population of color entered the labor market at its the lowest rungs (Waldinger and Bozorgmehr 1996b; Chinchilla and Hamilton 2001; Zentgraf 2001). Occupations were stratified also across gender. Whereas Mexican and Central American male immigrants tended to concentrate in industries “characterized by heavy materials-handling labor processes” and hazardous working conditions, such as a metallurgy or wood-related, their female counterparts concentrated in “labor-intensive craft industries marked by small establishment size”, such as for example “clothing, textile and leather-products industries” (Scott 1996: 230). If Asian male immigrants were often able to find jobs in the booming high-tech sectors, including computer technology, electronics and advanced machinery production, Asian women were present both in similar industries – particularly as assembly workers – as well as in the same craft industries of Latino women (Scott 1996). A similar segmentation occurred in the service sector. Mexican and Central American men became overrepresented in a wide range of low-paid and precarious occupations, from construction to building maintenance, from gardening to delivery (Chang and Diaz-Veizades 1999). Figures such as the ‘day laborer’ or *jornalero* – people soliciting a day-job at a street corner or in proximity of large shopping malls – as well as street vendors became closely associated to Latino migration (Hamilton and Chinchilla 2001; Valenzuela 2002). Women often took up jobs as domestic workers, waitresses, caretakers or hotel maids (Ortiz 1996; Lopez, Popkin and Telles 1996; Chang and Diaz-Veizades 1999). Similarly, different Asian immigrant groups were channeled towards specific segments of the economy. For example, Korean immigrants (both men and women) concentrated in self-employment, investing in businesses such as grocery stores, restaurants, laundries, auto repairs or liquor stores (Chang and Diaz-Veizades 1999; Chung 2007; Cheng and Yang 1996). Filipinos, instead, were largely present in sectors such as home care, nursing and domestic work (Espiritu 1995).

The question of whether international migration was the cause or rather the consequence of such economic changes in Los Angeles has been hotly debated (Milkman 2006; Scott 1996; Waldinger and Bozorgmehr 1996b). It seems safe to assume that processes of economic restructuring and incorporation of migrants in Los Angeles as both skilled and unskilled labor were deeply intertwined and mutually sustained each other (Scott and Soja 1996; Sassen 2005). In the most general terms, immigrants filled labor market niches where local workforce was either insufficient – or not skilled enough, such as in highly-skilled occupations – or unwilling to take a wide range of low-paid, ‘dirty, dangerous and demeaning’ jobs (Waldinger and Bozorgmehr 1996b; Ong and Valenzuela 1996). However, by the time they entered those sectors, those occupations had already been on a

downward spiral of de-unionization, casualization and worsening working conditions (Milkman 2006). Generally, observers have noted that economic restructuring removed mobility ladders for workers at the bottom of the labor market (Sassen 1988). Portes and Zhou (1993) argued that immigrants and their children were hit particularly hard by economic restructuring, as the disappearance of mid-level jobs greatly reduced chances for inter-generational mobility.

Variations in human capital and education certainly contributed to channeling different migrants towards alternative occupations (Ortiz 1996; Scott 1996). Waldinger and Bozorgmehr (1996b: 16) argued that, while “the newcomers to LA [had] come from all walks of life, ...the very distinctive national origins of LA’s immigrants mean[t] that its foreign-born mix [was] characterized not by diversity but rather by socio-economic polarization.” Latino immigrants generally had quite a low level of human capital and tended to come from rural and (to a lesser extent) working class backgrounds. Among Mexican and Central American immigrants, 10 percent of the adult population in 1990 was virtually illiterate, while an additional 40 percent had only attained 8<sup>th</sup> grade education (Waldinger and Bozorgmehr 1996b). Migrants from Asian countries were instead generally high-educated and with a middle-class background. Unlike Mexicans and Central Americans, they were able to use the provisions of the 1965 act to find jobs in highly skilled occupations such as engineering, pharmacy, medicine or nursery (Waldinger and Bozorgmehr 1996b). Moreover, they showed considerable entrepreneurial skills as well as capital funds and other resources to be invested in the area (Waldinger and Bozorgmehr 1996b). This is not to say, of course, that all newcomers from Asian countries were from a middle-class background, or even that they immediately entered the middle-class in LA, but rather than compared to newcomers from the Western Hemisphere they had significant comparative advantages, including more familiarity with American culture and values (Lopez 1996; Cheng and Yang 1996).

Two important structural factors also contributed to the social and economic subordination of immigrants: their differential racialization<sup>28</sup> and their legal precarization. A growing number of social historians such as Ngai (2014) and Almaguer (2009), as well as sociologists such as Portes and Zhou (1993) have highlighted how non-European immigrant groups have traditionally found it harder to integrate within the American ‘mainstream’ than their European counter-parts due to pre-existing structures of racial domination. Such structures have ensured and justified asymmetries of status among different groups, as well as unequal treatment and distribution of power and resources (Omi and Winant 2015; Pulido 2002; 2006). Racialization was a key factor in the process of US expansionism and nation-building in the southwest as early as the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and it was only reinforced by the already mentioned mass migrations from the

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<sup>28</sup> I define racialization as “the extension of racial meaning to a previously racially unclassified relationship, social practice or group” (Omi and Winant 2015: 111). At the basis, racialization entails the construction of human difference “based on supposedly significant biological features, including skin color, hair texture, and eye structure” (Pulido 2006: 21).

mid-West in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century (Almaguer 2009; Laslett 1996; Davis 2006). While racial hierarchies were never entirely fixed,<sup>29</sup> they overall resulted in preventing populations of color such as Native Americans, Mexican Americans and Asian Americans from competing on an equal footing in the labor market or in accessing the same level of social goods (such as education or decent housing) as whites, all other conditions being equal (Ngai 2014; Almaguer 2009). Those groups were *collectively* incorporated at the bottom of the economy of Southern California, first in a range of semi-free labor arrangements in construction and agriculture (such as indentured labor), and later on in low-skilled manufacturing (Pulido 2006; Laslett 1996; Ngai 2014). Racial hierarchies also contributed to processes such as residential segregation and ethnic enclave formation. Those measures, which also targeted the growing African American population, led to a strengthening of inter-ethnic difference and to the development of distinct racialized ethnic communities between the 1920s and the 1960s, particularly at a time when no major immigrant flows reached Los Angeles (Acuña 1995; Laslett 1996). Racial hierarchies, once institutionalized, remained salient even when formal citizenship rights were granted to minorities of color. While race-based housing covenants were abolished in Los Angeles in 1947 and deemed unconstitutional in 1948, informal discrimination still prevented Mexican Americans and Asian Americans (as well as African Americans and, to an extent, Jews) from accessing residential areas inhabited by white, Christian communities in the following decades (Laslett 1996; Davis 2006). Mexican American youth, similarly to African Americans, were effectively prevented from attending mainstream public schools and higher education until the late 1950s and early 1960s (Muñoz, 2007). During World War II, Japanese American citizens, stripped off their civil liberties, were interned in several camps across California and deprived of all their economic assets (Pulido 2006).

By the late 1960s and 1970s, when new immigrants from Asia and Latin America began to reach Los Angeles, their status within the new society came to be a reflection of the interplay between their prevalent socio-economic conditions and the pre-existing racialized structures in Southern California.<sup>30</sup> For example, immigrants from South Korea and China, who generally displayed high levels of entrepreneurship, education, professional skills and strong work ethic, came to be perceived as ‘model minorities’ (Chang and Diaz-Veizades 1999) – in that respect following the trajectory of Japanese Americans after WWII, following the normalization of geopolitical relations with Japan (Pulido 2006). Filipino migrants, because of their English proficiency and high professional qualifications, especially in the health sector, also earned a similar (ambiguous) model minority status (Espiritu, 1995). Given the comparatively limited size

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<sup>29</sup> California constitution defined the pre-existing Mexican population as ‘white’ and granted them full-fledged citizenship – in spite of the fact that most of them were dark complexioned *mestizos*. This owed to their social diversity, the influence of Spanish colonization, their romance language, as well as to the existence of an economically powerful local economic elite (Almaguer 2009).

<sup>30</sup> By this period, the growth of the African American community in Southern California had repositioned racial hierarchies along a white-black spectrum (Pulido 2006).

with respect to Mexican and Central American immigrants, those groups were also often lumped together for both administrative and statistical purposes as simply ‘Asians’ (Espiritu 1993). New Mexican and Central American immigrants, instead, partly because of their generally low human capital and resources,<sup>31</sup> partly because they were associated to a pre-existing working class Mexican American community that was already heavily stigmatized, suffered more intense stigmatization and discrimination (Pulido 2006; Chang and Diaz-Veizades 1999). More in general, the salience of racialization was so pervasive that it contributed to mask the existence of other key social cleavages within immigrant and ethnic communities, such as class or gender. Moreover, it obscured the fact that, to an extent, old and new immigrant communities faced similar challenges: they were subject to the same exclusionary process of racialization; they often shared the same geographical spaces; they were essentially competing for the same limited social and economic opportunities (Chang and Diaz-Veizades 1999; Chung 2007).

Between the 1970s and 1990s, the new immigrant inflow led to a reconfiguration of the social composition of Los Angeles’ neighborhoods, particularly in its inner city. New immigrants settled across most of the region. However, it was LA County – and particularly the poor urban areas of Central, South and East Los Angeles – which attracted the largest numbers of newcomers in relative terms, particularly those with limited economic resources and low human capital (Chang and Diaz-Veizades 1999). In addition to racial discrimination, the pre-existence of sizable communities of co-ethnics, geographical proximity to some low-wage jobs (particularly light manufacturing) as well as low costs of housing were key in favoring such concentration of low-income populations (Laslett 1996; Ortiz 1996; Chang and Diaz-Veizades 1999). Central Americans, among the poorest of the new immigrants, overwhelmingly settled in areas such as Westlake or Pico-Union, just west of downtown LA (Chang and Diaz-Veizades 1999). Mexicans and Mexican Americans continued to concentrate in areas such as East Los Angeles, but also expanded towards traditional black neighborhoods in South Los Angeles, such as Huntington Park or Bell Gardens (Hamilton and Chinchilla 2001). Despite their relatively higher socio-economic status, many Korean immigrant entrepreneurs similarly established their businesses in the inner city,<sup>32</sup> developing an economic ethnic enclave which relied on a multi-ethnic low-wage workforce and similarly catered to the needs of the low-income immigrant and ethnic minority populations of the area (Chung 2007; Chang and Diaz-Veizades 1999).

In areas where long-term residents, predominantly African Americans and older generations of Mexican Americans, had witnessed the disappearance of manufacturing jobs, endured decades of institutional neglect and suffered growing poverty rates and

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<sup>31</sup> While ethnic Mexicans and Central Americans were an extremely diverse mix of people, both in cultural and physical terms, the arrival of a predominantly rural population with indigenous features and low literacy crystallized a negative (and racialized) understanding of the ‘Latino’ label in popular usage.

<sup>32</sup> Due to the high visibility of Korean ‘ethnic’ businesses in this part of the city, the area would earn the formal name of ‘Koreatown’ in 1980 (Chung 2007).

worsening living conditions,<sup>33</sup> the arrival of new immigrants led to growing inter-group tensions (Chang and Diaz-Veizades 1999; Min 1996). Issues such as economic competition or access to social services and benefits were perceived by residents through the prism of race (Chang and Diaz-Veizades 1999). African Americans resented the competition of Latinos in housing, low-wage jobs or educational opportunities, while at the same time accusing them of driving down wages and working conditions in what were previously unionized and better-paid occupations – e.g. building maintenance and janitorial work (Chang and Diaz-Veizades 1999; Milkman 2006). The conflict grew particularly acute between African Americans and Koreans, largely the result of their asymmetric customer-merchant relations – Koreans being accused of capitalizing on the misfortunes of oppressed native minorities of colors (Min 1996; Chang and Diaz-Veizades 1999). The mounting tensions among new and old residents eventually exploded on April 29, 1992, leading to four days of civil disturbances that would leave a trail of 52 casualties, 2,400 wounded, 10,000 arrests and 1 billion \$ in property damage across the city of Los Angeles (Chang and Diaz-Veizades 1999; Chung 2007). While the causes of the unrest went much beyond the Black-Korean conflict, involving issues such as police brutality and institutional racism, its unfolding demonstrated how not only racialization had structured social relations in the area, but also how the language of racial and ethnic solidarity provided the most powerful source to develop collective grievances and sustain collective action in Los Angeles (Chang and Diaz-Veizades 1999). Such tensions, in spite of institutional and grassroots efforts to diffuse them, would not dissipate in the following years. Racial and ethnic cleavages remain salient well into the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

In addition to racialization, another factor contributed to creating a vulnerable immigrant population and to channeling it towards the lowest rungs of the economy: precarious legal status. Several scholars have highlighted how state authorities, by affording discretionary access to legal status to newcomers, can dramatically affect the extent and quality of social and economic opportunities afforded to them in host societies (Ngai 2014; Menjivar 2006; Castles and Davidson 2000). In this respect, legal status has proved to be a key ‘axis of stratification’ among the immigrant population, as situations of ‘deportability’ and ‘liminal legality’ have compounded the vulnerability of already marginalized populations (Menjivar 2006). Mexicans and Central Americans, for different reasons, have comprised the largest share of undocumented migrants in Los Angeles (and nationwide) in the post-1965 era (Waldinger and Bozorgmehr 1996b). In the case of Mexicans, long involved in virtually unimpeded cross-border mobility with Southern California, the gradual restrictions to their freedom of movement from the late 1920s onwards,<sup>34</sup> including the imposition of quotas following the 1965 Act, mirrored the

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<sup>33</sup> The poverty rate of African Americans in South Los Angeles was slightly above 30 percent in 1990 (Chang and Diaz-Veizades 1999).

<sup>34</sup> Ngai (2014: 17) has argued that the federal Johnson-Reed Immigration Act of 1924, in addition to introducing immigration quota restrictions for European and Asian countries, also “generated illegal immigration as the central problem in immigration law.” This was done in two ways: on the one side, by institutionalizing a system of visa controls to track the effective distribution of



development of a national immigration enforcement infrastructure (Ngai 2014; Tichenor 2002). In a somehow different fashion, Central American immigrants in Los Angeles also frequently became undocumented. While the majority of them had strong grounds for obtaining asylum as they had to flee conflict situations in El Salvador and Guatemala, they were often granted only temporary humanitarian protection and refused permanent refugee status due to geopolitical reasons<sup>35</sup> (Hamilton and Chinchilla 2001). While Latinos have consistently comprised the greater share among undocumented,<sup>36</sup> a growing number of migrants from Asia living Southern California are in irregular situation, particularly as flows from countries such as China, South Korea, India or Bangladesh have become more diverse socio-economically and channels of highly skilled migration have become more difficult to access (Chang and Diaz-Veizades 1999).

In Los Angeles, and in the United States more generally, precarious legal status has dramatically contributed to channeling large segments of the immigrant population into the lowest rungs of the emerging restructured low-wage economy, and in transforming them into cheap and disposable labor (de Genova 2004; Menjivar and Kanstroom 2014). In theory, even undocumented immigrants are protected by existing labor law regulations and possess the same range of civil liberties and labor rights afforded to citizens and legal permanent residents (Ngai 2014). Moreover, landmark Supreme Court decisions affirmed the right of undocumented children to public education (*Plyer v. Doe*, 1982) and the right of undocumented migrants to receiving welfare benefits (*Graham v. Richardson*, 1971) (Ngai 2014). However, undocumented immigrants have rarely been in a position to have those rights enforced. At all times, such rights may be revoked as they are tied to a right to residence on which US authorities retain considerable discretionary powers (Ngai 2014; Tichenor 2002; Park 2013). The passage of 1965 Act was in fact followed by the expansion of border militarization and the increasing criminalization of undocumented migrants. The result was a surge in deportations of irregular migrants,<sup>37</sup> particularly towards Mexico. Further legislation, such as the Immigration Reform and Control Act (IRCA) of 1986,<sup>38</sup> if on the one hand provided a path to regularization for

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quotas among the different nationalities; on the other side, by establishing an apparatus of internal and border surveillance that would ensure that only those individuals in possession of proper documentation are allowed in the country. While Mexican seasonal workers were initially spared from the restrictive provisions of the 1924 Act, they were nevertheless obliged to require a visa and comply with a number of administrative requirements, including paying a head tax and the visa fee. Because of their economic value to California growers, the newly established land Border Patrol was generally lenient towards laborers lacking proper documentation, although raids and deportations were routinely conducted (particularly in times of economic recession) (Ngai 2014).

<sup>35</sup> In the 1980s, under the presidency of Ronald Reagan, the US was actively supporting, both militarily and politically, the authoritarian regimes in El Salvador and Guatemala largely responsible for the conflict. For more information, see Booth, Wade and Walker (2010).

<sup>36</sup> According to estimates, between 2 and 4 million immigrants from Mexico and Central America arrived unauthorized in the US as of 1980, and roughly a third of the total settled in Southern California (Waldinger and Bozorgmehr 1996b).

<sup>37</sup> In 1968 151,000 undocumented Mexican immigrants were removed from the US territory by the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS). In 1976, the same agency deported 781,000 migrants (Ngai 2014).

<sup>38</sup> When the Immigration Reform and Control Act (IRCA) was passed in 1986, it included a general amnesty for undocumented immigrants who had resided continuously in the US since January 1<sup>st</sup>, 1982; a special program for agricultural workers; a series

specific categories of undocumented migrants, on the other penalized employers for knowingly hiring undocumented migrant workers (Durand, Massey and Parrado 1999). Such legislation turned out to be particularly detrimental to undocumented immigrants, as employers frequently threatened to alert authorities of their legal status should they start demanding better working conditions, higher wages or unionization (Durand, Massey and Parrado 1999; Milkman 2006). While immigrants gained certain legal battles throughout the 1980s and 1990s,<sup>39</sup> federal immigration and welfare reforms of 1996<sup>40</sup> launched another attack on immigrants by limiting newcomers' access to welfare benefits, increasing penalties for undocumented migrants found in the country and expanding border militarization at the US-Mexico border (Tichenor 2002). Since then, the number of undocumented immigrants has continued to grow throughout the 1990s and 2000s, and with no major immigration reform as of 2017, it shows no signs of abating.

The dynamics presented above indicated that a significant portion of the immigrant population was confined in menial, unprotected jobs, denied access to even most basic social provisions and segregated from the rest of the city. Moreover, as new immigrants moved in areas of the city inhabited by pre-existing poor racial and ethnic communities, they also had to face mounting tensions. In the next section I will address the issue of political exclusion that has kept migrants at the margins of the polity in Southern California, and how they responded to it.

## The Political Context of Immigrant Los Angeles

### *Immigrant Political Activism and the Historical Salience of Racial and Ethnic Politics*

Ethnic- and race-based dynamics of political mobilization have often been taken for granted in the United States, assumed to be a natural feature of how immigrants enter the game of politics in a new context (Portes, Escobar and Arana 2008; Portes and Rumbaut 2006). Observers have noted how the primacy of race and ethnicity in US society can be traced back to its particular history of nation-building, characterized by the 'Manifest Destiny' imperialism of Euro-American settlers and the enslavement of the black

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of sanctions targeting employers who knowingly hired undocumented immigrants (Tichenor 2002). As of 1992, 1.76 million people had applied for IRCA's general amnesty, and 1.3 million used the special agricultural option (Durand, Massey and Parrado 1999). Although the IRCA amnesty led to an immediate drop in the undocumented population, it did not stop its longer-term growth – by the early 1990s it was already growing again nationally by 300,000 migrants per year (Waldinger and Bozorgmehr 1996b).

<sup>39</sup> For example, immigrant advocates obtained that INS considers granting administrative relief depending on a set of criteria, such as length of residence in the country, family ties, employment, evidence of rehabilitation in criminal cases, etc. (Ngai 2014).

<sup>40</sup> Those included the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996 (PRWORA) and the Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act (IIRIRA). While PRWORA, among other provisions, suggested incoming migrants be withheld social benefits for a period of five years, IIRIRA laid out a number of steep penalties (including a ban from re-entering the United States for a period of up to ten years) for people found to be residing in the country unlawfully. The law also allocated funding for the construction of a border fence at the US-Mexico border, and established a legal framework for promoting collaboration between local and federal authorities on immigration enforcement (Tichenor 2002).

population (Almaguer 2009; Ngai 2014). Some scholars have moreover highlighted how immigrant incorporation in the US political system as ‘ethnics’ has been historically encouraged by major political parties, particularly in the East of the country; these parties have traditionally engaged in clientelistic relations with ‘ethnic brokers’ in order to capture the vote of particular ethno-national communities (Dahl 1961; Katznelson 1981). Those processes combined have reinforced ethnic and pan-ethnic identification among members of immigrant communities, even across generations and national and sub-national groups, and led to the formation of cohesive ethnicized communities that could be mobilized politically by ‘political entrepreneurs’ (Brubaker 2004; Castles and Davidson 2000).

The salience of racial and ethnic politics is similarly prominent in the social and political history of Los Angeles and California. The LA context, however, differs significantly from other US regions, especially from comparable contexts such as New York City. On the one hand, during the first great migration at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Southern California did not receive a comparable number of immigrants from Eastern Europe and Southern European Catholic countries as East Coast cities did (Laslett 1996). This reinforced the social and cultural homogeneity of the white dominant block and limited its porosity, preventing the formation of an intermediate stratum of new immigrants that could claim gradual political incorporation by virtue of their higher racialized status (Laslett 1996; Mollenkopf and Sonenshein 2009). On the other hand, the extreme process of ‘otherization’ of immigrants of color in Southern California, who came to be seen as entirely incompatible with the values and norms of the white majority, resulted in their nearly total political disenfranchisement in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and throughout the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century<sup>41</sup> (Chavez 2002; Laslett 1996). This exclusion, coupled with the historical dominance of business interests and the relatively limited influence of political party machines,<sup>42</sup> prevented the development of similar processes of ethnic political incorporation that took place in the East, such as in the case of Italian Americans or the Irish Americans (Ignatieff 2009[1995]; Dahl 1961). More concretely, it resulted in the formation of white homogenous city councils, and the election of white, generally socially conservative mayors which relied on the support of organized business (Sonenshein 1993). This pattern was disrupted only in 1973, with the election of African American Tom Bradley. However, for new immigrants from Mexico, Central America and

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<sup>41</sup> Chinese immigrants, even before the federal Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 barred them from further entering the United States, were deemed ineligible for naturalization and citizenship in 1854; Japanese immigrants followed in 1893 (Almaguer 2009). Chinese Exclusion Laws would not be repealed until 1943, while it was only in 1952 that Japanese were allowed to naturalize as the Immigration and Naturalization Act (McCarran-Walter) lifted the racial requirement for naturalization.

<sup>42</sup> Scholars have argued that Los Angeles, unlike cities like New York, has historically been dominated by business interests (Foner and Waldinger 2013; Davis 2006). Economic elites have been strongly involved in the management of public affairs, and this dynamic has reflected in the relatively limited power of local politicians and political appointees, in the fragmentation of electoral constituencies as well as in the lack of strong political machines run by mainstream parties (Mollenkopf and Sonenshein 2009). As far as immigrant communities were concerned, this state of affairs limited the attractiveness of clientelism and political patronage – widely used in the East Coast (Dahl 1961) – as a strategy to enter institutional politics (Laslett 1996).

different Asian countries, as well as for more long-standing communities of color (with the exception of African Americans), those barriers would largely remain intact well into the 21<sup>st</sup> century (Sonenshein 1993; Mollenkopf and Sonenshein 2009).

In spite of their limited resources and low socio-economic status, Mexican Americans began to develop an organizational infrastructure in Southern California as early as 1937, with the foundation of the LA Chapter of the League of United Latin American Citizens (LULAC). It was followed by organizations such as the Mexican American Movement, Inc. (MAM) in 1942, the Community Service Organizations (CSO) in 1947, the Association of Mexican American Educators (AMAE) in the 1950s and the Mexican American Political Association in 1959 (Muñoz 2007; Chavez 2002). Those organizations had fairly different structures and goals. LULAC, an organization that remains to this day, was a federation of civil rights groups committed to improving the legal standing of Mexican Americans, for example by challenging school segregation in court<sup>43</sup> (Muñoz 2007). MAM, and later AMAE, were mainly concerned with increasing access to education and other social services for Mexican American youth (Muñoz 2007). CSO was established as a community-based organization with the objective of promoting voter registration and naturalization among the Mexican American community, while also mobilizing on issues such as police brutality and school segregation (Chavez 2002). MAPA was created with the goal of developing an independent political infrastructure that could be used to mobilize Mexican Americans without relying on the support of the local Democratic party (Muñoz 2007). What all these organizations had in common, however, was a reformist approach to politics, a firm commitment to American democratic institutions and traditional values, as well as anti-Communism (Chavez 2002). Aware of the discrimination encountered by ethnic Mexicans, those groups nevertheless believed assimilation to be the best path forward for the successful inclusion of old and new migrants, and encouraged them to leave behind Mexican traditions, adopt English language and acquire US citizenship (Muñoz 2007). Education, declined in a liberal way, was seen as the main tool for Mexican Americans to gain their acceptance as first-class citizens. While those organizations “acknowledged that Mexican Americans were victims of racism, ...they did not promote a nonwhite racial identity for their people [; i]nstead, they promoted the image of Mexican Americans as a white ethnic group that had little in common with African Americans” (Muñoz 2007: 64). MAPA, together with LULAC, was probably the most influential of these organizations. Disinterested in creating a third political party (like militants of La Raza Unida Party would try to do a decade later), MAPA saw itself as a nonpartisan organization with a clear ethnic focus on Mexican Americans,<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> For example, LULAC played a role in the lawsuit that brought to the 1946 decision by the Ninth US Circuit Court of Appeals in the *Mendez v. Westminster* case, which ended formal legal school segregation in the state of California (Muñoz 2007).

<sup>44</sup> In 1960 MAPA became part of a larger national umbrella organization committed to the same objectives, the Political Association of Spanish-Speaking Organizations (PASSO).

and did not seek to alliances or political coalitions with other non-white minorities (Chavez 2002: 33).

This is not to say that there were no leftist Mexican American organizations in Southern California at the time. The *Asociacion Nacional Mexico Americana* (ANMA), a political membership organization briefly active in the early 1950s, advocated for the political, civil, and economic rights of ethnic Mexicans (Chavez 2002). While not Communist, ANMA's member were sympathetic to socialist ideas, singled out institutional racism as the main problem of US society and called for the unity of Mexican American and Mexican immigrants, bound together by their common working-class fate (Chavez 2002). The political climate of the 1940s and early 1950s, however, was hardly conducive to more radical political struggles, both within ethnic communities and mainstream societies. Rather, it was shaped by the politics of 'super-patriotism' – a reflection of WWII US involvement against the German Nazi regime and the beginning of the Cold War – and the following anti-Communist hysteria led by right-wing politicians such as Senator Joseph McCarthy of Wisconsin (Muñoz 2007). Organizations such as ANMA did not last more than a few years.<sup>45</sup> Such climate also affected the participation of immigrants in labor unions, the only mainstream organizations potentially open to them. Despite a patchy early history of racial hostility by organized labor,<sup>46</sup> the 1930s and the 1940s saw unskilled and semi-skilled Mexican American workers enter the ranks of the industrial unions affiliated to the new Congress of Industrial Relations (CIO) federation and, in some cases, even the crafts unions of the American Federation of Labor (AFL) (Milkman 2000a; Milkman 2006). However, McCarthyism played an important role in purging labor unions of their most progressive leadership, thus severing the links between mainstream organized labor and grassroots social movements and limiting labor outreach towards the most disempowered segments of the multi-ethnic working class (Tait, 2016). Despite some laudable attempts of unions to organize ethnic Mexicans, particularly in agriculture, the presence of ethnic Mexicans (and other communities) in labor unions in Southern California remained extremely limited (Chavez 2002).

During the 1950s, gradual settlement and rise in numbers of the immigrant population, as well as growing organizational presence did not translate in greater political power of Mexican Americans. If the Asian community remained relatively small until the 1970s, the larger Mexican American community was finally able to elect Edward Roybal to the LA city council in 1949 (Laslett 1996). Roybal, a conservative politician of distant Mexican ancestry who had grown up in the heavily Mexican neighborhood of

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<sup>45</sup> Because of its left leanings, ANMA was identified as a state security threat under the Internal Security (McCarran) Act of 1950. Continuous surveillance and harassment of the organization's members led to its demise in 1954. However, the organization still remained committed to reform: "though accused of being 'un-American', ANMA was the opposite, for it promoted reform of American society, not revolution, and the reform it sought was protection of the constitutional rights of all, including Mexican immigrants as well as Mexican Americans" (Chavez 2002:18).

<sup>46</sup> Crafts unions affiliated to the American Federation of Labor (AFL) were generally hostile to including immigrants and people of color within their ranks (Tait 2016).

Boyle Heights, had played a pivotal role in the formation of CSO to support his political ambitions, and would also be involved in the formation of MAPA (Chavez 2002). While holding limited influence within City Hall,<sup>47</sup> Roybal nevertheless became the spokesperson for the local ethnic Mexican community throughout the 1950s. However, once Roybal was elected to Congress in 1962, leaving his seat vacant, he was unable to have another Mexican American elected. He was instead replaced by Gilbert Lindsay, an African American who would keep that seat until 1990 – leaving ethnic Mexicans without representation in the city council until 1985, when Richard Alatorre was elected in another district. While the immigrant naturalization rate began to steadily increase from the 1950s onwards, Mexican Americans (as well as other minority groups) were still heavily penalized by the political fragmentation of the LA region, including districting clearly engineered to favor majorities of white voters in the city and most of the county<sup>48</sup> (Laslett 1996).

Things began to change in the early and mid-1960s. The election of Democrat John F. Kennedy to the US presidency in 1960 marked the beginning of a new liberal era, while the African American civil rights movement broke out of southeastern states to spread across the country. One of the side effects of those development was enhanced educational opportunities for minority youth, including Mexican Americans,<sup>49</sup> who were now able to access higher education in greater numbers thanks to federally-funded programs established and implemented during the Johnson administration (Muñoz 2007). By the late 1960s, frustrated by the lack of social and political progress and the excessively accommodating stance of reformist organizations,<sup>50</sup> and galvanized by the examples of the Black Power movement and the white New Left, a new generation of US-born Mexican American and Asian American youth took the front political stage (Pulido 2006). It is difficult to summarize in little space the diversity and richness of the political activism that developed during this period – a myriad of organizations, political study groups and collectives were founded between 1968 and the early 1970s, not only in Los Angeles but nationwide. In Southern California, movements of second-generation immigrants during

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<sup>47</sup> Roybal, despite being firmly anti-Communist and generally socially conservative, gained prominence for speaking out against the abuses of the LAPD towards Mexican Americans, or for opposing measures that he saw as discriminatory towards minorities of color (particularly in housing). However, he could not mitigate the impact of large infrastructural redevelopment plans that deeply affected Mexican American communities in LA's inner city, such as the construction of the Golden State freeway (which would cut through Boyle Heights) and the building of Dodgers Stadium in the working class neighborhood of Chavez Ravine (Chavez 2002).

<sup>48</sup> The decision not to incorporate East Los Angeles as part of the city of Los Angeles was also motivated by the concern of the white population regarding the potential of a growing political weight of Latinos in the city (Foner and Waldinger 2009).

<sup>49</sup> Education for Mexican Americans was limited to segregated schools in Los Angeles throughout most of the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Educational possibilities in the 1930s and 1940s were limited to those sponsored by YMCA, while other limited opportunities opened up for veterans in 1940s and 1950s (Muñoz 2007).

<sup>50</sup> MAPA itself had been established following the clear lack of Democratic party support received by Roybal as well as Henry Lopez (another Mexican American politicians) in their runs for state office during the 1950s (Chavez, 2002). Mexican Americans moreover contested the lack of influence and of upward mobility in the local Democratic party. The loss of Roybal's LA city council seat was a severe blow to MAPA's reputation, and marked the virtual exclusion of Mexican Americans from local politics (Chavez 2002)

this time revolved around four large themes: education, opposition to the Vietnam war, community service and electoral political mobilization. Perhaps the most famous political mobilization of the time was that for the establishment of Ethnic Studies programs across the country, spearhead by organizations such as the Third World Liberation Front (TWLF) in San Francisco, or various Mexican American organizations such as the United Mexican American Students (UMAS) or the Mexican American Student Association (MASA) in Southern California. A variety of Mexican American student organizations from the southwest would converge into the *Movimiento Estudiantil Chicano de Aztlan (MEChA)* in 1969 and begin to engage in political activism over a wide variety of issues, from education to drug abuse and police brutality (Muñoz 2007). The opposition to the war in Vietnam also became an important moment of politicization, both for Mexican Americans (who served in high numbers in the military) and for Asian Americans (which in Los Angeles were predominantly Japanese Americans), who identified with the ‘popular liberation struggles’ of the South-East Asian population (Pulido 2006; Wei 1993). The LA-movement also included paramilitary organizations such as the *Brown Berets*, a Mexican American group structured on the self-defense model of the Black Panther Party (BPP) (Pulido 2006). In parallel, other activists established LA chapters of *La Raza Unida Party*, an organization intended to operate as a veritable third independent political party at all levels of institutional politics for the representation and support of Mexican Americans (Muñoz 2007; Chavez 2002).

The most visible Mexican American organizations of the time, such as MEChA, La Raza Unida, or the Brown Berets, were largely nationalist in vision and scope. They advocated an oppositional *Chicanismo* that based itself on traditional Mexican culture and rejected mainstream (white) US culture. Such organizations therefore largely viewed Mexican Americans, or ‘Chicanos’,<sup>51</sup> as a homogenous non-white group oppressed by decades of US imperialism and racist institutions. They viewed their struggle going beyond class differences, and whose “basis for unity would be their pride in Mexican ethnicity and culture” (Muñoz 2007: 92). They also vehemently rejected the assimilationist views of the old political guard embodied by MAPA and other Mexican American organizations, arguing instead for more or less open revolutionary struggles (Chavez 2002).

Nevertheless, a handful of radical organizations of the time, including Japanese American *East Wind*, Mexican American *Centro de Accion Social (CASA)* and multi-ethnic *August 29<sup>th</sup> Movement* were deeply influenced by Marxism-Leninism. Maoism was particularly appealing, because of Mao’s role as nonwhite philosopher and his theoretical work on China’s national struggle against foreign imperialism (Pulido 2006). As Pulido has argued (2006: 135), “Maoism, or some version of it, enabled [radical] nonwhites to

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<sup>51</sup> The term ‘Chicano’ was a disparaging label initially used to denote people of Mexican descent of working class background. However, during the 1960s and early 1970s it was claimed by student activists in a positive light and came to refer to someone who supported the Chicano student movement (Chavez 2002).

engage Marxism in a meaningful way, as it allowed them to merge their commitments to class and racial politics under the rubric of the nation.” This meant, however, that even when activists elaborated radical anti-capitalist projects, they did primarily so through the lens of *race*, by conceptualizing their different racialized communities as ‘oppressed nations’ (Pulido 2002; 2006). Such a vision steered those organizations towards a primary commitment towards their ethnic and racial communities. It did not encourage the formation of inter-ethnic collaborations nor solidarity towards more recent immigrants,<sup>52</sup> whose social and political history (as well as political interests) were seen as different (Chavez 2002; Pulido 2006).

Among Asian American organizations, there were some attempts to forge multi-ethnic collaborations. For example, East Wind regularly supported the political actions of other groups, such as Chinese activists in Chinatown, Chicano groups or African Americans. However, the most notable example of organization trying to bridge the divide between older ethnic communities and new immigrants was CASA, at least in its early phase. CASA was established between 1968 and 1969 by labor organizer Bert Corona as a hybrid organization with the aim to defend the rights of undocumented workers and promote their political organization (Chavez 2002). CASA, affiliated to a national organization named *Hermandad Mexicana Nacional*, played an important role in the history of Los Angeles because it was the only known organization of the time that attempted to organize undocumented migrants— something that not even Cesar Chavez was prepared to do (Garcia 1994). Corona’s leadership of CASA, however, was short-lived. After the immigrant membership peaked at around 4,000 people in 1973, the organization was taken over by more radical second-generation Mexican American activists the following year. The younger activists tried to steer the organization towards an ideology of *sin fronteras*, a trans-border revolutionary nationalism that viewed Mexican Americans, Mexican immigrants and Mexicans living south of the border as part of the same community, all united in the same struggle against US oppression and imperialism (Muñoz 2007; Pulido 2006). Their goal of uniting Mexicans across borders was ultimately unsuccessful. Ideological dogmatism and neglect of services alienated the original immigrant membership, and state repression led to organizational disbandment by the late 1970s (Chavez 2002; Pulido 2006).

### *Immigrant Organizing Under Adverse Conditions*

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<sup>52</sup> For the people of immigrant descent involved in those organizations, the improvement of their own political condition and immediate interests were reasons strong enough to protest and mobilize for. Their organizational ideologies therefore generally reflected the acknowledgment that differences existed between second-class Mexican American and Asian American citizens on the one side, and the new immigrants on the other. Similarly, the most important multi-ethnic and multi-racial labor movement of the time, the one led by Cesar Chavez in the California Central Valley, was initially uninterested in organizing new immigrants, particularly undocumented immigrants. Yet, Cesar Chavez also explicitly rejected Chicano nationalism, being much more interested in advancing the cause of farmworkers and improving their working conditions on a class basis (Muñoz 2007).



The period between the late 1970s and the early 1990s was characterized by a conservative political backlash, both at the local and national level, which ended the possibility for radical revolutionary politics and stifled grassroots mobilization (Muñoz 2007; Nicholls and Uitermark 2016, chapter 6). Those years, which saw the emergence of some of the immigrant worker organizations analyzed in this dissertation, were hardly conducive to immigrant, class-based contentious politics. First, local and national discursive opportunities discouraged political action across ethnic lines, while anti-immigrant sentiment and legislation negatively impacted the legal, social, and economic status of newly arrived immigrants and asylum seekers from non-Western countries. If such conditions slowed down immigrants' access to institutional politics, they were likewise expected to prevent immigrants, especially undocumented ones, from engaging in contentious political action. Second, in spite of scattered support from local politicians and a handful of labor and advocacy organizations, immigrant worker organizations received limited backing from both mainstream politics and civil society in their early years of activity.

The election of Ronald Reagan to the US presidency marked the beginning of a conservative trend that resulted in the dismantlement of what remained of the welfare state, the pursuit of an aggressive neoliberal economic policy and interventionist foreign policy, and a mounting attack towards the national civil society progressive infrastructure and the growing immigrant communities (Muñoz 2007; Milkman 2006). In California, the growth of the immigrant community throughout the 1970s and 1980s was met by increasing frustration and concerns by the native population, particularly with respect to undocumented immigrants. The already mentioned IRCA, expansion of the deportation regime between 1980s and 1990s, as well as state and federal legislation of the mid-1990s all signaled increasing hostility towards immigrants (Nicholls and Uitermark 2016). As we have already seen, this period, characterized by the decline of labor union influence and economic restructuring, was also marked by rising socio-economic inequalities which overwhelmingly affected communities of color. Moreover, longer-standing ethnic and racial communities, as shown by the Civil Unrest of 1992, scapegoated newcomers for their own worsening conditions. Such period was not conducive to internal leftist politics. As Muñoz has argued (2007: 207), "compared with the 1960s, the politics of 1980s resembled the super-patriotism and anti-communism of the 1940s and 1950s."

Most of the radical organizations described in the previous section, plagued by internal ideological conflict, police infiltrators and lack of steady resource inflows, disbanded in the early 1970s. Mexican American and Asian American activists achieved very little of their ambitious plans. Besides failing to mobilize significant grassroots opposition to local political institutions, unlike African Americans they also failed to secure greater access to institutional politics. After a series of white, conservative mayors – including Norris Poulson (1953-1961) and Sam Yorty (1961-1973) – LA city voters selected in 1973 Democrat Tom Bradley, the first black mayor in a major US city (Davis 2006).

Elected in a 'bi-racial' coalition that included west-side Jewish liberals and the black communities, Bradley would remain the mayor of Los Angeles for 20 years, until 1993 (Sonenshein 1993). Yet, while Bradley appointed a number of Mexican Americans and Asian Americans in important political positions, the latter were generally unable to gain significant political power (Sonenshein 1993).

Nicholls and Uitermark (2013; 2016, chapter 7), in their history of immigrant activism in Los Angeles, have argued that local civil society went through important transformations as a result of shifting national and local government policies. Throughout the 1970s, using available federal-funded programs, local officials and private philanthropies encouraged community organizations to take up a greater role in service provision. In order to access government funding, organizations had to professionalize and conform to government norms and expectations, while at the same time abandon explicit political action. In its early years, in order to undermine the appeal of politicized civil society organizations, the Bradley coalition developed a progressive political platform that emphasized ethnic and racial justice and advocated for greater social redistribution of resources to minority groups (Nicholls and Uitermark 2013). In the early 1980s, however, as rollback neoliberalism became more influential and federal funding dramatically decreased, the priorities of the Bradley coalition dramatically changed (Nicholls and Uitermark 2013; Davis 2006). In spite of its initial progressive agenda of social spending, and its pledge to address poverty and invest in disadvantaged inner-city ethnic communities such as East LA or Watts, the Bradley coalition soon instead prioritized spending on infrastructure (especially ports and airport) and downtown real estate redevelopment (Davis 2006; Sonenshein 1993). More in general, the early 1980s witnessed declining government funding to the local civil society (Nicholls and Uitermark 2016). This resulted in the disbanding of several small-scale community organizations and in the significant downsizing of larger organizations – i.e. service providers, but also advocacy groups (Nicholls and Uitermark 2016; Muñoz 2007).

Between the 1980s and the early 1990s, emerging immigrant organizations could thus count on limited institutional and mainstream civil society support. At the institutional level, the growth of particular ethnic communities did not significantly alter the local balance of political power. Mexican Americans were finally able to elect two city councilmen between the mid-1980s and early 1990s, while Asian Americans elected their first in 1985, but both communities remained dramatically under-represented in local politics. Moreover, the unfolding of the 1992 Civil Unrest, marked by the LAPD's refusal to protect Latino- and Korean-owned businesses from looting and destruction, showed that both communities still held very limited influence in local politics (Chung 2007; Chang and Diaz-Veizades 1999). Labor unions, their membership and political influence decimated, were hardly in a position to provide significant resources to labor-oriented

immigrant groups. Moreover, while there were notable exceptions,<sup>53</sup> organized labor remained generally reluctant to welcome non-Western immigrants, particularly undocumented ones, in their rank-and-file (Tait 2016; Fine 2006). Even when union organizers expressed sympathy for the plight of undocumented immigrants, they often judged that the newcomers' precarious legal conditions, possible temporary presence or supposed political apathy would make them 'unorganizable' (Milkman 2006). Those concerns were also motivated by the fact that immigrants were often employed in sectors of the economy – e.g. building maintenance, domestic work, services – which were very volatile and extremely difficult to organize (Fine 2006). Overall, while unions gradually began to invest more and more resources in immigrant organizing, immigrant worker organizations and undocumented immigrants were cut off from the mainstream labor movement until the late 1990s.<sup>54</sup> In fact, some immigrant worker organizations in their early years developed in parallel and in partial competition with unions (Fine 2006; see chapters 5 and 6).

The late 1970s and 1980s was not a period entirely devoid of political activism in Los Angeles. However, given the political climate, much of the political action revolved around foreign policy issues, such as South African apartheid or US intervention in Central America. As Los Angeles received large numbers of El Salvadorans and Guatemalans asylum seekers at the turn of the decade, a number of faith-based organizations and advocacy groups mobilized to raise awareness about the conflict – and particularly about the US government support of brutal authoritarian dictatorships – and to protect the growing number of refugees who were denied legal protection and were being deported by the US government (Chinchilla, Hamilton and Loucky 2009). While the 'Sanctuary Movement' was mainly composed of local religious groups, students and teachers, newly formed immigrant organizations played a key role in the mobilization (Nicholls and Uitermark 2016). Those often mirrored the ideological political spectrum in the countries of origin and brought to Los Angeles new repertoires of political organizing (Chinchilla, Hamilton and Loucky 2009; Chinchilla and Hamilton 2001). In parallel, Los Angeles witnessed the emergence of a number of new organizations established by the new immigrant groups, such as Koreans or Filipinos (Park 1999; Chung 2007). While all in all those organizations remained oriented towards homeland politics or focused on their own ethnic communities, they would play an important role in establishing an organizational infrastructure for future immigrant rights organizations of the late 1980s and early 1990s (see chapter 3).

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<sup>53</sup> A few notable cases of immigrant organizing from the late 1980s and early 1990s are referenced in the collective volume edited by Milkman (2000). Those include the organizing drive of Latino workers in the LA manufacturing sector (Zabin 2000) and in construction (Milkman and Wong 2000), as well as the famous SEIU Justice for Janitors (J4J) campaign (Fisk, Mitchell and Erickson 2000; see also Waldinger et al. 1998). However, with the exception of J4J, as the authors themselves recognize, input for mobilization in those campaigns mostly came from immigrants themselves rather than from unions.

<sup>54</sup> This is a major difference from a city like New York, where labor unions had established connections with political parties and began organizing earlier waves of European immigrants at a relatively early stage, therefore facilitating their political incorporation in an 'ethnic politics' framework (Foner and Waldinger 2013).

The radical organizations of the late 1960s and early 1970s, in spite of their short lives, left a long-lasting political legacy. One of the most visible accomplishment was the establishment of Ethnic Studies programs and departments across the nation, including Los Angeles. Given access to alternative radical scholarship, generations of students during the 1980s and 1990s would become politicized through their experiences at the Chicano Studies Department or the Asian American Studies Center at the University of California-Los Angeles (see chapter 3, and Brodtkin 2007). Activists of the period also continued their political engagement through other organizations during the 1980s and 1990s, joining progressive labor unions such as the Hotel Employees and Restaurant Employees Union (HERE), civil rights advocacy organizations such as National Coalition for Redress and Reparations (NCRR) or progressive philanthropies such as the Liberty Hill Foundation (Pulido 2006). More in general, the long-lasting legacy of those movements – no doubt owing to African Americans as well – was to enshrine ‘racial politics’ and ‘identity politics’ as key axis of political mobilization in Southern California, whether in contentious politics or in institutional politics. As Ngai (2014: 263) has argued, by mirroring their own experience to the one of African Americans rather than older immigrant generations of European descent, many Asian American and Chicano activists “directly challenged the nationalist narrative of assimilation and proposed, instead, to read immigration and ethnic history through the lenses of race, conquest, and colonialism.”

While the organizations examined in this research developed during this period of widespread immigrant hostility and ultra-racialized politics, their influence weakened from the mid-2000s onwards. Somehow paradoxically, such period coincided with the improvement of political prospects of the new immigrants, particularly Mexicans and Mexican Americans, in Southern California. Growing naturalization rates transformed the Latino community – now comprising a heterogeneous population of ethnic Mexicans and Central Americans – into a potentially influential voting bloc (Mollenkopf and Sonenshein 2009). In parallel, labor unions underwent major transformations that dramatically reversed their stance towards ethnic and immigrant communities.<sup>55</sup> Under the new leadership of former SEIU Director John Sweeney, the AFL-CIO, the national confederation of labor organizations, started investing in immigrant organizing in 1995 (Milkman 2000b). In 2000, the AFL-CIO also approved a resolution that committed organized labor to supporting amnesty and regularization for undocumented immigrants (Milkman 2006). Los Angeles was the epicenter of this transformation. Miguel Contreras, a Mexican American and son of farmworkers in California Central Valley, became the head of the LA County Federation of Labor in 1996 (Milkman 2006). Maria Elena Durazo, a Mexican American from a similar background, took over the LA County Fed and maintained the post of Treasurer until 2014.

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<sup>55</sup> For more information, see also Milkman (2000a; 2006).

In the early 2000s, discursive and political opportunities for leftist immigrant activism in LA thus opened up. Local unions, together with progressive academics and newly formed community-based organizations, joined forces to revitalize the stagnant local civil society and promote a political discourse of cross-ethnic social and economic justice (Nicholls and Uitermark 2016; Milkman, Bloom and Narro 2010). The gradual incorporation of immigrant leaders, particularly from Mexico and Central America, within labor unions also facilitated the growth of their political influence in city-level affairs in Los Angeles. In 2005, after a first failed attempt in 2001, Antonio Villaraigosa became the first Latino mayor in a major US city – an event that would have been unthinkable in LA just a few decades earlier. These latest developments, here only briefly sketched, therefore suggest a more favorable environment for immigrant political mobilization in recent times. Why those dynamics resulted in the fragmentation of the immigrant worker rights movement is the subject of the last section of this dissertation (chapter 6 and the conclusion).

### **The Research Puzzle(s) Reframed.**

In this chapter I have placed my empirical study within the broader social history of Los Angeles and Southern California. This historical overview can help us appreciate both the relatively limited opportunities *and* the formidable constraints that emerging immigrant worker organizations faced between the 1980s and 1990s. In the first section I showed how Southern California, built around social and cultural homogeneity, received an unexpected flow of international migrants from non-European regions that completely reshaped its social make-up. In the second section I linked international migration to global and local processes of economic restructuring. I described how most newcomers, entering a labor market that was already skewed to the disadvantage of people of color, were incorporated at the lowest rungs of the economy as permanent disposable and cheap labor. Racialization and legal precarization underpinned this dynamic.

In the third and fourth sections I turned my attention to processes of political incorporation and participation of immigrants. I described how, until very recently, local institutions kept migrants of non-European origins at the margins of the political community in Southern California. Political, economic and social elites contributed to creating an unwelcoming political climate that reached high levels of hostility during the 1980s and early 1990s. Unwelcoming institutions included, to an extent, labor unions. Conversely, I have tried to show how immigrant communities tried to address their socio-economic and political exclusion by mobilizing at the grassroots level. They did so mostly by appealing to notions of ethnic and, at a later stage, racial solidarity. Rather than engaging in inter-ethnic mobilization and workplace organizing, they decided to privilege nationalist identities and to focus on their specific communities. Activists struggled to define their immediate constituency and to reconcile the political interests of newly

arrived immigrants and more long-standing ethnic communities. Finally, I briefly sketched how much the social and political context has changed since the late 1990s, significantly opening up political and discursive opportunities for immigrant right activism.

Outlined these factors, we can go back to the initial puzzle(s) of the research. Between the late 1980s and 1990s, a new set of immigrant-led organizations emerged in Los Angeles. Unlike the second-generation immigrant organizations of the late 1960s and early 1970s, who were primarily concerned with improving conditions of their long-standing ethnic communities, those *immigrant worker organizations* explicitly targeted new immigrants, particularly the most disenfranchised and politically powerless among them. In so doing, unlike previous immigrant organizations (both mainstream and radical), they emphasized class relations and class solidarity in order to create both multi-ethnic constituencies and multi-ethnic and multi-racial coalitions with other organizations. Critically, they were also able to attain substantial success and political visibility in spite of limited institutional backing, and of lack of strong support from mainstream civil society. It is the combination of *all* these aspects – a resurgence of contentious political action under conditions of political hostility and limited support; the unlikely politicization of a weak and under-resourced membership base; the popularity of a movement ideology promoting an intersectional understanding of immigrants’ subordinate conditions; the development of multi-ethnic constituencies and multi-ethnic coalitions – that makes the emergence of these organizations at this particular time quite puzzling. Conversely, what adds to this puzzle is the fact that, once political conditions improved and external support from civil society grew– the immigrant worker rights movement began to fragment. Organizations abandoned their most innovative campaigns and contentious actions, and some of them resorted to traditional ethnic-based mobilization and ethnic politics. In the chapters that follow I will attempt to provide an explanation of the various factors and conditions that can help us understand those puzzles.