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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 7. CONCLUSION

### An Overview of the Research Project.

In this research I have explored immigrant political incorporation from the perspective of contentious politics. I have begun my inquiry by highlighting three empirical puzzles that arose from a preliminary analysis of recent immigrant rights mobilizations in Los Angeles: unexpected organizational forms, identities and ideologies; unexpected organizational and movement success; unexpected trajectory of organizational and movement change over time. The first puzzle relates to the emergence of a multi-ethnic, class-based and cross-generational immigrant rights movement in a setting traditionally dominated by ethnic and racialized forms of political mobilization and collective action. The second puzzle refers to the emergence of a challenging movement that reached a relative degree of success under conditions of low resources (particularly financial ones), limited institutional backing and low support from surrounding civil society actors and institutions. Finally, the third puzzle relates to the fragmentation (and eventual weakening) of this movement over time, particularly as availability of resources and support from actors such as unions and foundations increased.

The literature has suggested that pre-existing discourses and frames are likely to shape the kind of claims, organizational forms and repertoires immigrant organizations adopt in a given context. It has also highlighted the importance of both favorable political opportunities and high levels of resources in making mobilization by a particular group likely to happen. In Los Angeles, the immigrant rights movement appears to have run counter those expectations in three different ways : 1) in its early stages, by developing a movement ideology that emphasized class-based and cross-generational solidarities as well as multi-ethnic and multi-racial collaborations while downplaying ethnic/racialized loyalties – the latter historically providing much more common channels of mobilization, particularly in the United States and California; 2) in its early stages, by proving capable of mounting relatively successful and visible contentious campaigns for the rights of immigrant workers in spite of widespread political hostility, low financial resources and low support from local civil society; 3) in its later stages, as the political climate became less hostile, and the surrounding civil society lent increasing support to the burgeoning immigrant worker rights movement, by moving away from their most innovative immigrant worker campaigns, by abandoning intense coalition-building work on the ground and eventually by losing lost much of their autonomy and influence with respect to other local civil society actors.

In the previous chapters I have provided an analysis of some of the factors and conditions that, in my opinion, can help us understand the rise, consolidation and ultimate fragmentation of a class-based, multi-ethnic and cross-generational immigrant rights movement in Los Angeles over the last thirty years. I divided this inquiry in three

sub-questions that overlap with the three empirical puzzles described above. The first question asks what factors and conditions can help us account for why and how those particular types of organizations emerged in a setting traditionally dominated by ethnic and racialized forms of political mobilization and collective action. The second one interrogates the factors and conditions that, in spite of low financial resources, limited institutional backing and low support from local civil society actors, allowed immigrant worker organizations to mount successful campaigns and gain visibility in local LA politics. The third question asks what factors and conditions led organizations to differentiate, and ultimately the movement to fragment under conditions of more open political opportunities and growing external support. The previous chapters deal with these intertwined questions throughout. More specifically, chapters 3 and 5 (in part) mainly touch upon the first question, chapters 4, 5 and 6 (in part) deal with the second question, and chapter 6 focuses extensively on the third question.

In the remaining sections of this conclusion I will begin by recapitulating the main findings of the study. Rather than presenting again the arguments of each paper individually, I will discuss them in relation to the three different research sub-questions. I will then consider the significance of the study and its findings for the broader debate on organizational success immigrant political incorporation and urban ethnic politics. I will conclude by discussing research generalizability, limitations and potential avenues for further research and inquiry.

### **Connecting the Threads: Understanding the Emergence, Success and Fragmentation of the LA Immigrant Worker Rights Movement in a Relational Perspective.**

*The Birth of a Leftist Immigrant Worker Rights Movement. Cold War, International Migration and Organizational Innovation.*

The first puzzle of this research begs the question of where organizational ideologies, forms and practices came from. How can we explain the emergence of a multi-ethnic, class-based and cross-generational immigrant rights movement in a setting traditionally dominated by ethnic and racialized forms of political mobilization and collective action?

In chapter 3, in my analysis of the genesis of IDEPSCA, KIWA and PWC, I drew on theories of organizational innovation and diffusion to show how migrant communities contributed to reshaping local politics through their own processes of knowledge production and synthesis. Those practices were both *local* and *transnational* and were influenced by broadly similar geopolitical contexts in each immigrant community. In chapter 5, I compared KIWA's early organizational trajectory with that of the Korean Resource Center (KRC), an LA-based Korean American advocacy organization characterized by a more mainstream, liberal-progressive political orientation. I suggested that the respective founders' early political socialization and their reliance on two

ideologically distinct cores of supporters, both in South Korea and in Los Angeles, critically influenced the organizations' trajectories, and eventually drove them towards two different organizational fields in spite of being located in the same socio-political environment. With this study I also attempted to show how, within the same immigrant community (and the same socio-political context), different paths of political engagement remain open to immigrant activists.

In both chapters I tried to show how migration-induced social networks functioned as conduits for the transmission of ideas, practices and values between people and places, both locally and transnationally. The development of long-standing migration flows between several countries of origin and Los Angeles was key in establishing a social infrastructure for the circulation of ideas and practices across those contexts. The spread of leftist ideologies in Los Angeles was favored by the arrival of immigrants from countries experiencing an extremely polarized, Cold War-style political conflict, where radical leftist ideologies held considerable currency and radical activists had gained tremendous experience in political organizing. While those immigrants initially committed to homeland politics, some of them also influenced or directly moved into US-oriented immigrant worker organizations. Nevertheless, it was *1.5 and second-generation immigrants* that played a pivotal role in establishing the organizations object of this research. Both groups were open to engage on the side of newly arrived immigrants, including those of a different national background, and to embrace new ideas and practices from abroad because they drew parallels between the experience of newcomers and their own as racialized, discriminated and oppressed people of color. Clearly, immigrant worker organizations of the 1980s and 1990s drew much inspiration from the experience of previous US-based organizations and movements. However, they also filtered those lessons through their own cultural sensitivities and understandings (language included), recombining them with the insights coming from abroad.

The dynamics outlined above suggest that migration can be an important driver of innovation and change. The type or scope of innovation was tied to two factors: the specific ideas and practices being circulated, function of migration patterns and socio-economic and geopolitical circumstances affecting given sending countries; the extent to which other social actors – namely mediating actors – proved willing to embrace and capable of adapting such ideas and practices to the local context. The immigrant worker organizations analyzed here were a product of these dynamics and came to share both their ideological framework and organizational objectives. As we will see in the following sections, such commonalities proved crucial to sustain the intense inter-organizational cooperation required to mount ambitious immigrant rights campaigns.

*Mobilizing under Hostile Political Conditions and with Low External Support. The Key Role of Fringe Actors and Inter-Organizational Collaboration.*

The second puzzle of this research relates to organizational and movement success. What are the factors and conditions that, in spite of low financial resources, limited institutional backing and low support from local civil society actors, allowed immigrant worker organizations to mount successful campaigns and gain visibility in local LA politics? Previous literature has suggested that organizational mobilization capacities and performance, particularly in adverse conditions, largely depend on the organizations' ability to attract different kinds of resources, namely money and labor. Money is necessary to cover organizational expenses and to hire and retain core staff. Free labor, both specialized and unspecialized, is crucial to fulfill different organizational and campaign functions and tasks. Traditionally, volunteers, activists and different kinds of movement supporters have fulfilled the role of free labor, particularly in cases where monetary resources have been scarce. In chapter 5 and 6 I described how immigrant worker organizations, particularly in their early phases, relied on very limited financial resources and received little logistical support from the surrounding LA civil society. Organizations such as KIWA, IDEPSCA or CHIRLA were regularly understaffed, could not afford attractive salaries to their staff and did not have the financial and organizational capacities to mount large-scale campaigns or advocacy efforts. KIWA, more than any other group, also had to confront the open hostility of the immigrant community itself. The leadership of the South Korean community in Los Angeles, who was by and large socially conservative, firmly anti-Socialist and suspicious of other communities of color, not only denied support but also antagonized KIWA. Given these constraints, how were they then able to mount aggressive grassroots campaign, let alone survive during the early stages of their organizational trajectories?

In the previous chapters, I explained overall movement effectiveness and success in two ways. In chapter 3, 5 and 6, I argued that immigrant worker organizations were able to survive and engage in various contentious activities thanks to the support of a number of fringe actors at the margins of LA's institutionalized civil society. Those included college students, often of immigrant background but by and large socialized in the United States, small-scale radical philanthropies such as the Liberty Hill Foundation, individual activists and donors, as well as themselves. In chapter 4 and 5, I argued that we can better understand this process through the lens of organizational legitimacy and legitimation. I suggested that immigrant organizations gained external support by developing alternative organizational narratives that, particularly at times of great turmoil such as in the aftermath of the LA Civil Unrest, strongly resonated with these particular actors. Financial support, at this stage, was hardly sufficient for mounting any serious advocacy campaigns or outreach efforts; however, it was compounded by the strong ideological commitment of both staff and volunteers, who also put whatever technical expertise they had (legal, communication, advocacy, research, etc.) at the service of the organization. As I argue in chapter 6, the capacities and effectiveness of single immigrant worker organizations were dramatically strengthened by inter-organizational collaboration.

Shared ideological and emotional commitments among the staff of different immigrant organizations created the conditions for highly effective – though extremely labor-intensive – cooperation on particular issues such as day labor organizing, garment workers campaigning, or unionization in the supermarket sector. By pooling their resources, organizations were able to make the most out of a scattered set of skills and competences (on advocacy, communication, labor law, litigation, various languages, organizing, etc.).

Immigrant worker organizations were thus able to survive their early phases and launch innovative immigrant rights campaigns by relying on the support of fringe actors. Those included second-generation immigrant students and small-scale foundations, as well as like-minded individual activists and immigrant worker organizations. A focus on legitimacy and legitimation strategies provides us with an additional entry point to understand how organizations secured those resources. In the following section, I will turn to the question of how the changes in the surrounding context affected the trajectory of immigrant worker organizations in their later phase.

*Organizational Change and Movement Fragmentation. A Resource-Dependency Perspective on Organizations.*

The third puzzle of this research relates to the unexpected trajectory of organizational and movement change in a more recent phase. What are the factors and conditions that led to the fragmentation (and eventual weakening) of the immigrant worker movement over time, particularly as availability of resources and support from actors such as unions and foundations increased? As I described in chapter 6, after a series of smaller victories, the immigrant worker rights movement reached its high point in the early to mid-2000s with the birth of the Multi-Ethnic Immigrant Worker Organizing Network (MIWON) and the massive pro-migrant mobilizations of 2006. MIWON, in this respect, represented the first effort of the kind to establish a broad, immigrant-led immigrant rights political platform in Los Angeles. By the mid-2000s, however, despite persisting organizational rhetoric on representing immigrant low-wage workers, the movement had already begun to fragment. In the following years, organizations such as CHIRLA, PWC and KIWA moved away from an exclusive focus on the workplace and on low-wage, undocumented immigrant workers. Other organizations, such as IDEPSCA and GWC, nearly disbanded and had to considerably reduce their organizational scope and activities. By the late 2000s MIWON had ceased to exist but on paper. Interestingly, all this happened as mainstream political opportunities opened up – particularly for Latinos – immigrant worker organizations mushroomed everywhere, and civil society support for immigrant organizing and immigrant leftist organizations increased. How can we explain this contradiction?

In chapter 6, inspired by ecological theory and Olson's collective action theory, I suggested that we can begin to understand this paradox by paying more attention to how the fate of single organizations is linked to the changing characteristics of the broader context in which they operate. I thus argued that the prevalence of collaborative or rather conflictive relations depended on three factors: 1) structural forces that spur competition between organizations, 2) complementarity and alignment of organizational goals, and 3) ideologically grounded moral incentives that sustain collective action. Changing levels and quality of surrounding available resources, as well as the degree of external resource overlap with other organizations are key variables in determining whether inter-organizational cooperation or rather conflict will prevail.

In my analysis I showed how immigrant worker organizations went through three distinct chronological phases. During the first period, characterized by resource scarcity and low external support, organizations were pushed to collaborate out of ideological similarity, goal alignment and pragmatic considerations. Their reliance on a different set of core supporters made this collaboration productive and non-threatening for all groups involved. During the second phase, characterized by a moderate resource increase and growing civil society support, but also by an incipient expansion of the immigrant worker organizational field, organizations engaged in more formalized and even intense collaboration, which ushered in higher profile immigrant rights campaigns. However, deeper integration of organizational activities and campaigns, as well as of organizational structures increased resource overlap and began to threaten the maintenance and survival of individual groups. During the third phase, characterized by an unevenly distributed resource increase, but also by growing external competition from other immigrant groups and local labor unions, organizations were compelled to specialize and differentiate their goals and activities from others as a way to survive and (possibly) expand. While single organizational responses to this external threat varied significantly, function of differing organizational capacities, ideologies and managerial capacities, the overall consequence was that intense common campaigning ceased and organizations drifted apart.

In this section I tried to provide an explanation for the paradoxical fragmentation of the immigrant worker movement under conditions of growing external support. I argued that we can understand this contradiction if we approach it from the perspective of organizational maintenance and survival, and we analyze the behavior of immigrant worker organizations in relation to both resource providers and potential organizational competitors. Seen through this lens, movement fragmentation was a reflection of the different ways in which immigrant worker organizations, under conditions of growing dependence on the same set of resources, and under the pressure of new actors entering their sphere of organizational activity (i.e. labor unions and new immigrant 'worker centers'), tackled the challenges of surviving and maintaining or expanding their influence in the local activist and non-profit scene.

## Research Implications, Generalizability and Limitations

### *Organizational Success, the Meaning of Immigrant Political Incorporation and the Return of Ethnic Politics.*

In this section I would like to discuss the implications of the research findings described above. I will especially focus on three interrelated dimensions: organizational success and influence; political participation, incorporation and representation of undocumented, low-wage immigrant workers in immigrant worker organizations; the changing role of immigrants in local civil society and politics, and the changing basis of local urban politics.

The first dimension relates to organizational success and influence. A key question we may ask is how organizational change has affected the capacity of each group to improve the social, economic and legal standing of immigrants (particularly the most vulnerable ones). The voluminous literature on immigrant rights activism in Los Angeles has already convincingly shown that, in their early phases, immigrant worker organizations were able to attain remarkable achievements and significant victories – though necessarily limited in scope. The turn to institutional advocacy of organizations such as CHIRLA and, to a lesser extent PWC and KIWA has driven those organizations away from both contentious, grassroots-based politics and an exclusive commitment to undocumented, low-wage immigrant workers. Organizations justified this turn by the need to influence the very structural conditions – i.e. local, state and federal legislation and enforcement policies on immigration, labor and other socio-economic issues – that created the exploitative dynamics they were confronting on the ground in their earlier years of grassroots activism. Yet, the evidence presented in chapter 6 and elsewhere in the literature seems to indicate that those organizations have remained too small, understaffed and under-resourced to become visible and influential actors in those kinds of political struggles. Those limitations concern even CHIRLA, who has been able to capture national funding resources and to considerably expand the scope and breadth of its activities but remained relatively weak compared to national mainstream and ethnic advocacy organizations, or organized labor (Nicholls, Uitermark and van Haperen 2016; Nicholls and Uitermark 2016).

As we have seen, increased support on the side of labor unions and civil society actors has encouraged – if not forced – immigrant worker organizations to abandon the type of labor-intensive and intimate collaborations that proved so effective and productive at the local level. To be sure, rather than weakening the appeal of coalition-building, the stronger involvement of local civil society over immigration issues has strengthened it. Immigrant organizations are now part of numerous collaborative efforts that span issues as diverse as housing, gentrification, environmental issues, civic engagement, minimum wage, access to healthcare or education, labor standards, immigrant detention and



deportations, and, finally, immigration reform. Within those coalitions, however, restructured immigrant worker organizations seem to have a relatively marginal role, while labor unions appear to have taken a strong leading and steering role. If an organization like CHIRLA may still retain the capacity to partially influence the direction of these coalitions, smaller groups such as KIWA and PWC are condemned to playing more of a symbolic role. We should consider, however, that local civil society has also changed. Unions and mainstream advocacy groups have made considerable efforts to include immigrants both in their rank-n-file and in their leadership, as well as to incorporate the interests of immigrant constituencies in their political platforms.

The second dimension of this discussion refers to the implication of these findings for the political incorporation, participation and organizational representation of low-wage immigrants, particularly those in the most precarious socio-economic and legal conditions. One of the major consequences of CHIRLA's, KIWA's and PWC's changing organizational priorities was the downplay of activities that required direct outreach and the active involvement of their most disempowered immigrant constituents. New organizational activities, in fact, demanded particular technical expertise (lobbying, policy analysis, legal skills, etc.) that their direct constituents did not have. We may therefore wonder whether certain organizations have 'betrayed' their initial commitment to be both the direct voice of the most marginalized immigrants and the vehicle for improving their conditions. This is a very complicated question to answer. In their early phases, immigrant worker organizations tried to craft creative and effective campaigns that relied both on technical expertise and grassroots mobilization. In doing so, they attempted to include immigrant workers at all levels of the organizing process. Those two objectives, however, are not always compatible with each other, particularly when the skills and competences supplied by the membership do not match those needed for ensuring the success of a particular campaign (Jenkins 2002).

Internal organizational divides and power asymmetries also existed, particularly between the staff on the one side and organizational memberships and constituencies on the other. To what extent was the membership of those organizations able to influence the trajectory of immigrant worker organizations? This is something I could not clearly assess with the available data. Organizations, broadly speaking, were composed of immigrants or people of immigrant background. Given the intrinsic socio-economic and legal vulnerability of the people targeted, significant differences in terms of class and status nonetheless existed between staff and volunteers on one side, and members on the other. If some immigrant workers were able to gain relative visibility within the organizations, most of them were primarily service beneficiaries and only occasionally participated in more political activities. Those considerations lead us to conclude that organizational change was largely staff-driven and, regardless of the objectives, reflected staff priorities rather than those of the membership (provided it would be even possible for members to articulate common interests and grievances). This is not to say that the

staff was driven to goal displacement uniquely out of concerns of organizational maintenance and survival,<sup>233</sup> rather, that they were likely more sensitive to those issues than the membership.

The third and final dimension refers to an assessment of immigrant organizations in the context of LA politics. The role of immigrant worker organizations in re-shaping local politics can hardly be overestimated. At the level of discourse, they contributed to popularizing a narrative of economic and social justice that now underpins much of the advocacy and campaign work of LA mainstream civil society. Indirectly, they contributed to driving unions towards immigrant organizing. Moreover, they played a key role in supporting and incubating several other immigrant-led organizations and collectives that seek to improve the conditions of different immigrant communities. While those organizations have become competitors for resources, they have also contributed to strengthening the local civil society infrastructure that fights for immigrant rights on a daily basis. CHIRLA and IDEPSCA, for example, helped create the National Day Laborer Organizing Network (NDLON), one of the most prominent organizations fighting for the rights of day laborers and undocumented immigrants nationwide, and have invested considerable resources in mobilizing undocumented immigrant youth. The DREAMers movement could have hardly become a major grassroots force in the late 2000s and early 2010s without the support of the organizational infrastructure provided by the old immigrant guard (Nicholls 2013).

It remains to be seen, however, whether the latest developments signal a return to more traditional forms of immigrant ethnic politics, and whether that will harm or strengthen the fight for immigrant rights. CHIRLA, in particular, has since concentrated more and more on immigration reform and Latino voter mobilization. This organization's value for the bigger political landscape has therefore become its capacity to politically mobilize a specific ethnic group, Latinos, in one of the most important gateway cities of the US. We can speculate that CHIRLA, upon entering the much more institutionalized field of mainstream politics, has found it very difficult to challenge its fundamental logics. Growing dependency of immigrant organizations on labor unions, which have long been part of the urban political machines of the Democratic Party, has also encouraged this trend across groups. While recruitment on the basis of ethnic identities may not necessarily hamper issue-based and multi-ethnic mobilizations, there are certain

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<sup>233</sup> For example, CHIRLA realized there were particular openings both at the state and federal level to influence legislation affecting immigrants – e.g. on domestic work, on state-federal collaboration on immigration enforcement, on California state drivers' license, on immigration reform – and would have to rely on experienced lobbyists and policy analysts to directly influence those processes. KIWA, in light of the failure of its market worker campaign, had instead to acknowledge the limitations of grassroots unionization efforts involving undocumented immigrant workers in the current legislative context. KIWA staff also recognized that, even when successful, grassroots campaigns against employers were not necessarily effective in the long run without proper labor law enforcement and sanction mechanisms in place. PWC leadership, influenced by both CHIRLA and KIWA, also genuinely viewed institutional advocacy as a way to concretely improve the situation of domestic and care workers beyond the rear-guard battles targeting individual employers.

implications in this strategy. For once, the wedge between different immigrant ethnic communities of color may grow deeper, at a time when those groups still share a subordinate position in US society and need to rely on each other to push forward an ambitious agenda of social and economic justice (Pulido 2006; Ngin and Torres 2001). Organizations rooted in the 'Latino' community, because of the growing strength of their numbers, may be particularly tempted to continue on their own. Particularly as immigrant organizations come to rely on institutionalized ethnic resources, and they decouple institutional immigrant engagement from the question of work, they may also move away from the concerns of the lowest strata of the immigrant working class to embrace more moderate, when not conservative, middle-class political projects. The recent election of Donald J. Trump as U.S. President may well change this. In light of the increasing hostility of both the President and Congress towards immigrants, immigrant organizations may become more inclined to step up grassroots mobilizations, return to more contentious action and to more robust grassroots coalitions.

#### *Research Limitations, Generalizability, and Avenues for Further Research: Beyond the LA Model?*

As I argued in the introduction, I selected Los Angeles and a handful of immigrant worker organizations as a case study because of the unusual set of dynamics that characterized this context. However, it is important to recognize the limitations of such an approach. I have already discussed data collection and analysis limitations in the introduction and throughout the various chapter. Here I would like to reiterate the point that this research focused on a very specific group of organizations, to the detriment of the vast and varied organizational landscape that characterized, and still characterizes Los Angeles (as well as many other major US and world cities). Furthermore, I believe that the particular set-up of this research may also limit its generalizability to other contexts. To an extent, the history of the immigrant worker rights movement in Los Angeles is unique. In comparison with other major cities in the US, Los Angeles received unprecedented and very specific immigration flows. The process of economic restructuring, and its impact on immigration, were also dramatic. Finally, and partly as a result of those dynamics, Los Angeles emerged as an experiment of immigrant (and other forms of) activism that had few parallels in the United States between the 1990s and 2000s. For all these reasons, it is difficult to make a direct comparison with the situations in other urban contexts.

Some of the processes I highlighted throughout this research, however, may prove insightful to understand dynamics at work elsewhere, both in the United States and in Europe. Questions of organizational innovation, resource competition and legitimacy concern not only immigrant worker organizations in Los Angeles, but organizations in general. In assessing the best course of action for any given time, organizations routinely consider the costs of maintaining their founding ideologies and organizational goals. Keeping in mind the (not always reconcilable) imperatives of organizational survival and

success, organizations also have to determine how far they can or should remain loyal to their early constituents and beneficiaries. Those issues relate to the more fundamental questions of what criteria should underpin the legitimacy of immigrant-oriented organizations, and to what extent their legitimacy should be based on technical or professional expertise, on a particular ideological commitment, on shared positionality and ascribed characteristics with their constituents and membership, or on a varying combination of these dimensions.

Those questions are particularly important for contentious organizations with an explicit political dimension. The varying answers may dramatically affect the extent to which immigrants not only see their material conditions improve, but also have a say in the process. In the United States, those questions have been primarily framed with respect to the growing influence of large philanthropic foundations over immigrant organizational activity. In Europe, researchers have made a similar argument with respect to the role of national, local and supra-national government institutions. A related aspect that has both concrete implications for society and research potential is the role of immigrants within immigrant rights advocacy. While immigrant rights advocacy organizations in the United States have been traditionally staffed by immigrants and their children (de Graauw 2016; Louie 2001), this has not been the case in Europe, where immigrant associations have largely refrained from open contentious action against the state or private actors (Nicholls and Vermeulen 2012; Nicholls 2008). Immigrant organizations have often been co-opted or neutralized by the different levels of the state, and immigrant rights advocacy is generally conducted by more specialized organizations staffed by trained professionals with no migrant background or direct connection to the immigrant community (Pero' 2007; Martiniello 1993; Nicholls and Uitermark 2016). More cross-national comparative research is needed to understand those diverging trajectories, as well as to more broadly appreciate how the latter have impacted the overall incorporation of immigrants in societies of settlement.