



## Urban Geographies of Immigration and the “Balkanization” Debate

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### The “Balkanization” Metaphor

In the early 1990s, an American demographer specializing in urban and regional population changes, began to notice curious trends in Census data on migration flows. Frey observed that the dramatic resurgence of immigration into the U.S. during the 1980s was focused on a very small number of “gateway” cities: the dominant ports-of-entry for new arrivals were Los Angeles, New York, San Francisco, Miami, Washington, DC, and Chicago. Frey also noticed, however, that these immigrant gateways were losing a disproportionate number of native-born, unskilled, Non-Hispanic Whites to other parts of the country. Frey diagnosed this trend as a widening urban and regional spatial segmentation of the American population by race and ethnicity. Sifting through the evidence, Frey became convinced that the most important

explanation for this trend could be found in labor-market competition. Most of the immigrants coming to the United States are comparatively un-skilled, with relatively few professional or educational qualifications. Thus “...the concentrated influx of lower-skilled immigrants” to the large immigrant gateway cities leads to the displacement of un-skilled, native-born American workers from working-class jobs “as the immigrants bid down wages below those that native-born workers would accept. This kind of pattern exists in almost all high-immigration metropolitan areas. Moreover, statistical analyses that take into account other migration-inducing factors show that immigration exerts an independent effect on the net out-migration of less-skilled residents.”<sup>1</sup> Labor market competition seemed to be driving the new patterns of spatial segmentation.

**Table 1.** Immigration and Internal Migration, U.S. Metropolitan Areas.

	<i>Contribution to 1990-1995 population change</i>	
<b>High-immigration metro areas, 1990-1995</b>	Immigration	Net internal migration
Los Angeles, California	797,712	-1,095,455
New York, New York	705,939	-1,113,924
San Francisco, California	262,519	-260,961
Chicago, Illinois	216,309	-279,763
Miami, Florida	157,059	-4,631
Washington, DC	125,479	-91,643
Houston, Texas	110,323	45,017
San Diego, California	85,025	-140,591
Boston, Massachusetts	74,316	-165,822
Dallas, Texas	72,246	75,978
<b>High internal migration metro areas, 1990-1995</b>		
Atlanta, Georgia	32,391	259,094
Las Vegas, Nevada	12,501	211,536
Phoenix, Arizona	27,516	165,760
Portland, Oregon	22,618	128,878
Denver, Colorado	22,360	118,696
Seattle, Washington	42,617	89,347
Austin, Texas	10,253	86,696
Raleigh, North Carolina	6,175	86,016
Orlando, Florida	16,675	80,685
Tampa, Florida	18,297	77,650
West Palm Beach, Florida	18,899	74,903
Charlotte, North Carolina	6,214	69,198
Nashville, Tennessee	5,096	63,592

Source: William H. Frey (1996). "Immigration, Domestic Migration, and Demographic Balkanization in America: New Evidence for the 1990s." *Population and Development Review* 22(4), 741-763, table presented on p. 746.

<sup>1</sup> William H. Frey (1999). "Immigration and Demographic Balkanization." In James W. Hughes and Joseph J. Seneca, eds., *America's Demographic Tapestry: Baseline for the New Millennium*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 78-97, quote from p. 85.

Some of the preliminary evidence Frey worked with is presented in Table 1. Notice that in a five-year period in the early 1990s, Los Angeles and New York each hosted more than 700 thousand immigrant arrivals -- but each metropolitan area also lost **more than a million** native-born residents. By contrast, all of the metropolitan areas with the largest number of internal migrants had comparatively few immigrants. Atlanta, Georgia saw an influx of 259 thousand internal migrants, but during the same period, international immigration to Atlanta was only one-eighth of this figure (a bit more than 32 thousand).

Frey went on to consider the implications:

**“Current immigration along with ongoing domestic migration forces are creating a demographic balkanization** that portends increasing divisions across broad regions of the country. If the new trends continue, today’s multi-ethnic immigrant gateway regions may very well turn into individual melting pots in which different Hispanic, Asian, African American, Native American, and Anglo groups coexist and intermarry while still retaining some elements of their own national heritage. Although this ideal image of ‘one America’ may be approximated in these regions, it will be less achievable nationally. In the rest of the country, which will look demographically quite distinct, different political agendas will come to the fore, and there will be a lower tolerance for the issues and concerns of ethnically more diverse populations in other regions.”<sup>2</sup>

For many years, Frey and many other social scientists began to document the intricate details and implications of this line of inquiry. The “balkanization” metaphor spread widely, and was used not only in specialized academic investigations, but in public discourse and public policy. Interestingly enough, similar empirical questions were being explored in Canada. Consider Dan Hiebert’s assessment of research undertaken by Larry Bourne:

“In a preliminary and highly suggestive analysis, Bourne (1999) examines the relationship between immigrant settlement and internal migration between Canadian metropolitan areas. Prior to the mid-1980s, these population flows were generally complementary; that is, internal migrants and immigrants tended to move to the same places -- those experiencing the highest rates of economic growth. In the 1990s, immigrants continued this pattern, and have settled in metropolitan areas that are the largest in the country, have the highest incomes and levels of educational attainment, and have well-developed service sectors. Conversely, they avoid places of high unemployment, dependence on government transfers, and urban areas in Québec rather than Montréal. Non-immigrants share some of these predilections, but not all of them. In particular, internal migrants in Canada have generally not moved to the largest urban centres in recent years, and Toronto, Montréal and Vancouver are experiencing large net inflows of immigrants coupled with either small net inflows of non-immigrants or outflows.... Bourne shows that the increasingly opposed migration systems of immigrants and internal migrants are contributing to a particularly rapid

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<sup>2</sup> Frey, “Immigration...,” p. 79, emphasis added.

internationalization of the population of Canada's primary cities and [a]...lack of diversity in smaller centres.”<sup>3</sup>

But note that Hiebert does not use the ‘balkanization’ metaphor. In part, this is because the relations between immigration and inequality work out very differently in Canada compared to the U.S.: while most but not all immigrants to the United States are un-skilled workers with relatively little formal education, most but not all immigrants to Canada are admitted under the formal ‘points system’ as skilled workers, with comparatively more formal education and credentials. Even so, some commentators in Canada do use the term, especially critics of Canada’s official federal policy commitment to multiculturalism, first expressed in a federal government statement in 1971 and then formalized in the Canada Multiculturalism Act of 1987, which “committed Ottaaw, amongst other things, to promote ‘the full and equitable participation of individual communities of all origins in the continuing evolution and shaping of all aspects of Canadian society and assist them in the elimination of any barriers to such participation.’”<sup>4</sup> The key distinguishing feature of this policy is the official state recognition that the diversity of immigration will, and should, change the nature of what ‘Canada’ means -- in stark contrast to the traditional emphasis in many countries that immigrants should give up their old identities and ‘assimilate’ to the dominant norms of the host society. There is significant controversy over this policy in Canada, and sometimes the balkanization metaphor is used in these discussions.

Moreover, the metaphor is used to describe the earlier generations of racial and ethnic discrimination in Canadian policy:

“The 1920s witnessed the continuation of strong anti-immigrant lobbies, supported by politicians, educators, the medical profession, journalists, and farm and labour groups. They fear ‘Balianization’ and an undermining of Canada’s Anglo-Saxon character. ... Canadian politicians were quick to condemn the American ‘melting pot’ as a failure insofar as uncontrolled immigration to the U.S. prevented the preservation of any distinct culture. As the premier of British Columbia stated in 1923, ‘We are anxious to keep this a British country. We want [it] British and nothing else.’ ... In 1928, a member of Parliament asserted that Canada was going to learn from America’s mistake by making sure ‘to assimilate these people to British institutions.’”<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Daniel Hiebert (2000). “Immigration and the Changing Canadian City.” *The Canadian Geographer* 44(1), 25-43, quote from pp. 27-28.

<sup>4</sup> Cited and quoted in Peter Woolstencroft (2002). “Education Policies: Challenges and Controversies.” In Edmund P. Fowler and David Siegel, eds., *Urban Policy Issues: Canadian Perspectives*. Second Edition. Don Mills, ON: Oxford University Press, 276-297, quote from p. 286.

<sup>5</sup> Sarah V. Wayland (1997). “Immigration, Multiculturalism, and National Identity in Canada.” *International Journal on Group Rights* 5, 33-58, quote from p. 40.



## The Dangers of the Metaphor<sup>6</sup>

### A. *Why metaphors matter.*

All writing, even scientific writing, is at least partially rhetorical -- communication intended to persuade. Metaphor is a fundamental rhetorical device. In literary works, metaphors are most successful when unexpected and 'alive'; Jamaica Kincaid begins one of her works with the line, "My father's skin was the color of corruption." Scientific metaphors, by contrast, are most successful when they achieve widespread repetition. When they are repeated, scientific metaphors become taken-for-granted and seemingly obvious. In North America, the old immigration metaphor of the "melting pot" is being replaced by contemporary alternatives: the mosaic, the tapestry, the kaleidoscope, the 'salad bowl,' ... and balkanization.

### B. *The history of the balkanization metaphor.*

The term "balkanization" first emerged during the First World War, amidst debates about the collapse of the Austro-Hungarian and Russian Empires. Opponents of division into small states feared a process of state fragmentation as a 'balkanization' that would create permanent instability and conflict. After the Second World War, the term became what one critic described an "abstract demon," a "linguistic weed." The term was used to describe the risks of de-colonization. Southeast Asia was described as the "Balkans of the Orient." In 1960, The Economist issued warnings to Africa's new generation of leaders "before they opt for balkanisation." Since the late 1980s, the term has been de-contextualized, and applied to all sorts of different things: telephone area codes; specialties in the medical profession; systems of financial services; sexual identities. In recent years, the term has been used in increasingly controversial discussions of the future of American culture and identity. Kevin Phillips wrote a book on "The Balkanization of America." Arthur Schlesinger lamented a "cult of ethnicity" and a "multiethnic dogma" that is "replacing assimilation by fragmentation, integration by separatism. It belies *unum* and glorifies *pluribus*." One critic likened U.S. immigration policy to "Bosniaziation."

### C. *Balkanization and spatial assimilation.*

Ellis and Wright argue that the proliferation of balkanization metaphors translates ethnic concentration -- in particular cities, and particular neighborhoods -- as a 'failure to become American.' In traditional urban theory going all the way back to the Chicago School, spatial concentration always seemed to signal a separation from the mainstream. Research in this line of inquiry continues. But it has important flaws:

- i. Most segregation studies measure assimilation by proximity to whites -- assuming that this is the target group for assimilation. Being American is equated with whiteness.

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<sup>6</sup> This section is adapted from Mark Ellis and Richard Wright (1998). "The Balkanization Metaphor in the Analysis of U.S. Immigration." *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 88(4), 686-698. All quotes are cited from Ellis and Wright's piece.

- ii. The research assumes that the integration of minorities always and universally benefits minorities. There are important exceptions to the general trend.

Ellis and Wright suggest that there are three reasons for the current use of 'balkanization' in alarmist ways:

- i. Several generations ago, conflicts between 'old' and 'new' immigrant groups led to significant 1920s restrictions on immigration.
- ii. By the mid-1960s, conflicts amongst different European-origin immigrants had faded into a general, universalized sense of "whiteness."
- iii. Policy changes in 1965, which led to dramatic growth in immigration from Latin America, Asia, and Africa, began to revive the old tensions between 'old' and 'new' immigrants, with conflicts now intertwined with issues of racial and ethnic difference as well as social class (since most new immigrants tend to be poor or working-class).

**"Balkanization is at best a poor analogy -- at worst, it is racist. Immigration-driven balkanization implies that newcomers to the country take responsibility for the breakup of U.S. society. We disagree. A threat to U.S. society stems not from immigrants, but from a new nativism, some of which derives directly from seductive phrases like balkanization."**

**"We reap what we sow. The theme of a Los Angeles radio discussion [recently] was Latino voting patterns. The program addressed why Latinos were voting more as a bloc and in greater percentages than ever before. One commentator labeled the pattern 'balkanization.' Respondents countered that this voting pattern is a reaction to growing anti-immigrant and anti-Latino policies and consciousness, symbolized by such words as balkanization."**