



2008

*Survival of the Knitted: Immigrant Social Networks in a Stratified World.* Vilna Francine Bashi. Reviewed by Qingwen Xu.

Qingwen Xu  
Boston College

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/jssw>

 Part of the [Social Work Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Xu, Qingwen (2008) "Survival of the Knitted: Immigrant Social Networks in a Stratified World. Vilna Francine Bashi. Reviewed by Qingwen Xu.," *The Journal of Sociology & Social Welfare*: Vol. 35 : Iss. 4 , Article 11.  
Available at: <https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/jssw/vol35/iss4/11>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the Social Work at ScholarWorks at WMU. For more information, please contact [maira.bundza@wmich.edu](mailto:maira.bundza@wmich.edu).



Vilna Francine Bashi, *Survival of the Knitted: Immigrant Social Networks in a Stratified World*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2007. \$21.95 papercover.

Every immigrant family has a story of survival; every ethnic immigration group endures an era of struggle, oppression, and for most, eventual success. West Indians represent a particularly fascinating case. Because they are, in American racial terms, blacks, West Indians highlight the critical role that race plays in the U.S. immigrant experience. Because many West Indian migrants remain closely tied to their home societies, their experiences underscore the role of transnational processes and practices. Unlike previous scholarly efforts that focus on race and ethnicity, Bashi's book, in providing a broad view of West Indian migration to the United States, Great Britain, and Canada, draws on a variety of theoretical perspectives and examines West Indian immigrants' social networks.

In exploring two immigrant networks in New York and London, Bashi offers important insights into the mechanisms of West Indian immigrants' social network. What is the structure of the network? What functions have hubs (veteran immigrants) played in the process of migration and settlement? To what extent do these hubs control the social capital that shapes the migration experience of new immigrants? How do these networks respond to racist immigration policies? How have the dynamics of social networks allowed West Indians to distance themselves from negative racialization? In her description, West Indians' social networks have a unique hub-and-spoke structure that plays an important role in mitigating the difficulties of immigration. The "hubs" guide the "spokes" (new immigrants) across the border, showing them preferred legal routes and even sponsoring their entry. More important, these networks serve as financial safety nets and sources of key cultural, economic and political information. Hubs can provide temporary housing and financial assistance, arrange employment opportunities, and continuously help new arrivals with a range of needs, from housing to social supports.

Compared with other ethnic networks that also help new immigrants navigate immigration and social systems, such as the family-friendship networks of South Asians, the

daughter-community networks of Mexicans, and the entrepreneurial networks of the Koreans and Chinese, the uniqueness of West Indian social networks, as detailed in the book, is the amount of social capital controlled by hubs which carefully select which immigrants are to be assisted and which therefore expect reciprocity in terms of work ethics and the preservation of cultural values. The author believes that the uniqueness of West Indian social networks has resulted in successful immigration experiences—a high degree of labor market integration, educational and credential attainment, upward mobility, and ethnic-racial solidarity. As a result, while immigration policies in the U.S., U.K. and Canada reflect anti-black (or anti-people-of-color) sentiments, West Indians continuously migrate to and settle in these Western countries, because strong internal networks lower the social, economic and emotional costs of migration. The author's insights and in-depth details of West Indian social networks are compelling; they enhance understanding of the relationship among immigration, race/ethnicity, family and community, and discrimination.

As the book investigates immigrant social networks in the context of racially stratified societies, chapters seven and eight raise doubts about the extent that the West Indian's social networks can protect immigrants from racial stratification and prejudice against not only people of color, but immigrants in general. Opportunity saturation limits a hub's ability to bring in spokes and therefore the volume of migrants and the size of the network. Social capital embedded in the networks by and large is a bonding social capital; since social capital is highly controlled by the hubs, this limits the network's ability of developing bridging social capital, such as access to community leaders and decision makers. Also, because the networks are hub-centered, their protection is subject to each hub's response to systematic discrimination in Western societies. These limitations would seem to make it difficult for networks to create a haven free of racism, even temporarily, as the author implies. While social networks greatly help immigrants cope with a racially biased and stratified society, the protection provided by social networks might come from new immigrants' psychological resilience, rather than prevailing social realities.

In addition, the author states that the success of West Indian

immigrants makes it possible for West Indians to differentiate themselves from African Americans, and therefore distance themselves from the "negative" racial stereotyping of blacks in the U.S., which helps to strengthen West Indian ethnic solidarity. But it is doubtful that increased ethnic solidarity helps West Indians to be incorporated into a racially stratified society.

Learning from the experience of Chinese immigrants in the U.S., the success of a small section of Chinese "model minority" immigrants, who have excelled in education, employment, social status and social integration, overshadows a large group of Asian immigrants who have not been economically successful. The experienced success has not prevented a conservative backlash in welfare and educational policies. As Chinese Americans strengthen their ethnic solidarity, due to their unique immigration history and distinguished role in a series of anti-oppressive battles with the American legal and social systems, they are also seeking pan-ethnic solidarity in order to resist institutional oppression and change the status quo that tends to exclude Asian Americans from mainstream society.

For West Indian immigrants, their success in the new country is phenomenal, which is attributable to the social networks. However, in a racially stratified society, immigrants of color have been and will continue to be discriminated against until institutional changes are made to eradicate racism or ameliorate its effects on people of color.

Qingwen Xu  
Boston College

Risa L. Goluboff, *The Lost Promise of Civil Rights*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007. \$35.00 hardcover.

This book adds to the voluminous body of literature on civil rights and the civil rights movement by analyzing labor force litigation, which has taken a backseat to education litigation and the 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* decision. Civil rights advances have heretofore been largely chronicled in relation to education in the post-Brown era and litigated on the basis