



**WESTERN
MICHIGAN**
UNIVERSITY

The Journal of Sociology & Social Welfare

Volume 40
Issue 3 September

Article 13

2013

Review of *Barrios to Burbs: The Making of the Mexican American Middle Class*. Jody A. Vallejo. Reviewed by Celestino Fernandez.

Celestino Fernandez
University of Arizona

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



Part of the Social Work Commons

Recommended Citation

Fernandez, Celestino (2013) "Review of *Barrios to Burbs: The Making of the Mexican American Middle Class*. Jody A. Vallejo. Reviewed by Celestino Fernandez.," *The Journal of Sociology & Social Welfare*: Vol. 40 : Iss. 3 , Article 13.

Available at: <https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/jssw/vol40/iss3/13>

This Book Review is brought to you by the Western Michigan University School of Social Work. For more information, please contact wmu-scholarworks@wmich.edu.



**WESTERN
MICHIGAN**
UNIVERSITY

Jody A. Vallejo, *Barrios to Burbs: The Making of the Mexican American Middle Class*. Stanford University Press (2012). \$40 (hardcover).

Latinos are the largest ethnic minority group in the United States, comprising close to 17% of the population, as documented by the 2010 Census. This population is projected to continue to grow rapidly, reaching at least 30% by 2050; 40% of California's population is already Latino. Although the Latino population is varied in terms of national origin and ancestry, the majority (fully 63%) of Latinos can be categorized as Mexican American, an ethnic group that continues to grow due to both immigration from Mexico and higher than average birth rates.

Much has been written about various aspects of the Mexican American experience in the United States, and this academic literature includes a variety of theoretical perspectives and disciplines in both the social sciences and humanities, among others, such as public health and business. The majority of this literature, however, tends to focus on working class Mexican Americans/Chicanos and Mexican immigrants, perhaps not unjustifiably given the political turmoil around the issue of immigration and the fact that a large percentage of the Mexican American population lives in poverty. For example, according to the 2010 Census, almost one in four (24.2%) Mexican American families lived in poverty, compared to 11.3% for the general population.

A relatively small percentage, both within group and in comparison to other groups, of Mexican Americans can be classified as middle class. For example, less than 10% of Mexican Americans have completed a Bachelor's degree or higher, compared to 30% of the White population, 16% of Blacks, and 48% of Asian Americans. However, given the projected growth of the overall Mexican American population, the Mexican American middle class is likely to grow rapidly as well. And this is where the book under review comes in; Vallejo, its author, states:

The objective of this book is to examine the mobility paths, lived experiences, and incorporation outcomes [assimilation] of today's Mexican American middle

class in order to provide a more comprehensive understanding of this population and a more promising outlook for the future. (p. 2)

She defines middle class status sociologically on the basis of four characteristics: college education; total household income over the national median; white-collar employment or business ownership; and homeownership.

Data for this book were gathered by the author in the greater Los Angeles, California region, using field methods that included 75 in-depth structured interviews, participant observation, and an ethnography of a Latina business association over a three-year period. Basically, the research was conducted for the Vallejo's dissertation and the book is based on the dissertation.

So, what did Vallejo find? Basically, that Mexican Americans are achieving upward mobility, albeit at a very slow pace, and that they are incorporating into the middle class. This mobility is achieved through various pathways, including via the traditional assimilation model (cutting most ties with ethnic community) and via the minority culture framework (which includes retaining ties to working-class and ethnic origins). Vallejo also finds that those individuals who reached the middle class via the minority culture pathway are much more likely to retain ties to their working class and ethnic communities, financially and in other ways support poorer family members, and act as language and cultural brokers for relatives. In sum, they are more likely to "give back."

The book's main weakness is that it is written exclusively as an academic study and thus it will have a very limited readership (race/ethnic and class scholars). However, the book's strengths far exceed this limitation. It's an interesting book, with an interesting focus, and interesting findings. The book makes a contribution to our understanding of the Mexican American middle class where there is a dearth of literature. My hope is that this book will spur much more research on the Mexican American middle class, including research that compares the Mexican American middle class to the middle classes of other ethnic groups. While Vallejo makes an important contribution in this area, the research on the Mexican American

middle class has just begun; we have much to learn yet about this category of the Mexican American population.

Celestino Fernández, Dept. of Sociology, University of Arizona

Rina Agarwala, *Informal Labor, Formal Politics, and Dignified Discontent in India*. Cambridge University Press (2013). \$29.95 (paperback).

In Informal Labor, Formal Politics, and Dignified Discontent in India, Rina Agarwala challenges assumptions about the ability of informal workers to organize and pessimism about the prospects for workers' organizing under neoliberalism and global capitalism that are characterized by precarious employment and shrinking prospects for the welfare state. This is an exciting book that describes successes of informal worker demands in India where workers have used strategies that target the state rather than the employer in the context of economic liberalization—the term used by Agarwala to capture privatization and the shift to forms of production that rely on flexible informal employment—and where seek to “dignify” the workforce through citizenship demands.

Her study of organized informal workers in the bidi (hand-rolled cigarettes) and construction industries begins by considering several phenomena; that informal workers *are* organized in India—at levels on par with workers in the formal sector (union density rates are roughly equal among formal and informal workers in the 4 states represented in this study), and that these organizations have won significant demands for social welfare benefits from the state. However, organizations of informal workers have not been uniformly successful, and the central question Agarwala examines is what conditions at the state level have been conducive to the success of these organizations.

This well researched and tightly argued book is based on 200 interviews with government officials, employers, and labor leaders of formal and informal workers organizations, and 140 interviews with members of informal workers organizations in 4 Indian States (Tamil Nadu, Maharashtra, West Bengal, and Kerala). Agarwala employs several devices that make