05.30 LPR essay: The Economist on American society, Part II

The July 14, 2005 issue of the Economist includes a set of seven articles on the state of American society. Several of the articles contain useful data and insights for educators trying to gauge the direction of higher education. What follows is our review and commentary on articles pertaining to social and demographic patterns; the impact of Hispanic immigration; and a growing class divide. Unless otherwise noted, all statistics come from the Economist.

A dynamic and optimistic society

Which country has the highest fertility rate: France, the United States, Brazil, China, or South Korea?

Readers who answered “the United States” are correct. The Economist wrote that:

“America's population is dynamic in comparison not only with Europe but also with some of the fastest-growing developing countries . . . America is the only country to have maintained industrial-era patterns of demographic growth in a post-industrial age . . . If a willingness to reproduce is a measure of a rich country's confidence in the future, then America is supremely self-confident.”

America's population increased 250% in the last century and continues to grow twice as fast as the European Union, mostly from natural increase rather than immigration. As a result, America will remain comparatively young for the foreseeable future. In 2050 our median age will be just over forty, compared to 45 in China and 54 in South Korea. For all the talk about the aging of the baby boomers (a global phenomenon), what distinguishes American society is its youthfulness. To be an educator here is to be part of a flourishing enterprise.

Comparative demographic youthfulness in the United States is compounded by an ingrained sense of optimism in individual economic futures. The Economist reports that “two-thirds of Americans think they will achieve the American Dream of self-improvement at some point in their lifetime”—and they spend about $700 million a year on self-help books to try to do it.
From the earliest days of the republic, most Americans have had a sense that progress is linear and inexorable. Words like “speed,” “change,” and “mobility” capture the mood of those who were free to participate in the broader economy. Alexis de Tocqueville described the recognizable spirit in his Democracy in America, (Mentor edition, 1956, p. 158), first published in 1835:

“I accost an American sailor, and inquire why the ships of his country are built so as to last but for a short time; he answers without hesitation, that the art of navigation is every day making such rapid progress, that the finest vessel would become almost useless if it lasted beyond a few years. In these words...from an uninstructed man, I recognize the general and systematic idea upon which a great people direct all their concerns.”

Substitute the words “computer,” “automobile,” “cell-phone” or “video-game” for “ships” and you understand Tocqueville’s insight.

Youthfulness and optimism help promote extraordinary patterns of restlessness in American society. The Economist reports that “[t]his year, around 40m Americans—one in seven—will move house, the equivalent of the entire population of Spain.” In the spirit of the western migration, Americans continue to looking for “the next new thing.” They’re finding it in far-flung suburbs (America is “the first society in the world to classify more than half its population as suburban”), especially in the west and south. Las Vegas, for example, has grown by 250% in the past twenty five years.

What’s striking about the migration from north and east to south and west is the movement of college educated young adults. The Economist reported that:

“[T]he largest absolute increase in the number of people with college degrees were Atlanta, the unofficial capital of the new South, and Phoenix, which 25 years ago was only one generation away from being a cattle town. At least these are diversified economic hubs. But Las Vegas too, home of Liberace and Celine Dion, saw its graduate population rise by over 20% in the late 1990s, proportionately the largest brain gain of any city.”

New York and Boston retain their cultural vitality, but if students ask your opinion about cities to begin a career Atlanta and Austin should be on the list.

Finally, America’s western and southern suburban migration is having a significant impact in reducing racial isolation and segregation. Your editor participated in this phenomenon six years ago (moving from Maryland to Washington’s distant exurb of Fredericksburg, Virginia) and immediately noticed greater ethnic diversity in middle class housing. The Economist observed in this regard that “ethnic minorities in new suburbs...now make up more than one-quarter of the suburban population... [n]ationwide, roughly half of all Asians and Latinos and two-fifths of blacks live in suburbs.”

Beyond career advice, implications of this data for college educators should encompass an understanding that most of our students (especially the millennials) will be optimistic about their personal economic futures. Their optimism is shaped less by a sense of entitlement or an altruistic desire to do good than a belief that hard work will produce economic benefits. No one should be surprised that our students are comparatively uninterested in learning as an end in itself. Look for that trait in more introspective societies better acquainted with cyclical patterns of triumph and defeat. Our students live in a world encompassed by movement and migration, change, speed, economic vitality, ethnic diversity (which they typically understand and experience more than we recognize) and work. They’re more likely to listen to us if we speak to them in tones they appreciate: optimistic rather than fatalistic; orientated to the future rather than the past; understanding of the frenetic pace of their lives; and appreciative (as well as willing to build upon) experiences they’ve had rather than those we imagine.
The impact of Hispanic immigration

By 2050 Hispanics will make up nearly a quarter of the American population. The *Economist* reports that

“The cities that have seen the fastest growth in Hispanics lately are . . . smaller cities of the New South—places such as Greensboro, Raleigh and Charlotte, North Carolina. In all of those, the Hispanic population rose by around 600% during the 1990s. The top attractions for Asians are no longer San Francisco and Los Angeles but Atlanta and Las Vegas. That is one reason why America’s growing towns and new suburbs are more racially integrated than its old cities.”

New and second-generation immigrants, especially Hispanics, are following migrations to the suburbs and doing much of the work required to build them. A new cadre of skilled labor is being created in the process.

Fears that Hispanic immigration would create a fractured culture are proving groundless, especially since a third of all Hispanic marriages cross ethnic lines. Likewise, research cited by the *Economist* shows that “over 90% of second-generation Hispanics were either bilingual or mainly English-speaking . . . [and in ] the third generation, more than three-quarters were mainly English-speaking.” More Hispanics are also entering politics, including two United States senators, 25 Congressmen, and the new mayor of Los Angeles.

Hispanics seem to be adopting a pattern of acculturation that retains roots in their countries of origin while embracing a broad American identity. This isn’t significantly different than the Irish and Italians before them, but attracts criticism by some observers if it seems to stray too far into assimilation. The risk for academic intellectuals, as Kwame Anthony Appiah has written in his 2005 book *The Ethics of Identity* (Princeton University Press), is that “upholding differences among groups may entail imposing uniformity within them” (p.151). Hispanics will take pride in an array of traditional values and customs, but they also appreciate the chance to incorporate core traits of a broader American culture, including respect for *individual* as well as ethnic diversity.

A particular challenge for educators is that only 10% of Hispanics have college degrees. The prospect for increased college enrollment is hurt by the fact that 40% of young immigrants fail to graduate from high school. The children of Hispanic immigrants are doing better, but the importance of education in an information economy requires more attention to keeping young Hispanics in high school and helping them enroll (and thrive) in college.

A growing class divide

A general sense of optimism in the *Economist* series is tempered by analysis suggesting that social mobility in America is declining. The editors report that “[s]ince 1979, median family incomes” in America “have risen by 18% but the incomes of the top 1% have gone up by 200%.” Admirers of Jacksonian traditions will be troubled to learn that “the top 0.1% of Americans [now] earn two or three times as much as their peers in Britain and France.” On top of a robust meritocracy (created, in part, by land grant universities and the GI Bill), America is re-fashioning an entrenched economic “upper class,” more assertive than anytime since the 1920s.

Keeping social mobility alive requires expanded access to college education, especially in a global economy. The benefits of a degree are accelerating, highlighted by the fact that the income gap between college graduates and non-graduates “doubled between 1979 and 1997.” Access has been diminished, however, by copious tuition increases and a tendency among state “flagship” universities to define themselves as competitors with the Ivy League. What the country needs is less competition among colleges based on SAT scores, and greater willingness to define success (and prestige) by the economic diversity of the students enrolled—and how much those students learn by the time they graduate.

Ten years ago in *SynFax Weekly Report* we reported that demographer Harold Hodgkinson had begun to emphasize that America is more “effectively segregated” by wealth than race (97.26 *SWR* 621). The importance
of Hodgkinson’s warning seems greater than ever, highlighted by a concluding paragraph in the *Economist* essay “Middle of the class: Equality of opportunity is under threat:"

“The country faced a similar rise in inequality in the early 20th century and rallied against it. President Roosevelt sought to save American capitalism from its own excesses so that ‘malefactors of great wealth’ would not become a hereditary aristocracy . . . Today, policy changes, such as reforming the way schools are financed, or giving federal help to poorer college students, would lessen social inequality. But for that to happen, American politicians and the public must first acknowledge that there is a problem. At the moment, they do not.”