

“Us” and “Them”

For the most part, the literature on discrimination tells a story about actions taken because of aversion towards specific “others.” But it might be better to begin with an understanding of preferences for those like oneself, in which case the sociological literature that has emerged from the study of ethnic enterprise provides particularly fertile terrain. In general, we anticipate a preference for insiders over outsiders on grounds of ethnocentricity alone. The sociological research concerned with ethnic entrepreneurs and their workers actually is somewhat different, painting a picture of an employer whose preference for others of his or her “own kind” stems as much from rational calculation as from intragroup solidarity. Yes, the employer is motivated by a sense of obligation to co-ethnics, but he or she also knows them better than outsiders—and is influenced by this factor, since the indexical qualities of persons like oneself yield considerable predictive power as to how an applicant will actually perform. In addition, the employer’s pulse is quickened by the knowledge that group members—both from solidarity and from limited options—can be squeezed that much harder.

This literature is helpful, but only to a point; the problem is that it takes a particular “us” and “them” relationship for granted, when in fact those distinctions fall out in a variety of ways. In the nineteenth century, for example, Benjamin Disraeli wrote of “two nations,” having in mind Britain’s “respectables,” on the one hand, and its workers, on the other.¹ A century later, the famous union organizer James Matles returned the

compliment with a book about the militant electrical workers union and the capitalists it battled, *Them and Us*.² Whether the view is from the bottom or from the top, managers and workers may look at each other and find only differences, putative ethnic commonality notwithstanding.

Moreover, nativity and ethnicity crisscross in paradoxical ways. By definition, the United States is a consensual nation, now distinguished, at least in theory, by the irrelevance of ethnic origins to attainment of full citizenship. "We Americans" provides a category for organizing and grouping persons of all ethnic stripes—in part by opposing them to the immigrant outsiders, who have not yet shifted their ways and affiliations from "there" to "here." But like any category, "American" can be associated with valences of a positive or negative kind, depending on the context. In particular, employers looking for low-wage help may be attuned to qualities of Americanness ill-suited to the tasks at hand: doing difficult, unpleasant jobs in return for paltry compensation. Under these circumstances, do employers seeking to fill vacancies see the work as better fit for "them" or for "us"? In the pages that follow, we examine how employers define "them" and "us," and the difference that these definitions make.

"WHITE WORKERS JUST DON'T WANT TO GET THEIR HANDS DIRTY"

In our sample, a substantial majority of the persons in positions to make decisions about hiring were of Euro-American background, but that trait hardly exhausts their relevant characteristics: they were also all managers or owners (the occasional foreman excepted). As our concerns involved the low-skilled labor market, the hires in question were always quite different from self—issues of ethnic background, nativity, language, or gender notwithstanding.³

Indeed, for the most part, those making decisions about hiring were reluctant to take on those workers who were least removed from their own social status. We saw this most vividly in our interviews with managers at restaurants and retail department stores, especially in the San Fernando Valley where many reported receiving applications from former aerospace workers. Managers proved reluctant to hire men and women who had been earning upwards of twenty dollars per hour for jobs that would pay little more than the minimum wage on the grounds that these formerly highly paid workers would be too unhappy with low-wage work to stay long.⁴ However, employers might have also had an

unspoken worry: "overqualified" workers might cause trouble, resisting paternalistic control, fighting for conditions and wages more commensurate with their felt worth. In sum, these usually white, highly skilled, but displaced workers came with relatively high social standing—and this turned out to be the chief factor disqualifying them.

Thus, when managers did hire white applicants, such workers were usually "them," that is, of a lower-class background, possessing a good deal less education and skill than the person making the decision. Usually, no job seeker answering this description knocked at the door; to a large extent, whites had fallen out of the labor pool for such entry-level jobs. Many employers complained that, from looking at the applicants they did get, "Most of the white people don't want to work." "Take your Caucasians, they get fat and happy," noted the chief engineer of one factory we visited. "They take things too easy. A lot of people around this area don't want to come in at the five-dollars-an-hour level. If you take people who have just arrived in the [United States] a short time [ago], they want to get ahead. Same as our grandparents did." Whites were particularly scarce on the production floor; referring to natives in general, one furniture manager observed that "nobody wants a job in a factory here." According to the furniture makers, whites had largely dropped out of the industry's labor supply, reflecting the stigmatized character of the jobs and not just their low wages: "White workers just don't want to get their hands dirty. That is it. People prefer to work in McDonald's all their lives for the meager salary of five dollars. We only have one person that earns [only] five dollars. Our whole society discourages for people not to work in these type of [manufacturing] jobs. People are not supposed to get their hands dirty."

Although positions in furniture manufacturing certainly stood near the very bottom of the job hierarchy, other industries employing low-level labor were also bidding adieu to their Euro-American help. The owner of an Italian restaurant recalled that whites were available to do any job when he had lived "back east"; now, "the American or Anglo is not a great dishwasher—unless he's an 'alkie' just doing it to get off the street." "We don't have a lot of whites applying or being hired for entry-level jobs," was the view of a manager with a large public hospital. When the dominant pattern was reversed, the unexpected entry of whites only served to underscore the norm, as in the case of a regional chain that had opened a restaurant in a newly developed area in San Bernardino County: "Anglos don't work at [this restaurant chain] any more. The only problems finding workers are in 'lily-white' communities. We

opened a new store in a 'white flight' area a year ago. We had three hundred applicants for thirty jobs, most of whom were Anglos. It was incredible, like going through a time warp. A throwback."

Of course, many managers still recruited from a white labor supply; in these cases, their evaluations were colored by their understandings of the appropriate relationship between the labor supply and the particular positions they were trying to fill. Seeking "the traditional American values—be on time, be clean, do what your employer tells you," employers often found that at the bottom of the labor market, non-white groups were more likely to come with the desired traits. Asians, in particular, often edged out whites as the labor force of choice. "I would say it's a little tougher to find today white workers with as high a work ethic as Asians. But that doesn't mean it's impossible. . . . I would say that twenty years ago there were [more]." And employers who would concede that "white workers are good workers" would nonetheless go on to say that "overall Latinos are much better workers. They have a loyalty towards the company that white workers don't have."

The white worker "problem" involved a contradictory relationship between (dominant) group and (lowly) position: "White people . . . feel that they can achieve more, so therefore entry-level or lower levels are beneath them. Like we talked about it earlier, we paint this picture of the ability to achieve success, and success in this country is measured by expensive things. Big houses, expensive cars, all the things you can't get at entry-level jobs. And they want it now." The immediacy of whites' expectations was certainly a matter for grumbling. "They [whites] are not as hardworking as Hispanics. They want to get to the top rung quickly," noted a manager in a public sector hospital. As pointed out by a number of employers, especially those in manufacturing, white workers employed in jobs that were now "right" for some different group were not simply impatient; worse, "a lot of white males in entry-level positions have the attitude that they're better than this and don't need to be doing this, whereas someone with a different ethnic background wouldn't think that." To express the point a little more politely than the pungent quote that follows, white workers had a different understanding of the proper equation between effort and reward than their employers thought appropriate: "The white factory worker is a whining piece of shit. They [feel that they] never make enough money, they always work too hard, they never want to work over eight hours a day and they feel that, as soon as you hire them, you owe them." Another remarked with equal pungency: "Their [whites'] work ethic is a little bit lower. Because they

feel that they should not be doing this type of work because they are Americans. ‘I shouldn’t be breaking my back.’ Whites are worse than blacks, they are always complaining. They tell me that they are not ‘wet-backs.’ ”

As these comments suggest, in-group status was exactly what made “in-group” workers undesirable. Moreover, the lines demarcating “ins” from “outs” varied with the situation. Since the reward-and-effort equation is mainly affected by relative expectations, whites were likely to be disqualified because they insisted on “American” standards. As a restaurant manager opined, “They’re lazier. They don’t work as hard as immigrants in this market. They’d rather earn the same wage for a less strenuous job—this is hard work.” For that reason, whites were seen by a hospital manager as “more like the blacks.” He elaborated: “You know when you offer them a job, they want more money, they expect more. The Asian groups, a lot of them just really want a job. These immigrants, they come in from their country and they just want to work.”

Of course, those employers most likely to rate white workers negatively were also those recruiting for the least desirable jobs. Relatively few managers placed whites at the bottom of the heap. Situational factors also heavily influenced the negative assessments. Hotels and, particularly, restaurants were often way stations for actors or “spoiled Valley kids”⁵ working in the front of the house; in hiring whites, managers were aware of, and irked by, the likelihood that “the minute they get a call from an agent, they drop us like a hot potato.”

As further evidence that context matters, whites’ work ethic was generally viewed more favorably where job ladders were more extended and opportunities for career employment more abundant. Some managers, for instance, were positively disposed toward white workers, but their dispositions were often functional, as when they had a preference for hiring native whites because these workers could speak English. Often, the critical assessments of whites would have had a positive valence in some other context. Sometimes, situational considerations had the opposite effect, as when managers noted that white workers were the most eager to get ahead, a trait that also made them a poor choice for jobs with few outlets upward. In the end, relative considerations heavily influenced employers, who were more likely to assess fitness contextually than in the terms of ethnic attitudes of a more abstract sort. That whites were often found unsuitable tells us much about the factors influencing employers’ views of the other groups making up the labor pool.

A NEW ETHNIC ORDER?

Latino Immigrants: "They Like to Work"

One might imagine, especially in the immigrant-dense regions of Southern California, South Florida, or New York, that apprehension over the political and demographic consequences of immigration might lead Euro-Americans to revise their long-held racial antipathy for blacks. Yet Euro-American employers still prove reluctant to hire African Americans, even if the alternative involves recruiting Mexicans or Central Americans, toward whom the same Euro-American bosses often evince considerable aversion.

The distinction made earlier between attitudes and preferences does much to illuminate the characteristics of the emergent ethnic hierarchy, as well as the factors influencing employers' selection and ranking criteria. In Los Angeles' multi-ethnic labor market, nativity serves as a crucial marker, although only one of several, distinguishing "us" from "them." As noted earlier, individualistic understandings of the issue link discrimination to an aversion to others not like oneself: "we" do not hire "them," because "they" are different, hence to be kept at a distance from "us." But, from the employers' perspective, "we" lack those characteristics that make for a good—that is, hardworking and uncomplaining—low-level worker. Although the employers seemed unlikely to think of themselves as "un-American," they often viewed "American" as shorthand for those qualities to avoid in a worker. "The American people, *we've* been spoiled." Part of the problem was a general disinclination for hard, menial labor: "The American workforce does not want to do physical labor." But the problem lay deeper: "Americans are too damned spoiled and lazy to work. Fifteen, twenty years ago, I wouldn't have said this. Their outlook has changed completely."

"Spoiled" American workers held to the belief that "it's a birthright to have good jobs and good pay. Why on earth would an American clean a hotel for five-fifty an hour? But immigrants see them as good jobs. There's a willingness to take jobs that Americans see as demeaning." Managers were enchanted neither with the American approach to work at the bottom—"It's 3:30, I've done my job. It's 'me, me, me.'"—nor with the prevailing work ethos. "When you say to an American person, 'Do you want to work at McDonald's?' they'll say, 'No way. I don't want to flip burgers,' due to the general laziness of American culture." Worse still

was the fact that, as Americans, the native-born workforce was likely to talk back: “And American workers are more concerned with their rights, as opposed to immigrants who just want a job and will settle for minimal pay without a fuss. [Without immigrants] we’d have more problems managing workers that would be more difficult and more demanding.”

Lack of the experiences, and therefore, expectations, shared by natives made the foreign-born workers different. But this was not such a bad thing, since “having gone without meals gives you motivation,” as a fast-fooder explained: “These people have a drive. From where these people are coming from, they are not given the opportunities that they are granted here, so the workers are very motivated to work, and work hard. Even though they are earning low wages.”

Rephrased in the language of our respondents, the disparities between *here* and *there* made all the difference: “Where *they* come from, five dollars an hour, at home, is a lot of money to them, where five dollars *here* is nothing”; “From where *they* are coming, working for these wages—*they* think it’s great”; “For *them*, the basics is a lot; for people raised *here*, it is not worth it.” Or, as clarified by one of our more sophisticated furniture industry respondents, “If *I* consider that relative deprivation,”—the “that” consisting of unskilled work at “six-to-seven-dollar rates”—“*they* consider this a very good opportunity.”

Thus, immigrants *were* different from “us,” but their differences served as a *positive* signal for selection; the immigrants’ “otherness” was associated with a set of behavioral characteristics that employers generally liked. “The ‘amigo,’” a fast-food manager said bluntly, “comes to work.” Noted others:

Yes, the immigrants just want to work, work long hours, just want to do anything. They spend a lot of money coming up from Mexico. They want as many hours as possible. If I called them in for four hours to clean latrines, they’d do it. *They like to work.* They have large families, a big work ethic, and small salaries. The whites have more, so they’re willing to work fewer hours. Vacation time is important to them. They get a pay and want to get two months off. They want me to rearrange a schedule at a moment’s notice. These guys in the back would never dream of that. They would like to go back to Mexico every four years for a month which I [let them] do. The back-of-the-house workers take vacation pay and then work through their vacations. I try to get them to take off a week once a year. But most of them plead poverty. The kids in the front of the house are still being taken care of by their parents. I’m not trying to disparage them, but *they’re spoiled.* (Manager in a French bistro)

Immigrants are here to work, and they're not afraid of hard work. There are a lot of young Americans who don't want to work. If they want work at the minimum wage, they go elsewhere. Immigrants will work for minimum wage and *won't complain, even if you keep them there forever*. They're used to this kind of job. (Coffee shop manager)

They're real good workers and they work lots of overtime. I mean they work and work and work. . . . Maybe some of your natives would say, "Wait a minute, I've already worked, you know, eighty hours this week. I'm kind of tired." Well then, you know, your Asian will go, "Oh yeah, you need me to work? No problem." So I think that the work ethic, you talk about work ethic, is there for them. Because, I mean, compared to what they came from this is paradise. (Public hospital human resources manager)

They're willing to work for a dollar. They don't have an attitude of "you owe me a job." They'll give eight hours work for eight hours of pay, *and they're happy doing it*, especially Hispanics. (Print shop manager)

As indicated by the comments above, employers' assessments were most likely to be couched in contextual terms, praising the immigrants for traits especially valuable in the function that the newcomers filled. As a furniture manufacturer put it, "I think that immigrants as a whole are generally suited for the type of work that we do"—hard, menial, poorly remunerated, and not likely to be seen as suitable by many other, native-born groups. Indeed, the employers tended to describe group characteristics in terms of jobs held, as did the furniture manufacturer who told us that "the Hispanic will work on a repetitious basis," the printer who observed that "Latinos seem to be good with their hands," or the manufacturer who told us that "Hispanics are good in this type of industry." Not only were immigrants considered well-matched for the tasks involved, they also were seen as possessing understandings of the reward/effort relationship that an employer would be especially likely to appreciate. "They are willing to come and do whatever job you tell them without question." Unlike the natives, the immigrants were fully cognizant of the importance of a job, and therefore less likely to quit in search of better prospects. "We have very little turnover in positions that I would think people would not want to stay in for a long period of time, like the Environmental Services Tech position [janitor]," said the HR manager of a large HMO. "The [immigrants] . . . are content to have, to continue working in those positions. So, often we have people who've been here for twenty years."

Even better, the newcomers were unlikely to scoff at the employer's coin: "I think immigrants are very hardworking, they are responsible,

and most importantly are willing to receive meager salaries for the work they put in.” Finally, they knew their place in the social hierarchy of the workplace, proving more accepting of subordination than were natives, as suggested by the white personnel director of an Asian fast-food chain: “The Latinos in our locations, most are recent arrivals. Most are tenuously here, and here on fragile documents. I see them as very subservient. I see the Asian restaurant managers call them the ‘amigos.’ That’s their name for them. The Asian kitchen people are very hierarchical. There’s a place for everyone and it’s clear where their place is.”

“I Don’t Know How They Do It”

As argued above, the managers were quite capable of preferring immigrants to fill the low-level jobs that few others found attractive without actually *liking* the immigrants, or (as we note below) favoring immigration, or holding the immigrants’ ethnic groups in high esteem. To some extent, the stigma associated with the job spilled over to the group, with suitability for undesirable work signaling incompatibility with higher functions. Thus, the appreciation involved in a typical comment—“Lots of Spanish people, if they’re working for you and feel that they have a fair shake, they stay forever”—had its nastier accompaniment, in the form of respondents’ “amazement” over workers who persisted in dead-end jobs for years. “I see a lot of complacency,” noted a respondent, referring to “people contented in housekeeping or entry-level jobs and remain in them. I don’t know how they do it.” Likewise, managers glad to find somebody to fill their entry-level jobs nonetheless looked down on those persons, whom they saw as “not all that interested in responsibility and advancement.” One hotel manager nicely expressed the Janus-faced nature of the evaluations involved in the preference for immigrant labor: “The dishwashers don’t have to speak English. They’re not driven, not motivated. They don’t want to better their life. They’re happy, doing a good job, a whole group of non-promotables.”

Thus, contrary to what follows from more individualistic perspectives, a preference for immigrant labor could go hand-in-hand with an aversion to immigrants or their communities. “There are so many of them,” said a department store personnel manager, who happened to be a native-born woman of Mexican descent. She referred to the immigrants in terms that echoed the protests of many other Californians: “There are also a lot from Mexico that come up to get social services. They’re exploiting California’s welfare system. They come here and

think we should support them. They get Social Security. Especially from Asia. They come in with an immigrant status and they get more money than Americans on Social Security.”

A printer who saw no alternatives to hiring immigrants, since “I can’t seem to hire whites right now,” still thought that immigrants “should be kept out, enough are here already.” A furniture manufacturer with a heavily foreign-born workforce conceded that immigration “creates the quality of my life,” but also told us that “on a personal level where we live, a lot of us see the quality of life deteriorating and a lot of us feel it is because of immigration.” A manager in a printing plant could laud the newcomers as *workers*, but go on to describe the immigrants as *people* in quite unflattering terms:

Field notes: The respondent first tells me, “A lot of people come to me from working in the fields.” She goes on to say that they’ve picked vegetables, milked cows, done whatever they could do to help their family, and are used to hard work. “There’s very few lazy immigrant workers.” But she then notes that Thais are industrious, more eager to assimilate into American culture than are Hispanics. “Here, everything is set up for Hispanics. They don’t have to utter a word in English and can get along fine. Thais want to learn English.” She tells me that she lives near a Tianguis supermarket [a subdivision of a major supermarket chain, designed to serve the Hispanic market] and has to make a two-city drive to get to a market where people speak English and she can recognize the food.

Similarly, a contextually related preference might not exclude a negative stereotype or an implied, more abstract, aversion: “[The immigrants are] all pretty much hard workers but relatively lazy when it comes to the language.” In general, resentment of the symbolic and cultural changes associated with immigration—as well as of the prominence of Spanish and other “foreign” languages in the workplace and public space—were frequently echoed by managers who had nothing but praise for the immigrants’ work ethic.

The Hierarchy of the Bottom

By the same token, as immigrants’ “otherness” progressively disappeared—a process quaintly described by the social sciences as “assimilation”—employers came to feel differently about the newcomers, without, however, any gain in affection. Hardly multiculturalists, the managers were ambivalent about Americanization. “[T]he more Americanized the [immigrants] become, they start getting a little bit lazier, once they start to learn the system,” said a furniture manufacturer. A hotelier had a sim-

ilar complaint, praising the “new immigrants, [who] tend to be the most aggressive and hardest workers,” but chastising “the more American ones, [who] tend to be less productive.” A printer thought that “immigrants come here trying to survive,” but that “those who’ve been here a while see that there are ways to get by.” Asked about the second generation, managers were even less enthusiastic: the children of the immigrants were “too damned Americanized”—that is to say, too much like “us.” One remarked: “If the sons are raised in the old way of raising children, they are just like their parents. But if they are Americanized, a *pocho*, the majority of them turn out to have an American work ethic.”

Managers looked askance at assimilation—“Americanized Mexicans . . . that’s the problem”—because the process changed the benchmarks by which immigrant children evaluated both jobs and the terms of compensation. The second generation was seen as not so willing to cooperate with authority: “We tell them that we need you to sweep outside,” said a printer; “They say ‘that’s not what I was hired for.’” Nor were they willing to work as hard, having other options. “The children of immigrants are more cocky. This is probably as a result of the American system. They have an attitude, they are also more familiar with their environment. Confidence is more apparent in the children of immigrants. They are also more inclined to leave the job and not work for a considerable time,” said one white furniture manufacturing manager. “Many of the Mexican Americans acquire an education and they don’t want to work in these types of jobs. Also the Mexican American is bilingual, so he has other opportunities to work in other settings earning better salaries,” said another HR manager, a Latino, also in furniture manufacturing.

Of course, the same characteristics could fit managers’ needs in other ways, as noted by a manufacturer who told us that “they are not as hard-working as their parents, although they speak both languages, which is an asset.” Consequently, depending on the dimension and its relevance to the tasks at hand, the fading of otherness could make immigrants’ children preferable as workers because they had become “like us,” just as it could make them unwanted for the same reason.

Since the preference for immigrants was so often contextual, it did not necessarily generalize beyond the workplace or even the specific set of jobs for which particular immigrant groups were thought suited. Whereas employers associated foreign birth with an “otherness” conducive to desired work habits, many were also aware of other distinctions among the immigrant population, providing the basis for a more elaborate ranking. In the words of one furniture manufacturer:

In Southern California, if I had to rank workforces, and give you four racial areas of Caucasian, Asian, blacks, and Hispanics—I would say if I had to rank them I would probably rate the Caucasian with the Asian equal, but for different reasons. The Caucasians because of the communications skills, the flexibility skills, and the comfortness that we would have culturally. The Asians would be here on the basis of hard working, long hours, the ability to do detailed work. The Hispanic would come underneath them, on the basis of their ability to do tedious work over a long period of time, and reasonably good quality, but lacking in flexibility, communication skills, education, and drive. This leaves us with blacks at the bottom, who have no flexibility, no drive, massive personal problems, and no feeling that they want to contribute to the well-being of the company.

Most managers thought that “immigrants are hardworking people, anywhere they come from.” Still, their discourse about race and ethnicity at the workplace pointed to a distinct and often quite elaborate hierarchy. Asians vied with whites as the most preferred group; Latinos, taking into account distinctions based on generational status and national origins, were arrayed towards, but not at, the bottom; and blacks were generally the least liked *and* least preferred group. Said one manager, after a long pause: “Based on my observations, I could generalize by saying that Asians are very well-organized and regimented. They are quality workers. They don’t distract easily from their work. Hispanics, on the other hand, are more casual, have less intensity. You also have to be motivating the Hispanic group so they will arrive on time. Tardiness is a big problem. Blacks, on the other hand, are even less productive. This is from the very limited experience that I have with this group [blacks].”

As suggested by these remarks, rankings often involved the invocation of prejudices having little if any relationship to the work context, informed only by broader social stereotypes. Employers’ praise of Asians took the familiar form of the superego stereotype. They heaped encomiums on Asians’ hard-work ethic, desire to get ahead, drive, goal orientation, and so on, only to arrive at the inevitable comparison: “They’re able to trade dollars with the best Jewish salesman you ever saw.” As displayed also in the quotes above, stereotypes of Hispanics revealed ambivalence with a more negative twist. Wanting a compliant workforce, some employers discovered that there was such a thing as workers who were *too* subservient. As one department store manager said, “[T]he Hispanic people don’t seem to really want to improve themselves as much as some of the other groups do.” Of course, stereotypes invoking the image of the dumb and unambitious but eager-to-please worker seemed to entail considerable projection; it was far easier to blame underlings for

their lack of skills than oneself or the "bigger bosses" for the pinched purse and unpleasant conditions that deterred more-qualified workers and allowed no outlet for the ambitious.

On the other hand, differences in education and skill between most Asians and Hispanics meant that employers' preferences regarding the two groups were unlikely to enter into hiring decisions for entry-level jobs. Employers were indeed likely to prefer hiring Asians over Hispanics when given the choice, but this opportunity only rarely presented itself. Skill differences ensured that workers of Asian and Hispanic background were typically assigned to different jobs. Asians were found in the office, not in the shop; employed as supervisors, not line workers; involved "in sales and work with computers, while Hispanics are in the pressroom"; "stealing the jobs at the technical level," according to a hospital manager, but never applying for housekeeping positions. Even if many respondents agreed with the printer who contended that "Asians are more productive," this assessment was normally irrelevant to entry-level hiring decisions. As the African-American owner of a small print shop told us, the ethnicity of the worker "depends on the job function. In the United States, you wouldn't find an Asian running a press."

Although employers were also aware of national origin differences among Latino workers, no comparably clear set of feelings or judgments had crystallized around these characteristics. Some respondents did seem to entertain a ranking system, but there was little intensity or much consistency in their comparisons. For the most part, social distance complicated the job of making the fundamental perceptual distinctions needed for such discriminations. "They are all Hispanic to me. I can't distinguish between nationalities." Occasionally, the employers noted a behavioral difference related to some disparity in the immigrant settlement experience, as pointed out by a manufacturer who told us that, "[w]here we see the difference, the Mexicans, during Christmas, tend to want to go home, because it's closer." Such niceties apart, the traits that might distinguish Latino immigrants from one another were not seen as so impressive as those that made these immigrants different from the native-born. As a department store manager tersely responded, "[They are] all hard workers to me."

AFRICAN AMERICANS: DISLIKED AND NOT PREFERRED

If employers prefer immigrants without necessarily liking them, what considerations influence their views of blacks, and with what effects? Dislike for African Americans does a reasonable job of explaining white

avoidance of blacks as neighbors, but it obviously cannot explain why some people who will not tolerate a black neighbor will happily employ a black servant. Economic theories of prejudice provide plausible accounts of how white owners can get away with paying lower wages to black than to white workers, but these accounts are of limited help here. As we discussed in chapter 8, standard economic theory casts owners as motivated by the desire for profit maximization. Instead, however, the economic theory of discrimination contends that they may be driven by a “taste for discrimination,” a modification introduced ad hoc and without justification.⁶ At its best, the economic theory of discrimination illuminates the trade-off between the psychic benefits of discrimination and the monetary rewards of hiring without prejudice. However, this trade-off only applies to capitalists, not to their agents—that is, managers—who may well put their comfort ahead of any profits foregone as a result of discrimination. In any event, the economic framework is largely irrelevant to the issue at hand, which is not wage inequality *within* any given occupation, but occupational segregation. We want to know why employers have generally been willing to hire blacks as janitors and hotel maids, but far more resistant to engaging them as bank tellers or salespersons—not to speak of higher-level, more prestigious positions in the professions or management.⁷

Where Do African Americans Now Fit?

An alternative to the economists' view might be that employers hire under the influence of stereotyped notions of the jobs for which blacks are most fit. But any such hypothesis suffers from circularity, since the fit between traditional stereotype and historical position has been too tight to determine which came first. In the past, long-held stereotypes proved no obstacle when other considerations became important; the historical record shows that employers who previously excluded blacks could quickly turn accepting, particularly when blacks could be deployed as replacements for union-prone and strike-happy whites.⁸

In any case, it is not clear how traditional stereotypes of African Americans would influence decisions in today's labor market. On the one hand, we are asking about factors that affect entry into jobs that have generally been considered right for persons considered inferior, so it is unlikely that views of African-American inferiority would render them ineligible for jobs denoting inferiority (such as janitorial or other unskilled jobs). On the other hand, we are also interested in explaining the

declining African-American presence in positions or industries (e.g., hotels and hospitals) where they were previously overrepresented. Since a constant cannot explain a change, one cannot invoke traditional stereotypes as an explanation of why employers of low-skilled help suddenly developed an aversion to black labor. And as these stereotypes served to explain why blacks were confined to the low-skilled sector in the first place, we are locked in circularity.

It may be that employers are impelled by a new set of stereotypes. As Lawrence Bobo, among others, has argued, there is a new form of Euro-American prejudice in play, in which “laissez-faire racism” has replaced the “Jim Crow racism” of old.⁹ For Bobo, laissez-faire racism functions as a stratification ideology, explaining black/white inequality in terms of deficiencies of individual blacks, as opposed to the persistent effect of racialized social structures; laissez-faire racism includes *symbolic racism*, a view that “blacks violate such traditional American values as individualism and self-reliance, the work ethic, obedience, and discipline.”¹⁰ *Laissez-faire* racism also draws from contemporary conceptions of African Americans bound up with media-popularized notions of the “underclass”—which, to the extent they attempt to explain persistent black poverty, have increased the salience of stereotypic views of blacks as unwilling to work. As opposed to older stereotypes of inherent inferiority, the “underclass” label ascribes the problems of poor African Americans to misguided government attempts to do good, the suburbanization of the well-behaved middle and working classes, and the birth of a “culture of poverty” among those remaining in the urban ghetto.¹¹ Lingering images from the Black Power movement of the 1960s, videos from the “gangsta rap” movement of the 1990s, and age-old fears of “black thugs and rapists” have combined, within the “underclass” rubric, to identify opposition to authority as the principal expression of black identity. Whereas traditional stereotypes of blacks impeded movement into higher-level positions, while supporting continued black employment in menial jobs, underclass stereotypes may have the opposite effect. Equipped with the new stereotypes, employers filling professional positions may consider well-educated middle-class African Americans, but those seeking deferential less-educated workers are cued to scratch African Americans off the list.

This argument brings us back to the Blumerian concept of race as a sense of group position, and to our related discussion of class. Traditional stereotypes of African Americans told employers where black workers belonged, producing a contextual preference for persons otherwise dis-

liked. The new stereotypes, by contrast, signal that this earlier fit no longer holds. Black workers should not be assigned to bottom-level tasks, because their sense of group position no longer supports the subordination that such low-level roles require. The new stereotypes associated with low-level labor groups typically combine negative traits (too stupid/too smart, not sufficiently ambitious/too competitive) with some positive evaluation (hardworking). Thus past and present diverge. Employers in the low-skilled sector previously held *negative* attitudes toward blacks as *people* but *positive* preferences for blacks as *workers* for the least desirable jobs. Today, however, both attitudes *and* preferences are negative. Moreover, the weight of the antiblack animus reduces the likelihood that employers' experiences with blacks will be sufficiently common or powerful to undermine the new stereotypes' baneful influence.

"I Hope This Doesn't Sound Racist"

Our interviews show that the aura of negativity associated with African Americans deeply affected employers' views toward applicants from this group, as our respondents' many frank admissions of *prejudgment* make amply clear. Predictably, employers' disquisitions on the qualities of black workers sometimes began with a preamble disclaiming any prejudicial intent, as in "I don't want to sound like a racist. I don't think I am. But . . ." or "I don't want to sound like I am stereotyping this group, but . . ." or "I hope this doesn't sound racist," the last statement intoned by a Central American immigrant manager. However, we find our respondents' admission of their racialized views far more telling:

From my standpoint, and I'll be very, very honest with you, I have a difficult time dealing with the black man. . . . And that probably is a part of my own social upbringing, because my mom was very much a racist person. So she groomed me that every black person in the world—and that is not true, because I have known numerous black people and they have been very great people and have enjoyed their relationships. (White male furniture manufacturer)

I don't think racism really comes into play with us, though there are stereotypes. Especially after the riots. To be honest, they say that black people scare white people; they do. I confess. You know, I see young black guys walking on the street and I look twice. It is not fair, because I don't think these individuals have anything to do with it, but as a group that is a perception. We don't have a perception that is formulated from a business experience, you know, because we have not been exposed on this level. But

we did employ a black truck driver for years and we deal with an all-black company that does our delivery out to the desert. So it is not really that, it is just that there are stereotypes about work ethic, dependability, and things like that, that are with us all. We all try to be individuals and judge people on an individual basis, but that is when stereotypes come true. (White male furniture manufacturer)

Such sentiments may fade under the impact of experiences that contradict them. But, as suggested above, prejudices are known to be reality-resistant, and the intensity of antiblack feelings increases the likelihood that belief will resist reality—and this is precisely what our informants often told us. “My black secretary was excellent,” recounted a furniture manufacturer, who simultaneously insisted that “blacks have no work ethic and an attitude.”

Field notes: A printer had several longtime black employees on the payroll, with whom he had no complaint; nonetheless, he was of the impression that blacks “are not serious about wanting to work.” Hard work is acceptable to a lot of Hispanics. He’s hired a young black, and he’ll say, “It’s not my job.” He’ll have this kind of an attitude.

Sometimes, negative views expressed themselves in stereotypes that drew on those traditional elements in American racial culture depicting African Americans as inherently inferior. Whereas employers lauded immigrants for their hard-work ethic, they were far more likely to describe African Americans as lazy. A fast-fooder insisted that there was a “big difference” between immigrants and blacks: “They’re lazy. Black men are lazy. Immigrant men are more willing to work and do the job right. Black men don’t care what the outcome is.” Comments of this sort, tapping into one of the oldest Euro-American prejudices against blacks, were not infrequent, although we should note that they were not delivered uniquely by Euro-Americans, as with the Chicano manager who told us, “They are lazy, they don’t show up on time, you could just see the attitude.” Employers’ descriptions linked laziness to other identifying traits, making blacks responsible for their own difficulties. Sometimes, laziness implied lack of ambition: “They don’t want to come up in life. They just want to stay where they are.” More often, the employers depicted laziness as lack of effort: “They don’t try hard enough. They want everything to be handed down to them. They don’t want to work for what they get.” *Laziness* also served as shorthand for *attitude*, of which blacks were often perceived to have the wrong kind, as in the quote from the Mexican-American manager just cited. And laziness was

invoked to describe the perceived deficiencies in blacks' work ethic: "The blacks have less work performance. They don't work hard; they're just lazy. They have less work ethic. It's because of their upbringing."

Self-Presentation and "Attitude"

The "laziness" theme was actually a minor note, although complaints about effort and performance resounded throughout the interviews. It may be that our respondents were engaged in heavy self-censorship, aware that comments associated with a view of inherent racial inferiority have become too socially unacceptable for mention in public. But as the employers seemed otherwise uninhibited in their willingness to expound on the deficiencies of black workers, one suspects that we picked up a real, rather than artifactual, dimension to their "racial" views.

We begin with a back-handed compliment, noting that managers often resembled social scientists in a preference for multidimensional depictions and multivariate explanations. For example, a manufacturer insisted that "there is a real problem," but then threw the sociologists' own vocabulary back at them to highlight its complexity: "There is a perception out there and it might be a vicious circle, there is the perception that they are lazy, that creates a resentment in them which I think makes them lazy, which makes the perception more real, and somewhere you are going to have to break that cycle." When asked whether lack of skills, discrimination, or something else was responsible for the labor market difficulties of young black men, the foreign-born black HR manager in an upmarket hotel covered all the bases: "Difficult to answer because all the factors play a role. When there's a weak economy, those at the bottom suffer the most, because there's no safety net. Skills are important. Discrimination unfortunately has been with us for centuries and it has not left. It does play a big role. Attitude, I regret that the attitudes of the person looking for employment has turned into one of arrogance. The street mentality is very unfortunate, a certain arrogance that you sometimes see in young black males."

Comparable phrasing emerged from another hotel HR manager, whose views also explicitly echo social-science thinking on the topic:

Attitude is a root cause, but the three [attitude, skills, and discrimination] interrelate. If he perceives he is being discriminated against, he is going to have an attitude. Therefore he is not going to get the skills. I'm hesitant to say blatant discrimination. But I'm not a fool to believe it doesn't exist. If he thinks he's not going to get the job because he is black or that he should

get the job because he is black, I'm not going to hire him. He's got a bad attitude. In the end, to believe that you're not going to get the job because you're black, then you portray that attitude, and you don't get the job, [it becomes a] self-fulfilling prophecy. Young black males who do not portray that attitude succeed. I see “because I'm black” as a cop-out, a way of blaming someone else for failures. I don't buy into that.

Each element above—skills, discrimination, and especially attitude—was repeatedly sounded in our interviews. Many managers depicted black applicants as less likely to know, or at least to display, the appropriate demeanor for getting the job. “In the less educated,” a furniture manufacturer pointed out, “I've noticed that they don't carry themselves well. In other words, they will come in [seeking a job] looking like a gang member.” More common were comments directly related to the skills actually required on the job, but these were most likely to be offered by respondents in organizations where entry-level requirements were higher than the average in our sample. “We have lots of black males applying for jobs who haven't finished high school and have either no work history or very poor work history,” noted a manager in a nonprofit hospital with a workforce characterized by high ethnic diversity. “Their disadvantage is no skills. And the fact that they don't go out and get them.” A manager in an HMO with a large black workforce and a mainly black applicant pool complained that “lots of people coming out of high school don't have basic skills. One of the questions [on the test for chart-room file clerks] is to write out the alphabet in block letters, and they get that wrong, if you can believe it. We test ten to twelve people at a time, and only three pass it.” And as a printing manager perceptively noted, basic skill deficiencies could easily produce interactional frictions that would make it difficult for less-skilled black workers to hold, if not to obtain, a job: “More because of, because they'd get frustrated, because, for one, they weren't taught basic skills. A lot of what they should've learned in high school, they end up having to learn on the job. If an undereducated twenty-two-year-old has to be talked down to, to make sure he understands things, it would be frustrating for him. Even for a mechanical job, it could be necessary to be able to fill out purchase forms.”

As intimated by the extended quotes above, having the wrong (or lacking the right) “attitude” was a particularly frequent criticism, one as frequently made in context as in isolation. A hospital environmental services manager, for example, who evaluated black workers and applicants unfavorably, noted that “lack of skills makes people hostile, hard to deal

with.” “My gut feeling is that they’re not stable,” echoed a public sector manager, in reference to black men.

Manager: It’s a combination of attitude and lack of skills.

Interviewer: What do you mean when you say attitude?

Manager: They’re mouthy.

The Latina human resources manager in a discount chain store told us: “In this store, we haven’t had any luck with young black men. From past experience, I’d say it’s their attitude. I couldn’t say it’s their skills, because there’s no real skill required for the job. And this goes for some of them, but not for all. It’s attitude. They felt that they didn’t have to work, didn’t have to put effort into it, because they were black. And that’s a quote. Of course, other blacks do work hard. I think it depends on their upbringing.”

Thus, employers recurrently refer to “attitude” as at once characteristic of black workers and exemplifying their deficiencies; in part, this theme embodies contemporary racialized conceptions of African Americans. If, as Bobo and others have argued, Euro-Americans have moved from Jim Crow racism to laissez-faire racism, the employers’ complaints about “attitude” and their “underclass” imagery would suggest that they are “in sync” with this drift.

Yet that characterization would overlook other, similar-sounding yet distinct, themes in the employers’ discourse, as well as the import of the comparisons the employers drew with immigrants. Employers spoke of “attitude” when describing a variety of objectionable qualities they observed in, or attributed to, black workers and applicants; however, their complaints crystallized around the impression that black workers saw themselves entitled to treatment that other workers, especially immigrants, neither expected nor received. “Of all the ethnic groups, I certainly don’t want someone who wants something for nothing,” commented the manager of a printing shop. “Lots of blacks feel that way. That’s what they have been taught.” A hotel manager complained that blacks lacked the qualities looked for in a good worker: “If you’re talking about service in the hotel industry you have to have a certain attitude. If you come with a chip on your shoulder, negativeness, ‘I’ve been a victim,’ you don’t come across as guest-oriented, helpful. You have to smile, use the guest’s name, have to be friendly, the attitude shows you want to be friendly in tone and manner. [With blacks] there is an attitude that is

there. It's hard to pinpoint, because when you say it you're accused of being a racist."

Happiest with subordinates who quietly accept subordination—a readiness more necessary at the bottom of the labor market, where the demand for subordination is great and rewards are few—employers gave black workers bad marks. "The attitudes [of immigrants and blacks] are different. One's appreciative and one is 'You owe me.'" "They [blacks] complain a lot about work assignments, whereas Asians accept." An Asian-American factory owner, employing two black workers in a crew of twenty-five, described his relationship with them:

Field notes: Talking about the two black workers in the shop, the respondent tells me that, "They're not my two best, they may not be top one-third. Both average. Those [black] individuals have always taken advantage of every situation they could." He then gave an example having to do with vacations. Since he doesn't give any benefits, he lets employees take vacations when they want. . . . So these black employees asked him for vacation before a year had gone by. He concludes by saying: "Both black workers work just as hard as the Latinos in the shop. The difference is that they tend to be more aware of the system and more willing to use it. Other employees will not even ask for two weeks. These people will."

From the employers' standpoint, any group more likely to mouth off was undesirable on this ground alone; making matters worse, as the employers saw it, was the likelihood that friction between themselves and their black workers would be expressed in racial terms. Employers particularly disliked the "black thing," the attitude that, as one manager put it, "you owe me to make up for the past . . . since I'm black." "I just think that the black thing is taken too far. I hate that when it gets thrown in somebody's face, 'It's because I'm black.' It has a lot to do with attitude. With whites, you don't throw in the color. The attitude seems to be better because they don't throw in the color thing."

"There are lots of recriminations of mistreatment, favoritism," noted the manager of a regional fast-food chain. "It's not universal. But I encounter them with too much frequency." "I don't want to sound like I am stereotyping this group," remarked a factory manager, "but they immediately react that they are being discriminated [against] and file a suit against the company." A furniture manufacturer had a similar grievance, charging that black workers "immediately let you know that they are from the 'hood' and that you should not mess with them." A black woman who directed the environmental services department in a hospi-

tal noted with some disdain that “some think the job should be given to them because they’re black.”

Exchanges of this sort were especially distasteful to employers since they felt put on the defensive—as in a furniture factory where management felt “intimidated” by a small group of black workers in the shipping department, who were seen as needing more careful treatment than the average nonblack employee. A printer put it bluntly: “[I]mmigrant men are going to work much harder and take more crap than any black man . . . will take.”

It is no surprise that employers should find little relish in having their authority questioned, but the willingness of African Americans to “put you on notice” was related to a further contrast noted by managers between them and immigrants. Blacks, the managers told us, often resisted accepting disciplinary procedures. A hotel manager, for example, argued that immigrants are “more apt to accept what they’ve done when they break rules,” whereas “blacks automatically say, ‘You’re writing us up because you’re racist.’”

Born in the U.S.A.

While employers evinced aversion to hiring blacks because, they said, blacks were too different from immigrants, they were also reluctant to hire blacks, because blacks were too much like native whites. A furniture manufacturer depicted the situation in the following light:

Manager: Like I stated before, it seems like they are not in a hurry to do anything, while the immigrants are more anxious to please.

Interviewer: Why do you think this difference exists?

Manager: I don’t think it is a difference between blacks and Hispanics. I think it is the difference between Americans and non-Americans. Between natives and immigrants. I don’t think that you can narrow it down to a Hispanic and black thing.

As we noted earlier, similar distinctions emerged when managers compared Latino immigrants with the U.S.-raised children of the foreign-born, seeing the latter as both capable of hewing to the good old ways of the parental generation and susceptible to the siren song of Americanization, with its deleterious effects on work ethos and respect for authority. Put somewhat differently, the employers’ complaint was that many workers looking for jobs in the low-wage labor market had caught the “Amer-

ican attitude: they owe me, I’m entitled”—a syndrome afflicting blacks, whites, *and* Latinos, for much the same reasons. In the employers’ eyes, blacks thought it legitimate to ask for more because they were native-born, and, in this respect, were just like whites: “Blacks demand more and want more benefits and higher salary,” said a hotelier, “because they’re Americans.” A furniture manufacturer, who maintained that blacks and whites are outperformed by the immigrants, similarly placed the source of the problem at home: “Americans are always crying, they don’t want to work hard. They argue that they are not slaves, and are always complaining when they have to work at a fast pace.”

Our respondents conceded that the motivation problem stemmed from the disparity between conditions and compensation at the bottom, on the one hand, and the expectations of the native-born on the other:

Manager: Well, I can only hire Hispanics, they are the only ones that apply for these jobs, we had some blacks, but they don’t last a week. We try them, but they don’t last.

Interviewer: Why don’t they last? There is a big black community around here.

Manager: It is low-pay jobs. They are the worst workers around. We only have one white worker, he is a minimum-wage employee. We have the same problem with them [whites]; they are worst.

Interviewer: So the only people that are willing to work are Hispanics?

Manager: Yes, they are all Hispanics. We don’t have one “legal”—I mean, one American-born worker. Well, except for me.

The owner of a coffee shop depicted black workers as similar to white workers in their reluctance to take the very lowest jobs: “Black men—even American white men—they say, ‘I’m not going to wash dishes.’ Or, ‘I went to high school and I deserve better.’” Well aware that the service sector is “a notoriously low-paying industry,” a hotel manager pointed out that “Americans, not just blacks, are not willing to work for a low amount of money.” This opinion was seconded by a fast-fooder who thought that without immigrants, “There would be no one working in these stores, because I don’t think black people, American people, will work here for four-and-a-quarter.”

The Importance of Context

Somewhat higher up in the hierarchy, where the demand for subordination was not so great and the compensation more likely to motivate

native-born workers, managers evinced a somewhat different view. An HR manager in one of the city's largest hotels commented, "I don't get a lot of black applicants and, when I do, they are older men who have been laid off or highly articulate, well-dressed younger men." With more schooling came different aspirations. Another hotel manager who "wouldn't say that the black group is any different from whites," noted in this vein that "blacks are also striving. Many are interested in higher positions and promotions. Most of the immigrants are not."

Jobs that required more demanding proficiencies also led managers to see the differences between blacks and Latino immigrants in a different light. For example, a hospital manager, who thought that "Hispanic workers are more content in the lower positions," went on to tell us that, in other jobs, there were "blacks chosen because of the language; they speak English well. These positions have more requirements—writing, reading, computers. These are young guys, providing better services." A retailer similarly noted that between blacks and Hispanic immigrants "are definitely differences. The black workforce for sales, they are better educated than the immigrants and have the necessary communications skills, if they are chosen to perform the job. This makes them far more productive in service, dealing with the customer." A long-established furniture manufacturer gave an example that illustrated just how context could alter preferences in favor of, or against, blacks: "Blacks have been much less stable. That's in the plant. Among the drivers, they've been very good. For shop people, Mexicans have a much better work ethic, in terms of the quality and quantity of work produced and productivity. But not among drivers, truck drivers. The guy working in the shop makes \$12,000–\$14,000. The driver makes \$40,000. There's a difference in the kind of person who takes the job. When he's on the truck, he has \$100,000 [of merchandise] with him. More importantly, he is our contact with the customer."

For such jobs, employers were more pleased with the fact that blacks were "like us"; a printer said, "I can talk to them without need of a translator," and a hotelier was pleased that "most can read and write." While employers knew that an American worker came with a greater likelihood of speaking his or her mind, they were also cognizant of disadvantages associated with employing a foreign-born crew (e.g., "You don't want the INS walking in.") In this context, the terms of comparison between blacks and others were changed. As a hospital HR manager said: "I certainly don't put blacks in the same. . . . I wouldn't consider blacks with immigrants; they're not immigrants. Is my experience different with them? I don't have to worry about authorizations and those type of

things, but they are also generally hardworking, dedicated. . . . Again, there's differences among people.”

CONCLUSION

America may be catapulting toward a postindustrial economy in which we all create, process, and transmit ideas and images without ever dirtying our hands. Regrettably, we are not there yet, not having figured out how to dispense with work of the hard, menial, and unpleasant kind, work still more stigmatized because increasingly removed from the typical job of the postindustrial age. Making matters worse is that the low-skilled worker earns a living in a global economy, competing with similarly situated workers thousands of miles away—which means that the wages paid in Los Angeles are effectively set in Sri Lanka.

It is under these circumstances that we ask the question: whom do employers want? In America's increasingly multi-ethnic, immigrant cities, the answer turns out to be: those least likely to complain about the conditions and compensation of low-level work. The foreign-born comprise the preferred labor force, but not because employers have suddenly developed a soft spot for immigrants, immigration, or the broader cultural or social changes wrought by large-scale immigration. Rather, employers perceive the newcomers as workers who assess their situation relative to the conditions and options encountered “back home.” As the employers understand it, the immigrants' dual frame of reference puts America's low-wage sector in a remarkably favorable perspective.

Of course, the employers know that not all immigrants are the same. They look at the immigrant workforce through the stereotypes generated in the world around them—which is why they tend to look down on Mexicans and Central Americans and to have a more favorable, if profoundly ambivalent, view of Asians. But these distinctions have little operational relevance, at least to the jobs we are considering. The employer looking for a dishwasher, janitor, machine operator, or laborer entertains little expectation that Asian applicants will flood through his door.

The same factors that lead employers to prefer immigrants breed an aversion for the native-born. We certainly would not accuse our respondents of lacking patriotism. However, they do seem to have some distaste for American culture and for the “bad habits” and unrealistic expectations it has inculcated in the American worker, who seems to want

the American dream—unavailable in the low-wage labor market, at least not with the effort that the American worker deems reasonable. Making the employer's life more difficult, everyone sooner or later falls under the spell of the American dream; as assimilation progresses, the immigrants lose some of their hard-work ethos, and their children have still less.

Employers who think American workers ill-suited for low-level jobs have an even lower opinion of African-American workers. The strength of the employers' antiblack affect, as well as the new and old stereotypes which filter their views, account for much of their aversion toward these workers. But employers are well aware of African *Americans*' dual status, seeing them as in-group members who want and expect more than usually possible at the bottom of the labor market. They also see them as out-group members, whose alienation further increases the likelihood of their making a fuss. Never looking for trouble, employers recognize whom they want—and whom they do not.

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