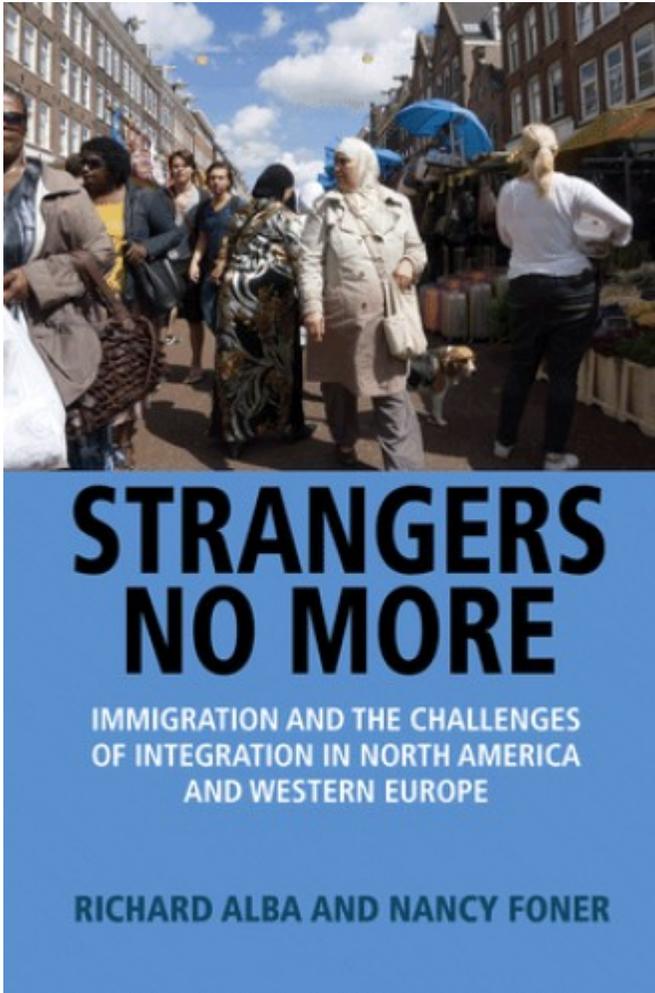


Strangers No More, by Richard Alba and Nancy Foner

reviewed by [Paul D. D. Numrich](#) in the [October 28, 2015](#) issue

In Review



Strangers No More

By Richard Alba and Nancy Foner
Princeton University Press

While I was writing this review, Pope Francis denounced the exploitation of migrant workers in a “throwaway economy”; Great Britain sought to curtail illegal entry through the Channel Tunnel; and Donald Trump, calling the United States “a

dumping ground for everyone else's problems," vowed to build "a great wall" along the Mexican border if he is elected president. The timeliness of *Strangers No More* is indisputable. The strangers of the title are mainly low-status immigrants and their children: Mexicans in the United States, "visible minorities" in Canada, Pakistanis in Great Britain, North Africans in France, Surinamese in the Netherlands, and Turks in Germany—all of whom experience marginal membership in their host societies.

Readers can expect much from this book, but they should not expect too much. Richard Alba and Nancy Foner, seasoned sociologists from the City University of New York, know the limitations of their data, which at times cannot support a conclusion, and at other times can support only a qualified one. Questions like "Which country is most successful in integrating its immigrant population?" have no simple answers. There are too many variables for researchers to make such broad determinations, and thus "there are no clear-cut winners or losers: each society fails and succeeds in different ways."

The authors do not shy away from identifying specific failures; for instance, the situation of undocumented immigrants in the United States is a "scandal." Still, reality is complicated, and given the methodological constraints of sociological analysis, this may be one of the most important conclusions of *Strangers No More*.

So what is really happening? A few examples illustrate the range of immigrant experiences and statuses.

In all six countries discussed, low-status immigrant groups are underrepresented at all levels of elective office, but their representation in the national legislatures is highest by far in the Netherlands and Canada. Again in all six countries, low-status immigrants tend to settle in disadvantaged neighborhoods, where opportunities for improvement for themselves and their children are limited. Yet residential segregation rates vary widely—they are relatively high in the United States and Great Britain and much lower in Germany.

Financial backing for education creates opportunities for social advancement for immigrants' children. The United States fares poorly in this regard, with its heavy reliance on localized—and thus inherently unequal—funding, whereas France and the Netherlands extend supplemental support to schools with immigrant children. The authors identify aspects of the French and Dutch educational models as worthy of emulation by other countries, including France's universal preschool system and

the Netherlands' subsidies for "coethnic mentors" provided by community organizations.

The authors' discussions of race and religion may be of greatest interest to American readers. Alba and Foner explore the "complex and contradictory" ways in which America's peculiar racial history has disadvantaged African-origin groups yet also provided opportunities for immigrants in the post-civil rights era, a situation unparalleled in the other countries. Race has been America's "bright boundary" between immigrants and mainstream society, while religion serves that function in Western Europe, specifically with regard to Islam.

The authors' discussion of religion may meet with skepticism. Alba and Foner contend that "Muslims in the United States are largely framed as an external threat, . . . not as an enemy from within undermining national cultural values, as in Western Europe." If that has been true, is it now changing? Have not American Muslims experienced a bright religious boundary between themselves and the larger public? But there is hope in this regard. If the country could successfully integrate Catholic immigrants, perhaps it can do so with Muslim immigrants. Moreover, the legacy of constitutional and civil rights bodes well for Muslim Americans.

What do Alba and Foner foresee happening in the future, or wish to see happen? One thing is certain: a whites-only strategy can no longer be sustained in the face of the inevitable diversification of the mainstreams. The authors end their book with the word *welcome*.

A true welcome will require structural change in all of these societies. Government policies must reduce residential segregation. Public denigration of racial and religious groups must cease, even where it is protected as free speech. Educational opportunities for immigrants' children must improve. In the United States, a welcome would involve equalizing school funding and incentivizing the teaching profession with higher salaries and better conditions, thus making it an attractive vocational option to the best and brightest students.

I have been pondering the implications of this book's title. Alba and Foner are clear that these immigrant-origin groups are no longer strangers in our societies, but neither are they fully integrated insiders. Perhaps we should call them neighbors instead.