



Book Review

Civic Engagements: The Citizenship Practices of Indian and Vietnamese Immigrants. By Caroline B. Brettell and Deborah Reed-Danahay. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2012. CCLXXV, 275 pages. \$24.95.

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Civic Engagements: The Citizenship Practices of Indian and Vietnamese Immigrants (2012) is a multi-year ethnographic study of the dynamics of civic and political incorporation among two post-1965 “immigrant” groups and their 1.5- and second-generation children: Indians, a highly skilled and recently arrived group composed primarily of professionals, entrepreneurs, and labor migrants, and the Vietnamese, an officially sanctioned “refugee” population. Brettell and Reed-Danahay’s study focuses on members of these two groups living in the greater Dallas-Forth Worth (DFO) metropolitan area, a new immigrant destination only that has recently begun to receive sustained scholarly attention.

The authors employ three types of ethnographic methods to triangulate their data. First, between 2005 and 2008, they conducted contextual research on the cultural landscapes of these two immigrant groups, situating them historically, demographically, and geographically across the highly suburbanized DFO metro area. Included in this enterprise is a mapping of the two groups’ commercial centers, religious institutions, and other public spaces. These data form the basis for Chapter 1, which overviews the two groups’ arrivals and settlement in the region, and also provide rich informational background for future chapters’ foci on the role of religious and ethnic institutions in shaping immigrants’ civic involvement.

Second, Brettell and Reed-Danahay draw on hours of participant observation,

particularly attendance at a variety of these two groups’ community events (voluntary association meetings, fundraising, and other banquets, ethnic festivals, religious ceremonies, youth group meetings, political protests, and so on), and informal discussions with members of voluntary associations. These data undergird the lion’s share of Chapters 3 through 6, where the authors examine the two immigrant groups’ forms of engagement in religious assemblies (Chapter 3), ethnic associations (Chapter 4), festivals and banquets (Chapter 5), and even pan-Asian groups – which they find are most actively attended by first-generation business and community leaders and 1.5 and second-generation youth, rather than “lay” first-generation immigrant community residents (Chapter 6).

Third, Brettell and Reed-Danahay conducted three types of semi-structured interviews: individual interviews with community leaders and media professionals (including some leaders from other ethnic groups who interact with the Indians or Vietnamese); focus-group interviews with college students at several local public and private universities; and individual interviews with 67 Indian and Vietnamese parents of high school- and college-age children, accessed through multiple-entry techniques. These data form the basis for Chapter 2, a detailed analysis of the two groups’ immigrant identities and understandings of citizenship, and show large generational differences. But they also, like the participant observation data, inform the major findings and arguments presented in Chapters 3–6.

Overall, this is a well-written and well-organized book; and I see in it three main strengths. First, Brettell and Reed-Danahay do a good job of introducing Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger’s concept of “communities of practice” to the literature on immigrant incorporation. They are largely successful in arguing that this concept sheds greater light on the processes of “situated learning” that take place in a variety of institutional spheres and through which

immigrants and their children observe, learn, and even teach (often through role modeling) ideas about social responsibility, civic involvement, and political participation. While not forsaking the more influential concept of social capital, the authors argue that adopting a “communities of practice” model allows us to better see the social agency that immigrants have in understanding and defining their civic engagement, as well as the processes through which immigrants transfer and link civic activities across multiple sites.

Second, over the course of the book, Brettell and Reed-Danahay are largely successful in backing up their argument that members of these two immigrant groups are not necessarily shedding their ethnicity to become civically and politically involved as “Americans,” as a classical assimilation approach would predict. Although I wish they would have addressed Dahl’s (1961) classic work on this topic in their analysis, it is clear that, despite the multiple pathways that members of these groups are taking into civic and political involvement, ethnicity and even pan-ethnicity can encourage forms of situated learning related to the importance of “doing good” (for the Vietnamese) or “giving back” (for Indians) and to the development of an understanding of how politics works in the U.S. (largely through business visibility and financial donations but also by downplaying internal disputes in favor of a presenting a “unified front”).

Third, two critical measures of the success of qualitative research are its internal validity – its ability to accurately portray what it has set out to portray – and its potential for generating ideas – especially ones that might be applied to other contexts in an effort to determine the work’s potential external validity. Especially in Chapters 4–6, I found myself smiling and jotting down notes in the margins of the book, pinpointing places where the authors’ descriptions of what Indian and Vietnamese immigrants are learning and doing in these institutional spheres in DFO reminded me

of what Mexican and other Latin American immigrants were doing in some of the groups and associations I studied in eastern North Carolina in 2003–2004 (Marrow, 2011). I realize now that my respondents were also involved in “situated learning” – for instance, showcasing successful immigrant leader role models at their ethnic and panethnic banquets, who could teach fellow members about civic and political involvement; inviting mainstream community and political leaders as well as mainstream business sponsors to their ethnic festivals to showcase their “Hispanic/Latino” consumer clout and establish links to prominent decision-makers and financial high-rollers in the community; holding leadership forums for adults and youth via multiple institutions; and even, especially among high-level leaders, strategically picking up the language of panethnicity to downplay internal community divisions when engaging with mainstream officials. Being able to see Brettell and Reed-Danahay’s findings and arguments so clearly within my own work, conducted with another set of immigrants in another U.S. state, is suggestive of internal and potential external validity.

At the same time, I would offer two general critiques of the book. First, I am not convinced that the authors correctly throw away the language of assimilation in favor of an alternate framework whereby we can allegedly see these two immigrant groups starting “from a position of peripherality and then mov[ing] toward full participation” (p. 9). This alternate framework of moving “from peripheries to centers” (p. 11) sounds suspiciously like the standard model of civic and political incorporation and assimilation, whereby immigrants are modeled to move progressively closer toward a “mainstream” in terms of both cultural beliefs and practices and structural access to networks and institutions. This is especially the case if we think about assimilation as a *process* rather than an outcome; if we think about it as a process that unfolds over *multiple generations* (and indeed, the book’s data suggest strong generational

shifts); and if we recognize that new versions of assimilation theory no longer require that ethnicity be shed along the way. The authors would have performed better to maintain the language of assimilation, using their data to engage with its newest iterations, rather than arguing that what they have found is something distinct, which I do not think is so.

Second, I was glad to see the authors recognize in the Conclusion that the book does not address how receiving host societies structure different immigrant groups' modes and methods of civic and political engagement. By virtue of their research design, Brettell and Reed-Danahay are able to analyze what immigrants are doing to get engaged and participate on the ground but largely unable to analyze this other important element of the incorporation process. In future work, I would like to see more focus on receiving structures and policies – which, for example, Bloemraad (2006) shows encourages identification and organizing along racial and panethnic lines in the U.S., as opposed to national origin lines in Canada. I would also like to see more

focus on how local host communities might be reacting to immigrant groups' rising civic and political participation, including potentially altering and changing themselves (or not), to provide a better sense of the possibility of true “two-way” assimilation.

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