

## CHAPTER 1

# *Women and International Migration: Moving Beyond Unproductive Polarizations*

No description can even begin to lead to a valid explanation if it does not effectively encompass the whole world.

—Fernand Braudel<sup>1</sup>

Neither the life of an individual nor the history of a society can be understood without understanding both . . . No study that does not come back to the problems of biography, of history, and of their intersections within society has completed its intellectual journey.

—C. Wright Mills<sup>2</sup>

Our collective goal ought to be to advance a theoretical framework to our scholarship that transcends the victim/heroine, domination/resistance dualism and incorporates the varied experiences of women. We need . . . work that insists on presenting the complexity of the sources of power and weakness in women's lives.

—Linda Gordon<sup>3</sup>

Migrating women at the turn of the century found themselves living a paradox. On the one hand, migration to the United States promised the fulfillment of "old world" dreams in a new land or, at least, a degree of emancipation from old world hierarchies and greater self-determination. At the same time, however, migration had the potential to intensify existing subordination, as well as to subject women to new forms of control and domination.

Rosa Cavalleri, who emigrated from Italy to the United States in 1884, cooked and cleaned over forty years for the female social reformers of the Chicago Commons Settlement House. "How can I not love America," she proclaimed to a resident settlement worker, "an angel woman," taking down her life story (for which

she was never paid). "I hope I do my work so good so I never have to leave this place! . . . Even if they didn't pay me I would not want to stop working in the Commons" (Ets 1970:221). Writing about the same time, Russian-Jewish immigrant Anzia Yeziarska, expressed a contrasting view of immigrant women's experiences in America. In her autobiographical short story, "The Free Vacation House," Yeziarska sharply criticized Americanizing reformers of the "Social Betterment Society." "For why do they make it so hard for us," an immigrant mother implores. "When a mother needs a vacation, why must they tear the insides out from her first . . . why do they boss the life out of us? (Seller 1981:194).

Migration, like "city air," might make women "free," but the paradox of this metaphor of modernity was that women, like men, seldom migrated and resettled under conditions of their own choosing. Whether or not, the conservative reaction to large-scale social change, or the collective resistance to it, mass migration posed a potential threat to the personal and group identities of all who made the journey, transforming the initially hopeful into the most recent wave of the dispossessed.

Recently, Salman Rushdie in his novel, *Satanic Verses* (1989), portrayed the assault on his immigrant protagonists' identities by the gatekeepers of the dominant nationality. "They have the power of description," he wrote, "and we succumb to the pictures they construct." Nearly a century before, a young Russian-Jewish immigrant, Mary Antin, offered her own terse characterization of this particular dimension of displacement. In the preface to her autobiography, *The Promised Land*, she wrote: "I was born, I have lived, and I have been made over" ([1911] 1969:x). Russian-Jewish novelist, Anzia Yeziarska, struggled "to become a person," as she put it, an active agent in control of her own life. During the same period, Leonard Coviello's teacher took it upon himself to change the young Italian immigrant's name to Covello, claiming it was easier to pronounce. Upon discovering this, Coviello's father exploded in anger; his mother, in an attempt to mediate the conflict between cultural and generational authorities, internal and external change, explained to the boy: "A person's life and honor is in his name. A name is not a shirt or a piece of underwear" (Covello 1958:23). The road to potentially wider opportunities and empowerment for both individuals and social groups was often strewn with new forms of domination and control.

My goal in this study was to analyze how Italian and Russian-Jewish immigrant women experienced and tried to negotiate both the potentially empowering and the coercive dimensions inherent in the process of international migration. To what extent did migration provide women the conditions under which they could free themselves from preexisting social constraints? How did Russian-Jewish and Italian immigrant women compare with regard to the extent of their empowerment or subordination in America? What meanings of migration did these women construct to make sense of and to evaluate their changing geographic and social locations?

TRANSNATIONAL MIGRATION:  
THE REMAKING OF SOCIAL RELATIONS  
AND SOCIAL CONCEPTS

A variety of social relationships systematically structured women's migration experiences and outcomes. The various modes of adaptation, accommodation, collaboration, negotiation, reconciliation, and resistance through which migrating women responded to change and transformed themselves and their environments, were shaped by their multiple, linked, and often contradictory positions in social relationships. More specifically, the class, nationality/ethnic/race, and gender relations of the world-system all intersected to shape the timing and organization of women's European departures and their patterns of settlement in the United States. Thus, in order to understand if the position of women improved as a consequence of migration, it is not only necessary to explore the historically changing meanings of gender relations, but also those of race/ethnicity/nationality, and social class in a developing world-system. One task of this project has been to develop a framework for interpreting and evaluating the extent of changes in immigrant women's social position, or status, by connecting it to the forces of proletarianization, sexism, and racism/nativism embedded within the developmental processes of the modern world-system.<sup>4</sup> While the focus of this study is migrating women, considerable attention then is given to the overarching, but historically specific, social institutions and social relationships that constrained their options and aspirations, or alternatively served as their points of leverage in subverting, manipulating, or resisting the multiple and intersecting dominations they faced.

Historical and comparative analyses of transnational migration have a unique potential to illuminate both the rigidity and the flexibility inherent in categories of group identification. In migrating, women both challenged and reflected changes in what are traditionally assumed to be “authentic” social group boundaries and differences, not only between “feminine” and “masculine” behaviors, but between a number of socially constructed and paired opposites, including “alien” and “native,” “race” and “ethnicity,” “child” and “adult.” Geographic and political relocation exposes the extent to which these categories of identification do not have some “authentic” essence or universally fixed content. The multiple contexts and conflicts that give meaning to categories of nationality, race, ethnicity, gender, age, and social class are reorganized in the course of migration. Thus, one aim of this study has been to explore how a comparative and historically contextualized analysis of migrating women’s shifting personal and collective identities might unsettle and rearrange traditional understandings of international migration.

### *The Multiple Dimensions of Immigrant Women’s Position*

Before discussing the implications of various traditional migration and resettlement theories for understanding immigrant women’s experiences and outcomes, it is necessary to make explicit which dimensions of women’s lives are examined in this study. Feminist scholarship in the humanities and social sciences has shown that *gender*—the socially constructed and historically situated relationships and practices patterned around perceived differences between the sexes—is a significant organizing principle of overall social life, one which shapes women’s opportunities and life chances, as it does men’s.<sup>4</sup> Gender is, thus, “a set of social relations which organize immigration patterns,” in much the same way as other social institutions and practices are organized through gender relations, such as the economy and work, the family and mothering, ethnic communities and social networks. In her application of gender analysis to the study of Mexican undocumented migration and settlement in the U.S., sociologist Pierrette Hondagneu-Sotelo reminds us that “the task is, then, not simply . . . to ask the same questions of immigrant women that are asked of immigrant men, but to begin with an examination of how

gender relations facilitate or constrain," in this case, eastern and southern European immigrant women's opportunities for greater self-determination (Hondagneu-Sotelo 1994:3).

My use of the terms *social position* and *status* are meant to convey the multifaceted nature of immigrant women's experiences, collectively and personally, within a range of gendered social relationships, and to draw attention to both the possibilities of an improvement in their material well being, as well as in their sense of increased empowerment, or greater relative control over their lives. This study foregrounds immigrant women's interactions with state migration policies, private Americanization efforts, coethnic community networks, and income-producing opportunities. Within these sets of social relations, women came to exercise varying levels of authority or autonomy as "foreigners," as workers, and as family, household, and community members.

Immigrant women also evidenced a range of experiences as participants in the determination of their individual identities. One of the tasks of this study was to explore what I took as Anzia Yezierska's sense of personhood, the more subjective side of self-determination. I looked at the extent to which immigrant women demonstrated greater personal autonomy in terms of developing and pursuing more self-defined identities, outside the range of gender, ethnic/nationality/race, and social-class-defined roles traditionally open to them. In other words, I examined the extent to which women, in the course of migrating and resettling, imagined, defined, or identified themselves as somehow apart from the larger collectivities into which others had defined them. The capacity to develop more self-defined identities may have been indicative of a sense of empowerment that transcended the individual and reflected a more general expansion in the content and meaning of social categories.

Over the past decade many scholars, feminist scholars of color in particular, have commented critically upon notions of gender inequality which implied a universal "sisterhood" formed by and through common subordination to a male patriarchy, without regard to historical or cultural context or to relations of domination-subordination between women.<sup>6</sup> For feminist philosopher, Sandra Harding, "[In] cultures stratified by both gender and race, gender is always a racial category and race a gender category" (Harding 1986:18). This study considers the hierarchal relations of gender, nationality/ethnicity/race, and class to be tightly inter-

woven within each set of interactions between immigrant women and state migration policies, private Americanization efforts, coethnic community networks, and income-producing opportunities. What was prescribed for, forbidden to, or experienced by working-class Italian immigrant women, single and married, as compared to working-class Russian-Jewish immigrant women, single and married—rather than by *all immigrant women in general*—is precisely the objective of this study.

*European Immigrants, Racialization,  
and Not-Yet-White Ethnics*

My use of the terms *race*, *racialization*, and *racial nativism*, in the context of a study about European immigrant (“white ethnic”) women requires some clarification. My overriding concern has been to distance this analysis from those framed within assimilation and cultural pluralist perspectives that claim to seek, but more often to justify, why some different, but equivalent, ethnic groups (white) became more economically successful than others (nonwhite). Assimilation theorists have actually had very little to say about “race.” African-Americans, like Irish-Americans, Italian-Americans, and Jewish-Americans were all perceived as recently arriving immigrant (i.e., ethnic) groups in northern U.S. cities by the classic assimilationists (Wirth 1928; Park 1950). Mistakenly, the assimilation/ethnicity perspective equates the durability of prejudice and discrimination against people of color with the comparatively ephemeral and fluid nature of coercive Americanization policies directed against not-yet-white ethnics.<sup>7</sup> Neither assimilationists nor cultural pluralists have analyzed the differences and hierarchical ranking systems between ethnic groups or within any particular ethnic group designation, for instance among Jews or Italians in America.

My use of racial terminology is meant to signal the removal of this study from the assimilationist and cultural pluralist paradigms. In contrast, I place the interpretation of southern Italian and Russian-Jewish immigrant women’s experiences within the developing literature on the social construction of whiteness as a racial category and social identity.<sup>8</sup> More specifically, I examine how processes of national/regional/ethnic stratification within eastern and southern Europe shaped the migration of particular social groups, as opposed to others, and how those groups were

constructed during the period under examination as “not-yet-white ethnics.”

Racialization refers to “the extension of racial meaning to a previously racially unclassified relationship, social practice, or group” (Omi and Winant 1986:64). Racism is defined here as “those social practices which (explicitly or implicitly) attribute merits or allocate values to members of racially categorized groups solely because of their ‘race’” (Omi and Winant 1986:145). Racial nativism is racism modified by distinctiveness based on citizenship status. Racism and racialization are simultaneously ideological, economic, and political processes. They are historically and contextually specific. In particular, the meanings attached to *white*, *nonwhite*, *American*, *Hebrew*, and *Southern Italian* are historically contingent ones. The boundaries, the boundary-setting processes, and the identification of similarities and differences between groups that emerge, develop, and change are only analyzable within clearly demarcated sets of historical and social relationships (Wallerstein 1987). The same nominal group classification (e.g., southern Italian or Russian-Jewish) may, in the context of one set of historically specific hierarchical relations, be understood as a “nationality” (attributing a political dimension to peoplehood). In another entirely different set of social relations, the same name may be descriptive of a “race,” (attributing a physical distinctiveness to peoplehood) or possibly, an “ethnicity” (attributing a cultural distinctiveness to peoplehood).

It seems clear from contemporary sources that the “new immigration” from southern and eastern Europe in the late nineteenth century was, to some extent, racialized and depicted in terms of specific “scientifically derived racial traits” based on the so-called immutable laws of nature.<sup>9</sup> But the rationale for interpreting southern and eastern European immigration within a paradigm based on race can be strengthened if we consider that turn-of-the-century understandings of the relation between biology, race, and culture differed from those developed in the mid- to late twentieth century. The predominant nineteenth-century understanding of race, which informed political and economic activity, defined race on the basis of *both* biological and cultural distinctiveness. Moreover, the characteristics of biology and culture were assumed to be equally heritable across generations, as well as equally subject to modification or disappearance in the course of historical development (Paul 1981).<sup>10</sup> Race, racialization, and racism understood in

the nineteenth-century conceptualization of the terms, thus encompassed for a limited time the identities and experiences of southern Italian and eastern European Jewish immigrants in the United States.

While one aim of this book is to analyze the process by which “not-yet-white ethnic” women were differentiated from each other, as well as in relation to “white” and “white ethnic” women, the study does not attempt to examine the specific ways in which “not-yet” and “not-quite” white ethnics, to paraphrase historian David Roediger (1994), eventually became white Americans. As Roediger aptly points out, “in the process of Americanizing European immigrants acquired a sense of whiteness and of white supremacy” (Roediger 1994:187). He goes on to suggest that “immigrants often were moved to struggle to equate whiteness with Americanism in order to turn arguments over immigration from the question of who was foreign to the question of who was white” (Roediger 1994:189). At some point, possibly by the 1920s, not-yet-white ethnic women emerged simultaneously as both the subordinate gender and as part of the dominant race in the U.S. This study addresses the preconditions for white ethnic women’s contradictory experiences of dominance and subordination.

In the section that follows I situate immigrant women’s experiences within a multidisciplinary literature of contrasting theories about international migration and adaptation, and discuss its implications for understanding the relationship between migration and changes in women’s social position.

### CONTRASTING PERSPECTIVES ON WOMEN AND MIGRATION: TRANSCENDING INVISIBILITY, PASSIVITY, AND REDUCTIONISM

Following two decades of research in women’s studies and ethnic studies, it would seem appropriate that a study of this nature begin with a focus centered clearly on women’s premigration lives in their nineteenth-century European regions of origin. But, as historian Donna Gabaccia has aptly pointed out, “the very proliferation of specialties that allowed ethnic and women’s studies to develop as multidisciplinary fields has also helped institutionalize the conflicting categories, methods, and modes of analysis that



contribute to the marginality of scholarship on immigrant women" (Gabaccia 1991:74). In other words, one legacy of the lively outpouring of multidisciplinary research on women has been misunderstanding, polarization, and the lack of any common ground, language, or research agenda. Neglect of the relationship between women and migration by many researchers and conflict over mode and unit of analysis by others suggests that a critical examination of the various theoretical frameworks and their implications for this study is much needed before proceeding. The need to draw explicit connections between migrating women's personal and social origins, destinations, and destinies exists in the first instance and is made all the more complicated by a combination of omissions, misrepresentations, and false dichotomies in much of the migration literature.

Three fundamentally problematic trends have tended to characterize research on the role of women in the migration process, historically, as well as in contemporary international migrations. The sources of these analytical difficulties can be traced to certain, until recently unchallenged premises within general theories of international migration, starting with the central stereotyped assumption that the prototypical migrant was and continues to be a male breadwinner. Still problematic although no longer the dominant tendency, the role of women in international migration was sociologically invisible; women were excluded both from general theories of migration and historical-empirical research.<sup>11</sup> Of course, it is no longer the case that women are completely overlooked in the migration process. Rather, the analytical difficulties have increasingly become those which developed in the varying stages of their becoming visible. The second trend in research concerning women and migration was to recognize the category of "woman" simply as synonym for unproductive dependent, to consider women only within the framework of the family and, as with children, to acknowledge them merely as passive followers of "the real migrant," the male labor migrant or political exile. Finally, from the mid-1970s onwards, social scientists increasingly turned their attention to women. In an effort to redress past stereotypes, researchers, for the first time, discovered migrating women as important persons in their own right and produced a literature that centered on migrating women's wage labor. Some have even claimed that "the massive increase in the female labor force throughout the world is to a large extent the result of female

migration" (Brettell and Simon 1986:4). While there has been widespread agreement on the importance of studying migrant women's purposive behavior, it seems legitimate to ask, following Morokvasic, "why [are] only the economically active women migrants . . . 'sociologisable' [considered worthy of sociological analysis]?" (Morokvasic 1983:14). In the otherwise praiseworthy attempt to correct previous omissions, migrating women have been reduced to genderless, cultureless units of labor power, as researchers liberated them from kinship, household, community and all other nonmarket relationships.

The source of women's invisibility, passivity, and reduction in the literature on migration is rooted in fundamental premises of widely held theoretical explanations for the dynamics and consequences of international migration, as well as in the nature and organization of the historical evidence. In particular, the invisibility of women's participation in population movements, termed "the world of our father's perspective," by historian Laura Anker Schwartz (1983:102), is as much a matter of the nature of the available evidence as it is of biased research questions. The concentration on evidence collected by the receiving state, particularly U.S. Immigration Commission records and census data, reveals little about the emigration process as one of gender selection. As a consequence, studies based on this evidence were unable to acknowledge or explain population movements dominated or pioneered by women, as in the cases of Irish women's migration to New York in the mid-nineteenth century, or Jamaican women's in the mid-twentieth (see Diner 1983; Rudd 1988; Foner 1985).

The roles and experiences of women left behind after the migration of fathers, husbands, and sons have similarly been overlooked until fairly recently. Rather than "left out" of migration, these women were simply located at one end of a global process. Some became temporary, even permanent, heads of households in their countries of origin. Although they worked at maintaining family property and status, thereby enabling the movement of men and, indirectly subsidizing the low and unsteady wages paid to the male members of their transnational households, their contributions have only recently been acknowledged in the migration literature. But other women left behind just as easily found themselves bound more firmly as subordinates in their own families of origin or in their missing husbands' families.<sup>12</sup>

Reliance on U.S. census and immigration records have similarly underestimated or excluded entirely much of immigrant women's paid work. In immigrant communities women's earnings in the home, whether in the form of wages from industrial homework or profits from small informal sector/family enterprises, were seldom reported to government investigators. Moreover, the existence, let aside the importance, of women's nonwaged domestic labor, whether performed in the country of origin or destination, whether combined with paid work or not, has been systematically neglected in U.S. government investigations of migration.

Thus, the areas where women's involvement in the migration process might have been discovered were precisely those omitted from government data collection, whose reports have traditionally served as the primary source of information about U.S. immigration history. At bottom, however, it has been the underanalyzed theoretical assumptions that bear most responsibility for guiding researchers to the particular bodies of evidence that have depicted migration as a flow of adult male breadwinners, and immigrant communities as primarily collectivities of fathers and sons.<sup>13</sup>

### *Migrating Women, Modernization, and Assimilation*

The most widely held theoretical perspective on the dynamics of international migration, the push-pull/modernization model, together with complementary human capital and assimilationist approaches to immigrant outcomes, have contributed to and justified the study of migration from the vantage point of the receiving state. A central premise underlying these approaches holds that migration is primarily a matter of individual choice and a movement of unencumbered individuals. The individual, as the unit of analysis and source of the decision to move, is distanced from any constraining or facilitating social relationships, just as conditions in the sending country are analytically separated from those in the receiving society. Thus, the mass movement from eastern and southern Europe to the United States in the late nineteenth century is explained by means of a compilation of economic, political, and social disadvantages that prompted individuals to leave their homelands, and a separate calculation of advantages that pulled these individuals toward the United States (e.g., Thomas 1954). The social origins of immigrants are acknowledged only insofar as they appear, from time to time, as justifications for their

subsequent “successes” or “failures” in the receiving society. In this case, origins or backgrounds are, in the language of the human capital model, translated as attributes of individuals, (i.e., Western male middle-class individuals) such as years of schooling, knowledge of English, or industrial experience. Sociologist Janet Abu-Lughod has described the push-pull model as follows: “Human beings, like iron filings, were impelled by forces beyond their conscious control and like atoms stripped of their cultural and temporal diversity, were denied creative capacity to innovate and shape the worlds from which and into which they moved” (Bach and Schraml 1982:323). Largely as a consequence of working within this framework, researchers had not seen it necessary to question or to rethink their reliance on evidence gathered nearly exclusively beside “the golden door” to the United States.

A popular variant of the push-pull migration model suggests that only those individuals who had been exposed to “modern Western values” and who thus could project themselves into the role of “Western man,” had the ability to uproot themselves and migrate.<sup>14</sup> When this view is combined with the stereotyped assumptions of men as goal-directed risk takers and women as guardians of traditional culture and mothers of the future generation, the consequence was the near invisibility of women in population movements and their exclusion from analytic frameworks.

Once migrating women emerged from scholarly invisibility, analysis of their adaptation experiences quickly became entangled in the polarized debate between proponents of models based on cultural destruction, or uprooting, in contrast to those based on cultural continuity, or transplanting. Premised upon a traditional-modernity continuum and an assimilationist perspective, the model of cultural destruction posited that migration was accompanied by the breakdown of preindustrial values, cultural practices, and social structures. Because the ethos of individualism was more in keeping with the needs of a modern urban-industrial society, proponents of this view argued that most new immigrants eventually abandoned their old-world kinship and community loyalties.<sup>15</sup>

Advocates of the cultural uprooting thesis have had some difficulties, however, reconciling traditional gender stereotypes with women’s migration patterns. When migrating women first emerged from scholarly invisibility the most widely held perspective explained their presence away as the dependent wife, mother,

sister, and/or daughter of the prototypical breadwinning male migrant. Portrayed as passively following the decision maker out of the sending country, migrating women were not yet analyzed as individuals motivated by the same "modern" ambitions as men. Although many southern Italian and eastern European Jewish women did migrate as part of families, and this approach does recognize them, it fails by continuing to depict women as if they had been somehow untouched by modern social change prior to emigration.

Migrating women's lives have been typically analyzed only from the moment they entered the new world. They are assumed to have entered modern history just as they emerged from the hold of a ship with traditional values and practices unshaken; in other words, from point zero of individual subjectivity or group acculturation. Where it has become necessary for proponents of a push-pull/modernization approach to survey immigrant women's old-world backgrounds and identify those attributes that either promoted or retarded assimilation, contradictory stereotypes of race, gender, and class collude. The representation of immigrant women as passive accessories to an overarching process in which they were not fully engaged both reflects and contributes to their continued depiction as "victims" by researchers, as well as policy-makers. Immigrant women have, on the one hand, been portrayed as dependent, saintly, sacrificing, secluded from the outside world, and subjugated completely to the will of a traditional male patriarch for whom they must bear untold numbers of children. At the same time, social reformers have defined immigrant women as "social problems" and "social projects." They have been alternatively characterized as unproductive, ignorant, crude, brash, and miserly matriarchs who struggled for total control over their households.<sup>16</sup>

Most frequently, immigrant women have been blamed for delaying Americanization and thus retarding the upward mobility of their families and ethnic communities. Although this approach no longer predominates as such, it has reemerged in a subtly assimilationist version of contemporary feminism, which promotes and measures immigrant women's empowerment by extent of paid employment, number of children, and method of child rearing. In one of the more recent attempts at writing a general history of immigrant women in America, *Foreign and Female*

(1986), Doris Weatherford begins her book with the following unfortunate claim:

The word that most fittingly describes the immigrant woman's attitude toward her body, her life, and her world was *fatalism*. It was a European attitude, developed from long centuries of a class structure that wiped out the peasant who showed any signs of assertion. It was a woman's attitude, formed by aeons of submission to the men who controlled her life—and her body. The direct result was fecundity far greater than that of the average American woman. (Weatherford 1986:2)

In this example, the author has extracted migrating women from history and reconstructed their social origins on the basis of gender, race, and class stereotypes. An ideal typical immigrant woman is thus constructed and then represented as a complete *tabula rasa* upon arrival in the new world. The fact that a Russian-Jewish or southern Italian woman may have been a productive, responsible, and knowledgeable person in Europe for whom emigration was only one chapter in a broader and longer-term process of personal and social change cannot be acknowledged from within this theoretical model. Within the evolutionary schema of push-pull/modernization theory, the point of reference for evaluating the consequences of migration in women's lives is a static, unitary, and oppressive traditional society that stands in marked opposition to a modern, progressive, and enlightened new world. When viewed solely from within this perspective, how can migration be interpreted as anything other than liberating for women?

A variation of the "uprooting" thesis depicts the migration of women in the same individualistic or psycho-culturalist terms as modernization/assimilation theorists claimed for migrating men (Morokvasic 1983:14). In other words, the dynamics of women's migration is interpreted simply as the response of the so-called best individual women attempting to better themselves. In the otherwise praiseworthy effort to correct the passive "victim" and "social problem" bias and portray women as other than simply members of larger kin and family units, some studies have erred in another direction; in these, researchers have liberated migrating women nearly entirely from the nineteenth-century political, national/cultural, class, and kinship relations in which their lives were embedded. These studies stress the pursuit of self-interest in explaining women's migration. In so doing, the social relation-

ships and networks that directly or indirectly prohibited, promoted, and/or organized gender-selective population movements have been disregarded.

For instance, in their introduction to *Jewish Grandmothers*, Sydelle Kramer and Jenny Masur discuss the immigrant women whose life histories they included in their book:

They are not passive. None of the women in this book was content to stay at home and do nothing. They pursued either education or a career and, by doing so, broke out of the ghetto of passive domesticity for women. (1976:xv)

In recovering immigrant women's voices and acknowledging individual immigrant women as economically active protagonists, the authors redressed a serious imbalance in the literature at that time and introduced important new methods. However, their interpretation of women's mass migration is still framed in terms of economically calculating individuals or atypically adventurous women. Their possibly unavoidable error was to position and evaluate turn-of-the-century immigrant women's experiences in accordance with the cultural values and class interests of feminist scholars of the 1970s.<sup>17</sup>

In marked contrast to the cultural destruction model of immigrant adaptation, proponents of cultural continuity attempted to counter the depiction of international migration as a process eventuating always and for everyone in assimilation/Americanization and individualization/atomization. Revisionist social and labor historians argued that it was women in particular who preserved premigration cultural values and social structures, rather than allow them to fall victim to the disaggregating pressures of urban-industrial capitalism (e.g., Gutman 1976; Yans-McLaughlin 1977). Immigrant women were placed at the forefront of social change, in flexibly maintaining extended kinship networks and household economies from destruction by the dominant culture (Ewen 1985; Deutsch 1987; Weinberg 1988). In case after case, historians documented the crucial role of kinship networks in the migration and settlement process and in the provision of housing, jobs, and other assistance in times of crisis. Some scholars also explored the link between the resilience of immigrant kinship systems and labor protest.<sup>18</sup>

Although the cultural persistence thesis is valuable insofar as it recovered the history of popular cultural autonomy and the

nature of resistance to anonymous social and economic pressures, certain underanalyzed assumptions and dichotomies detract from its potential usefulness in explaining immigrant women's experiences. First, although advocates of this perspective acknowledge women as productive members of immigrant communities, the source of their resistance to disruptive social change is nevertheless based on an uncritical acceptance of a set of primordial oppositions between maleness and femaleness. These are presumed not only to have existed in preindustrial, "traditional," southern and eastern European societies, but to have been transported and transplanted fairly intact in urban-ethnic settings in the United States as well.

Particularly disturbing is the appearance here of the well-worn universal assumption that women's identity and behavior, unlike men's, is rooted in a sense of family obligation and loyalty. One analytic problem that arises from this is that the very same preindustrial value of family cooperation is called upon to do double duty as both explanation for a woman's entry into the wage-earning labor force and for her retention in the home as a nonwaged worker in the service of her family.<sup>19</sup> Alternative conceptualizations of mothering and women's roles in families as dynamic social constructions, formed and transformed by individuals interacting and negotiating with each other and with broader political and economic forces in historically specific contexts, still needs to be made part of this theoretical approach.<sup>20</sup>

Some proponents of the cultural continuity model have explained the presence of "familial consciousness" among immigrants by emphasizing traits supposedly natural to women (Cornelisen 1976:155). Other perspectives focus on the attributes of a static preindustrial culture, in which women are more visibly embedded than men (Banfield 1958). Patricia Pessar, in an early article quite uncharacteristic of her later work, inadvertently managed to combine both problems. In an otherwise useful analysis on "The Role of Gender in Dominican Settlement in the United States," Pessar stated:

By contrast [to men], women's identity is firmly rooted in the household. Even as a "bird of passage," the woman may be metaphorically compared to an actual bird which carries in its genetic make-up the capacity and proclivity to construct a nest wherever it goes. As part of her cultural programming the Dominican woman transports the values and roles associated with the home wherever she settles. (1986:276)



The link between femaleness and familial consciousness appears to have survived the transition from one theoretical framework to another, rather than becoming itself a subject for sociological and historical inquiry.

A second source of difficulty with the way the cultural continuity model has depicted women's part in international migration concerns its tendency to romanticize immigrant preindustrial practices and structures (e.g., Bodnar 1985). Overemphasis on the resourcefulness and inventiveness of new immigrants in adapting old-world kinship, household, and cultural patterns to new-world settings has obscured the extent to which these same "family survival strategies" could impose severe limitations on the ability of migrating women to "become persons," subjects of their own lives. Immigrant families and households may have survived the journey to industrial capitalism, and their preindustrial cultural values may have aided in this and even, at times, served as an instrument of resistance, but often only at very great cost to individual family members. The resilience or, more likely, the reconstitution of ethnic and kinship solidarities could facilitate employment and upward mobility for some individuals, but it could more than likely subject the less-powerful members of the same family or community to high degrees of exploitation, as in the "ethnic economy."<sup>21</sup> Women, in particular, were often the ones to forfeit opportunities for schooling and meaningful employment; they frequently delayed marriages, gave up the chance for a free-choice marriage, or conversely were coerced into marriages against their will when kinship obligations and cultural loyalties left few or no alternatives. Late twentieth-century desires for a more "collective consciousness" should not be permitted to invent a past that obscures the systematic power inequalities that were a part of so many pre- and postmigration practices. Women's own varied understandings of their migration and settlement experiences have needed to be included and analyzed as part of the historical record.

A third analytical difficulty with the direction taken by advocates of cultural continuity in immigrant history became cause, in part, for the emergence of an alternative theoretical framework. Critics of "the new social history" charged it with "photographing the positive aspects of the culture of the oppressed with a focus too close to show the framework: the prison bars" (Gordon 1986b:24).

*Migrating Women and the  
Global Development of Capitalism*

Many social scientists in the 1970s and 1980s began to situate the study of international migration within research on the global development of capitalism, in response to both the excessive individualism of the push-pull/human capital/assimilation perspectives and the overemphasis on "agency," "resistance," and "cultural autonomy" in the preindustrial continuity model. Writing about women in the migration process at this time, Anthony Leeds argued that "the emphasis on the individual and internalized norms and personal motivations . . . tends to obscure socially determined strategies . . . in individual and group action within social-structural contexts" (1976:69). Henceforth, the central unit of analysis in an emerging alternative macroframework for migration research was shifted upward from the individual (and the aggregate of his/her decisions) to the social structures and processes of an overarching global economic system. More precisely, proponents of a historical-structural, or world-systems approach, conceptualized "migration as part of the routine activities of a single unified economic system" (Portes and Walton 1981:59). Rather than a one-way transfer of individuals between separate and unevenly developed nation states, world-systems theory recast international migration as part of the ongoing circulation of resources, both capital and labor, within the boundaries of a single global division of labor, that is between a dominant core and a dependent periphery (Sassen-Koob 1980b, 1981, 1988). Advocates of this approach placed emphasis on the exploitative nature of the relationship between sending and receiving countries in international migration.

From this perspective, scholars committed themselves to the task of analyzing the structural origins of constraints that faced members of laboring classes in peripheral societies, as potential migrants. Utilizing the conceptual language of "political economy," researchers linked migration to large-scale social structures and long-term processes in the global accumulation of capital, for example, development and underdevelopment, international division of labor, world labor market, split or dual labor markets, reserve army of labor, class formation.<sup>22</sup>

The most important distinguishing feature of international migration "since the advent of capitalism and especially during

the last 150 years" is, according to this approach, its identification as a "migration of *labor*," that is of individuals whose purpose in moving is to sell their work capacity in the receiving areas. For Portes and Walton, as for other proponents of this perspective, "the historical function of immigration has been to provide a source of cheap labor" (1981:21, 56).

A historical-structural or world-systems approach to international migration has, however, been applied predominantly to the analysis of post-World War II population flows from Third World peripheries and semiperipheries to core regions of the world-economy. Very little work within this general perspective has been directed toward historical analysis of the turn-of-the-century mass migrations from eastern and southern Europe to the Americas.<sup>23</sup>

A world-systems perspective considerably broadened the conventional limits of migration scholarship by focusing on longer-term larger-scale social change. Where migration was typically looked at from the viewpoint and interests of an individual receiving society in the push-pull and assimilationist perspectives, the historical-structural approach observed the process through a lens singularly focused on the functions of geographically circulating labor for the developing capitalist world-economy. Viewing the large-scale upsurge of transnational migration at the end of the nineteenth century from the vantage point of the modern world-system dramatically highlighted the expansion of the capitalist world-economy and the increased pressures for the further commodification and proletarianization of labor. It also revealed the reorganization of the global division of labor, as the United States, in the process of becoming a core zone, drew nearly 26.5 million new immigrant arrivals between 1880 and 1924 (U.S. Census, His. Stat., 1960:62).

By interpreting population flows as part of long-term economic transformations within a single interdependent global division of labor, rather than as a transfer between two distinct and unrelated political units, the world-systems approach managed to circumvent some of the more tenacious conceptual polarizations that traditionally characterized the study of immigration. By making the mode of incorporation into the world-economy of migrant-sending regions a central question of research, this perspective drew attention to migration as both a reflection of and a response to earlier and ongoing transformations in the nature of global economic, social, and political relations. But most impor-

tant of all, it made it possible to analyze the backgrounds or social origins of migrants as dynamic and flexible arrangements within a broader context of social relations and social change.

In the context of a discussion on post-World War II Mexican and Cuban migration to the United States, Portes and Bach offered a succinct description of a historical-structural approach:

Large-scale migrations always reflect the internal structure and political and economic dynamics of the sending nations. Such internal processes do not occur in isolation, however, but are themselves influenced by the position of the country in an overarching world system. Both the internal origins of migrations and the countries to which they are directed are deeply conditioned by such global relations. Chances of individual economic success are similarly dependent on the migrants' correct assessment of these relations as they determine changing modes of reception in the host societies. (1985:74-75)

But, if a historical-structural perspective enlarged the scope of explanation, corrected some stereotypes, and avoided certain conceptual difficulties, it may have inadvertently reproduced some of the problems of previous models, insofar as women's part in migration is concerned. First, this approach has, with few exceptions, failed to include the perspective of migrating women themselves, either as a group or as individuals attempting to understand and respond to the changing circumstances of their lives.<sup>24</sup> Given the origin of the historical-structural alternative in a context of opposition to the individualism of human capital, push-pull, and assimilation theories, it is perhaps understandable, if not predictable, that the individual by definition would be disregarded.

But, as Bach and Schraml pointed out in an effort to both critique and build upon a world-systems analysis of migration, the polarization between individual agency and global structure has been a major obstacle to reconceptualizing the migration process.

No longer metal pieces, migrants are now treated more like empty grocery carts, wheeled back and forth between origin and destination under the hungry intentions of world capital. The migrants themselves engage in very little action. Rather, they are mere "agents" of social change, carrying the necessary attributes of labor to satisfy the abstract requirements of "the general law of capitalist accumulation." (1982:324)