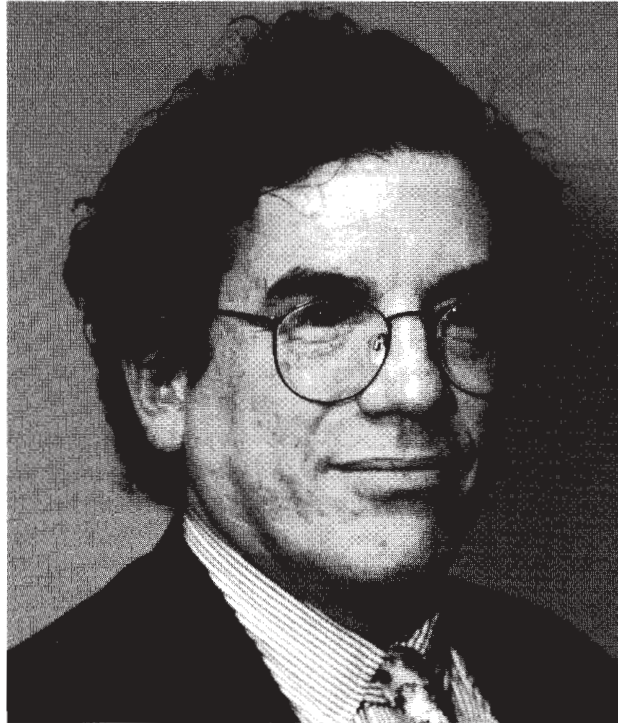


## ENCUENTROS



*How Latino  
Immigration is  
Transforming America*

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Lecture by

**Roberto Suro**

## **IDB CULTURAL CENTER**

Director: Ana María Coronel de Rodríguez

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The Cultural Center of the Inter-American Development Bank, an international financial organization, was created in May 1992 at the Bank's headquarters in Washington, D.C., as a gallery for exhibitions and a permanent forum from which to showcase outstanding expressions of the artistic and intellectual life of the Bank's member countries in North, Central and South America, the Caribbean region, Western Europe, Israel and Japan. Through the IDB Cultural Center, the Bank contributes to the understanding of cultural expression as an integral element of the economic and social development of its member countries. The IDB Cultural Center program of art exhibitions, concerts and lectures stimulates dialogue and a greater knowledge of the culture of the Americas.

## HOW LATINO IMMIGRATION IS TRANSFORMING AMERICA

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*Roberto Suro*

It is a great pleasure to be here, and thank you all for coming. To begin I would like to recall an exhibit at Ellis Island in New York Harbor. I do not know if any of you have been there since it became a museum of immigration. In the great hall, where recently arrived European immigrants used to pick up their baggage after they had been cleared into the country, there is a big globe about twenty feet high. It has little lights on it that go on and off to illustrate straits of immigration at different times in history. You certainly see little lights going off from Europe in the seventeenth century as immigrants traveled to do some empire building on the Indian subcontinent, as well as to Africa and South America and other places. You see the great march of

lights across the Atlantic during the nineteenth century period of industrialization. There are also straits of lights going around in Asia at different times.

This exhibit is interesting in that it shows that the history of migration is not continuous; it is not a permanent condition. Instead, it is a series of episodes, each with a beginning, middle, and end. There are long periods when the globe is basically dark, including a large part of this century. It also shows that when migration takes place, it usually involves people leaving from many different places going to many different destinations, rather than a single linear movement from one nation to another. If that globe were really updated

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*How Latino Immigration is Transforming America* was presented at the Inter-American Development Bank in Washington, D.C. on May 28, 1998 as part of the IDB Cultural Center Lectures Program.

to illustrate the situation in the mid-1990s, it would look like a neon display for the Las Vegas strip. You would have lights crossing Europe from Eastern Europe into Germany; migrant workers in Asia going from the Philippines to Thailand, Indonesia, and back; workers going into the Middle East from the subcontinent; but the brightest sets of lights would be coming from Latin America into the United States, especially from Mexico.

The human race is living through the most complex and extensive period of migration in history. The movement of people is one of the defining characteristics of our age. In the United States, immigration, specifically immigration from Spanish-speaking countries, is defining the future. Nearly twelve million foreign-born Latinos and their U.S. born children are defining the great social, political and economic challenges that will confront this nation in the next twenty years. They represent a great demographic force which, as the title of this lecture suggests, has the power to bring about a great transformation in this country. As my book on the subject, *Strangers Among Us*, concludes, these changes will be accompanied by strife, perhaps even conflict and contention. It is a difficult period of self examination for the United States, an identity crisis. Now I am ahead of myself; that is where it ends, not where it begins.

*Strangers Among Us* departs from a premise that Latino immigration to the United States is a mature though still incomplete historical event. The book is a series of narratives that attempt to describe

the trends and patterns that are already apparent, and to identify where those trends are taking us as a nation.

I begin with a story that I recall very vividly because, when I first reported it, it gave me the idea of writing this book. It is an interview with a fifteen year-old girl in Houston. She was the daughter of two very industrious Mexican immigrants, both working in low-wage factory jobs. Often the father or the mother also worked at night as janitors. They were very conservative, trying to raise their four children with strict Mexican customs, in a very religious household, encouraging them not to have too much contact with other kids in the public schools. When this young girl, Imelda, turned fifteen, they threw the traditional "quinceañera" party for her. They spent a lot of money to show their neighbors what they had been able to accomplish by coming to the United States. It was a big event for the parents. Imelda talked about how she went along with the whole thing and played the role they wanted her to play. The next day, she shocked her parents by telling them she had dropped out of school weeks earlier, that she was pregnant, and leaving the house to go live with her boyfriend, who was an English-speaking Mexican-American.

The story of Imelda is not the best or the worse of Latino immigration, but it illustrates one basic truth about immigration everywhere: it is a long process that plays out across generations as people find a place in their new country. The act of leaving one's homeland is only the first step in a great change of identity.

was much addicted to good cigars. Kennedy walked into this little conference room, and it soon became clear that there would be no ironing out their differences on this Act, which would greatly increase legal immigration in the United States. Kennedy had a big manila envelope that he opened up and pulled out a box of cigars; he put the box in the middle of the table between them, and for six hours they negotiated. Every time Brooks refused to give up on something, Kennedy would slide the box away, and every time Brooks gave in on something, he would slide the box towards him. This box went back and forth all afternoon long while the fates of tens of thousands of people were being determined. What they finally decided that day, over the cigar box, was to create something called a "pierceable cap," which put a limit on legal immigration but defined the limit as "pierceable." This satisfied both sides, and resulted in an immigration policy which nobody understands, and that has no consensus or support in the American public. This is a dangerous thing when you have a million newcomers arriving in the country each year.

One of my favorite stories illustrates how Latino immigration is affecting relations between the United States and Latin America. In 1978 a Guatemalan Mayan called Juan Chanax became the first person from his village of San Cristobal in the highlands of Totonicapan to set out for the United States. He eventually found a job in Houston and after a few months sent word that his brother and uncle should follow because things were looking pretty

good. The brother and the uncle came and, as Juan put it, more relatives came north. Then the friends of his relatives came north, their relatives came, and then their friends came.

Now, twenty years after Juan set out alone, there are more than two thousand people from San Cristobal, Guatemala in Houston, Texas. They have established two churches, a soccer league, and a neighborhood. The men have established jobs as green grocers in an upscale supermarket chain. The women provide child care for a wide network of Anglo professional women. In their own small way they have changed the landscape in Houston.

They have also changed the landscape in Totonicapan, where the Houston Mayas have now built houses for themselves. Now the biggest cars in San Cristobal no longer belong to the traditional landowning families; they belong to the relatives of the successful Houston Mayas. Every year the Houston Mayas come back to San Cristobal for the annual festival and town celebration. At the end of the four days there is a soccer game between the hometown all-stars and the Houston all-stars. Every year, after the soccer game, there is a fresh crowd of people who decide to move north when they see the people coming from Houston with better clothes, bigger cars, and children who speak English.

After twenty years, the entire community has become accustomed to the steady supply of remittance money. An entire generation has grown up with the expectation that going north is a way of



rewarding ambition, escaping disappointments, and overcoming barriers. Juan Chanax is a very dark-skinned Mayan man who, in Guatemala, would have been stuck in a social position that was defined for him, and that has not changed in five hundred years. In Houston, he was talking to me in a split-level house with central air conditioning and a big screen TV that he owned.

By coming north he had accomplished an extraordinary transformation in his life. This community, like many other Latino immigrant communities, is a living channel between the sending and receiving community, with money, people, dreams, and identity traveling in both directions all the time.

The nearly twelve million foreign-born Latinos, and their children living in the United States, are an expression of the social, political and economic integration of the Americas. Millions more to the south are waiting to come and there are many millions beyond them; they simply have the idea that maybe someday they will come north.

It is an error, however, to see this channel simply in human terms, with the migrants as the only protagonists. Juan Chanax first got the idea of moving north when an American garment factory opened up near his home town. It was a big plant employing some three hundred people who assembled and stitched sweaters. One of Juan's uncles went to work there and told them that someone who was good at handling yarns, as he was, could make more money than the people who work

hard all day out in the fields or fixing roads. Juan learned for the first time what it was to earn a salary, to simply be paid every week and have money on a regular basis, regardless of whether it rained or was dry, regardless of whether there was a market for his weavings. He learned the regularity of modern work.

The factory in this town became a meeting place for technology, capital, raw materials, and design ideas from all over the world. These ingredients mixed with the Mayans' traditional skills and their willingness to work for wages so low they would never be accepted in the United States or Western Europe. All these things came together for a moment—Italian ideas about color, yarn from Asia, capital from the United States, and Mayan labor. The sweater factory would change the Mayas of Totonacapan forever. The factory went from America to the Mayan highlands and, like a returning echo, the Mayans went from the highlands to Houston. The development of modern industrial economic processes in Latin America, whether through local or foreign investment, teaches people how to work in a modern work place.

The arrival of the U.S.-style shopping malls teaches people in Latin America to want. It is not surprising that someone working for \$5 a day in a garment factory in Santo Domingo will conclude that they have a better chance of getting what they want by going to New York City and working in a garment factory for \$5 an hour. The same model applies throughout the Hemisphere, and on an even larger

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scale since virtually every government and every economy seeks to model itself on American ways.

The United States now sits at the top of the Western Hemisphere like a beacon atop a lighthouse on a dark night. It powerfully destroys everything that it illuminates, even as it points the way. For a hundred years the United States has exercised its powerful influence over Latin America, and whether the medium was the Marine Corps or the Peace Corps, the message was always the same: Americans knew better, did better, and lived better. Whenever it was threatened, by Nazis or communists, the United States expended huge resources to portray itself as a paradigm of civic virtue in a land of balanced economic opportunity. Meanwhile the American consumer culture has penetrated deep into the Latin psyche, informing every appetite and defining new desires. With its TV shows, soldiers, and political ideals, the United States has reached out and touched people across the entire hemisphere. It has received immigrants in return.

Allow me to say a word about remittances, which I believe pose one of the greatest challenges and opportunities of this enormous historical event, and one that I think in this institution is of particular interest. The Thomas Rivera Center recently published an extraordinary study that combined estimates and calculated that the annual remittances from Mexican workers in the United States sent to Mexico total about \$3.7 billion a year; to El Salvador, it is about \$1.1 billion a year; to the Dominican Republic, about \$795

million. These remarkable sums offer tangible evidence that the immigration channel forms a bond between the sending and receiving communities, rather than just serving as a channel that carries people only in one direction. It is that connection between the old home and the new one, between the past and the future, that gives meaning to the migrant's voyage.

The size and importance of the remittance flows are an enduring characteristic of immigration. During the second half of the nineteenth century, annual remittances from Irish migrants in the United States exceeded \$8 million in some years, an extraordinary sum a hundred years ago. Considering those sums, Patrick J. Blessing, a historian of Irish heritage, concluded that the large scale Irish peasant migration to the New World was not a mindless flight from intolerable conditions, but one, among a limited range of alternatives, that delivered departure for individuals still very much concerned with the survival and well-being of family and friends remaining at home.

Typically, individual remittances were larger soon after the immigrant traveled away; if they remained abroad the money dropped off as they became preoccupied with their new lives. Then the families often sent off another immigrant to make up for the loss. The more experienced voyager would act as a host to ensure the newcomer success. The same model applies to the Houston Maya and many other Latino immigrants. Theirs is not a mindless flight from poverty; they too are always looking back to the home country.

If anything, links are stronger today because distances are shorter, and transportation is easier than it was for the Irish and the other Europeans. As before, there is a large element of individual self-interest in the migrant's connection to home.

The story of Juan, the Houston Maya, shows that immigration is not merely departure, it is a means of transformation. Juan found satisfaction in going back and forth between the two places. His great moments of victory were the weeks that he spent back in Guatemala after a year of working in Houston, for he was able to show what he had accomplished. He had overcome the barriers that had seemed so insuperable from home. People go back and forth between the two places and they use the new world to solve the problems of the old. In transforming his relationship to his past, Juan invaded his future. There are interesting financial and policy implications to this bond that now exists between the United States and Latin America. Enormous sums of money are outside the banking systems of both countries. They are typically subject to huge fees by Western Union and the other commercial companies that transmit remittances. Often people pay ten percent on each end for the money they send home.

The migrants here are basically giving up the profit of their labor rather than investing it here in their own future. The cash is spent rather than invested. How can this money be used to ensure economic investment here? How can it be used for economic development in the receiving

countries to basically reduce migration pressures in the future? These are great challenges.

Saskia Sassen, a professor of Urban Planning at Columbia University, has defined two distinct stages in the history of migration: the beginning of a new flow and its continuation. Sassen argues that the beginning of the migration involves factors in both the sending and receiving countries. These factors allow for the formation of objective and subjective linkages that make such a migration feasible. It is the development of channels that allow people to move. It is the establishment of a receiving community here that opens job niches and defines the way north, and we certainly have passed through that stage now. What we have seen in the 1980s and 1990s is that the channels have become quite deep and efficient from a number of countries, and new channels are developing from many other countries.

My mother's home country of Ecuador is a very good example of this. Not long ago, there were relatively few immigrants from Ecuador in the United States, because there was not a functioning channel that carried people north. Now, in a matter of ten or fifteen years, deep and very effective channels of immigration have developed between Ecuador and the United States. Ecuador did not have a tradition of sending people out, like Mexico, for example, nor did it have the long history of deep involvement with the United States, like the Dominican Republic, for example. Yet, in a very short period of time, channels carrying hundreds of thousands of people

north have been established.

In looking to the future, and trying to draw a few conclusions about where this is taking us, let me offer a few ideas. The inevitable comparison to the European era, and the notion that the United States will become a melting pot again, is not necessarily going to happen. The melting pot has to be seen as an event rather than a model; it is something that happened under very specific circumstances. There was an industrial economy that had a very large demand for new workers, that offered the possibility of upper mobility for people of relatively few skills, and it occurred during a time when unions were anxious to expand their membership and influence on the Democratic Party. The Roman Catholic Church in this country was committed to the assimilation of immigrants. A Depression, two World Wars, and a Cold War forged a new and vital sense of nationalism in this country. This is a different time, and these are different immigrants. There is no reason to assume that the model will repeat itself.

Today immigration arrives in a period when two large trends mark the kind of reception that people are getting in this country. One is economic restructuring: the transformation from an industrial commodities-based economy to one of services and information. That restructuring is completed, and it has happened very successfully during a period of a very large influx of immigration. A lot of things are clear now in this new economy: there are large and growing disparities between rich and poor; and there are structural

factors in the nature of our work force which limit mobility, the largest being education. People with education prosper in this economy, people without education remain poor, and it is very hard to cross that threshold without getting the credentials that the economy requires.

The other very basic trend is that immigration is taking place at the end of a period of social and political activity designed to ensure political and social equality. This is the end of the Great Society welfare system, basically the end of the civil rights era. After thirty years of activism, there are innumerable signs from recent Supreme Court decisions that validate the idea that this country is tired of making aggressive efforts to deal with disparities between racial and ethnic groups. The period of ensuring a safety net for the poor has also passed.

In order to understand the role that immigration plays in this process, it is important to see it as both the cause and the result of the changes. People are drawn to the United States by the new jobs created by economic restructuring. Once they are here, they change the social landscape. Latino immigrants, because they are poor, and because they are neither White nor Black, have forced this country to reexamine the ways it deals with ethnic and racial differences.

The good news about this process is that most immigrants have fair access to economic opportunity and are doing well, which is remarkable when it is considered, for example, that about 70% of recent Mexican immigrants arrived here without

a high school education. Poverty rates between 30 and 40%, however, are common in communities of recently arrived Latino immigrants, depending on how long they have been here and where they are living. The most disturbing fact is the increasing evidence that this poverty is likely to be carried across generations.

The Department of Education recently reported that the dropout rate among foreign-born Hispanics is about 44%. It is less for those who were born in the United States of foreign parents, about 20% as compared to 7% for Whites and 13% for Blacks. We are talking about much higher levels of young people entering the economy with very uncertain fates. There is no question about the earning expectations of the high school dropout in our society, no matter how bright they may be.

Beyond that, there are very disturbing indicators in terms of social behavior, like teen births. The rate of teenage pregnancies among Hispanic women has increased by a third since 1990, while national trends show decreases in teenage births. The rate of teenage pregnancies among Hispanic women now exceeds that of Blacks. Hispanic women are now four times more likely to bear a child before age twenty than White women. We know the fate of dropouts and teen mothers. We know from the African-American experience in this country that poverty rates of 30 to 40% carry across generations and achieve a very hard permanence in American cities. These poverty rates for a population of this size present enormous challenges, even when a large number of people succeed in

achieving upper mobility.

Most immigrants will make their way into the American working class. The size, however, of the American underclass will still double, making the United States today unlike the era of European immigration. It is a zero sum game, and it happens very fast. The assimilation of European immigrants occurred over the course of two or three generations. Here it happens within the lifetime of an immigrant.

What is next? Let me speak to the title of my book, *Strangers Among Us*. It comes from a passage in the Book of Leviticus in the Old Testament, that advises believers that when a stranger comes to live among them, they should be treated as family, because they themselves were once strangers in the land. That is a lesson that I think is important for this country to learn. The country as a whole has a stake in assuring the success of this demographic effort. If we look to the year 2010, when the baby boomers will be entering retirement at a very fast rate, it will be the children of today's Latino immigrants who will be the largest work force in the American economy.

Confronting the issues I have described will force this country to go beyond sharp, simple, racial distinctions. We are looking at a much more complicated ethnic landscape in a country that is used to seeing differences simply as a matter of black and white. Dealing with those who do not make it or who stayed behind is going to require new attitudes towards economic opportunity. The United States has focused overwhelmingly on welfare as the one way



of dealing with the poor. Latino poor present a very different kind of problem; it is the people in poverty who work hard. Typically, in Latino communities of recently arrived immigrants, there is a very high labor force participation rate. There are often three or four jobs per household, yet poverty rates are way above the norm.

Dealing with the problems of working poor will force this country to change its whole notion of economic opportunity, to change the way it looks at those who have not succeeded economically. It will certainly require guaranteeing access to education.

History teaches us that, in the United States, conflict is the most likely vehicle for the resolution of social problems. Conflict is likely to happen when this economic cycle turns. We have seen anti-immigrant

feelings come to a head almost predictably whenever the nation enters into a recession. I think that we have to accept that possibility. We have to accept the anti-immigrant feelings that are apparent even now, and embrace the conflict; understand that those kinds of fears are almost a natural part of the immigrant experience. If we look squarely into these problems we will come to the conclusion that this nation has been through this before. The United States has taken in newcomers, has struggled through ugly times, has reinforced itself, and every time has come out with a stronger sense of identity, with a renewed sense of purpose, with a clear sense of what equal opportunity means. In the end, I think that this is what we have to look forward to.

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Richard Suro". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style with a large initial "R" and "S".



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