The city as context: culture and scale in new immigrant destinations

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Introduction

In this paper, we heed the recent call by migration and urban studies scholars to bring questions of space, locality and culture squarely into discussions of immigrant incorporation (Brettell: 2005a; Glick Schiller and Caglar: 2009). These are two relatively unconnected bodies of research. While many urban studies scholars focus on how specific “global cities” influence and are influenced by worldwide economic restructuring, they do not pay enough attention to how migration affects these processes. In contrast, migration scholars around the world, but in the United States in particular, have produced a large body of work on new destinations and contexts of reception. Much of this work fails to consider how these contexts are embedded in larger geopolitical fields in ways that make them more or less receptive to newcomers (Glick Schiller and Caglar: 2009). Moreover, this work privileges the economic characteristics of localities without paying sufficient attention to the variations in cultural resources particular sites bring to bear on processes of incorporation. More complete and compelling explanations for why certain places integrate immigrants with greater success than others need to take scale and culture into account.

Over the last several years, we have studied immigrant incorporation in three small U.S. cities: Olympia, Washington; Portland, Maine; and Danbury, Connecticut. In this paper, we focus on the latter two. While both Portland and Danbury present themselves as communities that celebrate diversity, in actuality, Portland welcomes immigrants in a wider range of ways with a longer history than does Danbury. This is, in large part, related to numbers. While immigrants represent about 8% of Portland’s population of 63,000, the foreign-born represent nearly 40% percent of Danbury’s 90,000 residents. Further, in Danbury, an estimated twelve to fifteen thousand residents are in the country
illegally, while many of the foreign-born in Portland came as refugees. But this is not the entire story. In the course of our work, we have noticed important variations in how cities create and deploy their cultural armature, including differences in urban self-presentation, the prevailing ethos toward immigrants, and how culture is harnessed in service of urban renewal projects. We have also noted how history and political economy influence the available cultural apparatus in each site and the ways the city tells its story of welcome to immigrants. Although demographics explain much of the variation in our two contexts of reception in this tale of two cities, we believe that culture and scale are important subtexts in this narrative and explore their specific roles in this article.

3 We find significantly different contexts of reception in Danbury and Portland. While both cities market themselves as successful diverse communities, Portland both talks the talk and walks the walk while Danbury talks the talk but is not unconditionally welcoming to newcomers due to simmering anti-immigrant sentiment. While city leaders tout the benefits of diversity, much public discourse in Danbury points to “too many illegal immigrants too fast.”

4 This contrast is highly instructive for the questions we explore here. These cities are similar in that both experienced major economic declines due to de-industrialization. Each reinvented itself using cultural endowments shaped by scale, history, and geography and then went on to harness them in different ways. City scale and culture not only influenced how each city represents itself but also its ethos toward immigrants and the extent to which immigrants become an integral piece of the city-building project. In Portland, city leaders deploy a cultural armature that builds on the benefits of multiculturalism. They expand upon the city’s political economy and openness to strangers, whether as an important industrial port in the late 1880s or as cruise ship destination in the late 1990s. In contrast, while Danbury professes its commitment to multiculturalism, it has had, particularly recently, amore difficult time putting that into practice. Multiculturalism in Danbury is negotiated by local actors, not alongside international and local tourists who come specifically to sit under its cosmopolitan canopy. It is not a key piece of the city’s economic revitalization strategy, making immigrants as likely to be seen as the problem as the solution.

Scholarly debates

5 While the relationship between global capital accumulation, economic restructuring, and the movements of people is widely recognized, how that plays out differently in different places is often overlooked (Glick Schiller and Caglar: 2008). But it is precisely how these three factors cluster differently in different localities wherein the analytical purchase lies.

6 In the United States, concerns about space enter primarily into discussions about the contexts of reception for immigrant arrivals. This is a conversation with a fairly long history that has been revitalized as immigrants head toward new destinations. It began as a way to move theory away from its focus on how individual immigrants’ characteristics shape incorporation toward a greater recognition institutional structure and context. Portes and Rumbaut (2006:93) emphasized the role of the receiving government, the characteristics of the host-country labor market and the characteristics of ethnic communities in shaping contexts of reception. Jeffrey Reitz (2002:1006-1007) described four contextual factors, including: a) pre-existing ethnic and race relations within the
host population; b) differences in labor markets and related institutions; c) the impact of
government policies and programs, including immigration policy, policies for immigrant
integration, and policies for the regulation of social institutions; and d) the changing
nature of international boundaries, part of the process of globalization. He argues that
the characteristics of host societies can influence immigrant integration as much as, if
not more than individual immigrant characteristics.

More recent studies take a broader view. They see successful immigrant integration as a
function of the opportunities and barriers immigrants encounter in the receiving
community. In addition to contextual factors like ethnic networks, social capital and
labor market conditions, this work stresses how programs, institutional cultures, and
national and local policies affect immigrant integration (Fix and Zimmerman: 2000;
Waldinger: 2001). Integration is a fluid process based on both individual and community
level factors and thus, happens differently depending on the neighborhood, city, or state
Perceptions about newcomers and the openness (or resistance) to immigration
(Bloemraad: 2006; Padín: 2005), media and discursive constructions of immigration and
immigrants (Chavez: 2001; Padín: 2005), and local political mobilization (Bloemraad: 2006)
must also be taken into account. Other studies focus on how small-town community
members show newcomers ‘their place’—through individual acts of discrimination in
work or social arenas, communicating racial prejudice and their for immigrants (Millard

Place is also of central concern to scholars looking at new immigrant destinations. High
turnover rates, dangerous work environments, lack of unions, and low pay in
meatpacking employment all contribute to a negative context of reception (Fennelly and
In their study of two non-metropolitan communities in Oregon and Colorado where there
has been a significant increase in Latino immigration, Nelson & Hiemstra (2008:319)
assert that examining sociospatial relations is “crucial to analyzing immigrant-receiving
society interaction, and contributes to scholarship on the uneven geography of
immigrant incorporation in the contemporary USA.” Cabell (2007) stresses the
importance of religious institutions in making particular locales more receptive. Finally,
in her research on the dairy industry in Wisconsin, Valentine (2005) found that despite
their initial hostility, employers became more welcoming when they realized how
dependent they were on their immigrant workers.

Scholars are hard at work unearthing the causes and characteristics of newly emerging
non-traditional immigrant geographies (Godziak and Martin: 2005; Millard and Chapa
2004b; Singer, Hardwick and Brettell 2008). They are interrogating the conditions under
which immigrants revitalize the regional economy or harm it (Grey and Woodrick: 2005;
Mohl: 2003). Comprehensive, comparative metropolitan studies are in short supply, as
Singer (Singer, Hardwick and Brettell: 2008, p. 8) points out, not to mention systematic
rural and suburban cases. Much of this recent scholarship looks only at Mexican migrants
(Zúñiga and Hernández –León: 2005) or at particular pan-ethnic groups, such as Latinos
(Kandel, Parrado and Arreola: 2004; Saenz and Torrens: 2003; Smith and Furuseth: 2006).
It tends to focus on the Midwest (Millard and Chapa: 2004b), with its meatpacking
industry or the agricultural industries of the “New South,” where Latinos are subverting
the longstanding bi-racial order (Fink: 2003; Smith and Furuseth: 2006; Winders: 2006).
Our study, therefore, fills an important gap by not only including non-Latino groups, but by looking at small cities in New England.

Moreover, much of this research does not pay sufficient attention to how new contexts of reception are nested in larger geopolitical hierarchies. Context of reception is conceived as national, although immigrant incorporation, as well as the promulgation of policies and community responses to immigrants, varies considerably across physical and political spaces within nations. As new immigrants move increasingly into communities that have not dealt with large number of foreign-born residents, these new destinations variously accommodate, celebrate, and resist their new residents before. Their local experiences reverberate and contribute to national debates and policies. Furthermore, the current national security context imbues residents with worries and fears and brings them into direct contact with the power of the state through arrests, detentions and deportation.

In Europe, space is a key part of discussions about “the city as context” (Brettell: 2003; Caglar: 2005; Soysal: 2001). In the 1990s, a small group of scholars noted how size, position, and the political landscape affected how migrants settled in and became politically incorporated in particular cities. Like their American counterparts, most of this work did not address how global economic restructuring repositions particular places and directs migrants to settle where they do. Global cities scholarship was a step in this direction (Eade: 1997; Sassen: 2001; Yeoh and Chang: 2001). These scholars called attention to the disjuncture between geographical and social spaces that resulted from the uneven effects of globalization. Particular cities wrested themselves from the traditional local-global hierarchy to function almost independently of national context. Most of this work, however, did not connect these processes to immigrant incorporation.

The notion of “scale” is useful to capture how urban structures, lives, and policies are embedded in a range of political economic hierarchies (Glick Schiller and Caglar: 2009). Global economic restructuring repositions localities in hierarchies of economic and political power. But it is not just capital that moves. Where migrants move to, their modes of incorporation are strongly linked to this broader re-ordering of interstate, regional, national, and global fields of power (Glick Schiller and Caglar: 2009; Glick Schiller, Caglar and Gulbrandsen: 2006). Moreover, it is not just the changing position of particular localities in the context of globalization but the changing relationship between localities and states. State intervention and activities are institutionally and geographically differentiated. When states pursue economic development strategies, refugee resettlement policies, direct resources to particular zones (like becoming the state capital), or build highways in particular locations, they influence immigrant incorporation. Scale, then, involves not just a recalibration of the relationship between the global and the local but between the municipal, regional, and national as well.

Our study speaks to these literatures on contexts of reception, on immigrant incorporation in new immigrant gateways and destinations, and on scale. It is also a partial corrective to the emphasis on the economic characteristics of place at the expense of how place-based cultural resources shape immigrant incorporation. Migration scholarship requires a serious cultural turn that goes beyond a superficial nod (Levitt: 2005; Levitt and Jaworsky: 2007). That means bringing culture centrally into discussions of context of reception and acknowledging how scale affects the urban cultural apparatus. Cities have particular cultural resources based on their geopolitical position and they deploy these in particular ways. Brettell (2005b), for example, stresses the
importance of a dominant set of values or an urban ethos in shaping immigrant incorporation. Glick Schiller and Caglar (2009) highlight public discourse as key in making migrant incorporation a part of scale theory. Cultural diversity, they argue, is an important factor in the competitive struggle between cities. Immigrants can be marketable assets in the places where they settle, even enabling some cities to reposition themselves within the geopolitical hierarchy. It is this cultural armature, and how it is shaped by questions of scale, that is our focus in this article.

Research methods

We analyze immigrant reception in Danbury, Connecticut and Portland, Maine based on historical data gathered through published sources, a review of local newspapers, and approximately sixty in-depth interviews conducted between the summer of 2006 and the summer of 2008 with individuals representing approximately thirty organizations working with immigrants in each city. Organizations included municipal groups, social service organizations, civic groups and religious and faith-based organizations that we identified using snowball samples developed through existing contacts and listings in local directories. Interviews followed the same interview guide in each city, which included questions about the purpose, history and mission of the organization as well as the services they offer, their client populations, and their experiences and observations about immigrants’ experiences in the city. Interviews lasted between fifty minutes and two hours and were digitally recorded and professionally transcribed.

These interviews were supplemented with reviews of published information about each organizations and participant observation in relevant locations. In Portland, a researcher volunteered with Portland’s Office of Multicultural and Multilingual Programs and visited religious services attended by immigrants in the city. In Danbury, a researcher conducted field observations at social events, political rallies and fundraisers throughout the city and volunteered at a Portuguese-language newspaper.

The historical and qualitative interview data gathered was analyzed inductively following the principles of grounded theory (Strauss and Corbin: 1990). We worked collaboratively using Atlas-TI software to develop and refine a set of codes, working together with intra- and inter-city cross checks to ensure that our analytic categories were consistently applied across interviews as well as cities. The coded data were read in parallel with historical materials to facilitate our understandings of each city’s particular context.

Before proceeding to our analysis of the interviews, we briefly introduce each research site, including an overview of its social history and political economy, immigration patterns, the varying contexts of reception over time, and how its presentation of self has changed over time in documents and in statements by city leaders and residents.

City background and context

Portland

Portland is Maine's largest city and its commercial and cultural capital. The U.S. Census Bureau estimated its population at 63,011 in 2006. Immigrants have been arriving in Portland since the early nineteenth century. The Irish were the first to arrive in the
mid-1800s, followed by French Canadians, Portuguese and Scandinavians, and then by Italians, Eastern European Jews, Armenians, Greeks and Poles at the turn of the last century (Eagan: 2005). Maine’s earliest economic activities were fishing, fur trapping and substance farming. Sawmill factories were another early, natural development given the high percent of forested land in the state (Rose: 2003).

During the first half of the twentieth century, the city of Portland and the state of Maine as a whole, experienced steady population increases. Following World War II, however, the population and commercial activity declined precipitously. By the 1960s, the maritime industry in Portland had reached a low point. The population decreased by nearly 10 percent between 1960 and 1970, dropping to levels from 50 years before. The state of Maine as a whole experienced a net out-migration of 68,789 this decade. These trends began to reverse themselves in the 1970s, when after nearly 100 years of out-migration, Maine began to attract in-migrants. While the pace slowed after the 1970s, immigration to Maine has continued since then (Benson and Sherwood: 2004).

The influx of newcomers to Portland in recent decades resulted in part from federal immigration legislation, local policies and, more recently, the city’s designation as a refugee resettlement site. Since the 1970s, refugees came to Portland from Southeast Asia, Eastern Europe, Cuba and the former Soviet Republics. More recent arrivals come from Iraq, Afghanistan and the African countries of Rwanda, Congo, Sudan and Somalia. Portland is currently home to 4,895 foreign-born residents (U.S. Census Bureau: 2000), nearly a 50% increase since 1990. Fifty-three different languages are represented among the 1,172 students in the Portland public school system, which has the largest number of ESL (English as a Second Language) students in the state. Over the last several years, Portland has also become a destination for refugees relocating from their original settlement sites. While there are no official figures on these secondary migrants, unofficial estimates suggest they may be as many as 10,000, divided between Portland and the nearby city of Lewiston (Allen: 2006). Many find work in meat or fish packing plants, other factories, or in service-based or medical professions. Though still a working port, Portland’s economic base today is a broad mix of commercial, retail, manufacturing, and service industries.

The City of Portland has the largest population of citizens requiring social and other services in the state and the city has established a wide variety of service agencies. Non-profit organizations and faith-based initiatives also do a significant amount of the work. Since 1975, Catholic Charities Maine Refugee and Immigration Services (CCMRIS) has been the primary provider of resettlement services to refugees in Maine (Bombardieri: 2000). In addition, many city agencies have incorporated a multicultural or immigrant/refugee component into their services, including the Housing Authority, Health and Human Services, the Police and even the City Manager’s Office. Groups like the Immigrant Legal Advocacy Project and the Action for Self Reliance Association, an organization founded by and serving the Sudanese community, also play a critical role in providing for the immigrant community.

Danbury

Throughout its history, Danbury, with an estimated 2006 population of 79,463, welcomed white ethnic groups, primarily from Ireland, Germany, Italy and Poland. After 1965, there was a steady flow of “new” migrants, largely from Portugal. Since 1990, the number of
foreign-born individuals living in Danbury, particularly from Cambodia, India, the Dominican Republic, Brazil, Ecuador and other Central/South American countries has increased dramatically. Today, city officials estimate that the foreign-born represent a much larger proportion than the 34% reported by the U.S. Census Bureau for 2006, possibly as high as 45%, bringing the actual total population of the city to well over 90,000 residents.

Economically, the city shifted from early success in agriculture and artisanry during the colonial period to being the largest hat-manufacturing center in the country by the mid-nineteenth century. In the 1930s and 1940s, when hats went out of vogue, the industry steadily declined, and there were few hatters left by the late 1950s. Thus, Danbury’s economic fortunes declined earlier than other manufacturing cities ravaged by deindustrialization. An aggressive redevelopment plan was put into place in 1959 to attract high technology firms, producing everything from helicopters to pencils and surgical sutures, but it was not until the construction of two major highways, I-84 and Route 684, and the construction of the Danbury Fair Mall that industrial and commercial growth increased (Devlin: 1984).

By the late 1980s, Danbury, and its surroundings, had re-invented itself as a highly desirable, suburban small city. This expansion included the growth of big-box stores and malls which sent the downtown area into sharp decline. Beginning with a post-1965 influx from Portugal, followed by Brazilians in the early 1990s, immigrants have been not only been key to the city’s economic revitalization, through their work in manufacturing, construction and the service sector, they have also played a major role in rebuilding the downtown. Today, the economic picture for many of the city’s residents is bright. There are, however, large numbers of undocumented residents whose economic position is precarious.

While the city itself provides few direct services to immigrants in Danbury, there is a wide range of nonprofit organizations working with newcomers. These organizations include civic organizations such as The Ecuadorian and Hispanic Centers that foster community building, cultural connections with the homeland, and more recently, have been vocal advocates for immigrants’ rights. Numerous religious organizations also provide assistance. The Association of Religious Communities (ARC) helped resettle Cambodian and Vietnamese refugees in the 1970s and early 1980s and now focuses on fighting xenophobia and fostering inter-ethnic and inter-faith dialogues. There are also more than a dozen Brazilian evangelical churches in Danbury that provide some direct services.

Explaining variations in contexts of reception

Both Danbury and Portland have historically expressed a strong sense of pride in being tolerant, multicultural communities. Ideas such as “America is a nation of immigrants,” and “Multiculturalism is good for our community,” were firmly embedded in the collective cultural reservoir of these largely liberal, middle-class cities. The City of Danbury’s website welcomes visitors in four languages besides English, and the Mayor often cites the linguistic diversity of the city’s public school system in public speeches and printed materials designed to attract businesses and families to the area. When asked about his primary message for immigrant voters in his campaign for re-election to a fifth term, he replied, “I am proud of our rich multi-cultural heritage in Danbury and I am
proud of our residents. Danbury is a great place because of our diversity. The number one focus of my administration in the next two years will be the economy and how we can help small and medium size businesses achieve success in a difficult economic environment. All residents will benefit from job creation and expansion. Our diverse economy has insulated us from the worst of the recession, but we need to plan for the future.”

The City of Portland similarly lists multicultural sports tournaments and cultural events by and for a range of ethnic groups on their webpage, in addition to the wide range of services they make available to immigrants. This is one way the city has used diversity and multiculturalism as a tool to promote urban revitalization, creating an environment that not only allows for but also thrives because of its diverse population. Its efforts to become a culturally vibrant, livable city have not gone unnoticed by the media. For the past decade, Portland, like Danbury, has been recognized by national magazine and survey centers as one of the best places to live in the United States, with the city webpage describing it as “one of the 10 safest, culturally most fascinating cities.” The value of diversity is also evident in the city’s website content and strategic planning documents. The city’s immigrants/refugees are often referred to in these documents and by organizational and city staff as “new Mainers,” a testament to the conscious effort to minimize a negative otherness that often comes with an immigrant label. In individual interviews conducted with city leaders in Portland, people’s appreciation for its diversity and cultural cosmopolitanism was expressed over and over again.

While both cities position themselves publicly as multicultural havens, in Portland, immigrants have generally been integrated peacefully into the social fabric, while in Danbury, immigrant incorporation has turned problematic and tense since the early 2000s. The demographics of the cities’ new immigrant populations surely play a large role in fostering divisiveness. It is through the lens of culture, however, that we can observe the mechanisms through which “more people” translate into “more problems.” We argue that in addition to the numbers, there is a constellation of factors that we refer to as the urban cultural armature including each city’s geography, urban ethos, local political economy and its connection to the global, historical and recent demographic shifts, and municipal resources that explain these differences. We see culture and scale as threads that run through each of these analytical axis.

**Geographic Factors**

In addition to their broad cultural messages, each city’s spatial characteristics, including land-use policies, geography, and the ways in which local and global flows intersect influence its geopolitical position and how immigrants are received. These spatial characteristics also shape the prevailing urban ethos, the city’s self-image and how it approaches urban renewal. Geography can be everything or nothing, and much in between.

As a port city, Portland has been at the intersection of global and local flows throughout its history; its residents have always had to adopt to newcomers. Economic relationships between the West Indies and Portland, for example began in the early colonial period and turned the city into a key international port (Sanders and Helfgot:1977). Early on, Portland businesspeople saw the potential for trade, particularly in rum and molasses with the West Indies. By 1853, as a result of these close relationships, Portland imported
three times more sugar and molasses than Boston. These tight trade connections with the West Indies promoted immigration from Cuba and other areas in Latin America. According to the 1850 census, Portland had residents from Ecuador, Argentina, Guyana, Jamaica and Martinique. Scholar David Carey (2005: 100 has argued that the close relationship between Portland and the West Indies encouraged Portlanders to, “recognize themselves as global citizens and resist isolationist tendencies,” which he claims made Portland later more welcoming to Hispanic immigrants.

Portland, then, has been producing “global citizens” since the 1800s. In particular, the rise in tourism in the last fifty years means that Portland constantly hosts newcomers – as many as 6,000 visitors disembark from cruise ships on any given summer afternoon. There are also several sites throughout the city that function as what Elijah Anderson (2004) calls “cosmopolitan canopies,” or places where people come into contact with one another and engage in conversation and “folk ethnography” that serves as a cognitive and cultural basis for understanding others and constructing public behavior. International grocery stories and restaurants, from Eritrean to Salvadoran, are situated throughout the city and patronized not only by immigrants but also by a diverse group of native-born Mainers who attend citywide cultural events and programs throughout the year. Interviewees told stories about the richness that immigrant and refugees have brought to Portland. They are well distributed across the city—there is no single “ethnic” neighborhood.

Many respondents, including the immigrants and refugees themselves, described their positive contribution to the community and the overall spirit of Portland. They take pride that the city is a “good place to live,” especially compared to nearby Lewiston, which has not given nearly as warm a welcome to its new immigrant community. This interest in welcoming “new Mainers” was particularly evident in the responses we received to questions about how immigrants are treated in Portland. One interviewee summed up a certain ethos embodied within the culture of the city, “I think as far as being accepted on the street in general…it’s pretty darn good. I would say the majority of people think it’s pretty neat….such a mixed bag of people [are] moving in from out of state. And it’s relatively cosmopolitan... [F]or a teeny little city like this, we’re pretty hip.” A majority of the refugees we interviewed concurred. One said, “If one to ten, I will give [Portland] a ten...as a great welcoming place,” and another asserted, “[Portland has] turned out to be a hospitable place; I found that to be the truth.”

Geography also played a large role in the relationship between urban scale and immigrant incorporation in Danbury. The city’s location as the “Gateway to New England” has been responsible for virtually all the major historical shifts in its economy and demography. Because it was strategically located on the way to New York for colonial settlers making the arduous two-week trek from Boston, Danbury enjoyed a brisk trade in agricultural goods and hospitality services. When the first rail line opened in 1852, it provided easy access to the raw materials and coal power that drove the explosive growth of the hat making industry. Because hatting was a highly labor-intensive process, its expansion was never really “industrialization” per se. Instead, it created an attractive destination for immigrants – from the Irish fleeing the Potato Famine in the 1840s, followed by Germans and Italians. At that time, there was no question about accommodating immigrants – Danbury’s store clerks rushed to learn the German language so they could serve the burgeoning immigrant population. And in the 1870s, when the city experienced a small slump, the German community revitalized Main Street, opening various businesses –
tailor shops, bakeries, taverns, and of course, wonderful breweries (Devlin 1984). Toward the end of the eighteenth century, Eastern European Jews and Arabs brought more religious, and (at the time) “racial” diversity, with Poles, Slovaks, Czechs, as well as Lebanese and Syrians. As the twentieth century dawned upon Danbury, the majority of its residents came from other countries.

Further, hat making was not restricted to large factories - even Danbury’s farmers opened up small hatting shops in their backyards. This helped contain the “center” of town, keeping it a very tight-knit community, both spatially and socially. Although the city of Danbury was incorporated in 1889, and a century later, saw a major interstate highway run through it, to this day it retains a small-town atmosphere. But today, Main Street is no longer the typical New England thoroughfare. New industries have moved into office parks, attracted by Danbury’s proximity to Interstate Route 84, large tracts of land at the outskirts of town, and economic development incentives offered by the state. The 1984 sale of a large parcel that was the site of the Danbury Fair for over 100 years to a large mall developer contributed to the downtown’s rapid decay. These global and local economic factors left an “empty” space for new immigrants to re-appropriate. Today, most of the downtown storefronts have signs in Portuguese or Spanish and businesses catering to immigrants, including restaurants, travel agencies, money transfer outlets and international groceries abound.

Some native-born residents clearly experience Danbury’s downtown as a microcosm of the “Hispanicized” America that Samuel Huntington (2004) warns of – an imagined space of “invasion” by “illegal” foreigners. They express ambivalence, if not outright disdain, for their newly rejuvenated commercial district, claiming it offers them little. While the outskirts of Danbury are thriving, revitalization, as they would like to see it, has skipped its downtown. A life-long resident and President of the U.S. Citizens for Immigration Law Enforcement told us, “You can go down Main Street, and look at the changes. An awful lot of different people walking around, rather than strictly Americans… [It’s] not dangerous – just that there’s just nothing there – no reason for Americans to go.” While there is not much actual danger – crime levels are very low – the perception of fear persists, as does a sense of incomprehensibility for many residents who cannot shop where they do not understand what they are buying or where the storekeepers do not speak English. At the same time, post-1965 immigrants proudly claim Main Street and many respondents in our sample, foreign- and native-born alike, emphasized how devastated Main Street was until immigrants moved to town.

**Urban Repositioning and Self-Representation**

A second factor influencing the different ways these cities received immigrants is their economic revitalization and shifting self-identity over the past three decades. In Portland, a long period of stagnation, suburbanization, city center disinvestment and job loss characterized the first half of the 1900s. Revitalization began in the early 1970s, when grassroots activists and business owners interested in historic preservation, affordable housing and improving the built environment, along with business owners looking to infuse the city with new life, joined forces. As more housing and historic buildings were restored, Portland attracted more people, especially members of the artistic and gay communities. Larger businesses also played a key role during these early years by relocating to the downtown area. The city actively promoted these efforts, making...
streetscape, sidewalk, lighting and other improvements to public spaces. Projects to support an “arts and culture” initiative were implemented, such as performance centers, museums and public art pieces.

Today, downtown Portland is an eclectic mix of restaurants, galleries, boutiques, and international shops and services that contribute to Portland’s self-image as a diverse, progressive, cultural center. These venues border a still active port, which hosts a mix of cargo ships, ferries, as well as large tourist cruise liners and sightseeing boats. While Portland is a work in progress, grappling with issues such as housing, homelessness, and economic sustainability, it has become not only a tourist destination for international and out-of-state visitors but also a destination for people throughout the state who see Portland as a vibrant, cosmopolitan, culturally diverse hub. Its location as a port city makes it more open and welcoming towards immigrants as does its attempt to tell its story as a multi-ethnic, multicultural center in Maine.

Danbury’s economic shifts and the story it tells about itself is somewhat different. Its primary selling point today is as a good place to live and conduct business. After the hatting industry declined in the late 1950s, the city worked steadily to reinvent itself as one of the nation’s premier small cities – notably, a multicultural one. However, this trend shifted into reverse as the debates about illegal immigration escalated, especially since 2005. Danbury still wants diversity but only a certain kind and at a certain level. A small but very vocal group of residents see legal immigrants as an asset but undocumented workers as the problem and it is often difficult to distinguish between the two.

Demographic Factors

As described earlier, the demographic histories of both cities and the nature of earlier immigrant influxes also influence their particular context of reception. In addition to the number and country origins of current migrants, Portland and Danbury differ with respect to whether there is a presence (seeming or actual) of an easily identifiable (racial or otherwise) “other,” around which anti-immigrant sentiment and fear can coalesce.

Since immigrants from a wide range of countries come to Portland, there has never been one large “other.” Moreover, since 1965, the largest groups of immigrants to Portland have been refugees, leading at least some native-born residents and leaders to see them as the “deserving poor” rather than cultural “invaders” who overuse services and resources. It is a matter of “worthiness,” a measure based on moral classification schemes, not necessarily on cultural markers such as race or gender (Steensland 2006, Skocpol: 1992). Many of Portland’s refugees are Africans, for example, but their histories of trauma – child soldiers, torture and political oppression or civil war and famine – make them appear as deserving victims of undemocratic governments/ regimes (a second moral characterization) in the eyes of the public. Geo-political factors help differentiate these dark-skinned recipients of social services from Africa from the “welfare queens” who are so pervasive in contemporary neoliberal discourses about work and poverty.

Portland’s clear message of welcome, coupled with many leaders’ strong humanitarian impulse, helps create a positive context of reception, allowing them to feel safe and secure. The staff at the organizations in Portland we spoke with said that their immigrants clients expressed less fear and insecurity than in other cities, especially after September 11th, although there was some mention of anti-Islamic sentiment. For the most
part, immigrants were seen as success stories. One interviewee emphasized that compared to other residents on public assistance, their organization has a much better chance of helping a refugee or immigrant start a business because, “Well over half that come to us have run a business before in their home country...so they have that experience. They just don’t know how to navigate the system here.” A coordinator at the Salvation Army argued that immigrants don’t have the “institutionalized helplessness” she sees in a lot of other clients, and said she realizes, “They may be receiving more services, but it’s not because more services are offered to them. It’s that they’re willing to help themselves...they’re following up even if they don’t understand. They’re doing their best to make the effort to get the assistance they need.”

This categorization of a “deserving” population in Portland also came across in discussions with service providers who described cultural differences that created “problems,” which they tried to address in ways they described as “helpful” or “instructive,” rather than being critical or judgmental. They did not see immigrants as inherently flawed or problematic, but rather as needing guidance and education. Some clients simply “did not know any better,” for which they should not be blamed. Another interviewee observed that immigrants from Europe had and continue to have “access to the toolbox” of Western culture, education, and familiarity – not to mention practical, everyday know-how – that makes their adjustment to the United States less dramatic. For instance, when immigrants were unfamiliar with what could or could not be flushed down the toilet or where small children could safely play on their own in Portland, service agencies developed programs to teach them these skills. They taught them how to live in an “American” apartment, how to shop for groceries they had never seen before and how to prepare vegetables they had never eaten. Service providers’ attitudes and values caused them to respond in ways that increased social capital generation, because they saw their role as educating immigrants and providing them with the connections and skills to function successfully on their own.

From the mid-1700s, Danbury has also been demographically diverse; early on as home to many “new” religious groups in a staunch Congregationalist state, and later, to large numbers of immigrants. Danbury also fought to maintain this pluralism peacefully. In 1801, it was the Danbury Baptists that wrote to Thomas Jefferson about their marginalization under state law, prompting the oft-cited remark about the need for building a “wall between Church and State.” During a statewide climate of Nativism during the 1850s, the Know-Nothing Party couldn’t gain a foothold in the city. Nor could the Ku Klux Klan more than a century later, when race riots at Danbury High School threatened the community’s broad-minded stance concerning minorities. But things changed after 1965 –just prior to national legislative changes that would allow the influx of “new” immigrants, Danbury, unlike Portland, was already in recovery from its mid-1900s economic downturn. From 1950-1980, the city had doubled in size (from 30,337 to 60,470 people), with people coming to work in the new high-tech and pharmaceutical industries that replaced the hat making business that had dominated the region for nearly two centuries. In the early 1980s, a survey revealed that 30 percent of residents had lived in the city for less than five years (Devlin 1984, p. 102).

This new in-migration was largely U.S. born and “white,” including a steady influx of Portuguese immigrants, who proved themselves as “worthy and deserving” to their new neighbors. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, the number of “white” residents in the city changed little over this period, remaining at 90 percent or more. Today, it stands
“officially” at 73 percent, dropping as low as 65% if the undocumented immigrant population is included. Thus, the city faces a strong challenge to its viable multiculturalism from racist and “anti-immigrant” forces who depict the large numbers of foreign-born as one, unified “non-white,” threatening “other,” or as Minuteman founder Jim Gilchrist puts it, a “Trojan Horse” that inevitably will release the forces bent on destroying the very fabric of not only the city, but also the entire world (Gilchrist and Corsi 2006).

The ethnicization of Danbury’s downtown only served to highlight the city’s “browning.” As Trudeau (Trudeau 2006:422) notes, there is a connection between boundaries, belonging and landscapes, the latter embedding “spatially bounded scenes that visually communicate what belongs and what does not.” One way that this plays out in Danbury is through debates over who deserves access to public spaces and institutions. Narratives of the “taxpayer” serve as code for the real’ (read ‘white, legal and middle-class’) citizens, who are “victims’ of the “Hispanic” (read ‘illegal alien’) takeover of public spaces and social services that ‘taxpayers’ have paid for.

As a result, Danbury sends out a mixed message to newcomers and old-timers alike. Many non-immigrant, primarily white respondents called the city welcoming and supportive of immigrants. But nearly as many foreign-born respondents, especially people who had been living in the country for decades, said they felt anything but welcome. The Brazilian director of a faith-based service provider said the biggest obstacle facing new arrivals to the city is overcoming “this sense that we’re always owing something to the American community, we are always behind, because we do things that are wrong in order to stay here….so we always feel it, you know, behind, below, not worthy enough.”

**Municipal approaches**

Finally, how each city has officially responded to immigrants influences their reception. Portland has made an ongoing effort to increase and improve the services it offers immigrants. As early as the 1970s, the city developed many programs – a Multicultural and Multilingual Department in the school system, a Minority Health Division and an Office of Immigrant and Refugees Service, as well as staff positions such as the Multicultural Affairs Officer in the City Manager’s office and an Immigrant and Refugee Liaison in the Police Department. These staffs have proactively applied for funding to maintain and expand their services. Over the past two decades, the number of nonprofits and other groups serving the immigrant and refugee communities has increased. Various organizations now offer ESL, translators, interpreters, and special events where people can learn about the many services offered in Portland.

Furthermore, immigrants can feel at least somewhat safe about doing so, in part because in 2003, Portland joined the ranks of progressive U.S. cities which prohibit police and other city employees from asking about immigration status. Less than one year later, state legislators voted in a similar statewide measure (the first of its kind), after immigration raids stunned the city of Portland and created an atmosphere of fear among newcomers. Since then, even more protective, civil-rights legislation has been enacted. On July 14, 2005, Portland’s City Council resolved to protect civil liberties and oppose ethnic and racial profiling.” And on May 31, 2007, the City Council became an official Sanctuary City. Finally, although it has been met with what the Portland Press Herald called a “frosty reception,” a proposal which would let non-U.S. citizens vote in municipal
elections is under consideration. According to Portland’s Democratic State Senator, there are a variety of legal Maine residents who are not U.S. citizens, including doctors, refugees, students, and hockey players. The executive director of one of Portland’s immigrant and refugee advocacy associations, confirmed the city’s ethos of hospitality, “Knowing how Mainers are very democratic and very good with their neighbors, with us immigrants, I have no doubt that people in the counties and the cities would support that legislation. Portland’s welcoming approach is replicated by the state to a certain degree. In 2002, then-Governor Angus King told a task force on immigration that the nation “was built on immigration” and explained why the state should encourage immigrants to settle there. Not only is it “morally right to provide a haven for newcomers, as the state did with French Canadians in years past,” but it is also pragmatic, “The state’s work force must grow to help Maine promote economic development.”

A number of Danbury’s municipal departments provide services to immigrants, including ESL programs in the public schools, the Adult Education Program, and a state-of-the-art language center at the Public Library, as well as healthcare provision through the Visiting Nurses Association and the School-Based Healthcare Services, but there is no office for immigrants or refugees as such, nor is there a multicultural program as in Portland. In fact, there is a growing concern about City departments “cracking down” on immigrants, such as the Unified Neighborhood Inspection Team (the UNIT), which identifies housing violations such as overcrowding or too many cars at a particular residence. And those inclined toward an “anti-immigrant sentiment” make regular calls to report “illegals” infractions.

Moreover, the Danbury Common Council recently voted to enter into a partnership with the Department of Homeland Securities Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) program under section 287(g) of the federal immigration code. The ICE ACCESS program would train police department members to enforce certain aspects of immigration law. Danbury’s police chief Al Baker asserts, “The focus of our participation would be on crimes committed by illegal immigrants.” But the legal director of the state chapter of the ACLU worries about the “vagueness” of this position stating, “It’s entirely possible they will have the authority to ask anybody what they’re immigration status is...There have been cases in other parts of the country where ICE has stopped people simply because they are foreigners.” Concerns about racial profiling, and about creating fear and panic among immigrants, are on the increase, both on the ground and in media discourse, with protests, op-eds, and on-line forums exploding into controversy.

Conclusion

Portland, Maine and Danbury, Connecticut are two small post-industrial cities that position themselves as multicultural havens which welcome newcomers. On the ground, the reality is quite different. While Portland harnessed its increasing diversity to revitalize its downtown and to reinsert itself more advantageously in the global economy, Danbury has had a much more difficult time, particularly given rising anti-immigrant sentiments, to put its words into practice. We attribute this variation to difference in each city’s cultural armature and to city scale. Throughout its history, and because of its geography, Portland has always interacted with newcomers. A group of forward-thinking urban activists saw this as key to Portland’s urban redevelopment and economic revitalization. Moreover, “deserving” refugees from a variety of countries integrated
themselves across Portland’s neighborhoods, so there is no one immigrant “other” nor one particular immigrant area. The city received state and national funding not only to settle refugees but to use its increasing diversity as a springboard toward redeveloping its port into a major tourist destination. The city’s self representation and ethos stressed the benefits of welcoming newcomers which was, in turn, an integral part of jumpstarting how Portland would reposition itself in the global economy.

Danbury’s cultural apparatus also helps explain the city’s contentious relations with newcomers. While the office parks that surround the city maybe thriving, its downtown business district has become an ethnic business hub. While some see this as progress, others yearn for the downtown of yesteryear, with its English-language signs and familiar products. They see this concentration of Portuguese-speaking immigrants, and the undocumented day laborers who wait hoping to get work at the city park each day, as a threat to American values and the city’s economic base. While city leaders use Danbury’s diversity to try to attract new residents, they have not used it as an economic development tool. That most of the benefits of Danbury’s urban revitalization efforts accrue to high-skilled office workers mean that many other residents are suffering and that immigrants are an easy, concentrated, highly visible explanation for their pain. Rescaling in Danbury has not used immigrants as an asset nor does it particularly benefit them.

Danbury’s multiculturalism is also self-contained. By that we mean that it is not connected regularly or organically to infusions of outsiders, be they foreign or local tourists. It is also skewed, in that there are one or two focal groups that are spatially clustered (i.e. Brazilians and illegals). If anything, in Danbury, we see a political rescaling. That is, by becoming a key player in the national anti-immigrant movement, Danbury’s mayor has lifted the city out of its relative anonymity to prominence as a national exemplar of what can go wrong. By doing so, he exacerbates what had been fairly isolated tensions, making the disconnect between the city’s talk and the city’s walk wider and wider.

This tale of two cities underscores the importance of incorporating culture and scale into discussions of space and contexts of reception. While it is demography that ultimately explains much of what we discovered, it is cultural factors that influence what those numbers mean and how they are ultimately become part of the urban fabric.

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NOTES

1. When the natural increase resulting from births is included in this data, Maine’s’ population increased by 26,488 during this same period.

2. See for example, “Danbury Mayor Acts on A Serious Problem,” Associated Press, Apr 17, 2005 and Robert Miller, “Danbury Task Force to concentrate on planning,” The NewsTimes, Feb 03, 2007. In addition, we rely on personal communication with Danbury’s mayor, Mark Boughton and community leaders.


4. Over the past two years, there have been a number highly publicized “sweeps,” by Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE). The most recent was the arrest of day laborers who entered a van expecting to be taken to a job site, and were instead taken into federal custody. The immigrants’ rights community responded vigorously, dubbing the seized Ecuadorian men as the “Danbury 11.”

5. French, Italian, Spanish, and Portuguese.

6. The public school system reports enrolling students from 43 nations, speaking 47 different languages (Swift, Mike. “A Worldly Place: Flood of immigrants bring international flavor, age-old problems to Danbury [Census 2000 Workshop].” Hartford Courant, 13 January 2002).

7. These ordinances exclude cases in which persons are suspected of committing a felony, having been previously deported or being a threat to national security, or when otherwise required by law or court order

8. The governor’s original order prohibited all state employees from asking about or disclosing a person’s immigration status unless required by law to do so and explicitly banned state law enforcement officials from asking about a person’s immigration status “unless investigating or prosecuting illegal activity other than mere status as an undocumented alien. In February 2005, “Border patrol had issues with it,” said state police Maj. Robert Williams. “They were concerned that if we were working with them, we wouldn’t be able to engage with people as they do.”

ABSTRACTS

In this paper, we heed the recent call by migration and urban studies scholars to bring questions of space, locality and culture squarely into discussions of immigrant incorporation. While many urban studies scholars focus on how specific “global cities” influence and are influenced by worldwide economic restructuring, they do not pay enough attention to how migration affects these processes. In contrast, migration scholars around the world, but in the United States in particular, have produced a large body of work on new destinations and contexts of reception. Much of this work fails to consider how these contexts are embedded in larger geopolitical fields in ways that make them more or less receptive to newcomers. Moreover, this work privileges the economic characteristics of localities without paying sufficient attention to the variations in cultural resources particular sites bring to bear on processes of incorporation. More complete and compelling explanations for why certain places integrate immigrants with greater success than others need to take scale and culture into account. In this study of two small, post-industrial cities, we argue that important variations in how cities create and deploy what we call their cultural armature, including differences in urban self-presentation, the prevailing ethos toward immigrants, how culture is harnessed in service of urban renewal projects, and how history and political economy influence the available cultural apparatus explain much of the variation in our two contexts of reception.

Este artículo se sitúa en el campo de la investigación de los espacios urbanos y de la migración y centra la reflexión alrededor de temas como el espacio, la localidad, y la cultura. Si bien, muchos sociólogos del campo de estudios urbanos se focalizan en lo que se denominan “ciudades globales” y en qué medida la restructuración económica global influye en ellas, no prestan suficiente atención a cómo la migración influencia precisamente estos procesos. Por otro lado, los especialistas en estudios migratorios han producido muchos trabajos valiosos sobre los nuevos destinos y contextos de recepción pero sin considerar en qué medida estos contextos se sitúan en campos sociales geopolíticos más amplios, los que a su vez influyen en la acogida de los recién llegados. Estos trabajos también tienden a privilegiar las características económicas de espacios locales sin interesarse en los recursos culturales que estos espacios desarrollan. Necesitamos tomar en cuenta la cultura como elementos de análisis si queremos entender mejor la integración exitosa de los inmigrantes. En nuestro estudio, que se centra en dos ciudades pequeñas y post-industriales en los Estados Unidos, consideramos que hay diferencias importantes en la forma en que las ciudades se representan a sí mismas, en las actitudes que desarrollan frente a los inmigrantes, en cómo se moviliza la cultura para fomentar el desarrollo y, finalmente, en cómo la historia y la economía política influyen en el aparato cultural de las ciudades. Todos estos elementos permiten explicar por qué la incorporación de los inmigrantes resulta más fácil en ciertos lugares que en otros.

INDEX

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