

Mélange Cities

The disruption that immigrants bring is often a benefit.

BY BLAIR A. RUBLE

TENSIONS AND CONFLICT GET THE HEADLINES when peoples make contact, but historically migration is not a singular event tied always to a “crisis.” Migrants of all sorts—immigrants, emigrants, refugees, displaced persons, guest workers—have become a significant presence in cities around the world. According to the UN Human Settlements Program, there are approximately 175 million official international migrants worldwide, not including those without complete documentation. Even this massive movement of people is not unprecedented. During the past 500 years, Europeans began to inhabit the rest of the world and nearly 10 million African slaves were forced to migrate to the Americas; another 48 million people left Europe for the Americas and Australia between 1800 and 1925. That is not to mention the tens of millions of people who have migrated across other national boundaries, continental divides, and oceans during the past half-century. Migration is simply part and parcel of human existence. And it has always brought fruitful encounters as well as conflict.

The transformative power of today’s migration is easiest to see not in established “mélange cities” such as New York but in traditionally more insular communities such as Washington, D.C., and Montreal, which were long divided by race, language, culture, religion, ethnicity, or class. Once split along single fault lines between two core groups—whites and blacks in Washington, French-speakers and English-speakers in Montreal—these urban centers have become new mélange cities,

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and the evidence suggests that we should view such transformations with more hope than fear.

Montreal offers the clearest example in North America of the creative disruption wrought by new immigrants. In that city divided—and defined—for decades by conflicts between Francophones and Anglophones, a curious story appeared in the press a couple of years ago. During the depths of a typically harsh Quebec February, it was reported that Filipino and Hispanic parents were trekking with their sick children through snow-filled streets to a small apartment complex in the fringe neighborhood of St.-Laurent, where they desperately beseeched an iconlike portrait of the Virgin Mary to cure them. Abderezak Mehdi, the Muslim manager of the low-rise building, claimed to have discovered the Virgin’s image in the garbage. According to Mehdi and Greek Melkite Catholic priest Michel Saydé, the Virgin shed tears of oil that could cure the ill and tormented. Michel Parent, the chancellor of the Roman Catholic archdiocese of Montreal, cautioned skepticism, noting that “while it is true that nothing is impossible for God, historically, that is not how God acts.”

This small and almost comically inclusive multicultural scene of healing, which unfolded in a dreary neighborhood built at a time when Montreal was starkly divided between speakers of French and of English, captures some of the positive aspects, as well as some of the tensions, of a change that has occurred over the past three decades or so, as immigrants and their Canadian-born children have grown to number more than a quarter of the city’s population.

Immigrants are not the only force for change. Mon-



A *mélange* city moment: Tara Hecksher (center), the product of an Irish- Nigerian marriage, was queen of Montreal's St. Patrick's Day Parade in 2004.

Montreal's growth into a sprawling metropolitan region laced by freeways that provide a new organizing structure of daily life has rendered many old cultural and geographical boundaries meaningless. The Internet is likewise no friend to the old order. But it is the newcomers, who have no stake in the city's past divisions, who have had a singular impact on its political life. The once-powerful Francophone *sovereigniste* movement, which long pressed for the secession of the entire province of Quebec from Canada, has lost momentum in considerable measure because of opposition from immigrant groups. Those groups were an essential component of the very narrow majority that defeated the last referendum on Quebec sovereignty in 1995, 50.6 percent to 49.4 percent. Pro-sovereignty politicians have since been looking for ways to court the immigrant vote. The communally based populism that once dominated Montreal politics is giving way, slowly but surely, to a new pragmatism more suited to a world in which communities compete for investment and bond ratings.

Montreal may be further along the road to true cultural diversity than most North American cities, but its experience is hardly unique. Metropolitan Washington, D.C., another historically divided city, was the United States' fifth largest recipient of legal migrants during the 1990s, and it is beginning to experience some of the same sort of change affecting Montreal.

Twenty-first-century Washington is already dramatically different from the "Chocolate City, Vanilla Suburbs" days of the 1970s. New arrivals from El Salvador and Ukraine, Ethiopia and Vietnam, Brazil and India, and dozens of other countries, as well as other areas of the United States, have fanned out across an expanding metropolitan region that extends from Frederick, Maryland, 50 miles to the west, to the shores of the Chesapeake Bay and beyond to the east; from north of Baltimore more than 100 miles south to Fredericksburg, Virginia. The region as a whole is an incredible polyglot blend. The neighborhoods in the inner-ring Virginia suburb of South Arlington defined by zip code 22204, as well as zip code 20009 in the city's trendy Adams Mor-

gan-Mt. Pleasant area, are each home to residents from more than 130 different countries, according to a group of Brookings Institution analysts led by Audrey Singer. Yet not very many Americans or even Washingtonians appear aware that their capital has become a *mélange* city.

After Congress gave up its direct oversight of the capital city and reinstated partial home rule in the 1970s, local affairs quickly came to be dominated by the politics of race. As children of the civil rights battles of the 1960s, many of Washington's first elected officials appeared to view local politics as a new version of the nation's great racial struggle, and

stadium, most local observers were not prepared for the spectacle of a raging city council debate waged virtually without any reference to race.

In other new *mélange* cities, the story plays out in different ways. The Latinization of Denver's population and voter base has encouraged both political parties to reach out to minority voters. Once-sleepy Charlotte, North Carolina, has been transformed by, among other things, a 932 percent increase in its Hispanic population between 1980 and 2000. The country's second-largest city, Los Angeles, elected Antonio Villaraigosa in 2005 as its first Hispanic mayor since it was a village of 6,000 people, back in 1872.

Similar shifts are occurring throughout the world. In the Ukrainian capital of Kyiv, immigrants from Vietnam, China, Pakistan, and the Middle East are blunting the force of a nationwide population decline, and officials are beginning to speak of migration as a long-term

answer to the country's economic and demographic decline.

Even as seemingly homogenous a society as Japan has felt the impact of immigration. Japan's shrinking population and economic uncertainty are helping to drive companies to relocate factories abroad. Japan's reputation for homogeneity is not unearned, and national policies do not encourage immigration, but local leaders in some cities have decided that the best way to keep their local economies healthy is to actively seek out migrants from abroad.

Few cities anywhere in the world have been as aggressive in pursuing international migrants as Hamamatsu. A city of more than half a million located half way between Tokyo and Osaka, Hamamatsu boasts major Honda, Yamaha, and Suzuki factories. Realizing that the city would lose its economic base without new residents, municipal officials began to recruit workers from Japanese migrant communities in Brazil and Peru. The officials assumed—rather naively, it would seem to American eyes—that given their Japanese heritage, the immigrants would easily fit into local neighborhoods and workplaces. In fact, the migrants were descendants of Japanese who had left the home islands as much as a century before. They were Brazil-

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Ukraine, Ethiopia, Vietnam, Brazil, India,
and many other countries have made
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symbolic politics took precedence over pragmatic city management. This civil rights regime began to fray as the city's financial and management problems grew, and by the time Mayor Marion Barry was arrested in 1990 on charges of smoking crack cocaine, the dream of the city's activist leadership to transform D.C. into a showcase for their values and policies had been shattered. Congress essentially placed the city in receivership by appointing a financial control board in 1995.

The collapse of local government prompted a new generation of neighborhood leaders to enter local politics, shifting attention to pragmatic concerns about city services and neighborhood quality of life—a focus that began to allow immigrants into the city's political mix even as their presence became a subject of debate. During his 2002 reelection campaign, for example, Mayor Anthony Williams stirred controversy by proposing that noncitizens should be allowed to vote in local elections. Arriving in large numbers just at the moment of municipal regime shift, immigrants helped mold a new, broader political environment in which race yielded its preeminence to more pragmatic concerns. When the first major issue of the new era emerged in 2004 in the form of a controversy over the financing of a new baseball



Ethnic Japanese immigrants returning after many years in South America have injected samba and other unexpected elements into the life of the home islands.

ian and Peruvian more than they were Japanese.

As a result, Hamamatsu—like Montreal, Washington, and many other *mélange* cities—is no longer the community it was. There are four Portuguese newspapers, four Brazilian schools and a Peruvian school, Portuguese and Spanish community centers, and numerous samba nightclubs. City hall now publishes local laws and regulations in several languages, and municipal leaders have learned to embrace Brazilian holidays as their own, often using them as launching pads for local political campaigns.

Other cities in Japan have been changing as well. Osaka, long the home of Japan's largest Korean community, publishes city documents in nearly a half-dozen languages. Sapporo and other communities on the island of Hokkaido post street signs in Russian. Tens of thousands of city residents of all ages and races turn out for Kobe's annual samba festival.

Migrants, though still few in number, have brought significant change to Japan. Some of that change is measurable and lamentable, such as increasing income inequality, rising crime rates, and enervated traditional institutions.

Other changes that cannot be measured neatly may be creating opportunities for communities to escape dysfunctional institutions and patterns of life. One unexpected effect of the search by Hamamatsu and other Japanese cities for labor from abroad has been pressure from below on the traditionally hyper-centralized Japanese state to cede some central control over immigration policy.

How should we weigh the negative and positive impacts of immigration? Is all change for the worse? Heightened anxiety over international terrorism has cast suspicion on cities themselves as a social form and on migration as a social phenomenon. The impulse to withdraw into a cocoon of homogeneity increasingly undermines the acceptance of difference. The experiences of *mélange* cities such as Montreal, Washington, and Hamamatsu show us another course. Voluntarily or not, such cities have come to represent lively alternatives to a 21st-century metropolitan future in which everyone seeks protection from others unlike themselves. Despite the new *mélange* cities' obvious imperfections, their enormous intercultural vitality provides the basis for successful strategies for a 21st century in which people's movement around the world remains a fact of human existence. ■