How should democratic societies and the cities that propel them respond to increased social diversity? Surprisingly few studies compare cities on their capacity to manage social diversity or offer historical views of the bases for co-existence among identity groups. Studies of this crucial theme that do offer comparative reach are limited to higher-level analyses (e.g., of race and nation making in the modern global order) or partial views (e.g., of economic inequality by race or ethnic politics in contemporary cities). This study, an exercise in theory building, examines three large, history-making, and famously diverse cities that relied on distinct designs for society to accommodate diversity: ancient Rome, medieval Cordoba, and contemporary Los Angeles. Comparisons across such huge spans of time and major culture shifts yield lessons obscured in current debates over inequality, multiculturalism, or the need for tolerance. Three of the most important lessons relate to the power of integrative societal projects much larger than cities; the co-existence throughout history of separatism or cultural mosaic patterns alongside active cross-cultural exchange and hybridization; and the need to bound pluralistic ideals within a strong, locally viable public order. In earlier periods of history, autocracy provided such order for standout pluralist cities and the civilizations they led.

Come, come whoever you are. Ours is not a caravan of despair.

—Rumi, 13th-century Persian poet

INTRODUCTION

Economic change and environmental sustainability grab most of the headlines in this age of globalization, but increased social diversity is the other byproduct of large-scale migration to affluent nations from war-torn or poorer ones, differences in fertility rates across social groups in the destination countries, and cultural interdependence across borders. Nowhere are the opportunities and challenges of increased diversity—ethnic and religious differences, in particular—more sharply felt than in the world’s changing cities. In the United States in recent years, racial profiling and threats to civil liberties in the aftermath of 9/11, Census 2000 reports on our changing demographic profile, vigorous debates over affirmative action in higher education and other domains, and an increased sense of competition and stagnant fortunes from the middle class on down have all made “diversity” issues, broadly defined, front-page concerns. Likewise, large-scale emigration...
from developing countries to Europe, Canada, and Australia has made the economic self-
sufficiency and political and cultural integration of immigrants and their children—as well
as nativist backlash—a hot topic from Berlin and Paris to Montreal and Sydney. Where
the mega-challenges of diversity are concerned, since 9/11, political leaders, pundits,
scholars, journalists, and others have even wondered anew about a “clash of civilizations”
pitting Islamism (political Islam) against the modernizing world and, in particular, against
the supposedly American-dominated recipe of open markets, democratic pluralism, and
secular individualism. Notwithstanding all the caricatures of Islam and revisionist history
that this anxiety often mines, the challenges posed by sharply increased diversity are real.
And clearly they are not limited to religious fundamentalism or the first-ever emergence, in
modern Europe and North America, of a large-scale Islamic civil society—one that returns
religious differences to the foreground (Lubeck and Britts, 2002). Whatever the identity
boundary, if intergroup tolerance were enough, or if assimilation were both realistic and
attractive to all concerned, it might be enough to examine today’s problems in their
immediate contexts, but a look back in time suggests a healthy respect for the limits of
tolerance, assimilation, and other fixtures of contemporary debates.

Where the diversity challenges of contemporary cities and the wider societies they lead
are concerned, the lessons of history are sobering and rather mixed. On one hand, large-
scale integrative projects have successfully created inclusive civic identities, and prosperity
has generated economic opportunity, across identity group boundaries. The Romaniza-
tion of the ancient world—a remarkably inclusive project that rested on conquest but did
not favor an idealized ethnic stock of ancestral Romans—is one example, and at the heart
of the Empire, Rome the city flourished under such inclusiveness. On the other hand,
apparently successful diverse cities at key periods in history—great cities of the ancient
world, as well as medieval centers of learning and commerce that planted the seeds of the
Renaissance and Enlightenment, relied heavily on imperial expansion to create inclusion-
ary economies and autocratic rule to provide public order. Literally, the latter entailed
an ordering of group rights and responsibilities that enabled citizens, consumers, and
civic institutions to manage conflict and, more ambitiously, to learn and exchange across
cultures in ways that transformed societies, in time even changing the course of history.
Central to this order was the protection of minority groups. But since autocratic ordering,
empire building, and other bulwarks of earlier designs for pluralist societies are unac-
ceptable to us, how should contemporary democratic societies respond to their diversity
challenges? And what is the role of cities and of local arrangements in this picture? Part
of a larger ongoing project, this study is an exercise in theory building. It examines the
lessons of history for making diversity work in contemporary cities and the societies they
propel.

BACKGROUND: DIVERSITY, IDENTITY, AND CO-EXISTENCE PAST AND PRESENT

Identity-group differences may be defined along myriad dimensions, but throughout his-
tory, ethnic and ethnoreligious differences defined by a belief in common background
and/or creed have been particularly important sources of competition and conflict, as
well as cross-cultural learning and hybridization (so defined, ethnicity can subsume mod-
ern concepts of race) (Alba and Nee, 2003). In broad terms, three factors regulate the
impact of these group identities on co-existence in shared places, whether neighborhood,
town or city, province, nation, or supra-national region. The first is the salience, nature, and mutability of group identities themselves, that is, of the boundaries that (at once) define identity and difference and the potential for boundary shift in response to diversity. Boundaries may be “bright” (visible and clear) or blurred (ambiguous), permeable to crossers or seemingly impermeable, and pervasive (salient in most domains and social situations) or circumscribed (Alba, 2003; Lamont and Molnar, 2002). Furthermore, boundaries may shift dramatically over time to include or exclude. In general, scholars increasingly agree that ethnic boundaries are a complex product of social response to physical appearance (phenotype), linguistic and cultural variety, and actions of the state to magnify or de-emphasize differences over time, often as part of building a nation-state and constructing a national identity (Anderson, 1983; Collins, 2001; Hobshawm and Ranger, 1983).

In the most famous case of boundary shift through assimilation, influential differences among European Americans in the United States have all but disappeared over time, persisting in cultural symbols and folk practices perhaps (Lieberson and Waters, 1988; Waldinger and Lichter, 1996), but through construction of an expanded category (“white”), removing the basis for persistent intergroup hostility or ethnocentrism. In the Chicago School formulation, boundaries shift to include when out-groups are incorporated socially and spatially. Status-relevant differences go away. Outsiders become insiders following stages of contact, competition, and accommodation (Park, 1926). Current debates concern how much future boundary shifts will involve assimilation into a relatively well-defined in-group as opposed to convergence of several groups toward a new mainstream (Alba and Nee, 2003) and how such shifts might affect the fortunes of long-excluded groups, such as African Americans in the United States, for whom only limited convergence (or assimilation) is evident to date.

The second factor is tolerance: Identity-group differences persist and are recognized but permitted, even respected, without resort to discrimination or coercive action. Recent applications of agent-based computer modeling to ethnocentric behavior, which favors cooperation with one’s own group over that with out-groups (Axelrod and Hammond, 2003), underscore the power of this precious resource for diverse societies, adding to a vast literature on the psychology and social structures of “living with difference.” Recent ethnographic research in cities reviews this work and extends our understanding of civility and other acts of tolerance in diverse contexts, even where media and other forces emphasize the pervasiveness of interethnic conflict (see, e.g., Lee, 2002).

The third factor, a conjunction of the first two, is cross-cutting loyalties. This reflects the degree to which a multiplicity of identities and group obligations—a defining feature of modern life—hold each other in check in a diverse society (Blau and Schwartz, 1984; Briggs, 2003; Simmel, [1923] 1955). Say that I am Jewish and African American and these identities “cut” across a conflict in which my fellow African Americans find themselves in conflict with my fellow Jews. My cross-cutting loyalties, one ostensibly religious and one racial/ethnic, represent a potential circuit breaker or defuser of conflict among the two groups. Likewise, my involvement with both groups may foster useful collective action between the two groups, from everyday to extraordinary circumstances. Horton’s (1995) ethnography of “the politics of diversity” amid economic and demographic change in Monterey Park, California, highlights this in the form of cross-cutting ethnic and class ties between middle-class Asians and middle-class whites, as does Varshney’s (2002) study of conflict and cooperation among Hindus and Muslims in Indian cities. Cross-cutting
loyalties emerge from and also encourage less insular personal networks and associational involvement, creating ties across group boundaries that represent a source of "bridging social capital" (Briggs, 1997; Gittell and Vidal, 1998; Putnam, 2000; Putnam and Goss, 2002; Woolcock and Narayan, 2000). Cross-cutting ties derive their special significance from the fact that they bond on the social dimension shared by the linked actors while bridging their social differences.

DIVERSITY IN CONTEXT: UNDERSTANDING THE ROLE OF CITIES

All three of the above-mentioned factors—boundary shift, tolerance of difference, and cross-cutting loyalties—are observable in human settlements, of course, at the local level of cities and towns. More importantly, researchers consistently find that these factors are shaped by structural features of the local context—group population sizes, arrival rates and circumstances, relative prosperity or scarcity, and more—as well as the agency of key local actors. Yet cities hold a curiously residual status in research on how diversity is handled. Cities become merely mirrors, reflecting national and global forces, or stages on which a variety of "narratives" and culturally encoded styles are performed, where small-group experiences—diversity in the observable everyday—presumably aggregate up. In much research on human diversity, the city merely adds texture and place to forces that seem to be set in motion at the more micro or macro levels.

For much of recorded history, cities have been regarded as cradles of diversity or, to put it more modestly, as being more hospitable to differences in identity, belief, and behavior than the surrounding countryside. This is especially true where cities lay at crossroads between disparate societies, for example, as trading meccas or strategic ports of call (Mumford, 1961). What is more, human diversity is lived—some would say endured—locally and not just in the sense that everyday life is necessarily situated somewhere. It is at the local level where political, economic, and cultural forces, some locally generated and some not, either cohere in ways that support co-existence and shared access to the goods of society or to thwart co-existence in tangible ways, through spatial, institutional, and other barriers. This confluence for good or bad may be most pronounced in the lives of newly arrived immigrants (those new to both the city and the rules and expectations of the wider society), but it is felt by all of us.

In the social sciences, as mentioned above, the Chicago School provided the reference theory of spatial and social incorporation of new groups in America’s booming industrial cities early in the last century. Contemporary urbanists consistently, if rather abstractly, locate urban identity and its consequences at the heart of the global-local tension thought to define our age (see, e.g., Castells, 1997; Smith, 2001). Cities are intermediate between the small worlds of our everyday interactions and the large problems of nationhood, regional economic change, and even global order. Among the levels of analysis submitted to the scrutiny of research, therefore, cities are uniquely positioned to help us understand how, in Granovetter’s (1973, p. 1360) terms, “small-scale interaction becomes translated into large-scale patterns, and [how] these, in turn, feed back into small groups.”

Finally, it is in principal cities—political, economic, or cultural capitals—through exchanges and along networks, where many of the most influential ideas and boundary-pushing practices, good and bad, for dealing with diversity emerge. To be sure, cities are
nested in larger economies and political systems that supply driving forces (on which more below), but cities, often through political and business elites, have shown significant power to “steer” and resist as well (Orum, 1991; Savitch and Kantor, 2003; Smith, 2001). State-enforced ethnic ghettos, after all, are distinctly urban inventions; they function to circumscribe group activity and habitation within the local labor market that defines a settlement, not to remove groups entirely as rural resettlement would do (on the relevant, racially exclusionary American “invention,” see Hirsch, 1983; Massey and Denton, 1993). Likewise, new legal protections or prohibitions, differential rights for social groups, and mechanisms for conflict resolution all imagine the contacts and conflicts most frequent in cities. This is not a plea for purely functionalist renderings of social arrangements; it is simply an acknowledgment that social actors, sometimes through states and sometimes more informally, create mechanisms to defend ideals, status, and more, and that some of these mechanisms address distinctly local encounters across social boundaries. Cities, then, are not only mirrors of the larger society and its recipes for dealing with difference; cities are also generative of those recipes, steering and redefining their civilizations. As one reviewer of this article helpfully elaborated, cities—as crossroads and meeting places—actually help produce new identities too, appropriating and transforming cultural material and shifting the boundaries available (see, e.g., Sanchez, 1993).

For these and other reasons, urban context belongs at the heart of the diversity debate, especially in an age combining rapid urbanization with globalization, which favors increased contact among disparate groups and the creation of new social identities and group narratives (Kymlicka, 1995; Sandercock, 1998). Yet surprisingly few studies compare cities on their capacity to “manage” diversity (in the words we use today) or offer historical views of the basis for co-existence among groups in shared space. We need more than a critique of the xenophobic city and its inflexible rational-planning aims—or idealization of the multicultural one in which planning is “for cosmopolis” and the city is a courageous, negotiated, open-minded carnival in constant flux (Sandercock, 1998). Most studies of managing diversity that offer comparative and even historical reach are limited to nation-states in the modern global order. For example, scholars debate the relationship between socially constructed categories of difference, such as in official census treatment of racial/ethnic groups, and the development of the laws, political institutions, and conceptions of citizenship that define a nation. Comparative studies of the United States and Brazil have generated particularly rich lessons about this interplay between ideas and structures (Nobles, 2000), and so have comparisons of ethnic identity and nationalism in other “settler states,” such as Canada and Australia (Kivisto, 2002; and see Jung, 2000; Tilly, 2003).

By situating identity-group boundaries in the process of constructing states and citizenship, studies of race and nation complement several strains of scholarship, each quite distinct in the United States: a literature on economic and social status attainment, racial stratification, and inequality that largely focuses on city dwellers (Waldinger, 1996; O’Connor, Tilly, and Bobo, 2001; Anderson and Massey, 2001); a rapidly expanding literature that treats ethnic and other identities as segmented, multidimensional, and “negotiated” in everyday life in increasingly diverse societies (Waters, 1990; Rumbaut and Portes, 2001; Lee, 2002); and studies of ethnic politics in cities, which focus on dynamics of enfranchisement, mobilization, competition, and coalition building among groups (overview in Jones-Correa, 2001). Each of these strains contributes a vital but partial view of what managing diversity entails and (sometimes) why local context matters.
Research has not yet provided answers for the two major questions that motivate this study: Beyond the partial views, are there composite designs for society, and within them designs for urban life specifically, that handle diversity without large-scale exclusion, violence, or entrenched inequality? (That is, in toto, what does it take to make diversity work on just terms?) And since social diversity is not a new challenge, least of all in the world’s cities, are there some designs, or elements of the same, that either endure or recur over time, across long historical transitions?

PREVIEW

If one peril is ignoring the local as the essential space for making diversity work in all of its dimensions, another is in failing to jointly consider those dimensions. This study takes the multidimensional tack, and it does so unconventionally, by comparing a contemporary city to one ancient and one medieval one. I examine the arrangements (designs) that enabled cities that were famously diverse in ethnic or ethnoreligious terms to produce, govern, and conduct everyday life, that is, to propel the interdependent features of economy, politics, and culture that define a civilization, its contributions, and its discontents. This section previews the scope of the analysis; the next section overviews its comparative method and offers key limitations and caveats.

The principal cases are spaced many miles and some 1,000 years apart: ancient Rome (capital of the Empire at its zenith), medieval Cordoba (capital of the Islamic Caliphate at the height of its powers), and contemporary Los Angeles (world city and culture maker in the American “empire”). Though no Shangri-La of intergroup harmony in any case, these are uniquely influential places. They illustrate both the opportunities and challenges posed by human diversity. As such, I treat them not as representatives of their respective ages but as revelatory cases (Yin, 1989). That is, these cases are rich in certain timeless features of the human experience that are of theoretical as well as practical interest, but we should remain mindful of the difference between revealing key problems and societal resolutions and representing larger populations of cities at particular historical moments.

Next, there is the level-of-analysis problem—that of nesting cities in larger systems. I consider the three cities as cities (local contexts that always “mirror” but possibly “generate” too, as outlined above) along with the larger, supra-local forces that do much to drive the demand and opportunity for local arrangements. For the historical cases, the imperatives and opportunities of empire are primary, and for Los Angeles, global economic change, international and domestic migration flows, and the quirks of California democracy and U.S. federalism are crucial to the story. This article-length treatment offers a necessarily brief rendering of such nesting.

To examine the salience of boundary shift, tolerating differences, and cross-cutting loyalties, the study surveys the interdependent domains of politics, economy, and culture in each city-period. That is, I am interested in how the economic pie was (or is) generated by diverse groups and divided among them; who governed (roles of elites and nonelites) and how politics and law resolved problems of differing interests, conflicts, and public order; and how the symbols, norms, and identity markers of distinct groups co-existed and related to one another, as well as how diverse groups built social bridges. For example, is there a mosaic (distinct parts co-exist without mutual influence), a clear hierarchy (ordering of cultural space, even exclusion and repression), a “gumbo” of cultural fusion, mutual
assimilation (convergence), and transformation, or something else? Are there bridging networks (relational ties) across social groups? Since bridging and other phenomena are defined by the nature and persistence of boundaries, I address the issue of which boundaries (ethnic, religious, other) were or were not salient in each case and in the conclusion. It is not my aim to project contemporary notions of race, for example, backward in time.

Two themes cut across the domains of politics, economy, and culture. First, religion is no mere cultural feature, reflecting distinctive worship practices (group customs), tracking important ethnic group boundaries, and challenging or encouraging tolerance of differences. Religion is all of that but also more. From the ancient world to the modern, religious order is often bound up with political order, religious codes with laws of the state, religious identity with sense of place in the world. Second, contemporary urban research suggests that urban space is both structuring of diversity (of its handling) and structured by it. Far more than economic commodity, space in these city-periods is political and cultural material as well.

On a final note of preview, comparisons across such huge spans of time and major culture shifts yield lessons that are often obscured in current debates. Two of the most important lessons relate to the power of massive, integrative societal projects and principles (worrisome ones, such as Rome’s repressive imperial expansionism and near-perpetual war, and encouraging ones, such as the ideal of a tolerant Western Islamic city to rival an intolerant Eastern one in the 10th century); and the need to bound pluralistic ideals within a strong, clear, and locally viable public order—a concise expression of the possibility and the risk in diversity for our own democratic societies today. In the context of designs for society and for cities, the imperative of order—including what we might call the ordering of pluralism—is not necessarily dominant in each case. But nor can it be ignored in the interest of uncovering the somehow magical foundations of intergroup tolerance, pluralist productivity, or multicultural expression.

The article proceeds in three sections. In the first, I briefly discuss methods for case analysis that are comparative and historical, contrasting the objective and approach of this study with that of influential studies of what Tilly (1984) has aptly described as “big structures, large processes, and huge comparisons.” The case analyses follow in chronological order, with synthesis and discussion at the conclusion.

METHOD

In the past 30 years, comparative-historical approaches have become well established in social research, particularly in sociology, economics, and anthropology. Several methodological debates, centering on the basis for causal explanation, and a loose canon of seminal works define a body of work concerned primarily with macro-causal analysis of social change (Skocpol and Somers, 1980). That is, researchers use a relatively small number of cases to explain well-defined historical outcomes, such as state formation and revolution. Because they aim to explain outcomes, most comparative-historical accounts rely on a basic logic rooted in Mills’s ([1843] 1974) method of agreement and method of difference (Ragin, 1987). Cases are matched on a set of predictor variables but allowed to differ on one or more predictors as well as some outcome of interest. The analyst then tests the hypothesis that the difference on a given predictor variable(s) explains the difference in outcome.
My objective in this comparative study is not macro-causal explanation but corresponds, instead, to what Skocpol and Somers term “parallel demonstration of theory.” Using rich, revelatory cases, I explore the possibility that political, economic, and cultural arrangements important for the co-existence of groups in shared settlements interact and form composites—designs for society that may include designs for urban life. As we will see in a moment, designs are resultant structures, not to be confused with intentional programs of change that may contribute. Designs anticipate interactions among political, cultural, and economic spheres of social life, responding—as well-designed inventions should—to important problems, such as the need for loyalty in a far-flung, ethnically diverse empire (as in ancient Rome) or respect for tribal religious seclusion at the heart of a bustling, multicultural city (as in medieval Cordoba). The question of a design’s existence, of course, is distinct from that of its persistence or durability over time and across cultural and other distances. I am interested in both identifying designs and considering which elements of these designs, if any, persist across contexts (city-periods).

To clarify the distinction between this approach and macro-causal explanation, I have not identified a discrete outcome event, such as revolution, or a fixed set of predictor suspects to be tested, nor will I, in this article format, trace long pathways of historical causation. I am snapping shots of revelatory periods in history and examining what defines the handling of human diversity in those periods. Since the concept of designs for society is relatively untested in research on diversity and demands a multidimensional view, the objective is to explain the hows of these cities, nested in their larger societies, as diversity laboratories, not the long-term whys of the city’s origins. I limit myself to crucial, proximate historical influences.

The quest for designs holds several perils, such as reifying dynamic processes into static recipes, distorting complex and even disconfirming phenomena in the pursuit of unifying logics, and perhaps worst of all, imputing degrees of intentionality and coordination across actors and domains that may be all but impossible to achieve in any place and time (designs as blueprints). The quest demands several safeguards: peripheral vision (to show how patterns of stability co-existed alongside constant change); special attention to exceptions and major gaps in the historical or contemporary record (where important patterns are at odds with an otherwise distinct design or suggest an incomplete grasp of the design); and guarded application of the very concept of design—a resultant structure that is plausibly crucial to the functioning of a particular society (or embedded city), not to be confused with specific programs of change (policies) promoted by the state apparatus, economic elites, or other actors. Particular policies, such as restrictive covenants to promote residential segregation, can reflect a larger design and feed back to shape it. But it turns out that even where political power was highly centralized, as in imperial Rome and Cordoba, no one actor or policy program fully defined the design for handling differences. No one had such 360-degree vision or such total control.

Having underlined the contrast between this study and much comparative-historical research, the logics of such research nevertheless inform this work in several key ways. First, I have chosen cities that share key traits thought to influence the fortunes of distinct social groups in shared space. The cities are economically prosperous—comparatively “competitive,” in the current lingo—and extraordinarily diverse socially. Ethnicity and religion are two key axes of this diversity, though the two are not salient in consistent ways across the city-periods, as we will see. Second, the three cases are focal cities for their respective societies. Contemporary Los Angeles is a regional economic capital and global cultural
one. Medieval Cordoba and ancient Rome were political capitals in addition. Where the underlying phenomenon of interest—managing the co-existence of social groups—is concerned, the cities are also similar, though here the coding of success becomes tricky. With few exceptions, none of these cities was home, during the periods under study, to mass exclusion, forced spatial segregation, or violent “cleansing” of particular social groups. Notwithstanding the persecution of early Christians and the complexities of slave status in ancient Rome, even that most militaristic and temporally distant case presents as a relatively open-door or pluralist city in a pluralist empire, quite unlike other ancient cities in other societies. Third and finally, available data allow us to assert notable success based on contrasts within each era (i.e., by benchmarking against other places). Though one could hope for deeper comparisons, prior empirical research contrasts Rome with its ancient contemporaries, Cordoba with its own, and Los Angeles with other diverse metropolitan areas of the present era.

A host of other cities, in each period studied here, is worthy of more encompassing comparisons in future research. In addition, we should rethink diversity failures, including the historical evolution of exclusionary policies in various societies. Among the ancients, for example, for every Rome there is a Babel—biblical archetype of the city, where differences in language and custom make co-existence impossible—and, worse yet, cities where group-based repression was the rule. But if there are time-tested designs for managing differences without repression and pervasive exclusion, our search for them begins where some success is evident.

ANCIENT ROME: EXPANSION AND PLURALISM

By the second century A.D., the Roman empire encompassed a host of other ancient empires and primitive tribes, dozens of languages, and many ethnic cultures and native religions. The City of Rome was a microcosm of this global reach and home to about 1 million persons. Rome’s official and unofficial responses to such diversity are complex. Prejudice against particular ethnic groups is evident in essays by public officials and literature of the time, yet foreigners could become Roman and even become emperor. Class distinctions were marked. Indeed, scholars agree that Romans were “obsessed with status and rank” (Garnsey, 1987, p. 199) and that this probably became more true as the machinery of expansion increased profit-making opportunities. Yet slaves, as foreign peoples defeated by Rome, could become freedmen and amass considerable wealth, and more than a few did. A tiny Roman elite fled the cramped city for estates on the periphery—Rome’s affluent suburban villas. But the urban core itself was a largely unplanned hodgepodge of homes both affluent and humble, with little in the way of spatial separation between classes or ethnic groups. Did Roman politics, economy, and culture therefore deal with human diversity in any identifiable, let alone consistent, way?

Clues emerge in the basic principles that organized Roman life after the Republic gave way to empire in 27 B.C.E. First, Rome in its expansion was both inclusive, even absorptive, of other cultures—most notably that of Greece—and at the same time quite anxious about the allegiance of new peoples and far-flung provinces to Roman civic ideals and domination. Historians emphasize that Romans did not conceive of their identity in terms of language or bloodline (Huskinson, 1999). Anyone, given time and education, could be Roman, and the empire could expand without fear of soiling some idealized racial/ethnic stock
defined by ancestry. Rome was famously tolerant of diverse religious doctrines. Its pantheon admitted everyone’s gods. Only the radical “cult” of Christianity, which prescribed the spiritual equality of men and women and forbade the worship of multiple gods, would come, in time, to threaten the emperors. Culturally speaking, Rome was largely an open door, and conquered peoples were given room to selectively link their own traditions to that of the Roman elite. Historian Florence Dupont (1992, p. 64) writes:

In the process of becoming Roman citizens, freedmen lost their ethnic characteristics. A Roman of Libyan origin was not a “negro,” he was simply black-skinned. We would indeed be astonished if we could see a Roman crowd: an ethnic rainbow about which the Romans themselves were quite unconcerned.

Unconcerned does not mean oblivious to differences, however. In a first-century mosaic ruin found near what is now El Djem, Tunisia, six regions of the Roman Empire are depicted in idealized, folkloric busts. Africa wears an elephant-head mask, Egypt has dreadlocks and a staff for the worship of Isis, and so on. In the center is the City of Rome, the only armed figure, holding in her hand the orb of the universe. In Rome itself, meanwhile, mosaic maps were displayed in prominent public spaces, such as the fora, reminding the people of Rome’s global power, and literature celebrated the city’s intense cosmopolitanism. Some of this has a decidedly consumerist and superior ring, as in Aristides’ Laudation of Rome.

To you there comes from all lands and seas what seasons bring forth and what the climates produce, what rivers and lakes and the handicraft of Hellene or barbarian make. Whoever, therefore, wishes to view all this, must either journey through the whole world or stay in this city. (quoted in Mumford, 1961, p. 236)

Still, Juvenal’s Satires complain of Romans of Greek origin who were transforming the capital city, Martial’s Epigrams speak with disdain of Capadoccians and Syrians, and Egyptians were sometimes stereotyped as irresponsible and barbaric (Hope, 1999). Being Roman was thus not ethnically exclusive, nor were Roman elites and opinion-makers necessarily egalitarian in their conceptions of varied cultures or unconcerned about their capital city retaining its greatness as it became more “foreign.” The City of Rome, perhaps the world’s first multicultural metropolis, manifested the empire’s diversity in daily life. The historical record generally supports the view that an elite culture was defined by Greek ideals of the educated, honorable life, co-existing with myriad ethnic traditions. The latter remained distinctive despite frequent exchanges and the emergence of the hybrid cultural forms we expect in multicultural cities (Huskinson, 1999).

The spatial structure of the city favored contact among disparate ethnic groups. Outside the central, monumental spaces of the fora and the Coliseum, Rome’s growth was largely unplanned and spontaneous—what Vance (1977, p. 56) terms “yeasty and organic” and Mumford (1961, p. 56), less charitably, rates as “pathological overgrowth.” But status differences were not indexed in spatial ones. Except for the super-elite, the rich and poor, and people of every occupation, lived in close proximity (Dupont, 1992), and there is no record of forced ethnic segregation, though some ethnic residential enclaves, tracking occupational niches, probably persisted for a time.

Important questions remain, though, about the politics and economy of ancient Rome in relation to group identity and about how these shaped life in the city or were shaped by it.
Did the absence of spatial and cultural mechanisms for exclusion lead to more pronounced political and economic ones? The politics of the Roman Empire defined varied privileges of citizenship, a slavery that promoted incorporation of conquered peoples into Roman society, a hierarchy of legal protections for distinct classes, very limited involvement by nonelites in government decisions, and an expansive, privileged role for the military. As we will see, imperial imperatives drove several of these features, including construction of a supra-ethnic, status-conferring citizenship and a massive, integrative military.

First, in the early Republican era, Rome developed a sophisticated system of full and partial citizenship that became a key mechanism for incorporating and dominating new territories. Later, Roman emperors came to enfranchise their non-Roman troops, made personal gifts of Roman citizenship to Rome’s supporters in foreign cities, founded Roman towns in the provinces, and gradually extended citizenship privileges to foreign communities (Purcell, 1991). Citizenship became increasingly widespread until, in 212 A.D., the emperor Caracalla extended it to all freeborn persons in the empire (Hope, 1999). Citizens enjoyed legal advantages and higher social status marked by naming, dress, and more. In Rome and other cities of the empire, then, expanded citizenship gradually narrowed the social and legal status differences that regulated everyday life and protected economic fortunes. Furthermore, citizenship became less and less a correlate of ethnic or religious identity. Expansive, supra-ethnic citizenship, then, was central to Rome’s design for increased diversity.

In 312 B.C.E., slavery became an institution for gradually incorporating captured foreigners, not the punishment for debtors that it had been. Through the long expansion of the empire, there are no indications that Roman slave-holders believed, as Western slave-holders did in the modern era, that inborn group differences justified slavery. Slavery acted to incorporate foreigners into Roman family life and, in time, into citizenship. The lazy and culturally grotesque slave is a stock feature of Roman comedy, yet slaves were seen as soul-less not by birth but by lack of education. Through loyalty and training in a particular skill, a slave could earn freedman status, becoming a “child of Roman culture” (Dupont, 1992, p. 65). The City of Rome offered particularly rich opportunities for learning culture through observation and diverse associations, in the timeless way that cities do.

Roman law included a series of double standards based on citizenship, class, and gender differences. The first and most important distinction was that between Roman citizens and non-Romans: the latter had no rights whatsoever under Rome’s judicial system. And while citizenship, as we have seen, gradually lost any ethnic exclusivity, class distinctions, the second pillar of Roman law, became sharper as the empire expanded. Honestiores with money and political influence were, in the course of the second century, exempted from flogging, condemnation to the mines and quarries, and other punishments. The humiliores, or have-nots, were regularly subject to such penalties—and by the most summary of legal procedures (Matthews, 1991). City life, then, reflected this class-stratified system of legal protections, but it is not clear to what extent that system emerged in response to the crowding and conflicts of the city. Law was made in the City of Rome for all the empire, of course, but how much it was made with the city in mind—the generative dimension—is uncertain.

The transition from republic to empire led to a centralization of political power and limited participation by citizens in the decisions of government. In the former era, the city’s public spaces, most notably the forum, staged the live theater of government policy making
In the age of empire, an exclusive and somewhat ethnically homogeneous political elite made decisions for the largely uninvolved masses, and slaves and freedmen staffing that elite had enormous de facto influence, along with wealthy merchants (Purcell, 1991). Urban development, as we have seen, was hodge-podge, its orientation laissez-faire about ethnic and other identity-group differences. But on a larger scale, imperial expansion led to increasingly authoritarian rule, heavy taxation of provinces, and massive redistribution schemes that eventually included government-supplied staples, such as free olive oil for all inhabitants of the City of Rome and free grain for perhaps 670,000 persons (Garnsey, 1987). This was part of the “bread and circus” formula for appeasing the poor masses. In the city and larger empire, then, politics and the law tracked the sharp class distinctions of Roman society but not the racialized or religiously defined identity-group privileges or penalties seen in other societies, from ancient to modern.

Finally, the importance of the military in Roman society cannot be overstated, and imperial expansion only increased the role of military service as an integrative mechanism—social glue—for disparate ethnic, religious, and language groups. If citizenship was the cloak that came to envelop conquered lands and newcomers to the city, compulsory military service on a massive scale was essential to the project of expanding Rome’s influence, of “Romanizing” the known world. Every male citizen was a potential soldier, and beyond the battlefield, soldiers were public bureaucrats, land surveyors and builders, tax collectors, policemen, and prison managers (Purcell, 1991). Soldiers were privileged under law, and they were of every ethnic and religious group, without distinction.

About the economy of Rome, our evidence is more sparse. Historians of the period have vigorously debated the relative importance of agriculture and trade for the empire as a whole, along with such sectors as land speculation and money-lending in the capital and other principal cities (Garnsey, 1987). Rome profited enormously from its control of the Eastern Mediterranean and of trade routes linking the West to rich kingdoms in Asia. The Pax Romana was clearly good for trade, and a question in need of further research is this: Was the Pax good for co-existence in part because it promoted trade in which a wider variety of peoples could participate and profit? At its peak, the empire generated an enormous pie for diverse groups to divide. There is some evidence that the consumer demands of the imperial capital and other principal cities spurred a partial transformation of rural agriculture from small peasant farms to “agro-industries” dependent on large amounts of cheap labor, including that of slaves (Rawson, 1991; Perkins, 1991). But the great significance of occupational status in Roman life is clear. For ex-slaves barred from political office, for example, the occupations provided the only channel for upward mobility, and this channel, too, seems to have been remarkably colorblind.

The picture that emerges of human history’s first genuinely multicultural metropolis and the civilization it led—ethnically and religiously pluralist, often proudly cosmopolitan, prolific in its achievements—is a mixed one indeed. Clearly, key elements of ancient Rome’s design for handling differences were supra-local, originating in the problems and capacities of an expanding empire rather than labor markets, residential life, or other distinctly local phenomena. It was conquest and domination that, paradoxically, created the multicultural empire with its cosmopolitan capital and defined the major institutions for incorporating diverse groups. For example, where boundary shift is concerned, a supra-ethnic conception of citizenship and the deft political maneuvering of emperors bent on conquest created an expansive civic “in” group. So did a massive, high-status military—the other reflection of Rome’s regional political role. Dominated by an exclusive elite, the
autocratic state encouraged tolerance of different customs, including worship practices, and protected minority groups on these fronts. Legal protections tracked class differences, which correlated only loosely with ethnic ones. Control of a regional economic empire determined Rome’s prosperity and drove the trade contacts and labor migration that made Rome the city (and other cities in the empire) so diverse, but when compared to other economically successful regimes (both ancient and not), it seems clear that while prosperity contributed to social stability and upward mobility, it offered no guarantee of the ethnic and religious pluralism so evident in Roman society and state policy. The evidence on cross-cutting loyalties is more sparse, though the commercial success of “foreigners” in Roman society included cross-cutting networks and politicking by influential who were diverse in ethnic, if not class, terms, and the military was a remarkably leveling, cross-cutting institution. At the center of it all, the city remained largely unsegregated spatially, favoring contact among diverse groups and daily reminders of the city’s staggering diversity.

However, constant imperial expansion, the very force that made Rome multicultural and the military a powerful integrative force, hinged on a politics of elite domination and a hierarchy of law and repression that left the poor masses (of all backgrounds) largely unprotected. Finally, Rome’s elite profited from a degree of inequality that would, by the end of the third century A.D., exacerbate the military and political in-fighting, mismanagement of the economy, external attack from resentful tribes, and public persecutions of a growing Christian minority that signaled the beginning of the end of empire.

MEDIEVAL CORDOBA: FROM MUSLIM UPSTART TO “ORNAMENT OF THE WORLD”

Politically fragmented and economically backward, the Visigoths of the Iberian peninsula—those remembered by history mainly for their sack of Rome in 410 A.D., but also the most Romanized of the tribes in Western Christendom after the empire fell (Fletcher, 1992)—were no match, in the early eighth century, for a new power in the Mediterranean and Near East. This was an ethnically diverse group carrying forth the divine Quran (recitation) as revealed to the Prophet Muhammad. The rapid expansion of the Islamic empire, a political and religious order, brought to Iberia deep ethnic, theological, and family feuds. These centered on the disputed succession of the Prophet and the inherent tensions between the ideal, religiously Islamic life (variously conceived) and the practical demands of politics and government (Hourani, 1991). Like today’s global-local flows, these forces operated on a scale much greater than any one settlement, of course, but depended on the unique agglomeration of ethnicities, government machinery, religious instruction, and economic influence found only in cities, initially in Damascus and Baghdad.

Expansionist Islam echoed the Roman preference for absorbing and learning from advanced older cultures—not so much through fusion as cultural osmosis, as Menocal (2002) puts it—borrowing institutions, customs, and certainly technologies. Those who left behind nomadic lives on the Arabian peninsula to spread the Quran built most visibly on the wonders of ancient Persia, by then a civilization with nearly 4,000-year-old written traditions of government, education, science, and the arts centered on important cities. But the factions that defined early Islam differed on how to treat the dhimmi—Arabic for “Peoples of the Book,” the subject peoples of other faiths, including Jews and Christians.
In principle, the Quran prescribed tolerance of their beliefs as well as submission to Islamic law. In practice, the early caliphs, anxious to consolidate their rule, interpreted this prescription in a variety of ways, showing favoritism and making other group-specific concessions to supporters.

For its part, the city of Cordoba would rise as the center of Islam in the West, following the slaughter of the Umayyad dynasty by the rival Abassids in Damascus in 750–754, and the westward flight of the sole surviving Umayyad prince, Abd al-Rahman. His descendants created a singular, if fragile, urban civilization in Islamic Spain, often remembered by its Arabic name, *al-Andalus*. Cordoba was its capital until 1031. Our story centers on the city’s golden century, from the declaration of an independent Umayyad caliphate in Cordoba in 929 to the splintering and collapse of that kingdom in 1031. In this golden age, the city was home to about 100,000 persons, perhaps five times the size of Christian cities in northern Europe (though historians acknowledge that the population estimates are rough) (Fletcher, 1992, p. 65). Cordoba was at the center of a distinctly urban renaissance (Gardet, 1954), led by Islam’s most important contact with Europe in the 1,400-year history of that faith. Moreover, it reflected an inclusive Umayyad interpretation of the Quran’s protection of religious minorities and a repudiation of the rival Baghdad leadership’s intolerance.

Like the history of ancient Rome, Cordoba’s history has little meaning apart from these global currents that made and ultimately unmade it. But nor was the city a mere reflection of those broader currents. Cordoba represents the supreme medieval expression of a “culture of tolerance” (Menocal, 2002). It was an essentially urban culture, evolved in the space shared by Jews, Christians, and Muslims, and governing with a strong hand the vast agricultural and trading empire on which the city’s prosperity depended. Like the Christian Reconquest that followed it, Islam’s urbanization in this period must be understood in part as a long history of occupation—at once of the incorporation, assimilation, and fusion needed to acquire and govern cities and towns of the Iberian peninsula (Vicente-Mazariego-Eiriz, 1985, p. 750).

We have a particularly rich record of Cordoba’s cultural life, thanks to writings in Arabic, Hebrew, Latin, and even Greek and to a built heritage—the wonders of hybrid Andalusian architecture—that survives. Menocal (2002, pp. 32–33) writes:

Cordoba, by the beginning of the tenth century, was an astonishing place, and descriptions by both contemporaries and later historians suffer from the burden of cataloguing the wonders... the nine hundred baths and tens of thousands of shops, then the hundreds or perhaps thousands of mosques, then the aqueducts of running water, and the paved and well-lit streets... the [royal] library of (by one count) some four hundred thousand volumes, and this at a time when the largest library of Christian Europe probably held no more than four hundred manuscripts... there were books that would have astonished any Christian visitor, with his necessarily vague knowledge of the classical world. The Andalusians, thanks to their regular intercourse with Baghdad, which had made translation of the Greeks a prized project, also housed the libraries of crucial traditions long lost to those in the rest of the Latin West, and unknown to them still, in the tenth century.

In contemporary parlance, the cultural life of Cordoba was eminently multicultural. On one hand, Arab-speaking Muslims held political sway and transmitted the fruits of Persian
and Greco-Roman advancement. But in the ferment of Cordoba, Jews reinvented Hebrew as a vibrant, poetic language for use outside the synagogue, and they contributed original philosophies based on interfaith reasoning. Christians learned Arabic and converted to Islam in large numbers but also preserved distinctive associations and created new fusion traditions in design. Believers of the three major faiths celebrated each other’s feasts and spoke the same vernacular (Hole, 1958). Like ancient Rome, Cordoba generated a proudly pluralist local identity that crossed longstanding ethnic and religious boundaries.

Beyond its impact on the immediate participants, Cordoba’s multiculturalism and intellectual fervor would have a profound impact on the European Renaissance and the development of Western rationality, its science, medicine, and arts. Through networks and institutions we now call transnational, these seeds would flower in spite of the enormous social conservatism and religious intolerance of the later Christian monarchs and their Inquisition. But this gets ahead of the story. Let us examine the golden age, first in its politics and law, then in the organization of economy and city space.

At its height in the 10th century, Cordoba’s politics and military life centered on the absolute power of the Muslim Caliph, from khalif, who was also, as the successor to Muhammad, the society’s religious leader. But much of the machinery of government was managed by a vizier and an inner circle of advisors, some of the most influential of whom were Jewish and Christian (Hourani, 1991; Kennedy, 1996). Beneath them was a ruling class of administrators, sometimes described as an aristocracy, of Arab origin, and beneath these, slaves of mostly European origin who were recent arrivals. The slaves were mainly soldiers, but some held administrative posts. The socially and religiously conservative Berbers of North Africa were also well represented in the army. Indeed, they had been recruited into Iberia from the early days of Islamic conquest, and their influence contributed to the unraveling of the so-called culture of tolerance or, more precisely, its political underpinnings, early in the 11th century (Fletcher, 1989). But in Cordoba, no citizenship distinctions of the Roman variety enfranchised some social groups at the expense of others.

This does not imply equality before the law. Islamic law (sharia) was the foundation of Cordoba’s system, which defined differential rights for Muslims and non-Muslims.

Christians and Jews were regarded as “People of the Book,” those who possessed a revealed scripture. In general, they were not forced to convert, but they suffered from restrictions. They paid a special tax; they were not supposed to wear certain colors; they could not marry Muslim women; their evidence was not accepted against that of Muslims in law courts and there were excluded from positions of power. (Hourani, 1991, p. 47)

This set of restrictions, together with a poll tax on non-Muslim subjects, created significant incentive for religious conversion, particularly among Christians, who had ruled in Iberia until the arrival of Islam. In the late ninth century, only about 20 percent of the population of al-Andalus was Muslim, but by the beginning of the 11th, the figure was 70 percent (Fletcher, 1992, p. 37). Jews, on the other hand, who had been a persecuted minority under earlier Christian rule, were now protected by law, as well as valued for their contributions to scholarship, commerce, and government. Put simply, Jews and Christians were second-class citizens even at Cordoba’s tolerant zenith, but Jews, for their part, were third class everywhere else in Europe at the time.
Beyond organizing social and political relationships, Cordoban governance regulated and developed an economy based on innovative agriculture and far-flung trading networks, in essence reorganized from those of ancient Rome, that stretched upward into Europe and across the Mediterranean and Near East, even to India and China. Muslims brought irrigation techniques to the backward farms of Iberia and developed sophisticated craft industries—metalworking, leather, textiles, paper and book production, and more—in their capital and other cities (Glick, 1979). Historical records of this occupational structure are incomplete, but they suggest that distinct ethnoreligious groups held key occupational niches.

Of the spatial structure of the city, we know that beyond palaces, libraries, and other official buildings, there was some residential enclaving, mainly along religious and occupational lines. There is no record of official coercion in settlement patterns (Hourani, 1991) or of chronic disadvantage—slum conditions—tracking ethnic or ethnoreligious identity. Jewish quarters in Cordoba lay near the great mosque (Bendinger, 1983), and Western historians claim that Mozarab Christians lived “cheek-by-jowl” with Muslims (Hole, 1958, p. 49). But this very characterization, with its implication of convivial and perhaps spatially nonregulated living, obscures the spatial logic of the Islamic city. Indeed, it reflects a tendency in Western urbanism, with its love of classical linearity, to view the Islamic city as “anarchic” and formless (Vicente-Mazariegos-Eiriz, 1985).

The cities of medieval Islam, like some modern counterparts, organized the functions of settlement—and, in particular, the possibilities for contact among identified social groups—in ways that strictly respected precepts of Islam and the cultural traditions of clannish, patriarchal desert tribes. This spatial organization is a feature of medieval Cordoba’s urban design for diversity that ancient Rome did not create. Vicente-Mazariegos-Eiriz (1985, pp. 750–757) notes that inward-facing residential groupings, penetrated by sinuous alleyways and centered on private patios, expressed the autonomy of extended families and clans and the separation of believers from nonbelievers (and see Serjeant, 1980; Abu-Lughod, 1987). The patriarchy that defined these small, cloistered worlds reflected the larger patriarchy of the faith under a supreme political and religious leader in his palace (itself a cloister of rooms and gardens) and under Allah. Even the writings of the later Christian Reconquest underline and largely respect the exclusiveness of these small residential worlds of the faithful, where outsiders’ presence is not welcome, nor even their gaze. This is hardly an anarchic, let alone convivial, recipe for a residential melting pot as we imagine it today.

Intergroup contact, then, was segmented. The city’s spatial logic allowed both encounter and retreat. Contact happened beyond the clannish and strictly Islamic residential enclaves, in the marketplace, centers of learning, and government, and among the residences of the nonbelievers. (The military, while open to non-Arabs and non-Muslims, had neither the status of ancient Rome’s nor does it seem to have played such an encompassing, inclusionary function in Cordoban society.) Most of all, the marketplace represented “the place of encounter over and above the gender, tribal, and faith divides that constituted Islamic urbanization” (Mazariegos-Vicente-Eiriz, 1985, p. 763).

What developed in Cordoba, then, and served as a template for governing the whole of the Western Islamic empire, was a distinct political and legal hierarchy, accepting of religious and ethnic differences and protective of religious minorities, grounded in the absolute power of the monarch. The legal and social order closely tracked and reinforced
ethnoreligious boundaries but also buttressed tolerance, encouraged assimilation through religious conversion, and, via regulation of urban space and everyday urban life, encouraged bounded forms of intergroup exchange. The features of this design were sensitive to the preferences of each caliph, to be sure, but this approach to governance, rights, economy, and urban space would be emulated and adapted in the patchwork of states that succeeded Cordoba’s golden age, allowing Christians, Jews, and Muslims to co-exist in Iberia for another 500 years—albeit with increasingly unequal protections and severe punishments for the latter two groups.7

In sum, this medieval ornament of the world was no simple staging ground for an urbanized culture of tolerance. If Cordoba’s potential lessons for our own age are rich, they are not simple by any means. Cordoban society was enormously productive, both in technology and culture, and this productivity was a function, in part, of social diversity and command of a far-flung, trade-based empire. But even at its confident and prosperous zenith, Cordoba, relied on an elaborate and autocratic ordering of co-existence. Respect for traditions, both cultural and religious, was strong, but so was incentive for intergroup contact in clearly defined spheres. Cordoba the city and al-Andalus, the empire it led, were highly vulnerable to political instability, however. In the fallout of caliphal succession in the early 11th century, Cordoba’s autocrats, no longer of the Prophet’s bloodline, unleashed a reactionary military force that destroyed the city and massacred many of its scholars and artists, Muslims, Jews, and Christians alike (Menocal, 2002).

MODERN (POSTMODERN?) LOS ANGELES: IMMIGRANTS AND TRANSFORMATION

Our journey along this long arc of multicultural urban history ends, naturally, in Los Angeles. The city is superlative in so many respects—the most immigrant and the fastest growing of America’s major cities, the most economically divided by race (in terms of income inequality), the most productive global capital for “culture” through its entertainment media, the most captivating for contemporary urban studies—and, at least in the past decade, perhaps the most infamous American city in terms of its struggles with diversity. Witness the racially charged, internationally televised riots in 1992 and, looking to California as a whole, the conservative “save our state” referenda movements to limit immigrant access to education and other public services several years later. L.A. is an extreme case of the urban conditions under which increased diversity has triggered an increased policing of boundaries but, thanks in part to economic and political hopes, no slowdown in the rise of diversity itself.

L.A. is prolific in the inspiration of labels to capture its spatial form and social puzzles, from “postsuburban” to “exopolis” and “confetti city” and even, with a nod toward Disney, “Tomorrowland” (Soja, 2000). With specific reference to its ethnic diversity, it has also been called a “prismatic metropolis” (Bobo et al., 2000), and as Roger Waldinger (1996, p. 447), a long-time student of that diversity, addresses the matter:

Los Angeles is now profoundly, irremediably ethnic. The issue confronting the region is whether this new polyglot metropolis can work. And that is not a question for the region alone. In Los Angeles... America finds a mirror to itself.
If the attempt to make an integrated appraisal of the recipes for co-existence in ancient Rome and medieval Cordoba struggles with gaps in the available historical data, not to mention the love of hyperbole and “laudation” by those who happened to write things down back when, Los Angeles in the present poses the opposite challenge. Empirical analysis and commentary on this vast city already fill scores of academic volumes, mainstream periodicals, and activist Internet sites; offer incredible depth in a variety of specialty subjects; and illustrate extremes of perspective on how to understand and respond to the city’s diversity. This output, not all by Angelenos, seems to be growing by the minute. Moreover, most of these accounts are not integrative. They focus on segregated space or labor niches or political fragmentation, on diversity as a cultural cauldron or political fault line or organizer of economic inequality. I will begin by briefly discussing what seems most tangible about L.A.—its demography, economy, and spatial form. Then I will consider the politics and culture, which are both cause and effect, of course, of the tangibles. At the risk of reductionism, and without dismissing the importance of the economy as both inclusive generator of opportunity and sphere of boundary-crossing contact à la Rome and Cordoba, it is in the doing of politics and making of culture on which the city’s future, and that of so many cities for which it may be a bellwether, seems to hinge.

Ethnic identity has been particularly salient throughout L.A.’s history, due to a confluence of global economic demands, migration and other demographic responses, and specific policy decisions. L.A. is famously a city of immigrants but also very much one of influential, native-born in-migrants arriving in distinctive, racialized waves. The two groups most important in foreign immigration, Hispanics and Asians, are also the two ascendant in the city’s population and, in so many ways, in its economy, politics, and cultural life. Meanwhile, two native-born migrant groups, non-Hispanic whites (Anglos) and African Americans, are losing share in the population and struggling with real and perceived threats to their influence—navigating succession and sharing status in key realms of public and private life in the city. According to the 2000 Census, the population of Los Angeles County stood at 9.5 million, of which 45 percent were Hispanic, 31 percent non-Hispanic white, 11.8 percent Asian, 9.5 percent non-Hispanic black, and 3 percent other. A stunning majority (54.1 percent) of Angelenos over the age of five speak a language other than English at home (U.S. Census Bureau, 2002). Over a third (36.2 percent) of the population is foreign born, and 12.6 percent—over 1.2 million people in Los Angeles County—entered the country in the previous decade.

Los Angeles was born a Mexican settlement, part of Spain’s new world empire, in 1781. Following annexation by the United States, a process that fueled distinct Mexican/Anglo tensions and calculated land grabs and contests over water rights, the city’s Asian connections begin with the importing of low-wage Chinese, and later Japanese, workers to construct railroads and ports and in other ways to connect the city to the national economy (Weaver, 1980). Such connection triggered the first economic boom. By 1900, L.A., with a bustling port and rich oil supply, had surpassed Chicago as the fastest-growing major American city. And thanks to retirees and other migrants from the midwest, the city was, by 1920, the most Anglo of America’s major cities (Abu-Lughod, 1999, pp. 7–13). In the 1940s, African Americans were recruited from the southern United States to meet manufacturing and other wartime labor demands. Mexican immigration, meanwhile, happened in spurts throughout the 20th century, most significantly when agricultural policy brought guest workers (braceros) to labor in the fields between 1942 and 1964. Postwar prosperity and land-use policy driven by business elites triggered L.A.’s decentralized boom, replacing
vast amounts of agricultural land with a patchwork of small, urbanized municipalities—a pattern evident as early as the 1930s (Abu-Lughod, 1999; Sitton and Deverell, 2001)—and the endless, infamous freeways.

Throughout this period, official and unofficial discrimination in labor, housing, and capital markets restricted access and upward mobility by racial minorities in the areas of residence, occupation, and business ownership, while legal and political barriers kept many minorities out of voting booths and largely out of elected office. Anglo elites controlled business and government at that time, driven by larger economic forces and migration, but often steering locally as well—structuring the metropolis spatially and institutionally to enhance their status, to favor fellow Anglos, and often to exclude.

In 1965, another nonlocal driver—federal immigration reform—launched a new wave of immigration from various parts of Latin America, but most of all from contiguous Mexico, and from Asia. In the 1960s, federal civil rights laws banned discrimination in employment, housing, and public services, though violations are difficult to detect and many newcomer immigrants are either ignorant of their rights or fear reprisals if they are claimed. L.A.’s economy, meanwhile, had diversified to include major manufacturing, international trade and finance, entertainment, and R&D—most famously the aerospace and defense cluster that boomed with Cold War federal funding. Unlike most major American cities, L.A. continued to add manufacturing jobs throughout the 1970s and 1980s (Ong and Blumenfeld, 1996). As the population soared, real estate markets roared, and the city’s sprawling, polycentric form began to get serious attention from social critics and political activists (e.g., Davis, 1990).

Today, L.A.’s ethnic groups are separated spatially and institutionally (by workplace, educational, and faith institutions) to a considerable degree, and in some dimensions that separateness is clearly on the rise. Today’s separateness reflects the deep historical roots outlined above along with quite recent economic and demographic transformation (Waldinger, 1996; Bobo et al., 2000). L.A.’s enormous people machine is defined by three primary trends: outmigration by Anglos, continued Asian and Hispanic immigration, and higher natural increase (through fertility rates) of the immigrant groups (Abu-Lughod, 1999).

Residential segregation captures all these influences. Following a pattern typical of high-immigration U.S. cities, the moderate to high rates of residential segregation of Asians and Hispanics from whites increased in the 1990s—high-volume immigration usually outpaces diffusion through the housing market, in part because immigrants find enclaves of co-ethnics useful (Massey, 2001)—while that of African Americans declined modestly (Lewis Mumford Center for Comparative Urban and Regional Research, 2001). Overall rates of segregation are moderate to high for racial/ethnic groups in L.A., however, when compared to all U.S. metro areas. Survey evidence indicates that differences in buying power and the accuracy of housing-market information possessed by distinct racial/ethnic groups explain little of this segregation. Racial preferences for particular neighbors, on the other hand, are powerful predictors: whites are the most popular out-group for members of other groups and African Americans the least popular (Charles, 2000), and these preferences correlate well with expressed stereotypes. Racial segregation in L.A.’s public schools has roughly paralleled the trends for residential segregation in recent years (Lewis Mumford Center for Comparative Urban and Regional Research, 2002).

The city’s occupational structure is also color coded. But Waldinger (1996) proposes that the standard model of the “dual” postindustrial city, with white managers and owners
and minority laborers and underclass, is fundamentally inadequate to capture L.A.’s “new ethnic order.” The ethnic ordering of the area’s economy has not diminished over the past several decades. It persists, relying on networks of recruitment and referral and a color-coded hierarchy of education and skills to reproduce, more or less consistently, the distinct ethnic compositions of law firms, fast-food restaurants, cleaning services, and other businesses. For example, many of the furniture factories in South Central Los Angeles have only Latino workers; toy factories near downtown employ mainly Chinese; small grocery stores tend to be owned by Koreans; and African Americans work disproportionately in government jobs (Waldinger, 1997). Meanwhile, upper-income, high-status occupations remain overwhelmingly Anglo.

Competition among low-skill people of color is particularly intense at lower rungs of the job ladder, with continued immigration of Latinos over whom employers report they have greater leverage, driving down wages and saturating key jobs for which native-born African Americans could otherwise compete (Waldinger, 1996, 1998). Many immigrants working at the “sweatshop” level, mainly Latinos but also some Asian subgroups, appear to get stuck laboring in low-paid, less-secure, and sometimes dangerous jobs, while more educated immigrants, mostly Asian and Middle Eastern, join the majority of whites at middle-class status relatively quickly. The ethnic order, then, is not a simple duality in which whites alone have status but a hierarchy in which some minorities are consigned to low-status, low.mobility niches of a large metropolitan economy. As Waldinger (1996, p. 451) puts it: “Niching is pervasive, but not every niche proves rewarding.” Reports of racial discrimination are common in the L.A. labor market, according to survey evidence. African Americans and Latinos are most likely to report incidences of discrimination, usually denial of employment, and this does not appear to vary substantially by class (Bobo and Suh, 2000).

Business decisions about hiring and investment, social networks of job holders and job seekers, and individual choices about the labor market combine to produce a segmented economy with the highest levels of income inequality by race of any major U.S. city. The region had twice as many gardeners and servants in 1990 as it had 10 years earlier, and the ranks of hotel housekeepers, babysitters, restaurant workers, and other occupations that support middle- and upper-income lifestyles are overwhelmingly Latino, many of the workers barely schooled. L.A.’s markets and marketable lifestyles thus embody the extremes of the new ethnic service economy evolving in other U.S. cities—and on a massive, historically entrenched scale. To be fair, L.A.’s economy also illustrates unique positives of diversity and of immigrant-led growth, in particular: larger markets, diversified demand, expansive possibilities for social learning, and innovation.

The modern American experiment in democracy, unlike the autocratic ancient Roman or medieval Islamic one, promises opportunity in the political and legal realms to redress historical injustices and to construct a more inclusive economy and society. As previewed above, articulated rights include extensive civil and political liberties that apply to native-born minorities and foreign-born immigrants (albeit few of the social and economic rights, such as the right to shelter, emerging in certain developing countries). Unfortunately, politics in Los Angeles and many other parts of California over the past generation shows a marked increase in what Abu-Lughod terms “defensive maneuvers” by Anglos aimed at limiting minority rights, as well as a structure of government that inhibits inclusive representation, coalition building by newcomer groups, and thus active engagement by those who become citizens.
First, as Abu-Lughod notes, political behavior over the past decade, in particular, belies the idealized image of an exciting, forward-looking West Coast metropolis more comfortable with diversity that its counterparts in the tradition-bound midwest or northeastern United States.

The resentments seem to be fomented by three recent changes in degree, if not in kind: (1) the economic recession in the early 1990s, which has generated fears for job security, even in those sectors where immigrants are not relevant competitors; (2) the dramatic decline in the ratio of Anglos and blacks to “others,” along with a concern that the newcomers (both legal and undocumented) are draining the public coffers by their expanded needs for educational, welfare, and health services, as well as requiring an increase in police protection and repression; and (3) a fear, whether grounded or not, that these new demographic realities may be translated into a redistribution of political power, thus breaking the long-term Anglo monopoly . . . . (1999, p. 375)

Second, political structure matters, and this becomes clearer if one compares L.A. to New York, America’s other immigrant gateway mega-city. Begin at the state level: California has relied increasingly on direct democracy (provisions for popular referenda, recall, and initiatives that do not exist in New York State) rather than elected officials to make major policy decisions. Using direct democracy, Anglo voters in L.A. and other parts of the state, at times with modest support from middle-class minority voters, heavily supported limits on local taxation (through Proposition 13) in 1978, effectively limiting public services overall; tried to limit access by undocumented immigrants to public services through Proposition 187 in 1994 (though the courts have challenged its constitutionality and the measure remains unenforced); and succeeded in ending race- and sex-based affirmative action in state government hiring, contracting, and educational programs via Proposition 209 in 1997. In New York during the same period, a Republican mayor, while embattled in other ways on the race issue, vigorously opposed anti-immigrant measures throughout the 1990s. In 1996, Mayor Giuliani even sued the federal government to block a provision in the laws that allows city employees to turn in illegal immigrants who seek public services like police protection (Abu-Lughod, 1999, p. 385).

The contrast in urban political structure is marked as well. Thanks in part to municipal reforms that date back to the Progressive Era, city agencies in L.A. are notoriously independent of elected council control, and the city council, county board of supervisors, and school district boards are all elected by enormous wards, a feature that discourages minority influence. The five members of the county board, for example, preside over a land area four times the size of the State of Rhode Island, with each elected supervisor representing almost 2 million people. Each of the 15 members of the city council represents about 250,000 people. In New York City, by contrast, elected bodies are much larger—the city council alone is 51 members—city agencies are more accountable to those bodies, and there are a greater number of routes to political influence, with a hierarchical system of community boards, borough presidencies, and mayor. Ethnic groups both cooperate and compete, but New York’s centralized, larger elective system (in terms of the number of elective offices at stake) favors greater mobilization and intergroup negotiation, as well as greater representation of ethnic minorities than does L.A.’s decentralized structure (Mollenkopf, 1999).
The fortunes of L.A.’s last three mayors, dating back to 1973, reflect shifting coalitions, highly racialized voting patterns, and the expansion of Latino and Asian influence as the latter become citizens, begin to vote, and gradually challenge Anglo-black dominance. In the latest election, a hard-fought and highly-racialized campaign led to a coalition of liberal Anglos and African Americans behind moderate Democrat Jim Hahn, narrowly defeating the more liberal Democrat Antonio Villaraigosa, who was backed by an alliance of Latinos and organized labor (across racial and ethnic lines). Villaraigosa would have been the first Latino mayor in Los Angeles in 130 years. Reinvigorated, multiracial unions, mostly of janitors, hotel workers, and other low-wage service workers, are probably the single most important engines of immigrant political participation in L.A., and efforts to institute a “living wage” and an affordable housing trust fund have focused multiracial organizing in recent years (Meyerson, 2001).

Close observers argue, however, that political strategy and not structural determinism will decide L.A.’s civic future. Key organizers of the growing Latino electorate could, for example, decide to “go it alone” in agenda setting to a degree that would trigger significant conflict with other minority groups in the decade ahead (Mollenkopf, Olson, and Ross, 2001). The interplay of ideology, interest, and forged connections (mutuality and trust) will determine whether “natural” political allies, such as liberal Latino and Jewish voters—the former “an outsider group pushing in” and the latter “an insider group fearing being pushed out”—in fact ally effectively (Sonenshein, 2001, p. 226). And like counterparts in cities around the nation and around the world, immigrant and other groups in Los Angeles rarely behave as monolithic communities of interest. Divisions within the ethnic groups can be enormously important, as class (Kwong, 2001) and generational (Park and Park, 2001) factors have been. Rates of immigrant naturalization and political mobilization, both of which have been slow for recent immigrants to America’s cities, are also important factors (Jones-Correa, 2001). Gate-keeping citizenship is a federal, not state or local, responsibility, of course, but while nation-states can extend membership, localities are much better positioned to make passive and officially protected members into active participants in civic life. Interest formation, coalition building, and precious cross-cutting loyalties all develop best in the push-and-pull of community life. In the United States and other wealthy settler states, the process of becoming a citizen emphasizes a (necessary) legal formalism, not socialization into the means and meanings of active citizenry in a democratic society.

As we saw in the cases of ancient Rome and medieval Cordoba, diversity challenges have long shaped and reflected the organization of public order, including the strong articulation of minority-group rights, regulation of exchange across group boundaries, and application of the coercive power of government, for example, to handle conflicts. Echoing this, Abu-Lughod (1999, p. 393) notes, citing recent histories: “In almost every instance of interracial, interethnic, and interclass conflict that has erupted over the past hundred years in American cities, police actions have been the tinder spark that ignited preexisting tensions.” In the latter half of the 20th century, as New York, Chicago, and other police departments moved to diversify the racial/ethnic composition of the police force, train officers in community relations, uncover and prosecute police corruption, and regulate the use of deadly force, L.A. did little of the kind.

Chevigny, in a wide-ranging study of policing in the Americas, goes so far as to conclude that “the governments of New York and Los Angeles have taken almost opposite
approaches to policing” (1995, p. 1). Federal crime statistics indicate, for example, that in 1993, L.A. had the second highest per capita rate of police-caused fatalities among major U.S. cities, a rate almost three times as high as New York (Abu-Lughod, 1999, p. 394), and the Los Angeles Police Department has been much more insulated from demands of the city’s elected leadership than is the NYPD from the New York mayor and council. Perhaps it is not surprising, then, that the street riots following the 1992 acquittal of white police officers in the beating of African-American motorist Rodney King—a beating captured on videotape and broadcast worldwide—shocked outside observers but not long-aggrieved members of minority groups in the city, whose complaints against the L.A. police were, by then, legend.

Finally, L.A. is an extraordinary and influential cultural space, reflecting in great extremes and proportions most of the concerns of contemporary analysis of cultural representation and practice in cities. L.A. expresses the differentiation and independence that Zukin (1995) defines as central to urban cultural life, as well as the odd dualities she finds: a “public” culture largely produced by private real estate and advertising interests, elements of both elitism and democratization in access to symbolic space, of globalism and intimate localness, and numerous invitations to multicultural encounter alongside ubiquitous reminders of exclusion, nativism, and fear of the Other. Some traits of the city, such as the car reliance that is both a practical necessity and symbolic reference point, create a privateness and detachment in moving about that contrasts sharply with the daily experience of dense, transit-oriented, and pedestrian-friendly New York (Abu-Lughod, 1999). Furthermore, L.A.’s built form has been described as “fortressed” in accounts that emphasize the enclaving of groups rather than encounters among them (see, e.g., Davis, 1990). In L.A., the contention goes, diversity is more comfortably consumed at arm’s length.

The media is a source of mixed messages, proffering images of exclusion and enclavism on one hand, as in gated communities where “people like you” treat each other like neighbors should, and encounter and fusion on the other—L.A.’s exotic urbanism, its strong cultural connections to Asia and Latin America, in particular, but also the more home-grown exotica of the rugged American West, the class or “street” culture of African-American hip-hop, and the hybrids (e.g., “Nuevo Latino” and “pan-Asian” cuisine). There is some indication that 10 years after the most expensive riots in U.S. history, L.A. is working on a self-image that boasts of diversity without naively discounting its challenges. That may be progress.

One standout in this complex quiltwork is what Davis and others have described as “a geography without precedent.” An outgrowth of the high segregation rates for particular immigrants, this geography is the burgeoning Latino “city within a city”—not a minority enclave or set of connected districts but an expanding zone of 100 mostly Spanish-speaking neighborhoods, home to the largest Latino retail market in the United States at $28.9 billion per year (Davis, 2000, pp. 20–21, 43). It is a zone of extraordinary internal diversity, not only in the organization of Salvadorean, Guatemalan, Mexican, and other national ancestry groups, with distinct product tastes, civic associations, and more, but in the emergence of recognizable, critical-mass social identities within those, such as indigenous immigrant groups of Mixtec, Yaqui, and Zapotec origin. (Following an old sociological rule, with scale have come niches.) As Davis notes, Latinos remain largely invisible in mainstream media in the United States, but even Latin media is hard pressed to respond to the heterogeneity
of Latino L.A. As we have seen, the residents of this city within a city are likely to work the city’s hardest jobs and earn its lowest wages. Their political influence pales in comparison to their raw numbers, at least for now. But if demography is destiny, then the Latinization of L.A. is something of an irresistible force.

The perils of imputing an overall design for diversity are clearest in this last case, the only one still in progress. Moreover, characterizations of success and failure should be interpreted with caution. By definition, we lack the perspective that centuries and cultural distance allow. Nonetheless, several elements of earlier designs for pluralist cities and their societies are glaring in their absence in L.A. There is no large-scale inclusive project to compare to those of the expansionist empires of the ancient and medieval worlds. In this socially and spatially segregated metropolis, the cross-cutting loyalties that arise from a diversity of group memberships and social ties loom small. That is, the ties are there, as surveys confirm, but are they even close to enough in light of the city’s challenges? The strong, viable public order imposed from above by autocratic regimes at earlier periods in world history has no clear, democratically mandated, socially legitimate counterpart in L.A.’s beleaguered law enforcement regime. On the other hand, in a democracy, law enforcement can learn and compromise in ways that empires tend to discourage. Key identity group boundaries have become brighter and more entrenched, not as much as Cordoba’s institutionalized, ethnoreligious boundaries were, to be sure, but deep nonetheless. Continued, high-volume immigration in recent decades is central to the status differences and perceived political threat that contribute to immigrant backlash. But throughout its history, L.A.’s politics and policy making have emphasized ethnic group differences. The political structure of the city and surrounding state have thus far favored established elites and winner-take-all outcomes rather than coalition building and minority checks on power, though minority influence is on the rise.

L.A.’s urban design for diversity includes marked residential segregation by income level and by race/ethnicity. Differences in buying power, not respect for ethnic or religious tradition, provide the housing market’s rationale. Segregation reflects immigrant enclaving, to be sure, but also the exclusionary land-use policies and housing discrimination that make U.S. cities so segregated. The labor market is a hierarchy of niches, some of which look—for now—like dead ends, but conversely, a large market makes room for upwardly mobile ethnic minorities of many backgrounds, and only time will tell how much social and economic mobility the second generation of immigrants and native-born poor will enjoy or how much workplaces and associations will compensate for social bridges not built in neighborhoods and schools. Culturally, L.A. has the blend of encounter and retreat, mosaic and fusion, that marked Rome and Cordoba in millennia past. Some boundaries may blur, and some may shift as well, with Asians and Latinos marrying Anglos at high rates (Alba and Nee, 2003; Collins, 2001).

The serious challenges and exclusionary features aside, L.A. manages to function—to produce, govern, and conduct everyday life—in ways that continue to attract and captivate, making it one of the most diverse cities in the most diverse society that history has ever known. The city does so under political rules and norms of co-existence that would have confounded the powerful in Rome and Cordoba. The question of how to handle old dilemmas under new rules awaits us next, as we rethink the lessons of history for Los Angeles and other diverse cities in democratic societies today.
In famously tolerant societies of the ancient and medieval eras, incorporation of diverse groups was a practical necessity as well as a political and economic possibility. Today, the former condition is not yet widely felt in societies where diversity is increasing sharply, and the latter condition is not yet assured. If we think of these, in simple terms, as the key push-and-pull factors—what a society’s influential actors feel the need to accommodate, how capable the society is of making the adequate arrangements—the lessons of history for today’s cities and the societies they propel are sobering as well as mixed.

The designs for society that evolved in ancient Rome and medieval Cordoba—each a metropole at the heart of a dominant empire—relied on the absorption of conquered peoples and protection of minority ethnic and religious groups. These features shaped the tolerance of difference, boundary shifts, and cross-cutting loyalties that do so much to regulate effects of social difference in any time and place. But ironically from the standpoint of contemporary debates about diversity, the deep roots of co-existence lie not in voluntarism, self-conscious cosmopolitanism, or accommodation—not initially, that is—but in domination. Rome dominated with a massive military that held a pervasive role in everyday life (administering the huge empire), and this military, whatever its brutal tactics on the battlefield, was a fabulous machine of integration. Likewise, the world’s first-ever supra-ethnic conception of citizenship—membership (being Roman) as a civic, not ethnic, institution—evolved as a device for building loyalty and conferring status on disparate peoples.

For its part, medieval Cordoba under Islam also extended citizenship broadly as it occupied vast territory and struggled to keep it, respected conquered Christians and Jews as “Peoples of the Book” to be protected (while encouraging conversion), and brought order to pluralism in key domains. First, a legal hierarchy favored Muslims and regulated everyday exchanges across religious boundaries. Second, the spatial logic of the city respected tribal religious practice, making the marketplace the principal sphere of contact among diverse groups and secluding the community of Islamic faithful in residential enclaves. (This distinctively urban arrangement had no forerunner in the multiethnic hodgepodge of Rome the city.) Before Cordoba blossomed, Islam, born among isolated desert tribes, had absorbed much from ancient Rome and also Persia—about how to be urban, how to govern a far-flung empire, how to profit from trade with diverse peoples, and how to encourage learning by critiquing and transmitting the intellectual and artistic richness of many cultures. Like Rome, Cordoba’s empire relied on autocracy to make it all work. But no one can argue with the economic and cultural output that resulted or deny the persistence of a key design feature—regulated everyday contact among groups in diverse cities—for centuries after the golden age of Cordoba’s “culture of tolerance” expired.

That exceptional urban feature aside for a moment, ancient Rome and medieval Cordoba worked as diverse cities in part because of autocratically imposed order and in part because of massive integrative projects and institutions—armies, the project of conquest, prosperous imperial trade—much larger than the cities themselves. These factors created shared (bridging) identities and fortunes, everyday political mutuality, and relationships across group lines. Historically, integrative projects such as “Romanizing” the known world were solidaristic (framed persuasively beneath inclusive goals pursued through joint activities), status conferring (regarded as important, not just authorized, but valued), and socially inclusive (spanning groups and penetrating them extensively).
In our one contemporary city-period, Los Angeles in the world we know today, it is not at all clear what the appropriately “massive” integrative projects or viable sources of order may be. L.A., like the other two cities, develops in context. It is nested in a (subnational) state and that state in a larger nation and global marketplace. At all levels, though, the push-and-pull factors suggested above appear incomplete, even contradictory. For example, the American design for society opens the door to diverse citizenship (in part because immigrants ensure the future of the economy) and articulates minority-group protections that, whatever their limits, remain a significant source of symbolic and practical leverage on problems of inequality. But that design also prescribes a relatively laissez-faire approach to the economy, one that reverses individual choice and tolerates great inequality. One of the local (urban) manifestations of this design is socially costly segregation by race/ethnicity and income in both housing and public schools. Segregation is rationalized as a byproduct of differential ability to pay: Market choice trumps equality. Back to the nation-state, citizenship is often defined in terms of latent rights and legalistic obligations rather than opportunities for active civic engagement by and with diverse social groups. Plus, expectations about “being American,” while officially pan-ethnic, still carry ethnocentric baggage and reflect stylized interpretations of our history that mask ethnic conflicts.10

As a locality, L.A.’s relatively exclusive political life is not yet a strong contender as an integrative force, and the metro economy is as segmented and unequal as they come. These factors reflect regional and global economic forces and state and national political ones, to be sure, but key responses are subject to local control: voter registration and mobilization, organizing low-wage workers and allies to improve wages and working conditions, securing access to regional business networks for minority businesses, education and training reform, and curbing discrimination in metropolitan labor and housing markets. A look at L.A. in long historical perspective both underscores the importance of global markets, state and national policies, and other “driving” forces and confirms how local steering can make things better or worse.

What about the ordering of pluralism that is evident in earlier, autocratic cities and societies? Ordering the city are the “good cop” and “bad cop” functions of legal and political institutions—both the progressive possibilities of securing influence and negotiating with other social groups and the enforcement and coercion that often become the tension points, or darker side, of diversity discussions. As contested, uncertain, and negotiated places, cities, in order to make diversity work, rely on policing and other monitoring, enforcement, and conflict-resolution mechanisms. Cities must provide public order in ways that prescriptions of tolerance and openness to difference too often downplay, ignore, or caricature. To be sure, the rapid rise in demand for residential “gating” and private security services in U.S. cities (Blakely and Snyder, 1997), but also in Latin America, Africa, and other parts of the world, is one highly visible and worrisome symptom of uncertainty and the fear of difference. The evidence from L.A., New York, and other cities suggests, moreover, that the interplay of guiding social values and political interests, institutional structures, norms of politicking, histories of relations among social groups, and public and private action strategies are quite localized. The public order needed to make diversity work must be **locally viable**—one reason that cookie-cutter models may not travel well, though cross-city learning can certainly help.

Criminal justice encompasses some of the most controversial touch points between civil society and the state in any time or place. Recent research on race and policing in the
United States, inspired in part by high-profile racial tensions in Boston and Cincinnati, outlines encouraging mechanisms of community-police accountability and joint problem solving. None of this research suggests that establishing and sustaining such mechanisms is easy (see, e.g., Winship and Berrien, 1999; PolicyLink, 2001).

Cities are not just ordered or productive places, of course, but places of meaning. The ancient, medieval, and contemporary cities in this study all reflect cultural osmosis (absorption of preexisting cultural elements by new occupiers), mosaic patterns (persistence of difference, cultures side by side), and the hybridization or fusion of cultures. All three patterns are notable. They define these urban civilizations not as happy melting pots but as culturally ample, offering room for retreat and enclaving as well as encounter, exchange, and transformation. However this is to be achieved, the persistence of this outcome may be one of the more timeless lessons about what it takes to make diversity work in shared space.

This study is, for now, an exercise in theory building and not an effort to test hypotheses about historical causation or prescribe solutions for today’s communities. A number of major cross-cutting issues call for more analysis in these three cases and other cases, including: the importance of economic prosperity (which is certainly not sufficient and may not even be necessary to the success of designs for diversity); the relevance of autocratic versus democratic political regimes for the construction and performance of designs; contemporary varieties of ordered pluralism (on the Cordoban model) and their effects on life in urban communities; and implications of ongoing boundary shifts, particularly (in the United States) if certain Anglo and non-Anglo ethnic groups converge in a new mainstream but high rates of immigration act to perpetuate status boundaries and even racialized backlash.

Cities have linked economic, political, and cultural functions, and diverse cities therefore face linked “design problems” in these several dimensions. Where contemporary cities and the societies they propel are concerned, social research and criticism have framed the challenges and opportunities in social diversity in a wide variety of ways, generating useful insights but typically through quite partial views of the human experience. This includes the urban experience, where the small worlds of everyday interaction and the macro forces of nation building, global trade, and more converge, where social boundaries are managed, tolerance operates, and cross-cutting loyalties are thwarted or made possible.

Some of this partialness is about trading breadth for depth in research, of course, but if we want better diagnoses and some capacity to move from diagnosis to action, partial views are risky. They may lead to naïve hopes and, worse yet, myopic experiments. For example, some contemporary observers focus on transforming public planning processes to accommodate varied narratives and identity-group interests. Others stress the leveling of barriers to economic attainment across group lines or the political mobilization on which such progressive reforms seem to hinge. Another group emphasizes how shifting the rights and obligations of membership—in the form of citizenship in nation-states—would affect attitudes, relationships, and power among diverse groups. Although one can reasonably decide that all these have something to contribute, and that, in general, both formal policy making and informal action matter in making social diversity work in any time and place, it is not at all clear that the benefits of these prescriptions accumulate in straightforward ways, let alone reinforce each other. Discussions about making diversity work will likely remain overly fragmented, even hyper-specialized, in lieu of some means
of organizing these elements, scrutinizing their rationales and interdependencies, and testing them against the lessons of history as best we can.

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Notes

1 Scholars differ on the question of how race and ethnicity should each be defined and whether they should be considered nested or linked concepts (Alba, 2003; Cornell and Hartman, 2002). Ethnicity can be defined, as I do in this study, in ways that subsume modern conceptions of race or in ways that distinguish a “belief in common descent” (ethnicity, per Weber) from socially constructed racial categories that emphasize phenotypical differences, for example, in skin color or facial features (Alba, 2003).

2 Following Menocal (2002) and other researchers, I will use the English derivations of native place names and other words (Córdoba, Qur’an, etc.).

3 As Lieberson (1991) notes, analysts relying on small Ns must confidently rule out multiple causes of the outcome, interaction effects among predictors, and measurement error—three conditions likely to obtain in the case of research on complex social phenomena. To make their case, suggests Mahoney (1999), the best comparative-historical studies in fact appraise in several ways, using nominal (yes/no) differences in explanatory variables, ordinal differences (in degree), and complex narrative appraisal that attributes key outcomes in part to how the interactions of explanatory factors unfold in particular sequences or conjunctures. The statistical analogs would be dummy variables, ordinal variables, and path analysis—combined to tell a complex story and refute plausible, competing explanations. Specifically, Mahoney argues that nominal and ordinal appraisal are used to rule out or rule in certain causal factors. Narrative then helps to explain the nature of interactions among and effects of the ruled-in (significant) factors. To illustrate, Mahoney (1999, pp. 1165–1167) offers a partly graphical anatomy of Skocpol’s (1979) causal account of the French Revolution. Though she does not adopt Mahoney’s language, Abu-Lughod’s (1999) comparative history of New York, Chicago, and Los Angeles in effect loosely applies these multiple forms of appraisal, controlling on national context to distinguish each of America’s “global cities.”

4 Most famous is the hybrid Mudejar architecture visible to this day in southern Spain and diffused throughout Spanish and Portuguese America by colonizers from Andalusia.

5 My translation, from the Spanish.

6 Codified protections for subject peoples seem to have been important to the very acquisition of towns, some by peaceful means, in the early days of Islamic conquest in Spain. A treaty in 713 outlines a variety of protections for Christian rulers and their people and designates a poll tax to be paid in agricultural products as well as Arab currency (Constable, 1997).

7 In a telling example, a Castilian law code of the 14th century details “in what ways Jews should pass their lives among Christians” and likewise stipulates dos and don’ts for Moors. But the code also protects both
subject minorities against certain abuses by Christians, including arbitrary seizure of property and prohibition
of religious worship (Scott, 1931).

8 Though designed in the Progressive Era to promote more responsive government and active citizenry,
the instruments of direct democracy have frequently rewarded well-organized, well-funded political minorities,
and precluded the compromise that legislative process demands, in California’s recent political history. Schrag
(1999) argues that many California voters, far from pursuing the democratic ideal of responsive elected officials,
expect a “clockmaker state” that will run itself without the need for discretionary action by elected officials.

9 I am grateful to Alethia Jones for highlighting this point in an earlier draft.

10 The meanings and terms of political integration are being widely debated in the United States, Europe,
Canada, and other immigrant destinations. Analysts have, for example, contrasted a culturally thin republican
integration (identification by newcomers with the host polity) with culturally thicker communitarian integration
that implies acceptance of “core” political values (Tillie, 2003; Tillie and Slijper, 2003).

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