

## **ASIA COMES TO MAIN STREET AND MAY LEARN TO SPEAK SPANISH: GLOBALIZATION IN A POOR NEIGHBORHOOD IN WORCESTER**

**Kate Driscoll Derickson**  
*Pennsylvania State University*

**Robert J.S. Ross**  
*Department of Sociology*  
*Clark University*  
rjsross@clarku.edu

### **ABSTRACT**

*This paper considers how and why an Asian enclave of small businesses has appeared in a poor neighborhood characterized by Puerto Rican and other Latino immigration in the post-industrial city of Worcester, Massachusetts. We begin by examining the role of the US in the world system, and argue that the US hegemonic role and specific political economic aspects of global capitalism (ie. deindustrialization) account for some of the migration stream. Next, using socio-economic and historical data, interviews, and observations, we outline the history of Worcester's economy and immigration patterns. We demonstrate that the increasing economic inequality leaves few promising employment options for newcomers to Worcester. Drawing on existing literature on immigrant entrepreneurs and ethnic enclaves, we argue that some aspects of the literature appear to shed light on the Vietnamese enterprises which have so visibly appeared (e.g., ethnic niches), while others, (e.g., middle-man minority theory) are not now reflected in local conflict. We conclude by considering the prospects for immigrants to this neighborhood in light of its political economic context.*

### **INTRODUCTION: IMMIGRATION AND GLOBALIZATION**

Walk just one block in either direction along Main Street in front of the Clark University campus in Worcester, Massachusetts, in the neighborhood known as Main South, and one cannot help but notice a series of Asian (Vietnamese) owned businesses – among them three Vietnamese or Vietnamese-Chinese restaurants, two Vietnamese groceries; a trinket shop that rents Asian videos. A bit farther on, more of the same type appear. A cluster of businesses owned by Asian immigrant entrepreneurs in a poor neighborhood with an even larger Latino population in a provincial city does require some explanation. This article shows how macro-level social science – globalization and inequality, deindustrialization, core v. periphery and hegemonic status in the world hierarchy – come together with middle level concepts of urban sociology to render order out of the apparently accidental appearance of “Asia on Main Street” in the form of immigration to Worcester’s poorest neighborhood.

## THE HEGEMONIC ROLE COMES HOME

The city of Worcester has been marked by recent trends in the global political economy and by the U.S. role in world affairs – and by more local forces of regional redistribution. These have come together in one of the city’s oldest and poorest neighborhoods to create something entirely new for the city: an Asian enclave in the midst of an increasingly Hispanic area. War and peace, boom and bust – all have stamped the human variety of the Main South neighborhood. In this paper, we explore the global and regional economic trends that have enabled an enclave of Asian immigrant owned businesses to pop up in Main South at this moment in time, when little else is “popping up” in the post-industrial city of Worcester, MA.

Our initial insight concerns hegemony and migration. As the hegemonic power of global capital, the United States served as the armed rampart against revolution in the Cold War period (and beyond) (Chase-Dunn 1989; Kentor 2000). The U.S. thus engaged in a string of large and small wars – Korea, Vietnam (and Laos and Cambodia), interventions in Cuba, Guatemala, and Iran; interventions in the Dominican Republic and Haiti; participation in civil wars in El Salvador and Nicaragua. These interventions each involved client relations with governments and associated local personnel and, in a number of instances, obligations to provide for the safety of these clients by giving them refuge in the U.S. In other instances, the traffic between client states and the U.S. produced at first smaller and then larger trickles of migration that, by a familiar pattern of chain migration and internal redistribution, led a variety of post-World War II immigrants to settle in different places within the U.S. ( See, e.g., Boyd 1989; Jones 1989; Russell 1995; Zolberg 1995). In Massachusetts, for example, the city of Lowell’s large numbers of Cambodian migrants are products of this process (Gerson 1998, 2003), as refugees from Pol Pot’s regime were given special access to U.S. visas. (Gall and Natividad 1995). As in the Roman Empire, the U.S. global role entails an inevitable flow of peoples toward the center. Let us call this angle of perspective on Worcester’s post-1965 immigrant flows the “global hegemonic” perspective. It informs our understanding of how and why Vietnamese restaurants should appear in a middle-sized city’s low income neighborhood.

Not only is labor migration to U.S. cities partly a consequence of our imperial wars, but the globalization of (especially) manufacturing capital and the restructuring of regional economies are also part of the story. Economic marginalization in peripheral countries, especially among landless laborers, pushes them towards cities (see, e.g., Shaw 1974). In developing countries, these cities frequently grow in population much more rapidly than in their basic employment structures – and so, many of their residents look outwards for work and survival. Simultaneously, capital’s search for low wage or compliant labor forces has caused manufacturing jobs to flow from older “advanced” industrial regions to semi-peripheral and peripheral developing countries (Ross and Trachte 1990), producing deindustrialization in one place and industrialization in the others. In a paradox first noted by Sassen-Koob, (e.g. 1983, 1989; Sassen 1988), the flight of capital from older industrial regions may be accompanied by an influx of migrants from the very regions towards which investment is moving.

In the Worcester region, as other Northeastern cities, what Sassen called “downgraded” manufacturing attracted Puerto Rican migrants who settled in Spanish speaking neighborhoods (Gomez 2002). In turn, they were followed in the 1980s and 1990s by migrants thrown up by revolutionary and counter-revolutionary wars in Central America. As a consequence, Latino migrants moved into whole new industrial sectors and job niches, e.g., landscaping, flower-growing at the metropolitan periphery, central city fast food restaurants. Through this process, after the 1960s, first, Puerto Rican and then Central American migrants came to dominate migration to the Main South neighborhood. Its character changed from working class with an Irish plurality to a mixed working class and poor neighborhood with a very large Latino fraction.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> For more background on Worcester’s ethnic and migration structures see Cohen 1976.

In the remainder of this investigation we work towards the examination of a poor neighborhood in a middle sized Northeastern city showing the ways that two faces of world system dynamics -- immigration towards the center, and manufacturing job flow outwards – have brought Asian entrepreneurs to Main South. We begin by considering the economic trajectory of Worcester and the region in the context of a larger history of urban industrial decline in the US. We examine the impacts this history has had on the labor market in Worcester and argue that by at least two measures, immigrants arriving in Worcester face an increasingly bleak labor market with little opportunity for upward mobility. We then situate current patterns of immigration to Worcester in the city's larger history of immigration. Next, we explore the literature on immigrant entrepreneurs to consider what research on other such immigrant enclaves might tell us about how and why this particular enclave has appeared. We argue that this literature is useful in explaining this particular enclave, but that the phenomenon in Main South differs in important ways. Having laid out these social and economic contexts, we discuss our empirical findings with respect to the particular enclave of immigrant entrepreneurs that we are interested in, and conclude by considering the prospects for these, and other immigrants to Worcester, Massachusetts.

## **METHODS**

In addition to our extraction of US Census and American Community Survey Data from American Factfinder online, our examination of Vietnamese businesses in the Main South neighborhood is based on three waves of student seminar work. The first, in the spring of 2003 was a workshop project of MA students in Community Development. These students located Asian businesses in the neighborhood close to Clark University and asked the owners about their perceptions of business conditions and about their own immigrant origins. No common interview instrument was used but student ethnographic reports were provided to us. In 2004 when the present authors worked on the project a “windshield” and walking survey counted Asian businesses along a strip of the main shopping street in Main South (“Main Street”) and students asked the owners about their clientele and their origins. In addition, interviews with the staff leaders of a Vietnamese social service office in the neighborhood and with the local Community Development Corporation were conducted. Also in 2004, student seminar participants sought to supplement city's ethnic immigrant historical material that had been collected since the 1976 Bicentennial.

## **INEQUALITY AND STRUCTURAL CHANGE**

The particular enclave in which we are interested was formed in the context of increasing inequality in the US labor market. Pulling oneself up by the proverbial bootstraps to achieve the American dream of prosperity is increasingly difficult for natives and immigrants in the US, and Worcester, Massachusetts is no exception (Sawhill and Morton 2007). Located 50 miles west of Boston, Worcester, Massachusetts is approximately tied with Providence, Rhode Island, as the second largest city in New England.<sup>2</sup> It is part of a quadrangle of Southern New England cities in the same size class dominated either by New York City's reach, or Boston's, or in a field of influence shared by both: Hartford, Providence, Springfield, Worcester.

Worcester's deindustrialization was part of a process that began in the older manufacturing-intense regions and is now a structural reality for the whole nation. This

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<sup>2</sup> Providence, RI is marginally larger. From the 2000 Census: Hartford, CT, city, 121,578; Providence RI, city, 173,618; Springfield MA city, 152,082; Worcester MA city, 172,648

restructuring is contributing to the growth of inequality in America. As Harrison and Bluestone (1988) noted, the older mill-based economy tended to produce an income/occupation structure with a sizable middle income stratum: bulky in the middle with smaller tails at the top and bottom – like the hump of a dromedary camel. By contrast, the postindustrial structure creates high paying jobs for the few at the top, and, and weakens the labor market position of those at the bottom, creating a large number of service sector jobs of low pay (Bluestone 1995; Harrison and Bluestone 1988). The structure evolves toward the two-humped shape of a Bactrian camel.

These trends show up in national data. The ratio of the top 10% of wage earners to the bottom 10% of wage earners was 3.7:1 in 1973; 4:1 in 1983; 4.3:1 in 1993 and in 2003. Another way to see this is the ratio of average hourly wages of those with college education to those with less than High School. College educated workers earned 1.7 times as much as high school dropouts in 1973 and 1983; 2.1 times the more than high school wages in 1993; and 2.4 times more in 2001 (Mishel, Bernstein, and Boushey 2003).

The national trends are part of the Massachusetts and Worcester stories as well. The Commonwealth (of Massachusetts) had higher levels of inequality than the nation in 1998-99; and those levels had grown between 1979 and 1999. Using the ratio of the incomes of the top 10% of families, to the bottom 10 %, Andrew Sum and his colleagues calculated the increase as rising more than a third from 6.4:1 to 8.7:1 (Sum et al. 2000). The same ratio for household incomes in 1998-99 showed Massachusetts at 11.5 and the U.S. at 10.5.

**Table 1: Some measures of income deprivation and inequality**

	<i>US</i>		<i>MA</i>		<i>Worc Metro</i>		<i>Worc city</i>	
Extreme Poverty (1)	1990	5.8%	1990	4.4%	1990	4.7%	1990	9.1%
	2000	5.6%	2000	3.6%	2000	3.3%	2000	5.6%
Very Low Income (2)	1990	Na	1990	Na	1990	18.0%	1990	33%
	2000	Na	2000	Na	2000	25%	2000	34%
International Relative Poverty (3)	1990	24%	1990	20%	1990	21%	1990	28%
	2000	23.0%	2000	20.5%	2000	21.7%	2000	30%
Median Household income	1990	\$30,056	\$36,952		\$35,977		\$ 28,955	
	2000	\$41,994	\$50,502		\$47,899		\$ 35,653	

1) Households Under 50% of official poverty standard; Table P121 (1990); P88 2000

2) Households under 50% of metro unit median income (HUD);(NB: not adjusted for family size) calculated from SF3, 1990, 2000

3) Households under 50% national median (NB: not adjusted for family size), calculated from SF3, 1990, 2000

These larger trends have had a clear impact on Worcester. Between 1990 and 2000, a period of very high employment levels for most of Massachusetts, and falling unemployment rates in Worcester, metro region median incomes grew less rapidly than the state’s – the ratio fell from about 97% to about 95%. As a region going through the final phase of deindustrialization, Worcester has little of the high technology industry of the areas to its East, nor the FIRE (Finance Insurance and Real Estate) headquarters functions that contributed so largely to Boston regional incomes.

More ominously, some measures of inequality and deprivation grew markedly in this decade of growth. By two of the three measures of inequality that we examined for the Worcester

region between 1990 and 2000 (reported in Table 1), things are getting worse in Worcester. The first is “extreme poverty”. This measure indicates the number of households that fall below one-half of the official US poverty line (corrected for family size). As many observers believe the U.S. official poverty level is considerably lower than it should be, incomes that fail to reach over one-half of it suggest painful suffering. This is a measure of absolute suffering, using a “market basket” approach to defining poverty. Happily, this proportion in extreme poverty actually fell slightly in the US as a whole, and fell more markedly in the Commonwealth, substantially in the Worcester Metro region and fell dramatically in Worcester City. Indeed, it was cut nearly in half. The other measures we calculate, however, are more relative, and indicate localized inequality. In these, the story is more mixed.

The second measure uses a figure calculated by the federal Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD). HUD creates income guidelines to define eligibility and target populations for public housing and housing subsidies. Different levels of income qualify a family for different subsidy programs. As housing markets vary locally, the subsidy levels are tied to local incomes. For the HUD “Section 8” housing vouchers, which families may use to pay rent on the private market, levels of subsidy depend on family income in relation to the local median. HUD uses three levels. Families with incomes no higher than 30% of the local median are called “extremely low income”; those whose incomes are no higher than 50% of the local median are considered “very low income,” and those at 80% of the median are “low income.” HUD adjusts these definitions by family size. In Table 1, we use the HUD 50% level (very low income) income cutoff as a proxy for a localized inequality measure. It is only an estimate, since, unlike HUD, we a) did not adjust it for family or household size and b) use household, not family income data.<sup>3</sup> At the metro and city level, a higher percentage of households fell under the 50% level in 2000 than in 1990. The growth was more rapid in the metro area, reflecting its enlargement between the two periods and the even lower rates of economic growth in some of the other urban centers in the region (i.e., the smaller cities of Fitchburg and Leominster). Still the level of the “very low income” population in the city (34%) is a strong reminder of the polarization between the central city poor and those living in the “new economy” suburbs, especially to the city’s east.

Finally, the third measure in Table 1 is the international measure of relative poverty, household income one-half or less than the national median.<sup>4</sup> (e.g., Rainwater, Smeeding, and Coder 1999). By that measure, used most frequently by rich European countries, the region as a whole showed no change, but the city of Worcester edged upwards, with 30% of its households among the poor or those “very much less than average.”

The occupational structures driving the increasing income inequality in Worcester can be illustrated with some simple job change data which shows a dramatic loss in manufacturing jobs and a gain in service sector jobs. From 1990-2003 the Worcester metro area lost 13,600 manufacturing jobs (32% of all); an estimated third of these – over 4,000 were from the city itself. Worcester gained over 10,000 miscellaneous service jobs (about a 32% gain). In 2001, the average Worcester manufacturing job produced weekly earnings of \$870. By contrast, the average service producing job (including its higher paid sub-sectors, which did not produce job growth) provided earnings of \$698 (Extracted from Massachusetts Division of Unemployment Assistance 2004; and U.S. Department of Labor 2004).

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<sup>3</sup> Adjustments for family size are beyond of the scope of this work; the use of household data captures a broader range of persons and units.

<sup>4</sup> Among the principal centers of work on income inequality using this definition is the Luxembourg Income Study. Their leading American principals now appear to advocate using regionalized median, rather than national median as the benchmark for comparative inequality/poverty studies. See Rainwater, Smeeding, and Coder (1999)

The erosion of middle-income producing manufacturing in Massachusetts did not begin recently – but it has accelerated with the neoliberal trade regime of contemporary global capitalism. For example, the Economic Policy Institute estimates that the Commonwealth lost over 59,000 jobs (about 75% of which were in manufacturing) due to trade with China between 2001 and 2006 (Scott 2007). Some major fraction of the job losses from the China trade would partly account for the Worcester loss of over 13,000 manufacturing jobs.

Things could be worse – and they are in Providence, Hartford and Springfield, where poverty and inequality measures are higher.<sup>5</sup> Nevertheless, Worcester has not been a hotspot of growth, and its poor and working poor – while employed at higher rates over the decade – have fallen farther behind their region and nation. Yet immigrants still come, and immigrant entrepreneurs and workers pursue their own versions of liberty and happiness.

### COMING TO WORCESTER

The city of Worcester has a long history of immigration, and the experience of each wave of immigrants has reflected the labor market to which they were introduced and the response of the host culture to their ethnicity. When the textile industry grew in New England in the early nineteenth century, so did Worcester's industrial base. Though home to some mills, Worcester took a backseat to cities like Lowell, Massachusetts in the textile industry. Instead, the city's diversified manufacturing base grew to include wire manufacturing, boots and shoes, machinery, arms and ammunition, metal, paper goods, leather, and woolen goods (Kolesar 1989; Worcester Historical Museum 2004). Worcester's manufacturing diversity rivaled that of major industrial centers like New York and Philadelphia by the late nineteenth century (Worcester Historical Museum 2004). A major destination for immigrants in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> Century, Worcester also shared the late 19<sup>th</sup> Century surge of migrants from Eastern and Southern Europe. The national origins and ancestries that Worcester residents reported to the U.S. Census in 2000 register clearly these two waves.<sup>6</sup> Table Two shows the reason that Irish and Italian politicians dominated the late 20<sup>th</sup> Century history of the city: together, members of these ethnic groups compose 30 % of the population.

Other ethnic groups compose part of a distinctive immigration history for Worcester, including Swedes, Armenians and African-Americans, but are not so apparent from Census data on ancestry. Worcester was unusual as an East Coast urban destination for Swedish industrial workers (Estus and McClymer 1995; Parkinson 2004; Runblom 1995). They were largely recruited by the founder of the Washburn and Moen Company, which specialized in wire production for barbed wire fences and hoop skirts, who was impressed by the quality of Swedish steel and the talents of the Swedish workforce. He and other iron and ceramic manufactures actively recruited Swedes to Worcester (Salomonsson, Hultgren, and Becker 2002). Swedes also

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<sup>5</sup> Gini coefficients of income inequality (calculated by author from census SF3 for: Hartford: 44; Springfield and Worcester 42; Providence 47; and by reference US 41. NB: this is considerably lower than the Census Bureau national calculation, undoubtedly because of the estimation of grouped data used here, that counts the top bracket of the publicly reported grouped data at its lower-bound. The comparisons however, are instructive. Worcester's official poverty rate (1999) is considerably lower than the other cities' as well: 16.8% of households compared to Hartford 29%; Springfield 21% and Providence 28%. Author's calculations from Census SF3, Table P92.

<sup>6</sup> The Census Bureau question is : "What is your ancestry or ethnic origin?" They also report: "The question also provides examples of particular ethnic groups, which have changed since 1980. The response options to the question are two blank spaces in which respondents can write in whatever ancestry(ies) they want. We coded up to two ancestries per person." See U.S. Census: <http://www.census.gov/population/www/anc-faq.html#q02>. "Ancestry" is thus about ethnic self-identity. It differs from the foreign born category which is derived from census respondents' reports of where they were born.

initially accounted for nearly the entire workforce at Norton Company, manufacturer of industrial abrasives and heavy duty grinding machines (Worcester Historical Museum 2004). At the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, there were still over 5500 Worcester residents who identified as Swedish.

Worcester was also among the earliest Armenian immigrant portals to America, and thus, the home of the first Armenian Church in the United States (Deranian 1998). Armenians were able to find jobs within walking distance of their homes at the American Steel and Wire Company in Worcester (Apkarian-Russell 2000). Small grocery stores specializing in Armenian goods are still present in Worcester, although their customer base has diversified over the years to include non-Armenians (Apkarian-Russell 2000). Though Providence, RI and Watertown, MA would later prove to be more important centers of Armenian-American life, the establishment of a Chair in Armenian Genocide Studies at Worcester's Clark University registers something of this history.

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**Table 2: Worcester Ancestry: 2000 Census (Single or Multiple)**

Total population	172,648	100
Total ancestries reported	188,978	109.5
Irish	32,784	19
Italian	19,950	11.6
French (except Basque) <sup>1</sup>	17,719	10.3
English	10,633	6.2
Polish	10,482	6.1
French Canadian	7,394	4.3
United States or American	6,054	3.5
German	5,894	3.4
Swedish	5,535	3.2
Lithuanian	3,812	2.2
Subsaharan African	3,878	2.2
Greek	2,431	1.4
Arab	2,292	1.3
Russian	2,174	1.3
Scottish	2,156	1.2

All others below 1%

1: It is likely that most "French" are "French Canadian"

Source: Extracted from American Factfinder: [http://factfinder.census.gov/bf/\\_lang=en\\_vt\\_name=DEC\\_2000\\_SF3\\_U\\_DP2\\_geo\\_id=16000US2582000.html](http://factfinder.census.gov/bf/_lang=en_vt_name=DEC_2000_SF3_U_DP2_geo_id=16000US2582000.html)

Though the African-American population of Worcester doubled between 1860 and 1870, these newcomers did not enjoy the same industrial labor market opportunities that their white counterparts did (Greenwood 2003). Local industrialists preferred to hire white immigrants in their factories, often complaining of shortages of workers while refusing to hire blacks. Fewer than 20% of African Americans worked in manufacturing in 1900. In contrast, roughly 66% of French Canadians, many of whom emigrated around the same time as African-Americans and also came from non-industrial backgrounds, worked in manufacturing in 1900. Almost 60% of Worcester’s African-American population worked as domestic workers in white homes (Greenwood 2003). The African-American community in Worcester suffered in terms of social mobility and wealth as a result of their exclusion from industrial jobs (Greenwood 2003).

An industrial town, like many other New England’s older cities, Worcester’s Rust Belt experience of deindustrialization led to population stagnation and fiscal stress (Ross and Riesman 1994). After the 1960’s Worcester became a migration destination for the Puerto Rican journey Northeast from New York (Gomez 2002). Originally recruited as farm workers by the Massachusetts Department of Employment Services in the early 1950’s, Puerto Rican workers in the Northeast have been relatively concentrated in manufacturing industries (Morales 1986; Rodrigues 1979; Ross 2004). Their migration patterns have in part followed the paths to work provided for operatives. In the Census of 2000, fifteen percent of Worcester residents were classified as “Hispanic or Latino”; 13% of those over five years of age speak Spanish at home (US Census Bureau 2007a). In 1990, 9.6% of Worcester Residents were “Hispanic” (US Census 2007b). In addition to the influx of people of Puerto Rican descent, the increase from Hispanic to Latino from 1990 to 2000 also included individuals and families from Central America.

**Table 3: Percent Asian and Pacific Islander: U.S., Northeast and Massachusetts. 1970-2000**

Region	1970	MA:US	1980	MA:US	1990	MA:US	2000	MA:US
United States	0.7		1.5		2.9		3.6	
Northeast	0.4		1.1		2.6		4	
Massachusetts	0.4	.57	0.9	.6	2.4	.92	3.8	1.05

Source: For 1970, 1980, 1990: Hobbs, Frank and Nicole Stoops (2002) U.S. Census Bureau, Census 2000 Special Reports, Series CENSR-4, *Demographic Trends in the 20th Century*, U.S. Government Printing Office, Washington, DC, 2002. Table 8. For 2000: 2001 Statistical Abstract of the United States, Tables 24 and 22.

In these ways – Rust Belt decline, and a shift from European to Western Hemisphere migrants -- Worcester was like other New England cities. But in the last decade or so, Worcester has experienced an influx of Asian immigration somewhat greater than many other Rust Belt cities (except for e.g., Lowell, as above), and that is something very new for the city. In the Census of 1970, Massachusetts’ Asian and Pacific Island population composed but 0.4% of the whole, about 60% of the nation’s ratio. In the ensuing generation, the Northeast and the Commonwealth attracted Asian migrants at a faster rate than the nation as a whole, and Massachusetts now is home to over 53,000 Asian people, 3.8% of its population, somewhat higher than the Nation’s 3.6%.<sup>7</sup> [See Table Three]. From the 1990 to the 2000 Censuses, the number and proportion of people of Asian background in the central city of Worcester nearly doubled, from 4800 to 9400 (See Table Four). More numerous than any other national-origin group among the new Asian migrants to the city, however, have been those from Vietnam. The

<sup>7</sup> The 2000 Census separated Asian from Pacific Islander populations – 0.1% of the U.S. population.

2400 Vietnamese who lived in the city of Worcester in 1990 grew in number to 5100 by the year 2000. From a barely visible 1% of the population they are now a very visible 3% of the population. As with the Cambodians in Lowell, Worcester's Vietnamese newcomers appeared as part of a long wave of consequences of the wars in Southeast Asia (just as the Cuban population in South Florida and New Jersey are a function of the Cold War and the campaign against Castro). They were admitted to the US through special non-quota arrangements and were usually linked somehow as clients of our partners in Republic of Vietnam. (Campi 2005; Hohl 1978).

This new cohort of immigrants are not only changing the demography of Worcester: since 1993, thirteen small Asian immigrant owned businesses have opened their doors along Main Street in a neighborhood called Main South.

**Table 4: Worcester, MA-CT PMSA Asian Population Data for the Central City Area**

Race & Ethnicity	Population Distribution			
	1990		2000	
	Number	%	Number	%
Total	169,738	100	172,648	100
Non-Hispanic White	141,395	83.3	122,211	70.8
Non-Hispanic Black	6,746	4	12,132	7
Hispanic	16,258	9.6	26,155	15.1
Asian	4,770	2.8	9,377	5.4
Asian Indian	557	0.3	1,153	0.7
Chinese	694	0.4	1,347	0.8
Filipino	122	0.1	221	0.1
Japanese	178	0.1	259	0.2
Korean	231	0.1	265	0.2
Vietnamese	2,391	1.4	5,061	2.9
Other Asian	187	0.1	144	0.1

Source: American Communities Project, Lewis Mumford Center Census analysis database (2008).

### Problems, Issues, Theories

What accounts for this seemingly high instance of newly arrived immigrants starting businesses in poor, minority dominated neighborhoods? On the one hand, a minority ethnic group may be part of an immigrant cohort that lacks the technical skills to fit easily into the mainstream

economy. Language barriers may deter easy transfer of existing cultural skills to middle and upper income employment. It is also true that poor neighborhoods offer lower rents and the reluctance of majority status groups to compete in certain retail niches reduces competition. Furthermore, some, such as Korean entrepreneurs in Los Angeles, face systematic and institutional barriers to entering the professional work force in the United States. Highly educated Koreans find that their prestigious degrees from esteemed Korean institutions are not valued in the U.S. (Abelmann and Lie 1995). Blocked opportunity for middle income jobs, ambition to become part of an owning class, and a de facto vacuum of competition from mainstream groups produces an opening for the immigrant entrepreneur.

On the other hand, as employers, such middleman ethnic business owners can often gain an advantage over native businesses by exploiting themselves and the weakness of their co-ethnics. They hire cheap but obtain loyalty because these paternalistic entrepreneurs offer employment that is flexible in terms of cultural understandings (Sanders and Nee 1987). Waldinger (1994) also finds that solid information networks increase ethnic entrepreneurs' access to a labor force, and decreases the costs and risks associated with hiring and training. These networks also provide access to coethnics with a strong sense of loyalty and ethnic solidarity, which serves to decrease union activity, and enable coethnic employers to maintain sweatshop conditions and impose low wages (Sanders and Nee 1987). Additionally, retail businesses offer the opportunity of self-exploitation by working long hours (Bonacich 1973).

In addition to a lack of other opportunities and advantages in the labor market, a corner on ethnic tastes and exclusive access to coethnic distribution chains may also explain the prevalence of immigrant entrepreneurs. Expanding on Light's (1972) "protected market hypothesis," Waldinger, Aldrich, and Ward (1990:27) find that "ethnic consumer tastes provide a protected market position" for ethnic entrepreneurs. Not only do the wholesalers of ethnic goods have a preference for doing business with coethnics, but consumers have a preference for patronizing coethnics. Others cannot break into the market because they do not have the knowledge or the connections to sell or produce the goods in demand (Waldinger, Aldrich, and Ward 1990). Ethnic stores thrive, among other reasons, because they can cater to the distinct tastes of their coethnics (Lee 1999). Aldrich and Waldinger's (1990) findings that ethnic concentrations are particularly loyal to coethnic entrepreneurs in early years of migration is especially applicable to the relatively recently arrived Vietnamese on Main Street.

A second potential advantage held by immigrant entrepreneurs is the dense network of coethnics supplying wholesale goods to their retail counterparts. The ethnic retailer may thus gain a significant advantage over his native counterpart. "Family, regional, dialect, sect, and ultimately, ethnic ties are used for preferential economic treatment" (Bonacich 1973:586). Such vertical distribution networks provide information and employment for newcomers, as well as loyal employees for ethnic entrepreneurs (Bonacich 1973; Waldinger 1994).<sup>8</sup> Some research suggests that the type of work immigrants pursue is influenced by an evolutionary chain of immigrant retail niche domination (Lee 1999). "As immigrant entrepreneurs gather experience and capital, they move up the retail chain and penetrate more capital-intensive industries, thereby leaving room for newer immigrants to occupy the abandoned niches" (Lee 1999:1414). The more recently a group has immigrated, the more likely it is to occupy labor intensive industries, like take out food stores and groceries (Lee 1999).

Bonacich (1973), in particular, has conceptualized a theory about immigrant entrepreneurs which she calls the "middleman minority" phenomenon. In so doing, she lays out a series of interrelated traits that characterize middleman minorities. First and foremost, they are sojourners who do not intend to stay in the country. As such, they tend not to integrate into the

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<sup>8</sup> The clustering of two Asian grocery stores and four Asian restaurants (One Vietnamese-Chinese, two Vietnamese and one Thai) within three blocks along Main Street suggests just such a supply network – and the restaurant prices are very low. See below

community, and are more willing than others to live a thrifty lifestyle. Their short term orientation to their host countries causes them to choose business that are easily liquidated, such as retail stores. They also take advantage of their closed ethnic networks by **depending on** their families for cheap labor, and by taking advantage of vertical distribution networks of coethnics.

In addition to influencing their choices and business practices, their short term orientation to their host country can create hostility from members of their host country. This conflict, she argues, arises from what she sees as the incompatible goals of each of the groups involved. As sellers, middleman minorities invariably come into conflict with their buyers. As business owners, they come in conflict with other business owners. And finally, as employers, they come into conflict with labor. Thus, she concludes, host hostility toward middleman minorities and the frequent resulting scapegoating may not be justifiable, but can be explained by the inherent contradictions between the host and the middleman minorities.<sup>9</sup>

In addition to what may be a preference by some immigrants to open easily liquidated enterprises, local retail niches for ethnic entrepreneurs open up when large retail chains desert inner city neighborhoods (Waldinger, McEvoy, and Aldrich 1990). High crime rates (and/or the perception of such) and other challenges to doing business in largely minority areas leave neighborhoods with low income populations who cannot access necessities locally and often are without adequate transportation to shop elsewhere. The apparent undesirability of the neighborhood reduces rents and keeps out competing businesses. Ethnic entrepreneurs capitalize on this opportunity. Captive Black and Hispanic communities are particularly important to ethnic entrepreneurs, who have set up shop in neighborhoods with high concentrations of minority populations. Lee finds that recent immigrant insecurities about interacting with a more affluent clientele also play into their decision to situate in low income, minority neighborhoods (1999). She quotes a Korean restaurant owner in West Harlem:

Here they don't have many car, so easier, cheaper rent. When you go to White location... rent is already cost \$20,000 [per month], you know, and they don't have any room for us. But Black people area, other people hesitate to come because they worry about crime and something like that, so they got a lot of room for Koreans (Lee 1999:1402).

The relatively new enclave of Vietnamese owned business in the midst of a Latino neighborhood in the post-industrial New England city of Worcester, Massachusetts reflects some of the patterns of immigrant entrepreneurs and middleman minorities, but is also differs in important ways, as we will see below.

## MAIN SOUTH

Consistent with the classic models of immigrant economic enclaves and community building, the Vietnamese presence in Worcester is accentuated by the concentration of enterprise along a particular stretch of one of the two main North-South commercial streets of the city. Main Street bisects Worcester on a North-South axis. South of the Central Business District, Main Street enters the poorest precincts of town. Emerging from the older, and far from thriving, commercial center of the city, Main Street becomes the center of a community known as Main South, housing among other institutions, Clark University. In Main South we have seen the tides of the 20<sup>th</sup> century ebb and flow of immigrant labor. Following those from Ireland and Latin America, the 21<sup>st</sup> century brings newcomers from Asia.

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<sup>9</sup> For a critique of the Middleman Minority theory, see Wong 1985.

The community known as Main South<sup>10</sup> is among the poorest in Worcester County: 17.9% of the Worcester city population fell under the official poverty line in 2000, but 28.5% of Main South residents did. A quarter of Main South residents are Hispanic, and 60% of these are Puerto Rican (15.8% of the total). Over 9% of Main South residents are Black – a bit over double the City’s average. And now, as has usually been the case with immigrants who arrive without technical skills, the late 20<sup>th</sup> Century witnessed a new influx into this historically poor community. About 11% of area residents are from Asia (1364) and two-thirds of these are from Vietnam (877).

The Vietnamese population arrived relatively recently in the community. In 1975 a large cohort of Vietnamese immigrated to Massachusetts. Catholic Charities of Worcester played a large role in settling some of the immigrants in Worcester, helping the newcomers find jobs and housing (Le 2005). Drawn by the prospect of living near friends, relatives and coethnics (Le 2005), the Vietnamese population of Main South has almost doubled in the past 10 years. Only 533 persons in 1990, Vietnamese residents number about 1000 and composed seven percent of the Main South population by 2000<sup>11</sup>. Local observers, including those who have done housing surveys for the local Community Development Corporation, report with some assurance that the Census underreported the number of Vietnamese. Reluctant to talk to outsiders, the Vietnamese who even answer a knock on their front doors seem reluctant to tell how many people are living in their apartments. This leads the local CDC workers to guess they are saving on rent and living quite densely. Still, the Vietnamese in Worcester are a smaller group than the Cambodians in Lowell, a near by post-industrial city, and their appearance in the city is more recent.

Despite their relatively small number, the business presence of Asians is quite large and visible. A windshield survey of Main South, not restricted to the main Shopping street, with follow-up interviews in October, 2003 found 23 (26.5%) Asian businesses, 36 (41%) Latino, and 28 (32.5%) categorized as other (i.e., Greek, African American, Caucasian) totaling 87 businesses. The rate of Asian business ownership in relation to the local population is very high. Thirteen of the Asian-owned businesses are owned by immigrants from Vietnam along a five or six block length of Main Street that has become something of an ethnic enclave. Nine of these are owned by ethnic Vietnamese, two by ethnic Chinese – and two would not respond to student interviewers. None of these businesses existed before 1993.

The enterprises include one grocery (Chinese owner); one Vietnamese/Chinese restaurant (Vietnamese owner); one nail salon (Vietnamese owner); one Chinese restaurant (Chinese owner); one Laundromat (Vietnamese owner). Six others are a variety of food stores. An earlier interview study conducted by community development students collected data from six of these business owners. Not all live in the community; most complained of poor business in the spring of 2003. Most express the typical complaints of retailers in poor neighborhoods: dirty streets, perceived dangers that deter outsiders from coming to eat or shop.

There are thirteen more Asian and Vietnamese-owned business locations outside of this striking single strip, including those on a large shopping street (Park Avenue) that is a border of the neighborhood. However, their distribution is not as dense, and there is not as visible a pattern as that of the relatively new businesses along Main Street.

This new Vietnamese business enclave mirrors some of the typical models of immigrant entrepreneurs outlined above, but does not so easily fit others. The New York and LA stories of Korean business owners in Black communities has had an ominous dimension, as have Asian contractor-Latino worker relations in the apparel industry (Bonacich and Appelbaum 2000). The

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<sup>10</sup> Main South is comprised of Census Tracts 7312.01, 7312.02, and 7313

<sup>11</sup> Note the discrepancy with the official Census number (877) and our “guestestimate” of 1000. As in the text, numerous informants told us that because many people ‘crowd’ into apartments, and because the residents have fairly high distrust of authority, they probably understate the number of people living in each household when disclosing information to officials, i.e., the Census.

tension in those places is not apparent in Worcester. Furthermore, Worcester's Vietnamese do not share the exact circumstances of the Koreans of Spike Lee's fiction or of Los Angeles: their median incomes are below those of local African Americans (although they are higher than local Latinos). Asian poverty rates in Worcester (27%) are comparable to African Americans (25%) but less than Latinos (37%). No class conflict is obvious in Worcester's Main South between the new Asian entrepreneurs and the largest ethnic minority in the community, Hispanics of Puerto Rican and Central American background. Asians do not monopolize the local economy. There are also substantial numbers of small retail establishments owned by and catering to Spanish speakers – Bodegas, a hair salon, etc. Though the rate of Hispanic self-employment is lower, the presence of a vibrant Latino commercial sector is inviting to Spanish speakers. Local businesses from both ethnic groups benefit from a common customer base. The tensions and scapegoating that the “middle-man minority” thesis predicts are poorly echoed in the data or the relations of Worcester and Main South.

Main South's Vietnamese businesses reflect Waldinger, Aldrich, and Ward's (1990) research that finds immigrant entrepreneurs often thrive in market conditions in which they can primarily cater to coethnics by selling products that natives and other may also enjoy. Thua Le, the Southeast Asian Outreach Coalition's Executive Director points out that although the Vietnamese businesses in Main South are largely set up to serve co-ethnics by selling products Asians desire but are not available in local grocery stores, they also sell products that appeal to the local Latino community (Le 2005). Chinese and Vietnamese restaurants in Main South have menus in both English and Vietnamese, making their products accessible to both natives and co-ethnics. This is a familiar pattern in Worcester: Armenians and Swedes set up small grocery stores and bakeries to provide their co-ethnics with a “taste of home” and some of those markets are still open, although their customer base has expanded beyond coethnics (Apkarian-Russell 2000; Salomonsson 2002). These immigrant owned businesses have the privileged knowledge required to offer co-ethnics specialty goods they cannot obtain at local supermarkets or franchise restaurants (Waldinger, Aldrich, and Ward 1990). To the low income locals, they offer cheap food and the choice to eat another group's street food.

The theories of ethnic entrepreneurs as middle men serving an impoverished community lacking the transportation or the purchasing power to attract retail chains are reflected by the Vietnamese enclave in Worcester. Main South is much poorer than the rest of Worcester, and has double the African American residents. There is little competition nearby from large retailers. Chain grocery stores can be found on the periphery of this neighborhood, but are not within convenient walking distance of Main Street. One of the primary appeals of Main South to the newly arrived Vietnamese population is the density of coethnics that can provide transportation to employment, according to Le, Director of the local South East Asian Outreach Center. Low cost dining and shopping options specializing in Vietnamese cuisine enjoy a captive audience of coethnics with limited mobility.

Asian restaurants (and indeed, those in Main South) give very high value for money: they are inexpensive or they are moderately priced at higher levels of service. This is where the exploitation of both co-ethnicity and family members is relevant. By holding labor costs down, such establishments reach out to a broader public; the Latino establishments, though inexpensive, use less labor and provide a less service-oriented atmosphere. Indeed, the Vietnamese business owners with whom we spoke in Main South employ their families at high rates and themselves work long hours.

Furthermore, the Vietnamese wholesale grocery supplier in the neighborhood suggests there is an element of vertical distribution in Main South, with Vietnamese wholesalers selling to Vietnamese restaurants and groceries who then sell exotic goods to their loyal coethnic consumers, still newcomers to Worcester. Le (2005) confirmed that in Worcester, many Vietnamese grocery and convenience store owners get their start with the help of coethnic wholesalers who front the merchandise for the first delivery.

Main South's Vietnamese enclave follows Lee's theory (1999) that newly arrived immigrants occupy the most labor intensive industries like food stores and grocery stores. Only time will tell if they will eventually move up the retail chain into more capital intensive industries, as Lee's theory predicts.

The Vietnamese (and other Asians) in Worcester hold college degrees at about the same rate as other local residents, according to the Census, but are considerably less likely to hold high school degrees. They are, compared to the other major immigrant groups, highly entrepreneurial. Ten percent of Vietnamese employed persons are self-employed in the city and the Main South census tract where they are concentrated; this compares to a 2.5% self-employment rate for Puerto Rican-Americans citywide, and 2% in Main South.<sup>12</sup>

In contrast to the Cambodians in Lowell, the Worcester Asians are invisible in political and civic affairs. There is a Southeast Asian Outreach Center along Main Street at the heart of the neighborhood. Founded in June of 2002, it is housed in a structure shared with the Main South Community Development Corporation. The Outreach Center's services include referrals, education and job training, social and cultural support. According to the staff, the center serves as many as fifteen drop-in clients per day. Two people maintain the Center. So many clients with so many service needs have overloaded this minimal staff. The Outreach Center relies heavily on the network of other social organizations that provide more specialized services. In October 2003, the staff told student interviewers that Vietnamese value Massachusetts for the level of social benefits offered, mainly healthcare and childcare<sup>13</sup>. The Outreach Center staff also noted that Worcester is popular because the cost of housing is considered reasonable compared to surrounding areas.

The Center staff reported that a Southeast Asian Coalition between Southeast Asians and Latinos is working on an education initiative to strengthen school attendance, and parental support. Neither the Center staff nor knowledgeable observers with whom we consulted are aware of any other deliberate political coalition efforts at a common cause with local Latinos. Vietnamese merchants we interviewed affirm the lack of coalition activity. In sum, the picture that emerges of Main South's (and Worcester's) Vietnamese and Southeast Asian immigrants is that of a relatively insular, hard-working and entrepreneurial population, whose civic presence is but a fraction of its commercial visibility.

## PROSPECTS

Although the arrival of Asian migrants to Worcester's poorest neighborhoods, and its commercial sector may presage an unfolding story of increasing diversity, cultural globalization and, if we are lucky, a happy immigration saga, there is also a darker possibility. Recession, loss of working class purchasing power, increasing crime, business failure, immigrant privation, and tension among competing groups loom as potential hazards.

The softening of the Massachusetts and Worcester labor market in the 2001-2003 period did not have a dramatic impact on daily life in Main South.<sup>14</sup> There are no prominent business failures along Main Street, and there is no obvious tension between Latinos and Asians. Unemployment is up citywide, however, and prostitutes, after a period of relative absence, can, occasionally, once again be observed on Main Street. The 2005 American Community Survey of the U.S. Census measured official poverty at 18.7% -- up from the Decennial Census 17.9%.

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<sup>12</sup> Author's calculations from Sample File 4, 2000 Census, Table PCT 87.

<sup>13</sup> As of late Spring 2004, medical care and other means-tested benefits for legal immigrants are in jeopardy in the state legislature.

<sup>14</sup> A well-known local activist, Lynne Simonds, claims homelessness is growing in and around the neighborhood, and she launched in 2004 an (unsuccessful) write-in campaign for City Council to put her agenda forward.

The type of growth experienced in Worcester and in the Commonwealth over the last 15 years or so has had a mixed impact. Low unemployment rates have relieved the intense suffering of desperate poverty (those existing at less than 50% of the official poverty income), but the globalization of manufacturing has produced higher rates of inequality. As mentioned, officially measured poverty has increased slightly. If these trends are extrapolated into the future, with no public policy intervention or civil society innovation (e.g., a rise in union density or in social sector housing provision), the neighborhood and its Asian and Latino migrants are likely to share the fate of the nation's working poor. Some may find middle income status and leave the neighborhood, but most others will not. The majority of Asians and Latinos would live lives at the margins of poverty and deprivation, hoping for their children, who will likewise experience diverse futures.

One factor weighing in favor of reduced friction and somewhat more amenity for Main South's migrants is the collaboration between the Main South Community Development Corporation and Clark University – the University Park Partnership. (Main South CDC 2008; Clark University 2008). Although less wealthy than many private universities<sup>15</sup> that found themselves in increasingly poor neighborhoods, Clark University has endeavored to leverage its expertise and values on behalf of the neighborhood and its self-interest in being situated in a sustainable environment. The university encourages middle income and aspiring immigrant families to stay in the neighborhood by guaranteeing Clark admission and needs-based financial aid to students who live in the neighborhood and achieve good high school records. This amounts to several hundred thousand dollars a year in subsidies. It modestly subsidizes faculty and staff who buy houses in the neighborhood (few have done so). The University has acted as loan guarantor for the local CDC's housing rehabilitation activity. Indeed, the CDC has refurbished or created over 200 units of affordable housing. Reversing the stand-offish, even antagonistic town/gown record of prior decades, the University has opened its recreational facilities to local youngsters and runs free summer activities for them.

In brief, Clark has tried to turn its neighborhood from a liability to an asset, proclaiming its commitment to both good works and urban research. Doctoral, Masters and undergraduate research students do benchmark research on business, housing, and social conditions in the community.

This activity and the local presence of an educational and research institution cannot possibly compensate for the losses caused by globalization or affect the tides of immigration that wars at the periphery of the empire may bring to the community. But Clark University does offer marginal resources to help buffer the blows, compensate for injuries, and invent solutions.

Conceptually, the story of Main South is that of the tension between the military/political hegemony of the United States that attracts migrants and clients, on one hand, and on the other, the faltering economic role and structure that no longer provides a an abundance of middle income jobs for those without higher levels of technical and cultural skills. The era of the dromedary (one humped) camel distribution of jobs and income has given way to the hour-glass (or bactrtian, two-humped) distribution of jobs and income. In this one small neighborhood that means the Asian immigrant entrepreneurs will have to struggle ferociously to hold onto or to attain their version of the American Dream – and many of their coethnics and their Latino neighbors may not be alongside them if they succeed.

Now in the middle years of the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, Worcester's Main South fears not so much the racial tension of Bedford Stuyvesant as depicted in Spike Lee's *Do The Right Thing*, or LA's South Central where African-Americans vented frustration upon Korean store-owners. Rather, Main South lives with the grinding anxiety of *not enough*; of worry about where the next job will come from; of whether one's child will come home safe. It is not a race riot that haunts the neighborhood: it is instead life at the margins of the Big Feast.

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<sup>15</sup> Clark has lowest endowment per student of the research universities to which it compares itself.

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