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Education and Community Development Among Nineteenth-Century Irish and Contemporary Cambodians in Lowell, Massachusetts

Dr. Peter N. Kiang

As cities undergo dramatic demographic changes, schools become important sites of conflict between the interests of established and emerging communities. This article presents a case study of Lowell, Massachusetts, where the second largest Irish community in the country resided during the 1850s, and which is now home to the second largest Cambodian community in the United States. Analysis of nineteenth-century Irish community dynamics, particularly in relation to issues of public education in Lowell, reveals the significance of religious institutions and middle-class entrepreneurs in the process of immigrant community development and highlights important relationships to ethnicity, electoral politics, and economic development. In light of the Irish example, a conceptual framework is presented to understand current dynamics of leadership, institution building, and community empowerment among Cambodians and their contemporary struggles for educational equity.

Lowell, Massachusetts, the birthplace of America's industrial revolution and the crucible for many important developments in U.S. immigrant and labor history, has undergone a new period of dramatic demographic change caused by the rapid growth of Latino and Southeast Asian populations.¹ During the 1980s, for example, the number of Cambodians in Lowell grew from fewer than 100 to between 15,000 and 25,000 — totaling one fifth of the city's population and making Lowell the site of the second largest concentration of Cambodians in the country after Long Beach, California. Rapid demographic change has triggered conflict in the city, particularly in relation to issues of schooling and the new immigrant communities.

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This article explores the recent dynamics of Cambodian community development in light of Lowell's remarkable history during the mid-1800s, when rapid demographic change led to the development of the nation's second largest concentration of Irish in the country. Analyzing the development of the Irish community and its relationship to issues of public education in Lowell during this earlier historical period reveals particular themes that situate schools in their social context and that link current struggles for educational equity in Lowell with dynamics of leadership, institution building, and community empowerment.

There are obvious limitations in the applicability of specific lessons from mid-nineteenth-century Lowell to the present day. The city's economic structure and political institutions have changed dramatically during the past 150 years. Furthermore, the social, cultural, racial, class, and religious characteristics of the two immigrant groups are substantially different.²

Nevertheless, given the lack of focused research on Cambodian community development as well as continuing debates over larger issues of race, class, and immigrant assimilation in the United States, the historical case provides a useful lens through which to assess contemporary social conflicts and community strategies for empowerment. As historian Mark Scott Miller asserts in his study analyzing the impact of World War II on Lowell:

At each step of the city's history, Lowell's citizens experienced the extremes of the advance of American society and its social and economic structures. Because Lowell's life as a city is so dramatic, changes in this archetypical community clarify trends that more moderated experiences in other communities might obscure.³

A Brief History of Lowell

The town of Lowell⁴ was established in 1826 in the context of America's industrial revolution. Seeking to expand their economic base, Boston gentry purchased land alongside the Merrimack River and built a chain of textile mills with an elaborate interlocking system of canals that powered looms with energy generated by the river's current. As Lowell emerged as the country's textile center, teenage girls were recruited from the area's surrounding farms to work in the mills. Paid at half the male wage, yet earning more than they would from farm work, the mill girls lived in dormitory-style housing constructed next to the factories. Harsh working and living conditions, however, led to some of the country's first examples of labor organizing — including mill girl strikes in 1834 and 1836, formation of the Lowell Female Labor Reform Association in 1844, and a petition to the Massachusetts legislature for a ten-hour workday in 1845.⁵

With successive waves of European immigrants arriving on the East Coast throughout the 1800s and early 1900s, cheap immigrant labor entered the booming textile industry and replaced the mill girls in Lowell. The girls' dormitories evolved into overcrowded tenement housing for successive waves of Irish, French Canadian, Greek, Polish, and Portuguese immigrants.

As the textile industry reached its height in the 1890s, Lowell became widely recognized as a city built by immigrants. Labor organizing also continued in the city

as the Yiddish-speaking Lowell Workingmen's Circle formed in 1900 and Greek immigrants led a citywide strike in 1903 that set the stage for the well-known Bread and Roses strike of 1912 in the neighboring mill town of Lawrence.

But by the 1920s, the textile industry in Lowell entered a long period of depression and economic decline. By 1945, eight of the city's eleven big mills had closed and unemployment soared. Foreshadowing the decline of many midwestern industrial cities during the 1970s, Lowell and other textile mill towns in the area all but died during this period.

In the 1970s, a combination of factors, including the emergence of new industries fueled by high-technology research at Massachusetts universities and the political muscle of the Massachusetts congressional delegation — which included Speaker of the House Thomas ("Tip") O'Neill, Jr., Senator Edward Kennedy, and Senator Paul Tsongas (who was born and raised in Lowell) — led to a turnaround in the state's economic condition. A combination of federal dollars and corporate investment revitalized Lowell's economy, enabling the city to move from 13.8 percent unemployment in 1978 to 7 percent in 1982 to less than 3 percent in 1987. After rehabilitation of the rundown mill factories, the city's vacant industrial land area dropped from 100 acres in 1978 to zero by 1987.⁶

Serving as the backdrop for the launching of Michael Dukakis's presidential campaign in 1988, Lowell was cited as the model city of the Massachusetts economic miracle, having overcome industrial decline to reemerge as a leading center of the country's high-technology revolution. Lowell's remarkable rebirth generated an optimism within the city that paralleled accounts from the early days of industrialization during the 1830s, when Lowell was described as "the focus of all eyes . . . a light upon a hill."⁷

Demographic Change and Community Development: The Irish Experience

Lowell owes much to Irish immigrants, who were among the initial laborers to construct a set of canals and factories in 1822 even before the city was formally incorporated. By 1830, more than 500 Irish had settled permanently in "paddy camps," later known as "the Acre," on the outskirts of the mill village at the center of town.⁸

During the 1830s, two contrasting trends emerged. The Irish population established a stable community characterized by their entry into the mills in Lowell and the surrounding area, their development of ethnic businesses and a small entrepreneurial class, and most important, their construction of an Irish Catholic church in the neighborhood. Erected in 1831, Saint Patrick's served as "a symbol of the Irish presence in Lowell and represented the Irish commitment to order and stability. . . . The church was, in effect, the center of the first stirrings of community among the Irish in Lowell."⁹

However, as the Irish population grew, so did local resentment and anti-Irish Catholic reaction. In May 1831, a general riot left one person dead and many others injured. Street fights and harassment escalated. Lowell city officials reported in 1832 that "a disturbance of the peace is of almost nightly occurrence."¹⁰

These two trends, which continued to take root in counterpoint during the next two decades, intensified with the massive influx of Irish immigrants escaping Ireland's potato famines in the 1840s. By 1840, the Irish population of Lowell had

reached 21,000. By 1850, the arrival of famine Irish raised the number to more than 33,000 — roughly 30 percent of the city — making Lowell the second largest concentration of Irish in the country, after Boston.

Irish population growth created new markets and opportunities for the small Irish entrepreneurial class who owned ethnic neighborhood businesses, rented out tenement apartments, and contracted Irish labor power for the mills. With increased support from the Boston Irish Catholic church leadership, Lowell's Irish community, which had long since outgrown their 1831 church facility, succeeded in constructing a magnificent new Saint Patrick's Church in 1854.

At the same time, rapid demographic change led to growing concerns about public image and order in the city, particularly after the influx of poor, uneducated famine Irish. Anti-Irish sentiment, which had been brewing since 1831, climaxed in 1854, less than a month after the opening dedication ceremony of the new Saint Patrick's Church, when the Know-Nothing party swept into elected office in Lowell and throughout the state on an explicitly anti-Irish campaign platform. Lowell's local Know-Nothing party was founded in 1851 with a call to action against "the swarms of Irish poor who wreaked such havoc upon the moral, economic, and social character of Lowell."¹¹

Given the intensity of demographic change, educational institutions were called on to resolve some of the growing social conflicts. Like the evolution of common schooling throughout New England, the view of Lowell's graded schools embodied deeply felt goals of assimilating and Americanizing immigrants. Lowell's attention to public schooling reflected strong desires for social order and stability amid the growing crime, poverty, and health problems that had seemingly accompanied the famine Irish to the city. Schooling was seen as the vehicle to preserve and promote Yankee standards and power relations.

Schooling through the 1840s and 1850s also became the process through which Lowell's Irish became employable. Public school certificates of attendance became standard letters of introduction for Irish children seeking work in the mills.¹²

Of any city institution, the public schools dealt most directly, and perhaps most equitably with the Irish community. Interestingly, as Mitchell notes, "of all Irish political activity, participation on the school committee was most significant."¹³ A compromise agreement over schooling between the city and the Irish community in 1835 exemplified this relationship. Unlike New York and other cities where the issue of public schooling for Irish Catholic children fueled bitter debate and hostility between school officials and the church, a compromise negotiated between local priests, Boston's Bishop Benedict Joseph Fenwick, and Lowell city officials allocated public education funds to support parish schools attended by Irish Catholic schoolchildren.

The compromise, hailed by all parties, maintained nominal school committee authority while providing for significant Irish community control. School committee decisions on hiring, curriculum, and textbook selection, for example, were to be based on choices acceptable to the church and its Catholic instructors. The agreement recognized the significance of the Irish Catholic community as a constituent group in the city,¹⁴ and resulted in the incorporation of the majority of Lowell's Irish Catholic schoolchildren into the public school system.¹⁵

The 1835 compromise remained in effect until 1851, when the nascent Know-Nothing party forced the parish schools to close for lack of public funds.¹⁶ By then,

the Irish constituted a majority of the labor force working in the mills. As anti-Irish sentiment grew through the 1840s with the coming of the famine Irish, a new generation of Irish community leadership emerged which responded to the worsening social climate by calling for unity under the banner of the church. Central to their strategy was the establishment of new Catholic parish schools with their own funding and facilities.

Unlike their predecessors, who tried to accommodate community needs with Yankee concerns for order and stability, the emerging generation of Irish leadership in the 1850s advocated fulfilling the community's needs by strengthening the roles of the family and the church. Over time, this approach succeeded in forging a new, working-class, Irish Catholic identity that evolved into a cohesive voting bloc and significant political force in the city — eventually producing Lowell's first Irish mayor in 1882 and dominating city politics from that time to the present.¹⁷

Demographic Change and Community Development: The Recent Experience

More than a century after the Irish had settled the Acre, a small number of Puerto Ricans settled in Lowell in the late 1950s as part of large-scale Puerto Rican migrations throughout the Northeast industrial states. In the late 1960s, a large group of Puerto Rican workers based at garment factories in New Jersey were transferred to Lowell. Through the 1970s, Puerto Ricans and growing numbers of Dominicans established a more permanent Latino community. By 1987, the Latino community had grown to represent more than 10 percent of the city.¹⁸ In neighboring Lawrence, Massachusetts, the Latino community swelled to 30 percent of the city's population — reflecting significant demographic changes throughout the Merrimack Valley area.

However, the most dramatic growth in Lowell during the 1980s resulted from Southeast Asian refugee resettlement and secondary migration. The 1990 U.S. census counted 11,493 Asians in Lowell compared with only 604 in 1980. Highly critical of the census undercounting, the Lowell city and community estimates show an even more striking profile with fewer than 100 Cambodians in Lowell in 1980, compared with between 15,000 and 20,000 ten years later. In addition, city and community leaders estimate an additional 1,000 Lao and 1,000 Vietnamese. During the 1980s, Lowell became home to the largest Cambodian community on the East Coast and the second largest per capita concentration of Southeast Asians in the United States after Long Beach, California.

The majority of Southeast Asians in Lowell are secondary migrants, having moved there from other states rather than being resettled directly from refugee camps in Southeast Asia. Many settled in Lowell because of the city's well-publicized economic health and availability of jobs. Some were drawn by the establishment of one of the few Cambodian Buddhist temples in the country in the mid-1980s. Others came because family members or friends were already established there. Still others came simply because they heard that Lowell was a place where Cambodians live.

As the numbers of Latinos and Southeast Asians expanded rapidly during the 1980s, the city found itself unprepared to address the multiple issues of housing, bilingual services, and civil rights that confront new immigrants. Furthermore, Lowell's economic rejuvenation had failed to refurbish the city's nineteenth-century housing stock and public school facilities, particularly in neighborhoods such as the

Acre, where large numbers of Latinos and Southeast Asians had settled. Educational issues and the schools quickly emerged as a primary concern for Lowell's new immigrant communities.

Lowell has the sixth largest Hispanic student population and second largest number of Asian students in Massachusetts. In 1975, only 4 percent of Lowell's students were children of color. By 1987, however, students of color made up 40 percent of the school-age population. Half of them were limited English proficient. As their families continued to migrate to Lowell throughout 1987, as many as thirty-five to fifty new Southeast Asian students arrived and enrolled in school each week. Strains on the public school system quickly reached crisis proportions.

In trying to accommodate state bilingual education mandates, the Lowell School Committee responded to the population influx by establishing makeshift bilingual classrooms. Overcrowded classrooms combined students from grades one to six. Partitions in cafeterias separated bilingual classes in Spanish, Lao, and Khmer. Special compensatory education classes were held in hallways, which were quieter. The basement boiler room and an auditorium storage area of the Robinson School were converted into classrooms. A Lao bilingual class in the Daley School was conducted in a converted bathroom that still housed a toilet stall.

Other students were placed in nonschool facilities such as the Lowell Boys Club and Lowell YMCA. This process de facto segregated 170 Latino and Southeast Asian elementary-age schoolchildren in buildings that lacked library and cafeteria facilities as well as principals and supervisory staff on site.

At a school committee meeting to discuss the crisis, on May 6, 1987, one hundred Latino and Southeast Asian parents came to voice their concerns about their children's education. After requesting to speak with the assistance of interpreters who accompanied them, the parents were quickly rebuffed by George Kouloheras, senior member of the committee, who declared that they were in an English-only meeting in an English-only town in an English-only America. Kouloheras then walked out, reducing the quorum necessary for the meeting to continue; later he characterized the Latino parents as "those bastards who speak Spanish."¹⁹

From May 1987 through November 1988, Latino and Southeast Asian parents responded by developing a thirty-three-point program of demands for educational reform and by filing a Title VI lawsuit in federal court against the city for unconstitutional segregation and denial of equal educational opportunities to students of limited English proficiency.²⁰ In the process, they confronted disenfranchisement within the city's political institutions as well as anti-immigrant resentment and racial intolerance.

In June 1987, under pressure from the parents and the state board of education, the Lowell School Committee adopted a desegregation plan that Kouloheras and many white residents vehemently opposed because it required a mandatory busing plan to integrate several predominantly white schools. The desegregation plan became the focal point for candidates' campaigns during the fall 1987 school committee and city council elections. Fueled by English-only rhetoric, anti-immigrant sentiment escalated throughout the summer and climaxed in September with the drowning of Vandy Phornng, a thirteen-year-old Cambodian boy who was thrown into one of the canals by an eleven-year-old white boy who called him racist names. The white child's father was an outspoken advocate for English only in Lowell.

In the school committee election, Kouloheras and his ally, Kathryn Stoklosa, received the highest tallies of votes. Sean Sullivan, a first-time candidate whose

campaign focused exclusively on opposition to “forced busing” was also elected, while George O’Hare, a longtime incumbent who supported the desegregation plan was defeated.

For the Southeast Asian and Latino parents, the election reinforced what they had begun to recognize — in spite of their significant and growing numbers, they had no political representation or even influence within the city’s institutions. The only Hispanic in City Hall, for example, as many community leaders were quick to point out, was a gardener.²¹

In the months following the city elections, the parents continued to press their case with assistance from the advocacy organization META, Inc., and a statewide Latino parents network, PUEDO. In November 1988, the coalition of Latino and Southeast Asian parents, known affectionately as MAMA, or the Minority Association for Mutual Assistance, won a historic victory as the Lowell School Committee accepted most of the demands for reform and settled the lawsuit out of court.

In spite of these gains, however, anti-immigrant sentiment continued; it culminated in November 1989, when Lowell’s electorate voted on a nonbinding referendum introduced by George Kouloheras to declare English the official language of the city. The English-only referendum passed by a wide 72 percent to 28 percent margin, with 14,575 votes for and 5,679 votes against.²² Not unlike the Know-Nothing electoral sweep of 1854, the three-to-one English-only referendum vote galvanized native opposition to the rapid demographic changes taking place in Lowell. Yet, as Pérez-Bustillo notes, it was ironic that so many European Americans, whose families were themselves victims of exclusion and harassment as immigrants in Lowell, were so threatened by the population growth of Latinos and Southeast Asians.²³

Current prospects for Cambodian community development and empowerment in Lowell are far from clear. However, themes from the historic example of Lowell’s Irish community suggest some ways to analyze and participate in the process of contemporary Cambodian community development in Lowell, and perhaps in other cities as well.

Community Development and the Role of Religious Institutions

As the most important institution within Lowell’s Irish community, the Catholic church provided moral, social, and political guidance for all of its members. The construction of Saint Patrick’s Church, first in 1831 and again in 1854, signified major landmarks in the community’s development. Church facilities served a variety of roles, including classroom space when public school facilities were deemed inappropriate or inadequate. Local priests, with the sanction of Boston’s bishop, handled not only their religious duties, but also functioned as political leaders with the responsibility of representing their community’s interests in negotiations with city officials. This crucial political role of religious leaders was highlighted in their successful brokering of the education compromise of 1835, which integrated parish schools into the Lowell public school system while preserving essential community control over hiring and curriculum decisions.

In the recent case, a majority of the Latino parents are Catholics with strong ties to their own local churches. Furthermore, most of Lowell’s Cambodians are Buddhists. Reminiscent of Saint Patrick’s Church, a significant symbol and landmark of

the Cambodian community's place in Lowell was first achieved when community members established a Buddhist temple in 1984.

Unlike the Irish priests, however, the temple's Cambodian monks have neither sought nor attained recognition by city officials as having a role to play in political affairs, despite the fact that they are the single most important influence on the direction of the Cambodian parents. Community advocates have observed, for example, that only a small number of Cambodian parents go to City Hall or a public school to meet about educational issues, while large numbers of them go to the temple to discuss the same issues.

Examples ranging from Lowell's Irish Catholic church in the mid-nineteenth century to the roles of black churches and Jewish temples in other settings suggest that religious institutions are significant in the process of community development. The survival and development of Cambodian Buddhist temples are essential to the maintenance and rebuilding of Cambodian culture and identity in the United States. Can Cambodian monks go beyond that internal community role to participate actively in Lowell city politics and lead the external process of Cambodian community empowerment in ways comparable to Irish Catholic priests? Or will such a role fundamentally compromise their spiritual and moral legitimacy, which rests upon their renunciation of worldly affairs?

There are examples in Asia of Buddhist monks asserting moral leadership within political contexts — including those who self-immolated in Vietnam to protest government policies during the war and current examples of monks demanding fundamental change in Burma. The appropriateness of such comparisons to Cambodian monks in the United States, however, is unclear. It is worth noting, however, that the lay chair of Lowell's Buddhist temple was one of the main community leaders in the 1987 parents' struggle. Though not a monk himself, he has often voiced the need for Cambodians to run for school committee and city council offices, and will likely do so in the future.

Community Development and the Role of Middle-Class Entrepreneurs

During the 1830s, the small number of Irish store owners and entrepreneurs wielded considerable social, economic, and political influence within the community and were also key players in negotiating the 1835 schools compromise with the city. Mitchell identifies them as a class force because of their relative economic security and their perspective, which he describes as less transient, less clannish, more broad minded, more independent, and the "most 'American' of the Irish in Lowell."²⁴

The strategy for community development articulated by these entrepreneurs, and exemplified in their own lives, was one of accommodation to Yankee interests for the sake of peace and stability. In the 1840s, as the numbers of famine Irish multiplied, the middle-class entrepreneurs initially benefited because of expanded market opportunities. However, their accommodationist strategy proved inadequate or inappropriate for the masses of poor Irish immigrants. By the mid-1840s, their leadership had been eclipsed by a new generation of service-oriented priests who called on community members to unite behind an Irish Catholic working-class identity in order to strengthen the community's own institutions.

In the more recent case, a class sector similar to their Irish middle-class entrepreneurs comprises the main public leadership within the Cambodian community. Their approach to city/community relations is also comparable in its accommodationist tendency. While some observers of community dynamics have suggested that the desire for harmony and stability expressed by the Cambodian community leadership is a cultural value, the Irish experience suggests that it may also be a class characteristic. There is not yet an articulated working-class identity or an organizational form outside of the Buddhist temple, which reaches the masses of Cambodians in Lowell. In light of the Irish example, this may constitute an important stage of development and maturation for the Cambodian community in the coming years.

Interestingly, the Latino community leadership in Lowell has been more effective in reaching and mobilizing the masses behind a clear agenda. This may reflect their longer term of residence in Lowell relative to the Cambodian community and, for Puerto Ricans, the advantage of already enjoying U.S. citizenship and some voting rights.

In any case, the Irish example suggests the importance of analyzing the character and quality of leadership within the community, particularly in terms of its class orientation and strategy for community development.²⁵ This should be examined more closely in the Cambodian community.

The Economic Context and the Role of Industry

While the first two themes from the Irish community's history refer to internal dimensions, it is also important to place the processes of demographic change and community development in the larger context of the local economy. One way of understanding the history of Lowell is to view it through the lens of industry.

The story of Lowell's Irish is simultaneously the story of Lowell's industrialization and urbanization brought about by nineteenth-century capitalist expansion and economic growth. The mills served as the context of life in Lowell for more than a century. With the mills came the rationales for initial settlement, continuing cycles of demographic growth and change, class and ethnic conflict, and expanded public education. Without considering the context of the mills, Irish community development in Lowell loses much of its meaning.

Similarly, it is impossible to understand why Cambodians came to Lowell in such large numbers in the 1980s without analyzing the city's economic revitalization. Central to the city's rebirth was the decision of An Wang, a Chinese immigrant and chairman of Wang Laboratories, Inc., to relocate his company to Lowell in 1976. Wang purchased cheap industrial land and, with the added incentive of \$5 million in federal grants, built new electronics assembly plants and corporate office towers. The timing of the move coincided with Wang's takeoff as a company. Corporate sales rose from \$97 million in 1977 to \$2.88 billion in 1986, making Wang the largest employer in Lowell. Its 1986 payroll of \$114 million infused the city with a significant new economic base.²⁶

Cambodians flocked to Lowell because of the promise of jobs. However, concentrated, like the Irish, in entry-level assembly work, they remained vulnerable to shifts in the local and regional economies. Beginning in 1988, Wang Laboratories has faced steady and severe economic difficulties, leading to layoffs of thousands of

employees, drops in quarterly earnings and stock prices, and resignations of many managers, including An Wang's son, Frederick. Following An Wang's death in April 1990, the company's fortunes continued to deteriorate. Between 1988 and 1992, Wang's work force declined from 31,500 to 8,000. Facing estimated losses of nearly \$140 million in fiscal year 1992, Wang Laboratories filed for Chapter 11 bankruptcy in August 1992.²⁷

With Wang's decline and the Massachusetts recession entering its fifth year, economic scapegoating of the Cambodians, like that of the Irish during the depression years of the late 1830s, has continued. Drastic cuts in school budgets and social services have coincided with increased unemployment, homelessness, small-business closings, and youth gang and drug activity among Cambodians in Lowell. Cambodian community leaders have also observed patterns of migration out of Lowell with as much as 15 percent of the population seeking a better living elsewhere. For those who have stayed, however, community development remains an urgent challenge.

Ethnicity, Race, and the Role of Electoral Politics

Lowell is a city of 100,000 residents, but only 40,000 voters. The overwhelming majority of Southeast Asians and Latinos are not registered, and many are not citizens. Numerically, however, they account for roughly 45 percent of the city's population, and their numbers are continuing to grow. Successful candidates in Lowell elections typically receive fewer than 10,000 votes. George Kouloheras, the top vote getter in the 1987 school committee race, for example, received only 8,400 votes. Although not a factor in the most recent election, the political potential of both the Latino and Cambodian vote seems exceptional in this context.

It is useful to remember that in 1854, when the city's population was nearly one-third foreign-born, the mayor was elected on the basis of a "Know-Nothing" anti-Irish, anti-immigrant platform. Later waves of European newcomers continued to face resentment, exclusion, and exploitation characteristic of the immigrant experience in New England.

Yet, eventually, each group achieved some measure of representation and political power. As early as 1874, with immigrants nearly 40 percent of the population, Samuel P. Marin became the first French-Canadian to win elected office in Lowell. Under his leadership, the ethnic "Little Canada" community grew and thrived. By the 1950s, most of Lowell's ethnic groups, including the English, Irish, Greeks, and Poles, had succeeded in electing their "favorite sons" to the mayor's office and had won basic political representation within the city.

Will the newest immigrant groups of Latinos and Southeast Asians follow this same historical pattern of European ethnics' structural assimilation into the social, economic, and political mainstream of Lowell? Or alternatively, does the current state of disenfranchisement confronting Latinos and Asians reflect their nonwhite status in the tradition of the African-American experience as much as it does their being recent immigrants?

Lowell's African-American population, according to the 1990 U.S. census, comprised less than 3 percent of the city's population. Prior to the dramatic influx of Latinos and Southeast Asians to Lowell, the city was ethnically diverse but racially

homogeneous. Noting the implications of this reality during the 1987 parents' struggle with the school committee, a Latina member of the city's Human Rights Commission Planning Committee observed: "People in Lowell talk about it being an ethnic city, but they only embrace that and endorse that as long as they are white."²⁸ A Lao community leader involved with the parents' struggle echoed: "When they say 'Americans,' they don't mean us. Look at our eyes and our skin. We are minorities, but we have rights, too. We need to support each other."²⁹

Further analysis and development of strategies for Cambodian community development will need not only to consider scenarios based on lessons from the Irish case, but also how the dimensions of race and racism shape Cambodian experiences and status within the structure of the city's social, economic, and political institutions.

As a case study illustrating the contemporary challenge of changing demographics and community development, the story of Lowell is unresolved. By drawing from an earlier case of changing demographics involving the historic development of Lowell's Irish Catholic community, some important conceptual perspectives can be identified, which help to frame analyses of current and future developments in the city. Specifically, the historical example of mid-nineteenth-century Irish community formation suggests the significance of religious institutions and the role of middle-class entrepreneurs in the process of community development.

Schools have historically served as sites of struggle by immigrants and communities of color for access, equity, and democratic reforms. Schooling and school committee policy represented critical issues for Lowell's Irish throughout the 1800s. Similarly, for contemporary generations of immigrant and refugee parents who have sacrificed their own lives and dreams in order to give their children opportunities for security and social mobility, the schools typically represent their single most important investment in this country.

Historically and currently, as cities have undergone dramatic shifts in their demographic makeup, the schools have quickly emerged as one major arena, and often as the initial battleground, where contradictory agendas unfold based on conflicting relations and responses to the population changes. Anti-immigrant sentiment, racial harassment, and English-only advocacy characterize one set of responses to the challenge of changing demographics currently facing Lowell as well as many other American cities. These reactions, framed by struggles over turf and the interests of a shifting electorate, often lead to divisiveness and segregation as in the case of the Lowell public schools, and even violence and tragedy as in the killing of thirteen-year-old Vandy Phornng.

Like the rise and fall of the Know-Nothing party in relation to the growing political presence of Irish in Lowell during the 1850s, efforts by Lowell's Latino and Southeast Asian communities to gain access and equity for their children in the schools have met with resistance, if not overt hostility, and have led directly to their demands for political representation and political power.

Lowell's political dynamics, however, are fluid and volatile. With the Massachusetts economy in the midst of deep recession and companies like Wang Laboratories, the foundation of Lowell's economic infrastructure, having declared bankruptcy, social conditions are becoming more polarized. As was the case with

Lowell's Irish, it is crucial to ground the dynamics of social and demographic change within the larger economic context of the city.

The structural changes caused by industrialization and urbanization in Lowell during the 1800s, according to historian Thomas Bender, were reflected in changing cultural paradigms and ideals about society and social relations. Bender suggests that as the famine Irish poured into Lowell's factories, the ideas and ideals of Lowell's residents lost their agrarian roots and were transformed into an increasingly urban vision.³⁰

Ironically, with the influx of Cambodians during the 1980s, the city of Lowell may have, for the first time since the mills opened, a growing number of its residents who can claim peasant roots and agrarian visions. In time, Cambodians, who represent the largest minority group in the city with a population approaching 20 percent of the total, will have an especially critical role to play in determining the future of Lowell. Their efforts at community development, including contention over school policy and issues of educational reform, will continue to prove critical to that historic process. ❧

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Notes

1. Puerto Ricans, along with some Dominicans, comprise the majority of the Latino population; Cambodians comprise the majority of the Southeast Asian population, although there are some Lao and Vietnamese.
2. I thank Joel Perlmann for his comment on an earlier draft of this article.
3. Marc Scott Miller, *The Irony of Victory: World War II and Lowell, Massachusetts* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1988), viii.
4. This section is adapted from Peter Nien-chu Kiang, "Southeast Asian Parent Empowerment: The Challenge of Changing Demographics in Lowell, Massachusetts," Monograph No. 1, Massachusetts Association for Bilingual Education, 1990.
5. Kevin Cullen, "Lowell: The Dark Side of the Boom," *Boston Globe*, October 25, 1987. For autobiographical recollections of life among the early mill girls, including a section on education, see Harriet H. Robinson, *Loom and Spindle* (Kailua, Hawaii: Press Pacifica, 1976). See also Thomas Dublin, *Women at Work: The Transformation of Work and Community in Lowell, Massachusetts, 1826-1860* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1979).
6. Cullen, "Lowell."
7. Thomas Bender, *Toward an Urban Vision: Ideas and Institutions in Nineteenth-Century America* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1975), 42.
8. For further descriptions, see *ibid.* or Brian C. Mitchell, *The Paddy Camps: The Irish of Lowell, 1821-1861* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1988).
9. Mitchell, *The Paddy Camps*, 56.
10. Bender, *Toward an Urban Vision*, 107.
11. Mitchell, *The Paddy Camps*, 134-135.
12. *Ibid.*, 114-116.
13. *Ibid.*, 49.

14. *Ibid.*, 49–53.
15. However, the agreement never enabled large numbers of Irish to attend Lowell High School. See Bender, *Toward an Urban Vision*, 123–126, for more discussion of Irish enrollments and high school attendance.
16. *Ibid.*, 123.
17. Mitchell, *The Paddy Camps*, 142.
18. The 1990 U.S. census, criticized for undercounting immigrants and people of color in urban areas, counted 10,499 Hispanics in Lowell out of a total population of 103,438.
19. Diego Ribadeneira, “School Panelist in Lowell Accused of Racism,” *Boston Globe*, May 8, 1987, and Nancy Costello, “Kouloheras Sparks Racial Clash at Meeting,” *Lowell Sun*, May 7, 1987.
20. The legal precedents came from the 1964 Civil Rights Act and the Equal Educational Opportunities Act of 1974.
21. Doris Sue Wong, “Lowell Is Seen Not Fulfilling Its Promise for Many Asians, Hispanics,” *Boston Globe*, November 3, 1987.
22. Jules Crittendon, “English Referendum Passes Nearly 3 to 1,” *Lowell Sun*, November 8, 1989.
23. Camilo Pérez-Bustillo, “What Happens When English-Only Comes to Town? A Case Study of Lowell, Massachusetts,” in James Crawford, ed., *Language Loyalties: A Sourcebook on the Official English Controversy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 194–201.
24. Mitchell, *The Paddy Camps*, 40–41.
25. For a provocative discussion of immigrant leadership, see Victor R. Greene, *American Immigrant Leaders, 1800–1910* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987).
26. John Wilke, “Wang Had Key Role in Lowell’s Economic Revival,” *Boston Globe*, November 9, 1987.
27. Jonathan Yenkin, “Wang Says ‘92 Loss May Get Worse,” *Boston Globe*, September 25, 1992.
28. Wong, “Lowell Is Not Fulfilling Promise.”
29. Interview with Sommanee Bounphasaysonh, June 11, 1987.
30. Bender, *Toward an Urban Vision*, 71–92.