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People in Economics

Debunking Myths

Chris Wellisz profiles Princeton's **Leah Platt Boustan**, who uses ancestry data to test commonly held beliefs

LONG BEFORE SHE BECAME AN ECONOMIC HISTORIAN, Leah Platt Boustan's family lore shaped her beliefs about immigration. When she was in high school, she flew from Boston to Chicago with her father to interview her great-uncle Joe about the family's roots. Their interest in genealogy was spurred by the film director Stephen Spielberg's interviews with Holocaust survivors in the mid-1990s.

Leah and her father set up a camcorder on a tripod and listened to her great-uncle describe how his father, who immigrated to the United States from Russia in 1891, got his start selling goods from a pushcart and eventually opened his own store. Uncle Joe, the youngest of eight children, became a lawyer, fulfilling the American dream of upward mobility.

The story reinforced Boustan's initial view that, once upon a time, immigrant families quickly climbed the socioeconomic ladder, but that progress is much slower for today's immigrants. Yet when she and eventual collaborator Ran Abramitzky started analyzing decades of US census data to trace the fortunes of immigrant families across generations, they realized that the children of recent arrivals from Guatemala or Nigeria do just as well as those who came from Italy, Norway, or Russia in the 19th century.

"The biggest surprise for me was when we were looking at the children of immigrants today and the children of immigrants 100 years ago," says Boustan, a professor of economics at Princeton University. "I had a prior belief, which turned out not to be true in the data, that it was harder today for the children of immigrants."

Boustan and research partner Ran Abramitzky developed computer algorithms that linked census data across generations, making it possible to study the fortunes of immigrants' children and grandchildren.

Challenging assumptions

It was just one of the commonly held beliefs that animate the often-angry public debate about immigration policy in the United States. In a dozen papers spanning more than a decade, Boustan and Abramitzky, who teaches economics at Stanford University, challenged several assumptions about immigration in America: that today's immigrants take jobs away from native-born Americans, for example, or that they don't assimilate as quickly as they did in the past.

Those were academic studies aimed at fellow economists. But when the immigration debate reached a fever pitch during and after the 2016 US presidential election campaign, Abramitzky and Boustan decided it was time to address a broader audience.

"Ran and I started talking to each other at that point and said, 'Maybe what we're working on does have something to say about the modern conversation,'" Boustan says. That was the genesis of their 2022 book, *Streets of Gold: America's Untold Story of Immigrant Success*. The book, written in lively, jargon-free prose, was widely reviewed in the academic and popular press.

Boustan's interest in economic history began as an undergraduate at Princeton, where her junior and senior year thesis advisor was Henry Farber, a leading labor economist. Farber introduced her to the National Longitudinal Surveys of Youth, which follow a group of young people as they progress through their working lives. Meanwhile, in an urban history class, she learned about the mass migration of Black Americans from the rural South to northern cities in the 20th century.

Outside of classes, she honed her writing and editing skills at Princeton's alternative undergraduate publication, *Nassau Weekly*, where she became coeditor-in-chief. Her interest in social issues sprang from a year spent after college working at the *American Prospect*, a public policy magazine whose founders included Robert Reich, labor secretary under President Bill Clinton, and Paul Starr, a professor of sociology at Princeton.

Deciding against a career in journal-

ism, Boustan instead took advantage of a National Science Foundation Graduate Research Fellowship to pursue a doctorate in economics. On Farber's advice, she chose to study at Harvard University under Claudia Goldin, who later won the Nobel Prize in economics for her work on the role of women in labor markets.

Black migration, white flight

Boustan's PhD thesis, "Black Migration, White Flight: The Effect of Black Migration on Northern Cities and Labor Markets," was the starting point for much of her later work. In it, she examined the connection between Black migration and the movement of white residents of northern cities to the suburbs that sprang up in the decades following World War II.

Goldin remembers Boustan as a student with well-defined goals who also appreciated the wonders of intellectual exploration. Boustan's key contribution to the field? "It's the sense in her work that migration is an extremely important part of an economy's growth," Goldin says. The vagaries of policy or technology can leave people stranded in places where they may not be the most productive—such as former slaves in the rural South or Europe's poor. "The greatest change is simply moving from one place to another," Goldin says.

In her first published paper, Boustan shifted from migration to immigration. The paper looked at the interplay between religious persecution and opportunities for a better life in the US in prompting the immigration of some 1.5 million Russian Jews in the decades before World War I. That paper was published in 2007, about the time she met Abramitzky.

Abramitzky, an Israeli citizen, had come to the US to pursue a PhD in economics at Northwestern University. One focus of his work was the kibbutz, a community where property is held in common. Abramitzky used fine-grained census data to study why some people chose to leave the kibbutz, giving up their share of the common property to take their chances in the market economy, while others opted to remain.

They were both assistant professors, she at the University of California, Los Angeles, and he at Stanford. She had received the 2006 Economic History Association prize for best dissertation in American history; he had received the prize for best dissertation in non-US history. They met while strolling near a koi pond at the Huntington Botanical Gardens in San Marino, California, during a conference of California-based economic historians and soon became engrossed in conversation.

The talk turned to the potential of big datasets as a tool of analysis on a larger scale than that of the kibbutz. "I said, You know what would be really cool?" Boustan recalls. "What if we could do these kinds of really detailed studies, but for the age of mass migration from Europe to the US?" That idea eventually spawned their first joint article, "Europe's Tired, Poor, Huddled Masses: Self-Selection and Economic Outcomes in the Age of Mass Migration," published in 2012.

Meanwhile, she continued to work on Black migration. Her first book, *Competition in the Promised Land: Black Migrants in Northern Cities and Labor Markets*, was published in 2017. It showed that while Blacks who moved north benefited from higher wages, their northern-born peers faced greater competition for the limited pool of jobs then available to Black workers.

Intellectual partnership

At the same time, her partnership with Abramitzky blossomed. "It's hard to talk about the trajectory of my career without talking about collaboration with Ran," she says. "Everything we've been doing academically, we do together."

"We have huge respect and trust in each other," Abramitzky says. "Some collaborations are just, 'This person can write the model, that person can do the data work.' We are not like that. We are thinking about the world quite similarly."

A priceless source of data for their research on immigration to the US was Ancestry.com, a popular genealogy website. They developed computer algorithms that linked census data across generations, making it possible to study

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Abramitzky recalls getting a phone call from a lawyer for Ancestry.com who said, jokingly, “You must have a big family over there in Palo Alto.” Abramitzky explained that he and Boustan were using the site for academic research, “and since then they became real partners.”

They bring the data to life with the stories of immigrant experience gleaned from thousands of interviews compiled by the Ellis Island Oral History Project and conducted their own surveys. “Each immigrant is a story, but we can aggregate this story by looking up many, many, many immigrant families,” Abramitzky says.

Boustan even interviewed her father, much as she had interviewed her great-uncle Joe when she was a high school student in suburban Boston. “I almost felt like the torch had been passed,” she says. “It seems like it’s part of the family legacy to try to preserve these stories from the past.”

Upward mobility

That interview confirmed her finding that the first generation of immigrants generally does no better economically than native-born peers, so that the rags-to-riches myth is just that—a myth. Instead, upward mobility is more incremental both today and in the past. It is the second-generation immigrants who close the earnings gap with native-born Americans.

Another myth that Abramitzky and Boustan debunk is that today’s immigrants don’t integrate as quickly as before. Instead, they find that immigrants today try just as hard to embrace American culture. They learn English

just as quickly, are just as likely to leave immigrant residential enclaves, and are even more likely to marry a member of another national or ethnic group.

Perhaps their most counterintuitive conclusion is that immigrant success doesn’t come at the expense of native-born Americans. To be sure, some workers who do the same jobs as immigrants face greater competition (often they are themselves recent immigrants). But for the most part, immigrants don’t compete for the same jobs and instead concentrate on work that doesn’t require English-language proficiency, such as landscaping or construction, while native-born workers fill jobs that require communicating with customers.

“Low-skilled workers may not be substitutes for the high-skilled,” Boustan says. “They could be complements. Think about a restaurant. The low-skilled could be the dishwashers; the high-skilled could be the waiters.”

Eventually, immigrants may start businesses of their own—a restaurant, say, or a medical practice—creating jobs for others. And immigrants often provide services such as cooking, cleaning, or childcare, which frees up time for native-born Americans and helps them become more productive at their own jobs.

The long view

When it comes to immigration policy, Boustan and Abramitzky say that their research supports taking a long view: If Americans are willing to accept that immigrant success will come over time, there is no need to preselect immigrants based on skills or education, as countries such as Australia and Canada do.

Reihan Salam, president of the right-leaning Manhattan Institute, takes issue with that view. “I think that they wrote a terrific book,” says Salam, the author of *Melting Pot or Civil War? A Son of Immigrants Makes the Case Against Open Borders*, published in 2018. “And I think I don’t really disagree with that much of it. What I found not necessarily convincing is that there is massive demand for low-skilled migration.”

Salam favors a more selective immigration policy, saying it helps make the economy more productive while avoiding some of the short-term social frictions and fiscal costs associated with low-skilled immigrants, who may need subsidized housing or health care.

Over the years, Abramitzky and Boustan have moved on with their careers and family lives. He is now senior associate dean of the social sciences at Stanford. His wife, Noya, is an educator who ran the local Hebrew school. Boustan is director of the Industrial Relations Section at Princeton. She is married to Ra’anana Boustan, a research scholar in the Program in Judaic Studies at Princeton. Both couples have three children. As they grew busier with administrative and family duties, they brought in more graduate students to help with research.

Their next project? Immigration to Europe, which has spurred a rightward shift in politics there. It’s a vast undertaking. “We have 37 coauthors,” Boustan laughs. “I feel like I’m becoming like a company manager or something.” **F&D**

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