Does Ethnicity Matter for European Americans?

Interpreting Ethnic Identity in the Post-Civil Rights Era

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It is not surprising that sociologists have entered into a sustained debate over whether or not a process of straight-line assimilation is underway among European ethnics, or, to use the phrase of Richard Alba (1981), whether these groups are experiencing the "twilight of ethnicity." In a long series of books and articles beginning in the immediate aftermath of the civil rights movement, Andrew Greeley (e.g., 1974; 1975; 1988; Greeley and McCready, 1975; Greeley, et al., 1980) has challenged this conclusion, arguing that ethnicity continues to shape people's values and behaviors.

Greeley's work is meant to be a challenge to those who see a fading role for ethnicity among the third and subsequent generational offspring of European immigrants. A wide range of attitudinal and behavioral topics are explored in Greeley's research. These include such personality attributes as conformism, anxiety, authoritarianism, moralism, and trust. Attitudes regarding such diverse topics as families and children, politics, race relations, and religion are also explored. Similarly, behaviors investigated include such diverse matters as political participation and drinking patterns. In addition, he looks at ethnic differences in educational attainment and socioeconomic mobility. Throughout this ongoing research agenda, one recurring question is constantly posed: Does ethnicity matter?

Despite the mixed findings that emerge from his research, Greeley (1974:319) argues that ethnicity does matter, though he qualifies his answer: "to some extent some dimensions of the ethnic culture do indeed survive and enable us to predict some aspects of the behavior of the children, grandchildren, and great grandchildren of immigrants." He goes on to suggest, though with little empirical support, that people tend to look to the ethnic community in establishing a variety of interpersonal attachments, including marital partners, close friends, recreational partners, and informal associates (Greeley, 1974:306–307). Unfortunately, he proceeds with virtually no attention paid to the particular historical experiences of specific groups. He fails to locate ethnic identity in either social structural or historical contexts.

During the second half of the twentieth century the institutional network of most European American ethnic communities eroded considerably. Mutual aid societies, athletic clubs, cultural organizations, and the like all witnessed a decline in membership. The immigrant generation died off and their children and grandchildren chose not to follow in their footsteps, because they did not need these institu-

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tions to assist them in their quest for economic security, a political voice, or enhanced status. Foreign language newspapers shut their doors forever as native-born ethnics no longer maintained what Joshua Fishman (1966) termed "language loyalty."

The Debate Over an Ethnic Revival

In contrast to the continuity of ethnicity perspective, which derived not only from the work of sociologists like Greeley, but also gained popular expression during the early 1970s in the writing of Michael Novak (1971), who spoke about what he referred to as "unmeltable ethnics," a different argument suggested that there was a contemporary resurgence of interest in ethnic identity. It presumably involved a return to various modes of ethnic affiliation — or in other words, it suggested that an ethnic revival was underway in the United States.

Actually, there are two different, though not necessarily mutually exclusive, versions of the ethnic revival theory. One focuses on the dynamics of generational change and is essentially psychological, while the other is political. The generational theory received its initial formulation by historian Marcus Lee Hansen (1990[1938]:195), summarized with the pithy claim that "what the son wishes to forget the grandson wishes to remember." (We can assume that Hansen also had in mind daughters and granddaughters, but he was insensitive to gender issues.) Hansen's "principle of third generation interest" was based on his understanding of the social psychology of second and third generation ethnics. Whereas the former were seen as insecure about their place in America, and therefore sought to abandon their ethnic past in order to fit into the society outside of the ethnic world, the third generation was at home in America. Their secure status made possible a curiosity about and a pride in their ancestry.

If Hansen is read literally, the evidence overwhelmingly suggests that his hypothesis is incorrect (Appel, 1961; Nahirny and Fishman, 1962; Lazerwitz and Rowitz 1964; Abramson, 1975; Greene, 1990). However, if freed from its generational formulation, Hansen's thesis suggests that ethnicity must be treated as a flexible and variable phenomenon. This general perspective could be used to account for the growth of ethnic celebrations, genealogical interests, travel to the ancestral homeland, and interest in ethnic artifacts, ethnic cuisine, ethnic language and literature, and the dramatic expansion of interest in ethnicity on the part of scholars from a variety of disciplines (TeSelle, 1973; Tricarico, 1985, 1989; Archdeacon, 1985; Fishman, et al. 1985). While these manifestations of ethnicity must be accounted for, it is difficult to determine with precision the extent to which what amounts to a voluntary interest in one's ethnic background has permeated large sectors of European America. In fact, it would appear that this voluntary ethnicity is limited to a rather small sector, generally composed of the more highly educated members of the middle class.

To appreciate the limits inherent in this ethnic revival, it is helpful to compare the advocates of this return to ethnicity with various ethnic revivals in other parts of the advanced industrial world. According to Anthony Smith (1981:156), what is distinctive about the United States that makes this ethnic revival weak and politically ineffectual is the "lack of an autonomist, let alone separatist, nationalist component of the ideology of 'neo-ethnicity'." Simply put, this revival in the

United States was not linked to land—it entails no territorial claims (Rothschild, 1981; Nagel and Olzak, 1982; Nielsen, 1985).

This is not to suggest that a more political, interest-based form of resurgent ethnicity did not occur at approximately the same time as this more apolitical, nostalgic form of ethnic return. Nathan Glazer and Daniel P. Moynihan, in their seminal work Beyond the Melting Pot (1963), considered the five major groups in New York City that they scrutinized, including three European-origin groups — Jews, Italians, and Irish — as constituting in effect political interest groups, vying competitively in the political arena for their own piece of the pie. While they do not highlight this in their work, this emergent ethnicity was closely connected to racial politics, especially in major American cities with large black populations (Weed, 1971; Yancey, et al., 1976; Polenberg, 1980).

In a study of Italians and Irish in Providence, Rhode Island during the height of the civil rights movement, John Goering (1971) discerned a reemergence of ethnic identification. It was a conservative defense against perceived challenges to their neighborhoods and jobs expressed by working class and lower middle class urban ethnics, those who had not made it out of the ethnic enclave. Similarly, Jonathan Rieder's (1985) ethnography of the Jews and Italians in the Canarsie section of Brooklyn provides a vivid account of the way in which these two ethnic groups, different in history and politics, managed to find common ground in their collective quest to protect their neighborhood. They were united by a fear that their neighborhood was vulnerable to the pathologies of the ghetto (crime, drugs, teen pregnancies, and a general decline in civic responsibility) brought about by the incursion of blacks and Hispanics into a predominantly white section of the borough. Both ethnic groups, although expressed in different ways, viewed affluent liberals as being unconcerned or outright hostile to them. Though these white ethnics were an important component of the liberal coalition that made up the Democratic party since the New Deal, they have shifted to embrace conservatism. While Rieder provides ample evidence of the racism that characterizes the thinking of many of these white ethnics, including some violent and other unpleasant acts on the part of a very small minority, he also indicates that the obvious discontent and anxiety they feel about their future is not entirely unfounded.

It should be noted that what is at stake here is not Italians and Jews returning to their ethnic roots, but European ethnics finding common cause against changes in the city that, to their mind, have come about because of the increased proximity of non-European ethnics. If, at a earlier time in the century, Italians entered into conflictual relations with Jews, Irish, or other European ethnics, today such conflicts have either disappeared or have become inconsequential in the face of forces which have produced or reinforced racial tensions and hostilities. Ethnicity has not disappeared for these European Americans, as the earlier assimilationists predicted. But neither has it exhibited an ability to resist change.

A useful way of accounting for both the indicators of the persistence of various manifestations of ethnicity and its simultaneous more pervasive gradual decline is via the theory of "symbolic ethnicity." This concept was formulated by Herbert Gans (1979), and is seen as applicable to ethnics from the third generation and beyond. Ethnicity for

most European Americans is seen by him as having a low level of intensity, occupying an individual's attention only sporadically. The decline in ethnic organizations and cultures does not make possible more substantive manifestations of ethnic identity or affiliation. Rather than relying on community or culture, the third generation and beyond makes use of symbols, doing so primarily out of a sense of nostalgia for the traditions of the immigrant generation.

Stanley Lieberson and Mary C. Waters (1988) have mined census data, and their findings provide general support for this thesis. For example, though differences persist regarding the spatial distribution of groups, in part predicated on length of time in the country, the trend is for all groups to spread out across all regions of the United States over time. Conceding that census data are not the most useful for considering cultural issues, nonetheless they found that in terms of three culturallyshaped issues — fertility, marriage rates, and educational attainment — a clear convergence has occurred or is underway. While some differences remain in the propensity to marry, these differences are fading. For both fertility patterns and educational attainment, no statistically significant differences were observed across groups. Similarly, "for the most part socioeconomic inequalities among white ethnic groups are both relatively minor and unrelated to patterns of ethnic inequality found earlier in the century" (Lieberson and Waters, 1988:155).

Finally, Lieberson and Waters (1985, 1988) conclude that there is a trend toward increased intermarriage with other European Americans, seen especially among younger cohorts, and involving both ethnic groups from northwestern Europe as well as those from South Central Europe. This conclusion finds support in the work of Richard Alba (1985), also utilizing data from the 1980 census. He found intermarriage among native-born nonHispanic whites to be widespread. Alba (1985:17) notes one irony in this trend, namely that as people acquire ever-more complicated mixed ancestries, multiple ancestry actually "increases the probability of sharing some common ancestry with a spouse."

But what are the implications of these trends for ethnic identity? Do they support Gans's symbolic ethnicity thesis? There are no simple answers to these questions. Rather, there is evidence of a considerable amount of flux in terms of ethnic identification (Lieberson and Waters, 1986). For the 13.3 million respondents who identified their ancestry as "American" or "United States" in the 1980 census, national origins are either unknown, unimportant, or both. One's ethnic ancestry has no apparent relevance for current sociopolitical matters. These "unhyphenated whites" may constitute a new ethnic group that "is in the process of forming" (Lieberson, 1985:179).

Ethnic Options

However, most respondents did opt to identify with, by claiming ancestry in, one or more European ethnic groups. The census data do not reveal what this meant to these individuals. Was it merely a fact of birth that a person was, say, Irish and German, or did these identities mean something to the individual? Mary C. Waters (1990) set out to explore this via a series of indepth interviews with third and fourth generation ethnics in suburban Philadelphia and San Jose, California.

Her general conclusion is that, in fact, ethnicity does mean something for her subjects. She discerns in their attachment to ethnic identity a desire for a sense of community, while at the same time being intent on preserving a sense of individualism. Thus, their ethnicity takes on a voluntaristic cast. Taking part in a St. Patrick's Day parade or preparing ethnic dishes for holiday meals are examples of ways of connecting intermittently with an ethnic past without great outlays of time and energy. At the same time they pick and choose features of the ethnic tradition to valorize, while ignoring or abandoning others, such as a tradition that is sexist. Likewise, while the immigrant culture might have demanded that a women's role is in the home, a dual-career household composed of third or fourth generation ethnics will opt not to perpetuate the values that endorse that particular gender division of labor (Waters, 1990:168).

Waters (1990:155) concurs with Gans that this can be seen as symbolic ethnicity, which, she believes, "is not something that will easily or quickly disappear, while at the same time it does not need very much to sustain it. The choice itself — a community without cost and a specialness that comes to you just by virtue of being born — is a potent combination."

While her subjects made frequent use of ethnic distinctions, she noted that when asked to describe how the traditional values of their own ethnic group differed from others, respondents routinely argued, regardless of which group they were from, that their particular group placed a high premium on family, education, hard work, religiosity, and patriotism (Waters, 1990:134).

The general conclusions supporting the symbolic ethnicity thesis are further confirmed in a survey research project undertaken by Richard Alba (1990:65–69) in New York state's capital region. In his sample, two-thirds of respondents identified ethnically, and of this group only one-quarter said that ethnicity was very important to them, about two-fifths said it was somewhat important, while one-third attached no importance to it. The older immigrant groups (English, German, Dutch, and French) attached less importance to ethnicity than the newer immigrant groups, such as Italians and Poles. Alba found that women tended to attach greater importance to ethnicity than men (cf., di Leonardo, 1987). Moreover, among the largest category, namely those that attach some importance to their ethnic identity, there is a feeling that ethnicity must be consciously nurtured if it is to survive. In other words, they think that ethnicity is at risk of fading away into insignificance. Like Gans, Lieberson, and Waters, Alba does not conclude that ethic identity will entirely disappear for these white ethnics in the foreseeable future. Rather, he contends that as ethnic identity is severed from ethnic social structure, it increasingly becomes privatized, and (echoing Waters) as such resonates with American notions of individualism.

Thus, ethnicity for European Americans has not disappeared, but it is undergoing reformulation. Alba (1990) points to the possibility that what may be occurring is the emergence of a new ethnic group, which he refers to as the European American. Though Alba does not stress this, the manner in which many European Americans forge this panethnic identity is based on its conceptualization of other, non-European groups — on their understanding of "we" versus "them." Micaela di Leonardo

(1984:234) does make this connection when she writes of a symbolic ethnicity that makes use of "rhetorical nostalgia" in celebrating one's own past, while at the same time criticizing or denigrating other ethnic groups. Such nostalgia becomes a substitute for an appreciation of the differences in the historical experiences of various groups. For example, to argue, as so many European ethnics do, that their culture placed a high premium on close-knit families is to implicitly criticize groups such as African Americans because of the prevalence of singeparent households in that group. Similarly, the belief that one's ancestors imbued subsequent generations with a willingness to engage in hard work can be used as a way of blaming those groups who suffer from persistently high levels of unemployment and underemployment for their economic circumstances.

This approach fails to see, among other things, the historical impact of exclusionary hiring practices and the opposition of organized labor to inviting some groups into their ranks. Mary Waters (1990:147) detected a similar underside to symbolic ethnicity, and bluntly concluded that one of the reasons that "symbolic ethnicity persists [is] because of its ideological 'fit' with racist beliefs."

The Specter of Race

Public opinion polls capture something of the nature of changes that have transpired since Gunnar Myrdal conducted his research on American race relations. During the period when boundaries dividing different white ethnic groups have eroded considerably, what has happened to the color line? Changes in white racial attitudes since the 1940s are difficult to summarize both because the trends are not unambiguous and because different analysts can and do interpret changes in various ways.

In terms of the acceptance of general principles regarding discrimination and integration, there is rather clear evidence that a substantial majority of whites have come to endorse equality and integration in principle (Taylor, et al., 1978). For example, while 54 percent of whites in 1942 believed that blacks should be required to occupy separate sections on streetcars and buses, by 1970, 88 percent of whites disagreed with this stance. Subsequent public opinion polls have dropped this question, a reflection of the fact that the number of whites accepting integrated transportation systems was approaching 100 percent. The percent agreeing that whites and blacks should attend the same schools rose from 32 percent in 1942 to 90 percent by 1982. In the job arena, 97 percent of whites agreed that blacks should have the same chance as whites for any kind of job, a 52 percent increase from 1944 (Schuman, et al., 1985:72–79).

Questions about residential segregation suggest a more favorable attitude about open housing than in the 1940s, but the change is not as pronounced as in other areas. In part, this is due to the fact that this issue was often posed in terms of rights, including the right of whites to sell their homes to whomever they want. Given the importance attached to individual rights in America, it is not surprising that the rights of whites and the rights of blacks could come into conflict. Nevertheless, in a 1982 National Opinion Research Center (NORC) survey, 71 percent of whites either disagreed or disagreed strongly with the statement that whites have a right to keep blacks out of their neighborhoods if they want to (Schuman, et al., 1985:79–81).

When shifting to areas of intimacy in social relations, these principles are not as

overwhelmingly supported. For example, during the past decade 34 percent of white Americans agreed that there should be laws prohibiting interracial marriages. A majority of whites — 60 percent — disapprove of marriages between whites and nonwhites (Schuman, et al., 1985:75). Thus, what Robert Park long ago saw as the last major barrier to assimilation still remains in place.

Looking at the preferred kind of social contact with blacks, it is clear that in matters related to residential and school integration, whites are far more comfortable in situations with small numbers of blacks. This suggests that whites prefer to interact with blacks in a context in which whites are in the majority, and black interactants find themselves in a situation where they need to conform to white expectations and work at fitting in. While some analysts have concluded that this is an indication of persistent racism, it is a gross oversimplification to reduce this solely to racism. Issues related to social class also enter in, as whites manifest a greater willingness to interact with blacks from the same class background than with blacks from a lower class background than their own.

When turning from principles to ways of effecting change, or in other words, to questions related to implementation, whites are far more divided. In general, a majority of whites do not support a major role for the federal government in initiating policies to remedy problems such as school and residential segregation, inequitable treatment in the labor market, and related issues (Schuman, et al., 1985:86–104). In two areas-busing to achieve school integration and affirmative action policies — the pronounced split in white opinions have made these implementation practices highly charged political issues.

While public opinion surveys provide valuable data, there are limits to their utility. They fail to get at some of the complicated reasons that go into people's attitudes. Furthermore, attitudes do not necessarily translate into behaviors. For example, while 86 percent of whites in 1982 said they would vote for a black presidential candidate if he or she was qualified, in local and state races, whites have been far less willing than this figure suggests to cast their votes for black candidates. The reason for this reluctance is not easy to unravel. Is it because of latent racism or because the voters genuinely believe the black candidate is not as qualified as the white opponent? Is it due to disagreement over the candidate's platform and general political orientation?

Whites comprise a large majority of the nation's population, and as such are characterized by a great number of divisions. They cannot be seen in monolithic terms. The opinion polls reviewed above indicate, for example, the differences that persist between Southern whites and whites elsewhere in the nation, the former remaining more conservative in their racial attitudes than the latter. Similarly, more highly educated people have more liberal racial attitudes than those with less education.

Michael Omi and Howard Winant (1986) have pointed to a shift in the configuration of race relations since the 1960s. A conservative reaction not only to the civil rights movement but to the loss of the Vietnam War, the transformations brought about by the 1960s counterculture, as well as the growing stagnation of the American economy led to electoral victories first by Richard Nixon, and then, in 1980, by the most ideologically-motivated president of the century, Ronald Reagan. The backlash that was part of this shift to conservatism was frequently mo-

tivated by what can be seen as a politics of resentment. White ethnics, especially poor and working class whites, felt that they had been left behind by liberal politicians. The Reagan administration contended that the federal government did not have a legitimate role in promoting social change. It sought to roll back the government's role in matters related to racial and class inequality. However, as Omi and Winant (1986:113) write:

There were clear limits to any attempt to undo the effects of the "great transformation." In the aftermath of the 1960s, any effective challenge to the egalitarian ideals framed by the [civil rights movement] could no longer rely on the racism of the past. Racial equality had to be acknowledged as a desirable goal. But the meaning of equality, and the proper means for achieving it, remained matters of considerable debate.

Less sanguine than this assessment, Andrew Hacker's Two Nations (1992) contends that in the wake of the Black Power movement and the urban riots of the late 1960s and early 1970s, the white moral constituency that had supported the nonviolent civil rights movement eroded, giving way to a wall of anger and fear that came to characterize the new and tense post-civil rights era.

The combined impact of these recent studies lends considerable support to the position that as European Americans engage in the invention of a new, more expansive or pan-European ethnic identity, they do so by constructing ethnic boundaries predicated along racial lines. Future research should inquire into the ways in which such boundaries are being created, for their particular contours will serve to enable certain kinds of intergroup relations to occur, while constraining or limiting others. To answer the question posed by the title of this paper, it would appear that ethnicity does, indeed, matter. Moreover, it matters in ways not anticipated until recently.

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