“Ethnicity and Race”
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Introduction

The term "ethnicity" only gained widespread currency in the mid to late 20th century. Ethnic consciousness, for instance, became the label for the process by which an individual or community came to understand themselves as separate or different from others. Ethnicity has also commonly referred to the actual group consciousness that excluded or subordinated groups expressed. By extension, ethnicity could describe the language, the religion, the social rituals, and other patterns of behavior that were defined as the content of a group’s ethnic culture. Ethnic culture has also come to define the set of material objects that were uniquely utilized by a particular ethnic group, so that ethnic goods became synonymous with the people who were members of that group or who practiced that culture.

Ethnicity as a category of experience was the historical product of mass migrations in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. As an intellectual concept and a mode of social analysis, however, ethnicity was shaped by early 20th century reformulations of social theory, in particular the rise of the concept of culture as a way of understanding social life. The spread of theories emphasizing differences in cultural consciousness (as distinct from descriptions of social difference based upon theories about biological race) was coincidental with a political shift among many American intellectuals between the 1920s and 1940s towards what might be termed anti-racism. Ethnicity as a social theory repudiated attempts to use the physical body to explain differences between people. Ethnic theory, as a branch of cultural theory, was an argument against claims that social conflicts were fixed because they resulted from immutable physical differences. For instance, in explaining how European immigrants with distinct social practices (i.e., language or religion) interacted in the United States, ethnic theory both described the creation of social conflict and prescribed ways of overcoming such differences. Such prescriptions were then applied to the problems of racial discrimination and exclusion against African Americans, Asian Americans, and other people defined as non-white. However, at the same time that ethnicity as a theory offered hope for transcending race-based social hierarchies in American society, it also reformulated and reinforced a distinction between white and black in the United States, further exacerbating a false distinction between race as a physical trait and ethnicity as a cultural phenomenon.

Periodization of Intellectual Theories About Ethnicity

Ethnicity as both a lived experience and an intellectual concept has been profoundly shaped by the immigration history of the United States, which can be divided roughly into the period of open immigration before 1924, the era of immigration exclusion between 1924 and 1965, and the return to a more open immigration policy since 1965. The four decades of federal immigration exclusion between 1924 and 1965 were the aberration in U.S. history. At every other time, significant new migration to the nation has been the rule. Global labor migration and population displacement due to industrialization and colonization led to massive U.S. immigration in the late 19th and early 20th century. An estimated 35 million new immigrants came to the United States in the century before immigration was curtailed in 1924, with the majority of them in the decades surrounding the turn of the century. By the 1920s, American social scientists (some of whom were themselves either immigrants or children of immigrants) had created a body of theories defining “race” and “culture” that had grown out of this world of mass movement.
After the 1924 Johnson Act created restrictive national quotas that practically ended immigration from everywhere except northern and western Europe, a politically charged debate about the desirability of immigration slowly began to fade. Nativism, a xenophobic popular movement which united a coalition of earlier migrants to the United States against more contemporary immigrants, had created a category of so-called "native" or "old stock" Americans. Characteristics such as Protestant Christianity were meant to distinguish these "natives" from recent Catholic immigrants (Italian in this period much more than earlier migrations from Ireland), from Orthodox Christians from Southern and Eastern Europe, and from Jewish émigrés fleeing Eastern Europe and Russia. Language use was also used as a defining characteristic of a difference between "old stock" and "new," since few of the recent immigrants spoke English as a first language. By mid-century, nativism had been blunted by decades of exclusion. In the 1970s and 1980s, when the United States was re-opened to immigration, it was clear that the new groups of migrants and refugees were again from very different geographic origins than earlier waves; their visual appearance tied them to Asia, Latin America, Africa, and the Caribbean.

Theories about ethnicity throughout the 20th century served as both a description and prescription for social life in the United States. In the period before 1924, questions about whether recent immigrants could be incorporated into the nation were answered with the theory of cultural assimilation. In the era of immigration exclusion between 1924 and 1965, theoretical claims about the parallel between race and ethnicity were an attempt to address an intellectual and social crisis concerning race relations. By the 1940s and 1950s, the transformation into "white ethnics" of people earlier considered racially inferior was at its height. Liberal social thinkers hoped that this process of cultural assimilation, considered a success with European immigrants, could be extended to seemingly non-white racial groups such as "Negroes" and "Orientals." Since the resumption of mass immigration in 1965, theories about ethnicity have been dominated either by the development and application of earlier theories about ethnicity (in particular focusing on its transitory nature), or by theories about racial formation which challenge the primacy of ethnicity as a universal process and which often assert the intractable nature of racially defined social hierarchies. The problem of tying together race and ethnicity as unified social processes came to a crisis during this period, and debates over how to define ethnicity and ethnic consciousness have continued to the present.

At every stage, the increasing power of social science in the 20th century in defining, justifying, and implementing public policy and education carried these theories and debates into the realm of everyday American social life. Social scientists began to assert the need for scientific control of public policy during the era of Progressive reform between roughly 1890-1920, and achieved the height of influence and funding at mid-century. Even with a decline in the power of social scientists to define public policy during the end of the 20th century, the importance of social theorists in defining and justifying policy remains high.

The Rise of Cultural Theory as the Foundation for Ethnicity

The genealogy of ethnicity as a concept can be traced to theories in the 1920's about the phenomenon of cultural consciousness. Although the term ethnicity was not commonly used before the 1940s, the categories of social phenomena that it purported to name had already been created as analytical concepts. A spate of social scientific studies of immigration conducted in the first three decades of the 20th century provided the theoretical foundation for the concept of ethnicity. The most significant of these studies were associated with sociologists such as William I. Thomas and Robert E. Park at the
University of Chicago. Thomas and his Polish colleague Florian Znaniecki wrote perhaps the most significant study of immigration of the period, their multivolume *The Polish Peasant in Europe and America*. Charting the changes that migration to the United States had wrought in individuals and communities, Thomas and his colleague Park went on to write another study entitled *Old World Traits Transplanted* which surveyed a myriad of European immigrant groups. Both Park and Thomas were at the forefront of an attempt among sociologists and anthropologists to advance a new theory about social interaction that was based upon the concept of culture. In opposition to earlier theories about the importance of racial or biological characteristics in determining human behavior, cultural theories emphasized the centrality of consciousness, of the mental attitudes and forms of self-understanding that people communicated through writing, speech, and other media.

The centrality of the formation of group consciousness became a key to later definitions of both race and ethnicity, seemingly de-emphasizing the analytical importance of physical ancestry. For instance, in many of the immigrant studies, social scientists noted that migrants coming to the U.S. did not have a strong sense of community or group consciousness until they had lived in the U.S. for a significant period. A large factor in the formation of a group consciousness was their exclusion from the host society. Ironically, being lumped in together by so called nativists, who saw all Italians or all Armenians as a group to be kept out, helped reinforce a sense of solidarity within disparate groups who might not have felt much fellowship in their homeland. People who had very local ties to village or region in their place of origin, began to feel stronger affinities to others in the U.S. who were purportedly from the same national origin. Of course, this sense of commonality in the U.S. was not merely a response to nativism. National independence movements, newly formed networks of trade and sociality, the formation of geographic and linguistic enclaves, media such as immigrant newspapers, even a nostalgic sense of longing for the home country, also drew people together and created institutions and social practices unique to the United States. Thus, social scientists emphasized how arrival in the U.S. transformed modified or completely changed the social practices of migrants. The importance of ancestry was de-emphasized in favor of processes of group formation in the U.S.

One of the most important theories that Park and Thomas popularized concerned what they labeled cultural assimilation, the process by which two groups in contact communicated with each other and came to share common experiences, memories, and histories. Applied specifically to immigrants in the United States, the theory of assimilation promised that any migrant, no matter how different in language, or religion, or other social practices at the moment of landing, could learn to assimilate the cultural norms of other Americans. A progressive, inclusive vision of the United States, assimilation theory became the foundation for later arguments about the nature of ethnic consciousness.

Ethnicity versus Race

The conceptual split that defined race as a set of physical traits and culture as a form of consciousness is crucial for understanding later confusion about the difference between race and ethnicity. Race before the rise of the theory of culture was a much broader category, referring to a person’s ancestral stock and including all traits—physical and behavioral—associated with membership in that race. To be of the Irish race in the 19th century, for instance, meant that one’s ancestors hailed from Ireland, even if a person himself had never been to Ireland. Descriptions of Irish racial characteristics encompassed social practices as well as physical features, and less analytical importance was attributed to the differentiation between behavioral and physical traits. The spread of a theory of culture, however, created two mutually exclusive categories which were
analytically separate, with cultural traits utterly divorced from the workings of the physical body.

When anthropologists such as Franz Boas of Columbia University and sociologists and anthropologists from the University of Chicago began to teach students in the early 20th century that cultural characteristics were the most interesting social phenomena for study, they spread at the same time the idea that any attention to physical characteristics was intellectually inappropriate. Arguing against eugenics programs that sterilized men and women deemed unfit for reproduction, and attacking justifications for racial hierarchy based upon biology, social scientists used the theory of culture as a weapon against racial thinking. In particular, sociologists such as Robert Park shifted the definition of race away from actual physical characteristics to the awareness of these physical traits, and thus made race a matter of consciousness. Thinking that a group of people was racially different and thus should be treated badly was a matter of prejudicial thought and attitude, and anti-racism came to be defined as the elimination of such attitudes.

This shift of race from the physical to an awareness of the physical was crucial in creating a new category of analysis, what Robert Park labeled racial or cultural consciousness. If a collection of individuals were seen to be different, and they therefore came to understand themselves as different, then they could develop a group consciousness of themselves as a separate race or culture. The creation of the concept of cultural consciousness made possible the later definition of such categories as ethnic consciousness, self identity, and group identity. When W. Lloyd Warner, a prominent social scientist trained at Harvard and working at the University of Chicago, released between 1941 and 1959 a five-volume study called the "Yankee City" series, he helped popularize the term ethnicity and enshrine it as a category of social experience, but the intellectual shifts that created ethnicity as an analytical category had been put in place decades earlier. In a similar manner to ethnicity, identity (also a term not used by social scientists in the 1920s), was essentially a concept popularized in the 1950s by social psychologists such as Erik Erikson, but which commonly served as a label for the same processes by which self and group consciousness were formed.

The analytical power of cultural theories based upon consciousness resulted from their ability to tie together seemingly disparate phenomena under the same rubric. For instance, an emphasis upon consciousness of physical traits rather than the traits themselves explained racial passing (when light skinned children of people otherwise defined as black could pass as white). At the same time, cultural theory also described the formation of group consciousness as immigrants formed ethnic communities (when migrants who might not have considered themselves alike before coming to the U.S. came to see each other as compatriots, both because they were lumped in together by others and because of a new found sense of being from the same place elsewhere).

The subsuming of race under the broader category of ethnicity was a significant attempt at offering a solution to racial conflict. For instance, individuals whose skin color was dark enough to be considered non-white might be thought of as a different race, and thus treated as different. A group of "colored" people might then be formed, and come to have a consciousness of themselves as a separate community, with lives very different from those who were considered white. The possibility for a self-consciously "Negro culture" meant that such a racial culture was just one variety of a larger spectrum of cultures, each of them defined by the act of self-consciousness (both on the part of individuals who considered themselves a member of a group, and of the group as a whole considering themselves a separate community). As a matter of consciousness, the racial culture of Negro Americans was no different in kind than the ethnic culture of Polish Americans, and purely cultural processes of assimilation could eliminate the differences between
white and non-white. Robert Park was the primary theorist of this attempt to solve what was labeled the "Negro Problem" with the seemingly successful model of culturally assimilated European immigrants. Interestingly, the bridge for Park was Asian migrants on the West Coast. As a non-white racial group, Asian Americans were commonly understood as an "Oriental Problem" just as African Americans were seen to be a "Negro Problem." As immigrants, however, Asian Americans could provide an analytical example that tied racial difference to the predominantly white European migration that cultural assimilation theory analyzed. In a large scale research program in the 1920s and 1930s, Park and other sociologists from the University of Chicago attempted to prove that Chinese American and Japanese American immigrants were just as successful as European immigrants in assimilating the culture of older stock Americans. The reward for such a project was to tie race and ethnicity under the same rubric of cultural theory. Earlier definitions of race had counted a myriad of groups as racially different, from Irish to Jewish to Negro. Cultural theory redefined race to mean only those groups that could not by merely changing behavior lose themselves within a newly expanding category of white. African Americans and Asian Americans were thus the two most prominent groups that were now being defined as racially different in a new way.

Anti-racist theories often used ethnicity as an alternative term to escape the biological emphases of racial hierarchy. In Man's Most Dangerous Myth: The Fallacy of Race (1942), one of the most significant anti-racist books published in the 20th-century, anthropologist Ashley Montagu argued that race as a category of analysis should be dropped as a dangerous invention, and that "ethnic group" was a more neutral term. Ethnicity became synonymous with cultural difference, and any theory dependent upon physical characteristics was dismissed as racist. Similarly, the attempt by anthropologists such as Ruth Benedict to array all societies as a spectrum of different cultures, aided this flattening of all human distinction into a matter of cultural or ethnic difference. In her book Patterns of Culture (1934), Benedict advanced a model of cultural relativism that attacked the use of physical differences between bodies as an explanation for analyzing human societies. The possibilities for the elimination of racial prejudice (defined specifically as expression of conscious attitudes about a group of people considered racially different, even if the actual existence of physical race was an illusion) depended upon a very specific definition of race as a form of consciousness. Race was a myth because it had no basis in biology, yet race as a consciousness about the importance of a set of physical attributes could still exist. But because consciousness of race was claimed to be merely one form of ethnic consciousness, race and ethnicity were concepts both distinct and indistinct from each other.

There were chronic difficulties with the distinction between race and ethnicity. W. Lloyd Warner's categorization in the 1940's of the varieties of ethnic groups, a development of earlier sociological studies of immigrants, embodied the paradox inherent in this phenomenological conception of race and ethnicity. In the third volume of the Yankee City series, The Social Systems of American Ethnic Groups (1945), Warner and Leo Srole argued in a section on "The American Ethnic Group" for a difference between ethnicity and race. The host society which viewed racial and ethnic groups as different (Warner and Srole identified with this "Yankee" host society by using the term "we" to describe such tendencies), accepted some ethnic groups more easily than others. Class differences tended to fragment ethnic groups, and the class mobility of some members of ethnic groups was the major determinant of acceptance within the host society. Most difficult to accept, however, were those groups seen to be racially different. At the same time that Warner and Srole argued that group conflict was a matter of ethnic identification (in the sense that the host society viewed a group as different, and the group viewed themselves as different), they also assumed that there was some characteristic that set apart ethnic groups that were racially defined. Indeed, the consciousness of biological
differences that theoretically made a group only seem racially different was commonly analyzed as if the biological differences really did exist. Like many theorists of ethnicity, Warner and Srole were caught by the limitations of cultural theory. Ethnicity as a matter of culture offered the hope for cultural assimilation of all ethnic groups, but even if an awareness of racial difference was a matter of consciousness and therefore could be overcome through the processes of cultural change and exchange, the racial formations built around color hierarchy in the United States seemed intractable. If ethnicity was limited to cultural traits rather than what seemed like obvious physical differences, then race and ethnicity would have to be separate phenomena analytically. Ethnicity was a category in practice limited to those who could visually pass as white. Clarifying this distinction between ethnicity as white and race as nonwhite, Warner and Srole concluded at the end of The Social Systems of American Ethnic Groups that the: ‘future of American ethnic groups seems to be limited; it is likely that they will be quickly absorbed. When this happens one of the great epochs of American history will have ended and another, that of race, will begin’ (295)

Ethnicity and the Expansion of the Category of White

The sense that a great epoch of ethnicity was about to end at mid-century was a product of a crucial social transformation in the decades following immigration exclusion. The 20th century alchemy of race, as described recently by historian Matthew Jacobson, lay in how European immigrants defined at the beginning of the century as racially different came to be seen as white ethnics by the end of the century. The crucial period was the two decades following the 1924 exclusion acts. Along with the intellectual transformation wrought by cultural theory, popular writers such as Louis Adamic, who was himself of recent immigrant ancestry, pushed for an overcoming of the nativist divide between old and new Americans. In books such as From Many Lands (1939) and Nation of Nations (1944), Adamic reconceived the United States as a land of immigrants, subsuming what had earlier been major dividing lines such as religion and language by arguing that they were mere differences of ethnic culture. In the journal Common Ground, published in the 1940's by the Council of American Unity (which Adamic helped found), he stated what many liberal intellectuals were calling for at the time: "We need to work toward a synthesis of the old stock and the new immigrant America." (Common Ground, Autumn, 1940, 66). Organizations such as the National Council of Christians and Jews, founded in 1928, were creating the support for the unification of Protestants, Catholics, Orthodox Christians and Jews into a so-called Judeo-Christian tradition, and arguments for the end of religious discrimination became widespread, perhaps most visibly in 1950s Hollywood motion pictures such as The Ten Commandments (1956) and Ben-Hur (1959).

The focus upon the assimilation of religious differences, powerfully propelled by wartime propaganda against the genocidal science of Nazism, helped lessen anti-Semitism and anti-Catholicism in the 1940s. By the end of the 1950s, class mobility fueled by the post-war Montgomery G.I. Bill and federal subsidies of suburban housing had made Adamic's dream of an amalgamation of new and old seem viable. The effects of such programs of social engineering, however, were predominantly focused upon male Americans able to pass as white. Immigrants who had been treated in the period between 1890 and 1920 as racially different (Slavs, Jews, Southern Europeans such as Italians, Greeks, and Armenians) were now transformed into white ethnics, mere varieties of the so-called Caucasian race. The continuing problem of race and color that W. Lloyd Warner described was left firmly upon those who remained non-white, specifically those labeled Negroid or Mongoloid races. In fact, the lingering significance of color was one of the by-products of the successful amalgamation of "new stock" European immigrants into Caucasian whiteness. Just as dividing lines over religion, which had seemed intractable a generation before, were now reduced to mere denominational differences, all such
culturally defined elements of difference had disappeared into a generic whiteness marked only superficially by vestiges of ethnic culture.

The creation of the concept of a Caucasian race expanded the category of white, and extended the social and legal privileges of white supremacy to a host of immigrant families that had heretofore been excluded. Ironically, the civil rights movement of the 1950s helped reinforce this process of ethnic transformation. Jewish American intellectuals of the 1930s and 1940s (for instance prominent social scientist Louis Wirth, a German Jewish immigrant teaching at the University of Chicago and a member of the National Council of Christians and Jews), had been at the forefront of political coalitions with African Americans seeking civil rights. Similarities in discrimination and exclusion at work, and in the legal segregation of housing, of public facilities, and of social institutions, had drawn Jewish Americans and black Americans together to fight together for civil rights. However, paralleling the larger transformation of white ethnics, Jewish Americans by the end of the civil rights era in the 1970s had become solidly white, even if anti-Semitism remained in vestigial and virulent forms.

In many ways, the political and social process of civil rights helped reinforce the lumping together of formerly non-white ethnic groups into the larger pantheon of whiteness. The ways in which some of the popular rhetoric of civil rights struggle helped transform white ethnicity was clear in the effects of Gunnar Myrdal's landmark study *An American Dilemma*. Commissioned by the Carnegie Foundation as a comprehensive survey of American race relations, and heavily dependent upon research conducted into the Negro Problem by intellectuals associated with Robert Park at the University of Chicago (in particular prominent African American sociologists and writers such as Charles Johnson, E. Franklin Frazier, Horace Cayton, and St. Clair Drake), Myrdal's study argued that the racial problems of the United States were not caused by the existence of minority races, but by the prejudice and discrimination of white Americans. Labeling white supremacy as the dilemma that undermined the "American Creed" of equality, democracy, and justice, Myrdal's description of race relations helped galvanize popular support for civil rights. However, since arguments about the problem of race drew attention to the ways that white supremacy structured almost every moment of the daily lives of non-whites, one of the results was that the intellectual conception of a singular white America was further solidified. Ironically, the civil rights movement for blacks ended up helping amalgamate into this new conception of ethnic whiteness immigrant groups that previously had been the targets of racial nativism.

Ethnicity as the Historical Product of Migration

A key to the strategy for theoretically transforming ethnicity into a universal process was the redefinition of all Americans as migrants. Ironically, this redefinition occurred during the exclusion period between 1924 and 1965, when legal immigration to the U.S. was sharply curtailed. Becoming popular in the 1940s and 1950s with the writings of historians Marcus Lee Hansen and Oscar and Mary Handlin, this epic narrative of American history made every individual currently in the U.S. the historical product of the same universal cycle of departure and arrival. Ultimately a triumphant tale of progress, the difficulties suffered by immigrants in any given historical period were relegated to an initial period of adjustment to a new world. Handlin himself directed a number of graduate student dissertations at Harvard that expanded on this theme, and by the 1960s, a significant number of historians around the nation had focused on immigration as the central theme of U.S. history. As in the social scientific studies on immigrants decades earlier, these histories of immigration took European migration as the model, in particular what was labeled the "Great Migrations" of the late 19th century. Even if not all migrants had experienced similar adjustments, the epic story professed universal application. Each
migrant group created its own ethnic culture, distinct yet the product of the same general process of incorporation into the greater body of American society.

This narrative of U.S. history as a nation of immigrants has powerfully shaped scholarly and popular conceptions of American history. Even when scholars have attempted to move beyond its Eurocentric focus by comprehensively including non-Europeans into their studies (for instance in Andrew Greeley, 1974; Stephen Thernstrom, 1980; Thomas Sowell, 1981; Roger Daniels, 1990), they have only partially succeeded in extending to universal applicability the experience of immigration. Were Native Indians the first immigrants, having crossed the Bering Strait 30,000 years before in the same manner that the Mayflower crossed the Atlantic? Even more difficult to assimilate has been the forced migration of enslaved captives from Africa, sold against their will into a life of labor in the new world. Even counter-narratives of U.S. history that have focused upon non-European migration have often served to replicate the grand narrative of coming to America (for instance, historian Ronald Takaki's popular history of Asian American migration, Strangers From a Different Shore).

The Embrace of Ethnicity

Despite formidable intellectual problems in expanding the application of migration as a universal process, ethnicity as a description and as a prescription for social life in the U.S. has continued to be widespread. Indeed, the acceptance and eventual celebration of ethnic difference has been one of the most significant transitions during the 20th century. Coincidental with the increasing awareness of migration at the beginning of the century, the rise of a cosmopolitan appreciation of exotic difference was associated with intellectuals such as Randolph Bourne and Horace Kallen. Writing in the days before the First World War, a number of New York intelligentsia embraced the rich diversity of the city, forecasting that the eclectic mix of migrants from Europe, Asia, and the American South was the future of U.S. society. Bourne's vision of a "transnational America" and Kallen's description of "cultural pluralism" argued against the xenophobia of nativists, replacing it instead with a toleration and acceptance of the different.

The racially exotic were defined as valuable and positive contributions to American society. The consuming of the music and art of the Harlem Renaissance that flourished in the 1920s, along with periodic fads for Oriental art and so-called primitive tribal objects, reflected an elite white embrace of the exotic. As historian Jackson Lears has argued, American elites since the industrial age began in the late 19th century had searched in the mystical, mythic Orient and the simplicity of primitive savagery for answers to a growing sense of spiritual vacuum. (Lears) Both Orientalism and primitivism were outgrowths of a desire for the different that answered questions about an eroding self. Chinese and Japanese watercolors and vases were tastefully collected alongside African tribal carvings. In New York in particular, the travel of elite intellectuals into the exotic spaces of Harlem uptown and Chinatown and Little Italy downtown were the spatial embodiment of their desire to sample and experience the exotic. Their extolation of such exoticism in theories about the cosmopolitan self laid the groundwork for two major developments concerning ethnicity. The first was the theoretical foundation for the eventual commercialization of ethnic difference, and the second was the creation of a new definition of elite, enlightened whiteness.

As ethnic identity has proliferated through the 20th century, it has also increasingly become commodified as a commercial product. Beginning with the fascination with exotic art forms in modernism, but also embodied in the hunger for ethnic food and objects, a tasteful appreciation of the exotically different that began with cosmopolitan elites became part of an educational program to combat racism and ignorance that began
in the 1920s but only came to fruition in the 1960s. At the same time that education was being touted as the answer to race relations in the 1960s, ethnic music and other forms of exotic art and entertainment were offered at first as alternatives to the mass productions of popular culture, and by the 1990s had become an important commodity distributed and consumed in the market place.

Interestingly, the rise and spread of a cosmopolitan embrace of exotic difference helped expand the boundaries of whiteness. One of the ways in which those formerly excluded as racially or ethnically suspect could whiten was to reinforce a definition of themselves as a good white by embracing cosmopolitan ideas. Those who continued to express racist opinions became subsumed under the newly enlarged rubric of white racists (a category that strangely whitened former ethnics at the same time that it tarred them as ignorant, unenlightened bigots of the lower classes). The embrace of cosmopolitan ideals during the exclusion period was a way of becoming an elite, enlightened white. Whether it was black music or Chinese food, an appreciation of exotic difference served as one of the entries to a higher class status. The successful spread of the idea that ignorance of other cultures was a lower class phenomenon, and expertise about exotic cultures was a mark of elite status, was accomplished through an education system that began in the 1940s to widely distribute this outlook on ethnicity and class. As one of the key transformations in the creation of a process of white class mobility, aspirations toward enlightened, elite appreciation of cultural difference paralleled the ways in which higher education became associated with anti-racism. Occurring at precisely the moment that higher education expanded to include working class white ethnics, these lessons in the enlightened appreciation of cultural difference equated aspirations for class mobility with anti-racism.

The process by which ethnicity has been defined as a valuable object serves as the link between its creation as a scholarly object of interest and its transformation into a commercial object with value. When Stephen Thernstrom completed the Harvard Encyclopedia of Ethnic Groups in 1980, a project begun by immigration historian Oscar Handlin, the comprehensive tome epitomized the academic genre which collected and organized information about a vast array of ethnic cultures. Written for a learned audience from the point of view of the scholarly collector of knowledge concerning exotic cultural groups, the encyclopedia surveyed the rituals, religious beliefs, traditional costumes, and everyday social life of ethnic groups. Ethnicity was an object to be collected and consumed by enlightened readers. In the same way, cosmopolitan patterns of consumption created the ideal of a tasteful, enlightened consumer able to appreciate an array of objects marked by ethnic differences.

The commercialization of ethnicity also allowed those defined as being different to turn their exotic identification into an object with value. In music, for instance, musical styles such as rhythm and blues, rock and roll, soul, rap, and hip hop were marketed by an association with their black origins. By the 1970s, the commercialization of ethnicity also extended to those ethnics formerly the target of xenophobia but who were now comfortably white. White ethnics could continue to express cosmopolitan appreciation for the exoticism of non-whites, but they could now also embrace signs of their own ethnicity without fear of exclusion from the privileges of whiteness. White ethnicity was securely different from non-white racial ethnicity, and white ethnics drew upon a history as victims of discrimination in ways that both attenuated their own enjoyment of the privileges of being white at the same time that it consciously paralleled the historical suffering of non-whites.

By the end of the 20th century, objects associated with ethnicity enjoyed a popular boom as commercial goods. Ethnic objects that had assumed the status of collectible art (such as African tribal masks and Native totem poles); items of everyday use (such as Chinese
woks and chopsticks or Scottish tartan kilts); as well performances of identity which could be consumed (ethnic music and dance)--all were packaged as desirable objects of consumption. As the marketing of ethnicity has expanded, however, the seemingly universal embrace of ethnic culture has obscured the lingering legacies of social structures in determining social difference and hierarchy.

Structural Arguments Against Ethnicity as a Cultural Phenomenon

In the 1960s, theories such as sociologist Milton Gordon's description of "structural assimilation," moved social analyses away from their emphasis upon cultural assimilation and group identity. The work of Gordon and others addressed the inability of many Americans identified with ethnic and racial ancestry, no matter how culturally assimilated they behaved, to achieve entrance into exclusive social institutions (for instance country clubs or positions of power in corporate boardrooms). Gordon explained the tendency of organizations to reproduce themselves socially and to embrace as new members only those who were already socially tied to existing members. Social structures operated in ways that cultural theories describing ethnic identity could not adequately explain. Even if an outsider looked and behaved the same as someone already a part of an institution, the seeming "progress" of cultural assimilation did not align at all times with what Gordon now described as "social assimilation," the actual inclusion of new and diverse members in existing institutions.

Since Gordon’s explication of social assimilation in the early 1960’s, the state of thinking about processes of identity formation have been dominated either by the development and refinement of earlier theories about ethnicity as a process dominated by cultural consciousness and assimilation (for instance, the works of Herbert Gans and Nathan Glazer) or by theories about racial formation which challenge the primacy of ethnicity as a universal process (for instance, work on racial formation by Michael Omi and Howard Winant). Emphases such as Gordon's upon the actual diversification of social institutions provided intellectual justification for many women and racial minorities to insist that public policy legally challenge organizations that did not take positive steps to include members previously excluded.

Post-1965 Challenges to Ethnic Theory

As the demography of the U.S. changed dramatically with new post-1965 immigration, understandings of immigration changed. During the four decades after immigration exclusion, migration was often a historical phenomena dominated by the memory of parents or grandparents. Assimilation theory and vast social programs had succeeded in creating a heterogeneous white ethnicity which promised to erase most markers of cultural difference, in particular among American-born children. Remembrance of an ethnic past seemed to many a choice. The application of ethnic theory to black/white race relations was intellectually promising, although there were already many who questioned its potential. However, with the increasing proportion of migrants from Asia, Latin America, Africa, and the Caribbean since 1965, and because of social changes wrought by the civil rights movement, debates over race came to dominate discussions of ethnicity. In particular, questions about the intractability of racial subordination in both historical and contemporary settings became the crux of disagreement.

At the core of debates over ethnicity has been the question of the applicability of assimilation as a process that extends to Americans identified as non-white. In 1975, for instance, Nathan Glazer argued for an ever increasing capacity of America to absorb successive waves of ethnic groups, and that the same process that had seemingly allowed every immigrant group to become American (after an obligatory period of subordination
and discrimination), would continue to serve as an adequate social process of inclusion. His study, a development of earlier assimilation theories that ethnicity was the same for "blacks and Orientals, Jews and Catholics, Indians and Mexican Americans," served also as an argument against the need for legal interventions such as affirmative action. (see Ronald Takaki, From a Different Shore 1987, for a collection containing various arguments, including Glazer's, about affirmative action as one of the solutions for problems of race and ethnicity).

Among Glazer's examples was that of Chinese Americans, who were vilified to the extent of being the first group of American migrants to be excluded on the basis of race in 1882, and yet according to Glazer had over time become acceptable as Americans. The use of Asian Americans (commonly referred to as "Orientals" before the 1970s) as an ethnic "success story" had begun during the 1950s, as social scientists criticized the internment during World War II of 120,000 Japanese Americans (two-thirds of whom were native-born American citizens) by asserting their hyper-assimilated quality and successful citizenry. (Peterson, 1971; Yu, 2001) By the 1960s, as civil unrest among African Americans dissatisfied with second-class status spread, this "model minority" theory was increasingly used as an argument against political interventions to solve racial inequity. The seemingly natural social process of ethnicity should be enough to transform society. As with Robert Park's theories about cultural assimilation in the 1920s, Asian migrants played a crucial role in attempts to overcome the problem of a visually non-white identity in theories about ethnicity.

By the 1980s, many social theorists were addressing the fear that the theoretical and social experiment to subsume all differences into ethnicity, and thus defuse race, might fail. Sociologist Thomas Sowell admitted in 1981 that the "road to pluralism and cosmopolitanism has been long and rocky," but reaffirmed the relentless progress of ethnic assimilation.(Ethnic America, 1981, p9) "Ethnic groups themselves have changed in ways that made their acceptance easier," Sowell argued, and if there were various obstructions in the integration of racially marked ethnic groups, they could be overcome. Sociologist Nathan Glazer blamed the potential for failure on the continuing subordination of and consequent unrest among blacks. In the early 1980s, Glazer wrote that the "ethnic analogy" seemed to be losing ground among "black youth." He expressed his fear that this would lead to a slippery slope where other racialized groups (Mexican American, Puerto Rican, American Indian, and what he labeled "relatively prosperous Oriental communities") might lose faith in the assimilation process of ethnic America. Even the "white ethnic groups," Glazer prophesized, might begin to "reflect on their experiences and position in American society and perhaps to decide that they too are subject to insupportable deprivation and that the American ethnic system has failed." (from chapter “Blacks, Jews, and Others” in Glazer, 1983, p92) Glazer reassessed the overall promise of ethnic assimilation, however, as long as a particular group did not try to maintain too separate an identity or demand formal political solutions such as affirmative action.

The importance of Asian Americans as a key to arguments such as Glazer's also exposed the limitations of ethnic theory. First and foremost was a misapprehension of the periodization of migration. Connecting early migrants who had survived the virulent anti-Asian discrimination of the late 19th and first half of the 20th century with completely different groups of Asian American migrants arriving after 1965 was analytically suspect. The highly educated migrants from Taiwan, Hong Kong, the Philippines, India, and Pakistan who arrived after 1965 already trained for professional jobs were not those forced to overcome the discriminatory anti-Asian legislation and violence of early migrant groups. The first wave of 1975 refugees from Vietnam after the end of American intervention in Southeast Asia also contained highly educated, upper class professional
and political elites whose family backgrounds helped them succeed in the U.S. Other migrant groups from Asia conveniently lumped together by a racially defined category of "Orientals" (such as Hmong refugees from Cambodia, and many Pacific Islander groups) are absent from the claims of an Asian model minority because their statistics for economic and educational attainment do not support such arguments. The common erasure of differences between the historical experience of Asian migrants before and after 1965, and between different classes of migrants within national groups, has been crucial to portrayals of Asian Americans as a successful ethnic group. The monolithic portrayal of Asians generalized, just as all definitions of ethnic culture did, a singular cultural experience when there was not one. There were significant numbers of Asian migrants and refugees that did not do well and continued to struggle in the United States, and the perception that Asians as a group had boot-strapped themselves to success in the U.S. belied a complex mix of reasons for the educational and economic achievement of certain Asian Americans. Racial distinctiveness, continuing structures of racial subordination, and a lingering sense of Asians as somehow foreign (no matter how long and for how many generations they have lived in the United States), continues to mark Americans of Asian ancestry in ways that white ethnics are not.

Conclusion

There have been long term legacies to the central place of whiteness in the history of ethnicity. Ethnic theory derived its popular appeal from the combination of two elements. On the one hand was the description of how European immigrants were transformed into white ethnics during the mid-twentieth century; on the other hand was the hope that this social process would also work for Americans subordinated as nonwhite. However, the extension of what Nathan Glazer called the "ethnic analogy" to the problems of racial hierarchy has often foundered intellectually because of a widespread belief that ethnicity was somehow voluntary, an act of choice or individual volition. This mistake was the direct result of the way ethnicity was modeled upon the extension of whiteness to those who could erase signs of their foreign origins. A definition of ethnicity as a matter of choice has been implied in many analyses of American social life. Historians such as David Hollinger and Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., who echoed in the 1990s earlier theories that an overly separate ethnic identity was detrimental to American society, expressed a reliance on this conception of ethnic culture as somehow a choice. Both argued for cosmopolitan perspectives as an answer to overt ethnicity, shifting the burden of social dysfunction away from institutional structures that reinforced racial inequities, and towards those "ethnic" individuals and groups whom they asserted had chosen to remain separate.

The ideal of ethnicity as a choice was based upon the historical amalgamation of European immigrants into a common whiteness; the process seemed a forgetting of past ancestry (it did not matter whether you were of Jewish or Irish or Italian descent). However, consciousness of race based upon physical characteristics that suggest a non-white ancestry remains widespread in practice, even if in the science of biology, racial categories have been found to be fallacious. At this moment, the ever increasing number of migrants from Mexico and Latin America encapsulate best the complicated ways in which ethnicity operates both as a process of racial formation and as a market phenomenon. Beginning in the 1920s and 1930s, Mexican immigration was increasingly seen as a problem on the West Coast. Racialization of Spanish-speaking immigrants, however, has always been complicated. Since migrants from the rest of the Americas embody the complex global admixtures of Native, European, African, and Asian ancestry that have also marked North American history, attempts to encapsulate such migrants into a single category have reflected the same difficulties that all racialization incurs. Stratified by distinctions in skin color, class status, and country of origin, there have
nevertheless been marked attempts recently to envision a unified ethnic Hispanic America. Such attempts have utilized the concept of ethnicity as a marketing tool, in particular an awareness of the Spanish language as a distinct cultural unifier. But beyond popular music, entertainment, and other forms of ethnic objectification that have defined the seeming wholism of other forms of ethnicity in the market, it remains to be seen how ethnic consciousness will develop. In particular, issues of racial differentiation remain operative. Within the vast spectrum of Spanish-speaking migrants to the United States, some will find it easier to pass as white, whereas for others linguistic differences will be less salient than a visual identification of them as having non-white ancestry.

At this moment, the ideal that enlightened, educated individuals could will themselves to transcend their own consciousness of race or ethnicity remains widespread. Yet, most social theorists of ethnicity since the days of W. Lloyd Warner have also struggled to explain the ubiquitous social effects of racial hierarchies in U.S. society. Even as the boundaries that historically defined who was of which race shifted and changed through time and between places, beliefs in the existence of boundaries based upon physical features, and the social consequences of such racial beliefs, have stubbornly remained. As new immigration continues to change the demography of the United States, both popular conceptions and scholarly theories about ethnicity and race will be profoundly shaped by the constant presence of recently arrived immigrants, and ideas about ethnicity formed in the aberrational period of immigration exclusion will be left in the dustbin of history.

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