Ethnicity and Beyond

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Ethnicity had nothing to do with Jews prior to the 1930s. The classical meaning of the term “ethnic,” according to the Oxford English Dictionary, is “one who is not a Christian or a Jew.” Ethnics, the OED continues, were Gentiles, heathens, and pagans—not Jews. At different times in America, Jews were described as a “nation,” a “society,” a “people” and (most commonly) a “race.” For more than 250 years, though, no Jews in America ever considered themselves, or were considered by others, to be “ethnics.”

The word ethnic, and its cognates, took on new meaning in Nazism’s shadow. With the politicization of the term “race” and the discrediting of “racial science,” liberal social scientists searched for new ways to describe “a group of people differentiated from the rest of the community by racial origins or cultural background, and usually claiming or enjoying official recognition of their group identity.” In their influential book, We Europeans: A Survey of ‘Racial’ Problems (1935), biologist Julian S. Huxley and anthropologist Alfred C. Haddon urged that “the term race as applied to human groups should be dropped from the vocabulary of science.” In its place, they advocated for “ethnic group” or “people.”

Early users of these new terms employed them much the way “race” had once been used: to denote a primordial tie that group members shared in common. In response to Hitler, and in line with the teachings of anthropologists, they may have looked to culture rather than biology to explain the origin of ethnic differences. But they scarcely doubted that ethnicity reflected history and shaped destiny. As Tony Michels demonstrates in his fascinating essay in this symposium, this was the case even among Jewish Communists. They did not know the word “ethnicity” and they certainly eschewed religion. But for all their attention to class, they continued to harbor deep emotional attachments to their fellow Jews. They looked to common descent and culture as the basis for Jewish identity and as a marker of social boundaries. That explains why, when Di morgn frayhayt, under pressure from Communist party officials, stridently attacked Zionism following the 1929 Hebron riots, “the large-scale backlash [among readers] almost bankrupted the newspaper.”

The belief that ethnicity was innate—that even the most assimilated of Jews harbored within them some kind of pintele yid, a dormant Jewish homunculus waiting to burst forth—lived on for many decades. But as Lila Corwin Berman has recently
reminded us, conversions to Judaism raised a daunting challenge to the view that ethnicity was primordial. The widely publicized 1956 conversion of actress Marilyn Monroe, in particular, pointed to a much more volitional definition of ethnicity. If, after all, the “American body” (symbolized by the erotic Monroe) could be Judaized, then Judaism was obviously much more determined by consent than descent, and ethnicity was not destiny after all.  

It took time before this new view of ethnicity took hold. Indeed, the publication of Nathan Glazer and Daniel P. Moynihan’s *Beyond the Melting Pot* (1963) and Michael Novak’s *The Rise of the Unmeltable Ethnicities* (1972) provided fresh ammunition to support the view that ethnicity was destiny. Politically speaking, these scholars argued, once an ethnic, always an ethnic. Nevertheless, a growing volume of contrary evidence, coupled with an ideological distaste for determinism of any sort, soon swept the old consensus aside. Books like Werner Sollors’ *The Invention of Ethnicity* (1989) and Mary Waters’ *Ethnic Options: Choosing Identities in America* (1990) implied that ethnicities were either selected or invented; they were not innate.

This new view of ethnicity as volitional and contingent meshed nicely with facts on the ground in Jewish life. Everywhere, it seemed, non-Orthodox converts to Judaism, children of intermarried Jewish fathers (patrilineal Jews), people descended from 15th-century forced converts to Christianity on the Iberian peninsula (*anusim*), Ethiopian Falash Mura, and others sought recognition as Jews on the basis of their having *freely chosen* Judaism. Where “citizenship” in the Jewish people had once overwhelmingly depended on having been born into the Jewish “race” through a Jewish mother, now a much broader definition was advocated. Hundreds of thousands of people worldwide today self-identify as Jews, and seek to have others identify them as Jews, based on their belief that identity should be volitional. They hope that the boundaries of (Orthodox) Judaism will someday be opened wide enough to receive them.

Ewa Morawska, in her essay here, complicates contemporary reinterpretations of ethnicity by arguing, following Steven Fenton, that “changing constellations of primordial, circumstantial and constructed components . . . make up ethnic practices and identities.” She views Jewish ethnicity as “a hybrid creation” composed of elements that are in some cases timeless and universal, and in others, time-dependent and context-dependent. In passing, she reminds us that the sub-ethnic components of ethnicity—those that distinguish Russian Jews from German Jews, or even Russian Jews in Philadelphia from their counterparts in Tel Aviv—are deeply significant, even if historically contingent. The “ethnicization” process that melts immigrants into ethnics tends to erode sub-ethnic categories among succeeding generations. Even once highly significant sub-ethnic designations, such as “Galician Jew,” have disappeared over the course of time.

Morawska’s understanding of ethnicity is informed by historical examples and by recent work on immigrants from the former Soviet Union. Bethamie Horowitz, however, reminds us that Jewish ethnicity in the United States operates within a strikingly different context than was true even a generation ago. Three differences seem to me particularly important.

First of all, the nation’s values have changed. Neither endogamy nor the maintenance of ethnic identity is high on the current American scale of values. Indeed, the
current president of the United States, Barack Obama, projects through his own life’s story a sense that mixed and multiple identities “hold great promise” and that ethnicity, even as it contains primordial elements, is to a considerable degree constructed. With an African father who was, in his words, “black as pitch,” and an American mother who was “white as milk,” Obama is himself the product of a mixed marriage. He experienced “a variety of cultures in a climate of mutual respect” while growing up in Hawaii, and over time, he assumed an African American identity, though it was not one that he was born into. He is, in short, the poster child for freedom of choice in both marriage and matters of identity.5

The second great change in the American context, related to the first, is the normalization of intermarriage. In the 1950s, most Americans married people of their own kind: “birds of a feather,” the saying went, “flock together.” Endogamy rates for Protestants, Catholics, Jews, African Americans, Asian Americans, and white people were all extraordinarily high. Today, by contrast, marriages across ethnic, religious, and racial lines are culturally celebrated, in many circles, and have become commonplace. Swedish, Norwegian, German, Italian, and Irish Americans all experience intermarriage rates in excess of 60 percent. Among Catholics, intermarriage rates among young people exceed 50 percent. In the much smaller Greek Orthodox Church, by the early 1990s, fully two-thirds of all marriages involved a partner who was not Greek Orthodox. Asian Americans and African Americans have likewise witnessed dramatic upswings in intermarriage. “Nearly half of recent marriages for U.S. born Asian-Americans have been to non-Asian White Americans,” according to an account published in 2002, whereas marriages between blacks and whites multiplied seven-fold between 1960 and 1993.6 Jews have been greatly affected by this cultural transformation. Roughly half of all Jews in America today marry individuals not raised as Jews, and some say that there are now more intermarried than in-married families in the community. Since, as Joel Perlmann reminds us in his essay, “it is generally harder for ethnicity to remain a strong force in a mixed than in a single-origin family,” ethnic ties are weakening. An increasing number of young people are, in Sylvia B. Fishman’s phrase, “Jewish and something else.”7

Third, both American society and American Jewish society have become culturally far more heterogeneous and pluralistic. Foreign-born immigrants to the United States have literally changed the complexion of the country; the largest groups of immigrants come from Latin America, China, the Philippines, India, and Vietnam. The Jewish community has similarly been transformed, seemingly overnight, from a homogeneous community of white European origin to a much more heterogeneous community embracing a full range of races and colors. Intermarriages, conversions, interracial adoptions, and immigration have brought about these changes, which are especially prevalent within the Reform movement but are now also visible wherever Jews gather in numbers.8 Gone are the days when savvy Jews could look at a crowd and, at a glance, pick out “members of the tribe” on the basis of their looks alone. Today, appearance plays a much smaller role in Jewish ethnicity than it did even one generation ago.

What continues to hold Jews together in the wake of these seismic changes? Sarah Bunin Benor and Steven M. Cohen suggest in their innovative discussion here that patterns of speech play some role. “American Jews speak differently from their non-Jewish neighbors,” they conclude, and the younger they are, the more they want to distinguish
themselves linguistically from their neighbors—perhaps because the younger they are, the more likely they are to be Orthodox. Like head coverings and “Star of David” necklaces, “talking Jewish” in the way that Benor and Cohen describe helps to distinguish as Jews those who in so many other ways closely resemble their non-Jewish neighbors.

Jews also turn to genetics to validate who they are. Harking back to the idea that Jewishness is innate, they point to studies that provide a biological basis for Jewish intelligence (“Jewish intelligence is simply a compensatory genetic error linked to other genetic diseases”). Or they study the “Cohen” gene that supposedly demonstrates priestly continuity. Or they point to Jewish genetic diseases that likewise are said to show that, at the DNA level, Jews form a single biological family. Jews may appear more variegated and diverse, but these genetic studies imply that in terms of the fundamental building blocks of life, they are as interrelated as ever they were.

Lastly, Jews point to behaviors that define them distinctively as Jews. Studies of Jewish habits, political behaviors, and attitudes in the United States suggest that, as a group, Jews differ from other Americans in terms of their “high level of and interest in education and learning,” their commitment to the values of individual freedom and choice, their support for liberal values such as minority rights and social justice, their “urban orientation,” their child-rearing practices, and their “skepticism about the military.” Yet for all of this emphasis on “Jewish distinctiveness in America,” these same studies reveal that on fully 88 percent of all issues examined, Jews differ little or not at all from their neighbors, ethnicity notwithstanding.

Against this complex and changing background, a collection of essays on “ethnicity and beyond” could scarcely be more timely. The word “ethnicity,” unknown prior to the 1930s and ubiquitous in the 1970s, has lost much of its cachet in recent years, but the idea that Jews are still somehow distinctive continues to muster strong support. What that “somehow” is, and whether it will suffice to sustain Jewish group loyalties in the 21st century, remains to be seen.

Notes


