

From Immigrants to Ethnics: Toward a New Theory of "Ethnicization"

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The author contrasts the fragmented nature of immigrant groups upon their arrival in America with the social and cultural unities found among ethnic groups years later. He explains this change—the process of "ethnicization"—as a consequence of two factors: ascription and adversity. Outside institutions ascribed ethnic identity for practical reasons: village loyalties were too complicated to be understood. Immigrant institutions had equally practical motivations for furthering the same end: defense in the face of adversity. Viewed from this perspective it becomes clear that the melting pot was not, as commonly assumed, a failure. It succeeded in transforming weak, fragmented and unclassified bundles of immigrants into self-conscious, active, and easily identifiable ethnic groups. This model serves equally well if applied to the WASP. Today, "WASP-ishness" is only an ascribed mystique. In the face of adversity, however, it is quite possible that WASPs will undergo "ethnicization." They may unite, organize, and make demands.

Students of American ethnicity too often assume that there is a direct relationship between the nations of Europe and the ethnic groups of America. Immigrants, we are told, left Europe, arrived in America, set up old-world institutions, and gradually acculturated into ethnic groups. That these groups are still distinguishable from one another today, is considered to be proof that the previous generation's melting pot theory is inaccurate and unrealistic. America never did transform the old races of Europe into a new and superior American race (cf. Dinnerstein and Reimers, 1975; and works cited in Vecoli, 1972). Yet, today's revisionist view is as misleading as its predecessor. It falsely assumes that immigrant groups were internally united by preexisting ties and that all "old-world" institutions actually existed across the ocean. The facts, on the other hand, demonstrate that ethnic ties developed only on American soil. As for "old-world" institutions, they were often as foreign to immigrants as to natives.

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"A MINIATURE FEDERATION OF SEMI-INDEPENDENT ALLIED STATES"

Immigrants to America maintained close ties with their native villages and regions—but not beyond them. The group that Americans broadly referred to as Germans, for example, was really divided into Protestants and Catholics, Southerners and *Plattsdeutschen*, pre-1848, "grey" immigrants and post-revolution "green" ones (cf. Gleason, 1968; Ernst, 1949, p. 177; Hawgood, 1940, pp. 21, 57, and 132; Park, 1922, pp. 292–293). Even in the United States these subgroups often settled far from one another (cf. Park and Miller, 1921, p. 165). Among Jews, differences were even more complicated. Long before the well-known uptown–downtown (Yahudi-immigrant) split developed in the 1880s, there were strained relations between Portuguese Jews and Central Europeans (cf. Stern, 1976), and even greater divisions among German, Polish, and English Jews (cf. Glanz, 1970, pp. 187–202). Among the later Eastern European Jewish immigrants, tensions were equally evident. Lithuanians, Rumanians, Poles, Austrians, and Hungarians were so separated by long-standing enmities and religious disputes, that they kept physically apart even in New York's crowded ghetto (cf. Rischin, 1970, p. 77; Teller, 1968, pp. 5–10); an area Marcus Ramage (1971, p. 87) referred to as "a miniature federation of semi-independent allied states." Italians also clustered around immigrants from their hometowns and provinces. "The migrants left Italy not as Italians," Joseph Lopreato (1970, p. 101) points out, "but as Genoese, Venetians, Neapolitans, Sicilians, Calabrians, and the like, and continued to identify themselves as such for some time, if not for the rest of their lives." As for Chinese immigrants, their divisions were perhaps the most violent of all the internal immigrant rifts. Emigrating in the wake of China's Taiping Rebellion, Hakka and Punti groups (each of which was itself of heterogeneous composition) both found their way to California, and in 1854 open warfare was carried on between them (cf. Lyman, 1974).

The fragmented nature of these and other immigrant groups upon their arrival is in sharp contrast with the social and cultural unities found among ethnic groups years later. Clearly a profound change had taken place, one which cannot simply be accounted for by the passage of time. This change—the process of "ethnicization"—has been already examined by several scholars (cf. Greene, 1975, pp. 1–13). According to their views, identity symbols such as a common language, an immigrant press, and a shared religion were the key unifying factors. It, however, remains unclear why language served to unify some groups (cf. Fishman, 1966) while religion or some other common similarity was required to unify others. Why, for example, were linguistically similar but religiously different Irish and Scotch-Irish distinguished from one another, while German Re-

form Jewish "Israelites" merged with linguistically and religiously dissimilar East European Orthodox Jews. Indeed, if common similarities played so important a unifying role, why did English-speaking immigrants preserve their separate identities as Scottish, English, and Welsh late into the nineteenth century (cf. Berthoff, 1968)? A shared language should supposedly have united them years earlier. One can only conclude that similarities alone explain neither why nor when ethnic unity was developed. Common feelings of identity would seem to stem primarily from other factors.

AScription AND ADVERSITY

It is the thesis of this paper that ethnic unity was forged as a consequence of two factors: ascription and adversity. The categories set down by *outsiders* became broadly accepted by the media, the public at large, and ultimately by the immigrants themselves. It should be emphasized that the term "outsiders" covers more than merely old stock nativists. Immigrants found it just as necessary to use broad categories when dealing with foreigners from distant areas. An Italian might proudly have called himself a Sicilian; he could not, however, be troubled to distinguish a Galician Jew from a Lithuanian one. No human mind could cope with the complexities which village identities entailed. A broader classification scheme was unavoidable (cf. Allport, 1958, pp. 17-27).

It is hardly surprising that the classification scheme which emerged was based on common similarities—all classification schemes are. The questions raised above simply suggest that many possible systems might have been employed. The critical factor which actually operated—unconsciously of course—seems to have been selectivity by "lowest common status" (cf. Banton, 1967, pp. 118-119, and 145). Irish Catholics were dubbed Catholics and distinguished from higher status Protestants. The same stigma plagued German Catholics. As for Jews, they were considered Jews regardless of their country of origin. Only during the two world wars, when Germans held lower status than Jews, were the Jews considered full fledged Germans. Not even Hitler's anti-Semitism prevented some German Jews—even refugees—from being classed as enemy aliens and being hounded (cf. Hirshler, 1955, p. 96).

There was little that the immigrant could do in the face of this situation. Not granted the leisure to fashion his own identity, the newcomer found it in large part fashioned for him. This accords well with recent social scientific theory. George Devereux (1975) has differentiated between ethnic personality, "an inductive generalization from behavioural data," and ethnic identity, which is merely the product of a "self-mystique" and an "ascribed mystique." Since human perceptions change more rapidly than cultural traits, ethnic identity is more quickly affected by

new conditions than ethnic personality. Even within the two components of ethnic identity changes occur at an unequal rate. As David Horowitz (1975) points out, an "ascribed mystique" (Horowitz prefers the term "other definition") often precedes and encompasses more individuals than a "self-mystique" ("self-definition"). Ultimately, however, the two mystiques converge. In the case of immigrants to America, the "ascribed mystique" was an appellation like Irish, Italian, German, or Jew. The "self-mystique" was a village identity. When immigrants cast off hometown loyalties and viewed themselves in terms of broad national groupings intelligible to outsiders, then the two mystiques were merged. The immigrants had become ethnics.

Ascribed identity—that is, the outsiders' view of immigrants—was crystallized by 1910 when the Immigration (Dillingham) Commission's Dictionary of Races gave the seal of "science" to an organizing principle (race) that writers had accepted for some time. The better acquainted Americans were with an immigrant group, and the higher the group's status, the more accurately it was described. "Old" immigrants, therefore, were more accurately and sympathetically viewed than "new" ones. On the other hand, Arabs, who formed a tiny minority about which little was known, found themselves lumped together as "Syrians" (Handlin, 1957, pp. 74–110; Handlin, 1973, p. 167; Gossett, 1965). Of course, European nationalism and imported racial theories also played important roles in determining the alleged character of immigrant groups. In most cases, however, the group label was both ascribed and accepted for the first time in the United States. It was only in "deceptive retrospect" that a man might tell his children how he brought over his ethnic identity intact from the old world (cf. Handlin, 1973, p. 166).

This self-deception seems easy to understand. An immigrant was classified according to one or another race or nationality as soon as he entered port. In the ghetto, political bosses took it for granted that ethnic group consciousness existed (cf. Gerson, 1976). The Catholic Church also accepted foreign language (national) churches; regional dialects and differences, however, were not recognized (cf. Dolan, 1975; Greene, 1975; Smith, 1966). Similarly, in schools, ethnic group achievement rates (e.g., Jews and Italians) were compared. No comparable statistics compared the relative achievement rates of each ethnic group's component parts (cf. Berrol, 1976; Olneck, 1974; Cohen, 1970). Children, of course, followed their parents. Lopreato (1970, p. 105) reports how Italian youngsters discovered that "the Irish gang engaged them in a fight as Italians, not as individuals from particular regions of Italy."

THE IMMIGRANTS' RESPONSE TO ADVERSITY

When immigrants finally identified with the group label imposed upon them by government, the political machine, the church, the school, the

natives, and even by other immigrants, then their ascribed and self-mystiques had converged. They had become ethnics. By that time, provincial and village loyalties had diminished to secondary importance (although they probably continued to influence elements of the ethnic personality for generations), and immigrant social and benevolent institutions had been united. Ascription, however, cannot explain *why* immigrants identified with the views of outsiders. Why, in other words, were they so open to outside influence? Could not the same newcomers who preserved so many old-world cultural traits—even passing them on to their descendants—also preserve their village identities? Is there, perhaps, a reason why immigrants deceived themselves into accepting mistaken memories of past national ties? The answer to these questions lies in the immigrant response to adversity. Ethnic unity, ascribed by outsiders, was accepted as part of the defense against prejudice and hostility.

This process is easily observed in the case of the German immigrants. Originally divided, they united and became a political force in the 1850s as part of their response to nativist pressures (cf. Hawgood, 1940, pp. 52, 228, 232). German Catholics also united in self-defense, aligning themselves either with Germans or Catholics, depending on which group seemed most threatened (Gleason, 1968). As for the Jews, Salo Baron (1971) has described their entire American experience in the words “stepped by adversity.” Missions to the Jews, social discrimination, immigration restriction, and anti-Semitic violence at home and abroad drove Jews together into defensive organizations.

The Italians and the Chinese reacted somewhat differently. In both cases, defensive unity was delayed as immigrants reacted to adversity by withdrawing into “urban villages” and “Chinatowns” where localized, old-world loyalties were maintained (Gans, 1962; Yuan, 1963). Only in recent years has Italian unity been strengthened as part of a community response to alleged FBI harassment (DeConde, 1971, p. 350). The Chinese, on the other hand, do not yet see themselves as fully united, probably because the massive post-World War II immigration of Chinese has split disunited immigrants from more unified ethnics (Lyman, 1974, pp. 151–185; Sung, 1967, pp. 77–94).

Italian and Chinese disunity suggests that too much credit may have been given to the role played by the immigrant press and related cultural institutions in unifying the immigrant community. It is certainly true that foreign language newspapers developed quickly in every major city, that they were designed to serve a wide audience, and that they therefore generally stood above internal conflicts. Editors did lament internal divisions, and they often galvanized disparate groups to unite in the face of opposition from outside forces. Yet, it is a mistake to presume that such propaganda was uncritically accepted. First, it was doubtless realized that economic necessities prevented there being as many news-

papers as there were immigrant hometowns. Second, and more important, is the fact that many newspaper readers read what they wanted to read, and absorbed what they wanted to absorb. A reader of the *Jewish Daily Forward* was no more likely to become a Socialist than a reader of the *Christian Science Monitor* today is likely to become a Christian Scientist. Finally, it is difficult to understand why the immigrant press would have been so much more successful at destroying divisions between immigrants than the national press has ever been at destroying divisions between ethnics. It therefore seems more likely that the immigrant press, as well as other cultural institutions, succeeded in furthering the unity which immigrants themselves demanded as part of their response to ascription and adversity.

The immigrant press was joined in its efforts to unite the immigrant community by mutual aid and benevolent societies. These societies began as small *landsmanschaften*, uniting immigrants from a single town or province. By the end of the nineteenth century, however, German *vereine*, Jewish *landsmanschaften*, and Chinese *hui kuan* had each united, citing efficiency, economy, and security (cf. Gleason, 1968; Doroshkin, 1969, pp. 136–169, 219–242; Lyman, 1974, pp. 32–37, 116–118). It might be wondered why the same demands did not lead ethnic groups to unite all their societies into one giant benevolent society; a step which would doubtless have brought about even greater benefits. Such a step, however, was not even considered since there was really no demand that ethnic groups all melt together. Indeed, a close examination reveals that “Americanizing” agencies—the school, the church, the polity, the press, and the benevolent societies—were, in fact, all functioning to create ethnic groups out of divided immigrants. Outside institutions (government, political machines, churches, and schools) ascribed ethnic identity for practical reasons: village loyalties were too complicated to be understood. Immigrant institutions (the press and benevolent societies) had equally practical motivations for furthering the same end: defense in the face of adversity. Viewed from this perspective, it becomes clear that the melting pot was not, as so commonly assumed, a failure. Rather, it succeeded in transforming weak, fragmented, and unclassified bundles of immigrants into self-conscious, active, and easily identifiable ethnic groups.

Buttressing this theory is the encouraging reception that immigrants and natives both gave to ethnic symbols—in spite of supposed pressure to Americanize. Holidays like Columbus Day, the Chinese New Year, and Hanukah were recognized and accepted as peculiarly ethnic, although not one had been of similar importance in the old world (cf. Tomasi, 1972, pp. 79–80; Nee, 1973, p. 244; Petuchowski, 1960). Real or imagined Revolutionary War heroes like Haym Salomon, Baron Von Steuben, and Thaddeus Kosciuszko were suddenly lauded as ethnic contributions to American independence. Ethnic foods, like bagels, *chon suev*, and *nizza*—

though unknown to most immigrating Jews, Chinese, and Italians—nevertheless became associated with these groups and were warmly embraced by ethnics and natives alike (Time-Life Books, 1971, pp. 32, 100–101; Root and de Rochemont, 1976, pp. 276–312).

These and similar symbols were created by immigrants undergoing the process of unification. In part, their creation reflects a desire to stimulate ethnic solidarity and self-consciousness. Italians supported Columbus Day, for example, “As an opportunity for all [Italians] to unite in a common observance” (cf. Tomasi, 1972, p. 80). Even more important was the desire to compensate for the more exclusive symbols lost in the transition from immigrant to ethnic. To return to Columbus Day, it may well have served as a surrogate for the innumerable localized saints’ days which did not survive in the American environment. Americans, of course, did not understand these changes taking place in the immigrant community. In their eyes, the ethnic’s new identity symbols were nothing less than historical artifacts from a dying old-world culture. The truth, however, is otherwise. The identity ascribed to immigrants years earlier had, in the face of adversity, finally been accepted and symbolically confirmed. The immigrants had indeed become ethnics.

THE “ETHNICIZATION” OF THE WASP

It may be objected that the WASPs could not possibly have conformed to the schema outlined above. As “native” Americans, they presumably faced neither ascription nor adversity. Nevertheless, the mass media consider WASPs to be a distinctive and self-conscious entity. The media, however, are in error. WASPs are not an historically self-conscious group. The very term WASP has only become popular recently. Indeed, the WASP is now in a position somewhat like that of the newly arrived immigrant; his self-image and ascribed image vary greatly. For this reason, the WASP presents an interesting opportunity to test elements of the immigrant to ethnic model presented in this essay.

At present, “WASP-ishness” is only an ascribed mystique. Ethnics decide who is a WASP and they generally use white Protestantism as the “lowest common status” shared by a motley of groups. Meanwhile, self-identity and ethnic personality (cultural unit) have not yet appeared. As Irving Allen (1975, p. 48) notes, WASPs are still “a variegated, originally polyglot, regionally diverse category of white Americans who have some kind of connection, often nominal, with several score of Protestant denominations and sects.” WASPs today are as divided among themselves as British immigrants were 125 years ago. As Rowland Berthoff (1968, pp. 185–186) points out, it was only the Irish threat that drove these Englishmen, Scots, and Welshmen together and led to the creation of the British-American ethnic group. Certain cultural differences, to be sure,

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