

**HOST SOCIETIES
AND THE RECEPTION OF IMMIGRANTS**

Edited by

Jeffrey G. Reitz

LA JOLLA, CALIFORNIA

Center for Comparative Immigration Studies
University of California, San Diego

2

The Sociology of Immigration: Second Thoughts and Reconsiderations

ROGER WALDINGER

The contemporary study of immigration has come a long way. The domain three decades ago of historians and ethnopietists, it has now transfixed the attention of a legion of social scientists, who approach the subject with theories and methodological tools of an ever more sophisticated kind. But if the intellectual record is one of steady progress, the students of this defining American feature have too often succumbed to the perils that inevitably attend their way.

The root problem involves the potential overlap between native and social science understandings of the question at hand. Common sense tells us that the United States comprises a bounded entity, in which the entry of immigrants represents a foreign phenomenon, the immigrants' difference somehow anomalous, an imported feature that is neither expected nor desired to last. Unfortunately, much of the social scientific literature frames the matter in much the same way.

After all, no sooner do the immigrant outsiders arrive than they turn out to be ethnics, a term we now take for granted but whose etymological roots should make room for concern. *Ethnos* was the Greek word used for the Hebrew term "goy" when the Bible was translated more than two millennia ago, later to be applied as a synonym for "heathens." And this was more or less how the word "ethnicity" was intended when Lloyd Warner first brought it into the American social

science lexicon. In his classic, depression-era studies, Warner labeled all of "Yankee City's" groups as ethnic, but not the "Yankees or Natives"—implicitly accepting the Yankee point of view that this rubric applied to others but not to them (Warner and Lunt 1941; Warner and Srole 1945). While much has changed since Warner, the scholarly taken-for-granted may be much the same. As astute a student of the American ethnic scene as Herbert Gans (1998) recently thought it appropriate to distinguish immigration researchers as either insiders or outsiders, classifying insiders as those who shared either an ancestry with the group they studied or a commitment to its persistence, as opposed to all others, whom he called "outsiders." But if immigration is a distinguishing American trait that is at once persistent and defines everyday understandings of what it means to be an American, then Gans's so-called outsiders are no less implicated than his insiders in the phenomenon they both study. Too much of our literature amounts to a sociology of the "goy," of the other, written from the standpoint of the insider posing as outsider, always remaining external to the analysis itself, indeed entirely invisible.

Moreover, the assumption of boundedness is no less common to self-proclaimed critical perspectives than it is to conventional ones, the former underscoring the twin force of in-group exclusion and newcomer solidarity, the latter emphasizing the absorptive power of American society. In revolt against assimilation, today's scholars often highlight the salience of immigrants' ethnic identities and attachments; theirs is a differentialist view, portraying an America in which ethnic boundaries are hard and fast. But in so doing, contemporary scholarship simply echoes the established account. Both assume that immigrants comprise a *group* right from the start, a view that presumes stability and homogeneity in the structure of immigrants' affiliations, when in fact migration destabilizes and diversifies those relationships.

Taking issue with both established and critical approaches, this essay is organized in contrapuntal form. I first discuss the concept of "assimilation," contending that it assumes a normally integrated society and is therefore vitiated by its inherent assimilationism. I then turn to assimilation's opposite, the notion of ethnic retention, arguing that retentionism involves a projection of a past that never was. Next I return to the critique of the conventional wisdom, tackling the concept of "acculturation" and arguing that it misconstrues culture as a list of traits, as opposed to an understanding of the world. Consequently, the conventional approach neglects the most decisive moments in cultural

change: first, the process by which immigrants take on a native theory of American society, and second, the changes that occur as they encounter the negative images that insiders have of them. I end by returning to the discussion of differentialism, arguing that the necessary critique of assimilation has produced a positive program that wrongly insists on the existence of groups of different kinds. Instead, we would do better to think of the relationship between "them" and "us" in terms of a continuum, where the relationship between ethnic category and pattern of association varies from one dimension of social life to another.

ASSIMILATION

Let me begin with assimilation, our most enduring, most influential concept. Long in disgrace, assimilation is now back in style. For the most eloquent and justifiably influential of the recent defenses, we can turn to the work of Richard Alba and Victor Nee (1998, 2003). Although their effort at rehabilitation is a major achievement, one does not detract from their accomplishment to note that they jumped on a horse that was already in full stride. Whether we take as indicators works designed to engage a broader literate public or those directed purely at an academic audience, it is clear that numerous writers have found appeal in an idea so often rejected. What they observe is an America too porous and too mutable to be captured by the differentialist vision, in which ethnic boundaries are depicted as hard and fast, just as we understand them to have been one hundred years ago. Searching for a vocabulary to describe the reality they discern, many of our colleagues have inevitably returned to the concept of assimilation (Kazal 1995; Brubaker 2001; Hollinger 1995).

While I sympathize, I cannot agree. As Alba and Nee argued, assimilation entails a reduction in ethnic difference, a definition that seems accurately to describe the way in which social scientists have generally understood assimilation. However, it does seem to beg the question of how the intellectual problematic should be defined and why.

The issues at hand clearly fall into the general concerns raised by the study of stratification, in that our interests involve the relationship between some birth-ascribed characteristic and outcomes later on in life or in subsequent generations. In principle, the same framework that is applied when considering the influence of one trait, let us say foreign birth or ancestry, should hold when the interest turns to the impact of

another, let us say parents' social class. But imagine that I were to propose a concept that entailed "the decline, and at its endpoint the disappearance of a *class* distinction and the cultural and social differences that express it," thus exactly rephrasing the definition provided by Alba and Nee but substituting the word "class" for "ethnic" (Alba and Nee 1998: 159). While a formulation of this sort might appeal to the more egalitarian readers of this essay, it also reflects my own, lamentably outdated social democratic views, as opposed to the specification of an analytic concept around which a field of study can be organized. More charitably, one could suppose that "assimilation" could be usefully invoked to identify an outcome of a stratificational process of uncertain outcome, very possibly eventuating in diminished difference but no less likely to lead to difference of an increased or persistent sort, or very possibly a shift in the nature of the relevant differences. To pose the question in stratificational terms, however, implies that difference is a normal and *not* a deviant outcome and, therefore, that the production and reproduction of difference, and *not just its reduction*, belongs at the heart of the inquiry.

In its very formulation, the sociology of assimilation thus reveals its assimilationist cast. It begins with the presence of outsiders, whose appearance on the scene requires no explanation and whose distinctiveness can be assumed without making reference to those parties that perceive difference and make it socially significant. Moreover, it has never seriously asked how difference might decline—or conversely, how similarity might come to be. An obvious answer involves one of the other, usually forgotten meanings of assimilation, namely, treating similarly. If, as I have argued above, the intellectual problem involves the relationship between ethnic origins and ethnic destinies, then we need to enlarge the analytical frame to include those others—whether located at subordinate, lateral, or superior levels—that play a crucial role in affecting both "who gets what" and "who is what." Understood this way, assimilation is a process whose subjects are not simply outsiders but insiders as well, and who make "assimilation" through an interactional process that both redefines the lines between insiders and outsiders and determines who is "in" and who is "out."

And just why one should be concerned with the disappearance of difference—or its converse, similarity—has never been adequately explained. After all, similarity is a very specific distributional attribute, in which persons with an origin in a particular source population need to have a wide spread, so that there is extensive overlap between them

and the reference population. Why could we not define assimilation as the process whereby members of a source population *converge* around the mean for the reference population? Convergence could still entail very great difference if the source population turns out to be much more tightly clustered around the mean than the reference population. But clustering around the mean would be closely correlated, though not perfectly, with *similar treatment*. From a normative standpoint, I do not see why we should care about anything else. Now there may be an intellectual or scientific reason to be interested in similarity rather than convergence with the mean, but such an argument is one that I have yet to encounter. As assimilation necessarily involves the dissolution of ethnic groups—it is hard to imagine ethnic persistence without dissimilarity—the expectation of similarity seems uncomfortably close to the ideological preoccupations that have shaped this field right from the start.

Moreover, difference is only meaningful within a relational framework, which means that we cannot talk about "them" without also referring to "us." The literature on assimilation, however, cannot quite manage to identify those actors who make difference important, nor why or how they do so. If we cannot answer such questions as "different from whom?" can we have anything to say about difference at all?

To be fair, the literature does make some effort to identify the target population to which outsiders are supposed to assimilate, but at the expense of muddying things further. Our leading analysts—Alba and Nee, Portes and Rumbaut (1996)—tell us that assimilation involves absorption into a majority or a mainstream. However, it takes but a few seconds of reflection to realize that there is no such thing there. Detach the "majority" from its inherent opposition to the minoritarian outsiders and it collapses along the class, regional, religious, and ideological cleavages that keep members of the "majority" regularly at odds with one another. In effect, the concept of assimilation presumes a society that would be normally integrated, were it not for the unfortunate appearance of the outsiders from abroad.

Moreover, majority necessarily implies minority: to assert that the former is somehow less ethnic than the latter is simply to adopt the dominant group's own self-concept. As used by Alba and Nee, moreover, "majority" means "white majority," a term that is certainly part of the everyday discourse of race and ethnicity but is otherwise lacking in intellectual content. Simply put, "white majority" are just two words for continued exclusion on the basis of descent; thus assimilation into

the “white majority” simultaneously means disassimilation, since the former necessarily links the conditions of one group’s acceptance to another’s rejection. Were our literature truly interested in the nature of the U.S. system of ethnic stratification, it would ask just how the entry of immigrant outsiders might eventuate in an outcome of this sort. But too many of our colleagues have concluded that this is a question that we can blithely ignore.

Our older commentators did better, in part because they could talk more freely, avoiding the circumlocutions favored by the right-thinking academics of today, ever on guard against offending thoughts. Good old Milton Gordon (1964)—where would we be without him?—had no compunctions about naming the group to whose acceptance outsiders were supposed to aspire. In the early 1960s, one could not only write about a “core cultural group” but also name it—white Protestants of vaguely British descent. Of course, identifying the target population in terms such as these simply described the world from the standpoint of the particular communal group standing at the top of the system, and whose centrality and dominance therefore required no further discussion. Although the perspective of one’s betters certainly warrants attention, it would be good to label it as such. The ability of any group to assert itself as “core” is bound to affect the mechanisms by which outsiders seek and gain acceptance, not to speak of their motivations for doing so. And in any case, that was then, this is now, everything solid—yesterday’s cultural core included—having since melted into thin air.

My own guess is that our literature struggles with stating the target group because it cannot quite get itself around to stating the obvious: namely, that as the process transforming outsiders into insiders, assimilation takes foreigners and turns them into “Americans.” Of course, to put it that way makes it clear that we can no longer describe assimilation as a shift from particularism to universality, as was the wont of the earlier literature and as some contemporary scholars continue to pretend. Rather, we need to confront assimilation for what it is—a substitution of just one particularism for another. I do not mean to impugn particularism as such: after all, the importance of belonging is one of the few sociological maxims that we possess. And why not cultivate a sense of membership in a national collectivity? In theory, if not in practice, the American people is surely wider and more inclusive than other forms of ethnic affiliation. But still the point stands: assimilation is a very peculiar scholarly concept, resonating with that norma-

tive vision of national life that envisions a direct relationship between the individual and the nation, unmediated by ties of an ethnic type. As such, the ideological echo sounds all too clear: too much of our social scientific literature amounts to little more than a mildly intellectualized version of the folk understanding of what it means to become American, obscuring our ability to approach the phenomenon with the critical distance it requires.

ETHNIC RETENTION

Our literature typically opposes assimilationist with retentionist points of view (Gans 1998). Retentionism is an anachronism, mirroring many of the assumptions of the view that it contests, and subject, therefore, to many of the same liabilities. Retentionism needs to posit some stable, fixed entity; after all, what would there be to retain, were there not a coherent, self-conscious collectivity enacting and reenacting the life of its group? There would be nothing wrong with such a description, if only it specified the time and place. The problem is that retentionism freezes a single point in time, projecting it backwards as if patterns of self-awareness and interaction had not always been changing, which, in turn, makes the American ethnic group moment but a stage in the broader sweep of time.

Like assimilationism, retentionism begins with the assumption of a bounded, undifferentiated group. But the reality is almost always otherwise, and all the more so if we move out of the group-ist assumptions common to the literature and think of the subjects of our inquiry as actors in a relational field, whose self-awareness shifts as the pattern of interaction changes. From this standpoint, migration necessarily yields greater diversity in the structure of interpersonal relations, though the significance of that change varies depending on how one situates oneself relative to the actors at hand.

Let us begin by considering the peasant migrant. This prototypical newcomer begins from a small-scale society, where alliances are either knitted together among locals or through connections that extend to neighboring villages; self-sufficiency, isolation, and customary patterns of local social control reduce exposure to unknown outsiders. While existing contacts to friends and kin lubricate the movement to a new society, they cannot possibly reproduce the same level of encapsulation. The hometowners are a small element in a new context, whose size, heterogeneity, and complexity almost surely increase the probabil-

ity of exposure to outsiders. The most relevant group of outsiders may turn out to consist of members of related categories, removed in terms of dialect, customs, and habit, and yet not so distant as to preclude effective contact. Notwithstanding the preference for familiarity, similarity will often suffice. Moreover, the prohibitions or suspicions that might have constrained relations back home no longer have the same force; the elders are not around and the power of loneliness is frequently sufficient to overcome all other restraints. Some migrants will end up venturing still further afield, if for no other reason than a taste for adventure and the chance encounters made more probable by the fluidity of life in a less structured context. As always, necessity is the mother of invention, the gender imbalance characteristic of so many migrations providing ample reason to effect alliances of a totally innovative kind. Thus, while the balance of relationships may shift toward connections with elements that were known, if unfamiliar, in the home context, others will extend to categories and groups entirely absent from the original interactional field.

For observers working from the standpoint of the host society, the only relevant shifts are those that can be mapped on to the categories it recognizes, regardless of how these correspond to the self-understandings of the persons whom one purports to describe. Thus what I might describe as the growth of an ethnic niche, using official census data that obscure differentiations below the national-origin level (for example, Waldinger 1996), may simply be a case of misplaced concreteness. From the standpoint of the home society, the environment that appears so homogeneous to the outsiders is more likely to represent unparalleled diversity. After all, relatively small shifts in the number of persons having out-group contacts quickly diminish the proportion of relationships that are entirely encapsulated within the group; before too long everyone has a contact that extends beyond the original circle.

While the new society offers opportunities for exposure far wider than those ever imagined back home, a variety of factors keeps the options circumscribed. At the bottom of the labor market, like meets like—which is to say, workers differing in ethnic and national origins but otherwise quite similar in social traits and related dispositions. To the extent that ethnicity and class bear little relationship, persons who qualify as outsiders by virtue of national origin will run into those who also lack acceptance, but by virtue of social class position. On the other hand, the forces that create the demand for immigrant workers tend to be the same as those that put native-born labor in short supply (Wald-

inger 1996). Past and present, there have been relatively few members of the American working class in those sectors of the economy where peasant migrants have made a living. Rephrased in somewhat more abstract terms, the potential for immigrant exposure to dominant group outsiders is limited by the degree of overlap in the distribution of other, relevant social characteristics. Where the occupational, educational, and geographic distributions barely overlap—as, for example, in the case of native-born Euro-Americans and Mexican immigrants in early twenty-first-century Los Angeles—these sets of strangers will frequently encounter one another as subordinates and superiors, but far more rarely as potential neighbors, friends, or intimates (Waldinger and Lichter 2003).

Moreover, exposure does not guarantee acceptance. Peasant migrants are preferred precisely because they are despised, a quality that makes them all the more desirable in performing a society's least desired tasks. As it happens, those tasks are dishonoring, which is why the stigma associated with dirty jobs rubs onto their incumbents. And all the worse if the children of immigrants retain their parents' stigma while acquiring American aspirations—in which case we can expect that they will be neither liked nor preferred (Waldinger and Lichter 2003). So migration may induce far-reaching changes in the ethnic social structure of any source population without in any way yielding the diminished differences between source and reference populations that are predicted by the sociology of assimilation.

To each, his—or her—own ethnic myth. Assimilation is the myth of the dissolution of ethnic boundaries as told from the standpoint of the nation-state society, which imagines itself to be a bounded, sharply demarcated entity. But the economic networks of goods, services, information, and people cut across any single nation-state society and other like units of the world, propelling migrants across those interactional cleavages—to borrow a concept from Michael Mann (1986)—that states try so hard to create. Even while noting states' remarkable effectiveness at bounding the unit they seek to enclose, it is our misfortune that this intellectual field crystallized just when the interactional cleavage at the national boundary was at its height—leading us to mistake a contingent event for an inevitability.

By contrast, retention is the myth of persistence, projected backward from a moment of relatively stable association and affiliation to an interactional field of a totally different type. In a sense, one myth is at the service of the other, the assumption of entity (Handler 1988) no

less applicable, in the sociology of assimilation, to the immigrants than it is to the host society. Not for nothing do we have a concept with a digestive meaning, the very notion of assimilation implying the existence of foreign groups who are absorbed as their boundaries are dissolved.

But the idea of retention is no less fallacious, since the networks that breach the nation-state society simultaneously pull the migrants out of their home environment, progressively diffusing them across a broader interactional field. Consequently, the diversity of contacts, especially as measured against the interaction networks known back home, vastly expands. Since only a modest proportion of the home community ever leaves, one cannot ever recapture the same homogeneity of contact. No matter where one settles, the new environment is sure to be a place of high exposure probabilities to persons whose traits would have surely marked them as outsiders back home. On the other hand, members of the host population are incapable of making the same discriminations as insiders, leading to fundamental attribution errors, which provide the bases for new identities. If, back home, sensitivities to regional or linguistic differences rank high, they diminish or even collapse in the new context, thanks to the lumping efforts of the unknowing members of the native group. The ethnic moment is the time when an interactional field, whose internal ethnic differentiations are either slight or forgotten, takes hold; but the same forces that bring it into being will almost surely produce its demise. In the end, ethnic retention and ethnic assimilation emerge, not just as simplistic, but also as false polarities, two complementary ways of obscuring the reality we wish to understand.

ACCULTURATION

Like its twin, assimilation, the concept of acculturation has shown the capacity for absorbing innumerable intellectual beatings and yet endure. By acculturation our literature refers to the process by which an outsider group adopts the culture of the society into which it has moved. The standard complaints lodged against this particular conceptualization are too well known to merit extensive review (but see Alba and Nee 1998: 141–42). That there may be a host society onto which could be mapped a single, uniform culture is pure illusion; at best one can identify an amalgam of subcultures, varying by region or class, all of which are changing over time. Moreover, the notion that the transmis-

sion of tastes, styles, and beliefs between ethnic outsiders and insiders follows a single direction is just simplistic. Not only do the immigrants import a set of influences that diffuse far beyond the initial, bounded category. They and their descendants also engage in a new set of cultural activities—partially in an attempt to respond to or make sense of their new environment—that turn out to have broader, innovative effects. Case in point: the Jewish immigrant tycoons and the Hollywood they invented and sustained.

But complaints of this sort, which can be accommodated without much trouble, only begin to scratch the surface of the problem. As it is conceptualized in our literature, culture turns out to be nothing more than an inventory of traits. However, a trait inventory, as Michael Moerman (1974) has pointed out, is merely a list, and lists lack closure, which means that they cannot provide an adequate summary of the parts, let alone the cultural “whole” that they purport to represent. The difficulties get more serious when one asks how to identify the group (or category) to which the traits supposedly belong. Since ethnicity is a relational concept (Eriksen 1993), identifying some set of traits as characteristic of one group implies something about the features that typify some other—each of which is equally “ethnic,” albeit in its own peculiar way. But then it turns out that “groupness” is precisely in question, proving too variable to support any fixed set of traits. As the boundary between groups is not given—but rather constructed, negotiated, and contested—it too needs to be understood as a cultural product. Of course, the same holds true for the categories—native and foreign, American and ethnic, “white” and “colored”—around which the boundaries are maintained.

If categories and boundaries are both cultural, then the bedrock distinction between acculturation and assimilation collapses. That opposition, as Herbert Gans (1998: 162) has written, rests on the contrast between culture and society, a difference that remains alive and well in our specialized literature but fares less well outside our native land. At the very least, we need to avoid assuming that the relevant actors are cultural dopes, to paraphrase Harold Garfinkel (1967), lacking a finely elaborated understanding of the social structures in which they may be encased. On the contrary, we would do better to ask about the everyday theories of the world with which ethnics on both sides of the native/immigrant divide work—that is to say, the intellectual and emotional toolkits that allow them to both make distinctions between “us” and “them” and also make sense of the consequences that ensue.

From this perspective, examining shifts in immigrant traits becomes secondary to understanding the evolution of immigrants' view of the world and their place in it. To ask that question, however, demonstrates a greater connectedness between culture and society than our usual approaches allow. Immigration, after all, is a transitional phenomenon, in which immigrants slowly give up the attachments that rooted them to their earlier lives. At the outset, immigrants begin with a "dual frame of reference" (Ogbu 1991), judging conditions "here" in light of the standards that prevail back "home," which means that they understand their condition relative to a benchmark that the native population does not share.

But meanings change as the frame of reference—and related social attachments—shift: "here" replaces "there" as the benchmark by which immigrants and their descendants judge their condition. While the foreign-born may consent to circumstances that natives cannot accept, the children almost always want more, having been exposed to different wage and consumption standards from the start (Waldinger and Perlmann 1998). However, the causes of second-generation revolt go beyond the strictly material—as economic disparities would not be a source of grievance among immigrants and the offspring were it not for the fact that the latter saw these differences as unjust.

Justice—and related political—frames change because acculturation transmits a native theory of American society, as well as the associated ways of acting and feeling. In "becoming American," immigrants come to understand themselves as candidate insiders in a loosely structured, democratic society where a special premium is placed on the expression and development of the individual self. But the gratified American self is likely to be more than a materially satiated self; an American self also derives a sense of worth from a situation of presumed equality with ethnic insiders. Therefore, the explosive potential is greater still, given that fully Americanized immigrants and their descendants will be unlikely to accept the subordination that the new arrivals take as a given.

Of course, the way in which one understands the world is related to the tools employed for comprehending it. For that reason, the diffusion of cultural patterns from insiders to outsiders yields an effect at considerable variance from what our standard accounts suggest. Contrary to the conventional wisdom, as epitomized by the so-called straight-line theory, one would do better to forecast a pattern of nonlinear change. Reducing cultural difference is probably the best means for increasing

sensitivity to any disparities that persist. The better one reads, talks, and speaks the native code, the easier it is to see which of its promises have not been delivered; the more one has bought into the national creed, the more bitter the disappointment if one's expectations go unfulfilled.

Moreover, culture as theory of the world or worldview necessarily implicates insiders in ways that our conventional literature manages to elide. The distinction between native and foreign traits only holds if we assume that the latter are truly alien. Since the presence of social outsiders imported from beyond the boundaries of the state is a recurrent, and therefore native, phenomenon to the United States, the culture of its natives also encompasses their everyday, working theories of immigrants and immigration. Consequently, the culture shared by Americans includes a set of understandings about the boundaries that separate native-born insiders from immigrant outsiders, as well as interpretations of the conditions for membership in the American people and the meanings entailed by that status.

Thus the very recruitment of immigrant labor needs to be understood as a culturally informed, if not cultural, activity itself. Marxist or Marxist-inspired theories have it largely right: the dynamic, unequal nature of capitalist economies yields perpetual recourse to cheaper, more tractable sources of labor from beyond the society's bounds (for example, Piore 1979). Nonetheless, they assume what needs to be explained: namely, the existence of the categories distinguishing immigrant from native labor, and the understandings entailed in that discrimination. Let me put it crudely if not in the least bit unfairly: immigrants compose a group of workers whom their employers at once prefer but also despise. The employers' contempt is the stuff of the social psychological literature, a body of work that points to some universal cognitive mechanisms but which cannot explain the specific discriminations between particular groups of them and us in other than cultural terms. But the employers' preference for immigrants can be best understood as an everyday theory of immigrant labor, in which immigrants are perceived as that class of worker that evaluates conditions "here" in light of how bad they are "there." That quality makes immigrants preferable to the native-born alternatives, comprising people who set their sights on rewards a good deal higher than those available at the bottom of the totem pole. And thus we can see why immigration needs to be thought of as a property of the national cul-

ture, as native employers value foreigners, doing so precisely because they understand the immigrants to be different.¹

If understandings about immigrants and immigration form part of the national culture, then those processes conventionally denoted as “acculturation” also entail the mechanisms whereby immigrants and their descendants become oriented toward insiders’ views of ethnic outsiders. Those views need not always imply derision or rejection, and one can trace a shift, over the course of the last century, from more exclusive to more accepting understandings. On the other hand, our own literature reveals a continuing perception of immigrants as different, a preoccupation that can only suggest that such difference is a source of discomfort and trouble. Certainly, our older commentators took rejection of ethnic difference for granted; recall that Milton Gordon identified a decline of the prejudices held by insiders as one of the very *last* stages in his assimilation typology (Gordon 1964: 70–71). And the large majorities that continue to voice opposition to large-scale immigration, if only when asked (not to speak of the smaller, though more vocal group of nativists and restrictionists), do leave grounds for thinking that acceptance remains problematic.

Thus, in construing immigration as an occurrence of a foreign, and not native, type, both public and social scientific understandings construct the familiar as strange. From the standpoint of the self-proclaimed normals—that is to say, our literature’s so-called majority group—difference appears undesirable. Moreover, the views of these particular normals count, not simply because they possess the key to acceptance and the goodies it unlocks; acculturation itself at once orients outsiders toward the standards of insiders and leads them to accept insiders’ standards of judgment. From this point on, the analysis proceeds straightforwardly: as Goffman (1963) explained, the stigma associated with an ethnic or any other sort of difference at once confirms the usualness of the stigmatizer while discrediting the stigmatized. Since one is stigmatized by association, with the stigma spreading from the stigmatized person to his or her intimates, disaffiliation from the more stigmatized elements provides one route of obtaining acceptance. To quote Goffman, “the very notion of *shameful* differences assumes a similarity in regard to crucial beliefs” (1963: 131). Therefore, acculturation and stigmatization can turn out to be one and the same, as immigrants and their descendants display their growing attachment

to the host society by adopting the ways of the insider group and seeking their approval.

One can easily go further. In orienting themselves toward insiders’ views, outsiders also accept the view that the reference group holds of the outsiders themselves. The outsiders wish to do more than simply erase the difference that separates them from insiders. They feel compelled to reject the very qualities of their own group to which insiders object, which not only belong to others of their originating kind but regrettably are to be found within the self. At its best, the result is the phenomenon of “double consciousness” described by Du Bois: “this sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others, of measuring oneself by the tape of a world that looks in amused contempt and pity” (1999: 11). At its worst, the stigmatized outsiders find their way to self-hatred (Lewin 1948).

These are the terms that we do not usually find in our lexicon. After all, can we doubt that ours is an unself-consciously assimilationist sociology of assimilation when the author of our canonical text is none other than a Goldberg turned Gordon, the name change the symbolic equivalent of the nose job? Yes, one can concede that name changes and nose jobs are possibly motivated by a quintessentially American desire to start afresh. Still, we have to admit that some distaste for one’s prior self almost surely plays a significant role. And is it an innocent—or revealing—slip that in the fifteen-page, double-column index to the recent 500-page *Handbook of International Migration* (Hirschman, DeWind, and Kasinitz 1998), there is not a single entry to stigma or self-hatred?

On the other hand, the stigmatizers of immigrant America—that is to say, the assimilation literature’s “core cultural group”—do not always have the good fortune of encountering a human material equally susceptible to stigmatization. The peasant migrants of the turn of the twentieth century did not need a sociology professor to tell them that they were expected to act as inferiors, as that was the lesson they had absorbed in the old world, where the peasant’s stigmatized status, relative to townsmen or aristocrats, was beyond question. And was there any reason to doubt the claims of the insiders who sought to Americanize them? After all, the United States was then the very acme of modernity, its material abundance and growing national power the demonstration of its superiority, as against the immigrants and the old worlds from which they came.

But today’s immigrants have entered a different world, one where stigmatized outsiders have learned a new trick. Inversion was always

¹ For an elaboration, with empirical evidence, see Waldinger and Lichter 2003: chaps. 8 and 9.

one of the weapons of the weak: it is better to be “bad,” as even squares like us know. But inversion is now utilized in self-conscious ways, with stigma at once revalued as the positive pole of one’s identity, as Christian Joppke (1999) has pointed out, but also turned around, forcing the stigmatizers to confront their own shameful deeds. “Black is beautiful” was a revolutionary slogan, and all the more powerful because it worked. The ethnic revival of the late 1960s and early 1970s, so scorned by our literature, illustrates a glimmer of belated recognition: the young ethnic intellectuals of the time realized that their parents had swallowed the American dream hook, line, and sinker, when in fact they need not have gone so far. And while that particular ethnic revival had no hope—history had moved too fast—the new immigrants arrived just in time to take up the cultural toolkit that the civil rights revolution had invented and legitimated.

Moreover, today’s immigrants are especially well suited to use this particular tool. Relative to the past, contemporary immigrants are distinguished by their considerable symbolic capital and competence; as for the less skilled immigrants, they tend to find a proximal host, equipped with the necessary intellectual arsenal. So even if Frederik Barth’s (1969) crucial insight holds—the influence of America’s democratic, consumerist culture quickly rendering ethnicity an empty vessel, absent of most content—the collectivities in which the immigrants participate have the capacity to both create and consume a symbolic content for the vessel that they inhabit. That symbolic capacity is fateful since the stakes involve the relationship between “who is what” and “who gets what.” In that contest, today’s immigrants fare relatively well, since the ability to tap into desired resources largely rests on the ability to legitimize some particular who.

ETHNIC GROUP—OR GROUPNESS?

If the sociology of assimilation prefers to ignore the identity of the insiders to whom the (at best, ambivalently welcomed) outsiders are to be oriented, it shows no similar shyness regarding the “them-ness” of the outsiders whose behavior it is so intent on describing. The literature makes that “them-ness” crystal clear: we are talking about the assimilation of “immigrant groups.”

But it is groupness precisely that is at question. At the very least, the degree of groupness is likely to vary, a good deal lower among those categories of persons for whom groupness is embedded in a highly

particular, place-specific way of life, as opposed to the self-conscious sense of belonging engendered by a process of nation-building. The peasant migrants of the past came from a set of folk societies, not yet nationalized and therefore not possessing the common traits and corporate sense that the nation-building project imparts. By contrast, today’s newcomers typically arrive with a prior experience of nationalization, which means that they show up fully equipped with the resources for understanding themselves as self-conscious entities of an ethnic sort. Moreover, the capacity for groupness also hinges on the symbolic and cultural resources required to articulate an explicit understanding of groupness, that is to say, how I fit in with those “like me” and those who are different. From this standpoint, almost all of yesterday’s migrations were lacking the human resources needed for the articulation of ethnic differences. In comparison, the extraordinarily high level of education characteristic of many of today’s flows implies far greater symbolic competence, crucial for both elaborating and legitimating ethnic identities.

While I am suggesting that we think in terms of “groupness” rather than “group,” much of our literature has moved in a different direction, largely out of an understandable reaction to the problems bequeathed by our intellectual legacy. The standard critique of the older literature starts with the point I predictably offered in *Ethnic Los Angeles*, namely, that the assimilation model seems to fit the trajectory of European-origin groups, but that “the historical experience of immigrants of non-European origin requires a different approach” (Waldinger and Bozorgmehr 1996: 18).

Rereading this sentence with some years’ distance, I now realize that I failed to make an adequate case for a different approach; indeed, I am not certain that I made a case at all. But behind the confusion lay a common enough thought: that these two immigrations contained groupings of a fundamentally different sort. However impoverished or stigmatized, I thought, the European immigrants shared a common cultural and racial background with the majority whose acceptance they sought; by contrast, the non-European newcomers were far more distinctive, and on both counts. In effect, race mattered, to paraphrase the title of Cornel West’s (1993) well-known book, facilitating inclusion in one case while hindering it in the other.

Unfortunately, this formulation mistakes cause and effect: acceptance did not occur because the European immigrants were white when they stepped off the boat; their children *became white in America*,

which is what then allowed for inclusion. Not to make excuses, but my own failings reflect the shortcomings of our literature. The older scholarly formulations imagined the process by which immigrants became Americans as if it could be abstracted from the system of ethnic stratification into which the immigrants entered. Oscar Handlin wrought an earlier revolution in immigration historiography when he realized that the "history of immigration was the history of the American people"; in the process, he also excised a large portion of the people he purported to describe (Handlin 1951: 3). Thinkers of a slightly later vintage did not commit the same slip: they understood that the American ethnic order was made up of the descendants of those who had become Americans, not just by consent but by force as well. But in extending the field of vision, they also saw an identity among these outsiders of different sorts, as announced by Irving Kristol in his famous article entitled "The Negro of Today Is Like the Immigrant of Yesterday" (1966). Kristol was hardly alone. As Nathan Glazer noted in his introduction to the second edition of *Beyond the Melting Pot*, he and Daniel Moynihan had assumed that "Negroes and Puerto Ricans could be seen as the latest of the series of major ethnic groups that had ... come as *immigrants*" (1970: xiii, emphasis added). As all groups had begun on the bottom, it followed that the blacks, like the European immigrants, would gradually move ahead. Similarly, Milton Gordon applied the same assimilation scheme to Italians, Jews, Negroes, and Mexicans, providing further indication that the scholarly authorities of the time understood these as minorities of a similar, if not necessarily the same, type.

Not only did the analysis proceed as if all groups of outsiders moved in at the bottom, confronting barriers of similar sorts. The underlying framework neglected the contrastive nature of the social identities that the immigrants and their descendants gradually absorbed, assuming instead that ethnicity is a property of the individual, like age or sex.

However, social identities are different: we know who we are only by reference to who we are not. Though acceptance came slowly for the descendants of the immigrants from southern and eastern Europe, it affected them in two quite different ways, transforming foreigners into Americans but also making them members of a majority that defined itself through exclusion. While the making of Americans was there for all to see, few scholars noted that majority necessarily implied minority. And so when the descendants of the European immigrants made

an unexpected appearance in the late 1960s, they did so in a completely new guise, with the Poles, Italians, and others of the sort that were described as plain "ethnics" in Warner's Yankee City studies transformed into a new entity called the "white ethnics" (Novak 1972). Though it was never transparent just why and how "white" should modify "ethnic," rather than the other way around, few seemed to care, which is why this folk concept came to define an entire field of academic study.

Of course, today we know better, though it is depressing to note that historians, not sociologists, have been chiefly responsible for changing our views. A rapidly expanding corpus (see, for example, Roediger 1991; Ignatiev 1995) tells us that the once swarthy immigrants from southern, eastern, and even northern Europe eventually became white, which is another way of saying that "race" is an achieved, not an ascribed, status. One can try to reconcile this observation with the older assimilation story, contending that racial perceptions changed as the Irish, Poles, Italians, and Jews moved ahead, and were then able to move among the same people who had previously held them in contempt (see Alba and Nee 1998: 148–49). However, this formulation leaves out the essential, contrastive element: in becoming white, the immigrants and their descendants also became party to strategies of social closure that maintained others' exclusion (Nelson 2001).

But the whiteness literature only gets us so far. After all, the man and woman in the street will tell us that Jews, Italians, Irish, Poles, you name the group, are whites. We then still need reference to some other set of concepts to explain what the everyday categorization as "white" entails. The new literature's contribution is to remind us that the European immigrants were once not-quite-white, and that reminder underscores the fluidity that the everyday notions obscure. Yet having said this, we run the risk of circularity, describing this "not-quite-white" status in ways that make recourse to the concept of race itself. And once we have underscored the mutability of racial status, our customary option of contrasting groups of different kinds no longer holds. Though we say that a group has changed its colors, we really mean something else: it has now acquired eligibility for participation among established groups, all the while engaging in efforts to maintain boundaries against some other, more stigmatized entity.

Thus our newer scholarship too often maintains the vices of the old. It is one thing to argue that the struggle for place in a contested, ethnic order has historically provided ample motivations for newcomers to

resolve the ambiguities over how their racial identities are to be defined (Orsi 1992). But it is another thing altogether to insist that these racialized categories represent real, substantial groupings of a fundamentally different sort. Though everyday language portrays insiders and outsiders as mutually exclusive, bounded entities, the reality is often otherwise, with the nexus between ethnic category and pattern of association varying from one dimension of social life to another. True, our unfortunate history has produced far too many situations in which excluded outsiders were never eligible for acceptance—whether as co-workers, neighbors, friends, or intimates. But it is also the case that rejection has often been replaced by acceptance, though only in some spheres and rarely without pushing and fuss. Furthermore, it is precisely the nonlinear nature of the shifts from rejection to acceptance—with interethnic contacts proceeding smoothly at work, for example, but ending the minute everyone leaves the job for home—that provides impetus for continued contestation.

Yet in phrasing the matter this way, we abandon the absolute distinctions implied by the concept of “race,” adopting an analytic language that emphasizes the contrasts between outsiders of differing degrees of unacceptability, and those for whom membership in the national community can be taken for granted. We thereby convert the relationship between “them” and “us” into a multidimensional continuum: at one end of the continuum are situations in which acceptability is *never* a possibility; at the other end are situations in which acceptability is *always* a possibility and ethnic difference is of symbolic value only. In between lie many intervening points at which eligibility for acceptance occurs on one or more dimensions, but not all. In the end we gain purchase on the dynamic nature of ethnic life without succumbing to the groupist illusion that has so often clouded our vision in the past.²

CONCLUSION

As an ongoing effort to bound social relations at the territory’s edge, the nation-state society can boast a record of considerable success. Not least among its triumphs ranks the everyday assumption that the nation comprises an entity apart, its separation from the rest of the world

² For further critique of the “groupist illusion,” see Brubaker 2002; Brubaker’s thinking on these and related matters has been an inspiration for many of the ideas developed here.

representing the normal state of affairs. While we could expect the man and the woman in the street to therefore regard immigration as an unexpected surprise, we run into problems if our own social scientific views similarly present immigration as a foreign, not native phenomenon. We would do better if we conceptualized immigration as a characteristic of our society and its insiders, who interact with the newcomers in ways that enhance, rather than diminish, difference. And we should also take insiders’ understandings more seriously since the folk view of immigration as anomalous, immigrants as different, and difference as undesirable helps define the native theory of the world, which immigrants are in turn expected to absorb. The analytic task gets tougher because the response to immigration engenders a reaction among the newcomers themselves, in which new identities and forms of affiliation take hold. But the intensity of these attachments obscures their innovative, mutable character, if for no other reason than the extraordinary utility furnished by the image and idea of the bounded, ethnic group. While appreciating the compelling nature of ethnic identities, we should recall their relational foundation and remember that boundaries rarely enclose the same people at all times and in all places.

In the end, of course, we confront the intellectual difficulties that inevitably impinge on those of us who study a phenomenon of which we are also a part. This is our abiding dilemma and our greatest intellectual challenge.

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