Featured Essay

What Happened to the White Ethnics?


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There are critical historical moments when events of the “real world” seem to disconfirm established social science paradigms. Such was the case with American sociological theory of race and ethnic relations in the wake of the race riots of the 1960s and the apparent revival of ethnicity among all segments of American society in the 1970s. The leading theoretical hypothesis was the assimilation model, often identified with the image of the melting pot. The apparent failure of assimilation theory is now standard fare in textbooks, student term papers, and even the mass media. The development of theory and empirical knowledge in American ethnic studies is not quite as simple, however, as this conventional account suggests.

To my knowledge, none of the scholars whose names are associated with assimilation theory (e.g., Park, Frazier, Myrdal, Gordon) posited that the path of ethnic change was linear or that assimilation was to be expected in the near future. The hypothesis was that the logic of industrialization, increased scientific knowledge, greater social and geographic mobility, and democratic institutions would eventually reduce the traditional and modern barriers that divided racial and ethnic groups. A fundamental criticism of the assimilation model was the lack of expected time dimension for assimilation, which made the theory impossible to refute. The great value of the assimilation model was not its well-developed theoretical structure, however, but the very clear and straightforward hypothesis that guided empirical research. And, in fact, much of the empirical research found persistent ethnic and especially racial inequality in the United States. Even while accepting the assimilation model as general theory, few scholars or researchers expected to find an absence of ethnic or racial differences in their data.

One of the great refinements of the assimilation models was Milton Gordon’s *Assimilation in American Life* (1964), in which Gordon convincingly documents the multiple dimensions of ethnicity and ethnic inequality. The key lesson of his work is that ethnic assimilation in these varied dimensions (e.g., cultural, structural, marital) has not necessarily occurred at the same pace and that the causes of these varied changes may not be the same. The task of constructing a more complex, yet integrated, theory of assimilation that is sensitive to this multidimensionality and to the mixed empirical evidence of ethnic change in American society remains the major challenge of the field. Most empirical research has been directed at testing middle-range hypotheses about the trend in ethnic inequality and the socioeconomic causes of ethnic and racial inequality. Such work draws heavily on (and contributes to) the social stratification literature of the socioeconomic life cycle. This research has led to an impressive body of empirical findings, although the results are often difficult to summarize concisely and have not offered the basis for an alternative theory that might integrate the field.

The theoretical alternative to assimilation theory is the Glazer and Moynihan (1963) thesis that strong ethnic ties not only persist in American society, but are very effective functionally for achieving community and political objectives. Over the past two decades, this school of thought has become the
conventional wisdom in much of sociology and beyond. The demonstrated persistence of ethnicity in American society is taken as conclusive evidence that the assimilation theory is wrong. Documenting social, economic, and political differences among ethnic groups, however, does not provide an alternative theoretical explanation. The continuing dilemma has been to develop a convincing interpretation of how and why ethnicity matters for different groups in different times and contexts.

The problems of interpretation are not due entirely to the lack of an adequate theory. The lack of comprehensive data on American ethnicity also seriously limits research. Classical assimilation theory and other hypotheses emphasize the long-term process of change across generations. Yet no data sources permit conclusive tests of long-term trends in ethnic intermarriage, ethnic residential segregation, and other dimensions of ethnic stratification and integration. Prior to 1980, U.S. censuses only collected data on the country of birth of individuals and their parents. For “whites,” ethnicity or ancestry could not be traced beyond the second generation with census data. And few other data sources contained comprehensive data on ethnicity or had large enough samples to include more than a few ethnic groups for comparative analysis. The subjective experience of ethnicity and the role of ethnicity in everyday life are themes explored only in a handful of field studies in ethnic communities.


Jiobu’s extensive review of the research literature on American ethnicity frames his empirical account of ethnic inequality, based upon 1980 census data. The style is primarily descriptive—reporting what various authors have said and discussing two- and three-way tabulations of ethnicity by socioeconomic status. Unfortunately, this book does not shed any new light, conceptual or empirical, on the major issues under debate. Using a combination of ancestry and race, Jiobu constructs a twenty-category classification of ethnic groups that includes many European-ancestry groups, the standard racial and Hispanic groupings, and several residual categories. Most of the analysis consists of bar charts and cross-tabulations of ethnicity by various socioeconomic dimensions, primarily occupation. The heterogeneity of most dependent variables (e.g., major occupational categories) and lack of necessary control variables (data for men and women are rarely presented separately) preclude any but the most general of empirical conclusions. For example, one major conclusion was that “the concept and operationalization of socioeconomic status is not ethnic group specific, or to put it otherwise, socioeconomic status applies across the board” (p. 89). The concluding chapter, “Explaining Ethnic Inequality,” reviews cultural theories, economic theories, competition and ethnic relations, ethnicity and world systems, class and ethnic resources, and several more theories, but makes almost no reference to the preceding empirical chapters nor to the extant body of research findings in the literature. For readers interested in the findings of the 1980 census on ethnic inequality and other dimensions of ethnicity, I would recommend *From Many Strands: Ethnic and Racial Groups in Contemporary America*, by Stanley Lieberson and Mary Waters (1988).

Richard Alba is well known for his research on the diminished role of ethnicity among white Americans in the post-World War II era. This theme is evoked in the title of a prior publication, “The Twilight of Ethnicity Among American Catholics of European Ancestry.” In his new study, he moves beyond structural measures of socioeconomic status and intermarriage to explore what remains of ethnic identity, culture, and attachments among Americans of European ancestry. To put the matter simply, there is very little left of ethnicity for most white Americans. Of his sample, only about
one-half could even give an ethnic identity that they did not immediately qualify (pp. 50–51). As Alba explores other aspects of ethnicity—e.g., importance attached to ethnicity, knowledge of a few words of ancestral language, having ethnic political concerns, eating ethnic foods at home, having co-ethnic friends, joining an ethnic organization, living in an ethnic neighborhood—the results are overwhelming. It seems that the minority of “real” white ethnics that still remain might soon be considered an endangered species.

Alba’s most powerful interpretation turns on the link between the structural bases of ethnicity and its expression in identity and culture. He anticipates skeptics who acknowledge the decline of the structure of traditional ethnic communities and organization but still argue for the continuation of ethnic identity and attachment as social and psychological anchors in modern society. Alba argues, convincingly in my judgment, that ethnic culture cannot survive without ethnic families and primary groups that sustain shared meanings and experiences, reproduced through the socialization of children. What is left of ethnic attachments when seventy percent of respondents deny that the ethnic identity of their spouses had any impact on their marriages (p. 179) and only twelve percent of parents attach great importance to their children’s ethnic identity (p. 190)?

I found the greatest empirical contribution of Alba’s work in the basic tabulations on the incidence of various ethnic behaviors and experiences. The multivariate analysis in every chapter, while very technically competent, is much more difficult to interpret. The problem is the absence of clear models or hypotheses guiding the selection of the causal variables. In particular, the inclusion of ethnic identity status as a predictor of ethnic behavior seems poorly justified. Causation could be the reverse. If I were redoing the analysis of these data, I would suggest parallel (separate) analyses of each ethnic group (Irish, Italian, German, etc.). The incidence and social correlates of many ethnic experiences and behaviors (encountering discrimination or eating ethnic foods) are heavily (if not primarily) influenced by the ethnic composition of the sample. While ethnic differences are sometimes reported in the text, comparisons of specific ethnic groups are generally absent from many tables and interpretations in the book.

In Ethnic Options, Waters takes Alba’s thesis one step further. In lengthy personal interviews of one to three hours, she began with the standard 1980 census ancestry questions and then followed up with questions on the respondent’s family history, ethnic experiences, and ethnic identity. She discovered that the initial answers to the census question were often only a simplified subset of the respondent’s “true” ancestry. Most respondents were not intentionally concealing information; they simply remembered some ancestries as more important or interesting than others. When probed for the “meaning” of ethnic identity in their lives, most respondents said that being Polish (or Italian or Irish or whatever) made them feel special or interesting in some way. An ethnic identity offered an opportunity to celebrate a particular holiday (e.g., St. Patrick’s Day), to enjoy ethnic food, or to explain one’s personality or proclivities (e.g., being social, family-centered, or hard-working). While ethnic attachments or identities were not chosen completely at random, there was usually a range of choices from which to select. For the most part, ethnicity played a minor role in lives of Waters’ sample of middle-class Catholic Americans. Ethnicity did not determine one’s career, marriage partner, friends, or neighborhood, but was an interesting “extra” to spice up life.

Like all good ethnographic studies, Waters’ book is full of memorable quotations from respondents. Many readers, myself included, find such firsthand accounts absolutely fascinating. When skillfully chosen by the analyst, as in this book, the words of the respondents offer both empirical evidence and sociological interpretation. Because of this quality, Waters’ book can be a vivid text for undergraduates as well as solid scholarship for the professional sociological reader. Beyond the empirical contribution from the interviews, Waters offers a very important interpretative statement in her concluding chapter, “The Costs of a Costless Community.” She argues that many whites assume that their voluntary ethnic identity is similar to the involuntary ethnicity of racial minorities. Whites ignore the fact that skin color of African Americans cannot be “turned off” whenever it is inconvenient. While this point
is not original, her argument is well supported by the empirical content of the interviews and is very effectively expressed.

After reading these books, especially those of Alba and Waters, I believe that the assimilation theory may have been dismissed prematurely. No, I am not arguing for the race relations cycle of Robert Park, much less the straight-line assimilation theory that only exists in the minds of the critics of the assimilation model. But over the course of the twentieth century, within the space of three or four generations, the very real ethnic differences of European immigrants seem to have survived only for a small fraction of their descendants. For the rest, "symbolic ethnicity" (the term is from Gans 1979) is all that is left. Clearly the situation of racial minorities is quite a different story. Ninety years ago, W. E. B. Du Bois wrote that the problem of the twentieth century was the color line. With only ten years left in the century, the question of race remains unexplained and unresolved. Assimilation theory is not sufficient.

Other Literature Cited


