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The twilight of ethnicity: what relevance for today?

Richard Alba

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The 'twilight of ethnicity', a secular decline in the significance of ethnicity for the lives of the descendants of European immigrants in the USA, was set in motion by post-Second World War developments; and as Herbert Gans demonstrates, it has deepened since then. Looking at such a large-scale alteration to the ethno-racial configuration of the USA prompts the question: what can we learn about possible or likely changes involving new immigrant populations? My argument is that, although a replication of the massive boundary shift of the past seems out of reach, demographic shifts will create the prospect of some non-zero-sum mobility, with ramifications for the constitution of the mainstream and that of minority groups themselves.

Keywords: assimilation; demographic transition; immigration; race; social mobility; stereotypes

Gans's essay is valuable for making us look again at a major set of twentieth-century changes to the ethno-racial configuration of the USA. From today's perspective, which tends to give pre-eminence to race and colour, these changes are frequently taken for granted, even belittled as little more than the resolution of distinctions of secondary importance within the white population (Omi and Winant 1994). Yet without this assimilation, David Hollinger's (1995) 'ethno-racial pentagon' would require a considerably more elaborate geometric figure. Certainly if we were looking forward from the mid-twentieth century, the ethno-racial prominences that would attract our attention would not be the same as those that stand out when we look backwards from today. Glazer and Moynihan's ([1963] 1970) *Beyond the Melting Pot* is a reminder of this past reality; especially striking, given today's understanding of what matters, is the importance that they give in their 1970 introduction to social and political divisions based on religion.

Gans appropriately asks whether the 'twilight of ethnicity' has now faded into 'darkness'. Although the dynamics underlying the changes that he is referring to were most intense during 1945–70 – in such forces as massive educational and occupational mobility, the exodus from cities to suburbs and the surge of intermarriage – once set in motion, the decline in the significance of ethno-religious distinctions among whites has continued. For instance, Robert Orsi and I (Alba and Orsi 2008) found a remarkable falling-off from Catholicism in the fourth generation of Americans with Italian ancestry–a consequence in large part of inter-religious marriage, especially in the prior generation. Although the immigrants were virtually all Catholic, at least nominally, when they arrived in the early twentieth century, at the century's end their great-grandchildren were only about half Catholic. In other words, a religious coherence that helped to sustain an ethnic one has weakened. However, it is important also to acknowledge that ethnicity has not disappeared among whites, and it remains robust in communal 'pockets' scattered

throughout the regions of European immigrant settlement, even if overall its condition has been weakened.

I agree with much of Gans's characterization of the state of late-generation ethnicity, with one significant exception: in my view, he underplays the puzzling vigour of ethnic stereotypes. For the most part, the popular stereotypes of European-origin ethnic groups affect the largest of the groups of the early twentieth-century wave, the Italians and the Jews. The stereotypes are not new creations; the writer Bill Dal Cerro has documented the long history of Italian American stereotypes in the movies.[1] These prejudices show no sign of fading in the mass media – perhaps, they are even reviving, aided in part by the programming freedom and cultural-niche innovations of cable television. A number of recent and popular television shows, ranging from 'high-culture' drama, *The Sopranos*, to reality television, *Jersey Shore*, *Mob Wives*, *The Real Housewives of New Jersey* and *Princesses Long Island*, trade in Italian and Jewish stereotypes, whose common denominator is working-class boorishness and/or vulgar striving– characteristics often attributed to socially ascending groups whose economic mobility has brought them into new milieus. In the USA, ethnicity provides an idiom for talking about socio-economic inequalities that popular culture has difficulty in facing; but that observation aside, we do not yet have a theory to explain the persistence of stereotypes as the group distinctions they embody are blurring, nor to address their possible effects.

Past, present and future

By calling attention to the transformation of ethnicity that has reshaped the white population, Gans's discussion implicitly raises an issue that seems to me of cardinal importance. How, if at all, can we use an understanding of the assimilation of the last great wave of European immigrants to inform us about the absorption of the post-1965 immigrants and their descendants, who are overwhelmingly non-European? That the new groups are mainly non-white suggests to many social science observers that the assimilatory processes of the past are no longer relevant. Yet an outright rejection of relevance seems to me to go much too far, and it is apparent from the evidence that assimilation is a part of the contemporary reality of incorporation (Alba, Jiménez, and Marrow 2013; Waters and Jiménez 2005).

It seems impossible that the past will be replicated precisely, for the larger societal context is so different. Assimilation and mobility are not the same (Gans 2007), but for low-status immigrant groups, they are strongly connected: assimilation occurs most robustly when members of such groups are ascending economically and socially. The quarter-century following the end of the Second World War was a time of exceptionally low inequality – the 'Great Compression', according to economic historians – and high social mobility, especially for whites, as the post-secondary educational system of the USA expanded to a mass system and government programmes subsidized education and home purchase (Katznelson 2005). It was a period of abundance for what I have called 'non-zero-sum mobility', when members of disadvantaged white ethnic groups were able to move up without appearing to threaten the position of established white Protestants.

By contrast, the present, as is well known, is a time of high inequality and constrained mobility. These economic facts raise the question of how the non-zero-sum mobility supporting large-scale assimilation might come about. One possibility lies in demographic shift, a phenomenon that will loom especially large during the next two decades throughout the western world. For this is the period during which the post-Second World

War baby boom, in the USA born between 1946 and 1964, will leave the ages of work and civic activity. The baby boomers are disproportionately native whites, and many occupy positions in the top tiers of the workforce. Because the cohorts reaching the ages of school departure and labour force entry will be much more diverse – and in fact contain fewer whites than are leaving the workforce – a changing of the guard will occur in ethno-racial terms. Between 2010 and 2035, when the youngest US baby boomer turns seventy-one, the twenty-five to sixty-four age group will lose seventeen million whites while growing in size by almost the same number, going from almost two-thirds white to half minority.

This massive demographic transition opens up the possibility of non-zero-sum mobility, as members of minorities move up to take positions that previously would have gone to whites. To some extent, this process is already under way in the USA. Analysing census data for 2000, I found that at the top of the occupational structure, whites were very dominant in the baby boom cohorts (then aged thirty-six to fifty-four), holding down for example about 85% of full-time positions in the top quartile. However, among twenty-six to thirty-five year olds, most of whom took up full-time work during the 1990s, the white percentage had declined to 77% (Alba 2009). Analysing now the 2009–11 American Community Survey, Gulliermo Yrizar Barbosa and I have found that the white percentage in top positions has continued to decline in young cohorts, falling to 69% among twenty-six to thirty-five year olds, many of whom entered the labour force during the 2000s, a period of slow economic growth followed by recession.

The groups that are benefitting the most from this opening up are those of immigrant origin. In light of the changes across birth cohorts and between 2000 and 2009–11, the largest increases by far are occurring among Asians, both immigrant and native born, and among native-born Latinos. African Americans, native-born blacks, are not gaining much, and there is considerable evidence of large barriers for black men to participation in these changes. In this respect, there seems to be a repetition of an old story that involves deep-seated preferences for the immigrants who choose to come to the USA, over the descendants of the most involuntary of arrivals (Blauner 1972).

I do not mean to suggest at all that the non-zero-sum mobility of the near future will bring about a 'twilight of ethnicity' for the second and third generations of the new immigrant population; nor that the advantages associated with whiteness will disappear (although they may be reduced). The demographic landscape of the near future creates what is best described as an opportunity for greater ethno-racial fluidity, but the extent to which this opportunity will be realized will be affected by a series of factors that cannot be predicted precisely. One, certainly, involves macro-economic conditions – the magnitude of economic growth and the impact of globalization and other economic forces on the shape of the occupational structure. Another stems from the educational inequalities between blacks and Hispanics, on the one hand, and whites and Asians, on the other. These remain large and seem unyielding, especially in terms of post-secondary education, which matters most for social mobility. These are also inequalities that are affected by public policies, among which those bearing on the costs of post-secondary education could be altered to bring almost immediate relief (Alba and Holdaway 2013; Goldin and Katz 2008).

Yet, despite all the qualifications, two significant conclusions about change seem unassailable. For one, the mainstream of American society is changing as a result of the demographic transition (Alba and Nee 2003). The top of the workforce can be thought of

as a window into the mainstream, in the sense that the individuals occupying positions there are unusually visible because of their occupational roles and are likely to show up elsewhere in positions of civic leadership. Even if the growing diversification among young cohorts were brought to a halt by, say, economic changes, overall diversification would continue as the heavily white baby boom cohorts leave the workforce. Yet a question remains: will this diversity be whitewashed by the whitening of the minorities who are achieving mainstream membership (Bonilla-Silva 2004)? The question cannot be answered definitively as yet, but my own suspicion is that it will not. The changes are massive, and there is diversity within the diversity that will be hard to paint over with a single colour: for instance, Indians, many of them dark-skinned, are among the most successful Asian groups.

Moreover, the whitening of the southern and eastern European ethnics that accompanied their mainstream assimilation allows for a narrow and potentially misleading reading of the meaning of post-Second World War changes (Roediger 2005). An additional change to the mainstream involved religion, and in this case, the mainstream expanded to accept new charter religions, Catholicism and Judaism, rather than forcing a one-way assimilation, namely a conversion to Protestantism, on newcomers (Alba 2009; Gerstle 2001). This expansion was a remarkable shift, given the historical importance of religious divisions in a society where religion had mattered a great deal since the arrival of the first British colonists. The religious diversification of the mainstream after the Second World War offers a different model of mainstream change, one that I suspect will turn out to be especially relevant in the near future.

The other conclusion concerns minority populations themselves. They will become more internally heterogeneous as a consequence of growing mobility and mainstream entry, along with intermarriage (Lee and Bean 2010). To be sure, many will be left out of these shifts in status. Therefore, within many groups, there will be a spectrum of incorporation that runs from poverty and social exclusion, at one end, to affluence and mainstream incorporation at the other. Some in a group like the Mexicans will be subject to processes of racialization, while the affiliations of others with the group will become more tenuous, leading even to symbolic identities similar to those found among European-ancestry Americans (Alba, Jiménez, and Marrow 2013; Gans 1979; Telles and Ortiz 2008). This growing heterogeneity raises numerous questions that will require research attention – for example, does racial appearance predict where individuals are found on the spectrum of incorporation?

Conclusion

Gans's essay brings valuable attention again to a paradigmatic experience of ethnic transformation in the USA. This experience will not be repeated precisely, but it carries clues, admittedly not always easy to decipher, about the opportunities for ethno-racial change in the near future. But without a close examination of this experience in its own terms, we risk missing these clues.

Note

1. http://www.stereotypethis.com/index.php

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RICHARD ALBA is Distinguished Professor of Sociology at the Graduate Center of the City University of New York. His newest book, edited with Jennifer Holdaway, is *The Children of Immigrants at School: A Comparative Look at Integration in the United States and Western Europe* (New York University Press, 2013).

ADDRESS: Department of Sociology, CUNY Graduate Center, 365 Fifth Avenue, New York, NY 10016, USA. Email: ralba@gc.cuny.edu